



THE GRAVEYARD SHIFT

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I'm on the graveyard shift: one A.M. till nine. But it's not like the name suggests. It's always a real busy time – just how I like it.

'There's a homicide,' they greet me at the desk.

'So what's new?' I ask, wondering if I've time for a plastic cup of the burning-hot gray drink labelled 'cappuccino' from the vending machine.

'Guy at Eighth and Madison. No ID. Shot in the guts, a Jackson Pollock pavement. DOA. No witnesses.'

It's a parting gift from the late shift. Right now they'll be toasting themselves in front the TV, downing a late night supper and pulling a few tabs. They've left me to sort the shit. That's what I do.

I go down to Memorial where the guy pegged out.

'Any callers?' I ask the duty nurse. 'Relatives? Friends? Strangers. Suspicious guys with guns?' But the cadaver's friendless. No-one's enquiring about his health.

It's like this sometimes. Anonymous corpse. No friends. No witnesses. A mugging? Narcotics? Marital tiff? Who knows? No ID, no motive. That's what I enjoy, figuring out the pieces.

I cruise to the crime scene and start asking questions. At Joe Donut's I ask the peroxide waitress what she knows. Nothing, she just came on shift. The early crew are gone. But she thinks maybe there's a chance.

'Hey! Arnie!' she calls.

A six foot something guy appears from the grill. Sure he was here earlier, but, no, he ain't seen nothing neither.

'You know the way it is,' Arnie says. 'People come, people go.'

'Sure,' I say. 'I know the way it is.'

Arnie's not comfortable and shows it by fidgeting and looking at me and then at the door. Me and then the door. Again. Just in case I don't get it. This time of night his clients aren't the type to welcome the sight of a suit from the precinct. It disrupts the equilibrium of the sweet little deals and backhanders that fill the vacuum of their night.

But I ain't going nowhere till I've checked. Leave the murder trail now just because I'm getting the blank-eye and I might as well close the case, go home and put my carpet slippers on in front the fire.

There's a bearded guy seated by the window. From the pile of ash, I guess he's been there most his life, smoking cheap Mexican cigarettes. I go over to him.

'Sure,' he says. 'A guy got shot. Messy business. Death. It ain't recommended.'

He grins and I figure he's just another air-head. He knows nothing first-hand. It's just something he picked up, the usual tumbleweed street whispers. But everyone has surprises. And so does beardy. Word is the cadaver's name is Brady. From somewhere downtown. But beardy's looking uneasy the more he speaks. It's not cool to talk, yet he just can't stop himself.

I go back over to Arnie and mention the name Brady. He shoots an accusing glance over at beardy and shrugs.

'Yeah, heard the name. Hangs out with Lanky.' He leans closer. 'Lanky carries.'

I do another scan of Donut's, but it's nearly empty now. Beardy's snuck out somewhere. I guess the few remaining customers know more, but they're not talking. I'd like to lay a few notes on them, help refresh their memories. But it's only the Feds play that game, we just ain't in that league.

I get back in the motor and call the precinct to run a check on Lanky. They get a fix on him. It's local, so I cruise round and drop in. He doesn't seem pleased to see me, goes the full darting eyes like some cornered hunted animal and drips big raindrops from his sweaty brow. But he gives me a name, Troy. Game on.

Troy's where I knew I'd find him, on the corner with the broken street light. He's busy peddling 'stuff' on his regular pitch, so I pull him over and whisper 'homicide' in his ear. He over-does the what-me-all-innocent routine, palms turned towards me, mouth wide open.

'Ain't nothing to do with me. Nothing. Nothing.'

I smile and tell him I know that line already, but I need him to cut me the legwork. He's not happy, but he's not too keen on my generous invitation to visit our beautiful minimalist cells downtown either, so he talks.

'Try Hammy.'

You get a name, you get another, like a line of link sausages. Sometimes they lay a false trail, but not Arnie and Lanky and Troy. They're local, they know I can find them again any time I want. And Hammy's the same name that Lanky gave me. You get two matching cards like that, you know it's looking strong.

Troy gives me a description, only it fits damn near everyone in this part of town. They all shop down Dynamo Dan's. Cheap stuff. They think it makes them look good, only it don't. It really don't. But I find Hammy anyhow. He's hanging out at Satchmo's with a couple of bored looking girls who seize their chance to fade away into the night like a candle burning out.

Hammy sweats in the back of the car, like he's real nervous. I think about taking him in. He's telling me nothing. I tell him I'm going to book him when for some reason he changes his mind, gives me the cadaver's name.

Brady.

Now it clicks. Same now beardy gave me. I didn't recognize the cadaver, but now I hear it again, I know the name. I booked Brady, what, maybe a year back? Him and a dozen others. Small-time dope peddlers, back on the street before the judge exited the courthouse.

'He went too far, see,' Hammy tells me. 'This girl. Brady tries to sell her the stuff, but she's walking by, giving him the dead-eye. He grabs her.'

'You see it yourself?' I ask.

He nods. 'I was in Smojo's, getting the clip.' He waves at his head.

'You were fleeced,' I say, patting what remains of his hair. It's just a vicious crew cut with a badly shaped V sliced into it like any teen with a razor blade could do.

'So he grabs her,' he goes on. 'Snatches her jools right off her neck and hands, and legs it.'

It's not making sense. 'So let me check I have this straight. He took her jools? And you're saying in return she gave him the ultimate payoff? I'm not buying it.'

'Uh-huh,' he shakes his head. 'Not her. But she's one of Sanchez's girls ain't she?'

Boom. It starts to fall into place. Sanchez thinks he's a big fish, but he's just some miserable shriveled tadpole in a pissing-sized puddle. Only he's mean with it. When he gets rattled, it's not words he uses to remedy the situation. Brady can't have known: no-one round here would touch a Sanchez girl.

‘So you know how it is. Sanchez comes a-calling, maybe an hour later,’ Hammy says. ‘Swans over to me, asks about Brady. I know it’s trouble.’

It has the smell of the truth. Minnows like Brady don’t matter to Sanchez – he deals the hard stuff, crack and coke and the like. Cut with god knows what unholy shit.

‘So when he sees Brady,’ Hammy continues. ‘He goes right up to him and pumps two into him – pop, pop – just like that, and he’s gone.’

‘Count yourself a witness,’ I tell him and put him back on the street.

Hammy’s not happy, but that’s tough. I don’t like it either. I need more than Hammy’s words. A convicted felon’s not the most credible witness to sell a judge on sending someone down.

I return to the crime scene neighborhood, right near where Brady became a late-career pavement artist. There’s a good view from Smojo’s, so I stroll in there. I get a lot of blank-eye, but one girl who’s new says she saw the shooting. Even better, her description fits Sanchez pretty good. Witness number two.

I realise I’m hungry, so it’s back to Joe Donut’s. Arnie ain’t there, but beardy’s sitting in the window again, glued to his favorite perch. After I finish my fine dining I give him another go. This time he’s got something.

‘Oh – I know her. Suzie,’ he says. ‘Yeah, that’s her. She comes in here earlier, mouthing off, all full of BS. Boasting that if anyone else wanna try something, she’ll get Sanchez to sort ‘em. You know what? She got too big a mouth, not a good look.’

Witness three. But beardy and Hammy are lightweights. One hint of a threat from Suzie or Sanchez and they’ll be vacationing out of town for a time, all-expenses paid. Right now I’m left with one good witness. It’s way too risky to read anyone their rights.

I move on to see who else knows anything. I find three more who know the story. I’m sure of it, but none of them’s talking. Small time addicts, minding their own business, no interest in tangling with Sanchez. I can’t blame them. He’s big league to them.

I need a confession. Not the type you get from some guy droning on about seeing the Lord and repenting. The type you get from a playoff. I’m thinking of Suzie and Sanchez. You know, get one of them to think the other’s talked. Get one of them to crack, point the finger. A good old policeman’s bluff.

This business has changed. One time a cop could’ve just taken them someplace quiet and gotten them to talk with a bit of ‘persuasion’. Now, we play it by the book. It’s all psychological stuff instead of the physical. You get the same results, it just takes more time.

Truth is, it's Sanchez I want, not Suzie. So I get Hammy to point the girl out to me and pick her up. She ain't singing, no way is she singing.

I let her know I have witnesses.

'Course you do. So see me in court,' she says.

I tell her I know everything. About the jools, how Brady snatched them. But then I add a little bit of color. I say:

'My witness saw you come back later. And you know what she saw?'

'Sure, what she seen?'

'She saw you blow Brady away. One, two. Neat work too. You're a pro.'

She goes white. 'Now hold on, that ain't right.'

'How so?' I look at her. 'That's the way I've got it. That's the way the judge'll hear it. You're going down. Homicide, Suzie.'

She bites her lip and fidgets. I nearly feel sorry for her. It ain't a pretty choice. One way she goes down for homicide, the other she betrays Sanchez. Right now she's busy calculating the least worst option.

'We'll get to him first,' I say to nudge her along. If she thinks we can pull Sanchez before he can get to her, it might help.

'Reckon?' she sneers at me. 'Ain't never seen no cop do a good thing like that.'

I can't say I disagree with that. Too many times we offer witness-protection and don't deliver on it. Reality? No protection, no witness. And no surprise it's real hard getting anyone to whistle.

But I do my stuff. Softly, softly. Finally she breaks, spills everything about Sanchez. I take her to the precinct. They take her story and her autograph on the dotted line.

C Squad runs her back to her place and make sure she stays there while I cruise round to Sanchez's place. His type are way too small to keep serious personal protection. It's only if their ego bloats they start to play Al Capone.

I wait till he comes out. He fits the description from Hammy and Suzie, so I figure it's him. But he's bigger and meaner than I thought. No matter, I'm committed now.

I get out the car and walk over, ready to duck if he moves for a gun. He looks at me and I can see he's thinking fast, figuring his best move.

'Sanchez? I'm taking you in. Homicide.'

He moves fast, grabs my arm and twists it. I'm in trouble: his grip's strong and I think something's gonna break.

‘Forget it,’ he whispers.

He twists me round and onto the ground. Maybe a bit late, but I’m thinking fast. I underestimated him and now this guy ain’t playing. If he gets his chance, I’m finished.

I hook a leg around him and pull him over. Bad move – he lands on me. It’s painful. Before I can get hold of him, he’s up again and this time he’s really yanking my arm. There’s a cracking sound and something goes. It hurts. And I mean Hurts.

I kick out and trip him again. This time his grip slackens and I jump myself free. I get him in a grip, but he’s strong, too strong, and he’s shaking me like a wet dog shakes itself dry.

I can hear someone running towards us. Shit, I just pray it’s not one of his stooges. I push back real hard, forcing him down and into a half-Nelson. But even that’s not gonna hold him.

Then I see the cavalry arriving, a blue from the precinct. He grabs Sanchez’s other arm and forces it round, unbalancing him. And then he squats on Sanchez’s back, pinning him down. Sometimes it’s good to be a big, heavy man.

The cop looks at me and grins.

‘Looked like you could do with a hand.’

I nod and pull the cuffs from my pocket. It’s a real good moment, despite my arm hurting like Hell. Sanchez goes ballistic as we get him into the car, chucking himself around like a real crazy. Lots of so-called hard guys are just spoilt little kids in men’s bodies under the surface. He cracks the passenger window with his head.

It’s not a comfortable ride back to the station. I steer with just my good arm while the big blue keeps Sanchez under control.

We turn him in at the desk and I go and write up my report as best I can. After I’m done I check the time. One hour left on shift. Time flies when you’re having fun, as they say.

I get one of the hot gray ‘cappuccinos’ from the vending machine. I’m getting ready to see the medics about my arm when the desk say:

‘You got another homicide.’

‘Hey, not me,’ I say, nodding at the clock. ‘I’m done with the graveyard shift.’