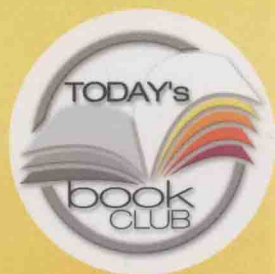


A NOVEL BY THE EDGAR-AWARD NOMINATED AUTHOR OF *OPEN AND SHUT*

DAVID ROSENFELT



BURY THE LEAD

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LEAD

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To Sara Ann Freed.

I am not a good enough writer to create a character with the grace, dignity, generosity, spirit, and courage that came so naturally to Sara Ann.

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AS SOON AS I WALK IN, the woman gives me the eye.

This is not quite as promising a situation as it sounds. First of all, I'm in a Laundromat. The actual name is the Lawdromat, owned by my associate Kevin Randall. Kevin uses this business to emotionally, as well as literally, cleanse himself of the rather grimy things we're exposed to in our criminal law practice. In the process he dispenses free legal advice to customers along with detergent and bleach.

Also, the woman giving me this particular eye is not exactly a supermodel. She's maybe four feet eleven inches tall, rather round, and wearing a coat so bulky she could be hiding a four-gallon jug of Tide under it. Her hair is stringy and most likely not squeaky clean to the touch.

Truth be told, even if we were in a nightclub and the woman looked more like Halle than Boysen Berry, I doubt I could accurately gauge the situation. I'm no better than average-looking myself and thus have almost no experience with women giving me the eye. In fact, though I'm not in the habit of counting offered body parts, it's safe to say that over the years I've gotten the finger more than the eye. And

I've probably gotten the boot more than both of them combined.

To totally close off any romantic possibilities in this encounter, I remain in love with, and totally faithful to, one Laurie Collins. So no matter how this round stranger tries to tempt me, I'm not about to engage in an early evening bout of tawdry Laundromat sex.

I notice that the woman's eyes start alternating between me and the door, though no one else is entering. And as I move in her general direction, she starts to inch toward that door. This woman is afraid of me.

"Hi," I say, figuring a clever opening like that will put her at ease. Instead, she just nods slightly and seems to draw inward, as if she wants to become invisible. "Kevin around?" I ask.

The woman mutters, "No . . . I don't know . . .," then gathers her clothes, which she hadn't yet put into the machine, and quickly leaves. In the process she bangs into Kevin's cousin Billy, who is just coming in. Billy runs the place when Kevin is not around.

"Hey, Andy. What's with her?" Billy asks.

"I'm not sure. I think she was afraid she might succumb to my charms."

He nods. "We've been getting a lot of that lately."

"What do you mean?"

Billy just points toward a shelf high up in the corner of the room, and for the first time I realize that there is a television up there. It's turned to local news, though the sound is off. There was a day when that would have been a problem, but now all the stations have that annoying crawl along the bottom of the screen.

The subject of the newscast is the murder of a woman last night in Passaic, the third such murder in the last three weeks. The killer has chosen to communicate and taunt the police through Daniel Cummings, a reporter for a local

newspaper, and in the process has created a media furor. The woman who just left is not alone in her fear; the entire community seems gripped by it.

"They making any progress?" I ask, referring to the police.

Billy shrugs. "They're appealing to the guy to give himself up."

I nod. "That should do the trick. Where's Kevin?"

"Doctor."

"Is he sick?" I ask, though I know better. Kevin has as many admirable qualities as anyone I know, but he happens to be a total hypochondriac.

Billy laughs. "Yeah. He thinks his tongue is swollen and turning black. Kept sticking it out for me to look at."

"Was it swollen?"

He shakes his head. "Nope."

"Black?"

"Nope."

"Did you tell him that?" I ask.

"Nope. I told him he should get it checked out, that he might be getting 'fat black tongue' disease." He shrugs and explains, "I'm a little short this month; I needed the hours."

I nod; the more time Kevin spends at the doctor, the more time Billy gets to work here. I hand an envelope to Billy; it had come to the office for Kevin. "Give this to him, okay?"

"You making deliveries now?" he asks.

"I'm on my way to the foundation."

Billy nods. "Listen, do me a favor? When you see Kevin, tell him his tongue looks like a bowling ball."

"No problem."



NEW JERSEY EXISTS in a sort of twilight zone. That is, if it exists at all. It is a densely populated, diverse collection of cities and towns, yet it has no identity. Half of it is a suburb of New York City, and the other half a suburb of Philadelphia. The Giants and Jets play football in Jersey, yet they deny its existence, referring to themselves as “New York.”

The most embarrassing part is that all the major TV stations that cover New Jersey are based in New York. Ottumwa, Iowa, has its own network affiliates, but Jersey doesn't. It should thus come as no surprise that those same stations treat Jerseyites as second-class citizens.

Stories about New Jersey are barely covered, unless they are simply too juicy to overlook. The recent murders have successfully crossed that high-juice threshold, and the networks are all over them. Even more pumped up are the national cable networks, and I've been invited to serve as an uninformed panelist on eleven of the shows that specialize in uninformed panels. I've accepted three of those invitations, and in the process I fit right in by bringing absolutely nothing of value to the public discourse.

My appeal to these shows is based on the fact that I've successfully handled a couple of high-profile murder cases in the last couple of years. I must've gotten on some list that is shared among TV news producers. "Let's see . . .," I can hear them say as they check that list when a New Jersey crime story comes up. "Here it is . . . Andy Carpenter. Let's get him. That'll fill twenty minutes."

The one question always posed to me on these shows is whether I would be willing to defend the murderer when he is caught. I point out that he wouldn't legally be a murderer until he's been tried and convicted, but this distinction is basically lost on the questioner and, I suspect, the viewing public. I ultimately and lamely say that I would consider it based on the circumstances, and I can almost feel that public recoiling in shock. "How," they collectively wonder, "could you defend that animal?"

I don't really have to worry about any of that, though, because the police don't seem terribly close to catching this particular animal. Instead, I can focus on other animals, specifically dogs. Right now I am on my way to the building that houses the Tara Foundation, a converted kennel that Willie Miller and I have turned into a dog rescue operation. We've self-financed it, which does not represent a major sacrifice. I inherited twenty-two million dollars last year, and about five months ago I secured ten million dollars for Willie in a civil suit against the people who conspired to wrongfully put him on death row for seven years. To put it another way, we are both filthy rich.

The foundation is named after my own golden retriever, Tara, whose official name is Tara, Greatest Living Creature on This or Any Other Planet. Willie is foolish enough to believe that his dog, Cash, is up there in Tara's class. I only occasionally mock this notion, since Willie is my partner, the foundation was his idea, and he does most of the work.

What we do is rescue dogs from animal shelters, where

they are about to be put to sleep, and then find them good homes. People come to us at the foundation, meet the dogs, and then have to endure a fairly rigorous application process to determine if we consider them to have a satisfactory home for our dogs.

As I enter the building, Willie is interviewing a fortyish couple who are interested in adopting Tyler, a three-year-old black Lab mix. Willie introduces me to the couple, Stan and Julie Harrington, and Stan makes it clear that he knows me from my TV appearances.

I take a seat across the room as Willie continues the interview. The Harringtons alternate answering, slightly anxious and clearly trying to ascertain what it is that Willie wants to hear.

“Where would the dog sleep?” Willie asks innocently, as if he’s just curious. Tyler, the dog whose sleep location is the subject being discussed, sits alongside Willie, his curiosity piqued as well.

This time Julie, fashionably and therefore incongruously dressed for these surroundings, brightens. “Oh, we’ve got a wonderful doghouse in the backyard.”

Stan nods in vigorous agreement, unaware that his wife has just blown what little chance they had of adopting Tyler. “I built it myself. It’s huge. There are *people* who would like to live in it.” He chuckles at the thought, then turns to Tyler. “Wouldn’t you like a great big doghouse?” He speaks in a form of baby talk.

Maybe it’s my imagination, but from my vantage point across the room, Tyler seems to edge closer to Willie, apparently aware that this couple are not going to become his new parents. And that great big outside doghouse that some *people* would like is definitely not going to be the place where he sleeps.

Willie and I have rather rigid ideas of what represents a good home for a dog. Stan and Julie have just demonstrated

that, in our eyes, their home doesn't make the cut. It is an unbending rule of the Tara Foundation that dogs must be allowed to sleep in the house.

I expect Willie to immediately terminate the session and send the Harringtons on their way, but for some reason he decides to delay the inevitable. He asks a question that sounds like a challenge. "Why do you guys want a dog?"

I see a quick flash of annoyance on Stan's face. He doesn't think he should have to answer all these questions; he should be able to buy a dog like he can buy anything else. "I had dogs when I was growing up," he allows. "I'm a dog person."

Willie doesn't seem moved by this revelation, and Julie, sensing things are not going well, jumps in. "He'll be like a member of our family. And he can guard—"

Willie interrupts, incredulous. "You want a guard dog?" He points to Tyler, who doesn't seem that offended. "You think he's a guard dog?"

His tone causes me to get up and walk toward them. Willie's generally been on his good behavior, but he can be volatile, and he's a black belt in karate, so there is always the potential for things to get a little ugly.

"Mr. and Mrs. Harrington," I say, "I'm afraid we don't have any guard dogs up for adoption."

Stan is getting frustrated. "We didn't mean a *guard* dog. We just want a dog that will bark if someone enters the property." He holds up a newspaper that is on the desk. "I mean with what's going on . . ."

He is of course referring to the murder last night in Passaic, the third victim of the serial killer who has dominated the news. It is pretty much all anyone is talking about. "Julie's alone in the house all day," he points out.

"Then why don't you adopt a goddamn burglar alarm?" Willie asks, standing and getting a tad hostile. I shoot him a look that says, "I'll handle this," but he disregards it. "Or

maybe you can adopt a fucking Secret Service agent.” These dogs are like his kids, and he’s not about to put them in the line of fire.

Stan gets up. He’s not going to confront Willie, since in addition to being a “dog person,” he’s a “sane person.” “I can see this was a mistake,” he says. “Come on, Julie.” She’s a little slow, so he helps her to her feet and guides her toward the door. The last thing I hear her say before they exit is, “But what about the dog?”

Willie shakes his head in disgust. “Losers.” Then he turns to me. “You know why losers like that come here? They don’t want no dog. They come here because of you, because they think you’re hot shit.”

Now I get annoyed, an increasingly frequent occurrence of late. “Fine. It’s my fault. Okay? Does that make you happy?”

He grins widely; Willie can change moods even faster than I can. He taps me on the shoulder. “Hey, lighten up, huh? You can’t help it if you’re hot shit.”

Willie is only partially right about why people like the Harringtons come here. The two big cases in the past year have made me a celebrity lawyer of sorts. But one of those cases was Willie’s, and as a wrongfully convicted man set free, he’s become a big shot in his own right. So people come here because they’ve heard of both of us and it’s a cool thing to do, rather than go to breeders or pet stores or whatever.

“We’ve placed thirty-one dogs,” I say. “That’s not bad for five weeks.”

He nods. “Damn right. Not bad at all.” Then, “You going to the meeting tomorrow?”

He’s talking about an informal investment group I made the mistake of organizing. I’ve regretted it from day one, which was about two months ago.

I nod reluctantly just as the phone rings, which now and

always sends the twenty-five dogs at the foundation into a barking frenzy. I pick it up and shout into the receiver, "Hold on!" I then wait the thirty seconds or so that it takes for the dogs to quiet down before I speak into the phone again. "Hello?"

"How can you stand that barking?" It's Vince Sanders, editor of what passes as the local newspaper in Paterson. Vince is always pissed off about something; this time the dogs just happened to have given him a good reason.

"Fine, Vince, how are you?"

"Did you hear what I said?" he snarls.

"I hang on your every word."

"Then hang on these. Come down to my office."

"When?" I ask.

"When? A year from August, bozo."

Although the "when" question didn't go too well, I decide to try another one. "Why?"

"You're still a lawyer, aren't you?"

"You want to hire me?"

He doesn't consider this a question worth answering. "Be here in twenty minutes."

Click.



VINCE SHOULD BE a happy camper these days. His paper's circulation has gone through the roof since the murders began, mainly because Daniel Cummings, through whom the killer has chosen to speak to the public and police, is one of Vince's reporters.

Vince brought Cummings in about six months ago from somewhere in Ohio, I think Cleveland. He made him his top crime reporter, although Cummings can't be more than thirty. I've only met him once, but he's a pretty easy guy for a defense attorney to dislike, a strong law-and-order type who clearly believes in a presumption of guilt.

I've known Vince for about a year. He's cantankerous and obnoxious on the surface, but when you chip that away and dig deeper, you find him to be surly and disagreeable. You probably could say Vince and I have become good friends, if your definition of "friends" isn't too rigid. We're not "Ya-Ya Brotherhood" types, but we hang out some in sports bars and trade insults, which fits my definition pretty well.

Vince usually starts off our conversations with five minutes of complaining, but he doesn't do that when I arrive

this time. Instead, he offers me a chair and starts telling me what's on his mind, almost like a normal human would do. "I want to hire you," he says.

Since I'm a criminal attorney, I'm surprised. Under all the bluster, Vince is a straightforward, ethical guy. "Are you in some kind of trouble?" I ask.

"Of course not. I want you to represent the paper. Not officially. Like a consultant."

Vince's paper is owned by a newspaper syndicate, which employs lawyers by the barrelful. "You already have lawyers. What do you need me for?"

"They're idiots. Besides, you'll be dealing only with me. They won't even know about you. You'll be my own private idiot."

I'm not understanding any of this. "So you're going to pay me?"

"Pay you? Are you out of your mind?"

My friends share two common views about money. They think they don't have enough, and that I have too much. "This is what I do for a living, Vince. I'm a lawyer. I got an A in money grubbing in law school."

He throws up his arms in an exaggerated gesture. "Fine. You want my money? No problem." He yells out so he can be heard beyond the closed office door. "Shirley! Don't mail that check to the Orphans Fund! I need it to pay the big-time lawyer!" He turns to me, shaking his head in disgust. "It's just as well. Little brats don't have parents, they think that entitles them to three meals a day."

I know that Vince is lying; I would know that even if he had a secretary named Shirley. But I'm not going to get any money out of him, and I'm curious as to what is going on, so I accept a jelly donut as a retainer. For the rather rotund Vince, it's a significant payment.

Vince describes his concern about the newspaper's position in the Daniel Cummings matter. He has no idea why the

killer has chosen Cummings as his conduit, and though he loves the resulting boost in circulation, as a journalist he's uncomfortable that his newspaper seems to have become part of the story.

"These last couple of weeks there have been more cops in here than reporters," he says.

"But you've been cooperating?"

"Of course. I mean, there's no source to protect, right? Daniel's only source is the killer, and he has no idea who he is."

"So what are you worried about?" I ask.

"I'm not sure. Nothing specific, but who knows where this is gonna go? Who knows what the cops are gonna ask us to do?"

This doesn't seem like Vince; he's usually far more confident and decisive than this. "Okay," I say, "I'll keep an eye on things. I'll have to talk to Cummings."

Vince nods. "I told him you would. Just so you'll know, he's not thrilled about it."

"Why?"

He shrugs. "He seems to think you're a major pain in the ass."

"You told him that?"

"I didn't use the word 'major.' I used the word 'total.' He also doesn't want you interfering with how he does his job."

I nod. "I don't expect to. Is he a good reporter?"

"As good as any I've ever had," he says. "When do you want to talk to him?"

"How's tomorrow morning? Around eleven? And I'll want the stories he's written on the murders to read through tonight. Plus the stories in the other papers."

"Done," he says. "Laurie back yet?"

I shake my head. "No."

"Maybe if you'd take on some clients, she wouldn't have