

Unknown Female

By Brian Ray

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Also by Brian Ray:
Through the Pale Door

To all my friends, mentors, and enemies

One

1976

Marx Thoreau stared at the lovely corpse reposing doll-like inside her glass coffin. The young woman had an eerie beauty, the kind that reminded him of the bad ending in a fairy tale. He tapped his foot, running through all the facts. No signs of rape, drugs, or trauma. No entry or exit wounds. No cause of death. No purse. No ID. No name. Little wonder the Sheriff had called the FBI. But Marx wasn't a special agent, just an outcast with a sketchpad and a wooden box of charcoal pencils. The Sheriff hoped the case would close before the equinox, or maybe it was the solstice—whatever happened when the leaves turned red.

The local law wanted to publish the woman's face as soon as possible, in hopes of reeling in a friend or relative to ID the body. Nameless headstones spelled bad luck in Stonewall. They were ghosts waiting to happen.

But why not just run the morgue photos, Marx wondered. That would save time and money, but he should've known these Southern gentlemen and their prudish respect for the dead. So here was Marx, all the way from Charleston,

sharpening his favorite pencil. The town of Stonewall was tiny by comparison, couldn't even afford its own morgue. The lovely corpse lay upstairs at Stonewall Baptist, in their coldest room. Thank the Almighty for air conditioning and air-tight containers, although he didn't really believe in God. Neither had his father. He supposed this made him a double outcast. Two secrets to keep. More like three, if you counted his lust for the woman inside the coffin.

The Sheriff tugged at his belt loops and nodded. He'd been on Marx's heels for almost an hour now. "She wasn't local, we don't think. Otherwise we'd have made contact with some kin by now."

Marx nodded. He really wished the Sheriff would leave now so he could get to work. Using the sketchpad to hide his arousal had succeeded so far, but it would make drawing difficult. "I'm assuming you've already checked the master list," he said, referring to the state's potholed database of missing persons reports. He put his weight on one foot, making the floorboards creak. "You've been cooperating with the press?"

"Newspapers, radio, and television this side of the state. We're not Neanderthals."

"I didn't mean anything personal," Marx said. "Just curious."

“You’re not even a detective,” the Sheriff went on. “Just a sketch artist.”

Marx nodded. “You tend to pick things up, though. Bits and pieces.”

“From what, experience or something? What are you, like eighteen?”

“Twenty-five.”

“You sure as hell don’t look it,” said the Sheriff. “Grow a beard, or at least a mustache. You’ll look older. I mean that. You’ve got the sort of face that can handle one.” The Sheriff used his palm to buff fingerprints on the girl’s coffin. A kindness filled his eyes, like he was looking at his own daughter. “As far as the master list goes,” he said, “it’s like pinning a tail on a mule. Four hundred people in this state haven’t been seen nor heard from in a year or longer. That takes a while to sift through. Spooks you, don’t it, that many people who just up and vanish?”

“You haven’t found any matches?” asked Marx. “Not one of them panned out?”

“We’re still panning. And the FBI hasn’t sent us squat except some little pipsqueak with a sketchpad.”

Marx smiled. “Squeak, squeak.”

They looked at the woman, the lovely corpse. Marx tried to will his arousal away, with little success. She was mesmerizing. But death could improve anyone’s

allure for a sick soul like his. Waiting, he thought he saw the girl's eyelashes twitch. The Sheriff must've seen, too, because he stopped buffing and stared a moment, then backed away. He tried bending a grimace into a smirk. "Sometimes that happens."

"What does?"

"She blinks, sort of." The Sheriff closed his eyes and forced himself into a full smile. "This whole thing's making us a mighty bit uncomfortable. We see our fair share of violence, but that's always plain dealing. Fights, a shooting now and then, Wild West kind of stuff. This here, well, ain't even Christian. You know, the case reminds me of that story everybody read in school, the one about getting buried alive?"

Marx watched the woman. He had read the story several times as a kid, daydreaming about his high school crushes buried alive, motionless and pale, eyes glazed. This young woman was a gift, and yet so alive. She looked like she might yawn awake any minute. A body in such perfect condition might rise up and walk out of the room whenever she wanted. According to what Marx knew of the case file, the examiner had found no decay. She wasn't a ghost waiting to happen. She

was already a ghost. He leaned closer, waiting for another twitch, and waved the Sheriff quiet.

“You hear that too?” the Sheriff asked.

“What?”

“She whispers sometimes.”

Marx held his head near the glass and listened, the hair in his lobe tingling. He heard something, a twist of slithery words scratching at the inside of the woman’s lips. Then the scratching stopped. No, nothing after all. Just a malicious trick of the wind.

“You should keep pressing police agencies in the state,” Marx said, trying to sound detached. “Missing persons reports fall through the cracks all the time.” He played with his tie, seeking comfort and distraction in the blue. Honestly, he didn’t know why he wore a suit. He could do his job in a black sweater and a beret. He imagined Picasso or Van Gogh as forensic sketch artists, smoking cigarettes on the edge of a crime scene as they prepared to trace the path of a murder. Would they have fallen in love with the victims?

Marx sighed and went to work, realizing the Sheriff wouldn’t leave him alone with his dark desires. The woman grew in beauty as he sketched. Part of his

job, in this case, was to take away death rather than revel in its sweetness. But he could still admire. The woman's eyelids were strung shut with a coarse black thread that thickened the lashes, making them look like paintbrush tips. She wore a donated green dress with a neckline that revealed the stitches at the tops of the Y-incision across her sternum, as if someone had sewn her together from patches. Autopsy incision marks showed through her makeup, carving a thin line along the edge of her face. He smiled at the scraping sound of charcoal on his pad. Careful craftsmanship could smooth away any trace of dissection. She would live again on paper.

Sometimes Marx wondered what the thieves, rapists, and killers thought of his work. Maybe somewhere in the lowcountry a convict was sitting on his small cot, staring at his suspect sketch like a reflection as he counted the days ahead. He'd drawn a lot of ugly psychopaths over the years. But cute dead girls turned up more often than most people wanted to know. Of course, most people would also prefer not to know that Marx kept a special portfolio of his work from those scenes, tucked away in a cabinet. Drawing scandalous pictures of the deceased was a definite moral improvement over actually sleeping with them, right?