

MOON MEDICINE

By Christopher Leppek & Emanuel Isler

Damn near every one of them deserved exactly what they got.

Somebody once asked me, just before I retired after 30 years on the force—25 of them in the trenches of homicide—what common thread linked the hundreds of murders I had investigated. It wasn't the motive—not jealousy or greed or vengeance or anger or passion or madness.

It was simply that the victims—most of them—deserved their fates.

That sounds hard, I know. That sounds like I don't give a damn, which isn't true. I did care about the kids. None of them deserved it. Those scenes still haunt me, like unswept dust in a corner, even after all these years.

I saw the faces of the victims, the pain, often the surprise, and wondered whether they'd still be alive if they'd just kept their mouth shut. Or walked away from the challenge. Or treated the perpetrator a little better somewhere down the line. Or whether they'd gotten away with something in the past, and were just getting paid for it now.

At least I used to think that way.

I have to admit, after scores of murders, the lines started to get a little blurry. I began to wonder about things.

Other things haunt me too. The rubber-banded batch of yellowed files –unsolved cases—still lingers in some detective's drawer back at the precinct. There were some cases, not many but some, that were never solved. Some were never even explained. But not long after earning my stripes, I learned a valuable lesson –knowing when to put a case back into the file and forget about it. No, not forget about it. Abandon it. Walk away.

Still, I have to admit that some of those unsolved cases would always remain open in my mind, wounds unable to scab over. The most glaring – the most maddeningly frustrating – involved a perfect killer with the harmless sounding name of Benny Hoskiss. Even though I managed to drive him elsewhere, I knew that I had done nothing more than interrupt the horrors he was so fond of perpetrating. Benny would always represent my greatest failure.

Jackie's voice, soft but knowing as always, interrupted my dark stroll down Memory Lane.

You're getting morose, Charlie, she said. Have another.

I regarded the foaming pilsner, her caring eyes. You're reading my mind again. To myself I thought, I'm glad she really can't read my mind.

Thanks, kid.

That's my job, Jackie said.

I looked out the hazy window of the bar and caught a quick glimpse of the moon, fat and round, beginning its slow rise from the unseen horizon.

First, I took a tiny vial from my breast pocket—my medicine—and let its white powder drift slowly into the beer. Then I lifted the seal from a can of tomato juice and let its red clouds tumble down. Easier on the stomach, they say. Takes the bitterness away.

I laughed softly, briefly drawing Jackie's glance. If only it would take the bitterness away, and more.

There was a loud hoot behind me as a radiologist beat a paramedic on the shuffleboard game, both of them off shift for the night. There were other off-duty types hanging around the Oasis, and a handful of useless retirees like me, sitting on ancient stools, drinking away their idle time. The place was loud and smoky and utterly unremarkable in every way, except one.

There was a stranger here tonight and that didn't happen very often at the Oasis. Worse, he was looking at me. And worse yet, there was something familiar about him.

The guy was watching me, I was sure of it. I could smell it. Through the perpetual darkness of the bar—a darkness carefully cultivated to foster solitude, protect anonymity and comfort self-pity—I felt the stranger's eyes out of the corner of my own. When I'd turn my head in his direction, he would be staring at the table. I'd look away and I'd feel it again. He was well dressed—a little too well dressed for a working man's joint like this—in a neat black jacket and stylish slacks. Brown wingtips. Clean shaven, gray hair nicely combed, a little long in the back. Intelligent look on his face, but I can't really read it through all the smoke.

But I'd seen him before. I don't forget faces, never have. I just couldn't place him.

I didn't appreciate the stranger's interest. Call me paranoid, but don't call me stupid. You put in two and half decades in homicide and you make plenty of enemies, believe me. Some of them don't forget. For some of them, vengeance dies hard. I just don't take chances with strangers who stare in my direction. Odds are they aren't old friends.

I suddenly remembered the time. Twenty till eleven. It was Wednesday—third Wednesday of the month—and I had an appointment with Barb. I downed the beer, pulled the filter off a Winston and bade Jackie goodnight. I glanced at the man in the corner. This time, he was glancing right back.

The air was cold and moist and tugs were moaning in the river, its murky depths illuminated by the pale moon. When clouds shrouded it, the city grew coal mine dark, especially this section, where the streetlights seemed hard-pressed to push back the blackness. The streets were shimmering, quiet; the only footsteps I heard were my own.

Still, I wasn't feeling cocky. I've learned to trust my instincts. I stepped into the doorway of a warehouse and pressed my back against the cold glass door. I cooled my heels, hand on the stock of my Smith and Wesson, waiting for the stranger to show. After ten minutes he didn't come, so I went on my way. Maybe I was wrong after all; it's happened before.

I made my way to the Barth Hotel—Barb's office—by the usual route. I shared the streets with alley cats and newspaper trucks and thoroughly enjoyed the solitude.

I passed the places that are alive by day and dead by night: The fruit stand, Joe Collareti's magazine kiosk, Goldstein's Deli, the hat factory, all entombed in graffiti-scarred grating.

I also passed the corner of Fifth and Telegraph, where Rip used to live. The only thing moving now was the steady release of gray steam from a curbside vent.

There was little left, but I paused anyway. Call it respect. Regret maybe. The pathetic shed and its sorry furnishings had all been hauled off. But be it ever so humble, it had once been the home of a man. Make that a friend.

My relationship with Rip . . . no, make that my friendship with him, began about a year before he died. It started with a simple look of gratitude on that unusual face. I'd given him a quarter, maybe two, even though he never asked me for it. He was sitting right here, at this very corner, on a milk crate, almost like any guy sitting on the porch in front of his house. Except that Rip's house was nothing more than an old storage shed behind a tenement, six by seven maybe, with an old plywood sign propped up for a door and the sharp tang of spent Sterno lingering in the air.

I couldn't tell how old he was. His long beard gave the impression of considerable age, but its lack of gray hinted at youth. He wore an old army overcoat which reached almost to the ground, but he kept it open so I could see the faded overalls underneath and the right leg pinned neatly behind the knee. Maybe it was the bushy beard, maybe the one leg, but he somehow conjured the image of a landlocked pirate.

I didn't give him the coin out of pity. It was just a gift, an urge to do something good. There was something in Rip's eyes—kindness, wisdom maybe, but definitely pride—that stayed with me.

He took the coin after great hesitation and showed his gratitude only through his eyes. He didn't say a word—then or ever—and I never knew for sure whether he was mute.

Whoever he might have been—whatever his story was—didn't really make much difference, because I found myself in the habit of pausing by his place, giving him whatever change I had in my pocket, accepting his silent thanks, and moving on.

I saw him virtually every night. His hovel was located right in the middle of my nocturnal walk. Even retired cops take regular walks; I like to think of it as my beat. Makes me feel less old, I guess. And giving Rip a coin or two every day somehow made me feel better. Not like a Rockefeller or a Samaritan, and not like I was trying to buy a friend. It's hard to explain.

You might say that Rip was the only person I've ever known who I truly accepted at face value. And the only person who ever accepted me totally and without reservation or judgment. I accepted his poverty and destitution without pity or condescension, and he accepted my comfort and leisure without envy or resentment.

And who could say, really, whose lot was better than whose?

It's hard to explain, but we were absolutely equal. We never exchanged a word between us, but I knew he understood. He was like kin to me. Like a brother.

And when he died, I grieved as if my own brother had died.

I came to his shack one evening, looking forward to the usual encounter, but he wasn't there. My experience told me that something was wrong. I knocked on the plywood door and got no answer. I heard nothing and smelled no Sterno, so I pushed the door aside.

There was something about that pathetic room—the damp newspapers used for bedclothes, the unopened tins of food on the floor, the cold corncob pipe, a dried rose propped in an empty beer bottle—that told me its occupant would never be coming home.

And I was right. It took a simple phone call to the precinct captain to confirm it. Just another homeless John Doe, the captain said. Just another derelict who died on a cold night in the big city. Why was I interested anyway? he asked. I didn't have an answer for him, at least not one that he would understand.

I cried—I'm not ashamed of it. Twenty years ago that would have been hard for me to admit. Well, I'm proud of it now. And after I cried I made a decision. I'd give him a decent funeral. He deserved it. It was the least I could do.

I sat on the old milk crate, the last physical reminder that Rip had ever lived. Even though it was cool and I was already late for Barb, I decided to linger a while longer. I tore off the filter of a Winston, lit it, and tried to remember the pathetic circus at the coroner's office.

He was only the deputy coroner—a young hotshot fresh out of med school—and I didn't like him from the start. He tried to lie to me and believe me, a cop with 25 years on homicide is not the kind of guy you want to lie to. This guy reeked of deceit.

I asked him a simple question: Had the John Doe been released, and to what mortuary? I was pretty sure that Rip had no family to claim him, so the standard operating procedure would have been for the coroner to release the body to the mortuary of the week. All of them participate in a rotation pool of sorts, whereby unclaimed John and Jane Does were buried gratis. Some kind of state law.

The deputy coroner hemmed and hawed about the Doe. He said there had been five Does that day alone. Which one was I inquiring about? The one-legged one, I replied.

Records aren't available, the guy announced. Can't help you. Had the nerve to ask what my business was anyway.

So I told him who I was, what my experience was, that experience having begun before this punk was even born. And I added that if I didn't get an answer in the next 30 seconds I'd put in a call to my old friend, the chief coroner. Maybe he'd find the records.

He fessed up. The jerk had already sold Rip's body to the med school as a cadaver, a word I've always hated. He'd broken about a dozen laws with that particular act, but that wasn't all that important to me. What bothered me was the image of Rip being sliced and diced by the eager students in Gross Anatomy 101.

Get the body to me before morning, I told the now white-faced deputy coroner, and I might let you continue your career without being interrupted by several years in the state pen. Just call me with the name of the appropriate mortuary. I slammed the door, announcing my departure to the entire department.

Sure enough, I got a call the next morning. Rip had been duly delivered to the mortuary. They'd wait a couple days for someone to claim the body, take a photo for the record and publish a simple legal notice. After that, he was all mine.

The service was simple, short and sweet, just me, the preacher and Rip. I purchased a plot in the popular cemetery, ordered a stone, hired the neighborhood Methodist minister to preside and say the usual prayers, even purchased a decent casket—an oak job with shiny brass handles. It was the sun glinting off those handles as the box went into the dark hole that gave me a sense of peace; what the shrinks would call closure.

I said my own prayer, thanked the preacher and walked back to my car, feeling better than I'd felt in a long time.

A cold gust of wind brought me out of the reverie. I glanced at my watch again. Damn. Fifteen minutes late for Barb.

I left the scene and resumed my journey, my mind turning to something warmer than death and dark alleys. I listened to the sound my shoes made—a sharp tapping amidst the sounds of the city—and knew that something wasn't right. Something was in the air; something didn't smell right. And there was a subtle echo, strangely soft, to every step I took, closely matched but not perfectly, somewhere behind me, at least a block away. My nerves tingled, and I felt a familiar sensation at my temples.

I kept my cool, remembering the stranger in the bar and his watchful stare. And remembering other things too. I didn't know what the stranger wanted but it probably wasn't anything nice. I didn't turn back to confirm my instincts, knowing that the darkness here—as deep as jet on black velvet—would conceal whoever was patiently dogging my heels.

Like before, I ducked into the doorway of a closed storefront. Almost on cue, my echo stopped as well. The guy was good.

Instinctively, my hand went for the reassuring touch of my revolver. This time I waited a good fifteen minutes before deciding to move on.

Only half a block away, the scarlet neon glow of the Barth beckoned out of the gloom. I was getting tired of worrying about this creep. After Barb and I were finished, maybe I'd take a cab home.

I stepped into the flimsy revolving doors and spun my way into the lobby. Like always I was greeted with the stale smell of dust and somebody's supper. The TV was on and a couple old-timers had fallen asleep on the cracked vinyl couch. Sammy looked up from his racing form, switched his toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other, and gave me his usual nod.

He leered like only Sammy could leer. He knew why I was there. He'd seen me every month, like clockwork, for years.

She's been expecting you for the past half hour, he said.

I admit it. I'm a creature of habit—good habits and bad habits alike—and this was one habit I had no intention of ever shaking. Some people might think that sleeping with a prostitute is something awful; evil at worst, pathetic at best. But I'm not afraid to be honest. I've only slept with one woman since my wife died, and that one woman was

Barb. She took care of me, maybe even loved me in her touching, low-rent kind of way. And maybe I loved her back.

To put it bluntly, I don't have many friends anymore. Price of getting old I guess. Or of being an old cop.

Like always, the hallway was bathed in half-light. The carpet, flat and stained, muffled my approach. It was quiet except for the steady throbbing of sleeping hearts. I got to 415 and knocked. Hearing no answer, I tried the door and wasn't surprised to find it open.

Even through my medication, the smell assaulted my senses—something feral and unclean, something like carrion, and something more familiar to me.

It was like stepping into a pool of black ink. She had the lights turned off. The only illumination was coming from the Barth's tube neon, just outside the window. It pulsed its baleful light through the blackness—tomato red—red and black, red and black.

Hello, I said.

I quickly scanned the room, desperate to make out a shape through the scarlet flashes. I saw Barb's old sofa and coffee table, her brass bed in the corner, the vanity with its assembly of dusty perfume bottles.

Everything looked normal, but everything was wrong.

What I didn't see was the thing that clawed its way across my face and sent me sprawling to the other side of the room. I tasted my blood. It brought back that familiar pressure to my temples even before I felt the fear.

And now I knew what the smell was.

It wasn't just him. It was Barb, or what was left of her. She was crumpled near the window. He had taken her by the throat, and all I could hope for was that it had been quick.

I felt the hair stand up on my neck, the choking sensation in my throat, the pain in my teeth, the raw anger, but I pushed it all back.

Not even now, I told myself.

The voice behind the red eyes in the corner spoke at last, the sound raspy and low. Canine.

Charlie, it said. So good to see you after all these years.

My eyes were adjusting to the scarlet pulse. I saw the form crouched a few feet away, saw the profile of the face, the snout, the pointed ears, upright and alert. The teeth.

I pulled myself up to a standing position, expecting a strike that didn't come. I was scared—I'm not ashamed to say it—but I wouldn't let him hear it in my voice.

Benny, I said quietly, without a tremor. Every dog has its day, I guess.

He laughed, or at least attempted to. The sound that came out was a cross between a hiss and a snarl.

How do you control it, Charlie? he asked, turning his face to the window and the moon that showed pink through the neon.

Medicine, I told him, somehow forgetting how twisted it was to be having a conversation with such a creature as him. Old-fashioned medicine.

But why? he persisted. Why do you deprive yourself? Of this?

His long tongue lapped a trickle of blood—mine or Barb’s—from his paw.

I never did it, Benny. Not once. That’s your curse, not mine. I couldn’t let you win. Not like that.

You’re pathetic, he said. You’re just a worthless old man.

He was trying to sound triumphant, trying to belittle me, but I suspected that I was cheating him out of a long-awaited payback.

Oh, Benny owed me one, all right. Big time. It was 20 years ago, back when I was on homicide. There was a serial killer on the loose. It made no sense at first. His victims were men, women, old, young, white, black. They had been brutalized, savaged, in the act of their murders. The only M.O. common to the crimes was that their throats had been ripped out, and parts of their bodies had been literally consumed. As in eaten.

It kept homicide in chaos for nearly two years. The papers were full of it. The citizens were terrified.

To make a long story short, I somehow managed to make myself believe it. I figured out who it was and, worst of all, what it was. And I caught him. I anticipated him. I stalked him—the ultimate hunter—on his own hunting ground. And emptied a chamber from my Smith and Wesson into his chest.

Problem was, he didn’t die.

Nothing but lead in the bullets. I thought I had him dead on the pavement, but I should have trusted my instincts. I messed up. I approached the thing on the ground and allowed him to give me a lasting gift. He buried his fangs deep into my leg. Not enough to kill me, but more than enough to infect me.

To curse me for life.

Now I was just like he was—almost. With that moon beaming through the window, I could feel it. With him crouched before me in a killing position, my muscles ached, and something deep inside me—something ancient and predatory—longed to burst out. But it couldn’t. I wouldn’t let it. And if I failed, the medicine wouldn’t let it.

Why so long, Benny? Why now?

He made a sound like a pit bull warning me of attack.

I’ve been a busy man, Charlie. Places to go, things to do, people to kill. And I couldn’t very well hang around here, could I? You took care of that.

The scarlet pulse revealed his face. Long strands of saliva dripped from the maw of a beast that was almost lupine, but with perverse human characteristics.

I gave this territory to you, he said. Actually, you won it. And what did you do? You squandered it, Charlie. You’ve wasted prime land, and for what? For the pathetic life of an old man, a forgotten cop whose only thrill is coming to a dump like this to mate with a bitch like that. He pointed to the floor with a crooked paw.

He could have killed me ten times by now, and I wondered what he was waiting for. He’d had his say, watched me squirm, and still he didn’t lunge.

But I figured it out. He’d picked this time—this night—for a specific reason. He was waiting for me to turn. Goading my instincts and my emotions to make me turn. He wanted to regain this territory, and he wanted to fight an equal in order to get it.

To be honest, I wasn't sure that it wouldn't happen. I had never felt the urge this strong. Now, beneath the feral stench of the thing itself, I smelled its aggression, its desperate thirst for alpha battle. Instincts were exaggerated, heightened. I could taste the musk of his hot breath. In spite of the darkness, my eyes now saw the room in perfect clarity. My hearing picked up not only the buzz of the pulsing neon, but the soft beating of the wings of the insects that were drawn to it. I heard the steady expansion and contraction of Benny's ribs, the hollow sound of his intestines.

He was hungry, and he planned to feast tonight.

It wasn't going to happen.

I don't know where the figure came from. Not from the door, which was behind me. Not from the window, which was before me. It was almost as if he came from inside the room itself. Suddenly, he was just there.

He didn't waste any time. I saw a flash of silver as he reached into the pocket of a dark jacket, and I saw the long dagger enter Benny's arched back, right between the blades. I saw its tip surface through the furry surface of his muscular chest.

He howled.

The room shook with the bestial sound of it. The thing gurgled and reached vainly for the object that had been planted in its back.

Benny gave me one last look—surprise, anger, unsatisfied bloodlust—but mostly disappointment. Sheer frustrated rage.

He was dead in under a minute, sprawled on the floor just like Barb and, like her, he was human. He was the same guy I'd shot 20 years ago, almost as if he hadn't aged a day, the same boyish face, the same deceptive look of innocence.

But this time, I was sure he was dead. I could tell by the retreat of my instincts. My vision returned to its normal old man's level. My smell picked up nothing more than the coppery scent of fresh blood.

The stranger was still there. I saw the figure of the man standing above the body—neat black jacket and stylish slacks. Brown wingtips. Clean shaven, gray hair nicely combed, a little long in the back.

The man in the bar. The guy who followed me here.

He was smiling at me in a strange, gentle sort of way.

Who are you?

A friend, he said.

I wanted to ask a million questions, but I settled for one.

Why?

The man looked at the form of the thing that had become a man, now only discernible when the neon bathed the darkness in scarlet.

I knew you'd need me, he said.

I took a closer look at the stranger. I still recognized him somehow, from somewhere, from some time before I saw him at the bar tonight. There was something in his eyes, something about the way he stood.

Who the hell are you? I repeated.

In response, he reached into the pocket of his slacks and pitched a quarter my way. I managed to catch it.

And with that, he turned to the door and walked away.

I knew I couldn't follow him.

* * *

I told it to the cops straight — not leaving out a single detail—and of course they didn't believe me, but all the evidence was circumstantial. My prints weren't on the knife, nor anywhere on Barb's body. The DA thought about pressing charges but gave it up. He had no chance. There were too many questions and too few answers. They knew who Barb was, and Benny ended up classified as a Doe. As for me, I guess they figured I'd gone off my rocker, or maybe I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Eventually, it all ended up—as I knew it would—in a yellowed file back in the precinct, marked unsolved.

I didn't mention anything about 20 years ago, of course, and they never made a connection. My secret was safe and my life went on.

It's been two years now, and somehow I'm still kicking. It's another night at the Oasis, Jackie's smile is still in force, and the big full moon is inching its way up from the unseen horizon.

Jackie placed the customary pilsner and tomato juice before me. Before taking a sip, I tipped the vial of medicine into the beer.

Want to know another secret? It's nothing more dramatic than PCP, better known on the street as angel dust. It's intended purpose is to serve as an animal tranquilizer and trust me, it works. It's kept me from Benny's fate for a long time now and, looking back, I'm grateful that my fate was different than his.

I'm also grateful for the stranger, of course.

It was the eyes, and the tossed coin, that gave him away. Despite the well groomed appearance of my benefactor—and his two perfect legs—I understood that an old friend had come back to return a favor.

I only wish that I had the chance to thank him in turn.

I still miss Barb, and in a way, I still love her. I realize that she didn't deserve to die the way she did, just as I realize that Rip deserved a lot better than he got. And, strange as it may sound, maybe even Benny didn't deserve his fate.

I'm not smart enough to understand how life works, but I've always known that some perpetrators are just perpetrators, and some victims just victims.

What I know now is, in the end, none of them deserved the pain.

I sipped my medicine and pondered the moon.

#