



Messages from Enrique

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A Puppet Press Thriller

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This story was inspired by an actual case file in the annals of the NYPD: the murder of Norma Eleanor Weldon, whose mutilated corpse was found in Mount Morris Park, Harlem, New York, in December of 1976, with its head and hands removed. The case remained unsolved for almost fifteen years until, in 1990, it was retrieved from the cold case files and solved by Detectives Vicky Meyers and Rolf Rehbein of the Twenty-fifth precinct in Harlem.

On a blustery Tuesday morning, December 20th, 1986, eighteen-year-old Sherry Souvignon was walking her dog in a remote section of Mount Morris Park in Harlem, New York, when she made a grisly discovery: the headless, handless body of a naked female lying in the grass. Terrified, she ran the almost thirteen blocks back to her home in the projects to report what she'd seen.

Police emergency vehicles arrived at the crime scene and scoured the area for clues. Forensic photographs of the body were taken before it was transferred to the morgue for tests and possible identification. A grid search for evidence was initiated, as well as house-to-house interviews with everyone in the area who might have witnessed the murder or the dismemberment. Chief Medical Examiner for the City of New York, Dominic F. Braziano, performed an autopsy but lacking a head and hands, was unable to make a positive identification of the victim. All that could be ascertained at that time was that she was a white female between sixteen and twenty five years of age; she had died of strangulation by ligature less than twenty-four hours before her body was found; and she had been killed and butchered somewhere other than the Mount Morris site.

A case file was opened in the Sixth Homicide Zone of the New York City under the heading NYPD Complaint # 27175/19, Homicide, Unidentified W/F, and Detective second grade Dan McGory of the Manhattan Twenty-fifth Precinct, a twelve-year veteran of the NYPD, was assigned as the primary investigator.

Three weeks after the discovery of the body, nine year-old Robert Wye, a truant from nearby PS 155, was playing in an abandoned tenement building on east 118th street when he found a partially-mummified human hand buried in a pile of rubble. More curious than afraid, Robert took it home to his mother, who immediately called the police. Officers responding to the call then took the hand to the office of the Medical Examiner where it matched the body of the murdered female. Fingerprints were then taken from the severed hand and sent to New York

Motor Vehicles, Immigration, Civil Service and the armed forces in an attempt to identify the victim, but no match could be made.

On January 5th, a United States Coast Guard Harbor Patrol Boat was operating in the East River off 136th street in North Harlem when Lieutenant Michael T. Espina saw something unusual bobbing in the icy water. Lifting it aboard the vessel, he discovered to his horror that it was an almost-completely-decomposed human skull. The harbor craft returned to port and notified local police who tagged the skull and took it to the downtown morgue where M.E. Dominic Braziano determined from the incision and scarring of the vertebrae that the skull had come from his headless corpse.

Hair and skin samples were taken from the skull and bagged for forensic examination. Braziano ordered a complete set of dental charts and X-rays in an effort to ascertain the victim's identity but after several weeks had not been able to obtain a match. As a last resort, both the fingerprints and dental records were forwarded to the Bureau of Criminal Identification in the hope that they would match those of a previously arrested felon, but again no match was found. Missing Persons records were checked. A forensic sketch of what the victim might have looked like was released to the media and telecast on New York evening news channels, but no credible witness came forward to shed light on the victim's identity.

By the end of August 1987, the file had been removed from the caseload of Detective Dan McGory and the investigation was put on inactive status. In February of 1988, it was formally assigned to the archives of the Twenty-fifth Precinct where a homicide detective would review the paperwork once a year. For all intents and purposes, the trail ended there. NYPD complaint # 27175/19 was officially a cold case. Unless some startling new development was to occur, the headless, handless body found in Mount Morris Park two years earlier would never be identified. Her killer would never be brought to justice.

One

Where do I start?
How about identifying yourself for the record.

Okay, for the record, my name is Richard Steven Janus, but everybody calls me Janus. Up until a few months ago I was an investigative reporter for the New York Clarion, living at the Prince William Hotel in Manhattan.

What's the address there, Rich?

Thirty-two West 28th, and it's Janus, okay?

Okay, speak distinctly.

From the beginning, right?

Wherever you want. Tell us about yourself. Tell us about what happened.

A to Z? What went down after everything got shook out, and all the assholes from the NYPD and the Mayor's office and the press got caught with their fingers up their asses; is that what you want to hear? Sure. Why the hell not?

Can you turn that thing down a little? The vibrations are fucking up what's left of my brain. Thanks.

Where was I? Oh yeah, I was starting to tell you about all the bad shit that went down in my life. Sounds like I'm feeling sorry for myself? Well, maybe I am a little bit, but that shouldn't get in the way of the story. How much time have I got? As much as I need? Christ! How much time does it take to put a life in focus? How long do you spend on failure and greed and obsession? How long does it take to tell what turns perfectly rational people into madmen? An hour? A day? I could spend that much time just telling you about the fear I felt, about trying to stay awake because closing my eyes meant giving in to the clutches of death; but you're not interested in hearing that. I guess what you want from me is a broad overview.

A broad overview. That's what we used to call a *précis* in the newspaper business. I'd go to my managing editor with a half-page of

pure garbage and I'd say, "Maximillian, you old fart. Here's a fucking *précis*. I need two and a half columns top-front." And old Max, he would look at it and he would say, "Write me a fucking story." Just like that. Write me a fucking story.

You know how you write a story? Well, the first thing is, you've gotta have a story, or at least something that passes as a story. Now old Max and me knew each other well enough to know that nobody can come up with a Pulitzer prize-winner day-in and day-out. Not even somebody as good as me. Most of the time it's scratching around for something that looks like it'll fly. Nothing too specific. The thing about it is, if you hang around the right places long enough, and schmooze with the right people long enough, and ask questions long enough, sooner or later something's going to fall into your lap.

Max knew that. That's why he put up with all the drinking, and the attitude, and the bullshit *précis*, which was just another way of saying I didn't have a clue where I was going. He figured by morning I'd have put it all together and there'd be fresh pages on his desk. And, you know, he was usually right. Maybe they weren't all prizewinners, but they were good enough to keep me employed for a lot of years. And Max? He got to say, "fuck you" to the publishers and the stockholders and all those other scumbags who'd been pissing and moaning about me. I could write stoned, I could write drunk, I could write hung over, I could write hanging from the ceiling with my finger up my blowhole. And until they could prove different, I was his guy.

The way it turned out, Max backed the wrong horse. I'm sorry about that—he deserved better. So did a lot of people, I guess. But back when it was all churning up and I was flying high on booze and dope and sex and excitement, and anything else that blocked out the time, I didn't think about things like letting people down. Not to put too fine a point on it, I figured everybody else was too busy working out his or her own shit to give much notice to mine.

Anyway, Maximillian Terence O'Donnell was right about one thing. You hang around the business long enough and that one big story is bound to come along; the one that changes everything. The thing is to recognize it when it's staring you right in the face. That's where a newspaper reporter has the edge on your ordinary guy. He's a trained cynic, if you know what I mean. When everything he sees tells him it's going down one way, he picks up the corners and looks underneath and sure as shit he comes up with a different angle. That kind of instinct never leaves you; not even after you've taken that ride from the top all the way

down to the bottom. It's funny the way it works. You're lying there in the gutter with nothing better on your mind then getting hold of a piece and jamming it up to the roof of your mouth and routing out all the nothingness clogging your brain when somebody comes along and says, "Here you lucky bum. Here's that Pulitzer Prize-winner you never got when you were in the chips." And you pick it up and you run with it. And everything changes.

Well that's not literally how it happened, but you get the idea. I've gotta admit it took me a while to pick up the corners and look underneath, but when I did, what I saw really blew me away. It's gonna blow you away too when you hear it. You'll see. This is one fucking great story.

Forty-four

The email message waiting for me at the Prince William was short and direct: “You think I don’t know what you’re doing, you scum-sucking piece of shit? You think I don’t know you’re trying to give me up to the cops? Now you gone and done it, Janus. I trusted you and you fucked me over; now it’s my turn. You’re fucking dead, man; you just don’t know it yet.”

I had no reason to doubt that Enrique meant what he said, but there wasn’t much I could do about it. I couldn’t take it to the police without implicating myself, and I couldn’t just shrug it off as the meandering of a demented mind. Enrique had killed before, brutally and without remorse. I knew that as long as he was alive, killing me would be on his short list of things to be done. I had to move things ahead, faster than I’d wanted to but I felt time was running out. I pulled up the Clarion’s website on my computer and placed an ad to run in the next morning’s Personals: Sorry about the screw-up. I need you now more than ever.

The following day, Moira arrived at our prearranged meeting place, the Cloisters, an hour late, looking flustered. “What’s this all about?” she asked through a fixed smile, pretending to be engrossed in an exhibit of medieval French tapestries.

“I couldn’t believe it when I saw you in the 9th Precinct,” I whispered back. “You were supposed to be in Ohio.”

Her jaw stiffened. “You got me up here to ask me that? Suppose the police are following us?”

“I had to take the chance. Everything’s falling apart,” I muttered. “I’ve got to know why you were at the police station and what you told them if I’m going to carry this off.”

“I made myself available for questioning as soon as Ronald’s death hit the TV news in Ohio. If I hadn’t, it would have looked like I was running.” Moira shot me a withering look.

“There’s more,” I rasped. “Enrique’s gone haywire. He’s threatening to do the same thing to me he did to Ronald, and I wouldn’t be surprised if you’re on the list too.”

“Why? You gave him the money, didn’t you?” Moira moved to the opposite side of the exhibit and shot me a confused glance.

“Of course,” I nodded.

“I thought you said he was reliable.”

“I misjudged him,” I admitted.

“Well that’s just great, she groaned. “How much does he want?”

“It has nothing to do with the money. Enrique’s a psychotic. I think this is becoming fun for him.”

“So what is it you’re telling me?”

“Well first, be careful. Keep your door locked; carry a gun if you’ve got one. Also, we should think about moving the timetable up. The sooner we can get out of this city, the better.”

She turned and moved on to another exhibit. I could see the dismay in her walk, the discouraged slump of her shoulders. “I’m sorry about all this,” I whispered, moving alongside her. “It’s not fatal; just a slight glitch in our plans.”

“I’m not blaming you,” she replied softly. “It’s just that getting the money is taking longer than I’d expected. It’s been transferred to my name, but I can’t move any of it until an official inquiry into Ronald’s death is completed.”

“Why can’t we just take off anyway?” I asked.

Moira considered it briefly. “Your friend Enrique’s put us in a very difficult spot,” she finally said. “We wouldn’t have any of these problems if he’d made it look like a drug overdose the way we’d planned. Now everybody’s on edge, and whether we like it or not, we’re suspects. If we become fugitives, we’ll lose any chance we might have had of getting the money.”

“Is that what they told you the day you were questioned; that we’re suspects?” “Not in so many words,” she allowed.

“You didn’t tell them anything that would make them think that, did you?”

“I’m not stupid.”

“Okay, okay, let’s not let this thing tear us apart,” I said, trying to pacify her. “Maybe you should tell me just what you did tell them so we can get our stories straight.”

“It wasn’t much. They wanted to know the usual things; where I was at the time of his death, did he have any enemies, things like that.”

“Did they ask you about his alarm system?”

“Not that I remember.”

“How about the drugs? Did they ask you if he was an habitual drug user?”

“Everybody knew Ronald used drugs,” she said impatiently. “Look, don’t you think you may be getting a little paranoid? As long as we sit tight and stick to our original plan, I don’t see how we can get hurt.”

“Unless Enrique decides to add us to his little shop of horrors,” I noted ruefully. “Can’t you do anything to stop him?” she asked.

“I’m working on it.”

“It won’t be long,” she promised.

“Every minute away from you is too long.”

“We’ll stick to our original plan.”

“Sure.” I tried to sound upbeat.

There was a call from Billy on my message pad back at the paper. “What’s up?” I asked when I got back to him at the precinct.

“Hold on, ...” I could hear Billy shuffling papers. “Weren’t you once involved with a woman named Cina?”

“Yeah, on and off. Why?”

“Cina Martinez, a schoolteacher?”

“That’s right.”

“Eight-eleven East 114th Street?”

“Come on Billy, don’t jerk me off.”

“You better come up here, Janus.”

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