

ALL SMOKE RISES. The story of Lilly and her need for MILK-BLOOD

by Mark Matthews

(From the author of MILK-BLOOD, an excerpt from All Smoke Rises,
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ALL SMOKE RISES: Chapter One

It all starts quiet. Thick quiet, like cotton that fills up your ears so no sound can get in and all you hear are your own organs at work.

With all the women who work with you at Sharepoint Psychiatric hospital, you aren't often alone, but at that moment, you had the bathroom for your own private cavern. You stood with hands mounted on the sink and eyes staring at the mirror, taking in the sea of silence after a grueling week under the dark clouds of mental illness.

Streaks of grey were sprouting in your ponytail, barely noticeable in most lights, but the fluorescent bulbs of hospital hallways made the wiry strings glow like neon. You called them grey but they were really white, dead and lifeless, so that despite handfuls of Pantene conditioner, they were stiff as a corpse. When you started here as a psychiatrist seventeen years ago, the first black doctor the hospital had ever seen, there wasn't a sign of such aging.

The quiet moment ends when you hear the pounding of footsteps outside the bathroom door. A chase is underway. An army of staff members are bounding down the hallway and the familiar sound of a rugby scrum with a psychotic patient begins. A carpet-bombing of delusions and loose associations gush from the patient's mouth, and he wails like he is being burned at the stake.

A needle full of chemical restraints is surely on the way. *Shoot first and ask questions later*, was the mantra. After a five point takedown, a Haldol/Ativan cocktail will be injected into his skin.

You rinse your hands in the sink and dry them on your pants as you walk out the door.

Nurses and assistants are huddled around the man. His cheeks are scratched and blood splattered in tiny sprinkles. Psychotic screams fly from his mouth, none of his words decipherable, until his eyes make direct contact with yours, and then clarity strikes:

"You. You let him go," he screams into your face. "You did it. Now you must read and learn what happened."

A nurse has the syringe ready to fire. She plops it in, just a pin into a pin cushion, and his words stop. His muscles release and his eyes roll into the back of his head. His eyelids close and consciousness is gone.

"Self-serve walk-in," says the charge nurse. "Came on his own. Just another psychotic John Doe. Blood test for drugs is pending, but he has one big-ass oozing abscess on his arm from injecting something. Smells real bad. No cell, no ID, nobody he would let us call. All he had was a laptop bag full of papers, but no laptop."

It's 6:48 p.m. on a Friday, and you're done for the day. If they realize this John Doe has no insurance, he may get discharged pretty quick. If not, he'll be here when you come back on Monday.

Your drive home feels like one of those quiet moments in movies where the audience feels the main character reflecting. You do that once in a while: pretend you have an audience watching, one who would never reveal themselves, but who follow your life's drama. It helped with the loneliness. Your only marriage is to the pain of others, and the tears of the mentally ill have stained your soul. It used to feel heroic, but now you need cleansing.

It's an hour drive from the hospital to your two-bedroom house. You put your keys on the kitchen island, and look across your open floor plan out the front window. Your blood pumps faster than it should and your hand trembles a bit as you pour a glass of wine. Friday is a day harder to shake than the rest.

The damn breaks, just a bit, and you pound your fist on the kitchen island. A group of fruit flies rise into the air and circle over a plate of brown bananas. You watch the mass of tiny creatures scatter, fleeing in fear, their little brains no doubt wondering if it's safe to return to feast on the fruit. The bananas were bought when green, but ripened quite fast, and lie there like still-life, alone all day in this place you called home.

Where do fruit flies come from? you wonder. It's like they live inside bananas, buried in the yellow skin, only to be released to life when enough of the yellow decomposes into brown.

Two more glasses of wine in a dimly lit room and soon you're in your king-size bed. You pull the comforter under your chin and prepare for dreams you know will come. But there are no dreams that night, and you wake to a day of laundry, phone calls, and grocery shopping.

It was on Saturday night that the dreams came to you. Clients of the week rising from your subconscious, their bulging eyes, sad faces, beaten souls, bits and parts of all of them sewn together into one body. Limbs are twitching, mouths open, tongues wagging, waiting for you to give it pills like Zyprexa or Haldol.

When no pills come, the tongue returns to its mouth, the body gets a voice, and the lips whisper in your ear: *You. You let him go. You did it. Now you must read it and learn what happened.* You wake, the dream ends and the words stop. But each time you drift back to sleep the words are waiting there anew, each time with more energy, keeping you from full sleep, until finally an enormous bed-shaking crash of glass wakes you up completely.

Your heart machine-gun fires through your chest, and you shoot out of bed to the only window in your house that could have caused such a noise.

In the front room of your house, shards of glass from the shattered window covers the floor. A figure silhouetted against the faint light has stepped through and now stands in your house. A large bag is draped over his neck, and he moves like a midnight Santa.

His face is covered in shadow, but he stares straight at you as if he can see through the dark. You feel your heart pounding in your chest, and you're sure he can hear it, too. You need a weapon, you need to call for help, or you need to flee.

"What's wrong, good doctor?" he asks. "You always take your work home with you. Why so surprised?"

Your eyes adjust, reality gets stronger, and the voice hits your memory. It was John Doe, the psychotic John Doe from Sharepoint.

"They let me go," he tells you. "I didn't escape. They let me go. I told them I was okay, wasn't going to hurt myself, so they let me go."

"How. How did you know where I live?"

"Don't you understand? I have magic in my veins. I know things, I hear things. Things I wish I didn't. I even know what you'll do with Lilly. How you'll fix things after you did what you did."

The John Doe was discharged from the hospital too early, for his psychosis is still clear. He is full of nervous twitches, tiny motions and electric energy. He shifts his weight, swings the huge hockey bag off his neck, and plops it on the kitchen island. It lands with a thud. More fruit flies scatter in the air.

You need to either escape or talk him down. *Shoot first and ask questions later*, doesn't work without a Haldol cocktail to inject. It's fight, flee, or negotiate. Get into his mind, align yourself with him, then get him back to Sharepoint.

The man reaches into the bag, pulls out a pile of wrinkled papers, and sets them on the island. They sit under your nose, at least a hundred typed pages, and you begin a therapy session that may save your life.

"Is this something you wrote?" you ask, tapping the mound of papers.

"Yes. My second novel written about her. Started out as fiction, but it's true, it's not fiction. It's real. You'll see."

"And why did you bring the papers here?"

"Because, doctor, you must read it. And you must believe it to be true. I will show you that it is true. The real truth might burn your eyes right out."

"What is the story about?" You ask while thinking of your next move. If you even made it to the phone, it would be twenty minutes before the police would arrive. Or you could grab a knife from the kitchen. With your open floor plan, the butcher block wasn't far.

"A girl born of the streets of Detroit, living at 608 Brentwood. She lived with her grandma who some thought was a witch, and a man who tried to raise her, but he had no fucking clue. A mentally ill squatter who lived across the street was her real dad, but that was a secret. Every God-given thing about her was defective, and her gut was always hungry. Her mother was murdered, buried across the street, but the mother's spirit is powerful, and still haunts the girl to this day."

With each word, the man gets closer. Hurt sweats from his pores.

"I feel your sadness for this girl," you assure him. "Girls like her are the kind of people I try to help at the hospital."

"The hospital!" he laughs. "The hospital isn't real. It's a fortress made of brick and mortar and keeps real things *out*. It isn't the real world. You want to know how a lion lives, how he feeds? Visit the jungle, not the zoo. It's what I did. Been around a bit, been a social worker myself, Doctor."

You hear his claim of being a social worker, but dismiss it as the grandiosity of a psychotic.

"Doctor, how many people have you helped only for them to suffer longer? How many ghouls, how many rotten souls have crawled up from out of the Detroit sewer, spent a few days getting drugs from you at the hospital, only to return to the streets? You don't help them, you feed them and street them."

This isn't working. You eye the knife, you eye the front door, you think about his weak spots. His eyes, his neck, his crotch.

"In your story, does anybody help the girl?" you ask to buy time.

"If you count her uncle shooting heroin into her big blue veins to take away her pain. Changed her forever. Soon enough she needed heroin to exist... and then the night of the fire. The night of the fire, when the blood of all of them, all of them, her grandmother, her father, the psychotic monster, the bones of her mother, all of them

were mixed in the bathtub, dripped into the basement where she was trapped. She injected the mixture into her own veins right before the place caught fire. It exploded her into something new. I went to visit and saw her."

"Saw who?"

"Lilly. I visited Brentwood and found her as I feared. Living in the abandoned house, days after the fire. She injected part of herself right into me. Look right here."

He points toward the black abscess in his arm and you lean in to look. It's a few weeks old but certainly not healing. It looks like someone put a burning cigar out on his arm.

"Lilly was in me, and I tried to help her."

"And did you?"

"No, I failed. I wanted to help her. To do something. To help her, or to help Oscar, the boy who died in a fire years before her. I failed. What could I do? I can't pretend to know. So all I did was follow her everywhere. Tracked her every move from afar. Not sure if she noticed me."

He's lost in his illusion, but you need to stay there with him. It's the only way he'll trust you. The only way to get him out of here. In the weeks to follow, you'll get a home security system installed, and you'll buy that dog you've been thinking of.

"Doctor," he asks, reading your thoughts. "You don't trust me. You don't believe me, do you?"

"I believe you are hurt by all of this. Really hurt, and I want to help you."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

That one word sets him in motion and he unzips the hockey bag with excitement. Whatever treasure is inside, he wants you to see, and he becomes an eight-year-old boy showing his mother his artwork.

When you see what's inside, however, you are not proud. Your stomach feels wretched and you gasp so loud you're sure he's offended.

A black skeleton. Or not a skeleton, but the skinny body of a child. He cradles the body in his arms like a doctor who's just delivered, and places it back down on the kitchen island.

"This is the body of Lilly".

Lilly was anything but a white flower. Her skin had been blackened and burnt. Charred legs and arms stuck out like tiny tree limbs, the knuckles on her fingers barely covered by skin. The child's face is frozen in the beginnings of a scream. She seems ancient as a mummy, but has on boy clothes that were fresh. The stench of singed hair burns the inside of your nose.

"She is yours to take care of. She suffers like you won't believe. I've got a tiny part of her inside me, but I can't take it anymore. I can't. Only thing I can do is to make myself die."

As if he'd been listening to your plans, John Doe dashes to the butcher block and pulls out a knife. The largest of them all. He waves it in his hand, moving like a spastic, psychotic house troll. You're losing him.

"Let me help you," you tell him. "I can help you. Tell me what happened? Tell me about her. Let me hear it, I want to know. Tell me your name, tell me what I can do for you."

"We are beyond that, Doctor. I'll not be able to live any longer. It was too much. Thought I could help her, but it's too much. She wants to be dead. You would want us both dead if you knew."

"No, I would not!" you scream. You wish the light would show the sincerity on your face. You think of tackling him. He reads your mind and points the knife at your face, freezing you on the spot.

"Knives like this," he says as he studies it. "It's like they're made for veins. You might think a razor to the wrists works best, but a knife slices better than the tiny blades."

He holds it at different angles, admiring it, feeling its weight.

"When I'm done bleeding out," he tells you, "before you do anything. Before you call anyone. Before you touch the body of Lilly. Read the pages. Read them through. Because you must."

You've never witnessed a suicide before, only seen them in dreams and heard of their details, but you are about to see your

first. You thought it would be more somber, but that's not the case.

The violence is striking when John Doe begins slashing himself. First he slides the knife across his wrists, carefully, as if carving a turkey, but soon after he starts hacking away, nearly severing his hand. Blood comes forth like a fire hydrant's cap has been loosened on a hot summer day in the city.

After he falls to the ground and you're sure he's dead, he raises the knife one last time and slices across his neck.

Jugular cut. Fire hydrant completely busted open

The smell of blood coats the inside of your nose. The air becomes moist and humid. You kneel next to him, the sticky pool soaking your cotton PJs. Your hands get bloody, as if you were the one who did the butchering. His life is gone, and if his soul has risen, it's gone right through your own body on its way to where all souls rise.

The chaos is swallowed by the quiet. **'Out, Out—'**

You sit in the silence, not wanting to move forward in time, for whatever is up ahead has changed too much. So you wait, but nothing. Even with the growing puddle of blood on your floor, there's a peaceful stillness to the John Doe that you didn't think he could find. You envied it. You wished it for all your clients.

You rise up from the ground. It's time to call 911. First responders will come, you'll speak to them as little as possible, and when they leave you'll crawl back into that shell of yours. Realtors will be contacted and your house will be put up for sale.

The plastic phone in your hand feels solid and safe. Just three digits, and then the authorities will come and take care of things. The dead body on the ground, and the body on your kitchen island, both will be taken.

You can explain the John Doe, but not the girl. Where did this girl he called Lilly come from? She seems frozen, not in ice, but in ash. Her face is stuck in pain and suffering, her eyes squeezed shut. Her burnt skin seems old and weathered, spread tightly across her youthful face and pug nose. Her cheeks are hallowed, her hair matted. You trace a finger along her bony arm—it's cold, but not

frigid. Limbs stick out her jean shorts like a disfigured tree. Her blue t-shirt is the only thing that seems fresh.

Time to dial 911.

Before you do anything. Read this. Read it through. Because you must.

Who knows where he found her, if maybe he killed her himself and somehow kept her preserved. But why did he bring her to you? This was sinister beyond any tale that you've ever heard.

Next to her, lie the papers. The manuscript.

Your bloody thumbprint stamps the papers as soon as you pick them up, and the white manuscript is now as stained as your own soul.

And you read. *Because you must.*

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