SHORT STORY

Another One Bites the Dust

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The room was pitch-black when a piercing sound echoed through the darkness. A woman groaned loudly. A tousled head emerged from under a heavy duvet, illuminated softly by the green numbers of the digital alarm clock on an otherwise empty nightstand.

Fucking sirens, she thought. It was not yet time to get up. The alarm display showed 5:17, but knowing that she wouldn't fall asleep again, she dragged herself out of bed.

After taking a long, relieving piss, she splashed some ice-cold water onto her face. She stared at her unfriendly reflection in the bathroom mirror, wondering when she had become so old. There were dark sockets under her eyes, and her forehead was set in deep lines, even when she was not scowling at someone.

She put on the ugly dressing gown her mother had given her almost a decade ago for her birthday, and went to fetch the newspaper in front of her apartment door. She set up the electric kettle for her obligatory morning coffee fix and fished some bowls out of the cupboard in her tiny kitchen, filled one with Cheerios and the other with tuna. She splashed some milk over her cereal and set the other bowl down where a hungry cat was already waiting for it, purring happily.

Munching on her Cheerios without much enthusiasm, she picked up the newspaper and started browsing. After roughly five minutes, she crumpled it up and tossed it into the trash. It always featured more or less the same: celebrities, crime and the obligatory blue-collar drama.

Time passed unnoticed as she stared at the white tiling of her kitchen, when suddenly her phone vibrated, announcing an incoming call. She picked it up, looked at the caller ID and declined it. Only then did she realise how late it had gotten. She put the first shirt and pair of pants on that she pulled out of her closet, grabbed an old trench coat and hurried out the door, shutting it with a loud *thud*.

The room was buzzing like a bee-hive as Helen Darling entered the open-space office of the downtown police headquarters. Before she could flop down in front of her plain, undecorated desk, thinking that no one had noticed her late arrival, someone tapped her on the shoulder.

"The big one wants to talk to you," her desk neighbour Doge told her and nodded toward the fancy office at the end of the rectangular room. "Doesn't seem to be in the best mood, so keep that temper of yours in check."

Helen rolled her eyes and let her finger tell him what she thought of his well-meant advice about her temper.

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“That’s exactly what I’m talking about, Helen!” he called after her.

She walked up to the glass door and knocked, waiting for chief inspector Brick to beckon her in. When he did, she pushed the handle down with more force than necessary, trying to control herself. That brownnosing little prick. They had worked together for close to three years and she was by far the better detective, yet she had gotten the short end of the stick again. Year after year, closed case after closed case, she watched her partners get the promotions she deserved. No wonder she didn’t like them. But Brick was the worst of the lot. He loved to rub salt into that wound, jumping at every possibility to be condescending and humiliate her, making her feel he was the boss.

“You’re late again, Darling. If it happens one more time, I’ll have to issue a disciplinary warning,” he said, his eyes glinting with malice. “Oh, and since you’ve missed the briefing, Doge will fill you in on the High Road murder.”

“Yay, jackpot!” she exclaimed cynically.

“Save that attitude, Darling.”

She felt a migraine creeping up on her again. Dealing with morons all day long certainly didn’t agree with her.

“If that’s all, sir, I’d like to go now.” Without waiting to be excused, she stood up and left, heading straight for her desk.

“Had some one-on-one time with the boss again, Darling? You’re working really hard for that promotion, eh?” one of the other inspectors shouted at her, causing the room to explode with hysterical laughter.

She stopped dead in her tracks, smiling dangerously, “Oh, not today, Dowling. He said his arsehole was still too sore from your attentions.”

He really hadn’t seen this one coming his way. He opened his mouth to yell some other obscenity at Helen as her partner suddenly blocked his view. “Suck it up, Dowling,” Doge spat at him.

“C’mon, Doge, we have somewhere else to be,” she said, turning to leave, Doge on her heels.

As they arrived at the crime scene, they ducked beneath the police tape at the door and sauntered into the apartment.

“Hey,” she yelled, “what d’you think you’re doing? Get outta here you moron!” She gripped the back of the police officer’s collar tightly, catching him offhand, throwing him

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out of the apartment before he even knew what had happened. She couldn't believe how such people were even allowed at a crime scene investigation, trampling all over the evidence like it was a playground. Crime Scene Investigation, huh? More like Capital Stupidity Institute. She snorted at her own sarcasm. They really must have lowered the bar for the entrance exam. No way such idiots would have gotten in back in her day.

"Okay, what have we got here?" She came back into the room, glancing around uninterestedly. Scenes like this didn't really have much of an impact on her anymore. Now that she had been doing the same crap for over twenty-four years and seen mutilated bodies and bloated corpses more often than she cared to admit, she was getting really, really tired of it all. It was a daily routine, nothing more. Not exactly what she had imagined her life would be when she first decided to become a detective.

"Helen?" a voice interrupted her trail of thought, yanking her mind firmly back to reality.

"Hm? Oh sorry, Doge, I was somewhere else."

"Yeah, I noticed. Want me to repeat?"

She nodded.

"The dead woman is Magda Hollen, twenty-five years old, waitress at the Styx nightclub. Flatmates Gretchen and Mary Rail, sisters. The girls have all been living in the apartment for two years. Known each other pretty well. The older sister found her this morning at six, when she came in to ask her if she could borrow a shirt."

Helen circled the body on the bed, taking a closer look. There were five blue marks around her throat, one on the left side, four on the others — clear signs of strangulation by a right-handed person. Her face was an obscure mixture of pleasure and pain, dilated pupils, no burst blood vessels in the eyeballs though. Curious. The victim was naked, her arms were tied to the headboard, and the bedsheets were crumpled and stained with semen.

"What else do we know?"

"Her flatmates told us that she'd been steady with a guy named Jondo Smith, but that she hasn't been...um...how do I put it...," he mused and blushed slightly.

"Don't be such a pussy, Doge. Spit it out."

"They said, and I quote, she was 'whoring around' a lot."

"This bed has undeniably seen some action," she mocked. He couldn't help himself and smirked at her inappropriate remark.

"Her roommates also said that Jondo was the 'jealous type.'"

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“How would they know that?”

“Well, Ms. Mary Rail stated that whenever the two of them stayed here, it was hard not to hear them argue about her other guys.”

“Still doesn’t make him a murderer,” she mumbled, “but it does definitely look like an aggressive encounter here.”

“Mhm.”

“Okay, I think we’ve got everything. Let’s pack up here and look for that boyfriend of hers. Where did you say we can find him?”

“I didn’t. We don’t have any particulars other than his name. But Mary said he and Magda had been hanging out in a bar called ‘X’ a lot, maybe we should start there?”

Helen nodded approvingly..

After a forty minute drive, they arrived at the ‘X’ bar, pulled the door open and walked straight up to the counter, where a a shifty looking balding guy was cleaning glasses with a dirt-stained rag.

“We’re not open yet,” the man said gruffly and shot them an unwelcoming look.

“Then you should lock your door.”

He grunted disapprovingly, but she had a point, so he said, “What’ll you two have?”

“Cherry coke and everything you got on Jondo Smith,” Helen said, putting a fiver on the countertop, “and make it on the rocks.”

“Who?”

“Jondo Smith.”

“Never heard that name before.”

“How long have you been working here...,” she leaned in closer to read his name tag,

“...Phil?”

“’Bout six years.”

“Then don’t play dumb with me, sucker,” she fumbled her police badge out of her coat and shoved it under his nose. “I’m asking about one of your regulars.”

“Sorry, you didn’t strike me as officials,” he backpedalled.

The bartender proved to be very cooperative after all, telling them that ‘Big Jay,’ as the suspect was called by friends, has had a couple of brushes with the law before,

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mainly incidents involving violent offences and drugs. He also gave them an address where he was likely hiding out.

She gulped her sickly-sweet beverage down, put the glass on the counter, wiped her mouth with her sleeve, turned on her heels and walked out. Doge followed close behind. They squinted at the brightness of the daylight after the dark, stuffy interior of the establishment.

“Doesn’t really seem like the kinda guy your mom would like you to date, huh?” Doge said.

Helen snorted.

Since the address they had been given was only a couple of blocks away, Darling decided to walk, Doge tagging along behind her.

As they walked in silence, Helen threw a sideway-glance at her partner.She still couldn’t wrap her head around the fact that he’d actually stepped up to these other assholes — for her.

“What you did back at the office, that wasn’t necessary, you know? I have my own back,” she blurted out unexpectedly.“I know you’re perfectly capable of defending yourself, that’s not why I did it, though.”

“Why then?”

“Because he’s a prick and I don’t like him.”

They continued to walk in silence.

“You know what, Doge?”

“What?”

“You’re not as awful as I thought you were.”

“Wow, I think that’s the nicest thing you’ve said to me since I’ve become your partner, Helen.” Then he added quietly but with sincerity, “You’re not as awful as I thought, too.”

Her lips quirked up, almost smiling. They made it to the apartment block. The street in front of the building was littered with trash and the air reeked of rancid oil and piss.

“Lovely neighbourhood,” he held the lobby door open for her. “After you, milady.”

“Flattery ain’t getting you anywhere, Doge.”

Having reached their destination, they knocked on the door of apartment 9C. An unwashed heavyset Post-Malone-sort-of-guy with a thick gold chain around his neck and a beer in his hand opened.

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“’Sup?”

“We’re looking for Big Jay.”

“Who is looking for him?”

“Police.”

“What d’ya want from him?”

“Talk about his girlfriend.”

“’Kay, come on in, guys.” He opened the door further and led them in. “Yo, Jay, police are here to see you.” With the bottom of his bottle he pointed towards a room on the right. He went to lounge on the couch, his attention focused on the TV.

Helen knocked on the door, but no one answered. She exchanged a look with Doge, both readied themselves as he pushed the door open. Inside the room they saw Jondo disappearing through the window. Cursing, the pair took up the chase, climbing through the window, rushing down the fire escape after the fugitive. Their hurried footsteps on the wobbly and ill-kept metal structure caused one hell of a noise.

Doge gained ground on him as they sprinted through a back alley. Helen was breathing heavily and had trouble keeping up the pace.

“Stop, Jondo!” Doge shouted after him, his breathing still steady. He drew his gun. “I will fire one warning shot, you hear me?” Both men kept running. “If you don’t stop, the next one will hit your leg!”

Jondo kept on running, his shirt soaked with sweat. Doge pulled the trigger. The bullet ricocheted off a green garbage container, straight into the man’s neck, piercing his skin and carotid artery. He seemed surprised as he crumpled to the floor, blood gushing out of his wound. Doge was already at his side, desperately trying to stop the bleeding, pressing his hands to his neck while Helen called an ambulance. But their efforts were in vain. He was dead within a minute.

It was late in the evening, the office had quieted down as most people had clocked off already when Helen and Doge sat at their desks, staring at each other, at a loss for words. Both of them were covered in dried blood, and drenched with the cold sweat of horror of what had happened before their eyes. Doge’s shoulders were slumped and he clutched his head in his hands, grabbing fistfuls of his short, ash blonde hair, rocking back and forth. Even though he had loosened his tie, he had trouble inhaling, his ribcage heaving unrhythmically.

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Helen was the first to somewhat regain her composure, straightening her back, blinking. “Anyone would’ve done the same thing, Doge, you acted according to protocol,” she said, squeezing his shoulder reassuringly. “It was an accident, everyone knows that.”

She tried her best to console her partner, even though it was really not her way and she was feeling sick to her stomach herself. But she knew it was his first time. He had never seen it happen right in front of him. And you never got over the first one, especially when it’s your own fault. She’d never forget that week of alcohol-induced oblivion after the Maldron incident. He threw her a thankful smile that couldn’t cover up the inner terror he was experiencing.

They sat in silence as someone from the lab downstairs walked up to them, handing Doge a folder, and leaving again without much of a greeting or goodbye. He flicked through the folder, finding what he was looking for at the very end. Helen’s heart skipped a beat as she saw him pale even further.

“What...?” she started. He handed her the paper without comment and vomited, the greyish substance pooling at his feet.

Helen skimmed the page as fast as she could. No... no, no, no, NO, her face fell and she threw Doge a terrified sideways glance, re-reading the conclusion of the autopsy report again and again. The report stated that Magda Hollen had died of an opiate overdose, induced by the substance methadone, ingredient of the prescribed sleeping pills that had been found in her bedside table. It wasn’t homicide. Her partner had killed an innocent man.

The realisation of it hit her like a club, knocking the air out of her. The world around them seemed to have stopped. Both inspectors went pale, their expressions completely blank. The clock ticked away as neither of them moved. The odour of their failure was assaulting their olfactory nerves, a nauseating mixture of dried blood, sweat and the sweetness of fresh vomit. She stirred at the sound of his quiet sobbing, looking at him with pity. She could not fathom how life could be so fucking cruel. Doge, the only decent guy in the department would now be facing an official investigation and might lose his job.

She manned up, trying to contain her own misery as best as she could and accompanied him home, making sure that he would arrive in his own bed safely, without doing something irrational or stupid. After she heard his soft snoring, she poured herself a drink from his liquor cabinet, downed it, and called a cab.

She got home in the middle of the night, her grey and empty apartment greeting her with dead silence. She tossed her keys into a bowl next to the door, and not bothering to undress, went straight to bed. Just another day in hell, she thought, as she dropped onto her

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convertible to fall into a dreamless sleep.

The End.

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