

The Spiritkeeper

Lynn Biederstadt

*“When the senses are shaken and the soul
is driven to madness, who can stand?”
-William Blake*

*There are people who are full.
And people who are empty.
People who die, and people who live.
And in darkness,
 sometimes,
they find one another.*

-1-

-The Witness-

Walking. Walking.
Dead guy walking.
Heart bumping lots faster than it should have
for a little walk like that.
Lights too bright in here. Too many people.
They don't tell you there's going to be that many people
in the place you die.
People talking. Saying nothing.
You can't hear good with your heart so loud.
Strap you down, arms stretched out like Jesus.
Needle in the arm. Big needle.
Curtains open. Grey cloth.
Now you can see the witnesses
and they can see you.
Witnesses. Not friends. Didn't have friends, now.
Lawyers, plenty. No friends.
The victims families were there.
Lot of hate coming from them, coming right through the window.
Wrong hate. For the wrong guy.
Well, no reason why the last minute of your life
should be any different from how the rest of it had been.
All that hate from all them people. Except from one.
Skinny guy. Tall. White hair.
Dressed all in grey.
Something kindly in this one.
All the hate out there, it kept its distance from him,
like it parted around him.
Warden was coming.
Warden put a microphone next to the killing table.
Anything you want to say?
Anything to say.
Why ask? He'd been saying the truth for five years.
Nobody listening then, nobody listening now.

Didn't do it didn't do it never did it.
Done a lot of things, but not this one.
Pretty funny that the one thing they kill you for is the one you didn't do.
The white-haired guy, leaning forward now.
Looking right at him. Into him. Like he wanted to tell him something.
Wasn't a voice, but it said
easy. easy. it's bad, i know, but don't be scared....
Not-voice made his head hum. Not-voice pushed the room away.
White-headed guy was the only place he could look.
Warden made the Governor phone call
from right there in the chamber.
Warden listened, Warden shook his head.
*Isthereanylegalimpedimentpreventingmefromissuingthisorder?
ThenaccordingtothestatuesofthestateofConnecticutIherebycarryoutthisorderof
executionandmaygodhavemercyonyoursoul.*
Once the needle's in, time comes, somebody presses a button.
Nobody touches you.
Somebody ought to touch you if they're killing you.
He saw it. Saw it. The stuff that was moving down the tube to his arm.
They said the first dose made you sleep.
The second stopped your breathing.
Third one stopped your heart.
He could feel it coming.
He lay there holding his breath, like that'd stop anything...
here. i'm here....
The not-voice again, outside the window.
Sound but not-sound. Sharp and soft.
Like the white-headed guy had called him.
...it's okay. it's okay. don't be scared. let it go....
White-headed guy's eyes. White-headed guy's breath.
White-headed guy was all there was.
First dose coming. No second dose. No need.
Somebody was singing a high note in his ears.
The room stretched. The singing stretched. His life stretched.
Thinner... thinner... until you could see light through it...
until light all there was...
...it was okay it was okay it was okay now....

-2-

-Man Minus Self-

sting of needles
bottom of the ocean
reduced to nothing
 with the switches thrown wide
wrapped in the jacket
 with the sleeves strapped behind
hauled like a sack of sand
 helpless in rough hands
buried deep inside
 where no one could find him
outer voices through cheesecloth
inner voices choked and strangled
 no calm, no quiet
 no me here
 no here here
not here
 not there
 not where he belonged
wanted to go home
but helpless
too heavy to move

 but so so light
 inside

-3-

-Drive-

Damn him.

The miles flew. The city fell away. McGill had lucked into one of those rare, mysterious traffic-free pockets on the New York State Thruway where you slipped into a lane and sailed upstate like a slotcar. She was flying the road. It should have been exhilarating. It didn't come close.

She'd rolled out of a cellphone dead zone. Wished she could have stayed there. No sooner did she have service than the phone started up with a wildly insistent *message waiting* signal: four missed calls from Ty, four messages, each more hyped and crabby than the last. He got so prissy if she didn't pick up when he phoned. Yet, he'd made it more than clear that she was not to call him when he was on tour. She'd interrupted him once in the middle of an interview. One time. Years ago. That had been the end of that. No more calls unless he called her.

God, how she'd come to hate the Touring Ty. A month on the road and sure as shit he would Mr. Hyde into a rockstar cliché, spoiled rotten and full of tantrum. What else could you expect from him, surrounded 24/7 by people paid to feed his every whim?

Too often, she knew, those whims would be women. Another reason he didn't want her to call. Life on the road was packed to the walls with bed-fodder; an endless stream of slotted-out hogties, each one absolutely sure that she was the one he'd been waiting for—if only he could get to know her very, very well. Four unanswered calls would give Ty more than enough excuse to sample what was so freely offered; schoolgirl-costumed Harajuku girls being the flavor of the moment. Ty Florey was nothing if not supremely predictable: Sex with strangers was how he paid back arguments with his wife.

Enough. She was fed up with thinking about him; fed up that, once again, he'd elbowed her out of her own thoughts when she was supposed to be concentrating on something else. Ty would do what Ty would do. Sooner or later, somebody would bring her the paparazzi photos. Somebody always did.

Halfway to the house, now. Making excellent time. If this kept up, she'd get there early.

She had her attack planned down to the last footfall. Drop her bag off at the house. Wash the city off her face. Grab a burger. Then head for the hospital, a day and several hours earlier than her appointment...and wasn't Mister Director Doctor Jon Arledge going to be chapped about that.

The cell phone rang again. Not Ty, this time—not his ringtone. She pulled over, dug around for the phone in the passenger foot well where she'd thrown it after listening to Ty's ranting messages. She caught the call on the last ring.

"McGill. It's Julie."

You always took calls from your agent. Even when you didn't want to. "What's up?"

"You're going to love this...It's the book: You just broke into *The Times* top ten! Yukio sent over the advance notice. You've gotta hear this..."

"That McGill Forester is a master of emotional nuance will come as no surprise to those who know her work from such shrines to fine writing as *The New Yorker*. What *will* surprise is the breathtaking depth of character that this *Collection* reveals in her subjects, a revelation made even more extraordinary by the realization that the transforming episodes are drawn from nothing more concrete than the natures and personalities of her subjects themselves.

"Ms. Forester's deft and unique ability to capture souls on paper is a cover-to-cover celebration of the minute moments that make us who we are. There are everyday people in this *Collection*, but no ordinary ones. There is only what is most appealing and most enduring in all of us."

This was it. This was what she had been working for since the first word she'd ever laid to paper. But this wasn't the place or the time to bask in the well-earned limelight. She had no attention to spare for anything except the work just ahead; not while she had such a complicated iron in the fire.

"I'm sorry, Julie. Could you email it? I'm in the car."

"Headed up to the house?"

"Yeah. Until the piece is finished."

"How's the move coming?"

"I am overrun by boxes. Still."

"At least it's pretty up there. So peaceful."

Sure. Pretty. Peaceful. Whatever.

“Any idea when you’ll have the piece finished?”

“It’ll be finished when it’s finished, Julie. Tomorrow, next week, never. Don’t ask me that.”

“It’s not me. Jay’s been calling twice a day, asking for it. He wants to hold the next issue for it. And don’t yell, but he’s still pressing to get you on the talk-circuit.”

“Tell him no. Same answer as last time he asked. No.” As much as McGill enjoyed the recognition, she hated its trappings. She detested readings. She flat-out refused to do the TV talk shows that would undermine every interview she would try to do afterward. Even with her photo all over the dustjacket and newspaper reviews and internet profiles, she was rarely recognized. She liked it that way.

“So how’s Ty?” *Et tu, Julie.* Ty was the inevitable landing point of every conversation of McGill’s life. She maintained a standing bet with herself, how long people would take to get around to him. Three minutes or less—the talk always came down to Ty.

“He’s on tour. Asia, for two months. I’m supposed to catch him when the tour comes back stateside.”

“That’s so exciting, McGill. That’s got to be so much fun.”

Exciting. Fun. So everybody thought. But truth was, she didn’t enjoy spending time with him when he was working. Arena-rock tours were a wanton counterfeit of glamour. Days of stifling boredom, followed by a boring sound-check, followed by a deafening few hours of hysteria. Then more hours of adrenaline-soaked excess as the band wound down with an endless parade of hangers-on, disposable lovers and temporary best friends. And no sooner did it wrap up in one city than it started all over in the next. Fun. Sure.

“Bet you can’t wait to tell him about making the Top Ten.”

“Julie, you’re breaking up.” She’d just told the White Lie of the New Millennium, but she’d had all the chitchat she could stand for one day.

“Thanks for sharing the review. Talk to you next week.”

She fell back into the rhythms of the road. Her thoughts hummed with the miles...

nasty curve...

stop sign (noisy brakes, better get those looked at)...

hidden cop (slow down)...

ancient driver—come on, come on (pass. Now.)

coffee...need a convenience store...

Where was that turn? Always missed that turn...

Careful, car parked up ahead. Family potty stop—cute. Dog. Dog...

DOG!

She hit the brakes, but the scene played out like a sickening mini-movie in slow-mo: the black dog bounding toward her, smiling his dog smile. The little girl screaming. The thump. Oh god. Oh god.

She skidded to a stop on the shoulder and ran back to where the dog lay. It was looking at her, eyes not yet clouded, too close to life to seem completely dead. But the soul was gone from it. A beautiful creature. And she had killed it. She had turned it into one of those pathetic things that lay along the roadside, lost and abandoned when it should have been petted and loved.

The family was standing around her. Mom and dad. Little boy and littler girl. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she said; couldn't stop saying it. This wasn't her fault. The family told her so. They told her two dozen times. But she knew better. She helped the father collect the dog's body in a blanket. She helped move it to the side of the road. They wouldn't leave it there, would they? Sorry, sorry, sorry.

What could she do for them? Could she give them money? Could she take the body to a vet for them? The family was kind. They kept reassuring her that there was nothing she could have done and nothing they wanted her to do. All of them except the sobbing little girl with the face drowned in tears.

"You killed him," she said. "You killed him. Don't say you're sorry. You won't be sorry later, and he'll still be dead. You can't give him back."

The family put the body in the back of their SUV. They drove away. She drove away. And that was where her day really began. That was where her day changed. With the death of a black dog. And when she looked back, she would know that that was when everything in her life changed with it.