

An Excerpt from Yield

By Lee Houck

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My high school chemistry teacher was also a forensics investigator. He specialized in arson, burned bodies and flammable chemicals, and he entertained us with sometimes gruesome stories from more than twenty-five years of duty. There was the skeleton of a woman, average height—which is to say five foot four—somewhere around thirty years old, reduced to blackened bones and cinders in a house fire. He gave us two clues: “For example, the middle finger on her right hand has a large calcification on the top section, like you might have if you wrote heavily with a pencil, for example.” He said ‘for example’ at the beginning and end of everything. “For example, she also has a tiny indentation, a notch, in her front tooth, also the right one, for example.” It was our job, eager students, wound up by the grisly details, to figure out her occupation.

Work changes you. It shows itself on your body. In the same way that a carpenter’s hands are tuned to the nuances of hammer and nail, the way wood can talk to you through your arms, my hands listen to numbers on files, to injection records and saturation levels, to painful and courageous histories. I filter through the hundreds of thousands (could be millions) of dead medical records at St. Vincent’s Hospital, and line them up in ascending order by year of admittance.

The files begin with a complaint. Something like “My back hurts and I don’t know why,” or “My leg is broken,” or worse things—usually only one sentence, typed up by someone in Admitting. Then a social and family history, which is dictated to the nurse by the patient, and hand-written. This is where the nurses fill in what’s really happening, the stuff that doesn’t show up in the complaint: “Woman claims to have walked into door,” or “Child has bruises on back and legs, father says they are from falling off the bed.” Then a medical history, a list of procedures performed, if any, and finally billing information. Sometimes there are x-rays, sometimes there are sonograms. Sometimes there’s hardly anything—a blurry carbon copy and illegible signature. The files are stored vertically on shelves in thirty-two rows. They’re accented by six different color-coded stickers (green for first-time emergency visit, orange for same-day dismissal, red for D.O.A., yellow, brown and light blue for what I haven’t been able to figure out yet.)

My fingertips are tough, callused by the constant shuffling and reshuffling of paperwork and paperclips, removing the tiny staples, and my cuticles are often rubbed red and raw from jamming my hands in between two folders, cut open on the sharp edges of the files.

I work alone. I don’t talk to anyone, don’t see anyone. I don’t know who deposits the manila folders into the wire inbox. I only know that when I arrive, the box is full, and the files are sometimes spilling over into two or sometimes three stacks on the carpet. I work when I want to, so long as I’ve a hefty dent at the end of the week. I don’t make enough money to get by on this job alone, so I hustle. Truthfully, I was hustling before I took this job, and if you ever see a documentary film about strippers, or prostitutes, or

hustlers, they always say something like: “I couldn’t make enough money waiting tables, so I started turning tricks and here I am.”

With me it was the opposite.

The fact that I work alone also means that, in some ways, I have no proof of the work at all. I have no product. Other than my fingers, I have nothing to show for it, no physical manifestation of time passing. Hustling is the same. If I flatten myself out enough (in my head, I mean, you’ll see) then it’s easily forgettable. And because it’s a secret, an almost invisible transaction between strangers, it doesn’t really exist. But I will—reluctantly—say this: all the anonymous numbers, all those forgotten histories, the injuries and surgeries and remarkable recoveries, they hide in my fingers. Where the sex work goes, I don’t know.

The burned woman? She held a pair of scissors which pressed on that knuckle, and she tucked bobby pins in that tooth, where over the years they carved out a little nick in the enamel. She was a hairdresser.

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Sometimes I can tell you what sort of files are going to find their way into my hands, and into my life, before I’m even in the room with them. First I get a feeling, an ominous weight to the morning, perhaps. A drizzle of rain which turns to fog and back to rain again all before I get out of bed. Weather as foreshadowing. And then my Metrocard won’t read properly, and I swipe it ten times before the technology does what it is supposed to do and I finally get on the train. Sometimes I say a quiet prayer—to nobody really, I don’t actually believe in that stuff—that the day will behave as planned and whatever turbulence arises won’t shake me right out of the sky.

For example, on my way to work a janitor accidentally dropped a tray full of silverware on the floor in front of me, forks skewing in every direction, the sound ringing down the corridors, halting movement in every direction. People in the waiting room covered their ears.

I knew right then that something in the files today would be a little too familiar. And now I’ve found it. It’s a gay bashing from a few months ago. I find more and more of them every day—maybe twenty in the last year alone, spreading like a rash. In this case, a fag walking home from the gym decided to take a shortcut through the park and—zap—they got him with a stun gun. For twenty-seven minutes, they got him. So says the police report, which is strangely included, along with other documents and written statements—some of the forms I’ve never come across before. Signatures everywhere.

They treated him for bruises and swelling in his face where they punched him, two broken fingers (left third and fourth,) marks on his throat where they strangled him. One of the doctors suspects it was a telephone cord, or something similar. “Shoelace?” says one of the papers. Plus a mysteriously dislocated kneecap. And the place where the stun gun shot him through with electricity was burned and bleeding.

I’m thinking about that spot—the two tiny holes in his side, halfway up his ribcage, the only place where they managed to enter his body. I’m thinking about how that feels, to have your flesh opened up like that, your aura burst like a soap bubble.

But he survived.

One of the most difficult parts of my job is not knowing the rest of the story. I process the incidents without having all the details—I only know the beginning and end of the story. I don't know if a lover came to take him home, if family members rushed to the bedside. If they caught the jerks. There is an old custom of hiring mourners at a funeral, to be sure that the deceased are properly lamented. And that's sometimes what I feel like: a grief vessel.

I swallow the pain, shove the folder into the rows with all the others, and walk back to the inbox, where I pick up ten or twelve more. And just like that, the day continues.