

LAWRENCE MATHEWS

Scar

IN THE FIRST PLACE, I'm really bad with faces, I said. Really bad. That's OK, said the one detective. We just want your honest take, that's all.

It was like on TV. There we were, in the room with the one-way glass. The suspects on the other side. Me and the two detectives and the defence lawyer on this. A nicely confined space. I felt safe.

Faces, I don't know, I said. Body types, I'm better on. Skin colour, one hundred per cent. And names. Never forget a name. Or a voice. But faces, sometimes a complete blank. Sometimes I'll be approached on the street by someone I think I've never seen before, and after we exchange a few words I'll recognize the voice, and he'll be a close friend. Only then will the face make sense, after I've heard the voice.

The defence lawyer was making notes. He was a big guy, six-four maybe, with shoulder-length grey hair. His name was Roy C. Batterton.

Close friends are forever playing practical jokes on me, I continued, revolving around this issue of recognition.

Let's just get on with it, shall we, said the first detective. His name was Jack Merkley. He wore cowboy boots. I didn't particularly like him. There was something duplicitous in the very core of his being, I theorized, and this deficiency manifested itself in subtle ways in his bearing, gesture, and intonation.

The other detective was called Patrick Daniel. He hovered in the background and said almost nothing. Once in a while he'd belch softly.

Someone started to knock on the door, in a rhythm and volume traditionally employed to convey urgency.

So far I had told the truth, and nothing but.

My wife sat hunched on a stool in the corner of the room. I wondered, idly, if I would be able to recognize her if I didn't know who she was to begin with. I've devoted many years of study to her face. But the lighting here wasn't that great.

I decided to play for time.

Aren't you going to answer it? I asked, of the knocking.

Go away! said Merkley loudly, to the door. This isn't a good time. The knocking stopped for a moment, then picked up again. Holy-o baldheaded, said Batterton. Why don't they shut up? My wife began to giggle, somewhat hysterically. The knocking stopped. My wife's giggling ceased.

Merkley seemed relieved. Let's check out that lineup, he said.

Five people standing there. They all looked pretty much the same to me. Five white males, probably in their twenties. I looked hard and long, but it didn't help.

Take your time.

Was it my imagination, or was there an edge of sarcasm in his voice? It's the one in the middle, my wife said. He's the guy. You weren't even there, I pointed out. I'm sure it's him. He looks sneaky.

To me, he looked no sneakier than the others. They all looked sneaky.

We know she's upset, Merkley said. We'll just ignore that. Between you and me, she's way off base.

Hey hey, cut that out, Batterton said. Any more coaching, and I'll pull the plug on this sucker.

Daniel cleared his throat and said, We're all in this together, Roy. You know that. When you come down to it, it's our kind against theirs.

I got a client to represent. Indigent and ignorant though he may be, it's my sworn duty to do the best—

Put a cork in it, Roy, Merkley said forcefully. To me he said, Just focus on those faces. Any differentiating factors may be worth considering.

Five identical white males, all with that shifty look in the eyes that invariably implies up-to-no-goodness. One of them seemed to be snarling softly to himself, one smiled nervously, and the other three were completely impassive.

The pounding on the door started again, a different kind. Seemed like a battering ram. Fractured my concentration. What differentiating factor could there be?

It was getting dark, I said. I only saw him for a minute. And I am really bad with faces.

I had already decided not to tell them about the killing. Felt bad about it. Could be the man didn't know the Lord. Could be he went straight to hell. But I was justified. Man was trespassing. My property, broad daylight. As if he owned it and not me. What choice did I have?

Happened on the south-east lawn. Saw him from the gazebo. Chased after him with the John Deere. Cornered him down by the pine grove, where I had the ten-foot wall put in.

He knew what was coming. Stood there and faced me, as if he was daring me to do it. Didn't say a word. Totally inarticulate, no surprise there. Trespasser of the deepest dye. Looked him in the eye. Trespasser, I said. So he'd be in no doubt as to why one shot was enough, well-placed as I made sure it was.

Tied him on the back of the John Deere and hauled him off to this secret place I know. Didn't want the servants to see him. Keep things simple. Buried him in the secret place. Case closed, I thought.

I forgive him now, as Scripture enjoins me to do. Forgive him his trespass. Hope he's with the Lord. But he had no business on the south-east lawn.

The battering noise stopped.

What do you want? Merkle shouted. There's a lineup going on in here.

A voice from the other side of the door: We're a concerned group of godfearing citizens. Daniel belched before he spoke. Lynch mob, he said. First one in months. I be damned. What do you want?

We want that asshole you got in there.

I could tell by the body language of the other occupants of the room that I was the one being referred to.

He's busy selecting a criminal.

He's the criminal, said the voice. Murdered a trespasser only yesterday, down by the pine grove on his own south-east lawn. His servants got it all on video. We want justice.

Sorry about this, Merkley said to me. We don't know anything about that, he said to the voice. Ask him, said the voice, where he was at 4:37 yesterday afternoon.

We got no probable cause. We're investigating something that happened at eight p.m. yesterday. Walked right up the north drive and through a flowerbed, my wife said. True enough, I never saw him, but his footprints are all over the petunia bed. Tromped on a good many of them. Then he scared my husband half to death, staring in through the study window. Go away and come back later, Merkley said to the door. Or don't come back at all, Daniel said.

Murdered a trespasser, Batterton said pensively. I find that very interesting.

We're not going anywhere, said the voice. Oddly, I was unable to recognize it, despite my impressive track record in the voice department. Must be an outside agitator, I was thinking. Someone sent here to stir up trouble.

I could sense things slipping out of control. Let's pray about this, I suggested. The others had no choice but to comply, or pretend to.

As I prayed, I saw the face of the trespasser I had killed staring at me as he had the day before, standing by the pine grove on my perfect lawn. At least I saw a sort of generic face that *could* have been his. As I prayed, I explained to the Lord why I had acted as I had, and how I knew that He had blessed me by arranging for such a satisfactory result. After all, if the death of the trespasser had not been in His will, he could have arranged for the John Deere to run out of gas at a crucial point, or for my weapon to malfunction. But no, He had seen that my cause was just and had smiled down on me.

Amen, I said aloud. Let's wrap this up. I was sure that the Lord would bless me now.

I stared at the five identical faces on the other side of the glass. Then I saw the differentiating factor. Thank you Lord, I thought.

It's the one on the far left, I said. The one with the scar.

For in truth it came back to me now that as I had been seated at my desk the previous evening studying the Scriptures, the face pushing against the glass of my study window, ghostly as

it seemed in the dimness, sported, if that is the word, sported a scar, jagged and meandering, like a cartographer's depiction of a major river, a river with many tributaries, seeking without success the release of union with the sea.

The one on the far left. I'm sure of it.

I could tell by the lawyer's disappointed snort that I had picked the right man.

OK, we're done here, said Merkley.

We became aware of various small noises emanating from the general area of the keyhole. Somebody picking the damn lock, Daniel said. Godfearing lynchmob, most likely.

He opened the door with a theatrical flourish. A tall man was kneeling there, hands filthy with lock-picking equipment. Like so many people, he looked vaguely familiar.

It's Robert McMichael, my wife hissed, sensing my puzzlement.

My best friend. Of course. I knew him now. My best friend, but a man with whom I had recently quarrelled over a point of doctrine having to do with the issue of the pre-millennial rapture.

We got the body, McMichael said. A crush of ne'er-do-wells filled the corridor behind him.

I was taken aback, not so much by the revelation that McMichael was leading the mob as by the fact that I hadn't recognized his voice. Was I losing it completely?

Found it in the asshole's secret hiding place, McMichael continued, in his unfamiliar new manner of speaking. Turned out not to be so damn secret after all. A body, he repeated. How's that for probable cause? Good enough for us, ain't it, boys?

Affirmative grunts from the layabouts behind him.

Hang on now, Merkley said. We got to follow procedure here. We'll look into it, same as we would any other report of a trespasser's body found in somebody's secret hiding place.

Daniel belched loudly, a gesture I interpreted as supportive.

I confess to being somewhat intimidated. How had the rabble been allowed to get into the police station? Obviously through confederates on the force. Possibly Jack Merkley and Patrick Daniel were my last best hope for justice to prevail. I have already mentioned my earlier intuition about Merkley's character. By now I had a strong conviction that both men were hopeless reprobates, willing hosts to the worm of sinfulness even now doubtlessly gnawing through the metaphorical vitals of their respective souls.

Nonetheless I got behind Merkley, made sure he stood between me and McMichael.

Meanwhile my wife had begun to whimper, her perennial weakness of character beginning to reveal itself.

Let's all keep calm, said the lawyer. Everything's under control.

Easy for you to say, I thought. You with your pretentious white hat.

I backed into the glass and turned around.

The five men on the other side were shuffling about in confusion, waiting to be told what to do, as you would expect of people who could credibly be identified as trespassers.

My eye was drawn inexorably to the one on the left, standing apart from the others now, to the scar, to the point on the skin, the precise cartographical dot at which the blood first welled up from oblivion, *fons et origo* of our present condition.

I began to pray, again.