Every small town needs a serial killer...

HARRY DOLAN

'Great f***ing book, man. I was totally hooked.' Stephen King

Contents

About the Book

Anthony Lark has a list of names:

Terry Dawtrey
Sutton Bell
Henry Kormoran

He is hunting them down, and he won’t stop until every one of them is dead.

But this is a killer with a conscience and crime editor David Loogan is about to find out that his latest manuscript is no work of fiction but a serial killer’s confession of what he’s done – or is about to do – to some very bad men…

About the Author

Harry Dolan graduated from Colgate University, where he majored in philosophy and studied fiction-writing with the novelist Frederick Busch. He earned a master's degree in philosophy from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and worked for several years as a freelance editor.

Dolan, who grew up in Rome, New York, now lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan, with his partner, Linda Randolph. He is the author of *Bad Things Happen*.

Also by Harry Dolan

Bad Things Happen

Praise for Harry Dolan:

‘A riveting crime novel … Relentless pacing, a wry sense of humor, and an engaging protagonist add up to another winner for Dolan’
Publishers Weekly

‘Dolan mixes his pitches with an ace’s judgment…The rare crime novel with something for everyone who reads crime fiction’
Kirkus

‘A wonderfully moody and atmospheric story reminiscent of the masters of the noir mysteries. Tightly plotted, sophisticated, and engrossing, this is a winner’
Nelson DeMille

‘You better believe he has a gift for storytelling … the narrative comes with startling developments and nicely tricky reversals. There’s also something appealingly offbeat about the wry, dry tone of its humour …’
New York Times Book Review

‘If I say that the novel is as well plotted as Agatha Christie at her best, I don’t mean to make it sound old-fashioned; it’s not. Even more than Christie, this novel reminded me of Patricia Highsmith. There’s some lovely writing here. It’s witty, sophisticated, suspenseful and endless fun – a novel to be savoured by people who know and love good crime fiction, and the best first novel I’ve read this year.’
Washington Post

VERY BAD MEN

HARRY DOLAN

To my mother and father

Author's Note

The *National Current* is a tabloid of my own invention. The *Ann Arbor News* is a real paper—or it was, until it ceased publication in 2009. I've kept it alive in this novel, for purposes of my own.

The Great Lakes Bank and Whiteleaf Cemetery are, likewise, inventions. You won't find them in Sault Sainte Marie. What's more, I've occasionally taken liberties with the geography of the state of Michigan and the street map of Ann Arbor, all for the sake of advancing the story. To cite just a couple of examples: I've borrowed a bit of Brimley State Park in Michigan's Upper Peninsula and used it as the setting for Charlie Dawtrey's cabin, and I've made the woods around the cabin deeper and more extensive than the woods you'd find in the park. In Ann Arbor, I've placed the Bridgewell Building next to the Seva Restaurant on Liberty Street, where it has no business being, since there's already a perfectly good building there.

Last, I should mention that in chapter 23, when Senator John Casterbridge refers to his constituents' "black, flabby little hearts," he's quoting the late Robert Heinlein.

THERE'S A NECKLACE in my office, a string of glass beads. It hangs over the arm of my desk lamp, and any little movement can set it swaying. The beads are a middle shade of blue, the color of an evening sky, and when the light plays over them they look cool and bright and alive.

I'll tell you where they came from. Elizabeth was wearing them the first time we kissed. It happened here in the office on a winter night, six stories up over Main Street in Ann Arbor. Elizabeth is a detective, and that night she'd been called out to the scene of a car accident: crushed metal and broken glass, and other crushed and broken things. Three fatalities, one of them a child. The kind of accident you don't want to see, the kind you hope you can forget.

She saw it, and afterward she wanted to get as far away from it as she could. She came to me. I was working late and I heard the hallway door open, heard her footsteps cross the emptiness of the outer office, and then she was standing in my doorway. She's tall, and the long overcoat she wore only emphasized her height. The coat had snowflakes melting on the shoulders. It was open, and the blouse she had on underneath was unbuttoned at the neck. The fingers of her right hand worried over the blue beads at her throat. That was her only movement; the rest of her stood still.

I knew her well enough to know something was wrong. Her face was pale, and her hair—black and shiny as a raven's wing—fell loose around it. I got up from my desk and went to her, and her stillness as I approached made me leery of touching her. I started to lay a palm on her shoulder, then drew it back.

Snow fell lazily outside my office window. We stood together for a long while, and I didn't ask her anything. I

waited for her to tell me, and she did. She told me all of it, everything she had seen. The words poured out of her in a relentless stream. Her fingers on the glass beads counted off each terrible detail.

When she was done, she turned her face away from me. Shyly. Almost awkwardly. And awkwardly I stepped back and, not knowing what else to do, offered to pour her a drink from the bottle of Scotch I keep in the deep drawer of the desk.

She didn't want a drink.

I watched her shed her overcoat and fold it over the back of a chair. Watched her close the distance between us, her eyes steady on mine. She kept them open when she kissed me; they were the same blue as the glass beads. The first kiss was slow and lingering and deliberate. We both knew what it was: an act of defiance. It's human nature. We look on death and we rebel; we want to prove to ourselves that we're alive.

These thoughts passed through my mind, but I didn't have time to dwell on them. The second kiss was harder and more eager. I felt her hands move over my shoulders to the back of my neck, felt her fingers twist into my hair. She pressed herself against me and we held on to each other, and I could feel the heat of her, the vitality, the coiled energy of her body.

THERE'S A LIMIT to how much of this memory I intend to share, and I think we've reached it. The rest is hers and mine and no one else's. But that's where the necklace came from, the one I keep in my office. Elizabeth left it behind that night.

I'm telling you this for a reason. It has to do with motives.

If you took that necklace to a jeweler, he'd say it wasn't worth anything. The beads are only glass, and they're held

together by a string. And on some level I know that's true.

But I also know that if a thief tried to take those beads away from me, I'd do everything in my power to stop him. I wouldn't hesitate to kill him, if that's what it took.

THIS STORY I have to tell—it's not about a necklace. But it is about the motives people have for killing one another. That's a subject I know something about, not least because I'm an editor and people send me stories about killers all the time. My name is David Loogan. Most of the manuscripts that come to me are awful, but some of them have promise. I find the best ones and polish them up and publish them in a mystery magazine called *Gray Streets*.

Maybe it's not surprising, then, that my part in this story begins with a manuscript.

The facts are simple enough. I found it on a Wednesday evening in mid-July, in the hallway outside my office. That's not unusual. Local authors leave manuscripts out there more often than you'd think.

This one was different, though. It came in a plain, unmarked envelope and amounted to fewer than ten pages. It was the story of three murders, two already committed, one yet to come. And it wasn't fiction.

There was no signature or byline. The man who wrote the story didn't want to give himself away. He had typed it on a computer and printed it out in a copy shop. Of course, I didn't know that at the time. Elizabeth discovered it later.

When I turned the manuscript over to her, I had an outside hope that it might yield some useful piece of physical evidence. Crime labs can do wonders now with hairs and fibers, with DNA. I thought there might be fingerprints on the pages, other than my own. But when she sent the manuscript to the lab, it was a dead end. It rendered up no secrets—nothing to tell her who wrote it or what his motives were.

If you want to know the answers to those questions, we'll have to go back. Back before that day in mid-July. We'll have to put aside the usual rules, because this is a story that doesn't want to follow them. It has its own ideas. Although it's mine, and Elizabeth's too, it doesn't really begin with us. It begins in northern Michigan, in the city of Sault Sainte Marie. It begins in a hotel room.

It begins with a notebook.

CHAPTER 1

THE NOTEBOOK IS a simple thing, but elegant. Lined pages bound with thread between soft black covers. Small enough to fit in a pocket. Vincent van Gogh made sketches in a notebook like this. Ernest Hemingway jotted lines of terse dialogue in Parisian cafés.

Anthony Lark uses his to make a list.

Three names, in rich black ink. *Henry Kormoran. Sutton Bell. Terry Dawtrey*. The letters flow gracefully. The pen is a Waterman, an heirloom from Lark's father.

Kormoran and Bell should be relatively easy. Both of them live in Ann Arbor—Kormoran in an apartment, Bell in a modest house with a wife and daughter. The wife and daughter complicate things, but on the whole Lark is unconcerned. He can manage Kormoran and Bell.

Dawtrey is another story. He's serving a thirty-year sentence at Kinross Prison, twenty miles south of Sault Sainte Marie.

LARK LEFT his notebook on the hotel bed and padded barefoot to the ice machine down the hall. He caught ice chips in a plastic bag, just a handful, enough to soothe his brow. The headaches had been coming more frequently.

He had been fine this afternoon when he drove past the gates of Kinross Prison. He didn't know what he expected to see, maybe something like a fortress. Tall buildings of

stone. Ramparts and buttresses. Lofty walls with turrets for the guards.

The reality was less impressive. There were a few broad buildings of homely tan brick. The sun cast the shadows of the guardtowers across the yard. Two high chain-link fences, topped with razor wire, surrounded everything.

Lark had been raised in a working-class neighborhood in Dearborn, on the outskirts of Detroit. Take away the towers and the fences, and he might have been looking at his old high school.

Still, the fences and towers would be enough to keep him from Terry Dawtrey. In theory, he could make a go of it, if a dozen things went his way. He could acquire a high-powered rifle. He could find some cover in the flat, featureless land that surrounded the prison. Dawtrey could walk out to the front gate with a target painted on his chest.

Lark pondered the problem in his hotel room, lying against the pillows with the ice pressed to his forehead. There was another alternative. He could find some pretext for a visit to Dawtrey. He could walk through the gate, submit to a search. They would lead him to a room with bland cinder-block walls. A common room with lots of tables, full of convicts' wives and their restless children. He would sit at a table across from Dawtrey. There would be no glass between them, not like in the movies. He would have no weapon, but he would only need something sharp—a stem broken off from a pair of eyeglasses. It could be done.

But there would be no going out again past the guards. It would be a one-way trip.

A hard problem. He needed to consider it some more. He pressed the power button on the television remote and flipped through the channels. Cop shows, infomercials, cable news. He wasn't really looking for the woman, but he found her on CNN. Sometimes it happened that way. She

was at a podium with a crowd around her. Young people holding up signs. She had as much of a tan as you could get, living in the state of Michigan. She had hair like black silk and wore it in a short, stylish cut.

He had the sound muted, so he didn't hear what she was saying, but it hardly mattered. She smiled, and the people applauded and waved their signs. The smile was wondrous. Without it, she could seem stern, aloof. With it, she was joyous and mischievous at the same time. He remembered something he'd heard once: That smile alone should be worth ten points at the polls.

Watching her helped. The ice helped too. It cooled the ache behind his brow. He was tempted to check out in the morning and drive south to Ann Arbor. That was what most people would do. Take the easier way. Deal with Kormoran and Bell. Save Dawtrey for last. Put off confronting the problem. But that's not the way he was raised.

Always do the hardest thing first, his father used to say.

THE NEXT NIGHT, Anthony Lark found himself in a town called Brimley on the shore of Whitefish Bay, sixteen miles southwest of Sault Sainte Marie. He ate dinner at the Cozy Inn, a restaurant that catered to tourists. He sat at a table in a corner and kept his eyes on an old man who had settled in on a stool at the bar.

Lark knew there were Chippewa Indians in Brimley. They ran the Bay Mills Casino, the area's main attraction. The old man at the bar looked like he had Chippewa blood. He had a weathered face marked with deep vertical lines, the kind of face you might find carved into the side of a cliff. He had a compact frame and limbs that might once have been sturdy and thick—before time diminished them.

Lark knew the man's name. He had found it in the Brimley telephone directory. He had written it in his notebook with his Waterman pen.

The man lived in a cabin not far from the shore of Lake Superior. A wooden shanty, really, one of a score of cabins scattered in the woods, with a warren of unpaved lanes running between them. It would be a pleasant place to live now, in the summer, in the dense shade of old birch trees. In the winter, Lark thought, it would be hell.

He had spent an hour in the cabin around midday; he had found a key under a wooden bucket on the porch. The old man had been away at work. A drawer full of pay stubs told the tale: he had a job at the casino, probably on the cleaning crew. His wages were pitiful.

The cabin had a cramped living room, a small kitchen, a smaller bath. No bedroom, just a fold-out sofa bed. A bare minimum of possessions. The medicine cabinet over the bathroom sink held a straight razor, a toothbrush, toothpaste. The furnishings of the living room included a TV set with rabbit ears and a wall calendar illustrated with watercolor sparrows. Lark leafed through the pages. Someone had written the letter “T” on every other Saturday.

A framed photograph hung next to the calendar: a school picture of a boy fourteen or fifteen years old.

A ringing telephone startled Lark as he studied the photo. He followed the sound to the kitchen, where a battered beige phone sat on the counter beside a primitive-looking answering machine. The tape in the machine began to turn, the old man’s outgoing message. Then a beep and a woman’s voice, rough with cigarette smoke.

“Charlie, are you there?” she said. A pause. “Maybe I’ll see you at the Cozy later.”

When the old man got home from work, Lark was sitting in his Chevy a little distance down the lane. He watched the man step down from the cab of a pickup and trudge to the cabin door. He might have done it then, might have simply followed the man inside, but it seemed too abrupt

somehow. And it was still daylight. Better to do it after dark.

Lark drove to the Cozy Inn and had a leisurely dinner—fish caught from the bay, french fries, coleslaw. He had brought a newspaper with him from Sault Sainte Marie, and after the waitress cleared his plate away he started reading the front page. She brought him the bill and he gave her a sizable tip and after that she left him alone.

The old man came in at eight and took up his position at the bar. He drank shots of Irish whiskey and mugs of beer. By ten o'clock most of the tourists had left and the locals began to fill the place with raucous voices and laughter. At eleven a woman came in wearing a leather skirt and a knitted blouse. Hair dyed black. Fifty-five years old, Lark thought, hoping to pass for forty.

"There you are, Charlie," she said to the old man.

"Madelyn, you vixen," he said, patting the stool beside him.

As Lark watched them from the corner—Madelyn producing a cigarette from a beaded purse, Charlie lighting it with a Zippo—he wished that he were done. He should have taken care of things at the cabin. He felt a headache coming on and took a pill (*Imitrex*) from a small tin that once held breath mints. He didn't expect the pill to work. He could feel the pain creeping into the space behind his eyes, curling and twisting like the smoke of Madelyn's cigarette.

A voice in his mind said, *The headaches are a symptom*. His doctor's voice. It was something his doctor had told him again and again.

The trouble started near midnight. Lark had a beer in front of him that he'd been nursing for an hour. He watched a crowd of young people heading for the exit. Clean-cut, well-dressed—dealers from the casino, if he had to guess. The last of them held the door for a brawny man heading in.

That one's not a dealer, Lark thought. *A laborer or a fisherman maybe*.

Madelyn knew him. She got up and met him halfway across the room.

"Kyle, my love," she said carelessly.

He was a younger man, maybe forty—the age she was pretending to be. He wore denim work clothes and heavy canvas boots. She led him to the bar, ordered him a drink. She chattered away at him, her hands brushing his collar or resting on his arm. She had the nervous energy of a woman caught where she shouldn't be.

The old man, Charlie, sat forgotten beside her, his face souring as the minutes passed. The other patrons at the bar seemed to lean away from the three of them, as if they sensed what was going to happen.

Lark watched it from his corner table. Charlie putting a hand on the back of Madelyn's neck. A proprietary gesture. Madelyn turning to shoot him a look. Kyle, hunched over his glass, doing his best to ignore what was happening, until he couldn't ignore it any longer.

Kyle got to his feet, and Charlie followed. Madelyn made a halfhearted effort to get between them, but Kyle pushed her gently aside.

Lark knew that the quickest way to win a fight was to break the other guy's nose. A broken nose puts a man down, takes all the struggle out of him. Charlie knew it too. He made a fist of his right hand and jabbed at the bigger man's face.

Kyle saw it coming and ducked down to catch the punch on his forehead.

The bones of the hand are delicate, the bones of the skull less so. Charlie drew his fist back with a cry. Kyle shook his head to clear it, then stepped forward casually and scuffed a work boot over the wooden floorboards, sweeping the old man's legs out from under him. Charlie

landed on his backside and on his wounded hand, howling and curling up on the floor.

Kyle reached behind him for his glass, drained it, and headed for the door, beckoning for Madelyn to follow. She glared at him and growled, “Damn it, Kyle,” but she went with him after only the briefest of glances at the old man.

Lark left the bar a few minutes later. By then some of the locals had helped Charlie up onto his stool and wrapped a handkerchief around his knuckles and set him up with another beer.

DARK UNDER THE BIRCH TREES. Lark found the cabin again, drove past it, and parked at the side of the lane. He cut the Chevy’s engine and waited. A tire iron lay on the seat beside him.

Charlie’s pickup truck appeared at one in the morning, rolling to a stop on the lawn. The old man stumbled up the stone-paved walk and went inside. Lark got out of his car with the tire iron, crossed to the porch, and retrieved the key from underneath the wooden bucket.

The door squeaked on its hinges when he opened it, but not enough to catch the old man’s attention. In fact, when Lark stepped into the cabin, the old man was nowhere to be seen. A table lamp cast its glow over the sofa and the television. Over a pair of worn shoes abandoned on the carpet.

Lark saw the lamp reflected in the dark glass of the window behind the sofa and quickly crossed the room to draw the curtains. As he stood by the window he heard the rush of water running, and without thinking he vaulted the sofa and pressed himself against the wall beside the bathroom door.

With the tire iron raised in his right hand, he waited for the door to open. A minute passed, then two. From his earlier visit he knew that the window in the bathroom was

a frosted square too small for a man to climb through. Charlie must be waiting on the other side of the door.

Lark said, “You may as well come out. How did you know I was here?”

A brief delay, and then the old man’s voice came through. “You stomp around like an elephant. Who are you? A friend of Scudder’s?”

“I don’t know who that is.”

“Kyle Scudder. You’re one of his pals?”

“No, but I saw what he did to you at the bar. You should have your hand looked at. I can help you.”

“Are you a doctor?”

“I know some first aid.”

“I don’t need your help. You clear out, before I call the cops.”

“The phone’s out here.”

“I’ve got a cell.”

Lark looked around at the ragged sofa, the threadbare carpet, the worn-out shoes.

“I don’t think so,” he said.

He could hear faint sounds through the door. The old man’s breathing. The medicine cabinet being opened, then softly closed.

“All right, I’m coming out.”

Lark lowered the tire iron and stepped in front of the door, pivoting so that his right shoulder faced it. He braced his feet, waited for the knob to turn, and hit the door with everything he had.

CHAPTER 2

"THE RAZOR WON'T do you any good," Lark said.

"Fuck you."

The old man sat on the floor where he had fallen, his back against the vanity of the sink, the straight razor from the medicine cabinet clutched in his left hand. His right hand, still wrapped in a handkerchief, came up to wipe the blood that ran over his upper lip.

"Your nose is broken," Lark said.

"I've had it broken before," said the old man, his speech distorted only a little, like someone talking through thick glass.

"Ice might help."

"Fuck you."

"Leave the razor and come out," said Lark, "and I'll get you some ice."

He backed out of the doorway and watched as the old man laid the razor on the floor and pulled himself up the vanity and to his feet. The man swatted away the hand Lark offered and made his way to the sofa, where he fell back against the cushions and pressed the heel of his left hand gingerly against his nostrils.

Lark kept an eye on him from the kitchen. He laid the tire iron on the seat of a kitchen chair and took an ice tray from the freezer, a pair of dish towels from a drawer. He piled it all on the chair and carried the chair into the living room.

He bundled some ice cubes in a towel and the old man accepted them without a word, laying the bundle against the side of his nose. Lark filled the second towel and pressed it against his own forehead.

“What’s wrong with you?” the old man asked.

“I get headaches.”

The old man’s laugh sounded half like a groan. “That’s a damn shame.”

“It’s a symptom,” Lark said absently, and then a thought occurred to him. He had settled into the chair with the tire iron across his lap, but now he rose and put the iron and the towel on the floor and dug his notebook from his pocket.

He found the page he wanted and held it a foot away from the old man’s eyes. “Tell me what you see,” he said.

Twisted strands of iron-gray hair hung over the old man’s brow. His eyes squinted. “That’s my name.”

“Is there anything odd about it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is it moving?”

“What are you talking about?”

“What color would you say it is?”

“Is this a joke? It’s written in black.”

Lark turned the notebook around and read the name. *Charlie Dawtrey*. “Yes, the ink is black. I know that. Intellectually. But the words seem red to me. They don’t seem red to you?”

The old man’s eyelids fluttered. “God in heaven.”

“They don’t ripple, like they’re floating on water? They don’t expand and contract, like they’re breathing?”

“God in heaven. I’m talking to a crazy man.”

“I’m not crazy,” Lark said, turning back a page. “What about these names?”

He watched the old man’s eyes move down the list. *Henry Kormoran. Sutton Bell. Terry Dawtrey*.

“That’s my son. My son and two of his no-good friends.”

“But you don’t see the letters breathing?”

“Is this about my son?”

Lark closed the notebook and slipped it into his pocket. “Are you close to your son?”

“Not for a long time.”

“If something happened to you, would it matter to him?”

“What’s this about?”

“Would he mourn, if you were gone?”

“What do you want here?”

A dull ache wound itself in a figure eight behind Lark’s brow. He returned to the chair and reached for the towel-wrapped ice.

“I want you to answer my question,” he said. “I think if you were gone, it would affect him. He would mourn your passing.”

The old man sat forward slowly. His ice pack lay neglected on the sofa cushion beside him. His nose had stopped bleeding.

He said, “Mister, if you think you can get to my son by hurting me, you’ve gone off the rails. No one’s going to care much when I’m gone, least of all Terry.”

“You haven’t kept in touch with him?”

“He’s been in prison the last sixteen years. I gave up on him, and he gave up on me, a long time back.”

“You never go to see him?”

“Not anymore. So why don’t you clear out now, and take whatever grudge you’ve got with you.”

“I don’t have a grudge.”

“You’re wasting your time.”

“I don’t think so. You have a sparrow calendar.”

The old man brushed iron-gray hair out of his eyes. “What?”

“There’s providence in the fall of a sparrow. I’m pretty sure that’s in the Bible.”

“Oh Lord, you’ve gone crazy again.”

“I’m not crazy. That line about the sparrow—it means we’re all part of a bigger plan. You shouldn’t be afraid of playing your part. You shouldn’t lie to get out of it.”

“I haven’t lied to you.”

The towel was damp against Lark’s brow. He felt a drop of icy water roll along the bridge of his nose and onto his cheek.

“You have a sparrow calendar,” he said again. “Every other Saturday is marked with a ‘T.’ Short for ‘Terry.’ You’re still close to him. You visit him at the prison every other Saturday.”

The old man didn’t try to deny it. He flexed the fingers of his swollen right hand. His eyes settled on Lark’s.

“You don’t look good. How’s your head?”

Lark shrugged the question away.

“Maybe it’s trying to tell you something,” the old man said.

The pain traced its figure eight. The ice helped, but not enough.

“The headaches are just a symptom,” said Lark. “I’ll have them until I deal with the underlying problem.”

“Is that what you’re doing? You imagine killing me is going to solve all your problems?”

“It’s all I can think of.”

The old man shook his head sadly. “Look, mister, you don’t want to do this.”

“The truth is, I don’t. If there were another way, I’d try it. But they’ve got fences at the prison, and towers. This is the only way I can get at him.”

The old man’s eyes fell shut and a jagged breath escaped him. When he spoke, his voice was a whisper.

“The men in that prison are animals. Terry’s been in there sixteen years. Do you think there’s anything you can do to him that hasn’t been done? Do you think you’re going to make him suffer, by killing me?”

Lark drew the towel away from his brow, dropped it to the floor. A cube of ice skipped quietly over the carpet.

“It doesn’t matter if he suffers,” Lark said. “The point is, they’re going to let him out. That’s how it works, isn’t it? Just for a few hours.”

The tire iron lay at Lark’s feet. He bent to pick it up.

“I can’t get through the fences, or past the towers. But I think they’ll let him out. He’ll be at your funeral.”

CHAPTER 3

DOESN'T MATTER HOW *you get there*, Lark's father used to say. *Just so long as you get there*.

Thomas Lark spent thirty years building Mustangs at the Dearborn Assembly Plant on the Rouge River. After the first few months the job lost all its appeal, but he clung to it anyway, because he only wanted a few modest things—a wife and a family and maybe a fishing boat—and it didn't matter how he got them as long as he got them.

So he stayed on, weathering layoffs and buyouts, and he found a wife—Helen, a kindergarten teacher. They had a son, Anthony. And Thomas Lark bought four boats over the years, starting with a small aluminum skiff, ending with a twenty-four-foot fiberglass runabout. His three decades on the assembly line earned him two years of retirement before a valve in his heart gave out and he collapsed on a dock one fine spring morning an hour before sunrise.

Helen Lark, who had spent her days teaching children their letters and numbers, never complained about the equation of her husband's life: thirty years in exchange for two. When Anthony Lark wept at his father's funeral, she drew him close and did her best to comfort him. Then she took him by the shoulders and said, "Promise me you'll use the time you're given."

He thought of her on the morning after his encounter with Charlie Dawtrey, and though he would have liked to sleep the day away he decided it wouldn't be right. He had

a few days, at least, until Dawtrey's funeral, but there were preparations he needed to make.

He took a long drive south through mild June heat, crossing over the Mackinac Bridge around midmorning—Lake Michigan on his right, Lake Huron on his left. He kept on driving, first to the town of Grayling on the Au Sable River, then west to Traverse City. At a sporting-goods store on Front Street he bought a Remington hunting rifle, a scope, and a box of 30-06 cartridges. He ate lunch in a park by the water and watched the sailboats out on the bay.

He drove back to Grayling in the afternoon and got on I-75 heading north. When he saw an exit that looked like it wouldn't lead much of anywhere, he got off the interstate and drifted along until he found an unpaved road that took him through bramble fields and past an abandoned grain silo.

Three miles after the silo, he pulled over to the side of the road and got the rifle out of the trunk. He mounted the scope, loaded the magazine, and fired into a stand of trees thirty yards from the roadside. The first shot chipped bark from a sickly looking ash and shocked a pair of crows into the sky—a reckless flutter of black wings against the blue. He took a few more practice shots, returned the rifle to the trunk, and drove back to I-75.

The next day he made some calls from his hotel room and found the funeral home handling the arrangements for Charlie Dawtrey. A mass would be held at Saint Joseph's in Sault Sainte Marie. The burial would be directly after at a local cemetery. The date for the funeral was July eighth, still a week and a half away. He took some encouragement from that. The family would need time to arrange to have Terry Dawtrey attend.

The days passed slowly, but Lark didn't mind. Sometimes in the evenings he flipped through the channels and managed to find the woman with the wondrous smile.