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THE DEATH OF HARRY CROW

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1

The Driver

Leaning into the gale, The Driver plows through knee-deep snow toward the back of his truck. When a blast of icy wind cuts into his face, his eyes clamp shut. *Good.* If he can't see beyond two feet, no one can see him.

He leans against the liftgate and allows the storm to pummel him. Lowering his head, he wonders why he's being subjected to this obstacle. His other hauls had gone off without a hitch – each late-night drive, each boat ride through freezing waters, each delivery to that mass of unforgiving stone.

To soothe The Driver's grief and agony, God came to his bed one night and whispered details of a MasterPlan into his ear. Since then, the plan has been unfolding perfectly. *But this fucking storm could ruin everything!*

His anger with the elements raging, The Driver feels the urge to smash his head against the truck!
Make it stop!

He knows he's losing his mind. No matter. He's committed to the plan. If it takes his life to complete it, he'll gladly give it.

Son of a bitch! The Driver screams. Then he unlocks the padlock on the steel bar, yanks the icy handle and pushes the heavy door upward till he hears the clank of the safety latch.

Hoisting himself into the truck's empty cargo box, he has a strange feeling. He pushes his hood back, eyes adjusting to the dark. Satisfied nothing has changed, he pulls the door down with a clang.

Outside, the wind screams back at him.

His flashlight beam pierces the darkness. There's a box at the base of each side-wall, the size of a freezer chest. To the untrained eye, the two boxes look like the truck's wheel wells. The Driver did the carpentry himself, adding the extra length, doubling the space inside. Installing heating ducts to feed warm air into the custom wheel wells had been critical. January in Maine, the mercury can drop below zero.

The Driver goes to the right wheel well, takes a small, cordless screwdriver from his parka, kneels and begins removing screws. The whine of the cordless tool in the empty space strikes a nerve in his psyche. He stops. Listens.

Only the howl of the storm.

Gloves off, hands freezing, he switches the tool from one hand to the other. When the last screw falls, he lifts the sheet metal and is immediately knocked back by the smell.

Taking a deep breath, he bends forward and plays the flashlight's beam into the space. His heart pounds as he pulls a woolen blanket out and throws it to the floor. The heat-duct-system worked well on his previous runs, but those nights weren't viciously cold like this. The Driver has been out of his heated cab only a few minutes, yet already he's shivering. What if it's just too cold?

After pulling a second blanket out of the well, he sees the bright orange of the *Minus-Thirty* sleeping bag. Grabbing the big tab at the corner, he slides the zipper open and moves the flashlight closer. Twin orbs bounce the light back at him like little mirrors.

Inside the coffin-like space, lifeless eyes stare at him. The Driver jerks back. Stark, grey, frozen, the eyes hold him. As he watches, a drop of liquid forms in the corner of one eye. With agonizing slowness, the drop leaks out, then slides down the frozen cheek.

The Driver holds his breath. He waits.

The eye closes.

When the eye opens, The Driver lets his breath go. *It isn't dead.*

He takes a leather case from his parka, unzips it and removes a long syringe. With his teeth, he pulls the cap off the needle and, once again, leans forward into the well

2

Laura Crow

Home is an old tugboat, 100 feet long, 25 feet wide. Displacing 300 tons, *Paralus* is my personal leviathan. I'm tall and wide and I'm surrounded by steel – above, beside, beneath me. My bare feet slide across it. My shoulders brush against it. My knuckles graze across it. I reside within a universe of iron bolts, diamond plate, welds, rivets. There's even bulletproof glass.

On my good days, living within the constancy of a steel-plated hull makes me feel safe. I'm comforted by its coolness, its solidity, its absolute unwillingness to yield.

But on the dark days, steel turns to lead, and time grinds to a halt. I am oblivious to the outside world. *Don't answer the phone. Don't get the mail. Ignore the tapping at the door.* I could be living in a cave, or on an abandoned planet.

Thursday.

I notice the corner of a pale green envelope sticking through the bottom seam of my ninety-pound front door. I know it's from Paula.

A single piece of pale green stationery carefully folded inside a matching envelope. A handwritten note with the letterhead: *Morning Star Kennel*. At some point she must have quietly slipped it underneath my door. She'd neither tapped nor rung. The woman knows me.

The note reads: *Laura Crow is a friend. Her daughter has gone missing. When she calls, answer the damn phone!*

Paula knows how committed I become when searching for a child. Her referral implies urgency.

When I begin a search, clues don't come to me, and I rarely experience what you might call intuition. Others call what happens inside my head 'a gift' – truth is, what happens in there is mostly chaos and confusion, so disturbing it sometimes makes me crazy. You could call the images I receive puzzles, signs, or even metaphors; but they're more like deconstructed concepts tossed into a blender. Which is just about what my head feels like after I get them.

But regardless, I'm in. Because it's a missing girl. Because it's Paula asking. And because I can never say, "No".

The following day. Four in the afternoon.

Low on the horizon, the sun scatters a trillion tiny lights across the surface of the cove. It's so beautiful, it's hard to look away. The ocean breeze brings the smell of salt and mud through portholes, open for the first time in weeks.

The prospect of working again stirs me. Anxious for spring, I feel my energies gathering. This is good. It's been a hard winter. I don't like cold and I'm glad it's almost over. I long to get back to scraping, sanding, and painting my tugboat's hull.

I hear the crunch of tires in the gravel parking lot that abuts the docks. Looking through a small starboard porthole, I see a white Chevy sedan, pulling up to my gangplank. The glare on the windshield makes it impossible to see inside.

I don't go to my door. Instead, I watch.

The engine shuts off. The driver's door opens. A woman steps out, leans against a fender and raises a hand to shade her eyes.

I'm guessing she's five and a half feet. I wouldn't call her skinny, but she looks thinner than I'd imagined. Perhaps even delicate. Suburban mom. Mid-forties. 2.5 kids. In her casual jeans and dark, waist-length coat, Laura Crow is a fine-looking woman.

Balanced against her car, staring up at *Paralus*, Laura Crow looks hesitant. Maybe she's wondering what kind of person lives in a rusty old tugboat. Or maybe she's trying to decide if such a person should be involved, in any way, with her family.

Maybe she'll change her mind. Turn away. Get back in her car. *Leave*. That would be fine with me. There's more than enough work to be done on *Paralus*. I've got a little money in the bank. Enough to keep me out of trouble for a good long time.

Laura Crow drops her hand and curls around the front of her car. As she's doing this, the other door opens and a younger version of her steps out. Laura's daughter has the same body stance, the same coloring as her mother. Together, they begin walking up my gangplank. It appears Mrs Crow has made up her mind.

Life has been tolerable lately. Why do I feel that's all about to change?

3

Amanda

Amanda believes she's in a bed. She thinks she's asleep. There are blankets all over her. She's wrapped in them. Engulfed by them.

Suddenly the floor drops and there's a loud bang. Amanda wakes. Her first thought is, *I can't breathe!* She's being suffocated by the covers! She tries to throw them off, but she can't move her arms!

Her senses seem to go on and off, like a lighthouse in the fog – in and out, like a radio station warbling in a storm. She hears rushing water. Smells gasoline and oil, dead fish, and the caustic stink of fiberglass. She tastes her last meal, her bile, her fear. Feels her hair being pulled from her scalp, her shoulders arched and aching, the roughness of wool scraping on her skin.

She is conscious. Then unconscious. In and out.

More sounds.

An engine thrumming. Moving water.

I'm so cold!

Amanda Crow's head slams into something hard and she goes out again. This time, she doesn't come back.

4

The Crows

Laura Crow has an expressive face and intelligent brown eyes. Shoulder-length brown hair brushes against her beige turtleneck sweater. Next to her, Annie looks just like Laura, minus ten pounds and twenty years.

We're in the salon on board *Paralus*, sitting across from each other in the dinette; a booth like the ones in old diners. There are dark circles under Laura's eyes. As she tells her story, her fingers twitch and her right foot taps on the cool steel floor. Annie Crow looks as if she hopes I might produce her missing twin sister from behind a screen.

As Laura tells me about Amanda's disappearance, Annie's slim fingers twitch and her eyes moisten. The look in Annie's eyes suggests boldness and strength, but her body does not. It looks frail, as if a precisely directed scream might cause it to shatter.

It's apparent that Laura and Annie both think I look familiar. I get that a lot. It's also apparent that Paula has spoken highly of me. The look in Laura's eyes mirrors Annie's – mother and daughter envision me as the hero of their story. They see me bringing Amanda home, safe and sound. I've worked with enough desperate families to know; this kind of misplaced familiarity can be a problem.

Laura begins by telling about a tragic incident that occurred four years ago. Her husband, Harry, was a recovering alcoholic. Hadn't had a drink in years. For some reason unbeknownst to Laura, Harry fell off the wagon on June 6, 2002: the twins' fourteenth birthday. It started in the morning in his workshop, out in the old barn behind the house. By the afternoon, when Harry came into the house to join in the celebration, he'd obviously had a slip and gotten drunk. An argument ensued. Laura demanded that Harry leave, thinking he would go back to his workshop in the barn. She imagined he might even sleep it off in the apartment above. Instead, Harry roared off in his Cadillac and got into a horrible accident. Five people died, including Harry himself.

As Laura finishes this part of their story, Annie's shoulders fall and she closes her eyes.

"Amanda became distant after her father's death," Laura says, softly. "Her grades crashed. She stopped hanging out with her friends and started running around with these kids I'd never seen before. She got hard and crass and had a constant chip on her shoulder. It seemed almost every day she and I would fight. It was chaos. About two years ago she moved out of the house and into the apartment over the workshop. We rarely spoke. She'd have those awful friends of hers over, but the barn is far enough behind the house that it didn't cause too much of a problem. You know, out of sight, out of mind. Things stayed pretty much that way until a few weeks ago when I noticed that Amanda just wasn't there anymore."

She turns her head and looks at Annie.

Annie opens her eyes. As she speaks, two perfect tears spill softly onto her cheeks. "Her friends weren't even from our school. I'd never seen them before. They were very...dirty. They would come and go, and I just tried to ignore them. But then it was quiet out there for a couple of days. When we checked the apartment, she was gone."

"It was obvious," Laura says. "She hadn't been there in a while."

“It must have been hard,” I say.

Neither of them responds. There’s an uncomfortable silence.

Then Laura steals a glance at my dog. Annie does the same. Sitting on her haunches, backed into a corner of the salon, Bradley is huge – 180 pounds. Her fur is brown and black, and short. Her head is lopsided, like it’s been walloped with a lead pipe. Ever since Laura and Annie arrived, Bradley has been fixated on them, her blind eye unblinking, her seeing eye unwavering. Every so often, Bradley’s tongue shoots out and snakes across her nose.

Laura and Annie look back at me. “She’s really something,” Laura says.

I nod.

“She looks...” Laura struggles for a word. “Formidable. She must be quite the watch dog.”

“She is,” I say. “Try coming in here without any warning and you’ll get all the *watch* you can handle.”

Annie’s lower lip begins to tremble. Nice move, Snowman. Subtle.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I didn’t mean to put it that way. I know Bradley’s disfigurement can be unsettling. But she’s really a sweetheart. You have no idea what a little softie she is.”

Annie gives me a look.

“Okay,” I smile. “She’s a *big* softie.”

Laura shakes her head, as if trying to shrug off an old memory. “I was bitten by a big dog when I was a little girl. Ever since, I’ve been... I’ve never seen a dog like her. She’s...umm...” Laura’s lips barely move.

“Scary,” I say.

Laura gives a tremulous smile. “I didn’t want to offend you. Or her.” She nods at Bradley. “But yes. She’s scary.”

“What happened to her?” Annie asks.

Laura bristles. “Annie!”

“No, it’s all right,” I say. “A few years ago, I was throwing some garbage into the dumpster when I heard whimpering. I climbed in and found this little puppy, stuffed inside a trash bag. Her head and face were disfigured, which is probably why they threw her out.” I pause, feeling it in my bones – the ancient anger. “I wanted to find them and...” I look over at Bradley’s sweet, crumpled face.

“What is it?” Laura says. “What did you want to do?”

I look back at Laura. “I wanted to find the person who put her in that bag and kill them.”

“Kill them?” Annie seems to approve. “Literally?”

“Figuratively isn’t worth much.”

Annie looks at me like I’ve answered a question not yet asked.

“The way she looked at me. With that one eye, like her life depended on me.”

“You saved her,” Annie says, with admiration.

“Mm,” I say. “She was adorable, with that one little ear pointing straight out. And those sounds she was making. Kind of mewing, almost like a kitten. From then on we were a couple.”

“A couple.” Annie smiles. “That’s so cute.”

Annie may be warming up to me.

Laura looks relieved. “I see why Paula was so adamant about you. It certainly feels like you’re the one to help us. You know, you look a lot like...”

I raise a hand. “Bridges, yes.”

Laura nods. “Have you ever felt utterly helpless?” She lifts her chin toward Bradley. “Like she must have felt when she was inside that dumpster?”

I look at Bradley, then at Annie and Laura. Reminding myself of their losses, I say nothing.

“This feeling of helplessness, of not knowing what’s happened to Amanda. It’s awful.”

I wait.

“Do you have children?”

I shake my head, no.

Laura looks at Annie, then at me again. “Paula told me you’re a powerful man. Just sitting across from you, I feel it. She says you have hard bark.”

I say nothing.

“Paula says that when you’re looking for a child, nothing will stop you. That you’re fearless. Is that true, Mr Snow?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” I say. “But the only thing that matters is whether or not I can bring your daughter home.” I look at Annie. “If I can save your sister.”

“You know, I just realized...” Laura says. “I remember reading an article in the *Providence Journal* a few years ago. Something about a teenage runaway. The reporter called you The Finding Man.”

No. It was a little girl who called me that. She’ll be with me forever.

“I suppose I should tell you about *this*,” I say, tapping the warm mahogany table.

Laura looks at where I am tapping and then to me, curiously. “The wood is stunning. But I don’t see...”

I cut her off. “This table was built by Bob Shaw. He’s a shipwright. A legend among local artisans.” I stroke the smooth surface with my hand. The joiner work is flawless, and the finish shines like glass. “You may have heard of him,” I say.

Laura shakes her head, no.

“A few summers ago, I helped find Shaw’s missing niece, Kelly. Kelly’s parents – Shaw’s brother and sister-in-law – are heroin addicts. Shaw was certain Kelly took off to get away from them, and he was afraid she’d end up with the wrong people.”

I have Laura and Annie’s full attention now.

“I enlisted the aid of an acquaintance, a man named Mooney.”

Thinking about Mooney, I pause and glance out the salon window. My eyes track along C dock, all the way to its end, to Mooney’s shack. My gliding awareness stops and hovers a few feet above the shack’s roof. I close my eyes. Mooney’s not inside.

Feeling Laura and Annie’s stares, I open my eyes. “Sorry,” I say, and reel my awareness back into the dinette. “Mooney found Kelly, along with two other girls, in an abandoned tenement house in South Providence. Kelly didn’t want to go with Mooney. He took her anyway.

“I don’t know how Mooney did it and I don’t want to know. But the encounter with him scared Kelly so badly, she gave up drugs and stopped hanging with the people who use them. Kelly’s back in school today and doing all right. She’s living with Bob Shaw and his wife, while her father rots in jail. No one knows where the mother is.”

I pause again. Give my story a moment to sink in.

“A few months after Kelly was *saved*” – I smile at Annie – “Shaw built this dinette. His way of saying thank you.”

Laura’s reaction is both grave and comprehending. “Please help us find Amanda.”

I look across the table at the Crows. Their desperation is brittle and bright. My gaze settles on the daughter. She holds my eye. In the midst of this moment, it occurs to me that I know very little about identical twins.

“Annie,” I say. “Help me understand what it feels like to be a twin.”

Annie responds without hesitation, “Amanda and me. We can’t imagine what it would be like to be you. You know what I mean? Just *one*.”

I get a sense of something, like a sacred garment being torn; a separation. Somehow, I know this is the right moment to ask. “Is she alive, Annie?”

Laura gasps.

But Annie doesn’t flinch. “Yes,” she says. “I’d know it if she wasn’t.”

“Mm,” I say, almost to myself. “I think I’d know it, too.”

I speak directly to Annie. “I’ll need to know more about Amanda,” I say.

“Amanda is amazing. Even though we look alike, she’s different from me. She’s strong. Did you know she plays ice hockey? And that she’s a gymnast? Last year she was state champion in the floor exercise. She’s really smart. So smart she doesn’t need to study. Everyone likes Amanda. She’s always smiling. The most popular girl in school.” Annie bows her head again. “At least she *was*, before all this happened.

“Amanda was closer to Dad than I was. She did things with him that I didn’t. Skate. Go to ballgames. Stuff like that. Dad was...” Annie looks down.

Laura takes Annie’s hand and squeezes gently. “It’s okay. If Mr Snow is going to help us, he needs to know everything.”

Annie lifts her head, eyes glistening. “Dad was...a guy. He liked to do guy stuff. Watch football, hockey, work on his car. He went to Amanda’s hockey games, her gymnastic meets. I think that my sister was...” Annie looks down again.

Laura pats Annie’s hand. “Annie’s got this idea that her sister was the son her father never had.”

When mother and daughter look into each other’s eyes, I feel the love and pain of both hearts. And I feel the disappointment, like alternating currents of heat.

Laura and Annie hold each other’s hands on the tabletop. When Annie looks at me, her eyes seem small, her resolve even smaller. “But it’s true, Mr Snow. Amanda was Daddy’s girl. Without him she was lost.”

“What about the police?” I ask.

“I went to them,” Laura says. “The first time, they said she had to be missing at least twenty-four hours. The second time, they said she was eighteen, an adult, and had the right to go wherever she wanted.”

Cops who don’t care. That’s just what I need to hear.

I reach across the table and put my hand on top of theirs. “Try not to worry anymore. We’re going to find Amanda.”