

BLOOD HARVEST

BY
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A SHORT STORY

BLOOD HARVEST

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BLOOD HARVEST

T*his is Detective Second Class Michael O'Hare ... This is a test. Can everybody hear that? Good. This is Detective Second Class Michael O'Hare. I am in Interrogation Room B of the Detective Squad, Midtown South Police Precinct, New York, New York. Present are Detective Guilford, also of Midtown Precinct, Detectives Michael Bucholder and John Koenig of the 168th Suffolk County Detective Squad, Assistant Bronx District Attorney, Laura Harte, Mr. Robert J. Elias, and his attorney, Anthony Attanasio. The date is July 5, 2002; the time is 09:35 hours.*

Did I pronounce everybody's name correctly? Okay, let's get started.

For the record, Mr. Elias: the statement you're about to give is made of your own free will, without coercion of any sort on the part by members of the police department or the District Attorney's office?

That's right.

And you are making this statement with the approval of and with advice from your attorney, Anthony Attanasio; and you have been fully informed of your rights?

Can we just get on with this?

Will you please answer in the affirmative for the record?

Yes, then.

Okay, it's your show, Mr. Elias.

I guess I should begin when I started working for the school, huh?

Like I said, it's your show.

Shit!

Take as long as you want. We've got nothing but time here.

Nothing but time; I guess that's what I thought I had. I guess everybody thinks they've got all the time in the world; time to plan, time to build a life; time to reap the rewards of hard work. Then one

day it all blows up in your face and you find yourself praying for just a moment – a few seconds where your life stops spinning out of control. You're not looking for anything like happiness then; you're looking for absolute stillness – no feeling, no pain, no joy. You wish there was a valve in the side of your neck you could turn to shut everything off. I was estranged from my wife, Carol, my career was down the toilet; about all that was left for me was putting in the time. What'd I have left – another forty years? Another forty years of feeling like my chest had been kicked in, like my balls had been cut off. Really something to look forward to, huh?

Mr. Elias, if you could just move along, please.

Sure, I'm sorry; it's just hard to stop feeling sorry for myself when that's pretty much all I've been doing for the last year and a half.

Okay, down to facts. You all know how I was railroaded out of my old job. It's no secret, it was the top TV story on every metropolitan area newscast for two weeks or more; Respected elementary school teacher is accused of luring his students to his home for sex. Luring students for sex! I didn't even know the students who accused me, but it didn't matter. From the minute the story first hit the front pages, and was aired on the first newscast, I was toast. My teaching career was over; whatever chance I might have had of putting my marriage back together was gone.

It didn't matter that I was completely innocent, that the parents who accused me were caught up in a hysterical feeding frenzy. It didn't matter that I was completely exonerated. I'd been tainted with the suspicion of child molestation. My wife wouldn't take my calls. My so-called friends and neighbors would cross the street just so they wouldn't have to face me. I was fired from my job at the elementary school and my applications for other teaching positions were never answered. I was being hung out to dry for something I'd never done, and I was pissed. But more than that, I was disgusted with a society that was perfectly willing to destroy a man's life on the basis of accusations alone, even after they'd been proven false. It was the Salem witch trials all over again and it was my turn at the stake.

So there I was, alone, jobless, unemployable in my field, and the money was running out. I was about ready to take a job cooking burgers at Mickey D's or Wendy's when I came across a classified ad tucked away in the back pages of the *New York Post*:

Published Writers Wanted; Work at Home

If you are a published writer and would like to become an instructor with a nationally renowned home-study facility, please send your resume and credentials to:
Stuyvesant Writer's Institute • PO Box 119 • Ingrahm, NY 12020

I'd written a few dozen articles for education-related publications, even gotten a couple of fiction stories published in magazines before the scandal. Not exactly world-class credentials, but I figured that not too many Hemingways were applying for teaching jobs in correspondence schools. Even then, I assumed they'd reject my application like everyone else as soon as they saw my name and made the connection. But I decided to give it a shot anyway. At that point, my self-respect was already gone. I had nothing left to lose.

Either the school had never read the newspapers or Ingrahm, New York was just too far out of the loop to have paid too much attention to the story, but I got accepted. After a two-week training program, I was a full-fledged instructor for the Stuyvesant Writer's Institute, receiving assignments from students all over the country at my New York apartment, correcting them, and returning them to the school which forwarded them on to the students. I was paid by the assignment so my salary was pretty much up to me. Working at home, I could spend all day in my robe and pajamas, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes, which fit right in with my plummeting self-esteem. And I didn't have to face the possibility of being falsely accused of being a pervert by my students. I wasn't getting rich, but I wasn't getting screwed either.

My phone contact at the school was Ellen Rankin, the director of student services. Most of my students were beginners. A few had real talent, but most were struggling with the basics of spelling, grammar, and punctuation. I was to correct their work, send an encouraging letter, and hope they got better as time went by. Surprisingly, a lot of them did. I got to thinking maybe I was a better teacher than I thought I was.

Any chance we can get to the point here, Mr. Elias?

I was just getting there. Just when I thought I was getting into a groove, a funny thing started to happen. I found out that a few of my students were taking me into their confidence. Along with their assignments, I received notes telling me about their lives. They'd bitch about their jobs, their spouses, the tedium of their lives. I'd correct

their complaints for spelling, syntax, and grammar, and content myself with the fact that there were still people out there more miserable than I. That is, until I got Sue Bird's first assignment in the mail.

I remember calling Ellen Rankin as soon as I'd read it. "It's a fiction assignment, right?" she asked.

"She's talking about killing herself, for chrissake."

"There are no rules preventing a student from making up a story about suicide," she pointed out.

"Listen to this:

It all seems so hopeless. I can stay here and be beaten every couple of days in one of my husband's drunken rages, or I can take the children and leave. I know he'd find me, though; he warned me that he'd kill the babies and me if I ever left him. So there's no way out for me. Every morning, I wake up to face another day. The thought of ending it all becomes more attractive. Joe's pistol is always in his nightstand drawer, fully loaded. I can't imagine that there would be more than a fleeting instant of pain.

Does that sound like fiction to you?"

"How's the syntax and punctuation?"

"Christ! Get serious, will you?"

"Bob, if I panicked every time one of the students wrote something bizarre, I wouldn't last very long in this business," she said wearily. "If you want to send me her folder, I'll reassign her to another instructor. Otherwise, you've got to maintain some objectivity here, and treat this like any other assignment."

"Jeezus, it scares the shit out of me."

"So correct it without comment, and wait for her next assignment. If it's about something else altogether, you'll know you've worried about nothing."

"And if there isn't any next assignment?"

"We'll talk about it then."

Sue Bird's next assignment came a month later. Rather than being about suicide, it was about *me*:

"I recognized your name from the pamphlet the school sent me, Mr. Elias," her accompanying letter stated.

I just want to tell you that I followed your case closely when it was in the papers and on television, and that I always believed you were innocent of the charges against you. Seeing you on TV, I knew you were a kind, compassionate man, and that you could never be capable of exploiting children. I've dared to enclose a picture of myself that was taken two years ago during a happier time in my life. Please let me know if I've overstepped my limits. Best, Sue.

What I should have done was call Ellen Rankin and have Sue Bird dismissed as my student right then. But I didn't. The picture she'd enclosed was a snapshot of a drop-dead gorgeous blonde with sky-blue eyes and a smile that wouldn't quit. Sure, it might have been a photograph of someone else, but right then it didn't seem to matter. Here was a young woman who believed I was innocent. She believed I was kind and compassionate. Those were the only friendly words I'd heard in a long time. If she was really as beautiful as the snapshot suggested, all the better. But whoever she was, and whatever she was, I was not about to let her go.

I guess what followed was a kind of May-December relationship by mail. Don't get me wrong; I was only forty and that's not exactly ancient. She was twenty-three, living in a trailer park outside of Cincinnati, Ohio with an alcoholic husband and two children, a girl and a boy, ages eight and six. Christ, she had her first baby when she was fifteen! It was as improbable and irrational a situation as I could ever have gotten myself into, but it seemed to be just what I needed at that point in my life. Sue was an untutored child, completely open, completely vulnerable. She told me everything about her life and I responded by giving her caring advice. If it weren't for the fact that I was obsessed with her, you'd think I was her father, her best friend, or her confessor. It was an odd, yet strangely exhilarating place to be.

After awhile I started sending personal letters to her at a post office box in Ohio, rather than funneling my mail through the Institute as I did with all other school-related correspondence. I was still her mentor, correcting the work she sent to the school. But in our private letters I'd started advising her on how to deal with her unhappy marriage and children. By then our communication was becoming openly passionate. We wrote about wanting each other, about our carnal needs and fantasies. Sue admitted to having been sexually abused as a child, a pattern she had repeated without wanting to by

marrying her abusive husband. I assured her that given the chance I would treat her body with respect and reverence. I would spend every moment of our lovemaking as if I were participating in a religious ritual: every kiss would be a genuflection, every touch a prayer, every moment when our naked bodies united would be a benediction too precious to be imagined.

It was becoming clear we would have to meet.

Since she had no money and no way of leaving her children, the only logical thing was for me to go to Ohio. The plan was to meet on a weekday when her husband worked the night shift at the Proctor & Gamble plant in Hamilton, not far from her home. She would leave her children with a friend she trusted and meet me at a nearby roadhouse where we would plan the next few days. I made some last-minute arrangements, left my dog with the local dog sitter, and hopped a plane to Cincinnati with my heart pounding through my chest.

The place was called "The Waffle Shack," set back on a darkened highway about ten miles outside the city. Even with no breeze, the sick-sweet smell of fat rendering in the Proctor & Gamble plant a half-mile away flooded the area. Between that, and the persistent nervousness in my gut, I didn't feel much like eating.

"Just coffee," I told the paper-thin waitress.

"How about some pie? Banana cream's real good"

"No thanks. Does it always smell like that around here?"

"Like what?"

"You tell me."

"Oh, the plant. You get used to it." She shrugged and walked away.

I glanced at my watch: almost 10:30 P.M. With the exception of one other man seated at the counter, tall and beefy and dressed in dirty coveralls, with long, greasy black hair that hung limply beneath a tightly fitting baseball cap, I was the only customer in the roadhouse. Sue wasn't supposed to be there until eleven, so I settled in with a copy of the *New York Times* I'd purchased at the airport.

"You Elias?"

"Excuse me?"

"You're Robert Elias, Right?" The man in the greasy coveralls eased into the booth across from me.

"Do I know you?"

"No, but I know who you are." He took a folded sheet of paper from his jacket pocket and slid it across the table. Without reading its contents, I could see it was a letter from me to Sue. "Where did you get this?" I asked, nervously.

"It don't matter where I got it," he snarled. "Only thing that matters is, I got it and now I got you."

"Would you mind telling me who you are?"

"I think you know who I am, scumbag, but just so there ain't any mistake, I'm Joe Bird. That name mean anything to you?"

My heart was pounding through my chest. "Where's Sue, have you hurt her?" I asked him.

"What I do with my wife ain't none of your goddam business," he shot back.

"If she's hurt in any way, I'll see to it that the police are notified," I warned him, without the slightest idea how I might be able to find that out.

Joe Bird eyed me without answering; his narrow, cruel eyes appraising me across the table. I was everything he despised, I thought, an educated, erudite New Yorker who'd managed to convince his wife that there was more to life than living in a squalid trailer park with a repulsive drunk, keeping house for him, bearing his children, and taking his beatings. In his own brutish way I suppose he had a right to hate me, but I didn't feel at all guilty. If anything, I felt anger at being exposed and fear over how he planned to retaliate.

"What kind of name is "Elias?" Is that some kinda Jew name?" he asked.

"That's none of your business," I replied, trying to control the tremor in my voice.

"Well, you listen here, Mr. E-lias ... He spit out the syllables as if he'd tasted a bad clam. "This is the one and only time I'm gonna tell you this. If I ever see another letter from you, or hear your name, or even suspect that Sue's thinking about you, I'll beat her so bad, no man in his right mind'll ever want anything to do with her again. And when I'm finished with her, I'll come after you, and I'll kill you. You got that?"

I'm not proud of what I did. I suppose a braver man might have stood up to him, but I've never considered myself a brave man. There I was, in the middle of a strange town at night, facing a man who outweighed me by maybe fifty pounds and had just threatened to kill

me. Besides, there was nothing I could do to help Sue at that moment. Even if I'd decided to do that, I had no idea where or how to find her. The only address I had was a post office box. The smell of rendering fat filled my nostrils and I choked it back. It was the smell of my own inborn cowardice. The smell of gut wrenching fear.

I caught the next available flight back to New York, feeling powerless and disgusted with myself. My mind reeled with lost opportunities, squandered possibilities for the future. If Sue was somehow able to contact me, or even wanted to after this, I'd make certain there would be no slip-ups. There wouldn't be any attempts to meet at out-of-the way places, or to spend a few days together examining our feelings. It had gone way beyond that; Joe Bird had made that perfectly clear. If I ever got another chance, I would see to it that she was taken away from him forever.

But there were no more letters. Not even any writing assignments. Frustrated, I decided to phone Ellen Rankin at the Institute:

I asked a few inconsequential questions about billing procedures, then, almost as an afterthought; "I'm going over my files, and I see where Sue Bird hasn't sent her last two assignments. I was just wondering if you'd heard anything."

"Sue Bird ... wasn't she the one who got suicidal?"

"Yeah. It turned out she's just a better writer than I gave her credit for."

"Just a minute ... " Ellen pulled Sue's file up on her computer. "She hasn't dropped out of the course. Why don't you send a letter asking her what's up?"

"I'd just as soon not do that. Do you suppose you could check it out?"

"I guess so. But if you don't hear from her, don't take it personally. Sometimes students start off the course all filled with enthusiasm and it just wears off after awhile."

Don't take it personally! If Ellen had any idea where I was coming from, she'd have realized how impossible that was. Every day I picked up my mail with my heart in my throat from anticipation, hoping I'd see the familiar Cincinnati postmark on one of the envelopes. But it was never there. I was beginning to give up hope of ever hearing from her again when my telephone rang one afternoon:

"Bob, this is Sue," a small voice whispered.

"Sue? Where are you?"

"I'm at a phone booth, but I can't talk now. Will you be in later tonight?"

"Of course, what time?"

"I'll try to call at eleven or eleven-thirty. He should be passed out by then."

"I thought I'd never hear from you again."

"Gotta go. I'll talk to you later."

The following hours were agonizing. Waiting for her call, every minute seemed like an hour, every hour an eternity. It was almost twelve when my phone finally rang.

"How are you?" I asked when I heard her voice.

"I'll be okay."

"I was at the roadhouse, Joe was there too. I should have stood up to him, but I thought ... "

"It's okay," she broke in. "I'm glad you didn't. He probably would've killed you right there, then come back and done the same to me and the kids."

"You've got to leave him," I blurted.

"That's why I'm calling. We're leaving tonight, for good," she said in a hoarse whisper.

"Are you really going to do that?"

"I have to. He'll kill us all if I don't"

I'd heard it before. She'd threatened to leave Joe in several of her letters, and I'd encouraged her, but when push came to shove, she always backed down. Still, something told me she meant it this time.

"Where will you go?" I asked.

"I have a sister who lives not far from you, on Long Island. The kids will be safe there."

"Does she know you're coming?"

"I spoke to her yesterday. She's happy I'm leaving him."

"When will you be here? Do you need any money?" Thoughts were racing through my head. If she were coming to New York, we could be together. Maybe, after everything blew over and Joe was out of the picture for good, we could be married. Hell, I was forty and that was pretty old to be raising two small children, but I could manage it. Carol and I never had any kids; maybe that was part of our problem. Now I was getting a second chance, and even if I wasn't anywhere near ready to be a father, I had the rest of my life to learn.

"I've got enough for the plane fare," she informed me. "My sister will pick me up at the airport and take me back to her place in the morning."

"Let me meet you. I want to be there when you arrive," I pleaded.

"Please, Bob, let's not take any chances at this point. I'll phone you once we're all safe at my sister's."

"Jeez, I love you."

"I love you too."

"I'm really happy you're doing this."

"So am I." She hung up.

By noon the following day, I was a complete wreck. By dinnertime, I was talking to myself. There were a dozen things that might go wrong: Tied to him by fear and the aberrant psychosis of abuse, Sue would be unable to tear herself and her children away. Joe would awaken from his drunken slumber before they'd had a chance to escape and beat them almost to death for the attempt. Or he'd follow them to the airport and drag them off before they'd had a chance to board their plane. I envisioned his cruel eyes glaring, his mouth twisted in rage. I saw his beefy fists tearing into the delicate skin of Sue's face, her eyes swollen and discolored. But there was nothing I could do. I was as powerless as I had ever been. All I could manage was to sit by the telephone and wait for her call.

It came at 11:42 that night.

"Are you okay?" I asked, unable to hide the anxiety in my voice.

"We are now." She breathed a sigh of relief.

"Everything went off all right? Joe never saw you leave?"

"As far as I know, he's still sleeping it off."

"Will he know where to look for you when he wakes up?" The wild speculations of my past few hours had left me with a million unanswered questions. "Does he know you'd go to your sister's? Can you get a restraining order preventing him from leaving Ohio?"

"Slow down, Bob." Of the two of us, she was by far the most in control. "Everything's taken care of. We're safe here for the time being. Why don't you get some sleep and come out to see us tomorrow morning?"

"You know I can't sleep, Sue."

"I guess I won't be able to either," she admitted.

"So I'll come out there now. Christ, I've done nothing but pace the floor since you called last night. Don't ask me to wait any longer."

There was a pause, and the sound of muffled conversation. "Do you know where East Hampton is?" she asked finally.

"Sure, I've been there dozens of times."

"Dune Road?"

"Just give me the number. I can be there in an hour."

"Two-sixteen," she relayed the information. "They'll all be asleep by the time you get here, but we'll be in the guest cottage behind the main house. Just pull in back and knock on the door."

"An hour."

"See you then."

"I can't wait."

"Me neither."

I don't even remember the drive to East Hampton. Highways, traffic, streetlights, even directional road signs blurred into a phantasm of unreality: I was actually going to meet her. We were actually going to be together for the first time! I practiced what I'd say to her when we met: "Are you disappointed?" No, I didn't want to even suggest that; I was still a good-looking guy. Maybe I'd just stare into her eyes, drinking in her loveliness. "You're even more beautiful than your picture," I'd say; "more beautiful than I'd ever imagined." I knew that whatever I said, and however she answered, it wouldn't be adequate. Nothing in our vocabularies could match the sheer magnificence of that moment. There we would be: two unhappy people who'd found one another through the unlikeliest of circumstances, and who'd overcome everything to be together.

The house was directly on the East Hampton beach, as were most houses in that neighborhood. It was unlit, but that was no surprise. Sue said everyone would have gone to bed. I turned into the driveway and circled around to the back where a dim light shone from the windows of a small guest cottage. Everything was eerily quiet. Even the crashing surf a less than a hundred feet away seemed to have fallen silent as I parked the car and made my way to the front door.

"It's me, Bob," I announced in a throaty rasp when nobody answered my first tentative knock.

I knocked harder, thinking she might have fallen asleep after her strenuous flight to freedom. "It's me, Bob Elias."

The door creaked open a crack under the force of my persistent knocking, and I pushed it inward ...

Oh shit. I don't know whether I can do this again.

Just take your time, Mr. Elias.

I wasn't prepared for what I saw then. Nobody would've been prepared for it. It was like a charnel house in there. There was blood all over the place. When I got over the initial shock, I could make out three bodies: the two kids on the floor lying not far apart. It looked like their throats had been cut. And Sue was sprawled on a small sofa. I can't describe what had been done to her. It looked like someone had run her head through a wood chipper...

Would you like a drink of water?

No, just give me a minute here.

Take as much time as you need.

Okay, let me get this over with. I guess the first thing I did was check to see if they were still alive. I checked Sue's pulse first, but there was none. Same with the children. I really didn't expect anyone could have possibly survived that bloodbath, but I guess it was instinctive. I couldn't even look at Sue. The only memory I had of her was that snapshot she'd sent and I wanted to remember her that way. I didn't want my last vision of her face to be that crushed, bloodied visage staring up from the sofa. I couldn't have lived with that.

Joe had gotten to them. Somehow, he'd outwitted Sue and followed her to this place and extracted his awful vengeance, just as he'd warned me he would that night in the roadhouse. I would be next. I knew that. He was probably watching me at that very moment, savoring my horror and agony. He would come at me when it suited his purposes, but I knew it would be soon. Standing there in the middle of all that carnage, in the middle of my lost dreams, I had no good reason to expect I would ever leave there alive.

I don't remember running. A better man might have run to the main house for help, or called 911 from the cottage telephone. But, like I said, I've never thought of myself as a hero. My first conscious memory is of driving across the Triborough Bridge. That was when it hit me: I was still alive! However I'd managed it, I'd been able to escape from the cottage. I remember shaking so uncontrollably that I had to pull the car over and stop. Incredibly, there was an emergency pay phone only a few feet away. Feeling ashamed that I hadn't done it before, I dialed 911 and reported what I'd found.

True to form, I didn't give my name with the report. I rationalized that it couldn't have served any useful purpose and, in spite of my grief, I knew I'd lose my job at the school if my relationship with Sue ever got out. I drove home in a daze of gloom and self-recrimination. None of this would have happened if I hadn't encouraged her to leave her husband. She and the kids might not have had a very happy life before I entered the picture, but at least they had a life. I was responsible for their brutal murders, and I knew I could never live with myself if I didn't come clean to the police sooner or later. All I had to do was screw up the courage.

After a sleepless night, I felt I had no choice but to turn myself in. At least I could point the police in Joe's direction, provide a description, give them what little I knew about him that might help in his capture. I was standing by the telephone, ready to dial, when a TV news flash stopped me dead in my tracks:

Suffolk County police have reported finding three murdered bodies in the upscale village of East Hampton on eastern Long Island. The victims have been identified as eight-year-old Susan Thurmond, her brother Joseph, five years of age, and their nanny, twenty-eight-year-old Anna Stapleton. Susan and Joseph Thurmond are the children of the late billionaire financier, Jay Thurmond, and his wife Denise Thurmond, both of whom died in an airplane crash in 1998.

Thurmond? It wasn't processing. The bodies I'd discovered were those of Sue Bird and her two children Shawn and Joe Jr. I stared blankly at the TV screen as the story unfolded with file footage of the late financier and his wife. They had been on vacation in South America when their private jet crashed in the Chilean Andes. The children became sole heirs to his estate, estimated to be roughly fifteen billion dollars. Fifteen billion dollars? Sue Bird and her children lived in a trailer park in Ohio. They barely had the money for plane fare to New York!

By that afternoon, the story was front page in every New York newspaper. Spot news broadcasts interrupted scheduled TV programming to report new developments in the investigation. A picture was beginning to develop, and it was about as far away from what I had believed to be true as a picture could get. I bought every newspaper I could find and read every word that was printed but it

wasn't until the next day when I saw an account in the tabloid, *The National Enquirer*, that the truth hit me like a ton of bricks:

"Although Suffolk County police have declined comment, reliable sources close to the investigation report that an alleged pedophile is suspected in the grisly slayings. Letters of an explicit sexual nature have been found in the bedroom of the slain little girl, one of which has been obtained exclusively by the *National Enquirer*. It reads in part as follows:

"Dearest Sue: Know this, that a child's body is a sacred thing, and to violate it in any way is an unforgivable sin. I will treat your body as the temple it is. I will anoint it with holy chrism, and touch your young breasts, your warm, hidden sex, with reverence. Oh my baby girl; how I long to feel your naked skin next to mine. Someday, when we are at last together, I will make love to you in ways you can never have imagined possible ..."

I sat stunned, really not comprehending anything at that point. The letter was mine, word for word. I'd written it to Sue after she divulged her childhood sexual abuse at the hands of an uncle. My letter had gone on to describe the ways I would delight her with my lovemaking — nothing anyone would write to an eight-year-old girl. But there it was. Somehow the police had gotten hold of it, and somehow they'd accepted the absurd improbability that an eight-year-old child was receiving love letters from a pedophile and hiding them in her bedroom. It would have been laughable if it hadn't been so terrifying. How had that letter gotten to a child's bedroom in East Hampton, Long Island? Who was setting me up, and why?

Whoever it was must have known that I'd once been accused of sexual impropriety with a minor. It didn't matter that I'd been proven innocent. Once you're saddled with something like that it stays with you for life. Could it have been one of the parents who'd accused me, and had a grudge because I'd been cleared of the charges? Could it have been someone on the school board? A disgruntled fellow teacher who felt I'd been unjustly exonerated? Whoever, it was a psycho and I had no intention of sitting still while he stalked me. Taking only a few things with me, I left my apartment and checked into a SRO hotel on the West Side under an assumed name.

I decided to call Ellen Rankin at the school. "Can you bring me up to speed on my student, Sue Bird?" I asked, trying to sound relaxed.

There was a fumbling at the other end. "Sue Bird ... we haven't heard from her since your phone call."

"Which phone call is that?"

"On July 19, you called and asked to have her assigned to another instructor."

My mind raced backward. "I think I called because I was concerned about an apparent suicide note. I didn't ask to have her reassigned."

"Well she was. Not that it made any difference. The school never received another assignment from her."

I took a deep breath. "Look, I don't know what the hell is going on here, but I've been correcting her assignments for months now. Maybe you're looking under the wrong name."

"Sue Bird," Ellen said stiffly. "Her last correspondence with this school was on May 6, 2001. After that she dropped off our radar screen."

"Do me a favor and check it out further, okay?" I pleaded. "Maybe it's a computer glitch. Maybe somebody just misfiled her papers."

"That's not likely, but I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks. I'll call back tomorrow."

By then it was too late. When I phoned the following day, Ellen's tone was icily distant. "The police were here asking about you," she informed me before I had a chance to speak.

"Why were the police there?"

"Your fingerprints were all over that East Hampton cottage where those children were murdered. Apparently, they were on record from an earlier crime you committed."

"I never committed any crime. I was never even charged with anything," I protested feebly.

"If I were you, I'd give myself up before anything else happened to me."

"Well, you're not me!" I exploded. "And what about Sue Bird?"

"I can't talk to you any more and I'm obliged to report this call to the police." The phone went dead.

That's it?

Basically, that's it. I guess if the story ended there, it would have been only a matter of time until the police caught up with me. Outside of my fingerprints, I'd trailed bloody footprints all the way to my car, and back to the hotel. They had a half-dozen letters like that one in the *Enquirer*, each more incriminating than the last. It's amazing how cleverly I was set up, how every nuance in Sue Bird's letters was designed to dig me deeper and deeper into a hole. She'd confided her childhood sexual abuse to me, and my heart had gone out to her. Coupled with my obsession, my passionate response could be easily misread as the work of a sexual predator and that's what you guys wanted to read.

There was no Sue Bird. There was no record that she ever existed, no record of a husband named Joe who'd worked the night shift at the Proctor & Gamble plant, no record of any children. She'd vanished just as she'd appeared: a vision in my mind, someone to take the ache of unfairness out of my life. It took a while for me to be convinced I'd been had, but when the reality came crashing in, I figured there wasn't much point in living. A quick, sure bullet in the brain would be a lot better than what I was looking forward to.

Good thing you didn't have a gun.

Sometimes I wonder about that.

Okay, as far as this session goes, we're about done. Is there anything you want to add, ADA Harte?

Only that you'll receive a written transcript of this interview in a day or two, Mr. Elias. If you see anything there that's inconsistent with the testimony you'll be giving on the stand, I'll want you to call my office and tell me about it.

Is this thing off now?

Yes sir, it is.

Then will you fill me in on something, just for my own edification?

If I can.

What put you onto Ellen Rankin in the first place?

That's easy. We ran a background check on everyone who was questioned in the investigation. Ellen Rankin came up as having been issued a bench warrant in Manhattan back in the eighties. The vice cops raided one of those private sex and drug clubs that were popular back then, a place called "Cloud nine" on the upper east side. Everybody there was busted, including Ellen Rankin and her boyfriend, Clyde Ferranti, a New York City transit cop at the time. But what

caught our attention was that one of the other people caught in that raid was Rebecca Thurmond, wife of the financier, Jay Thurmond.

Well, I guess Jay didn't like the idea of his wife screwing and smoking dope with a bunch of strangers, so he dropped her like a bad investment, but he never went to the trouble of voiding his first will, which left her everything. When he remarried, I guess he'd assumed that a second will leaving his estate to his new wife would supercede the old one, and he was right. That is, until they were both killed in an air crash; then everything reverted to their two children.

But guess what? If in the unlikely circumstance that both children were to die, Rebecca still stood to inherit the whole kit and caboodle from the earlier will. Once we found that out, linking Rebecca to Ellen Rankin was a short investigative chip shot. They'd never lost touch. The two of them planned the whole thing from the beginning with Clyde Ferranti, who by then was a security guard in charge of protecting, you guessed it: the Thurmond kids. By the way, Ferranti's the guy you picked out of the photo array as being Joe Bird, that supposed husband you met in Ohio.

I guess you must think I'm pretty stupid.

No, anybody would've fallen for it. Your only mistake was not recognizing why the school hired you as an instructor in the first place. Let's face it, as unfair as it might seem, no reputable school is going to hire someone who's even been suspected of sexual impropriety toward his students. That should have tipped you off right there.

When you're in my position, you don't ask a lot of questions. I was grateful to be working.

And Ellen Rankin was grateful you came along. The fact is you were perfect for their scheme. They knew that with your background, the letters would be almost as good as a confession of guilt. They knew you'd panic when Ferranti confronted you in Ohio. They knew you'd believe Sue Bird was coming to you because that was what you wanted to believe. Like you said, desperate people don't ask a lot of searching questions.

So what happens now?

I dunno about you, but I'm going home and get some sleep. It's been a long day.

That's the end of it?"

*Unless anybody has more questions. Nothing? Okay, Mr. Elias.
We'll see you in court.*

I'm free to go?

Free as a bird.

Until the next time there's a sex crime, you mean.

*I can't promise they won't take a hard look at you. That's the
world, Mr. Elias. Sometimes it just sucks. Know what I mean?*

THE END

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