

An illustration of a crime scene. A body lies on a tiled floor, illuminated by a bright light source. A large knife with a long blade and a black handle lies on the floor near the body. Another knife with a shorter blade and a black handle lies on the floor in the foreground. The scene is set in a room with a wooden door and a window in the background. The overall tone is dark and gritty.

DEAD PIG COLLECTOR

WARREN ELLIS

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Mister Sun was almost forty thousand seconds behind the moment when he finally emerged from the shiny, sad pens of LAX into the wet heat of the late afternoon. It takes forty thousand seconds, more or less, to fly from London to Los Angeles and then negotiate the boxes and runs of the airport. That's how he thought of it. Eleven hours would be a sleep of exhaustion and a leisurely breakfast. It didn't carry a sense of urgency. Forty thousand seconds sounded to him like time running away without him, leaving him stuck in a dim and disconnected past. A lot could happen in forty thousand seconds.

Mister Sun put his shades on. It had been winter in Britain for the previous eighteen months or so, and he only saw authentic daylight when he traveled, or on television. Los Angeles light, stinging as it was, had a familiar quality to him. It was a strange thing, he reflected, to recognize a certain flavor of daylight from afternoon films in the Sundays of his childhood.

He'd already lifted his packet of cigarettes and his lighter from the top pocket of his rollaboard bag. The lighter was a gift from one of his apparent legion of uncles and aunts who'd pass through London on their way from China to God-only-knew where. A flat, two-inch-long bar that charged by USB, it featured an ultraviolet light for finding the watermark on paper money as well as a button-operated cigarette-lighting coil. Mister Sun had, in 2009, owned a cigarette-lighting cell phone—a Chinese SB6309 with the hot coil under a slide-away plate on the bottom of the phone's back. He'd loved that stupid phone, but business had eventually demanded that he use something smarter. He'd never thrown that phone away, though, and when at home he sometimes took it from his drawer and lighted a Dunhill with it just to experience that gentle and amused pleasure again. It was a unique thing; a placid joy unlike anything else in his personal or professional life.

It usually took Mister Sun about four minutes to smoke a cigarette. Another two hundred and forty seconds burned. As he

smoked, he watched his current phone, quite smart but entirely charmless, finally find the local 4G. He opened an app that displayed photos for only ten seconds before securely deleting them. There was no communication therein from his client. He found himself curiously dismayed by this. He was forty thousand seconds back and nothing had happened. Mister Sun was almost offended. He crushed out his cigarette with the heel of his brogue, carefully deposited the dead stub in a bin, and walked down the concourse to request a cab from the attendant.

The cab took the best part of three thousand, six hundred seconds to pick and thread its way from LAX to West Hollywood. Mister Sun did not like Los Angeles. He could never find a center to it. It seemed to him to hang on top of the world like a fallen constellation, resting on a rickety scaffold of endless, maddening road. In Los Angeles, Mister Sun only ever arrived anywhere by surprise, unable to find any sense or structure in the route.

He used the Mark Hotel in that district, a boutique hotel of the '00s sliding toward the grimy sheen and dull plaster of budget accommodation in the '10s. The Chateau Marmont was barely five minutes' walk away, and much nicer, but it was a place people went to look at other people. Mister Sun himself, on lunch occasions at the Marmont's open-air dining space, had fallen prey to it. You'd spot one half-remembered face—a dying actress you'd seen flayed by magazine covers, an almost-famous actor you'd glimpsed on some awards ceremony watched on a hotel TV on an insomniac night—and start looking around for more.

The lobby of the Mark was full of a different kind of person. People—not famous people, and probably not terribly smart either—still came here to be seen, while remaining entirely oblivious to most other people. Mister Sun, in his sober suit, with his businessman's rollaboard, was effectively invisible among the long and languid creatures littering the lobby's low sofas and strangely louche silvered beanbags. Checking in was always a painfully drawn-out process. The staff were far too culturally rarefied to be seen to be working for a living, and there was a girl in a fish tank

directly behind the reception area. This was debris from the Mark's days as an artistic and trend-setting location. Someone had decided it would be charmingly bohemian to keep a mostly naked girl in the fish tank at night. It was, he always felt, a saddening indictment of Los Angeles culture—or, rather, an illustration of how Los Angeles had no culture of its own, just a large collection of misreadings of the artistic histories of other, proper cities.

He wasn't pleased with himself for appraising the girl in the tank. He thought of her as half-pretty, the sort of girl one would find modeling for art classes in dire community colleges. Putting her cheap panties and her ex-boyfriend's shirt back on to wander around the easels afterward and wondering how grotesque she must really be, to have summoned up the deformities whacked down in merciless charcoal strikes. She lay on her untuned belly in the tank, yellow calloused feet slowly waving in the air, wearing an orange dollar-store bikini thong and picking at a MacBook Air encrusted in stickers.

He soundlessly apologized for his spite, ashamed of the poison that'd bubbled up in him over the three or four hundred seconds he'd been standing there, but checking into the Mark and having to look at the body in the tank was always difficult for him. Mister Sun killed people and disposed of their carcasses for a living.

Mister Sun's room was blessed with a balcony and a vertical ashtray bolted to the exterior wall. The room itself was as expected: a broad slab of a bed dressed in tired clothes, carpet trodden thin, blank walls lightly pitted by ten years of corrosive sweat in the air. The balcony was indeed a blessing, though. It hung from the face of the hotel that was turned away from the noise of the city, overlooking a tree-fringed disc of churned mud that a previous client had told him was a dog-walking park. It looked thoroughly medieval to Mister Sun, and he wondered how many dogs had died there. Still and all, it was pleasant to stand there on the balcony and smoke, obscured from the sight of the city, letting the Los Angeles early evening thaw his bones a little. With one thumb he batted out a text to his girlfriend that she wouldn't see until morning in

Greenwich Mean Time, thereby completing the day's necessary tasks. He warmly anticipated the delivery of the food he knew was good at the Mark, the carpaccio and the sliders, and a few hours of American television before a decent night's sleep. He had to kill someone in the morning.

And a beautiful morning it was. Mister Sun took coffee and porridge—which the locals insisted on referring to as “oatmeal”—in the diner-style restaurant off the hotel lobby. He discreetly swallowed two loperamide tablets with his coffee. Those, and the low-residue foods consumed over the last half-day, would limit his bowel movements, which he preferred when working. He checked his message again on the phone. His client had spoken. The photo was of the client himself, a baggy-looking man with red-rimmed eyes, giving the thumbs-up in front of his own manic grin. The text laid over the image read “Getting it done!” Mister Sun presumed this was some kind of hearty encouragement. It was far from the first time he'd conceived of his client as a bit of a dick.

After breakfast, he visited the reception desk and asked if there might be any mail for him. There was. A large cardboard envelope. He made a point of opening it in front of the receptionist, stripping off the pull tab to reveal a thick screenplay, shrink-wrapped. He rolled his eyes, and the receptionist smiled sympathetically. He smiled back, gave a good-natured shrug, and tucked it under his arm for the return to his room. Only in Los Angeles would the production of a screenplay be an instantly forgotten piece of information. It marked him as unspecial. Just another of the ten million people aimlessly orbiting the movie business.

In his room, kneeling at the single low table, he pulled away the shrink-wrap. After the first five pages, the screenplay had been cut away to create a boxy space in the middle, which had a pair of car keys affixed there, bound securely in tape. Mister Sun already knew which vehicle to look for, having memorized a photo sent by the client through the self-destruct app. The vehicle would have been

parked yesterday, when the client put this envelope into the mail. It was time to begin preparation.

The rollaboard case was half-filled with fat, transparent plastic worms: clothes bags that bore a black fitting for a vacuum cleaner tube to suck them into a compressed log. The vacuum bags generally allowed him to pack twice what he needed into a quarter of the space.

Not long after, Mister Sun left the hotel, wearing clothes under his shirt and suit. Out front, he put on his shades, smilingly confirmed with the attendants that the Chateau Marmont was indeed a left turn down the road because good God he had so many annoying meetings to sit through there today, and left with the screenplay tucked under his arm.

A gentle three-hundred-and-sixty-second stroll brought him to a parking lot in the lee of a dying strip club, where he found a short white van of nondescript age. The keys opened the back of the van easily, and he quickly appraised the contents. Everything on his shopping list seemed to be in there, right down to the old blue baseball cap and the battered sneakers stuffed in a disposable grocery sack, which he took. The keys were a little more argumentative about opening the driver-side door, but he convinced it, hoping this was no more than a sticky fluke. Inside, he put the grocery sack at his feet and pulled from his suit pocket a folded vacuum bag. He wrestled off his jacket, shoes, and, most awkwardly, his pants and shirt, and serially pushed them into the vacuum bag. Under the shirt and pants he was wearing a plain T-shirt and thin two-piece mechanic's coveralls, in blue. The bag went into the passenger-side footwell, and he carefully got the sneakers on his feet.

The van didn't want to start. Mister Sun bit back his fury. How was he supposed to go and kill someone in a vehicle that didn't work? How much longer was he going to draw attention to himself by making the damn thing grind and groan in front of a fucking strip club of all places? "You're a dick," Mister Sun hissed at the

dashboard, and strongly considered killing his client after the job was done. He'd been paid in advance, after all.

The damned thing eventually caught, but it didn't sound happy about having to move. It may as well have been a sick horse, coughing and stuttering all the way out of the lot.

An estimated six-hundred-second run to the job took him almost a thousand seconds, and so Mister Sun was almost vibrating with hate by the time he parked up in front of the scene of the job. He threw himself out of the van, slammed the door shut with murderous force, tore open the back of the van, pulled on the disposable latex gloves, picked up the toolbox and the messenger bag, took what he needed from them before hefting them, and stomped up to the front door of the property so deeply angry that he knew he wouldn't even enjoy the day's work.

He had learned the layout of the low, detached house by heart, and had memorized the daily schedule of the occupant as provided to him by the client. He mimed pressing the doorbell with one hand while he worked on the lock with the tool in the palm of the other. The door popped. He silently pantomimed being greeted by an occupant, just for the look of it, and slipped inside.

He took five seconds to close the door its last inch, to ensure the seal was soundless. In those five seconds, he listened. No TV or radio, which was a shame. The occupant rose late and habitually fashioned a brunch before leaving home in the early afternoon. Mister Sun found a smile as he picked up some shuffling from the kitchen in the back of the structure. Excellent. Kitchens were both easy to clean and festooned with confusing evidence traces. He set the toolbox and messenger bag down, without sound, and moved with great craft down the hallway to the kitchen.

Standing in the kitchen, facing Mister Sun, was a tall woman with very wide eyes.

Lying in the kitchen, also facing Mister Sun, was his client, also with very wide eyes, and in addition sporting a superb Chinese chef's knife in his head.

The woman was shuffling, one foot forward, one foot back, head bobbing, not blinking at all. His client wasn't blinking either. It was, Mister Sun thought, just as well he was dead, because the position he was lying in didn't look a bit comfortable. A gun—a ridiculous off-brand long-barreled .357—lay by his awkwardly splayed right hand. Mister Sun suspected he recognized it as an overpriced Argentine weapon of distant experience, a thing with a shit trigger that was prone to jamming and, as his client may have found, was not the easiest shooter in the world to draw quickly.

The eight-inch knife in his head, however, was marvelous, having cleaved his skull and brain so sharply that no blood had yet leaked out. The only thing in the room that had spilled, in fact, was the plate of carrot sticks the woman had obviously been chopping when his client had let himself into the house and taken her by surprise. It seemed very likely that she'd been so surprised that she'd turned around and brought the knife down on his head while he was still trying to wrestle that stupid gun out of his pocket.

The woman, Mister Sun's target for the day, found him in her field of vision. He saw her eyes clutch at him.

"Help," she simply said.

Mister Sun released the breath he'd been holding and looked down at his dead client. "Getting it done!" had, apparently, meant that he couldn't wait another minute and had driven across town to kill the woman himself, leaving Mister Sun to take care of the disposal. His client was, in fact, a colossal dick. So much of a dick that he'd died of it.

"He died of being a dick," Mister Sun said to the woman. She seemed to have no response to that beyond taking a long, shuddering breath, so he studied the dick for twenty seconds longer. Mister Sun had been paid. All the correct protocols had been observed. There was no knowledge of the contract outside this room, no trail or trace. When one considered it rationally, Mister Sun thought, this would indeed fulfill the contract. He wasn't,

strictly speaking, paid for the murder. Any idiot could kill someone. He was paid for the disposal.

“Yes,” Mister Sun decided, looking up at the woman again. “I will help you. Do you have a bath?”

The woman, whose name was Amanda, did own a bath: a high-backed claw-foot tub that Mister Sun would not have been surprised to see in an old Western TV show. She was not much help with transporting the client to the bathroom, and was much more interested in talking, very fast, about the client—whose name was evidently Bastard Dogfucker—the successful business they’d shared in, and the apparently spectacularly unsuccessful sexual experience she had regrettably subjected herself to. His client’s decision to take action in her respect therefore appeared to be a direct result of both her intent to move on from him professionally and her refusal to repeat an amorous conjunction she likened to being mounted by one of those big slobbery animals that take brandy barrels to dying climbers in the Alps.

Mister Sun preferred never to learn the reasons for his being hired, and tolerated her shock-powered ranting insofar as it occupied her enough to prevent her actively hampering his work. She was an attractive woman, in that sinewy, rangy American way that spoke to him of cheerleaders and swimmers. Great candyfloss tumbles of blond hair, and immense green cat-eyes, with features so pale and crystal that make-up would ruin, render overt and crass. He found himself wondering what she’d look like in ten years. Perhaps features like Amanda’s wouldn’t age, not obviously. His own girlfriend, in eighteen months, had visibly aged. He did not enjoy watching people die slowly.

The client was wrestled into the bath. Amanda was prevailed upon to find some garbage sacks. The client’s socks and shoes went into the first black plastic sack. Mister Sun brought his work bags in. The client had stocked them to Mister Sun’s specifications, more or less. Mister Sun found and snapped open the large KA-BAR clone knife. It was, naturally enough, of lower quality than a blade of the

actual KA-BAR marque—it may not, he reflected, even have been as good as the chopper jutting out of his client’s brain—but a hell of a lot cheaper, and he was only going to use it once. He sliced away his client’s clothes, depositing them strip by swatch in the sack.

Unclothed, the dead man in the bath was not a picture of beauty. Considering his client’s gut, Mister Sun speculated that one last donut could well have been as lethal as a knife in the head. Additionally, the dense and oily thatching of body hair, and what Mister Sun presumed, at least by its location if not by girth, must be a human penis, somewhat clarified the comparison with a St. Bernard.

A second garbage sack went over the client’s head, knife and all. Mister Sun duct-taped it closed, as tightly as possible, around the neck. Satisfied with the seal, he took up the bag’s slack in his right hand and got a hold of the knife through the plastic. Over seven hundred seconds or so, he very, very carefully worked the blade loose from the head. He did not want to split the bag, and he did not want to suddenly discover his duct-tape seal was imperfect from a rush or spray of blood. All the blood had to stay in the bath, and its flow had to be controlled. There was an audible *pop* when the knife came free. The edge on the knife must have been magnificent, he thought, to have fitted so tightly into the head. He gathered the blade into the slack of the bag, and, with another two lengths of duct tape, safed its edge and segregated it into a new and separate chamber of the bag.

Time for the hammer.

Amanda, watching this, stopped rambling when she saw it.

“Really?” Mister Sun said. “You killed a man with the same knife you use to make brunch, and you’re suddenly squeamish about a hammer. While standing in front of the man you killed, who is now naked in your bath with a bag taped over his head. Really?”

“I just ... I don’t know why you need a hammer.”

“Does it matter?”

“I ... I want to understand. I think I should understand what’s happening. I should understand the process. If I’m going to do this, I should, I don’t know, I should commit to it.”

Mister Sun was almost touched by this. He smiled. “You want to understand how I do my job?”

“I think so,” Amanda said. “Yes. It will help, I think. Help me to cope. Does that sound weird?”

Mister Sun actually chuckled. “Yes. No. It’s, ah, it’s not a thing I’ve been asked before. Well. The hammer.” He lifted it, and then put it down by his side again, laughing a little, suddenly adrift. “I’ve never had to do this before. It does feel weird.”

He shook his head, laughed again. “Okay then. The process. It has to happen in stages. The presumption is always that we won’t get caught, and we’ll see the process through to its end. But, well, the world is what it is, and surprise or interruption can happen at any time. We have to be prepared for that. So we push the body a bit further down into the bath, like this, and we ...”

Mister Sun swung the hammer down into the client’s bagged face. It crunched.

“Oh my god,” Amanda said.

“It is very important,” Mister Sun said, lifting the hammer again, “that we pulverize the teeth and facial bone structure as well as possible.” Crunch. “If we are caught in ten minutes, then, yes, we are standing over a dead body in the bathtub.” Crunch. “But we will, by God, force them to do a DNA test to identify the body. This purchases us useful seconds.”

“What about fingerprints, though?” Amanda asked. “They won’t need DNA. He has fingerprints.”

“Well,” said Mister Sun, as the hammer’s impact reports degenerated from crunches to sounds like glass dust being pounded into pork chops, “that’s why there’s a thirty-dollar brûlée torch in my bag. We might want some air freshener, by the way.”

“That’s clever,” Amanda said.

Straightening up, Mister Sun said, "I must observe that, at this point, you're dealing with all this very well."

"It's interesting," Amanda said. "I like protocols. I like processes. Checklists. It's a bit like building code and workflows. I find it calming, somehow. Can I get a chair?"

"Sure," he said, bringing the hammer down at a new angle, looking to collapse the cheekbones and eye orbits.

At the bathroom door, she turned and stood, head at a quizzical angle. "What do I call you?"

Mister Sun considered her. It was approaching noon outside, and the light from the frosted-glass window looked like diamonds falling on her skin.

"Call me David," he said.

"Is that your real name?"

"Yes," Mister Sun lied.

Her face lit up. "David, then. Be right back."

He went back to smashing his client's face into powder, oddly happy.

"This does tend to stink a bit," Mister Sun said as he pressed the ignition button on the small gray kitchen torch. The flame sprang into life like a spike from hell. He held his client's left wrist in his left hand and swiftly and efficiently blitzed away each of the dead man's left fingerprints.

"Barbecued pork," Amanda commented, sitting on a dining chair at the foot of the bath. "I suppose that's not an original description." A green can of air freshener stood under the chair.

"It's common," agreed Mister Sun. "Although I have met people who insist that humans taste like veal. And one woman from Canada who will swear up and down that people, like most other things, taste a bit like chicken. But she was crazy. And also Canadian. Frightening people. Have you ever seen what they did to Chinese food? The Chinese smorgasbord, for God's sake. There. All done."

He laid the client's hands back down, and stoppered the bath's plughole.

Mister Sun replaced the torch in the toolbox. He liked his tools ordered. He'd previously placed the KA-BAR clone in the toolbox, and retrieved it now.

"Now," he said, snapping the black blade open, "we have destroyed the teeth, crushed the face, and obliterated the fingerprints. And we have not been caught. We can therefore proceed with the first stage of carcass disposal. Fluid drainage."

Amanda placed her hands together so quickly that they almost clapped. "Ooh," she said. "What is the process for that, David?"

"Incisions," he said.

He lifted the client by the neck and expertly stroked six deep cuts into the corpse's back, like a sketch of wings. He then sank the knife into the side of the body's abdomen, three times. He thought for a few seconds, shifted his grip, and levered the blade through the bag on the body's head and under the skull for a single perforation. Lowering him again, Mister Sun turned to his client's legs and made several deep, angled slashes into the thighs. "Opening the femoral arteries," he said to Amanda, as he finished scoring the last diagonal.

"I don't understand," Amanda said. "Won't the blood take forever to just leak out of him?"

"Well," said Mister Sun, "we are still around eleven thousand seconds away from having to worry about rigor mortis. We are still in the phase of primary flaccidity, where the carcass remains entirely flexible." He went to his messenger bag. The large plastic sheet he'd requested was there, right on top of the two bottles of bleach.

Mister Sun, with the ease of long practice, laid the sheet over the client—it did, as he'd hoped, reach right down to the toes—and cut two hand-sized holes in the sheet over the body's chest. He reserved the discs of plastic, placing them next to the roll of duct tape by the toolbox. He got one knee up on the edge of the tub, pushed his

gloved hands through the two holes, rested them on the dead man's chest, and said, "Watch."

He began to compress his client's chest, on a ten-second rhythm. The ribs flexed, and, after a minute, blood began to squirt from the slashes and perforations.

"The heart, you see, is just a pump, and can be manually operated."

Amanda giggled. "The heart is just a pump. I love that. It sounds so true."

"It's a mechanical fact," said Mister Sun, bringing the compression to a five-second beat.

"In so many ways," Amanda said. "I've never met anyone who had anything other than a pump inside them."

Out of the corner of his eye, Mister Sun saw a new line appear on her forehead. "I'm sure that's not true," he said.

"I've only been able to wash my hair for the last two years," Amanda said.

"I don't know what that means."

"When I worked for other people? Working in big rooms divided into cubicles? They were like human pens for software writing, and the ratio of women to men was maybe, *maybe* one to thirty. I stopped washing my hair, for years, and wore nothing that wasn't a Junior Anti-Sex League chastity sack. I met nothing but boys who had pumps for hearts. I'm not great at reading social cues, but even I, after long enough, worked out that if my hair looked like a hobo wig and I wore nothing but thick onesies and lime-green Crocs then they'd leave me alone. The whole point of the start-up, of creating a new business and getting out from working for other people, was that I could start to be myself again. Whatever that means."

The crease in her brow had gone. Amanda's face had re-assumed a sort of flat placidity that had informed much of their time together so far. The joy of her smiles and laughs seemed, to Mister Sun, to be

in her genuine surprise at their arrival, as if strong emotions traveled some miles to get here and showed up without warning.

“I do understand the pleasures of working for oneself,” Mister Sun offered.

“Well,” she said, gazing at the corpse. “Almost working for myself. He had skills I didn’t have. He had money I didn’t have. He always had money.”

Mister Sun decided not to comment on that, since quite a lot of that money was currently sloshing around in his own bank account.

“Fucking bastard dogfucker,” Amanda said, all in a rush. “I bet you liked him.” Her expression seemed not to change as she said it.

Mister Sun raised an eyebrow. “I’ve never met him, or directly spoken to him.”

“Oh,” Amanda said. “That’s how the process works? How did you communicate?”

“There’s an app for encrypted self-erasing images with text overlay, made by security experts.”

“I know that one,” Amanda said. “Or, I’ve read about it. It doesn’t work on Android phones yet. I prefer Android. You can get much deeper into the operating system. Men like men with money. Even when they profess to hate them, they respect the money and admire its keeper.”

“Respect,” said Mister Sun, pushing blood out of his client’s body, “doesn’t come into it. I provide a service. I like to get paid for it. I may, perhaps, suspect my clients are not people I’d want to spend time with”—he gave the corpse a harder shove, for emphasis, and there was a pattering rainy noise as blood struck the underside of the plastic sheet—“but, happily, I do not have to.”

“It’s a transaction,” Amanda said. “No emotional content.”

“No emotional content is required. I’m a dead pig collector.”

Amanda leaned forward, spotting new information. “I don’t understand that reference.”

Mister Sun stood, unkinking his shoulders and back, taking stock of the liquid in the bath. He approved of that useful slight incline in the tub's surface, helping the blood run down toward the plughole. It was almost impossible to manually pump all the blood out of a corpse. There always somehow seemed to be a pint left in there. But he'd certainly processed out the lion's share, and, given the unexpected situation he found himself in, he probably had more time to play with than usual. He went to get the bottles of bleach from the bottom of the messenger bag, nestled there around the small roll of heavy-gauge garbage sacks.

Amanda uncapped the green can and gave a few blasts of something synthetic and cloying into the air. "These things fascinate me," she said. "It's like what you'd get if you tried to describe spring to a robot. Not remotely authentic but somehow true. What's a dead pig collector?"

Mister Sun poured one bottle of bleach through the left-hand hole in the plastic sheet. "China," he said, "is a place rife with pollution and disease. It's not *just* that, but that is certainly a part of the landscape. It's also a place of pig farming. And a part of pig farming —"

The bottle was empty. He stood it by the bath and opened the second bottle. In it went, through the second hole. "There are periods—we're in one right now, in fact—where serious disease and pollution events will kill the pigs. They will wash up on riversides in their tens of thousands. They will litter fields and pile up in their pens. A small farm—and, in places like Shanghai, they're *all* small farms—cannot spend what little time they have disposing of tons of dead pigs instead of maintaining their remaining assets."

The second bottle was empty. Mister Sun swiftly cut five small sections of duct-tape and fixed them around the edge of one of the reserved plastic-sheet discs. The disc was therefore stuck back on the sheet, closing the left hole.

"The farmers could," he said, "just sell the infected dead pigs into the food market. But, of course, people get sick. Sometimes they die.

The food supply is always on the edge of triggering a pandemic. So it's illegal. People get sentenced to life imprisonment for selling contaminated pig meat. You can draw your own conclusions about the life expectancy in a Chinese prison."

The second disc fixed on, Mister Sun busied himself with lightly tacking the sheet around the bath with a few more short sections of tape. "So," he said, "there are people who have learned how to effectively and safely dispose of swine carcasses. If you have a stack of dead pigs, and you don't want to go to prison, then you pay for a dead pig collector."

Mister Sun pulled off his gloves and delicately pushed them into one of the empty bleach bottles. Twisting on the cap, he then went to his toolbox, tugged out another pair of gloves, and snapped them on. He looked at Amanda, and gave her an uncertain smile.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Not as such. It's just that this is an unusual situation, and I'm not sure if it's correct to ask for a cup of coffee while the blood breaks down."

"You shouldn't tell me too much about yourself," said Mister Sun, sitting with a handmade espresso that had been produced by a strange device whose shape suggested nothing but two cubes fucking. He had watched Amanda get lost in methodically selecting, weighing, and grinding the coffee beans, tamping the ground coffee and hand-pumping the espresso out of the device with extraordinary focus and vigilance.

"In case something happens," she said. "I understand that. It just seems somehow wrong that you shouldn't know anything about the person you came to kill. Does that make sense?"

"Um," he said. "Not really. I did say there was no emotional content in the work."

"But," Amanda said, "that makes me just a dead pig in a pen."

"Amanda, you killed your own business partner with a cleaver and are in the process of allowing a complete stranger to dispose of

the body.”

“I did,” she said. Her eyes were flicking side-to-side, very fast, unfocused. “I did do that. And when I said ‘help,’ you could have said ‘call the police.’ Because he had a gun, didn’t he? I could have claimed self-defense. Home invasion. Even though he had a set of keys. But you didn’t say that. Because you would have been questioned as part of *their* process. Of course you would have been. You broke into my house too. And you might be dressed like a generic service employee of some kind, but I bet you didn’t arrive in America dressed like that. So it was in your best interest to help by doing the job you came to do anyway, thereby guaranteeing my silence.”

Mister Sun sipped his espresso, quietly calculating space and seconds. He didn’t require a weapon for his job. His intent had been to steal into the room, silently approach her, stamp a foot into the back of her knee, and cleanly snap her neck as she collapsed.

He could still perform a similar operation from this position.

“You are a very intelligent woman,” he said.

“I’m good with problems. Breaking things down. Step by step. It’s how code works. Logical procession.”

He gave her a smile whose warmth was not entirely false. “Would you like to finish learning how to break down a dead body?”

Amanda’s head cocked to that querent angle again. “There’s more?”

“Amanda, we haven’t even gotten him out of your house yet. Shall we follow the process all the way to the end, before we go our separate ways?”

“I don’t like that.”

“Don’t like what?”

“The way you said that last part. Like we’d never see each other again.”

“We won’t.”

“I don’t like that.”

Mister Sun’s phone vibrated in his pocket, just once. He realized that that would be his girlfriend, responding to last night’s text. He elected to ignore it, and smiled at Amanda again. She smiled back. He liked her smile immensely.

In the bath was a white body and a couple of gallons of pink muck. Mister Sun reached under the sheet and tugged the plug out. The bath began to drain, sounding like an extended and ugly strangulation the whole time. He gave the cold faucet a half-turn and suggested to Amanda that a couple more blasts of the robot-perfume air freshener might be in order.

“So why have we drained all the blood out of the bastard?” Amanda asked.

Mister Sun had torn one of his heavy sacks off the roll and was shaking it open. “Because it’s going to make it much easier and cleaner to joint him.”

Amanda just looked at him. “I wouldn’t have expected that.”

“Well, we need to make him simpler and more discreet to transport. Also, every step has the intent of making him harder to identify in case of an interruption. You know what you might also find interesting? It may seem that I brought a lot of gear in here, but it’s all very inexpensive. If you shopped around, you could probably dispose of a body for under a hundred dollars.”

He pulled the sheet off the bath. Amanda was moved to give another long spray from the can. Mister Sun folded the sheet as best he could, and stuffed it into the open sack. He tied the sack off and put it to one side, and then pulled another one off the roll.

“Right, then,” he said. “Head first.”

There was always a little extra blood during this part, which is why he left the water running as he put the KA-BAR clone to his client’s throat and began to slice through meat and ligament, all the way around the neck until he met his first cut. Putting the knife down, he grabbed the head under the jaw and began to twist. He

was rewarded by a little crepitation. With a tight smile he twisted the head the other way, working it, and then pulled. The client's head, contained inside the sack, came free with a loud smack where the spine parted company with the skull.

This time, Amanda did actually clap her hands, as if she'd been shown a mysterious and spectacular magic trick.

"Did you want your knife back?" he grinned, cradling the head and its thin run-off over the bath.

"Please say we can stay friends, David," Amanda said.

Amanda's dishwasher thrummed away in the background. The Chinese chef's knife was terrific, and had gone through the client's head without a notch, nick, or scratch. It would continue to perform admirably for years to come, and throwing it away had seemed to Mister Sun like a terrible waste.

The stupid gun was in there, too.

The head was in a sack, liberally sprayed with a cheap aerosol oven cleaner whose active ingredient was lye, and Mister Sun was working with the KA-BAR knife and a hammer on a shoulder joint. He was making short, careful strikes, as he didn't want to spatter the place with bone chips.

Amanda was talking about her business. It appeared to be the sort of classic mismatch that kept Mister Sun self-employed. The business didn't exist without her skills and perceptions, but it didn't move without his client's money. This tension torqued until it became clear that the whole machine of the company had locked fast and was beginning to smolder.

"He'd threatened me with everything he could think of, I suppose," Amanda mused. "But if I left the company, money and intellectual property came with me. He couldn't force me out, and he couldn't scare me out. I guess having me killed seemed like the best option."

"What I don't get," said Mister Sun, "is this: He was just the money, right? You were the brains. Why would he want you out?"

“Monetizing software, especially software with a social purpose, is disgusting. Licensing it, I can accept. We did fine from government licenses for some of the things I built. But sticking ads on everything? Making it so you had to look at ads just to open your phone?”

The client’s right arm came off, a little more wetly than Mister Sun would have liked. “You were selling services, though.”

“We were *providing* services. We rented tools to the government in order to provide services to people. Do you know how much easier it is for me to interact with people through devices? How could anyone monetize the easing of human contact?”

“He wanted to cover everything with ads? That is kind of repellent,” Mister Sun said, making a start at sawing off the dead body’s left arm.

“It occurs to me now that his life would have been simpler and richer with me dead and a bunch of new hires implementing his wishes.”

“One of my uncles once told me you have to spend money to make money,” Mister Sun said.

“Did he pay you a lot of money?” asked Amanda, who did not smile.

“I charge a fair price,” said Mister Sun, hacking through some intransigent muscle, “but I don’t advertise. Word of mouth only. Human contact.”

“But there’s no human contact with you, is there?”

“An aunt of mine would say that I am currently engaged in the most intimate human contact of all.” He tore through the meat, and began to attack a socket with knife and hammer.

Amanda watched him with glittering eyes, impassive. Mister Sun placed his concentration back on his work, feeling as if he’d impulsively broached something badly.

After an industrious couple of hundred seconds, the left arm came away. The only sound in the room seemed to be Amanda’s

breathing.

A head and two arms in one sack, two legs in a second sack, and a torso in a third, all coated in oven cleaner. The gun was out of the dishwasher and temporarily stored in his toolbox, the knife back in its block. Mister Sun very much wanted a cigarette, for a few reasons, but this was part of the discipline of the job, even though the craving was exacerbated by today's particular working conditions. The bath was sluiced out and wiped over with several alcohol-impregnated wet napkins that were now piled in the torso bag. He figured it for mid-afternoon. Not bad.

The phone in his pocket vibrated again. This time, Amanda heard it buzz. "Who's that?" she said, quickly.

"Not important," Mister Sun said. "Someone just waking up in a different time zone. Nothing to be concerned about."

Her eyes flickered. "Your girlfriend?"

"No," he smiled. "I don't have a girlfriend. Just a friend."

Her eyes jumped around his face before settling on his. "David, I have a hard time telling when people are lying to me. Sometimes I just naturally assume they are. This gets me into fights, now and then. So I'm just going to ask. Are you lying to me?"

He held her stare, evenly. "No, Amanda. I'm not lying to you."

"Okay, then," she said. "What now?"

"Now I tie these bags off and carry them to my van," he said, and then stopped. "Where's his car?"

"Whose car?"

"Him," Mister Sun, said, pointing to a bag of bits. "He doesn't live nearby, does he? If he does, tell me. If he doesn't, then he drove here, right? Do you know what he drives?"

Amanda nodded.

"Then could you open the front door for me, so I can carry these bags out to my van? It'll take a couple of trips. And while I'm doing that, can you look for his car?"

“I’m sorry,” she said, for no reason he could see.

“No, Amanda. I should have thought of it. Events have overtaken me a little, today.” He tied off the bags of limbs and lifted them, one in each hand. “Let’s go.”

It was indeed mid-afternoon outside, and a lovely day. Mister Sun walked back from the van to where Amanda stood on the front step, scanning the street.

“It’s not here,” she said quietly.

“Okay,” Mister Sun said, slipping past her. Inside, he added, “This means that either he took a cab here, or he parked a few streets away and walked, not wishing to be seen parking outside your house. Have you known him to take cabs often?”

“He’d use Uber to get to LAX sometimes. That’s it. He likes his car. It’s horrible.”

“Then we’ll assume the car’s in another street,” he said, lifting the last bag. “I’ll put this in the van, and then collect my toolbox and work bag, and I’m done.”

“What will you do now?”

“That doesn’t matter, does it?” Mister Sun said. “This will all be over, I’ll be out of your way, and you can get on with your life. Has it occurred to you that you now control your company completely, and can steer it in any direction you like?”

“I won’t get to see the end of the process,” Amanda said. Mister Sun believed she might be sulking, in her way. He then stopped to consider that someone with her specific cast of mind might be seriously disturbed by being led through only four-fifths of a process.

He had, obviously, also considered that Amanda was seriously disturbed. But he found he was more bothered by upsetting her than that she was possibly crazy. Perhaps it was that unusual emotional make-up that led to her being the one who escaped her pen. That interested him. He decided to provide her with the closure she so clearly wished for.

“Do you want to come with me?”

“Um,” she said. “I actually really, really do. But I don’t want to ... I mean ... would that be okay?”

“Let me get the van loaded up. Grab your keys.”

He opened the passenger door of the van for her, warning her to be careful as there was a bag of clothes in the footwell. She had a black canvas shoulder bag shrugged over her arm. He chose not to question it.

Mister Sun drove them north, to where Los Angeles turns into lumps and bumps, canyons and trees. It was, he reflected again, not a real city. In what real city could you drive into solitude tens of miles before leaving it? This was an absurd place. It had taken less than an hour to drive them into a place nobody much looked at.

In fact, the only people who’d recently been here, just past this fork in a meandering road scribbled across steep and scrubby drops, were the people who’d placed the rental car for him by arrangement.

“Here we are,” Mister Sun said.

“What happens now?”

“We dispose of this vehicle, and everything in it, and drive back in the car ahead of us.”

“You planned that?”

“I did. Every job has a method, right? This is mine. No one else has gotten to see it before. It’s been really quite nice, being able to show someone.”

“Could I learn how to do it, do you think?”

He smiled. “I’m positive, Amanda, that you could learn anything, with great speed.”

“My laptop’s in my bag,” she said.

“What?”

“I can work from anywhere. We have an office manager. At the company. I work remotely as it is, from home, a lot of the time. I can work from anywhere in the world. I brought my purse and my passport.”

“I don’t understand.”

“When you leave I want to come with you. You haven’t lied to me. Not once. You keep smiling at me. I know I’m talking really fast but everything just seems to be fitting together and I am hoping so *hard* I’m not wrong about any of this and you want me to come with you.”

Her eyes glittered and sparkled and spun.

“So hard, David,” she said. “I am hoping *so hard* for this.”

Her hands reached for him tentatively, as if they’d just been untied. Wrists twisting, fingers unfolding.

Mister Sun, whose first name was not David, smiled at her. Amanda smiled back with relief and joy.

He touched her face with a fingertip, and then two. He brought his other hand up, and stroked her cheeks. She closed her eyes and swallowed back something that may have been a sob of reprieve from all the fears and questions in her aching and confused heart. He sighed and snapped her neck.

Mister Sun decided that it was very much time for a cigarette.

“You don’t mind, do you?” he asked. She didn’t, so he fished his cigarettes and lighter out and lit up.

“Here’s what happens now,” he said to her. “I move you into the driver’s seat. Your belt won’t be fastened. I think I’ll probably put the gun in your lap, to amuse any crime scene investigators who peruse the remains. Then what I’ll do is push the van down off the side of the road. I’m hoping I can aim it at a tree, but I’d also like to get it quite deep into the vegetation down there. Once we’re all down there, I’m going to change out of these clothes, throw them in the back with the client and the tools, and start a fire. After that, I

will get changed. The keys to my other car will be taped under the wheel well.”

He smoked for sixty seconds, looking around until the silence bothered him.

“Around here, this time of year,” he said to Amanda, “the chances are good that I could start a full-on wildfire. Which would be helpful. Contrary to popular opinion, it’s quite hard to make a car’s petrol tank explode with fire. I mean, think about it: if fire made cars explode that easily, every car manufacturer in the world would have been sued to death decades ago. But being in the middle of a big California wildfire ... let’s say I have hopes.”

He stopped himself. No, it was going to be a while before the words *hope* or *hoping* were completely comfortable for him.

“Anyway. That’s the end of the process. I drive back to the hotel, eat, shower, and get some sleep, and fly out in the morning. Back home, Amanda, where it’s cold and everyone seems a foot closer to death every day. You wouldn’t have liked it a bit.”

He brushed his fingers through her hair. “And you would have been scared, all the time. Just as soon as you’d worked out the logical progression of things. Disappearing with a strange man the day your business partner went missing, his car parked in front of someone else’s house just a street or two away from your place. Spending the rest of your life feeling like you were trapped in a pen.”

He spent a hundred and twenty seconds or more just looking at that face, ageless and peaceful.

Mister Sun pulled his bag of clothing out of the footwell and got to work.

Mister Sun parked the car in the agreed collection spot, which was the same space the van had occupied earlier. He taped the keys back under the wheel well, adjusted his shades, tucked the screenplay under his arm, and walked back to the Mark.

The same car attendant was outside the hotel. “How’d it go?” he asked Mister Sun.

“Hollywood people are stupid,” Mister Sun said, smiling. “I’m done for the day. Time for dinner and a drink.”

“Damn right,” the attendant agreed, opening the lobby door for Mister Sun.

Mister Sun briefly used the hotel’s small business area to shred the screenplay, then repaired to his room. He found an acceptable beer in the minibar and took it out onto his balcony to have with another cigarette or so. The beer was over-cold for his taste, but clean and crisp, and so it would do.

His phone buzzed. Balancing the beer on the balcony rail, he pulled it from his pocket. There was a message in his self-destruct app. A client request, from the Provence region of France. He’d never been there before, and decided it might be an interesting trip, if the client was up to scratch.

Closing the app, he saw the text-message notification and tapped it open. It seemed that, over the course of the day, his girlfriend had decided that he was no good and of no further use. She communicated, in language far clearer than her usual style of discourse, that it was all over and she was done. The messages didn’t read like her speaking at all, until the final word of the final text, which was *dogfucker*.

Mister Sun wondered if he really believed it was true that the heart is just a pump.

A Note About the Author



WARREN ELLIS is an author, graphic novelist, columnist, and speaker. His latest novel, *Gun Machine*, was released in January 2013, and is being developed for television by Chernin Entertainment and FOX.

Crooked Little Vein, his first novel, was described by Joss Whedon as “Funny, inventive, and blithely appalling ... Dante on paint fumes.”

His graphic novel *RED* was made into a successful film starring Bruce Willis and Helen Mirren, and its sequel film will be released in August 2013. His other graphic novels, including *Transmetropolitan*, *Planetary*, *Ministry of Space*, *Global Frequency*, *Gravel*, and *Freakangels*, have won multiple awards, including a Lifetime Achievement Prize from the Eagle Awards and the NUIG Lit & Deb’s President’s Medal in recognition of support for free speech.

Previously a commentator for Reuters and *Wired* (UK), he is currently writing a weekly column for *Vice*.

His first nonfiction book, *Spirit Tracks*, is due in 2014 from FSG Originals. He lives mostly in Britain.

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