

Two-Tenths Millogram
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What do you say to death? Do you, with a lilt to your voice, say, “Hello?” Or do you say, “Goodbye?” Or do you stare slack-jawed and wide-eyed? Do you even know? I certainly didn’t at twenty, and I’m not sure I have the answer now, a double lifetime later. I sit on this warm patch of wooden flooring inside my French doors at the end of spring and the beginning of my winter, surrounded by only sleeping cats, calling butterflies, and fractured memories. It may be too late for consolation but it’s a story that’s never been told. Besides, there seems to be something in the orange glow of the daffodil blooms in the window boxes and the whoosh of Lake Michigan waves on the sand that says it’s time.

It took them two years to actually commit the murder, and murder it was. It could probably be proven if I’d care to dredge up the pain, the past, and take a risk with my own life in doing so. In the 70s, drugs flowed through this country as freely as tap water from your kitchen faucet. Ever see the movie *Blow*? It had more truth to it than people like to admit. Art mimics life, and in the 70s the waters into Florida and the highways from Florida were fore and aft, bumper to bumper reefer, coke and heroin loads.

And who ran that market? The names have been changed, as they say, to protect the innocent—more likely the guilty. And since it’s difficult to make up an Italian name that doesn’t belong to one somewhere, these are generic American names, such as Smith and Jones. Not as dramatic as Giamaricci or Caparelli or Scardina, but safer. Much safer.

During that era there was a pool hall on Belmont and Southport, owned and operated by Mr. Smith, a short, balding, cigar-smoking Italian. Not too far behind the scenes, in the back room actually, Mr. Smith also owned and operated a highly profitable

marijuana business. Probably some coke and heroin too, plus he was the local loan shark and bookie, but that's not what this story is about. This is about a shipment of Black African Gangá.

In July 1977, I stood in dim yellow somberness, in a room cushioned in the colors of death. Or the colors someone long ago decided would comfort the survivors of death—deep royal blues and warm magentas. The unfamiliar body of my twenty-four-year-old husband lay inside lacquered mahogany, lush satin and crisp lace. I noticed none of that, though. What I noticed was the uncertainty of what to do next. Where to place my foot? What to do with my hands? My eyes? My ears? My ears heard, but were they expected to acknowledge? Was my brain supposed to have the ability to respond? Response requires ability. At twenty-one? Looking at death? I'd become again, the mousy four-eyed grade school nerd, an outcast, shrinking beneath the whispers behind cupped hands. Their whispers floated in clouds, a swirling essence from a genie lamp.

“They did a good job. Looks like he's sleeping.”

Isn't that what they always say? But they must have never seen him asleep. They'd never sat crosslegged in the middle of a twin-sized bed, with the moon glow dancing across his ruddy face, tinted red from the beard growth. They'd never stared at him and relished how his golden hair fell sideways or how his muscular, hairless chest rose and fell with each breath. They'd never looked at his sleeping self with longing, bursting love, as I'd done a million times over the past five years. They'd never done that. If they had, they'd know that this husk inside a store bought shell looked nothing like Phil. Not my Phil.

“Overdose. Such a young life wasted. And it’s her fault.”

My fault. My fault. My fault? The music of angelic harps strains intermingled with the whisper clouds and whisked them about wildly above my head. He would’ve hated this shit. The music should’ve been “Stairway to Heaven” or “Horse with no Name.” That’s what he would’ve wanted. But no one asked me. It was my fault. No one saw the blackened tendrils of anger that reached out to choke the whispered word clouds and harpsichords. It wasn’t my fault. They said possible methadone overdose. I never did methadone. Phil never did methadone. And he hadn’t this time either. And he hadn’t overdosed.

But I didn’t think any of those things. What I thought, as I looked down, was about five years earlier. The shores of Lake Michigan and the glistening sunset on the slow, rolling waves, flickered and scratched my eyes, and then spread vividly to overlay the body, the casket, the parlor. The hum of the air conditioning became the crash of waves against the rocks. The sun pulsed warm on my face and the sultry breeze flapped the edges of my long yellow flowered sundress. I tilted the brim of my white straw hat into the wind and continued my stroll on the craggy rocks at Addison Street lakefront. It was a Woodstock moment. There were hippies with long hair in bell bottoms while “Smoke on the Water” bellowed through the air, mingled with yells of “Weed here,” “Orange sunshine,” “Get your Quaaludes here.” I’d been here before so I knew. I knew that across the green grass that shook with the beat of conga drums was Phil. I knew that once I started across that grass, the beat would surge through my feet and burst in my heart. I knew we would walk under the stars and hold hands that shimmered with moonlight. I knew we would make love that night and for hundreds of nights to come. I

stood on the rocks in the amber glow and looked out over the field of people and drugs, dogs, wildflowers and weeds, and knew my soulmate was waiting, that we'd have children and that he was waiting to be buried. *Maybe, if I don't walk over there, if I don't touch his hand, it won't happen.* But that doesn't work. I know that, so I step off of the rock, blades of grass tickling my toes, and I stroll with the beat.

“Marie, are you OK?”

Was I OK? I was when I wasn't looking at the hollow shell. I was brought back by my brother who stood beside me with a worried look in his chocolate eyes.

“I'm fine. Don't worry. I know you don't wanna be here, so why don't you go on and go. I'll be ok.”

He looked so relieved I almost laughed. I felt the whoosh from his lungs that brushed my face, his breath unconsciously held. He kissed my cheek and left. Just like that. Gone. Just like Phil, gone, except I could go after my brother if I needed to. Instead I just gazed at Phil and wondered how it got to that. Death. As I stood there, visualizing every moment of our lives together, I reached over to fix his hair because it was all wrong, but it was just one other thing no had asked me.

“Don't worry baby, I'll fix it.”

And there in my twenty year old hands were clumps of his hair. I held it in my cupped hands like it was sacred, watered it with tears and stared.

“Now honey, you don't want to do that. They did an autopsy there and cut off the whole top of his head.”

I looked at the shrunken, wrinkled, gray old man who stood behind the casket. I stared at him for a long while, I'm sure. I looked back at the hair that had sifted through

my fingers, leaving only a strand or two behind. I turned around, walked past all those old and young Italians who had the audacity to blame and point fingers. I walked past all the dark strangers in black fedoras and trenchcoats standing along the walls; walked past Phil's father who was their clone; walked out of the doors of Adinamis Funeral Home on Western Avenue and into the bar on the corner. I sat down, ordered a Smirnoff on ice, and told the story to the first slobbering old drunk that sat next to me.

It was the fall of 1975 when it started and my daughter was just a few months old. One day I was bathing her in the dining room of our apartment on Ridge, just off of Glenwood. The sun streamed through the grimy windows and flickered off the soapy water in the plastic tub that sat on the dining room table. Pot roast simmered on the stove and, down the long hall that separated the back from the front, the TV blared, "Bear Down, Chicago Bears" and Phil slept, stretched out on the sofa. It was a nice Sunday afternoon, having him home since he always seemed to be out and about—youth and all. But lately he was home on fall Sunday afternoons. Home cooking and the Bears did that. And a new baby helped. I cooed and splashed Jeanette.

"When we're done here, you can lay on the sofa with Daddy and watch the Bears, OK?"

She didn't have a clue what I was saying, but she liked the sound of it so she giggled bubbly and splashed some more. That's when there was a knock on the door.

"Damn, I knew it was too good to be true. It's probably one of his hoodlum friends come to drag him out somewhere. Come on Baby, you sit in the crib and I'll be right back."

I wrapped her in her fuzzy, pink bunny hooded blanket, laid her in the crib beneath the windows, turned on the bunny mobile and went to the door. We never asked who it was, no one ever came that we didn't know, so I opened the door to the barrel of a .45 inches from my nose. There were two of them, the gunman and another, short, stockier guy, neither of them familiar. They asked for Phil, and I said he was asleep on the sofa. There was no way I was gonna play hero with a baby in the next room.

They pushed past me, me with my bare feet, in sweats and a ponytail, me who wasn't dressed for an altercation anyway, even if I'd wanted to help Phil. And I didn't. He'd promised me he wasn't doing stuff anymore, but with the appearance of these two, gunman and non, I figured he was lying, so let him pay the consequences. Right?

But I couldn't do that. Not if there was a way to help. I was his partner, for better or worse, right or wrong. So I glanced back at Jeanette, happily talking to her toes, and then I inched my way along the hallway toward the front room. Along the dark paneled walls covered with family pictures, past the bedroom with the black-light walls where we dreamed, cuddled together beneath marijuana and Jimi Hendrix posters. The couch, that huge brown floral-print, wooden-armed couch was in full view from the hall although the intruders were not. Phil was still spread out, unmoving even though I saw a foot reach out and kick the front of the sofa.

“Come on motherfucker, get up,” a voice boomed.

“Was a matta wit choo guys, comin' in my house wit dat shit? Betta put it away b'fore somebody gets hurt.”

I stopped in mid-breath, plastered against the wall, not believing my ears. Here he was spread eagle on the sofa with a gun pointed at his head acting like he was in control.

Always in control of the situation, huh Phil? Never let 'em see ya sweat, huh? Well, I'm sweating, you fucking idiot. Get up and give them what they want. We have a baby here.

“You got no room to be callin’ da shots, Philly. We got da piece here, na-choo. Get up and give us our shit back.”

“Put da heat away and I’ll get up. I got a baby in here, whadya stupid?”
What are YOU stupid? Talking to them like you have the gun.

“Get da shit and we’ll put it away. Hell, we’ll go. But we need it back so ge’chor ass up.”

Phil stretched languidly, waking leisurely from his afternoon nap. He yawned and sighed. I could hear it from the hall, although by then I was standing at the door frame of the front room.

“OK, I’m gonna tell ya again, put the heat away before somebody gets hurt and then I’ll get up.”

I saw the shadow fall on the wall behind the sofa, the sun glistening through the spider plants hung in the floor to ceiling windows to the right of the gunman and his buddy. The reflection was broken in pieces by the gilded shadow box on the wall, but it was clearly the motion of a man slipping a gun in the front of his pants.

“OK, come on now Philly, give us da shit. Ya know whose it was and we’s all gonna be hurt if he don’t get it back.”

Phil stretched again, sat up, reached over to pull back in place the coffee table the guys had kicked away and plopped his own bare feet on top of it. And they moved aside for him to do it.

“Have a seat man. Da Bears are ‘bout to play. Marie’s got dinner going. Smells good too? Whatchoo got in dere baby? Why donchoo come in here and get that bottle a wine outta the closet?”

“We don’t want no food and we don’t want no fuckin’ wine and we sure as hell don’t wanna sit down and watch no fuckin’ Bears. We want our shit.”

Wine? What wine? There’s no wine in the front closet. Who would keep wine in a closet? The only thing that’s in there is #. #. #. # and then I knew he truly was crazy. The only thing in the front closet besides coats and a stroller was a 9mm automatic that he obviously expected me to not only get but use. He never glanced at me, never even acknowledged my presence and neither did the fellas. I slipped into the room, still hugging the wall, noticed how pretty those spider plants looked hanging in the windows, noticed the cold sweat pooled in the small of my back, the blare of the TV announcer yelling each player by name, — “Walter Payton,” “Bo Rather,”— and the deafening knock of my knees drowned out only by the pounding of my heart and their continuous bickering back and forth like bantering school boys in a playground.

“Aw man, cool it. You’re gonna ge’chor shit and den some, don’t worry ‘bout it.”

“Don’t worry ‘bout it? Is you’s crazy Philly. Ya know da ole man nuts when it comes to money. You got ‘em for close to 10 g’s and you got it from us. Means we boat in a world a shit if you don’t come off it. So ge’chor ass up and hand it over.”

The gunless gunman kicked the coffee table again. By now I had made my way around behind them and my sweaty hand slipped on the doorknob of the closet. My eyes glared at Phil but he never looked my way. I opened the door and slipped in. I made certain the door was shut completely before I turned the light on. They’d not noticed a

thing, still quibbling back and forth. *What a bunch of fucking idiots, all of them.* I reached up on the top shelf, felt around in the dust and thought for a moment it was gone. Maybe I'd been in one of my cleaning frenzies and thrown it out, or maybe he'd gotten greedy and sold it, but no such luck. There on my tiptoes, in the musk of the winter coats and boots, my fingertips crossed the cold steel. I grabbed it tightly and lifted. My other hand reached up for the clip. With index finger, thumb, and clip I turned the doorknob slowly.

“Look Philly, either you get da shit or you get yours, baby or no baby.”

I saw his arm bend and then stop in mid-motion. Over the din of the TV, he heard the sharp click of the clip. But he didn't turn around, he didn't need to, he knew what was up.

“OK, motherfuckers,” and Phil finally stood up, reached in the guys pants and took his gun away from him. “Who's gonna git what? You got ta be outta yo fuckin mind to come in my home wit my ole lady and baby, waving some heat like you are somebody. Now get the fuck outta here before someone really does get hurt.”

He waved the .45 past them toward the front door, and they went, hands in the air where no one said they should be. They walked slowly, with Phil behind them. The short guy opened the front door, they walked out and Phil kicked it shut behind them.

“Good job baby,” and when he turned around I was crumpled on the floor, cradling the 9mm, crying, with rock-a-bye-baby tinkling in the background.

That was two years before, almost to the day. The slobbering drunk who sat beside me in the dingy bar obviously wasn't too far gone because he asked, “So what was the shit? And how'd he get it and why didn't he just give it back?” They were all really

good questions. The same questions I asked Philly that afternoon as he held me and rocked me and told me it was all gonna be OK, baby.

The “shit” of course was the Black African Gangá, and he didn’t just give it back because he’d already sold it. For the street value of \$10,000, just like they’d said. Which also answered the question many, including myself, asked about why I chose to stay with my children (for I’d had another before it was over) in that kind of environment. Youth and love coupled with money, sprinkled with a little aura of excitement and you have the stuff of movies. And Philly always was the one for grand performances. I didn’t know just how grand his final exit was until several months later. Sitting at that bar, with that drunk, I only knew that I was alone. I had no idea that the story I had just told was anything other than a fond memory of Phil.

“So what happened? How’d he get the stuff in the first place?”

The two hoodlums who thought to scare Phil into returning the weed were small time punks off the street, kinda like Philly himself. In fact, they were acquaintances. They’d all been sitting in the Golden Angel on Lincoln and Wellington, eating French fries with globs of ketchup, drinking Cokes and exchanging bravado stories of all the jobs they’d done over their extensive twenty-some years of living. Joey and Al, the two would-be intruders, bragged about the current run they were doing for Mr. Smith.

“Pounds of it, man. Just came in from Florida. We drove it up ourselves. Gonna pay us \$2500 for the delivery. Cash in hand, man.”

“You get it yet?” Philly asked as he slopped up ketchup with fries and dripped it in his mouth.

“Tomorrow. Ten in the morning we drop off at the pool hall. Shit’s still in the trunk.”

Phil took a long drink of his Coke as he watched passing cars through the window.

“Gotta piss, man,” Phil said. “I’ll be back.”

He strutted his Don Johnson look a like self to the back of the restaurant and climbed out of the bathroom window. He’d rolled in self-glorifying laughter when he told me this story on that 9mm Sunday afternoon, while we lounged in a Hyatt hotel room waiting to hear that all our belongings were safely removed from our hot apartment. Not everything, of course. With \$10,000, we planned new furniture, new clothes, new everything really, but there *are* personal mementos one carries everywhere. These were the things his brothers gathered and stored until our new address was known. After he climbed out of that bathroom window, Phil casually strolled to the 1965 Impala, popped the trunk lock, transferred the pounds and pounds (twenty-five to be exact) into the trunk of our rusted Pinto and drove off into the sunset...as it were.

Unloading it proved to be a bit more difficult, since most of the area dealers knew Mr. Smith was bringing in a shipment and it was common knowledge that Phil was a lightweight who couldn’t possibly have gotten that kind of merchandise on his own. Thugs are stupid but not dumb, and the city boys wanted nothing to do with it. It ended up being sold to a Wisconsin man who later turned out to be an old friend of Phil Sr. Unbeknownst to me until later that Sunday afternoon when we fled in supposed secrecy, Phil had dumped the Pinto and bought a nice, shiny, money-green 1972 Riviera. We

rented an upscale apartment, bought all that new stuff, and began what I thought was a new life.

Phil, being the show-off he was, couldn't resist driving through the old neighborhoods with his new car all decked out. Things like that car with fender skirts and huge white wall tires, gold Italian horns hanging from our necks, and the in-vogue Super Fly wardrobe are hard to miss. Someone had lost \$10,000 and someone else was pimping large. It doesn't take a genius to figure out what happened. After a few months, we didn't even think about hiding it anymore. But since they were all compadres in the "family," it was no big deal. Mr. Smith talked to Phil's dad who talked to Phil, who apologized and promised to pay his debt.

"Ah, kids," Mr. Smith said. "Mine's no bedda."

Phil promised me, again, that he'd get a "real" job and settle down. Otherwise, he would've been content to continue street hustling and helping his dad attract cute little girls. I'd realized after the first year or so that the whole writing poetry and playing music was about his dad and young groupies. I didn't mind in the beginning. I was happy when he played the conga's and sang my poetry to the babies and me. We'd all lie on the brown shag in front of the stereo with candles glowing all around, and dream of a front yard and white picket fences when the band hit it big. Phil's dad sounded like Frank Sinatra singing folk songs and girls seemed to love that. Of course, they loved the throb of Philly's conga's and Donny's bass strumming as well. For awhile we all believed Phil's dad though when he said they'd go nowhere without his voice. All the best bands had smooth lead singers.

Once, we all went down to Knoxville, KY to a recording studio. We were so excited to be just a few miles from the heart of music dream makers—Nashville. They recorded one of my pieces they'd put to music. I was so proud of myself but mostly of Philly. When they finished the recording, one of the studio directors pulled him aside.

“Say man, you're pretty fuckin' good on those drums. Why don't you stay down here and play back-up for the singers that come in? Not bad pay and maybe you'll either get picked up or you can work on somethin' yourself?”

“What about my dad?” Phil asked while he winked back at me.

“Hey man, nobody listens to that shit anymore. He's got a good voice for Frank Sinatra shit, but what you're tryin' to do, it ain't him man. He'll just hold ya back.”

“I can't leave my dad, man,” Phil said and turned away.

He took Jeannette's hand, put his arm around my shoulder and we walked out of that studio. I thought he should've taken the job, but he was loyal to his dad—if one made it, they'd all make it. I was perfectly content then with whatever Philly decided, as long as we were all together, life was good. After years of nothing happening though except playing night club gigs and selling dope, I pushed hard for that real job, and other people in our lives besides his dad and brothers. I often wondered what my girlfriends from high school were doing, but I had a gorgeous, creative husband and a bouncy toddler, so I didn't try too hard to find out. Life just kind of went forward.

Eighteen months after that African Gangá deal, we had a son and Mr. Smith decided to help Philly pay his debt.

“I got a friend. He runs a security service guardin' wetbacks dat are bein' extradited back to Mexico. Ya' gotta job, Philly. Den ya pay me back. OK, kid?”

“OK, Mr. Smith. Thanks and I’m sorry, again. I didn’t know.”

“Sure ya didn’t, kid.”

It was a wonderful time, sending him off to work everyday in his sexy uniform with gold bangles against a crisp white shirt. His deep-set dark eyes brooded devilishly below the brim of the big-state-trooper-style hat. And he went, seriously and religiously, every day. He surprised everyone. Four months later though and he hadn’t paid one red cent to Mr. Smith. But nothing was ever said. Compadres!

“Michael’s goin’ wit me tonight,” Phil said one evening after dinner.

“Michael? How come? You don’t even like him. You said he’s slow.”

“He wants ta come and I could use somebody ta talk ta. It gets borin’ jes sittin’ dere wit a bunch of fuckin’ wetbacks.”

He kissed us all goodbye, set the trooper hat tight on his new shag haircut and swaggered out the door. It was the last time I saw him.

The next morning, I got the phone call from the Rosemont Police Dept. My father-in-law, a perfect Robert Blake mirror stood beside me.

“What the hell do you mean dead?” I screamed in the receiver. “He’s at work. He’ll be home any minute. Whoever this is, stop playing the fucking games.”

Phil Sr. took the phone, mumbled a few “uh-huh’s” and hung up.

“Sounds real, Marie. Philly was DOA at Resurrection Hospital, brought from da hotel. Da wetback was the ones dat called the cops. Said he went ta sleep after eatin’ and never woke up. You shouldn’t be the one ta identify da body, honey. I’ll go.”

He was so matter of fact, so unsurprised, but I just shook my head. I sat with my babies at the oatmeal-smearred table shaking my head while he walked out the door. I sat

that way for hours, staring into space. I didn't cry because I didn't believe it. I just shook my head, probably just another one of his grand performances. Jeanette played and slapped at the oatmeal, then crawled on the sofa to watch Sesame Street. Phil III fell asleep in my arms. At some point, I put him in his crib and stood by the tall front windows looking out at Fullerton Ave. This was to become a habit. For weeks I stood at that window and watched for Philly to come strolling down the street, laughing about what a cool joke he'd played on us. At that moment though, I wasn't thinking about cool jokes or anything else. I saw buses go by and people walking somewhere. I heard Big Bird on the TV and the crib mobile playing Rock-a-bye-baby. I saw my father-in-law get out of the cab, tip his Fedora up at the window, hang his head, and slouch in the bottom door.

By now, the red-faced lush next to me had downed several whiskey shots with Old Style chasers. Saliva slid down both sides of the glass, going back into the beer and pooling on the bar. I was still on my second Smirnoff, not being much of a drinker and having only been in a bar a few times prior to this one. Even though it was no big deal for a minor to drink in a bar, it's difficult when you have babies. I'd gone a few times to Philly's gigs, but having an old lady around decreased the tips from the ladies. Anyway, after years of getting high, I was fine without. Besides, most druggies aren't drinkers. But that day, it was close and available.

“So how'd he die? They kill 'em?”

I rolled my finger around the rim of the glass, lit a cigarette, tilted my head back, and watched the stream of smoke rise through the stale air.

“Food poisoning. Or drug overdose. They won’t know for sure until the autopsy report.”

It’s what they had told me—the police, his boss, his father. He died in a Rosemont motel room. Michael, the son of Mr. Smith, was there and had confirmed it, along with the fact that he and Phil had drunk some Methadone. Yeah, Michael was a heroin addict and got a daily bottle of orange juice and Methadone from the clinic. For some reason, this is what the family chose to believe. And that it was my fault for “turning Phil on to the drug scene,” even though our drugs of choice was marijuana, some downers, some speeders, and maybe a little acid, but never heroin or Methadone. Even after the five illegal aliens that he was guarding gave their depositions and stated that he’d gotten a sandwich from the vending machine in the motel lobby, that he’d laid down on the floor to watch TV after eating it, but fell asleep and never woke up. They all hoped it was food poisoning, because then there’d be a lawsuit, but their eyes said “overdose.” Still, the talk was about food poisoning. It was the only logical explanation, they said. It wouldn’t be official until the autopsy results came back and the death certificate issued, but what else could it have been?

It would be months before that answer would materialize in all its murky clarity. Right then, I thanked the drunk, who was now leaning too close, for listening and I walked out into the night air. The wake was over and the funeral home dark. I went home with a new found friend, Smirnoff, to attempt sleep and prepare for a funeral.

The sun rose and set several times outside my window. I watched its tawny fingers crackle on windowpanes when it came up, and I watched the shadows creep across the street as it went down. I watched the ritual over and over and over again. I saw

Phil in the satin sheets of the casket. I saw darkness cross his face when the lid closed. I watched them lower the box into the black dirt of Mt. Carmel Cemetery on a chilled and wet July afternoon. The thick gray clouds hung so low they obscured the tip of Bishop's Hill. And still I watched Fullerton Ave and the continuous trail of the sun through my own perpetual gray cloud. Phone calls from old friends and family members went unanswered. I watched. Phil Sr. was adamant that he would take care of us. That he would make sure we never wanted for anything.

“You know, I always loved you and if you weren't with Philly, I would've took care of you a long time ago.”

I felt his hot breath on my neck and turned from the window.

“Are you crazy, old man? I'm moving back home with my mother.”

I pushed past him and the thick black chest hairs that curled over his Dago-T fluttered in my wake.

“I know ya miss 'im,” Phil said to my back. “I miss 'im too, we all do, but he's gone and you're still a young woman. A beautiful young woman, wit two kids. Ya need someone ta take care of youse. And I'll do it. Ya just need some time. When da case is settled and we got da money, you'll think different.”

I didn't answer. I was busy packing stuff—kid stuff, my stuff, Philly's stuff. I heard the click of the front door and sighed. I gathered the stuff, the kids, called a cab, and stared at my apartment window from the door of the cab. I stared from the back window of the cab and then I leaned over and stared from the rear view mirror. The cab pulled in the alley behind my mother's at Foster and Pulaski. I was miles from memories but there were ghosts in this place that rattled quietly in the closets. Still staring out the

cab window, I saw her 300lb German hulk loom over the banister, not even attempting to hide the glare of “I told you so.” I looked away when my brother Clay walked past to gather my things from the trunk. I smiled brightly at my future sister-in-law Amy when she opened the cab door and leaned in, her golden hair spilling from her shoulders. She took the baby and Jeanette clamored after her. The moment was shattered by my mothers’ voice.

“Just put all that shit in the basement. She only needs the baby stuff. Barely enough room here for them let alone all that junk.”

Junk. Those mementos that are carried everywhere, some for decades– junk. To her credit, and as I’ve come to realize most mothers do, she greeted the moment with food – egg salad sandwiches, German chocolate cake, and cup after cup of fresh brewed coffee. We all sat around the yellow swirled Formica-and-chrome table; Philly asleep in my mom’s bed and Jeanette in my lap, painting her face and the table with egg salad and cake.

“So, what are you going to do?” began my mother.

“Get some kind of job, I guess. Wait for the Social Security to come through and see what Phil gets in the settlement.”

“Why the hell is he getting the money?” she asked. “You’re the one with the kids.”

“Yeah,” Clay said, “you’re his wife. Shouldn’t the settlement come to you?”

The egg salad and cake paint dripped down the sides of the table and plopped on the floor. My mother hrumpped loudly.

“OK honey, that’s enough. Why don’t you go watch Sesame Street?”

I set Jeanette on the floor with clean face and hands and began to clear the table.

“Phil’s handling all the legalities because he’s older and he knows more,” I mumbled.

“Don’t you have a mother the same age? Don’t I know something? I tell you what I know, he’s handling it because he wants you to answer to him, to depend on him. You need to just get your own lawyer and take care of your own affairs. You got two kids that are your responsibility, not his.”

I sighed, sniffled back tears that I knew she’d never stand for, and stared at the yellow gingham curtains fluttering in the summer breeze. Somewhere a car honked, a crow cawed, and in the front room Jeanette giggled at Big Bird. The orders were issued and I had no energy to refute any of them. My mother or Phil’s father, it didn’t matter who ordered, I was expected to listen and follow. There was very little fight in me then. Amy patted my shoulder.

“She’s right honey. If any good comes out of this it should be for those kids.”

And just as quickly as the barrage began, it was over. Clay and Amy finished clearing the table, washed the dishes, kissed me, and said to call if I needed anything. Then they left, gone again. My mother laid down with the baby and I sat in another swirling cloud of words, with a freshly poured Smirnoff on ice. No one thought it strange that I had a fifth of vodka in the diaper bag, least of all me. It was cool and clear as nothing else was. But it was just as numbing.

The next day, with my mother thankfully gone to work and both kids napping, I found him. Mr. Kaplan, Esq. Sitting on my mother’s green, mushy sofa with the rotary dial phone in my lap, I made an appointment for later that afternoon while Amy babysat.

On LaSalle Street, in luxurious mahogany and glass offices, I explained the case and also that my father-in-law and Phil's boss (that close business associate of Mr. Smith) already had a lawyer working to make it easier on me; and because they knew what to do. Mr. Kaplan removed his silver half spectacles, leaned back in his red leather chair with the glow from the crystal chandelier sparkling on his bald head, and assured me that he too knew what to do.

“First, I will file a widow's petition so your father-in-law or anyone else is ineligible to receive any damages awarded. After that, nothing can be done until the death certificate is issued.”

A death certificate, a certificate of death, a certifiable death, a death certified, a certificate that will end the death situation; and it was something that wouldn't happen for another three months. I thanked him, went home, and had dinner in silence while my mother complained. The “I told you so” was getting increasingly closer. Then, the only thing said was, “Should never have gotten involved with those damn dagos in the first place.” She grunted a “goodnight” and padded off to bed. That night as I gazed at some black and white gangster movie on the 15” television screen, I received the first of many, many nightly calls.

“We know you saw a lawyer.”

“Who is this?”

“Doesn't matter. We know, and you should just let Phil handle it. He knows what to do.”

“Who are you? And what does it matter if Phil handles it or not? Philly was *my* husband and I have his children.”

“Marie, drop the lawyer.”

The click, then silence. Dead silence. And fear. Who could it have been and why?

The next day, I called Mr. Kaplan, who explained that he’d filed the widow’s petition, which was how Phil Sr. knew about our contact.

“You have an attorney now, Marie, so don’t worry.”

At midnight, the phone rang.

“Marie, you don’t wanna do this. Forget about the lawyer and let Phil handle it.”

“Will you please tell me who this is?”

“Just drop the lawyer, Marie.”

Click. Silence. Fear.

The sun rose and set out of my mother’s window the same way it had rose and set out of the Fullerton Ave. window. Amber fingers and creeping shadows. Creeping shadows and amber fingers. Fingers of Smirnoff on ice and the midnight ring of the phone.

“What is your problem, little girl? You don’t listen so well do you? If you keep this up, you’re gonna be sorry.”

I didn’t ask who it was anymore. The little girl just listened. I listened for the click, the silence, and of course, the fear. For three months, every night, until one night I snapped.

“Marie, drop the lawyer. Drop the case. Let it go.”

“Leave me the fuck alone,” I screamed. My mother grunted in the other room and my daughter moaned, but no one came to stand by my side.

“Listen, if you don’t let it go, no one will get anything. The death certificate will go down as an overdose. Is that what you want? Right now you still have a chance to take care of those kids. Let it go, or no one gets anything.”

Click. Silence. Fear.

The next morning, I called Mr. Kaplan to drop the case.

“Mr. Kaplan, it’s Marie. I got another call last night, and I’m getting pretty scared. Maybe I oughta just drop this.”

“Another call about letting your father-in-law handle everything? Marie, he knows that we look to have a sizable amount in wrongful death, and as unfortunate as it is for a father-in-law to behave this way, he wants to control it. There’s no reason for you to allow that. You have children and family and you’re perfectly capable of taking care of things.”

“No, Mr. Kaplan. This time they said that if I didn’t drop the case that no one would get anything because it would be labeled as an overdose.”

“Well in that case I can certainly put your mind at ease. See, they’re just trying to scare you, Marie. I talked to the coroner’s office this morning, and the death certificate was being typed up at that very moment. The cause of death is food poisoning. We have a good suit against the hotel and the vending machine company for not maintaining the freshness of that food. The deposition of the Mexicans makes it a solid case. You and your children will be fine financially, and there is absolutely no reason to allow your father-in-law to impose on this. I’ll call you this afternoon to discuss next steps. The coroner’s office is sending over a copy of the death certificate as soon as it’s completed and recorded.”

I took a long sip of my cool, clear breakfast.

“OK, Mr. Kaplan. I didn’t think they could make death certificates say whatever they wanted.”

We hung up and I sighed as the ice clinked in the sweating glass. I sunk deep into the green of the sofa—my mother’s sofa. It was a sofa that swallowed and a mother who suffocated, both of which I thought I’d left behind years ago. I took another drink and looked down at the tiny infant in my arms. Not only did this child have his father’s name, but at four months old, he looked exactly like him as well. He had his sunken eyes, deep pools of black, and a strong grip on my little finger, holding me tight through the panic just as his dad would’ve done. I stroked his head and rocked.

“It’s gonna be ok honey. Mommy’s still here. We’re gonna be fine. Mr. Kaplan said so. When this is all over, maybe we’ll go away somewhere. Just you, me and Jeanette. Get away from all this bullshit because none of it makes any sense. No fucking sense at all. Phone calls and threats and people I don’t even know. I wish daddy were here, he’d take care of it. But he’s not, it’s just us. Just me. And have to do it. I won’t let anything happen. Mommy’ll take care of everything. It’ll be ok. Mr. Kaplan said so.”

I rocked and stroked and stroked and rocked almost frantically.

“We’ll be ok, we’ll be ok.”

I whispered and whispered while I rocked and stroked, trying to comfort, to soothe, to reassure myself more than the baby. Rocked and stroked on that mushy sofa until we dozed, safe in each other, until the clang of the phone jerked me into defensive alertness. My hand trembled as I reached through the distance and silently pleaded, *Please don’t let it be them again. I can’t listen to anymore. Please, please don’t let it be them.*

“Hello Marie, Kaplan here. I have the death certificate.”

“Oh good,” I breathed. “Do you want me to come in.”

“Well actually, we have a bit of a problem. I don’t know what happened. When I talked to the transcriber this morning, she was typing the death certificate with the cause of death as food poisoning.”

“Right, that’s what you said. So what’s the problem?”

“Well, I have the death certificate in my hand, and the cause of death is methadone overdose. I don’t know what happened, really, I’ve never heard of anything like this before. I called the coroner’s office and they said methadone overdose is what they have recorded. I’m sorry, but there’s nothing more we can do.”

“But, wait, what do you mean? You said it was food poisoning. You said they told you it was food poisoning. You said it was being typed up. What happened? How can you not know, you’re a lawyer. You said you knew how to handle things. What do I do now?”

“The person I talked to this morning isn’t there. We could wait until she comes in but I’m afraid that death certificates cannot be changed. What I have in my hand is the official document.”

“Well, it seems as though death certificates can be changed. This one was. I guess you just have to know the right people.”

Click. Silence. Fear.

The next day Mr. Smith’s junkie son Michael was found dead in a garbage can in an alley behind Larrabee Street with a bullet wound to the head. Strange that he was the only witness available. But, I don’t think that was the reason for his death. Philly’s

brothers and friends were vengeful people. Michael was the addict with the Methadone after all. I can't say for sure because I was still getting the silent treatment.

Phil Sr. received regular cash pick-ups from Mr. Smith for over a year, probably just payment for another ordered job well done, another debt paid in full.

Well, the sun has passed and this patch of wooden flooring has grown cold and hard. The cats are on the prowl, the butterflies sleep and the daffodils are in the shadows, with the memories. I have glazed at my reflection in this pool long enough. The Chicago hawk has changed the whoosh of waves to a crash of thunder, and the breeze carries the scent of fish decay. My bones stiffen and creak on rising but I'm lighter.

Phil Sr. passed away last month without revealing a thing to anyone, of course I wasn't there, nor any of my children. Still today, years past, children grown with children of their own, I hear the click and the silence but no longer fear. I can see the typing on the documents. They are yellowed with age in an unmarked envelope at the bottom of a suitcase covered with pictures of life. The death certificate did say overdose. The toxicology report read:

“No traces of alcohol found in system. No traces of barbiturate found in system. No traces of opiate found in system. 0.02mg of methadone found in system.”