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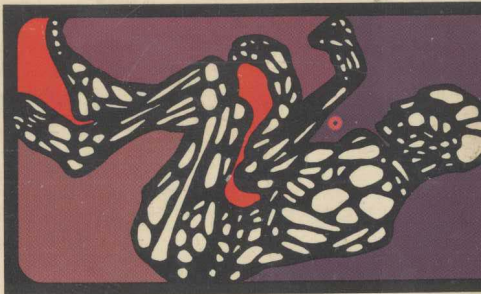
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The Underground Man

by **ROSS
Macdonald**

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tale of crime in California by a
master of the detective novel.



author of THE GOODBYE LOOK

THE UNDERGROUND MAN

Ross Macdonald



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NOT ONE WORD HAS BEEN OMITTED.*



THE UNDERGROUND MAN

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THE UNDERGROUND MAN
Ross Macdonald's best book

"Stunning achievement . . . In our day it is for such a novel as **The Underground Man** that the detective form exists. I think it also matters that it is the detective form, with all its difficult demands and its corresponding charms, that makes such a novel possible. What gives me special satisfaction about this novel is that no one but a good writer—THIS good writer—could have possibly brought it off. **The Underground Man** is Mr. Macdonald's best book yet. It is not only exhilaratingly well done; it is also very moving."

—Eudora Welty, *The New York Times Book Review*

"**The Underground Man** is pure Macdonald—that is, it's a relentlessly unsentimental mystery-thriller that doubtless will just happen to be one of the best 'straight' novels of the year."

—*The National Observer*

"In **The Underground Man** Archer Macdonald are working together at their peak, producing together a most modern American tragedy, making literature out of the thriller form, gazing more clearly than ever into the future as it rolls through the night."

—*Newsweek*

THE UNDERGROUND MAN

"Macdonald spins an intricate plot . . . set in a background called West Coast Affluent. Macdonald's writing never yells. He prefers to grab the reader with sudden, unexpected insights and images. For illuminating language and psychological richness, nobody in the detective story field can top Ross Macdonald."

—Joseph Shallit, *The Philadelphia Bulletin*

"He weaves some of the most intriguing, complicated and logical plots you can find in any suspense books, and this is the best . . . of the detective novels he has written. He's so talented that the only way to consider him is as a novelist, first, who happens to write about people and their troubles through the device of the detective story. So that, after you have enjoyed his plots, you take much more away from a Lew Archer novel than just that. Ultimately, this is the strongest appeal of the Ross Macdonald books: Lew Archer's humanity. Looking at the world with those seen-it-all perceptive eyes, he knows its evil . . . and yet he finds good, too, and reason for hope and forgiveness. In a child's unblemished innocence, a woman's love, a son's sacrifice, he discovers a justification for the pains of the human condition."

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THE UNDERGROUND MAN

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THE WAY SOME PEOPLE DIE
THE UNDERGROUND MAN
THE ZEBRA-STRIPED HEARSE**

I

A rattle of leaves woke me some time before dawn. A hot wind was breathing in at the bedroom window. I got up and closed the window and lay in bed and listened to the wind.

After a while it died down, and I got up and opened the window again. Cool air, smelling of fresh ocean and slightly used West Los Angeles, poured into the apartment. I went back to bed and slept until I was wakened in the morning by my scrub jays.

I called them mine. There were five or six of them taking turns at dive-bombing the window sill, then retreating to the magnolia tree next door.

I went into the kitchen and opened a can of peanuts and threw a handful out the window. The jays swooped down into the yard of the apartment building. I put on some clothes and went down the outside stairs with the rest of the can of peanuts.

It was a bright September morning. The edges of the sky had a yellowish tinge like cheap paper darkening in the sunlight. There was no wind at all now, but I could smell the inland desert and feel its heat.

I threw my jays another handful of peanuts and watched the birds scatter on the grass. A little boy in a blue cotton suit opened the door of one of the downstairs apartments, the one that was normally occupied by a couple named Waller. The boy looked about five or six. He had dark close-cropped hair and anxious blue eyes.

"Is it all right if I come out?"

"It's all right with me."

Leaving the door wide open, he moved toward me with exaggerated caution, so as not to frighten the birds. The jays were swooping and screeching, intent on outwitting each other. They paid no attention to him.

"What are you feeding them? Peanuts?"

"That's right. Do you want some?"

"No thanks. My daddy's taking me to visit my grandma. She always gives me a lot of stuff to eat. She feeds birds, too." After a silence, he added: "I wouldn't mind feeding the jays some peanuts."

I offered him the open can. He took a fistful of peanuts and flung them on the grass. The jays came swooping. Two of them started to fight, raucously, bloodlessly.

The boy turned pale. "Are they killing each other?" he said in a tense small voice.

"No. They're just fighting."

"Do jays kill other birds?"

"Sometimes they do." I tried to change the subject: "What's your name?"

"Ronny Broadhurst. What kind of birds do they kill?"

"Young birds of other species."

The boy lifted his shoulders and held his folded arms close to his chest, like undeveloped wings. "Do they kill children?"

"No. They're not big enough."

This seemed to encourage him. "I'll try one of the peanuts now. Okay?"

"Okay."

He placed himself in front of me, face up and squinting against the morning light. "Throw it and I'll catch it in my mouth."

I threw a peanut, which he caught, and after that quite a few others. Some he caught and some fell in the grass. The jays were all around him like chunks of broken sky.

A young man in a peppermint-striped sport shirt came into the yard from the street. He looked like a grown-up version of the boy and gave the same impression of anxiety. He was puffing rapidly on a thin brown cigarillo.

As if she had been watching for the man, a woman with her dark hair in a pony-tail stepped out through the open door of the Wallers' apartment. She was pretty enough to make me conscious that I hadn't shaved.

The man pretended not to see her. He spoke to the boy formally: "Good morning, Ronald."

The boy glanced at him but didn't turn. As the man and the woman moved on him from different directions, the boy's face had lost its look of reckless pleasure. His small body seemed to grow smaller as if under the pressure of their meeting. He answered the man in a tiny voice:

"Good morning."

The man turned brusquely to the woman. "He's afraid of me. What have you been telling him, for God's sake?"

"We haven't been talking about you, Stan. For our own sake."

The man thrust his head forward. Without moving his feet, he gave the impression of attacking. "What does that mean, 'for our own sake'? Is that an accusation?"

"No, but I can think of a few if you like."

"So can I." His eyes moved in my direction. "Who's Ronny's playmate? Or is he *your* playmate?" He brandished the hot-tipped cigarillo in his hand.

"I don't even know this gentleman's name."

"Would that make a difference?" He didn't look at me.

The woman's face lost its color, as if she had become suddenly ill. "This is hard to take, Stan. I don't want trouble."

"If you didn't want trouble, why did you move out on me?"

"You know why." She said in a thin voice: "Is that girl still in the house?"

"We won't discuss her." Abruptly he turned to the boy. "Let's get out of here, Ron. We have a date with Grandma Nell in Santa Teresa."

The boy was standing between them with his fists clenched. He looked at his feet. "I don't want to go to Santa Teresa. Do I have to?"

"You have to," the woman said.

The boy edged in my direction. "But I want to stay here. I want to stay with the man." He took hold of my belt and stood with his head down, his face hidden from all adults.

His father moved on the boy. "Let go of him."

"I won't."

"Is he your mother's boyfriend? Is that what he is?"

"No."

"You're a little liar."

The man threw down his cigarillo and drew back his hand to slap the boy. I took hold of the boy under the arms, swung him out of reach, and held him. He was trembling.

The woman said: "Why don't you let him be, Stan? You can see what you're doing to him."

"What *you're* doing to him. I came here to take him on a nice trip. Mother's been looking forward to it. So what happens?" His voice rose in complaint. "I run into a nasty family scene, and Ron's all fixed up with a substitute father."

"You're not making too much sense," I said. "Ron and I are neighbors—very new neighbors. I only just met him."

"Then put him down. He's my son."

I put the boy down.

"And keep your dirty hands off him."

I was tempted to slug the man. But it wouldn't do the boy any good, and it wouldn't do the woman any good. I said in the quietest tone I knew:

"Go away now, mister."

"I've got a right to take my son with me."

The boy said to me: "Do I have to go with him?"

"He's your father, isn't he? You're lucky to have a father who wants to take you places."

"That's right," his mother put in. "Go along now, Ronny. You always get along better with your father when I'm not around. And Grandma Nell will be sad if you don't visit her."

The boy went to his father, head down, and put his hand in the man's hand. They headed for the street.

The woman said: "I apologize for my husband."

"You don't need to. He means nothing to me."

"He does to me, though, that's the trouble. He's so terribly aggressive. He wasn't always like this."

"He couldn't have been. He wouldn't have survived."

I meant this to be a light remark, but it fell heavily. The conversation died. I tried to revive it.

"Are the Wallers friends of yours, Mrs. Broadhurst?"

"Yes. Professor Waller was my adviser when I was in school." She sounded nostalgic. "As a matter of fact he still is my adviser. He and Laura both are. I called them at Lake Tahoe last night when I—" She failed to finish the sentence. "Are they friends of yours?"

"Good neighbors. My name is Archer, by the way. I live upstairs."

She nodded. "Laura Waller mentioned you last night, when she offered me the use of their apartment. She said if I needed any kind of help, that I could call on you." She gave me a small cool smile. "In a way I have already, haven't I? Thank you for being so kind to my little boy."

"It was a pleasure."

But we were ill at ease. As angry people do, her husband had left his impression on the morning. The scene he had made still echoed dismally in the air. As if to dispel it, she said:

"I just perked some coffee. It's Laura Waller's special grind, and it looks as if it isn't going to get used. Would you like a cup?"

"Thanks, but it wouldn't be a good idea. Your husband might come back." In the street I had heard a car door open and then close, but no engine starting up. "He's pretty close to violence, Mrs. Broadhurst."

"Not really." But her tone was questioning.

"Yes, really. I've seen a lot of them, and I've learned not to stir them up when I can help it."

"Laura said that you're a detective. Is that right?" Something that looked like a challenge had come up into her face.

"Yes, but this is my day off. I hope."

I smiled, but I had said the wrong thing. A hurt look darkened her eyes and pinched her mouth. I blundered on:

"May I have a raincheck, Mrs. Broadhurst?"

She shook her head, not so much at me as at herself.

"I don't know—I don't know if I'm going to stay here."

In the street the car door had opened. Stanley Broadhurst came back into the yard alone.

"Don't let me interrupt anything."

"There's nothing to interrupt," the woman said. "Where's Ronny?"

"In the car. He'll be all right after a little time with his father." He spoke as if the boy's father was someone else. "You forgot to give me his toys and animals and stuff. He said you packed them."

"Yes, of course." Looking offended with herself, she hurried into the apartment and came out with a blue nylon airline bag. "Give my best regards to your mother."

There was no warmth in her voice and none in his answer: "Of course."

They sounded like a couple who never expected to see each other again. A pang of fear went through me—dull, because I was used to suppressing fear. I think it was mainly fear for the boy. At any rate, I wanted to stop Broadhurst and bring the boy back. But I didn't.

Broadhurst went out to the street. I climbed the outside stairs two at a time and walked quickly along the gallery to the front. A fairly new black Ford convertible was standing at the curb. A blond girl or woman in a sleeveless yellow dress was sitting in the front seat. Her left arm was around Ronny, who seemed to be holding himself in a strained position.

Stanley Broadhurst got into the front seat. He started the engine and drove away in a hurry. I didn't get a look at the girl's face. Foreshortened by the height, she was all bare shoulders and swelling breasts and flowing blond hair.

The pang of fear I felt for the boy had become a nagging ache. I went into my bathroom and looked at my face as if I could somehow read his future there. But all I could read was my own past, in the marks of erosion under my eyes, the mica glints of white and gray in my twenty-four-hour beard.

I shaved and put on a clean shirt and started down-

stairs again. Halfway down I paused and leaned on the handrail and told myself that I was descending into trouble: a pretty young woman with a likable boy and a wandering husband. A hot wind was blowing in my face.

II

I walked past the closed door of the Wallers' apartment and down the street to the nearest newsstand, where I bought the weekend edition of the *Los Angeles Times*. I lugged it home and spent most of the morning reading it. All of it, including the classified ads, which sometimes tell you more about Los Angeles than the news.

I had a cold shower. Then I sat down at the desk in my front room, looked at the balance in my checkbook, and paid the phone and light bills. Neither was overdue, and it made me feel dominant and controlled.

While I was putting my checks in envelopes, I heard a woman's steps approaching the door.

"Mr. Archer?"

I opened the door. Her hair was up, and she had on a short stylish multicolored dress and white textured stockings. There was blue shadow on her eyelids and carmine lipstick on her mouth. Behind all this she looked tense and vulnerable.

"I don't want to disturb you if you're busy."

"I'm not busy. Come in."

She stepped into the room and gave it a sweeping glance which lit up its contents like radar blips, one thing after another, and made me realize that the furniture was rather worn. I closed the door behind her and pulled the chair out from the desk.

"Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you." But she remained standing. "There's a fire in Santa Teresa. A forest fire. Did you know that?"

"No, but it's fire weather."

"According to the radio report it flared up quite near to Grandma Nell's—to my mother-in-law's estate. I've been trying to get her on the phone. Nobody answers. Ronny's supposed to be there, and I'm terribly worried."

"Why?"

She bit her lower lip and got a trace of lipstick on her teeth. "I don't trust Stanley to look after him properly. I should never have let him take Ronny away."

"Why did you?"

"I have no right to deprive Stanley of his son. And a boy needs his father's companionship."

"Not Stanley's, in his present mood."

She looked at me soberly and leaned toward me with one tentative hand extended. "Help me to get him back, Mr. Archer."

"Ronny," I said, "or Stanley?"

"Both of them. But it's Ronny I'm most concerned about. The man on the radio said they may have to evacuate some of the houses. I don't know what's going on in Santa Teresa."

She raised her hand to her forehead and covered her eyes. I led her to the chesterfield and persuaded her to sit down. Then I went out to the kitchen and rinsed a glass and filled it with water. Her throat vibrated as she drank. Her long white-stockinged dancer's legs protruded into the shabby room as if from some more theatrical dimension.

I sat at the desk, half-turned to face her. "What's your mother-in-law's number?"

She gave it to me, with the area code, and I dialed direct. The phone at the other end buzzed urgently nine or ten times.

The gentle crash of the receiver being lifted took me by surprise. A woman's voice said: "Yes?"

"Is that Mrs. Broadhurst?"

"Yes, it is." Her voice was firm but polite.

"Stanley's wife wants to talk to you. Hold on."

I handed the receiver to the young woman, and she took my place at the desk. I went into the bedroom, closing the door behind me, and picked up the extension phone by my bed.

The older woman was saying: "I haven't seen Stanley. Saturday is my Pink Lady day, as he well knows, and I just got back from the hospital."

"Aren't you expecting him?"

"Perhaps later in the day, Jean."

"But he said he had a date with you this morning, that he had promised to take Ronny to see you."

"Then I presume he will." The older woman's voice had become guarded and more precise. **"I fail to see why it's so important—"**

"They left here hours ago," Jean said. **"And I understand there's a fire in your neighborhood."**

"There is. It's why I rushed home from the hospital. You'll forgive me now if I say goodbye, Jean."

She hung up, and so did I. When I went back into the living room, Jean was frowning at the receiver in her hand, as if it was a live thing which had died on her.

"Stan lied to me," she said. **"His mother was at the hospital all morning. He took that girl to an empty house."**

"Are you and Stanley breaking up?"

"I guess maybe we are. I don't want to."

"Who is the blond girl?"

She lifted the receiver in her hand and slammed it down rather violently. I felt as if she was hanging up on me.

"We won't discuss it," she said.

I changed the subject, slightly. **"How long have you and Stanley been separated?"**

"Just since yesterday. We're not really separated. I thought if Stanley talked to his mother—" She paused.

"That she'd take your side? I wouldn't count on it."

She looked at me in some surprise. **"Do you know Mrs. Broadhurst?"**

"No. But I still wouldn't count on it. Does Mrs. Broadhurst have money?"

"Am I—is it so obvious?"

"No. But there has to be a reason for everything. Your husband sort of used his mother's name to get Ronny away from you."

It sounded like an accusation, and she bowed her head under it. **"Someone's been talking to you about us."**

"You have."