Where do you draw the line between an act of love and a crime of passion?

The Love Hunter

A NOVEL

JON HASSLER

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That death's unnatural that kills for loving.

OTHELLO

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PART ONE

1

AT THE APPOINTED TIME—sunrise—Chris arrived at the Quinns' house in his mint-green Chevrolet. He stopped at the curb under the giant elm and saw the front door open and Larry come shuffling out into the sparkling, rain-soaked morning. Before dawn a thunderstorm had drenched the city, stripping the trees of half their golden leaves and opening this yard to sunlight where yesterday there had been shadow. Larry blinked. His movements were tentative. His face was an oval of ivory and his pale, wispy hair, what remained of it, lifted in the breeze. His brown eyes were dark and damaging; even from this distance they pierced Chris's heart.

Behind Larry came Rachel in her blue robe. She laid a hand lightly on her husband's shoulder and the two of them moved slowly along the short walk as Chris stepped around the car to open Larry's door and then stood under the dripping elm watching them—watching her—approach. This was Rachel the actress, Rachel the jogger, Rachel the woman of compassion and quick moves and brimming good nature. In the sun she was radiant. She, too, pierced Chris's heart, but not with sorrow or pity or whatever it was that Larry inflicted; when Chris looked at Rachel he was shot through with joy. And longing. Against the ivy clinging thickly to the front of the house—ivy darkening from green to rust—Rachel's sunlit hair was the color of fire.

"A perfect morning," said Chris.

"Yes," they said together, she making a chirp of it, Larry a groan. Smiling, she took Chris's hand for an in-

stant, squeezed it; then as Chris helped Larry into the car she folded shut the walker and put it into the back seat.

"I'll get his things," she said, returning to the house.

"This is all nonsense," said Larry. He sat on the passenger side of the front seat like a small boy acting prim, his legs tight together, his hands folded on his knees. Except when he fell asleep in a chair, his sitting posture was always stiff, as though he feared relaxing into pain. He looked up from under the bill of his brown corduroy cap. His eyes were murky, his nose bony and pointed, his smile slightly bilious. "This is all nonsense and, mind you, I'm going only because we're both agreed that it's all nonsense."

Chris, standing with one foot in the leafy gutter, stooped to roll down the window. He shut the door. "But on the other hand," he said through the window, "it might be the hunt of a lifetime."

Larry said, "How exciting." At the sides of Larry's mouth the muscles designed for sarcasm—lemon-sucking muscles—were well developed; they brought down the corners of his smile, tightening it. "How utterly exciting."

Chris said, "Don't go away," and as he turned to follow Rachel, he met a paperboy, who handed him the Quinns' copy of the *Rookery Morning Call*, which was lumpy with moisture. Going up the walk, he scanned the front page—Thursday, October 4, 1979: three thousand Soviet troops in Cuba; sunshine in the forecast; a sea of spilled oil washing up on the beaches of Texas; the Pope and his cardinals flying to Iowa to say mass on a farm; Gene Autry and his Angels flying to Baltimore for the playoffs.

In the living room Larry's hunting gear was heaped in front of the cold fireplace. Rachel, avoiding Chris's eyes, opened the bulging duffel bag and lifted out the shaving kit containing Larry's medicine. "This is the pill he takes for pain, and this one whenever his head aches."

"I know."

She sorted through the shaving equipment with her

large, nimble hands, her nails painted blood-red. She drew out a string of eight or ten capsules pressed between foil and clear plastic. "And this is Ayrozil—one each day. Unless he gets depressed—then two."

"I know."

"I *know* you know, Chris, but I've got to go over it with you, to ease my conscience." She gave him what he called her in-between smile—half sincere and half stagecraft. "I'm facing four days of freedom and already I'm feeling guilty."

"Four days in what—fourteen years? No wonder you feel guilty." It had been fourteen years since Larry's decline from vigor was diagnosed as multiple sclerosis, and Rachel's roles had been multiplying ever since. She had trained herself to be his nurse, his psychiatrist, his dietitian, his breadwinner, his will to live—all this besides being his wife and the mother of Bruce, whose heavy footsteps they now heard upstairs.

Chris pressed his hand on her lean hip. "Why don't you get the hell out of town for four days? Drive down to Minneapolis and take in some plays?"

She bent to the duffel bag, replacing the shaving kit, then bobbed up and gripped him tightly by both forearms and brought the point of her nose forward to the point of his chin. "I may drive down Saturday, but first I'm going to lie in bed and read for a day and a half." Her voice, an instrument of many registers, was low now, a purr. "I'm not going to dress until tomorrow noon. I'll have Bruce bring me peanut butter sandwiches."

Through a wisp of her red hair he kept an eye on the stairway as he kissed her between the eyebrows.

"Remember, Chris, don't push him." She spoke to his throat. "He's finally got to the point where he no longer tries to exert himself beyond his limits, so just let him go at his own pace. If he doesn't feel like climbing into a boat or sitting all day in a duck blind, please don't force him."

He lifted her chin and they kissed quickly, not as fervently as he had hoped. How many hours, days, had he spent weighing the fervency of Rachel's kisses? How

many nights had he lain awake, alone, trying to understand if her love for him matched his for her? He knew she loved him. She had told him so. But that was months ago, before declaring that only in her widowhood would she permit anything more to be said—or done—about their love. It was distressing—crippling, actually—for Chris to realize that the male lead in last winter's production of *Barefoot in the Park* had tasted more of Rachel's kisses than he himself ever had.

"Oh, I almost forgot your lunch." She darted into the kitchen and returned with a sack. "Here are four ham-on-ryes and a few apples—for snacking as you drive." She picked up Larry's boots and sleeping bag and went out the front door as Bruce, barefoot, came padding down the stairs in his pajamas.

Scarcely awake now, his yellow hair stringy on his forehead, his eyes puffy, Bruce said, "Hi, Chris. Remember to aim before you shoot."

"Show respect."

Bruce was seventeen and a hulk—an amiable giant with bruises on his face from football. North High was halfway through its eight-game schedule and if the team finished with as many as four wins, Bruce's immovable presence in the line would have a lot to do with it. He loved to knock people down and crush them under his two hundred pounds and then get to his feet and exult. Among the characteristic sounds of a North High game, among the clicking impact of pads and helmets and the grunts of exertion and the thunder of stampeding cleats, was the howling laughter of Bruce Quinn. Larry and Rachel and Chris attended all the home games—they watched from lawn chairs near the end zone so Larry wouldn't have to climb into the bleachers—and last Friday night they sat within ten feet of Bruce as he dumped the Lincoln High quarterback behind the goal line, then jumped to his feet and howled at the sky. What was the source of that ecstatic howl? Had it come down to Bruce from his four-legged ancestors, or was it the purely human joy one feels in being good at what he does? Or

was it an act? Chris suspected that Bruce, like his mother, was an actor.

"Are you hunting this weekend?"

"Yeah, this afternoon after practice and tomorrow afternoon before the game. With a couple of friends. We're going to hunt the Badbattle River about ten miles downstream." He hoisted his father's heavy duffel bag to his shoulder and went out to the car.

Chris followed with Larry's shotgun and string bag of shells, certain that although he and Larry were setting off for Canada's prime duck country, neither of them was really interested in ducks. He was convinced that Larry sought oblivion—he wanted, literally, to die. How many times in the past two years had Larry told him he'd prefer nonexistence to the misery he endured? Surely he wouldn't be making the superhuman effort that hunting required of a man in his condition if he weren't hunting for death, not ducks.

And myself? thought Chris, stepping out into ribbons of sunlight. I'm hunting for love.

2

THE GEAR STOWED, THE sun climbing, Chris got in behind the wheel. He looked across at Rachel and Bruce, their heads framed in Larry's window. Yawning, Bruce said something that sounded like "God love you both." It may have been just that, for Bruce (to his father's disdain and his mother's wonderment) was currently religious. Weekends he sang in a gospel quartet; he and three of his friends from the football team delivered their repertoire of sacred songs in a shoulder-wagging, knee-flexing style that was much in demand at three Rookery churches: Assemblies of God, United Baptist, Parkview Methodist.

"Go back to bed," Larry told him. "You look half-asleep. Your eyes are gummy."

"You betcha," said Bruce. No school today and tomorrow—the state teacher's convention. When Chris first proposed this trip to Canada, Larry had considered taking Bruce along. Delta Marsh would be farther than they had ever before traveled for ducks, and Larry imagined himself going forth with his son, shoulder to shoulder, man to man (the son being more of a man these days than the father)—one last hunting trip for Larry to savor and, after he died, for Bruce to cherish. But football was keeping Bruce home. He had practice this afternoon and a game tomorrow night.

Rachel put her head in at the window. Her lips hovered before her husband, brushing light kisses across his forehead and temple. Backing away, she looked across at Chris with her most genuine smile, the one he read as a sign of their love, a sad and splendid smile. He started

the car. In his mind's eye, the faces of those he loved were always the most elusive, and as he called goodbye and pulled away from the curb, he kept his gaze on Rachel, trying to inscribe her face in his memory. He did this whenever they parted. Last time he had concentrated on her gray eyes, blue at the center. The time before that, on the matched pair of curving creases that parenthesised her lovely mouth. Now he took in her cheekbones. They were prominent cheekbones, wide and lightly freckled. They colored with feeling as she waved goodbye.

"Better watch where you're going," said Larry.

Chris wrenched the wheel to avoid running up on the curb. He switched on the windshield wipers (the car had been plastered by wet leaves from the Quinns' elm) and thought how essential were good cheekbones to a woman's beauty. Cheekbones guided you into her eyes, into her soul. He looked in the mirror and caught a glimpse of Rachel turning in a pirouette on her way to the house—her arms out, the hem of her bathrobe floating wide, her head thrown back. In this little dance signifying the joy of release, her hair was a blur of copper sunlight, her robe a swirl of blue. Her ankles flashed white against the dripping shrubbery.

Larry said, "I didn't sleep well last night." He leaned forward and pushed in the lighter, then fumbled in the pockets of his jacket for a cigarette. He found none. "I can't walk, Chris. What the hell am I going hunting for?"

Chris switched off the wipers, turned a corner and speeded up. "Don't tell me I'm in for four days of self-pity. Get happy, we're off on a holiday."

Larry turned to him, blinking. "Tell you what, I'll lay off the self-pity if you lay off the goddamn happiness." He crossed his arms and looked perturbed.

"Fair enough."

"This weekend let's try not to think of you as a counselor and me as an invalid."

"Right."

"Let's try not to think of this trip as therapy. As long

as we're going duck hunting, let's think of it as a duck-hunting trip, okay?"

"Fair enough."

"So get your mind off counseling for a while. Put it where it belongs—on the stinking muck of Delta Marsh."

Which was precisely where Chris's mind had been for the past sixty days—the Manitoba bogland, where Larry, between now and Sunday, would die.

Speeding west, they met a glut of traffic moving into the city—factory workers, nurses, gas pumpers, janitors, policemen and all others whose shift would begin at eight. Ordinarily Chris's day, too, began at eight, but he was on a two-day leave—to settle some business, he had told the dean. It was the truth.

Beside the highway were clusters of pine trees—angular, green-brown. Also clusters of garish signs announcing hamburgers and gas. The signs diminished as they drove, the pines grew thicker. It had been a summer and autumn of ample rain. The forestland was luxuriant. Last night's downpour had snarled and matted the thick weeds in the roadside ditches. The highway curved around a lake. Larry gazed at the water.

"Chris, you know what I'd like to do more than anything else in the world?" He sounded wistful.

"Yes."

"No, you don't."

"But I do. You'd like to write a history of Minnesota." For as long as Chris had known him—eighteen years—Larry had been meaning to write the definitive state history.

"No, that's out of the question. What I'd like more than anything is to stop and buy a pack of Old Golds."

"Fine."

"And another thing I'd like more than anything is to eat breakfast at a truck stop. I've had this great urge the last few years to someday eat breakfast at a truck stop. I told Rachel no breakfast this morning, we'd eat along the way."

"We'll do that. We're about ten minutes from Buster's."

"What's Buster's?"

"Buster's Truck Corral. Buster has it all—sassy waitresses, picture postcards, Old Golds."

"Park close to the door. My walker isn't designed for long distances."

In a moment Larry was asleep, his arms crossed, his head drooping forward, his cheek flexing in a spasm of nerves.

3

At Buster's Truck Corral, Chris lifted the walker out from the back seat, snapped it open and set it before Larry's door on its rubber-tipped feet. Larry swung, or rather threw, his legs out onto the ground and Chris helped him to stand.

The walker was new. Until this fall Larry had used a crutch; before that, two canes; before that, one cane. Two years ago his two legs were enough. As Larry's legs failed him, Chris had been fascinated by Rachel's reaction. About the time Larry got his first cane, Rachel began taking long slow walks with him in the late afternoon when she got home from work (her work that year was social work); and when he got his second cane and she could no longer draw him away from their yard, she set off alone, jogging. By the time he got his crutch she was jogging twice a day in a new running outfit—maroon with white piping, shorts in warm weather, sweatpants in cold. The day he got his walker she became a compulsive runner; now she ran six miles a day if it wasn't raining, two miles if it was. She ran in the narrow valley behind her house—an eye-shaped depression of land at the center of the city through which the Badbattle River flowed. From her back door she followed a path downhill through a cemetery and came out on Badbattle Drive, which led along the east side of the river to an amusement park half a mile downstream. There she crossed the river on a wooden footbridge and came back along a bike trail on the west bank, crossed another bridge and returned home through the cemetery. High above the bike trail on the west bank stood the apart-