

# Misery loves company

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GUTTERIDGE



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*Misery Loves Company*

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# PROLOGUE



**IN THE EARLY MORNING HOURS,** with the stars dotted across a fading black sky, the air was still and thick and shadowless. Turning on a lamp, he walked toward her and then stood over her, his thin shadow stretching across her body. She lay motionless, as fragile as a locust shell. It seemed if he touched her, she would crumble into dust.

He could not tell if she was cold. Her hands had been icy since she was in her thirties. But he pulled the blanket to her chin anyway. It was like tucking in a child. Except there would not be any wishes for sweet dreams. The dream was ending, slowly and painfully.

In another room, his dinner was long since chilled. He had no appetite, and she couldn't insist he do anything anymore.

"I haven't eaten," he said aloud suddenly. "Not a bite."

She stirred and let out the faintest breath, a hiss that sounded like a deflating bicycle tire.

He looked at the clock. In a little under an hour, the nurse

would arrive, the only other person besides the two of them to come to this place. She'd agreed to work off the books.

Another hiss. Then her eyes opened, wide, as if she'd been dropped out the window of an eight-story building. Her gaze frantically searched the ceiling.

"Looking for someone?" He smiled gently.

She tried to lift a hand, but the weight of the sheet and the blanket kept it tucked away.

"Why am I still here?" Her voice was raspy and unkind, weighed down by spite.

He couldn't answer. He didn't have the answer.

"*Why am I still here?*" Her eyes had turned cloudy. They used to be blue and clear, like an afternoon sky. Now they were gray as gravel.

"You have no right," he said. "No right at all." He was not a man easily driven to anger, but it was the only emotion he felt these days.

"I have every right," she said, her watery eyes looking into his.

He stepped away from the bed, stared at her from a safe distance. Was he capable of this? He dropped to his knees, pressing a fist against his mouth to keep himself from screaming.

It was horrific pain either for her or for him. Which would he choose? Because ultimately, in a quiet, empty corner of his mind, he knew he believed that a soul could be damned.

The misery of it all was more than he could take. He had not understood until now what it meant to suffer.

She called his name, angrily, in a tone he'd never guessed

she was capable of. Over and over she called out to him, then cursed and cursed again. In the thirty-five years he'd known her, she had not uttered a curse word once.

His legs were shaky from age and burden, but he managed to stand again.

She turned her head when he stepped in front of the bedside lamp, sensing he'd returned. Her hair was stringy and clumped, what was left of it. At the crown, it was wispy, her white scalp showing like she had mange.

All the memories they shared were gone. They meant nothing now. He couldn't have imagined it, but the meaning of their love had trickled through his hands, puddling at his feet like dirty water. And even though he'd known her for most of his years, her foul mouth repulsed him, and her request had rendered her unrecognizable to him.

He thought he heard someone at the door. He checked his watch and listened. *Margaret? Please. Margaret.*

But it was silent again.

She'd managed to get her hand out from the covers and was grasping the air, clawing at it with her gnarled fingers. Her nails had grown thick and rough and yellow. The veins in her arms, blue and rigid, appeared to sit atop her skin instead of underneath.

"I know you're nearby," she whispered.

"I'm always nearby," he replied.

"I have done everything for you. Everything. Given you every dream. Offered you every opportunity. Asked nothing in return."

It was true. All of it.

“And then you cut down my tree. And you let the raccoon out, you ignorant menace. Do you think I didn’t know you cut my tree down?”

It was often like this. She’d seem clear-minded and then slip into nonsense and crudeness. So he wasn’t sure if her only request came from a clear mind or not. And even if it did, he didn’t know if he loved her enough. Or too little.

“The nurse will be here soon,” he said but probably not loud enough for her to hear because she was screaming and grunting now, thrashing about as much as she was capable, her head whipping from one side to the other.

“Are you in pain?” he asked.

She cursed him.

Tears streamed down his face. He could see her pain in the way her eyes bulged and how her hands suddenly clenched the sheets.

“Margaret is coming. Soon. Very soon.”

She cursed Margaret.

Then, to his surprise, her hand grasped his shirt, so tightly that he heard a seam rip in the shoulder. She yanked at him and he stumbled, his bad knee hitting the railing of the bed.

“Don’t ever say you love me again,” she snarled. “There is no decency in you.”

He took her hand and with little effort put it back under the covers, just as she slipped into unconsciousness. He pulled the covers to her chin once again. He brushed the wisps of

hair out of her face. He checked his watch. The nurse would be here soon because she was almost always early.

A few minutes and it could all be over.

Including any decency he might have.

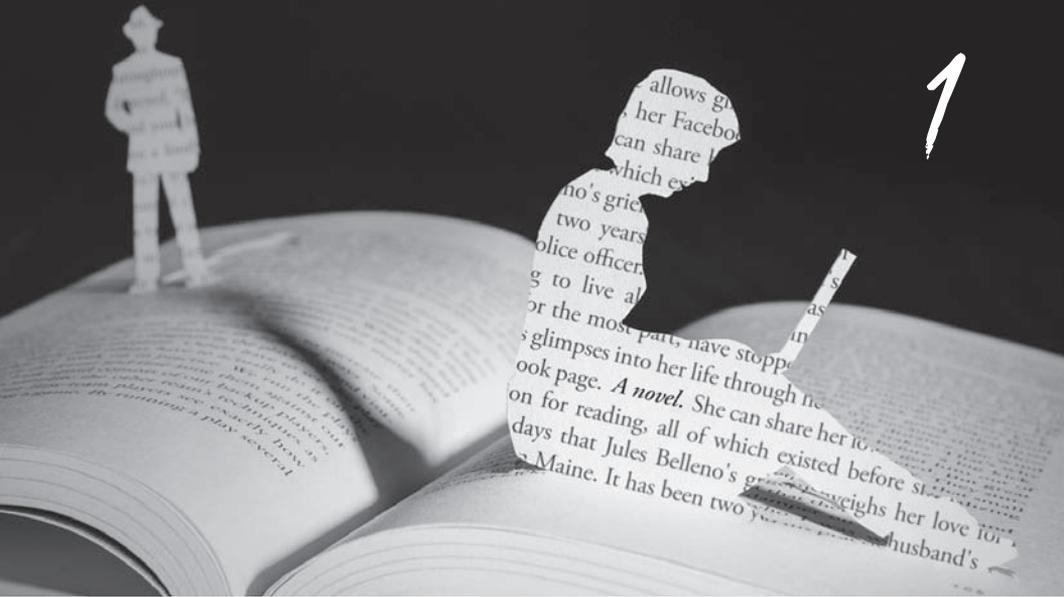
A heaviness pressed into his heart muscle, tearing at the fibers that held it together. There was only so much a human being could be expected to overcome. If there was a God, surely He was merciful enough to understand. Surely there was no sin too big.

But he wasn't certain.

He *was* certain, however, that he loved her.

And love could drive a man to do terrible things.





**AT THE AGE OF THIRTY-FOUR,** Jules Belleno couldn't believe how much routine comforted her.

She remembered watching her grandparents in their old age, wondering how anyone could be so set in their ways, so satisfied with uneventfulness. They rose at the same time every morning—an ungodly hour like 4 a.m. They ate the same thing for breakfast: half a grapefruit (always split and sprinkled with Sweet’N Low), a cup of decaffeinated coffee—hers with cream, his black. They’d walk the dog as soon as the sun rose. Lunch at eleven, errands or chores in the afternoon. TV dinners were served at 4 p.m., and their

last and favorite thing was to watch *Wheel of Fortune* before they found themselves in bed by seven.

It had seemed like such a ridiculous life to her. She couldn't fathom why they wouldn't go to a movie in the evening or to the jazz festival or do anything outside their little world. They had so much freedom and never used it.

Of course, she was in her late teens at the time and also couldn't fathom that life was going to be anything but remarkable and spectacular. How naive she was.

Her grandparents had died within six weeks of each other, and Jules remembered thinking that was so sad. Now she understood what a gift it was. A gift that was rarely given.

She rose every day, without the help of a clock, at precisely 5:57 a.m. She never could figure out why her body chose that time, but it was where she'd landed.

By seven she'd already exercised and showered, and by seven thirty, she was cooking herself egg whites or having a bowl of cereal. Breakfast provided the most variety in her day.

A few minutes past eight, she was at her computer, logged on to her blog and her Facebook page.

*Hoping the rain moves out today!* A lame status update for today, but it was all she could muster.

Within minutes, she'd gotten eight thumbs-ups and a few remarks about the weather.

She'd dreaded this day, but dread never kept any day from coming. It was also the first Tuesday of the month, the day she reviewed a book on her blog. Readers expected it. She'd

missed it once due to the flu and been surprised at how many inquiries she received about why her review wasn't posted.

On the far corner of her desk, the book sat, looking like it was in a time-out. Jules stared at its glossy cover, its embossed-gold, royal-like lettering. She'd watched over the years how his name had grown and his titles had shrunk. It meant he was platinum to the publisher.

But this one, like the last two, was a disappointment. The quality of his work had been declining. His most current was late. Without fail, he released a book every nine months, but she'd had to wait longer for this one. With other authors, she figured it came with the territory. They got so popular and the demand so great that they began churning out books faster than they should.

But he mattered. He'd always mattered to her, since she discovered his books when she was only twenty-one. It wasn't just that he was from her hometown. That was great and gave her a lot to blog about, but there seemed to be a special quality about his writing. Even though it was suspense and the plots could border on outrageous, there was a depth to how he wrote, as though the words came out his fingertips straight from his soul. There were treasures buried inside the paragraphs, from page to page. Sometimes you had to hunt for them, but they were there—little nuggets of truth about your life, cleverly intertwined with murder, mayhem, and madness.

Jules sighed and pulled the book closer. Her fingers typed out the title: "*THE LION'S MOUTH* by PATRICK

REAGAN. Reviewed by Jules Belleno.” That was the easy part. Now came the—

Knock at her door.

She moaned quietly, cut her eyes to the door. Was it already *that* time?

The knock again, this time a little heavier. If she didn't get there fast, he'd start calling her name.

“Coming!” She forced the singsong in her tone. Opening the door, she widened her smile. “Hi, Daddy.”

“I thought you might not be home. I knocked twice.”

“You have to give me a chance to get up and walk over here.”

He smiled. “Just anxious to see you. I was in the neighborhood. You busy?”

Always a loaded question. There never was a right answer, so today she just went with no.

“Why not? Why aren't you writing?” He stepped in and she closed the door.

“I am writing. I was about to work on my blog.”

“Real writing, Juliet. Blogging is for people who can't write professionally. You know how capable you are. You've got real talent.”

They went to the kitchen, where she took another mug from the cabinet. She didn't even ask, just poured him coffee. “Dad, I've told you this. There are some really talented bloggers. Very gifted. Have thousands of followers, reaching more people than if they published a book.”

“Well, you should get *paid* to write. That's how they did it

in my day.” He’d gotten a few articles published in a military newsletter, so he was an expert. “People would write and get paid for their thoughts and their words. Now people offer all that stuff up for free. I told you about my dream, didn’t I?”

Her dad’s memory was getting kind of bad. He’d told her four times. She watched his shaky hands try to get the coffee mug to his lips before he pressed on with the dream.

“The one where I saw your book at a bookstore, for sale? It was at the front where they put all the famous people?”

“Yes, you told me.”

“Well, you’re not going to be a famous writer if you don’t write something.”

“I’m not interested in being famous, Dad. I love to write, but it’s more for the ability to explore things, think things through, wonder about things.”

“Writers can make good money. I know a couple of generals who’ve written some bestsellers in their retirement.”

Her dad was a Marine. It had been expected of Jules to find the *hoorah* in every part of her life. And she had. She’d found Jason.

Jules sighed.

They’d done this so much that her dad had gotten good at retorting himself. “I know I get pushy about this stuff. I just know how talented you are, Juliet. You could make it as a writer if you’d try. You’ve got to stop moping around this house, you know? Get out, enjoy life again.”

She couldn’t hate him for it, but she resented it all the same. With his flattop haircut, now gray at the temples, and

his angular face that held the bluest sparkling eyes, he would never be able to totally get on her bad side, but he'd given it a good run for many years. He was pushy, opinionated, and completely lacking in self-awareness, but he'd been in three wars, so he always had at least some grace with her.

"I'll get something out there. I've been working on a few things."

"You have? See!" Then he frowned. "Are you just telling me what I want to hear?"

She only smiled.

"I was thinking of taking a little road trip next month, down the coast. What do you think?"

"Nah."

"What could be so bad about a road trip? What else do you have to do?"

She shrugged. "I have things to do."

He chugged his hot coffee the way only a Marine could, then slammed the mug down on the counter with a small smile. "A bit tame. I like mine real black."

"That's why you have your house and I have mine."

"Your way of turning down my offer, again, for you to come live with me?"

"I like it here," she said. "Trust me, I'd get on your nerves very fast. I get on my own nerves."

"Not possible. I want you to give it another thought. Think it through completely, not just your first instinct. Like I told my men, instinct can carry you an awful long way, but full analysis can save your life."

She smiled warmly at him, the kind of smile that lets a dad know his little girl is going to be okay. She'd become good at faking that smile. He looked like he was about to burst at the seams, so she threw him a bone.

"I sort of got a story idea last night while I was—"

"Go with that! Yes! Someplace to start already and it's not even lunchtime. There's a reason Marines rise before sunup. We put more into life before breakfast than most people put into their whole day. You got my blood in you, baby."

"I am fully pepped."

"When you were born," he said, wrapping his arm around her waist as they walked to the door, "I was disappointed. I already told you this story."

"You wanted a boy."

"I wanted a boy. I'm so glad it was you instead."

She patted him on the shoulder. "Dad, don't worry so much about me, okay?"

"I wouldn't if you ever left this house."

"This is a good, safe place for me." And it was. She still felt connected to the world, through a twenty-inch screen.

"I may go fishing tomorrow."

Doubtful. It was starting to get too cold, for one thing. He had good intentions, but they rarely saw the light of day. "Have fun."

"Maybe we can have a fish fry, invite some of these neighbors you refuse to get to know."

"I know all the people I need to know." She gave him a little help out the door. "Off you go."

He gave her a white-flag wave and climbed into his truck. A sadness sank into her soul as she watched him go. That was the best part of his day. It was all downhill from here.

Back at the computer, she took a long, slow sip of her coffee and stared at the blinking cursor. Ugh. It was so hard to say what she needed to say about Patrick Reagan, but at the same time, she knew people read her blog for her honest opinion. And her honest opinion was that he just didn't have what he used to.

She typed the words carefully: *I can't put my finger on it.*

His stories still contain the fast-paced plot, the heroic law enforcement character, and the surprise twist.

But it's like he had magic in his fingers once. And now that magic is gone. He can still type, still use his fingers in remarkable ways, but maybe the curtain has been pulled back a little and we're seeing the wizard as he is for the first time.

What causes writers to lose their magic? Maybe they don't even know. Maybe every writer has only so many genuinely birthed stories, and after that, they're just cranking the levers and using the smoke and mirrors to try to sell us on the idea that we should suspend our disbelief.

I'm his biggest fan. Patrick Reagan is still one of the finest American writers with which we've been gifted. He always will be. But maybe our expectations exceed what he is capable of.

THE LION'S MOUTH had all the right elements. Great premise: a Secret Service agent must determine if a president under whom he once served is corrupt. But at the end of the read, I didn't really care what happened to the character. Any of the characters. And that's the very first thing a reader must do: care.

Everything from the plot to the dialogue seemed to fall flat. I felt like grabbing the book by its jacket cover, shaking it, and saying, "Don't tell me it's terrifying. Terrify me!" And that's where the most problematic issue lies, I believe. He's telling me how I should feel about what he writes. Yet every great storyteller knows it's the fine art of taking me by the hand and showing me that has the most effect on a reader's soul. It's how writers slip it all into us while we're not looking. While we're reading words, they're making magic happen, and when that magic lands right in our hearts, we're theirs forever.

I am in mourning. But I am confident that one day soon, Patrick Reagan will capture me again.