

Northtown Eclipse

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A man can bare himself before others only out of a particular kind of love. A love which acknowledges, as it were, that we are all wicked children. --Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

Ch. 1 - Aug. 1

Visitors to Raimo Jarvi's office on Bridge Street that morning, had there been any, would have found the temperature uncomfortable. If yesterday was an indicator, daytime heat would proceed from pre-dawn warm through stifling to downright oppressive by noon. Heat like this was unusual for Northern Ohio after mid-July. That typical turn in the morning air as day broke could be felt in the blood and was expected by early August even if residents ignored the calendar. Everyone knew summer was ending, fall was on the way, and time to get the last vacation plans in. Not this year; just an oppressive, blanketing heat for the past two weeks.

When he bought the two-story building with his trust money, Raimo renovated the upstairs into living space for himself and sealed off the downstairs office with a partition. He was a one-man outfit and he didn't require more room. Behind his desk the door with the transom window—strictly for architectural effect circa 1909—led to nothing. A single row of fluorescent lighting down the center still worked, but the long narrow room contained no furniture except for an old cherry table covered with nicks where old George O'Mullan used to wrap the shoes like a butcher; he'd wrap the box with thick brown paper and tie it off with string unspooled from a cast iron dispenser. Hundreds of empty shoe boxes occupied the shelves against the walls.

Raimo had one memory of the shoe salesman from a visit with his mother before she turned recluse. She brought him to Mr. O'Mullan's for a new pair of dress shoes for his fourth-grade class Confirmation; O'Mullan's bald head shone from the same overhead lighting, his navy-blue suit and bone-white shirt were crisply pressed. His voice had an actor's timbre, not unpleasant but something lurked in the earnest expression, something his mother picked up. While George talked to himself searching among the racks of shoes tiers honeycombed along the wall, he noticed the piles of empty boxes, some with shoes still wrapped in their wax paper, dumped in tiny mounds here and there like some ransacking thief. Without a word to him, his mother snatched his hand and jerked him from the seat and hauled him out of there. She never spoke about it later, but he never forgot the experience. Raimo was free from superstition and didn't consider it ominous he had acquired the building once occupied by the mad shoe salesman.

The boxy air conditioner that he inherited with the building sat directly above his office door and hissed like a basket of snakes; it spat fat drops of water onto the sidewalk below where Raimo watched it evaporate in seconds.

People walking too close by his window couldn't see through the glare, but he could see them in every detail. Some, by now, were as familiar as species of water birds—tourists traveling by car

wore brighter clothing than locals and shopkeepers, other tourists arriving by port from pleasure craft all over the Great Lakes possessed the shabbily genteel look of people with money, locals visiting the shops, bars, and diners of Bridge Street wore a smug ordinariness like a badge of contentment. The occasional drunk or group wandered past Raimo's office, a fact of being sandwiched between a pair of the busier taverns, one catering to Twenty-somethings, the other rabidly country-western.

Couples chattered in their sojourn past and would sometimes try to peer in. Raimo sat rock-still as if he could be seen. His straining a/c unit, however, drowned out any words. The out-of-towners were more alert and took a wider detour to avoid being hit by the spray. The evening drunks were reckless, some acting as if they'd been doused from a bucket instead of sprinkled. The heaviest drinkers plowed past oblivious of any dotting of hair or clothing.

Raimo thought of it as street theater: humanity's parade; he even looked forward to the goat skip of some passersby as the drops flew and landed. Several stared balefully upward at the unit before moving on. Occasionally, an abrupt curse followed a hostile look through the glass. The higher the temperature outside, the more droplets ejected from his rattletrap machine.

One familiar drunk, a grizzled Bridge Street veteran with a graying ponytail, put himself on display in a mime show for Raimo's benefit. He opened his mouth, tongue protruding like a bass snapping at bugs on the water's surface or he impersonated a man showering, his black-and-gold tee speckled from the falling water; he rubbed his armpits energetically with invisible soap while bellowing something that sounded to Raimo like Waylon Jennings or Willie Nelson. That morning Raimo caught a good look at the man because—drunker than usual and earlier than usual—he'd pressed his face against the plate glass, his hands forming a bridge over his brow to penetrate the glare. Raimo beheld the aging peeping tom with a crosshatched Appalachian face, narrow as a fox's, eyes red-rimmed from drink.

"There but for the grace of God," Raimo muttered, quoting his mother, and felt himself blushing. It had taken him years to overcome his ingrained discomfort of being stared at by strangers.

Raimo had never exchanged a word with the man in the three years since he'd become a private investigator with a license and an office to go with it. The light's angle of refraction guaranteed his security behind the glass until mid-afternoon; then he'd be obliged to wave back at the few boulevardiers who acknowledged him as a visible, if not a busy, man inside.

He leaned back in his executive office chair, an impulse buy from Office Max, and realized that, if he didn't start drumming up more and better clients, he was going out of business. As if to affirm that resolution, the air conditioner released a final gurgle, a death rattle, and ceased.

While he stared at the water pooling on the sidewalk, the office phone trilled.

Raimo heard the familiar, odd opening: *Mister Jarvi, I am Leotis Pennimann here.*

Leotis began every phone conversation this way and thereafter followed the *in medias res* logic of the epic, backing up and filling in, but it was always one epic, his personal tragic one, that Raimo knew he was about to hear yet another rendition of.

It baffled him so completely the first time Leotis called that he begged him to come into his office “to explain his situation.” By now, he was used to him, and could piece together enough of the scrambled narrative to understand the drift of Leotis’ message, and it was always the same message: *Tanisha was cheating on him again, follow her, get proof.* Leotis Pennimann was the opposite of drumming up new business.

The sixty-six-year-old, retired track laborer for Norfolk & Sothern Pacific was his first and oldest client. Leotis had raised five children, all of whom at one time were threaded into conversations centering around Tanisha’s infidelities. Darnell, Deshon, and Demetrius were either serving time or were back under the patriarchal roof for the short while their freedom lasted. Anthony, the youngest, was also the luckiest—and the most dangerous of his sons. He’d eluded a homicide charge by the narrowest margin last year and was mentioned in the police-beat section of the *North Coast Tribune* as “a person of interest” if the crime was unsolved or suspect if it wasn’t. Raimo met Anthony when he’d been forced to squire his injured father around after an accident on a ladder left that Leotis in a leg cast. He was polite, like his father, but remained silent once his father unleashed his impassioned rhetoric about Anthony’s mother’s latest infidelity. Raimo noticed a twinge of Anthony’s hand in his lap as his father concluded the visit with the denouement Raimo had heard before: “She a bitch, Mister Jarvi.”

“She been seeing this dude every Thursday night,” Pennimann said for the fourth time.

Raimo cut through Leotis’ diatribe and told him to drop by the office at two o’clock. He was tempted to ask Leotis to put his wife on the phone. Tanisha was probably the easiest spouse in the state to follow, and it would save everyone a bundle of time and Leotis’ fee if she would simply give her husband the details that Raimo was going to have to spend two or three days gathering for yet another report. Raimo pitied Leotis and kept his costs down as much as possible, but nothing could persuade him to divorce Tanisha. His love for his cheating wife was bullet-proof, beyond comprehension, and as immortal as any lyric poet had ever lamented in sonnet or ode.

Cutting Leotis’ woeful pining about his marriage short only brought Raimo face to face with his own nearly monastic love life. His parents were married forty-one years. Comparing theirs to Leotis and Tanisha, he thought his parents’ not that much superior—his father cowed his entire life by a stronger, more intellectually agile mate. Raimo’s mother, a staunch and fierce Catholic who never darkened the church’s threshold once she retreated inward, died as she lived—raving at the world, bitter, convinced she’d been short-changed in everything, especially her husband and younger son. His older brother and her firstborn was the sole exception. Riekoriki, formally, but Rick to all, Rikki inside the family, was the exceptional son: handsome, athletic, admired, and envied.

Under the battering of mockery by classmates during his first recess at school, Raimo came home crying and demanded to be called “Ray” from then on. Rikki, however, had the swagger and toughness to hold on to his Finnish heritage if he chose, but let the assimilation happen naturally with friends, family, and teachers abetting the swindle.

The copperplate gothic lettering of Raimo's name and profession—RAY JARVI, PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS—rebuked him with the knowledge he'd lost one of the earliest battles of life in letting others take away his birth name.

As he did unconsciously every time that thought occurred, he brought up his hand to touch his face. Raimo knew a greater loss at a young age. The word "Freak!" chanted by a wolf pack of classmates surrounding him in a tight ring and shoving him with thumps on his back reminded him of his difference from them forever from that day on; his face had healed but the scars in his psyche oozed open daily with some reminder he did not, and never would again from the age of ten on, look like other people.

Raimo decided sitting at a desk with an empty in tray made little sense on a day without air conditioning. He checked out some online portable air-conditioners online, clicked on one with an elephant-trunk extension and checked to see if the town's trio of hardware stores had it for purchase. It was something to do.

He set the desk phone on record and stepped into muggy heat laced with its familiar river smells of diesel fuel and rotting fish. Raimo made a decision one day in the pre-op room before another skin graft surgery. While a February squall kicked up outside the hospital, he'd listened to his parents talk about the weather on the drive over. They missed what he thought was a gorgeous display of cloud cover over the lake—huge, boiling clouds with battleship-gray cores running through tree-rings of pewter to finish in silver-brite fringes at their edges, all that tumult backlit by a fuzzy white disc of sun, and everything below dappled with shades of gray. All they could see was the misery of snow, ice, and dark skies. Even Rikki, along for the ride, complained that the mud-spattered snowbanks looked like "diarrhea." Hearing two doctors in the outer room complain, he decided to add days to his life by never talking about weather again.

Raimo usually parked above his office around the corner on Hulbert Avenue but decided to meet Bart Massey by walking to the diner. He knew each business down from his from childhood, as if he were passing ghosts and remembered the people who once owned those stores. None seemed on the verge of going out of business except his. The man who had first encouraged him to hang the p. i. shingle was always upbeat about his prospects. *Dastardly crime*, Bart Massey, deputy sheriff, liked to exclaim—especially after a couple rounds of lubrication at one of Bridge Street's drinking establishment—is on the rise in Northtown. . .

Most of the noontime crowd in the Poseidon diner were just settling into their menus when he entered the foyer of what had once been a Chandler's shop. The upstairs led to the dining area. Heads swiveled toward him and abruptly away as he paused, scanning for Bart in uniform. Today he occupied a booth near the window facing the river traffic. Raimo sat opposite his boyhood friend and noticed the show: the *Arthur M. Anderson* was unloading stone just across the river not fifty yards distant. Raimo hoped it wasn't going to lead to stories of Bart's sailing days out of high school, not because he hadn't heard them all by now, but because he envied him. Every Finnish kid who grew up in the Harbor wanted to go sailing on the big lakeboats instead of getting stuck in factories and stores like their fathers. That included two boys from Raimo's class who went down with the *Fitz*.

“Bart.”

“Ray, what up.”

That was mumbled without Bart looking away, mesmerized by the ore boat’s activities.

“I could be an assassin, a serial killer,” Raimo said and picked up a menu.

“I recognized your footsteps,” Bart said. “That’s why you need me as a partner.”

Bart had hinted more than once if he ever left the Sheriff’s he’d like to come in on his “gig” as the town’s sole shamus. Raimo wondered if it took Bart, someone he’d known for twenty-five years, a moment to adjust like the other diners. Always one or two nearby diners had to steal a second or third glance. It took Raimo years to break the habit of touching his face whenever that happened.

“Fighting crime this morning or are you coming off shift?”

Bart yawned. “Coming off. I switched shifts with Barrick. His wife’s in labor again.”

Bart was nicknamed “Black Bart” for his heavy beard, which seemed to start just below his eyes. His five o’clock shadow was darker than most men’s beards. Bart was part-Sicilian, “part-Heinz Fifty-Seven,” he said, for the varieties of genetic contributors to his clan’s make-up of dark- and light-complexioned people. He had as many blondes as black-haired people in his family.

“I should have guessed,” Raimo said.

Deputies had to be close-shaved and Bart would have a piece or two of tissue to clot blood sticking to his face or neck. Raimo, on the other hand, could go three days without shaving on the right side before he felt stubble. Rikki could sport a noble Viking’s red-gold beard in three weeks. Bart was un-nicked today.

“I envy you, Ray,” he said; “you never have to get in a fight with your razor.”

“They sell styptic pencils in every drug store nowadays, Bart.”

“You won’t believe how many uniform shirts I’ve ruined,” he lamented.

“Sartre said a man should never let hairs invade his face.”

“Who?”

“Forget it. How’s crime in the backroads?”

“It’s up, way up. You know about the body dump off Cato-Springs, right?”

“Three, all women.”

The only girl in Leotis Pennimann’s family, Rhonda, was murdered. She was a heroin-addicted prostitute living in the projects in Cleveland with arrests for drugs and solicitation. She was one of four decomposed bodies found within a thousand yards of one another off Cato-Springs Road in the southern end of Northtown County. The killer or killers were never found. Rhonda’s name

was never mentioned. Raimo wondered if Leotis' problems with Tanisha were tied in some unfathomable way to this terrible family tragedy.

"Three so far. We think there's more," Bart said.

"We?"

"Sheriff's, FBI, Northtown PD, Highway Patrol. It's called a multiagency task force, my boy, and I'm angling for a slot."

"Good luck," Raimo said.

"Luck, shit," Bart said loud enough to draw stares. "It's politics. Who gets on and who gets third-shift rotation to the ass end of the county where there's nothing but a barbed-wire fence and a lobo wolf."

Sometimes it was nothing but "Amish barns and a pack of coyotes."

Raimo had to acknowledge Bart's complaint, by now a song with a single refrain and interchangeable lyrics, was warranted by the politics of cronyism and aggravated by the fact his friend long had an eye out for the Sheriff's job. Complaining loud and long in half the bars on Bridge Street did little to endear him to his boss.

A girl, perky and blonde, wearing the unisex black slacks and white shirt to match the all black-and-white décor of the walls, floor tiles, and Ansel Adams prints brought them coffee. Bart, a ferocious eater, gave all his concentration to the meal. Raimo silently complimented their waiter for not overreacting, a common occurrence, when she handed him the bill. He had other kinds of scar tissue to thank for that.

"You eat like a friggin' rabbit, Ray."

"I like salads."

"You must."

The diner specialized in hamburgers half the diameter of a dinner plate and sides that were a meal in their own right. Bart's appetite was as robust in a heat wave as a blizzard.

"I heard your brother's coming back this way for his reunion."

It was a silent admonishment. Rikki never came home for either of his parents' funerals.

"He told me he was wrapping up some business commitments," Ray said, knowing how hollow that sounded.

"Why cover for him, Ray?"

The waitress returned while Raimo considered a response to that. Apologizing for Rikki was new to him. It had been the other way around for most of his life.

Bart was in touch with the town's gossip and Bart had attended the same schools, been married in the same church. Bart's divorce was the single subject he refused to acknowledge. He remembered when Rikki was a football god that Bart would have bragged about if his older brother had acknowledged him in the halls of Sts. Stephen and Basil. Bart had ignored him throughout their high-school years, run with his own jock crowd, which was no more than what Rikki had done.

"He wants to see you," Bart said.

He, her husband. Her killer.

"How can you ask me that?"

"Don't shoot the messenger, man," Bart said. "I'm just saying. He's being transferred to the holding center for assignment."

"Good. The Youngstown state pen, right? Maximum security. I hear they're crawling with Aryan Brotherhood."

"Don't get your hopes up. He goes to a holding pen. They'll assess him there and then assign him somewhere."

"Lucasville, I hope," Raimo said.

Bart snorted. "Fat chance of that. Only the baddest of bad boys go down the river."

Lucasville was Ohio's toughest maximum-security prison on the Ohio River where lethal executions were handled.

"He murdered his wife," Raimo reminded him.

"So? That's like littering nowadays. The guy's filthy rich and connected to half the state legislators. He has college background, country club, *yadda-yadda*, he'll probably get minimum security or a work camp."

"There'll be wire fences around it. That's the main thing," Raimo replied.

"If I had to bet," Bart said. "I'd guess Dayton or maybe Chillicothe, medium-security."

"Beat your wife to death with an aluminum bat, get aggravated manslaughter because you can afford the best lawyers."

He'll be out in ten, maybe sooner. First parole's in five and there's good time, weekends will get you an extra day off the count. What do you expect, Ray? He isn't the reincarnation of Charley Manson."

"She didn't deserve it," Raimo said. They both knew his anger was pleading his own guilt.

"Jury didn't think so after they heard all that juicy stuff about her."

That juicy stuff. Meaning: all those men she cheated with. Him included.

“I’ll give him your best,” Bart said.

“Tell him to hang on to the soap,” Raimo said.

“Jefferson’s not going to be his worry,” Bart replied.

Jefferson was the county seat of Northtown where the jail and court house were located as well as the pre-Civil War homes of abolitionists Joshua Giddings and Benjamin Wade. Another abolitionist firebrand of the county was John Brown, a failure at farming with a fiery red beard. Ohio was known for sending trouble-makers to Congress and mediocrities to the White House.

Raimo attended Kristine’s husband’s arraignment in Jefferson; he felt eyes boring through him from all over the court house during the brief proceedings. His name never came up in the investigation, he was left off the witness list by the defense, but he was known as one of Kristine Radebaugh’s lovers, the last she’d ever have. He’d known her in high school. Her husband was fifteen years older.

Raimo had a view of people coming from the marina. They looked happy, tanned, laughing in their groups despite the sweltering heat. It would be cooler on the lake where they’d probably been sailing in their yachts shiny with brightwork visible from the breakwall where he’d fished as a boy. The bridge siren screamed through his thoughts.

Bart bit the last of his fries in half and stabbed the other half into a pool of viscous ketchup on his plate. Even scrambled eggs didn’t escape the fate of being drowned in ketchup. He checked his watch, and declared he had to run.

“Crime doesn’t wait,” Bart said.

“You’re sticking me with the check.”

“You invited me, remember? Besides, you’ve tapped my crime-fighting brain for insider info as usual, so it’s a fair swap.”

“Go easy on those Amish buggies,” Raimo said.

“Not me. I’m incorruptible. All are equal before the eyes of the law.”

“That tells me the Sheriff’s got you guys filling quotas again.”

Bart grimaced, said nothing, and headed for the door. Gun on hip, athletic swagger coupled with bulked shoulders from bench-pressing, he made an impression on females in public. Bart savored the glances when he exited or entered a place. Raimo once called him a reverse Marilyn Monroe.

“What do you mean?” Bart asked him. “You saying I have an ass like a woman?”

“I’m saying,” Raimo replied, “you like to make a big splash when you exit.”

“What can I say? The camera loves me.”

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