



THE HURRICANE MURDERS

DAVID HOLMBERG

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PART ONE

"The imagining of the abhorrent is now effortless,"

Philip Roth, "An American Pastoral"

ONE

THE BIKER AND THE TALL WOMAN

I saw the biker wearing gloves step out of the phone booth. In the deadly heat of June.

It was indicative of my mental state that I noticed him. And those black leather gloves that fit tight as skin. He wore a black T-shirt, too, and worn jeans. I watched him for a few seconds in my rear view mirror at a red light; didn't see his face. When the light turned green, he straddled his big hog and roared off down the road in the opposite direction. I stepped on the gas and kept on driving.

That was on the second day of June, 1998. I was in bad shape. Jumpy. I picked up on things I normally wouldn't have reacted to. Like a motorcyclist wearing gloves in the heat. So fucking what?

Just because it's June, June, June. What a great song that was. Which musical? I wouldn't know. My pop culture IQ is dropping, dropping, dropping, as the heat rises, as the hurricane season begins.

Goddamn hurricanes. If they don't kill us all, they'll scare the shit out of us, make us even more neurotic than we were before coming to this false, entrapping refuge. We

should put up signs at the border for those entering Florida: "Social, psychological, physical disintegration in progress. Enter at your own risk."

Now would be a good time to do that, at the start of hurricane season. Keep them up for six months at least, until November 30, when the season ends. That magic date when we have one less thing to worry about until the cycle comes around again. On the next day of meteorological infamy: June 1.

And to think that once, in the North, I looked forward to the beginning of summer.

"I saw my first dead body," the tall woman said in August, two months later.

The tall woman.

The party.

The victims.

Palm Beach.

To itemize is to define. Sort of.

That party defied definition. I told my friend, Frank Conway, not to have it: the stupid fucking storm's approaching and people don't have hurricane parties anymore. It used to be cool. No more. Because now people could legitimately fear dying at their own party, or at least having their roof blown off, not to mention their windows shattered, their ground floor flooded and all their books saturated into a heap of mush. And people would be giving parties all the time because there are hurricanes all the time.

Of course Frank told me to stuff it. He wanted his party. A reporter he had the hots for was leaving for another paper. Despite their substantial age difference, he figured she might recall him

fondly if he gave her a farewell bash, might even invite him to her new place when she got settled, might even . . .

Frank often lived in a fantasy world. As he said himself: he was an old divorced guy who wouldn't quit. But you had to admire his resilience.

I didn't know the tall woman. I didn't know everybody at the paper. Frank did; he'd been there for an ungodly number of years. Given parties for lots of people moving on to better things. That's usually an illusion, though. It's all shit now, really. No newspaper is even close to newspaper nirvana. A few used to be. Those were the days. These seem like the waning moments, particularly if you believe all the hysteria about on-line newspapers replacing print. Newspapers are closing their doors, or merging with other newspapers, pretty often, but not because of the dot-com threat. Not yet, anyway. Blame the corporate bottom-liners who care more about numbers than news, profit-margins than readers. Blame the people who can't get through two or three paragraphs without boredom or jumpiness setting in.

I didn't have a whole lot of initial interest in the tall woman's story -- a story that would soon come to dominate my life. But she seemed to have some class, and I listened. Her hair was auburn and she wore it like a cap with shaggy bangs, which she brushed out of her eyes with the hand that wasn't holding a drink. She held my gaze as we spoke. Seemed confident, as attractive women tend to be, despite the continual fussing with her hair.

I asked her: "Where was this?"

"Out west," she said, brushing the bangs off her forehead.

I hadn't been in the Palm Beaches, as the Chamber of Commerce likes to call them, long enough to adjust to this kind of geographical malapropism. "Out west" to me was

Arizona, Wyoming, Montana, the west of fable and lore. To the locals it meant away from the ocean, somewhere in the sea of developments and condos that made up most of the county. A big, big county. Probably as huge as some counties out west.

"You got there before the cops?" That wasn't unheard of in South Florida. Reporters fried and soaked in the sun and rain, but we had good response time. We listened carefully to the scanners.

"Oh, no," the tall woman said. "I'm exaggerating. I didn't actually see the body. I saw one after they bagged it."

"You mean they were taking it out?"

"Right." She combed her fingers through her hair.

"Two victims?"

"Right."

"What were they? A couple?"

"No. Mother and daughter. Fifty and twenty-five."

"Jesus."

"Yeah. Everybody said this was a bad one."

I nodded empathetically. She sipped her drink. I said: "Sounds like everybody was right."

The party whirled on.

Summertime.

In Palm Beach, a barrier island of some renown.

Palm Beach isn't so terrible. Some think it's a place where pretense prevails and the outside world (West Palm Beach, for instance) is barely tolerated. I view it as a small resort town surrounded by water with good restaurants -- a place where you can fit in even if you don't have a crystal pot to piss in.

Of course, I don't mean socially or economically. No way. But you can have dinner, meet someone for a drink, stroll through a gallery, watch the surf, buy a half-pound of hamburger at the Publix, even *live* there for a while (in an apartment, naturally) without feeling like some kind of deprived degenerate intruding on the rarefied private space of a privileged class.

Assuming you're presentable, you won't be snubbed by waiters, sneered at by residents, or yapped at by overindulged poodles. This doesn't mean the place isn't racist. This doesn't mean there's no anti-Semitism on the tight little island. Hardly anyone will make that claim; I've heard some alarming stories about Jews being banned from certain clubs, about discrimination in apartment buildings. But one can function on a certain level. Being middle class doesn't disqualify you from crossing the goddamn bridge. (There are three of them, actually.)

On occasion, you might even have a conversation that reveals vulnerability. To loneliness (perhaps a woman's retired CEO husband has just died and left her bereft in a spacious mansion by the sea). To a financial setback (perhaps a stock market down-turn propelled an international lawyer to a late afternoon seat at the bar a block from the water the Kennedys frolicked in years ago, when they were a presence on the island.)

Or vulnerability to the damn hurricanes. As a barrier island, it serves as a shield to the mainland, taking the first hit in a storm. Those winds, that pounding, drenching rain, then sweeps over to West Palm Beach. You can see the storms roaring across the roiling water.

I remember browsing in a gallery when I first came here, unaware of the power of hurricanes to instill lingering

fear. The gallery owner, a blonde of indeterminate age, was chatty, first about art, then about the weather.

"I'm not looking forward to the season," she said.

"Really? Why not?" I thought she meant the social season.

"It's been dreadful, since Andrew in '92. We're all afraid there'll be another one like that. It barely ruffled our palm trees, here, but it devastated Miami. My friends who are South Florida natives say it never used to be like this."

"You're from New York?" No guess. It was in her every intonation.

"Yes, I have a gallery there, too, in Soho. It's doing quite well, considering how bad the art market has been lately."

"I'm glad for you."

"Yes, I may go back permanently." The air-conditioning was icy, and she rubbed her very tan arms with her very tan hands. "I'll see how things go here this season, but . . ."

"The storms have been that bad?"

"Well, we haven't really been hit yet, since Andrew." The door opened, and a couple strolled in and began examining the paintings -- mostly big, colorful, abstract, high-priced -- and the gallery owner glanced in their direction, then opted to keep talking to me. "But it's gotten to the point that the anticipation is a huge factor in itself. It can drive one quite crazy, if you decide to stay here for some reason in the summer and fall. The television unconscionably plays up every storm, the supermarket is simply jammed with people stocking up on supplies, and the weather is all anyone talks about. It's a dreadful time."

"But most people go up North, right?"

"A lot of them do." She looked away, following the browsing -- or buying? -- couple with her eyes. "I don't."

I didn't ask why: none of my business. We chatted a little

more, with hurricanes the primary topic. Art was forgotten. To a newcomer, it was an unnerving conversation, and I left the gallery wondering what the hell I was in for.

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