

Three-time nominee for the Edgar Allen Poe award



RUSSELL HILL

the EGRET

*"I was so engrossed by *The Egret* that I read it in one straight sitting. It's brilliant, concise, poetic, gritty and deceptively simple with all the dark undercurrents of anger and nostalgia." - Max Jourdan, London filmmaker*

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CHAPTER 1

The tide was out, leaving a stretch of mudflat from the edge of the sandy beach out to where the water began. It was silent, six o'clock in the morning, the motel behind me quiet, no one else up, only an occasional crow squawk from across the highway. Nothing in front of me except the bay that lapped at the edge of the mud, forty yards off. A breeze ruffled the water beyond the edge.

An egret came toward me, low, its wingtips touching the surface and then it splayed its wings, came upright, and settled its long legs into the water. It folded its wings and remained motionless. I watched it. Its shadow against the mud was like two apostrophes touching each other, a mirror image. It did not move. Then, slowly it bent its head, canting it to one side, looking intently at something beneath the surface. Something down there had moved, and it waited, head bent, still, motionless as sleep, motionless as death. And it was death for whatever had moved. Some tiny fish or a mollusk or a mud worm. Something that was alive and would not be alive in a few moments. I waited to see the egret strike. But it did not move. It maintained its motionless presence, waiting, waiting. I realized that it could wait longer than I could. And it came to me that the thing that was the target had no idea that death was poised above it.

The worm continued to work its way through the mud or the tiny fish finned searching for something to eat while the thing that would eat it waited patiently for the right moment.

And that was it. Be the egret. Be the creature that was silent and motionless, and when it struck the strike would be deadly and quick and what I needed to do was to practice patience. Practice waiting. Practice holding myself in readiness, waiting for the right moment. There was no point in rushing in. If the egret moved, the worm would suddenly bury itself, the minnow dart away beyond the reach of the sharp bill. Wait, I told myself. Wait for the moment when he was unaware that I was there; wait until he moved as carelessly as that tiny fish.

The egret lifted one leg, a millimeter at a time until the foot was clear of the water, and then the egret placed the foot in the water, lowered its leg until it was no longer bent, and it was a few inches forward, head still canted, eye seeing the thing that would be snatched up in a single thrust. I could hear that crow calling out again. I did not move. How long would the egret wait? Probably longer than I could stay motionless, watching.

I heard a noise and turned. A man approached, an older man, slightly bent, and he held a leash and a dog, a small dog that stopped, bristling when it saw me. It barked several times and the man told it to be quiet, pulled at the leash. I looked back at the egret, but it was gone.

“Up early?” the man said.

“Yes, it’s quiet at this time.”

“Sorry about Ralph. He’s friendly, but he has to announce himself.” Now he was close enough so that the dog came toward me, tugging at the leash, and it barked again.

“He won’t bite,” the man said.

How often have I heard that one? He won’t bite and the child stretches out a hand to pet the dog and suddenly the teeth snatch at the outstretched fingers. “But he never does that!” the owner protests while the child howls, clutching its hand. This dog sniffed at my shoes, and I thought for a moment that it would raise a leg and piss on me, but it waited, I suppose, for me to pet it.

“Sweet dog,” I said. I like dogs. This one reminded me of a dog that we had, my daughter’s dog, a feisty little schnauzer, but when it got old and deaf and its hindquarters didn’t work right it began to lash out at people who approached it from behind. It couldn’t hear them and it lashed out at the unknown. Eventually it got to the point where it couldn’t function all that well and I took it to the vet. “I can stitch it together,” he said. “It’s unraveling, but you won’t be doing it any favor if you have me do that “

“So it’s come to the end?” I asked.

“I can do it for you,” he said.

“No, I need to do this myself.” By then my daughter was dead, and Trigger was the only thing left alive that was connected to her, if you discounted me and my wife, who had left me three years before.

“The humane society does it,” he said, and I drove out there and filled out the papers and sat with Trigger in the lobby and then a nice young woman came out. She reminded me a bit of my daughter. She took Trigger and said, “It won’t be long,” and then she came back with the papers and I went out to my truck and sat behind the wheel and cried. I cried for the old dog and I cried for my daughter.

CHAPTER 2

Detective Robert Fuller came to the house late in the afternoon. When he knocked on the door I was having my second vodka over ice, a ritual I have every afternoon. I knew Fuller from the accident. My daughter was coming home from an afternoon at Heart's Desire Beach on the Point Reyes peninsula and when she came around a curve, there was the Ford Expedition, over the center line, cutting the corner and it struck her car a glancing blow. The huge SUV hardly wavered, but my daughter's little car was airborne, sending it pinwheeling into the edge of Tomales Bay. Those were the words of the truck driver who saw the accident. "The car pinwheelled and landed on its roof in the edge of the bay," he said. "I stopped, but the car that clipped her just kept going."

Fuller was with the Marin County Sheriff's Department and had been in charge of the investigation and he hadn't found the car or the driver. All he had was her death. And that had destroyed my marriage. I was devastated by her death, a bright girl in her freshman year at SF State, on the way back from a Point Reyes beach after a day with friends, and some sonofabitch came around a corner and clipped her car, sending it pinwheeling into the bay. Pinwheeling. A Fourth of July verb. It was the verb that the truck driver who witnessed the accident used on the police report. She drowned in the upside down car. My whole life pinwheelled as well, and eventually my wife grew tired of my grief.

We tried counseling but there was this big hole in my life and I must confess that I was no good at the group sessions at the Catholic Social Services, couples arranged in a circle trying to deal with the deaths of their children. I was not good at it and Andrea gave up on me. I didn't blame her. The sessions were designed so that each couple shared their story. There were couples whose child had overdosed on drugs. One couple described an automobile accident, a teenage driver going too fast over White's Hill, lost control, plunged over the edge of the road and the car rolled until it was a crushed wreckage, the occupants dead.

The facilitator of the group was a middle aged woman with a ball point pen in the bun of hair that was tightly wound over her forehead, and she kept saying that it was good to talk things out. Put your grief into words, she said. But I could not put words to my daughter's death. She had hung, trapped, upside down while her car sank in Tomales Bay, and the water rose until it enveloped her. I could imagine her lifting her head as the water rose and when I was asked how my daughter died, I could only say that she had drowned.

My wife began to correct me, saying, No, it was not an ordinary drowning, but before she could explain, I rose and left the room.

I had nightmares in which I dove into the water to pry open the door of an upside down car, hearing my daughter's voice bubbling through the water. My wife moved to the guest room. She said I shouted in my sleep, thrashed so much that I struck her.

Things came back to me in a rush at odd times of the day. I spent time in my garage making birdhouses. She loved birds and kept a log of birds that she had spotted. I still had that little black book with notations: *A cardinal! So red that it was unreal. San Anselmo Park, October 16, 5:00 p.m. How wonderful!*

I sometimes pictured her on the dock at Bodega Bay where I had taken her to fish for perch when she was not yet a teenager, her face lighting up when a wriggling perch came up to the railing. Soccer games. I took time off work to watch her run down the field, long-legged, a fluid movement and when she went off to SF State, I drove her to the dorm, carried her box of things up to her room, helped her to move in, met her roommate, a black girl from Compton. I bought her the Toyota and she brought her roommate to the house for dinner, a sweet girl who played soccer as well, but was not good enough to be on the SF State women's soccer team.

I remembered times when she was out late in high school and I had met some of the friends who hung out with her, some boys that I had reservations about, and I waited up, listening for the front door that told me she had made it safely back to the house. My wife was asleep. She'll be all right, she repeatedly told me.

Fuller shook my hand, and I asked if he wanted a coffee or a drink.

"What are you drinking?" he asked.

"Vodka over ice."

"Not my style."

"I've got some scotch."

"That would be nice!"

"To what do I owe this visit?"

I poured him a scotch and he took a sip, then placed the glass on the coffee table.

"I've found the sonofabitch who clipped your kid."

"You found him? You're going to arrest him?"

“No. I know who he is, but I haven’t got enough evidence to arrest him.”

I was stunned.

Fuller took out a small notebook, laid it on the coffee table and opened it.

“That was three years ago,” I said. “I thought you gave up on it.”

“No. That’s a fault of mine. I struggle along, and some cases solve themselves and some of them drift along without a clue to help solve things, and I’m like some old dog chewing on a bone. I’ve been doing this twenty-five years. It doesn’t get easier, it gets harder.”

“So what happened this time?”

“You remember that we put out an alert to body shops about a Ford Expedition that might need body work on the right side?”

“But nothing came back.”

“That’s right. But last week there’s a guy doing an audit at Gotelli’s Body Work in San Rafael, a routine examination of the books for taxes, and he comes across our BOLO. And apparently nobody did anything with it. So here he is, with all these old records, and he’s curious, which is a stroke of luck for me, so he checks it out and sure enough there’s a black Ford Expedition that comes in two days after the accident date, and it gets fixed and the sonofabitch comes in and pays them in cash and drives off. There’s no insurance, the name he gives them turns out to be a phony and the address in Vallejo doesn’t exist. But of course the body shop takes down the VIN number of the car, that’s routine. And a check with the DMV tells us who bought the sucker. It’s only a year old when it gets fixed, so chances are that this is the original owner.” He traced something in his notebook with his index finger.

“Earl Anthony Winslow. 221 Carmel Drive, Ross, California.”

“That’s an expensive address.”

“Unless he lives in the chauffeur’s quarters over the garage.”

“So you go there and you arrest the sonofabitch.”

“No. What I have is a three-year old car repair. He’ll claim that he didn’t want the accident to go on his insurance, which is why he paid cash. I can’t connect that damage to your daughter’s car. The damaged parts are long gone. He’ll make up some cockamamie story about why he used a false name. There’s nothing there that I can use to make a direct connection to your daughter’s death.”

“But you think it’s him?”

“Two DUI convictions. A summer cottage in Inverness, not two miles from where he sideswiped the kid’s car.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I have two daughters. One of them is married, two grandkids. The other one is a doctor. She spends time in Third World countries fixing the bodies of poor kids. When they were growing up, I sweated out every Saturday night. They were both a bit on the wild side, parties and nights on beaches with a keg of beer and boys that I would just as soon have arrested and I lived in fear that something would happen to them. But nothing did. Sometimes I think it’s all just a matter of luck. What I know is this.” He paused, closed his notebook, picked up his glass and sipped at the scotch. “If some motherfucker sideswiped the car of one of my daughters, and pitched her into the bay and kept on going, I would have hunted down the asshole and I would have put a bullet into his head.”

“Are you saying I should find this prick and kill him?”

“I’m not saying anything of the kind. I’ll continue to work on the case, but it’s a cold case, and my boss won’t be happy if I spend too much time on it. I’ll find that truck driver, if he’s findable, and ask him some more questions. But it’s unlikely that I’ll find anything that concretely ties Earl Winslow to this. What you do is your own business.” He sipped at the scotch again.

“You’re sure it’s him?”

“I’m going to talk to him. Ask him about the repair to his car. Ask to see the car if he still has it. See how he reacts. It’s been three years. It will be interesting to see how he reacts when I show up with questions.”

“And you’ll let me know?”

“You’ll be the first person I talk to.”

I could feel the blood rising in my neck, feel a sudden agitation in my body. When I looked at my hands, I could see that I was claspings and unclaspings them, forming fists.

“Maybe it’s all just coincidence. Maybe the damage to his car has nothing to do with that hit and run. But the truck driver, according to the field interview, was sure it was a black Expedition. Driven by a man. And two days later a black Expedition gets fixed, paid for with cash, a phony name and address. Rich bastard who has a house out at Inverness, and a record of driving under the influence. I don’t like coincidence. In all my years, I’ve never found one that held up.” He finished his scotch.

“Thanks for the drink. I’ll be in touch. Don’t do anything foolish.”

I stood, shook his hand. His face was lined and he looked at least fifteen years older than me. Which put him in his sixties. He looked tired.

“Thanks,” I said.

“I didn’t give you anything,” he said. “Maybe some grief. Like I said, don’t do anything foolish. Maybe I should amend that. Don’t do anything. I’ll be in touch.”

He left and I stood looking at the closed door. I would find 221 Carmel Drive in Ross. I would find Earl Anthony Winslow. I would see what he looks like. I would find out all I could about him. And if I were convinced that he was the one, then I would do something. Something foolish, no doubt. But I had spent the last three years during which there was never a day when I didn’t think about the death of my daughter. Fuller had no idea what his news had done to me. It had struck a match to the fuse.

CHAPTER 3

On the anniversary of my daughter's death I take a room at the Tomales Bay Resort and I visit the spot where her car landed. The resort is a quiet one in the spring. Summer is a different matter. The Lodge has a small marina and the crowds come to their boats. The sailboats are all center boarders now that the bay has silted up as much as it has. At low tide the boats in the marina sit on the mud.

My daughter and I came out here several times. I rented a small boat and we sailed toward Marshall, the rising afternoon wind heeling the boat so that one rail was almost in the water. She loved to hike out on the high side, yelling at me to come closer to the wind, drop the rail even farther. "Come on Dad! Bury it!"

That's where I was this weekend. I could imagine Earl Anthony Winslow driving his Ford Expedition out the two-lane road toward his vacation cottage. Traffic came quickly around the curves. The road was narrow. Every once in a while a big tanker truck came, either from Point Reyes Station or back from one of the dairy ranches scattered on the peninsula. Some of those ranches dated back to the 1850's.

I drove out to North Beach on the western side of the peninsula. The parking lot is close to the water, and the beach was empty. I walked down through the soft sand to stand at the edge of the water. The surf was its usual maelstrom of surging water. There was nothing between this beach and Japan. The beach shelves off dramatically, the sand dipping and the waves tumbling over each other, smashing up the slope, one on top of the next, the following waves surging over it all. It is a mass of churning, angry water, a constant roar, and people have died on this beach. The unwary Iowa tourist who wants to dip his or her feet into the Pacific comes down to the edge and suddenly a sneaker wave engulfs them to their knees and their feet slip in the dissolving sand and they are pulled under and when they surface, the water is a hundred feet deep, the mad cauldron of surf between them and the beach, and the undertow drags them out further and within minutes the icy water immobilizes them. Anyone foolish enough to plunge into the surf to save them drowns, too. One story was of a man's dog that got dragged into the surf. The man went after the dog, was dragged out, and drowned. 'The dog made it back to the beach.

I could imagine Earl Anthony Winslow in that surf. I could imagine watching him flail his arms, try to swim, only to be tumbled by the violent water, and he, too, would drown, just as my daughter did when her car

pinwheeled into Tomales Bay. Perhaps Winslow would be foolish enough to come out to North Beach to watch the surf and perhaps he would be foolish enough to decide to get his feet wet and perhaps he would, like that unwary Iowa tourist, find himself sliding into the churning water

I found a log half buried at the high tide mark, and sat against it, letting the log take the brunt of the wind at my back. I watched the surf. It did not change.

I drove back into Point Reyes Station and stopped at the Old Western Saloon. It's one of those old fashioned small town saloons, and the men at the bar were workers from the dairy ranches and carpenters and the drivers of trucks for Toby's Barn, hauling sand and hay into Petaluma and Santa Rosa and San Rafael, and taking milk from the scattered ranches to Strauss Dairy where it would become butter and ice cream and milk for breakfast cereal. Nothing fancy about the Old Western. Beer and shots and a young bartender in a tee shirt and Tule elk antlers on the wall. The bang of cups and the calls for liar's dice resounded.

"Scotch on the rocks," I said, pushing a five spot onto the bar. He poured, no shot glass, a generous pour, gave me back a dollar. I pushed it back at him, and he pocketed it. No small talk.

The single main street through Point Reyes Station is Highway One, the highway that follows the California coast, and it was clogged with bike riders in spandex outfits, a few motorcycles and a stream of cars and pickups. The Bovine Bakery down the street had its usual cluster of people at the door. It had been a favorite of my daughter's. She and her friends came out on Sundays, had a pastry and a coffee, walked their dogs, went out to Limantour Beach or Heart's Desire and came back sunburned and wind blown. She had done it since she was a sophomore in high school. And when she turned sixteen and got her license, she became one of the drivers. Two years later she pinwheeled into Tomales Bay. And now I knew who had caused her to do that.

The drive back into Fairfax goes either through Samuel P. Taylor State Park, filled with redwoods, or up to Lake Nicasio and past the Rancho Nicasio bar and restaurant. This time I stopped there, went in and sat at the bar and ordered a BLT. The walls were filled with the heads of deer, a great ugly wild boar and another Tule elk, this one staring benignly down at the people eating their hamburgers and fries and BBQed oysters. I had another scotch and tried to imagine the death of Winslow. I could shoot him. Put a gun to his head and blow his brains out. But that was risky.

Police would investigate a death like that. He could have an accident, his

car could plunge off the road but I didn't know how to engineer that. It was the stuff that you saw in TV shows. He could get poisoned, but that meant somehow getting at what he ate or drank. Or, and as I imagined this afternoon, he could go for a walk on North Beach and slip into the surf. And that would be the perfect death. A man who was taking a walk on a dangerous beach. A beach where people had died. A misstep and he would be found several miles away, washed up on the South Beach, and his car would still be in the North Beach parking lot where he had left it. And he would drown too, just like my daughter. He would find the water take him, try to breathe the heavy stuff, watch the water rise over him, know that he was dying, see the opaque world through the water and know that he was in the wrong element, an air-breathing creature who was trapped in the sea. And, like the young woman hanging upside down in the car, he would wonder why his life was ending too soon.

It required planning. Somehow I had to get him out there. Somehow it had to be in his car. And somehow I had to get myself back to Fairfax or at least to the Tomales Bay Lodge without anyone knowing that I had been involved in his death. I would be like the egret. I would wait for the right moment. I would wait until he was swimming beneath my beak, unaware that I was poised to end his life.

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