

STRAY, chapter one

by Mark Matthews

Chapter One

Thomas Cleaves made a slower than usual right turn off of Fairlane Drive, inching his way to work. The coffee in the cup holder was lukewarm, the sun had finally turned a full orange circle above the two-story horizon, and the brakes of a school bus shrieked through the morning rush.

Call me Counselor, call me Therapist, or call me Social Worker, which one should I call myself? I've called myself all three.

Tom pondered these thoughts as he took the last gulp of his morning coffee. He had referred to himself as a counselor to the policeman who had just pulled him over for making an illegal right turn. Tom's license and registration had been ready at the window as the officer approached.

"Where are you off to so quick today sir?"

"To work. I'm going to work. I'm a *Counselor*."

Counselor sounded open and warm, but it reminded Tom of a lazy and soft man in an office, like a school counselor, hiding behind a desk to avoid the real world. Anyone can be a counselor. Tom's clients called him a counselor.

But it was therapist, Substance Abuse Therapist, that was Tom's official job title at the treatment center. Therapist sounded intellectual, like a man with beard and glasses, smart and cerebral. But it also hinted of psychobabble mental masturbation and more complex than Tom saw himself. Therapists had answers, couches, and took notes. Counselors had ears, wore brightly colored sweaters, and said, "So how do you feel about that?"

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How about a social worker? Social workers were visionaries, paid nothing, and listened to The Indigo Girls. They were the renegades and lost liberals on the front line of macro and micro changes everywhere. Tom was a social worker, with a Master's Degree in Social Work. And his wife Patty was a social worker. The intern Tom worked with, Christy, was a budding young social worker. Certainly all three of them were quite different.

A professor in Tom's master's degree program had explained the differences between the three job titles.

"A Social Worker develops programs to help feed the poor," she had said, "and makes sure there's a chicken in every pot. A Counselor asks them how they feel about getting the chicken. And a Therapist diagnoses and treats them when they start hearing voices from the chicken telling them to cut their wrists. "

Sometimes Tom thought the whole idea of social work was just a way to let women have power. Let's figure out what women do best with their natural instincts, and let's give that status and a paycheck. Then call me a woman, thought Tom. And call me an alcoholic, but ten years sober and in recovery. Also call me a son, but perhaps ten years an orphan--dad is dead and mother's moved far away.

Call me anything or nothing, but don't call me father or daddy, not just yet.

But calling himself a counselor to the police got him off with just a warning, no ticket, just a warning. A therapist would have been given a ticket for sure, maybe arrested and beaten. There's nothing more that a cop would hate than a therapist--someone who might analyze them, talk about their sublimated homosexual tendencies or anal transgressions and use them in a case study.

A social worker may have gotten off too, but would probably have been judged harshly and made fun of as the cop and his partner rode off. As it was, the cop didn't leave until Tom expressed his incredible gratitude and was appropriately subservient. This was proof that Tom had the sensitivity of a counselor but not the snooty intellect of a therapist or the righteousness of a social worker

Sober Tom was also surprised by how simple the process of getting pulled over can be. Years ago it meant trying to hide the liquor or chew some gum to disguise his breath. Then he'd try to think of something witty yet powerful to say to the cop to keep from spending a night in the drunk tank. It never worked, and Tom ended up handcuffed in the cop car drunk and miserable.

But today Tom could have just told the cop he was rushing to the emergency room, and that wouldn't have been much of a lie. Tom's workplace often felt like a spiritual emergency room where desperate souls got bandaged up and shipped out. We'll try to stop the bleeding, but the healing will have to take place somewhere else. But Tom loved it on most days. It was raw and explosive, spiritual warfare against despair, self-pity, and laziness.

On a good day it helped to make a difference and it felt like a wonderful spring morning. On any day it kept Tom fresh. Today, Tom would no doubt be hearing from sad, talking heads telling stories of crack-cocaine hotel stays, a fifth-a-day alcohol binges, or the womb-like return from a shot of heroin into their bloodstream. Reflections and echoes of Tom's own life were everywhere in the clients he treated--echoes in their tales and reflections in their twinkling black hole eyes.

Except most of the clients he treated had earned the right to be called father. Not him, but he wasn't done trying yet.

Tom drove on and made a quick glance at a man to his right who tapped a white, red-tipped cane as he journeyed down the sidewalk. Tom always saw the man counting his steps. He could never really see his lips but just assumed the man was counting and this image burned in his brain even long after he had driven by the man. The man was counting his steps, tapping his white, red-tipped cane from side to side, and making turns in perpendicular angles when needed. He wore the same gray jacket and baseball hat, and Tom felt happy to be alive every morning when he saw the blind man. Everybody's got their place, we all have our place in the great flow of things, we just have to allow ourselves to be pulled there. Like the blind man who had every reason to be cemented in fear but knew where to go, just let the river flow take me where it needs me, I trust it, and trust my cane will tap tap tap me safely home. Just be careful not to take an illegal right turn along the way.

Tom could always tell if he were late to work or not by how far the blind man had traveled down the sidewalk. If he was on time, the blind man had just finished crossing Fairlane drive. If early, Tom saw him just about to cross the road --an amazing Moses-like miracle every morning. But if Tom were late the gray figure was already half way down the street, about the same place he was this morning as Tom drove by.

Tom never did see where the blind man was going. Where was the final destination for this kind, shrouded, fatherly figure? Perhaps some day when Tom was really late he would see the shuffling man turn into a building, stop at a doorway, wait for a bus, or at least not be alone for once. Tom would be disappointed again today. He was still not late enough to figure out what was pulling this brave soul out into his dark world every day.

My dad's specter, still condemned to walk the earth and keep an eye over me, thought Tom. All Tom could remember from his dad's life and his death was a mix of bitterness and vodka. His dad's funeral

was many years ago, but despite the burial, the father wasn't really dead yet.

The day had tattooed itself forever into his insides.

Tom had went to his dad's wake drunk that day and stood over the casket with an aching pain that burned, so he paced the funeral home hoping the hurt would go away. It didn't, and required quick trips to the parking lot to drink a half-pint, returning with a breath mint, but the ghosts of pain, fear, and thirst followed him. For two days he went through the haze of seeing dad in the casket, a mannequin zombie lying there.

Just to make me feel guilt, Tom decided, as if I had killed him and then embalmed the cadaver myself.

So Tom drank. He drank and felt settled, until he began to shake.

His spine trembled with cold sweaty shakes each morning. He threw up in the funeral home bathroom and scrubbed the vomit off his tie. Relatives he'd rather see dead began shuffling in trying to comfort him.

And then the funeral morning when the seizures hit. The seizures sent his body convulsing, tiny spiders crawling across his arms and back, everything aching and cramping and begging for more vodka, more vodka. But vodka wasn't enough for this day. The cramps came back stronger, shakes and sweats increasing with a tidal wave might, tingling electric. The seizure sent him sprawling on the ground that morning like an epileptic, hallucinating that the pattern on the carpet was turning into tiny bugs and sea barnacles, attaching themselves to his body. He could hear the blood pulsing in his neck and through his temple. And then the melting voices that started whispering and then screaming in his ear from the funeral home cracks. Somewhere in the cacophony there was the voice of his dad **"you will kill again-you're not done yet"** The voice faded away with his consciousness.

He didn't cry on the casket, he went to Detox hallucinating with delirium tremens on the day of his dad's funeral. He lay in Detox for three days, the Detox he had been at so many times before but this time he went to therapy and treatment and stayed sober. The date of his last drink of an unknown amount of Popov vodka was the morning of his father's funeral. The sobriety date he celebrates every year was the first morning his father spent buried beneath the dirt. And now he goes to work each day, providing therapy to others, who are just ghosts of his former self.

No, not done yet.

