

Noire presents: A Henry Bloomburg story *by Martin Tripp*

The Puppet Master



COLUM SANSON REGAN



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The morning the Hartfield case came in again was cold. The sun was too early in the sky for any heat to make it to the street. The city hunched its shoulders against the frozen air while people walked over its hard back, their hands in their pockets and their heads pulled down, down to the grimy trails they followed. Winter was a killer. Henry let the phone ring until it stopped. Then he leaned over the end of the bed to a tangle of clothes and pulled out his phone and found his cigarettes. He lay back down and held one to his lips and listened to the message.

*Hello Mr Bloomberg. It's Bert Hartfield. We'd like...yes, well we need you to talk to you again...to, yes, to...*The voice trailed off. Henry imagined Bert taking the

phone away from his ear and listening as Annie gave him instruction. She was standing at the centre of the room with a cloth in her hand.

...to try again. We really, we really don't know what else to do. We still need to find out one way or the other. We would like, Annie and I, to meet with you, maybe not at the house, but...well, to see what we can do. We've changed our number again. This one is 708-458-4770. Thank you.

Henry could see the Hartfields now, in their big house in Aldering, hovering around the kitchen, waiting for him to call back. Annie wiping the counter tops, moving the coffee maker to get the cloth right in behind it, then wiping her hands and rearranging the fruit in the fruit bowl, while Bert stands between the kitchen and the conservatory. The conservatory where they keep the boxes of posters and flyers. He's checking the flowers along the borders. He knows the dates of the planting of each one. He can remember each day he poked at the earth and put life there. Maybe the boxes were gone from the conservatory by now. Maybe the flowers were. It was more than two years ago since Henry had seen the Hartfields. Two years since he told them that he couldn't do any more. More than two years since he collected his money and told them they were going to have to try and get on with their own lives. There weren't many cases Henry walked away from without closure, but the search for Richie Hartfield was one.

–Mr. Hartfield, it's Henry Bloomburg. I got your message. Let's meet.

–Mr. Bloomburg. Thank you. Shall we come to you? Are you in your new offices?

Henry squinted and shaded his eyes as the rattling of a passing train shook the blinds and more sunlight leaked into the room. He put a light to the cigarette.

–Um, yes, but no. There's eh, work going on, renovations. It's not a very peaceful place to be. Let's meet somewhere neutral. Has there been movement on the case?

–No, nothing. That's why we're calling. We need you to try again.

–Mr. Hartfield, you know that I tried everything...

–Mr. Bloomberg, we need you to try again. Annie and I, we...well, we...

–Hey, alright let's meet. You should bring anything you think may be relevant since we last spoke. It doesn't matter how small. Anyone that has been in contact.

–Ok. Simmons Park? Can we do it this morning?

–Mmmm. Too cold.

–Cacciatori's? The café on Richmond?

–Well, no. How about O'Grady's on the corner of The Citadel?

–Really? I know it but...I don't think I've ever been in there.

–It's a good spot. A discreet place.

–Discreet.

–Yeah, discreet. If you excuse my language, Mr. Hartfield, no-one in there gives a shit about you.

Henry ordered a whiskey and a coffee and drank the whiskey in one. He checked the time. The television was turned down, and the weatherman stood in front of a map and shrugged his shoulders. In the corner of the screen it read 11:18. They'd be early. The barman put a black coffee in front of him. Four and a half years ago the Hartfield case was all over the news. A six year-old boy Richie Hartfield went missing from his home in Aldering. Of course the parents were investigated. They were cleared of suspicion. Richie wasn't found and the hungry media eye didn't wait for a neat ending, just spun around looking for the next exciting tragedy. But the Hartfields, they didn't let it go. They threw money at a media and street campaign. There were pictures of Richie all over the city. For months they kept searching but still no sign of Richie. They brought charges of negligence to the investigating officer in charge of the case. Then the media spun back to them and gripped them like a dog toy. Before it was Richie's face on the shoulder of the newscaster and now it was pictures of Bert and Annie, looking red eyed and biblical. They weren't grieving parents anymore, they were now attention seeking monsters, and any public goodwill left rotted on the bone. They got Henry in when

they were convinced that the police stopped looking for their boy. For fifteen months Henry followed every lead and he and the Hartfields went over what happened again and again and again. Each time he was led back to the same scene. It was brutal in its simplicity. It was morning. Annie opened the bedroom door. The window was open. The bed was empty.

It was still early, so he ordered another whiskey before sitting in a booth, facing the entrance. Between him and the door there was old white-haired man who was drinking from a straw because his hands were shrivelled and arthritic, bent into claws, and two workers who wore the overalls of the train companies which ran the city transport. All night they had been in the tunnels fixing tracks, and now they sat together silently, drinking slowly, bleary eyed, both watching sports news on the silent TV. The tinny beat of a low volume pop song buzzed around the room like a fly trapped in a glass.

The Hartfields came through the door. Hand in hand, they walked in at 11.26 and already Henry was glad he had drunk the second whiskey. Defeat and anxiety rolled through the room like a fog. They were almost unrecognisable from the faces that had been flashed up behind the news reporter's shoulder three years ago. They were both grey. His eyes were sunken, a glint of light from them like the reflection of water deep in a well, and hers bloodshot like the grain on a stained plane of knotted wood. Years of not knowing weighed heavy on their shoulders and the seats creaked as they sat opposite. Most couples would have broken up by now, collapsed under the strain, but the Hartfields were the exception. And it was killing them.

Henry said –You should get a drink, we might be here for a while.

Bert stood and went to the bar. Annie took things from her bag and laid them on the table, quite deliberately. Each piece had its place in her arrangement and she concentrated until they were all in order. There was a bulging folder packed with newspaper clippings and copies of police statements and court letters held together with elastic and clothes pegs, a laptop, a big envelope overflowing with handwritten pages.

–Are those your letters?

–Yes.

–You still write every day?

–Yes. I still don't have anywhere to send them.

–Do you mind?

Annie gestured to the envelope and Henry picked it up and took one out.

9th July

Today I hope you are on a sunny beach, playing in the surf with your new Mum and Dad and your new big sister, who is taking good care of you. You'll try to splash her! Oh Richie it is like I am turning over the pages for you. Oh my darling boy, my little munchkin, you deserve the very best the world can give and so I will give it to you when I close my eyes. Oh how I want to hold you, just hug you and tell you everything's alright and never let... Henry stopped.

In earlier years, each word would have been cutting away at his insides, but he had long been hollowed out, and this letter was a broken blade falling into the empty barrel. He put the page down. Bert was on his way back with two big cups of coffee. He saw the paper and winced, his mouth turning downward like a bow under pressure from the archer.

As he sat, Henry said – Do you think he's still alive?

Bert said – I've asked her to stop writing those. Annie, I thought you had stopped. For God's sake.

–Do you still think he's alive?

–Well, that's why we asked to meet –

–Yes, Annie interrupted. Yes, he is. Somewhere.

–Then keep writing.

Henry handed her back the paper. She folded it carefully along the crease and put it back in the envelope with all the others. She patted it gently.

–I asked her to stop writing those, Bert said again, and then you tell –

–Mr. Hartfield, I don't see it's a problem. It might be painful, but it might be what's keeping you together. For all we know, it might be what's keeping your son alive.

Bert shook his head and looked back and to from Henry to Annie and shook his head again.

Annie said –We need you to look again.

–Annie. Did the police come up with any more suspects? Besides you?

–Since you left us, there has been, well, no movement at all. Just some more newspaper reports, more crazies on email, some horrible horrible phone calls, but all directed at us, nothing about Richie.

–What about Kramer?

Annie winced and Bert growled.

–Horrible man. We lost the case.

Kramer was alright. Henry knew him. He had worked with him before he left the force and before the Hartfield case they had helped each other out sometimes. During the search, Kramer had let Henry get whatever he thought he needed. He was a great lump of body with a wide mouth and a permanent scowl. When he spoke he didn't project his words much so as drop and dribble them onto his huge chest. You had to lean right in and get close to get what he was saying. It wasn't a pleasant experience. Talking with him was like examining spores on rotten wood, but he was alright. He did his best. But a lot of things happen in the city. There are a lot of bad people doing terrible things, even good people doing terrible things, and once you've exhausted every lead and you get nothing, well, there's nothing. And there's always another crime.

–What made you call me again? Have there been any developments at all?

Bert sipped his coffee and grimaced again. –Nothing.

–Then why now?

Annie said – I bumped into Suzie. She asked if you were still on the case. I wanted to say yes.

–Suzie?

–Suzie Diamond.

Suzie Diamond. It must have been ten years now since he had interviewed her for a case and she fell for him. Or rather who she thought he was. This was a woman in need of a hero. She wanted someone dark, mysterious and noble. She ended up with him for a while. She wanted him to be a romantic enigma. He wanted to get on with the job. They were together for nearly three years, and 18 months of that was him trying to get rid of her.

–We thought it was about time. When you gave up on us, you said that maybe in the future things might change. Well this is the future Mr Bloomberg. You tell us, has anything changed?

–My prices have gone up.

Annie sat back and looked once around the bar before closing her eyes. Slowly, she leaned against Bert. They were so much older. The years of not knowing had weathered them beyond their years. An open window. An empty bed. The terrible wound never closed, and they were still being drained, never allowed to die, bleeding that would never run dry. Bert put his arm around his wife and kissed her head and closed his eyes too. They were soldiers of love, weary and battle worn, just about holding each other up.

The two train workers emptied their glasses and stood to leave, scraping the bar stools on the floor. As they left another man came through the door, shaking his head and rubbing his arms. He was dressed in a tie-dye t-shirt and shorts, with bright yellow flip flops. A breath of cold air followed him before the door closed and he took a seat at the bar his eyes on the TV. The newscaster was still there, but the screen was split in two and on the other side was a white-haired man in an identical studio. They were talking to each other, but both looking straight at the camera. They were suited torsos only differentiated by their heads and they were disagreeing by the looks of things.

–Well?

–I’ve never come back to a case like this before Mr Hartfield. Right now it’s hard to see what I can do. I will have to come back to the house. Is it still the same?

–Mr Bloomberg. We are still in the same moment we were when you left us last.

–Does Kramer still have everything from the room?

–Yes.

The police had taken everything from the room, bagged and sealed. Henry had been through the bags over and over. He’d have to do it all again. The guy at the bar had taken a seat at the counter. His flip flops were on the ground and he had one leg crossed, so his foot was in his lap. He was bending over, inspecting the sole, then dipping a finger in his whiskey and rubbing it into his foot. It was still cold in the bar. Henry sipped his coffee and pulled his jacket around him. The Hartfields, leaning into each other, looked as if they would crumble any moment. If a wind came in now, Henry thought, they would dissolve and be scattered like ashes. If he went in again and came out empty handed would that be the end? Would they cut themselves free and drift on? Or would it just tighten the chain?

–Are you still drinking?

Bert looked turned his head sharply and gritted his teeth –Yes, I am.

Annie said, with her eyes still closed –But only after dinner now.

Bert’s face flushed for a second and a sound like a creak came from somewhere in his throat.

On the night of the disappearance, they had both been drinking. When the papers and TV found out they went into a righteous frenzy. All of a sudden the Hartfields were irresponsible alcoholics who shouldn’t have had a child to care for. Considering these journalists were known for spending their time drinking and plying people with alcohol to get their stories this was a bit cruel, but journalists don’t write about themselves, and it made a good story.

–And how are you sleeping Mrs Hartfield?

–Terrible. I can’t sleep. I have some drugs that help me, but then when I sleep...

–When Annie sleeps, she –

–I have recurring nightmares.

–What happens?

–I am caught in an invisible web. Or I am tied to the bed with invisible ropes, and someone is taking Richie away. I can't move.

–I don't know what you expect to happen, Henry said.

–Mr Bloomberg, Bert leaned forward, if we're not doing this, we're not living, do you know what I mean? Can you understand?

Annie opened her eyes. There was such sorrow in them, such a wild landscape of regret. How did Bert deal with looking into those eyes? No wonder he could never heal. Each day, when she opened her eyes, his heart must break again. There was no way Henry could say no. A no would just sink in the swamp like a rock. And besides, they had a lot of money.

–Ok. I'll do it. I'll need to come to the house. I'll call you.

Annie's eyes were glassy and Bert leaned across with his hand outstretched.

Henry shook it and stood up. He pulled a few bills from his wallet.

–Mrs Hartfield, can I take a letter?

Her glassy eyes blinked and for a moment she put her hand protectively on the bulging envelope. Then she took a breath.

–Of course. Which one? The latest one?

–Whichever you want.

Henry waited as she bent over into the envelope, going through the pile. It didn't matter which one really. They would all be the same. The guy in the shirt and shorts sitting at the table in the corner was working up his body, now inspecting his knees, picking at scabs, leaning over and spitting slowly onto them, then rubbing the spit in.

–There, she said holding out a folded paper, take that one.

–Thank you. Keep writing. I'll be in contact. Coffee's on me.

He put the notes on the table and turned to the door. There was a slurp and clack as the guy with the claw hands and straw reached the end of his drink. In the background some song buzzed and beat frantically. The TV showed rockets being launched at night, fiery and unsteady, trying to find balance as they disappeared toward their victims. Tiny explosions flashed in the distance. The newscaster shrugged.

When Kramer answered he sounded out of breath.

–Bloomberg. You crawled out of your pit again. What is it?

–Kramer. I'm back on the Hartfield case.

–You're what? Say that again? It sounded like you said you were back on the Hartfield

case.

–Kramer...

–Well, that's gone for me. I can't do anything with that.

–Kramer, I just need you to let me have the evidence bags.

There was a pause. Instead of raising his voice and losing his temper, Kramer drew it in.

–Bloomberg, you know. The Hartfields. That whacko and his psycho wife. You know what they did right?

–I know what they tried to do. But you won. Now they want me back on it. Has there been any movement on the case?

Again there was a pause. There was a soft crunch and when Kramer started talking again his words had to push past whatever in his mouth.

–Nothing. You can come in and have a look.

–No. I need to bring the bags out to the house.

–Why do you wanna do that?

–Kramer, just help me out. You know I'm not going to mess with anything. I just want to find the kid.

– Didn't you try and do that two years ago? The kid's gone Bloomburg. You just wanna find a fatter paycheck. And the Hartfields are good for it, d'you know how much money they threw at the prosecution case?

– Kramer, come on. Finish your pizza and put in the call for me. I'll be around this afternoon to pick up the bags.

Another crunch and sticky chewing. Henry held the phone away from his ear until it stopped.

–You can come and get 'em, I'll tell Weller, but Henry you're not going to find anything. There's nothing pointing at anyone else.

–Tell Weller I'll be in this afternoon. Thanks.

The Hartfield's house was on the south side of the river. Massive and red bricked, it stood on the edge of Aldering, a neighbourhood of big gardens, trimmed borders and paved driveways. Annie answered the door.

–I've just made fresh coffee, she said.

Henry stepped in. the house was the same, but even more spotlessly clean than how he remembered it. The floor was shinier, the walls were brighter, until he walked through to the kitchen. Here the light dimmed and claustrophobia pushed in from the corners. The windows had wooden slat blinds down and the glass roof of the conservatory which before had allowed the light to flood in was covered over. Annie handed him a coffee.

–You've haven't taken them down, he said.

–No. It's to stop people looking in. And throwing things. The conservatory was getting ruined. Rotten fruit, eggs, dog shit.

–Still? They're still doing it?

–Well no. But we are still a target. It was horrible, Mr Bloomburg, people are horrible. But yes it's stopped.

–Good. You've still got posters and flyers left, he said, nodding to the stack of cardboard boxes.

–Yes. Bert keeps ordering more.

–I’m going to go upstairs to Richie’s room. He put the coffee down and held up the two bags. I’ve brought it all back from the station. I know it’s tidy and you want to keep it like that, but I’m going to ask you to help me mess it up.

On the stairway family pictures hung on the wall. Studio shots with good lighting, a neutral background, and smiles that had been held for a second too long. Richie was a chubby little boy, with full rosy cheeks and a glint in his eye.

When Annie opened the bedroom door a heavy breath of heartbreak hit Henry hard. The light was dim and subdued, the curtains were drawn. Everything was clean and neat, the books on the little desk were arranged in ascending size, the sheets on the bed were tucked tightly in. He walked across the room and opened the curtains, then sat on the bed and looked back at Annie. The air ached. He pulled at the sharp fold on the bed and pulled back the covers, shook the pillow. Taking the things out of the bag, he unwrapped them from their sealed bags and threw them around the room. The insides of toys, springs and batteries, broken bits of plastic, soldiers in action poses, shooting and throwing grenades. There were half eaten biscuits, bits of crayons, badges and stickers from magazines. In two bags were stuffed toys, one a bear with an eye patch and one a rabbit with ears as long as its body. He took them out and tossed them on the bed. The rabbit fell over on the other side. Annie looked on, horrified.

–If you remember anything being in particular places, then put them where you remember them. He opened the other bag. Annie stepped into the room and slowly sat in the middle of the floor. Henry took the contents of the bag one by one and tossed them on the floor around her.

–He loved taking things apart, she said. She picked up wires and a little circuit board. I think this is from an old baby monitor. Of course he could never put anything back together. He was six. You can’t put stuff together at six. This was all under the bed, all of these bit and pieces. And lots of socks.

She moved the wires and circuit board and a little speaker, the batteries and springs all under the bed. There were two dice and football cards of a team.

–These were never in the pack, she said, he didn't like this team anymore because they lost every time, and she threw the cards around the room. She stood up and went to the wardrobe and opened it. All of Richie's clothes were still there.

–He never tidied up, such a messy little boy. He knew I'd always come and tidy up for him. She leaned down to the drawers and pulled out socks and underwear. He'd leave his dirty socks and underwear on the ground, or if they were dirty, he'd stuff them under the bed, knowing that I'd come along and tidy it all up for him, and books...She turned to the bookshelf, and took books from it, then placed them near the bed and near the wall. Books he'd never finish reading, he'd just leave them wherever he got bored, on the ground or in the bed, no matter how many times I told him, no matter what I said, he just couldn't tidy up! At night I'd hear him stepping on things, his books and toys then coming into our room, saying he couldn't sleep.

As he watched Annie, Henry realised he was holding something in his hand, turning it and pressing his fingers into it. He looked down. It was a piece of wax, about the size of a coin with a thin thread attached. He held it up.

–What's this?

Annie bent to take a closer look.

–I remember that. I don't know what that is exactly. It was in the room. It's probably from something he took apart and couldn't put back together. He could have got it from school.

Henry turned it in his fingers.

–Your pictures, I need to see them all again. What's in print and what's on your laptop.

–Ok, come down and I will make more coffee.

–No, bring them up here. I'm staying here.

She looked around the room. –It really was a mess, all the time.

She turned and went downstairs. Henry moved off the bed and sat in the middle of the room, right in the middle of the mess. The sun through the window was hot on his back.

As the day passed it got hotter. Henry heard Bert come in. He didn't come up. Henry looked through his old case notes. There was a lot, he had been on the case for over a year. He took his time, reading through the case notes carefully. He looked through the photos. First the printed ones Annie had put in a big album. He'd seen them all before. He took his time.

On the laptop, a happy boy, unruly hair in typical pictures taken by the loving Mother. Sticking his tongue out, putting his thumbs in his ears and crossing his eyes. Friends running around. A park. Kicking a ball. Standing with the ball. With friends at a water slide. Wet and smiling knee deep in the splash pool. A small back garden with balloons tied to the wooden fence. Blowing out five candles. A new football shirt and scooter. Friends sitting around in a semi-circle excited watching a birthday act. Henry zoomed in, past the little t-shirted boys and the party hats to the dark-suited man wearing a crimson lined cloak standing in the middle of the semicircle of children. He wore a top hat. He was leaning forward with his hands open, about to grab something. Henry zoomed in. He recognised him.

Henry went through his cases over the last five years before remembered. Michael McDermott. Years ago he had interviewed him in connection with illegal imports, oriental skin oils that weren't tested. He was investigating for a law firm who wanted to avoid compensation claims getting to court. All he had to do was dig up what he could on the claimants and show that their characters were questionable. Everybody's character was questionable if you looked hard enough and Bloomberg knew how to do it. McDermott was vain man in his sixties, immaculately turned out. When Henry had questioned him, he wore a layer of make-up and eyeliner which couldn't hide the deep lines on his aging face. He had only spoken with him once. He was right at the end of the chain. Henry knew straight away he couldn't put him forward. The guy was obviously a nut case, the needy kind of nut case. He didn't really matter then, but Henry got the impression that he really wanted to. At the end of the questioning, McDermott had seemed irritated that Henry didn't want to question him

for longer, probe deeper. The case never went to court. Now here he was again with a top hat, making magic.

He looked up. Annie and Bert were standing in the doorway.

–You mentioned Suzie Diamond. How do you know her?

–We’ve kept in touch. She works for the agency we used to go to for Richie’s parties.

Henry could hear Suzie’s voice now, the light butterfly tone, so happy to talk, so excited by your choices and eager to please. Perfect for an agency which was going to send you someone to entertain your children on another birthday.

–The Power Agency.

–Yes, that’s it. We used the agency for all our parties. She’s really lovely. She really cares.

–The Power Agency. That’s where you got this guy from?

Henry turned the laptop around. Bert and Annie leaned down and peered at the screen. Henry looked at his hand. He had been absent-mindedly pressing the wax in his hands, it was warm and he was squeezing it through the spaces between his fingers.

–Yes, that’s right. We used them every year. So did our friends, we recommended them all the time. That was Richie’s fifth birthday. The magician.

–What was his name?

–Something Magic. Miki Magic, I think.

–Was he any good?

–Any good?

–Yes, what did he do? Card tricks? Illusions?

Annie said –He did card tricks, to start, floated things around, made some things disappear. He did a thing with puppets without strings.

–Did Richie enjoy it?

–Well, yes, they all did. All children love magic, don’t they?

–Did he want to do any magic? Did you buy him a magic set?

Bert put his head in his hands and rubbed his face, and groaned slightly before he said, –No, Mr. Bloomberg we did not buy him a magic set. And Richie didn't like him enough for us to book him for his sixth birthday too, we went for the reptile guy. Why have you messed up the room?

–What age was he?

–What age? I don't know. Late forties or something. He had eyeliner and some make up on I think. Bert ran his hands through his hair and leaned forward to look at the laptop screen again.

–Yeah probably late forties. Something like that, why are you interested in magic all of a sudden?

–Mr Hartfield. Here's someone who makes things disappear.

–But there's nothing linking him to our boy. That guy does hundreds of kids' parties a year, and that party was over a year and a half before he went missing. Surely, if there was something, the police would have questioned him. You would have already investigated him.

Henry stood up slowly. His legs ached from sitting on the ground for so long. The Hartfields watched in silence as he stretched his arms up and touched the ceiling, then rubbed the back of his thighs and stamped his feet to get the blood back into them. The Hartfields just stood there, like a couple at the last stop of the railway line, standing on the platform when the train pulls in, waiting for someone, anyone, to get off.

–Ok. Well, it's been a good day. I have something to go on. Leave it with me, I'll be in contact.

Bert's face hardened –What have you got? A hunch about the magic man? After one day? He started to spit as he spoke. That's all you want to ask us? You just come in and make a mess, throw my boys things around? What have you got to work on?

–Three things, Mr. Hartfield, I have three things that I didn't have before. Henry held up his hand. I've got a little ball of wax and a thin piece of string. I've got your

wife in an invisible web. I've got a magician who is getting younger. Start to pay me and I can start working. I'll call you.



Suzie answered the phone. Her high-toned voice vibrated somewhere between his stomach and knees.

–The Power Agency. I'm Suzie, how can I help?

–It's Henry.

He heard her stop breathing for a moment. He could see her, paused, her mouth close to the phone and her blonde hair styled and pinned into place, in that pokey musty little brown office, surrounded by pictures of clowns, snake handlers, women in Disney dresses, superheroes carrying cake, an old man with a wand and a cape, two astronauts playing banjo and a double bass.

–What do you want?

Her voice flattened once she knew it was him. The words creaked.

–Just to meet up and ask a few questions about the agency. I've got a new case.

–Just ask me now.

–Miki Magic.

–Why do you want to know?

–Suzie, when can we meet up? Have a drink with me. I have a few more questions.

–I'm not meeting up with you Henry.

–Come on. Just one drink. How are you anyway?

–After all this time? Now you want to know how I am? Well you can stick your

–

–One drink. When you're done with work. Come on Suzie, just one. It's been so long. Come on.

–I don't believe this. Ok. Just a drink. After work. One drink Henry.

It was never going to be just one drink. It took two drinks just for her to tell him what a shit he was. She looked as fabulous as ever, just with new lines around her eyes which her foundation couldn't cover. Henry listened as she told him again how he broke her heart, how he could find anything for anyone else but couldn't find love if it was stuffed into his coffee cup. How he had no concept of compassion or the effect of his heartless actions. How...well, her list went on for a while Henry drank.

–I don't know why I even stayed with you for so long, she said.

Then the rattle of the ice in her glass drew the attention of the barman and two more drinks were placed on the counter.

–Well, Henry said, you still look amazing Suzie. Really. Are you with anyone now?

–Oh yes, a real man, who knows how to take care of a lady. Not run out on her and then keep running.

–Would I know him?

–You wouldn't know him, no. He's not part of your seedy world, your bad crooks and secrets. He's a businessman, he's involved in banking. International banking.

–Travels a lot?

–Yes, he's very busy. He doesn't lie around for days waiting for the phone to ring.

–And you're still at the agency. How is that?

–Well, Bushy needs someone there. It would fall apart without me.

Tom Bush was the owner. When Henry had seen him he looked pretty damn close to falling apart. By now must be a dishevelled husk of a man but Suzie loved him like a house bound Granddaddy or a dying dog, Henry could never quite decide which. Either way, she wasn't going to leave him. The white-collar crook she had hooked up with had the right idea. Travel. A lot.

–I want to ask you about Miki Magic.

–Oh Henry, you've always got an agenda. You never ask me anything unless it's for a case.

–Suzie, we haven't spoken in, what six, seven years?

–See? Exactly. Nine.

–Miki Magic. Is he still going?

–Oh yeah, he'll never stop.

–You know how old he is?

–He must be in his 70's.

The city records had a Michael McDermott born 73 years ago listed in the County Orphanage. There were a lot that year, what with the war and so many mothers dying in childbirth. A new birthing technique which bypassed the mother's need to participate was brought into the public system that year by some eminent doctor. It worked on dogs. And monkeys. A machine which sent electric impulses and contracted the mother's muscles. Some hospitals bought it. Not a good idea. It was over ten months of synchronous deaths and births before the doctor admitted defeat and disappeared back into a laboratory to work on another great idea. Henry produced his phone and put it in her hands. A close up of the party.

–That was about five years ago.

–Yeah, it's him.

–You're sure it's the same guy? He doesn't look seventy.

–Oh yes, that's him. He's always looked a bit strange.

–Doesn't he look different from the poster, the picture on your website?

–Oh yeah, he looks weird. Younger. But I saw him after this, so I knew he'd had some work done or something. He was always strange.

She started to scroll through his pictures. Henry snapped the phone out of her hand and she smiled mischievously, picking up her glass and sucking through the straw, keeping her eyes on him.

–When was the last time you saw him?

–Well, I shot a video, it was supposed to be promotional, but we never used it. That was a while ago, a few years? Maybe more. No, I remember it was three years ago, we were updating all the promo stuff. And then he came into the office soon after.

–So this shot is before that. This is five years ago.

–Yeah, and I remember thinking then that he must have had a lot of work done. I didn't think he'd have the money for that kind of thing, but maybe he saved up for some serious work. Wouldn't you? So that at 70, you could take 30 years off your face?

–What did he want?

–What do you want?

–I want to find him.

–No, Henry, what do you really want? What's the real reason you called? Have you got somebody at the moment? Or are we just drinking for old time's sake? You picking up some pieces Henry?

–Suzie...come on, let's not get caught up in that. Let's get another drink.

They did. Now that she was getting drunk, her body was loosening up, and her eyes took on that misty glaze that Henry had spent so much time looking into all those years ago. The fist she had met him with was opening.

–Why did Miki come to see you?

–He said that he was no longer at the address we had for him, and all payment should go to a PO Box. All by cheque.

–Not a bank account?

–He's old fashioned. He's in his 70's for God's sake.

–I'm going to need that address Suzie.

She leaned back, shaking her head. Locks of blonde were starting to fall over her face. She emptied the glass again.

–Nononono. I can't give out classified information.

–Classified? Come on Suzie. This is an important case.

–Isn't that the line you always use? Classified? Why do you want his old address?

–You know I can't go into it. Let's swing by the office now and collect what I need. Grab your coat.

Outside the streets were still. It was still cold. A few couples walked away from the old cinema as the doors closed and the lights went out. Henry liked the city like this, dark and quiet. There was no threat. On nights like this not even the beggars disturbed the street silence to ask for change. Normally the addicts came out of the shadows to tell you a story of why they needed that extra bit of change. A bus home. Some food. A phone call. A place to sleep. All they really wanted was enough scraps from strangers' pockets to tip the scales, to get a hit so the next hour would not be as desperate and aching as the last one. Not tonight. Maybe tonight they'd all got their fix. Maybe tonight the beggars had all eaten well or been forgiven and taken home by their long-lost families and that's why the city was calm. Suzie's heels made a click clacking as they walked. Henry put his arm around her waist and she shook her hips and shoulders, shooing him away.

She fumbled with the keys as she unlocked the door and motioned for him to go up the stairs first.

–After you, Henry said.

–No. You first, she replied.

The stairs were narrow and dark, the cheap carpet was worn away and the paint was peeling from the walls. Inside, Henry saw that the tiny office hadn't changed. A single chair in front of a computer, with filing cabinets on either side and a wall calendar and post-it notes stuck around the desk. Suzie turned the computer on and without sitting down, found the address. The printer started up.

–There. His old address.

–Have you got pictures of him on there?

–Just the catalogue shot.

It same as the one he had seen before. An old dark-haired man with a hat and a grin, holding a wooden puppet in either hand. The Amazing Miki Magic! Tricks and Illusions like you've never seen before! High quality entertainment for parties of all ages!

–Have you got that recording?

–Yeah it's here.

–How come you never used it?

–He never cleared it. He had to say yes before we could use it, and he never did.

–Why not?

She shrugged.

Henry sat and Suzie clicked. The footage looked like it was recorded in a school sports hall. The sound was echoing around the oohs and ahhs and the tinny music in the background as an even younger looking Miki Magic drew back his cape to reveal two marionette puppets at his feet. One was a clown and one was a pigtailed girl in a milk maid's outfit. The clown's smile was spread across his wide face and he shifted from foot to foot with his elbows out to the side like he was warming up for a barn dance. He had bright red braces holding his sparkly blue trousers in place over his belly. The milk maid had rosy cheeks and big blue surprised eyes. Her mouth was a little circle of red and her hands hung lazily at her sides. Her shape was thin with an exaggerated bust, and she wore a white apron over a knee-length blue skirt. She was looking up and swaying gently from side to side as if lost in her own thoughts, or following the flight of a distant bird. Against the black of the magician's suit it was hard to tell where the strings were.

Miki Magic held his hands over the two characters and moved his wrists and fingers. The clown turned to the milk maid as if offering to dance. She turned shyly away and he moved towards her then tripped over. She helped him up and brushed

him off then they started a dance together. Henry leaned closer. Claps and cheers erupted as they spun round together weightlessly, their feet skimming over the floor, then they stood side and started to swing their hips and move their arms, pointing in unison at the assembled children and mums and dads, and then pointing to the ceiling in a rhythm together. The clown turned to the milk maid as if to spin her again, but she wasn't ready and they bumped. Hoots of laughter echoed around the hall as they reprimanded each other for getting the steps wrong. The laughter continued when they started the dance again, then bumped again on the first move and fell onto each other.

Miki Magic shook his head and crossed his arms. The laughter and cheers drained away as the puppets stood up again and started the routine once more. Miki Magic had not uncrossed his arms. He stood still, arms crossed, and raised his eyes, straight into the camera while at his feet the smiling clown and the blue-eyed milk maid went step by step through their dance routine. This was one hell of a magic trick, but people are used to seeing tricks like this on the TV, Henry thought, you expect magic from a magician. The milk maid did a turn and bent over. The clown lifted her skirt, before she pushed him off and they ended up on the floor again. There was some laughter. The music stopped. A few people clapped and Miki Magic said, – I do apologise ladies and gentlemen, they were supposed to have been rehearsing all week.

He stepped away from the little heap to restart the music. As beat came in again he walked back and stood over them, his dark cape hanging behind them and put his hands on his hips. He called out –Ok, he called out, one more time! Let's get it right this time!

The clown and the milk maid got to their feet as the music started and, without the magician moving his hands from his hips, they started the routine again. Now everyone started to cheer and whoop as the two wood and cloth figures, with no visible ropes or ties, spun each other around, they kicked their legs, they moved their shoulders and hips and danced until the end of the song in unison. Right at the climax Miki Magic swept his cape away and stood dramatically to the side and took a step back while the puppets kicked their legs and shook their hands to end the dance, and then

took a bow and a curtsy and stood upright again. The avalanche of applause and cheering was distorting the speakers and the camera shook as he stepped behind the puppets once more and swept them into his cloak. Miki Magic looked into the camera again and smiled and bowed, and that was the end.

–Pretty good huh? Suzie said.

– Pretty good. That’s damn good. So you saw him do this?

–I recorded it. What has he done?

–Do you have any idea how he does it?

–Why are you interested in Miki? What has he done?

–Do you know how he does it?

–It’s fucking magic, Henry.

She put one hand on her hip, looking down on him. Her patience had run out. The fist had clenched again. Her make up looked like it had set. Any alcoholic goodwill was evaporating fast. Henry sensed she was about to launch into another disassembly of him. He got in there just in time.

–Is he still on your books?

–Yeah. But I never see him if that’s what you’re going to ask me. I just send him the cheques.

–Have you got a list of his bookings?

–Of course.

She leaned over him and tapped at the keyboard, clicking and scrolling. He inhaled deeply. She had changed her scent. Probably been bought some new fragrance by her banker boyfriend. Henry cast his mind back. Did he ever buy her perfume? Probably not. The printer lit up again and pushed the page out.

–There you go, she said, is that all now? I spend enough time here as it is.

–Yeah, that’s enough for now.

When they got to the street, and Suzie was locking the door, Henry suggested another drink. Suzie shook her head.

–Well how about just one more? Back at my place? Henry said.

–Your place? Are you still in that shitty little apartment on Breaker?

–Yeah, well, how about your place? Your old man banking abroad at the moment?

–He’s not old. And if you think you can just call me up and hop back into bed with me you can forget it. You always were a creep Henry, a slippery creep. To think I chased after you. You haven’t got a life of your own, that’s why it never worked, you don’t have anything anyone else can be a part of.

–That’s a no then. Do you at least want a lift home? To give you time to change your mind?

She looked at him disbelievingly. She waited, gave him a chance to say more, to take it back, to turn it into a joke. He didn’t.

–Fuck off Henry.

She turned on her heel and walked away from him.

He watched her walk away, her hips swaying and her heels click clacking as she silhouetted down the empty street. Some people, it seemed were meant to stay together, like the Hartfields. Life required it. That was love. Or desperation. Others were just meant to get close and bump into each other for a while, like strangers on a crowded train. He felt something, a kind of tangled longing, for Suzie Diamond as she disappeared. Maybe that was as near to love as it would ever be. Maybe he wasn’t desperate enough. He had spent so much time all those years ago trying to get Suzie Diamonds’ claws out of him, but it would have felt good to feel her grip him again just for one night.

Henry lit a cigarette and took the folded print-out from his pocket. There was a booking for tomorrow evening, in Dredford, which was a two hour drive. The looked at the address. Clairmont View. Over the edge of the city.



The hills that rose up from the centre of the city were steep, and by the time you reached the top the temptation to turn and look at the tussle of streetlights beneath you was overwhelming. Henry didn't. He'd seen it before. He drove straight over the ridge to the other side to Clairmont View. Up here the population thinned out. Yellow fields dotted with huge agricultural barns and giant cylindrical storage towers and took up great swathes of land, and the houses stood in defensive clusters, hemmed in by flattened acres of bright gold crop sloping away into the distance. The colour leaked, settling just above the fields, making a translucent membrane over the land as the last of the day started to drain through the dirty sky.

Henry turned off the main road and in to the cul de sac and spotted the house immediately. It was set back from the street, up a ragged unkempt gravel drive. The house stood in dark silhouette like a crooked top hat. From here it looked older than it was, as if it had been abandoned. He stopped the car and stepped out. It was even colder up here. He considered the silence. He could see the lights of cars on the nearby road but there was no sound. Nothing. All of the windows had blinds down. The house was asleep. He was hesitant to step onto the driveway. The crunch of his feet on the stones scraped away at his ear cavity as he walked around the side of the house. Henry knelt at the back door and took a packet of gum from his pocket. He put one in his mouth and folded the foil. He chewed for a moment as he found the alarm sensor then slid the foil over it, fixing it to the door frame with the soft sticky gum. The colour of the sky was changing and the strange cape of luminescence over the canola fields glowed in the twilight behind him as he took a set of keys from his pocket and

picked one. He listened again. Still no sound, just his own breathing. Then the key in the lock. And just like that, he was in.

He switched his torch on and the thin white beam divided the gloom of the cluttered kitchen. Mugs and tankards hung from hooks embedded in the walls. Sprigs of dried rosemary and bayleaf hung from a thin rail. The floor was cracked, but swept clean. There was life, but it was broken. Broken, then crudely put back together. Henry opened the fridge. A tray of chicken breasts and thighs, uncooked and plump, bloody at the edges, and covered with cling film took up the centre shelf. There were fresh green leaves, kale, spinach and watercress, bundled onto the bottom shelf and in the door were sauces, milk, eggs and a single thin vial of blood. Henry took it out and turned it in the stale light of the fridge. Its rich ruby colour looked heavy in the thick glass. He replaced it, then opened the freezer. There on the top shelf, next to a full fish and a tub of ripple ice cream, was an open box with tubes of frozen blood. Two tubes were empty, and three were full. Henry straightened up and closed the freezer. He scanned around the kitchen again, and started to go through the drawers. He found the medicine drawer. Boxes of fish oil supplements, a tube of Renova, jars of pills. Resveratrol, Melatonin, Centrophenoxine. A proper little pharmacetic collection. There was a black fabric bag. Henry knew what was in it before he opened it up on the counter. A syringe. Clean.

The stairs creaked as Henry ascended and the house felt more and more unstable with each step. It was top heavy. The tension in the house was what was holding it upright. At the top of the stairs the torch shone on a trap door in the ceiling. There was a stepladder leaning against the wall. He pulled it into place and climbed up. With his hands to the trap door, he tilted his head and listened. There was a mumbling, someone talking. But it was just one voice. It didn't sound close by. As quietly as he could, Henry pulled back the bolt and pushed open the trap door.

The attic was lit by tiny gentle lights, strings of yellow beads hung between the beams. The roof bowed inwards like hands in prayer. Sitting at the other end of the

attic, half turned away from him, was the emaciated figure of a boy, back bent and wild hair, like a scarecrow about to become a man. Henry could hear cadence of the voice now. The boy was telling some kind of story, to a host of puppets and marionettes, arranged in a semicircle around him. All of their faces were upturned to him. Wooden eyes and painted smiles. Fabric faces and button noses. Some bears, a cat, clowns, princesses, sailors, maids, witches, a surgeon, elves and a wizard, a Jester, there was a congregation enraptured by the quiet tale he was telling.

As the story continued, Henry pushed the trap door up further as noiselessly as he could. As he climbed into the attic, the story stopped. The boy turned to him. It was Richie. Or what was left of him. He was ancient, he had died and haunted this attic for centuries. His face was hollow and ghostly. His cheeks were sunken and his eyes were big, his hair was long and thin. His shoulder bones were like sticks under his white skin. A look of confusion, then horror spasmed his face. He started to stutter consonant sounds random and sharp, and moan. Henry saw he hadn't aged at all. He was a scared little boy.

–Richie, Henry said slowly, I can take you home.

Richie's body trembled. In the dangling light Henry saw that all over his skin were bruises and dots, needle entry points, a used hide with all of the stiches taken out. His skin stretched over his skeleton as he heaved for breath and began an unearthly wail. Henry moved forward.

Then the puppets, as one, stood. The Jester looked up at him and shook the rattle he held. Henry scanned the room, looking for wires, looking for controls, looking for some way to explain the movement, the shuffling and tapping of tiny feet on the attic floor. Maybe beyond the glow of lights in the attic beams there was something. Something that was making them move together, making them walk towards him, making those at the back gather and circle around Richie's shaking body. The puppets walked impossibly, like broken bodies walking away from a terrible crash. Faces in perpetual pantomime and unblinking eyes, all focused on him, pushed a sick fear into Henry, a fear that sank into him and gripped his spine and a cold knot

tightened in him. He suddenly heard his giant heart as it began to thud thud thud thud. He glanced behind him. The trap door stood open.

–Richie. Mum and Dad are waiting for you. I can bring you home to them.

Richie looked up from the floor.

The puppets were closer and Henry backed away, glancing again at the open trap door.

He reached into his jacket pocket, unfolded the letter. His ears rang with a high pitch panic and he shouted to get the words above the noise and the clicking and shuffling of false movement.

My darling boy Richie, my messy boy, my bundle of trouble, my naughty imp –

Richie made a low howl formed into the cry of om om om dripping with dark anguish and the cold spread through Henry again, pushing through his stomach with each sound. He kept reading. *I'm thinking about you sitting at the table with your hands in your dinner and how much you love the feel of squashing the beans in your hands...* Richie lifted his head. His eyes were huge in his withered face and his withered skin was streaked with tears.

–I'm real Richie. I'll bring you home.

Henry stepped forward again and leaned down, offering Richie his hand over the heads of the puppets. There was a sound like gears clicking into place. Thin little hands scratched and pulled at him. A clown clambered onto the back of a bear and grabbed his arm, pulling it down. Henry felt a sharp grip in his leg and then some claws catch him and he saw a wolf climbing onto his feet. The clown grinned up at him as he tried to shake him off. Would he have to break them? He would have to break every one. He pulled the clown from his arm and threw him to the other side of the attic. The clown hit the wall, the lights started to flash.

Blackness

henry frozen

Flash

wooden smiles sewed mouths clambering and grip

Blackness

clack clacking and the moaning of one alive knows of a death

Flash

richie's ghost face withered arm reaching out

Blackness

clacking quick rustling angled gripping wiry strong

Flash

richie's hand.

Blackness

Heart stop. Swell too long

Flash

beat a torrent dam breaking and take richie's hand

Blackness

grip and pull

Flash

richie on his feet a sailor a princess climbing the boy bony body

Blackness

grabbing, biting, on his legs and back pull richie towards him

Flash

a wizard on his belt drag Richie to the trap

Blackness

pinching clambering over the shoulders pulling

Flash

richie's face back in horror eyes in skin stretched pulled from behind

Blackness

richie pulling back, drag shake spasm drag

Flash

at his neck face hair pulled tearing clumps

Blackness

flood blood in head swirl strange tangle clicking limbs

Flash

pulling richie closer move back trap door

Blackness

wooden grip hand pulling at his mouth dragging side pulling step back trap door

and

Flash

the face of the Jester grin wide little hands choking him

Blackness

one foot down ladder

Flash

Jester's face wooden jabbing at his eyes shake head gripping richie

Blackness

two steps down richie screaming now No No No pull pull

Flash

falling from the attic, turning, crash ladder quick floor loud

Blackness

crack and thump hard breath and bodies floor

Flash

richie underneath mouth wide poisoned tunnel scream

Blackness

knees arm hand wall up reach

Flash

down picking gathering richie stand.

Blackness.

Henry isn't holding anything.

Flash.

He is.

Richie hangs elbow bent back broken.

Blackness.

Nothing. No clacking no noise. Look up.

Flash.

Smiling faces of the puppets at the trap door.

Blackness.

The jingling of Jester's hat.

Flash.

The Jester looking up, straight at him again Henry drawing a leg back shout

Blackness.

kick the Jester through the dark. Smash at the wall.

Flash.

The heap on the floor, limbs twitch and grinning head begins to turn again.

Turn. Down the stairs, disappear into the darkness of the house with Richie in his arms, long wordless gut screams then running through the black gloom of the hallway and kitchen, kick open the back door and out into the night.

The crop fields glowed and the gravel driveway crunched and in Henry's arms as he ran Richie opened his eyes to the sweet thin light of a fading day as he tasted the air, his awakening, the birth of a cool night on the mountain. Henry ran down the driveway, his breath making clouds trail behind him and he felt the cold sweat covering his body and lights still flashed in his eyes, blinding him each time flash blackness flash but now his body was flooded with adrenaline and Richie was weightless, nearly slipping from his arms and Henry thought that any moment he might come apart, collapse into a heap of bones scars and tears as he put him in the back of the car, but he stayed in one impossible piece, punctured loose limbed lying across the seat sobbing with his arm bent backward and his eyes washed out and red raw wide looking around wildly.

—You are going to see your Mommy and Daddy, Richie, do you hear? Henry started the engine. — Do you hear me? At the hospital. We're going straight to the hospital.

He pulled off the drive and onto the cul de sac. As he turned onto the main road a beaten-up estate car pulled in past him. It was Miki Magic. Their eyes met for a second. Henry pushed his foot to the floor. His blood still rang in his ears and his eyes still flashed and all of his insides rose and squashed against his throat as pulled onto the road. He imagined Miki Magic running from the front door of his crooked home, spitting and cursing, back out to his car to chase the stranger he had just seen. Or he would run. Yes, he would run. Again, Henry pushed the accelerator to the floor. The road careered in front of him and he swerved around cars as he ran his hands over his shoulders and checked his legs and arms for anything, anything that might still cling to him. Richie was shaking and rolling in the back as Henry raced, dragged from a nightmare, barely mumbling incoherences, just about hanging on. The long yellow haze of the crop fields sitting at the bottom of the darkness disappeared as the car sped back over the ridge. The night-time city was sprawled out before them like a glistening spiderweb.

They rushed into it.



When he dropped Richie at the hospital his head was a mess. When he carried him in, the eyes of the attendant flashed with horror. All Henry could think to say was, I got here as fast as I could, and then the nurses whisked Richie's thin punctured body away

through the swinging doors to where they saved life, sometimes. He called Kramer and told him the location of the house, the blood in the freezer, the model and colour of the old estate car and then waited for the force to arrive. In the hospital corridor, on a hard seat he sprawled and rested his head against the wall and started to consider how much he could tell the officers that would question him. Soon as he closed his eyes, Suzie was there, dressed like she's going to a premiere, stepping in then dismissing him, you've never really solved anything, if that's what you think you do. You're just good for finding things and pulling them into the street. She was there in attic, with the puppets, walking away from him and walking towards him. Oh man. What a mess. The officers are going to need something, something. Images distorted and the film of the attic swelled and swirled and he realised he should check his arms and neck for scratches, evidence of the impossible, but he couldn't open his eyes. Sleep had him.

Then Kramer was there, holding his shoulders and looking him in the eyes.

–Shit. Look at you. Let's get you out of here.

By the time the police reached the house on the hill it was a tower of fire. Now Kramer walked around it heavily while teams of forensics raked through smoking ruins. He'd heard Henry's story, listened to it dropping sideways out of Henry's slumping mouth in the passenger seat of the car, and back at his house, spilling out of him as Kramer rolled him into bed. In the official report the puppets were omitted, but now there was no evidence of the blood. There was no evidence of anything. The disorder, the madness, the fever of the attic against the cold brutal sanity of the freezer. It was so simple. Replace old blood with young. Its simplicity echoed. The rest of the story was like a spinning top that Henry couldn't stop, a roulette wheel out of control and Kramer didn't know to how pick out what he needed to but by now anything that might have made sense of it was ash. The house was a charred cracked shell and the wind was scattering Henry's story across the fields. Kramer looked around. The car was gone. The blood was gone. There was just Richie.

When the Hartfields saw Richie, they refused to be moved from the room. It soon became a grotesque Baroque tableau. There was Richie at the centre, so much older than either of them, a ten year old one hundred year old on what should be his death bed, monitors and machines and clear bags of fluid nutrients for what should be angels, pumps and tubes and wires following the Divine Proportion cajoling life into this body which should be calling out for death. Annie draped herself dramatically over him, blanketing his legs and stomach with her tired body and Bert sat at the bedside, leaning in close as if to tell a beautiful secret, just as soon as he'd finished crying. Which wasn't going to be any time soon. The tears were not stopping. All of the space inside the Hartfields that had been filling up with years and years of sorrow, all of it was being drawn out, draining from them now, until their faces were cramping from the weeping with which they blessed the head and feet of their broken boy.

When he woke it only lasted moments but in those moments he moved his head and opened his eyes. Annie and Bert clasped their hands together and held their breath and spoke in whispers as if to their deity before his eyes closed and drifted off again. And there they stayed, day after day, clinging dearly to each breath he took. If there was a summit, somewhere high and narrow, where you can stand and look down on one side to the wild unforgiving slopes of suffering you have struggled to ascend and on the other the sweet rolling lowlands of joyous living, then that was where they stood. Balanced. This weary couple, still just about holding each other up; even here in the hospital room, they were now so happy, but still so weak. Still all it would take would be one hard cruel wind. And still, they refused to leave the room.

With Kramer there the room was full and the three watched Richie in the bed, eyes closed, breathing through the mask and fluids running in and out of him. Kramer knew they weren't doing themselves any favours. The governing board were watching and already considered the Hartfield's house as an unstable environment. To look at, the Hartfields were crazy kooks, and to speak to too. But a grief that cannot be grieved will do that to you. And so far Richie hadn't said a word to either of them. To anyone. According to Henry, the only words Richie said that he could understand was no no

no. Annie wanted to talk to Henry. Kramer didn't say that Henry was holed up in his own room with Bourbon and cigarettes as his angels, but he did tell her what he thought Henry would tell her.

–The letters, Mrs Hartfield. It's the letters. That's what got through to Richie. When Henry read the letter. To get him back. So, how about reading to him, how about that? But Mrs Hartfield, please listen to me... He lowered his voice and moved closer to her, took her gently by the elbow. –Take it slowly, you don't know when he will be deemed fit for release by the hospital. It's going to take a long time. You need to pace yourself, take turns with Bert, and give him and the doctors some space, get some rest yourselves. Get cleaned up.

–Mr Kramer, she said, really? Do you think I'm acting desperately? I've got to change what I do? Now? Kramer didn't say anything. Tears rolled from her eyes and she put her head and fists on his chest, like he was a big door she was tired of knocking at. Bert didn't move his eyes from Richie. She sobbed. –Then I don't know anything. You must understand, this is the beginning of my life. This is the beginning of my life.

And then she cried some more and they stood there like that until she stopped.

The cold had passed and below his apartment window the people still walked, but with looser hands and their hunch aligned over the hard city. His job was over. Over the newscaster's shoulder Mikki Magik's aged face scowled with SUSPECT written underneath. Kramer had a team of men who could hunt this guy down. All Henry had to do was collect his money from the Hartfields and then he could hide in his little flat. But Kramer kept wanting to talk to him. This time when he opened the door Kramer held up a bottle before he walked in. By the time the third glass was being poured Kramer was way back in the big chair and Henry was pacing up and down.

–Younger! That picture, that shot you're using on TV is no good, he's gonna be younger. No one looks for that. In the birthday video he looked in his forties for Christ's sake. He must have had someone before Richie. He must have started before

that party. He can change so much about himself. How about you? What would you look like if you were twenty years younger?

–I'd still look the same, there's just more of me now than there was twenty years ago. Ok, you're right about him, but what can we do? Isn't the other thing worrying you more? The attic?

–You know I can't explain that properly. I know it happened. I don't know how it happened. Or what it was that happened.

–Telekenesis?

–He wasn't there was he? Animation through intent. Intent. He would have had to have known I was in the attic before he could control the toys. And he didn't know. When he saw me driving away with Richie, that was a surprise to him, I'm telling you. So, the telekinesis, him controlling them with his mind it doesn't work, it doesn't add up.

–I've seen the tapes of his little shows. Some good tricks there. How did he do that?

–Magic. You're not supposed to know. It feels old Kramer, the trick. I'd never seen it before but it's old magic.

–This is a man not the devil. Moving toys around. A trick.

–That's all. That's all. And in the attic. What was that? If I'd have been prepared then I wouldn't have had a problem. It was toys, Kramer, a box full of kids' toys. Just angry toys moving around. What? If it wasn't for fear I'd have had no problem. So? Not much power?

Kramer took a drink. Henry lit a cigarette.

–No, doesn't seem like a lot of power. Maybe just enough to get him what he wants.

–He'll want to stay young. That's all he wants. He'll have shaved his head, got beard a moustache. He'll run. The blood was all gone, so he took that before he torched the place. But he'll need more.

–Have you any idea how many people have handed themselves in, claiming to be Mikki Magik? He’s really caught on. They’re getting calls all day. Have you heard from Suzie?

Henry stopped pacing, emptied his glass and looked out onto the street. The beggars were back out and talkative again. Now the grip of frost had loosened the city streets were warm enough to sleep on again. People could take their hands from their pockets now, if they wanted to. The sun was nearly down. There was only one call in the last week, another job investigating insurance claims, but Henry didn’t take it on. The Hartfield money was enough for now, and he didn’t want to have to go looking for anything again. But it was just a matter of time. There was always another job to do. Another job for him to pull the cover back from something he wished he hadn’t seen. There must be some way of reversing the trend. The inevitable tide of self-destruction by revelation. That was all he saw. That everyone was riding it, tumbling towards the rocks to find out what it felt like whether they knew it or not and he couldn’t blame the little shitty scummy Mikki Magik looking around and seeing it. For asking the question, I don’t want to get old, how can I fix that? He came up with an answer at least. Not a pretty one, but it was an answer that made simple sense and worked. However he did it, it worked. That is the real power, Henry thought. The real power is in owning the success of the idea. Magic. If he realises that, he’ll never have to worry about us again, and the world will change. He turned to Kramer.

–Will Richie go home?

–We don’t know. Really. They’re a mess.

–If he doesn’t it’ll kill them. Really.

–I know.

–He’s going to look for more blood.

–He’s just a dime store magician Henry. His trick isn’t even that good. We’ll get him.

Suzie called before the first news report even ended. How could someone she knew do something like this? The thing is, this would never have happened if it wasn't for Suzie. Not just this case, but all of Henry's cases. That is, Henry would never have done any of this. It would still be going on, but Henry would be somewhere else. All of this deceit, the hiding and tumbling and lying and hurting and searching would all be going on, but Henry would have had no part in it. If it wasn't for her.

When he left the force he was ready to step away from all of it. He told her that he just wanted to raise chickens somewhere. She said 'you're not that kind of man. You know better than anyone the world you live in and you can't ignore what's right in front of you. You're not that kind of man. You can't say no to someone who needs you. You're not that kind of man', and she went on telling him what kind of man he wasn't while he was thinking, 'Well, at least I won't have to sort out any problems. I'll get the details, point out what a mess it all is, then get paid and leave. That's what kind of man I am,' but he didn't say that. He let her keep talking. The more she talked the more convinced he became that people's quests to make themselves happy, to find who they are, to fulfil their fantasies and squeeze everything they can, all of this was always going to lead to conflicts that they could never resolve; the more he knew that the way to avoid these conflicts was to not try to get to that higher level of happiness. The problems were so defeating, even if they were solved, they still defeated your idea of this happiness that really, you were never going to have in the first place. People just want to stop crying. You don't need happiness for that. You just need less sorrow. But still people tried. As a Private Investigator, he'd never be short of work, and he'd never have to think about himself. That was what was wrong with him and Suzie. Her being there made him think about himself. She started talking about we and us. Being with her and had made him realise how little he liked himself.

So now she'd seen the news and of course wanted to know about it all. That was the question she asked. How could someone she knew do such a terrible terrible thing? Everyone always asked that question. By now he had the Hartfield money, so they met

at Bully's. She was wearing her silver-grey dress, the one that dipped low at the back. She sat opposite him and said –You're getting old Henry. You're looking older.

He didn't tell her anything about the attic or the blood. He just told her what he had told the police when he gave a statement, that the boy was in the attic surrounded by toys and when he tried to get him out, the boy struggled and fought, causing him to fall from the ladder. How could he do such a thing? I knew him.

Later on, she said –Bushy is leaving the agency to me. He wants to retire. All to me. I'm going to upgrade. Completely. It feels bad, but people will always need to be entertained. People still need magic and music and something to laugh at. But how can I ever sit back at that desk. Oh Henry. It all feels so...it's soiled.

He watched her put food in her mouth, chew a bit then wash it down with a sip from the oversized glass. She didn't cry but her eyes were filled and shone and a tear fell that was not because of him, for once.

–I could help you, he said.

–With what? Help me what?

–Sit back at the desk. Clean up. Make it new.

–What do you want Henry?

He thought about that. He just wanted people to stop crying. He wanted her to stop crying, to be able to eat. He wanted to do something. Her starting point now was someone doing something terrible. He wanted to make something good.

–I've missed you Suzie.

–Really. What have you missed about me?

She looked straight into his eyes, then squinted her own. Her eye shadow was crimson and cracked. Her make-up was the texture of an uncooked ceramic. She was right. He was getting old. And she was getting old too. He leaned back and toyed with his knife.

–I guess...

She waited, raised her eyebrows.

–Ah shit Suzie, can't I just say that? I've missed you. It's as simple as that. Can I just say that and not have it turned into some thought experiment or whatever? I missed just being with you.

–You told me being with me was driving you crazy, that you hated it. Which is it?

–Well now I'm telling you I miss it. So both are true.

And this was the issue. She needed validation. He just needed someone he could lay his head down with. Someone he could get groceries for. He didn't know what he had left to offer. And of course if there's nothing left to offer, there's nothing left to offer. She needed so much more. And he just wanted less sorrow.

The waiter brought dessert and poured more wine.

When they were alone again, Henry said –What about your other man?

–Oh Jesus, there's no other man Henry, look at me.

–Well then...

She picked up her fork. –Well then.

Next time Kramer called to the flat he told him to put his shirt and jacket on, they were going to the hospital. The Hartfields wanted to see him. Henry didn't need to see them, the boy was back in the world, the money was in his account, but Kramer was just waited at the door until he came. So they drove to the hospital.

Richie was in a different room now, in a different part of the hospital. There were windows, sunlight here, and the rooms were big enough for a coffee table. Henry stood on the threshold. They'd shaved his head and a little growth had started back again. His arms were free of tubes. His face was fuller, and Henry could see there was a life inside him, more than a haunting in a shell. He was sitting upright in the bed, his eyes closed. His face was in the sunlight, serene and still. Bert was next to him in a chair, head bowed eyes closed. There were flowers blooming on the table and two of the stuffed toys from Richie's bedroom at the foot of the bed. The bear with an eye patch and the floppy eared rabbit, sitting upright too.

–Mr Bloomberg. Annie was behind them in the corridor.

–Annie.

Kramer stepped back and leaned against the wall. Annie faced Henry. She too was fuller somehow. He commented that she was looking better.

–Thank you, she said.

–How is he getting on?

–We are all doing so well.

–Has he spoken about it?

–He still hasn't spoken.

–So...

–So neither do we. Very much.

–You don't read to him?

–Sometimes. We meditate. All of us.

Henry looked again over the threshold. It was peaceful in there and Richie faced the sunlight like a miniature Buddhist monk at the head of the bed.

–Meditation. That's new? Did you do it before? I don't remember you mentioning it.

–No we started because he does it. When we moved room, and he started sitting up and we brought some of his things back, he started. And he does it all the time. So we do it together. But I do it to make him better. I'm making him better, we're making him better he's making himself better.

–What about the hospital...

–That too, but without me it would be much slower. You said it yourself Mr Bloomberg, it was my letters that kept him alive, and that saved him from that place. Now we're making him better. With will.

–Mrs Hartfield, Annie...

–Don't try and talk me away from this Mr Bloomberg, I've been through this with the specialists already. They have their way and I have mine. We are working together.

–If you want to get him home –

–Then it will happen when he’s better and I can make him better faster. Will will manifest reality. Belief. Certainty. Not the if. The is. Anything can change if you concentrate enough for long enough. You can animate change if you meditate on dynamism and concentrate your will. Mr Bloomberg, we’re happy.

She was smiling now and Henry found himself smiling too. He had never seen her smile like this before. Had he ever seen her smile? He had never seen such light in her face or such confidence in her voice. Her posture was sure, her breathing was even. The greyness which framed her was gone and her outline was solid.

–Ok. Well, what is he meditating for? Do you know his will?

She looked into the room for a while. Kramer was scratching and yawning.

–I think we will find out. I wanted, Mr Bloomberg to say thank you. To see you to say thank you. From Bert and me. We have life again. Thank you.

–Well you’re welcome Mrs Hartfield. Good luck.

–Now if you’ll excuse me.

She walked back into the room and took her place in the chair on the other side of the bed and closed her eyes and entered stillness, and there they were, Annie and Bert, they had found their promised land and level ground, solid statues flanking a cross legged form with his palms upturned, a deity, a child returned.

In the car Kramer said –Maybe the care workers will let him back home with them. I mean, they seem less crazy right? Or just a different crazy?

–Well, it helps that they’ve had haircuts and are smiling.

–Still kooks though, right? I wanted you to see them. To see the boy.

–Look, they’ve stopped crying. That’s enough for me.

–And those toys? They brought the toys. That shouldn’t be so weird.

–My job is done Kramer. Look, you’re looking for sense so you know what will happen next. That’s your job. I’m not looking for sense to what happened or what

happens next. All I look for is what I'm being paid to find. And I did it. They have their boy. My job is done.

Kramer looked at the road and nodded.

After a while he said, –Grady's?

Henry closed his hands. A man with claws for hands, workers tired and worn down but drinking, a traveller peeling scabs from his feet.

–No, drop me home.

–Mikki is gone. Still nothing. Vanished.

Of course he had. He had slipped into the spaces in between. The spaces in between understanding, in between the design, in between the certainty, in between minds, in between explanations, in between the lives shuffling and bumping along. Once, magic was associated with the devil but the devil is just the spaces in between. It's the people who have the will. And once they know where it is, anyone can vanish into the devil.

Suzie reopened the agency. She called him. He carried the old desk down the steps and the new desk up. He pulled up the old carpet and took the old posters away and scraped the peeling skin from the walls. Each day she came with a sandwich and a beer and while he ate it she talked, about the business, about him and what he was going to do, about the years she was leaving behind and the years she had left and he told her how pretty she was. The weather was warm and he left the street door open and laid out a cover and painted the walls. The stairs was an ochre gold and the office was panama white. When Suzie sat in her office chair she was bathed in a new light. The office was classy. Stylish and neat, like her. The evening after he screwed the new emblazoned sign on the door, they were back at Bully's.

The waiter poured the wine and as he did so Suzie looked up into Henry's eyes. He knew. They were both just waiting

–Well then, he said.

–I can't Henry. I know you too well. We can't. You know it too. I need more and you don't need enough. You know it. You're not that kind of man.
They drank to that.

