

DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

The Margins

a 321Lumina.com book



by Blurt Snodgrass

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A Drake & Voss Novella

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Chapter One

He arrived on a Monday morning in May carrying nothing.

Flora noted this the way she noted things that were unusual without being dramatic — the absence of the ordinary props. Almost everyone who came to the office carried something: a bag, a phone visible in a pocket, a folder, a hat, the accumulated equipment of a life being lived in transit through a city. Thomas Spry arrived with his hands empty and his coat buttoned against a morning that had warmed enough that the coat was unnecessary, and he came up the stairs at the pace of someone who had decided to come and was not going to allow himself to slow down, and he sat in the client chair and he looked at the room.

He looked at it the way teachers looked at rooms — with the assessment of someone accustomed to understanding spaces as contexts for something to happen in, reading the arrangement of things for what it said about what the space was for.

He was sixty-three. White, the specific weathering of a man who had spent thirty-one years in fluorescent-lit classrooms and had not particularly noticed, the weathering of someone whose attention had been pointed outward at other people for so long that the inward self had been maintained rather than tended. He had the look of a man who was newly without occupation and had not yet worked out what to do with his hands.

He looked at the cork board.

He looked at the card stock in Nancy's handwriting above the door and Flora saw him read it and she saw his face do something small and specific when he read it — the recognition of a teacher encountering a sentence that was doing exactly what a sentence should do.

He sat.

Nancy came in, hung her coat, wrote the name from the phone call three days before. Wrote the time. Read both. Looked at both again.

Good.

She put the cap on her pen and waited.

"Mr. Spry," Flora said. "What do you need?"

He looked at his hands in his lap. Empty hands. He turned them over once, palms up, as though checking them for something.

"I need to find out if I was a good teacher," he said.

Flora looked at him.

"Not in general," he said. "I know what I was in general. I was good in general. I have thirty-one years of evidence for general." He paused. "I need to find out if I was a good teacher to one specific student. A girl named Patience Achterberg. She was in my class in 1996. She was fifteen."

"Tell me about her," Flora said.

He was quiet for a moment. The quiet of someone reaching for something they've had in their hands many times and are now picking up carefully because it matters to hold it right.

"She wrote," he said. "I mean — all my students wrote, that's what English class is, they all wrote. But Patience wrote with a quality I had seen in a student perhaps three times in thirty-one years. Possibly four. I don't want to overstate it — she was fifteen, her work was uneven, she made the mistakes fifteen-year-olds made, she hadn't yet learned what she didn't know." He paused. "But underneath all of that there was a quality I can only describe as inevitability. The sense that when she found the right word it was the only word that could have been there, and that she knew it, and that knowing it gave her a small private satisfaction she tried not to show but couldn't quite conceal." He looked at the window. "I've seen that quality three, maybe four times. It doesn't always mean what you think it means — some of those students did nothing with it, or did something else with it, or it just lived in them quietly as a capacity they never developed. But when I see it I always tell the student. Because I think it's important to be told."

"You told her," Flora said.

"I told her. I spent extra time on her work. I wrote marginal notes — long ones, the kind you wrote when you knew the student would read every word. I told her in her work and I told her in conference and I told her after

class once, in the spring of 1996, directly, without the protection of the classroom formality. I said: you have something real. I said: I want you to know that." He paused. "Three weeks later she stopped coming to school."

"What happened?" Flora said.

"Family situation," he said. "That's what I was told. I asked — I went to the counselor, I went to the office, I asked what had happened. Family situation. She didn't come back." He paused. "I tried to follow up. I wrote to the address I had on file. The letter came back. I asked the counselor twice more over the following months. By the end of the year there were thirty-two other students and the year was what it was and then she was in the past in the way students become the past."

"But she came back to you," Flora said.

He looked at his empty hands.

"In the last year," he said. "The last year of teaching, the last months, the last weeks. She came back more and more. The girl who wrote like that. Who I had told: you have something real. Who had then —" He stopped. "I've told three, maybe four students in thirty-one years that they had something real. I think about all of them, from time to time. But Patience Achterberg is the one I think about most. Because she's the one I didn't get to find out about." He looked at Flora. "I need to know what happened to her. I need to know if she's all right. I need to know if the time I spent on her margins was time she received."

"What if we find her," Flora said, "and the answer is complicated."

He looked at her.

"Thirty-one years of teaching," he said. "I know complicated. The complicated answers are usually the true ones." He paused. "I'm not asking for a good answer. I'm asking for a true one."

Flora looked at him for a long time.

"All right," she said. "Tell me everything you remember about her."

He remembered a great deal.

He was a teacher and teachers were, by professional necessity, observers of the specific — they had to know which students to worry about and which were fine and which were performing fine over a reality that required

attention, and that knowledge came from the accumulation of specific detail. He remembered Patience Achterberg with the specificity of a man who had been paying close attention to her for most of a school year and had been reviewing that attention for twenty-seven years since.

She was the youngest of three children. Her mother worked — he didn't know where. There was no father in the picture, or no father who was mentioned. She came to school reliably until she didn't. She was quiet in the particular way of intelligent children who had learned that their intelligence was not always welcome — the learned quietness, the holding-back, which was different from shyness and which he had learned to distinguish from shyness over many years because shyness went away in a safe context and the learned quietness didn't, it just softened.

She wore the same three or four things in rotation. Not poverty, necessarily — the clothes were clean, they fit, there was care in them. But a limited wardrobe, the wardrobe of someone managing carefully.

She read. He remembered her reading in the spaces before class, between classes, at lunch when he saw her in the cafeteria. Reading with the absorption of someone for whom books were not recreation but were something closer to oxygen, the medium in which she was most comfortable existing.

He remembered one paper in particular. An assignment on a poem — he didn't remember which poem, which troubled him, he felt he should remember the poem — and Patience had written eight pages when the assignment called for two. Not padding, not repetition — eight pages that built on each other, that worked the poem from four different angles, that arrived at a conclusion that was not the conclusion he would have arrived at and was better than his conclusion and was, in a way he still thought about, obviously right.

He had written at the top of that paper, in red pen: *This is the best student essay I have read in twenty years of teaching. Read it again. You wrote something true.*

He remembered the look on her face when he gave it back.

"What did she look like?" Nancy said from her desk. "When she read what you'd written."

He thought about it.

"Frightened," he said. "And then something else. Something that came after the fright that was — relief, maybe. Or something close to relief. Like someone who had been holding something very carefully for a long time and had just been told it was real. That the thing they were holding was actually there."

The office was quiet.

"She stopped coming three weeks after that," he said. "Whether those two things are connected I've never known. Whether I said something that changed something. Whether the timing was coincidence." He paused. "That's part of what I want to know."

Flora looked at the cork board.

She thought about the things they had found. The map in the oilcloth. The letter in the good handkerchief. The recording in Eilidh Forsyth's flat. The chair with the repair on the left rear leg. The smell that had existed in forty-three people's lives.

"We'll find her," she said.

Chapter Two

Patience Achterberg was not easy to find.

The name was distinctive enough that if she had kept it she should have been findable, and she was not in the ordinary places — no professional presence, no social media, no voter registration in California under that name, no driver's license current or lapsed. Either she had moved out of state, or she had changed her name, or she was living in a way that left very little digital trace, which was its own kind of answer about the years between 1996 and now.

Nancy went to the school records first.

Public school records from 1996 were not always accessible, but Nancy had methods for public school records that she had developed over years of cases that required them, and what she found was this: Patience Achterberg, born 1981, enrolled at the school in the Excelsior in September 1993, withdrawn in April 1996. Reason for withdrawal: family relocation.

Not family situation. Family relocation.

Which was different.

"They moved," Flora said.

"Or she moved," Nancy said. "Or she was moved." She paused. "The address on file is in the Excelsior. I've found the address — it's a building that's had multiple tenants, it's been a rental property for thirty years. The family was there from 1991 to 1996. After that, no trace in San Francisco."

"The mother," Flora said. "What was her name?"

Nancy looked at the record. "Elaine Achterberg."

"Find the mother," Flora said. "If Patience changed her name, the mother might not have."

Elaine Achterberg had not changed her name.

She was sixty-four, living in Stockton, where she had lived since 1998 after two years in Sacramento. She worked as a medical receptionist. She had a phone number that Nancy found through a public records database, a landline, which told you something about a person.

Flora called on a Wednesday morning.

Elaine answered on the fourth ring, cautious, the caution of someone who received calls they weren't expecting and had learned to be careful about them.

Flora introduced herself. Said she was a private investigator in San Francisco. Said she was trying to find Patience Achterberg on behalf of a former teacher who wanted to know she was well.

A silence.

"Mr. Spry," Elaine said.

"Yes," Flora said.

Another silence. Then: "He looked for her. Back then. He wrote."

"Yes," Flora said. "He told me."

"I didn't write back," Elaine said. "We were —" She stopped. "Things were difficult. We'd left quickly. I wasn't in a good place to write back to her teacher."

"I understand," Flora said. "Can you tell me where Patience is now?"

A longer silence.

"She's not — she doesn't use that name anymore," Elaine said. "She changed it. Years ago. Legally. She's been Patience Solis since she was married, but she went by her husband's name before they married too." A pause. "She lives in Portland. Oregon."

"Is she well?" Flora said.

Elaine was quiet for a moment.

"She's better than she was," she said. "For a long time she wasn't, and then she was better, and now she's — yes. She's well." She paused. "She writes. She's a writer. I don't know how to find what she's written, I'm not good with that, but she writes."

Flora sat with this.

"Does she write under her name?" she said. "Under Solis?"

"I think so," Elaine said. "I think she uses her full name. Patience Solis."

Flora thanked her.

She ended the call and looked at Nancy.

Nancy was already at her computer.

Patience Solis had two books.

The first was a collection of essays published in 2018 by a small press — personal essays, the kind that lived in the space between memoir and criticism, the kind that required you to look directly at things most people looked away from. The second was a novel published in 2022 by a larger press, the kind of novel that got reviewed seriously, that got quoted in reviews in ways that suggested the reviewer had been stopped by a sentence and needed to share it.

Nancy pulled up the reviews.

She read several.

She brought one to Flora's desk and set it down without speaking.

Flora read it.

The reviewer, writing in a literary journal, had said: *Patience Solis writes as though words are the only honest currency and she refuses to be cheated. There is no sentence in this book that is merely functional. Every sentence is doing two things at once and knows it.*

Flora read it again.

She looked at Nancy.

"She has something real," Nancy said.

"Yes," Flora said. "She does."

She called Thomas Spry.

She told him that Patience Achterberg was now Patience Solis and lived in Portland and had published two books and was, by all accounts, a writer of the specific kind he had told her she could be.

He was quiet for a long time.

"She writes," he said.

"Yes."

"Under her name."

"Yes. Patience Solis."

Another long silence.

"The essay collection or the novel," he said. "Which do I read first?"

Flora thought about this.

"The essays," she said. "I think. The essays first."

"All right," he said.

He was quiet again.

"Mr. Spry," Flora said. "She's well. She's doing the work. What you saw in her was real."

"Yes," he said. His voice was entirely steady, the steadiness of a man receiving something he'd been waiting a long time to receive and was not going to allow to unsteady him. "I know. I know that now." A pause. "I want to —" He stopped. "I want to write to her. Tell her I found her. Tell her I read her work." He paused. "Is that appropriate? After twenty-seven years?"

"I don't know," Flora said honestly. "I think it depends on what you write and why." She paused. "What would you say?"

He thought about it.

"I'd say: I told you that you had something real. I was right. That's all. I'd say: I was right and I'm glad and I hope you know it." He paused. "I wouldn't ask for anything back. I wouldn't make it something she has to respond to." He paused. "I just want to say: I was right. Because someone should say it."

"Then write it," Flora said. "Say exactly that and nothing more."

"All right," he said.

He was quiet for a moment.

"I looked up the reviews," he said. "While we've been talking. I looked them up on my phone." A pause. "There's a line from one of them. A reviewer who said she writes as though words are the only honest currency." A pause. "That's what she was at fifteen. I saw that at fifteen. I didn't have that sentence for it but that's what I saw."

"Yes," Flora said.

"I'm going to read the essays tonight," he said.

"Good," Flora said.

"Thank you," he said. "Ms. Voss. Thank you."

He hung up.

Chapter Three

He came in the following week to settle the account.

He came the same way he'd come the first time — no bag, no folder, his hands empty. But the coat was unbuttoned now. The May morning had warmed and he'd allowed it.

He sat in the client chair and Nancy quoted the fee and he wrote the check and he sat for a moment with his hands on his knees, not the empty turned-over hands of the first visit but hands at rest, hands that had found somewhere to be.

"I read the essays," he said.

"And?" Flora said.

He was quiet for a moment.

"She writes about a teacher," he said. "In the second essay. Not by name — she doesn't name anyone. But a teacher who wrote in her margins. Who said: you wrote something true." He paused. "She writes about what those words did. What it cost her to receive them at fifteen, when receiving something like that was — she writes about being fifteen and having something seen in you before you had the vocabulary to understand what was being seen, and how that was both the most important thing and also frightening in a way she couldn't have explained." He paused. "She writes: the problem with being told you have something real is that you then have to figure out what to do with it. The having becomes a responsibility. A debt you owe to the seeing."

The office was quiet.

Flora looked at his hands.

"She received it," Flora said.

"She received it," he said. "And she carried it. And she made something from it." He paused. "She writes at the end of that essay: I am still paying the debt. I expect I will be paying it for the rest of my life. I have decided this is not a burden. It is a kind of company."

Nancy had put her pen down.

She was looking at the notepad with the expression she wore when something had landed in a particular way.

"Did you write to her?" Flora said.

"I wrote the letter," he said. "I haven't sent it yet. I've been sitting with it." He paused. "I want to be sure I'm sending it for the right reason. That I'm not sending it because I need something back." He paused. "She wrote about paying a debt. I don't want to add to the debt. I want to say: the debt is paid, it's been paid, I'm the one who should be grateful."

"Is that what the letter says?" Nancy said.

He looked at her.

"That's what the seventh draft says," he said.

Nancy looked at him.

"Send the seventh draft," she said.

He almost smiled.

"You think?"

"I think you know what you're trying to say," Nancy said. "And I think she's a writer who would want to receive a true letter over a careful one."

He looked at the card stock above the door.

What do you actually know. Not what you feel. What you know.

"The seventh draft is true," he said.

"Then send it," Nancy said.

He nodded. He stood. He picked up his coat.

At the door he stopped.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"The things on the cork board," he said. "The postcards and the notes. Are those —" He looked at the cork board. "Are those from the people you've found things for?"

"Yes," Flora said.

He looked at the accumulation of it. The Farallon Islands. Inverness. Penang. The folded note. The single sheet. The postcard of a table. The cream note in fountain pen.

"She'll write back," he said. Not a prediction exactly. Something more like a recognition.

"We'll see," Flora said.

He looked at the cork board one more time.

"I taught for thirty-one years," he said. "I had —" He paused, calculating. "I had roughly a hundred and twenty students a year. Thirty-one years. That's nearly four thousand students." He paused. "I couldn't have seen all of them. Not really seen them. Not the way I saw Patience. You can't see four thousand people, not in the way that matters." He paused. "But I saw some. And she was one. And she paid the debt." He looked at the window. "That's enough. That's — that's what teaching is, I think. That you see some of them. And the ones you see carry it forward." He paused. "You can't smell your own smell. But you can know that it exists."

Flora looked at him.

He had read the cream note on the cork board. Henri knew.

"Yes," she said. "That's exactly right."

He went down the stairs.

The fourth step.

The door.

The street.

Chapter Four

Nancy made tea.

She brought the cups and sat and they sat in the May office and the morning went about its business outside the window and the cork board held its accumulation and the card stock kept its counsel above the door.

"The debt," Nancy said. "What she wrote. That being told you have something real becomes a debt you owe to the seeing."

"Yes," Flora said.

Nancy held her tea.

"I've been thinking about that," she said. "About whether that's what this is." She paused. "Not a debt — that's her word for her relationship to it. But something like — a responsibility. To the work. To what the work can see in people that they can't yet see in themselves."

Flora looked at her.

"You were a court stenographer for thirty years," she said. "You saw things."

"I recorded things," Nancy said. "Which is different." She paused. "I recorded other people seeing things. The lawyers, the judges, the witnesses. I was the record of the seeing." She paused. "But sometimes — sometimes there were things in the record that no one seemed to have noticed were in the record. Things that were there and should have changed what happened and didn't because no one saw them." She paused. "That was the frustration of the work. That you could hold the complete record of a thing and know something was in it that wasn't being seen and not be able to say so."

"And now?" Flora said.

"Now I say so," Nancy said. "This work is — we see things and we say what we see. We bring the thing that was there and give it to the person who

needed it." She paused. "That's different from stenography. But it uses the same muscle. The same capacity for attending to what's actually there rather than what everyone has decided is there."

Flora looked at the card stock.

What do you actually know. Not what you feel. What you know.

"That sentence," she said. "You said it once and I put it on the wall. You don't remember saying it."

"No," Nancy said.

"But it's the whole of what we do," Flora said. "It's the question we ask. It's what Octavia needed — to know what she actually knew. It's what Thomas needed — to know if what he'd seen was actually there. It's what all of them need."

Nancy looked at the card stock.

"I'm glad you put it on the wall," she said.

"I'm glad you said it," Flora said.

Nancy looked at her notepad.

She picked up her pen.

She wrote the date.

She wrote the time.

She looked at both lines.

She looked at them again.

Good.

She set the pen down parallel to the notepad.

She looked at the window.

"Thomas Spry taught for thirty-one years," she said. "He saw Patience Achterberg once, clearly, for part of one school year. She's been paying that debt for twenty-seven years." She paused. "One year. One student. One seeing." She paused. "And she's still paying it. She'll be paying it for the rest of her life and she's decided it's company." She paused. "That's not a small thing, to be seen once by the right person at the right time."

"No," Flora said. "It isn't."

"I was seen," Nancy said.

Flora looked at her.

"By you," Nancy said. "When I couldn't see myself clearly. When the managing was working but something was going wrong underneath and I was covering it the way Sable covered the pieces." She paused. "You saw it. You put the piece of paper in the drawer. You waited. You let me arrive at it." She paused. "That's a debt I owe to the seeing."

Flora looked at the window.

"It's company," she said.

"Yes," Nancy said. "That's exactly what it is."

They sat in the May office with their tea and the morning going on outside and the cork board with its eight things and the card stock and the Farallon Islands and the sign on the door that was still slightly crooked.

Flora thought about Patience Achterberg at fifteen with a paper handed back to her that said: *This is the best student essay I have read in twenty years of teaching. Read it again. You wrote something true.* And the fright and the relief and then the absence from school three weeks later and the twenty-seven years of paying the debt.

She thought about Thomas Spry arriving with his hands empty and going home with a letter in his pocket, the seventh draft, the true one.

She thought about what the work was.

What it actually was.

Not finding missing persons. Not locating objects. Not the procedural machinery of investigation.

What it actually was: seeing. Being the room where things that had been unwitnessed got witnessed. Being the place where what was actually there got said.

You could not smell your own smell.

But you could know that it existed.

She picked up her pen.

She wrote the date at the top of a fresh page.

She wrote the time.

She waited for the next case.

Three weeks later a letter arrived.

Postmarked Portland, Oregon. Addressed to Drake and Voss Investigations in a handwriting that Flora recognized immediately as the handwriting of someone who thought carefully about how words sat on a page.

Inside: a single card. Good paper. Four sentences.

He wrote. I read his letter four times. Tell him the debt is paid and the company is good.

And then, below, a fifth sentence, alone:

Tell him he was right.

Flora read it.

She passed it to Nancy.

Nancy read it.

She looked at it for a long time in the way she looked at things she wanted to hold clearly.

Then she stood and went to the cork board and pinned it below the cream note in Honorine's fountain pen.

She stepped back and looked at the cork board.

Nine things.

She put the cap on her pen.

Tell him he was right.

The work continued.

In the office on the second floor, the cork board held what it held.

The Farallon Islands postcard above the door.

The note on card stock gone slightly yellow.

The postcard from Inverness. The postcard from Penang.

A folded note: Second movement. Last night. I got out of the way.

A single sheet: He wrote back.

A postcard of a table: I'm the one who gets to sit at it first.

A cream note in fountain pen: You cannot smell your own smell. But you can know that it exists.

A card on good paper: Tell him he was right.

The sign on the frosted glass door was still slightly crooked.

Neither of them had fixed it.

Neither of them ever would.

End.