



Vincent Barry

Same Difference

It was about—what? oh, maybe eleven, midnight at Tommy Knockers Top o’ the Hill. Sirens wailing, homicide detectives, *Eyewitness News*...you know, *Sunset Boulevard*-like?...

Why, you could almost hear a mellow voice:

“They’ll tell you in their own way what it’s about. But before they do, if you want the inside dope, you’ve come to the right place.”

Only it wasn’t Joe Gillis floating face down in Norma Desmond’s pool. It was Neil Diamond’s growing baritone that TK’s new Rockola Sybaris sent wafting through the stale smoky air before settling beneath an opalescent glitter ball like a volcano’s crown, above a middle-aged man slumped over a wood top bar.

“A lot of ’em!”

That was Rook, railing against students, talking to a hangdog detective whose barricaded look couldn’t quite conceal a nervous tension and straggling self-memory. Rook did security at the

community college where both teachers taught English. The detective, for his part, was about to pull the pin. Retirement, not suicide.

“They attack teachers more than you’d think,” Rook snapped, leaving his mouth open like a dog. Then, barking loud enough to dispel any doubt a block away, “Believe me, more ’n you’d think!”

The detective scribbled aimlessly.

He was preoccupied, y’see, not with the slug from a Sig P365 in the back of the head fired at point-blank range, his best guess, but with what of a sudden had led him to search interrogatively the heavy-lidded, numbed eyes of the lathered face he saw in the seriously de-silvered mirror that a.m., before reaching for a styptic pencil, dipped and dabbed, then felt a slight stinging sensation at the jugular, like the burn at the back of the throat from a shot of his favored single malt. Then, leaning in, breath fogging the discolored glass, he said with a curious sharpened wonder in direct, choice language, “Why are things not pure and simple?”

And, presto, the detective decided that once retired he’d write a novel, like, in his mind’s eye, Joe Wambaugh. Why couldn’t *he* be like the ex-cop author?... A movie even?...

Then treasonous self-doubt stole in. He blew off the whim with, “Right—where to begin?,” and vigorously towed his furrowed lank face.

Bending low and screwing up his bleary eyes, the detective now peered through half-rim Foster Grant’s at the small circular shape at the back of the head, like a miner at an ancient skull who, searching for metal ore deposits, has come upon, of all things, a bullet hole. ’Cept, of course, the detective had seen it all before, and, besides, it didn’t really matter, since in a matter of days it’d be someone else’s matter.

“Doin’ ’em in even,” Rook ranted on about students, following up with a rat-a-tat “Don’t kid yourself!” till it stuck in the detective’s brain like a nail.

As if, after thirty-four years, a man of grim experience, mere days away from a long-chased after pension, passion even, did know, of course, where to begin—which is, to say, as if such a man who feels the whips and stings of avenging fiendish guilt for an unsolved crime, could he but express it, namely, not to have had anyone who cared for him, loved him, could kid himself....

No, what such a man as that does is what he did just hours before. He interrogates his mirror image, the seemingly foreshortened face with its big Glenfiddich-enriched corrugated nose, and, self-defeated, laments into a napless towel, “Why are things not pure and simple?”

’s what he does, ’cuz such a man is not sentimental. He’s a realist. He sees things from the other side of the grave, and always carries his department-issued Glock in a Galco concealable belt holster on the strong side of his waist, the right side—’cept in bed, of course, where he still keeps

it close, under a cool pillow, sleeping on the heart side, with of late a languorous arm draped over the hackette's curved half-veiled hip....

“Hackette”— the detective's sobriquet for the right-in-your-face *Eyewitness* reporter he'd hooked up with when she was doing a piece on gun safety and casually shook a pistol in his face, the very one she'd just fired down range at a target.

“Aitch,” he sometimes called her affectionately. She, unfailingly, called him, lowercased, “dick.”

“Boss-eyed,” the full-timer called Rook. That and an oracular “procured father” for viewing truth as “a daughter of authority.”

The part-timer, in turn, sensed a veiled portent in the full-timer's words, something sinister, something even that incestuously yoked Rook to Nightsider. But—and here's the thing— to this foreboding the part-timer shut his eyes, parried it with, “Been reading Poe lately, I see,” thinking, y'know, of Ligeia and the Ushers and the like. And it was true. The full-timer was, in fact, preparing lectures on the sibilant and macabre “jingle man,” before falling ill....

Truth be told, the full-timer's words left him with the chill of a vault, of foretold fate— a bodeful presentiment, indeed, but it also left a lurking image so tantalizing as to leave one empty, as it were: the full-timer's warm loving arm extended as if to one teetering on the edge of a precipice, a dark chthonic abyss, meditating a plunge and unable to walk away.

It was thus that, akratically, the part-timer succumbed to the drift of time in the dead hand of the valley.

“The valley”— the locals' endonym for a sullen stretch of land flatter than a gander's arch about fifty miles wide and five hundred miles long—of oil derricks, truck stops, country music, conspiracy politics, and just about every known non-tropical crop, cultivated and harvested by generations of migrant field workers, who shared the locals' disdain for “stinkin' badges.”

“Bumblefuck” to the detective, the hardscrabble town of desiccated trees and low, tar and gravel roofed buildings with walls of pink stucco or grey cinder block that showed best in winter's cold greasy fogs, or better yet...as, perhaps, the spirochetic setting of a movie?

But before that, before the glory beyond the fog, the fog, the nagging question: Where to begin?

In the shifting pattern of the detective's thoughts floated two buckshot-peppered signs that marked B'fuck's city limits, as alive to him as the disembodied eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, which, funnily enough, still stuck from high school English. Behind one or the other, as a rookie “blue flamer,” he craftily used to station his black-and-white that smelled of rotten eggs and the darkness, and lie in wait on Saturday nights to hang paper on “screamers” and bust “B-Dubs” and “two-beers”...

One sign read “Sun, Fun, Play Stay,” which, given the town's punishing unemployment, crushing poverty, and head-snapping argosy of clinical addictions and behaviors, the full-timer preferred to render as: “Abandon hope, all you who pass here.” Its pockmarked companion boasted more evangelical churches than any other town its size.

Framing the signs in his mind, the detective now muttered between his teeth, “Tight,” for the shot he wanted of the gunshot wound. Then, refocusing, signs fading, he expelled with a backward jerk of his head an exasperated, gruff-voiced plea to the boys in blue: “Will somebody please unplug ‘Play Me’?”

Then stillness— stillness so thick it rang in your ears....

Why Neil Diamond? Why not for the valley Buck Owens?...Merle Haggard? A good question, a detective's question. A subtle question a man of less bluish and pale skin, with quicker responses, might ask, a man with uncupped hands less chilled with fear...not one, certainly, but a husk of erstwhile flame and desire, suffering from acute confirmation bias, would ask.

So enfeebled a man as that would blandly allow if asked why Neil Diamond: “Oh, some oil rigger or other dropped a quarter to hear, ‘You are the sun, I am the moon/You are the words, I am the tune,’” and bending into, as now, a keyhole of bone, would mumble low, “guess she wasn't his first choice,” and add, as now, after a marked, dispirited pause, “end of story.”

“For its solecism,” the full-timer once said instead with the quickness of a hair clipper over a vodka martini, always savored with a salty garnish and always up at TK's, for its “louche aroma.” The full-timer meant, of solecism, “Songs you sang to me, sounds you brang to me.” Then, nimbly self-editing, “Or is it a barbarism?”, mindful, y'see, of their work in the valley, that being, largely, to disabuse its offspring of such corruptions as “just between you and I,” “allmonds,” “alot,” and alike.

Then, on the aforesaid occasion, the full-timer addressed the waitress ironically, “Irregardless,” adding, “with pickled onion.”

“Huh?” the pea-stick figure went, head fallen on her right cheek, for sure a wannabe B-girl at the valley's fancy-schmancy Broken Circle.

“Capers, perhaps?” returned the full-timer, as though cadging for a drink.

“Outside,” B-girl sighed with a head wag and a lethal flame red stiletto-nailed thumb slung over her right shoulder, “there's a machine.”

“Well, then, girl,” went the full-timer, “I'll just have what you're wearing,” and pointed to her white on green “Hello, my name is” name tag. “Uh-huh,” B-girl said, raising a long-suffering single black penciled eyebrow. “Olive. Cute.”

After an easy silence and some pause, the full-timer said to B-girl, “You know, you know your stuff,” simply, faintly, friendly, as if to a niece or a family friend, and B-girl tightened her lips on a grin before slew footing off.

Security, too, knew his stuff— oh, not stuff that makes you feel drunk or that the top of your head were taken off...stuff about how the world actually works stuff...pot-filling stuff, two-timer stuff, not the fire-lighting Hippocrene stuff of the two timers....

Cut his teeth, Rook did, selling unowned land to Haitians in Georgia and South Florida before slithering on into security at Kmart. Silk-smooth the move. Then Kmart went under—not Rook, though. Took his game to the valley, to the college, “gettin’ fly and findin’ bitches to turn out,” as the full-timer cast it.

The part-timer let on he didn’t catch on, chose to bash on, sharpening the blunt edge of habit, the embodiment of demonic portent.... Same difference—another valley idiom to be broken.

“What’s to say?” the detective said reflexively to some fatuity or other from the hackette. Then, with slackened voice, he fed her a story tag for her live shot. “One night,” he whispered into Aitch’s shell-like ear, “poof, you pass with prejudice,” and she souged back, “Dick.”

“What’s to say?” of what it’s like no full-timer ever said, and the part-timer, aching, obsessed y’cud say, to be a full-timer, but forever losing out in the fierce competition for dwindling positions, had asked a lot of ’em, what it was like to be full-time tenured?

“Born just a bit too soon and a bit too light to ever go full-time in these times,” the full-timer told the part-timer, adding with a loose laugh and mincing precision, “*dude*. That too.”

All delivered with the delicate charm of a careless, self-effacing candor that the part-timer somehow felt deeply affecting. Especially the full-timer’s dead serious *coup de grâce*: “Stop negating me,” which made the part-timer’s neck contuse with a blush that mounted to his face when the full-timer tacked on the stern, “Stop ‘capitulating to badges and names.’”

At that, the part-timer recognized Emerson and, suiting words to thought, left forever unrealized, a sweet fleeting moment of inchoate feeling for the full-timer that transcended friendship.

So, remedial comp, one evening a week, in the spring. In the fall and winter he soldiered through the luteous Tule fog up to the prison at Tehachapi, the same of *Maltese Falcon* fame, where Bogie’s Sam told Astor’s Brigit: “Well, if you get a break you’ll be out of Tehachapi in twenty years and you can come back to me then.”

Only then it was The California Institution for Women, Tehachapi. So “I hope they don’t hang you, precious, by the neck” doesn’t quite fit, since now it’s all men. Still, the valley prevails, it endures, “the valley of bacterium and delirium,” the full-timer’s words. Then, as if requiting, the valley gave back fever—but not Peggy Lee’s kind.

Valley Fever. 'S a lung infection you get from inhaling fungal spores that live in the soil and carry on a wind blown out of a cloud. Sometimes it migrates from the lungs to the brain or other organs. "Disseminated disease," they alliteratively then call it. Rare, not contagious, but serious, even fatal. Specially to African Americans, like the full-timer, who called dying with it "an ironic joke," and more caustically, "affirmative action in spades."

The part-timer didn't laugh, and he couldn't tell you, if you asked, why it made his eyes suddenly fill with the schwarmerei of something that would pass, frankly, for a peculiar dancing in his veins that he wanted both to hide and confess, but that's only a guess, and it passed unexpressed.

He'd summoned Security earlier, the part-timer had, when the gaunt and haunted grinagog with the pale famished mouth, whom the full-timer tagged "Nightsider" and premonished him to avoid, suddenly stood like one of *The Shining*'s Grady sisters in the oblong of yellow lamplight dropping across the threshold of his office, in just enough of the light, to expose—what *was* that in her boney ringed hand? A purse, a smartphone, a pocket pistol? Something small and grey like a mouse, that made his blood run slow and chill with fear, and regret ever getting mixed up, like a poet, in "a mug's game," with a bar code on a wrist.

'S when he called Security. Well, not exactly then but....

After she left it was, when he said to himself, alone he thought, "Thank God the crazy witch is gone."

But Nightsider must have been hovering in the hall, 'cuz, y'see, she stormed back in like frenzied Brunnhilde...caused a terrible row. Just terrible—turned his office into Chekov's "sparrow night"—y'know, a night full of thunder and lightning and wind and rain? Like that....

Of course, reflection urging forbearance, he told her that she was hearing things, that he'd never call her a bitch.

'Bout then's when, nerves twitching, he called over.

Nightsider left.

Security came.

They agreed they could stand a drink.

Once at TK's, the part-timer allowed that he could kick himself for not realizing that she would be lurking about after class,—to skulk and lie in wait in a convenient shadow, then pounce, as she had done, after his lecture, . . . well, the full-timer's actually, on Poe's "Imp of the Perverse." He was subbing, y'see....

Next up next week: Emerson. “Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.” The full-timer’s header.

Hunched over a glass in light just bright enough to expose a bald patch on the crown of his head, “‘S what stalkers do,” Security said, with a nightmarish mouthful of crooked teeth peeking from between short thin lips. And the part-timer, nerves kicking, cheeks quivering and flicked with red, said with an incongruous amiable air, “Who’s keeping an eye on the store?”

Security didn’t say—didn’t have to. His flat colored gimlet-like eyes said it all—that and his signature grunt of laughter. “They lurk,” both said darkly, menacingly, like a father coveting a daughter left broken, abandoned, unloved. Then, speaking stiffly as if with lacquered lips, “‘S what stalkers do.” A cold-eyed, unused smile played across his face when he then rasped with contemptuous amusement, “Don’tcha even know that?”

The detective, who now was scribbling purposefully, said eagerly, “And what did *he* say?”

“What could he say?”

The detective put his head inquisitively to one side, and, reading it, Rook said, “‘Bout then s’when sumthin loud punched with a phut through the back of his head.”

With concentrated determination now knitting his brows, the detective nodded once or twice and wrote fast in his “Field Notes,” pausing only to ask, without looking up, “With a ‘foot’ you say?”

“Phut, phut!” from Rook impatiently, then, “Do I gotta spell it for you?—p-h-u-t. Phut.”

“Like an explosion?”

“Same difference,” growled Rook, jerking his close-cropped head up from his half-drained glass and fixing the detective with a cocked, impudent eye, which passed unnoticed, for the detective was writing with all the assiduity of a medieval scribe, and murmuring, “‘Same difference.”

Then, with a peculiar twist of his head, there escaped the detective’s closed-pressed lips, “Got it,” and he closed the book....

The closeup.

That was taken—hmm, hard to say....

Whenever, it wasn’t Mr. DeMille’s time.... Emerson’s, y’cud say, or the full-timer’s, she quoted it enough, of bad times—“occasions a good learner would not miss”....

In the drift of time she would imagine him, whenever teaching “The Raven,” having just enough time to override a nimety of memories, the overmastering pang of possibility forever passing—“Never—nevermore”....

But for sure it was taken, the closeup, just after everything happened at once disclosed to the detective in the camera obscura of his mind that in human relations there is no pure and simple truth....

Which is to say, just after he *got* it...where to begin...or, as they say in the valley, “Same difference.”

After retiring from a career teaching philosophy, Vincent Barry returned to his first love, fiction. His stories have appeared in numerous publications in the U.S. and abroad, including: The Saint Ann’s Review, The Bitchin’ Kitsch, The Broken City, Abstract: Contemporary Expressions, Kairos, Terror House, Caveat Lector, The Fem, BlogNostics, The Writing Disorder, whimperbang, The Disappointed Housewife, The Collidescope, Anti-Heroin Chic, and Beakful. Barry lives in Santa Barbara, California.