

DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

The Structure of Before

a 321Lumina.com book



by Blurt Snodgrass

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Chapter One

She arrived on a Thursday in November, which was the kind of November day San Francisco offered occasionally as evidence that it understood other climates — cold and clear, the light making hard edges of everything, the bay visible from the tops of hills in a way it usually wasn't.

Pauline Sark was fifty-five. Architect was the word that came to Flora before the woman had said anything beyond her name — not because of the coat or the bag or the particular uprightness of her posture, but because of the way she looked at the office. Not at the cork board or the desks or the two women in it. At the walls. The ceiling. The proportions. The way the window sat in the frame. The way the room was organized by its own structural logic, the hooks and the cork board and the two desks facing opposite walls not arranged but arrived at, the way rooms arrived at their own arrangements when people stopped imposing on them.

She was reading the building, Flora thought. The way some people read rooms and others read faces.

"Ms. Voss," Pauline said. Her voice was the voice of someone accustomed to being precise. "I was referred by a colleague. I'll tell you upfront that I've thought about coming here for some time and I've talked myself out of it twice. I'm here today because I've run out of the things I can do myself."

"Sit down," Flora said. "I'll get you coffee."

Nancy came in while the coffee was being made. She took in Pauline — the coat, the bag set on the floor beside the chair rather than on her lap, the envelope she was holding — and hung her coat on the right hook and sat at her desk and opened her notepad.

She wrote the date and the time.

Below it she wrote: *Pauline Sark*.

Below that, after a moment, in the margin, small: *Clear today. Good.*

Flora brought the coffee and sat.

"Tell me," she said.

Pauline set the envelope on the desk. She did not open it yet.

"My father," she said. "Edmund Sark. He's eighty-one. He's in a care facility in Marin — a good one, he's well looked after. He has moderate dementia. He's been there three years." She paused. "He doesn't know me, most days. Some days he does. We've made our peace with that, my mother and I — my mother died two years ago, so now it's just me. I visit every other Sunday."

"I'm sorry," Flora said.

Pauline received this with a nod that was not dismissive but was practiced — the nod of someone who had received a great deal of condolence in the last two years and had developed a method for it.

"My mother's death," she said, "is what brought me here. Not directly. But she had papers, things I had to go through. And in the papers I found —" She tapped the envelope. "May I?"

"Please," Flora said.

Pauline opened the envelope and placed a photograph on the desk.

It was a photograph of a young man — twenty, perhaps twenty-two, lean and clear-eyed, with the particular quality of presence that photographs from that era sometimes caught and sometimes didn't. He was standing in front of a house, a white house with a porch, and beside him was a woman. The woman was turned slightly away from the camera, laughing at something, so that what you saw was the line of her jaw and the fall of her hair and the suggestion of a face that was fully alive to something just outside the frame.

"My father," Pauline said. "Approximately 1963 or 1964, based on what I can estimate from his age. He would have been twenty or twenty-one." She paused. "I have no idea who the woman is. I have no idea where the house is. And in thirty years of knowing my father, I never heard him mention either."

Flora looked at the photograph. The young man who would become Edmund Sark, eighty-one, moderate dementia, Marin care facility. The woman laughing at something beyond the frame. The white house behind them.

"What do you want us to find?" Flora asked.

"The woman," Pauline said. "The house. The years before he became my father." She looked at the photograph. "He never talked about before. I grew up with the sense that his life began in San Francisco, in 1968, when he met my mother. Anything prior to that was — not forbidden. Just absent." She looked up. "I'm an architect. I think about what comes before a building. How the ground shapes what you put on it. What the previous structures were." She paused. "I want to know what was on this ground."

"And if we find something uncomfortable?" Flora said. The question she always asked.

Pauline looked at her steadily. "I'm fifty-five years old. My mother is dead and my father doesn't know my name most days. There's no one left to protect."

Flora held her gaze.

"There might be," she said.

Pauline looked at her.

"We'll take the case," Flora said. "We'll tell you what we find. All of it."

Pauline nodded. She reached into her bag and produced a second photograph — Edmund Sark, perhaps forty, with a woman who was clearly Pauline's mother, and a small girl who was clearly Pauline, squinting into summer light.

"For reference," Pauline said. "So you know who you're looking for."

Flora looked at the two photographs side by side. The young man in front of the white house. The man of forty with his wife and daughter. The same face, twenty years apart, the space between them empty of everything but the question.

"We'll be in touch," Flora said.

Chapter Two

The house took Nancy four days.

This was the kind of work Nancy did better than anyone Flora had known — the patient cross-referencing of visual detail against architectural record, the library of her own memory supplementing the databases, the willingness to look at a thing from multiple angles until one of them resolved. She enlarged the photograph and studied the porch construction, the window placement, the style of the railing. She compared it to property records in northern California coastal towns. She was methodical in the way she was methodical, which was the way a woman was methodical who had spent thirty years recording other people's facts and knew that the facts were always in the details you almost skipped.

On the fourth day she said: "Eureka."

Flora looked up.

"The house," Nancy said. "I'm fairly sure. The porch style, the window proportion, the way the gable sits — it's a type that was built in Humboldt County in the forties and fifties. Eureka or Arcata, one or the other." She set the enlarged photograph on Flora's desk beside the property comparison she'd pulled. "Look."

Flora looked. Nancy was right. Not certainly — not provably — but right in the way that mattered, the way that gave you somewhere to go next.

"Edmund Sark in Eureka," Flora said. "Before San Francisco."

"Before San Francisco," Nancy agreed. "With a woman we don't know yet, in a house we can probably find."

Flora looked at the photograph. The woman laughing at something beyond the frame. The good jaw. The fall of the hair.

"I'll start on the woman," Flora said.

The woman took longer.

Flora pulled Edmund Sark's records back as far as she could pull them — birth certificate, which gave her parents and a hometown in Oregon; military service, which was brief and honorable and ended in 1963; the gap between 1963 and 1966 when he appeared in San Francisco, renting a room in the Haight.

Three years. Eureka to San Francisco. The white house and the woman and whatever had happened between those two points.

She found Marion Vetch on the eleventh day.

A marriage announcement in the Humboldt County records, 1961 — not a marriage, an engagement. Edmund Patrick Sark and Marion Ruth Vetch, of Eureka, announced their engagement on the fourteenth of June, 1961.

There was no corresponding marriage announcement.

Flora sat with that for a moment.

Then she found Marion Vetch in the Eureka city directory, 1965 — Marion R. Vetch, address on Sequoia Lane. A house on Sequoia Lane, Eureka, with a porch and a gable. Flora looked at the address and then at the enlarged photograph on her desk.

She was fairly sure it was the same house.

Marion Vetch had a son. Flora found this in the county birth records — Gabriel Edmund Vetch, born October 3rd, 1965. Father not listed.

Gabriel Edmund.

She sat very still for a moment.

Edmund.

She looked at the birth year. 1965. Edmund Sark had appeared in San Francisco in 1966. She did the arithmetic she didn't need to do because it was already done.

She looked out the window at Clement Street, which was going about its Tuesday afternoon business, knowing nothing about any of this.

"Nancy," she said.

Nancy was already looking at her.

"Edmund Sark has a son," Flora said. "Born 1965. Before San Francisco. Before Pauline's mother." She paused. "His name is Gabriel. Gabriel

Edmund Vetch."

Nancy held her pen without writing.

The office was quiet. The steam was coming up through the floor, something warm being pressed below, the smell of someone else's wool.

"Pauline doesn't know," Nancy said.

"Pauline doesn't know," Flora agreed.

Nancy looked at the cork board.

"Does Gabriel Vetch know about Pauline?" she said.

"I don't know yet," Flora said.

"Are you going to find him?"

Flora picked up her recorder. Turned it over once.

"Yes," she said.

Chapter Three

Gabriel Vetch was fifty-eight years old and taught music at a high school in Fresno, and on the Saturday Flora drove down to find him he was running a soccer practice for eleven-year-olds at a park three blocks from the school.

Flora sat on a bench at the edge of the park and watched.

He was not what she had expected, or rather — she had expected someone shaped by an absence, carrying the particular posture of a man who had grown up with a question that nobody answered. She had seen that posture before. It had a way of organizing a person around itself, a slight inward lean, a watchfulness that looked like attention but was really bracing.

Gabriel Vetch did not have it.

He was tall — Edmund's height, from the photograph — and he moved around the soccer field with an ease that came from being entirely comfortable in a space. He corrected a girl's footwork with a patience that was not performed. He laughed at something an eleven-year-old said, a real laugh, fully present. He coached the way Nancy took notes — not performing the task but doing it, the task being the whole of his attention.

When the practice ended he saw her on the bench and came over, wiping his hands on a cloth, looking at her with the open assessment of someone who had nothing to hide and was simply curious.

"Ms. Voss?" he said. Her message had been brief — she had sent it through the school's general contact, said she was a private investigator with a matter she'd like to discuss at his convenience, given her number, expected him not to call.

He had called within the day.

"Mr. Vetch," she said. "Thank you for seeing me."

"You were mysterious," he said, sitting on the bench beside her, "but not alarmingly so."

He was, she noticed, easy. Not performing ease — actually easy, the ease of a man who had found his ground and stood on it. He had his mother's jaw, presumably — she had not found a photograph of Marion Vetch — and Edmund's height and what she suspected were his own eyes, nobody else's.

"I've been hired," she said, "by a woman in San Francisco. Her name is Pauline Sark. Her father's name is Edmund."

The ease didn't leave him exactly. But something in him attended differently.

"Edmund Sark," he said. Not a question.

"You know the name," Flora said.

"I know the name." He looked at the empty soccer field, the eleven-year-olds dispersed to their parents and their weekend. "My mother told me when I was old enough to ask. His name, and that he'd chosen not to know me, and that she had made her peace with it and I should too." He paused. "She was not a bitter woman. She was extremely clear about what had happened and she was not bitter about it."

"How did you make your peace?" Flora said.

He thought about it the way people thought about things that were real to them rather than performed. "I had a good life," he said. "My mother was — she was sufficient. That sounds like a small word but I mean it largely. She was sufficient for herself and she made sufficient room for me. I grew up knowing I had a father who didn't know me, and I had a mother who did, and I chose to organize myself around the second fact rather than the first."

Flora looked at him.

"Did you ever look for him?" she asked.

"When I was thirty," he said. "I found him in San Francisco. I found that he'd married, had a daughter, worked as an engineer, had a life." He looked at his hands, the cloth still in them. "I didn't do anything with it. I wasn't sure what I'd do with it. And then time passed and it became one of those things you carry without putting down but also without opening."

"Six months ago you looked again," Flora said.

He looked at her sharply. Then, more slowly: "Yes."

"You found the dementia."

A pause. "Yes."

"You weren't going to do anything about it."

"I didn't know what to do about it," he said. "He doesn't know me. He wouldn't have known me before the dementia probably. Going to see him seemed —" He stopped. "I couldn't work out who it would be for."

Flora looked at him.

"Mr. Vetch," she said. "Pauline Sark hired us to find the woman in a photograph she found after her mother died. A young man and a woman in front of a house in Eureka. She doesn't know about you. She thinks she's looking for a chapter of her father's history — a woman he loved, a place he lived."

Gabriel Vetch was still.

"She's looking for the ground her father was built on," Flora said. "And you are some of that ground."

He looked at the empty field.

"Does she know I exist," he said.

"Not yet," Flora said.

"What will you tell her?"

Flora looked at him steadily. "Everything. That's what she hired us for. She said there was no one left to protect." She paused. "I think she was wrong about that. I think you have some protecting available to you if you want it." She paused again. "But I also think you've been carrying a question for fifty-eight years and there is now a person in San Francisco who is looking for the same question from the other side."

Gabriel Vetch sat on the park bench in the November light and looked at the grass where eleven-year-olds had been running twenty minutes ago.

"Is he —" he started. Stopped. Started again. "My father. Is he — in any pain? Is he being looked after?"

"He's being looked after," Flora said. "It's a good facility. Pauline visits every other Sunday."

He nodded slowly.

"Every other Sunday," he said, as though he were noting a fact he wanted to keep.

"Mr. Vetch," Flora said. "Can I ask you something?"

"Yes."

"When you found the dementia diagnosis six months ago. What were you feeling?"

He thought about this with the same fullness he brought to everything.

"Grief," he said. "Which surprised me. I thought I would feel — I don't know, confirmed. He left and then he declined and now he's gone in the way he's gone. I thought it would feel like a door that had been shut for a long time being shut more finally." He looked at his hands. "But it just felt like loss. Which seems strange, to lose someone you never had."

"It doesn't seem strange to me," Flora said.

He looked at her.

"You can lose the idea of someone," she said. "The possibility. That's a real thing to lose."

He was quiet for a moment.

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

Flora reached into her coat pocket and took out a card. She set it on the bench between them.

"That's my number," she said. "And I'm going to give you one more." She took out a piece of paper and wrote a name and a number. Set it beside the card. "That's Pauline. She doesn't know I'm giving you this. But I think she'd want you to have it."

He looked at the piece of paper.

"You're not asking me to call her," he said.

"No," Flora said. "I'm giving you the option to call her. When you want. If you want." She stood and buttoned her coat. "Or not to. That's your door. I'm just letting you know it's there."

She left him on the bench with the November light and the empty field and his father's name and his sister's number, and she drove back to San Francisco through the valley, through the long flat agriculture of the interior, the sky wide and impersonal above it all.

She did not take out her recorder.

She drove in silence and thought about Gabriel Vetch's ease and what it had taken to build it and what it meant that he had built it anyway, in the shape he had.

She thought about Pauline Sark and what she had come looking for and what she was going to find instead.

She thought about the photograph. The young man who became Edmund. The woman laughing at something beyond the frame.

She thought about Nancy, alone in the office.

She had been in Fresno for six hours.

She would be back before six.

She did not think, particularly, about what alone in the office meant, on a day when the fog came in and didn't clear.

She drove north through the valley and the afternoon shifted toward evening around her and she was thinking about Gabriel Vetch, about Pauline Sark, about the good feeling of a case that was going to resolve in the direction of something rather than the direction of nothing, and she was not thinking about the office on Clement Street, the notepad, the margin, the shorthand that had been going slightly wrong for longer than either of them had named.

This is how you look away.

Not by choosing to. By having something else to look at.

Chapter Four

She told Pauline the following Thursday.

Pauline came in and sat in the client chair and listened with the stillness of an architect examining a structure — not passive, deeply attentive, the attention of someone who was revising their understanding of load-bearing elements in real time.

Flora told her about Marion Vetch. The engagement in 1961, the house on Sequoia Lane, the four years. The pregnancy. Edmund's departure. San Francisco, 1966.

She told her about Gabriel.

Pauline sat with it.

When Flora finished, the office was quiet for long enough that the dry cleaner's compressor cycled on below and the steam smell shifted from something floral to something that was just warmth.

"A brother," Pauline said.

"A half-brother," Flora said. "Though I'm not sure the half does any work worth doing."

Pauline looked at the cork board. The photograph was pinned there — the young Edmund, the laughing woman, the white house. Pauline looked at it as she looked at structures.

"He left Marion the way he never left us," she said. Not bitterly. Architecturally. As though noting the difference in foundation. "He learned something from it."

"Perhaps," Flora said. "Or he was a different man by the time he became your father."

"Both," Pauline said. "Both can be true."

She was quiet again.

"Gabriel," she said. "Fifty-eight."

"He lives in Fresno. He teaches music. He's —" Flora considered how to say it. "He's a person who built something solid from what he was given. What he wasn't given." She paused. "He knows about you. I told him. He has your number."

Pauline looked at her.

"You gave him my number."

"Yes." Flora held her gaze. "You told me there was no one left to protect. I think there is. I think Gabriel Vetch has been carrying a question for fifty-eight years and you're the person on the other side of it." She paused. "I thought you'd both rather know."

Pauline looked at the photograph.

"My father built his life on a story that started in 1966," she said. "And the real story started in 1961 in Eureka, California, and there's a man in Fresno who is part of that story whether anyone wanted him to be or not." She paused. "He built the house on a ground he never told us about."

"Yes."

"And the ground has a person in it."

"Yes," Flora said.

Pauline was quiet for a long time.

"Does he want to meet me?" she said.

"I don't know," Flora said. "I think he'd like to be asked."

Pauline nodded.

She reached out and unpinned the photograph from the cork board. She looked at it — the young Edmund, the laughing Marion, the house in Eureka that was Gabriel's beginning and none of their knowing.

"Thank you," she said. She put the photograph in the envelope and put the envelope in her bag. She stood and put on her coat and looked at the office one more time with the reading gaze.

"This room," she said. "It's been organized by use."

"Yes," Flora said.

"The best rooms are," Pauline said.

She left.

Nancy had been at her desk through all of it. Writing, or appearing to write. When the door closed she put her pen down parallel to the notepad.

"Well," she said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"You gave him her number without asking her first."

"Yes."

Nancy looked at the cork board, the empty pin where the photograph had been.

"I think that was right," she said.

"I think so too," Flora said. "I wasn't certain until just now."

Nancy picked up her pen. Wrote something in the margin — Flora didn't look at what, had been trying since the Dennis Sully case not to read the margin notes, was finding it harder to not-look than it had been before she'd started trying.

"The father can't know any of this," Nancy said.

"No," Flora said. "He's already somewhere else."

"But the children can," Nancy said. "The children can know each other." She set the pen down. "That's something. That's not nothing."

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

Chapter Five

She stayed after Nancy left.

This too was habit — the evening office, the loosening street, the space after a case closed where she could let it settle. She sat at her desk and thought about Pauline Sark with the photograph in her bag and Gabriel Vetch's number in her phone. She thought about Gabriel on the park bench with the empty soccer field. She thought about Marion Vetch, laughing at something beyond the frame, the full aliveness of a woman who did not know yet what the next four years would require of her.

She thought about Edmund Sark, eighty-one, in a room in Marin, somewhere else entirely.

She took out her recorder.

"Pauline Sark," she said. "Fifty-five. She came looking for the ground her father was built on and found that the ground had a person in it." She clicked it off. Clicked it back on. "Gabriel Vetch, fifty-eight. He spent his life building something solid from what he had, and what he had was enough. He's the most — he's the one I'll think about." She clicked it off.

She sat in the quiet.

She reached over and threw away the paper cup that had been on the edge of her desk since Tuesday. She straightened a stack of folders. Small organizing movements, the kind that happened when a case was closing and the hands needed something to do.

She looked at the wastepaper bin.

There was something in it.

She looked at it for a moment. Not a deliberate look — the incidental look that goes to a thing without deciding to. A torn piece of paper, roughly two inches square, the kind of small tearing you did when you pulled

something from a notepad in a hurry.

She could see writing on it.

She did not pick it up.

She looked at it for a moment. The piece of paper in the bin. The writing she could not read from this distance but could see was there.

She picked it up.

Nancy's handwriting. The particular letterforms, compressed now, slightly imprecise at the edges but recognizable in the way that thirty years of reading someone's hand makes anything they write recognizable.

Two words.

Tell Flora.

She sat very still.

She turned the piece of paper over. Blank on the other side. Torn from the notepad by someone who had torn it in a way that left no corresponding tear in the visible pages — carefully, which meant from a page that had been removed first. A note that had been taken out of the record before it could be found there.

Nancy had written herself a note to tell Flora something.

And then she had not told Flora.

And then she had thrown the note away.

Flora sat with the piece of paper in her hand.

She thought about the last several months. The coat on the wrong hook that Nancy thought no one had noticed. The keys inside the door. *Good day. Remember this.* And then: *Remember what.* The shorthand going slightly more wrong, incrementally, at the edges, in the way that ice shifted — not dramatically, not all at once, just the slow relentless physics of a thing under sustained pressure.

She thought about the day she had driven to Fresno.

Six hours. She had been gone six hours. She had come back at six o'clock and Nancy had been at her desk and had asked the right questions and said the right things. She had seemed — fine. The word they used. The word that meant: I am not going to show you what this costs and you are not going to ask.

Tell Flora.

She sat for a long time with the piece of paper.

She did not throw it away again. She did not fold it and put it in her pocket. She slid the desk drawer open and placed it inside, on top of the other things that lived in the drawer — a spare battery for the recorder, two pens, a card from a case three years ago that she'd never quite been able to file.

She closed the drawer.

She looked at the cork board. The empty pin. The note in Nancy's handwriting on card stock gone slightly yellow: *What do you actually know. Not what you feel. What you know.*

She looked at it for a long time.

What did she know.

She knew Nancy's handwriting had been going slightly wrong for longer than either of them had named.

She knew Nancy had written herself a note to tell Flora something and had not told her.

She knew that the something was, in some form, the condition. The slipping. The fog that came in some days and didn't clear. Nancy knew it too — had known it, had been writing it in margins and not showing it, had been arriving at offices alone and leaving them in order, had been managing, was still managing, but had written *tell Flora* and then had not.

She knew what the next story was. She had known for some time. The next story was the hardest one and probably the best one and she was not ready for it, and ready didn't particularly matter when the story had already arrived.

She looked at the drawer.

She looked at the note on the card stock.

What do you actually know.

She knew Nancy had put the note there. She knew Nancy didn't remember saying the thing the note recorded. She knew the note had been there long enough that the card stock had gone slightly yellow. She knew Flora had put it there after the first time Nancy said it to her.

She knew all of this and she had been carrying it in the place where kept things went and now a piece of paper in a drawer was telling her that Nancy was carrying it too, was trying to hand it to her, and couldn't quite bring

herself to open the door.

Flora put on her coat.

She turned off the light.

She went down the stairs, past the fourth step where the carpet was loose.

At the bottom she stopped.

She stood in the small lobby with the dry cleaner's locked door to her left and the frosted glass of the street door in front of her, the Clement Street evening showing through it, abstract and lit.

She took out her recorder.

She held it.

She pressed record.

"Nancy," she said into it. "I'm going to need you to tell me. When you're ready. I'm not going to ask. But I need you to tell me." She paused. "I know you know I know. I think it might be easier if we just said so."

She clicked it off.

She stood in the lobby for a moment.

Then she put the recorder in her pocket and went out onto Clement Street, where the evening was its November self — cold and clear, the hard-edged light now gone and the softer dark of the city taking its place, the restaurants lit and the street full of people with somewhere warm to be.

She walked home.

She did not play back the recording.

She did not know yet if she would.

*In the office on the second floor, the cork board held what it held.
The note in Nancy's handwriting on card stock gone slightly yellow.
The Farallon Islands postcard above the door.
The empty pin where the photograph of Edmund Sark had been.
In the desk drawer: a piece of paper, two inches square.
Two words.
The sign on the frosted glass door was still slightly crooked.
Neither of them had fixed it.*

Neither of them ever would.



End.