CHAPTER ONE

Night Train

By MARTIN AMIS
Harmony Books

Read the Review

I am a police. That may sound like an unusual statement--or an unusual construction. But it's a parlance we have. Among ourselves, we would never say I am a policeman or I am a policewoman or I am a police officer. We would just say I am a police. I am a police. I am a police and my name is Detective Mike Hoolihan. And I am a woman, also.

What I am setting out here is an account of the worst case I have ever handled. The worst case--for me, that is. When you're a police, "worst" is an elastic concept. You can't really get a fix on "worst." The boundaries are pushed out every other day. "Worst?" we'll ask. "There's no such thing as worst." But for Detective Mike Hoolihan this was the worst case.

Downtown, at CID, with its three thousand sworn, there are many departments and subdepartments, sections and units, whose names are always changing: Organized Crime, Major Crimes, Crimes Against Persons, Sex Offenses, Auto Theft, Check and Fraud, Special Investigations, Asset Forfeiture, Intelligence, Narcotics, Kidnapping, Burglary, Robbery--and Homicide. There is a glass door marked Vice. There is no glass door marked Sin. The city is the offense. We are the defense. That's the general idea.

Here is my personal "ten-card." At the age of eighteen I enrolled for a master's in Criminal Justice at Pete Brown. But what I really wanted was the streets. And I couldn't wait. I took tests for state trooper, for border patrol, and even for state corrections officer. I passed them all. I also took the police test, and I passed that, too. I quit Pete and enrolled at the Academy.

I started out as a beat cop in the Southern. I was part of the Neighborhood Stabilization Unit in the Forty-Four. We walked foot patrol and did radio runs. Then for five years I was in the Senior Citizens Robbery Unit. Going proactive--decoy and entrapment--was my ticket to plainclothes. Later, another test, and downtown, with my shield. I'm now in Asset Forfeiture, but for eight years I was in Homicide. I worked murders. I was a murder police.

A few words about my appearance. The physique I inherited from my mother. Way ahead of her time, she had the look now associated with highly politicized feminists. Ma could have played the male villain in a postnuclear road movie. I copped her voice, too: It has been further deepened by three decades of nicotine abuse. My features I inherited from my father. They are rural rather than urban--flat, undecided. The hair is dyed blonde. I was born and raised in this city, out in Moon Park. But all that went to pieces, when I was ten, and thereafter I was raised by the state. I don't know where my parents are. I'm five-ten and I go 180.

Some say you can't top the adrenaline (and the dirty cash) of Narcotics, and all agree that Kidnapping is a million laughs (if murder in America is largely black on black, then kidnapping is largely gang on gang), and Sex Offenses has its followers, and Vice has its votaries, and Intelligence means what it says (Intelligence runs deep, and brings in the deep-sea malefactors), but everyone is quietly aware that Homicide is the daddy. Homicide is the Show.

In this second-echelon American city, mildly famed for its Jap-financed Babel Tower, its harbors and marinas, its university, its futuristically enlightened corporations (computer software, aerospace, pharmaceuticals), its high unemployment, and its catastrophic inner-city taxpayer flight, a homicide police works maybe a dozen murders per year. Sometimes you're a primary investigator on the case, sometimes a secondary. I worked one hundred murders. My clearance rate was just above average. I could read a crime scene, and, more than once, I was described as an "exceptional interrogator." My paperwork was outstanding. When I came to CID from the Southern everybody expected my reports to be district quality. But they were downtown quality, right from the start. And I sought to improve still further and gave it a hundred percent. One time I did a very, very competent job, collating two rival accounts of a hot-potato homicide in the Seventy-Three: One witness/suspect versus another witness/suspect. "Compared to what you guys give me to read," pronounced Detective Sergeant Henrik Overmars, brandishing my report at the whole squad, "this is fucking oratory. It's goddamn Cicero versus Robespierre." I did the work as best I could until I entered my own end-zone and couldn't do it anymore. In my time, I have come in on the aftermath of maybe a thousand suspicious deaths, most of which turned out to be suicides or accidentals or plain unattendeds. So I've seen them all: Jumpers, stumpers, dumpers, dunkers, bleeders, floaters, poppers, bursters. I have seen the bodies of bludgeoned one-year-olds. I have seen the bodies of gang-raped nonagenarians. I have seen bodies left dead so long that your only shot at a t.o.d. is to weigh the maggots. But of all the bodies I have ever seen, none has stayed with me, in my gut, like the body of Jennifer Rockwell.

I say all this because I am part of the story I am going to tell, and I feel the need to give some idea of where I'm coming from.

As of today--April second--I consider the case "Solved." It's closed. It's made. It's down. But yet the solution only points toward further complexity. I have taken a good firm knot and reduced it to a mess of loose ends. This evening I meet with Paulie No. I will ask him two questions. He will give me two answers. And then it's a wrap. This case is the worst case. I wonder: Is it just me? But I know I'm right. It's all true. It's the case. It's the case. Paulie No, as we say, is a state cutter. He cuts for the state. He dissects people's bodies and tells you how come they died.

Allow me to apologize in advance for the bad language, the diseased sarcasm, and the bigotry. All police are racist. It's part of our job. New York police hate Puerto Ricans, Miami police hate Cubans, Houston police hate Mexicans, San Diego police hate Native Americans, and Portland police hate Eskimos. Here we hate pretty well everybody who's non-Irish. Or nonpolice. Anyone can become a police--Jews, blacks, Asians, women--and once you're there you're a member of a race called police, which is obliged to hate every other race.

These papers and transcripts were put together piecemeal over a period of four weeks. I apologize also for any inconsistencies in the tenses (hard to avoid, when writing about the recently dead) and for the informalities in the dialogue presentation. And I guess I apologize for the outcome. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

For me the thing began on the night of March fourth and then evolved day by day and that's how I'm going to tell this part of it.

March 4

That evening I was alone. My guy Tobe was out of town, attending some kind of computer convention. I hadn't even started on dinner: I was sitting there with my Discuss Group biography open on the couch, next to the ashtray. It was 20:15. I remember the time because I had just been startled out of a nod by the night train, which came through early, as it always does on Sundays. The night train, which shakes the floor I walk on. And keeps my rent way down.

The phone rang. It was Johnny Mac, a.k.a. Detective Sergeant John Macatitch. My colleague in Homicide, who has since made squad supervisor. A great guy and a hell of a detective.

"Mike?" he said. "I'm going to have to call in a big one."

And I said, Well, let's hear it.

"This is a bad one, Mike. I want you to ride a note for me."

Note meant n.o.d.--notification of death. In other words, he wanted me to go tell somebody that somebody close had died. That somebody they loved had died: This was already clear, from his voice. And died suddenly. And violently. I considered. I could have said, "I don't do that anymore" (though Asset Forfeiture, in fact, is hardly corpse-free). And then we might have had one of those bullshit TV conversations, with him saying You got to help me out and Mike, I'm begging you, and me saying Forget it and No way and Dream on, pal, until everyone is bored blind and I finally come across. I mean, why say no when you have to say yes? For things to proceed. So I just said, again: Well, let's hear it.

"Colonel Tom's daughter killed herself tonight."

"Jennifer?" And it just came out. I said: "You're fucking me."

"I wish I was fucking you, Mike. Really. This is as bad as it gets."

"How?"

".22 in the mouth."

I waited.

"Mike, I want you to go notify Colonel Tom. And Miriam. This hour."

I lit another cigarette. I don't drink anymore but man do I smoke. I said, "I've known Jennifer Rockwell since she was eight years old."

"Yeah, Mike. You see? If not you, who?"

"Okay. But you're going to have to take me by the scene."

In the bathroom I applied makeup. Like someone doing a chore. Wiping down a counter. With my mouth meanly clenched. I used to be something, I guess, but now I'm just another big blonde old broad.

Without thinking about it I found I had brought along my notebook, my flashlight, my rubber gloves, and my .38 snub.

In police work you soon get to be familiar with what we call the "yeah, right" suicide. Where you go in the door, see the body, look around the room, and say, "Yeah, right." This was definitely not a yeah-right suicide. I have known Jennifer Rockwell since she was eight years old. She was a favorite of mine. But she was also a favorite of everybody else's. And I watched her grow into a kind of embarrassment of perfection.

Brilliant, beautiful. Yeah, I'm thinking: To-die-for brilliant. Drop-dead beautiful. And not intimidating--or only as intimidating as the brilliant-beautiful can't help being, no matter how accessible they seem. She had it all and she had it all, and then she had some more. Her dad's a cop. Her considerably older brothers are cops--both with Chicago PD, Area Six. Jennifer was not a cop. She was an astrophysicist, here at Mount Lee. Guys? She combed them out of her hair, and played the field at CSU. But for the last--Christ, I don't know--seven or eight years, it must be, she was shacked up with another bigbrain and dreamboat: Trader. Professor Trader Faulkner. This was definitely not a yeah-right suicide. This was a no-wrong suicide.

Johnny Mac and myself pulled up in the unmarked. Whitman Avenue. Detached and semidetached residences on a wide tree-lined street: An academic dormitory on the edge of the Twenty-Seven. I climbed out in my stretch pants and my low pumps.

So the radio cars and the beat cops were there, and the science crew and the medical examiners were there, and Tony Silvera and Oltan O'Boye were there--inside. And some neighbors. But them you look right through. These uniformed figures were churning under the dome lights. And I knew they swayed to sudden priorities. It was like in the Southern when you keyed the mike and said there was an officer down. Down, in some cases, meaning fucked up forever, in a cross-alley after a chase, on a warehouse floor, or reeling alone around a vanished drug corner with both his hands over his eyes. When somebody close to the murder police starts crafting overtime for the murder police, then special rules apply. This is racial. This is an attack on every last one of us.

I badged my way through the tunnel of uniforms around the front door, making the landlady as my best witness or last-to-see. There was a fat full moon reflecting the sun on to my back. Not even Italian police are sentimental about full moons. You're looking at a workload increase of twenty-five to thirty-five percent. A full moon on a Friday night and you're talking a two-hour backup in the emergency room and long lines trailing in and out of Trauma.

At the door to Jennifer's apartment I was met by Silvera. Silvera. He and myself have worked many cases. We have stood together, like this, in many a stricken home. But not quite like this.

"Jesus, Mike."

"Where is she?"

"Bedroom."

"You through? Wait, don't tell me. I'm going in."

The bedroom led off the living room. And I knew where to go. Because I had been to this residence before, maybe a dozen times in half as many years--to drop something off for Colonel Tom, to give Jennifer a ride to a ballgame or a beach party or a function at the Dep Comm's. Her, and once or twice Trader, too. It was like that, a functional kind of friendship, but with good chats in the car. And as I crossed the living room and leaned on the bedroom door I flashed a memory of a couple of summers back, a party Overmars threw after his new deck was done, when I caught Jennifer's eye as she was smiling up from the glass of white wine she'd been nursing all night. (Everyone else apart from me, of course, was completely swacked.) I thought then that here was somebody who had a real talent for happiness. A lot of gratitude in her. I'd need a megaton of scotch to make me burn like that but she looked lovestruck on half a glass of white.

I went in and closed the door behind me.

This is how you do it. You kind of wheel around slowly into the scene. Periphery first. Body last. I mean, I knew where she was. My radar went to the bed but she had done it on a chair. In the corner, to my right. Otherwise: Curtains half-drawn against the moonlight, orderly dressing table, tousled sheets, and a faint smell of lust. At her feet, an old black-stained pillowcase and a squirt can of 303.

I have said that I am used to being around dead bodies. But I took a full hot flush when I saw Jennifer Rockwell, glazed naked on the chair, her mouth open, her eyes still moist, wearing an expression of childish surprise. The surprise light not heavy, as if she had come across something she'd lost and no longer expected to find. And not quite naked. Oh my. She'd done it with a towel turbaned around her head, like you do to dry your hair. But now of course the towel was wet through and solid red and looked as though it weighed more than any living woman could carry.

No, I didn't touch her. I just made my notes and drew my stick-figure sketch, with professional care--like I was back in the rotation. The .22 lay upside down and almost on its side, propped against the chair leg. Before I left the room I turned off the light for a second with a gloved hand and there were her eyes still moist in the

moonlight. Crime scenes you look at like cartoon puzzles in the newspapers. Spot the difference. And something was wrong. Jennifer's body was beautiful--you wouldn't dare pray for a body like that--but something was wrong with it. It was dead.

Silvera went in to bag the weapon. Then the crime-lab techs would get her prints and measure distances and take many photographs. And then the ME would come and roll her. And then pronounce her.

The jury is still out on women police. On whether they can take it. Or for how long. On the other hand, maybe it's me: Maybe I'm just another fuckoff. New York PD, for instance, is now fifteen percent female. And all over the country women detectives continue to do outstanding work, celebrated work. But I'm thinking that these must be some very, very exceptional ladies. Many times, when I was in Homicide, I said to myself, Walk away, girl. Ain't nobody stopping you. Just walk away. Murders are men's work. Men commit them, men clean up after them, men solve them, men try them. Because men like violence. Women really don't figure that much, except as victims, and among the bereaved, of course, and as witnesses. Ten or twelve years back, during the arms buildup toward the end of Reagan's first term, when the nuclear thing was on everyone's mind, it seemed to me that the ultimate homicide was coming and one day I'd get the dispatcher's call alerting me to five billion dead: "All of them, except you and me." In full consciousness and broad daylight men sat at desks drawing up contingency plans to murder everybody. I kept saying out loud: "Where are the women?" Where were the women? I'll tell you: They were witnesses. Those straggly chicks in their tents on Greenham Common, England, making the military crazy with their presence and their stares--they were witnesses. Naturally, the nuclear arrangement, the nuclear machine, was strictly men only. Murder is a man thing.

But if there's one aspect of homicide work that women do about a thousand times better than men it's riding a note. Women are good at that--at breaking the news. Men fuck it up because of the way they always handle emotion. They always have to act the n.o.d., so they come on like a preacher or a town crier, or all numb and hypnotized like someone reading off a list of commodity futures or bowling scores. Then halfway through it hits them what they're doing and you can tell they're close to losing it. I've seen beat cops burst out laughing in the face of some poor little schnook whose wife just walked under a Mack truck. At such moments, men realize that they're impostors, and then anything can happen. Whereas I would say that women feel the true weight of the thing immediately and after that it's a difficult event but not an unnatural one. Sometimes, of course, they crack up laughing--I mean the supposedly bereaved. You're just getting into your my-sad-duty routine and they're waking up the neighbors at three in the morning to pop a party.

Well, that wasn't going to happen tonight.

The Rockwells' residence is in the northwestern suburbs, out to Blackthorn: Twenty minutes. I had Johnny Macatitch stay in the car while I went around the back way like I normally would when paying a call. I was coming by the side of the house and I paused. To step on my cigarette. To breathe. And I could see them, in through the leaded windows and past the potted plants of the kitchen, Miriam and Colonel Tom, dancing. Dancing the twist, slow, and without a whole lot of bend in the knees, to the lecherous saxophone frying like the dinner in the pan. They clinked glasses. Red

wine. Up above the moon throbbed full, and the clouds it raced through seemed to be the moon's clouds rather than our clouds. Yes, an unforgettably beautiful night. And that beauty was part of this story. As if staged for my benefit, like the picture framed by the kitchen window: A forty-year marriage that still had fucking in it. Under a night so sweet it looked like day.

When you're bringing news of the kind I was bringing there are physical ramifications. The body feels concentrated. The body feels important. It has power, because it brings powerful truth. Say what you like about this news, but it's the truth. It's the truth. It is the case.

I rapped on the half-glass back door.

Colonel Tom turned: Pleased to see me. Not even a little frown of inconvenience, like maybe I was going to take the shine off his evening. But the instant he opened the door I could feel my face collapsing. And I knew what he thought. He thought I was back on it. I mean the booze and all.

"Mike. Jesus, Mike, are you okay?"

I said, "Colonel Tom? Miriam?" But Miriam was already falling away and fading from my sight. Falling away at thirty-two feet per second squared. "You lost your daughter on this day. You lost your Jennifer."

He looked like he was still trying to smile his way past it. The smile now starting to plead. They had David one year, Yehoshua the next. And then, a decade and a half later: Jennifer.

"Yes she's gone," I said. "By her own hand."

"This is nuts."

"Colonel Tom, you know I love you and I'd never lie to you. But it seems your baby girl took her own life, sir. Yes she did. Yes she did."

They fetched their coats and we drove downtown. Miriam stayed in the car with Johnny Mac. Colonel Tom made the ID leaning on a freezer door in the ME's office on Battery and Jeff.

Oltan O'Boye would be riding east, to campus. Taking the news to Trader Faulkner.

March 5

I woke up this morning and Jennifer was standing at the end of my bed. She was waiting for my eyes to open. I looked, and she was gone.

The ghost of a dead person must divide into many ghosts--to begin with. It is labor-intensive--to begin with. Because there are many bedrooms to visit, many sleepers to stand over.

Some sleepers--maybe just two or three--the dead will never leave.

March 6

Tuesdays I'm working the midnights. So Tuesdays I generally put in an afternoon at the Leadbetter. Attired in a taupe pants suit, I sit in my own office eighteen floors above where Wilmot deadends into Grainge. I am part-time security consultant here and I will go half-time or better when my EoD finally gets to be the mandatory twenty-five behind me. That date--my Entrance on Duty--is September 7, 1974. Retirement is already sniffing me up to see if I'm ripe.

The front desk called to say I had a visitor: Colonel Rockwell. Frankly, I was surprised that he was up and around. My understanding was that the boys were down from Chicago and the phone was off the hook. The Rockwells were digging in.

I put aside the CSSS layout I'd been staring at and I did my face. Too, I buzzed Linda, asking her to greet the elevator and bring the Colonel right on in.

He entered.

"Hey, Colonel Tom."

I stepped forward but he seemed to take a pass on the hug I was offering him and he kept his chin down as we slid off his coat. The head staying low when he sat in the leather chair. I went back of my desk and said,

"How goes it with you, Colonel Tom? My dear."

He shrugged. He exhaled slowly. He looked up. And I saw what you seldom see in the grief-struck. Panic. A primitive panic, a low-IQ panic, in the eyes--it makes you consider the meaning of the word hare-brained. And it made me panic. I thought: He's in a nightmare and now I am too. What do I do if he starts screaming? Start screaming? Should everybody start screaming?

"How is Miriam?"

"Very quiet," he said, after a while.

I waited. "Take your time, Colonel," I said. I thought it might be a good idea to do something null and soothing, like maybe get to some bills. "Say as much as you want or as little as you want."

Tom Rockwell was Squad Supervisor during much of my time in Homicide. That was before he climbed into his personal express elevator and pushed the button marked Penthouse. In the space of ten years he made lieutenant as Shift Commander, then captain in charge of Crimes Against Persons, then full colonel as head of CID. He's brass now: He isn't a police, he's a politician, juggling stats and budgets and PR. He could make Dep Comm for Operations. Christ, he could make Mayor. "It's all head-doctoring and kissing ass," he once said to me. "You know what I am? I'm not a cop. I'm a communicator." But now Colonel Tom, the communicator, just sat there, very quietly.

"Mike. There's something went on here."

Again I waited.

"Something's wrong."

"I feel that too," I said.

The diplomatic response--but his eyes leveled in.

"What's your read on it, Mike? Not as a friend. As a police."

"As a police? As a police I have to say that it looks like a suicide, Colonel Tom. But it could have been an accident. There was the rag there, and the 303. You think maybe she was cleaning it and..."

He flinched. And of course I understood. Yeah. What was she doing with the .22 in her mouth? Maybe tasting it. Tasting death. And then she--

"It's Trader," he said. "It has to be Trader."

Well, this demanded some time to settle. Okay: Now: It is sometimes true that an apparent suicide will, on inspection, come back a homicide. But that inspection takes about two seconds. It is ten o'clock on a Saturday night, in Destry or Oxville. Some jig has just blown his chick to bits with a shotgun. But a couple of spikes later he hatches a brilliant scheme: He'll make it look like she did it. So he gives the weapon a wipe and props her up on the bed or wherever. He might even muster the initiative to scrawl out a note, in his own fair hand. We used to have one of these notes tacked to the squadroom noticeboard. It read: "Good By Crule Whirld." Well this is some sad shit, Marvis, you say when you get there, responding to Marvis's call. What happened? And Marvis says, She was depress. Discreetly, Marvis leaves the room. He's done his bit. What more can a man do? Now it's our turn. You glance at the corpse: There's no burn or shell wadding in the wound and the blood spatter is on the wrong pillow. And the wrong wall. You follow Marvis into the kitchen and he's standing there with a glassine bag in one hand and a hot spoon in the other. Homicide. Heroin. Nice, Marvis. Come on. Downtown. Because you're a murdering piece of shit. And a degenerate motherfucker. That's why. A homicide come dressed to the ball as a suicide: This you expect from a braindead jackboy in the Seventy-Seven. But from Trader Faulkner, Associate Professor of Philosophy of Science at CSU? Please. The smart murder just never happens. That's all bullshit. That's all so...pathetic. The Professor did it. Oh, sure. Murder is dumb and then even dumber. Only two things will make you any good at it: Luck and practice. If you're dealing with the reasonably young and healthy, and if the means is violent, then the homicide/suicide gray area is TV, is bullshit, is ketchup. Make no mistake, we would see it if it was there--because we want suicides to be homicides. We would infinitely prefer it. A made homicide means overtime, a clearance stat, and high fives in the squadroom. And a suicide is no damn use to anyone.

This isn't me, I thought. This isn't me, sitting here. I'm not around.

"Trader?"

"Trader. He was there, Mike. He was the last to see. I'm not saying he...But it's Trader. Trader owns her. It's Trader."

"Why?"

"Who else?"

I sat back, away from this. But then he went on, saying in his tethered voice,

"Correct me if I'm wrong. Did you ever meet anybody happier than Jennifer? Did you ever hear about anybody happier than Jennifer? More stable? She was, she was sunny."

"No you're not wrong, Colonel Tom. But the minute you really go into someone. You and I both know that there's always enough pain."

"There wasn't any--"

Here his voice gave a kind of hiccup of fright. And I thought he must be imagining her last moments. It took him a few swallows, and then he continued:

"Pain. Why was she naked, Mike? Jennifer. Miss Modest. Who never even owned a bikini. With her figure."

"Excuse me, sir, is the case being worked? Is Silvera on it? What?"

"I stetted it, Mike. It's pending. Because I'm going to ask you to do something for me."

TV, etcetera, has had a terrible effect on perpetrators. It has given them style. And TV has ruined American juries for ever. And American lawyers. But TV has also fucked up us police. No profession has been so massively fictionalized. I had a bunch of great lines ready. Like: I was quit when you came in here. I'm twice as quit now. But this was Colonel Tom I was talking to. So I spoke the plain truth.

"You saved my life. I'd do anything for you. You know that."

He reached down for his briefcase. From it he removed a folder. Jennifer Rockwell. H97143. He held it out toward me, saying,

"Bring me something I can live with. Because I can't live with this."

Now he let me look at him. The panic had left his eyes. As for what remained, well, I've seen it a thousand times. The skin is matte, containing not a watt of light. The stare goes nowhere into the world. It cannot penetrate. Seated on the other side of the desk, I was already way out of range.

"It's a little fucked up, ain't it, Colonel Tom?"

"Yeah, it's a little fucked up. But it's the way we're going to do this."

I leaned back and said experimentally, "I keep trying to think it through. You're sitting there kind of idling around with it--with the weapon. Cleaning it. Toying with it. Then a perverse thought. An infantile thought." I mean, that's how an intelligent infant finds out about something: It puts it in its mouth. "You put it in your mouth. You--"

"It wasn't an accident, Mike," he said, standing. "That's precluded by the evidence.

Expect a package this time tomorrow."

He nodded at me. This package, his nod seemed to say, was going to straighten me out.

"What is it, Colonel Tom?"

"Something for your VCR."

And I thought, Oh, Jesus. Don't tell me. The young lovers in their designer dungeon. I could just see it. The young lovers, in their customized correctional facility--Trader in his Batman suit, and Jennifer shackled to her rack, wearing nothing but feathers and tar.

But Colonel Tom soon put my mind at rest.

"It's the autopsy," he said.

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