

The Haze

Bibliomysteries

by James W. Hall, 1947–

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He killed for a living. Killed a lot of people a long way back. How far back he wasn't sure. Not sure of a lot these days. The days of haze.

Who he was now, a professional killer stuck in a nursing home. New Jersey, or maybe Florida. Not sure. But a home, the kind of place she promised she'd never

take him. Lied to him. After all he'd done for her. Raised her, protected her, funded her hobbies, defended her against her mother. Her mother was the killer's wife. Where was she, that wife? What was her name? More things he didn't remember.

He went about his morning routine. Ate his two sunnyside eggs and toast and half a grapefruit, got a thrill levering the sections out with the pointy spoon. That's where his thrills came from these days.

He showered, doing it the same as always, start at the top. Shampoo his thick white hair, then his face, after that using his chest hair to lather up, with special attention to his armpits, ending with his ass. He valued a clean ass. Even now, even in his current state of disorder. He wasn't so far gone he'd put up with a dirty butt.

He knew he was confused. What he didn't know was exactly how much. In particular, he didn't know which stories from his past were his own actual personal history, or things he lifted from the stories of others. People he'd talked to or maybe books he'd read.

Books, it was mainly crime writers, that's who he'd been reading since he was a snotty kid growing up in West Virginia, or somewhere deprived like that, maybe Kentucky, Tennessee. He's reading crime novels while his wife, sitting on her side of the cold bed, read whatever it was she read. Women's books, how to fix a dying marriage, how to be happy, like that was in a book, like any of it was.

Crime writers, his specialty, was what his daughter did now. Worked in a store that sold the kind of books he used to read. Did he cause that? Did he drive his daughter, what was her name, did he drive her into crime? He'd ask her if she ever came back for a visit, built up her courage to face her father again after dumping him in this hellhole.

He had a mission. You had to have a mission. Something you thought about first thing in the morning when you woke up. His was to break out of this damn place. Kill anybody stood in his way. Especially the Puerto Rican who made him swallow the pills.

Force feeding dope pills was an old standby in the stories he read. Was it Chandler with the stocky guys in white uniforms? He thought he remembered a Travis book. Nightmare something. A guy being fed pills or maybe shots in the arm. A guy stuck in a perpetual nightmare. It was in Chandler too, he thought. Marlowe or Sam Spade. Maybe Archer, what was his name? Jake? No, no, it was Lew.

He'd known a Lew. He'd killed a Lew. A job, one of his last. Italian guy was boffing somebody's young wife. He couldn't recall whose. But a wife. He was sure of that. Or maybe a daughter. But he'd shot Lew. Three in the head, one in the heart. His signature. Four rounds. That way the dead stayed dead. He'd made a name for himself, thirty years in the business. Four slugs, three up, one down. His trademark. He remembered that very clearly. Not lost in the haze.

So there, that's what his mission was. Shoot his way out of this place.

First he needed to find his pistol. A .38, snubbie. Not a fancy gun. You get up close enough, you didn't need a top of the line gun to whack somebody. That was his approach, old school. Walk right up to the hit, breathe his air, nose to nose, then three up, one down.

He looked in the bureau for his gun. Dug under his socks and his Jockeys, looked in the closet, in the teeny kitchen, behind the dishes, the bowls, the glasses, everything on the shelves. He went in the bathroom, lifted the lid on the toilet. That's where they taped the guns sometime. Movies, books, that's where it was. Place nobody looked. The Godfather, that scene with whoever it was.

But here in the home, there was no gun. No gun anywhere.

Okay, fine. He'd find another way, maybe bribe somebody to unlock a door.

He needed to get on a schedule. He always had a schedule. It was another hallmark. A schedule: first this, then that, bing, bing, bing. In bed by eight, lights out at nine, up by four. Wake in the dark. An hour or two when nobody was up. He'd plan his day. Map out the hours ahead. Print it in a Month-in-a-Glance calendar. He'd never been good with dates and times and days of the week, had to see it written down for it to make sense. Maybe the haze had started early. Or was that some other guy, some guy from a book. Elmore whatever his name was.

So there you go. That was his problem. His big mountain to climb. Not sure if he was remembering shit he actually did or shit he read.

A plan. A sneaky plan, that's what he needed. He walked around the room. Trying to outwalk the haze, get some blood flowing into his skull. The room was tiny. He'd been in bigger jail cells. Spent years in a couple, one down in Florida, Raiford, he thought, counting the days, finding ways to cope.

That was all it was, all any of it was. Ways to cope. Doing things to fill up the hours, make them pass. That was the big secret. You climb a mountain, claw your way to the top, finally you're there at the summit, there's a wise man up there, you ask what's the secret and he says, hey, find something to fill up the hours. That's all there is. You can pay on your way down.

She came, his daughter. She smiled at him. Brought him some books. His weekly ration. Four hardbacks. His eyes weren't good enough for paperbacks.

"You'll like this one, Pop."

A red cover, the shadow of a man looking down an alley.

"Already read it."

"Just came out this week, Pop. No way you read it."

"I'm on top of things. I read it already. What else you got?"

She showed him the other three. Covers used to have dames on them. You could stare at the women, imagine sinking into them. You could fall in love. Stare for hours before you even started to read. Every time you closed the book, there she was and her cleavage, her legs and hips. All those curves.

Now it was all shadows and shit.

"That all you got? You work in a bookstore, you bring me this crap?"

She left. The books stayed behind.

There was one written by a woman author. A photo of her in the back. Blonde, nice rack, trying to hide them under all those fluffy clothes like she was embarrassed by them. But still you could catch the outline. Just barely. But worth looking at. Better than the other photos, guys trying to be tough, slouching against walls or against the hoods of old cars, wearing leather jackets, mean ass dogs with spiked collars. Big deal. They were writers for christsakes. How tough could they be, sitting in a room all day, writing down the shit in their heads, make-believe shit.

His pills came at six. Right on time. Javier, the Puerto Rican, shiny shaved head. Earrings.

Christ, he'd lived too long. Guys wore earrings now. Guys married guys. He'd lived a century too long.

He palmed the pills, faked slinging them into his mouth. Then talking to Javier, showing him the photo of the woman writer.

"How big you think her tits are?"

"I saw what you did with them pills, Mr. Connors. You need to take them. They're good for you."

"Like vitamins?"

"Better than vitamins."

"You live in the haze, Javier?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"The haze, this shit."

He swung his arm around through the air.

"Let's see the pills, Mr. Connors. I help you with them."

He swallowed the pills. The haze hung on.

In bed by eight, reading the book by the woman. About a serial killer. Like there weren't enough of those already. But this one was a woman. An old woman. She was about his age. Suffering from the haze like him, only not so dense yet. She goes out every night, finds somebody doing wrong, it could be a little thing, a little mean thing, somebody purse-snatching, shoplifting, whatever, not bad enough to kill somebody over, but she goes ahead and kills. That helps her sleep.

Something he should try.

He could use a good night's sleep.

He reads. Comes to a good part. The old woman bumps into a man her age. A retired killer. They talk, they have dinner, they walk on the city sidewalk, Manhattan maybe, they laugh about something. They look at the moon. They look at the stars. The two of them, they've got things in common. Killing is just one. They like pasta. They like to read. They got problems with their kids who want to stash them away somewhere, force feed them pills.

"I'm going to have to kill my daughter," he tells her.

"Your own daughter? That's extreme."

"Is it?"

"Your own flesh and blood, hell yes, extremely extreme."

"If I'm going to escape the home, be with you, there's only one choice. She's got to go."

"Maybe you could sneak out of the home."

"I tried that. They're always watching."

"I could help you."

"You'd do that?"

"What else I have to do? I'm tired of killing. I'm ready to hang it up. I just been doing it to fill up the hours."

"Giving up killing isn't as easy as you think. Killing becomes a way of life."

They kissed. They went to bed. All of it described the way he liked it in books. None of this timid bullshit like they close the bedroom door and the reader is stuck out in the hallway, can't even hear them moaning. No, this woman writer

showed everything. Not flinching at any of it, or being coy like how he hated some writers did it. That was one of his peeves. Not showing the real world. Like nobody ever took a dump in books. Dumps were important. You couldn't live without taking a dump. After the two old farts made love, both of them took dumps.

It was a good book.

He fell asleep.

Woke in the haze. Deep gray smog.

Javier was there with his sunnysides.

"You have a good night, Mr. Connors?"

"You ever screw an old lady, Javi?"

"Not that I recall."

"You having trouble with your memory, boy?"

Javier set the breakfast tray on his table. Little round thing by a window.

"Eat your eggs, Mr. Connors. Drink that coffee while it's hot."

"Who do I have to kill to get out of here?"

"You're being funny again, Mr. Connors."

"A regular Jack Benny," he said. "Know who that was?"

Javier was gone, leaving behind the eggs and coffee and unbuttered toast.

He spent the day with his book. The old lady serial killer and the retired hitman.

They caught a cab together, went downtown, way down to the bookstore where his daughter worked. They walked past the store, looked in the window, kept walking.

"She's pretty."

"Dark-haired like her mother."

"Only girl I saw was a blonde."

"Yeah, that's her."

"What's her name?"

"Like what, this is a test? I got to remember everybody's name?"

"Don't get huffy."

"That was huffy? You haven't seen huffy."

Their first big fight.

They walk for a while without talking. She's mad. He's mad too and hurt.

At a corner, it's down near Soho, she hails a cab, gets in, drives away. Doesn't look back.

"Shit," he said. "Left me standing in the cold, not sure where I am. Shit."

He threw the book at the door.

Javier is there to check on him. Wondering why there's noise. Why the book's sprawled on the floor.

"I'm fine. It's the book that's screwed up. I'm fine."

"You look pale."

"She left the guy, just walked away. Left him on the sidewalk, it's a part of town I don't know where I am. Way down there, it's cold, it's freezing and she's gone. I don't have my wallet. I can't get a cab. Nobody's stopping for me."

"It's summer, Mr. Connors. There's flowers blooming out your window."

"I'm talking about the book, you idiot. It's freezing on the streets. She dumped me, walked away. We had a little disagreement is all. A spat."

"You're in this book?"

Javier is holding the book he threw.

"I'm telling you, I'm lost, don't know which way is up, and she just walked away. Broke my heart. Broke it in half and pissed on the pieces."

Javier left. His daughter came.

"You keep throwing things, Pops. They don't allow that."

"What're they going to do, toss me out?"

"If you keep acting like a child, yeah, they might."

"It's these goddam books you bring. You're trying to drive me nuts. Breaking my heart. Making me climb up the mountain and I get up there and it's some asshole making fun of me. Pay on your way down he says. Like it's all some kind of joke and I'm not in on it."

"Pops, they won't let you stay, you keep throwing things."

"Don't bring any more of those goddam books. You hear me? I got better things to do with my time. I don't need books breaking my heart all day and night. Okay? We clear?"

It was another day or maybe it was the same one only later. Hazy day.

He picked up the book and found his place. It was easy enough. Let the book fall open, it's the place.

He's out on the freezing ass street and the cab is disappearing and his heart is aching like there's a slug in it. Three in the head, one in the heart. His motto. His calling card. He's out there looking around for a street sign, not sure which way is uptown where he wants to go, his hotel, or his apartment.

A cab pulls up, door comes open.

It's her. The serial killer who cracked his heart in half and drove off and left him.

"You still angry at me?"

"I was never angry. You haven't seen angry."

"You're a gruff old man."

"You going my way or you here to taunt me?"

They drive off. The cabbie is a black guy. He's checking them out in the mirror like they're the first two old fart killers he's ever seen.

"Your place or mine?"

"Do you even have a place?" She smiled like it was a joke.

"Your place," he said. "I bet your sheets are rose petals."

"Poetry all of a sudden. That's supposed to sweep me up?"

"Poetry? You haven't seen from poetry."

Javier was back with the pills.

"I've got a mission," he told Javier. "You want in?"

"Depends."

"In or out? Make up your mind and make it quick."

Was that from somewhere? Maybe that guy Higgins. There was a name he remembered. Guys talking, that's the whole story. Guys talking and talking, the back and forth, street shit. Getting it right, hitting the notes pure and simple.

"You want to break out of here, am I right?"

Sometimes it's better not to talk. Sometimes that's wiser.

Javier spoke into the silence. "You want, I could help you."

He let some more silence mount up and Javier said, "Okay, I got a price. Nothing's free in this world, you know that. I could help you. I like you, Mr. Connors, and I can see you're suffocating in this joint. I'll arrange an exit. It won't be easy. They's cameras, security stuff. People on duty around the clock. It's not easy, but I got a way to do it if you're interested."

He was interested, but the silence was working for him so it was hard to stop. Spent his life talking. Spent his life giving shit and taking it, messing with people, making them do what he wanted them to, setting them up with just the right words. Now he was seeing the beauty of stillness, the raw power of it.

"I can see you're not up to talking about it just now. But I'll be back at bedtime, if you want to discuss it, what I got in mind, we can do it then, or whenever you're ready, fine by me."

Javier left.

He climbed into bed and read the book. The story was waiting for him like stories do. Right where he left it. Christ it was hard to keep it all straight. You had a life, a long, complicated life full of a thousand things every day, you heard things, read things, lived things, how could you know which compartment anything was stored in, where it happened originally? Some people could do it, sure. People could say, yeah, that was from here and that was from there. And that meant they could stay in their own houses and not get shipped to the home. But what was that? Knowing where something was from, where it originated. Hey, who gives a shit? It was all knocking around inside him, equal parts this, and equal parts that.

The old lady serial killer was an experienced lover, a woman of the world who knew her business. She was beautiful in bed, perfect and beautiful. She reminded him of someone he'd made love to a long time ago when he was a young man. A Mexican girl of nineteen or twenty named Linda Vargas, black shining hair, black shining eyes. Or was she a character in a book? It didn't matter. He loved that woman, Linda Vargas, just the same as he loved the lady serial killer, loved her up and down and inside and out, her skin like rose petals and silk, her skin as sleek and soft as summer moonlight filtering through a sweet midnight haze.

And he stopped reading.

You had to stop sometimes. Show a little discipline, leave some in the bottle for tomorrow. He pulled up the sheets. His hand sliding into his underpants. His old friend. Been through the wars together, sleeping now, taking a furlough, on the sidelines. But he gave it a few pulls for old times' sake, felt it come to life. Half life anyway. Half was all he could manage. This time of life half was plenty.

He slept.

The important thing about missions is to keep them going. They can change, you had to adjust to circumstances, but you keep going forward, keep the goal in mind, otherwise, what've you got? You got that Greek guy pushing the boulder up the mountain and it sliding down the other side. You got one hazy day after another, the days stacking up without any progress, any hope.

Javier came with his sunnysides.

"You have a nice night sleeping?"

"I might've slept, I don't know. The state I'm in, how'm I supposed to tell?"

"You consider my proposal?"

"I need to hear a price."

"I been thinking about that, about money, you know what it's worth to you, what the risk I'm taking is worth to me, and I'm having a hard time putting a number on it. But okay, since you want a number, okay, five thousand, I get you out of here, take you wherever you want to go, drop you off free and clear."

"Five thousand bucks."

"American dollars. You get the first class ride out of here."

"I don't trust you, Javi."

"You think I take your money, don't deliver? What am I, crazy? You think I risk that, knowing who you are, what you did in your life, before you came to the home, the way you made your money. You think I'd cross a man like you?"

"I'm old. Some days I'm confused. Wouldn't be hard to pull one on me."

"I know you'd come for me. I know you'd track me down wherever I hid. Isn't no running from men like you. Professionals. I know that. So you can trust me, Mr. Connors. I'm not stupid like that, take your money and walk away."

"I'll have the five for you tomorrow."

Back to the book by the woman writer. Things heating up. The old lady serial killer, her name is Varla, nice exotic ring to it, Polish or gypsy or something, she'd decided she wanted to kill a young lady who worked in a bookstore, a young lady who'd done harm to her new manfriend, the retired professional killer, Little Mo Connors.

"That's my daughter, my own flesh and blood. You can't kill her."

"It's the only way you're going to get out of the home. She's the impediment. Once she's gone, you're free."

"Am I?"

"I'm doing you a favor."

They staked out the bookstore. It was summer, tables out on the sidewalk at the Italian place across the street. They took a table, the two old killers, and watched the bookstore. It was close to lunch time, the restaurant getting busy, so they had to order. Fettuccini alfredo for her, tortellini for him.

"Bad for my blood sugar," he said. "But what the hell. Screw my blood sugar."

"There she is, coming out the front door."

"Christ, she's coming this way. She'll see us. She'll know what we're up to. We should move."

Varla put a hand on his leg below the table. An electric thrill he hadn't felt in years.

"Dad, what're you doing here?"

"Reading a book, what does it look like?"

"The woman novelist, I told you you'd like her. She's right up your alley."

"I want out of here," he told her. "That's my goal, to escape this hellhole."

"Dad, this is a beautiful place. The food is good, people love you here. I was just talking to Javier and he was going on and on about what a funny guy you were, all the stories you been telling him."

"He keeps me doped up."

"Those are blood pressure pills, Dad. If you don't take them, you could have a stroke."

"Who do I have to kill to get out of this hellhole?"

"I brought you some more books. Another one by the woman writer. I'm glad you like her so much. I thought you would."

"I met somebody. Her name is Varla."

His daughter smiled at him.

"Javier told me. She sounds wonderful. When can I meet her?"

"Who?"

"Varla, your gal pal."

He'd said too much, given away a secret. The haze did that, it confused him, kept him loopy. He wasn't sure who he was talking to or why. He wasn't sure if he was remembering shit he did or shit he read or some other kind of shit entirely. Shit he made up while he sat at the window and looked out at the snow and the palm trees. He stopped talking. Refused to say another word.

His daughter left. Good riddance.

He searched his room for his pistol. Took out each pair of underwear, every T-shirt, scooted the bureau away from the wall, felt the floorboards for a secret shelf, a hidey hole like he'd used back in his day for all his weapons. Killers threw the guns away off bridges into rivers. But that was in books. That was bullshit. Buying new guns was a hassle. So he avoided it, held on to the ones he'd used. So what if some cop came around and took his gun and ran a ballistics test on the slugs. So what? He'd get sent to prison. Big deal. He was in prison already. Everyone told him how great it was, the food was good, like that mattered. Like it wasn't a box with a single, tiny window.

He didn't find the gun. But he knew it was there. He was tired of looking.

He put on his pajamas and got into bed to read. It was the middle of the afternoon. Big snowflakes coming down, white as the birds standing in the lawn. He opened the book he'd been reading, found his place.

Varla and Little Mo were still in bed together. They'd been making love all afternoon and now they were smoking cigarettes and blowing the smoke up at the ceiling.

"How do you feel?" Varla asked him.

"Got my ashes hauled three times in a row, how'm I supposed to feel? Good, real good."

"I mean about killing your little girl, your own flesh and blood."

"Kind of shitty. But there was no choice, was there?"

"There wasn't."

"I feel shitty anyway."

"How many is that for you?"

"How many what?"

"Notches on your pistola."

"I stopped counting years ago. It's just a number."

"I'm at sixteen," she said. "I'm going to stop soon. It's lost its thrill."

"I never got a thrill. It was just work. A job."

"You didn't enjoy it at all?"

"That's sick," he said.

"You're calling me sick?"

"Thrill killing is sick, yeah. Don't take it personally."

"How else am I going to take it?"

Varla got out of bed. Her breasts were sagging, her pubes were half gone. But Little Mo thought she was hot anyway.

“We having another fight?”

“This is turning into a stormy relationship. I’m not sure I want that.”

Someone was knocking on the door.

“It’s the cops,” Little Mo said. “Come to arrest us for all our sex noise.”

It wasn’t the cops. It was Javier. He kept his eyes down, not looking at Varla’s nakedness.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Mr. Connors and Mrs. Hardy. I apologize, but something happened. Something bad happened. I got to tell you some bad news.”

Varla said, “His daughter’s dead. Little Miss Priss got herself shot. Selling violent books, it came back to bite her in the ass.”

“How’d you know that?” Javier said. “Somebody call you?”

“Go on, Little Mo, tell Javier. Confess what you did.”

He didn’t know what to say. He’d never confessed to anything. His lawyers told him that. Keep your mouth shut, take the fifth, I’ll do the talking.

Javier picked up the book that was lying on the floor and brought it over to the bed and set it on the bedside table.

“You were throwing books again, Mr. Connors. Your daughter asked me to tell her if you did that again. And I got to report you to the supervisor.”

“Why would you report me?”

“You could be dangerous to yourself or others. These are hardbacks. Somebody could get knocked down.”

“Paperbacks, the print is too small.”

“Maybe you should find a different kind of book doesn’t stir you up so much.”

“What? A boring book? That what you’re saying? If I read a bunch of boring books you’ll let me stay in this hellhole?”

“It’s time for your pills, Mr. Connors.”

“Of course it is. Keep me stoned, I can’t read, I can’t do anything but look out the window at the palm trees.”

“You’re a funny guy, Mr. Connors. Always with the joke.”

He took the pills. Walked around the room. He stopped. He pressed his ear to the door. Nobody in the hallway. He opened the door, looked out. Hallway empty. He slipped out, headed up the hall away from the lobby and the card room and the exercise room and the TV room.

He didn’t need his .38. He’d killed before with his hands. He wasn’t as strong as before, but the moves were still there, the sharp hand blade to the throat, the eye gouge, bring them down, knees on the chest, snap the windpipe. He’d taken out Uncle Marvin Shuster that way. He’d turned off the lights on Billy Shapely and Shorty Crump with his bare hands. It was coming back to him through the haze, his history, his triumphs, his fearsome power, the respect he’d once commanded. Not like the killers in the books he read, always neat and organized, no, he’d been down in the slime and spit and bloody snot, flailing with the targets, feeling the life wriggle out of some badass mothers. Little Mo, one scary ass bastard. Coming back to him, his steely nerve.

“Mr. Connors, how are you this fine evening?”

It was Varla Hardy. She had on a flannel nightgown printed with flowers. Her hair was in a net. Her glasses were smudged.

"I'm breaking out of here. Care to join me?"

"Where would we go?"

"Anywhere but here."

"It's cold outside this time of night."

"I thought you were adventurous. I thought you were strong like bull and my equal in all things."

"You've been reading again, haven't you?"

"So?"

"It makes you silly. It gives you ideas. It confuses you. TV is better."

"TV is in one ear out the other."

"That's the whole point. It's better that way. Stories from books get caught inside you, they make you different. They're dangerous."

"I'm already dangerous. I was a hired gun. You wanted someone gone, you called Little Mo Connors."

"Oh, Mo. I don't like it when you're like this. You scare me."

She leaned forward and whispered in his ear: "Javier is at the door listening, this is for his benefit."

He nodded at her and tiptoed to Varla's door and yanked it open.

Javier jumped back.

"Mr. Connors, the police are out at the front desk. They want to talk to you. I don't know what it's about."

"It's okay, Javi. I'm ready to talk to them." He turned to Varla. "Don't worry, honey. I'll keep you out of it."

Two cops, one man, one woman came into Little Mo's room.

"I think you better sit down, Mr. Connors."

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said. "I could, but I won't."

The woman cop was built like a racing yacht. Sleek and curvy and with fast eyes. He could look at her for hours and never blink.

She said, "Mr. Connors, your daughter, Jennifer, was the victim of a brutal assault."

He nodded. This is how cops worked. Hit you in the face with a brick then when you were goofy with the pain they move in for the kill. Sneaky bastards.

"She was killed in a robbery at the store where she works."

"A bookstore," he said. "I know the place. I read those books. She brings me three or four every week. A good daughter. We have books in common. And crime."

"Yes, sir." The man cop was fat and sweaty and had a pencil moustache.

"A bookstore downtown. Two suspects entered the store and tied up the owner and one other worker, then they assaulted your daughter. She struggled heroically. We can tell that from her wounds. You should be proud of her courage. But she succumbed to her injuries and is no longer with us. We're deeply sorry, sir."

He said he wanted to go to bed now if that was okay. He was tired. A long day. A lot had happened. Some of it not so good.

They understood and were about to leave when the man cop said, "Hey, I know you."

"Is that right?"

"You're Little Mo, you worked for Slick Dicky Scarlini, that shitface."

"Yes, I did. So?"

The man cop said to the woman cop, "This old guy, looking at him it's hard to picture, but he was Scarlini's top enforcer."

"I thought that guy, the enforcer, was in jail."

"Yeah, how come you're not in jail, all the shit you pulled?"

"Look around you," he said. "This isn't jail?"

"Got a point," the man cop said.

"Sorry about your daughter," the woman cop said. "Though it is kind of poetic justice, you know what I'm saying? Karma kickback for all the nastiness you pulled."

When they left he got in bed and took the book off his bedside table and found his place again. It was good to have a book he liked, a way to escape the confusion of the day. The pain of his daughter's senseless death. He'd liked that girl. He hoped it wasn't him that killed her. He hoped he didn't have that on his conscience. Even if he didn't remember, it would still be there. Like a tiny bright red mole you can barely see, overnight it can turn into a flesh-eating cancer.

The book was good, told a decent story. He followed along and watched it unfold and all the bullshit that had happened that day and in the days and months before that, they didn't bother him while he was reading, while he was off in another place that made more sense, the haze lifted, the hours filled.

Javi was there with the sunnysides. Two of them and toast and another grapefruit with the slices already sliced, all you had to do was spoon them out. So okay, maybe the food was pretty good here, but he still wanted to escape and now that his daughter was gone, there was nothing stopping him.

Javi put the paper cup with his pills on the tray and said, "Time to swallow them all down."

"I got your five thousand," he said. "Today's the day."

"Let me see the cash and we'll talk about it."

"Half up front, half when I'm out of this hellhole."

"Okay, that's fair."

He pulled the money from his bottom drawer. He spotted a gun in there too under his socks where he'd forgotten to look. His old .38 snubbie wrapped in an oily rag. He gave Javi the two thousand five and Javi counted it. All in fifties, didn't take long. Fifties is how he'd done business all his life. Easy to deal them off a wad. Easy to count when Scarlini called him in for a pay day. Hundreds were ostentatious, twenties made too fat a wad.

"Okay, it's all there," Javi said. "So when you want to leave?"

"After dark tonight. And I'm taking Varla with me."

Javi shook his shaved head.

"Oh, no, Mr. Connors. Varla Hardy will set you back another five K. You think I'm giving it away free? No, sir. I'm not some stupid spic. You shouldn't treat me that way. It's insulting to my heritage and my mama. I may have to rethink helping you at all the way you're acting now."

"Varla's coming or the deal's off."

"Ten K for the two of you. That's the going rate, I won't take a peso less."

“Gimme back the two five then. We’re done. I’ll find another way.”

“I’m keeping the cash.”

“How you figure that?”

“You try to get it back I tell the super you’re trying to escape. They’ll double guard you then on.”

Javi left with the money.

Little Mo got dressed in slacks and a shirt. Plaid shirt, brown baggy slacks. Like that mattered, but there you go. He kept the shirttail out to hide the snubbie wedged into the waistband at the small of his back. He walked back to Varla’s room.

“I’m shooting my way out of here. Ready to go?”

Varla purred.

“Let me get my gun.”

“I never saw your gun.”

“I don’t show it to just anybody.”

“Hurry up before I change my mind. There’s a break in the haze. I’m remembering things. Not all of them pleasant.”

“Sorry about your little girl. She was cute but she had to go.”

“Everybody does eventually. It’s how it works. You climb the mountain, the guru up there, he tells you the secret, but it’s a different secret every day. Depends on whether it’s Monday or whatever. He’s got a ton of secrets. Fill up your hours, that’s on Monday. You go on a Thursday, it’s find someone to love. Sunday, it’s breathe, breathe, take it deep. Always something different. You’re looking for what it’s all about, the guy up there, he doesn’t know any more than Javier. It’s all bullshit. It’s haze. Everybody is inside it, not just me. Everybody’s got their own haze.”

“This is stimulating. Big ideas turn me on.”

Varla unbuttoned herself. She let him see her naked flesh. No underwear today. They don’t make underwear can fix what’s happened to her body, or his either. But she’s hot anyway. They crawled into bed. Crawled over each other. He crawls on her, she on him. They crawled together. It’s good, not great. Not much is great anymore. This age, good is about as great as it gets.

They stayed in bed all morning, all afternoon.

“You want me to read to you? I read good.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “No one’s ever read to me before.”

“Not even your mommy?”

“Not her, no. Nobody.”

“I’ll do it.”

He went back to his room, got the book by the woman writer, brought it back, found his place and showed her the page.

“My daughter gave me this book.”

“The poor girl.”

The serial killer and the retired hitman were in a cheap hotel room. Bullet holes in the mattress, blood on the sheets, that kind of place. She was lying in the bed in her mink coat smoking and he was looking out the edge of a curtain at the parking lot.

“How do you know this guy?”

“My business, I know a lot of people. All kinds.”

“He is trustworthy?”

“Hell, no. What we want him for, that’s better. Guy hasn’t told the truth since he was old enough to know the difference.”

“You think this is necessary? Running off to Mexico, that place ain’t what it once was. All the drugs down there, the cartels, beheadings. It’s ugly.”

“Until this town cools off it’s the safest place to be. You’ll like it. Cheap tequila, romantic sunsets.”

“If you can see them through the haze.”

“Isn’t any haze where we’re headed.”

“This guy we’re waiting for, is he a stud?”

He looked over at her.

“What kind of question is that?”

“I’m getting a little tired of your sex moves. I seen ’em all by now. Covering the same ground over and over.”

“Look, I’m distracted at the moment or I’d come over there and slap your face, that kind of disrespect.”

“Do it. It might turn my engines back on.”

“Later,” he said. “Our friend is here.”

The Puerto Rican with the shaved head was at the door.

“Come in, porkchop. Don’t be standing out there attracting attention.”

The kid came in, looked at Varla, got a gleam.

“Javier, meet Varla. And don’t get any ideas.”

“She’s an old lady, amigo. What kind of ideas she give me? Adult diapers?”

“Watch yourself, gringo.”

“You’re the gringo, gringo. Don’t be insulting me with insults.”

“I can’t read any more of this trash,” Varla said. “It’s tedious. It’s not going anywhere.”

“Where does anything go?” he said. “Like in a big circle, that’s all.”

He got out of the warm bed. Varla closed the book and set it aside.

“Thought you said she was a good writer.”

“Hills and valleys, every story has ’em,” he said. “Can’t be hills all the time.”

“What’re they running from anyway?”

“The serial killer murdered his daughter. And the cops are on their trail.”

“Like us.”

“Nobody’s like us. We’re snowflakes, Varla.”

Varla stopped talking. She went in the other room and didn’t come back. The room was empty. It was his room, not hers. He looked around. Yeah, his room. The book sprawled on the floor against the door.

Javier knocked on the door and came in.

“You threw it again, Mr. Connors. That’s the last time we accept that. You are now a danger to yourself and others. Hurling large heavy objects.”

“Yeah, what’re you going to do, toss me out? Great, make my day.”

“We move you to another room on the top floor. Up where we put the people throw things. It’s real quiet up there. The drugs, they work better in the altitude.”

“We had a deal.”

"There isn't any deal, Mr. Connors. We got rules and this is the third time, and that's all the strikes you get.

"I got an excuse. I've been under a lot of pressure since I lost my daughter."

"You didn't lose nobody."

"She was murdered in a robbery yesterday or day before. The cops came."

"Your daughter just left, Mr. Connors. She brought you some new books and she took away the old ones. That's what she told me."

"What?"

"She was in a hurry. I think you upset her, the way you're talking lately."

"She took my book? Varla and the retired hitman."

"I don't know any Varla, but yeah, she took four books with her, left those on the table over there."

"Shit, I wasn't through with that book. It was just getting interesting."

"That's nice. Now it's time for your pills. Let's go now, be a big boy today."

"My daughter's alive?"

"She looked alive to me. That's a pretty woman. Nice shape to her, too."

"Watch it, kid. My daughter's not into that stuff."

"Could have fooled me. She's a looker that one. Everybody stops what they're doing she comes around. Including me. I about dropped a bedpan."

Javi left and Little Mo sat at the small table and looked out at the trees. The books were sitting there, a stack of them. Something different with these. He could smell them. He leaned close. Musty. And they had price stickers on them. Used, two dollars. Discounted hardbacks. His daughter was going cheap on him.

He pushed the stack over, let them tumble onto the tabletop.

Four books. Every one of them with a babe on the cover. Juicy pictures. Fishnet stockings, garter belt, kimonos half open, breasts spilling out.

Old books.

He leaned close and inhaled them. Reminded him of somewhere. It took him a long time, he wasn't sure how long, smelling them and trying to remember until he had it. A library. A half dark library. Not a big city library. Somewhere out in the sticks. An older gentleman behind the desk stamping books for a young girl.

"I like mysteries," the little girl said.

"Oh, so do I," the man said. He stamped her books and passed them to her. "Nothing like a good murder to pass the time, fill up the hours."

"They're scary," the girl said. "I like that. Give me goosebumps."

"Me too. Scary is fun."

"My mom doesn't like me to read. Thinks it's a waste of time. Nobody gets ahead that way, nose in a book."

"Your mommy is an idiot."

The girl took the books into her arms like loaves of bread.

"I'll tell her you said that."

"Please do. Tell her Mo Connors thinks she's an idiot."

"I will. I'll tell her that."

Did he read that somewhere, a character in a story? He wasn't sure.

He opened one of the books, went to the back and there was an envelope pasted to the back cover. Raybun West Virginia Central Library. He looked at the other books. All from the same place, Raybun.

Little Mo went out to the front desk.

"I need to use a phone," he told the nurse. Black woman named Hazel.

"You don't have a cell phone, Mr. Connors?"

"Would I be asking to use the phone if I did?"

"No reason to get nasty."

"You think that was nasty? You don't know from nasty."

"I'll have to dial for you. No long distance calls allowed."

"Call information, Raybun, West Virginia."

"What you want to do that for?"

"Is my business your business?"

"There you go being nasty again."

Hazel punched in the numbers and handed him the phone.

An operator came on. Her hillbilly voice sounded like the slow moan of a coondog.

He told her he wanted the number for the Raybun Central Library.

"That library done closed ten years ago."

"It did?"

"Yes, sir. I hated to see it shut down. But you know how it is, people don't read books no more with the Internet and all. I used to go there my own self when I was a little girl."

"So you remember the librarian in that library? Maybe she still lives in the area, she can answer some questions."

"Oh, sure, I remember real good. Head librarian, it wasn't no woman."

He waited.

"Librarian was a fine gentleman. I can't recall his name but he was a nice man."

"Was it Connors?"

"Why yes, I do believe you're right. It was Connors, Mr. Mo Connors. A small man with a big smile. We all called him Little Mo. He knew them books inside and out. Read everything in that whole library then started over and read them again. Got me started reading, got a lot of people started. He'd lead you right down all them aisles and pick out a book like he could read your mind and knew just what it was you wanted to read and he'd hand it to you and it was the best damn book you ever did read. He did that for me. Got me started on a lifetime of reading murder stories."

Two sunnysides came the next morning. Javi hung around waiting for him to take his pills. Hello, haze.

Dense as the fog on a West Virginia morning, a white smoke that hung till noon some days, so thick nobody could go to work, everybody stuck at home reading the books Little Mo had suggested for them. In their shanty houses reading. Like the information operator in Raybun. That same little girl he'd been stamping her books.

He opened one of the books his daughter brought from the West Virginia library. Ten pages in, then twenty, it's Varla again and it's the old retired hit man, same characters as the other book, only this one was a few years later on. The hitman had escaped the nursing home and he and Varla were living in a small hotel room in the West Village. An Orange Julius was across the street, Washington Square

they could see from their window. They spent their days cleaning their guns and lying beside each other in the old saggy bed.

“We’re free,” Varla said. “We’re out of that two bit home.”

“If you can call this free,” Mo said. “Living in one room, drinking Orange Julius for breakfast, lunch and dinner.”

“I’d like to know what their magic ingredient is. Maybe we can hold the place up, take hostages, extract the secret from an employee.”

“The food was better before. I liked how they cut up my grapefruit.”

“You’re bored with me. I’m old and everything’s sagging. You’re through with me.”

“We need a mission. We just sit around without a mission. It’s the secret of life, the way to fill up your days.”

“We accomplished our mission,” Varla said. “This is how it is afterwards.”

“Well, we need a new one.”

“Okay, so if we get a new mission, we accomplish that one, then what?”

Javier brought his breakfast. Little Mo was still lying in bed turning the pages of that book. In a hurry to see how it turned out.

“Here’s your scrambled eggs,” Javi said. “And your fruit cup.”

“Where’s my grapefruit and sunnysides?”

Javi didn’t know what he was talking about.

“You ever read a book, Javi? Start to finish, a novel.”

“I gave up on it,” Javier said. “I didn’t like it, not knowing how things turned out.”

“What do you mean?”

“You get to the end of a story, it’s over, and the characters just keep on living and you don’t know how things are going to turn out for them. Leave you hanging. I didn’t like that.”

“Everything turns out the same way,” he said. “That’s stupid, Javi. End of the story, everybody dies. Isn’t but one outcome and that’s it.”

“I know that. But people in books they’re not the same as real people.”

“You don’t like living with uncertainty. That what you’re saying?”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m saying. I like things to be reliable. But books, the ones they made me read in school, nobody could say for sure what any of it added up to. It was on a test, I usually failed cause whatever I thought, it turned out it wasn’t the right thing. So I quit reading.”

“Grapefruit is what I have for breakfast. Pre-sliced.”

Javi left.

He got back to his book. A gangster came into the library one day, real tough guy, smelled like aftershave and gunpowder, walked right over to the librarian and said, “You know how to handle a gun?”

“Sure I do. I been shooting since I was knee high to a caterpillar.”

“I’m looking for somebody to do a job for me. It pays five grand.”

The librarian came out from behind his desk.

“Why me?”

“Cops take one look at you, little runty geriatric, they keep on walking. You’re perfect. It’s like a disguise, the old guy look. You look confused, your eyes are hazy.”

Later Little Mo met the gangster at his cheap motel on the edge of town. Tiny cabins with a gravel lot out front. The Davy Crockett Inn. A hot sheets joint in Raybun, West Virginia. Little Mo had lost his virginity in the same cabin where he met with the gangster. Jilly Johnson, a little girl, Mo took her to the mountaintop, showed her the sights, a first class orgasm, and she cried afterwards, couldn't stop crying. From the beauty of it, or the sadness, he was never sure.

"I could use the five G's."

"Yeah? Glad to hear it. How you feel about shooting a girl? You sexist or anything?"

"For five thousand I can get over it."

"She works in a store downtown, little shop sells books. The girl knows too much. She's going to testify, send me to jail. I'd do the job myself but they'd see me coming. You, hell no, you could just walk up to her put three in her head, one in her heart. That could be your calling card. Start a new career."

He didn't sleep good that night, worrying about his daughter, what was about to happen to her. She was the target. Working in that store, no protection. He turned and he tossed and in the morning he didn't have any appetite for his sunnysides and grapefruit.

"You keep leaving your food, Mr. Connors, we gonna stop feeding you."

"I need a ride downtown to my daughter's place of business. She's in danger. I need to warn her."

"Your daughter's outside in the lobby talking to the super, you can warn her in a minute."

His daughter came.

"Dad, Javier said you wanted to talk to me. You're very agitated."

Little Mo didn't say anything. He was trying to blink away the haze, get a good look at this girl, see if she seemed familiar.

"Dad, I think you're getting worse. The doctor and I think we should move you upstairs where they can give you better care."

"Upstairs?"

"They have more staff up there. They have pretty views, long distance. You can see across the river all the way to the Empire State Building when the sky's clear."

"Upstairs is where they send the troublemakers."

"It's just that you've been agitated lately, Dad. Throwing things, saying some weird stuff."

"Like what? What weird stuff?"

"Murder, for one thing. Scary stuff."

"I'll stop saying stuff then. I don't want to go upstairs."

"I think it's the books doing it," she said. "I think all that crime and violence isn't good for you. It puts bad ideas in your head. I'm going to have to stop bringing them until you're better."

"I said I'll stop saying stuff."

"We'll take a break from the books. A couple of weeks and see how you're feeling."

"I want my goddam books," he said. "You stop bringing them, I'll die. I'll go cold turkey and die."

“Dad, now don’t get worked up. This is exactly what I’m talking about, these outbursts.”

She went over to the table and gathered up his books and cradled them in her arms like a small child. She walked to the door.

“You can’t do that,” he said. “That’s torture. I’ll go nuts without my books.”

“It’s just an experiment,” she said. “A couple of weeks, maybe a month or two, we’ll see how you’re feeling and decide then if you should keep reading about so much murder and mayhem. I think you’ll start feeling a lot better.”

He tried to grab the books but she pushed him away. A frail old man, not the professional hitman he’d once been. Even a girl could push him around.

He sat at his desk and looked out at the hazy yard, the trees, the grass, the snow. Big white tropical birds. He sat and sat and sat.

Then he started to weep. He didn’t know how long he cried but it was longer than he’d ever done before. His wife died, he didn’t cry as much. A dog he loved got hit by a car, he cried for a few hours. The Raybun Library shut down and his job ended, and he cried. But nothing like this. He cried all afternoon, all evening, all night.

Javier tried to make him take his pills but he couldn’t stop crying.

The next morning he stopped. Javier was back with the paper cup of pills.

He looked at the pills and said, “I’m out of the haze. I skipped one round of pills and now I’m feeling fine.”

“No, sir. You got to take them. That’s the rules. You fight me, you go upstairs today. You already on probation.”

He took the pills.

Held them in his cheek, swallowed the water. Javi bought it.

When he was gone, Little Mo spit out the pills, flushed them away.

He looked out his window to check himself. Some patches of snow left, but it looked like it was warming up. No sign of a palm tree, no white birds. He was in Brooklyn, somewhere like that, across the river from Manhattan. Everything was starting to make sense.

He went out into the hallway, wandered up to the lobby. He was allowed to roam. Nobody looked funny at him. People said hello, he said hello back. He went to the little library they had near the aquarium. A woman was sitting in a chair asleep. A book in her lap. The book had a picture of a floozy on the cover. A dame with big red lips and a gun in the holster fixed to her girdle.

Little Mo sneaked the book out of her lap and headed back to his room.

Thank god for libraries. Thank god for free books lying around.

Back in his room he crawled into bed, pulled the covers up so he could hide the book if anybody came in.

He found his place. More than halfway in, things heating up, the pot boiling, action rolling fast down a twisty country road, the kind you’d find in Raybun, West Virginia.

“You gonna take the job or not? I need an answer now.”

The five thousand bucks was stacked on the chewed up table by the window.

“It’s a girl I got to shoot?”

“That’s right. She’s a danger to me. A mortal danger.”

“Half now, half when I’ve done the job?”

“That’s how it works.”

“What’d you do, she’s gonna turn you in for?”

“Murder and mayhem. The usual stuff. What’s it to you? You some kind of moralizer?”

“Maybe I am.”

“So forget it. I made a mistake picking you. Some crazy old bookworm.”

Little Mo started to leave but the gangster blocked him.

“You think I’m going to let you walk away, what you know about me? Hell, no. You got to die, old man. You know my face. One phone call from you I get put away. You think I’m nuts?”

His daughter was there.

“Dad, I’m going to have to sign the papers, have you sent upstairs.”

“Whoa, whoa. What’d I do?”

“You’re threatening people, Pops. A sweet old lady out in the front library, you threatened her. You stole her book.”

“Did not.”

“I’m sorry, Pops. They’re coming in an hour to move you upstairs. You’ll like it up there. Everybody says it’s very nice. And the food is very good.”

“Nobody talks up there. The drugs are stronger. That what you want, send me deeper into the haze?”

“Can you hear me, Pops?”

“Hell yes I can hear you and I don’t like what I’m hearing. I don’t like it one bit.”

Javier said, “He’s been like this for a couple of days. All clammed up, acting deaf and dumb. Just looking out that window. Maybe he had another stroke. Doctor needs to check him out.”

“I’m not going upstairs and that’s all there is to it. I got a say, don’t I? You steal my books, you threaten me, it isn’t fair. I was a good man. I did good.”

“What’d he do for a living?” Javi asked his daughter.

“Librarian,” she said. “Spent his life in a library in West Virginia.”

“He likes to read. I seen that for sure. He likes his books.”

“They only seem to agitate him these days. They make him act out.”

“He talks funny sometimes. Like he’s playing a part in a play.”

He was upstairs.

Big common room, lots of wheelchairs. Everybody ate their meals together. No more sunnysides, no more grapefruit cut up. It was slop. Cold scrambled eggs, some kind of meat, it didn’t have a name.

There were magazines but no books. The TV running night and day. Game shows. All the old shitbirds sitting in chairs watching people scream about winning a toaster oven.

He stole a magazine, took it back to his room. Tiny room, only one window and it was full of haze.

He lay down on his bed. Lumpy mattress.

Turned the pages of the magazine, came to a story.

And yes, by god, Varla was sneaking up the back stairs. She had her gun, a .38 snubbie. She was coming for him to liberate his ass. Little Mo Connors was trying to do his part, smiling at the nurses, taking his pills, being a good boy. All of it an

act. Biding his time while Varla worked her way up the stairs. An old lady, the stairs were tough. She was breathing hard and talking to herself.

“Two more floors, Little Mo. Hang on, baby. I’m coming. I’m coming, fighting my way through the haze.”

Little Mo dug through his drawers and found his own snubbie. They’d work together. Him shooting from his end, her from hers. A serial killer and a retired hitman. This place couldn’t hold them. These people didn’t know from imprisonment. You want to see imprisonment, spend a few years in Raiford. This was a country club compared to that goddam place.

“Almost there, sweet pea, only one more floor. I got to shoot out the locks. And I’m making a lot of noise. They’re bound to hear me, someone is bound to. They’ll be coming for me, so get ready, honey. Get yourself all set. I’m climbing the mountain and I’m almost at the top and you’re up there, the guru with the answers. I’m coming, sweetness, my big virile old man.”

He walked down the hall, waited by the locked stairway door. Big red sign on it, No Admittance. He could hear Varla coming up the stairs on the other side of the door. He could hear her breathing hard.

She’d want him to tell her what the secret was, coming all this way up the mountain just to see him. He needed to have something ready for her. The sum total of what he’d learned in these years, the sum total of all he’d learned from books and living and sitting and thinking. If there wasn’t something to give her, shit, what was the point?

She was at the door now. He could hear her back there. She was wheezing hard from the climb.

“You there, Little Mo?” she called out.

“I’m here, Varla.”

“Stand back while I blow open this lock. Stand back.”

The lock exploded and she came through the door.

“You made it, Varla. You saved my ass.”

They embraced. She smelled musty and wonderful.

“Okay, I’m here. What you got for me?”

“Let’s blow this hole first, I can tell you everything later.”

“And if there isn’t a later? If we get nabbed on our way down. We take some hits, three up, one down. No, you need to tell me now. What is it, I climbed all this way, what’s the answer?”

“I don’t know, Varla.”

“Don’t know? I come all this way and you don’t have the secret?”

“I think that may be the secret,” he said. “The whole enchilada. There’s no secret.”

“Enchilada? You telling me Mexican food is the secret, I come all this way, work through all this haze and shit and this is what you got? Chimichangas?”

He put the magazine on the little rickety table.

The gong was sounding for dinner.

His heart was beating hard. Varla wanted an answer. He didn’t have one for her. He’d come all this way, read a thousand books and a thousand more, had his heart broken and broken again, and the dinner gong was sounding and he didn’t have a goddam answer for her. He didn’t have an answer to any of it.

He slid the magazine under the mattress. He had to go to dinner or they'd come fetch him and drag him there. But the magazine would still be here when supper was over, and he'd find his place again and he'd finish the story.

He went to dinner. Kept to himself. Piddled with his roast beef. Trying to think of an answer for Varla because she was back there waiting, back in his room. Back there where the magazine was under his mattress.

Maybe that was it.

The story. He had to finish the story, get to the end, see how it turned out. There'd be an answer at the end. He was sure of it. There had to be. Okay, okay. So that was his mission now, the thing he needed so he could hang on a little longer, he had to get to the end of the story. You had to have a mission, a way to fill up the hours.

That was it. That was it.

