Practicality

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Detective Marshall stood in the doorway to the apartment, staring the fresh corpse in the eyes. It was something he couldn’t do at first, when he was still a rookie. He still couldn’t do it a few years after that. But during one case he had forced himself to. It was impractical, he thought, to avoid the eyes of the dead, especially if he was going to be exposed to them often. Once he did this he became, as far as he was concerned, a veteran FBI agent. He figured most of his colleagues now, some with 25 years field experience, hadn’t done it, could never or would never do it. It wasn’t really their fault, they were just impractical, he thought. Det. Marshall made sure at an early age to fully understand his profession, what it truly means for someone to be dead. The first few times it was disturbing, returning the gaze of a motionless figure who just hours earlier had been breathing, thinking, living. But that was years ago and now it was easy for him, as morbid as that sounds.

Det. Marshall was a practical man, always had been. He was an only child from two working class people. His mother had a variety of blue collar jobs; his dad was a construction worker. Not really an interesting or fun job, but a necessary and practical one. He was told as a boy that knowledge was extremely important, so he studied. And studied. He had no time for parties and gatherings. Not even friends, really. He had friends, but they were not very close, they weren’t like him at all. They would spend money frivolously, pull risky stunts, and basically just make impractical decisions. So he focused on school and was outstanding in all of his classes. Even college, the Great Defeater of scholastic warriors, was conquered. He loved science and math. There was no situation that could not be calculated, no outcome that could not be predicted. He also became interested in psychology and law. Psychology because he wanted to know why some people acted the way they did, and law because he believed in the law. That is how he got into criminal justice and profiling, and he was good at it. So good that the F.B.I. brought him on right after he had finished graduate school; that’s where he met Sara.

He actually hadn’t tried to court her, but she liked him, for reasons she didn’t understand (and neither did he, which kind of irritated him). He never really had a girlfriend of any kind, so they
dated for awhile and eventually married. It is kind of sudden to marry your first girlfriend, but it was the practical thing to settle down and have a family. A few years after his marriage both of his parents died. His mother of lung cancer, his father of a stroke. A year later, his son was born, John. Then, when his son was about seven, Sara just up and left. She said she was tired of him, of everything. She divorced him, took their child and moved to the other side of the country. He was angry then, he didn’t understand what was happening. There was no good reason for her to leave. He provided for them, he had never cheated on her. He loved them, as far as he was capable of it. He just didn’t get it. He tried to stay in touch with his son, but as time wore on it became too impractical to do so. Now he only saw him maybe twice a year, and talked to him a handful of times. But he still loved him and thought about him, and his wife leaving him perplexed him to this very day.

The apartment he was standing in now was the typical apartment room, moderately priced and small, but cozy. It was ground level, probably chosen for this reason as it was easy access, no climbing involved. No bars, and the complex was not heavily guarded. In fact it was very peaceful looking in the morning light. It was a Saturday morning, around 10:40 A.M. The victim had been found a couple hours ago by the landlord when he came to check on him. Apparently every Saturday the victim would get up early and talk with the landlord over breakfast before he headed off to the gym. The victim had told the landlord that he really needed to go to the gym every Saturday and gave the landlord permission to go in and wake him up if he was ever running late. So it was that the landlord happened upon the victims’ body, face down, perforated it would seem, blood trails dried and hardened like magma. He was running late this morning. It would later be found out that he was stabbed to death with various pens and pencils. Graphite broke off in some of the holes and stopped the blood flow like corks. Ink had mixed with blood to give things a very metallic, shiny brown. It was, in every sense of the word, gruesome.

Det. Marshall had been there since about 10:00, surveying the scene, making observations, running scenarios. He was now waiting for the local P.D. to bring him all the information they had collected so far. He had already ruled out the landlord as a suspect. It was a practical answer, but the man seemed genuinely dis-
traught and shocked at what happened. As Det. Marshall sipped his ever-present coffee, a young local officer approached him from behind.

“Detective Marshall,” he said, “here’s all the info we’ve collected this far, sir.”

Det. Marshall took the small bundle of papers and began to leaf through them: “victim, male Caucasian, 5’11”, age 25, living alone. No prior record. No complaints from landlord or employer. Friends and family knew of no one who disliked or begrudged him. Neighbors said he came home alone last night. Victim was stabbed repeatedly with pencils and pens. Evidence indicates that the victim’s wrists and ankles were bound while this occurred to prevent escape and the victim was gagged. Then, after death, presumably, the ties were removed and the body was taken from the site of death and placed in another room, sprawled on the floor in a random fashion.” This was not a very practical way to murder someone. “Yep,” thought Det. Marshall, “fits the profile.”

‘Fit’ wasn’t quite the word. ‘Resemble’ would be better. This murder resembled the ones in the profile only in that it was very bizarre. To the citizens, and most police officers, the murders seemed unconnected. Each victim was murdered differently, none of them were related in any way. The victims’ possessions were broken or strewn about, but nothing, as far as investigation could find, was ever stolen. There was no apparent motive. There were never any fingerprints or hair follicles or anything that they could really use to maybe get a lead on any suspects. If it was the same, singular murderer, it was obvious that he had some knowledge about how to keep himself off of the radar, it wasn’t just some Joe off the street looking for revenge. On the surface they simply looked like different, random murders.

The murders started in Sacramento, California. Then one in L.A., then they moved northward up the coast. Then in Washington, in Idaho, down in Texas; two in Arizona. They dotted the country like drops of paint flicked from a brush. For over two years the drops accumulated, taking their places on the canvas. At first, Det. Marshall wasn’t even involved in the case; he hadn’t really gotten involved until about a year after the first murders. He had been in California on a case; some drugs were reported to be coming in by ship that night. He happened to overhear some officers at a precinct talking about a handful of unsolved murders. “Morons,” he thought, “they’re probably just missing the practical
answer." He stopped over in Idaho and met a colleague at a particularly odd murder scene. Housewife, mother of three, burned repeatedly with an iron. Being the man he was, in the profession he was in, he couldn't help but notice things, make inferences of his own. In Texas another colleague asked him to look over a "strange" murder case he was working on. A boy had a bike chain rammed down his throat. In Arizona, some friends of the family told him of some "horrifying, perplexing" homicides. Every time he heard a story like this he remembered. He remembered bits and pieces and, being the man he is in the profession he was in, started to put them together. He went back and got copies of the old case files. He checked out other precincts that lay in between to see if they had anything similar. He saw, knew somehow, that these murders were by the same person, and now he was determined to catch him. He slowly convinced his superiors to give him some people and let him work on this case. After all, they were practical men, and they knew that Det. Marshall was good at his job. He had a gift for seeing things that others could not, profiling the criminal mind, connecting the dots when they weren't all that visible. It wasn't a gift, not to him. It was simply the outcome of analyzing a situation effectively and making the correct choices. Now those choices had led him here, on the verge of catching this murderer; he was practically sure of that.

Det. Marshall stayed on the scene for about another hour and then made his exit. He pulled out his cell phone and called his people. "Yeah, this one fits the profile, it's definitely our guy. No, it's fresh, he's most likely still somewhere in the city. Tell everyone to keep their positions and get ready, we get him today." There would be nothing 'unsolved' or 'perplexing' about these murders after today. Once he knew it was the same person, it was easy to profile him. They have mannerisms, fall into patterns that one could practically predict.

Det. Marshall had his team survey the surrounding cities and towns for reports of suspicious persons or stolen cars, and they found a couple of promising leads. He wouldn't be in town long and was almost certainly staying at a motel, unless he had family or friends here. But the way this guy traveled and did business, Det. Marshall could tell that he had no family or friends.

He slipped the cell phone back into the pocket of his gray suit. It used to be blue, a light blue, but it had since faded away. He bought it the first day he started at the F.B.I. and it was his
one and only suit that he always wore. Not that he was superstitious. He was just practical. The suit still fit, he took good care of it, and there were no major damages or stains on it, so why get a new one? Whether he knew it or not, the suit was just like his eyes. They used to be blue as well. But now when people looked into them, they swore up and down that they could see gray. Like some heavy cloud in his mind was distilling their pure color. A cloudy mirror that constantly reflected back things he did (or didn’t do) into his thoughts. If you were to compare his two eyes side by side, you would see how a person changes, ages. The fire, the drive in the Blue Eye; the hardship and knowledge in the Gray Eye, akin to the young king who rules by force, only to become the old king who rules by compromise.

Det. Marshall spent the rest of the day checking posts, doing paperwork. He was waiting for that one phone call to tell him it was over. He was not anxious for it; he knew it could be days, even weeks, before a call like that comes through. So he bided his time. After the paperwork, he found a little gas station to do his ritual. He went and bought a lottery ticket. He did this everyday, but he never told anyone. He felt too embarrassed. He knew he probably wouldn’t win, but he could not help himself, it was something he had to do. It was something he didn’t understand. He did not go to casinos, they were too impractical for him (or he was just too afraid because he might lose control). But there was something about putting your trust, however small a part, into the random. To blindly jump into the unknown future; leave it up to someone else for a change. It was intoxicating, awe-inspiring and fearful at the same time, as if he was at the edge of an infinitely high cliff, looking down, not wanting to fall but wanting to know what was down there, to break away and be free.

After his ritual he wanted to relax, so he went to a bar to grab a beer. He drank to relax, not to have fun. He knew what too much could do. Even so, as he was drinking, his thoughts began to wander. These were sporadic thoughts and he did not like it when this happened. It had happened before. It mostly happened when he was drinking. He began to think about Sara, to rack his brain for an answer as to why she left. “WHY?” he asked himself.

“She just did,” came the answer. “Sometimes things just HAPPEN.”

Suddenly a lock was loosed and memories and ideas and thoughts all came rushing to the top of his head, eager for free-
dom. “I should have spent my allowance on that nice bike. Why didn’t I take Jerry up on his offer for a road trip? I should have just walked up to Mary, grabbed her and kissed her right there! I should have gone cruising with Jimmy and his pals. Why didn’t I just buy that boat?” I wish I could have told my father I hated him before he died.” The thoughts raged against his sensible half, fighting and clawing for light. His head began to spin and reel from the blows. He stuck his hand out to steady himself, and he accidentally knocked one of the empty beer bottles over. It landed on its side and began to spin in cheap mockery of his head. He stared at it.

And then a voice, not his yet in him, started speaking. “Wouldn’t it be interesting if whoever that bottle happened to stop on had to pay me fifty bucks? Or had to quit their job? Or had to...die?”

He audibly groaned and got up to leave, he felt sick to his stomach from the beer (wasn’t it the beer?) and decided to go back to his hotel. As soon as he returned he fell into a dark sleep that swallowed him. The next day passed much like the previous one. More waiting. More work. Another lottery ticket. No bar tonight, just a quiet evening in the hotel room.

Then it happened. His cell phone rang. “We’ve got him down at the precinct, sir.”

It was about midnight when Det. Marshall walked into the precinct. He headed straight for the interrogation room. He walked in to find two officers standing in front of a table, with a middle-aged man sitting behind it.

“Sir, we were just about to start. We caught him at one of the hotels we were staking out,” said one officer. “He was snooping around. He had a knife on him.” The officer handed an evidence bag containing a rather large steak knife. Det. Marshall played with it for awhile.

“Who are you?” he asked. No answer. “What were you doing? Have you ever been to California, Idaho?” Still nothing. “Answer him, dammit!” the younger officer broke in.

“Pick a number,” the man replied.

“What?”

“Pick a number, one through ten.”

“Listen, this is no time for your bullshit.”


“Fine, whatever. Three.”

“Nine.”

“Hmph, you were closer. My name is Philip Smith, and yes, I’m the one who committed the recent murders here, and probably the ones you’ve been thinking about for the last two years. I used to be a police officer in Georgia, but that was a long time ago.”


“I let go. I decided to liberate myself. Sometimes the most rewarding freedom is giving in.”


“However. Roll of a die, flip of coin, random pick. Sometimes I would go into a bar and play a little game of ‘Spin the Bottle.’”

Det. Marshall’s grey eyes grew a bit darker when he heard that.

“Why did you do it?” asked one of the officers.

“No reason, really. They got the bad pick.”

“What do you mean ‘no reason’?! There has to be a reason, there is a reason for everything!” The man flinched then, like he had been struck, and grew enraged.

“IS THAT SO?! Tell me, what was the REASON my only son died in Desert Storm?! What was the reason my mother was diagnosed with cancer out of the blue?! My wife exercised and took care of herself her entire life. She died of a heart attack at thirty-two. WHAT WAS THE FUCKING REASON THERE! ?!” His hands were clenched and he had tears streaming down his face.

He took a breath and continued. “I’ll tell you the reason: there IS no reason. There is nothing. In my line of work, I’ve seen so many people die for no reason. Things just HAPPEN.”


“You can plan, and practice, and calculate, and be practical all you want; it doesn’t mean shit. There is no control, only chaos and unrest and disorder. Happenstance is the way of all things. Everyone in this world is aimlessly trotting down a road that is so fickle it can change direction with the slightest wind.” He took another moment to calm himself completely. “I thought I would just help things along, that’s all.”

Det. Marshall felt the lump in his throat expand. He was scared. Not of this man, but of himself. He could see himself now. As if his grey eyes had translocated out of his body to in front of him and now every idea or thought that they reflected back he
could fully see. In a way this man was beckoning him. Calling to him. Wanting him to break through the falsehoods of it all, see the truth. And Det. Marshall wanted to go. Wanted to so bad! He almost did right there...but he regained himself. He didn't understand what was happening. He felt weak. He needed to leave.

“I,” he started, “I'm going to go back to my hotel, start a report. You two hold him, check his story, make sure he is who he says he is,” but Det. Marshall knew in his heart it was all true.

When he reached his hotel, he just stood outside the vending machines, thinking. All kinds of thoughts racing, slamming into one another, disintegrating and rising as a new thought. It was so quiet in that hallway that he could hear every synapse in his brain fire. An elderly woman approached one of the machines. She scrounged in her pocket for change and the sound of the coins scraping together was like his brain and skull creating the most intense friction. Each PLUNK! of the coin was the loudest thought he had ever had falling into the abyss of his dark mind. The woman's candy bar then became stuck, and she starting banging on the machine. She started shaking it, shaking it so violently that it was shaking him, and Det. Marshall felt like he would unravel right there and turn to mush when he realized it was not the woman but his cell phone that was shaking him. It was in his pocket, on vibrate. He had turned the ringer off when he went to the precinct. He slowly regained himself and took it out. He had just missed their call, but whoever it was had left a voice mail. He listened. A woman was sobbing on the other end.

“Oh God, God, honey it's Sara. Oh God. He's dead. Dead. John is dead! He was hit by a drunk driver! Please honey! Please call! Oh God!”

Det. Marshall practically died right there. He was gone. He just stared off into space, like he was waiting for something to happen. His brain kept repeating “WHY, WHY, WHY” and he looked catatonic. Then he was brought back by the loudest noise he had ever heard. A cracking and then a great breaking and smattering of glass. He looked ahead and saw that the man in the mirror, the man reflected in his grey eyes, had broken through. He grabbed Det. Marshall, not in a violent way, but by the hand, the way an adult leads a child across the street. Det. Marshall accepted it, almost as if he had been searching for it his entire life. He reached into his other pocket – he had brought the knife with him. He removed it from the bag and looked over at the elderly
woman.

“Come,” said the Mirror Man, “we’ll just help things along, that’s all.” Det. Marshall grabbed the woman by the mouth and let the blade slide over her throat. The cold steel was warmed in her blood. He didn’t know why he was killing her and he didn’t care. It wasn’t that he enjoyed it; he was just practical.