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A Rumor of Ghosts

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A R U M O R O F G H O S T S

■ ■ ■ BY ROBERT KESSLER ■ ■ ■

As usual, the big brass in the department called it “cleaning house”, but I called it re-

election time. At any rate, they wanted the Derk case wiped off the books in Wheeler. That was where I came in—Lance Tanner.

The air was already warm that morning when I headed out with the assignment folder. The sun twisted my eyes into a tight squint and I pulled out the blue blockers my ex-wife gave me for Christmas a few years ago. June-Marie was a sweet kid, but she could never adjust to the hours of my line of work. I can still hear her . . . standing in the kitchen cooking eggs with her shiny pink underwear on, “You think you’re gonna save the world or something.” A month later she was gone. I found the papers closed in the screen door. Since then, well, let’s put

it this way, I’m still not saving the world—just a little overtime pay.

Inside the car I took the elastic off the brown accordion folder. During my career as a detective, I’d heard about the Derk case many times. It was a legend in these parts. When folks ran out of jokes or were bored with cards, they’d rehash the different versions of the Derk murder, usually adding something new now and then about evil curses or ghosts.

The only sure thing that I knew about the case up front was that the victim had been a retired oil man named Randall Derk. Derk was known for his eccentricity. I’d heard that he’d kept a collection of exotic sea creatures and was such an odd, old codger that some even said he’d dabbled in black magic.

Inside the folder, I found the name, Ralph Watkins, typed and scrawled at the bottom of the police report. Watkins was a detective from before my time who’d originally investigated the Derk case.

He was retired now. And after talking to his wife, I learned he spent most of his time hanging out at the Long Horn Cafe down in Wheeler. That was where I found him.

When I opened the door to the place, the fried food smell

hit me. Cigarette smoke curled upward here and there. The room was packed. I took a seat at the only available booth, which happened to be under the mounted head of Bessie the milk cow. When the waitress came by, a tall woman with drawn-on eyebrows and a name tag that read Thelma, I asked if she knew Ralph Watkins.

As I was asking, a group on the other side of the restaurant raised their voices followed by a peal of laughter. One of them yelled, "Bet you he would by golly!" and got up, slapping the man next to him on the back.

The man was heading out the door, when the waitress, Thelma, pointed him out. "That's him there," she said to me, and yelled out so the whole place could hear, "Hey, this guy over here's looking for you!" The old lawman pointed at himself, mimed silent words, "Who, Me?" and grinned. He adjusted his summer straw and made his way through the sunlight and smoke to the seat facing me.

I introduced myself and Thelma brought Watkins a fresh coffee. He sat silently, looking me in the eye, until I mentioned the Derk case. "Well," he took off, "we thought it was some kind of knife, but it was never really decided what it was. Strange blue color. Boys down at the crypt analyzed it. You know, the morgue used to double as a police lab back then." He grinned. "We had it pretty rough in those days. Anyway, they said it was some type of bone, but couldn't tell what kind of bone, and didn't have any idea what it'd come from."

"The murder weapon?" I shook a cigarette out.

He nodded. "You know, there's been an awful lot of rumors about this case."

"What's your opinion?" I lit the end, watching the flame collapse into a thin blue ghost.

"Well . . ." his eye caught someone crossing the room and he waved, giving them a smile as he continued. "The doors were double bolted and windows were all locked, that part was true. The maid only had one of the keys, called us up when she couldn't get in to clean. We had to break a window to get inside."

"What else."

"No prints. Nothing near the body, just the weapon sticking out, you know, out of the throat." He shook his head.

When he said "you know," I sure did. I'd seen the swollen blank stares and plenty of gore too in my career. They told us back in cadet school it was something you'd never forget. They were right.

Watkins kept going, "Blood . . . well, I remember one of the state boys lost it right there on the carpet next to the guy's giant fish tank."

I leaned back on the wooden seat and blew out smoke, remembering it wasn't so much the look of the face or the wounds, but the smell stuffed in your nose and down your throat that made you gag like that.

Watkins took another sip and continued. "The whole day, no one was seen coming in or going out of the house. There's no witnesses either. I figure this one's got to be as close to a perfect crime as any I come across."

"No suspects?"

"Oh you've heard the stories I'm sure. Some people think some cult fanatics he'd been screwing around with killed Derk. There's even been a few ghosts held responsible." He laughed under his breath and then turned silent for a moment.

I waited.

"What I'd say you're up against," he leaned in and began to whisper, "is the work of a pro." He paused to catch my reaction. "And all you've got

are those bone pieces, and that there coroner's report, and, well, Tanner, that's not much. I'd say you might just as well quit right now and go fishing."

It was still early when I left Watkins, got back in my car, and dug into the Derk file once more. The ghost idea was a joke, and professionals use guns.

I pulled the bag of bone shards out and remembered what Watkins had said about the local morgue being part of the lab back then, about how things had changed. An old buddy of mine worked the police lab in Oklahoma City and he owed me one.

John was a funny fellow, an Australian who'd married an Oklahoman and taken up roots. I'd met John years ago when I was taking some courses at OU, and we'd kept in touch ever since.

After the usual joking around we did, I handed him the bag with the blue bone shards. He gave me a serious stare and then his usual squint-eyed smile. "Need it yesterday, right?"

I nodded yes, wondering if he would put me off due to scheduling. Instead, he twisted around on his perch and checked a tablet that lay next to the microscope in front of him. His pen followed a list. Then he turned and winked. "Call you in a jiff, Mate."

After tracking the realtor down, I was finally able to get a look inside the Derk Ranch. Judy Frank was a shapely blond, mid-40's. She was getting out of a gray Lincoln when I pulled up at the Derk Ranch.

Judy explained that the large ranch house, surrounded by overgrown scrub brush and

rolling red earth, had been for sale ever since Derk's murder. His relatives lived in Houston and wanted to sell, but like most people from a big city their asking price was way too high.

"Between that, and the rumors of ghosts," she said, "well, in a small town like this" The realtor lowered her voice to a whisper as the thick door unsealed, "Nobody's been able to sell this place."

I was led to what had been the living room, where the body was found, and went to work. From the photos in my folder, I was able to determine the position in the room where the body had fallen. The windows were in the wrong spot for someone to have tossed something through; besides, both Watkins and the report mentioned all of the windows and doors were locked from the inside. Looking straight in front of where the body had fallen, I noticed a scarring and discoloring on the wooden floor.

"Oh, that's where one of the tanks was," Judy explained, intercepting my curious look. "I keep telling them they ought to have that section refinished."

"Tank?"

"You know, a big old fish tank," she added, pointing out the worst of it with the toe of her patent leather shoe. "Nearly ruined the floor in a couple of places. Need to see any other rooms?"

"Thanks, I don't think so, this will do." I followed Judy's legs up to her painted finger tips and noticed she was single.

She pulled a card from her pocket. "Well, Detective, let me know if there's anything else I can do."

I liked the way she said it. For the first time since my divorce I thought about the possibilities.

When I got back in the car I took another

look at the file. There were statements from the ranchers in Derk's neighborhood. Each neighbor had an airtight alibi. There was also the cleaning lady, Clara Parker. The woman had passed a lie detector test, confirming her innocence. Yet, she was the only other person with one of the keys to the Derk house in those days.

I found Ms. Parker, still living in the same apartment building in Wheeler. She was sitting in the courtyard cocked to one side in a fraying lawn chair. She had on a pink hairnet and an old striped dress. Her hands were thumbing through a glossy paperback, and I could hear her humming something.

When she looked up, I flashed the ID.

Her eyes squinted. "Tann-er," she said reading my name. "Isn't that the name of one of those TV po-leece?"

I had to crack a grin. "I'm not sure, Ma'am," and wasn't. It'd been years since I'd had a set. The last time I'd watched, Andy, Opie, and Aunt Bea were still eating dinner.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions about the Derk murder."

"Oh, but that was years ago."

"It's been reopened, Ma'am." I took out a Winston and cracked a match.

"There was a, I believe his name was Watkins, asked me questions about to death back when it happened."

"I'd be grateful if you helped, Ma'am."

She marked her place with her index finger and gave me a questioning look.

"You were Randall Derk's cleaning help. Is that true?"

"I was."

"Well, since you talked to Mr. Watkins, have you ever recalled anything else, maybe something so ordinary you didn't think it worth mentioning?"

"There wasn't nothing *ordinary* about it."

I gave her a questioning look. She repositioned herself in the chair, and looked far away, staring past me as she continued. "Told Mr. Derk about it too. I was always hearing things and having stuff just up and disappear out from under me. Un-natural, that's what it was."

"Does this have something to do with the murder, Ma'am?"

She turned her head and appeared to look far away. "I'm an old woman you know."

As I flicked my ashes, I noticed a half empty bourbon bottle next to Clara's feet. "Yes, Ma'am. I understand."

"I already told Mr. Watkins all this years ago." She waved me away with her hands.

"Ma'am, just a few more questions."

She shook her head and sighed. "I told him it was that ghost did it."

"Yes Ma'am, now the report says you cleaned up afterwards."

"Oh, the mess that was, too." She lifted her arms again and waved her hands as if to wave something away.

"Was there anything else?"

"I told him everything, I told him so much it made me sick to think about it. All I remember's those fish that man had, all those fish. There was one big one had died, found him floating belly up." She made a face. "Oh Lord, he smelled, nasty! Those ghosts didn't get along with those fish. Seemed they was always scrapping, cause now and then, I'd find one dead and smelling up the place. Same thing must have finally gone and happened to poor old Mr. Derk."

"Why do you say that?" I decided to play along, there weren't many cards left.

"Cause I told Mr. Watkins, that fish was dead when I got there. And I figures, the spook must have got them both at the same time. Awful

smell. I dug a hole right in the flower bed for that one. That's where I always got rid of 'em." She smiled then wrinkled her forehead. "Lord, what a fuss that man made over those fish."

I thanked her and left. Halfway down the next street I pulled over at a pay phone and called in for my messages. Good thing I did; seems John had something for me.

It was dinner time when I arrived back at the police lab. Lucky for me, John was a hard worker. He handed me the report. "Not interested in what this is for, Mate, and I'm not asking." I could tell he really wanted to know what was going on.

For a moment I stood in disbelief. I wanted to make sure I had read what I thought I'd read.

"Let's get this straight, these bone pieces, they aren't part of a knife made out of a bone?"

"Could be," he'd lost his smile. "But you see," he pointed at the report. "Here, the presence of biliverdin"

"English, John."

"I could tell it was a fish all right, Mate." He held one of the bone pieces up with a pair of tweezers. "But, the blue-green color puzzled me. It reflects the presence of a certain type of compound that, well, I've checked all the sources. As far as bones go, Mate, there aren't many creatures with blue bones." He shook his head. "It's a needlefish, all right."

I took a cigarette out but left it unlit.

"They have them in New Guinea, Mate. I remember reading something, a native got killed fishing." He illustrated with his hand the arc of a jumping fish. "Stuck the fellow."

I remembered what Clara had said about the

clean up, the floating fish, *the relationship of the body to the tank?*

Derk must have been looking down into the water when the fish struck. In the struggle, somehow, the fish's snout had broken off, the rest of him had fallen back into the tank. Derk collapsed and bled to death. I couldn't believe it, the old man had been done in by one of his own fish.

Later that night I finished typing the last of the Randall Derk report. Come election time, the big brass would finally have something to boast about. I flicked my cigarette and watched the smoke unravel. Staring tired and bleary-eyed past office chairs, I pulled Judy's card from my shirt pocket and ran my thumb over the raised numbers. An odd thought occurred to me: from now on, when the wind rushed down the streets of Wheeler, Oklahoma, something would be missing. That something was a ghost. ■

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