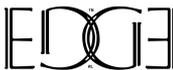

THE

MILKMAN

A FREE WORLD NOVEL

Michael J. Martineck



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DEDICATION

“What does that mean?” I asked. “Look it up,” my father answered. Which I did, in one of the countless dictionaries placed not so strategically about the house. My father taught me to throw a spiral and swing a golf club, but teaching me to play with words— that I still do. This stab at it is for him.

CHAPTER ONE

TO EDWIN MCCALLUM every act of insubordination was a work of art. Charcoal sketch thefts. Abstract expressionist assaults. A smuggling operation could have all the intricacies of an oil landscape. Despite this, he considered very few policy transgressions to be masterpieces. No one put the time in. Most insubordination spawned from opportunity, passion or a bottoming out of IQ. But this one. This fresco. He saw something more.

The girl could have been his daughter, had his life unfolded into a different shape, if he'd creased and bent this side instead or that, leaving him in another space, not on the street, in the cold, staring at face turned and pressed to concrete, beautiful if you imagined it asleep, if you ignored the puddle of cold blood and the jagged hack marks in her flesh.

McCallum threaded his fingers and thrust out his arms, bending his wrists back, stretching, stimulating blood flow. He had no extra pounds and used his various muscles frequently and hard. When the cold started poking around, he felt reminders of every indiscretion, lack of good judgment and bad luck his bones had suffered over the years. His face had found some of the creeks and rumples he noticed on other men his age. Only some. His walnut hair showed maybe two strokes of grey. For the most part, he only noticed the middleness of his age in his joints, and on nights like this one.

"Geri Vasquez," the uniformed operative reported. Brick red pants and cap. Black leather everything else. *One of mine*, McCallum thought. "24, lived up on West Ferry Street, grade 15 Marketing Field Researcher."

"Grade 15." McCallum snorted. Was there a grade higher? Newborn? "Anything off her cuff?"

"Waiting for the advocate." The uniform op couldn't be too much older than the victim, but he seemed to have his buckle polished, as his old boss used to say. McCallum liked him.

"This an India Group pub?" McCallum pointed a thumb at the large, frosty picture windows.

"Yes sir," another uniform op answered. Black pants and jacket. An India Group patrolperson. Not one of his. She stood close to the pub door, helping to keep a safe perimeter around the body.

"Anyone come out?" McCallum asked.

"No sir," she answered.

"You go in?"

"Waiting for an inspector."

"Really?" McCallum looked into the windows. Faces filled every inch to about the eight-foot line. People used bar stools to get over the first row of viewers and look into the insubordination scene. He hated the lookey-loo part of human nature. This poor girl had been pretty, with nice clothes, a decent hair cut; she would not have wanted them all to see her this way. Still, the ghouls served a momentary purpose. Everyone in the pub knew a dead girl lay outside. Someone inside waiting for her would have stormed out by now.

"She died at the door?" McCallum asked himself. "Why's an Ambyr girl trying to get into an IG place without a buddy?"

"Don't know, sir," the female op answered. "Maybe fleeing her assailant?"

"Lots of maybes," he mumbled.

An India Group detective would be here any second. McCallum wondered who was on tonight. The lazy one, the well-dressed one, or that guy who lost a hand disarming a small explosive a few years back. He was pleasant enough, quiet, but never —
—he never expected to see her.



Sylvia Cho didn't care for the choice of restaurant. It was the kind used to woo people — clients, actors, investors, whomever. Sylvia didn't like to be wooed, schmoosed, ass-kissed or sucked up to. At least... most of the time. She believed in merit. She judged people and projects on their value and expected the same. No one should ever need to be sold on something. She also understood that here, in Hollywood, in this belief, she was quite alone.

Adorned in miles of bamboo and white cotton, lit with millions of tiny candles, the place had appeal. She didn't deny that, it just reminded her of a great looking guy who knew it. The kind that aimed his smile, prying a rise out of you. The town was full of them, many trying to get this very spot, at the top of two small stairs, peering out for a well-juiced producer.

She didn't feel out of place. She kept herself fit, her obsidian hair current and paid attention to fashion. Sylvia had chosen a pencil skirt and sheer top for this meeting. She knew the effects of tight clothing. She also knew her way around a restaurant. She had found herself in most of the Los Angeles catchment's finer places, at one time or another. That was, after all, how things were done. She hadn't had a meeting in an office or conference room in nine years, since that impossible year between college and now, when she thought she'd have to club someone in the head to get any attention. Club several people, actually. One murder didn't turn heads.

Gavin Stoll sat in the center of the room, smiling. Black suit, white silk T-shirt, over a near-perfect body. He was the unnatural offspring of a cheetah and a penguin. He gave Sylvia a quick flick of the hand. Sylvia smiled, using her forceful, professional grin. The mask, she called it. The face that fooled all the boys, and some of the girls. Gavin stood as she crossed the room.

Good God, she thought. What the fuck was he going to want?

"So happy to see you," he said like he meant it. Maybe he did. She didn't know him any better than he knew her. "Tobacco Road was a blast. Loved, loved, loved it."

Thank God for the mask. She doubted this guy saw, saw, saw her last film.

"Thank you," she replied. "It's done better than I expected."

"You're too modest. Refreshing, but useless. Revel in your success."

"I'll try my best."

"So how does it feel?" They both sat.

"Stunning." She didn't like to lie if she didn't have to.

Gavin laughed. "I knew the movie tested well, but it hadn't prepared me for... the explosion. With no disrespect, I don't think anyone foresaw your peculiar demographic draw. You've had more females 18 to 34 down your picture than any other documentary in decades, while holding on to the boys. Hybrid demos, sister. Those frost the cake, eh?"

"Mmmm cake." Sylvia said.

"You've come to the right place."

The waiter stood next to the table. Sylvia hadn't seen him approach. Creepy.

"I'd like the St. George," Gavin said. "And hope you don't make any mistakes back there." He locked eyes with the waiter and waggled his head.

"Excellent choice, sir." The waiter gave a conspiratorial smirk and padded away.

"I hope you don't mind that I ordered for us." Gavin leaned over the table and dropped his voice to loud whisper. "They have a St. Germain pinot noir here, accidently delivered by an IG truck. It's exquisite. I'll cry when they run out."

"Perhaps there'll be another accident."

"I can only pray. IG has so many choice vineyards, I've been tempted to jump ship."

Sylvia laughed politely. She didn't want to encourage Gavin's pretensions. When it came to wine, she wasn't a hair-splitter. She could tell the difference between good, bad and awesome. Further subdivisions held little interest to her. Comparing vineyards outside the company held even less. The taste of forbidden fruit? There were probably two India Group people dining right now, pining for Ambyr wine in hushed voices.

"What's the deal?" Sylvia said.

"A movie. Funding is locked up."

"Already?" *Without a director?* she decided not to say out loud. "Who's attached?"

"No one," Gavin said. "I'm hoping you want to come aboard."

There is a formula in Hollywood. Good director, good cast, good script. You can only afford to take a chance on one. Everyone knows this rule. Nobody puts up money without two absolutes. The fact that Gavin didn't have a director or cast, but plenty of money, didn't all mesh. This scene wasn't working.

"This must be one Hell of a script."

"There's no script."

Check please, she yelled in her head.



Emory Leveski drove his blue Mazda sedan. Somehow. He couldn't see the black and blue night, the spots of light from other cars, street lights, sconces over house numbers and ground-level

lanterns releasing the last of their solar charge from the day. His body remembered how to keep the car in the lane and the peddle at the right angle and when to turn left and right. His conscious mind had no part of it. It refused to process any new information. That last chunk, with the stabbing and shrieking and collapsing body... that plugged up the pipelines. He was lucky he remembered how to breathe.