

The Magpie's Secret

G. J. Lau

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Loomings

They say it is better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all. You think so? How about I tell you what I've loved and what I've lost, and then you can tell me if it was worth it or not: a daughter, a marriage, a life. So, what do you think? Was it better to have loved and lost? I've spent the last couple of decades trying to figure it out. So far all I have for my trouble is too many memories of what might have been.

My life ends and begins with the disappearance of my daughter Jennifer. She was on her way back to college and never made it. Her car was found abandoned on I-81 near Hometown, Pennsylvania. Up until then my story had followed a normal track, or what passes for normal if you came of age in the sixties: the American dream gunned down by assassins' bullets, followed by a long national nightmare of a war that no one understood, least of all me . . . a war that carved deep gouges on my soul. Somehow I made it home in one piece. I got a job, got married, and went back to working for Uncle Sam, this time as a civilian. Things were looking good. Then the roof caved in. Jen's disappearance marked the beginning of a black hole that consumed everything I had left of myself, including my marriage.

After that I just quit trying to make sense of things. I returned to a way of thinking I left behind in Vietnam, marking off the days of my life on my short-timer's calendar, content to just keep putting one foot in front of the other on my lost patrol to nowhere in particular. I put in my thirty years and retired on a decent enough pension, a hollowed out man living a half-empty glass of a life, a story with an ending I didn't care about one way or another . . . Or so I thought until what started out as just another day in the life became a matter of life and death. Mine.

Chapter 1

“The past isn’t dead. It isn’t even past.” – William Faulkner

The promise of spring is just that . . . a promise. And promises are sometimes hard to keep. This year spring was having an especially difficult time of it. You’d go to bed after a sunny day that held out the hope of better things to come and wake up to cold blustery winds shooting down the mountains and across the valley and through your bones, a reminder that nothing’s easy. The daffodils huddled together in the cold morning air to wait it out, tiny yellow suns determined to shine under a Milky Way of white-blossomed Bradford pears that lined the streets of downtown Braddock, a small city just far enough away from Washington D.C. to be somewhere else.

Today the gods declared a truce in the tug-of-war between winter and spring. The corner bank sign registered a comfortable 71 degrees at 12:10 p.m. It being such a nice day I walked down to Juliet’s Café, an Asian-Italian deli located just off of Braddock’s main drag. Once it warms up, she puts out a couple of small round tables pushed up tight against the front of the café, which takes up the first floor of a large corner townhouse. Inside there is barely enough space to walk around among the shelves, freezer cases, and display tables packed with things Italian and delectable. Most of the trade is take-out, but she has a couple of tables wedged into a tight space in the back for those who want to dine in. I prefer to eat outside, especially when the weather is decent, as it was today. I was about to take another bite of my pasta salad when I was startled by a question from a man standing nearby on the sidewalk.

“Mind if I join you?”

I say startled because I had been following the comings and goings of some of Braddock’s least likely to succeed as they gathered on the sidewalk in front of a local counseling center across the street. The smack talk had reached a fever pitch, so I hadn’t noticed him standing there near my table. Some people might have found an excuse to say no, but he looked halfway normal, so after a brief pause I said, “Sure, why not” and pointed towards the other chair.

My unexpected guest looked to be about my age, which would put him somewhere just north or south of sixty. He was small but sturdy looking, with wispy blond hair, eyes the blue of a bright winter sky, a finely chiseled nose that I would have paid good money for, and a thin smile that looked like it was just passing through. He had that healthy open-faced all-American boy look to him like you see out west where people spend most of their time

outdoors riding bikes or climbing rocks. The kind of guy who might have surprised you in an arm-wrestling contest back in the day.

“You don’t remember me, I suppose,” he said.

His voice held the faintest echo of years spent somewhere in the mid-west but otherwise nothing you could put your finger on in terms of point of origin.

“No, I don’t suppose I do.”

“My name is Thomas Clayton, and I remember you. You’re Frank Martinelli, right? Back then you were Sergeant Martinelli, and I was Spec-4 Clayton.” I gave a tentative nod of agreement, and he looked back at me expectantly, waiting for my inner light bulb to click on. So far I was still in the dark. “It *was* a long time ago, so I’m not surprised if you don’t remember me,” he added with a quick smile. After a pause he said, “We were stationed together at Fort Myer in 1970. We both knew Jimmie Ray Talbot. He was the one they sent home to die right after you got there because he had the walking pneumonia and he let it get away from him.”

I sat up and took a closer look at him while I searched the memory banks. Like many Vietnam vets who had been drafted, I had a few months left in my 2-year hitch when I came home. My original assignment was Fort Benning, Georgia, but my father pulled a few strings and managed to get me reassigned to Fort Myer, home of the Third Herd and Arlington Cemetery. I don’t remember a whole lot from that time except for seeing lots of funerals and Star Trek reruns. My goal was to stay out of sight and out of trouble until my hitch was up. There wasn’t time to make a lot of friends, and quite honestly I wasn’t all that interested anyway.

Then I remembered. He looked even more like an all-American boy back then, but appearances can be deceiving. Thomas had picked up some nasty habits, including a taste for heroin. He told me this one day over a beer, or two, or three at an apartment he shared with his girlfriend, who I vaguely recall had long strawberry blond hair and wore a brightly flowered blouse in the hippie style of the day. I don’t remember her name or how I got to be there. Obviously, he and I must have hit it off to some degree because we talked about the kinds of things you don’t normally talk to people about, including his growing attraction to heroin.

I remember asking him why he was using heroin, and he looked at me like I was some sort of idiot and said, “Because it’s good, man.” He felt it took him higher for longer than anything else he had tried. Then he told me enough about what he did in Vietnam to make me understand a little better why he was ready to become a frequent flier.

Chapter 2

Clayton, Thomas, Specialist 4th Class, Serial Number RA45718364, was part of a three-man team whose job was to track down and kill the VC tax collectors and local political leaders who kept the peasants in line. He told me how his team would be inserted by helicopter deep into Indian country, sometimes right along the border where they would slip into Cambodia. They would move noiselessly through the jungle under cover of darkness until they reached their objective, identified only by a set of 6-digit coordinates marked with an X on the map. Usually it was a small group of men huddled around a fire talking softly in the sing-song rhythms of Vietnamese.

When everyone was in position, the team would open fire with silenced submachine guns. After searching the bodies for documents and any other “intel” they could find, the team would melt back into the jungle and head for the pick-up zone, only then breaking radio silence to make contact with the waiting chopper that would ferry them back to their base camp.

This was not combat as you or I understand combat, where opposing forces meet each other by accident or by design and start shooting at each other until one side calls it quits. The engagement is reported and recorded: location, time, number of friendlies and enemies killed or wounded, equipment captured or destroyed. The survivors move on to the next meal and the next firefight. What Thomas did for God and country was targeted killing, assassinations that were never reported or recorded in any logs you or I would likely ever see. There for damn sure were no survivors to fight another day.

You can see how fighting that kind of war could wear a fellow down. Sooner or later you are bound to have second thoughts about what you are doing, and when you come home those doubts and memories come home with you. That’s when the trouble starts. This was before the phrase “post-traumatic stress syndrome” had become common enough to get its own acronym. Vets were pretty much on their own when it came to mental health, and Thomas had come up with his own solution. I was just enough older than Thomas to know that using heroin to forget the past would only result in a future spent fighting addiction. I brought up his girlfriend, who he hoped to marry some day. Heroin would take away all his hopes for a normal life if he let it take control. I remember him looking at me after my fine little speech and asking me “How am I supposed to be normal again after the things I’ve seen and done?” I had no answer for that one.

After that day I have no memory of ever seeing Thomas again, until he showed up at

Juliet's. I wondered what brought him here. Whatever it was, I was pretty sure it wasn't just to catch up on old times.

Chapter 3

I was brought back to the present by Juliet bringing out a cappuccino that Thomas ordered before he sat down with me. He took a slow, careful sip, returned the cup to its saucer, then leaned back and gave me the once-over. I doubt that I passed his inspection as easily as he had mine. I think I'm in pretty good shape for my age, but I'm definitely not Iron Man material. No matter how hard I try to lose weight I have this one layer of fat that never seems to go away, a legacy of youthful dietary indiscretions and Mother Nature's determination to keep me ready for that next Ice Age. At least I still had most of my hair and almost all of my teeth.

Feeling the weight of his stare, I took another mouthful of my pasta. I figured sooner or later he'd get around to whatever it was he had to say.

"I guess you are wondering what brings me here."

"Well, yeah," I said. "What's it been, thirty years at least, I don't see you—hell, I don't see anybody from those days—and then you just show up out of the blue. So yeah, I'm wondering."

"I owe you one," he said, "and now I'm paying it back."

"That sounds good," I said as I took another bite of the pasta salad. "Tell me again what exactly it is you owe me for."

"You probably don't remember that time we had a long talk and you warned me that I should think twice before getting too deep into the heroin thing."

"Yeah, I remember that."

"Well, I took your advice."

"I'm glad to hear that," I said as I checked out the crisply starched Ralph Lauren shirt, the ultra-thin watch he wore on his left wrist, and the gold signet ring that weighed down his right forefinger like an anchor looking for some place to drop. "I guess things have worked out pretty well for you."

That thin smile made a brief return visit. Then he shrugged and said, "Well, you could say so, I guess. Do you remember what I told you I did in the Army?"

"Uh-huh," I said, not sure where this was headed.

"Well, after I got out in '71 I tried my hand at a few different things, but nothing really appealed to me. Then I ran into a buddy from my old unit. He introduced me to another guy who offered me a chance to continue where I left off in the Army, only this time for a different part of the government."

I guess he was telling me in a not so roundabout way that he had gone to work for the CIA

or any one of several government intelligence operations that were far less well known to the public than the spooks at Langley. I raised an eyebrow at that revelation but let him keep talking.

“After a few years of that, I retired and went into private practice.”

I interrupted him. “Are you sure you want to be telling me all this? I mean, I get what you’re saying here. I just don’t get why you are telling me all this.”

“It’s okay. I’m telling you because you have a need to know.” I looked him a question, which he ignored for the moment. “If you’re finished with your lunch, why don’t we go for a walk?”

We got up and went a couple of blocks over to Creekside Walkway, a piece of civic improvement that was Braddock’s answer to San Antonio’s River Walk and Baltimore’s Inner Harbor, only on a much smaller scale. There weren’t a lot of people around, so it was easy to find an isolated bench where we could resume our conversation.

“There aren’t really all that many of us in my particular line of work, at least there aren’t that many who can do it over a long period of time,” Thomas said. “I was good at what I did. Work was . . . steady. For what it’s worth, I only took jobs where I felt that the client warranted receiving my services, and believe me, that still left plenty of business opportunities.”

I looked around again to make sure nobody was in earshot and then leaned towards him across the bench. “Let me get this straight. You only did ‘work’ that met your ethical standards? Isn’t that kind of slippery moral ground to walk on every day?”

For the first time his voice betrayed some emotion. “Hey, you can thank Uncle Sam for that. I was brought up just like you, believing all that bullshit the preachers taught us in church. ‘Thou shalt not kill?’ Yeah, right. They forgot to tell us about the loopholes. We found out pretty damn quick that those rules didn’t apply out in the boonies. In fact, there weren’t any rules at all except for the ones we made up for ourselves. I guess I just never stopped living that way.”

I knew what he meant. When you enter a war zone, everything you believed in as a civilian got checked at the gate. The old-timers—in Vietnam that could be a 19-year-old farm boy from Iowa with dead eyes and a soul to match—would tell you “War is hell, but combat’s a motherfucker.” Killing and pillaging were part of the job description. Rape, thievery, drug-dealing . . . well, that just came with the territory, collateral damage that could be overlooked as long as you didn’t get stupid about it. I had seen it myself first-hand, and I can tell you nobody cared all that much as long as you did your job and looked out for your buddies. You learned pretty fast that you could get away with almost anything if you are bold enough and lucky enough.

A man could get used to that way of living if he wasn’t careful. Too many guys did. And

when you went back to the world it was hard to start coloring inside the lines again. It was like trying to believe again in the Wizard of Oz after you had looked behind the screen and found that everything you had been brought up to believe in was just a trick designed to keep you in line.

“A few years ago, I let it be known that I was going into semi-retirement. I had started a business as a cover for my travels. I dealt in a particular type of . . . collectible that had a small but intense following. Well, turns out I was a pretty fair businessman. I was able to make a very comfortable living, but every once in awhile I would take the odd small job when I need a little extra cash. Besides, I like to keep my hand in the game . . . just in case. That’s where you come in.”

Chapter 4

A gust of wind came up just then, rippling the water ahead of it. The sudden shift in the air gave me a brief chill. Or maybe it was knowing that we were finally getting to whatever it was Thomas had come to tell me. I was pretty sure that it would not be to my liking.

“As I said before, I only take jobs that meet my own personal standards. The man who makes the arrangements for me understands this and always provides me with the name of the individual that I will be, uh, dealing with, so that I can run background checks to make sure they are the right kind of people, so to speak.”

“That’s a delicate way of phrasing it,” I said dryly.

“Well, discretion is everything in my line of work. And, thanks to the internet, I can find just about everything I need to know without leaving my office. Funny thing is, the name of my latest prospective client seemed somehow familiar, and in fact it did turn out to be someone I knew. A fellow by the name of Frank Martinelli.”

I looked at him for a moment and then barked out a harsh sound that could have been mistaken for a laugh.

“You *are* shitting me, right? Why would anyone want to . . . you know . . . do that to me? I’m not anyone special. I sure as hell don’t recall making anyone mad enough to want to terminate me with extreme prejudice. Isn’t that how you fellows say it?”

“Actually, that went out in the 80’s, and whether you like it or not you need to believe me when I tell you that someone out there does indeed want you terminated, with or without prejudice.”

“But why? Did your contact man give you any hints?” I asked.

“No, it doesn’t work that way. Like I said, I’m mostly retired. This guy only calls me when he has a small job that he thinks I might be willing to take on.”

“Jesus . . . a small job . . . that’s nice,” I said, unsure whether I was more insulted or scared. Scared won out and with it came the anger. “Let me see if I have this straight: I’m just someone’s little mess that gets cleaned up by people like you for a nice fee.”

“Hey, I’m just the messenger here,” he said with an ironic smile that was neither helpful nor reassuring. “Remember, I’m the one who is doing you a favor. Anyway, it is what it is. Naturally, I turned down the job.”

“Well, that’s good to hear. Is this a little-boy-who-pulled-the-thorn-out-of-the-lion’s-paw deal?”

“You could think of it that way. Like I said, I do have standards and you are not the kind of

person who I would normally do business with, even if you hadn't done me a mitzvah back in the day. That's the good news."

"And the bad news would be . . .?"

"I turned the job down, and I asked my guy to put the word out that I would personally be grateful if other potential bidders did the same. But if I was you I wouldn't count too much on that. It's a tough economy for everyone, including people in my line of work. The big money just isn't there anymore. I would go on the assumption that someone out there is hungry enough to take the job even if it meant earning my displeasure. I can tell you for sure that as of the moment the contract has not been issued. Nobody big will touch it, but there are lots of other guys who will be happy to get the work. Like I said, times are tough. If I hear anything, I'll let you know, but you have to figure the clock is ticking as of right now."

"Well, this sucks. What am I supposed to do now?"

"Good question, one that I have given some thought to. It isn't often I get to put myself in the other fellow's shoes."

Again with the unhelpful irony.

"And did you come up with anything that might be useful to someone in my shoes?"

"Two things. First, you need to start being more careful. I've been following you for a week or so, and I have to say that you are far too much a creature of habit."

"So I've been told. Did you say that you had been following me for a week? I never noticed anyone following me, not that I was looking."

"Well, you better start looking," he said. "But don't feel too bad. You wouldn't have seen me even if you were looking. But starting right now you need to be more careful. Don't always be in the same place at the same time every day. Better yet, lie low until you figure this thing out."

"How exactly am I supposed to do that? I meant it when I said that there is no earthly reason for anyone to want to kill me." There, I had finally said the words. Kill . . . me. Someone wants to kill . . . me. I leaned forward, buried my head in my hands, and closed my eyes tightly shut, my all-purpose response to anything that might hurt.

"That's the second thing you can do. Don't worry so much about the "who" as the "why." Figure out why someone would want to do this and you will be able to figure out who is behind this. In my experience it usually comes down to two or three simple reasons."

"And they would be what exactly?" I asked, looking up at him.

"You pose a threat to someone, knowingly or unknowingly. You pissed someone off, knowingly or unknowingly. Or most likely you stand between someone and something that someone wants very badly, knowingly or unknowingly."

"That's it?" I asked, my voice rising from a growing sense of frustration at this whole situation. "That's the sum total of what your vast experience has taught you about human

nature?”

“In my line of work, yes, it really is pretty much that simple. Keep in mind I don’t deal much with the Mother Teresas of the world. My customers are ordinary people who have been pushed by circumstances to cross a line any one of us might cross if placed in similar circumstances.”

“That’s a pretty dark view of mankind, don’t you think?”

Thomas looked at me with tired eyes that had seen too much of mankind at less than its best.

“Let me ask you a question. Suppose I knew who had ordered the hit. Suppose I was here to offer my services to you, to solve your problem my way. What would you say to that?”

I stared at my sneakers for a few moments, but they weren’t talking. Finally I looked up and asked him, “Okay, what do we do now?”

“There’s no *we*, brother. This is your problem, not mine,” he said.

I started to protest, but Thomas held up his hand. “You’re going to have to figure this thing out for yourself.”

He sat back, his arms resting on the bench, the relaxed pose of man whose work was done. A passerby might easily mistake us for two guys with nothing more serious on their minds than where to have our next beer.

“Look, no one knows your life better than you do. Somewhere in your past you kicked a pebble that has become a landslide. You may not have a lot of time, so I suggest you get busy thinking. And if you know someone who is good with security, you might want them to check out your house and your car. No reason to make it too easy for them.”

He stood up as if to leave and then stopped and gave me a last look.

“Lots of people kill other people, usually in the heat of the moment. Not many people engage in murder for hire. Hell, most people don’t have a clue how to find a pro. They usually end up talking to an undercover cop who was tipped off by some lowlife who was shopped for the job and is more than happy to rat someone out in return for a little rhythm with the cops. Besides that, it’s expensive—even for a small job like this one—and it brings with it its own set of risks. So one thing we know for sure. Whoever ordered this has lots of money. One other thing we can be pretty sure of. They really want you out of the way.”

With that, Thomas turned and walked out of my life, a life that was suddenly in pieces, with only me left to pick them up. As I sat there pondering my uncertain future, I heard Thomas calling to me as he walked away.

“Hey, Martinelli, I almost forgot. Check your e-mail when you get home.”