

Email #183

Stephen Davis

From: Stacey Marchenkova <mailto:kookolka@powerup.com>

To: dom borax <domb@autumnfilms.com>

Sent: Thursday, Feb 15, 2001 1:11AM

Subject: A long story never cut short.

Dom, thanks for last night. It really picked up my spirits. It was a relief to forget about my relationship woes. It was good to have the opportunity to talk about myself for a change.

Indeed after last night, I've decided to explore my own writing again. See, lately I'd started to think I had no value. But after last night I realise I have one person who thinks I might have something interesting to say. You.

Anyway, how are you? I know you're asleep at this moment in time, so I guess I'm asking the question to someone who is just waking up. In that case, I imagine that you're a little hung-over and in need of a greasy breakfast. Call me if you want to catch up and we can share some bacon and eggs - maybe in West End?

Oh, but you have work don't you? Maybe you could skip work for the day and we could have a slower, calmer breakfast. Or maybe we could go shopping or the movies or something. I haven't seen *The Piano* yet... wanna see *The Piano*?

Or maybe all this is too predictable. Perhaps we could live dangerously.

See one of the things I really like doing is watching people. I love to observe their tight faces and their blank gazes. I like judging that they have no sense of joy whatsoever as they move through the day from work break to work break, from weekend to weekend, from year to year, from life to death... you know?

I once watched a man for three days. My observation started at an esoteric and wonderful New York-style pizza counter cafe near Central Station.

There was nothing special about him initially. His suit looked like one of those new space age fabrics – microfibre, I think they call it. It was bottle green. It was shiny. It was smooth.

But upon closer examination I noticed that the suit wasn't perfect. It had a small mar. It had a splodge of tomato base from the excellent pizza on his lapel.

And it was this splodge that made me notice him.

He didn't notice the splodge at first. But as he left, he got a quick glimpse of his own reflection from the stainless steel backing on the bin.

He grumbled then took out a Beatrix Potter-style handkerchief. Quickly he licked it and scrubbed at the tomato splodge. He did this a couple of times, each new pass allowing a second taste of the cotton and the residue of lunch until he felt satisfied that his suit was perfect. Then he moved away and walked into town.

And I followed him.

I followed him out of the food court and into the main bulk of shops. He stopped for a second outside a curiously titled book store called Pulp Fiction. I waited, holding back a few steps by the storefront of a nearby chocolate shop.

Now I admit to waiting that little bit too long as I became so drawn into the little sweet delights in the shop window that I nearly missed his departure. But fortunately I glanced up when someone in his direction sneezed too loudly and I noticed his departure.

I scurried after him, spotting the perfect space age green unflappable fabric rigidly marching out of the enclosed shopping area and into the city.

Outside, I noticed that his style and pace increased. He moved like the rest of the public. He was single minded. There was no time to ponder the delights of our secret Italian eatery or the giallo covers of the genre books. He had a place to go.

Once I nearly lost him as he hid among the throngs of pedestrians crossing the diagonal intersection of Edward and Adelaide streets. But I hurriedly caught up with my Microfibre Man outside the entrance to Rowes Arcade. Something had again caught his attention. It was an Army Surplus store window filled with camouflaged dummies, large hunting knives and heavy fabric German trench war coats.

Now, this made me think: What are the connections between these two places? A pulp fiction crime shop and Army Surplus store? One is a place for inspiration on crime and the other is a store where the tools to enact the crime can be purchased?

Was I following a man who was about to commit murder, I wondered?

Moments later he entered the store. I waited excitedly. Ten minutes later he exited with his purchase. It was a longish, rectangular box. I had to know what was in that box.

My Microfibre Man walked down the street and reached the corner leading to the Queen Street Mall. I followed. He reached the centre section and went into the T and G building.

He got into the lift. The doors closed. I held back. I couldn't be that close to him. Not yet. I watched which floor he got off. It was the 11th Floor. I quickly scanned the residents on the 11th floor. There was a Doctor, an Accountant, a Pathologist, and an entity with the inflated and meaningless name: International Tradings.

I caught the lift to the 11th floor to investigate.

Arriving on the 11th floor, I scanned the very thin hallway clad in seventies-style wood chip slatting and looked at the glass frosted entrances to the various establishments. Which one was he in? Where was my Microfibre Murderer?

I decided to try the Pathologist, rationalising that anyone with such a casual respect to life could potentially be interested in blood.

I took a breath and opened the Pathologist's door. But as I opened the door there was someone coming out of the Pathologist. It was My Microfibre Murderer. We bumped into each other. He said sorry. I mumbled something back.

But we had connected. I never wanted to connect with him. I only wanted to keep a distance and observe. I wanted to extrapolate and learn if this man was perhaps Jesus or God or Jack the Ripper and was worth worshipping. But now I know he says sorry. Now I know he has a conscience. Now I know he doesn't like to look you in the eye. Now I know that he has a slightly high voice.

I let him pass and stood lost in the doorway to the Pathologist. I watched him move up the hallway and enter the Doctor's office. Above the Office was a name. Doctor Beer.

I was now at a crossroads. I could continue my hunt for God/The Ripper or I could give up and go back to the every day. I had to make a choice.

I went to Dr. Beer's door and opened it.

I caught a glimpse of him entering the Doctor's Consultation room with a stethoscope around his neck. Wonderful, now I have a name. My Microfibre Man was Doctor Beer.

Shortly after, I approached the desk and said I needed to see Doctor Beer. I said I didn't have an appointment but all I needed was a prescription.

The Receptionist glanced up from her notes upon hearing my request. I could tell she considered that I was an addict. I quickly deflated this consideration by

qualifying I was only after Cortisone cream – the opiate-kind. This joke didn't work. I guess there are certain places you can't make heroin jokes.

After an exchange of personal details, I sat down and picked up a dated fashion magazine. I miss butterfly hair clips, I thought.

After a few minutes my name was called. I stood, feeling slightly nervous. I was about to meet My Microfibre Murderer in a more formal way. I was going to shake his hand. I was going to exchange names. I was going to tell him some personal details. I was going to let him touch me. I was going to let him observe me for a change.

I reached the office and opened the door. He was sitting at his desk. His Microfibre jacket was off and his braces were now on view. He asked me to sit. I sat opposite, trying desperately to scan the room for the Army Surplus purchase.

He asked me what my problem was and I quickly revealed my need for a cortisone prescription for a minor skin ailment. I elected to leave any reference to opiate out of the request, remembering my poor timing with the receptionist.

Doctor Beer asked me about my last doctor. He asked if I had tried any alternative methods of medication. I answered with as little charisma as possible, believing that if my answers were dull, I would be forgettable.

I achieved this illusion by letting my attention wander.

As we talked, I observed.

I explored his office. I saw the various 3D maps of the human form hanging on the walls. I tasted the alcoholic breath of a man who enjoys some vodka at night and mouthwash in the morning. I smelt the thin strips of cotton on the lapel of his starched white shirt. And I finally spotted the Army Surplus plastic bag resting against his cracked leather case.

I looked more closely.

The bag was open and the box inside was visible. The image on the box showed a shiny stainless steel tip of a knife.

He had bought a knife.

He was a killer.

But who was he going to kill?

Was it someone close, a wife, a parent? Was it a patient that had something on him? Was he being blackmailed because he was a corrupt medical professional, taking a backhand from a major pharmaceutical company--?

My musing was cut short when he asked if he could see my area of infection.

Infection?

Eczema, he clarified.

Now this was a problem. I did not have an area of infection.

I quickly ran through the choices. I could make a scene and suggest that it was too personal and storm out the room, affronted. But this option would make me memorable.

I could offer an area of infection, knowing all too well that it was phantom. But this could result in an after dinner story, turning my undercover work into an anecdote.

Finally, I took the dull uncharismatic option and admitted that there wasn't a great flare up at the moment. I offered the crook of my arm for inspection. I said that my irritation was more common in the colder drier months and with the advent of winter I wanted to be prepared.

This worked. Doctor Beer didn't look me in the eye. He just scrawled a prescription and I left feeling I'd successfully remained forgettable.

For the rest of the day, I camped outside the exit to the building waiting for him to go home. As I waited I spotted a number of other candidates to follow. But no one could truly compete with my Killer Doctor.

Around 4:30, Doctor Beer exited the building and the chase was on once more. I kept a low profile as there was a danger that he could spot me. I kept a distance of five people between us at all times as he pulled me toward the train station once more.

He bought a ticket at a machine. I got a glimpse of his destination: Fruitgrove.

He went down onto the platform. I followed. We both entered the train.

Aware that Fruitgrove was a small station in the city's south, I placed myself in a different carriage to Doctor Beer and waited.

'Fruitgrove Station' called the conductor through a bag of marbles. I only just deciphered the call in the nick of time and jumped off the train with seconds to spare.

It was now dark. Doctor Beer was already at the overpass and climbing over the railway. He was heading toward a busy street. I had to pick up the pace otherwise I could lose him in the illogical suburban roadway patterns.

I reached the apex of the overpass when I glanced down and saw Doctor Beer move into the car park of the train station. This was something I hadn't considered. He had a car. I did not.

The following day I returned more prepared. I was ready in the car park of Fruitgrove Station. I was sitting in a hire car near Doctor Beer's parked white station wagon.

Finally, I saw Doctor Beer exit the train, move over the overpass and reach his car. He started it up, drove off. I followed. Our dance was back on.

We weaved out of the car park together and into the streets. It was a strange sensation following him by car. It always feels more movie-like when machines are brought into the narrative.

Half way through the drive, I pulled up at an intersection directly beside him and stole a glance at Doctor Beer in the privacy of his cabin. In my glance I saw he was singing.

But what was he singing?

Was he singing from the radio?

I quickly turned on the radio in the car and flicked through the stations trying to match the broadcast lyrics to my man's lip syncing.

After a few twirls of the dial, I lucked onto a classic esoteric radio station. They were playing Fleetwood Mac's "Tusk."

I glanced over to my man and to my delight saw his lips and the song matched. He was listening to Fleetwood Mac and singing along. How delightfully incongruous, I thought as the lights changed and Doctor Beer drove forward.

After a series of meaningless turns around the themed World War One battle named streets, Doctor Beer stopped his car somewhere in Rouen Road. I pulled up in the adjacent cul-de-sac of Ypres Crescent. I glanced across to him.

I now knew where he lived: 29 Rouen Road Fruitgrove.

After a few minutes, I got out of the car and made my way over to his house.

I reached the double brick home and placed my body flush under the window sill. I took a breath. I stood up slightly. I looked through. I saw Doctor Beer. He wasn't dressed in a Microfibre suit today. Today he was wearing an old suit from the back of his cupboard.

Near Doctor Beer, I saw a woman. She was sitting on the couch and watching television. There was something heavy about her. Her movement was slow. Her blinking was half paced. Her hair looked unwashed and she was still in her pyjamas. On the table beside her, were some dirty bowls and cups.

Doctor Beer was the complete antithesis to her. He was buzzing around, picking up her dirty dishes and moving in and out of the adjacent kitchen speedily.

With this observation, new questions started to emerge for me: Why was she on the couch? Was she depressed? Did she ever go out?

I stayed camped outside the widow all night to find out.

Initially, the routine of the evening was uneventful. They ate together in front of the television. He massaged her feet. They exchanged the remote. Doctor Beer got tired and finally left the room.

And this is where it got interesting.

As soon as Doctor Beer left, his wife became energised. She took out a pen and paper that were hidden under the oversized cushion and started to immediately scribble.

What was she writing? I wondered.

Around 11:00, a small alarm went off on her wrist watch and she suddenly stopped her writing. She took the pen and legal paper, hid it under the cushion and immediately adopted the tired state on the couch once more.

Moments later, Doctor Beer re-entered the lounge. He picked up her dirty dishes and moved into the kitchen. Minutes passed as he cleaned up, putting everything in the dishwasher. He then went back into the lounge room, kissed his wife goodnight and went to bed.

And then it all changed again. Upon his departure, she immediately sprang into action. She bounced from the couch and stripped off her pyjamas. Underneath were black street clothes similar to mine.

She then grabbed a pair of shoes and moved to the front door of the house. I crouched down in the shadows and watched her sprint from her house and up the road. I thought about following her. But I was worried it'd be too obvious. I was wearing black. She was wearing black. We were the only two people out at this time of night. Come on!

Instead I elected to enter the house and see what she had written. Maybe I would finally solve the mystery behind the Army Surplus knife, I hoped.

So I waited until I saw the Doctor's Wife reach the top of her street and quickly climb into a Blue Ford.

Once the car was gone, I stretched and slowly made my way around to the back. The back door was open. I entered the kitchen.

I moved through the kitchen and into the lounge. I reached the couch and saw the cushion in more detail. It was a brown and yellow floral cushion embossed

with some sections of soft blue weave. Probably came free with the couch, I thought. No one would ever buy something so ugly.

I lifted up the cushion and saw the yellow legal pad. I flipped to the middle of the notepad and started reading.

To my surprise, I quickly realised that her writing was like my story. She was following someone too. But she was far more committed. She had a reason. It wasn't random. I read further.

Her subject was a woman called Nicla Forno. She was Italian. She worked in a Bakery. She worked nights. She had crimped, curled hair. It was not completely natural. She looked a little

“slutty...”

As her notes described on page three.

Doctor Beer's Wife first saw Nicla when Doctor Beer picked up an end-of-the-day Cobb loaf from her bakery last summer. Doctor Beer's Wife was selecting a New Zealand white from the bottle shop when she glanced over and saw the exchange. She wrote about it on page one of her notes:

“...as he exchanged the gold coins for the loaf, their fingers touched for that second too long. They refused to look in each other's eyes as if the touch was all that was needed...”

From this moment Doctor Beer's Wife became obsessed. She became convinced her husband was having an affair with Nicla Forno.

“...today he went to the shops. He took over an hour. He came back with six bap rolls. I asked him why he took so long. He said he got caught up with an old patient. I didn't believe him. There was flour on the back of his trousers...”

But as her writing continued, Doctor Beer's Wife shifted her interest away from her husband. This shift was best described on page 10.

“...what does she have that I don't...?”

And so Doctor Beer's Wife became obsessed with Nicla Forno instead. As the pages filled, her writing became more descriptive of her subject.

“...today I noticed that she smiles a lot. Every customer is greeted with warmth. But when the customer leaves, she wipes her mouth and the smile is removed. She then puts on lip gloss ready for the next customer and next smile...”

And on page 32:

“...oh no, she claps when she dances. Fleetwood Mac's 'Tusk' came on a classic pop station and she started dancing around the back of the Bakery. On the

chorus she started clapping her hands. To make matters worse. She even picked up a French loaf and started twirling it like a cheerleader's baton..."

And on page 61:

"...I heard her laugh for the first time today. It was very pleasant. It annoyed me greatly..."

As I continued reading, I wondered if Doctor Beer's Wife's observations of Nicla Forno would start to alter her own actions. After all, this was the woman she thought was having an affair with her husband.

But to my surprise the Doctor's Wife's presence and voice slowly disappeared. Her judgemental tone evaporated. Her emotional voice became silent. Her anger ceased. Instead she elected to just watch, not act, not change and not fight for her marriage. She simply noted what Nicla did and that's all.

"Nicla moved to the counter and bent down. She lifted up one of the Vienna loaves she had baked early that night and handed it to the Vietnamese man. She smiled. The Man took the bread, handed over what must have been the exact change and moved away. Nicla then applied lip gloss and moved her attention to the next customer. He was a plump, pale man who had been hovering outside the nearby Halal store for the last few minutes. Nicla paid him the requisite attention. She smiled. He bought three wholemeal rolls and overpaid, insisting she keep the change. Nicla did, pocketing the coins, applied lip gloss again and moved her attention to the next customer..."

I read for the next few hours. It was dull. It was just quotidian and obsessive descriptions of the life of Nicla Forno.

Frustrated, I put the notepad back under the cushion. Why didn't she fight for her marriage, I wondered? Is he that boring? Is he really having an affair? And what's with the knife?

I clenched my fists, digging my nails into my palms to stop me screaming with annoyance. Then I crept out of the house disappointed. I had just wasted two days of my life trying to stop a crime that obviously was never meant to happen, I thought. What is wrong with me? All I wanted to do was save someone's life and now a part of me wanted to kill her myself.

And that's when it all nearly fell apart.

As I reached the door, a light went on. I quickly took cover behind the door.

Doctor Beer entered. He was still dressed in his cheap suit. He took a seat at the kitchen galley and put an item down on the table. It was the Army Surplus knife.

He then placed another item next to it. It was his wife's legal notepad.

After adjusting his position, Doctor Beer smoothed out the pages of the yellow legal pad and starting reading. As he read, he picked up the knife and started sharpening it.

After Doctor Beer finished reading, he took the pad and knife and left the kitchen.

He looked exhausted.

But I was thrilled.

See, I knew it! He is trying to kill his wife. He hates her secret life. He hates being pushed to the sidelines. He may or may not have been having an affair. But his wife was certainly taking more interest in the Italian Baker. She was having a literary affair of sorts. And now she has broken him. She is cheating!

Great, I thought. I again have purpose. I am going to save someone's life!

I sprang into action. I quickly made my way out of the house and reached my hire car.

I remembered that my Doctor's Wife had mentioned in her writing that the bakery was at the local Bi-Lo shopping centre. Luckily, I could see the sapping glare of shopping centre lights in the near distance.

I parked a small distance away from the complex and made my way across the black bitumen. Only the Post Office and the Bakery were open.

Inside the Bakery, I saw Nicla Forno, preparing for the work ahead. I could see her loading large sacks of flour into industrial machines.

But my focus was elsewhere: I needed to warn the Doctor's Wife.

I scoured the black bitumen for the Doctor's Wife's car. Like mine, her car was a distance away, parked in the shadows.

I moved toward her car, rehearsing my speech with every step: "I'm so sorry to bother you, Mrs. Beer, but I think your husband is trying to kill you. I saw him buy a knife yesterday. I saw him reading your secret diary. I saw him sharpening the knife. I have to warn you. And if I am wrong, what does it matter? Better to warn you and be an idiot, than to have done nothing and read about your death in the weekend newspaper."

I reached Doctor Beer's Wife's car. I could see her outline in the night lights. She was watching Nicla with binoculars. I took a breath and tapped on her window. She jumped as expected. I told her all, and soon my actions from the past few days became overwhelmingly foolish.

Terribly foolish.

The following night I had to return to the Beer house one final time. Initially I thought it was to apologise. But as I watched their nightly routine all I could do was crouch in the darkness.

At 11:00, I observed Mrs. Beer hide her notepad under the cushion and exit the house for her nightly observations.

After a beat, I again broke in and made my way to the lounge room. I took the pad out hoping I'd find answers. It was strange reading her observations from the night before.

"...then I heard the tap on the window. I rolled down the window and saw this woman in her early twenties. She looked tired. She said her name was Stacey, she worked at the Post Office. I could tell she lied. She wondered if I could help her. Her car was nearby but she was scared to walk to it alone. I agreed to help. I walked with her and we started talking. She was a nervous young woman with a mixed style in fashion. I think she wanted to say to the world that she was outrageous and interesting. But really she looked like any attention seeking self-important extrovert. There's always one in every university intake. The kooky girl that everyone thinks is interesting for the first few months and only the first few months. She had a sleeveless dress and sleeve tattoos. She had butterfly clips in her hair to pin back what looked like a style-cut created by someone from a mad house. She also had a sense of entitlement that one day she would do something incredibly important. This was proved when she came out with the oddest comments I've ever heard. She told me that my husband was trying to kill me and she was here to save me. I can't believe it. Does this girl really need such drama in her life, such invention? My husband loves me. Yes we have our ways. Yes we have our secrets. Yes we know that I write and he reads. But it works for us. It always has."

I glanced at the notepad a few more times and saw words like laughable, deluded and dull. It was sad to read her judgement had returned. I was not inspired to read any further. I put the legal pad under the cushion and moved back to kitchen.

En-route, I saw Doctor Beer. He was sitting with his back to me in his office. On the walls rested a good collection of well preserved and maintained World War Two items. There were pistols, uniforms and knives. I wanted to compliment him on his collection but thought that would be going too far.

After quietly exiting, I got back in the hire car and drove away from the Beer house. I had never expected to put myself in my own narrative. Indeed when I started this exercise back at the esoteric and wonderful New York-style pizza counter cafe near Central Station, I never expected it would take me here, to the suburbs, to a woman, to a yellow legal pad that summed up my character with brutal honesty.

I got home. It was late. Kind of like now. And I wrote down my experience.

I've never shown it to anyone, Dom. It felt too personal. It felt too embarrassing. It felt too revealing.

So instead I put it away, until now, until tonight. I'm not sure why I dragged it out. I'm equally not sure why I'm sending it to you and hoping that you will read it.

Maybe I want us to never be like Doctor Beer and his wife. Maybe I want to be brave and show you it all. Maybe I want you to hate me because that's, in truth, all I deserve. After all I am a girl who stalks, meddles, invents and lies.

Or maybe I'm just an attention seeker, glad to know that you have read this.

I hope I haven't bored you, Dom. I really do.

Please have breakfast with me today. We can watch our fellow diners if you like. You don't have to talk about me. You don't need to offer advice.

We can simply invent stories about those around us. We can improvise ideas about killers or lovers or doctors or bakers. We can co-write narratives that we conduct and perhaps, just perhaps, it might even save us from our own indulgences.

Love

Stacey

Stephen Davis was born in Glasgow and currently resides in the Blue Mountains. He is a multi award winning playwright and screenwriter with six published work and four feature credits. He is currently doing his PhD at the University of New South Wales and archiving the website Bored Olives.