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CROSSROAD

A Novel by Bruce McClelland

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Chapter One

The flashing yellow signal hanging dead center above the intersection of Ashland and Louisa was a semaphoric waste. No vehicle had approached this crossing of two paths from Nowhere to Erewhon since I'd finished, not even a skulking trooper on the prowl for a pickup full of drunken good-ol-boys with a few six packs under their belts. Over a long sequence of blinking half-seconds of orange-yellow light, no improvement came over the dull mood of the withdrawn Goochburg Convenience Store and Video Rental. No one from the daytime population now would have dared drop in for an emergency candy bar or a dubbed martial arts video.

As often as there was light enough to see the side of the store and, directly across from it on the other corner north of

Louisa, the Louisa Body Shop, a windowless and soulless box surrounded by the decaying rumpled hulls of faded painted metal - just as often the human world would completely disappear, dissolve to black. Not completely black, actually: whenever the caution light blinked off, my rearview mirrors held a faint afterimage of the reversed removable lettering advertising, with no small wit, the theme of the upcoming sermon for the Goochburg Baptist Church. This temporary residue of the textual into the dark world parodied, to my tired mind, the ever so brief continuance of the life we imagine comes after this one.

Of the four corners, then, the southwestern was the only one to never reflect enough yellow light for me to get a clear sense of what might be situated there come cockcrow. Yet precisely in that quadrant, the true reflection of man's achievements and ambitions was most palpable, especially in the pitch darkness. For there was located the Goochburg churchyard, where, no more than twenty minutes ago, I'd thrown the last shovelful of still cold dirt into the hole it had taken me several exhausting hours to dig.

There was a contradiction here, of course. Crossroads were places where they used to bury suicides and murder victims, locations where the anxious and indecisive soul of the prematurely departed might hover forever and therefore never come

back to town. But here, a perfectly respectable Baptist church had planted its graveyard at just such a place once reserved for the excommunicate. No one on the planning committee cared, apparently, that in 1824 England, a law was passed forbidding burials at crossroads, a sequel, perhaps, to legislation enacted a couple of centuries earlier banning the excision of the heart of a freshly exhumed corpse.

The architects of this suburban Baptist church were probably also unaware, in 1974, of the ritual confusion they were creating by installing a hallowed perimeter around a site that was by its very nature dangerous. But their ignorance was my bliss: where else could I dig a makeshift grave for someone who had died by violence, yet who had once been my beloved? Where else but in the unilluminated southwest corner of an abandoned, for now, crossroads at the cusp of winter and spring could I presume to dig, then fill, a grave without the written permission of the authorities, sacred or secular?

This graveyard had been waiting for us - for her. In my car in the recently asphalted parking lot next to the church, I sat still, smoking and trying to catch my breath, replaying the horror what I'd just been compelled to do. We'd sat together in this very place many times, talking for hours, obsessively. It was situated conveniently at the very boundary between her world

and mine.

She had come from an old Virginia family which had little patience for aging liberal foreigners like myself. True, my parents had brought me from then Yugoslav Macedonia when I was just a boy, and I had been overeducated in Ivy League schools. But my odd Slavic name and Turkish skin were reason enough for her parents to accuse her of consorting "with a Gypsy old enough to be her grandfather." They could not forbid her to see me, since she was well beyond the age of consent. Nevertheless, her professed allegiance to an "alternate" lifestyle often abated under the frequently implied threat of disinheritance.

Disembodiment was probably more appropriate now. I had not had the heart, or is it guts, to sever her head as soon as I realized what had happened. When I'd found her, the day before, in her studio apartment above a Goth store on Carey Street, she was sitting in a wooden chair, with her livid blue face on the linoleum-topped table, set off nicely by a pool of pale green vomit that reeked of garlic and stomach acid. She had called me early in the morning, telling me not in words but by the excess quaver on top of her ordinarily tremulous voice that she was worried, and that she wanted me there. I couldn't tell from her wobbly pitch alone exactly what she was worried about, but my

nervous gut told me that even if I set off immediately, she'd be dead before I got there. I seemed to understand that no matter when I left, she would die just before my arrival.

That ambiguous fatalism did not delay me, however. I hopped in my old grey Caprice, Bernice, and took off down 64 east to Richmond. It was Saturday morning, and the tourists and consumers that usually clogged the old town were getting a late start, which eased the burden of finding a parking spot on the street near her apartment. The old three-storey brick building where she lived was in general disrepair, mostly because the vandalism inflicted on it by disaffected or bored youths over time had proved too much for the Polish superintendent to bother with. Stanislaw, his name was, told me that *diz ponks* were always breaking the lock on the street entrance to the apartments upstairs. He was right: it was no big deal to get in without being buzzed. Nevertheless I rang the buzzer for 3F. When no answering buzz materialized, I tried in vain to ignore the increasing flutter in my stomach. When I climbed the stairs to her apartment, I saw that her door was slightly ajar, and knew instantly she was dead.

We had once actually discussed my having a key. She had offered me one, but I thought it the better part of valor to decline it, since I couldn't imagine wanting to come to her place

if she weren't there. Now, it occurred to me, my lack of a key seemed something of a legal advantage, since a key might constitute some sort of evidence against me, in the event an investigation was begun. I must watch too many cop shows: before I even got to her door, I began to worry about fingerprints, alibis, the phone company's log of her calls to me. I even wondered whether these hypothetical investigators would know about the quaver in her voice, the one that told me she'd be dead, whenever, and no matter what my response.

I was a little surprised she hadn't been discovered yet. The slightly open door allowed such an overwhelming aroma of garlic to waft over the threshold and into the hallway that it was increasingly noticeable from about halfway up the first flight of stairs. Even if I could understand how no one would recognize the obvious symbolism - how many residents of this flophouse, after all, had sat in on my Old World Demonology class? - I couldn't understand why no one passing by would have been nosey enough to pop their head through the door. The apartment was so small that the kitchen area was quite visible from the doorway: one had only to look slightly around the edge of the door to notice how wrong things were.

It was fine with me this scene had gone unwitnessed, not so much because it allowed me to maintain a certain degree of

anonymity, but mostly because it would allow me to take care of things properly. The last time something like this had happened around here - a curiously delayed copycat murder several years back that mimicked a case in Stoke-on-Trent in 1925 where the premature death had been ruled an accident - the police took absolutely no precautions in disposing of the body. They had consulted me, since they'd been told I knew about East European customs, to ask about the significance of the wreaths of hawthorn and garlic they had found in the dormitory room of a Bosnian boy who had emigrated here with his mother at the height of the genocide. I told them at the time that the boy's choking on garlic was likely neither an accident nor suicide, nor even, in the literal sense, murder, but other evidence uncovered in his room convinced them otherwise. I always imagined they just didn't want to get in the middle of something they didn't understand if they didn't have to. And since the young émigré had no one to look out for him except his poor mother, who barely spoke English, it was unlikely anyone would object if they fabricated some evidence to show the death was accidental. Just like the 1925 case, where a Polish immigrant had choked to death on garlic: an accident.

It isn't really very often that people choke to death on garlic. But I was sure that whatever a medical examiner might

report, it would not persuade me that she hadn't been killed.

The immediate task was to find a way to get the body out of the building and into the ground without leaving any traces. I had no evident motive for killing her, but I would have a hard time explaining why I hadn't called the police and why I was removing a corpse from the crime scene - if that's what it was.

Less out of respect for the dead and more out of a real need to minimize the possibility that some other resident of this place might get curious about the ghastly aroma of thrown-up garlic and the eventual stench of human decomposition, I began to clean her up. I lifted her head off the table, pulling it up by her brown hair, which she had conveniently done into a ponytail. The smack of her cheek as it pulled away from the vacuum seal it had formed with the drying vomit was surprisingly loud, causing me for a second to imagine she was alive.

"What?" I asked as casually as I might ask a mumbler to speak a little more distinctly. I looked at her face to make sure there were no signs of animation. I was surprised to see that her eyes were slightly open, and with her head pulled back by the hair, she was staring at me through cloudy grey-brown eyes, not reprimanding me, exactly, but not happy, either.

It was the best I could do to try to treat her simply as a lifeless object, to push far from my mind any recollection of the

delicious moments of absolute tenderness we had shared.

Curiously, the nauseous stench and her horrid appearance had an effect upon me that was opposite to what I would have expected. For a moment, rather than repelling me, it drew me closer: Lola had never seemed more human, more vulnerable, than in this moment of silent humiliation. An overwhelming urge to embrace her - even to kiss her cold, revolting mouth - came over me, and I could only reject this perverse impulse by summoning a memory of the first time I'd been obliged to touch a corpse.

It was my first - and last - year in med school, when, along with the other students of gross anatomy, I was supposed to work on a cadaver. I had to cut into the corpse of an old alcoholic woman whose uncanny resemblance to my grandmother at first frightened me more than nauseated me. But even as I made my first incision between the woman's desiccated breasts, such an overwhelming impatience with the Frankensteinian arrogance of medical science came over me that I simply vomited and walked out of the room. Though I could not completely override the mental image of my deceased Lola with the now weak memory of my earlier experience, I was at least able to squelch my misplaced, or at least inappropriate, desire to embrace her lifeless body.

I wiped off her face with a damp dishtowel, which I rinsed and wrung out and threw into the garbage pail beneath the kitchen

sink. I took one last look into her insipid eyes, then politely closed the lids. There was no reason to change her clothes: she wasn't going to have a fancy funeral, and I didn't want the added responsibility of disposing of her clothes. But more than that, I didn't want to see her naked body. She was only wearing jeans and a t-shirt. In early March it still gets cold at night, and for a second I was worried about her. I sat her upright at the table and struggled to fold her arms in front of her so she wouldn't slump forward when I left her. In her new position, she could have been playing cards with invisible guests or idly drinking a contemplative cup of coffee from an invisible cup. I could leave her there until nighttime, when I would have to come back and take her body to the graveyard. Getting it out of the apartment was going to be tricky: despite recent efforts on the part of the Richmond police to set a curfew on the activities of the Goth club downstairs, I was pretty sure people hung out there into the wee hours. I'd have to wait until no one was around, then I'd simply have to hope I wasn't seen.

Though there wasn't much chance that whoever had gagged her with garlic would leave any other evidence, I looked around the small studio just in case. Links to me were undesirable, so I got pretty intimate in my search for anything that might connect her to me.

Gifts between us had been transferred mostly in one direction, from her to me. Alternative CDs, old postcards, clippings, photographs of odd people or places that Lola had brought me were still scattered around my apartment, but those things were unsigned, untraceable. Meanwhile, I'd been fairly cautious about giving her things. I'd pushed a lot of articles and books on her, but they were all unsigned and easily obtainable from other sources, except for one, which was neither: my own book I'd inscribed to her with words that any inventive criminal investigator would surely take the wrong way. It suddenly became important to me to find it and take it back.

I was betraying her, even though she was dead. I'd consecrated that copy not to her body, but to her soul, in my dualistic fashion, and taking it back now seemed a kind of sacrilege. I had little choice: for it was in the very pages of that book that I had cited the case of the Pole in 1925 Stoke-on-Trent, whose details were so remarkably... similar.

I went over to the area by her bed, where she kept the few books she had on a pair of sagging plywood shelves suspended on vertical wall stanchions above her double mattress. The mattress was on the floor, disheveled. I'd have to stand on it to see the books on the top shelf, which meant taking off my shoes. Otherwise, I imagined, I'd leave footprints, though with all the

other stains on her forever unwashed sheets, it was unlikely anyone would notice them.

Impatient, I kept my shoes on and tried to locate the spine of my slender book somewhere on her disordered shelves. My sight not being what it once was, I tried to lean closer to the shelf without stepping on the mattress by propping myself against the wall with my left arm. But the over-worn soles of my exhausted Italian shoes could not maintain friction against the equally worn pine floorboards. I slid back and lost my footing, and fell face down onto the bed.

Suddenly, Lola was alive. No, the sick corpse I'd left in the kitchen, but the vibrant and sensual young woman who'd offered herself to me the first time on this very bed - she was alive. Or rather, I was alive: her smell, a kind of perfumeless perfume, rose into my nostrils from these crumpled sheets, this pillow. I could feel her beneath me, I could even sense her subsiding post-coital shudder. It was horribly odd, for all its temporary pleasure: she was grey and dead at her kitchen table, choked on garlic puke, yet she was also alive, sexual, on the mattress where I'd just stumbled. Lifting my face from the soft crumple of worn sheets, I was able to resolve this ambiguity. No longer enchanted by my sense memory, I found beneath me nothing but the evidence of her brief, disordered life, her disobedience

of the rules of a common game in which people change their sheets and put beds in frames. Painful as it was to not be able to hold on to her with at least one of my senses, the alternative - a tug of war between senses and memory in which she was now dead, now undead - was far less desirable in the long run.

Propping myself up with my left hand, I felt something stiff beneath her pillow. I tossed the worn-out foam-rubber pillow to the side. Like a worm under a wet rock, there lay wriggling the hideous cover of my book. For some reason, the publisher had chosen for the cover of the paperback a rather poorly rendered image of a Bulgarian demon, the winged-serpent-like *Lamia*, whose effects upon young women we might now label depression, *ennui*, *anorexia*...

So there it was, my real gift to her. Lola had kept it - for how long, I would not hazard a guess - under her pillow. Now that the book was mine again, my first impulse was to hold it to my nose. To verify what? I half expected that my book, which had been placed in such intimate contact with her, might exhibit some magical, talismanic power. After all, it retained some mixture of *Us* - I could sense our bond radiating from the binding - but it could not restore her to life as my fall upon her bed had promised to do. Just as well.

I opened the book to reread my inscription on the half-title

page. It wasn't nearly as incriminatory as I'd thought. On the contrary, the banal praise, though not faint, now struck me as too formal, aloof. But it must have meant something to *her*: all around my handwritten paragraph she'd drawn, with sparkling silver and gold pens, various symbols and insignia. Some were recognizable: hearts and planetary symbols, eyes of Horus, stars, and the like. Others, however, were arcane even to me. They reminded me of some of the late Gnostic mystical amulets I'd seen in archives everywhere from Syria to Bulgaria to the Vatican Library itself. Yet there was something highly idiosyncratic about them: the combinations of bars and circles and semi-circles were not arranged in a familiar way. Perhaps these were just the amateurish imitations of a romantic, but there was an order to them, as there was nowhere else in this room or her life, that told me they were part of a *system*. A system I'd never seen.

In the midst of my distant, nostalgic reverie, it suddenly dawned on me that I still had work to do. I would have to remove from this apartment any evidence of my presence - short of removing my DNA from the sheets - as well as any evidence of a crime. And I could not take the chance that her corpse would not be disposed of in the proper manner.