

Homicide: The Game

Presents

Painseeker

“My Last Selfish Act”

by Lance Wagner

I pull these bleeding images from the pepper-laced golden haze of my memory. They are my last ones of her. We lived, we loved, and she left. She moved on and left me to hold the remains of her life as a poet. Now that I have told the pivotal points of her life, I have little left of myself to give here. Instead, I will concentrate on my long lingering and delayed duties. Now emboldened by my reinforced relationship with Raychel’s family, I can do this with minimal interruption. I was Raychel’s husband and now no one can challenge that fact. Now I must perform my last selfish act and recount Raychel’s funeral as best I can remember.

As I have stated previously, I did not speak of Raychel’s murder despite the constant pleas from several of my fellow Bleeders members. Although they knew about our long separation (if not our previous marriage) it had obviously passed through the group that I was hurting. I have little doubt that the other members were also pained by the loss of our greatest group treasure. Maybe they only came to me because, as the de facto father of the group, I was the person who was supposed to make everything all better. I was supposed to add perspective to a purposeless and tragic event. I was not able to do that. I am still not truly able to do that. I’m still not over it and I don’t know what I am supposed to do or say to take the ache away. That being said, I am much better now than I was then.

As Raychel’s husband, I should have been the one who made all of the arrangements for her funeral. Had the task fallen on me, I do not know how I would have been able to pay for such an occasion. That was prior to the time I came into my current living wage, and even that now is just enough to meet expenses. However, I was relieved of my responsibilities. Again, Raychel did better than me, or so it seemed at the time. I learned that her brother, David Vanderhoff, rode in to save the day. It also came about that Laura Douglass and Ken Kincaid combined their personal mailing lists to ensure that everyone who knew Raychel was able to attend the funeral. Laura took care

of Raychel's poetry friends while Ken contacted the Terror Trax and Cain International crowd. It made for an interesting dichotomy of acquaintances. Had I been in a more sound state of mind, I'm sure I would have appreciated it.

However, I had been on a hard drinking bender for the whole weekend. I had tried to hole myself up in my cramped apartment and blur my hurt with shot after shot in tribute to Raychel. The success of my tribute was repeatedly hampered by condolence calls from other members of The Bleeders. Not the least of them was Laura Douglass, who came to personally invite me to the funeral.

"You won't answer your phone, so I had to see you for myself," she told me after disturbing me that Sunday.

"I'm the man in the cage," I responded. "Everyone's coming to see what I look like."

"They noticed when you weren't at Safehaven, Lance. They've been coming ever since word got out about Raychel's murder."

"Well, I'm sure it helps."

"That's why you're here?"

"I'm here because this is where I'm supposed to be. I'll just stay here until she comes back. You know she left me at Safehaven, but I always thought she'd be back any day now."

"Lance-"

"Go, Laura!" I yelled, standing up so quickly it surprised me. I charged her as she retreated out the door. It wasn't so much that I was thinking violent thoughts as I was stumbling fast forward to keep from falling back down. The door closed behind her all the same.

The time between then passed as it had before: in a hammered fog. Swirls of memories mixed with whys and what could have beens. I had punished myself for every regret I ever had with Raychel, I had convinced myself I could have saved her and only my own weakness had prevented it. For that, I tortured myself further, then continued the cycle of abuse. By the time I made it to her funeral, I was burned beyond recognition. I was almost another person.

From the moment I entered the funeral home, I felt distant from everyone else in the room. They weren't people to me. They were objects to be navigated through. I cut through them without a passing glance. Familiar voices called out to me, but I paid no attention. I was on a mission that had to be carried out. I cruised through the foyer and into the parlor.

The lights in funeral parlors are always a little bit dim, but now they seemed almost out to me. The pitch black room embraced my pitch black heart. The people flooded the room, almost obliterating the object of my heart. I slid through the parlor, heading toward the head of the room. Faceless faces fell forward and all around me. I tried to pay as little attention as possible. I nodded, smiled, and worked my way into the front where a row of ornate floral arrangements stood sentinel about the casket. I waited in line for what felt like an eternity and then I finally reached my destination.

Raychel was lying there, or what was left of her. Her hair was brushed back behind her head. Her face was heavily made up, but I could still tell that she had been beaten badly. There was swelling on her right cheek and her jawline had a flaw on the right side that indicated to me that it had been broken. She was dressed in a long-sleeved black dress. It wasn't hers. It didn't look like something she would even buy, let alone wear. In retrospect, it was probably Laura's dress. They probably needed a long sleeved dress to cover Raychel's numerous wounds.

I knelt before her that one last time and said my prayer to her. When I finished, I stood up before her and leaned over her. I knew that what was in front of me was little more than a remnant, but it was all I had left of her now. I kissed her lips briefly, stood back up, and reached into my jacket for the newly sharpened hunting knife in my inside pocket.

I was going to slash my wrists before her and close the link between us. We were meant to be together and I was going to prove it to everyone. By committing suicide before her we would be bonded forever. Then maybe they would learn about the secret marriage and suddenly know just how deeply I had loved her. As I said before, I had been drinking. I was pretty deranged at the time.

But before my master plan could be enacted, a miracle occurred.

“You have about three seconds to back the Hell off and run, “ hissed Kyle McAllister.

Instinctively my hand retreated from the knife in my jacket. Instead it flew from me and found a new home.

Kyle’s neck.

I clamped down hard on him and drove him backward out of the parlor. I powered him out with strength I had never given myself credit for having. His eyes bulged a combination of fear and rage. I don’t know what I felt. I was acting too quickly to think and I wasn’t thinking very clearly in the first place.

Once outside the parlor I drove him into the floor. A number of The Bleeders were in the foyer and retreated further in surprise.

My voice came out like iron, “You killed her, you piece of s**t! Don’t expect me to sit around waiting for the police to figure it out. I know you and I know you did it.”

“No, Mr. Wagner, he did not.”

Why I let go of him I still don’t know, but I did. When I looked up I saw a woman in a green dress standing before me with the weirdest expression on her face. “Why should I believe you?”

“Because I cannot lie. It would be an insult to my trade, and I would also cease to be a suitable vessel of communication.”

There was no point in arguing further with that woman, whom I now have learned was Anna Fantiani. Besides, Kyle was getting his wind back, and I wasn't going to stick around waiting for his retaliation. I had done enough of what I had to do, if not in its entirety. I got up, stepped over Kyle, and pushed my way into the night. The heat closed in around me, gripping me, calling at me. I began to run.

Desperate.

Hopeless.

Abandoned.

Lost.