

Plastic Helix.

By Sean F Stevens.

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## PLASTIC HELIX

It was three in the morning, I had just returned from another exhausting twelve-hour shift in the Homicide Squad, to the ragged apartment that I called home, when the phone rang.

Answering, I was less than pleased to hear the all too familiar sound of my supervisor's voice on the other end of the line.

"Good morning!" He began, having to raise his voice to be heard over the seemingly unavoidable static interference that had plagued the cities phone lines lately, though whether it was due to hackers or simple rancid public service inefficiency had yet to be confirmed. "Had any sleep yet ?" He enquired in a very bad impression of sincere concern, a deaf and blind optimist would not be fooled and neither was I.

"Not a wink." I replied. "But I was just planning to, so unless you have something better than a Presidential assassination to tell me about, I am hanging up now."

"We've caught The Butcher." He murmured.

The line was so full of noise I had to ask him to repeat himself before I was certain that I'd heard him correctly, The Butcher was the nickname the media had given to a maniac that had been stalking the streets for the last seven months, breaking into peoples houses and hacking them to pieces. At last count he had been attributed with the murders of nearly thirty people, most of them affluent and well educated respectable citizens that were all over the age of fifty, but otherwise of no obviously favoured gender, race, religion or political affiliation.

"What has any of this got to do with me?" I asked my boss. "You could have told me this tomorrow, it's not my case."

"It is now." He replied.

"What do you mean?" I enquired suspiciously, the conversation was not leading in a direction that I was at all partial to.

"Let me give you a quick summary of the night's happenings." He proclaimed, as if already making the official report. "At twenty three hundred hours we get a phone call, we're told that some kind of disturbance is occurring in this big house in the Money Lenders district."

"And?" I prompted.

"We go to the house and literally catch The Butcher in the act, knife in one hand, some poor old fart's corpse on the ground and various body parts laid out on the carpet. And get this." He added. "The psychologists were all wrong, The Butcher is a woman, so much for their "male gender methodology" bullcrap."

I was interested, despite my exhaustion and the lack of a proper meal, but still confused as to my boss's motives for calling me.

"I'm sure this is all really fascinating." I began, trying to hide my growing curiosity under a facade of weary sarcasm, which came easily after so many years in the force. "But you still haven't told me what any of this has to do with me."

"I was coming to that." He replied slightly peevishly. "We brought in our "Jill The Ripper" about half an hour ago, and she's been in the interview room ever since." He paused theatrically.

"And?" I prompted.

"And nothing." He replied. "She has refused to tell us anything." He paused again. "In fact she has hardly spoken at all, except to make one request."

"Request?"

"That she talks to you." He said with mind numbing calmness.

"What the hell for?" I asked incredulously. "And how did she get my name?" I added.

"That's for you to find out when you interrogate her." He replied evenly. "See you here in twenty minutes." And he hung up before I could protest or say anything further.

My curiosity was now well and truly stinging, I was on the roof of my apartment and seated at the controls of my motorglider in record time, I gunned it's tiny engine and was airborne and en route to the station less than two minutes later.

I steered by reflex, my mind full of unanswered questions. The city passed slowly underneath me, it resembled the rubble of some megalopolis that had been stuck back together again with a mixture of refuse and greasy neon lights. Walking sluggishly through the wrecked city streets were the equally ruined shadows that passed for people in this town, the Mega-corporate machine had chewed them up and left only husks behind, devoid of hope or any valid reason for living. I couldn't help but wonder how much longer it would be before a wave of complete anarchy was born of all this grey misery and swallowed up this dying, grimy Hell on Earth.

I shook my head to clear it, I knew I was being morose and cynical and came to the conclusion that just right now it would be wise to be a little more objective, I was about to speak with the cities latest celebrity psychopath after all.

Sprouting out of one of the filthier neighbourhoods of the city like some stained concrete pustule was The Police Station where I worked and tried to fool myself that I helped to maintain order.... I paused in my internal ruminations, realising that I was still in as depressing a frame of mind as before, I sighed, perhaps I was over tired, or maybe it was just caffeine withdrawal.

I banked the glider and spiralling down landed on the narrow landing pad on the building's roof.

I usually spent the larger part of my waking life in the station. and this being the case I easily navigated the maze of grimy cracked corridors, with their peeling paint, unidentifiable stains and greasy aggregations of industrial strength dust.

A familiar depression washed over me as I came to the detention area, I'd had too many dark moments in this place of late and today was shaping up to be no exception.

My boss was waiting for me, though not much more than thirty years of age he was already on his second set of synthetic lungs, but he continued to smoke "a pack a day" anyway out of sheer bloody mindedness. I couldn't help but be impressed; here was a man that was truly (if repellently) dedicated to his addictions.

He beckoned to me with a slight cough and led me into a small darkened room, where there were several other cops and a wall length one way mirror, on the other side of the mirror was the brightly lit interview room with a single table, two chairs and a wall mounted audiovisual unit for recording the interrogation's.

Seated calmly on one of the chairs with her hands handcuffed to the back legs of the chair was The Butcher, she was a nondescript looking Caucasian woman in her late twenties, her hair was a light shade of brunette, somewhat streaked and bleached by what looked like recent exposure to the city's highly acidic rainwater. She was wearing an overtly masculine style of silk suit (which was the current fashion), and was splattered with copious quantities of her latest victims blood.

"Does she look familiar?" My boss asked.

I shook my head. "No, I've never seen her." And quietly breathed an inward sigh of relief, I'd been worried that The Butcher would actually be someone I knew, but this person was a complete stranger.

"Apart from the obvious, there's one other odd thing about this woman." My boss murmured. "Her fingerprints aren't on the print network, and yet she's young enough to have been born after they started recording the fingerprints of all newborns."

"Did you only check the female records?" I asked. "Could she be a sex changer?"

"She's for real." He confirmed. "We did a medical examination of her when she arrived, she turned out to be a full blown biological woman, no surgical scars or signs of intravenous hormone treatment, she has a fully functional womb and ovaries, and though having a few curious wobbles in her genetic structure it's nothing that's not in keeping with exposure to the usual urban pollutants, all in all she's your standard little miss with the XX chromosomes to prove it."

"Strange." I mused. "She must have been missed by the cataloguers, I suppose that's possible."

But even as I said the words, I had a hard time believing them myself. The bureaucracy was nothing if not efficient when it came to the tracking of its subjects, after all if they weren't listed on the register they couldn't be taxed, and our masters were very partial to their revenue.

"Well, shall you talk to our mystery woman?" He prompted.

"Guess there's no time like the present." I replied, inhaling deeply. I stepped through a connecting door and into the interview room; The Butcher looked up at me and smiled a vaguely familiar smile.

"Hello." She murmured, in a calm, evenly modulated voice, that was at the same

time faintly distant and unfocussed much as was the expression in her eyes. I wondered if she was on drugs, she certainly looked as if her grip on the here and now was a bit on the delicate side.

Unnerved by something I couldn't quite put my finger on; I walked over to the recording unit and started the tape, then crossed to the chair opposite the woman and sat down.

"Police interview with Butcher suspect." I announced for the recorders benefit. "Date is April 9th, 2075. Time is...."

"Time is meaningless." The woman intoned.

I stared at her, unsure of what she was implying, she appeared to have nothing to add to her previous observation so I continued. "Time is now three forty five A.M."

A slight smirk crossed the woman's features as if some private joke was to be found in her reflection on the polished steel tabletop, at which she was staring with an intensity beyond any visible reason.

"How about you tell me your name." I began; there was no response for a moment as her eyes slowly threaded their way from the tabletop to me and then to the mirror behind me.

"You don't recognise me then?" She asked, apparently genuinely surprised. "I guess it's only to be expected, really." She added staring at her reflection once more.

"What do you mean?" I demanded, my skin crawling.

"In my past life, I was your partner Martin Taylor." She announced, and grinned wolfishly at my shocked expression.

"That's impossible." I gasped, "Our examination has already proven that you're a fully biological female."

She sneered at the uncertainty in my tone. "Are you so sure of your methods?" She inquired, sitting back in her chair and staring up at the ceiling. "My DNA's more than you'd expect it to be, though admittedly you would have to check it very carefully to notice." She added, in a trancelike murmur.

The door opened and one of the plain-clothes men entered, he silently crossed the floor, handed me a note, and returned the way he came, exiting silently.

I read the note, it was from my boss. It read: "Her prints match Taylor's, he had been missing, presumed dead, Prints were no longer on main database."

"I can guess what the note says." The female Taylor remarked quietly. "I'd bet you're pretty confused by now."

I was indeed, but refused to show it. "Alright then, how about you explain why a person I knew to be a man, is now a woman, and yet has never appeared to have had any surgical gender adjustments." I demanded, inwardly cursing for not having an espresso on hand to clear some of the tired haze from my mind.

"Who needs surgery?" Taylor replied, and suddenly with an eye twisting fluidity, the woman's features shifted into those of a man. I suddenly found myself face to face with Martin Taylor; his familiar angular features were topped by a thick tangle of curly blonde hair, exactly as I remembered him to

have appeared in the past.

Despite all of this his expression had not changed from that of only a second ago, it was still one of detached half sentience and he was once again staring at his reflection in the tabletop.

"I'd heard you were still a cop, that's why I asked for you." Taylor murmured, ignoring my speechless astonishment.

"I'd figured it would be easier to talk to someone I used to know, but it isn't really."

"How did you do that?" I succeeded in gasping.

"I can be anybody, anybody at all." Taylor replied, and by demonstration he became for an instant a mirror image of myself, he grinned faintly and I could feel my heart thumping loudly in my chest at the shock of it all. I could only guess at how the men behind the mirror were reacting, if they felt like I was feeling, they'd certainly need a stiff drink later on.

"That note you received was about my fingerprints, right?" my mirror image queried. "I keep them as a sort of "calling card" but I can shift them just as easily as everything else."

Taylor reverted back to his original body, he appeared tired and grim, he winced as if remembering pain experienced long ago.

"It's not a very long story." He murmured. "Shall I tell it to you?"

"Go ahead." I prompted, currently too bewildered to do more than listen in dazed silence.

"Do you remember a raid on a drug factory about four years ago?" Taylor asked. "There was you, me and about half of the squads from North Sector in on the bust, must've been about fifty men in all."

"I remember it." I replied evenly. I was regaining my composure by degrees but as far as guessing where this conversation was going to lead I was as much in the dark as ever. "It was the last big heroin raid in the city."

"Then you may also remember that the lab was hidden inside a warehouse that turned out to be a storage facility for chemicals waiting for high temperature incineration." Taylor murmured, his glazed expression had been replaced by one of genuine misery. "In the resulting gunfight more than a few of the drums full of chemicals were ruptured, you remember that, don't you?"

I nodded in confirmation. "I've still got an acid scar on my leg from that raid."

"Some scars run deeper than others." Taylor remarked, staring at me curiously. "Do you remember how I got drenched in a blue pasty substance when a barrel above me burst?" He asked pointedly.

"Yes I do..." With a gasp, I halted mid sentence. Suddenly I realised where Taylor was leading me. "Are you saying it was that chemical that did this to you?" I asked him.

Taylor nodded. "Yes, but not right away." He sighed. "If you remember, I was transferred to district three about a month later, the effects didn't begin to manifest themselves for nearly a further two months."

"What happened then?" I asked.

"I found myself staring in the mirror one day." Taylor murmured. "Idly wondering what I'd look like with a moustache." He sniggered quietly for a moment. "And suddenly I had one, ha! I was as wide eyed then as you were a moment ago when I shifted!"

"So after that, what did you do, what happened next?" I prompted, noticing that Taylor was starting to fade into himself again.

He jerked out of his reverie slightly. "I guessed that my new ability was a product of my chemical drenching, after all what else could it have been?" He shrugged sadly. "I began to experiment, with a little practice I found that I could change my features at will." Taylor grinned slightly. "With a little extra effort I found that I could change my entire body, suddenly I could be anyone, anyone at all!"

I shook my head in disbelief but could not ignore what I had seen with my own eyes.

"After that I left the force." Taylor continued. "I'd decided to become a Private Investigator, with my new morph-able visage I figured I'd be the ultimate private eye, a million faces on command and totally untraceable." He bowed his head sadly. "It worked for a while anyway."

"Where is this leading?" I demanded, my patience wearing thin. "What has this got to do with us here and now, what made you kill all these people?"

Taylor grinned. "What indeed?" He replied with a slight ironic chuckle.

I grabbed Taylor by the shoulders, forcing him to look me in the eye. "Tell me!" I yelled at him, I was tired of waiting for Taylor's stumbling narrative to lead somewhere, and unsure whether anything he had told me had anything to do with the crimes or not.

His face cleared slightly, his eyes focussing upon me as if seeing me properly for the first time, he sighed, his expression pale and sad. "To make a long and miserable story short, eight months ago, after a messy punch up with a drunk in a bar, I woke up to find myself in hospital." Taylor began, his voice bleak and shaking. "They'd run a few checks to see if all my guts were still in the same place, they didn't have good news."

"Go on."

"I have cancer." Taylor announced. "What's more it's not like anything anyone's ever seen before, the doctors said I'd be dead inside of a year and no other quack I've seen since has had anything more hopeful to say on the subject." Taylor sobbed quietly for a moment. "I didn't know what to do." He whispered. "I didn't understand why this was happening to me."

"It was caused by the chemicals?"

"Yes." Taylor affirmed. "You see, after learning of my condition, I began to investigate the chemical. I still had my police notes of the incident but all I knew was the chemicals code: JX-12."

"You found out what it was?"

"Oh yeah." Taylor replied bitterly. "It took a while but with this body it wasn't too hard to get into most places. I'd tracked the chemical from the

warehouse to a government financed research lab on the edge of town, called Microtron. I broke in and checked the place out, I found that JX-12 had been developed there, for the governments super espionage project. JX's official title is Plastic Helix."

"Plastic Helix?"

"Plastic as in flexible, Helix as in DNA, It's not even a chemical compound." Taylor murmured, warming to his subject, anger and bitterness focussing his mind; making his explanation more lucid than it had been. "It is in fact a very clever type of nanomachine, a molecule sized automated unit with very specific functions." Taylor paused, shaking his head as if to clear it. "After someone is dosed with Plastic Helix the nanomachine's multiply within the body and slowly spread throughout the entire system, it's only when they've done this that the JX units begin to break down the hosts DNA at the subatomic level and replicate it, taking on the original hosts pattern. Eventually the hosts entire cell structure has been replaced by Helix machines which mimic the operations of the original cells perfectly." Taylor leaned forward, his face flushed with barely suppressed emotions. "And the pattern is reconfigurable." He whispered. "You follow so far?"

I nodded numbly. My head was spinning, either the whole situation was getting way too bizarre for me or the many long hours without sleep were taking their toll.

Taylor sat up in his seat. "It was then, while I was in Microtron, that I found out that JX-12 had been banned. The reason being that after the transformation is complete the hosts converted cell structure becomes unstable, for some reason JX cannot maintain the replicated host matrix and becomes excessively prone to a unique, mutated variant of cancer. None of the human Plastic Helix test subjects survived more than five years after their transformation." And with this revelation he slumped in the chair, sobbing quietly.

"But how does this lead to the murders?" I asked, shaking Taylor who'd gone near catatonic again, after his revelations.

"Haven't you already guessed?" Taylor murmured accusingly. "All those people, the ones I killed, they were the research team that developed JX-12."

Suddenly it was all so clear to me, the facts finally arranging themselves in the tired, sleep deprived contents of my aching cranium.

"So you hacked apart twenty eight people for revenge?" I concluded, trying not to sound as sickened as I felt. I was repelled in equal parts at the thought that not only had my ex-partner fallen about as far as it was possible to fall, but also at the realisation that if I had been standing a metre and a half to the left on that fateful day it would have been two dying psychotic mutants chained up in this room, rather than just one.

"I wanted to escape the pain." Taylor mumbled, his eyes glazed. "I wanted them to feel my pain, my terror. I killed them slowly, piece by piece, I wanted them to know what dying felt like."

I let go of Taylor and he flopped back in the chair, I was tired and disgusted and I wanted to be away from this creature that had once been my partner. I was certain that no more information was to be had from him.

As I turned to leave Taylor spoke again.

"I nauseate you, don't I?" He inquired.

"You were a Police Officer." I replied sadly. "And yet you've become the exact antithesis of what you once believed in, I can't believe there wasn't a better way to deal with this mess."

"You might be right." Taylor murmured with a slight chuckle. "But I'd like to see how you would have reacted, if you were in my shoes."

I didn't reply, in all honesty what could I say?

He remained silent. I turned off the recorder and made to leave the room.

"Just out of curiosity." Taylor murmured. "What's the time?"

"I thought you said time was meaningless?" I murmured, remembering his earlier remark.

"Indulge a dying man." He replied.

I checked my watch. "Just on four thirty." I replied.

Taylor smiled. "Time for the final curtain, then." He said enigmatically.

Before I could say anything there was a low rumble off in the distance, I could hear the surprised shouts of people throughout the building and from the street outside.

"That was Microtron." Taylor explained dreamily. "I wired it to blow last night as one last act of spite, just before I went to kill the last of the research team." Taylor smiled faintly. "Before I let you catch me."

"Let us?"

"Who do you think made the phone call about the disturbance?" Taylor asked ironically.

"You did?"

Taylor nodded. "And now that my own version of justice is done, I have nothing left to live for." He paused sadly. "But I felt that I ought to tell someone my story, before I died."

Taylor pitched face first into the table. Running over to him I raised his head to feel for a pulse, Taylor's breathing was shallow and his heartbeat erratic, he grinned at me and shook his head weakly.

"Don't waste your time." He advised. "I took a time release capsule of cyanide just before I was arrested, it was set to kill me just after the explosion." Taylor laughed feebly. "I wanted to go out with a bang." His head fell back and he was dead.

I turned to find my boss standing behind me, thoughtfully drawing on a cigarette and staring at Taylor.

"I'll write my report tomorrow." I told him. "This has all been just a bit too much for one night, I mean morning." I corrected myself.

"Forget about your report." He said grimly. "The word's come from up top, this interrogation never happened, The Butcher never talked."



"What?" I gasped, not believing my ears.

"The official cover story will be that The Butcher was shot and killed while resisting arrest, his motivations will remain unknown." My boss said.

"Just what the hell is this?" I demanded, outraged.

"Microtron is well connected," he explained, glancing back at the mirror pointedly. "If Taylor had been more objective he would have realised that Microtron have more than just one branch in this country, and they don't like stories about their failures getting around."

Calming down, I nodded in resignation, I was smart enough to realise when I was no longer in the same playing field, companies like Microtron could pretty much do what they like and were willing to do almost anything to protect their reputation. There wasn't a week that went by without some poor bastard who'd landed in some multinational's bad books being fished out of the harbour in various pieces and as much as I pitied Taylor I valued my life and the lives of my fellow officers more.

I removed the tape of the interrogation from the AV unit and handed it to The Boss. "I guess we won't be needing this then?" I said, to the mirror rather than him.

"Take the rest of the week off." My boss murmured, smiling sympathetically. "I think you need it."

Without bothering to reply I left the interview room.

I crossed to a cracked window and looked out over my grimy city of crumbling concrete, in the distance a tall column of smoke was rising from where the Microtron building must have once stood. Unable to think of anything but the desolate, hopeless face of Martin Taylor, I shook my head and exited the station.

THE END.

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