

YOU'RE OUTTA THERE

OKAY, SO HOW do I bullshit my way out of this one? I'm a police officer, trained to make split-second observations but also regarded by the department as something of a head case. I'm forced to sit in a cracked vinyl La-Z-Boy three times a week while an overweight, balding therapist looks across at me over templed fingers, saying, "Uh-huh," "I see," and "How does that make you feel?"

His career was already in big trouble. This little story about seeing a dead man on the 405 Freeway would make him look as though he'd started carrying his shit around in a sock.

Shane sat in the office of the towing company, waiting for the cab he'd called, looking out the window at a crumpled

STEPHEN J. CANNELL

gallery of traffic mistakes, the latest of which was Alexa's little Subaru. Aside from the destroyed right side, the car looked badly torqued to him. If the frame was bent, it was a total. Right on top of this sobering realization, his cell phone rang. He dug it out.

"Shane, where are you? Bud just called, and nobody was at the airport. He had to take a cab." Alexa sounded annoyed.

Shane had completely forgotten about Bud, the breakfast-food salesman. Shane had never met Bud but had talked to him once or twice on the phone. His booming "Hey, pal" voice always seemed jovial while still managing to convey displeasure.

"I'm sorry, honey. I hate to tell you this, but I had an accident in the Subaru."

"Are you okay?" Instant concern.

"Yeah, I'm fine." But of course, he wasn't. He was close to hysteria, his whole body shaking, his nerves buzzing like a desert power line. "I'm great," he lied, then added, "I need to talk to you. We need to sit down. I'm taking a cab over to the Glass House. I should be there in half an hour."

"Shane, I—"

"Look, I'm sorry about Buddy and the car. I'm afraid I really boxed it."

"I don't care about the car, Shane. As long as you're okay, that's all that matters."

Through the fly-specked office window, Shane saw the Yellow Cab pull into the tow company's parking lot. A round-shouldered Melrose cowboy, wearing a plaid shirt and a silver buckle the size of an ashtray, got out and started looking around for his fare. Shane motioned to him.

"Cab's here. I'll be there in forty minutes."

THE VIKING FUNERAL

“Shane, you know I’m swamped getting this financial review finished.”

“I need help. Something just came up. I can’t go into it on the phone.”

“Okay, then let’s try meeting at the Peking Duck. It’s fast. We can grab something while we talk, but gimme at least an hour.”

“Okay,” he said, and closed the phone. He heaved himself up and walked on stringy, oxygen-starved muscles out of the tow-service waiting room, then got into the Yellow Cab.

They were on the 405 heading back to L.A., Shane sitting quietly in the backseat behind the driver, looking for his bridge abutment, finally seeing the crash site sliding by across six lanes of traffic at Howard Hughes Parkway. A pound of rubber and a powder-blue slash of paint. His accident, like a thousand others, was now immortalized on freeway concrete, insignificant as a sauna-room butt mark.

A block from Parker Center was the Peking Duck, which was actually now called Kim Young’s. It had been sold by the original owners after an armed robbery attempt, but the old sign was still hanging out front. Kim Young had bought the restaurant from his cousin, who retired, giving up his American Dream after four dust bunnies in ski masks had tried to take the place, unaware that half the LAPD Glass House Day Watch lunched there. This criminal brain trust of highwaymen had just pulled their breakdowns out from under cool street dusters when they were surprised to hear half a dozen automatics trombone loudly behind them. They spun around and in seconds ate enough lead to qualify as the second-largest metal deposit in California. It took a crane to lift them into the coroner’s van.

Shane took a booth in the back. The restaurant had linoleum floors and was always noisy. He sat alone, waving at a few friends who came in but not over.

He thought about Jody—or more correctly, how he would explain what he had seen to Alexa. His mind was already hunting for a way out: shifting details to make them seem more acceptable, eliminating facts, pulling them this way and that. Piece by piece, he was trying to arrange the event so that it would become at least digestible, removing one crumb at a time, working to make it disappear, his thoughts like ants struggling to carry away a picnic. However, this was too big. He had to deal with it. But how? What should he do? How could he explain it?

Ten minutes later Alexa entered the place, and Shane heard the volume of conversation dip as forty or fifty guys whispered her arrival across tables stacked with egg rolls and dim sum. Then again, maybe that was just his jealous imagination—he wasn't sure. She walked toward him, her hips swaying slightly, her slender calves flexing.

She slid in, reached across the table, and squeezed his hand. "You sure you're okay? No whiplash?" she asked, concerned.

"Yeah, but your car is junk. A sea anchor."

"If it saved your life, it did its job." She smiled. "I'll cash the insurance and get a red one. I was tired of powder blue anyway."

Then, almost without knowing how he started, he was telling her, talking about seeing the Charger, seeing Jody Dean looking back at him across a lane of traffic, the heart-stopping moment of recognition . . . And then, Jody, taking off, leaving Shane in the dust; the Ryder van pinwheeling in front of him

THE VIKING FUNERAL

until the Subaru finally ground to a halt under the bridge on the Howard Hughes Parkway.

Alexa didn't say anything while he was telling it. "Shane," she said after he had finished. "Jody is *dead*. We talked about it last night. What is it? Why do you insist on? . . ." She didn't finish, but instead, let go of his hand.

"His suicide never made sense to me. . . . I couldn't believe he'd kill himself," Shane said. "He wasn't the kind of guy who eats his gun."

"Yet cops who seem normal do it all the time. . . . When it's a good friend, it's just harder to accept."

"Alexa, I may be going through a psychiatric review, but I'm not a psycho."

"Jody is dead," she repeated. "You carried his box to the furnace—gave his ashes to his wife. You *know* he's gone."

"Then who did I see on the freeway? He ran, Alexa. Took off. I crashed because he cut off a truck and it almost hit me. Why would he run if it wasn't Jody?"

She sat there quietly, looking at him, for a long time, trying to find the right thing to say. Then she lowered her voice and leaned toward him. "I want you to let this go. Okay? I want you to keep quiet about it and let it go."

"Don't think it'll look good in my package? Help dress up my psychiatric review?" he said sarcastically.

She smiled a tight smile. "I'm sure there's some explanation. Jody's body was identified by his wife and by his commander at Detective Services Group . . . who was it back then?"

"Captain Medwick."

"Right. Carl Medwick. He and Lauren wouldn't identify the body if Jody wasn't dead."

"Yeah . . . yeah . . . of course. Probably not." The conversation stopped, but these ideas lay between them, festering malignantly.

"You just saw somebody who looked like Jody," she added.
Ants working hard, tugging at crumbs, still trying to make this untidy idea go away.

"Of course, you're right," he said, with more enthusiasm. "That's gotta be it. Gotta be. And he ran because . . . because . . ." He looked up for help.

"Because, sometimes, Shane, when you stare at people, you can look very ferocious. The driver of that Charger just got scared."

A big piece, an important piece, dragged . . . hauled, actually, to the edge of the blanket, but not gone . . . not quite yet.

"You're right," he said. "Shit, I probably scared the poor guy, whoever he was, half to death."

"I've seen you do it."

"He probably thought I was some lane-change killer about to pull a gun and start blasting."

They both sat there anxiously, trying to buy it, hoping for the best, like family members waiting for a biopsy.

"Yeah . . . God, what was I thinking? The guy sure looked like Jody, but it wasn't him. Couldn't've been," Shane said.

Alexa nodded.

But as he sat there in the Peking Duck trying to convince himself, he remembered that look again—Jody's look. In his memory he saw little ten-year-old Jody, standing on the mound, shaking off signs in frustration, sending Shane his own brand of telepathy . . . Jody-thoughts coming in on their special frequency. With this realization, the self-deception ended. It *was* Jody in that Charger, talking to Shane without having to speak,

THE VIKING FUNERAL

just like in Little League. *Stop screwing around, man. . . . I'm gonna throw the heater.* Rearing back, going into his windup, burning it in there . . . Shane, knowing the pitch without even flashing the sign. Cowhide slapping leather. Fastball. Right down the old pipe.

Strike three, asshole. . . . You're outta there!