UNspoken words,
UNAnswered Questions

Richard Sanders

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This self-contained short story is taken from the opening of Dead Line, a novel described as “a tightly woven, mind-spinning tapestry” (Split Seed Review), “a fluid, snaky thriller of great momentum” (Bookpleasures) and “Hunter Thompson mixed with Raymond Chandler” (Amazon review).

What’s Dead Line about?

The Lit-Crit Take: A genre-bending, character-driven, word-burning thriller about memory, identity and making peace with the past.

The Pure Plot Pitch: Sure, we all know about arrogant, self-centered media executives. But how about one who served time as a teen for murdering her sister? And who suddenly believes she’s possessed by the spirit of Indira Gandhi? And now, at the height of her power, a secret from her past is
threatening to destroy her empire, while someone from that past is trying to take her life. Stop the damn presses!

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SHE’S JUST GONE

No one ever knew what happened, not really. Trish Fenellosa’s mother came home from work one evening to find that someone, going by the looks of it, had ritually slaughtered an animal in her kitchen. Blood was smeared on the walls, red rivers ran on the floor. An old carving knife, dripping with life juice, was sitting by itself on the dining table.

A trail of hemoglobin was leading to the rear of the house. The woman followed it, saw the blood covering the pale neck of the hallway, the off-white torso of the bedroom belonging to her oldest daughter, Katie. There was violence in every corner of the room. Someone had been stabbed here, and every wound had been deep.

Noise was coming from down the hall, from behind the closed bedroom door of her youngest daughter, Trish. Incongruous noise: Music. TV. Pressure pounding, hands trembling, still carrying her four-serving order of Chick-Fil-A take-out, the woman moved to the room and opened the door.

Trish was sitting at her desk, calmly working, despite her blood-stained clothes, on a term paper. The teen turned to look at her mother, face eerily blank, showing no emotion.

“Are you looking for Katie?” she said.
Within hours everyone in northern California’s Lake County was looking for Kate Fenellosa, 17. Or for her body. Based on the massive blood loss found at the scene, police thought it was unlikely—some said impossible—for the girl to have survived. Local hospitals were checked. Fields and woods were searched with dogs. Clear Lake was dredged. Detectives flooded the panicked community of Whispering Valley, looking for eyewitnesses. All in vain. Katie’s body would never be found.

The responding officers questioned Trish, 15, as soon as they arrived at the Fenellosa home. Her answers, according to transcripts entered as evidence in the trial, were halting, evasive and nothing short of strange.

**Off. Cuellar:** Can you tell us where your sister is?

**Trish Fenellosa:** My sister...my sister’s gone.

**Off. Cuellar:** Gone? Gone where?

**Trish Fenellosa:** She...took off. She just took off. She went away.

**Off. Cuellar:** She went away. Do you know where she went away to?
Trish Fenellosa: *I don’t know... Maybe down to the city* [meaning San Francisco]. *Or LA. Maybe she left the country, I don’t know... She’s just gone.*

It was obvious that Katie, what was left of her, had been taken *somewhere*. Trace evidence showed a blood trail leading out of the kitchen and abruptly stopping at the driveway, suggesting that the girl’s body had been wrapped in a blanket and dragged into a car. But how did her younger sister manage to get hold of a vehicle, stuff the corpse inside, then dump the remains somewhere and ditch the car? She had to have had help. Unfortunately, interviews with her school friends turned up no likely candidates. That was a problem.

On the other hand, there was the carving knife. A working woman, Trish’s mother rarely had time to cook and couldn’t remember ever using the knife. Which explained why the only prints on the handle belonged to Trish. As for the blood on the blade, yes, it was Katie’s. DNA tested, all the blood in the house was Katie’s.

Two days after the incident, Trish was brought to police headquarters in Lakeport, the county seat, for formal questioning. Her story kept changing as the interrogation went on. First she said she was in her room with the door closed, listening to music, the TV, and never heard a thing. Then she
suddenly remembered hearing noises in the house at one point, footsteps. Heavy footsteps, like a man’s. She heard a double rapping, like someone knocking on a door, then the footsteps went away.

**Det. Han:** You heard this over the music? You could hear the footsteps?

**Trish Fenellosa:** They were LOUD.

**Det. Han:** Did you get up and look? See what it was?

**Trish Fenellosa:** No.

**Det. Han:** Why not?

**Trish Fenellosa:** I didn’t CARE.

**Det. Han:** So you heard steps, but you didn’t look.

**Trish Fenellosa:** No. I had work to do.

**Det. Han:** So how did you get blood all over your clothes?

**Trish Fenellosa:** The blood was there when I got home. I slipped in it and fell.

**Det. Han:** You fell.

**Trish Fenellosa:** Yes.

**Det. Han:** In the blood.

**Trish Fenellosa:** Yes.
Det. Han: So you come home, you see all this blood, you go and work on your TERM paper?

Trish Fenellosa: It’s one-FIFTH of my grade.

That was the last thing she ever said to the police. From that moment on she slipped into a cocky and defiant silence that was never broken. Through all the subsequent interviews, through all the proceedings that followed, she never said a word. She never admitted any involvement in her sister’s disappearance/death. She never denied any involvement either. She never even said that she missed her sister, that she was sorry Katie was gone.

You know how 15-year-old girls can be? Surly, hyper-confident, full of themselves? Treating everything like it was one huge joke? That’s what Trish Fenellosa was like, only she maintained the attitude even while being questioned, even while being taken into court in handcuffs and arrested for murder as news cameras from around the state glared in her mocking and sneering face.

Her defenders said she was clearly traumatized, shocked into silence. She was just a kid who had no true comprehension of what was happening to her. The Lake County DA felt otherwise. In private, it later came out, he referred to her as *that snotty little shit*, and he believed guilt was bubbling inside her like black liquid in a primeval tar pit.
But why would she kill her sister? What was the motive? Investigators tried to find one. Talking to her family’s Whispering Valley neighbors, they heard rumors about sexual abuse by the girls’ stepfather. They attempted to work up a theory of sexual jealousy, the sisters fighting for the stepfather’s attention, but with no supporting evidence nothing ever came of it.

Then again, maybe motive wasn’t needed. Besides her prints on the knife, Trish’s behavior seemed to supply the strongest evidence against her. In her bedroom investigators found a notebook filled with drawings of a girl’s bloodied body in a field. The size, age and hair of the sketched victim bore a decent resemblance to Katie. One of the drawings was captioned, *Just Lay Down & Die.*

The notebook was entered into evidence. So was the testimony of one of the matrons at the Lake County Correctional Facility, who said Trish told her she wanted to be a surgeon when she grew up. Why? *They’re allowed to stick knives and needles into people. I like that. I like hurting people.*

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**A DANGEROUS HUSH**
The trial went on for 18 days. The Fenellosa’s attorney tried to mount a DEC defense—diminished emotional capacity. Trish, she said, had never experienced a stable childhood. The girls’ biological father, never married to their mother, had disappeared when Trish was 2, just walked away. Even as a toddler, her client exhibited unusual behavior, throwing daily temper tantrums and banging her head on the floor. When she was a few years older, Trish would approach strangers on the street and try to scare them by suddenly shouting, *Jesus is ALIVE!*

For most of her life, defense experts testified, Trish had been a chronic bedwetter, desperately attempting to stay awake, because if she wet the bed in her sleep her stepfather would punish her by rubbing her face in the urine.

Based on a prolonged visit, an emotional environmental analyst characterized the Fenellosa’s home as a *blank, sterile shell, bereft of warmth or emotion. The house simply has no feeling.*

These arguments didn’t fall on completely deaf ears, at least not outside the courthouse. Pro-Trish protestors began showing up each day, staging rallies for the benefit of the local and now national news media covering the trial. What ticked the protestors off were the comments made by the prosecutor in his opening statement, in which he described Trish as
cunning and manipulative...fiendishly intelligent...thoroughly unlikable. By this time the DA’s *snotty little shit* remark had also become public. The protestors saw all this as unduly prejudicial bias. Just because the prosecutor didn’t like her, they argued, didn’t make her guilty. Was she on trial for what she did, or for what she was? I.e., a typically nasty teenage girl.

Of course, when you’re sitting in court and laughing at things being said about you, or not paying attention to testimony about your sister’s blood splatter, you’re only adding fuel to the prosecutorial fire. As cunning and manipulative as Trish might’ve been, she sure didn’t know much about eliciting sympathy. She didn’t know how to play pity-pat. The jurors would watch with a kind of curious horror as she brought new levels of smugness to the defense table. She was cheeky, self-assured and way, way above it all.

Which probably explains why her attorney never put her on the stand. The jury never heard directly from Trish. She was still keeping her silence, and it hung over the proceedings like SoCal smog. No matter how much testimony was heard, the courtroom always seemed filled with unspoken words, unanswered questions, a dangerous hush like the moment before a storm breaks out.

Whether her silence hurt her case is a matter of debate. But a few other factors are beyond dispute.
She wasn’t helped by the presence of her mother, who kept disrupting the trial with outbursts of sobbing and screaming, rushing out with great drama and suddenly making grand re-entrances moments later.

She wasn’t helped by the complete absence of her stepfather.

She wasn’t helped by her constant habit of applying black lip liner like she was addicted to it.

She wasn’t helped by her occasionally blank and terrifying stare, Like her sister, Trish was a pretty, dark-haired girl with a snub nose and green knife-sharp eyes. Usually her eyes gave the impression of intelligence, but every once in a while—in times of suppressed anger, maybe, or hidden stress—they turned into an empty, frightening, voodoo-like gaze.

A little disconcerting.

Well aware of the blank stare and its effect, her lawyer tried to counteract it with expert testimony. One psychiatrist said Trish had an amazing ability to block out troubling parts of the past. She’d go into almost trance states in an effort to blank and void her memory. *I’ve never seen anything quite like it. She has incredible mental energy and inner intensity, which stems, I believe, from an extreme neediness that no one can understand or handle. Especially not her.*
But the prosecutor thought he had a handle on it, as he made clear in his closing argument. He mentioned her bloody fingerprints, her notebook filled with violent drawings, her bizarre pre-silence answers to the police, her surreal courtroom demeanor, On the basis of all that, he summed Trish Fenellosa up as a pathologically abnormal young woman, aggressive, cruel, vicious, freakishly incapable of compassion or remorse, with a dominating and controlling personality and a degree of devious intelligence that scares me to death.

It took the jury, seven women and five men, exactly two hours and 21 minutes to find her guilty.

A FEW QUIRKS

Tried and convicted as an adult, Trish Fenellosa received a sentence of 25 years to life. Until she was 18, she’d serve her time at Blue Mountain Correctional, a kind of max-security reform school. Her case was over, but it was hardly forgotten.

A national debate over her fate broke out on talk shows and editorial pages. Entire segments and special reports focused on the flaws in the
prosecution’s evidence. How could a 15 now 16-year-old girl be found guilty of murder without a body or a plausible motive? What about the whole body-disposal problem? Why wasn’t that even addressed during the trial? Had Trish been convicted on proof or on her attitude? Just because she’d stayed silent, did that make her psychopathic? And what’s up with the creepy stepfather?

Questioning the case became a grassroots phenomenon. Legal experts offered their opinions. Politicians and celebrities joined the cause. Rallies were staged across the country.

One of those who spoke out was a behavioral scientist with the FBI. He said that before the trial the Lake County DA’s office had asked him to study the drawings in Trish’s notebooks. According to his analysis, the sketches were emphatically not indicators of guilt. They were simply reenactments of an imagined event, restagings drawn to cope with a traumatic loss.

His most telling disclosure: His findings had never been shown to the defense.

As it turned out, he wasn’t alone.
Two years after the conviction, Donald Drones was resurrected from the grave. At least his name was. Drones, owner of the Whispering Valley Diner, had killed himself a week after Katie Fenellosa’s disappearance. The reason wasn’t hard to fathom. A 44-year-old married father of three, Drones had just been arrested for sexual voyeurism. Police had discovered cameras hidden in the women’s room stalls of his diner. Hundreds of videotapes were found in Drones’ basement, capturing customers as they pulled down their panties to pee. Among the images was that of Katie Fenellosa.

After Drones dined on a blast from his shotgun, his mug shot ran in the local Lake County papers. Within a day three women called the police to say they recognized his photo. They’d seen Donald Drones sitting by himself in a car in their neighborhood. All three women lived within two blocks of the Fenellosa home.

No, it wasn’t proof of murder. But, yes, it was material that might’ve raised a suspicion or two about the prosecution’s case. Yet, like the FBI findings, evidence of a possible connection between Donald Drones and Katie Fenellosa was never turned over to the defense during discovery.

The DA defended himself in a nationally televised press conference. *Maybe Drones had a few quirks, maybe he did something foolish, but he*
never committed a violent act. We never looked at him for the killing. We kept out eyes on Trish Fenellosa because all fingers were pointing in her direction. There’s a reason the jury convicted her.

And there was a reason, many felt, why he should no longer be Lake County DA. On the occasion of Trish’s 19th birthday, one of his most vocal critics announced he was running for the office. The opponent’s biggest campaign promise: I’ll reopen the Fenellosa case.

The candidate was elected, and after waiting for the gears of justice to slowly mesh, the promise was delivered. Trish eventually went back to court.

Perhaps it helped that her mother died during this time, succumbing to a long and terrible battle with lung cancer. Her mother had finally provided some sympathy.

In any case, while Trish wasn’t exactly exonerated of the crime, more than enough ammunition was supplied for reasonable doubt. The conviction was overturned. At age 22, Trish walked out of prison, and this dark little documentary on the history of Lake County finally reached its closing credits.

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