

Tom Sokolowski

## Then There's Something

I'm sitting on a stool with my back to the pantry in the kitchen of Paige's killer. The lights are off, though an intrusive streetlight yellows the dirty plates lopsidedly stacked beside the packed sink. A wet-dog smell. Crumbs and bits of rice like chewed-off fingernails texture the electric stovetop. The garbage brims with Coors cans and Diet Coke two-liters. On the table sits a three-quarters-empty handle of Jim Beam. Above the table is an old photo of Vincent, the killer, with his ex-wife and their baby. Vincent's arms wrap around her shoulders so that his hands cover hers. With his chin tucked to her shoulder, they are looking down at the child whose pinched red face stares right at the camera.

In dreams, Paige comes to me holding our baby. Moments after waking, it's as if she's alive. Once, against the black and white mosaic world of midnight, she was naked and pale, hair just covering the knuckles of spine at the top of her back, feeding our child. Other nights, I'll find myself crawling back into bed with my memory like an angry cloud of bees and a vague feeling that something terrible had been happening. I'll wake to find things open: windows, cabinets, my refrigerator. I don't know if I'm trying to let something out or something in—

Outside, Vincent's car door slams. He struggles to unlock the front door, keys the knob. Then, lineman-sized, he makes the doorway look small. Grocery bags hang from his forearm. He looks like a frog about to bellow from that swollen alcoholic face. He was leaner at the trial, always clean-shaved and in a good suit. Now he looks himself, like the man who stood on that street with a pistol in hand.

In the dark, he unloads his groceries at the kitchen table, then flicks on the living room light. Still, he doesn't notice me. My hands swamp inside nitrile gloves. I have my .38 Taurus, the revolver I inherited from my father. The bags have striped Vincent's forearm red. Why haven't I already squeezed the trigger?

His shoes come off followed by a jacket, revealing what looks a P226 pistol holstered on his hip. It's illegal for him to conceal now. The stench of his toes reaches me as he heads for the bathroom. I hear his stream from the kitchen. My glove sucks tight to my wedding band,

and the blood in my skull is war-drumming. That familiar anger. Killing him has to fix me.

Vincent flushes, doesn't wash his hands, then, on his way back for the groceries, he sees me. "The fuck?" he shouts.

"I have a gun. I have a gun," I say, my revolver aimed. "Give me yours."

His fingers reach for the ceiling. "Hold on," he says. "Just hold on."

"Turn around," I say.

"You're the husband."

"Righto," I say. "Turn."

His Adam's apple lumps. "Look. Wait." His eyes bounce around the room. "Put yours down."

I cut loose a scream like I'm trying to wake the whole block. My voice sears uncontrollably high. "I will kill you," I nearly whisper, catching my breath. "Turn."

He rotates with half-step shuffles. I creep from behind, swipe the pistol from his hip, and scuttle back to the kitchen to unchamber a round, remove the magazine.

"Sit," I say.

Vincent looks over his shoulder. I gesture to a kitchen table chair with my revolver. He wedges himself into the chair, arms still above his head. "You're the husband," he says.

"The other way." My voice quivers. Maintain strength. "Look away." I keep the kitchen counter between us and the barrel at his face.

He stands.

"Slowly," I say.

He straddles the chair.

"Sit on your hands," I say.

"What do you want?"

"Where are your sheets?"

"What?"

"Bedsheets," I say, "where are they?"

He tells me the sheets are in a hallway closet and turns to point, but I tell him to keep his eyes away and to keep his fucking hands under his ass. I backstep through the house and find the closet while never losing sight of him. I open the closet and root around with my left hand behind my back and reassure Vincent that I'll kill him if he moves. I knock an old crockpot. The glass lid shatters at my feet. I feel until I touch sheets.

I toss a SpongeBob pillowcase into Vincent's lap, command him to hood himself. With the sack over his head, he almost looks like an

executée, except, across his face, SpongeBob attempts to net a jellyfish. I ask about duct tape. He tells me it's in his garage, but his response comes after a moment of hesitation. I search the kitchen drawers. Pens, scissors, thumbtacks, silverware collect on the tile. I find a thin roll of packing tape in a cabinet with lightbulbs and batteries and instruct him to put his hands behind his back, with his palms facing out, the backs of his hands touching. As he adjusts, I free a strip of tape to handle the roll with one hand. I approach him like a handler wrapping a gator's maw. With my revolver inches from the back of his head, I loop the tape around his wrists. I use the whole roll. His ankles aren't taped. Should've had him bind his feet first.

"It was a mistake," he says. "Two years in prison."

I go back to the kitchen, sit on the stool. "Eighteen months."

He goes on. "I've never meant to hurt anyone."

I lift my revolver, aim at SpongeBob's face. My organs seem to vibrate independently. I felt this way after I saw the crime scene photos of Paige. She lay on the sidewalk, positioned the way she slept in on Saturday mornings.

With his forehead resting on the back of the chair, Vincent complains that it's hard to breathe. The tape bulges the veins in his hands. All I have to do is squeeze. I get close, five feet away, a cartoon jellyfish from the pillowcase popsied on the front sight post. Paige had called me a bad guy before she went out that night, said I was cruel, tainted by sadness. I'm not a bad guy, this is a bad guy.

His phone buzzes on the counter, crawling a bit. A picture of a girl of maybe thirteen lights the screen.

"Who's Mandy?" I ask.

He straightens. "My daughter." His breath catches the fabric making SpongeBob lurch in and out of his mouth.

I silence the ring.

"I need to answer," he says. "She doesn't call this late. Please."

It starts ringing again.

"It's an emergency," he says.

Should I believe him? I'd like to flip a coin. My heart rattles. "If you say anything," I threaten. I put the phone on speaker and drop it in his lap.

"Hey pumpkin," he says through the pillowcase, his voice forced calm and high-pitched. "Are you okay? Can you hear me?"

"Jeff is drunk again. Him and mom are fighting," the girl says, sounding bored. Background traffic buzz is made tiny through the cell-phone speakers. "He broke a door. The whole frame."

“Where are you?” Vincent asks.

“I left,” she says.

“Baby, I want you to call the cops.”

“That made things worse last time.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m walking to Dunkin’ Donuts.”

“Stay there. I’ll call you. I’ll call you soon. I love you.”

I end the call.

“I have to get my daughter,” he says.

“How fucking convenient,” I say, more to myself than him, I suppose.

I put the kitchen counter between us again.

“Shoot me, or let me see my daughter,” he says.

“You’re not leaving.”

He jerks up, toppling the chair, and bends, dipping his shoulders so that the pillowcase slips from his head. The veins in his neck swell, and his elbows flare out, but he fails to snap the tape around his wrists.

We make eye contact, and I point my revolver at his face. He doesn’t come any closer. “Sit down.”

He charges bull-like, his arms still taped behind his back. I crack my revolver against his head, and he careens into the fridge, cratering the freezer door. Tampa Bay Bucs magnets clatter to the tile. I vault over the counter.

Vincent gets up, goes for his pistol—the one I took from his hip. He realizes it’s unloaded and looks for bullets, but they’re in my pocket, and his hands are still taped anyway. He comes at me again; this time the kitchen table separates us, and we each do a side shuffle, keeping the table between us like children playing tag. It almost feels good to be chased. There’s real purpose to my movement, a need for my muscles to activate. He flips the table with a kick. I tuck the revolver in my waistband, grab a chair and explode it over his head. He yelps, staggers, and reaches to protect, or perhaps diagnose, a gash running from his ear to his chin. I scavenge a cracked-off chair leg and bludgeon the back of his left knee. He topples. A whack across his head vibrates through to my arm, numbing my hand.

He lays, gasping.

“Let me think or I’ll kill you,” I say. “I swear, I’ll kill you.”

I look at the family photo above the flipped table. In his youth, Vincent resembled Sergeant Matos. Goddamn Sergeant Matos who

made the entire squad piss in Gatorade bottles and toss them with chocolate to Afghani kids who flocked to our convoy.

I've dealt with violence all my life. Marines worship brutality. I knew my share of real psychos. The guys who, when the initial propaganda ended, flourished. They didn't need Godsmack-tracked commercials of explosions to pump them up anymore, they had the real thing. Savagery was in their DNA. Then there were guys like me who needed violence to prove something to ourselves and our fathers.

I don't know if I've ever killed anyone. Usually, when Taliban fighters were closest, they'd manifest as muzzle flashes from mountains a kilometer away. I'd only glimpse a figure and fire back with my head down, throwing out rounds to suppress. A kill from those distances would be like winning the lottery.

Once, I saw Taliban clearly. They ambushed my squad in the Rodat district of Nangarhar Province, right outside this tiny town called Hesarak—a bit southeast of Jalalabad. Their rounds sent us clambering into brown ankle-deep ravine water. They were using fig trees as concealment, maybe a hundred meters away, the size players are at a basketball game with decent tickets, so close we were throwing grenades. Everyone was screaming and shooting, and, with my vision closing like a lens shutter, I felt I was going blind. We went black on ammunition before a hull-down gun truck lit the fig trees from an elevated position. Everyone had the shakes for hours.

I had a strange feeling whenever I left the safety of a base. The moment I stepped outside the FOB I felt a tightness, a chill constricting all my muscles, this puckering of my asshole. On a scale to ten, leaving the FOB is a one. In that ravine, I was boiling past ten.

Here, with Vincent, I can't decide.

Vincent's refrigerator whines. Water from the dispenser trickles into the crater made by his head. He's still wheezing, lying on his side among chair debris. Blood dots the carpet pillowing his head. He looks IED hit.

"I need to call my daughter," he says.

"At the trial, your lawyers tried to paint you as a good father," I say. "They always made sure your little girl was in sight. When I saw her, I'd think about all the fatherly tasks I'd never do. Never change diapers. Never jingle a bell on top of a roof dressed as Santa. Never intimidate a boyfriend."

"I'm sorry," he says, choking up.

"You know what I still think about," I say. "If my baby has decomposed. Or if my baby is preserved in Paige's stomach under all that dirt. What do you think?"

"I don't know."

"You think they'll stay together? Sometimes babies calcify and huddle in a mother's fallopian tubes for a lifetime. Did you know that? Stone baby syndrome." I free the revolver from my waistband.

Vincent mumbles something, rolls to his belly, brings his knees to his chest with a grunt, and hinges up like a cellar door. He goes to one knee. Blood bubbles under the skin of his left leg. The gash across his cheek is swelling. I let him stand, and I'm not sure why. I can hear the wind breathing through the window that I broke through. The blinds are sucking in and puffing out, over and over, rattling like loose teeth. It's like I'm supposed to listen. I try to picture that night. Paige had been out with friends. Vincent fired a warning shot into the street to threaten a couple of other drunks, but the bullet ricocheted and burrowed into Paige's heart.

For a moment, I can think over the flooding pulse in my head. I say, "We'll see if your daughter is safe."

He pauses.

I go into the kitchen. "Don't try anything," I say. I find a kitchen knife and approach him, tell him to turn around. I slit the packing tape and step back with my revolver ready. He pulls tape from his wrists, stripping hair. I toss him his keys and tell him to walk slowly to his car. He limps. I follow.

A compact SUV frosted with sun-faded paint and in need of a wash sits on his driveway. The horn yips as he unlocks.

"How far is it?" I ask, taking the back after he's sat in the driver's seat, pulling his busted leg in with both hands.

"Twenty minutes north," he says.

Road lines dart at us like tracer rounds. Whether he's eager to reach his daughter or alert cops, I'm not sure.

I roll down the window. Paige and I fought the night before, had argued at a nice Italian restaurant with a rubble of burrata between us. "Paranoid ideas root themselves in your mind," Paige had said. She said there was a different reality up there, in my head. And she was right. Part of me just wanted to be alone, climb a plateau and lay there like an elephant in its graveyard. But the baby was going to fix things.

“I’ve been thinking about that night every day since,” Vincent says. “I can’t sleep.” Then, “We’re both vets, you know.”  
“Shut up and drive faster.”

In Afghanistan, the brown mountains are gouged with palm-filled fertile valleys and there are villages formed from earth and shared by generations. Usually, the Afghani people are safe in those buildings—homes made of mud, thickened over hundreds of years, even able to stop fifty-caliber rounds. They stack tires on the roofs to keep cool.

At the end of my last deployment, I was assigned to a hasty FOB overlooking Jaba from the south. During patrols into the village, I’d watch children form a circle and kick a slightly deflated soccer ball. One boy could juggle the ball with his feet like a tiny circus performer. Eventually, a sniper wormed into the village, began using a central house to get sight on our FOB. He timed an attack with a group of Taliban manning a DShK on an adjacent ridge with a kilometer or so of elevation—we were always stationed where some high ground looked down on us.

With us pinned down by the DShK, the machine gun’s low *thud thud thud* echoing into the valley, the sniper went at us. We figured his position out quickly—we’d suspected members of the village were working with the Taliban for a while—then got SAWs spitting back. Soon the mountain went quiet, and we got good eyes on the village. Sergeant Matos called in artillery. The wrong building went first, and all the marines had a good laugh, then a second mortar deleted the sniper.

Later, I found out a whole family went up with that wrong building. That little boy who juggled the soccer ball was mixed with his sisters and father in all that debris. Every day over there, I questioned if Sergeant Matos had targeted the wrong building on purpose, a kind of punishment to the village. I thought about that village a lot when I was back home, too.

Vincent hits the brakes like he’s trying to kick the road.

“Fuck, man,” I shout.

“A dog. Or a fox darted into the road,” he says.

I think I remember seeing the animal now, the hind legs pumping in the headlights. But I picture a deer, maybe a bear. I think about driving here versus at war. At home, my thoughts vanish only to return to reality in a moment that’s like coming out of a drunken

blackout. I'll wonder, for a moment, where I am, because I've traveled a mile or ten in the hypnosis of rumbling tires. At war, I was stuck in physical reality. Every foot of travel I was focused, spying terrain for something that wanted me dead.

I look around. We're on a county road tunneling through pines.

"My wife left me," he says.

"She had custody?" I ask.

"I have visits."

"Why'd she leave?"

"I had a drug problem for a minute," he says. "I drank a lot after deployment and things snowballed. You know how it goes."

The car feels like it's shrinking, or like at some point the cab shrunk and I've only now become aware. I press my revolver into his seat until the pressure in my wrist is too much. "My wife was pregnant when you killed her," I say. "I won't ever even have visits."

The speed limit drops, and we start hitting lights. A Walmart appears. After a couple blocks, we turn into a plaza. I tell Vincent to drive slowly around the Dunkin' Donuts, but not too slow. "You see her?" I ask.

He keeps his foot off the gas, his eyes on the building. It's easy to see inside with the glass walls and the interior lights against the night.

"Yes," he says about halfway around. "I see her."

Mandy, the daughter, has red hair and a baggy sweatshirt. Paige once dyed her hair like that, always snuggled in one of my big sweaters. Real revenge would mean me taking this girl from him. Why did he bring me here?

We pass overfilled dumpsters. "Stop," I say.

Vincent parks the car. An employee smokes by the rear door. I look for cameras.

"Let's go see her," I say, stepping out.

Vincent has trouble getting out of the car.

"Wipe the blood from your face," I say.

He blots himself with a rain jacket slung over the passenger seat. The blood smudges.

"Why not just leave now?" he asks.

I take the revolver out of my waistband just to show him. He shuffles toward the building.

Inside the Dunkin' Donuts, chairs are crooked and pulled from tables. A jelly donut lays exploded on the floor, as if picked apart by rats.

Mandy calls out, "Dad." She stands.

"You okay?" he asks.



When she gets a good look at his face, she covers her mouth.

“Why don’t we get some donuts first,” I say.

Vincent looks at me.

“Donuts,” I say.

Mandy stops her approach.

The employees are busy heating food for drive-through customers, so we stand at the counter for a moment. Finally, a teenage girl with makeup-caked acne asks what we’d like.

“Pick something your daughter likes,” I say.

“Frosted strawberry donut,” Vincent says.

The girl finally looks up. “You okay?”

“There’s three of us,” I remind Vincent.

“One frosted strawberry and two chocolate glazed,” he says.

The girl drifts to the trays of goods, gets a sheet of paper, and starts plopping donuts into a bag.

“Does your daughter like anything specific to drink,” I ask.

“One frosted strawberry, two chocolate glazed,” he says, “and an iced macchiato.”

The girl sets the bag of donuts on the counter, presses buttons on the cash register, and disappears into the back.

Vincent turns to look at Mandy.

“Stay right here,” I say.

The girl returns with the coffee. Vincent pays and we both say thank you. I follow Vincent to Mandy. Only after he sits does she sit. I take a chair across from them.

“What’s happening?” she asks as Vincent sets the coffee in front of her and the donuts in the middle of the table.

I stare at her so she gets a good look at my face. When I can tell she’s recognized me, I smile. “Your father isn’t a good man.”

“Dad,” she pleads.

“Why would you bring me here,” I ask Vincent. “What kind of idiot are you?”

“Don’t do anything rash,” he says.

“You can’t even begin to understand what he took from me,” I say to no one in particular. I lean into the table. I look Mandy in the eyes. “Your father took everything from me. He’s killed me.” I grapple for words. My voice is ready to crack. How do I explain my condition to a child? To anyone? Heartbroken doesn’t begin to do it justice. “Your father has made me an animal. What do you think he deserves?”

Mandy’s eyes are the size of golf balls.

“What does he deserve?” Snot worms my lips.

“I don’t know,” she says.

That’s the only answer I have. If this was a movie, Mandy would’ve been quick enough to answer forgiveness. But maybe she doesn’t even believe that.

This is the thing about killing: those who are murdered can’t take offense to it. A murderer only hurts those left behind. If I take out my revolver and spread Vincent’s brain across this filthy restaurant, he doesn’t suffer. But if I spread Mandy’s brain across the floor, across the straw wrappings and donut sprinkles and footprint-smudged napkins, then there’s something. Me killing Mandy, that would validate Paige’s worst thoughts about me. Yes, killing Mandy would make me a bad guy. Maybe Paige was right. Maybe I am. And maybe Paige deserves to be proved right.

I pull the donut bag toward me, lay napkins onto the table as plates. “Why don’t we eat,” I say.

Vincent looks like his heart is going a thousand miles an hour. His hands shake like he’s freezing to death. A car turns in the plaza, shooting its headlights into the building, making a shadow creep across Vincent’s face. The night he killed Paige, he stood in the middle of the street, jamming up traffic. Vincent was probably aglow in headlights, a performer with a chorus of car horns. He probably felt so tough when he fired that shot.

“What type of man is your father?” I ask. “Violent? Abusive?” I want to shout, but I need to keep the staff out of this.

“No,” Mandy says, crying.

“Look at me,” I say, placing my free hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t touch her,” Vincent shouts.

“Shut your fucking mouth,” I say with the revolver out, pointed at his face.

Vincent’s hands go up. I start talking, again to no one in particular. “I went to war with a murderous sergeant.” I’m leaning with my forearms flush to the table, the revolver slack in my hand and at Vincent’s chest. I look at Mandy. “Are you listening?”

She nods.

“I knew this guy was bad. The way he treated civilians, even his own soldiers. But I never said a thing,” I say. “The end of the deployment, he mortared an entire family.”

“What is he talking about, Dad?” she manages in about twice as many syllables as needed.

“Where are the keys?” I ask Vincent.

“The car’s still running.”

I stand with the revolver still aimed and take a good look at Vincent and Mandy. The staff is nowhere to be found. I squeeze. The explosion. A plunge of hollow deafness. The high-pitched sizzle in both ears and Mandy's scream. God, I squeezed. Vincent's eyes, immense with fright, dart to his chest. He gasps fishlike, clutches his left ribs with both hands. The blood, I can't yet see. Mandy has huddled beside the table. Her chair lays sideways. Her fingers, which she certainly has no control of, cling shiveringly to the edge of the table. It seems she is trying to drape the tabletop across her shoulders like a frightened child with a blanket. She has tucked her wobbling head, with that red hair parted perfectly down the middle, between her knees. The poor girl. How could I hurt her?

In Vincent's SUV, the seat is way back, but I don't adjust it. Ahead, the road follows a chain-link fence that surrounds a retention pond. I take the car forward. Trees close in around. Acorns carpet pavement, popcorn beneath the tires. Behind, police cars light the plaza blue. I keep my eyes on the rearview mirror. The road. But the car is angling into a tree. It's too late to make a correction. I jerk forward. The airbags blow. For a while, I get the same feeling I had when I saw someone shot and thought, for too long, that I'd been shot too.

I get out, hold the revolver in front of me as if to steady myself. The SUV's hood has a dent not much bigger than what Vincent's head made in his refrigerator, but a wisp of smoke escapes the engine. I've seen Humvees take round after round of 7.62 without smoking.

I drop my revolver to my side. The night is clear and alive with stars in patterns that seem purposeful. In Afghanistan, stars overwhelmed the sky, and an Afghani sky spied through night vision looked like a fuzzed-out TV channel tinted green.

Someone is shouting. Then many people are shouting. The police have taken cover in a horseshoe pattern all around. Near the Dunkin' Donuts, police are escorting a woman to safety. For a moment, I like to imagine she's Paige. It's as if I'm a ghost, teleported back to witness a different outcome of that night.

The revolver is still at my side. My arm feels bloodless. The police keep shouting. I focus on lifting my arm, but it's like trying to touch Paige and our baby in my dreams.