

## *Summoned*

“Read it to me again,” Larry said. “And this time just read it. Without the flourishes.”

Meaning: without the sarcasm.

But where was the fun in that?

Where the vicious fun?

It was ten, ten-thirty, Tuesday night. They were at The Bog.

Between ten and eleven p.m., week nights, weekends, he and Larry were always at The Bog. Cop, mortician, and the rest of Jackson City’s sauce hounds.

“*Dear Mr. Senestre,*” he began again. “—*Or may I call you Thomas?*”

He broke off, dropped the thing.

“Like she didn’t just call me Thomas. See what I mean? Games from the get-go.”

Larry lifted a finger.

Meaning: just read the fucking letter.

He and Larry hadn’t met because of work. New to Jackson City, he’d found The Bog and in The Bog found Larry.

A man in a rumpled black suit.

A man in a rumpled black suit drinking by himself.

A man in a rumpled black suit who didn’t seem to care that he drank alone.

He’d assumed he and the black-suited drinker would get

along, and they had gotten along, did. Larry wasn't chatty but would answer if harassed. Their first night as drinking compadres, he'd finished off a beer and a half before managing to extract the basics: Larry Fenley, inheritor of Fenley Funeral Home, Daggott Street.

"Inherit your personality along with your occupation?" he'd asked a little later on, a little more in his cups.

"Personality, suits and neckties," Larry had replied.

Phlegmatically.

Larry's standard mode of communication on first acquaintance and ever since.

Larry Fenley: phlegmatic man.

Phlegmatic Fenley.

Fenley the phlegmatic.

*Stop it*, some cusp of his brain warned another.

Drinking or playing darts, Larry kept his tie tight and his suit jacket on. The ties were the right size, neither too short nor too long. But the suits, jackets and slacks, hung on him. Nasty intestinal surgery and what it rectified had caused the weight drop and left other remnants.

But what did sunken eyes, skin folds, and a pleated neck matter to anyone who dealt with the destiny of all flesh, gorgeous or grotesque, six and often seven days a week?

Less than squat.

Corpses were Larry's business. Corpses paid the bills. Neither the dead nor the living rattled Larry.

"Or hand it over and I'll read it myself," Larry said—about the letter.

Who, truly terrified, wrote, rather than called? Or contacted a "friend's" son who lived elsewhere?

He took a swig of beer, another.

"Still waiting," Larry said.

He picked up what he'd dropped.

“Once more. With feeling.”

“Without the feeling,” Larry suggested.

*“I am writing to you because your mother—we knew each other ages ago—lost touch, and now, happily, have resumed our friendship—mentioned you were a policeman,”* he read.

Dashes within dashes.

He wasn’t a fan of dashes within dashes. They suggested someone who hadn’t quite sorted out priorities, which suggested conflicting motives, which suggested he’d been summoned by a namby-pamby.

Why throw in with another namby-pamby?

One of those already lived inside his own skin.

*“Perhaps I am being foolish, but I no longer feel safe at home or at work—I own Coastal Books—a small enterprise, but—as I have always maintained—one of vital importance to our community.”*

In that paragraph, she could have been hitting him up for a donation to the literacy fund, not asking him to nab a stalker.

*“I feel as if someone is watching me all the time—and not with loving intent. I would be most grateful if you could be persuaded to come and lend your expertise. Simply your presence would offer such relief. May I count on your assistance?”*

Another false “may I.”

She figured he’d oblige.

Of course she did.

*“I would rather not inform the local police. Pantego—perhaps you are aware?—perhaps you have visited us previously?—is a very small town.”*

A demographic that should count as an advantage, narrowing, as it did, the stalker prospects.

*“I would of course pay for your stay at The Inn at the Marshes—a lovely establishment—you will be quite comfortable there—but I dare not make the reservation myself.”*

He quit reading. Had to quit. To mock.

*"Dare not. Don't you just love it?"*

If his mother's contemporary, the letter writer was skirting 70. A twentieth-century 70-year-old taking on the airs of a nineteenth-century maiden.

Affected and proud of it, he thought.

Yet another red flag, he thought.

*Do not* get embroiled with this ditzzy old bat and her murky mess, he thought.

His mother's friend.

Or someone claiming to be.

Did his mother have friends?

News to him.

*"More reading, less critiquing,"* Larry said.

*"Please do come, Thomas. The parade, this weekend, will bring other tourists to town. Perhaps that would help your investigation?"*

His disguise, she meant.

*"What's her name again?"* Larry asked.

*"Thanking-you-in-advance-for-your-kindness-Adora Phelps,"* he said.

He'd never been credited with kindness, in advance or in situ.

He refolded the butterfly embossed page. Even after airing in a fetid bar, it retained the reek of lilac.

*"Question, Larry Fenley. You're trying to tempt someone you've never met to play cop on the sly. Wouldn't you throw in a few sordid details? Cat guts in the cupboard? Shredded sheets? Persistent, harassing phone calls of the 'Hello? Still alive?' variety? Those kinds of specifics?"*

*"Could be caution,"* Larry said. *"Commit nothing to paper."*

*"Or hooey."*

"She did play the mother card," Larry reminded.

Another strike against her and her aged damsel in distress project, as far as he was concerned.

"Not to mention the lure of a parade," Larry added.

Such a fucking deadpan comedian, Larry. Not even his bushy eyebrows wiggled.

"I'd have to take vacation days."

"Which you've got. In abundance."

"Yeah, but use up real vacation days pretending to be on vacation?" he groused.

As if it mattered.

As if it made any difference where he spent his vacation days.

Or nights.

"My verdict: why the hell not?" Larry concluded.

"So there's this cop and mortician, drinking in a bar," he said.

Larry and his baggy suit rose.

"Time to call it a night, Thomas."

Because Lucky Larry could do that. Call it a night. Go home. Go to bed. Pull up the spread. Turn out the lights. Drift off to dreamland. Stay in dreamland.

Stay, stay, stay the fuck asleep.

## *Timing is everything*

He could call the station now, speak with someone on night shift. Claim a “family emergency.” Predict he’d be away for a few days, tops. Start for Pantego, quarter past midnight.

The Citroën’s gas tank was full. It was always full.

Where did he go to empty it?

There’d be little to no traffic on the road at this hour. Just him and seagulls out and about.

Unless seagulls snoozed past midnight.

On telephone poles.

On waves.

*Move along.*

He got as far as opening the closet, peering into its darkness for a suitcase. Then he lost momentum.

The window was open.

He could hear the swimming nurse.

The building backed up against a 24-hour-fitness center. His apartment looked down onto the facility’s heated outdoor pool. Between midnight and one a.m., Monday through Friday, a middle-aged woman with saddlebag thighs swam laps in that vat of liquid. He called her, thought of her as, “the nurse” for no other reason than her workout schedule.

What the fuck did he know?

Maybe she labored till midnight in a convenience mart.

She wasn’t a great swimmer. She whacked the surface. A