

Deadolence
A Tale of Love and Sacrifice
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"I am still of the opinion that only two topics can be of the least interest to a serious and studious mood—sex and the dead."

—William Butler Yeats

Do your ears hang low?
Do they wobble to and fro?
Can you tie 'em in a knot?
Can you tie 'em in a bow?
Can you throw 'em o'er your shoulder
Like a continental soldier?
Do your ears hang low?

—Traditional song

"If God had meant us to have group sex, I guess he'd have given us all more organs."

—Malcolm Bradbury

PART ONE. Designated Slasher

1. Special Delivery

Sheriff Dewey Blackburn had a soft spot in his heart for the week leading up to prom night.

He never told anyone, though.

Wouldn't have been professional.

As Blackburn cruised the streets of Corundum, Kansas, scanning parks and sidewalks for ne'er-dowells, he felt mighty glad that his hand gripped the tiller of the law, keeping the more deranged impulses of the citizenry in check. Corundum was a thriving town, not so small as to bore one to tears, yet not so large as to lose its charm.

In the back seat, his charges shifted.

The woman released a low moan. The prom gown into which she had been tucked—a waste of fabric, to Blackburn's way of thinking—whispered and crinkled like Christmas wrapping paper. She had been a real scrapper in the holding tank, resisting the needle with every ounce of strength.

Not so her male counterpart, some aimless drifter who stank of sewage until Blackburn's junior deputies washed, coiffed, cologned, and tuxedo'd him. Obliginglly had he hazed toward his fate, a sheen of resignation smoothed over his eyes. The blunt, ragged remnants of his earlobes betrayed the shame of his past: ducking out on his prom ("promjumping," kids called it these days), being arrested and ostracized, having his lobes crudely docked before being thrust out to fend on his own.

Along the trim-lawned street, gawkers gawked from picture windows. Blackburn idled by, casual fingers guiding the steering wheel, an elbow bent at his rolled-down window, siren quiet. But folks knew he would be out and about. This neighborhood burst at the seams with teachers, and a squad car with a drugged-out, dressed-up couple in the back and a plastic trough cinched to its top meant only one thing on prom night.

The sheriff hung a right.

A left.

Down the way, a porchlight blazed. The house's big black digits matched the address on his clipboard. Blackburn angled into the driveway and killed the cruiser.

Art teacher's residence.

Plenty of strange rumors circulated about Zane Fronemeyer and his wives. The man coaxed perverse paintings out of his students at Corundum High. Scuttlebutt had it he had entered the teaching profession for the sole purpose of being chosen. It had taken years, but the sick bastard's wish had finally come true.

Blackburn got out.

The doped-up couple had at least an hour of grog on the meter, but they'd be checking out long before *that* timer popped.

The sheriff strode up the walkway, highly tuned to the neighborhood geeks and gawkers.

He raised a warning finger to the threesome on the lawn across the street. They ducked back into their house, two scrawny joes and a fat she-bitch, all three buck-nekkid except for their lobebags. Them and their fellow rubbernecks would keep their traps shut. They always did, on account of the heap of penitentiary time they'd face if word leaked early which teacher had been chosen.

One ring. Two heartbeats. The door swung back.

"Zane Fronemeyer?"

"You're looking at him." Fucker smiled in oil. Behind him, like a matched pair of aproned bowling pins, huddled his wives, their left lobes decently bagged, their right ones chewed up more than most folks would consider proper. "You brought me a couple o' good ones, I hope."

Christ, what a creep, thought Blackburn. "Here's the paperwork," he said. "Help me with the trough."

Fronemeyer passed the bulging packet to his creamier-skinned spouse and followed Blackburn to the squad car. The sheriff reached up and slipped the knots. In the old days, the steel troughs had been gut busters. These new plastic jobbies with their squat fat legs were a hell of a lot easier on the back.

Hefting the front end, Fronemeyer led the way into his house. "Sheriff," he said, "this here's Camille. That's Hedda."

The sheriff nodded without registering which wife was which, so badly did he want this part of his prom night duties over.

In the front hall, the art teacher sported a matched set of stuffed parents, upon whom an inept fluxidermist hadn't bothered to make his sex-ready alterations at all subtle. What had been done to them was strictly against the law, but the statute was so honored in the breach that Blackburn would be laughed out of court if he tried to call these three on it.

Fronemeyer led the way to the basement steps. The air cooled as they descended.

Tweed Megrim, eighteen, naked, and brimming with anticipation straight down to her tippytoes, stepped through tickling bursts of bubbles into a steamy-hot bath.

With a wince she withdrew her big toe, then slipped it all the way in. The rest of her in an abundance of glory swiftly followed.

As the water rose to embrace her, visions of Dexter Poindexter danced in Tweed's head. At this very moment, just a few blocks away, Dex was stepping into his tub too.

No, wait.

Showers were Dex's preferred mode of bathing. He was standing beneath the punishing blast of a shower, yes that was it, his eyes shut, his mouth open against the downpour. She pictured Dex's sweet head angled right, his left earlobe buttoned cutely at the base of his ear, looking (this all in her imagination of course) like a fat blunt thumb bereft of nail and bone.

Tweed gasped.

Don't go there. In the bathroom, both her lobes were naked, as were his. On the right the friendship lobe, kissable, touchable, and viewable in public. And on the left? The secret, naughty lobe that her classmates cracked jokes about by their gym lockers.

Funny how it was okay for it to be unbagged when you were alone. And it was okay for little kids' lobes to be exposed until they grew breasts or their voices lowered.

But otherwise, only wedded twos or threes in the dim-lit privacy of their bedrooms were allowed to fondle that concealed length of flesh. Only there could it be pinched and licked and sucked so that their love partner gasped with surprise and delight, going all gooshy in the down-there place.

A devilish grin widened upon her face.

Everyone thought pretty little Tweed Megrin so innocent. Such a goody-goody.

They were right, of course. Plenty of girls at school, from all reports, were supremely slutty (Peach Popkin came to mind). And it was true that she, Tweed, had only *thought* exciting thoughts. Never had she dared act upon them.

Until tonight.

She had decided. To get Dex's motor running, she had even hinted.

If he fluttered off a choice bit of flesh for her—a nose tip, a lobe, half a nipple, something like that—if he emerged from the frenzied crowd with his miniature cleaver dripping and a special prize clutched in his hand, why then, in the dark quiet of his parents' car, she would let him touch her lovelobe through her lobebag. Maybe she would even let him brush his nose against it.

Or rub his . . .

By God, she gasped, floating up through the bubbles and exposing the tips of her nipples.

. . . rub his bagged lovelobe against hers.

Tweed panted and laughed.

Enough of that. She felt light-headed. It wouldn't do to get herself all worked up so early in the evening.

She forced herself to concentrate on the pink-sequined dress that waited on a hanger in her bedroom. On the matching lobebag clipped to the hanger. And on her soft pastel pumps.

Her dad had spared no expense in decking her out.

Why should he? There was only one prom night in anyone's life. Well, okay, if you didn't count teachers, principals, janitors, school nurses, and such. *They* had one every year.

But they were grown-ups. Odd old folks whose generation didn't matter worth a hoot.

Nope. Tonight belonged to the kids.

She and Dex would survive. They hadn't been chosen to fall beneath the slasher's knife. Some other couple had.

A full life lay ahead for Dex and her, and cruel fate would not step in to cut it short.

The day before, Dex bragged that he would punch the slasher's lights out, he would defend her, if by freakishly bad luck they had in fact been chosen. But Tweed put a finger to his lips and told him, "Hush up now, we won't be."

And she was right.

There was no question.

Tonight would be the most wondrous night of their lives. And many more nights of wonder lay before them.

Downstairs, her dad was singing.

"Take 'er easy," grumbled the sheriff, his shoulders stooped as he footed his cumbrous way down the stairs. The back end of the trough was wide and unwieldy.

Fronemeyer, struggling with the front end, nodded and slowed.

Doggy smell. A high soft whine like the plaintive *scree* of a clothesline pulley.

In the dim spill of light, the pup looked pitiful. Rib-winded, sick-eyed, underfed. It strained at its tether, eager for companionship.

But the sinkpipe held. Puppy claws scabbled ineffectually on concrete. Light brown whips of turd swirled up from the floor by the dryer. A long-handled axe lay across the washing machine lid.

Blackburn's eyebrows rose. "You're practicing on a pooch?" he asked.

"There's no law against it." Defensive scum. "I used my own money. At the pound. They'd've snuffed him anyway. They'd've entered him in a dog-cracking contest, sure as we're standing here."

"Maybe so." The sheriff's tone betrayed him.

"I'm planning to work up. Most first-timers do, don't they?"

Blackburn's ears burned but he said nothing.

When they had set the trough near the drain in the floor, Fronemeyer arched his back and let out an exaggerated groan.

The sheriff glared at him and headed for the stairs. "Let's bring 'em in."

Upstairs, Fronemeyer's mates were draped in wifewear ten years out of date. Red-pink checks. Frilly aprons.

Blackburn nodded at them. He passed an end table that held the school's instruction packet, doing his best to ignore the fluxed elders in the vestibule.

It was a relief to hit the air outside. But the art teacher dogged his heels, putting in one small-talk goad after another.

When they reached the cruiser, Blackburn opened the back door. "I'll hand you the guy. "Walk him to the basement. Me and his date'll be right behind you."

The woman was propped against the man, both of them doped to the gills. It was a deal and a half to set her straight and wangle the man out, his ungainly shoes struggling for balance as the sheriff propped him up.

Fronemeyer, his eyes a gleam in the moonlight, staggered beneath the passed burden. Shouldering one of the man's arms, he poured soused-relative, coaxy soothing into his ear and steered him toward the house.

The woman groaned. Blackburn shifted her out, her gown rustling like wads of packing. A prom pass was pinned to her dress. At her side hung a miniature cleaver and a small Futterware container, green-lidded.

Authenticity, they said.

As far as Blackburn was concerned, it was nothing but a waste of taxpayer money and a huge boondoggle to the Futter family empire.

The woman reeked of perfume. She had a nice shape to her, fleshed-out and curvy, twenty-five tops. Were it not for the freakish dye-job done on her exposed friendship lobe—pale green from some fringe group's absurd protest against the sexification of the lobes, as if God had intended anything *else*, for the love of Christ—the lawman would have thought her attractive.

"Where am I?" she ventured, slow-tossing her head, unable to open her eyes.

"Just a little further," he said, guiding her past Camille and Hedda. "There's a nice couch for you downstairs."

Yeah. Old. Dusty. Discolored foam poking out of threadbare fabric. But in her state, she wouldn't notice. And in nine-ten minutes tops, to judge from the art teacher's zeal, she'd be way past the point of noticing anything.

Again the dog.

Scree of a clothesline pulley.

Fronemeyer panted at the couch. Snailtracks of sweat eased down his cheeks. The seated man's head lolled back, his mouth agape as if preparing to break into snores.

Blackburn placed the woman beside her date. Whipping the receipt from his pants pocket, he pushed the axe aside and smoothed the paper on the washing machine lid. On it he scrawled the time of delivery and his signature.

"Sign here," he said, "and here."

"No problem," said Fronemeyer, taking up the pen. The ratswim of hair on the back of his hand Blackburn found repulsive.

When he was through, the sheriff tore off the pink copy, left it on the lid, and clipped the pen to his shirt pocket. The mutt's soft high whine had gouged a killer headache into his skull.

"It's done then?" asked Fronemeyer.

What was this citizen's problem?

Did he burgle beyond the Maximum Swag Rate? Did he run red lights? Clearly he felt guilty about *something*.

One could never tell about folks. What went on inside them was a mystery.

"A deputy'll be by in the morning to pick up the corpses. All three. Leave 'em here in the trough. We do autopsies, so nobody'd better try any shenanigans—"

"Oh, we'd never—"

"—not before, not after. No diddle, no fondle, no lobeplay. Am I clear?"

"We're not the sort to—"

"*Am I clear?*"

"Yes, sheriff." A nasty glare. "You are."

"I'm going to check these two out myself." He pointed a harsh finger at the teacher, feeling bombs land and detonate, bullseye, bullseye. "The dog's part of it too. I'll be scrutinizing Fido here *real close*, you hear what I'm saying?"

"Yes, sir." Deflation.

"I'll see myself out."

And that he did. Fronemeyer's wives, in the midst of a fondle on the upstairs couch, bade him good night. The blonde one mumbled it around a nipple.

Blackburn's squad car, even with a linger of the drugged woman's perfume, hugged him like home. Firing it up, he headed for Corundum High and his duties there, the lockup, the speech.

If there was any justice in the world, he would never have to see Zane Fronemeyer or his wives again.

Shyler Bleak and his wife Bitsy sat on their bed, propped up against pillows. Their cardigans matched, their black patent leather loafers had been spit-polished to a bright sheen, and their fingers were lovingly entwined.

The TV on the dresser claimed pretty much the Bleaks' entire attention.

Ceremonies at the Shite House.

Down the hall there sounded a steady blast of shower water.

Gerber Waddell was Corundum High's feeb head janitor. Shyler and Bitsy Bleak housed, clothed, and fed him. Tonight, of course, he would be very much on duty.

The Bleaks got plenty of mileage out of the community for their sacrifices on Gerber's behalf. Store discounts, pleasant ego strokes, sympathetic words of encouragement and looks that said better-you-than-me.

But right now, on the heels of applause for the puppet president's introductory remarks about the nation's need for divine guidance, the Right Reverend Sparky Reezor bounded up to the podium and seized the lectern with his huge hands as if to rip it clean off its base.

"Mister President, distinguished guests, and all o' you sinners out there in this great nation of ours," intoned the burly churchman in his deep bass voice. "Got-*dammit!* Let us pray!"

He bowed his great white head. His eyelids clamped down tight, as if doing so tuned his mind to the eternal frequency.

Behind him, a TV camera caught Cholly Bork, crack puppetmaster and the brains—such as they were—behind the President. His masterful hands worked an elaborate airplane control. He mince-walked President Windfucker to a plush chair and angled his head as though he were listening in respect. Then that head bowed. The President's delicate oaken fingers steepled piously betwixt chest and belly.

"Dear God-in-heaven," thundered Sparky, "once again, as the year rolleth around like that vast immovable boulder (ha! but we know better, don't we, my friends?) that shut air and sunlight out of Thy Son's tomb, into our hearts and minds and pleasingly proud bosoms hast Thou rolled the marvel that is prom night.

"We in these Demented States of America are blessed to live in the greatest got-damned country on the greatest got-damned planet in this triple-got-damned wonder we fondly call the universe, my fellow citizens, ain't it a piece of work? And we have Thee, dear Lord, to thank for that.

"JEEsus—when He roamed the earth with those penetratin' eyes o' his—tugged with a harsh hand upon his friendship lobe and condemned us sinners, every one.

"JEEsus, the only man unfallen, swept His glarin' gaze, those condemnatory orbs whose sting we know so well, across the race of the fallen and He shouted, 'Let the little children suffer.'

"Got-dammit, let them suffer."

Shyler Bleak and his wife whispered the words along with Sparky Reezor.

"And JEEsus the Lion, He ramped back upon His great hind legs, His thighs tawny and muscular and slick with sweat. Across the tenuous fabric—that warp and woeful weft, my friends—of our smug complacency, JEEsus the Lion clawed bloody rents, roaring out: 'Cursed be the meek, for they shall eat camel dung.

"Cursed be the poor, for money, the measure of all worth, proclaimeth their unworthiness.

"Cursed be the peacemakers, for war alone has the power to set rods of steel in backbones that are otherwise fa-a-ar too bendable.

"Cursed be the cowards and the whiners, for rage and fear alone nourish the human heart.

"Lord, I'm not gonna recite every one o' Your glorious be-RAY-titudes, much as I'd like to. No! For we are gathered here this evening to celebrate the annual sacrifice of our young.

"Here in Washington and aw-w-l up'n'down our eastern shore, from the great state o' Maine to that blinkered backwater we call Florida, senior proms are just itching to begin. Our brave boys and girls're champin' at the bit like the prize studs and fillies we've raised them up to be. Their hooves are digging up divots from the dirt and flinging 'em skyward, as they wait for the starting gate to clang on back and for their death knell to sound.

"So I'll simply say THANK YOU, LORD, for the wisdom of our forefathers. THANK YOU, LORD, for this marvelous rite of spring, established in antiquity upon our great got-damned land to honor the spirit of your Son. For His rage and hatred, we give abundant and abiding thanks. His ferocity we worship. We strive to emulate it. Every year on this aw-w-l important night, we seek to renew that living dogma, so as to kickstart our nation out of the dying days—out of the morally suspect doldrums—of winter and on into the rejuvenatory times of spring and summer.

"All of us, old, young, and in-between, bow our heads. Some small number of those heads shall roll, never again to rise upon the youthful necks that bear them.

"Their bodies shall, by their sorrowin' school chums, be fattered, so that reminders, dried and preserved, disseminate across the land and on into the future of this great and pow'ful nation. Mementos of prom night. Mementos too of those brave young souls, unaware—until the abrupt unlooked-for fall of that short sharp shock o' death—that they have been so chosen, that they have been so honored.

"Honored may they be.

"Honored, their parents.

"And may vast new hordes of talented seniors be unleashed upon this land, upon an economy in dire need of their skills, upon this close-knit community of sinners known as the Demented States of America.

"Got-damn, got-damn, in all manner of ways I say, got-damn!

"In JEEsus' name. Amen."



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