

Cancer Is a Killer, and So Am I

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"A STRANGER TO CONFESSION" @ ANDRE GOVIA

I am dying. I am not dying courageously. Or gracefully. Or with good humor. My dying will not be emulated by other dying people or become the subject of a best-selling book. My dying will not move millions.

I am dying pathetically, painfully, bitterly.

I am dying in my daughter's basement in her house in Sherman, Ohio, in a single bed against the west window, through which I can see the sun set behind a loose line of red

maple trees. Behind the maple trees is the house of a man I have despised most of my life. It is the ultimate insult to see him working in his yard: mowing grass, pruning bushes, chopping wood. Sometimes he works with his shirt off, his torso bronzed. He is my age. He will probably outlive me by twenty-five years.

My cancer began in my kidneys but now is everywhere but my brain. My doctor will not give me an expiration date. But because she has suspended my treatments and has made my comfort her goal, I know I'm looking at weeks rather than months. I feel my pending death in my bones. When I walk, I move like an iceberg, pre-global warming. I go out the basement door, located next to the west window, and shuffle toward the red maple trees. If I see him—the man I detest—I stop and, slowly, walk back. If I don't see him, I continue to the trees. I reach up and touch the red leaves. They are as soft as tears.

So what do I have left to do? Live every day as if it were my last? A better man would. He would be inspirational. He would be life affirming. He would write a song or give a final lecture. I merely keep a close watch on our nation's two prolonged and disastrous wars. I read obituaries on the Internet and in the *Sherman Advocate and Post*. I study the dead the way I used to study baseball players' statistics. But although other people's deaths comfort me, I am not rooting for mass extinction. I am hoping Erin, my daughter, and Robert, her disaffected son, live long lives. My grandson, who is sixteen, may not be on the road to longevity, however. My daughter thinks he is dealing drugs. His friends tend to be older than he is; they tend to be high school dropouts; they obviously regard shaving and bathing as optional nuisances. Twice I have run into my grandson sitting on patio furniture in the backyard with unsavory men who couldn't be bothered to acknowledge me. I cannot say I would care if any of Robert's associates died.

Likewise, it would be all right with me if my daughter's ex-husband, who left her for a younger woman two-and-a-half years ago, perished in a manner befitting his transgressions against my flesh and blood. I am hoping he dies of a massive heart attack in a distant city during intercourse with a transvestite whore. It could happen—he's a pharmaceutical salesman with, aside from my daughter, peculiar tastes in female company.

But the man I would most like to see dead lives less than five hundred feet from me, past the red maples and across a creek. I have known Blair Crawford since elementary school, and I hated him the first time I saw him, when his lips curled into a sneer and he called me Chunky Chuck. In high school, he was a jock—six-foot-three, the quarterback of the Sherman High football team—who also had a voice like Sinatra's. He played the lead in all of the spring musicals and always dated his "leading ladies," as he called them, as if he were a Hollywood star.

During my senior year, I dated a tenth-grader named Daisy Dandridge. She was the first girl I'd ever gone steady with. Who, after all, would want to link fortunes with Chunky Chuck? Daisy worked with me on *The March*, Sherman High's yearbook. She was slim and petite, like a ballerina on a music box, and she had the most expressive green eyes I had ever seen. The first light of the Age of Aquarius had yet to reach Sherman when Daisy and I were dating. A chaste (but, for me, thrilling) kiss on the lips at the end of an evening was all the liberty she allowed me. Daisy and I didn't speak often about our future, but I secretly hoped to marry her.

The summer after my graduation, Daisy worked at the Dairy Queen at the top of Main Street. At the end of her evening shifts, I would walk her home, a ritual I loved. One evening, I found Blair Crawford leaning into the customer window. Out of an instinctive deference, I stopped short, and I heard him talking to her—casually, like they had been friends for years, although I knew this wasn't true. Finally, I approached, and he smiled and said, "They don't sell diet ice cream here, Chunky Chuck."

A brave man would have punched him. I laughed the canned, ingratiating laugh of a powerless coward. When I approached the window, he blocked my path. "I'm serious: No treats until you lose the bowling ball in your belly." He howled at his humor. When, eventually, he stepped aside, Daisy greeted me without her usual smile. She seemed to hesitate over whether to leave with me, and we said little to each other on our walk to her house.

The rest is predictable, with one cruel twist. The next night, Daisy wasn't at the Dairy Queen at the usual time, and when I asked one of her coworkers where she was, he told me what I feared: She had left early with Blair. Over the next week, she didn't report to work at all.

I spoke to her only once more, over the phone, three weeks after I'd last seen her at the Dairy Queen. In our conversation, she never used the word "rape," but it was obvious. They had gone to Murderer's Cove, on Sky Lake, famous as a make out spot. "He did what he wanted to do," she told me, "even after I said no—no a hundred times."

I told her I wanted to see her. But, crying, she said it was too late, and she hung up. One of her friends, whom I saw in the fall, told me she had gone to live with an aunt in Idaho.

I have had relationships since, including a twelve-year marriage, but none have been as meaningful and memorable to me, as filled with sweet possibility, as my relationship with Daisy Dandridge.

Today, Blair Crawford runs a construction company in town and is on the Board of Overseers at Ohio Eastern University, which explains why his company wins half the bids the university puts out on new projects. He's also married to the daughter of Martin Fisher, a state senator who chairs the Higher Education Committee, which explains why no one questions his business dealings with Ohio Eastern.

How my daughter came to live behind him is merely coincidence. On her side of the creek, the houses are far less grand than on Blair Crawford's side. She bought her place because, after her divorce, it was the nicest she could afford. She had no idea I had a history with him.

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My cancer considers my body a feast. How voracious is my cancer's hunger? I have cancer in my buttocks. I imagine my cancer eating the marrow of my bones, leaving me like a building made of hollow logs. I weigh fifty pounds less than I did in high school. "Chunky Chuck" is a fond wish.

In chemotherapy's wake, I am a Halloween costume. I am bald. I have become familiar with every pale-blue vein on my enormous, egg-shaped head. I am sixty-two years old, but I look ninety-five. I wear a diaper in case I cannot make it in time to the bathroom, which is only twenty steps from my bed.

Although he lives in the same house I do, Robert, my grandson, comes to see me, at most, once a week. He never comes closer to me than the doorway of my room, about fifteen feet from my bed. At sixteen, he is shorter than I am, even wilted as I am to well under six feet. When he was younger, he used to moan about his lack of height, as if it were keeping him from a brilliant, happy life. Now he accentuates his disappointing stature by slumping like a prematurely old man. Life seems already to have defeated him.

Today when he came into my room, Robert asked the usual question, and I gave him my usual answer—"Dying"—and there followed the usual silence. I thought his next word would be "Goodbye." But he lingered, and he even brought himself, by a step or two, deeper into my room. His hair was uncombed. His eyes seemed large and unfocused, the result perhaps of drugs or sleeplessness. He looked everywhere but at my face.

"Is there something you want to ask me?" My voice was like my bones. Cancer had made it hollow, brittle, and insubstantial.

The late afternoon light filled the room. I had yet to close the blinds. For a moment, he seemed to glow like an otherworldly figure, like a vampire gazing at fire. Presently, he shot his right hand into his hair, where it lingered as if stuck. "Grandpa?" he said. He followed this with nervous laughter.

"Yes?"

His gaze could not hold mine. Although he wasn't moving, he appeared to be backing up. He wasn't a terrible boy. He was merely battered by everything his era had thrown at him: divorce; video games; Internet pornography; violence of every kind; and, most destructively, cheap, addictive drugs.

"I was wondering..." he began, and still he couldn't look at me. I was at the point of telling him to. But what did I want from him? More of his sheepishness? His embarrassment? His awkwardness? He tried again: "When you die, if you die...."

"I will die," I said. "Soon."

His eyes briefly caught mine, and I thought I saw a smile at the edge of his mouth. "When you die," he said, "I was wondering..." Again his eyes caught mine momentarily before darting to something less stark. "I was wondering if I could have your car. I mean, Mom's Camry is only a couple of years old, so she doesn't need.... And I can drive now. Legally."

From time to time, I had thought to ask Robert if I could buy marijuana from him. I was sure it would do as much, if not more, to relieve my misery than the treasure box of painkillers I had been prescribed. But I didn't want to be implicated in Robert's delinquency. Now, however, I recognized that Robert could do me a greater favor.

"I'll give you the car before I die," I said. "I'll sign over the title right now."

"You will?"

I had never seen him look so surprised—or so happy.

"But I need something in exchange."

"Oh." His face fell. It was as if I was about to propose that he undertake the twelve labors of Hercules.

“I need a gun.”

I spoke bluntly, matter-of-factly. I spoke without equivocation. Is this how I felt? Yes, I suppose it is. I now had a plan, and a gun was necessary to my plan. “Loaded,” I added.

He glanced at me, looked away, glanced at me again, looked away again. “Uh...” he said. “Uh....”

“I’m not going to kill myself with it,” I said. “I promise.”

Robert drew in a breath. At the bottom of his neck, close to his right shoulder, I noticed he had a small tattoo of a dragon, blowing fiery red breath. “I don’t know,” he murmured.

“In my entire life I’ve never owned a gun,” I said. “I’ve never even held one. I’d like to fire off a few rounds—at trees, poor, unsuspecting trees, nothing else—before I die. I know it might strike you as a strange request. I find it a little strange myself. But it’s what this dying old man wants.”

Robert stared at me longer than he ever had before, slowly nodding. I’m not sure he believed me, but he believed me enough to consummate the deal. We even shook on it.

Three days later, he owned my silver Buick LeSabre. And I owned a jet-black Beretta 96.

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Why should one man who has done his best to lead a decent life, who has, indeed, had opportunities to stray from the straight and moral—a colleague’s wife whispering insinuations into his ear at a party, an expense account whose authenticity he knows is never verified—why should this man, at age sixty-two, be dying of cancer when a man of the same age who has walked the earth as if it owed him everything and has taken imperiously, greedily, and immorally what it didn’t willingly surrender—why should this man be as healthy as a god?

The universe is indifferent. The universe is amoral. I have believed this most of my life, but cancer cemented my belief. I feel it, as it were, in my bones. I was stricken with cancer for the same reason lightning strikes one tree instead of any of the other thousands in the forest. Because there is lightning. Because there are trees.

Why should I be any more moral than God or fate or whoever is responsible for striking down innocent trees with lightning and blameless men with cancer? But even if morality is at issue, there are mitigating circumstances. I am not intending to kill a baby, a toddler, a boy, or even a man in the prime of his life. I am planning to short Blair Crawford, at most, a quarter century of life. And it's possible cancer is waiting around the corner for him as it was for me, and by killing him now I am sparing him the indignity of a slow, awful decline. Finally—remember—I am not about to kill a saint. I am planning to kill a rapist and a thief. If it isn't an eye for an eye, it is close.

If I must confess to anything, it isn't to my plan but to the pleasure I anticipate feeling in my plan's execution. When I point my gun at his face, I want to see fear—no, terror, absolute terror—in Blair Crawford's eyes. I have not thought in detail about what will happen after I kill Blair Crawford. I am not referring to when I die. I am certain there is no hell or heaven, only an eternal silence, available in the same measure to murderers and martyrs alike. Rather, I am thinking about the moments after his body falls lifeless in his backyard and I turn to shuffle back to this basement room.

Will there be witnesses? Will the police, Sherman's earnest, eager finest, trace my shoeprints from the body to my bed? Will Robert, putting gun and neighbor's death together, turn me in? Or will there be days and weeks of fruitless investigation and speculation? Will what I have done be discovered when I am alive, when I am dead, or never?

. . .

In the morning, I usually wake up before my daughter comes into my room, bringing breakfast and as much cheer as she can manage. Today, I wake only when I hear her in the room, whispering to herself, pulling open the drawers of my dresser. Erin is nearly six feet and has a long chin and wide hips. On good days, she might be called handsome. On bad days, the apt description would be horsy.

Although my mouth is dry and my voice as I say "Good morning" is thin and quiet, I feel better than I have in a couple of weeks. I know why: My plan has given me a second wind.

"Dad, you okay?" Erin looks even more concerned than usual. It occurs to me she might have thought I was dead.

She puts a breakfast tray on the table next to my bed, a hospital bed, on loan, of course. I raise it so I am seated. She shakes a pair of morphine pills into my palm, and I down them with a sip of cran-raspberry juice. It is hell to have one's taste buds so compromised that

eating is a habit and never a pleasure. I nibble at an English muffin, nibble at a banana, ignore the oatmeal.

“It’s generous of you to give Robert your car,” she says. She adds quickly, “I know you’ve been troubled by the crowd he associates with.”

“He’s a good boy at heart,” I tell her. “I’m hoping that by giving him the car, I’ll show I have faith in him. And, maybe, who knows, he’ll remember me fondly.”

“Oh, he will, Dad. He will.” My daughter starts to cry. She swipes at her tears. When she’s sad, she looks like a winter sky.

There is a silence before she says, “Dad, I think we need to talk about the next step.”

“My next step?” I ask her. “My next step will be into the next world.”

She frowns. “I’m talking about hospice care. Maybe ten hours a week. I’m pretty behind at work—not your fault—and it’s going to be a rough couple of months. I could use some help.”

Unlike my grandson, my daughter looks at me when she speaks. Sometimes I wish she wouldn’t. From her expression, one might think she was witnessing a beheading.

“Please do whatever you need to do,” I say. “As I’ve said before....”

“I know, Dad. I know. But you’re not a burden.”

“Of course I’m a burden. I’m a burden to you and Robert. I’m a burden to myself.”

“You deserve to be comfortable,” she says. She tears up again, and I know what’s coming. But I let her say it anyway. “You’ve been the best father I could have had. And it kills me...well, it doesn’t kill me, but—”

I cut her off. “You don’t need to say it. I know.” I can’t help adding, “You don’t deserve what’s happening to me. Nor do I. There are some men, I’m sure, who would deserve it—deserve it and more.”

What am I doing? Am I asking my daughter’s tacit permission to kill Blair Crawford? His name is on my lips, as bitter as the food I’ve eaten this morning.

“I don’t know, Dad. I don’t think anyone deserves to suffer.”

“What about someone reprehensible? What about...”—I cannot help myself—“What about your backyard neighbor?”

“Not him again.”

“What do you mean?”

“He can’t be as awful as you say.”

“Have I told you about him?”

“Last week. But does it matter now anyway?”

“Why wouldn’t it matter? Because I’m about to step off the earth and so shouldn’t be concerned if evil walks it?”

I realize I may have implicated myself a priori in Blair Crawford’s murder, so I backtrack as swiftly as I can, even if it is inelegant. “You’re right, sweetheart. The truth is, I don’t wish my situation on anyone.” I affect a despairing look. Because it’s my usual expression, it isn’t difficult to fake.

Erin puts both her hands around my right hand. “I know, Dad. It’s all right.” She lifts my hand to her lips and gives it three faint kisses.

I smile sleepily. I am not faking my tiredness. The morphine is working, and soon I am gone.

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When I was boy, I used to swim summers at an outdoor pool that had an extraordinary diving board—or, rather, three diving boards, which could all be reached—could only be reached, in fact—by a single ladder. The lowest board was a standard diving board, a few feet from the water’s surface. The second diving board was the height of a standard high dive. The third, however, seemed to be lodged somewhere in the clouds.

Climbing the ladder, one had the option of using boards one, two, or three, but I don’t think I saw anyone but Bud Grace, a lifeguard who later would be one of the first American

soldiers killed in the Vietnam War, ever dive off board three. Yet, it was always what my friends and I told each other we were going to do. And always we stopped at board two, shrugged our shoulders, and, scared even of this height, jumped off with our fingers clamped over our noses.

As I walked toward Blair Crawford's yard, my gun in my back pocket, I had the same feeling I'd had when ascending the diving board. While I had options one, two, and three, I suspected three was a fantasy, a bit of braggadocio I would never live up to. I would never be able to kill him. No doubt I would reach one of the red maples and, winded to the point of collapse, merely spy on him. He was riding his lawn mower in a white T-shirt, his sleeves rolled up. His black hair, slicked back, glistened in the summer sunlight.

It was midafternoon on either a Wednesday or a Thursday; I had lost track of days. I had no idea why Blair Crawford was home and working on his yard rather than supervising one of his construction projects, but, when I'd seen him, I pulled myself out of my bed, grabbed my gun from where I had concealed it on the bookshelf opposite (behind volumes D, E, F, and G of the *World Book Encyclopedia*, tomes at least twenty years old), and stepped out the door of my basement room and into the warm day.

I never could run fast—my heaviness slowed me down—and now I moved across my daughter's lawn with plodding deliberateness. I had left my cane in my room—it didn't fit with my vision of myself as an assassin—even if I risked falling and shattering one of my fragile bones.

By the time I reached the first red maple, I was panting like I had summited Mount Everest. I wondered how I would manage the strength to return to my room. The idea of continuing over the creek, which, granted, was perhaps only two feet wide, and onto Blair Crawford's pristine lawn seemed as farfetched as any pipedream I'd ever had. I did, however, have an unobstructed view of Blair as he rode over his lawn. He hadn't shaved, and his stubble was what he no doubt saw as a winning mix of black and silver. His lips were moving, and, at the same time, he seemed to be grinning. Perhaps he was congratulating himself on another corrupt contract. Revived by his arrogance, I found myself stepping from behind the tree and walking toward the creek.

I hadn't crossed the creek—I don't know if I would have been capable of doing so—when he noticed me. How couldn't he have? There was nothing to hide me, and I was moving with the aching slowness of, well, a man in the late stages of terminal cancer. He idled his lawn mower. After he hopped off, he strolled over to his bank of the creek. Perhaps twelve feet separated us. I was sure he would speak to me with friendly words, and this would

end my murderous fantasy. Indeed, I was prepared to engage in a civil conversation before turning back in defeat.

“Something wrong, old timer?” Given the condescension in his voice, he may as well have been speaking down to me from the high diving board of my youth. “Do you need turning around?” he tried again. “I think you probably mean to be heading thatta way.” He pointed behind me, toward the red maples. When I didn’t say anything or move, he sighed, exhaling disgust, and shot his hand to his right. “Or thisa way.”

He shook his head, huffed, and frowned. I felt myself begin to shake at the realization that he wasn’t giving me a reason to retire my fantasy of killing him. Instead, he was only encouraging its realization.

Blair cursed and spat in disgust. “Alzheimer’s, old timer? I hope you have some ID on you because I don’t feel like sitting with you while the cops show up and figure out where the hell you’re supposed to be filling your diapers.” He spat again. “Christ.”

In my daydreams of our encounter, Blair and I had a long conversation in which I led him, like the ghost of Christmas past, through his long-ago and recent sins. He would fail to repent satisfactorily, and, with a single bullet, I would send him into forever. Perhaps I missed something satisfying by failing to prolong our meeting. I pulled the gun from my back pocket, aimed, and fired into his chest. I allowed myself a moment to savor his look of surprise, shock, and pain before I fired again and again.

I don’t think all my bullets struck their target. But enough of them did to render him an immobile pile of bleeding flesh on his immaculate green lawn. I tried to enjoy the scene, and perhaps I did for five seconds before a natural instinct to save myself kicked in and I turned quickly, or as quickly as I could, back to the maples, back to my room. Blair’s lawnmower was still running, and I wondered later if the engine’s noise disguised the sound of my shots. I wondered how in the hell I could shoot a man in broad daylight and no one could have heard or seen me do it.

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The Sherman police, in the form of a Lieutenant Sanders, came to speak to my daughter the next morning. From the basement, I overheard their conversation. She couldn’t help him, she said. She had been away from home until half past eight the previous night.

When my daughter escorted Lieutenant Sanders, his waist as thick as a donut, his white mustache as insubstantial as powdered sugar, into my room, I was sure my face would

give everything away. But even if it had, Lieutenant Sanders wouldn't have seen anything. He couldn't bear to look at me. What was he afraid of? What is anyone afraid of? Catching cancer? Seeing their own grim futures?

I told him I had been asleep most of the day and had heard nothing. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant. A cancer patient doesn't make a good witness."

But he does make a hell of a murderer, I thought. *Cancer is a killer, and so am I.* I almost laughed at the campiness of my silent boast.

He asked about my relationship with the "deceased," and I told him I hadn't had any contact with him since high school.

"Did you have any opinion of him?"

"What do you mean, Lieutenant?"

"Well, he wasn't necessarily the most popular man in town. Some people objected to the way he did business."

"I never had any business with him."

"Nothing? Never?"

"Never," I said. "Nothing."

"But did you have an opinion of him?"

My daughter stood in the doorway, and, unlike the good lieutenant, she actually looked at me. Was she suspicious? Was she trying to read my face?

"Honestly," I said in my firmest voice, which was no more solid than wind flowing over an empty bottle, "I despised him. If that seems too strong a word, give me a stronger one. He went from being an elementary school bully to a high school asshole. And from what I've read and heard about his business career, it seems he's had the wheels greased and the deck stacked in his favor at every step." I paused to catch my breath. As I was doing so, I coughed. And coughed.

“Would I have killed him?” I continued. “Give me my health back, and I’ll kill just about anyone in the world.” I paused. “I wish I could kill my cancer.” I pretended to laugh, and my pretend laugh became a real cough. Erin, I noticed, was dabbing at her eyes.

A moment later, the lieutenant was gone, and Erin was at my side, whispering an apology—for the lieutenant’s presence? for doubting her dear father’s innocence?—and I was catching the wave of what would become a four-hour nap.

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When my daughter steps into my room the next morning, she tells me the hospice nurse will be coming to meet me tomorrow.

“Fabulous,” I say.

She says she better get ready for work. But before she leaves, she turns to me and says, “It’s disturbing news about Blair Crawford.”

“Disturbing it happened in the neighborhood.”

“It’s disturbing for his family. His children. His grandchildren. His wife.”

“His third wife, isn’t she?”

“This morning’s *Advocate and Post* says it was probably a professional who killed him.”

“A professional?”

“Left no clues. The rain on the evening of the murder didn’t help either.”

“Did it rain?”

“You were sleeping, I’m sure.”

She looks at me, and I have the feeling she wants to ask me, against the grain of everything she knows about me, if I killed him. It’s as if I can see the question in her gray eyes. How would I answer?

I know a lie would be best. But—crazy—I want her to know the truth. I realize I’m proud of what I’ve done, although I know she wouldn’t be. I doubt even Daisy Dandridge would be. Even so, I push the issue, “Were you going to say something?”

She hesitates. “No. It was nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

Again, the hesitation. “Yes, I’m sure.”

She gives me a kiss on the forehead, gathers my plate of half-eaten food, and leaves. I fall into my usual post-breakfast sleep.

In the afternoon, I remove the gun—*my* gun—from its hiding spot behind the encyclopedias and bring it with me on my backyard walk. I stoop under the yellow crime scene tape around the site of the murder and step up to the edge of the creek. The police have no doubt scoured the shallow creek twice, three times. Will they look again? By tossing the gun into the creek, albeit into its deepest part, I dare them to. But I doubt they will ever find it.

With the gun out of my hands, I feel reduced, ancient, ill. I am sweating. I am exhausted. I return to my room and fall into a hypnotic half sleep. I dream my bullets fail to hit Blair Crawford. I dream he leaps across the creek to strangle me.

When I wake up, I remember the truth and am happy. But I also remember I am dying.

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I was hoping the hospice nurse would be Guatemalan or Salvadoran, a pleasingly overweight matriarch from Sherman’s Spanishville whose English might be rudimentary but whose nonchalant attitude toward the mess of dying would allow me to feel unself-conscious, unashamed—even, perhaps, human. Instead, Nurse Amber appears, in a uniform so white I feel like I’ve been teleported to a cloud. She is blond, slim, and short and admits to being “as nervous as a bee in a jar.” She earned her LPN degree two weeks ago, she says. This is her first job. “I didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life, so my dad suggested nursing.” She smiles. “He said it was better than waitressing.” When she comes close to me, her nose wrinkles. I apologize. “Death stinks,” I say.

Exactly six days later, I have a new hospice nurse, also young and filled with buzzing energy. She whistles as she hands me my pills, as she changes my diaper. I cannot tell what tune it is. When it continues without end the next day and the day after, I decide it's a requiem.

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Sometimes I hear Robert shuffling around upstairs or blasting music. But he doesn't come downstairs to see me. I am certain he knows it was I who killed Blair Crawford. The dots are too easy to connect.

Or perhaps they aren't. They connect only until he considers my condition. My feebleness. My decay. Couple this with the "professional" who was supposed to be responsible for the murder, and suddenly it doesn't look likely I'm the killer.

Sometimes, when I feel a pulse of machismo, I want to call him down and tell him the truth. *You think you're living on the edge with your drug dealing? Well, son, I have something to share with you....* The rest of the time, I know it's best if the truth about Blair Crawford's murder is buried with me.

By the time I have a third hospice nurse—a glorious fifty-five-year-old woman from Honduras who never whistles—I no longer have the strength to go outside or even to leave my bed.

One morning, Erin tells me that in speaking to a friend of hers who lost her sister to cancer, she learned it's important to say goodbye. A final goodbye. For closure's sake. "Of course I'll be here with you until the end," she says. "But maybe I should say goodbye now, just so we have this moment. Okay?" Everything about her is all business—her blue suit, her pulled-back hair, her modest perfume—except her eyes, which are watery and red. "Goodbye, Dad."

Filled with morphine and wasted away to half my adult weight, I am so much removed from this world I can only say in return, "Where are you going?"

Her sobs accompany me into a dream I have of flying down a dark corridor, seeking an open door and sunlight.

Terminal cancer never has a happy ending.

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I know there is no absolute good or absolute evil. I know about shades of gray. Blair Crawford had a wife, children, grandchildren. He was probably good to the kids, at least, and they loved him and they miss him. There is pain in the world that didn't exist before I killed him.

But, forgive me—or don't forgive me—whenever I close my eyes now, I see Blair Crawford gazing at me across the creek, my inaugural bullet in his heart, his face full of surprise, grievance, and desperate emotion. This delicious image is what I've been living off in these final hours. It is the last thing keeping me alive.



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