

THE MIND'S EYE THE MIND'S EYE

by David Laderoute

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[David Laderoute graces our site for the first time with a deliciously dark cross-genre tale of telepathy and justice.]

I arrived at the hospital just a little too late. Just like I knew he would, Rob Daniels turned and paced right into the path of a gurney being wheeled past the nurses' station. The thing nearly tipped, threatening to spill a gut-shot girl with a greasy punk hairdo onto the floor. Rob backed off, scowling at the pair of orderlies pushing the girl towards surgery. "Rob, are you okay?" I called--a needless question, because I knew damned well he'd be okay. Just like I'd known, a good half-hour earlier, that this whole little vignette would happen exactly this way. He straightened the Toronto police badge dangling from his jacket pocket. "Hi, Jen. Yeah, I'm fine." He raised his voice a notch. "No thanks to the freakin' angels of mercy, though!" One of the orderlies tossed him the finger, without looking back. Without thinking, I said, "Sorry...." He looked at me, his walrus-face still half-caught in a glare. "About what?" Oops...I shook my head. "Never mind. So, anyway, what's so important you had to drag me out of bed?" A tired smile lifted his moustache. "You mean you didn't know ahead of time I was going to call?" I guess my glance was a little too quick, because the smile wavered. I hadn't foreseen the call, but his sidelong reference to prescience rattled me. And I wasn't sure why. Prescient episodes hit me often enough, almost always in fore-reference to something inconsequential--like the time I foresaw breaking a vase my mother had given me. It happened, sure enough...a shame, but hardly a disaster. I covered my discomfiture by smiling back. "Yeah, well, I answered it anyway." So change the subject again. "So what's this all about?" The smile vanished like a light flicked off. "In here," he said, and led me down the hall, through the customary hospital-reek of smells sterile and septic and into one of the rooms. Two beds. One was occupied. A boy, maybe ten, maybe twelve years old. Handsome, or he seemed it, anyway, under the bandages. Too thin, though. Malnourished. Scars, old and new. A street kid, probably.... Then it hit me, what this was about. I looked at Rob. "The Piper, right?" He nodded. Shit. First the prescience. Now this. The Pied Piper was a monster...a brutal serial killer who preyed on Toronto's swollen population of street kids. His nickname, coined by the media, alluded to the fact that no matter how many warnings the cops spun onto the streets, he still managed to somehow lure his young victims to secluded spots, and then

rape and strangle them.

Eighteen, so far, boys and girls both. And--as far as the news reported, anyway--there were no leads, no physical evidence, not even anything useful from other paranormals involved in the case.

"He was staggering down Danforth," Rob said, "when he got swiped by a car. Just another doped-up street kid, the paramedics thought. Then they put away their guns and started looking close at his injuries." He ran a hand through thinning hair. "Sexual trauma, signs of strangulation...it fits the m.o. Which means either the Piper screwed up or he was interrupted. Hopefully the latter, because we're looking for witnesses right now. In the meantime, though...." He looked at me.

I looked away.

Ordinarily, I'd jump at a high-profile case like this. But I'd never worked with kids before. That was a whole empathic field on its own. More than all that, though, I just didn't know children. The way my life had evolved, kids just hadn't ever figured into it. Somehow, the thought of bringing them into it now, in the person of this boy...well, the idea made my stomach tighten down to nothing.

I shook my head. "Look, Rob...you should try Rachel Chin. She's the best empath I know, and she's worked with children--"

"We already did. She's in Ottawa, tied up with the Supreme Court, expert witness or something. And, before you ask, no other paras are available, either."

I searched his face instinctively, but there was no judgement there. That was one of the things I liked about Rob. To him, paranormality was just another part of the business--another investigative tool, like forensic pathology or ballistics or DNA serotyping. That attitude was rare at best, and not just among cops. Almost a generation had passed since the genome folks had unravelled the genetic basis for paranormality, making it something scientific and understandable. But most people nonetheless put paranormality on par with voodoo and seances--except scarier, because it really worked and never mind all the limitations and controlled conditions required. Add to that the fact that all paranormals were women and all the macho baggage that brings along....

Rob really was a gem. To him, it was just business.

This time, though, business wasn't reason enough.

"Rob...I'm sorry."

"Look, Jen, I know you haven't had much to do with children--"

"Try nothing."

"Fine. Nothing. But, look--we have to assume the Piper knows this one's still alive. So we need to move fast, before this bastard either gets away or kills again to make up for losing one." He leaned towards me, his round face a study in the word 'please'. "The truth is, Jen, the media's getting bored with this case. People just don't stay interested in street-kids. It won't be long before the department pulls the plug. Then it'll all just be so much more city noise, and I'll be pushed on to the next criminal flavour-of-the-day. We need this break."

I looked at the boy. AIDS orphan, probably. With the social safety net just tatters, there were lots of those. Probably HIV positive himself.

What a waste.

I puffed out a sigh. "There's a good chance, you know, I wouldn't be able to

do much for you."

"All you have to do is try." Smelling victory, he added, "That's all any of us can do. But, hey, who knows? It might be what makes the difference."

I thought again about tonight's prescient episode, about my stomach, then looked at the boy again. One last sigh, then I threw gut wariness out the window. What the hell. Anyway, I'd just got over the flu, so my body chemistry was probably still a little screwed up, leaving me hypersensitive.

Besides, the cops paid well for murder consults and the rent was coming due.

"Alright," I said. "But no guarantees, got it?"

The walrus smiled again. "Thanks, Jen."

Yeah, hypersensitive. That's all.

#

Dana Harzberg looked up from her pocket nurse and said, "Jennifer, I wish you wouldn't do this."

As a Certified Attending Physician, Dana was as familiar as any non-paranormal could be with the methods--and dangers--of deep readings.

"I'm not any happier about this than you are, Dana." I lay down on the gurney that had been placed beside the boy's bed. "But its got to be done, so let's call your objections officially noted and carry on. Okay?"

"Fine. But I'm telling you right now, children are very different from adult subjects. So if I think things are getting out of hand, I'm bringing you back up." She gestured at a syringe of epinephrine.

"Just don't flinch, okay? Remember that I'll be at level four." I tried to look confident. "That deep a reading gives me a lot of control."

Dana curled her lip most eloquently, said, "Uh-huh," and pricked an IV tube into my arm, starting a saline drip. Then she fiddled with the pocket nurse that would monitor my vitals, plugged the cables from it and the IV controller into her palm-top computer and turned it on.

"When did your period end?" she asked.

Rob made an uncomfortable sound. "Look, if you two want some privacy--"

"Oh, Rob, sit down and shut up. I need you here as a witness." I turned back to Dana. "Two weeks ago yesterday."

She entered that and some other things into the computer. The IV controller's little peristaltic pump began to whirr, feeding a mixture of hormones and RKT--a derivative of the beta-blocker popranolol--into the saline reservoir.

Immediately, my hands and feet tingled and went cold. I made myself more comfortable, grabbed the boy's thin wrist, and waited for Dana's signal.

She frowned at the computer's display, then said in a voice like wind through a long, steel pipe, "Okay, Jennifer. Whenever you're ready."

I relaxed, centred...then, like a diver off of a high board, plunged down through the levels.

A swirling kaleidoscope of distorted, nightmare images slammed into me, flinging me about like a leaf in a gale. I fought for orientation, but the storm of twisted shapes and figures was overpowering--a Bosch nightmare, brought to frenetic life. I finally resorted to bulling my way through, tearing apart the encroaching images at their seams. All at once, they vanished. A wave of disorientation swept over me....

...then I was washed in bright sunlight. I blinked, glanced around. I stood on a manicured lawn, among deep pools of shade thrown by scattered trees. But it was utterly silent. Even the wind tossing the leaves made no sound.

I paused, catching my psychic breath, while a distant, analytical part of me

recited: first layer, superficial echoes of trauma; second layer, protection through fundamental denial and withdrawal. Right out of the textbook.

Somewhere, I should find a more explicit metaphor....

There. The boy sat on a swing, eyes cast skyward. I walked over, deliberately stepping between him and the sun.

No surprise. I cast no shadow; my hand wouldn't ruffle his hair. In this safe place his mind had created, I didn't exist. Just the grass, the trees and the sun, all idealised to the point of plasticity. But no bruises, no pain, nothing that hurt.

I walked on, glancing back at the too-peaceful scene. Then I was back among the trees, and lost sight of him--

I was lying in a bed. Someone was holding my wrist. There were other people in the room. But it was blurred, unreal, just another fitful dream.

Next layer, basic motor-sensory functions. Off to the side, not quite accessible at this level, were the essential autonomous functions. It was

I/him now, an assemblage of us both. I/he was beneath the upper protections, but this layer was just mechanics. There was nothing to learn here. I/he kept going, down....

I/he screamed.

There were monsters here, repeats of some of the things in the most superficial level. But now they were far more vivid than those in any adult mind the I-part had encountered. And they were aware. They could see me/him, and they were hungry. They lurked under the bed, lurked in the closet, lurked just outside the bedroom door...and they were in the hall at the top of the dark stairs and down in the cellar and behind the shower curtain and they were EVERYWHERE--

I/he surged forward, through this uppermost layer of subconscious. The I-part was furiously erecting controls along the way, afraid that these terrors might sympathetically dredge up old Jennifer-childhood nightmares. Those, I/he may not be able to control at all.

Deeper still. The monsters faded into a pervasive fog behind us. I/he hesitated.

The fog darkened, thick with trauma. In an adult mind, this was where the real dangers would begin. The he-part resisted going any further, afraid of exposure to something from which his mind sought, in its elemental wisdom, to protect him. But if the identity of whoever had done this was anywhere, it was in there. Give up now, and the killing would continue.

No more time. The I-part drove towards the darkness, dragging the he-part on, into the lower depths of the boy's subconscious mind.

I/he melted, melded, became we.

A man loomed over us, a black silhouette haloed by searing light. We tried to move, but he was kneeling on our chest. We could barely breath, his weight crushed, pressed us down...we tried to push him off, to move, to breath, but he raised his fist and slammed it down, BANG our head rang like dropped metal pans and the world flashed green. We tried to cry please don't please stop but we couldn't and then he was pulling at our clothes....

The nightmare memories went on and on, playing themselves out, while the part that was the emotional me separated a fraction and cried in sick guilt and helpless outrage.

But the flip-side, the distant, analytical me shouted in outrage of its own, appalled at this self-indulgence. This wasn't just a chance to wallow,

commiserating in the boy's horrific memories; this was a chance to learn. I disengaged myself from boy a little further, enough to gain an external perspective, then wiped my mental tears and...watched.

Eventually, the pattern I sought resolved itself. The memory sequence was much more than a linear progression of images. Each portion of it carried along other memories, and those carried still others, in a branching network infinitely more complex than the most intricate of spider-webs. I forced myself to see past the memory of the rape itself, and into the branches beyond.

There were so many...what was I looking for?

No...not what. Where! Where was this happening?

I pushed deeper into the web. It was...a room. And the room was connected, in turn, to a multitude of memory-images. But that one, there, of stairs; it led up, into a hallway...which led to a door...and into another room, with a stove. The stove had a clock, and a--no! Ignore the stove. It was a kitchen...and now I could see the path I wanted. A kitchen in a house, a large house, in a yard, behind a hedge. A house number...? No, we hadn't seen any. Fine. We were in a car, with this man, driving down a street. He'd given us some money, and promised more if we'd...no, ignore that. Look for...there. A sign...with a street-name....

The pressure of denial swelled to an intolerable level. I had all I was going to get, without doing permanent harm. A man, in a house, on a street, with a name.

No, wait. Not quite all.

First, this man. We only saw his face in splintered glimpses, but that was enough. He was horrible, an evil cartoon-thing of bulbous eyes and thick, rubbery lips. Distorted by memory, no doubt, but I burned every line and blemish of it into the me-part's memory anyway, so that it would not, could not, be forgotten.

The other thing was harder to find. It finally turned up, a tiny bundle discarded in a far, dark corner. The boy's identity, his memories, his own, unique world-view....

...his name.

On the way back up, I paused before the swing in the silent park. Tears streamed down the boy's face, because something terrible had reached into this, his safe place, and hurt him so very badly. I wrapped my arms around him and whispered, "Oh, Kevin."

He stiffened and drew back. Our eyes met.

For a little while, he wasn't alone.

#

"Jennifer, what colour is this light?"

"Blue. Now it's red."

"Good. How do you feel?"

"Uh...fine. Usual light-headed feeling...." My tongue felt twice its normal size.

"How is she?" Rob asked from somewhere off to one side.

"I think she's alright," Dana grouched without looking up from the pocket nurse. She entered something in her computer, then turned it off. "Jennifer, what happened in there?"

"Oh, Dana, it's so bad--" I began, but Rob stepped forward.

"Jen, did you find out anything we can use?"

I turned to him and opened my mouth to say, yes, I know where this son of a bitch is--

--but bit off my own words.

The police weren't going to catch him.

It wasn't a feeling, or an opinion; it was a fact. I didn't know why they'd fail to get him. There was no context, no explanation--just an isolated fragment of certainty, like a snapshot. But there was no doubt. I just knew it, in the same way that I knew I was lying on a gurney in Sick Kid's hospital in Toronto.

Prescience.

Again.

I fumbled for something to say. "Uh...I...."

Dana frowned. "I don't think she's completely recovered yet. Let's give her some more time."

That was fine by me. I needed time to think. Rob closed his mouth and nodded.

"Okay. I could use a coffee, anyway."

After they'd gone, I looked at Kevin. The bastard who had done this was going to get away with it.

Shit! It wasn't right...!

No...wait.

A thought drifted by, just out of reach. I screwed my eyes shut and tried to ignore the dentist's drill whining behind my eyes. What was I thinking...?

What I knew was that the police weren't going to catch him. But that didn't mean he was going to get away with it.

A man, in a house, on a street with a name.

I knew what I was going to do. And this time, prescience had nothing to do with it.

#

I peered through the darkness, dithering. This had to be the right house. A few of the others were close, but none fit as well with the one in Kevin's memory. A red sandstone Victorian that said old money. I glanced around, taking in the graffiti and wind-stirred trash. Well, maybe this was old money, once. Now it was just old.

I checked the elastic band holding the pneumatic syringe on my right forearm.

The sequential doses of RKT and epinephrine that filled its cylinders weren't tough to get, if you knew the right people. Neither had any real street value.

But RKT was meant to be used clinically, for focusing and boosting paranormal abilities--not on the fly, without doctors like Dana watching over things. I'd meant it as a sort of insurance, or maybe a psychic placebo. In reality it was more likely to kill me, than to be of much help.

But it didn't matter. I wouldn't need it. There'd be nothing to this. I stepped out from the shadows under the hoary old elm, took a deep breath, and walked up the cracked flagstones.

I thought again about calling the cops, and again decided no. Prescience might sometimes be short on the "why" or "how", but the "what" was always accurate.

If I called the cops without being sure of the house, they'd start poking around the neighbourhood. And that might be the very reason they wouldn't get him. No. This was better. If I could corroborate what I'd learned in Kevin's memory with a man in this house, then that might change my prescient mind--I hoped. And if not...well, then I'd tell Rob what I knew, and just hope for the best.

Front door. A siren wailed from off towards the Toronto sky-scape, and I glanced that way. A misty childhood memory drifted by...that same city skyline, brightly lit against the night sky. Huh. Not anymore. These days, except for a few strobing anti-collision lights lit for the benefit of airplanes, the buildings were just dark shapes, like blackened teeth sprouting from smog-hazy, twilight gums.

The siren stopped, and silence pooled back around me. Okay, just knock, see who answers. If it's him, make an excuse, leave. That's all.

I raised my hand, knuckled it. Hesitated, then tapped it against the door.

Nothing. Then a thump, and a hall light clicked on. A pause. A head passed across the glowing rectangle of window. Another pause. My stomach did a slow roll.

The door opened.

I was facing a woman, thirtyish and tall, with a brunette page-boy framing a square, almost masculine face.

A woman...?

She peered over the door-chain. "Yes?"

Uh.... My mind raced. Finally: "Is your husband home?"

Oh, what a stupid thing to--

"My husband?" She frowned. "Who can I say is calling?"

"My name's Jennifer. Jennifer Platt." My mind whip-sawed from side to side.

"I...I found a wallet today...and it might be his, it had this address in it, and...well, I'd like to show it to him."

Christ. That was so pathetic.

She beamed a long, searching look at me. I focused hard on looking benign and casual and forcing myself to not fidget. Finally, she shrugged.

"Come on in. He's upstairs. I'll go get him." She unlatched the chain and pulled the door open.

The hallway was lit by a single fixture. There were stairs up, a closed door at the far end, and an open one to the left that led into a living room flickering blue with TV light. I stepped onto the mat, but no farther.

"Thank you," I said, regaining some composure. "I'm sorry to trouble you, but I was on my way home from work, and thought--"

"That's alright," she said. "I'll be right back." She padded up the stairs, her socked feet silent in the mangy tan shag. "Honey, someone to see you...!"

I took a few deep breaths while she was gone, clearing my head. Okay. When he comes down, take a GOOD look. Reach for the wallet, then say, oops, left it in my car. Be right back. Out the door, and gone. No problem.

Another breath and I tasted the ghosts of old dinners. No problem? Yeah, right. Tell my still-rolling stomach that. After this, stick to the paranormal work and no more of this detective nonsense.

I smiled. Jennifer Platt, detective. Yeah. Well, Ms. Platt, if you're a hotshot detective, what can you learn from the scene? Hmm. Okay. Shoes by the door. Sneakers, pumps, and sandals. So, Watson, the perpetrator obviously is none other than....

Huh. Sneakers, pumps, sandals. The pumps were peach-coloured, a little scuffed. The sandals were definitely a woman's. The sneakers, well-used and grubby, were small... men's sixes, no more...again, probably a woman's.

Maybe I should try reading her. Risky, but I could probably do a brief level one without attracting any--

Oh...shit.

She'd been as quiet coming down the stairs as she had been going up. Except now she had a gun.

"Well, Jennifer Platt," she said, "I'm afraid my husband can't come to the door right now."

"I--"

She shook her head. "Don't. Don't say anything. Just go. That way." She stepped down another step and jerked the gun towards the living room.

I took a step, stopped.

"Look--"

"NOW!"

I backed into the living room and found myself surrounded by tatty, mismatched furniture. A dark arched doorway framed a cheap metal dining room set, all of it lit TV-blue. The woman followed me, the gun waving with her steps.

"Look," I said, "I just came to--"

"Oh, the wallet. I know." She raised the gun until the sight bisected her eye.

"You can drop the bullshit. You came here to spy. For the police."

I swallowed, shook my head. "Listen." I swallowed again. "They're--"

--not anywhere nearby. Pretty stupid coming here all alone."

How the hell did she know that--?

Oh, shit again. She was a paranormal.

Which explained the long, searching look she'd given me at the door while I'd concentrated on just seeming harmless. Like I'd thought only seconds later, level one was barely noticeable.

She gestured with the gun again. "Sit down."

I glanced around. A chair beside me. I sat.

"You read that boy, the one that got away," she said, nodding. "I knew he was going to be trouble. I knew it, I TOLD YOU!" I jumped, although her last words, nearly shouted, didn't seem to be directed at me.

She shook her head. "Doesn't matter." She frowned. "So why you? Why not the police?"

I opened my mouth. But what could I say?

"You're hiding something," she went on. "You're hiding something, I read it, and I WANT to know what it IS!"

I was hiding lots of things, but I guessed she was talking about the syringe.

It'd been in the back of my mind, but probably too deep to read at level one.

Abruptly, she shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I do know you came expecting to find a man. And that's good."

"Good...?"

"Uh-huh. I live here alone."

"Alone? But...."

And that was the answer.

The man in Kevin's memory didn't exist. He'd been planted there by this woman, overprinting her own image. That explained the cartoon-evil face. It was a caricature, something she'd manufactured. It told me again how strong she was. As I understood it, memory alteration was, at best, a transient thing. But she'd made it stick.

It also explained why the police wouldn't catch him.

There was no him to catch.

I looked at her, trying to ignore the blackness of the muzzle. She gazed back, her dark eyes hard as flint.

"It's you," I said. "You're the Pied Piper. You're the one who's been killing

those children--"

"NO!"

I jumped again.

"I've never hurt anyone!" She leaned forward. "I tried to help those poor children. Really, I did."

I didn't believe her, of course, but nodded anyway. "Okay. Do you know who has been killing them, then?"

"My father."

"Your father."

She nodded. "That's right. He always hurts children. Always."

"I see." I glanced at the gun. "Where's your father now?"

She lifted a finger, tapped her head.

"Right here."

I stared.

"You see...my father, he's been hurting children for a long time," she said, starting to rock slightly. "He...he hurts them because it makes him feel so strong, so...so powerful. And he's still doing it, even though he...he's dead." Her voice collapsed into breathy sobs. "Even though he's dead, he...he's still hurting them."

Psychotic. Completely psychotic. Combine that with her paranormality and I couldn't have made up a more dangerous predicament. I opened my mouth, but couldn't think of anything to say.

"Do you know what the worst part is? He makes me help him. Me, I only want to help these poor children. They're dying out there on the streets, from drugs and AIDS and all kinds of things. And nobody gives a shit." She smiled suddenly. "Except me. I care."

I nodded. "I'm sure you do. But--"

"I DO! I KNOW YOU DON'T BELIEVE ME BUT I DO!" She was half-standing now, both hands clamped around the gun. She took two ragged breaths, three, and bile surged acid-acrid in my throat. In an instant, the gun would explode in my face....

But she sat back down and resumed the sweet-sweet smile. "I really do care. My father, though...." Her face darkened and she shook her head. "He makes me...makes me do things to them. He makes me hurt them, and I can't stop him...I've never been able to STOP him."

I took a shuddering breath. My life depended on what I said here. Try something innocuous....

"What's your name?"

Her turn to stare. "My...? It's...Mary. Why?"

"Maybe I can help you, Mary."

"Help me...?"

I forced my eyes up from the gun, to hers. "I can help you stop your father, Mary. Stop him from hurting anymore children."

A puzzled frown creased her face and the gun wavered. "How could you stop him?"

"By taking you away from him, Mary. So he can't hurt you, or make you hurt anyone else."

The gun wavered a bit more. "You can do that? Make him go away?"

I nodded. "With some help. But first you have to give me the gun."

"Give you.... Oh, no. No, I don't think so."

"It's alright, Mary. Give me the gun, and then we'll get you some help." I put

out my hand. "Give it to me, and we'll get you away from your father."

Her eyes flicked over to my hand, and her face softened. My hand was a way out for her, all she had to do was take it--

Something on my upraised arm glinted in the blue TV light.

The syringe.

Mary's eyes went crystal-hard.

"YOU LYING BITCH!" She jumped to her feet and jammed the muzzle of the gun into my face. "You didn't come here to help me, you came to DRUG me and to KILL ME!"

"Mary, NO--"

Her other hand snapped up in front of me.

"Give it to me," she said.

"Mary, please--"

"GIVE IT TO ME!"

My eyes never left her finger, bloodless-white around the trigger. I pushed up the sleeve of my jacket, felt for the syringe, pulled it out from under the elastic. For one wild second, I thought of plunging it into her hand and just hoping for the best. But the first injection, the RKT, wouldn't have any effect before she could pull the trigger and blast my head to bloody bits. I finally just handed it to her and she snatched it away.

"It's time to decide what we're going to do with you, Jennifer Platt. I'd like to just let you go. But my father...." She shook her head. "I'm sorry."

Her finger tightened. In another second, my world was going to end.

I didn't plan it...didn't even think.

Just drove my hand up and snapped my head to the side. Mary reacted reflexively, yanking the gun back and--

There was heat and a flash and a loud metallic CLICK, and something whumped past my ear. But I wasn't after the gun. My open palm connected with the syringe instead, driving the needle back against its stop. The pneumatic cartridge hissed, pumping the RKT into my hand. I kept going, sideways now, crashing against the table beside me and sprawling onto the floor.

Mary screamed something and fired again. The shag beside my arm puffed up a cloud of carpet-fibres and dust. I dove, crawled, heading for the gloom in the dining room, expecting a hammer blow in my back, pain exploding, breath blown out of me, then darkness swirling up as the bullet tore through me....

Click-WHUMP, splinters flew from the door-frame as I stumbled through, click-WHUMP into the floor, Oh God I couldn't move fast enough, she was right behind me click-THUMP into the carpet click-CLANG-WHIRR off a metal dining-room chair that's it dead end I spun she was silhouetted against the TV glow just feet away the gun centred on me as I lifted a hand gone ice-cold numb lifted it so slooow....

...brushed her leg....

...linked.

She was strong. But now I was stronger. I rode the crest of the RKT wave deep into her mind, level three, four...five....

Motor-sensory, the blade-sight planted in the middle of Jennifer Platt's face, finger squeezing the trigger, hammer rising, falling--

We jerked the gun aside flash-click-THUMP, the muzzle-blast swept Jennifer Platt's hair but the bullet smacked into the wall behind her.

We lowered the gun.

Father screamed, his face no longer cartoon-evil, just drink-flushed and

rage-contorted, the way we'd seen it so many times, late at night, crashing into our room, kneeling on our chest, we could barely breath, his weight crushing, pressing us down, and we tried to push him off, to move, to breath, but he raised his fist and brought it down, BANG our head rang like dropped metal pans and the world flashed green. We tried to cry please don't please stop but we couldn't and then he was yanking, pulling, tearing off our clothes....

Mother dead, gone, whatever. No one to trust. We ran, lived on the streets, sold our body under the cold neon, until the police found us, took us, brought us home.

Then did it all over again.

No one to trust, but father always there. Finally, we watched them bury him, came back to the house that was ours now and here he was, waiting. Children, ugly, ugly little children had to suffer, he said, because that's what children did. They suffered.

Back onto the streets, he took us to the kids who had no one to trust, to the kids who sold their bodies under the cold neon.

They suffered, they all suffered....

No one to trust.

No one....

Until now.

Mary could trust Jennifer Platt.

Absolutely.

Trust her to withdraw, to leave her alone in her mind.

Trust her, to let her put the gun into her mouth.

Trust her, to let her pull the trigger.

#

"Stupid stupid STUPID!"

"Say it again, Rob."

"Stupid!"

I nodded. The movement still hurt, but then, I was only a day out of the RKT-induced shock.

Not meant to be used that way, without buffers and stabilisers, Dana had lectured. Practically poison. Boy, was she right.

Rob leaned on the bed-rail. "Promise me, Jen, that next time you let me do the cop stuff!"

"I promise.

He sighed, long and slow. "Well, as it turns out, the physical evidence from the house definitely ties her to the boy. We even found some...um, prosthetics, and things, that she used to simulate the rapes." He shook his head. "That probably won't definitely tie her to any of the other victims, but I don't think it's going to matter. So, barring any recurrences, this damned Pied Piper case is finally closed."

"I'm glad."

"So am I." He shook his head. "Christ, a woman. I never would have thought a woman.... She must have been pretty screwed up."

"She was."

"Huh. Well, lucky for you. If she hadn't flipped out totally and decided to blow her brains out when she did--"

"Rob, I'd...I'd like to rest. Okay?"

He sighed again. "Yeah, sure. I'll see you later."

"Later. Okay."

"Rob?"

"Huh?"

"Is Kevin still in the hospital?"

"Yeah, I think so. Community and Social Services is looking for a foster placement for him. Why?"

"Just wondering. Thanks."

He opened his mouth, then shook his head, closed it, and left.

I sank back onto the pillow.

If she hadn't blown her brains out....

I could have stopped her. I should have stopped her....

But I remembered the last thing I'd felt before I'd left her mind.

Gratitude.

There was finally someone she could trust, someone who would let her have control over her own life, even if it was only for one, final instant.

I thought about Kevin. Fostered and forgotten, he'd just end up on the streets again.

Suffering under the cold neon....

No. That was something I could, would try to stop.

I queried the directory on the bedside phone, got it to search out the number for Community and Social Services. As it worked, I thought about Mary...and again, about Kevin.

What was it Rob had said?

"...what we all have to do is try..."

The phone beeped, ready. I reached for it....

Stopped.

I still didn't know kids.

But that could change.

I pressed 'DIAL'.

Dave Laderoute lives in Thunder Bay, Ontario, with his wife, Jackie, three children and an equal number of the obligatory writer's cats. In real life, he's a regional manager with the Ontario Geological Survey; writing is only a part-time obsession. "The Mind's Eye" is his eighth published story, giving rise to the delusion that he can now write--and actually expect someone to publish--a novel. But, then, doesn't every writer worth their word-processor...?