

## A KILLING

Three things unnerve Marcus about his line of work. The first is making eye contact with his targets and seeing their quick slide from surprise to terror, and that glimpse of disbelief bordering on a plea. The second is the stink of hot metal and burnt sulphur that clings to his clothes. The third he can barely admit because there is nothing tangible he can assign to the need that wells up in him to pray, beseeching the same mercy he denies his kills.

Together they make a bittersweet cocktail that triggers an explosion in his veins, an exhilaration that blends defeated fear with a charge of absolute abandon, a power that lifts him out of himself until the release comes – an awful freedom bursting like some trapped beast from his skin. Each kill is the drug that does it, releases him from himself – even if temporarily.

But afterwards, and just before, the only remedy he can find to still his desired and feared annihilation is to immerse himself in water, wherever he finds it: a standpipe, a shower, a river, the sea. Water. It soothes, washes him. His is that kind of occupation. Blood. The antidote is purification. More than anything he wants to be free.

Everything has been perfectly timed. The only unforeseen circumstance is the rain, but it works for him, like an unexpected washing. He waits at his lookout point at the far end of the street, his face up-tilted, allowing the drops to bathe him as he rehearses the kill. His jobs are always clean. No struggle. No mess-ups that need correction. In. BAM. Out. So from the moment the car swings onto the street, he

readies himself, gets the pedals of his freestyle in push-off position.

The vehicle slows, veering ever so slightly to ride the sleeping policeman – his signal to move, cruising forward, watching for the anticipated braking to negotiate the second hump, the stop, directly under the street light. The iron wheels of the automatic gate begin their rumble along the tracks, background music to the scene and his cue to speed up, getting just near enough. His target is almost too simple. She likes the windows down, no matter the heat. She is that kind of woman – in love with her climate, wanting to feel the air, the ground, hear the sounds, smell the streets.

Once or twice he has watched her during her Saturday morning jogs. He enjoys studying his targets, learning their habits. He knows that she is not light on her feet but that her short, steady stride chips away at the miles. Dark sunglasses – the wraparound type he too likes – worn for more than the glare, he felt. She is known – her views, her picture are always in the newspapers. The life that has chosen her also exposes her; privacy, he thinks, was what she craves – the reason for the shades.

He remembers the half-grimace on her face as she runs, as if movement is a decision of will against shutdown, a determination to keep pushing towards some invisible place where there is not just a finish line, but a purpose that demands her complete presence. That drive has made her somebody's problem – the one who ordered the job.

The lawyer-lady is different. People appreciate her. No nonsense lady. But she says too much and knows too much. There are battles she should leave alone. Doors she should not open. Not her. She has more than stepped on somebody's corn, so she has to go. Something is wrong with that. Sad. He feels he understands that push to get beyond herself. The difference is that he really wants to escape himself.

The bottom line – he has a job to deliver. No questions. People will weep for years when he takes her down. He, too,

is sorry, but cannot stop the wheels. He clenches and releases his left fist, grimacing at an imagined or remembered pain. It is a reflex he has never lost from that long ago time... *playing man*, is all his mother has ever said about his rumoured escapades... *only playing man*. Her helplessness still angers him.

His plan is to fire one shot directly to the head, no need to stop, just glide by, and then pump to the foreshore, fly across the highway and down past the mall into the sea. Abandon the bike, dunk the gun and swim – just swim to wherever the current takes him.

The car stops at the gate. At about twenty feet from the vehicle, he veers right, and uses his foot to brake. An impulsive change of plan he cannot explain. Time slows. He feels he is looking at a movie frame by frame. Through raindrops that seem as long as needles, he lifts his arm. The gun is in place targeting the lady. One flow. Now they are face to face, but only he can be seen. He prepares to squeeze. In spite of the headlights, he knows exactly where to fix his aim. Head first. And just so, the lights dip. The wipers keep working. Each swipe casual, unhurried. She wants him to see her. Maybe he, too, wants to be seen.

There is no fear in her eyes. Instead, he feels she really sees him. She is that kind of lady. One second... two... three... Unexpectedly, a head appears on the passenger's side, the face drawn close to the windscreen. Marcus hesitates... Why is he there? His eyes are all he sees – opened wide. His face. There is no mistaking what he reads. Wonder and fear interchange, leaving only an unspoken word that is not the child's but his... *Mercy, Marcus*. Not in the plan. He looks again. Now there is no one but the lady. He cannot turn back.

The streetlights go off. BLACKOUT. He squeezes like a reflex, relieved to be freed from those eyes that held him, if only for a few seconds, in an embrace that whispered the question, *Why?* The need to empty his gun, like his very life depends on it, consumes him. He fires again and again into the

darkness. He cannot stop shooting as though driven not just to empty himself of the death he has come to deliver, but is its very name.

In that split second before all the lights go out, the lady gives him a look he can't forget. What of the boy – was he in there? All is one flow. She wants nothing for herself. The *why* he read there, in a flash, is really his question. He knows, in that moment of her wordless asking about the Marcus beyond and before the kill, she is the kind that can never stay in a grave. She is the kind that cannot die – the only reason they wanted her dead. Too alive!

He fires. God is on his lips, but without sweetness. It is now too late to apologise – and to whom? He wants to let loose his rage and disappointment and shame, not as an excuse for himself, or as any justification for taking revenge or destroying another life, but as a cry to be free, to give somebody the death he can no longer carry. It is not him, the Marcus beyond, but an imposter that outruns him. So he fires until the last unresponsive click of the trigger is the emptiness he too feels. No fear or anguish or regret or imagined sorrow. Nothing.

The lawyer-lady, in a split second, tells him, in the intimacy of the darkness, that she can carry even the beast in him. "Is alright. Take a five, Marcus. Take five," he hears her say through the awful agony of the face she allows him to meet. No judgement, just that solemn invitation. Does he imagine it? "Take five." But even that generosity cannot stir in him the will to be again simply Marcus, freed of any cause for what he has become. What about the boy? He cannot remember who that was.

Someone from a neighbouring house lets loose a dog. He sees the light of a torch at a window. Time to ride. He shifts into action, shoves off and does not look back. That too is his weapon.

Crossing the highway is easy. Raindrops and tears mingle. He pumps the pedals hard, feeling the burn in his thigh muscles and calves, pumping too so that the breeze takes away

the smell of burnt sulphur. What is it? The breath of a volcano? Rotten eggs? The exhaust of Hell? Sweat trickles down his face and back. Rain. Sweat. Tears. His heart is racing ahead of him. Sweat. Rain. Tears. He pumps so hard he feels his legs will give out. His thoughts catch him on the stretch.

The lady's eyes were asking him *Why*, like an offer of a life, a call to possess the Marcus behind the mask – this gunman, gangster, the mas' that has already killed him. He has to free himself. Take responsibility. *For what? Everything? Yuh playing mas' and 'fraid powder? Take five, she says.* He pumps like his life depends on each push towards that face she mirrored for him, even in the death he came to deliver. And what about that little boy? Was he even there... the Marcus that disappeared? And he is back to that scene, after so many years.

The room is cramped with furniture. Miss Atkins, old as the hills, smells of Bengay and soft candle. A glossy picture of Jesus with heart exposed is overhead... He does not want to be back there. He thinks instead of his legs. He imagines the growth of wings somewhere at his ankles, or maybe they would burst from his thighs. One more hard push on the pedal – lift-off. He feels it coming, hovering on the tip. He remembers when Amber tried to remind him about Charlo's birthday, he'd spat into the phone, "Fuck him." Not really meaning it. He blames him for nothing. Wants nothing from him. Not any more. Who he has become has no one point of blame, only beginnings that grew into a colossal dark. The Marcus after... what?

One more push. He lifts himself off the saddle, pedal-sprinting. His backside is in the air, torso over the handlebars that he grips like a choke, his elbows bent, his legs pumping hard... He remembers the snickering at the window, the bedsprings, the muffled struggle beneath the pressed-down pillow. He hears weeping, but he keeps pumping, only pretending for the faces at the window, as God is his judge, telling the woman, "Shut up!" She won't hear to just keep quiet.

Only fifteen – they should never have made him do it. Not

that; but he agrees, wanting more of what he thought was theirs to give – a chance to belong to something. Poor Miss Atkins. Not wanting to see her face, he holds the pillow there, only pretending, but she wouldn't stop bawling, her fingers clawing at his back, and the smell of urine and everything old stifling him.

He smells the sea. Rotting seaweed. Sulphur. Almost there. He feels the rise approaching, the release to air, and with it the flood of terror and pleasure, the stretch of power and surrender. Free. He isn't going to stop. He rides and rides, ramps the seawall. Levitation. Tide is high. He breaks surface through a mat of seaweed. A thousand fingers tear at him and his plunge down is an eternal *why* – the lawyer-lady's question. And that boy – was he ever there? He should not have been there. Choked laughter pursues his plummet into what he hopes is an answer.

Poor Miss Atkins – older than his mother. He is in tears. Almost done, home free and somehow his bowels let loose. Just so, like a judgment on himself, he sits in his own waste. Those faces at the window... and Miss Atkins is on the bed, clutching the nightdress and sobbing with her face to the wall, her knees in her chest. Over her head is that longhaired Jesus, illuminated, smooth, a kind of distant calm, looking down at him, and pointing to a naked heart... He sees her face, again, the lawyer-lady's; she never judged him, her eyes, like the picture's over the bed, asking him *why* – the offer of a life, to possess the Marcus behind the killer that was playing him.

Marcus after... He never let them forget that madman he had become, and how much they should fear and hate him. No mercy. Her sobbing stops after the lash that knocks her cold. The laughter, no more... In that void, he feels the floor open and swallow him; but he finds his feet and pelts through the rain, holding the fractured fist, his eyes a blank stare at the unrelenting dark. Hell. He has been there and never came back. That is what they fear.

The blow is hard. Something like old iron when he hits the

bottom, but the nothingness that comes is a long release as his body buoys up to surface from what seems an incredible deep, breaking through the thick carpet of weed. Upheld. For the first time free to sleep, really sleep. Marcus beyond the deed – finally.