

EVERYONE TALKS

There are written rules and unwritten rules, and I hit one of each on my first day in the department. The unwritten rule said the new detective got the worst job. Which on that morning was to follow a written rule: City hospitals were required to report gunshot victims, and the department was required to investigate. Boring work, and likely fruitless. But rules were rules.

Times two for a woman in a man's world.

So off I went.

I got the worst car, obviously, with no GPS on the dash and no maps in the glove box, but I found the hospital easily enough. It was a large beige building southeast of downtown. I showed my shiny new shield and was directed to the fifth floor. Not exactly the ICU, they said, but the same kind of thing. A big enough deal that I had to turn off my phone.

A nurse met me there and took me to a doctor, who had threads of silver in her hair and looked like brains and money. She said I had wasted a trip. The victim was asleep and wasn't going to wake up anytime soon, because he was sedated with a custom mix that sounded pretty good to me. But I was new, and I had a report to write, so I asked for her perspective.

'Gunshot wound,' she said, like I was slow in the head. 'In the left side, up under the arm, broke a rib and tore some muscle. Not very nice. Hence the painkillers.'

'Caliber?' I asked.

'No idea,' she said. 'Not a BB gun, anyway.'

I asked to see the guy.

'You want to watch him sleep?'

'I have a report to write.'

She was cautious about infection, but she let me look in through a window. I saw a guy, fast asleep on a cot. A very distinctive guy. Short messy hair, plain features. He was on his back. The sheet was down at his hips. He was naked from the waist up. He had a pressure dressing high on his left side. He had tubes in the back of his hand, and a clip on his finger. I could see a sinus rhythm on his monitor. It was

beeping away, strong and powerful. As it should. Because the guy was huge. Almost bigger than the cot itself. He was easily six-five and two-fifty. A giant. Hands like catchers' mitts. A slab of a man. He was ridged with muscle. Not old. But not young, either. He looked worn and battered. He had scars here and there. A big old thing low down on his gut, like a huge white starfish, with thick, crude stitches. An old bullet hole in his chest. A .38, almost certainly. An eventful life. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

He looked to be sleeping quite peacefully.

I asked, 'Any idea what happened?'

'Probably not self-inflicted,' the doctor said. 'Unless he's a contortionist.'

'I mean, didn't he tell you anything?'

'He came in conscious, but he didn't say a word.'

I asked, 'Did he have ID?'

'His stuff is in a bag,' the doctor said. 'At the nurses' station.'

It was a very small bag. Clear plastic, with a zipper. Like people use in the airport line. At the bottom was loose change. A couple of bucks. There was a wad of folding money. A couple of hundred, possibly. Maybe more. It would depend on the denominations. There was an ATM card. And a creased old passport. And finally a travel toothbrush, reversed for a pocket, with the bristles inside a plastic tube.

'Is that it?' I asked.

'You think we're stealing from our patients?'

'Mind if I take a look?' I said.

'You're the cop,' the doctor said.

The ATM card was made out to J. Reacher. It had another year to run. The passport had expired three years previously. It was made out to Jack Reacher. Not John. Jack must have been on his birth certificate. No middle name, which was unusual in America. The photograph showed an approximate version of the face on the pillow. It was thirteen years younger, and animated with an expression halfway between patient and impatient, as if the guy was prepared to give the photographer the time he needed, but not a second longer.

No driver's license, no credit cards, no cell phone.

I asked, 'What was he wearing?'

'Cheap things,' the doctor said. 'We burned them.'

'Why?'

'Biohazard. I've seen better clothes on bums in the park.'

'Is he a transient?'

'I told you, he didn't say a word. He could be an eccentric billionaire, for all I know.'

'He looks in good shape.'

'You mean apart from being bandaged up in a hospital bed?'

'I mean, generally.'

'Healthy as a horse. Strong as a horse.'

'When will he wake up?'

'Tonight, maybe. I dosed him like a horse, too.'

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I went back at the end of my shift. Unpaid, but I was new and I wanted to make a good impression. There had been nothing on the wires about a shooting incident. No rumors. No other victims, no witnesses, no 911 calls. Which I gathered was not unusual. The city was like that. The underbelly had a life of its own. Like Vegas. What happened there stayed there.

I spent some time with the databases, too. Reacher was not a common name, and I figured the Jack-none-Reacher combination was likely to be much less common. But there was no real data. Or to put it the other way, all the data was negative. The guy had no phone, no car, no boat, no trailer, no credit history, no home, and no insurance. No nothing. There were some military records, from way back. He had been an army cop, mostly in the Criminal Investigation Division, an officer, decorated multiple times, which at first gave me a warm fellow feeling, and then it worried me. Thirteen years' honorable service, and now he was homeless, getting shot in the side, wearing clothes so toxic the hospital had to incinerate them. Not what a new detective wants to hear, on her first day on the job.

It was dark when I got back to the hospital, but up on the fifth floor I found the big guy awake. I knew his name, so I introduced myself, to balance things up. To be

polite. I told him I had a report to write. I told him it was required. I asked him what had happened.

He said, 'I don't remember.'

Which was plausible. Physical trauma can induce retrograde amnesia. But I didn't believe it. I got the feeling he was giving me a rote answer. I began to see why his file was so thin. A person has to work hard to stay under the radar. Which was OK with me, to be honest. I got my promotion because I'm a good interrogator. And I like a challenge. An old boyfriend said I should have it on my gravestone: Everyone talks.

I said, 'Help me out here.'

He looked back at me with clear blue eyes. Whatever painkiller cocktail they were using wasn't doing him any harm in the cognition department. His gaze was unworried and friendly, but also bleak and dangerous, wise and primitive, warm and predatory. I got the feeling he knew a hundred ways to help me, and a hundred ways to kill me.

I said, 'I'm new on the job. Today is my first day. I'm going to get my butt kicked if I don't deliver.'

'Which would be a shame,' he said. 'Because it's a very cute butt.'

Which would have gotten him sensitivity training on the job, but I couldn't take offense. He was lying there wounded and helpless, half naked, radiating a lazy kind of charm.

'You were a cop,' I said. 'I saw your file. You worked in a team. Did you ever save someone's ass?'

'Time to time,' he said.

'So save mine now.'

He said nothing.

'How did it start?'

'It's late,' he said. 'Don't you have a home to go to?'

'Don't you?'

He didn't answer.

'How did it start?' I asked again.

He sighed and took a breath and said it started like things usually start. Which was to say they usually don't start at all. He said most places he went were peaceful and quiet. He said most places, nothing happens.

I asked him what he meant.

He said big cities, small towns, he went about his business and nobody knew. He said he ate his meals, and slept, and showered and changed, and saw what he saw. Sometimes he got lucky with an hour's conversation. Sometimes he got lucky with a night's companionship. But mostly nothing happened. He said he had a quiet life. He said he could go months between days worth forgetting.

But if it was going to happen, it was going to start with people. Usually with people in bars or diners or restaurants. Places where food and drink is consumed, and where a certain kind of community is expected, and where sipping and chewing make people unembarrassed about not talking.

Because no one ever says anything. They look instead. It was all about the looking. The looking away, to be precise. There can be a guy people are looking away from. Maybe alone at the bar, or alone in a diner booth or at a restaurant table. People are partly shunning him, but mostly they're scared of him. Some kind of a bully. Unpopular, and he knows it. He knows people go quiet around him, and he knows they look away, and he loves it. He loves the power.

'Is that how it started?' I asked. 'Yesterday?'

Reacher nodded. There was a guy in a bar. Reacher didn't know the bar. He wasn't part of that community. He had never been in the city before. He had ridden the Big Dog all day and gotten out at the depot two blocks from First Street. He had walked over and found the bar. Not hard. That close to the depot, it was about the only game in town. He had walked in and taken a seat. He had figured he would rely on waitress service. He didn't want to belly up to the mahogany. He didn't want to get face to face with the barman. He wasn't looking for any kind of witty small talk.

I said, 'Back up a minute. You came in on the Greyhound bus?'

He nodded. He had told me that already. I saw the same look on his face, like in his passport photograph. Patient to a degree, but he wanted the world to keep up with

him.

I asked, 'Where were you coming from?'

He said, 'Does it matter?'

'Why were you coming here?'

'I have to be somewhere. I thought this place would be as good as any.'

'For what?'

'For passing a day or two. Or an hour or two.'

'The records show you have no permanent location.'

'Then the records are correct. Which is reassuring, I suppose. From your point of view.'

'What happened in the bar?'

He sighed again and took another breath and went on with the story, quite candidly. My interrogation mojo was working. Or maybe the painkiller cocktail was acting like a truth serum. He said the place was busy but he had gotten a seat with his back to a wall, so he could see the room and both its doors all at once. An old habit. Military cops do a lot of their work in bars. The waitress had scooted over and taken his order. He had asked for coffee and settled for beer. Rolling Rock, in a bottle. He was no kind of connoisseur. He was happy to take what places had to offer.

Then he had watched the man at the bar. He was a heavy-limbed guy, tall, with dark, vivid features, sitting there commandingly and complacently. With everyone else looking away from him. Reacher defaulted to his instinctive position, which was to hope for the best, but plan for the worst. And the worst with a guy like that wouldn't be too bad. He would come off the stool into a yard of clear space. There would be a certain amount of huffing and puffing. Bullies got by on reputation alone, and the worse the reputation, the less practice they got in actually doing anything. Because other people always backed off. Therefore a bully's skills were rusty and eroded. A simple cigarette punch would take care of the problem. Named way back in the day when everyone smoked. A guy's mouth would open, ready to load the next cigarette between his lips, an insolent and calculated little pause, maybe half a smile, and a vicious left uppercut under the chin timed just right would slam his mouth shut

again, busting teeth, maybe making him bite through his tongue. Game over, right there, and if it wasn't, then a clubbing downward right to the side of the neck would close the deal, like driving a railroad spike with your knuckles. No major problem. Except that no one smoked anymore, at least not indoors, so you had to do it while they were talking, which was OK, because everyone talked. Bullies most of all. They talked a lot. All kinds of threats and taunts and what are you looking at? But, hope for the best.

Reacher sipped the watery foam from his long-neck bottle and waited. The waitress was in a lull and came over to ask if he needed anything, which was clearly an excuse to chat a moment. Reacher liked her on sight. Maybe she liked him too. She was a professional. Maybe forty years old. Not a college kid, not a young person planning to move on soon to something better. She was looking away from the guy, too. His needs were being met by the barman, and she seemed very glad about that. It was more than obvious.

'Who is he?' Reacher asked.

'Just a customer,' she said.

'Does he have a name?'

'I don't know. I mean, I'm sure he has a name, but I don't know what it is.'

Which Reacher didn't believe. A guy like that, everyone knows his name. Because a guy like that makes sure of it.

Reacher asked, 'Does he come here often?'

'Once a week, every week.'

Which was a strangely precise schedule. Which had to mean something. But the woman didn't want to talk about it. That was clear. She started in with the usual questions instead. New in town? From where? Doing what? Which were questions Reacher found hard to answer. He was always new in town, and he was from nowhere in particular, and he wasn't doing anything. He had been in the military all his life, first an officer's kid, then an officer himself, raised on bases all over the world, serving on bases all over the world, and then he had fallen out into civilian life and couldn't really settle down to the kind of existence normal people seemed to have. So he wandered the land, seeing the things he had never had time

to see before, going here, going there, staying a night or two, and then moving on. No bags, no schedule, no plan. Travel light, travel far. At first he had expected to work it out of his system, but he had long ago given up on that ambition.

He said, 'Anyway, how's business here?'

The waitress shrugged and made a shape with her mouth, and said business was OK, but she didn't sound convinced. And waitresses knew. They had a close-up view. Better than accountants or auditors or analysts. They saw the sad expression on the owner's face, exactly once a week, on payday.

Which had to mean something too. The only bar near the bus depot should have been doing a roaring trade. Location was everything. And the place was crowded. All the tables were taken and people were shoulder to shoulder at the bar, except for a quarantine yard around the big guy on the stool. Bottles and glasses were slamming back and forth with regularity, and fives and tens and twenties were heading for the register like a raging river.

So Reacher watched a little longer, over the first beer, into a second, taking them slow, and he saw another guy step into the room, and he felt the atmosphere change. Like a moment of truth had arrived. Like the whole purpose of the evening had snapped into focus. The new guy was dressed one grade better than anyone else, and he moved in from the door with a proprietorial air. His place. The owner. He greeted people as he walked, a little vaguely, a little preoccupied, and then he ducked behind the bar and went in through a small door in back. The office, presumably. His domain.

He came out again two minutes later, carrying something in his hand. He stayed in the well behind the bar and squeezed past the bartender and stepped over to where the big guy was sitting on his stool. They faced each other, with nothing more than the mahogany slab between them. Everyone looked away.

Except Reacher. He saw the owner hand over the thing he was carrying. He did it fast and unobtrusive, like a magic trick. The guy on the stool took it and slipped it into his pocket. It was there, and then it was gone.

But Reacher had seen what it was.

It was a white office envelope, fat with cash.

Protection money, presumably.

The guy on the stool stayed where he was and finished his drink, ostentatiously slowly, rubbing it in. He had the power. He was the man. Except he wasn't. He was an underling. He was muscle. That was all. Reacher knew how these things worked. He had seen them before. He knew the envelope would go straight to some shadowy figure at the top of the chain, and the guy on the stool would get a cut, like a wage.

The waitress came back and asked if Reacher wanted a third go-round with the Rolling Rock. Reacher said no, and asked, 'What happens now?'

'About what?'

'You know about what.'

The woman shrugged, like a secret shame had been exposed, and she said, 'We stay in business another week. We don't get smashed up or burned out.'

'How long has this been going on?'

'A year.'

'Has anything been done about it?'

'Not by me. I like my face the way it is.'

'Me too,' Reacher said.

She smiled at him.

Reacher said, 'The owner could do something. There are laws.'

'Not unless something happens. The cops say they need to see someone beaten. Or worse. Or the place in flames.'

'What's the guy's name?'

'Does it matter?'

'Who does he work for?'

She pinched her finger and thumb and pretended to zipper her mouth.

'I like my face the way it is,' she said again. 'And I have kids.'

She collected his empty bottle and headed back to her station. The big guy on the stool finished his drink and put his glass on the bar. He didn't pay, and the barman

didn't ask him to. He stood up and walked to the door, through a channel suddenly clear of people.

Reacher slid out of his chair and followed. First Street was dark, all except for a yellow light on a pole about a block away. The guy from the stool was fifteen feet ahead. Upright and mobile he looked to be about six-two and two-ten. Not small, but smaller than Reacher. Younger, but almost certainly dumber. And less skilled, and less experienced, and more inhibited. Reacher was sure of that. He had yet to meet the man who outranked him in those categories.

He called out, 'Hey.'

The guy from the stool stopped and turned around, surprised.

Reacher walked up to him and said, 'I think you've got something that doesn't belong to you. I'm sure it was just a mistake. So I want to give you the chance to make it right.'

'Get lost,' the guy said, but he said it without the final few percent of conviction. He wasn't the total king of the jungle. Not right then and there.

Reacher asked, 'How many more calls do you have tonight?'

'Butt out, pal. This ain't your business.'

'So whose business is it?'

'Get lost,' the guy said again.

'It's all about free will,' Reacher said. 'It's all about making choices. You want to know what yours are?'

'What?'

'You can tell me his name now, or you can tell me after I break your legs.'

'Whose name?'

'The guy you picked up the money for.'

Reacher watched his eyes. Waited for the decision. There were three possibilities. The guy would run, fight, or talk. He hoped the guy wouldn't run, because then he would have to run after him, and he hated running. He didn't expect the guy to talk, because of ego and self-image. Therefore the guy would have to fight. Or try to.

And Reacher was right. The guy fought, or tried to. He lunged forward and swung his left fist downward, like a sweep, as if there was a knife in it. An attempt at a distraction, nothing more. Next would come a big straight right, maybe a little overhand. But Reacher wasn't about to wait for it. He had learned to fight a long time ago, in hot dusty outposts in the Pacific, and cold damp alleys in Europe, and hardscrabble towns in the South, against resentful local youth and tribal military kids, and then his techniques had been broken down and built back up by the army, and he had learned the golden rule: Get your retaliation in first.

He stepped in close, falling forward, and threw a heavy elbow at the guy's face. Usually better to target the throat, but Reacher wanted the guy talking afterward, not choking to death on a smashed larynx, so he went for the upper lip, just below the nose, accelerating hard, which would break teeth and bone, which would make the subsequent conversation a little garbled, but at least the guy wouldn't be struck mute. The blow landed and the guy's head snapped back and his knees went weak and he sat down on his ass, right there on the sidewalk, eyes all over the place, blood all over his nose and his mouth.

Reacher was a brawler by nature, and a brawler's dream is to have the other guy on the floor, ready for the winning kick to the head, but he held back, because he wanted a name. He said, 'Last chance, my friend.'

The guy from the stool said, 'Kubota.'

Garbled. Missing teeth, and blood, and swellings.

Reacher said, 'Spell it for me.'

Which the guy did, fast and obedient. Not the king of the jungle anymore. Which Reacher was happy about. Because human legs are hard to break. Big physical efforts are required. He asked, 'Where will I find Mr. Kubota?'

And the guy told him.

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At that point Reacher stopped talking and took a breath and put his head back on the hospital pillow.

I said, 'And then what?'

He said, 'Enough for tonight. I'm tired.'

'I need to know.'

'Come back tomorrow.'

'Did you find Kubota?'

No answer.

I said, 'Was there a confrontation?'

No answer.

'Did Kubota shoot you?'

Reacher said nothing. And then the doctor came in. The same woman, with the threads of silver in her hair. She told me she was terminating the interview immediately, on medical grounds. Which was frustrating, but not fatal. I had plenty of valuable data. I left the building with visions of a major score in my head. A protection racket, busted, on my very first day in the department. Priceless. Women have to work twice as hard, to get half the credit.

I went straight back to the station house. Unpaid, but I would have paid them. I found a thick file on Kubota. Lots of leads, lots of hours, but we never had enough to get a warrant. Now we did, big time. We had gun crime. We had his victim, right there in the hospital. Eyewitness testimony. And possibly even the bullet itself, in a stainless steel dish somewhere.

Solid gold.

The night judge agreed with me. He signed off on a big boilerplate warrant and I put a team together. Plenty of uniforms, cars, heavy weapons, three other detectives, all senior to me, but I was leading them. My case. An unwritten rule.

We executed the warrant at midnight, which was legal-speak for busting down Kubota's door, and knocking him over, and bouncing his head off the tile a couple of times. We found the guy from the bar in a back room, in a bad way. Like he had been run over by a truck. I had him taken to a different hospital, under guard.

Then the uniforms hauled Kubota away to a holding cell and I and my three detective partners spent most of the rest of the night going through his place like

we were looking for a tiny flake of chrome off the world's smallest needle in the world's biggest haystack.

His place was a treasure trove.

We found grocery sacks full of unexplained cash, and thirty different bank accounts, and notebooks and ledgers and diaries and maps. It was clear from our first glance the guy was making serious money from a hundred different establishments. According to his notes in the last six months three places had tried to resist, and we called in the dates and matched them to three unexplained arson attacks. We found temporary interruptions in two sets of payments, and when we checked the dates with the city's hospitals we found one broken leg and one slashed face.

We had everything.

Except the gun.

But that made sense, in its way. He had used it, and he had ditched it. Standard practice. It would be in the river, thrown from a bridge. Like his old cell phones, presumably. Pay-as-you-go burners. He had ditched the packaging and the paperwork, but for some dumb reason not the chargers. We found nearly fifty in a drawer.

At dawn I was face to face with him in an interview room. He had a lawyer with him, a slick guy in a suit, but I could tell by the guy's face he knew a defense was hopeless. On our side it was just me, all alone, but I guessed there was a crowd behind the one-way glass, to watch the mojo working. And it worked very well at first. I like to get a suspect in the habit of saying yes, one confession after the other, so I started with the easy stuff. I went through one bar after another, all the restaurants and diners, and I told him we had the notebooks and the ledgers and the diaries, and the cash and the bank statements, and he admitted them all. Ten minutes after I started we had enough on tape to put him away for a long, long time. But I kept him going, not because we really needed it, but because I wanted him warmed up for the big moment.

Which didn't happen.

He denied the shooting. He denied meeting Reacher the night before. He said he had been out of town. He denied owning a gun. He said he had never used one. I kept at him until the clock ticked around and my second day in the department officially began. Then my lieutenant came in, fresh from a night's sleep and a shower, and he told me to quit.

He said, 'No harm, no foul. You've done great. We have enough. He's going down for a long time. The goal has been achieved.'

Which was the general opinion in the department. There was no sense of failure. Quite the reverse. The new girl had busted a racket, on her first day on the job. A major score.

But it rankled with me. I didn't do the work I was supposed to do, and I dug deeper. I knew I would find something, and I did. But not what I was expecting.

The bar owner Reacher had seen was the doctor's brother-in-law. The woman with silver in her hair. They were family.

I was dizzy with fatigue, which helped, in a way. I made lightning connections a rational mind might have dismissed. Kubota's thick file, full of failed attempts to win a warrant. The endless quest for more. The need to see someone beaten, or worse. The relentless beep of Reacher's bedside monitor, too strong for a sick man. His clear eyes and his lucid mind, after opiates said to be strong enough to fell a horse.

I made my third trip to the hospital. Reacher's room was empty. There were no signs of recent occupation. The woman with silver in her hair swore she had treated no gunshot victims on the night in question. She invited me to check her records. Her records were blank. I sat down with the nurses, one at a time. No one talked.

Then I pictured Reacher, on the night in question, unable to find Kubota because Kubota was out of town. I pictured him heading back to the bar, handing back the money, working out a long-term solution with the owner. I pictured the owner, calling his sister-in-law.

I pictured the Greyhound depot at midnight. A tall figure getting on a bus. The bus rolling out. No bags, no schedule, no plan.

I went back to the station house. I walked in, and they gave me a round of applause.