

Max

By James LePore

Max French pulled up the collar of his wool coat and looked down at Francis Lee's grave. Its temporary wooden marker was surrounded by wet raw earth and wisps of sparse grass. The sky above was dull and gray and had been spitting down large wet snowflakes for the past half hour. A typical winter day in the Pacific Northwest. Some rain, some snow, some more rain. The grave was on the top of a hill on which stood a lone, massive Douglas fir, its branches heavy with wet snow. It was surrounded by other Lee's: *Jade, Timothy, Rodney*, Francis' generation passing away. Alone in the cemetery, Max wished he had a hat. His head was getting soaked and he was tired from traveling for the last thirty hours. From Prague to Newark to Minneapolis to Seattle to Auburn. A wasted effort since he had missed Francis' funeral by five hours. He was glad though that he had made the effort. As soon as he read about Francis' passing on-line in the Auburn Reporter, a newspaper he read compulsively almost every day, he told Washington that he would have to skip the after party--the immediate interrogation of the survivors of the Megan Nolan affair--for personal reasons. Megan Nolan--the stunningly beautiful Megan Nolan--had been much on his mind, the amazing thing she had pulled off--when he boarded the plane in Prague. But as he got closer and closer to Auburn, his thoughts turned more and more to Francis Lee and that summer night in 1982 when their paths crossed for the last time.

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Max could never be sure, but he thought he saw his stepfather kill his mom. He might have been dreaming but then again there she was in the morning on the trailer floor, her head in a pool of blood, a fat kitchen knife resting in the curled fingers of her right hand. Had he actually seen her run to the kitchen drawer, grab the knife and turn to take the full force of the channel wrench against her temple? Heard his stepfather's visceral grunt as flesh and bone gave way to steel? The psychiatrist the county sent him to told him that either way he was in a state of shock. His psyche had received a mighty blow, from which it would take a long time to recover. Maybe never. He liked the psychiatrist, Dr. Lee. He was twelve then and thought for a long time that all psychiatrists were kindly old Chinese-American men who spoke the plain truth. *You may never get over it, Max, he had said, start from there.*

Max liked Dr. Lee. He liked going to his shabby but comfortable office in downtown Auburn, the city south of Seattle where he and his mom, Marie, and his new stepfather, Jake, had moved two years earlier when Marie and Jake got married. He only saw Dr. Lee four times--the county wouldn't pay for more than that--but he still remembered everything they said to each other and every detail of the office. The wall of books. The dying plants on either side of the one window. The intricate pattern and colors of the first "Oriental" rug he had ever seen.

"I fell asleep reading," Max had said. "I forgot my bat." He had been sleeping with his baseball bat under his bed. His glove too, but that was a decoy.

"What were you reading?" Dr. Lee asked.

"The Carpetbaggers."

"How did you happen to choose that book?"

"My mom's."

"What else have you read?"

"I left my bat in the shed. I was too lazy to go get it. I fell asleep." The bat was to use on Jake the next time he beat up on him or his mom.

"If you were dreaming it wouldn't have mattered."

"I don't think I was dreaming."

Jake spent six years in jail, in the Washington State Penitentiary in Walla Walla. He claimed that Marie had attacked him. Since there were no witnesses, he was able to make a deal, five to ten with parole eligibility after five. Max' confusion--had he been dreaming or not?--had eliminated him as a witness. In the spring of 1982, Max, who would be starting college that fall, on a track scholarship from the University of Washington, went to the parole board hearing and testified that he had forgiven Jake. He was waiting outside the prison--the "Walls" the locals called it--on the July day Jake was released. He followed Jake. To a rooming house back in Auburn; in and out of bars; to a Korean massage parlor not far from Dr. Lee's office. When Jake took a job as a bouncer at Glass-X, a strip club that backed onto a lonely railroad right-of-way, Max drove by every night for a week, getting a feel for the rhythm of the place and the surrounding neighborhood, going in finally on a busy Friday night.

He was still a tough guy, his former stepfather, still scary. The dragon tattoos that had frightened and fascinated Max as a boy still rippled on Jake's forearms, now even more thickly muscled after six years of pushups at the Walls. He was still a thief as well, stashing a bottle of bonded bourbon in his gym bag when he thought no one was looking. And still an abuser of woman, grabbing the

strippers' asses whenever the mood struck him, once taking hold of one's arm so hard it made her cry. Max made eye contact with him on the way in, but if Jake recognized him he didn't show it. His eyes were dead, like his soul.

Max left early and got into the back seat of Jake's car, a piece of junk he parked in a dark back corner near a dumpster every night. He watched as the patrons trickled out; then at 2:15 the strippers in a group. At 2:30 the scripted neon *Glass-X* sign went out, and Jake and the manager, a thin black guy with a pencil mustache and the drowsy eyes of a crack smoker, emerged, exchanged a few words and headed toward their cars. Max watched Jake take a long piss against the side of the dumpster, at the same time listening to the manager's car start up and leave the parking lot, empty now except for Jake's car.

When Jake got in the driver's seat, smelling of alcohol, Max put a toy gun to his ear, a decent hardened plastic replica of a snubnose police revolver he had had since he was a boy.

"Its me," Max said, "Max. Your stepson."

Jake tried to turn to look at him, but Max pressed the gun hard into his ear and at the same time took hold of a hank of the half-drunk man's long greasy hair and gently pulled his head back.

"Don't make another move," Max said. "I don't want to have to kill you." Yet, he said to himself.

"Max," Jake said. "Max...they told me you testified for me at the parole board."

"I did. I wanted you to get out."

"Put the gun down, Max. Let's talk."

"O.K.," Max replied, putting the gun on the seat next to him and picking up from his lap a hunting knife that had

been among the things left behind by his father when he went to Viet Nam. Still holding Jake's stringy hair in his left hand, he put the point of the thick six inch blade against the nape of his mother's killer's neck.

"Is this better?" Max asked, jabbing the knife a half inch into Jake's neck, between two vertebra. Jake heaved and tried to pull away, but Max pulled him back hard by his hair. This movement drove the knife in, and--outside of himself now, seeming to be watching from somewhere above the action--Max drove it in to its hilt. He held on in that position, pushing the knife in and up, as Jake wildly clawed the air. Max pushed and pulled harder as the life drained out of Jake--Jake the abuser, Jake the woman killer--ending in one last convulsive spasm. Returning to himself, Max let go of the knife handle and the hair and nudged Jake's body forward.

Outside the car, Max calmly scanned the still empty parking lot before taking off the woolen gloves he'd been wearing and tossing them in the dumpster along with the toy gun. He held his hands in front of him for a second. They were rock steady. Before heading for his car, which was parked on the other side of the tracks behind an abandoned shack, Max turned for a last look at Jake. His cheek was resting on the steering wheel, his dead eyes staring into infinity. The polished wood knife handle with its brass bands at either end was protruding from his neck. He was bleeding from his mouth. Max recalled the gurgling sound as the knife reached Jake's throat and he began to choke on his own blood. Under that sound, deep in his bones, something was murmuring to Max, something that he would later identify as the lust to kill.

On his way out of town, a car pulled next to Max at a red light. Looking over, Max saw that the driver was Dr. Lee.

"Max," the psychiatrist said. "Is that you?"

"Yes," Max answered.

"It's me, Dr. Lee."

"Dr. Lee," Max said. "Hi."

"I tried to reach you," the doctor said. "Where have you been?"

"They put me in a foster home in Seattle."

"Where are you living now?"

"In Kent. I'm starting U-Dub in the fall."

They could see each other clearly through the cars' open windows, their voices carrying easily on the warm night air. The light on the side street was now yellow. Max stared at the kindly old doctor, who stared back at him.

"Call me," Dr. Lee said as the light changed to green.

"I will," Max replied, as he slowly drove off, watching Dr. Lee turn left in his rear view mirror. He had rented a cheap room at the A-Town Motel on a quiet stretch of the Valley Freeway out near the Indian Reservation. It was only a few miles away but he was in no hurry to get there, no hurry to find out what the rest of his life would be like.

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Max had never seen Francis Lee again after that night in Auburn twenty-two years ago, but he knew that the old Chinaman loved him like a son; had chosen loyalty to him over any sense of obligation to tell the police of the strange coincidence of seeing Max out and about at 2:45 AM

a mile away from the freshly minted scene of his ex-stepfather's brutal murder. He knew that Megan Nolan loved him too. He could see it in her eyes when they met for the first and last time in the Czech Republic three days ago. He would not see her again either, but he knew that he was exactly her type: brave, humble, handsome, and deranged in a way that made him interesting but not dangerous. If he mentioned this to anybody they would probably think he was crazy, but he believed he was lucky to have had such great love--a father's and a woman's--in a thus far solitary if not lonely life.

His mother, flawed as she was, had loved him too. But her love was too painful to recall. He should have killed Jake Dunham *before* Jake killed her. He might have had a normal life then, but now it was what it was. Not normal.

Max ran his large hands through his short blond hair, to get the snow out, and looked down at the grave one last time.

"Thank you, Dr. Lee," he said. "I'm over it. But you know that. You saw it in my eyes that night."

Then he turned and headed back through the snow to his rented car, parked at the bottom of the hill.