

In death, she smelled of oranges and honey. The aroma brought back memories of childhood weekends spent at his uncle's farm in Torrance, CA.

For a brief moment, snatched from the jaws of the beast of time, he was transported back to a sunny afternoon in the backyard of the farm, where he kissed the gardener's beautiful daughter--she was 11, he was 9--and experienced his first pang of bittersweet pain-love.

The aroma of oranges and honey was inextricably associated with that memory, and even now, kneeling here on the scarlet-stained tiles of this kitchen floor, that tiny flashback glowed warmly within him, helping insulate him from the cold task that lay ahead.

He swaddled the body in the enormous sheet of tarpaulin he'd bought the week before, then trussed it with nylon clothesline. He sat back, leaning against the blood-splattered wall and looked at her for a moment.

She reminded him of an enormous cocoon, like those of moths he'd sought out in the damp crevices of trees and crushed between his thumb and forefinger as a child, just for the pleasure of seeing the pus-like fluids ooze out sickeningly.

His watch beeped, signalling that it was time for the next phase of the plan. He went through the adjoining door to the enclosed garage and switched on the lights, keeping the trunk open. Then he went back for the body, carried it to the car, lowered it gently into the trunk.

The head of the cocoon struck the edge of the trunk with a soundless squishy impact and he winced. It was hardly a misdemeanour, after all the unspeakable havoc he'd wrought on her body--both while alive and even after death--but somehow it bothered him. A corner of the tarpaulin was sticking up out of the clothesline binding, and he tucked it in gently, like a father pulling the sheet up to his sleeping daughter's chin.

The drive out to the lake took him an hour and twenty minutes. He could have done it in half the time, but the highway was dark and empty, the wind on his face cool and refreshing and it was such a Godsend to be free of the pressures of honking horns, traffic signals, teenagers on scooters weaving recklessly between lanes and the drone of the interstate trucks.

He parked at the spot he'd selected--within stone's throw of the chemical plant, and carried the cocoon down to the lake. There was almost no traffic on this stretch of road, and the area by the lake was deserted, but he'd thought of everything, and the torch in the miner's hat carved a small but efficient pathway through the gloom. Disposing of the body took less than fifteen minutes, and by the time he walked back to the car, the alarm on his Casio still hadn't gone off. He was ahead of schedule--as usual.

He got into the car and drove back slowly. The road was awful at this point and he crawled along at snail's pace, trying to roll gently up the myriad bumps and pimples on the monsoon-ravaged asphalt. An odd bit of trivia came to mind: In some West Indian city, Trinidad probably, the traffic police had built large speed breakers to discourage speeding, and these foot-high humps were called, intriguingly, "dead men sleeping".

He toyed with the idea of turning his next victim into one such speedbreaker, then decided against the idea. The normally acceptable height for them was six to eight inches, while a female body would take up at least twice that much.

But the idea led to another, more practical one: Concealing the body in the sandlot of a children's nursery school. This was especially ironic, since one of the future 'possibles' he'd shortlisted for the next weekend was a nursery school teacher. Yes, the more he thought about it, the more it excited him. Imagine all those little toddlers rolling and digging and kicking about in the sand, blissfully unaware that only a few feet beneath their feet was their once-beloved Miss Sharon.

He was smiling at this vision as he approached his house. The smile faded slowly as he glanced up and saw an unfamiliar car parked in the driveway. Lights were on all over the bungalow, and with growing horror he saw a man's silhouette pass across a lighted window. His first thought was: I haven't cleaned the house yet, there's blood all over the bed, and in the kitchen...!

Then there was a gentle knock on the passenger's side window and he turned slowly to see the last person on earth he would have expected at a moment like this. As he struggled to find a suitable greeting, a second thought flashed across his mind: How do I get out of this alive?

"Howard," his mother said reproachfully. "You've been a bad boy again." He cringed as his father joined her. "Son," he said grimly, "We've told you before..."

His father's face twisted in a grin. "If you're going to have a bloodbath, don't leave your parents out!"

They both roared with laughter.

Howard sighed, relieved. "Sorry, dad, mom, we'll do the next one together."

"You bet we will, son." His father looked at his mother. "And, mother, I think it's time we gave him a gun, don't you?"

"Yes," she said, her eyes gleaming at the thought. "So much cleaner than those messy blades."

Howard didn't say anything. He was thinking of all the cleaning still left to be done. Yes, a gun would be nice.

His mother ruffled his hair affectionately. "Go on inside now and finish up in there. And after you're done, you still have to do your homework," she said, a twinkle in her eye: "Biology!"

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