

The Absent and the Damned

Yu

The day starts, as they all do anymore, with pain.

For every breath, every memory, there is a corresponding flayed nerve. The ribs like a side of freezer beef pummeled to a pulp by a boxer. Legs as heavy and lax as a snagged river log. Head that pounds, both with last night's bender and an ongoing, unshakeable torpor.

What the hell went wrong—and how?

He lifts himself up into the heavy weight of the day slowly and mechanically, like a pivoting crane leveraging an I-beam. He slogs his bag of ribs and limb bones over to the sink and squints into the mirror. Face more sallow than merely yellow, one slanted eye blued and bloodied, as swollen and veiny as a walnut.

How he always hated that face, shapelessly soft and effeminate, and just different enough to make him feel like an outsider. A lesser. Barely noticeable, easily dismissed. Hell, part of him thinks, I deserve that shiner.

The water he splashes turns his reflection into a ghost, his face melting. Like the matter has already been decided. And not in his favor.

The image begins to shard off into angles and shapes—triangles and trapezoids spun off by a dance-floor glitter ball, some rounded figures from stage lights, the brain chemistry-altering curves of dark women. He's portal-ed back into the night before, a kaleidoscope's worth of horrors and dishonors. Yet another night when the pursuit of something to numb the pain ends up metastasizing it.

In the dark now, shoulders slumped and otherwise motionless over the sink, the reel from the previous night rolls before him. Transported, he sits astride the runway, orders one of many G&Ts, pops a seconal, and sits rapt in the shadow of a dancer. The blinged-up fat ass of an emcee calls her Cheetah Chocolate. Even amid this reverie-replay, he shudders at the cliché and its stupid racism—and how that should have been a tipoff that something wasn't quite right with her.

Oh, but what wasn't right. The magical blaxploitation 'fro, the strong and defiant features of her mouth and eyes, those long shapely legs, perfect tits. Her youth and the endless possibilities that came with it. Even the fashion aspect of the "cheetah" cliché, the leopard-print leotard she writhed in, the way she wrapped it around the pole, did its work on him. He would dream about her later, perhaps with result.

The joint was crawling with operators, so many insects drooling, drinking, talking shifty deals, likely plotting others' demise. He'd spent another lifetime dealing with these high-functioning lowlifes. Some recognized him, but never came out and said so. If they noted his existence at all, it was with a leer, the upturn at one end of the mouth. The universal symbol of disrespect, or perhaps the lowest form of pity.

Lately, he'd noticed, as the girls at Jiggles got younger, the clientele became much more multicultural and upscale. Which didn't necessarily make it any more

interesting. Scum comes in all colors and flavors. Tailored Italian menswear and a suave dialect could never provide enough polish to make it otherwise.

The new guys brought a vibe that added a sense of expectation. Something new was going on. The suits with the accents gathered to watch the performers, but it wasn't all naked appreciation, so to speak. There were other calculations being made. The equations of the slaver, he thought.

His attentions ran in the other, strictly salacious direction, though he did what he could to cover it up. "Watch like nobody's dancing," was his usual mantra at these places. Keep it cool until you could stuff a fifty in a garter, the transaction that will get you a lap dance, maybe more.

Both buoyed and grounded by the gin, he made eye contact. The leopard girl slinked across the floor in front of him, wearing only a G-string along with all that God gave her. This was his moment, the rare spot when he could make himself something other than an inscrutable Asian stereotype. He looked into her eyes. She smiled, an ear-to-ear job that said something like, "I was expecting that." Or at least that's how he read it.

Soon enough, her quivering ass was in his face. He paused in admiration, grabbed the picture of U.S. Grant out of his shirt pocket and gently slid it along her skin, and then just under the micro strip of fabric. She smiled again, accepted a few more (and lesser) tributes of filthy lucre from a few other railbirds, and ended her set.

He knew what would come next. He'd spent the equivalent of years in smoky dives looking at black flesh, assessing it for warmth and the potential for pleasure. It was his weakness—not the only one, but the proclivity that would define his character, or the warps in it.

Cat Lady would sylph up out of the dark and from his left, and then gently and suggestively rub four fingers of her left hand against the upper part of his left arm. Only then would she swing her face around in front of his, her eyes wide and sparkling, the invitation clear.

It was a trope, a meme, a cliché. There was no real variation from girl to girl. And he lived for it.

His return move was no less unoriginal, and was one he invariably repeated. He'd smile--never easy for him, never natural—and then he'd politely decline the offer to buy her a drink. Instead, he'd cut right to the chase: Can we go someplace more private? She'd beam back with a mimicry of modesty, as if she'd never heard *that* before, and then take his hand and slowly lead him off to whatever red-lit shithole the club used to entertain the chumps who'd pay for a seat in an old chair for an old-fashioned cock teasing.

It was here that he always made his move. Cheetah was beautiful—genuinely beautiful, almost too pure in her movements. There was no cynical pantomime in her performance for him. Another sign of something. Something with a whiff to it. He was too transfixed to think about that now, though.

Even if she hadn't seemed really into him, he would have asked. It's just what he did: "Hey, maybe we could take this to my place sometime tonight? I could make it worth your while. I know you'd make it worth mine."

A nice line, one that covered all the mutual transactional benefits involved. It worked most of the time, as the girls ran angles to make ends meet, and often arranged ways to do it away from the eyes of their pimps or club managers.

Not this time. As soon as he had made his offer, he found himself jacked up above the couch he had been sitting on, and with a patrolman's Glock in his face.

"That's solicitation, motherfucker!"

Whatever was in his pants wilted, even as his pulse raced. His instincts told him to run. The Glock had other ideas. As soon as he recoiled, it slugged him—hard—in the eye. As he tried to collect himself on the floor, the roaring lioness announced her name: Sergeant Michelle Hardaway, of the MPD. She wanted his ID, but kept calling him "Johnny," as if she already knew it.

"Johnny!?! That's a new one. Do I look remotely like a Johnny? Or is it the john thing?" He was laughing now. "Is that it? Do you call all johns 'Johnny?' And what's with the gun? You need a gun to jack up an asshole in a titty bar?"

She was amazed with his cool, but more impressed with her haul. "After weeks of working that pole, I finally get my hands on Johnny Tang. Oh, 'John,' 'Johnny.' Any of those names work for me."

"Johnny *what?* Man, you gotta be kidding. Did you pull that out of your ass? What is it with the fucking names at this place?" He stared at the gun, reassessing the gravity of his situation. Just a case of mistaken identity, but whoever Pussycat thought he was warranted artillery. That meant something.

"I'm reaching for my wallet now—slowly."

He stares back at the mirror now, thinking, this is where I tell her it all went wrong—and how: Eighteen years on the metro force, and for the last ten of that, the best homicide dick in the nation's capital. The guy assigned to solve the thorny case of a murdered senator, and others made possible by a murderous nun. His surname was always a joke. It haunted him all through school and beyond. But by the time he had become a big shot cop, it was a joke that cut both ways.

Killers: Landon Yu would *land you* in prison. His case clearance rate was a remarkable 98 percent. No one else in the District, or likely in any other major urban homicide squad room, could touch him.

Years of studying forensics followed a lifelong habit--one made of fear, from his own sense of alien-ness--of observing human behavior. He understood where to find clues near the dead body, how a liar talks, exactly how the life leached out of a person. He cared about what the corpse's life was like. He gave reporters good, often wise quotes about who they were and what their lives meant.

Decorations and fame. Beautiful wife (a hotshot DA, no less) and lovely daughter. Invitations to police conventions all over the country, where cops, commissioners, and chiefs fawned over him, prodding him for more on his methods over Scotch and steak dinners he never paid for. A banquet for the nation's top cops. At the fucking White House.

And also: Black strippers he couldn't get enough of. A polyglot harem of them. Speed to keep the party or the casework going. Too much booze and pills to come down from it all. No matter how good the sex, it was never enough.

There was more, a backstory with twisted dimensions, tangled layers: Parents who fled China during the Cultural Revolution and hated themselves for it, setting

up a laundry shop on U Street. They rationalized their desertion of Mao and the cause by pouring all their hopes into young Landon, named after a TV actor on a show that featured a Chinese houseboy. Family honor. Christian evangelism. The weight of an entire family unit and family line upon him, their only child. Their Jesus.

And now, as the mirror again worked its magic, he had a gun in his face and his wallet out. It was like being robbed, he thought, but he had no more dignity to take.

Hardaway's face simultaneously registered disappointment and disbelief. He wasn't Tang, whoever the hell that was. "Holy shit. Yu? That Yu? Muthafuck."

Now, he had the upper hand. He needed to dodge the solicitation charge. He was still on probation. So, he went to work. "You know, I really thought you were special. It's not like I would ask anybody else to come home with me. And if you noticed, I never mentioned money. Sorry if I'm not your man, but wouldn't it be better for both of us if I just walked out of here?"

He ran his hand over his eye to rate the damage. There was blood. He showed it to her. "Looks like I'm the one in some grief here."

Hardaway sat on the back of the chair, which now served no entertainment purpose. "So, all that shit's true? You and black chicks. Oh, how the mighty warrior has fallen."

"Look, I paid my price. Three years in prison. You know what that's like for a cop. I do dick work on my own now. Who's this Tang guy, anyway? Why would an MPD cop care enough to go through all this just to find him?"

Beyond disappointment, and a bit out of her mind because of it, Hardaway did something she usually never does: She talked. The District was being infiltrated by foreign mobs—Asian, Eastern European, Russian—that were replacing the dirty money lost via the decriminalization of pot by creating networks of young girls for sale, she told him in a whisper.

He responded with a look that said, "So?"

"We're talking about kidnappings here—sometimes with actual kids."

He'd heard bits of this before, during his cop days. Girls abducted or tricked at Union Station and coerced or otherwise brutalized into the life.

"Something new in that?"

"No," she answered. "But the numbers are exploding. Girls are being shipped over here from everywhere else. There are rumors there are American women getting exported against their will. And then there are the murders."

"Murders? Here?"

"You heard about the three girls found floating in the Anacostia lately?"

"Sure. Sounded like whores who had come up against a bad john, maybe the same one. I thought there had to be a connection."

"No. These are young women who fought back against the men who wanted to imprison them and then put them to work on the street. But we're having a hard time nailing it all down. They keep moving from warehouse to warehouse, usually throughout the Southeast, across the river. I came up here to see if we could work from the head down. Catch one of the mooks running the operations. Johnny Tang has ties to China. We know he exists and that he has been seen in places like this one, that he might be placing some girls here. But I can't crack it."

The opportunity. He saw it right away. He'd been so locked into his self-pity, his need to salve his wounds, that he hadn't put together those murders, hadn't seen the pattern. In the past, those disappearances and dire discoveries would have grabbed his attention, and then assembled themselves for him, like a jigsaw puzzle that you can control with your mind. He would have encompassed it, saw the conspiratorial sense of it all. Instead, he'd allowed his sources to languish, having neglected the street corner know-it-alls whose eyes absorbed the sad truths of the city, not to mention the network of junkies and freaks who'd unload once they got a \$20 or a cheap color TV out of him.

He sighed inwardly at the dereliction of duty. But the anxiety of his predicament overcame his weariness, that old familiar feeling of being overwhelmed, and forced him into action.

"I know you're going to think I'm crazy, but I think I can help—and I'd like to help. I'm the best private dick in town and as you know from my reputation, nobody can pull together sources like I can."

She looked at him for a while. Was it pity or disgust? As it turned out, it was genuine consideration, tinged with doubt.

"I'll bet you can. But I'm also betting that my sarge wants me and the force to have nothing to do with you. And after what you did, I think you can understand why."

He wouldn't give up that easily. "OK, but what if I get to work on my own on this, like I'm your unnamed informant, the guy who gives you tjps that help you crack this? You won't even have to say who it is."

"And what would that do for you? You won't be able to bill anybody, grab any credit, or even let people know you were the hero who saved the MPD from its own ineptitude." She was back to glowering at him now. All the sex he had seen in her before was long gone. "And why would a half-assed G-string puller at a titty bar give a damn about any of these dead girls?"

His head hung. "Oh, I have a million reasons. One for every damn thing I've lost."

She knew she'd stung him, cut him down to size. She could also see that he hurt enough to mean what he was saying, and that there was a chance, at least, that he could prove useful. She gave him her card.

"You hear anything, call me. If I hear you're mentioning me or the MPD during your, er, investigation, I'll find a reason to jack you up. And stay away from places like this, especially if you see me working in one of them."

She handed him back his wallet and waited for him to leave before heading to the dressing room to become something other than an object.

In the meantime, he tramped his way through the weeds popping up in the cracks of the parking lot pavement. He slowly lowered himself into the Taurus rust bucket he bought at a police vehicle auction right after his release and thought about the possibilities, the chance to be useful, to refocus and reawaken his skills. Any bit of hope equaled a reason to keep going, a dangling carrot that could keep you walking toward the cliff.

Even temporary relief on that score was welcome. The problem, the unsolvable puzzle, he knows, is that life is too long. The length of the years. It naturally acts as the sun that nourishes your weaknesses into full bloom. They burst forth,

announcing you as you really are. Sure, you might hit your stride for a while, impress some people, make your way. But soon enough, the things you can't do or handle stare you down, and the little rewards you conjure up to make life worth living finish the job. It all becomes your scarlet letter. People come to see you for the pathetic sham you really are.

But still, there was something to be said for that stride.

The ring of the phone in his room—welfare fleabags are the last places with complimentary landlines—shakes him out of it. The fractals of the scene disappear into a shimmery whole, one that now reflects little more than his broken face.

The call comes from a friendly voice—an old contact, one with power—but today with more than a shot glass full of desperation to it too. It needs Yu's help, and though for years he has doubted whether he had it to give anymore, his voice surprises him with its confidence: "I'll do all I can." And finally: "I'll be right over."