

BLACK AND WHITE, AND RED ALL OVER

An unpublished story

As the plane began its descent through the fists of solid looking white cloud I started to catch glimpses of the various sub-divisions that surrounded the city centre. They all looked weary from the summer temperature, as if they were trying to crowd into the skyscrapers and tower blocks of Downtown and Lexington, trying to find some shade from the sun. Atlanta in August is hot and humid.

I was visiting my sister. She had lived in Covington, about an hours drive from the city centre, for about four years, and I still missed her company at home in England. We were born just a year apart, and the family resemblance was unmistakable; physically at least. Amy was far bolder than I could ever be. For me it was an adventure just to travel to visit her. She had set up home and found work in a new country, where she initially knew no one, as casually as visiting the local supermarket. I could never imagine living in a different country.

When the plane landed at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport there was a round of grateful applause from the mixed British and American passengers. It had been an easy, if long, flight. I'd read, slept, watched a movie, and tried to eat the in flight meals. The nine hours had passed fairly quickly.

People jostled to get off the plane, rushed to get a good spot in the immigration queue, and then fidgeted and fussed when the process took longer than they expected. I knew it would take some time. This time around, courtesy of terror threats, they were finger printing and photographing everyone as they processed their paperwork of green visa entry cards and passports. We were all lucky we didn't leave it a day later to fly or we'd have got caught in the chaos from the plots to blow up ten or more planes in mid air with liquid explosives that was foiled in Britain. Flights were delayed for hours that summer.

I passed through immigration, got my suitcase from the baggage carousel, and then of course had to deposit it again in the double system Hartsfield has. The transit train took me the four stops to Arrivals and there, at last, I was able to take my suitcase off the conveyer belt, and look for Amy.

Whenever she collected me at an airport she always joked she would be holding up one of those homemade cardboard signs pickup drivers use to collect fares. 'I'll have, "Sis" on it,' she would say. She never did though, and usually we were so pleased to see one another that we didn't give it a thought. Keeping in touch on the telephone was okay. Messenger and Web Cam were better, but still not as good as the real thing.

My case rolled along easily on wheels and my hand luggage from the plane wasn't heavy. I walked across to the entrance doors; there were several entrances and exits. I didn't see her, but that wasn't a concern, she was not organised with time. It was just as likely she had finished a night shift at work and had over slept. She worked as a nurse in two of the city hospitals.

I had my cell phone with me, with her number programmed in. I pressed the buttons and listened to the ring tone, half an eye watching out for her, one ear listening for her cry of welcome. The phone rang about seven times before the answer message cut in. 'Hi, Amy is busy right now, but leave a message and I'll get back to you quickly unless you've pissed me off recently, when you can forget it.' Typical Amy.

I didn't leave a message. She'd be en route, maybe even in the car park opposite Arrivals, and the distraction of answering the cell phone might be dangerous.

A coffee at Starbucks was an option; there was one in sight of the Arrivals lobby. Or I could walk across to the car park and scout around. I decided to call her house, just in case there was a mix up and she hadn't even left yet.

Taking my case to a corner near the front of the airport I leaned on it while I pressed different buttons to call her house. She had lived in an apartment when she first came over, a small duplex with a cramped swimming pool shared with the other seven apartments. The house in Covington was further from work but gave her much more for her mortgage. Four bedrooms, open living areas downstairs and use of two communal pools and tennis courts.

The phone rang twice and someone picked it up. They didn't speak and I waited a couple of seconds before I spoke. 'Amy?' I could hear breathing but still no voice. 'Amy, is that you? Are you okay?' Then the receiver was put down, quite heavily, and the connection ended. Surely that couldn't have been Amy? She would have said something, even if it was only 'Shit, I should be at the airport.'

'Do you need any help, ma'am?'

I turned, the cell phone still clutched uselessly in my hand. There was a uniformed black man looking at me and waiting to hear my reply.

'My sister was supposed to meet me here.'

He waited for more, but when I looked helplessly at the cell phone again, he said, 'You need a cab?'

Next I knew he was marching my suitcase, with me trying to keep up with him, through the glass doors and was waving down a cab. I didn't know whether to check out the car park or not, so I got the taxi driver to drive round the different levels, but I couldn't see Amy's blue Honda.

I rang the house again but this time the answer phone cut in quickly, so I left a message. I did the same on her cell phone, trying not to sound worried.

Traffic around five in the afternoon in Atlanta is heavy. I settled down on the back seat wondering where Amy was, and knowing that I was stuck in the pine scented interior of this Saturn for at least the next hour.

We passed through the centre of the city, under bridges, through intersections. There was the Coca Cola factory on one side, the Atlanta Braves stadium on another. Buildings tall and modern, glass and concrete. A church spire, tall and somehow stately in this most religious state of Georgia. The 285 became the I-75.

The cab was one of those drivers who drive just to lane hop. It was like being on a Disney ride. Left, right, speed up, slow down. He was a dark skinned man of about forty and he offered nothing by way of conversation. The only emotion he showed was when we were forced to slow almost to a stop by the inside lane of the highway being cordoned off by police.

As the cab neared the blue flashing lights of the stationary police car I could see through the windshield that there were at least four police vehicles and an ambulance. The lane had been taped off with crime scene tape, and three burly policemen were trying hard to move the traffic along without all the cars stopping to stare.

It was always going to be an impossible task. Human nature dictates that we look at what scares us. A road accident might mean blood, we might see a person lying injured in the road, there might be a body at the wheel, and there might even be death.

The cab driver began to get quite animated. The proximity to violence clearly excited him. 'It's not a crash.'

'Excuse me?'

'The way they have the lane blocked off. Makes you think it's a road accident. It's not.'

'How do you know that?'

'It's an accident, car wreck, you get the ambulance if there's a fatality or serious injury, that's for sure. You get the patrol car, possibly even two or three. What you don't get is those guys.' With that he hooked a long, thick thumb at the window to indicate two men dressed in trousers and jacket rather than police uniform. The two men were talking to a tall slim black woman.

'Who are they?' I asked, not really that interested. Amy was still uppermost in my mind.

'Homicide detectives. That's a murder scene.'

As the cab crawled past the scene I could see clearly that it was not a crash. There was a car parked on the hard shoulder, its hazard warning lights flashing but it wasn't damaged at all. The cab had come to a complete standstill as we drew level. I could see the two detectives listening to the woman, taking down notes as she spoke. She was visibly agitated; she kept glancing behind her, at the car.

The trunk was open and at first I thought it was a rug, or a blanket, draped over the edge. The cab jerked forward, and the driver swore. When I looked back at the car I realised it wasn't a rug, or a blanket. It was a woman's dress, billowed up and covering the top half of her body.

'At last,' the driver said, as the traffic in front began to move a bit more freely.

At that moment, perhaps her attention attracted to the cab moving forward, the woman turned and looked at me. Her dark eyes fixed on mine and an expression of recognition passed over her face. She half smiled, the other half of her emotion registering fear.

She grasped the detective nearest to her on the arm, her other hand beckoning towards my cab. She began pointing at the cab, pointing at me. The cab was moving faster now, moving away.

The black woman was pulling at the detective's sleeve, propelling him around, trying to make him turn around and see me. I could see her mouth moving with agitation. 'That's her.' She seemed to be saying. 'That's her.'

The cab switched lanes as the traffic eased slightly. One of the detectives was holding the woman by the shoulders, attempting to restrain her without actually manhandling her. She was gesticulating wildly now, waving her arms in the general direction of the cab.

Then we were too far away from them for me to see properly.

The I-20 was busy, trees and vines on each side of the highway lanes replaced the city buildings as we entered the counties. I tried Amy's cell phone again, but there was no reply. Where was she?

'We're in Newton County now,' the driver said.

'It's not far now. Covington.' I gave him general directions to Amy's subdivision and he grunted understanding.

The roads became a bit more familiar as we got closer. I had visited her three or four times. The airfare was expensive and there was only so much holiday time I could take from work. It was Christmas last since I'd seen her.

We were on the road through her shopping district now, the 278. Huge advertising boards lined the street, local malls dominated. Every shopping area had

three or four places to eat; Chilli's, Applebee's, Waffle House, Chinese, Chick Filet, and of course McDonalds. Supermarkets were staggered along the street; Target, Wal-Mart, Eckards, Publix. And a proliferation of smaller stores, mainly nails and beauty bars, but also electrical stores, Blockbuster, bookstores. Every half mile there was a church, modern and large and catering for a diverse religious mix.

'Left at the gas station,' I told him.

The air conditioning was drying out my eyes, as I remembered it always did. It was a necessity in the humidity and heat, but it wasn't something I would ever get used to.

We passed the small Christian school on the right, the huge water towers in the distance. Houses were built well back from the road, trucks parked in the shade next to them. As we neared Amy's sub-division there was evidence that at least two more developments had been built this year. The Heights advertised 'from the mid 400's' meaning the houses would sell at around \$450,000. Druids Reach was from the 'mid 300's'. Amy's sub-division, as we turned into its modest gates, still had houses being built on it and advertised from 'the early 200's'.

The roads were well laid out and easy to navigate. Constructed from wood and without formal gardens the houses were nonetheless attractive and large. They were well spaced out as well, with none of the feeling of claustrophobia housing estates in England can suffer from, even when the equivalent prices might well be 'from the high 900's'.

Amy's car was on the driveway as we pulled up on the street outside her house. For some reason I checked the mailbox, but it was empty. The cab driver got my suitcase from the boot, made sure I had tipped him, and drove off without a backward glance.

I had a key to the house from my last visit. Amy had insisted I keep it 'Because you never know.' I pulled it out of my handbag, opened the screen door, and hesitated. Before using the key I rang the doorbell, three or four times. There was no answer. I tried looking through the opaque glass either side of the door but it was impossible to see inside. Wait, I thought I saw some movement. Surely Amy wasn't there after all?

I rang the bell again and knocked on the wooden door.

'She's not there, honey.'

I turned around to see Epiphany, a neighbour from across the street.

'Oh, hi, honey,' she said. 'I recognise you from last Christmas. And you're not Santa Claus.' She laughed a deep throaty laugh that set rolls of fat around her midriff wobbling.

'Amy's not home?'

'No, lovely, she went out. Do you want to come across to my house and wait for her? I have lemonade, or Mountain Dew if you like the sweet stuff.'

I shook my head. 'Thanks, but no. I have a key. I'll let myself in and wait here. I can unpack and freshen up.'

She began what I remembered would be a long conversation about London and the flight but I cut her off as politely as I could. All I wanted to do was find Amy.

The house was as untidy as I remembered it. Piles of paper covered the dining table, which was obviously used more as a working desk than for eating on. There was a half size pool table in the front lounge. I left my case and bag at the foot of the stairs that bisected the downstairs, and went through into the main living area and the kitchen. There were cups in the sink, two of them, evidence on a plate of a sandwich

having been eaten. There were magazines in a heap on the floor next to the sofa, and a blanket flopped on the sofa where someone had been resting.

In the back yard a lawnmower was left on the half cut grass. Upstairs Amy's bedroom was the usual clutter of clothes and makeup, with DVD's and CD's in piles around a TV and HiFi system. The bath was still damp, and two towels were hung casually on the side of it. The linen basket was overflowing. The bedroom that housed the computer was another untidy jumble of boxes and papers. The two smaller bedrooms were musty from disuse, though clean and relatively tidy.

I went back into the computer room. We had exchanged many emails about my trip, vague plans to visit Stone Mountain, get tickets to the newly built aquarium, and perhaps visit CNN. Lifting up a dried coffee mug I found a few pieces of paper clipped together, the last few emails. On the most recent message, where I had confirmed the flight arrival details, for the third exasperated time, Amy had written, 'Lands 4.20, means meet 5.30, time for quick meet with R.'

Who was R? Was that where my sister was instead of meeting me at the airport? A quick rush of anger that she had stood me up soon passed as I realised she would never do that. R would turn out to be a household issue, car insurance or something domestic. Nothing important.

Back downstairs I clicked the answer machine on the telephone. Six messages. Two were from work about a case she was working on, parents had logged a complaint. Two more were sales pitches, a technique obviously not restricted to Britain judging by the false friendship on offer. One was my message, my voice as always when I listened to it, sounding far more common than I believed it to be. The last message, in fact the first to be recorded because this machine played them in reverse order, was a man. 'It's me. I'll be at Ruby Tuesday. Midday.' Was this R?

I had nowhere else to go. I tried the cell phone again but got nothing. Amy kept the spare car keys in the top kitchen drawer. I had my license, and okay I wasn't yet on her insurance, but I found driving in America, especially on the local Covington roads, easy. I knew where Ruby Tuesday was from previous visits. Anyway the cab had passed it on the way in.

I felt foolish as I opened the right side door of the Honda, closing it quickly and moving round to get in the left hand drivers side. I put the keys in the ignition but before I put it into gear I opened the glove box. I don't know what I expected to find, but not a packet of cigarettes. I didn't know Amy smoked, and after our sister had died from cancer last year, I was surprised that she had started.

I pulled into the busy car park at Ruby Tuesday, but found a space. At the entrance the young Mexican was professional politeness as he queried 'table for one?' and ticked off a number on his list. A young black woman came to take me to my table.

'Hungry already?' she said as she set the menu in front of me.

I realised I *was* hungry, I had been up since six that morning, and it was now early evening, but with the five hours time difference I had been up and about for over sixteen hours, with little food. The woman told me her name was Candy, took my drink order, Coke, and said she'd be right back.

The restaurant was decorated in dark wood, with red and white striped tablecloths, and classical style pictures on the walls. I looked around the sparsely filled tables. I didn't expect to see Amy; it was well past the midday meeting time the caller had indicated. I didn't really know why I was here, but I couldn't think of anywhere else to be. I didn't have any contact details of any of her friends, and her cell phone continued to go straight to voicemail.

The server brought me my coke and a large glass of iced water. Just like the inside of the cab the air conditioning here was fierce.

‘Ready to order?’

I gave an order for a small Caesar salad to start, and then a sirloin steak, medium well, with fries.

‘Wow, after your lunch I wouldn’t expect you to be so hungry.’

I handed her back the menu. ‘I didn’t really eat lunch. You know what airline food is like.’

She looked confused. ‘Airline? Is your boyfriend a pilot?’

I sipped some Coke. ‘Is this an English - American language thing? Boyfriend?’

‘The guy you were in here with lunchtime?’ Then a look of concern washed over her face. ‘Shit, I’m sorry. Married, huh? No problem, I’ve lived a little myself.’

Before I could say anything she had hustled away, although a few minutes later when I glanced over to the kitchen area she was gossiping with a couple of other servers, and nodding in my direction.

The thing was, even though I didn’t know what she meant at first, after a little thought I realised that she had probably seen Amy earlier and thought I was my sister. When she came over with my salad starter, and a refill for my drink, I asked her.

‘The man you thought I was with over lunch. What did he look like?’

She smiled and spoke softly. ‘I didn’t see any man, sister. You were on your own.’

‘No, look you don’t understand. I wasn’t in here today...’

‘Now you come to mention it, you’re right. I have never seen you before.’

‘It wasn’t me, it was my...’

‘But I sure do love your accent. Where are you from?’

I gave up. Ate my salad, and the steak that followed. I felt better for having eaten but felt totally frustrated that Amy had been here and I was no nearer knowing where she was. I was angry too. It was typical of her casual attitude to life that she would leave me to fend for myself.

I called the server over and asked for the bill.

‘Was everything okay?’

‘It was good,’ I said. I paid the bill, leaving a few dollars tip, and went back outside into the pulsating heat. It was moving towards dusk but I was still damp with perspiration before I got into the car.

It wasn’t until I was actually sitting in the seat that I realised that once again I had automatically got into the passenger’s side. I opened the door to get out when I was conscious there was someone sitting at the wheel.

‘Amy!’

She turned to look at me, an enigmatic smile on her lips and, just barely noticeable, in her eyes.

‘Amy, thank God you’re here. Where the Hell have you been?’

She put the car in gear, looked quickly behind her, and reversed out of the parking space.

‘Amy, what’s going...?’

She switched gears, pressed the accelerator, and the car smoothed forward towards the exit. Only there was a car coming in, using the wrong entrance. Amy swung the wheel to the right and the car swerved in front of the oncoming Buick, who honked his horn. We were driving too fast for a parking lot, and seemed to be moving in a meandering series of curves rather than driving in a straight line.

‘Amy. Where have you been?’

She looked at me and her mouth opened wide. A scream poured out, and it seemed to me as if it had a physical solidness about it. Her lips folded back over her chin and under her nose, the teeth appeared to sink into their gums, so that it was like looking into a deep and dark cave. The scream got louder and more chilling. It filled the interior of the car, bouncing off the windows, rattling into my head.

Then the car hit something, and I must have passed out.

It can only have been a few seconds before my eyes opened. I was sitting at the wheel. There was no one beside me. A smell of cigarette smoke pervaded the interior. I had a cigarette between the second and third fingers of my right hand, the filter crushed in my clenched fist.

I opened the door and got out. I wasn’t hurt and there didn’t seem to be much damage to the car. It had hit a bank of earth and bushes, so there were a few superficial scratches to the paintwork.

It wasn’t blocking anyone’s entrance or exit so I left the car there. Removed the keys and my handbag and marched back to Ruby Tuesday.

The same Mexican boy began his welcoming speech but then a flicker of recognition passed across his smooth features.

‘What’d you forget?’ He smiled.

‘Can I see Candy?’

‘She’s on her break.’

‘Can you get her, please? I need to see her.’

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. ‘I don’t want any trouble.’

I shook my head. ‘She’s not in any trouble. I won’t cause any trouble.’

‘Your boyfriend...’

Candy had obviously embellished her version of the story. ‘Can you call Candy, please?’

The restaurant was full now, the noise level was high, voices talking, laughter, cutlery chinking on plates, TV screens blasting out sports and music channels. Normal everyday life.

After a short delay Candy came out to reception. She looked nervous. I reassured her that I wasn’t annoyed with her. She wasn’t in any trouble.

‘It really wasn’t me at lunchtime. It was my sister. We look alike. I’m over from England, visiting her, except she didn’t meet me at the airport as we planned. I can’t contact her on her cell. She’s not at home. Look, you saw her with a man. Do you know who he is?’

‘I don’t want it coming back on me.’

‘You know him?’

‘Sure, I know him, everyone knows him. He’s not the kinda guy you’d be happy your sister hanging with.’

My stomach lurched as a knot of fright bunched inside me. ‘What kind of man?’

‘Look, all I’m saying is he might be known to the police. Is all I’m saying.’

‘What’s his name?’

She shook her head. ‘I shouldn’t be doing this. He is not a nice man.’

‘I have no choice. I have to find Amy.’

She looked around before saying quietly, ‘Ray Morrison.’

‘Where can I find him?’

She gave me a street name, but no number, and general directions where it was.

Back outside, night had fallen and although it was still stiflingly humid, the heat had diminished a little. I got in the drivers side of the car and pressed the cigarette lighter. The car reversed, and as I put it into drive, I lit a cigarette.

The neighbourhood was a couple of junctions along the I-20 near the Stone Crest shopping mall. I got on to the highway, already familiar with the filtering lane system and the fluctuating speed limits. I kept at a steady 55 until the sign for my exit came up. I indicated, moved to the right, and left the highway.

After a few wrong turns I finally found the sub-division I was looking for. It was pretty rundown. Cars were older, and although it was as clean and as litter free as most of Georgia, there was blanket of despair fluttering over the whole neighbourhood.

I took a right turn and knew I wouldn't have to knock on anyone's door for directions. The scene ahead of me told me where Ray Morrison's house was.

There was a herd of police cars blocking one end of the street. They were congregated in front of one house. The house was ablaze and three fire tenders were hosing furiously.

I drove a little closer.

Crime tape blocked off the street, keeping back a crowd of neighbours and onlookers. I parked the car, locked it, and walked through the crowd, pushing gently to move to the front.

The heat from the flames was fierce. Uniformed officers were standing keeping watch on the people, glancing every now and then back at the house. I saw an ambulance pull up and as it opened its back doors a stretcher was carried from the house, a slim body covered by a sheet. The sheet was smeared with red blood. They lifted it up towards the back of the ambulance, and as they did so the sheet fell away from the face.

I knew who it would be, and, sadly, I was right.

The two detectives I had seen by the crime scene on the way from the airport were leading a white man out of the house. He was dressed in dirty white shirt and crumpled blue trousers. Both garments were splashed with red all over. His hands were held loosely in front of him, handcuffed. Each detective had a hold on each of his arms, and both had guns in their other hand.

People in the crowd called out the mans name, although I already knew it was the man I was looking for.

He looked up and lifted his arms to wave to them. He must have seen me. A look of dread and desire passed over his face.

I couldn't hear what he said to them but he was pointing as best he could in my direction.

Then he shouted. 'That's her. Amy!'

I turned and ran. I was almost at the car when two men caught up with me, and spun me round. When they saw my face they took a step backwards.

'You can't be her,' one of them said.

I got in the car, swung it around in one turn, and headed back into town. 'Yes I can,' I mumbled to myself.

I parked the car back on the drive and opened the storm porch door. I turned before opening the front door. Epiphany was sitting, as she often did, in an old lounge on the front step. I waved and she smiled back, calling out something that I didn't catch.

It was warm indoors so I turned up the air conditioning. I switched on the TV. 'That's what Sonny did. Why would you ever want to go back?' It was political advert time.

I poured some water and ice from the refrigerator, and lit a cigarette.

There were several messages on the telephone, which I listened to. They included one from a common sounding English girl. I deleted them all.

I rang a couple of friends who were pleased to hear from me. The new intern at work in particular wanted to make plans for tomorrow. I told him he could pick me up around noon.

In the morning I would tidy some of the rooms. I couldn't live in this clutter any longer.

Things were going to be different around here from now on.