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The birthday card

Transparency - it is the perfect place to hide.

To be so conspicuous, so brazen as to be above suspicion.

It can be done.

In fact, we all do it. Every day.

It's probably the reason I'm standing here now, collecting my Ph.D. And it is mine. It carries my name: Blaine Ladderly PhD. It will look so much more impressive on the door than mere "counsellor."

And so it should, for this is no ordinary doctorate. Mine is a thesis to solve unsolvable crimes, discover new psychologies, and impeach the unimpeachable. An academic masterpiece.

Thanks in small measure, I suppose, to The Man.

Our first meeting in 1985 was an anticlimax. Well, it was for me.

I had been fully briefed, even down to trivialities about his illustrious youth at university, where he topped every class and taunted the lecturers in debate, especially the Catholic theology professors.

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Then inexplicably, he failed every subject in 1970, even his favoured psychology and anatomy, refusing to hand in his final assignment on human reproduction, despite an assured pass from the course director.

He joined the police academy the following year where all would eat his scholastic dust, especially in child-protection law, homicide and forensics.

By age twenty-eight, he'd risen to Senior Detective Inspector, advisor to the Minister and state union president. An impeccable career and one that earned him priority into restricted-access police information, Government and departmental libraries where he spent hours, days and years of free time cross-referencing the documents and diaries he would eventually leave for me in the boot of his car. "For Blaine" they were marked. "For your precious Ph.D."

For twenty-five years he never deviated. A truly driven pathology, not to be dismissed lightly - I was first to recognise it. I was first to publish.

But at that first meeting I encountered a thirty-six year old man whose sky-blue eyes were overcast in burnout, his light ginger hair unkempt, his face sullen behind a trimmed ginger beard. The O'Brien murder had upended his equilibrium. As first detective to view the body *in situ*, well, The Man had seen murders before, but this was unambiguous in its horror. A local pharmacist Lionel O'Brien, lay murdered, his genitals, groin, perineum and anus mutilated, his head almost severed from the shoulders. The pharmacist's own dirty socks and a savagely tight tie-gag had been used to suppress his agonised screams.

The Man noted, "Time of death: 4.15pm April 3rd. No forced entry; use of personal effects - killer familiar with victim's home." I was never one for irony until I read that.

The only other clue was a birthday card between the fingers of the unfortunate chemist, the cover of which featured babies on a conveyor belt with the caption:

"On this day, all those years ago, in that great baby-making factory in the sky, the foreman shouted, 'At last a perfect one! Let's go have a beer.'"

The 1969 copyright on the back of the card suggested it was so old, there'd be no chance to trace where it was purchased, and with no further slayings, the strongest theory was that the widely respected O'Brien had fallen victim to mistaken identity.

"First his daughter, now this," The Man would lament to his colleagues.

April 3rd, 1985 - the day of the O'Brien murder and five years exactly since the pharmacist's only child, Ellen, had committed suicide. With her stunning red hair, so like his, Ellen had been the source of Lionel's every breath. No one was surprised when this angelic girl entered St Anthony's Convent early in 1970, but no one could comprehend that she would take her own life just ten years on. No explanation, just a one word note: "*Rachel.*"

April 3rd. It might have been significant, it might not, but the investigating team found no causal link despite hours of searching.

The Man took personal responsibility, capitulating under the weight of this, his first and most public failure, leaving him unable to face the relatives or be present at the inquest.

Unable to cope with his everyday duties, The Man was referred to me.

"Lionel paid a high price for not selling condoms," he quipped in our first session.

"The pharmacist was Catholic, then?"

"With a name like O'Brien! I think so!"

"You used to give the Catholics a hard time at uni."

"You've done your homework."

"Is that why you feel guilty for this?"

"Not guilt. Just disappointment."

"Let the side down?"

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“Missed something. Made mistakes.”

“That’s inevitable sometimes.”

“So I have your permission, do I? That’s gratifying.”

“You don’t need my permission to be human,” I said.

“I’ll keep it in mind next time,” he said.

Even after three months we had made little progress, his depression consuming him, so I recommended extended stress leave. About a year later I received his first letter. He was working as an itinerant farm-hand on a Lachlan River cattle property owned by a Lawry and Ros Goldby.

The main thing he noted about the Goldbys was their hair colour, “how ridiculous it is that two such black-haired parents as Lawry and Ros would have a daughter with such glowing, flowing, bright red flames. Alison is simply magnificent. And her blue eyes are just captivating.”

His letters proved a great coup for my manuscript - the kind of personal detail that really improves one’s chances of permanent funding.

The Man was cautious with the 17 year old Alison Goldby, but gradually he developed a close friendship with her. “Why didn’t you ever marry?” she once asked him, the question too brash to be comfortable.

“There’s only ever been one,” he replied, “Ellen O’Brien. A golden rose that will never die.”

“Sounds like love,” she said. “What happened?”

“Her father sent her to a convent. St Anthony’s.”

He turned to see if St Anthony’s meant anything to her, to see how much she knew.

Alison frowned. Said nothing, so he pressed her. “Her father was a pharmacist. Lionel O’Brien,” he laughed. “Lionel the loser. Had red hair - just like Ellen. Just like you. She had blue eyes too.” He looked at the girl silently. “Things should have been different.”

“You should have married her,” Alison said. “Marriage and children. That’s what dad says. He didn’t feel like a man until I came along.”

“So that’s what Lawry says, does he?”

Next day Lawry Goldby drowned in the cattle dip, trampled under a hundred hooves, The Man being the only witness. The police figured Lawry had been watching from his customary perch when the rotting wooden rail gave way and he tumbled in. The Man continued to prod the cattle through, oblivious to Goldby’s misfortune.

By the time The Man dived in and dragged his boss out of the pit, Lawry Goldby was far gone, bruised beyond recognition although The Man pounded Lawry’s dead chest and puffed frantically into his purple lips for twenty minutes before the ambulance arrived.

The doctor noted the time of death: “4.15pm April 3rd 1988 - accidental drowning.”

No questions were asked with such a reputable witness.

Lawry Goldby’s untimely demise quashed any celebration of Alison’s eighteenth birthday, so The Man made a point of giving her a card.

“Babies on a conveyor belt,” she mused. “Peculiar.”

In the months after Lawry Goldby’s departure The Man became increasingly preoccupied with Alison. Something of a father figure, he would write in his diary.

“What’s your middle name?” he asked her one day.

“Maureen.”

“Maureen! You’re kidding!” He could hardly contain his anger.

“It’s not that bad!” she protested. “It’s after a friend of the family.”

“Some friend,” he fumed. “It should be Rachel.”

“Yuk!”

“Rachel’s a great name. It’s Hebrew for ‘links in a chain’.”

He paused to summon up words of direct approach.

“You know, you have the same petite nose and mouth as your mum.”

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She laughed. "Fancy my mum now, do you? Well you must need glasses because my mother doesn't have a petite nose at all!"

"How would you know?" he said quietly. "How would you know what Ellen looked like?"

Alison Goldby unravelled instantly. She had known about her adoption since childhood but suddenly her secret lazy dream-life had turned nightmare reality.

"Haven't you ever noticed how you and I have exactly the same eyes?" he said.

He was crying, but Alison's every freckle had turned white, her pupils dilated, her stomach punched her with nausea. In a single moment her pretend existence cracked right through - even thinking was no longer safe.

"Impossible! Never!" she screamed, jumping off the fence, and sprinting into the house.

"I just had to know you were alive," he said quietly. "I had to let you know I cared."

A minute's hiatus and Ros Goldby came, striding her robust frame along the homestead perimeter. "You have to go," she called. "You shouldn't be here."

"She's eighteen."

"It makes no difference. I'll pay you and you'll have to leave."

"You could never pay me what you owe."

Ros's trembling hands counted out a succession of fifties. Through the curtains, Alison watched The Man's face, struck by its now obvious similarities to her own.

"You've been a good worker. Take a bonus," Ros said bundling a handful into The Man's palm.

"Say goodbye to Rachel for me."

"Her name is Alison," said Ros, averting her eyes.

"Of course," The Man said. "Twenty thousand gives you naming rights."

Ros Goldby was struck utterly mute.

"I've seen all the receipts, Ros. All the 'donations' Lawry sent to St Anthony's. Your money might have

helped you jump the adoption queue, but it can never change my daughter's blood."

He walked off the property, caught a train back to Sydney. Back to the force.

Six years later he turned up at my consulting rooms one morning.

"We're about to crack the O'Brien case," he said.

"Breakthrough?"

"A decade's inaction and you call it a breakthrough - more like an anniversary," he laughed. "I can't believe no one saw it. There were clues everywhere. Actually," he regained seriousness, "you've had them in your notebook all the time!"

He reached into his pocket. "Except for this one." He handed me a small yellowing receipt.

Dee Why Newsagency.

14.5.70.

Greeting card 99c.

Greeting card 99c.

Greeting card 99c.

Sub. tot: \$2.97

Total: \$2.97

He drilled me with his eyes. "Do unconscionable things to good people, and good people will do unconscionable things." For ten seconds his vice like stare impaled me in silence before he smiled wryly and looked at his watch. "10.15 am. You have until 4.15, Blaine. Six hours to change the world." He turned to go, then looked back. "Oh, and by the way - happy birthday."

"April 3rd isn't my birthday."

I pulled his file and surveyed pages of disconnected scribble. Prattle about birthday cards, and suicides.

And April 3rd.

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I cantered down to archives to retrieve the O'Brien papers.

"What does the Births Deaths and Marriages print out say?" I mumbled to myself as I flicked through the file. I searched it front to back twice but there was no BDM print out and I could almost hear him taunting me. What does it mean, Blaine? What does it mean?

That incessant pen-clicking when I'm down these blind alleys.

"How did he know that they all died on the same date?"

"How would I know," said a passing archivist. I grabbed her.

"Get BDM to cross-match April 3rd with the name O'Brien. Just Sydney, the last 30 years."

"It'll take days!"

"I need it by lunchtime."

An hour later BDM faxed each certificate one by one.

Lionel O'Brien. Died: 4.15pm April 3rd, 1985.

Ellen O'Brien. Died: 4.15pm April 3rd, 1980.

But then a birth certificate.

Rachel O'Brien. Born 4.15pm April 3rd 1970.

Mother: Ellen O'Brien. Josephite novice. St Anthony's Convent Croydon.

Father: unknown.

"Father: 'unknown'? Not any more." Then came the original birth registration form detailing the baby. The Man's name had been included as the father all right, but had been crossed out and initialled M.B.

"M.B. M.B.? Who the hell are you, and where are you going to be at 4.15 this afternoon?"

Basic policing, Blaine, I could hear The Man say. His voice was so clear. Just follow the trail, Blaine. I knew him so well, now I had to think like him.

My hurried explanations seemed to amuse St Anthony's Mother Superior. "You've been watching too many Bruce Willis movies," she quipped with raised

eyebrow, but nonetheless, she efficiently recovered the Goldby file and sifted it through.

"Someone's tampered with these," the Superior said hotly. "They're all out of order."

"Go to the back of the file," I said on a hunch. She did. Nothing.

"Go to the middle." Again nothing.

"Turn it over. Go from back to front."

Blank page after blank page. Then suddenly, a completed form.

"What's this? It doesn't belong here. It's personal."

I scanned it quickly. "Who's Maureen Bellarmine?"

"She was the Principal Officer. Wonderful woman. She used to counsel all the pregnant girls and sign off all the adoption placements. Why's her 1960 medical chart here?" The Superior secreted it away. "So, she had a hysterectomy."

"M.B." I said. "Do you know where she lives?"

"In that waterside mansion on Woolwich Point."

"I'll get a unit over there immediately."

I looked at my watch. "3.40pm. We should make it."

The unmarked police car drew around the circular drive, its blue flash panning the hedges. The officer jogged up the steps and knocked loudly. "Mrs Bellarmine! Mrs Bellarmine!"

The old widow shuffled to the door. "Alright. Alright. I'm a sixty-five year old woman, not an Olympic athlete."

She peeped through the eye-piece to see a plain-clothed detective holding out his badge.

"Oh! Police!" she squealed, as she opened the door.

"Sorry to hurry you Mrs Bellarmine, but we've had reports of an intruder around your garden.

Seen anyone suspicious?"

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“Nothing.”

He held his two-way up to his mouth. “VL 2MC mobile 70 to control.” Just static. He tried again. No response.

“We must be in a valley. Can I use your phone?”

“Of course!” She shut and bolted the door behind him. “Through here to the study.”

The room was peppered with framed citations.

“My goodness!” said the officer as he read them. “Maureen Bellarmine. B. Soc. Sc. (Hon). Maureen Bellarmine. OAM. For services to adoption. Maureen Bellarmine. In appreciation of your fund-raising for St Anthony’s Convent.”

“Oh,” she said coyly, “My little career.”

“Little career, indeed,” he said, shifting to seven smaller wooden frames encasing seven youthful faces. “These your children?”

“Oh yes, I’m very proud of them.”

And I’m sure they’re very proud of you!” he amazed “I don’t envy a woman giving birth to seven children.”

“Oh, you tend to forget the pain,” she said, smiling weakly, and wondering why he didn’t seem to want to use the phone.

“Childbirth is a marvel,” he continued, running a finger across the top of the frames. “One birth is a miracle. But seven!” He chuckled. “That’s phenomenal - especially for a woman who doesn’t have a womb!”

He spun on his heels engaging her eye to eye. “It’s been a long time, Maudie.”

“I know you,” she quaked. “I know you. You’re that boy who wouldn’t leave us alone. The university student.”

The Man lifted his enormous fist and plunged it into her fragile face, a half effort that rendered her unconscious for thirty seconds. A full blow would have killed her, but it was enough to knock her septum almost into her brain.

“That’s for Ellen and Rachel. This is for the thousands.”

When she came to, he had dragged her by the hair into the kitchen, blood cascading from her nose and mouth.

"Don't kill me. Please don't kill me. My children," she whimpered through swollen lips.

"Whose children? Whose children, Maudie?" he menaced in her ear. "Our children. The children you stole from us, Maudie! Remember us? The ones you doomed to living death."

"Please don't kill me."

"That's good Maudie. Beg me. Beg like a dog. Just like Ellen begged you to hold her baby."

"It's the way things were done. We had to be tough. Please! Don't kill me!"

"Why would I kill you, Maudie? I want you to live for a long, long time, so that you'll learn what it's like to never be able to hug your children, to never hold their head to your chest, to never tell them you love them."

The first siren ricocheted around the Bellarmine hedges at 4.10pm.

The Man was sitting in his car with the door and boot open.

Conveyor-belt-baby birthday card in his hand inscribed in angelic script:

Dearest Rachel,

Lamp of my soul.

Be not ashamed.

I am first of many, so that we may be the last of few.

I am Prince among eunuchs - my manhood sold to the highest bidder.

The world must know what has been done to us but how I wish there was some other way.

So shall I awake a martyr in paradise or a demon in the flame?

All I know is this: as long as I breathe, I reside in hell.

Kyrie elieson my love.

Today, I shall again kiss sweet Ellen's hand.

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He had carefully placed his pen on the dashboard, and put a bullet through his head.

Maureen lay on the floor of the living room, her tongue and both arms mangled in the sink disposal. She was pronounced D.O.A.

So fours years on I stand here, mortar board and gown, receiving these plaudits. Entering the new millennium as 'doctor'. Who would have thought?

Final tally: three murders, two suicides, and a porcelain red head with a plastic life.

But of course, the ledger is balanced by the brilliance of my Ph.D.

Which is surely a fair trade: to exchange a few otherwise insignificant lives, for new light on this trap we call humanity.

No more opinions. No more blind assumptions.

Just my data, which speaks precisely, impartially, transparently.

And gives us all the perfect place to hide.