

# TYRONE STUTTERD

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## PIGSKIN MEMORIES

HE WAS A cold bastard. His life story was told in the lines on his face. Dead eyes that reflected no emotion and kept his thoughts hidden. Breathing was a struggle, most likely from a lifetime of smoking, and the strong smell of piss in the back of the police car didn't help. There had been many memories in the back seat of the blue and white, but this time was different. He knew this would be the last.

The cold grip of the handcuffs hung heavy around his wrists. He watched the wind churn up the leaves, surrounding the old neighbourhood. He pressed his face against the cool iron of the cage. A cage that made him feel uneasy, even claustrophobic.

'You see that place there, that place?' Lifting the handcuffs, he pointed with two fingers. 'I used to work there, maybe twenty years ago now. I was a butcher, his apprentice.'

His thoughts raced back to those simpler days. That unceasing noise of blade against flesh and the ever longing smell of cold blood and meat. The white of his apron would be stained with the thick red ooze that spilled endlessly from the bellies of the pigs.

A smile stretched across his face.

'We don't want to hear you.' The copper's eyes stared back angrily in the rear view mirror.

He was silent for a moment, scratching the stubble on his face. He wanted to do something. Kick the cage in, break a window, shit his pants; but he was too old for that now. The young agitator he used to be had slowly but surely gone.

'I didn't hang around there too long.'

The copper turned around quickly. A look of sheer anger and hatred that burned yet was reserved behind the badge. 'Are you still talking?'

Silence filled the car, like an invisible force holding the tongue.

He remembered the day his life as a butcher ended and his career as a criminal began.

His mind went back as he stared over the grey and empty streets.

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Slicing up pig skin, the smell rose from the hands no matter how many times they were cleaned. Water, soap, alcohol, the smell never left him. It was the day 'Jim the Suit' came in, handed him a package and left him with three words. 'Don't fuck up.'

Peeling away the soft fabric of the linen, a Magnum and a single gold laced bullet lay bare on the counter. Surrounding the metal was more money than his eyes had ever counted. Half now, half when the job was done.

He remembered how old and fragile the gun felt. Covered in dust he blew on it, the disturbed particles causing his eyes to water. It could have fallen apart that very moment in his hands.

He looked over the single bullet. 'One bullet, you scumbags,' he mumbled to himself.

It had to be done face to face.

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Rain thumping against the roof of the car broke his dream. It made his surroundings seem cosy, if only for a little while; like a mother's embrace before sleeping through a storm.

The police radio broke the silence. 'We've got a robbery in progress, 183 on Flint.'

The men in blue ignored it, switching off the radio. But his brow lowered in thought, Flint Street was known to him.

'Don't touch the girl.' He whispered to himself.

'What did you say?' The copper's eye peered through the cage.

'Those were his last words.' Whispered again.

The copper look confused; hungry for information like a dog watching another eat a meal. 'Who said that?'

He didn't answer, leaned back in his seat, eyes fixed to the sky, and remembered.

His thoughts took him back to Flint Street.

Waiting round the corner on Flint, his hands mechanically shook, forcing him to drop the cigarette before it was finished. 'Fuck.' He cursed to the wind and then immediately apologised to the old woman passing by. The old Magnum felt like a stone fitted to his hand. He remembered the bright red shirt the man wore. He called him 'Tango Man', because it looked as if at any moment he could have stepped out onto the street and danced a complete routine.

It was time to kill or be killed later. Either way someone had to die.

The walk towards the 'Tango Man' made him feel like a hunter creeping up on the tiger before it wakes. Hidden in the pocket of his jacket, his hand constantly fiddled with the trigger of the gun. Pains in the pit of his stomach nearly reunited him with breakfast. It was cold. His face and hands were both numb. His entire body felt like a rock facing a storm. But sweat poured from his brow. The pains made him think about turning round and going home. His hands trembled uncontrollably. He stood face to face with the 'Tango Man' and panic settled in like an old friend.

With an innate animal instinct, he raised the gun to eye level. The 'Tango Man' stared down the barrel, the cigarette dropping from his lips.

'Don't touch the girl,' the 'Tango Man' said without thinking.

There was no pause or reflection, the trigger was pulled.

The silence of the streets was rattled with a deafening thunder.

Blood flew in the air, spraying the wall behind and splashing against his face.

It blinded him but he could still make out the shattered head of the 'Tango Man' spiralled against the concrete. He threw the gun in panic and frantically rubbed his eyes while trying to run from the scene. Any direction, it didn't matter. The blood made him shake in disgust. It wasn't the blood of an animal. This was a man, a soul, and in the matter of an instant this life was gone. He felt consumed by the blood, even short of breath.

His legs pushed him until he lost complete feeling. Police sirens echoed through the empty streets. His heart thumped like a soldier's drum, his legs quivered and the pain in his stomach was consistent. But he felt nothing. The words of the 'Tango Man' spun endlessly through his mind. 'Don't touch the girl.'

He didn't know the girl but he thought about her. Was she blonde? Brunette? What colour were her eyes? Was it his child? It eventually all became too much and breakfast stared him in the face from the concrete. Eggs and bacon, or it used to be.

‘Who said those words?’ The copper angrily waking him.

He paused for a moment. ‘You know what? I can’t remember.’

A lie—and the copper knew it. The rain continued to pour down and the car got colder as it stopped at a red light. A rusted billboard stood over it like an impending dark cloud. Through the brown rust he could make out the picture of a father walking his young daughter to school. Underneath the picture it read “Insure your family today, with Care Link Insurance”. He tried to remember his own daughter. It had been so long, too long. How old she must be now. Her face was blank to him, no matter how hard he concentrated. But he could still remember the last day he saw her. His head rested in his hands and his thoughts took him back to the last memory of his daughter.

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He stood in the bathroom smothering water against the red of his pupils. The sting of the blood within his eyes still disgusted him. Opening the door of the bathroom his daughter, pigtails and all, rushed furiously towards him hugging him round the knee.

‘Hey, little girl, why aren’t you in bed?’

She didn’t answer but lowered her head as a soldier would after being defeated in battle. ‘The phone rang. They want to speak to you,’ she explained eventually.

He untangled the vice grip around his knee and headed towards the phone.

‘Off to bed now,’ he called from the lounge near the phone. She slowly crept to bed, as if sleep was the greatest punishment of all.

‘Hello,’ he said answering the phone. But there was no answer—only a crackling that sounded unnatural.

‘Hello,’ he said again. No answer, just the crackling. He slammed the phone down quickly. Something was wrong. He knew it. He had killed someone that day for a fee and now strange calls—paranoia was the theme of the night.

The door to his daughter’s room lay ajar as if a small creature peered through it behind the darkness. He moved towards the door. But the walk was halted. An uneasy feeling rested upon him. He knew they had found him.

The door to his apartment was thrown open in a tremendous crash. The neighbour’s dog barked in outcry. Ten to twelve blue and white stormed in, all guns in his general direction. He held his arms up high, not out of fear but more out of routine or instinct. A quick hit to the face and he was on the floor.

‘Put your hands behind your back! Now do it. Do it!’

Everything was pacing around him, like a speeding blur mixed with colours.

The police surrounded his apartment. Blood ran down his forehead. His daughter stood in the door frame of her room, tears in her eyes. Her sleep disturbed, her father in pain.

He looked over her. 'I'm sorry,' mouthing the words to her.

Her screams were cut short by the strong hand of an accompanying police officer, picking her off the ground and carrying her to a nearby room, as if she was a piece of the furniture. It was over and all he could do was close his eyes. He did what they demanded and his hands were cuffed behind him.

'You are under arrest for murder. You have the right to remain silent. Do you understand your rights?' Read like a script by the detective in charge.

'Yeah I understand. What took you guys so long?'

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The dream faded with the muffled cry of his daughter. Reality set in and the hard rock cushion of the back seat reshaped his arse. The sky was clearing but trickles of rain still fell to earth. The police car pushed onwards towards the prison that he would soon call home for the remainder of his life. The face of his daughter was still unclear. There had been no pictures sent, no letters written. A single tear flowed from his dark eye. Without a memory there is no daughter, no life, no soul. He stared over the greyness of his old neighbourhood. The eyes of the copper peering every so often through the rear view mirror. But they would not break him.