
Opening Extract from...

The Lovers

Written by John Connolly

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THE LOVERS

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PROLOGUE

The truth is often a terrible weapon of aggression. It is possible to lie, and even to murder, for the truth.

Alfred Adler (1870–1937),
Problems of Neurosis

I tell myself that this is not an investigation. It is for others to be investigated, but not for my family, and not for me. I will delve into the lives of strangers, and I will expose their secrets and their lies, sometimes for money, and sometimes because that is the only way to lay old ghosts to rest, but I do not want to pick and scratch in this manner at what I have always believed of my mother and father. They are gone. Let them sleep.

But there are too many questions left unanswered, too many inconsistencies in the narrative constructed of their lives, a tale told by them and continued by others. I can no longer allow them to remain unexamined.

My father, William Parker, known to his friends as Will, died when I was almost sixteen years old. He was a cop in the Ninth, on the Lower East Side of New York, loved by his wife, and faithful to her, with a son whom he adored and by whom he was adored in return. He chose to remain in uniform, and not to seek promotion, because he was content to serve on the streets as an ordinary patrolman. He had no secrets, at least none so terrible that he, or those close to him, might have been

damaged beyond repair had they been revealed. He lived an ordinary, small-town existence, or as ordinary as he could lead when the cycles of his days were determined by duty rosters, by killings, by theft and drug abuse, and by the predations of the strong and ruthless upon the weak and defenseless. His flaws were minor, his sins venial.

Every one of these statements is a lie, except that he loved his son, although his son sometimes forgot to love him back. After all, I was a teenager when he died, and what boy, at that age, is not already knocking heads with his father, attempting to establish his primacy over the old man in the house who no longer understands the nature of the ever-changing world around him? So, did I love him? Of course, but by the end I was refusing to admit it to him, or to myself.

Here, then, is the truth.

My father did not die of natural causes: he took his own life.

His lack of advancement was not a matter of choice, but of punishment.

His wife did not love him or, if she did, she did not love him as she once had, for he had betrayed her and she could not bring herself to forgive that betrayal.

He did not lead an ordinary existence, and people died to keep his secrets.

He had grave weaknesses, and his sins were mortal.

One night, my father killed two unarmed teenagers on a patch of waste ground not far from where we lived in Pearl River. They were not much older than I was. He shot the boy first, and then the girl. He used

his off-duty revolver, a .38 Colt with a two-inch barrel, because he was not in uniform at the time. The boy was hit in the face, the girl in the chest. When he was sure that they were dead, my father, as though in a trance, drove back to the city, and showered and changed in the locker room of the Ninth, where they came for him. Less than twenty-four hours later, he shot himself.

For my entire adult life, I have wondered why he acted as he did, but it seemed to me that there were no answers to be found to that question, or perhaps that was the lie I was happier to tell myself.

Until now.

It is time to call this what it is.

This is an investigation into the circumstances of my father's death.

I

I hate and I love. Perhaps you ask why I do so. I do not know, but I feel it happen and I am tormented.

Catullus, *Carmina*, 85

1

The Faraday boy had been missing for three days. On the first day, nothing was done. After all, he was twenty-one, and young men of that age no longer had to abide by curfews and parental rules. Still, his behavior was out of character. Bobby Faraday was trustworthy. He was a graduate student, although he had taken a year off before deciding on the direction of his graduate studies in engineering, with talk of going abroad for a couple of months, or working for his uncle in San Diego. Instead, he had stayed in his hometown, saving money by living with his parents and banking as much of what he earned as he could, which was a little less than the previous year as he could now drink with impunity, and was maybe indulging that newfound liberty with more enthusiasm than might have been considered entirely wise. He'd had a couple of killer hangovers over New Year's, that was for sure, and his old man had advised him to ease up before his liver started crying out for mercy, but Bobby was young, he was immortal, and he was in love, or had been until recently. Perhaps it would be truer to say that Bobby Faraday was still in love, but the object of his affection had moved on, leaving

Bobby mired in his own emotions. The girl was why he had opted to remain in town instead of seeing a little more of the world, a decision that had been met with mixed feelings by his parents: gratitude on the part of his mother, disappointment on that of his father. There had been some arguments about it at the start, but now, as with two reluctant armies on the verge of an unwanted battle, a truce had been declared between father and son, although each side continued to watch the other warily to see which one might blink first. Meanwhile, Bobby drank, and his father fumed, but remained silent in the hope that the ending of the relationship might lead his son to broaden his horizons until grad school resumed in the fall.

Despite his occasional overindulgences, Bobby was never late for work at the auto shop and gas station, and usually left a little later than he could have, because there was always something to be done, some task that he did not wish to abandon uncompleted, even if it could be finished quickly and easily in the morning. It was one of the reasons his father, whatever their disagreements, didn't worry too much about his son's future prospects: Bobby was too conscientious to leave the beaten track for long. He liked order, and always had. He'd never been one of those messy teenagers, either in appearance or in approach. It just wasn't in his nature.

But he hadn't come home the night before, and he hadn't called to tell his parents where he might be, and that in itself was unusual. Then he didn't make

it to work the following morning, which was so out of character that Ron Nevill, who owned the gas station, called the Faraday house to check on the boy and make sure that he wasn't ailing. His mother expressed surprise that her son wasn't already at work. She'd simply assumed that he'd come home late and left early. She checked his bedroom, which lay just off the basement den. His bed had not been slept in, and there was no indication that he'd spent the night on the couch instead.

When there was no word by 3 p.m., she called her husband at work. Together they checked with Bobby's friends, casual acquaintances, and his ex-girlfriend, Emily Kindler. That last call had been delicate, as she and Bobby had broken up only a couple of weeks before. His father suspected that this was the reason his son was drinking more than he should have, but he wouldn't have been the first man who tried to drown love's sorrows in a sea of alcohol. The trouble was that frustrated love was buoyant in booze: the more you tried to force it to the bottom, the more it insisted on bobbing right back up to the top.

Nobody had heard from Bobby, or had seen him, since the previous day. When 7 p.m. came and went, they called the police. The chief was skeptical. He was new in town but familiar with the ways of young people. Nevertheless, he accepted that this was not typical behavior for Bobby Faraday, and that twenty-four hours had now gone by since he left the gas station, for Bobby had not hit any of the local bars

after work, and Ron Nevill seemed to be the last person to have seen him. The chief put together a description of the boy at the Faraday house, borrowed a photograph that had been taken the previous summer, and informed local law enforcement and the state police of a possible missing person. None of the other agencies responded with any great urgency, for they were almost as cynical about the behavior of young males as the chief was, and in the case of one who was missing they tended to wait seventy-two hours before assuming that there might be more to the disappearance than a simple case of booze, hormones, or domestic difficulties.

On the second day, his parents, and their friends, began an informal canvass of the town and its environs, with no result. When it began to grow dark, his mother and father returned home, but they did not sleep that night, just as they had not slept the night before. His mother lay in bed, her face turned toward the window, straining to hear the sound of approaching footsteps, the familiar tread of her only son returning to her at last. She stirred slightly when she heard her husband rise and put on his robe.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Nothing. I'm going to make some tea, sit up for a while.' He paused. 'You want some?'

But she knew that he was asking only out of politeness, that he would prefer it if she stayed where she was. He did not want them to sit at the kitchen table in silence, together but apart, the fears of one feeding those of the other. He wanted to be alone. So she

let him go, and when the bedroom door closed behind him she began to cry.

On the third day, the formal search began.

The golden host moved as one, countless shapes bending obediently in unison at the gentle touch of the breeze, like a church congregation bowing in accordance with the progress of the service, awaiting the moment of consecration that is to come.

They whispered to themselves, a soft, low susurrus that might have been the crashing of distant waves were such an alien noise not unknown in this land-locked place. The paleness of them was dappled in spots by small flowers of red and orange and blue, a scattering of petals upon an ocean of seed and stem.

The host had been spared the reaping, and had grown tall, too tall, even as the crop decayed. A season's grain had gone to waste, for the old man upon whose land the host was gathered had died the previous summer, and his relatives were fighting over the sale of the property and how the proceeds would be divided. While they fought, the host had stretched skyward, a sea of dull gold in the depths of winter, speaking in hushed tones of what lay, rush-hemmed and undiscovered, nearby.

And yet the host, it seemed, was at peace.

Suddenly, the breeze dropped for an instant and the host stood erect, as though troubled by the change, sensing that all was not as it had been, and then the wind rose again, more tempestuous now, transforming into smaller, dispersed gusts that divided the host with

ripples and eddies, their caresses less delicate than before. Unity was replaced by confusion. Scattered fragments were caught by the sunlight before they fell to the ground. The whispering grew louder, drowning the calling of a solitary bird with rumors of approach.

A black shape appeared upon the horizon, like a great insect hovering over the stalks. It grew in stature, becoming the head, shoulders, and body of a man, passing between the rows of wheat while, ahead of him, a smaller form cleaved invisibly through the stalks, sniffing and yelping as it went, the first intruders upon the host's territory since the old man had died.

A second figure came into view, heavier than the first. This one seemed to be struggling with the terrain and with the unaccustomed exercise that his participation in the search had forced upon him. In the distance, but farther to the east, the two men could see other searchers. Somehow, they had drifted away from the main pack, although that itself had diminished as the day wore on. Already the light was fading. Soon it would be time to call a halt, and there would be fewer of them to look in the days that followed.

They had begun that morning, immediately after Sunday services. The searchers had congregated at the Catholic church, St. Jude's, since that had the largest yard and, curiously, the smallest congregation, a contradiction that Peyton Carmichael, the man with the dog, had never quite understood. Perhaps, he figured, they were expecting a mass conversion at some point in the future, which made him wonder if Catholics were just more optimistic than other folks.

The chief of police and his men had divided the township into grids, and the townspeople themselves into groups, and had assigned each group an area to search. Sandwiches, potato chips, and sodas in brown bags had been provided by the various churches, although most people had brought food and water of their own, just in case. In a break with Sunday tradition, none had dressed up in the usual finery. Instead, they wore loose shirts and old pants, and battered boots or comfortable sneakers. Some carried sticks, others garden rakes to search in the undergrowth. There was an air of subdued expectation, a kind of excitement despite the task before them. They shared rides, and drove out to their assigned areas. As each area was searched, and nothing found, another was suggested either by the cops who were coordinating the efforts on the ground, or by contacting the base of operations that had been set up in the hall behind the church.

It had been unseasonably warm when they began, a curious false thaw that would soon end, and the difficulty of coping with soft ground and melting snow had sapped the strength of many before they took a break for lunch at about one-thirty. Some of the older people had returned home at that stage, content to have made some effort for the Faradays, but the rest continued with the search. After all, the next day was Monday. There would be work to do, obligations to be met. This day was the only one that they could spare to look for the boy, and the best would have to be made of it. But as the light had grown dim, so too

the day had grown colder, and Peyton was grateful that he had not left his Timberland jacket in the car but had chosen to tie it around his waist until it was needed.

He whistled at his dog, a three-year-old spaniel named Molly, and waited, once again, for his companion to catch up. Artie Hoyt: of all the people he had to end up with. Relations between the two men had been cool for the last year or more, ever since Artie had caught Peyton eyeing his daughter's ass at church. It didn't matter to Artie that he hadn't seen exactly what he thought he'd seen. Yes, Peyton had been looking at his daughter's ass, but not out of any feelings of lust or attraction. Not that he was above such base impulses: at times, the pastor's sermons were so dull that the only thing keeping Peyton awake was the sight of young, lithe female forms draped in their Sunday best. Peyton was long past the age when he might have been troubled by the potential implications for his immortal soul of such carnal thoughts in church. He figured that God had better things to worry about than whether Peyton Carmichael, sixty-four, widower, was paying more attention to objects of female beauty than he was to the old blowhard at the pulpit. As Peyton's doctor liked to tell him, live a life of wine, women, and song, all in moderation but always of the proper vintage. Peyton's wife had died three years earlier, taken by breast cancer, and although there were plenty of women in town of the correct vintage who might have been prepared to offer Peyton some comfort on a

winter's evening, he just wasn't interested. He had loved his wife. Occasionally he was still lonely, although less often than before, but those feelings of loneliness were specific, not general: he missed his wife, not female company, and he viewed the occasional pleasure that he took in the sight of a young, good-looking woman merely as a sign that he was not entirely dead below the waist. God, having taken his wife from him, could allow him that small indulgence. If God was going to make a big deal of it, then, well, Peyton would have a few words for Him too, when eventually they met.

The problem with Artie Hoyt's daughter was that, although she was young, she was by no means good-looking. Neither was she lithe. In fact, she was the opposite of lithe and, come to think of it, the opposite of light too. She'd never been what you might call svelte, but then she had left town and gone to live in Baltimore, and by the time she came back she'd piled on the pounds. Now, when she walked into church, Peyton was sure that he felt the floor tremble beneath her feet. If she were any bigger, she'd have to enter sideways; that, or they'd be forced to widen the aisles.

And so, the first Sunday after she'd returned to the parental home, she had entered the chapel with her mom and dad and Peyton had found himself staring in appalled fascination at her ass, jiggling under a red and white floral dress like an earthquake in a rose garden. His jaw might even have been hanging open when he turned to find Artie Hoyt glaring at him, and after that, well, things had never been quite the same

between them. They hadn't been close before the incident, but at least they'd been civil when their paths had crossed. Now they rarely exchanged even a nod of greeting, and they hadn't spoken to each other until fate, and the missing Faraday boy, had forced them together. They'd been part of a group of eight that had started out in the morning, quickly falling to six after old Blackwell and his wife seemed set to pass out and had, reluctantly, turned back for home, then five, four, three, until now it was just Artie and him.

Peyton didn't understand why Artie didn't just give up and go home himself. Even the modest pace that Peyton and Molly were setting seemed too much for him, and they had been forced to stop repeatedly to allow Artie to catch his breath and gulp water from the bottle in his rucksack. It had taken Peyton a while to figure out that Artie wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of knowing that he'd kept searching while Artie had faded, even if the other man were to die in the attempt. With that in mind, Peyton had taken a malicious pleasure in forcing the pace for a time, until he acknowledged that his needless cruelty was rendering null and void his earlier efforts at worship and penitence, the occasional glance at young women notwithstanding.

They were nearing the boundary fence between this property and the next, a field of fallow, overgrown land with a small pond at its center sheltered by trees and rushes. Peyton had only a little water left, and Molly was thirsty. He figured he could let her drink at the pond, then call it a day. He couldn't see Artie

objecting, just as long as it was Peyton who suggested quitting, and not him.

'Let's head into the field there and check it out,' said Peyton. 'I need to get water for the dog anyway. After that, we can cut back onto the road and take an easy stroll back to the cars. Okay with you?'

Artie nodded. He walked to the fence, rested his hands upon it, and tried to hoist himself up and over. He got one foot off the ground, but the other wouldn't join it. He simply didn't have the strength to continue. Peyton thought he looked like he wanted to lie down and die, but he didn't. There was something admirable about his refusal to give up, even if it had less to do with any concerns about Bobby Faraday than his anger at Peyton Carmichael. Eventually, though, he was forced to admit defeat, and landed back down on the same side on which he'd started.

'Goddammit,' he said.

'Hold up,' said Peyton. 'I'll boost you over.'

'I can do it,' said Artie. 'Just give me a minute to catch my breath.'

'Come on. Neither of us is as young as he was. I'll help you over, and then you can give me a hand up from the other side. No sense in both of us killing ourselves just to prove a point.'

Artie considered the proposal, and nodded his agreement. Peyton tied Molly's leash to the fence, in case she caught a scent and decided to make a break for freedom, then leaned down and cupped his hands so that Artie could put one booted foot into his grip. When the boot was in place, and Artie's hold on the

fence seemed secure, Peyton pushed up. Either he was stronger than he thought, or Artie was lighter than he looked but, either way, Peyton ended up almost catapulting Artie over the fence. Only the judicious hooking of his left leg and right arm on the slats saved Artie from an awkward landing on the other side.

'The hell was that?' asked Artie once he had both feet on firm ground once again.

'Sorry,' said Peyton. He was trying not to laugh, and only partially succeeding.

'Yeah, well, I don't know what you're eating, but I could sure do with some of it.'

Peyton began climbing the fence. He was in good condition for a man of his age, a fact that gave him no little pleasure. Artie reached a hand up to steady him and, although Peyton didn't need it, he took it anyway.

'Funny,' said Peyton, as he stepped down from the fence, 'but I don't eat so much anymore. I used to have a hell of an appetite, but now some breakfast and a snack in the evening does me just fine. I even had to make an extra hole in my belt to stop my damn pants from falling down.'

There was an unreadable expression on Artie Hoyt's face as he glanced down at his own belly and reddened slightly. Peyton winced.

'I didn't mean anything by that, Artie,' he said quietly. 'When Rina was alive, I weighed thirty pounds more than I do now. She fed me up like she was going to slaughter me for Christmas. Without her . . .'

He trailed off and looked away.

'Don't talk to me about it,' said Artie, after a moment had passed. He appeared anxious to keep the conversation going, now that the long silence between them had at last been broken. 'My wife doesn't believe it's food unless it's deep fried, or comes in a bun. I think she'd deep fry candy if she could.'

'They actually do that in some places,' Peyton said.

'You don't say? Jesus, don't tell her that. Chocolate's the closest that she gets to health food as it is.'

They began walking toward the pond. Peyton let Molly off the leash. He knew that she had sensed the presence of water, and he didn't want to torment her by forcing her to walk at their pace. The dog raced ahead, a streak of brown and white, and soon was lost from sight in the tall grass.

'Nice dog,' said Artie.

'Thank you,' said Peyton. 'She's a good girl. She's like a child to me, I guess.'

'Yeah,' said Artie. He knew that Peyton and his wife had not been blessed with children.

'Look, Artie,' said Peyton, 'there's something I've been meaning to say for a while.'

He paused as he tried to find the right words, then took a deep breath and plowed right in.

'In church, that time, after Lydia had come home, I . . . Well, I wanted to apologize for staring at her, you know, her . . .'

'Ass,' finished Artie.

'Yeah, that. I'm sorry, is all I wanted to say. It wasn't right. Especially in church. Wasn't Christian. It wasn't what you might think, though.'

Peyton realized that he had wandered onto marshy ground, conversationally speaking. He now faced the possibility of being forced to explain both what he believed Artie might have thought Peyton was thinking, and what, in fact, he, Peyton, *had* been thinking, which was that Artie Hoyt's daughter looked like the *Hindenburg* just before it crashed.

'She's a big girl,' said Artie sadly, saving Peyton from further embarrassment. 'It's not her fault. Her marriage broke up, and the doctors gave her pills for depression, and she suddenly started to put on all this weight. She gets sad, she eats more, she gets sadder, she eats even more. It's a vicious cycle. I don't blame you for staring at her. Hell, she wasn't my daughter, I'd stare at her that way too. In fact, sometimes, it shames me to say, I do stare at her that way.'

'Anyway, I'm sorry,' said Peyton. 'It wasn't . . . kind.'

'Apology accepted,' said Artie. 'Buy me a drink next time we're in Dean's.'

He put his hand out, and the two men shook. Peyton felt his eyes water slightly, and blamed it on his exertions.

'How about I buy you a beer when we're done here? I could do with something to toast the end of a long day.'

'Agreed. Let's water your dog and get the—'

He stopped. They were within sight of the sheltered pond. It had been a popular trysting spot, once upon a time, until the land changed hands and the new owner, the God-fearing man whose estate was now being fought over by his godless relatives, had let it

be known that he didn't want any adolescent voyages of sexual discovery being embarked upon in the vicinity of his pond. A large beech tree overhung the water, its branches almost touching the surface. Molly was standing a small distance from it. She had not drunk the water. She had, in fact, stopped several feet from the bank. Now, she was waiting, one paw raised, her tail wagging uncertainly. Through the rushes, something blue was visible to the approaching men.

Bobby Faraday was kneeling by the water's edge, his upper body at a slight angle, as though he were trying to glimpse his reflection in the pool. There was a rope around his neck, attached to the trunk of the tree. He was swollen with gas, his face a reddish-purple, his features almost unrecognizable.

'Ah, hell,' said Peyton.

He wavered slightly, and Artie reached up and put his arm around his companion's shoulder as the sun set behind them, and the wind blew, and the host bowed low in mourning.