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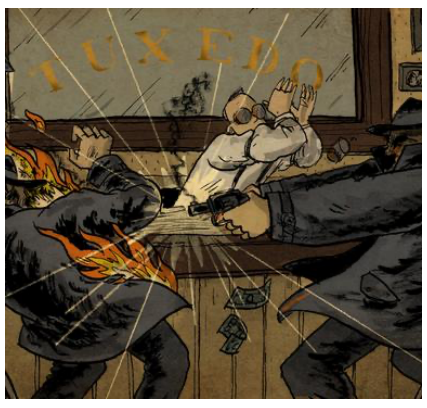

MURDER AT THE TUXEDO

The summer of 2005 is the worst time in my life. My landlord decides to sell the Boerum Hill house I've rented an apartment in for sixteen years, and then—in the aftermath of arguments about where to move—my wife suddenly walks out on our marriage. In the midst of a ferocious heat wave and at the peak of one of New York City's most inflated housing markets, I trudge across Brooklyn searching for a rental I can afford on my own, on a freelance writer's budget. One tiny apartment's only window looks out on a grimy airshaft. Another is a dark basement below the office of a doctor who practices adolescent gynecology.

The asphalt is so hot that it sticks to my shoes. The date when I have to leave

my old apartment looms closer and closer. I'm panicking that I'll end up homeless when a miracle occurs: I stumble across a funky, eccentric Park Slope realty office where a petite, friendly French woman tells me that she has the perfect solution. She drives me to Ditmas Park, a surprising, little-known neighborhood full of grand old Victorian houses, and she shows me a large ground-floor apartment. It features a front porch, a big back patio, stained-glass windows, even a chandelier. And here's the miracle: the price is seven or eight hundred dollars a month below market value. She says that the landlord lives out of town and his brother manages the property. The whole thing seems too good to be true, but I follow the proverbial advice about gift horses and sign the lease.

Two days before I'm scheduled to move in, I learn why the rent is so cheap.

I ask the broker for the keys so I can clean the place up. At the house, I introduce myself to an upstairs tenant. He's a single guy about my age at the time, 44. I ask what the landlord is like.

My neighbor gives me an odd look. "You mean you don't know?"

"Don't know what? All I know is that he lives out of town."

The tenant grimaces. "Well, he does. He's upstate. In prison."

My heart plummets. I've barely managed to survive a horrendous summer and I'm desperate for a little peace and calm. "What's he in for?"

"He killed his wife."

I can feel myself go pale, but I manage to ask two more questions. "Where did he kill her?"

"In your apartment."

"When?"

“Seven months ago.”

The news would be a shock for anyone, but it has special resonances for me. Not only am I in the middle of a painful divorce, but I’m the author of four novels about a Brooklyn homicide detective. I’ve just signed on to live in a crime scene.

* * *

I stand out on the patio under a broiling sun and wonder what the hell to do. If I had found out about this earlier I would probably have ripped up the lease and run, but I have only two days to get out of my other place and can’t face any more apartment hunting.

I only want one more detail. “What room did it happen in?”

When I learn that it was the bathroom, I’m a bit relieved; at least it wasn’t the room I’d have to sleep in every night.

My broker is as appalled to learn about the murder as I am, but even if she had known the apartment’s secret she would not have been obliged to tell. New York realtors don’t have to disclose the history of such ’stigmatized properties.’ The principle is plain: *buyer beware*.

* * *

I move in.

I’m not superstitious, but several friends advise me to burn sage to clear away bad spirits. (Evidently, native New Yorkers have a protocol for such situations.)

The first couple of weeks are unsettling. Not only do I have to adjust to sleeping without my wife, but I lie in the dark wondering what actually transpired in that little room just five feet away. I’m still roiling with grief and

resentment in the wreckage of my own marriage, and pondering such aggression doesn't help.

Over time, I begin to grow accustomed to my new home. I set up my office in the big middle room with the stained glass windows. While I write, dreaming up fictional homicides all over south Brooklyn, I do my best not to imagine the real killing that took place a few feet from my desk. Even so, the bathroom—walled, incongruously, in black and green Art Deco tiles and silvery disco-era wallpaper—is where I shave every morning and brush my teeth every night, and it takes a while before I stop looking for bloodstains.

One night, though, I'm woken in the wee hours by a repeating clanking from the direction of the bathroom—it sounds like the chains of Jacob Marley's ghost. Heart palpitating, I get up and tiptoe across the hall. It takes me a moment to realize that I'm only hearing the basement furnace kicking on.

Another eerie moment: for the first time, I follow the steps down to the dark basement and one of the most desolate sights I have ever seen. I click on a dim bare bulb, which reveals that the entire space is filled with a waist-high sea of furniture, clothes, children's toys, hair dryers, and *Little Mermaid* and *Finding Nemo* DVDs, all tossed there to clear my apartment for rental. My landlord, I will soon learn, had two daughters, aged three and fourteen when he killed their mother. They were in the house at the time.

I try to imagine how powerful a rage a person would have to be in to do such a terrible thing. I have my own reasons to think about anger. I consider myself a cheerful guy, and my wife and I got along peaceably for most of our time together, but when we hit our rough spot, tempers flared. I remember one argument during which I suddenly felt like the Incredible Hulk—I saw red, shouted, slammed a door. Yet I never came close to physical violence.

I wonder why my landlord did.

At first, I don't want to know anything more about the murder, especially not gruesome particulars, but curiosity creeps up on me. In time, and with a little effort—a nervous Internet search, a few questions over a beer with my neighbor, a visit to a library newspaper archive—a picture inexorably emerges, detail by graphic detail, like a crime scene photographer's print in a slow developing bath.

* * *

My landlord, an immigrant from Jamaica, was thirty-nine years old at the time of the killing. He and his wife, who was the same age and hailed from Barbados, bought this big house for $325,000 back in 1999. The man was not some sort of career criminal; he had a full-time job as a supervisor for a beer distributor, and his wife owned her own beauty parlor (which explains the hair dryers and salon chairs heaped in the basement).

My neighbor rarely heard our landlord raise his voice; after the killing, a coworker wrote a pre-sentencing letter of character support; and the defense lawyer was quoted as saying that "he got along well with everybody. Everybody felt he was an easy-going guy."

And yet, the man and his wife had argued, and the police were called to their home several times. After talk of a divorce, my landlord moved to the third floor. Late on the evening of January 21, 2005, something very bad must have been going on inside his head: he cornered his wife in the bathroom, bashed her four times with a brick, and stabbed her in the head and torso.

Right after the attack he called one of her sisters and told her what he had done, and he called the couple's live-in nanny, who was asleep upstairs along with the children. Then he took off. By the time the paramedics arrived, it was too late to save his wife. At 2:06 a.m. she was pronounced dead.

The story of that fateful night doesn't end there, but it isn't until a year later, when I come across an old newspaper story, that I learn the extraordinary next installment. Distraught over what he had done, my landlord jumped into his 1998 Lexus, wearing only his underwear—I suppose he must have stripped off his bloody clothes—and sped off into the night. Six miles away, near the Belt Parkway, he saw a fuel tanker parked at a gas station and decided to end it all. Spurred, perhaps, by the thought of fireballs on TV shows, he floored his car and slammed into the truck—which didn't explode. The tanker leaked two thousand gallons of gas and the crash just mauled the man; he ended up in the Riker's Island jail infirmary with a shattered hip and other severe injuries.

Another part of the picture emerges when I read that my landlord has finally appeared in court. Though he was charged with second-degree murder—as well as ramming the tanker and endangering lives in the gas station—his lawyer argued that he had acted in a state of "extreme emotional disturbance." He pled guilty to first-degree manslaughter and was sentenced to eighteen years in prison, where he now resides.

There is no question about who committed the crime, but for me, the killer's identity remains a mystery. Was my landlord a "monster," as his wife's relatives testified, or a regular person who committed one sudden crime of passion?

Given certain circumstances, could *anyone* "just snap"?

* * *

Naturally, I think of writing up my wild New York apartment story, but there's a catch: I don't have a lease, so I'm afraid that a published article will get me kicked out of my new home.

For five long years I sit on the story of the killing in my apartment. It's hard

to ignore the irony that the tragedy has still provided a bonus for me. I have a huge, cheap apartment, with a whole big extra room to write in. And I do—three more novels (about fictional homicides) and a nonfiction book about the hard lessons I learned from the collapse of my own marriage.

As the years pass, the house suffers a severe lack of maintenance. The roof leaks, leading to a little waterfall in my bedroom closet every time it rains; a family of raccoons moves into the crawlspace above my kitchen; the chimney begins to tilt at an alarming angle. The tenants—myself, my neighbor upstairs, and a very nice young Japanese family on the third floor—make do as best we can, but the front steps crumble, porch floorboards cave in, and an overhanging section of the roof collapses in a snowstorm. The place begins to look like what, in fact, it is: a haunted house.

In the daytime, I work on new novels. At night, as I lie in bed, I think of my landlord, upstate in his prison bunk. In my writing life and personal life, I'm fascinated by what makes people tick. (Myself included.) I've spent countless hours trying to write complex, believable fictional characters, and also struggling to make sense of my divorce. How did two well-meaning people, so deep in love, manage to go so wrong?

I have to admit that I feel a strange bond with my landlord, a man I've never met.

* * *

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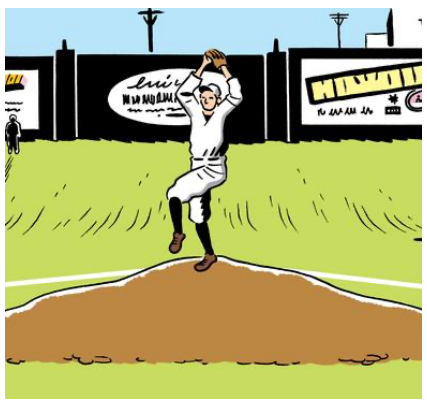

THE MAN WITH THE KILLER PITCH

While I'm writing my crime novels, living in that strange apartment, and recovering from the end of my marriage, I attend talks at a local Buddhist center and try meditation. Something I read by Buddhist teacher Noah Levine, who spends some of his time counseling prisoners, sticks in my mind. "Some *actions* may not be forgivable," he wrote, "but all *actors* are. For the actor, the person whose own suffering has spilled onto other people, there is always the possibility of compassion. There is always potential for mercy toward the suffering and confused person that hurts another."

And I *do* feel a little bit of compassion for my landlord, this man who, in one wild fit of jealousy and rage, managed not only to snuff out a precious human life, but to ravage the lives of many others, including his children and himself. It must have been bizarre for him to have his whole life reduced to one raw label: *killer*. I presume that his suicide attempt indicated some capacity for remorse.

* * *

One day, a "For Sale" sign sprouts on my front lawn; some legal process has been resolved and the late wife's family has decided—without any warning—to sell the house.

As a tenant, I'm in a weird limbo. But as a writer, all of a sudden, I'm free to publish my tale.

I realize that if I want to find out what made my landlord tick, I can simply ask him. I start thinking about arranging an interview, in hopes he might share his thoughts about what he did. A writer friend who has made such prison visits is dubious. "What do you think you're going to get out of talking to him? He's gonna tell you how he got religion. He's gonna tell you how his wife's head 'accidentally' hit the sink."

I press on. It's surprisingly easy, via the Internet, to find my landlord's new maximum-security address. Despite a visceral repulsion, I draft a short, neutral note explaining that I'm a writer living in his former home, and asking if he might care to discuss why his life took such a drastic turn. I stand at the mailbox for a minute holding the letter, wondering if I really want to do this.

I drop it in.

Several weeks go by. I'm rather relieved to get no reply. I go out of town for a few days; when I come back, there's an envelope waiting for me, postmarked from the Five Points Correctional Facility. I stare down at my landlord's neat, all-capitals handwriting and I'm stunned: all of a sudden the situation becomes shockingly real. This is no fictional bad guy I'm making up here. The hands that wrote this letter did nasty things with a brick and a knife.

"No promises," my landlord writes. "No guarantees." He says that due to prison regulations I cannot send him stamps. He asks to see my resumé and orders "Do Notdiscuss 'me' by mail." Due to prison regulations I can't call him, but he explains how to set up a phone account he can use to call me, and he closes with a Bible quote, a drawing of a heart, and the motto "One Love."

I'm shaken, and take a while to respond.

Finally, gathering my courage, I send the resumé and a couple of my newspaper clips. I apologize for the delay, saying that my elderly parents had been experiencing some medical problems (which happens to be true).

And then, because I've managed to make contact, I pitch the story to one of the top editors at a prominent magazine. This famous publication has featured some of journalism's titans, and stories printed there often lead to book and movie deals. I say that I plan to include a scene of me driving upstate to interview my landlord in prison, to finally sit down across from

the man so we can stare each other in the face. I can't help thinking of Truman Capote and *In Cold Blood*, and what that book did for Capote's career.

Almost immediately, I get a reply from the editor—and a lucrative contract.

I'm troubled about the fact that I'll soon be profiting from someone else's tragedy, yet I'm also thrilled. This could be the break that rescues me from crappy part-time jobs, and changes my life forever.

* * *

Fearing imminent eviction, I move out of my apartment into a new one down the street.

I don't order a landline from the phone company, but then I learn that prisoners are not allowed to call cell phones. In order to pursue this story, I have a new line installed. I write my landlord to say that I've complied with his instructions and ask him to call me any day between noon and three.

* * *

And then something deeply frustrating happens: *nothing*. As time passes, I stare at the deadline typed into my magazine contract. Once I was afraid to hear from my landlord; now I grow panicked that he won't respond.

I have a special dedicated phone sitting on my desk that reminds me of a hotline to the Kremlin. Only one other person has the number. Day after day, I stay home so I can answer it. When I have to use the bathroom, I move it within reach so I won't miss my landlord's call.

It doesn't ring.

I stare at it, and keep picking up the receiver to make sure it works. I try to

keep busy with other writing—another novel about a homicide—but I grow increasingly distracted. One morning while I'm sleeping, the phone rings. I jump up, flooded with adrenalin.

A nasal woman's voice: "Hello, Margie? I'm calling from Dr. Wegman's office about your appointment."

Two days later, the phone rings again, giving me another near heart attack.

A telemarketer.

When I'm not waiting for The Call, I go to the Kings County Supreme Court and peruse the case records. The police report is eerily matter-of-fact and sparse, as in the way it describes the evidence: "A knife, a brick, a jacket." Looking at newspaper archives from the day after the killing, I find—under the typically subdued tabloidheadline "BERSERK 'KILLER' HUBBY"—a stunning photo of my landlord's crumpled car wedged under the fuel truck, and a picture of the man himself, lying prone, his face contorted in a rictus of pain as the paramedics stretchered him away.

I call the prosecutor at the Brooklyn D.A.'s office, but the man refuses to talk. Even so, I soon uncover a possible trigger for my landlord's lethal rage. As good evidence for the six degrees of separation theory, I find out that the wife of a friend of mine knows a woman who knew one of the victim's best friends. This woman tells me that she and the friend discussed the victim's crumbling marriage just hours before the killing. She says that my landlord's wife—who was then separated from him, though they still lived in the same house—had planned a date for that evening, and that the friend was concerned for her safety.

This is something I want to ask my landlord about, but he doesn't call.

One month to deadline.

I develop insomnia, partly due to the heartburn that has begun scalding my chest. I come to a bitter realization: if I were writing a novel, I could dream up an exciting dialogue with the killer, but my ability to finish this story is completely dependent on the whim of one bored man in a prison cell. I've been expecting that we might engage in a sort of cat-and-mouse game as I try to extract the truth from him. As his refusal to call me lengthens, I start wondering who the cat is.

In a perverse way, I almost admire my landlord's resistance. Trapped in a cage and forced to surrender all personal power, he's seized back a tiny shred of control. I want to unmask and reveal him; he's preserving the only thing he still owns—his own mystery. I spend a lot of time staring at the telephone and cursing him, yet how can I fault him for that?

* * *

I turn to my more experienced journalist friend for advice, and he steers me to one of the most famous magazine pieces of all time. Hired to profile Frank Sinatra in 1966, Gay Talese did his best to interview the man, only to be stymied by excuses at every turn. Finally, he decided to write the profile *around* his subject, interviewing other people to create a portrait titled "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold."

I decide to follow suit and do everything else I can to rescue my piece, in case my landlord never calls.

One thing I realize is that, while I've been obsessed with what went on in my landlord's head, I've been completely neglecting his victim and her family. I obtain a transcript of the sentencing hearing, to which the dead woman's relatives traveled from all over the country. I read about her sister's scream of disbelief when she received my landlord's late-night call, and about her elderly mother, so traumatized by the death that she had never even been able to speak of it to her surviving children. The victim's brother, an attorney

who is now raising her children, testified to a history of domestic abuse. He argued that the fact that her husband kept hitting her with the brick (not to mention the multiple stab wounds he is alleged to have inflicted) exemplified a "vicious and animalistic nature." They all asked that my landlord be locked away for as long as possible.

The thirty-eight pages revealed a legacy of pain and nightmares, of desperately required therapy, not only for the victim's children, but for her siblings and *their* kids. As one brother put it, "All the candles in the world cannot illuminate the darkness that has been thrust upon us."

The most chilling testimony came from the victim's teenage daughter. She talked about how her mother will never attend her wedding or bond with her future children. She called her father a monster, and said, "Somebody who is insane enough to kill the mother of two children in the same house where they are sleeping deserves to be put in jail for life." She concluded by expressing a recurring, tormenting thought: "If my sister and I were sleeping down there [on the first floor], what do you think would have happened to us?"

I agonize over whether I should contact the family directly. Do I have the right to stir up those raw feelings again, years later? In writing novels, I can say whatever I want about my fictional characters without risking anything more than a bad review. Here I would be impinging on real lives. The thought of calling up the woman's relatives makes me sick.

Several friends suggest that I rethink my reluctance. What if the dead woman's relatives see my piece and are angry that no one offered them a chance to talk? Shouldn't they have the right to choose? The deciding moment comes when I talk with a reporter friend whose younger sister was murdered. Based on her own experience, she tells me that the family might actually welcome a chance to unburden themselves of some of the

desolation in their hearts.

I'm queasy about intruding, but I use the Internet to find the victim's cousin, an assistant professor now living in the Midwest. She tells me that she never took to her relative's husband, and felt that he didn't respect her. She describes the victim as a vibrant, gregarious person, devoted to her children, eager to keep in touch with her large extended family, passionate about her craft as a beautician.

Finally, she recalls the traumatic funeral: "I wanted to remember my cousin as she was. She took great care of her skin, her face; she always encouraged me to wear make-up because she said it protects your skin. I couldn't bear to see her lifeless, made-up by someone else, hair done by someone else, not looking like herself."

* * *

RELATED STORY

CONFESSIONS OF A SUICIDE SURVIVOR

It's heartbreaking to see how many shock waves rippled out from one dark act, but my main question remains unanswered: why would a human being commit such violence? My landlord's own testimony at the sentencing doesn't help. He proclaimed remorse, but did so in a crafty statement that echoed his defense that he had not even been fully conscious while committing his crime. "I took responsibility for my actions," he said, "once I was informed by my family and my lawyer of what happened."

I write to him again, asking him to call. I don't mention the magazine contract. I've never fly-fished in my life, but I understand the basic principle: the sport derives from the thinness of the line. If you yank too hard, the filament—that tenuous connection—snaps.

Soon, a note from him arrives, enclosed in a religious greeting card. The bulk of it, written on yellow legal paper, is his weird response to my comment about my ailing parents. "Tomorrow is not promised to any man (person). Therefore, family comes first in the here and now . . . Let the every details of 'them' write sweet memories upon your concious [sic] and subconcious [sic] being, that will permeate spiritually to your core. Every movement of their facial features in a smile. . .The taste of a loving kiss. The smell of love as they hold you in a warm embrace . . ." He goes on in this pseudo-mystical vein for a two full pages, but offers no comment on his own situation.

He requests a photograph of me and finishes with another command. "Slow D-O-W-N. Things move very slow . . . more relaxed. . .up here. (This is not N.Y.C.)" He draws a smiley face.

* * *

Prison must be profoundly boring, and it occurs to me that—for the sake of a little entertainment—my landlord might be willing to drag out an unrevealing correspondence for months, or even years. With my deadline rapidly approaching, I decide that I have no choice but to push him for an interview. I tell him about the magazine contract, and try to convince him that this is his chance to tell his side of the story. When I don't hear back for a while, I think I might have pushed too hard. Just in case, I write up an interview-less version of the tale, my "My Killer Landlord Has a Cold."

A week before the deadline, another envelope finally arrives. My landlord apologizes for the delay, explaining that he misaddressed his last letter.

Drawing another smiley face, he explains this slip by saying, "Sigmund Freud is always right." He includes a note card of an owl in winter, in which he offers a terse, unexplained refusal to agree to the prison visit: "MY APOLOGIES. NO COMMENT."

* * *

The jig is up. Truman Capote's legacy is under no threat from me.

Stubbornly refusing to surrender, I decide to give my piece one last shot. I reread my landlord's final note. Intriguingly, he included a quote from Charles F. Haanel, a financial self-help author whose most famous book, The *Master Key System*, was published in 1912. It reads, in part, "It is the few who know that the things which they see are only effects and understand the causes by which these effects were brought into existence. When the thought has been trained to look below the surface, everything takes on a different appearance."

It's odd—my landlord won't talk, but he seems to be telling me to look beyond the obvious facts of the case. I can't help thinking of that when I stumble across a newspaper article that quotes David Adams, a Cambridge-based psychologist and the author of a book called *Why Do They Kill? Men Who Murder Their Intimate Partner*, for which he interviewed thirty-one killers in prison and identified several profiles. I reach for the phone.

When I speak with Adams, he describes the most common profile, and I realize that I might have fundamentally misunderstood my landlord's crime. These men, Adams says, are not normal people who lose their heads due to one abnormal circumstance. "The media talks about crimes of passion," he tells me. "I found that most of these guys had been possessively jealous from the *beginning* of the relationship—and with previous partners."

More than half of Adams' killers witnessed domestic violence as children. "Men who grow up with abusive fathers at first tend to be very fearful, and protective of their mothers," he tells me. But then, around adolescence, "they tend to dissociate from the weak parent, almost as if angry at the mother who failed to protect them. They overcome their fear by taking on the persona of the person who seemed to be in control."

Batterers often appear likeable, even charming, to everyone but the women they abuse. Surprisingly, they tend to be very emotionally dependent on their partners. In fact, they often believe that their partner has the power over *them*. As children, they learned that their attachments were extremely insecure; as adults, they strive to dominate and hold on. But they encounter a big problem, according to Adams: "They push that person away, and they have to keep upping the ante."

And they do—until one final desperate act: "Some of them said that they had in effect lost the partner that they fought to control, and the only thing left was to kill."

For years I've been thinking that my landlord's suicide attempt proved that he was capable of remorse, but Adams says that though thirty percent of domestic killers follow their homicides by taking their own lives, their suicides often just reflect their essential narcissism. They're mourning their own losses, rather than what they did to someone else.

I can't say for sure that I've discovered what was going on in my ex-landlord's head when he committed his crime, but I've learned what can motivate men to perpetrate similar acts. They brutalize women because—caught in a terrible cycle of victimization and abuse—they're desperate to relieve their own pain.

On deadline day, I email my story in. In a kindly worded response, the editor informs me that without the prison interview, he can't run it. (But he mails

me a kill fee.)

* * *

Back in 2001 when my first novel was published, I gave a reading in a mystery bookstore. I asked the owner how many of the thousands of books on the shelves contained a killing.

"Almost all."

That's pretty weird, if you stop and think about it. Here in the West, we want to think about death as little as possible. We worship youth and beauty, spend billions to stave off old age, and tend to finish our lives hidden away from the public eye. So why is our pop culture so rife with guns and murder?

Partly, it's laziness. It's easy to pump up superficial drama by having characters shoot each other. But there's more to it. One of the most profound books I've ever read is *The Denial of Death*, anthropologist Ernest Becker's 1973 meditation on the roots of human civilization. He argued that many of our social and cultural institutions arose in response to our awareness that we have to die. Religion and art and the accumulation of wealth enable us to believe in varieties of immortality; war-making enables us to fantasize that we'll be spared if we project death onto others.

Crime novels and "true crime" stories play their part in this denial. Killers embody the thing we fear the most, and we get to see these agents of premature death caught and convicted—or killed themselves. Their punishment allows us the fantasy that we can win out in the end.

Essentially, like most mystery novelists, I've told the same tale: a tidy world is thrown into chaos, and then some lone sleuth figures out what happened so he or she can restore order. Thriller writers jeopardize the lives of their protagonists, then allow them to triumph and survive. Within the pages of

such books, we get a chance to play out a game that soothes our minds on a primitive level. The stories trigger our mortal anxiety, then deliver relief. Through this vicarious magic, we assure ourselves that we don't have to worry—that we are, ultimately, safe.

Likewise, true crime stories are supposed to provide a sense of *closure*. My problem is that I can't find any such thing. I've come to realize that even if I could go see my landlord in prison, even if I could grill him for months, he might never allow me an honest view into his mind. Whether his temporary insanity defense is true or not, he has a vested interest—looking ahead to his first parole hearing in 2020—in maintaining it.

* * *

I walk by my old house. The "For Sale" signs are gone and a new owner has brought in contractors to fix the crumbling porch and the holes in the roof, to make the place look charming again, as if nothing bad ever happened. (Human lives come and go, but real estate lasts forever.) But no one can restore the world that once existed there.

I walk on, leaving the old house behind. Compared to wrestling with a real-life killing, writing about fictional homicides now seems like a piece of cake.

This sad story will never release its terrible grip on the victim's family, but I can already feel a loosening of its hold on me. The more time that passes since I lived in the old apartment, the more this becomes just a wild New York story for me to tell at dinner parties, the further it recedes from a real splash of red against green tiles, from a woman's terrible cry on a cold winter night.

* * *

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* * *

Gabriel Cohen *is the author of six books; has written for the New York Times and many other publications; teaches writing at Pratt Institute; and is about to teach a course in writing crime fiction at the Center for Fiction's Crime Fiction Academy in NYC.*

Jessica Bal *hails from a two-stoplight town in Massachusetts and now resides in a city with too many lights to count, where she produces media for an arts education organization and looks for any excuse to write, photograph and film stories that she's curious about.*