

Excerpt from

DEATH'S GRIP

KEN L GOULD

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A Locket Full of Ashes

A girl of seventeen stood near the grave site, faces of sympathy on either side. The minister spoke to the gathering; his words barely registered as her thoughts were elsewhere. The first patters of rain struck the tent, and a chill ran through her. She wrapped herself further in her coat. In the distance a grayness hovered over Lake Michigan, just as it must have appeared the day her father slipped into the waters.

A lowering device held the casket over a slash of darkness in the earth, which lay ready to swallow the hollow box. Part of her wanted to run up to that box, throw open the lid, verify its emptiness. She imagined her father as they would have presented him in death, had the search team recovered the body. Inanimate matter wrapped in the finest of suits. The flesh cold, dry and rubbery. Perfume masking embalming chemicals. His eyes shut as if he were only asleep, perhaps just dreaming, imparting a false sense of a future reunion.

Funerals, she realized, were all about deception.

Death in absentia, they called it, though the phrase had no meaning to her beyond some statute in a dusty law book. He was either dead or he wasn't; the middle ground belonged to the philosophers. In the little over two years since her father went missing, a legal battle raged between the lawyers for the estate—now her estate—and the insurance company, which argued for a declaration of suicide so as to negate, or at least reduce, their liability on a seven figure policy, whose ink barely had time to dry when her father went missing. The man was distraught over the recent death of his wife, the company argued. The judge wasn't convinced. He ruled in favor of the sole heir and beneficiary and let the daughter have her inheritance. Minus attorney's fees, of course.

Even with the legal battle behind her and a funeral to bury the past, the residue of that day remained: the blood on the boat; the storm that whipped Lake Michigan into a frenzy and ripped open violent swells in its surface; clouds that spread to the horizon, strafed with lightning, thick and oily like a painting of her dreams. The abandoned daysailer drifted into shore days later. The currents must have made off with the body. They tore her father from this world by a roll of the dice—her uncle would have called it an act of God—as the denizens of the deep devoured his fleshy parts and left only disarticulated bones to drift about the connected waterways until someone came across them, which no one ever did.

Despite her uncle's view of things, to her mind God had nothing to do with it. God hadn't made the fateful decision to pilot a boat into a storm. God hadn't slammed her father's head into the hull. It was a natural weather event, plain and simple. Random, inexplicable. A brilliant biochemist forever lost to the world of science. Some were already using the word *genius*, yet beneath that were the whispers—never in front of the little girl—of madness, of a man who became,

more and more, a dangerous eccentric. She knew of those whispers yet dismissed them because her father wasn't crazy, no matter what they said.

An accident. A suicide. What did it really matter?

She was an orphan now.

The wind scoured the cemetery and beat against the tent as if the Earth itself screamed.

"Sharon."

Her uncle stood by the car, door open.

"Sharon. It's time to go."

The rain came hard now. The faces drifted away, leaving her alone with the casket.

She gripped the locket against her chest, the one containing her mother's ashes. A memory dangling about her neck. Her uncle gave her the locket for the same reason he insisted on the service, because ashes are as irrevocable as a funeral. No going back now. Leave it all in the rear view mirror. Hold onto the memories, the pleasant ones anyway, but move on. Up next, college. And from there, who knows?

A new chapter. A new family. A new life.

Yet the questions still lingered. They lingered deep in places not easily accessed and welled up every now and again to inhabit her dreams, then receded just as quickly when she awoke. Those brief encounters left behind shadowy impressions, which she quickly dismissed, because allowing those questions to the surface felt like ripping open some horrible scab.

As the car took her away, she stole one last look at the empty box that hovered over all those markers of death.

Eight years later ...

I

Where there is much light, the shadow is deep.

-Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Monday

His sun glasses on, an unlit cigar in his mouth, James Dysart leaned against the back wall of the fifth floor office and waited for Ned Baker, metro editor of the *Chicago Tribune*. What passed for Ned's taste in artwork lined the walls. Behind the desk hung a framed copy of the paper's front page from September 12, 2001.

"Take those damn glasses off," Ned said, when he showed up at last. "And no smoking." He jerked the frames off James, who squinted at the sudden light. Ned handed the glasses back to him and paused, looking at his reporter closely. "You're drunk."

"And you're ugly." James held out the article he'd finished a few hours earlier as some sort of apology. "It's not lit."

Ned grabbed the papers from him and settled in behind his uncluttered desk as he glanced over the pages.

James slipped the cigar into his shirt pocket.

"You missed another staff meeting," Ned said.

“Did that apply to me?”

Ned furrowed his brow. “So. Will you blog?”

“Will you blow me?”

“Will you blog!”

“Will you blow me?”

“Damn it, James! No wonder Steph divorced you.” Ned read through the pages in no particular order, flipping them over and back. “You know, they invented something called a fax machine. Or maybe email? Just a suggestion.”

“Then how would I annoy you?”

“Or you could actually come to the newsroom every once in a while like everyone else who works here.”

“Then you’d annoy me.”

“You know, spend some quality time with your peers.”

“What peers?”

Ned frowned and returned to the pages He added as he read, “Meet your new intern.”

James glanced around. A young, half-smiling brunette stood in the doorway, her arm raised as if to affirm her status as the newly acquired property of one James Dysart, *Tribune* staff reporter. “I don’t want her,” he said as if that ended the matter.

“As if you have a choice,” Ned said.

“Give her to Curtis. That ought to irritate the hell out of him.”

Ned held up some papers from a tidy stack on his desk and waved them at James. “Do you know what I have here? Let me read a little. Let’s see, ‘By signing, I agree to indemnify the Company from any future claims.’ Blah, blah, blah. ‘I agree to protect all proprietary information.’ Blah, blah. Oh, and my favorite: ‘All writings and contributions remain the sole property of the Company.’” He slammed the papers down on his desk.

“Those words sound familiar,” James said.

“Our boilerplate termination notice. So don’t piss me off! The board - when they even bother to notice you’re still on the payroll - figures they can cut a little extra fat, make room for younger, eager fish like her, the ones who come cheap. The only value you have anymore is that damn column of yours, and that doesn’t buy much in today’s economy. Do you know what bankruptcy means? This paper just let eighty staffers go. One more won’t cause much of a fuss. Replace your name on the byline, and I doubt your readers would even notice.”

“That’s my column,” James said.

“Company property. As are you.”

“What about the Bassett story?” James’ stormy history with Chicago’s very own billionaire real estate developer Richard Bassett was the stuff of legend around the *Tribune*. James had written muck-racker-type copy on Bassett going back twenty years as the state of Illinois indicted the billionaire twice and twice failed to reel in the big fish. Now that story had taken on the whiff of political corruption as James uncovered a bribery scheme between Bassett and a city alderman. He would keep digging, of course, but both the reporter and the paper (Ned included) had been down this road before with nothing to show for it. Bassett could be a slippery sucker. For his part, he claimed Dysart had a personal vendetta against him, which James never denied, because it was true.

“This is late. Again.” Ned flipped to the second page. “You may be the self-proclaimed expert on all things Bassett, but I have other reporters on staff who’d love to get their hands on a story like this. More political corruption in the Windy City?” He leaned back for a moment, then forward suddenly. “Oh, and those other reporters show up for meetings, don’t miss deadlines and blog when asked. *Willingly* blog. Reporters who don’t give me such a goddamned headache. So you currently have two choices: pink slip or slave girl.”

“Hey,” the intern piped up.

“Maybe I’ll shop it around to the highest bidder,” James said. “I know people who’d love to have this story.”

“Name’s Sharon.” The intern held her hand out.

“I’m the only bridge you’ve got left in this town,” Ned said. “Remember that. I was best man at your wedding for Christ’s sake, a waste of my time, considering the end result. Maybe if you take on some extra responsibilities around here, I can convince the board to keep you around for awhile.”

“So I’m training my own replacement? Why are we hiring interns in the midst of layoffs, anyway?”

“Despite what you may think, you’re not that irreplaceable. She requested you, you know. Some people still look up to you, though God knows why. Just show her the damn ropes. Maybe she can teach you a thing or two about respect for authority.”

“Did you call yourself the ‘authority’?”

“Just do it.”

“Aren’t the interns the ones who clean our toilets with toothbrushes while saying ‘yes, sir’ and ‘no, sir’?”

“Okay, you win.” Ned reached for a pen. “You just won’t be content until you drive everyone from your life.”

James stared at the pen. He’d been down this road before, too, on the verge of being fired. Some stubborn part of him wanted to sign it and be done with it. But another part of him didn’t have the energy anymore to struggle back toward a living in a world where aging, unemployed journalists were a dime a dozen. He needed the paper and his editor for a little while longer, and that irritated him even more.

He put his sun glasses back on. He passed the young woman as he left the room and said, “Come on. *Intern.*”

Ned motioned for her to follow James, so she did.

A dwindling number of journalists clung to life inside the newsroom, battling against obsolescence, the clock, each other and the

editors, feeding the ever changing needs of the creatures who still required their daily fix of print journalism, creatures who were also dwindling in number. What was once a chaotic mess of reporters, photojournalists, graphic designers and interns was now a more sedated form of anarchy as the worker bees drifted away from the hive, one by one, their careers dead or dying. Some wound up at an Internet start-up, struggling to find a niche in a paradoxical market where readers wanted quality for free.

The writing was on the wall. Journalism and the *Tribune* were not what they once were. But then neither was James Dysart.

James navigated the maze of cluttered desks and computers toward his own workstation, which he seldom visited anymore. He much preferred working from home, where he could drink his whiskey and pass out at his leisure. And he much preferred pounding out his assignments on his beloved Smith Corona typewriter, held together by a bit of tape, a few jerry-rigged repairs and a stubborn refusal to enter the digital age. A bunch of pixelated screens blinking at him wasn't his idea of progress.

Every now and then he came back to the newsroom, this Mecca of journalism, to remind himself of why he didn't come here anymore.

A few dozen reporters typed away on terminals, read the morning's edition, organized notes or engaged in whispered conversations.

"Hey, Dysart," a colleague yelled. "Still working on that novel? What's it been? Ten years? Must be one helluva book."

"You're still here, Curtis? Thought they fired you just for being an asshole." He stopped when he realized the intern still shadowed him.

She almost bumped into him. "Are you fired or not? Isn't this where security escorts you from the building? Do you really make the interns clean the toilets?"

He rolled his eyes and went on to his desk. Someone had stolen his chair so he requisitioned another and sat in front of the blank

terminal. A piece of paper clung to the power button of his computer. He removed the sticker, informing him of his temporary password, which had expired several months before.

Someone had dumped a pile of envelopes across his workstation, and some of them had fallen to the floor. On top of the pile rested another contraption of the digital age, a gleaming new smart phone, company provided. He examined it, front and back. What the hell was so smart about it? Now people could annoy him by text, too? He threw it back on top of the pile.

The intern smiled at him from over his shoulder.

He gave her his best go away look and turned back to the mess on his desk. He scanned the envelopes until he found a promising one. He sniffed it and shook it next to his ear. Satisfied that it met his high standards, he ran his finger under the flap.

Sharon picked out one, too, a purple envelope that smelled of perfume. The girly script of the return address indicated some lady in De Kalb sent it. Her eyebrows rose as she lifted out a black thong. "Some things you just can't email, I guess."

He grabbed them from her and stuffed them in the garbage can under his desk. "Don't touch anything. I have a system."

"How do you tell the garbage can from the desk?" she asked.

A smattering of laughter broke out around the room.

"I only read the hate mail." He tossed more envelopes to the floor.

"Why?"

"Freaks interest me."

Sharon opened another letter. As she read it, a different expression came over her face, a combination of disgust and curiosity.

"I wouldn't let it get to you," James said. "Your name appears in print, and you become a magnet for wackos."

"Hell of a thing to call your fans," Curtis said from his desk.

"How many letters do you get exactly?" James asked him.

“It’s very descriptive,” Sharon said. “Want to hear what he wants to carve in your face?”

“Must be that piece I did on the Bears.”

Tacked along the wall around his workstation were the trophies of an aging career, clips of a column called *Goin’ Nuts*. Sharon swiped one before James could stop her. She turned away from his outstretched hand.

Goin’ Nuts |
DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

By James Dysart
Tribune staff reporter

As H.L. Mencken would have said, the “booboisie” were out in force today, the mob, the ignorami we more commonly call voters, packing their local polling place like rats lining up for a scrap of cheese. Only some politician snuck the cheese out the back and sold it to one of his wealthy friends.

Standing in line for ungodly hours of misery to vote for another useless twit whose lies we substitute for truth. That’s our lot in life. Welcome to democracy in action. The action of a day we’ll never get back again.

Next time you press a button or mark a box for president or city council member, you can smile, content in the self-delusion your vote matters. We in Chicago know better.

Remember to vote early and vote often.

”That’s rather cynical,” Sharon said. “Who’s Mencken?”

James stared at her. “What’s wrong with cynical?”

She took another clipping down. He didn’t try to stop her.

Goin' Nuts |
USELESS EYE CANDY

By James Dysart
Tribune staff reporter

The new Windows OS (that's operating system to the ignorant like me) came out today to fanfare and shrugged shoulders (that's me, shrugging). Oh, goody. More useless techno-gadgets, manipulated by consumers seeking porn more than intelligent discourse. So unzip your pants and sit awhile.

"Not bad." She tacked the clippings back up on the wall without bothering to finish the last one. "So is the cliché true? Do journalists and their editors always fight like that?"

James laughed. "Sometimes. This particular editorial relationship has some subtext. Ned and I go way back, twenty-some years, even before he had the power to fire me, though between you and me, I think he enjoys that power a little too much. I know how to handle Ned. Look, you're his idea of a babysitter. His lame attempt to keep me from my real day job, alcoholism. Which reminds me ..."

He pulled on the file drawer, beating it, tugging on it until he jerked it loose, revealing a whiskey bottle where his files should have been. The bottle was empty, much to his annoyance. "You want to talk clichés, how about an alcoholic pain-in-the-ass reporter? Anyway, like all editors, Ned is real simple to understand, so here's lesson number one. All I gotta do is bring him something worth printing in his damn paper, and he'll kiss my ass for it. Both cheeks. Not the Bassett story, though. That's old hat by now. People get immune to a constant refrain. They need something new with a bit of sparkle to it. The next story of the century or whatever. I'll come up with something."

He searched the pencil drawer and came across a small bottle, half-full. He spun the cap loose, took a gulp and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He held the bottle out to Sharon. "Don't worry, no one's getting fired. Not today. They usually do that on Friday."

She glanced about. "Not during working hours."

"Where's the fun in that? Some of the best stories have been written under the influence, even front page. Booze goes with news like . . . Bonnie and Clyde. Lesson number one. Or two. Whichever."

"Well, then. I guess I'm driving." She took her keys out and headed for the elevators. She stopped partway across the room and turned. "Come on. Stories are written in the real world."

James stared at this new curiosity as if seeing her for the first time. She was beautiful, inquisitive, full of youthful vitality. He'd been that way once. Well, maybe not the beautiful part. Something about her reminded him of someone, he just couldn't place it.

Before he left his station, he threw away his worn-out flip phone with the slightly cracked screen and broken hinge. He grabbed his new "smart" phone and followed her to the elevators.

