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Opening Extract from...

The Night Watchman

Written by Richard Zimler

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'It is by no means certain that our individual personality is the single inhabitant of these our corporeal frames . . . We all do things both awake and asleep which surprise us. Perhaps we have co-tenants in this house we live in.'

Oliver Wendell Holmes

'Once believed to be a rare and dramatic aberration, Dissociative Identity Disorder is actually a highly evolved survival mechanism acquired by some individuals as they cope with severe and prolonged trauma, abuse, and fear.'

Deborah Bray Haddock,
The Dissociative Identity Disorder Sourcebook

'Maybe our second chances are the only ghosts who
ever appear to us.'

Henrique Monroe

Chapter 1

As I scanned my notes at my desk, the murder suspect sitting across from me told me that he and his wife had never had children but that he had pictured his son every night in bed for the last month.

‘I don’t get it – what son?’ I asked.

‘My imaginary one. We do things together all the time.’

His watchful eyes seemed to be yearning for my trust. While weighing my options, I blew on my steaming tea. ‘All right, so how old is this imaginary kid of yours?’ I asked as I jotted down the date in my notebook: *Friday 6 July 2012, 10.17 a.m.*

‘He’s seven,’ the suspect replied. ‘At least, he usually is. It can depend on what I’m daydreaming about.’ He bit his lip and looked up at the ceiling, as if needing a moment to script more of his story.

‘Come on, we both deserve better than you making up some crazy fantasy for me,’ I told him, and I pointed towards the stack of files sitting on the chair behind my desk. ‘I have at least twenty cases competing for my time, so if you’re just pretending to—’

‘Don’t you ever dream about what might have been?’ he cut in desperately. He took a rushed sip of his water. I realized he was running on nervous energy. His name was Manuel Moura. He was thirty-two years old but he looked years younger – more like a college student. He was a high school chemistry teacher.

'So you're serious about this made-up kid?' I asked.

'I've never been more serious about anything in my life.'

'Does he have a name?' I asked, and I felt the small, mild, tentative loss of balance we sometimes feel when we take a step forward into someone else's story.

'Miguel.'

'And what's he look like?'

'He has silky black hair cut in bangs, and big green eyes – an alert, intelligent face.' He smiled broadly at the beauty he'd created. 'A bright kid, outgoing. And brave – really brave.'

Moura had light brown hair, combed neatly to the side, and his wire-rimmed glasses made him look shy and secretive – a bit like Harry Potter. Since I regarded poisoning his wife as anything but courageous, I said, 'It sounds like you're trying to tell me – without actually saying it – that Miguel takes after his mother.'

Moura held up his hands as if surrendering – regrettably – to the truth of what I'd surmised, then took off his glasses and wiped his eyes. He looked more adult without them – more honest, too.

He surveyed my office, left, right, then left again, craning his neck out in a way that would have seemed comical under other circumstances. 'No photos of your family on your desk, no paintings – it's kind of cold in here,' he said. 'Don't you want anything personal in your office?'

He'd happened on one of my continuing sources of discomfort at work. 'Police policy,' I told him. 'No diversions for you, and none for me either.'

'The detectives on TV always give their offices lots of personality,' he pointed out.

'A number of things happen on television that don't happen around here.'

'And they nearly always get their cases over in forty-eight hours.'

'Let me guess, you watch *CSI*,' I replied in a weary tone;

this wasn't the first time I'd been compared unfavourably to fictional investigators.

'Yeah, but I only like the version that's set in Las Vegas.'

'The thing is, police dramas are all scripted to keep you on the edge of your seat, and this . . .' – here, I circled my hand in the air to indicate my office and, more generally, the dimension in which it existed – '. . . this, Mr Moura, happens to be what most people would call real life. People around here are only rarely entertaining and, between you and me, some of them could be considered pretty incompetent. Just so you know, it took a whole week to get your wife's tests for toxic substances back from the lab. And that was with me pushing hard.'

'But you knew I was responsible as soon as you got the report?' he asked in a hopeful tone.

He seemed anxious to think better of me, which struck me as both loopy and endearing. 'Chemistry teacher, cyanide poisoning – connecting the dots didn't require a higher degree in logic,' I told him.

He gazed down as though he were having second thoughts about opening up to me. To win back his trust, I leaned towards him and whispered conspiratorially, 'I've been known to defy the rules on occasion.' I turned around the coffee mug where I keep my pens so he could read its big, blue-lettered message: **I ♥ BLACK CANYON**. 'My wife had it made for me,' I told him. 'She runs a ceramics gallery.'

He smiled with gratified surprise – probably just like his imaginary son – and asked, 'Where's Black Canyon?'

'In America – in southwest Colorado.'

'I thought I heard a slight accent!' he announced proudly.

'I was born near there.'

'It must be really far away – I mean, not just geographically.'

'It's a different world.'

'I bet.' He gazed down, considering his options. By the time he looked back up, he was once again eager to tell me about what most mattered to him – but in his own

idiosyncratic way. 'My son is really lovable,' he told me. 'Everybody takes to him.'

I took a quick gulp of my tea and wrote *Suspect's Fantasy Life* in my notebook; whether indicative of insight or lunacy, this was just the kind of thing I liked to get down on paper. I had stacks of photocopied notes from my interrogations at our apartment, though what I intended to do with them was still a mystery.

'Who's everybody?' I asked.

'Other teachers, neighbours . . . Wherever we go, everybody can see he's special.'

Moura went on to tell me that picturing his make-believe son was the only way he could get to sleep at night. As he spoke, he knitted his hands together. It seemed as though he needed to keep himself under tight control.

Nodding to himself, anxious to convince both of us of the rightness of what he was about to say, he told me that his wife sent their lives spiralling off towards disaster when she began an affair with the philosophy teacher at his school. 'She behaved like a real whore!' he said angrily.

I mumbled to myself: *Good authors, too, who once knew better words . . .*

'What was that?' he asked.

'Song lyrics in English pop out of me sometimes – it's a nervous habit,' I explained.

'No problem. You know the worst part?' he asked, sneering. 'The guy she had an affair with is a total asshole!'

'But she obviously didn't think so,' I said challengingly. 'And it seems to me she had the right to think whatever she wanted.'

'Maybe so,' he admitted.

'Maybe or yes?' I insisted; suspects who hurt women tended to make me forget my tactics for maintaining their trust.

'You're right,' Moura agreed, but I could see it was only to get me off his back.

'Look, I'll tell you something I was forced to learn real

young,' I said. 'Men who regard their wives and girlfriends as property are responsible for far more than their fair share of the unhappiness in our world.'

'Yeah, I can believe that,' he conceded. 'So how long have you been a policeman?'

'Seventeen years.'

'You must have seen some pretty bad things in your time.'

I thought of saying, *Cruelty never goes out of style*, but it sounded too glib – too much like Philip Marlowe or one of the other fictional detectives whose cases I imagined myself solving when I was a kid. 'So what do you and Miguel do together while you're trying to find dreamland?' I asked instead.

'Mostly we go to the beach in Caparica. I take his hand and we run down to the edge of the ocean. He likes to stand still and watch the sand by his feet slide away – it makes him feel like he's skating. It makes him laugh. Me, too!'

Moura explained that he also took his son to the Feira da Ladra, the sprawling flea market behind the Pantheon, because the boy was wild about old farming tools and cooking gadgets – just like his dad, of course. In front of the tiger enclosure at the Lisbon Zoo, Miguel told his father that he wanted to be ferocious and fearless, and to have razor-sharp teeth. He wanted to run through the Himalayan forest. 'And I don't want anyone to be able to catch me!' he added, as if it were an absolute necessity.

I underlined that hope twice, because it seemed to be Moura's way of saying that he'd been worried for a long time that his wife and friends might catch up with *him* and figure out that he wasn't such a boyish, sweet-natured guy after all.

At this point in his zoo fantasy, Moura picked up Miguel, hugged him with all the relief of finally having found a trustworthy companion and told him that he, too, had always wanted to be big and powerful, but that he'd never dared tell anyone before.

Holding my gaze, asking for my understanding with the shadowed depth of his eyes, Moura confessed that it was a great comfort to tell his son that he never thought he was strong enough. 'Ever since I was ten or eleven, that's what I've wanted to tell someone. Though I was only ever able to confess it to Miguel. I couldn't trust anyone else.'

Tears caught in his lashes, and I was convinced that this was what he'd most wanted to tell me since the moment we'd met. A week ago, I'd come to his flat to question him about his wife's death, and he must have spotted something in my face that gave him hope that I'd be sympathetic. And by now he must have also realized that this might be his last chance to explain something important about himself to another person.

'Now you've confessed your secret to me, as well,' I pointed out.

'Because my life is over,' he said, wiping his eyes. 'So it doesn't much matter. I'll probably be . . . I don't know, fifty, before I get out of prison. Maybe even older.'

He waited for me to contradict him with a more optimistic assessment. When I didn't, he gazed off into what he thought his future might look like. His jaw throbbed; he was steeling himself for a long battle.

The phone rang next door. Through the glass window separating my office from the room where two of my inspectors have their desks, I saw the new officer on my team, Lucinda Pires, take the call.

Moura took a deep, calming breath and said, 'I really thought Miguel had changed everything. It was stupid for me to believe he could make things different, I guess.'

His despairing tone touched me and, with a jolt, I realized that he had used his fantasies about a son not just to put himself to sleep, but also to try to prevent himself from committing murder. He'd wanted to do the right thing. He'd fought and failed.

I wanted to help him – to make his stay in prison more bearable. 'It wasn't stupid,' I told him. 'But maybe . . . maybe

you needed to hide even deeper in your fantasies – and to stay there until you were sure you could talk with your wife without hurting her. They might be able to still help you in some way – to get through all this, I mean.’

Hearing the solidarity in my voice, he turned towards the wall and began to sob. His desolation caught me off guard, and I sensed Gabriel creeping up behind me, which was odd, because I wasn’t in any danger. At least, that was what I then thought.

‘Listen, Mr Moura,’ I said softly, hoping to bring him back to me, ‘do you think that your fantasy son will age along with you? I mean, twenty years from now, when you get out of prison, will Miguel be nearing thirty or still only seven?’

He rubbed his eyes and took a deep, calming breath. ‘I’d prefer he stay a little kid,’ he replied. ‘Though I’m not sure it matters that much any more.’

Knowing we’d both appreciate a safe subject for a few minutes, I got him talking about his teaching. As he told me about his difficulties with kids cheating in exams, I sensed Gabriel withdrawing. A feeling of lightness eased through me. And then he was gone, leaving a hollowness behind in exactly the shape of my curiosity about him.

As Moura and I spoke, I understood from his laboured search for the right words that he hadn’t had anyone to reveal his heart to for a long time. Maybe he never had.

When I reached the ins and outs of the murder itself, Moura told me he’d synthesized cyanide because it was a poison that was quick and sure. ‘I didn’t want my wife to suffer unnecessarily,’ he told me. ‘And it didn’t matter that it would show up on your tests.’ He shrugged as if to say that foiling our efforts was never the point.

‘Still, you could have tried to get away afterwards,’ I said.

‘I thought of flying to Brazil. But seeing my wife dead, looking at her face . . . I found something in its stillness, its forced silence – something about the two of us and our destiny. About how things started and how they’d turned

out. And what being married meant. I understood then that there was no point in fleeing.'

His words made me uneasy. Maybe because he'd understood something important about his marriage too late. 'Is cyanide hard to cook up?' I asked, a bit disappointed in myself for retreating from a conversation that might have been more meaningful.

'É *canja*,' he replied, flapping his hand. *A piece of cake.*

He fought a smile. He clearly thought it wouldn't look so good if he showed too much pride in his abilities. He was a strange guy – one minute in despair, the next seemingly ready for a starring role on his own TV drama. On a hunch, I asked, 'Are you on any medication?'

'An antidepressant,' he replied. 'My doctor thought it would help. I used to think about suicide pretty much all the time. Though now I'm here at police headquarters and about to go to prison. I'm not sure I would call that progress.'

He laughed mirthlessly – the laugh of a man who hasn't ended up anywhere near where he'd always expected to be. I drank my tea. I was tired of talking to suspects who'd ruined every chance for happiness they had once had. And who betrayed their loved ones. Their destructive impulses exhausted me.

When Moura put his glasses back on, I realized he preferred looking younger than he was; it was his camouflage. Maybe he was even a lot more dangerous than I imagined. It was possible that he'd even invented his fantasy son to win me to his side – that he'd sensed from the moment we'd first met that he could trick me with that particular strategy.

Since 1994, when I joined the Judicial Police, at least two sociopaths have fooled me completely. Both sat right where Moura was sitting. Number One was a young bank teller with a winning smile who lived with his parents in Almada. He'd been a spellbinding storyteller. We ended up talking mostly about his collection of rare coins. I was sure he was innocent until sniffer dogs led us to the bodies of his father and mother under the paving stones of his patio. Number

Two was a pretty nurse who worked at the Santa Cruz Hospital in Estoril. She could laugh, weep and flare into self-righteous anger on command: Meryl Streep dubbed into Portuguese. I thought she was the victim of a hateful conspiracy, but it turned out that she had killed at least nine patients with morphine injections.

One certainty police work has taught me is that, if you think you can't be fooled, you're wrong.

Moura went on to tell me that he'd poured his cyanide powder into the spicy tomato sauce he'd made for dinner one evening. 'My wife liked really hot food,' he explained.

A knock came on my door. Moura gasped as though he'd heard a bomb go off.

'It's okay, nothing's wrong,' I told him.

Inspector Pires poked her head in. She'd joined the Judiciary Police only a week earlier. 'Sorry, sir,' she said. 'There's been a murder.'

'Where?'

'In São Bento. On the Rua do Vale.'

It was my week to be on call, which meant I was given all the major crimes reported by the Public Security Police, the PSP. Their officers were nearly always the first on the scene because all emergency calls to 112 were directed their way.

'Okay, Pires, get the techs from Forensics over to the Rua do Vale ASAP. I'll get there as soon as I can.'

'Right, sir,' Pires agreed, but in a tone of warning, she added, 'the PSP says that the victim was wealthy and well-connected, with lots of friends in the government.'

I came out to talk to her, closing the door behind me. 'I know you're just trying to protect me, Inspector, but a cadaver isn't likely to phone any of his big-shot buddies to complain that I took a few extra minutes with a suspect. Don't let the PSP spook you.'

'Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.'

I'd spoken gently, but she looked as if she might burst into tears, so I took her shoulder. 'I didn't mean to sound harsh.'

This suspect has put me off-balance. One thing you can do for me is call Dr Zydowicz. I want him on this case.'

Zydowicz was the chief medical inspector. He'd just returned to work after two months on sick leave. We weren't required to have a medical expert on hand, but I preferred having one around for high-profile cases.

I slipped back into my office to finish up with Moura. He was finishing his glass of water when I stepped in. A few minutes later, we'd reached an agreement on the exact wording of his statement. Once he'd added his tiny, careful signature, he handed me back my pen and said in a hopeful tone, 'I don't think I'm really such a bad person.'

I considered what to tell him; I wanted to be honest but hurting him seemed pointless. 'Sometimes people get so lost that they can't find their way back to themselves. I think that's maybe what happened to you. Though you should keep in mind that nobody who ends up being interrogated in my office ever thinks of himself as a bad person.'

I was tempted to say more, but he'd wrecked his quiet little life in a way that could never be repaired, and that seemed to earn him the right to hold on to an illusion or two. Still, he sensed that I had more on my mind. 'Go ahead, I can take it,' he told me.

I looked at him hard to make sure he meant it. He nodded decisively.

'I'm sorry to have to say this, but do you really think your fantasy son will believe you're a good dad when he finds out you poisoned his mom?'

'I thought of that, too,' he acknowledged, sitting up straight. He seemed gratified that our minds worked alike. 'That's why I've made it so he'll never find out.'

'You're never going to think of him again?' I asked sceptically.

Passing over my question, he said in a grateful voice, 'You're a nice guy. And you listen well – thanks. I'm lucky I got to speak to you last.'

'Don't worry, you'll have plenty of people to talk to in prison. And more than a few of them will be thrilled to have a friend who's an expert chemist. You might even—'

Reaching up to his chest, he swallowed a sharp intake of breath, then coughed.

'What's wrong?' I asked.

He gazed down and took a fish-out-of-water gulp of air. 'I didn't want to have to tell my kid,' he said in a choking voice. 'Or anyone else.' He leaned over my desk, his hands gripping its edge, his knuckles white.

'What did you do?' I demanded, jumping up.

He closed his eyes. His grip slackened. 'Don't bother calling an ambulance.'

'Merda!' I hollered.

As I rushed to him, his head fell forward and hit the surface of my desk with a thud. His right hand shot out at the same time and sent my **I ♥ BLACK CANYON** mug and all my pens flying. His eyes were open but not seeing anything in our world. A rivulet of blood trickled out of his nose.

Inspector Pires came rushing in from next door. I shouted for her to call an ambulance. 'And tell the medics to bring an antidote for cyanide!'

I found a faint but steady pulse in Moura's wrist. Lifting him up out of his chair, I eased him down to the floor, positioning him on his back so his heart wouldn't have to work so hard. I noticed a tiny square of foil glimmering by one of the legs of my desk.

'Don't you do this to me!' I told him, but a few seconds later his chest stopped rising. Sensing that this was a test around which my own right to be alive was turning, I knelt beside him and pressed down hard over his sternum, then tilted his head back and gave him two of my breaths.