

Another Day

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Abstract

A composition written by me.

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Short Story

10:17pm, Thursday the 18th of November

Another day.

Another death.

Nineteen hours, twenty seven minutes after the last one.

Seventeen days since the first.

This is number eighteen.

The flat's like all the others.

Some minor cosmetic differences.

Shape, layout, fixtures and furnishings.

All are essentially the same.

Everything basic; everything cheap.

Less a home than a shelter.

The occupant was only passing through.

I light another off my last.

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Keep the fire burning.

Best way.

Standard single: kitchen/living room.

Bathroom down the hall.

No bath; body in the shower.

I check the bedroom first.

Dirty sheets, unmade bed.

Beer cans cover every inch of surface and floor.

Empties only.

Shoes stick to the carpet.

I think of a nightclub at two a.m.

Reek of damp, spilt beer and spoiled food.

Scent mingles in the back of my throat.

Tastes like municipal waste.

Porn piled in stacks by the bed.

The only items kept neat in the room.

If there was a struggle, it wouldn't show.

The victim must not have entertained much.

If he did, he clearly didn't expect to get to the bedroom.

I'm avoiding the body, but this is more horrific than death.

It starts to seem like a mercy kill.

I feel guilty over that thought.

I cringe finding a used tissue clinging to my shoe.

I follow the note's directions into the kitchen.

It tells me to "look in the fridge".

Spark another; fucking menthols.

Better for taking off the edge.

Inhale hard, deep breath.

Hold the minty smoke in my lungs, while I open the door.

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Expect to be immersed in gore.

Prepare for shock (if that's possible).

The hinges creak, the vacuum is released.

The white good's secrets escape.

No stench, no blood, no body parts.

No light.

No hum.

No click or whirr.

No power and no life.

Dial shows four degrees; inside feels room-temperature.

No food, just beer, over a dozen.

Saddening... reminds me of home.

Dried watermark on the floor; it's been off a while.

Pull it away from the wall... no plug.

Cords cut off, barely an inch left on the unit.

I realise the connotations of the note.

Time to face the body: take out another smoke.

Push open the bathroom door.

Deliberately look away from where the body lies.

Eyes rest on the floor.

Wonder why the tiling undulates.

Surprised to observe tiles, black, levitating off the floor.

Realise too late.

Rookie error.

Shut the door hurriedly; knock disturbed flies away from my face.

Take a few more tugs, breath it back out.

Insects hate smoke: they're smart enough to know it kills.

Kick door back open and throw in my lit fag.

Wait while the Uniform sprays some Raid.

The flies are livid now.

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They're all as fucked as the guy who lived here.
Some were incinerated when the live butt ignited the insecticide.

Another cigarette and a salts soaked handkerchief.
Back in the water closet; shit sight... literally.
The corpse was in the shower.
It must have started on the john.
What the victim had begun, he'd finished across the room.
I don't step foot through the door.
I note the inflammation on the soles of the subject's feet.
My shoes are rubber soled; I place one on top of the floor mat.
Dragging the mat away from the wall, I find resistance.
A white cord is connected at one corner.
Wet under the mat, preserved by its presence.
The cord runs through a hole in the wall.
Later, I knew we'd find the mat to be laced with wire.
Electrocution was the favoured means of execution.
That's why the killers were known as "The Electro-cutioner".
We knew them better; at least differently; at least as a plural.
Electrocution is the common feature.
But our main concerns are for the volume of killings.
One for every day in a thirty-day month.
Thirty days had September, thirty deaths as well.
April and June had the same.
Still no one to take the blame...
For one hundred and eight fucking murders.
The media ran with what we gave them.
A serial killer sells papers.
All the victims have one reoccurring common feature.
None of them have anyone to miss them.
The papers claimed a single criminal was running riot.
We knew there had to be a vast network.

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Engineering so many deaths in a single month?
Only fucking Santa Claus has that kind of magic.
He probably has better things to do.

I order the adjacent flat to be entered.

No hope it will help.

Every time, it's always the same.

No names or faces; sometimes rented, sometimes squatted.

Never a trace, never a tale; just one more sad, dead bastard.

They're never reported missing.

Their homes are never noticed to be inactive.

The level of research required in knowing a victim wouldn't be missed?

Shit.

One hundred and eight deaths; not one reported.

We only know they're gone because the notes keep us updated.

If I didn't have to keep the Met apprised of my location everyday.

I know each time: it could have been me.

A well placed sick note, and it still might.

The clerk at the drugstore might miss me, but he doesn't even know my name.

I ignore the rattle of dying flies.

I shut the door.

Prepare to sign the crime scene over to forensics.

I'm happy to go home.

Have a beer or two.

Maybe try to knock one out.

Get some sleep.

Pray to overcome my erectile dysfunction and insomnia.

Wait for tomorrow's note.

Hope I'm not next.

What more can I do?

Same Place, Some Weeks Earlie

He picked the lock. No sense of urgency. He took his time. His latex gloves were numbing. He knew the door handle was cold: he detected the temperature through the coating around his finger tips, but he felt removed from it. He was much like the glove. The gloves hid traces of his identity, just as he hid the traces of his Handler's identity, as his handler no doubt did for someone else in an incalculable chain. When this was over, he'd burn the gloves, along with his overalls and his cheap plimsolls. He pushed the glove metaphor from his thoughts; he decided he was more like a gun. A valuable, reliable weapon, he'd be hidden away until he was needed again. He was good at what he did, he was not disposable. The door slid shut behind him with an awkward clunk, the trademark of a fire prevention hinge. It was expected, but jarring none the less.

He swept the bedroom first, its location was already known to him. He was glad he would not have to waste time searching again. The smell in the room penetrated his thin paper mask with ease: his gag reflex was at its limit. A briefcase under the bed, a tool box in the cupboard; every empty can disturbed was replaced with painful precision. He left the room as he'd found it, minus the two items. He left the case by the front door, proceeding to the kitchen with the toolbox. His instructions were specific; deviation from them was not prudent; he referred closely to the note in his pocket. "Use the fridge". He worked quickly; he was an efficient electrician and his job was relatively simple. He didn't understand the need to use the Mark's tools, nor did he perceive the elaborate nature of his orders as particularly necessary, but he did not question his directive.

He entered the bathroom with the fridge's electrical cable and the toolbox in hand. He set the box down, opened it and located a pair of pliers. He deftly stripped the cable, exposing the inner wires, which he then began to separate into their many individual strands. He picked up the grime encrusted bathmat from underneath the toilet, and began to thread through the strands of wire, following the intricate pattern shown in his notes. This exercise took him the longest: he was a fair sparky, but a shit seamstress. He took care to ensure he didn't pierce his fingers: a pin-prick could permanently piss on his chips. When it came to the drilling, he was back in his element, one clean

hole through the wall into the adjacent flat. Once the wire was adequately concealed, he moistened the mat to the exact stipulation, and departed.

He waited by the front door of the neighbouring apartment listening for his mark in the hall, his electrical trap completed and set, his finger on the proverbial trigger. The trigger in this case was a complicated circuit breaker, so really his finger was on the switch. He rubbed the pivoting plastic with his finger still encased in latex. He kept his covering garments on at all times. He would not remove them until his business was completed and he was safely removed from the premises. Many hours passed. He was alone with his thoughts, and he found them poor company. His hands were hot. Perspiration filled the gloves, collecting in the lines on his palms, creating itches he couldn't scratch. The gloves had become an irritation, an inconvenience he'd be glad to be rid of. He thought again about his Handler; wondering whether 'convenience' was the motivation behind his current operation.

He disliked the dark; the covert spy-holes into the staging area made darkness a necessity in the production area. He tried not to think about the Mark; about the man he'd watched for weeks. The more he'd learnt, the harder it became to maintain detachment. The man's existence engendered pity. The Mark shared his trade, but was at present unemployed. They might both be electricians, but as far as he could tell, they shared no further similarities. Work was hard to come by. That's why he was here. He sympathised, but he was still sickened by the Mark's home-life: there was no excuse for slovenliness. He focused on his disgust. He told himself it would help. He was finding it difficult to differentiate between revulsion for the Mark's, and for his own life-style choices. The Mark might be a slob, but at least he wasn't a killer. Was he? He might be. How could he know?

He was beginning to doubt. In this line of work, doubt could be deadly. It caused hesitation, and he who hesitates is lost. Maybe he was lost? For all he knew, the man next door might have more in common with him than he had originally perceived. This time next year, he could find himself frying on his own toilet, just like the poor old bastard would tonight. One of the spy-holes flared with light. The bathroom: the Mark had got past and he'd missed his footsteps. Fuck it. He pressed his eye into the light, blinking at its synthetic cruelty, squinting to make out his target. On the other side of the wall, the Mark was loosening his trousers in the door way. The assassin looked down to see exposed toes. No shoes. Green light: the switch felt somehow heavier in his hand. He waited as

the Mark wriggled free of his clothes, kicking them into a pile on the floor. He waited while the man turned and squatted onto the toilet bowl. He waited to hear the splash

He left the building as anonymously as he'd entered. He never collected his final payment at the designated drop. His wages were greatly appreciated by the old vagrant who found them, under a bench, in one of London's less popular parks. He was never caught by any authority that might have been looking for him, and his Handler never found cause to find him. He never experienced another night of uninterrupted sleep and he never again sat comfortably when using the toilet. He kept the latex gloves he'd used that night: he couldn't bring himself to dispose of them. The "Electrocutioner" case was never closed; remaining eternally unresolved.

Commentary

Process of Composition

Working from the stimulus of Detective fiction, the piece was composed as a reaction to the constraints proposed by Todorov. Though the text does not attempt to reinvent his parameters, it applies some of his defining directives literally to the letter, whilst others are blurred or ignored on a subjective basis.

'At the base of the whodunit we find a duality, and it is this duality which will guide our description. This novel contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation.' (Todorov, Tzvetan, "The Typology of Detective Fiction", from Lodge (Ed.), *Modern Criticism & Theory*, Pearson, Harlow, 2000, p139)

The crime (in linear terms) must obviously take place before it is investigated, though due to the way I opted to formulate the two independent narratives, I decided that the crime should be recounted after the detection. It is standard practice to give a brief outline of the crime's specifics, before the detective interprets the clues, revealing "*whodunit*" and how at the conclusion. Skipping introductions, we move directly to the detective's first encounter of the crime scene, the implication that he has viewed many similar scenes before is of pivotal importance. I was attempting to depict the detective as having resigned himself to cynical failure. He, as a character,

is less important than the nature of the crime he is reviewing. He is, for all intents and purposes, totally impotent.

'Maybe try to knock one out.

Get some sleep.

Pray to overcome my erectile dysfunction and insomnia.'

In the second part of the story I aimed to reinforce the hopelessness of any investigation, by promoting the proficiency of the assassin ring, discretely implying a military or government link.

Development and Revision

It had been my intention to compose a piece to shatter the rules of Van Dine (advocate of the Detective fiction standard), as summarised by Todorov (Ibid, p142), an exercise that went well initially. I created a situation that would null all of the suggestions, through staging murder in the setting of a detective's training seminar. It did not take long to realise that such an endeavour would rapidly expand beyond the constraints of a short story of no more than two thousand words, especially if I were to successfully convey all of the subject matter I wished to acknowledge. I began to work on an alternative line of development, no longer intent on shattering rules, but bending them beyond recognition. I wrote an extensive analysis of a crime-scene in first person narrative. The detective recounting his experience in real-time; present tense; as he came across it. This too began to unfold, taking up more of the word count than I would have preferred, so I reviewed my work from a more realistic perspective. Whilst attempting to edit out some of my more flamboyant and unnecessarily descriptive terminology, I was reminded of Todorov's example of a *'pure' whodunit* (Ibid, p139).

'a small green index-card on which is typed:

Odel, Margaret.

184 W. Seventy-first Street. Murder: Strangled about 11p.m. Apartment robbed. Jewels Stolen. Body found by Amy Gibson, maid. [S. S. Van Dine, The 'Canary' Murder Case]

I decided to cut the nameless detective's account of the crime scene down to a series of bullet pointed notes, similar to the approach employed by Alan Moore for the character 'Rorschach' in his graphic novel, *Watchmen*.

Theoretical context

In accordance with Van Dine's first rule, I have adhered to the required cast of '*one detective and one criminal, and at least one victim (a corpse)*' (Ibid, p142) with each character taking on few defining personal traits beyond these limited requirements. The second rule is upheld to a certain extent, in that the murderer is not the detective and is not technically professional though acts as directed with proficiency; he does not however, '*kill for personal reasons*' (Ibid, p142), just business. The motivations of the killer are conveyed in the later story, where he shows distaste for his task and concerns for his own personal safety inspired by the sinister nature of his employers. He is inconsequential: if he did not carry out his task, someone else would be found to take his place; and he would like as not take the role of the victim. In this way, he fails to fulfil rule number four, which states '*the culprit must have a certain importance*' (Ibid, p142). Rule eight, that prohibits the use of '*banal solutions*' (Ibid, p142), has been carefully evaded in my text, in that no solution is offered. In this way, I hoped to re-direct the focus of the piece from the mystery resolution of standard Detective fiction, instead concentrating on the creation of the mystery. The first and second parts of the story each pursue different methods of developing suspense, each building to absolute anti-climax.

'the suspense novel. It keeps the mystery of the whodunit and also the two stories, that of the past and that of the present; but it refuses to reduce the second to a simple detection of the truth.' (Ibid, pg 143)

Self Evaluation

This was my first attempt at detective fiction and, in review, it seems far from a resounding success. I also tried to portray a character through first person narrative in the present tense, a technique I have never used before, and after several re-writes I am still not entirely convinced is satisfactory.

I am pleased with the effect achieved by the detective's bullet-pointed prose; it seems that despite being half the length, the primary meaning is still conveyed. What attracted me to Detective fiction was the prospect of creating a detective and killer whose hearts were not in their work, therefore escaping the archetypal roles of hero and villain. Each story reflects the senseless nature of the killing, giving little away as to any higher motive, though I feel enough clues have been given to that end. The victim is centred upon but pushed to the periphery simultaneously, he shares certain common traits with both detective and killer; through him I hoped to draw out the hidden aspects of the other characters. The defining similarity shared by all of the characters are their unifying illustrations of unfulfilled lives, this parallel probably constitutes the most effective allusion of this particular text.

Bibliography

Todorov, Tzvetan, 'The Typology of Detective Fiction', from Lodge (Ed.), *Modern Criticism & Theory*, Pearson (Harlow, 2000)

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