



jonathan

kellerman

monster

a
n
o
v
e
l

MONSTER

A NOVEL

JONATHAN KELLERMAN



RANDOM HOUSE NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. The characters and events
in it are inventions of the author
and do not depict any real persons or events.
Any resemblance to actual people or
incidents is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 1999 by Jonathan Kellerman

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions.
Published in the United States by Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously
in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

RANDOM HOUSE and colophon are registered
trademarks of Random House, Inc.

ISBN 0-679-45960-X

Random House website address: www.atrandom.com

TO THE MEMORY

of

KENNETH MILLAR

Special thanks to

DR. SPENCER ETH AND DR. SHOBA SRINIVASAN

MONSTER

1.

THE GIANT KNEW Richard Nixon.

Towering, yellow-haired, grizzled, a listing mountain in khaki twill, he limped closer, and Milo tightened up. I looked to Frank Dollard for a cue. Dollard appeared untroubled, meaty arms at his sides, mouth serene under the tobaccoed gray mustache. His eyes were slits, but they'd been that way at the main gate.

The giant belched out a bass laugh and brushed greasy hair away from his eyes. His beard was a corn-colored ruin. I could smell him now, vinegarish, hormonally charged. He had to be six-eight, three hundred. The shadow he threw on the dirt was ash-colored, amoebic, broad enough to shade us.

He took another lurching step, and this time Frank Dollard's right arm shot out.

The huge man didn't seem to notice, just stood there with Dollard's limb flung across his waist. Maybe a dozen other men in khaki were out on the yard, most of them standing still, a few others pacing, rocking, faces pressed against the chain link. No groups that I could see; everyone to himself. Above them, the sky was an untrammelled blue, clouds broiled away by a vengeful sun. I was cooking in my suit.

The giant's face was dry. He sighed, dropped his shoulders, and Dollard lowered his arm. The giant made a finger gun, pointed it at us, and laughed. His eyes were dark brown, pinched at the corners, the whites too sallow for health.

"Secret service." He thumped his chest. "Victoria's Secret service in the closet underwear undercover always lookin' out for the guy good old Nixon RMN Rimmin, always rimmin wanting to be rimmed he liked to talk the walk cuttin outta the White House night house doing the party thing all hours with Kurt Vonnegut J. D. Salinger the Glass family anyone who didn't mind the politics heat of the kitchen I wrote *Cat's Cradle* sold

it to Vonnegut for ten bucks *Billy Bathgate* typed the manuscript one time he walked out the front door got all the way to Las Vegas big hassle with the Hell's Angels over some dollar slots Vonnegut wanting to change the national debt Rimmin agreed the Angels got pissed we had to pull him out of it me and Kurt Vonnegut Salinger wasn't there Doctorow was sewing the Cat's Cradle they were bad cats, woulda assassinated him any day of the week leeway the oswald harvey."

He bent and lifted his left trouser leg. Below the knee was bone sheathed with glossy white scar tissue, most of the calf meat ripped away. An organic peg leg.

"Got shot protecting old Rimmin," he said, letting go of the fabric. "He died anyway poor Richard no almanac know what happened rimmed too hard I couldn't stop it."

"Chet," said Dollard, stretching to pat the giant's shoulder.

The giant shuddered. Little cherries of muscle rolled along Milo's jawline. His hand was where his gun would have been if he hadn't checked it at the gate.

Dollard said, "Gonna make it to the TV room today, Chet?"

The giant swayed a bit. "Ahh . . ."

"I think you should make it to the TV room, Chet. There's gonna be a movie on democracy. We're gonna sing 'The Star-Spangled Banner,' could use someone with a good voice."

"Yeah, Pavarotti," said the giant, suddenly cheerful. "He and Domingo were at Caesars Palace they didn't like the way it worked out Rimmin not doing his voice exercises lee lee lee lo lo lo no egg yolk to smooth the trachea it pissed Pavarotti off he didn't want to run for public office."

"Yeah, sure," said Dollard. He winked at Milo and me.

The giant had turned his back on all three of us and was staring down on the bare tan table of the yard. A short, thick, dark-haired man had pulled down his pants and was urinating in the dirt, setting off a tiny dust storm. None of the other men in khaki seemed to notice. The giant's face had gone stony.

"Wet," he said.

"Don't worry about it, Chet," Dollard said softly. "You know Sharbno and his bladder."

The giant didn't answer, but Dollard must have transmitted a message, because two other psych techs came jogging over from a far corner. One black, one white, just as muscular as Dollard but a lot younger, wearing the same uniform of short-sleeved sport shirt, jeans, and sneakers. Photo badges clipped to the collar. The heat and the run had turned the techs' faces wet. Milo's sport coat had soaked through at the armpits, but the giant hadn't let loose a drop of sweat.

His face tightened some more as he watched the urinating man shake himself off, then duck-walk across the yard, pants still puddled around his ankles.

"Wet."

"We'll handle it, Chet," soothed Dollard.

The black tech said, "I'll go get those trousers up."

He sauntered toward Sharbno. The white tech stayed with Chet. Dollard gave Chet another pat and we moved on.

Ten yards later, I looked back. Both techs were flanking Chet. The giant's posture had changed—shoulders higher, head craning as he continued to stare at the space vacated by Sharbno.

Milo said, "Guy that size, how can you control him?"

"We don't control him," said Dollard. "Clozapine does. Last month his dosage got upped after he beat the crap out of another patient. Broke about a dozen bones."

"Maybe he needs even more," said Milo.

"Why?"

"He doesn't exactly sound coherent."

Dollard chuckled. "Coherent." He glanced at me. "Know what his daily dosage is, Doctor? Fourteen hundred milligrams. Even with his body weight, that's pretty thorough, wouldn't you say?"

"Maximum's usually around nine hundred," I told Milo. "Lots of people do well on a third of that."

Dollard said, "He was on eleven migs when he broke the other inmate's face." Dollard's chest puffed a bit. "We exceed maximum recommendations all the time; the psychiatrists tell us it's no problem." He shrugged. "Maybe Chet'll get even more. If he does something else bad."

We covered more ground, passing more inmates. Untrimmed hair, slack mouths, empty eyes, stained uniforms. None of the iron-pumper bulk you see in prisons. These torsos were soft, warped, deflated. I felt eyes on the back of my head, glanced to the side, and saw a man with haunted-prophet eyes and a chestful of black beard staring at me. Above the facial pelt, his cheeks were sunken and sooty. Our eyes engaged. He came toward me, arms rigid, neck bobbing. He opened his mouth. No teeth.

He didn't know me but his eyes were rich with hatred.

My hands fisted. I walked faster. Dollard noticed and cocked his head. The bearded man stopped abruptly, stood there in the full sun, planted like a shrub. The red exit sign on the far gate was five hundred feet away. Dollard's key ring jangled. No other techs in sight. We kept walking. Beautiful sky, but no birds. A machine began grinding something.

I said, "Chet's ramblings. There seems to be some intelligence there."

"What, 'cause he talks about books?" said Dollard. "I think before he went nuts he was in college somewhere. I think his family was educated."

"What got him in here?" said Milo, glancing back.

"Same as all of them." Dollard scratched his mustache and kept his pace steady. The yard was vast. We were halfway across now, passing more dead eyes, frozen faces, wild looks that set up the small hairs on the back of my neck.

"Don't wear khaki or brown," Milo had said. "The inmates wear that, we don't want you stuck in there—though that would be interesting, wouldn't it? Shrink trying to convince them he's not crazy?"

"Same as all of them?" I said.

"Incompetent to stand trial," said Dollard. "Your basic 1026."

"How many do you have here?" said Milo.

"Twelve hundred or so. Old Chet's case is kinda sad. He was living on top of a mountain down near the Mexican border—some kind of hermit deal, sleeping in caves, eating weeds, all that good stuff. Couple of hikers just happened to be unlucky enough to find the wrong cave, wrong time, woke him up. He tore 'em up—really went at 'em with his bare hands. He actually managed to rip both the girl's arms off and was working on one of her legs when they found him. Some park ranger or sheriff shotgunned Chet's leg charging in, that's why it looks like that. He wasn't resisting arrest, just sitting there next to the body pieces, looking scared someone was gonna hit him. No big challenge getting a 1026 on something like that. He's been here three years. First six months he did nothing but stay curled up, crying, sucking his thumb. We had to IV-feed him."

"Now he beats people up," said Milo. "Progress."

Dollard flexed his fingers. He was in his late fifties, husky and sunburnt, no visible body fat. The lips beneath the mustache were thin, parched, amused. "What do you want we should do, haul him out and shoot him?"

Milo grunted.

Dollard said, "Yeah, I know what you're thinking: good riddance to bad rubbish, you'd be happy to be on the firing squad." He chuckled. "Cop thinking. I worked patrol in Hemet for ten years, woulda said the exact same thing before I came here. Couple of years on the wards and now I know reality: some of them really *are* sick." He touched his mustache. "Old Chet's no Ted Bundy. He couldn't help himself any more than a baby crapping its diaper. Same with old Sharbno back there, pissing in the dirt." He tapped his temple. "The wiring's screwy, some people just turn to garbage. And this place is the Dumpster."

"Exactly why we're here," said Milo.

Dollard raised an eyebrow. "That I don't know about. Our garbage

doesn't get taken out. I can't see how we're gonna be able to help you on Dr. Argent."

He flexed his fingers again. His nails were yellow horn. "I liked Dr. Argent. Real nice lady. But she met her end out there." He pointed randomly. "Out in the *civilized* world."

"Did you work with her?"

"Not steadily. We talked about cases from time to time, she'd tell me if a patient needed something. But you can tell about people. Nice lady. A little naive, but she was new."

"Naive in what way?"

"She started this group. Skills for Daily Living. Weekly discussions, supposedly helping some guys cope with the world. As if any of 'em are ever getting out."

"She ran it by herself."

"Her and a tech."

"Who's the tech?"

"Girl named Heidi Ott."

"Two women handling a group of killers?"

Dollard smiled. "The state says it's safe."

"You think different?"

"I'm not paid to think."

We neared the chain-link wall. Milo said, "Any idea why someone in the civilized world would kill Dr. Argent? Speaking as an ex-cop."

Dollard said, "From what you told me—the way you found her in that car trunk, all cleaned up—I'd say some sociopath, right? Someone who knew damn well what he was doing, and enjoyed it. More of a 1368 than a 1026—your basic lowlife criminal trying to fake being crazy 'cause they're under the mistaken impression it'll be easier here than in jail. We've got two, three hundred of *those* on the fifth floor, maybe a few more, 'cause of Three Strikes. They come here ranting and drooling, smearing shit on the walls, learn quickly they can't B.S. the docs here. Less than one percent succeed. The official eval period's ninety days, but plenty of them ask to leave sooner."

"Did Dr. Argent work on the fifth floor?"

"Nope. Hers were all 1026's."

"Besides total crazies and ninety-day losers, who else do you have here?" said Milo.

"We've got a few mentally disordered sex offenders left," said Dollard. "Pedophiles, that kind of trash. Maybe thirty of 'em. We used to have more but they keep changing the law—stick 'em here, nope, the prison system, oops, back here, unh-uh, prison. Dr. Argent didn't hang with them, either, least that I noticed."

"So the way you see it, what happened to her couldn't relate to her work here."

"You got it. Even if one of her guys got out—and they didn't—none of them could've killed her and stashed her in the trunk. None of them could plan that well."

We were at the gate. Tan men standing still, like oversized chess pieces. The faraway machine continued to grind.

Dollard flicked a hand back at the yard. "I'm not saying these guys are harmless, even with all the dope we pump into them. Get these poor bastards delusional enough, they could do anything. But they don't kill for fun—from what I've seen, they don't take much pleasure from life, period. If you can even call what they're doing living."

He cleared his throat, swallowed the phlegm. "Makes you wonder why God would take the trouble to create such a mess."

2.

TWO CORPSES IN car trunks. Claire Argent was the second.

The first, found eight months earlier, was a twenty-five-year-old would-be actor named Richard Dada, left in the front storage compartment of his own VW Bug in the industrial zone north of Centinela and Pico—a warren of tool-and-die shops, auto detailers, spare-parts dealers. It took three days for Dada's car to be noticed. A maintenance worker picked up the smell. The crime scene was walking distance from the West L.A. substation, but Milo drove over to the scene.

In life, Dada had been tall, dark, and handsome. The killer stripped off his clothes, bisected him cleanly at the waist with a tooth-edged weapon, dropped each segment in a heavy-duty black plastic lawn bag, fastened the sacks, stashed them in the Volkswagen, drove to the dump spot, most probably late at night, and escaped without notice. Cause of death was loss of blood from a deep, wide throat slash. Lack of gore in the bags and in the car said the butchery had been accomplished somewhere else. The coroner was fairly certain Dada was already dead when cut in half.

"Long legs," Milo said, the first time he talked to me about the case. "So maybe cutting him solved a storage problem. Or it was part of the thrill."

"Or both," I said.

He frowned. "Dada's eyes were taken out, too, but no other mutilation. Any ideas?"

"The killer drove Dada's car to the dump spot," I said, "so he could've left on foot and lives close by. Or he took the bus and you could interview drivers, see if any unusual passengers got on that night."

"I've already talked to the bus drivers. No memory of any conspicuously weird passengers. Same for taxi drivers. No late-night pickups in the neighborhood, period."

"By 'unusual' I didn't mean weird," I said. "The killer probably isn't bizarre-looking. I'd guess just the opposite: composed, a good planner, middle-class. Even so, having just dumped the VW, he might've been a little worked up. Who rides the bus at that hour? Mostly night-shift busboys and office cleaners, a few derelicts. Someone middle-class might be conspicuous."

"Makes sense," he said, "but there was no one who stuck in any of the drivers' memories."

"Okay, then. The third possibility: there was another car ready to take the killer away. Extremely careful planning. Or an accomplice."

Milo rubbed his face, like washing without water. We were at his desk in the Robbery-Homicide room at the West L.A. station, facing the bright orange lockers, drinking coffee. A few other detectives were typing and snacking. I had a child-custody court appearance downtown in two hours, had stopped by for lunch, but Milo had wanted to talk about Dada rather than eat.

"The accomplice bit is interesting," he said. "So is the local angle—okay, time to do some footwork, see if some joker who learned freelance meat-cutting at San Quentin is out on parole. Get to know more about the poor kid, too—see if he got himself in trouble."

Three months later, Milo's footwork had unearthed the minutiae of Richard Dada's life but had gotten him no closer to solving the case.

At the half-year mark, the file got pushed to the back of the drawer.

I knew Milo's nerves were rubbed raw by that. His specialty was clearing cold cases, not creating them. He had the highest solve rate of any homicide D in West L.A., maybe the entire department for this year. That didn't make him any more popular; as the only openly gay detective on the force, he'd never be invited to blue-buddy barbecues. But it did provide insurance, and I knew he regarded failure as professionally threatening.

As a personal sin, too; one of the last things he'd said before filing the murder book was "This one deserves more. Some felonious cretin getting bashed with a pool cue is one thing, but this . . . The way the kid was sliced—the spine was sheared straight through, Alex. Coroner says probably a band saw. Someone cut him, neat and clean, the way they section meat."

"Any other forensic evidence?" I said.

"Nope. No foreign hairs, no fluid exchange. . . . As far as I've been able to tell, Dada wasn't in any kind of trouble, no drug connections, bad friends, criminal history. Just one of those stupid kids who wanted to be

rich and famous. Days and weekends he worked at a kiddie gym. Nights he did guess what."

"Waited tables."

His index finger scored imaginary chalk marks. "Bar and grill in Toluca Lake. Closest he got to delivering lines was probably 'What kind of dressing would you like with that?'"

We were in a bar, ourselves. A nice one at the rear of the Luxe Hotel on the west end of Beverly Hills. No pool cues, and any felons were wearing Italian suits. Chandeliers dimmed to orange flicker, spongy carpets, club chairs warm as wombs. On our marble-topped drink stand were two leaden tumblers of Chivas Gold and a crystal pitcher of iced spring water. Milo's cheap panatela asserted itself rudely with the Cohibas and Churchills being sucked in corner booths. A few months later, the city said no smoking in bars, but back then, nicotine fog was an evening ritual.

All the trim notwithstanding, the reason for being there was to ingest alcohol, and Milo was doing a good job of that.

I nursed my first scotch as he finished his third and chased it with a glassful of water. "I got the case because the Lieutenant assumed Dada was gay. The mutilation—when homosexuals freak, they go all the way blah blah blah. But Dada had absolutely no links to the gay community, and his folks say he had three girlfriends back home."

"Any girlfriends out here?"

"None that I've found. He lived alone in a little studio place near La Brea and Sunset. Tiny, but he kept it neat."

"That can be a dicey neighborhood," I said.

"Yeah, but the building had a key-card parking lot and a security entrance; the landlady lives on the premises and tries to keep a good clientele. She said Dada was a quiet kid, she never saw him entertain visitors. And no signs of a break-in or any burglary. We haven't recovered his wallet, but no charges have been run up on the one credit card he owned—a Discover with a four-hundred-dollar limit. The apartment was clean of dope. If Dada did use, he or someone cleaned up every speck."

"The killer?" I said. "That fits with the clean cut and the planning."

"Possibly, but like I said, Dada lived neat. His rent was seven hundred, he took home twice that a month from both jobs, sent most of his money back home to a savings account." His big shoulders dropped. "Maybe he just ran into the wrong psychopath."

"The FBI says eye mutilation implies more than a casual relationship."

"Sent the FBI the crime-scene data questionnaire, got back double-talk and a recommendation to look for known associates. Problem is, I can't locate any friends Dada had. He'd only been out in California for nine months. Maybe working two jobs prevented a social life."

"Or he had a life he hid."

"What, he *was* gay? I think I would've unearthed that, Alex."

"Not necessarily gay," I said. "Any kind of secret life."

"What makes you say that?"

"Model tenants just don't walk out on the street and get sawed in half."

He growled. We drank. The waitresses were all gorgeous blondes wearing white peasant blouses and long skirts. Ours had an accent. Czechoslovakia, she'd told Milo when he asked; then she'd offered to clip his cigar, but he'd already bitten off the tip. It was the middle of the summer, but a gas fire was raging under a limestone mantel. Air-conditioning kept the room icy. A couple of other beauties at the bar had to be hookers. The men with them looked edgy.

"Toluca Lake is a drive from Hollywood," I said. "It's also near the Burbank studios. So maybe Dada was trying to make acting connections."

"That's what I figured. But if he got a job it wasn't at a studio. I found a want ad from the *Weekly* in the pocket of one of his jackets. Tiny print thing, open casting call for some flick called *Blood Walk*. The date was one month before he was killed. I tried to trace the company that placed the ad. The number was disconnected, but it had belonged at that time to some outfit called Thin Line Productions. That traced to a listing with an answering service, which no longer serviced Thin Line. The address they had was a POB in Venice, long gone, no forwarding. No one in Hollywood's heard of Thin Line, the script's never been registered with any of the guilds, no evidence a movie ever got made. I talked to Petra Connor over in Hollywood. She says par for the course, the *industry's* full of fly-by-nights, most casting calls go nowhere."

"*Blood Walk*," I said.

"Yeah, I know. But it was a full month before, and I can't take it any further."

"What about Richard's other job? Where's the kiddie gym?"

"Pico and Doheny."

"What'd he do there?"

"Played games with toddlers. Irregular work, mostly birthday parties. The gym owner said he was great—patient, clean-cut, polite." He shot back whiskey. "Goddamn Boy Scout and he gets bisected. There has to be more."

"Some homicidal toddler who resented waiting in line for the Moon Bounce."

He laughed, studied the bottom of his glass.

"You said he sent money home," I said. "Where's that?"

"Denver. Dad's a carpenter, Mom teaches school. They came out for a few days after he was killed. Salt of the earth, hurting bad, but no help.