

LOST:FAITH

EPIISODE THREE

Written By

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And

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How much is a human life worth? I've seen that question debated in quite a few ways: my high-school chemistry teacher broke it down by the market value of the chemical compounds of the flesh; accountants figure it out by net worth minus debt; politicians work it into ratios of acceptable loss; and then, of course, is the religious end of the debate - I won't go there, yet. Fact is, I know what a human life is worth. To the penny. It's been bought and paid for.

I recognized that voice, accusatory, incendiary, seditious; The one that rose easily above any voice of reason on the plane. Everson. The one that got it started. Not the 'ring-leader' par se, more like the center of gravity that sucked in the vapors of paranoia and exploded into a nuclear white-hot center of unreasonable rage. In the end they, the ones responsible, were the only ones to maintain a consistent shtick on just what exactly went down; so whether you agreed with them or not, they were right. They were our valiant protectors, and in the name of protecting us anything goes.

We were starting to run out of water and people were too busy worrying about salvaging knick knacks and bickering over what few creature comforts were recovered, (a couple of guys nearly killed each other over a shaving kit), to head the problem off at the pass; so I elected myself. I'd been taking little trips into the jungle every morning when the sun was a thumbs length above the eastern peninsula, my little landmark in the sky. About an hour in got me what I figured to be a practical distance from camp for purposes of ferrying water on foot. I was on my way back when I heard the argument carried through the chlorophyll engorged thickness of the jungle. At first I thought it was somebody whispering to me from ahead, then I heard the volume go up.

I'd heard that voice reach apex a couple of times before. When debate over the "rightness" or "wrongness" of what happened broke out, his was the voice that ended it. In all truth, I think some of them were afraid to challenge the 'coalition'; the only one to ever mount any sensible argument and stick to it was that guy, Storement, but he was such a wallflower he didn't pack any street cred, so nobody backed him. If I had to guess, he'd

be the guy that had it all together here; always going around, taking notes, observing while everybody else flopped around the fish out of water that they were.

So it wasn't all that unusual to hear Everson heated up, but there was something a little different in his inflection. I wouldn't call it pleading, but it was something approaching that; more like indignation with a few veins of fear starting to bulge. I couldn't hear the voice of who it was Everson had engaged so whoever was getting the better of him was doing it intellectually; I should have guessed it would be the quiet one.

I stopped and listened hard. It went quiet for a few minutes, and I guessed they'd either moved on or killed each other.

When I got to the clearing, all I saw was Storement standing there slack-jawed, perched over his handiwork. Everson was stone cold dead. Bound up with tape and stabbed through the chest. Storement looked up at me, palpable guilt in his eyes.

"What have you done?" I asked him.

"Poet..." Was all he got out before I took him down.

I booked the vacation on the internet. Not through any site you'd find on any search engine, or discount travel site. This was a highly specialized service, and it took work to get connected. I found my first lead in an old issue of Soldier of Fortune that I'd found in one of the collections supervisors garbage can. I'm a janitor by trade. I know, nothing as grandiose as my name may imply. I wish I had a dollar for everytime somebody said "You should be a poet, Joe." Followed by some yuck yuck laughter and a slap on the back from an easily amused cohort. That dweeb department manager, Randy, had used that line a few times himself. I think he got the sense I considered it demeaning. I didn't have the heart to tell him that people who felt empowered by the apparent short-comings of others usually harbored some sexual dysfunction.

The ad was styled like a help wanted ad:

WANTED: Cold Blooded Killers

ActionRec Incorporated is a placement agency for the worlds mercenary armys. We can get you in the action world wide! only experienced military, law enforcement, or security personnel need apply!

There was a web address and a phone number in Virginia. Let me say that I had no interest in being part of a mercenary army; this was not what caught my attention. I still cannot put a finger on what it was, exactly, that stirred my curiosity and touched that dark spot on my soul. What I know is that from that moment, whatever primal clockwork got wound never stopped running; from there on, my life was on a trajectory straight to hell.

"I never figured you for a murderer, Storement."

His eyes were flickering open, one side of his face, the side I'd driven into the ground when I tackled him, was coated with dirt. The soil here was like coffee grounds, fertile. Untouched. You wouldn't find dirt that pure anywhere else in the world.

"...what?" He asked and he tried to move. He was really complacent, just letting his body relax with a sigh once he realized he was hog tied. It probably wasn't necessary. Storement wasn't much of a physical specimen. Hell, I hadn't even meant to knock him out when I took him out. I could probably kill this guy with my bare hands, regardless of what resistance he 'tried' to put up. Still, part of being prepared is to eliminate the unexpected, as much as possible.

"I said... I never figured you for a killer. You always struck me as the diplomat of the bunch..."

"...I didn't kill him... I just found him here... why didn't you give me a chance to explain..."

I held my hands open to him. "I'm all ears."

"I just came out here to take a leak and here he was."

"When?"

"Just after sunrise."

"Who else was up?"

"I don't know, a couple of guys. Jase, Cooper..."

"Anybody see you go in here?"

"No... look, who the hell elected you sheriff anyways?"

"Oh, I'm not enforcing anything but my own safety..."

I reached down and started to loosen the belt I'd tied his wrists with.

"... if we have a killer running around... we need to find out who it is."

He stood slowly. The first thing he did once he had his hands free was fish his pen out of his pocket.

"... and eliminate the threat."

A blob of ink hung from the end of the pen, I noticed a dark patch on his pants. He had the expression of somebody looking at their teenage daughter's cell phone bill. I reached in my own breast pocket and pulled out the Uniball I had found in an unclaimed attaché.

"I think this is your brand."

We both paused for a second, a tendril of conscious serendipity realized, and he took the pen with an incredulous grab.

"We're all killers now, aren't we?"

His words brought it all back.

How much is a human life worth? First, let me tell you how I came by the purchase.

The website for ActionRec was little more than a photo gallery of red-necks and anal muscle heads clutching beat-up Chinese Ak-47's in some unidentified third-world country. If you wanted any actual information, you had to call the number and speak to a representative. Five seconds into the call and I knew why.

The rep was a tired sounding guy who sounded like he'd just got out of bed to take the call. We talked about a few things; he wanted to know what I was interested in, I told him I didn't know; he asked about my experience, I told him I didn't have any; finally, he asked me a little wearily why I called. I didn't even know I had an answer to the question until it slipped out.

"I want to know how it feels to kill a man."

There was a breathless silence. I asked if he was still there, and he was. The subject changed. How much money did I make; did I have a passport; was I married; did I have close family. The whole time, the guy didn't tell me what he had in mind, but I could tell he was cooking up something. He told me he needed to do a background check, and depending on what he found out he might have some options available for me which didn't involve any kind of commitments. More like, vacations. I ended the call still in shock with the realization of what it

was I was endeavoring to do.

A couple of weeks later the same guy called back, considerably more awake, and told me in muted tones that for five-grand I could know exactly what it feels like to kill a man.

Five-grand. Five Thousand Dollars. That is what a human life is worth. But the actual price I paid, was much higher. That price I'm debating right now.

Storement made it to the beach in a flash. I lagged behind at my usual pace; not in a hurry to get anywhere. By the time I got there, Storement had already attracted a small flock of inquisitors and was rattling off in hyperbole about Everson's run-in with a higher mammal. A few of them looked at me like I was carrying a club; so I changed directions and headed for the little cluster of rocks I usually sat at.

The only time I approached the group again was when we placed Everson's body atop the mass grave. The stockbroker and that guy Jase did most of the digging. Storement had was out of it from the early morning ruckus; it just plain figured that anyone who used blue gel ink pens were wusses who couldn't handle a little mano a mano.

What I said before though, about the dirt at the site of our struggle seemed so pristine? Like no where else? Well, there was one other place, and I waited until the others left before I moved forward.

Storement had assuaged the rest that I was not a threat by stating mere facts. No one else had awoken during whatever struggle had occurred. Everson had found plastic twine from the cargo hold--the kind used because of the people who overpack a bulging suitcase--and presumably felt consumed by guilt and wanted to end his life. During the course of the day's arguments, several people felt that the black-bearded man was the first to suggest tying the others on board the plane. I still could see him as a part of it, but as the day went by, I also thought of Stanley Tal, who was short and compact, yet muscular enough to knock a man out by swinging a fire extinguisher. Tal was welcomed later in the evening, Everson was not. I knew how the guy had expected to off himself; there are any number of ways to improvise a suicide. You use your own body weight

against you. Everson had planned to loop the strands behind the tree and lean forward for full asphyxiation.

Maybe he chickened out. Tried to stop. It would be easy enough to dig in the sand with his heels. And maybe someone else, Storment or yet another, who saw Everson having second thoughts decided to be more proactive about it. But what would Everson's suicide have disclosed to all of us? Why would it be better to make it look like a murder, take the time after the killing thrust to take the bindings from around his neck? Nobody here was a forensic psychologist and we may not have noticed any bruising, focusing more on the bloody knife in Everson's heart.

Storement was quiet, but the real killer had to have heard him and split. Even I had to believe that, his blood pressure was normal and I was sweating more than he was as I approached him. Just as I knew he was not the real threat, so did he remind the other survivors. He told me that either of us, if we were truly evil, could have had our pick of at least several who had not chosen to sleep coupled together. McBride and Mundt were the first to nod in acceptance of this.

And, face it, we were all in this together. We were quick to accept the event, equally hurried to bury the newest corpse, in the event that the rescue plane or helicopter or barge was on its way.

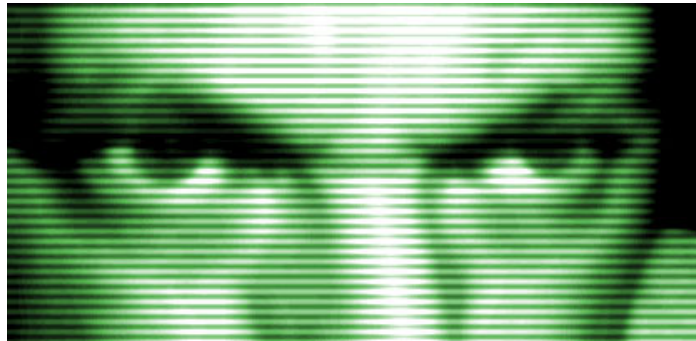
No one has arrived yet.

The last murder was yesterday.



Photo By Dan Szotak (www.danszotak.com)

Wayne Allen Sallee, a Chicago native, has been professionally published since 1986. He is a five time finalist for the Bram Stoker award and has over 200 stories in markets ranging from WRITER'S DIGEST, PENTHOUSE, CEMETERY DANCE, GRUE, LOVE IN VEIN, SEED OF FEAR and NIGHTMARES ON ELM STREET. His work has been reprinted in the UK, as well as in Spanish, German, French, Italian and Danish. Sallee has a border collie and no social life to speak of. His most recent story, "Mitch," in the form of a podcast, can be found at www.TwilightTales.com



Jon Lachonis, well known for his procrastination, is the author of innumerable unfinished horror stories, screenplays, and a novel or two. When he is not trying to complete a story, Lachonis takes on the role of DocArzt, the webmaster of www.thetailsection.com. Jon is currently working on a horror novel, which he doesn't expect to finish.