

NIGHT TERROR
By Raymond White

Why he killed her no longer seemed important. It did seem important at the time but he was unsure why. He got angry at her snide rebuff. That, and a little too much tequila made his angry urge irresistible and so she died with his hands wrapped around her neck.

She was just a Mexican girl he'd met in a bar. Like hundreds of other Latinas in Los Angeles, she seemed alone and looking for a friend. Or so it seemed to him.

All he did was ask her if she could use some company. Her rude "go to hell" was no proper way to say no. Whatever her problem was, she should have just said no and that would have been the end of it. But "go to hell"? He didn't deserve that and the verbal abuse made him angry. He went back to his table, still alone, stewed in his anger, and tried to drink it off. But the alcohol, instead of dulling him, just made his rage seethe all the more.

He had to talk to her alone, get an apology. Yeah, that's all he wanted. Then he could go home pacified.

He left the bar. His car was parked on the street just three spaces from the door so he'd have a perfect view of the patrons exiting. He got in on the passenger side because he had no intention of leaving. Instead, he sat and waited.

He rolled down the window so that the cool night air would prevent him falling asleep. He needn't have fretted about that because his unabating anger assured that he'd remain awake the entire night.

He knew that sooner or later she'd come out. Two hours later, after dozens of patrons had appeared and disappeared, one minute before midnight, she was there, standing at the door, gleaming in the moonlight, she was lovelier than any woman he had ever seen, and her beauty enraged him all the more.

She turned in his direction, and, not noticing him in his car, walked right past him. He could hear the click, click, click of her high heels.

He reflexively glanced at the dash clock, It displayed midnight.

He opened his door, stepped out, and fell in step behind her.

The streets were empty, there was just her and him, and it didn't take long for her to realize she was being followed.

She stopped.

He stopped.

She turned abruptly to face her stalker. Her face was full of rage. She pointed her index finger at his face and was about to give him a piece of her mind. Then suddenly her rage was replaced by fear. At an instant she recognized him, the unwanted suitor who just hours ago she had rebuffed. He had watched her scornfully from his booth. She never met his gaze, never dared to. But from her periphery, she watched him as intently as he watched her.

When he left the bar, she felt relief but didn't feel entirely safe either, not safe enough to leave right away, so she just sat and drank for two more hours. Finally she felt that enough time had passed and she could venture outside. Nobody would hold a grudge *that* long.

But she was wrong. There he was, as threatening as a hungry tiger.

He opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off.

"Madre Dios," she said in a panic. Then she screamed, and kept screaming at the top of her lungs. She turned to run.

He grabbed her around her neck. “Shut up!” he demanded.

She screamed louder.

His hands squeezed to silence her, then squeezed harder.

“I said *shut up!*”

He heard and felt the *pop*, and he knew — he had broken her neck.

She fell silent.

She draped from his still clutching hands down to the sidewalk. He dangled her limp body for just a moment to be sure. When he was sure that she was dead, he released her.

She fell with an audible “frump” to the sidewalk. She rolled away from him and rested finally on her back with her head looking up at him from the sidewalk.

He looked down at her. She did not look peaceful in death, she looked frightened still, lying there, face up, neck bent, eyes wide open, mouth wide open as her terror silently screamed up at him. But she was still, and quiet, and dead. Weren’t dead people supposed to look peaceful, he thought. She didn’t. She was dead, but he could still hear her screaming.

His next thought was self-preservation.

He turned and ran back to his car, got in, turned on the ignition, and drove away, leaving the body of 23 year-old Fiona Flores lying alone on the sidewalk. He glanced again at his dash clock. The time was 12:05. It had all happened in just five minutes.

Carl Sweeney pulled his car quietly into his parking stall, quietly exited the vehicle, and quietly made his way to and into his small, studio apartment.

He was in no mood to undress for bed, or brush his teeth, or do any of the things that he normally did before retiring. He just fell on his bed and lay their trembling at the horror of what he had done. But the alcohol quickly took its toll and he fell asleep.

The rising sun woke him. He showered, and shaved, and went to work as though nothing had happened.

The day was uneventful. He did his job more carefully than usual because the only way he could keep his mind off of last night was to stay focused on his work.

He worried a lot about being caught — he couldn’t keep that possibility out of his mind no matter how hard he tried. He continually tried to convince himself that he had gotten away with it, that there would be no police knocking at his door. But the thought just kept pressing on him like a song stuck in his head, and the only thing to be done was to work.

When the clock ticked five, he went home.

He filled his evening with television, never paying attention to any of it, and finally, emotionally drained, he went to bed.

His mind raced back and forth between worry and guilt. Then, finally, he fell asleep. Or he thought he had been asleep, but he wasn’t sure. Had he been awake when he first heard it, that unmistakable scream? Or had he been asleep and jolted awake by a night terror? Whichever, the footsteps were unmistakable. Somebody, some woman, was walking on the sidewalk just outside his apartment a few steps from his door, and the click, click, click of high heels sent shivers up his spine.

He sat upright in his bed. His eyes were riveted on the closed door as terror overcame him. He fancied that the door was a protection, that whoever or whatever was out there would not, could not open the door and enter.

He was wrong. She walked into his room through the closed door just as she had walked out the bar and onto the sidewalk last night. She turned towards him and walked across the floor past him just as she had last night as he sat in his car.

She stopped. She turned angrily at him but her anger quickly turned to terror. She screamed. She turned away from him. She tried to run but couldn't. She was held fast by invisible arms, his arms. She was lifted off the floor. Her neck broke sharply at a 90 degree angle and she slumped quietly to the floor.

Then, she vanished.

Carl jumped from the bed and rushed to the spot where she had fallen. She was not there. He never considered that he might be dreaming, he knew that he was fully awake, and he knew he would be fully awake the rest of the night. So he spent the rest of the night sitting on the couch staring at the wall. He worried that this would happen again the next night, and the next.

It did.

Every night, exactly at midnight, his ghostly victim returned. It happened with such regularity that her coming began to feel familiar, but never less terrifying. It might have been less terrifying had she been just any other ghost. But she was not just any other ghost, she was his victim, and that filled him with not only terror but also with the horror and self-loathing of unrelenting guilt.

Each night he noticed new things about her: the curve of her body, the loveliness of her face, her eyes, her cheekbones, her lips, her dress, her hair, her shoes, her purse, her walk, her everything. And he had destroyed *that*, all of it. All of what she had been now lie in some morgue and would soon be in the ground. And it was his doing.

He began to imagine who she was, what she had been. But of course he knew nothing of her. Still, his haunting fantasies made his guilt gnaw even deeper into his soul.

Then, one night, as he studied her, he noticed it. On her left hand was a ring, a wedding ring. *Oh, my God*, he thought. *She was married!* He fell to his knees in self-disgust as he realized that there were people who loved this woman — a husband, maybe children, certainly parents. Maybe they knew what had happened to her, maybe they didn't. Maybe they were looking for her. So he had injured not only her, but all of them as well. And he felt the damnation of hell suffocating him.

Carl got creative. He tried different things to try to end the madness. He stayed one night at a motel, but she came to him there. He worked all night once in his office, but she came to him there. He slept outside on a park bench, but she came to him from the trees. She would find him wherever he might go, so any thoughts of moving to some far away land like China would be pointless. She'd be already there waiting for him.

A week went by, then two, then three. Then something happened that changed everything.

It was evening. He was composing himself, bracing for her usual visit, when he heard footsteps outside his door. They were not hers, not a woman's.

They stopped at his door.

It's not even 9:00, he thought. This is different.

He heard a distinctive knock at the door. Now that *was* different. There was never any reason for this ghost to knock.

He opened the door, anxious to meet this ghost face to face and have a real conversation with her.

Two police officers stood there in full uniform.

“Are you Carl Sweeney?” one of them asked.

“Yes.”

They stepped in uninvited. One pulled his service revolver and pointed it directly at Carl's face. The other grabbed Carl, slammed him against the wall, and handcuffed his hands behind his back. He said, “Carl Sweeney, I arrest you for the murder of Fiona Flores. You have the right to remain silent...” and the arresting officer continued with his Miranda disclosure.

In less than five minutes Carl was in the backseat of a black-and-white heading towards the precinct. In less than ten, he was there.

The officers hauled him out of the unit, into the precinct, interrogated him, booked him, and locked him in a cell. And that's where he was through the night.

As midnight approached, he was frightened almost to death that she would come to him in that tiny cell. He'd be less than a dozen feet from her. There was no place to run, no place to hide. She could reach out and touch him wherever he might be in the cell.

But she didn't come. Not that night, and not the next, and not ever. And he thought: *My goodness, the haunting is over — now that I've been arrested.*

He was sure that no one had seen the crime, and no one had. But what witnesses had seen as they left the bar that night was Carl, or someone who looked like him, sitting in his car in the passenger seat apparently waiting for someone. The last witness placed him there just ten minutes before midnight and picked him out of a lineup. Another witness, the one who found the body, confirmed the forensics that the murder had occurred at midnight, give or take ten minutes. So detectives quickly deduced the truth that Carl was their man. They only needed to identify who he was, which, although not trivial, was not painfully difficult either.

But try as they did, they could not get a confession from him. And all they had against him was circumstantial evidence. *Good* circumstantial evidence, but forensics had failed to find any residue exchanged, so conviction was not a sure thing.

Finally, fear of a death penalty conviction — which is particularly intense for a man who knows he is damned to hell — Carl pled guilty to second degree murder and accepted a twenty year sentence.

The twenty years passed. The good part was that not once did Fiona visit him in prison. On release day, he felt at peace. Not only had he paid his debt to society, he had paid his debt to her, and she would not trouble him again.

He was checked-out and on the street before noon.

He had some money in an investment account which he had managed to grow over the two decades. It might have been substantial but the prison system charged him for his stay so what he had left was not so much. Still, it was something. Of course he had no job. Since he

needed to be frugal with what money he did have, he decided it best to stay at the ex-con rehab center rather than to squander his meager savings for rent. They had a room available for him and he accepted it gladly.

Then came nightfall.

He was confident that he was square with Fiona and slept like a baby.

Until midnight.

The unmistakable sound of high-heals brought him to full awake in a second and sent chills throughout his body.

He saw her. She screamed. He screamed. He knew now that he was only free of her so long as he was in prison paying his debt. Anywhere else, she would be there.

When she vanished, he got up, got dressed, and left.

Morning found Carl at the prosecutor's office. He was the first into the building after the office opened. He quickly moved past the security guard and into the first prosecutor's office that he came to. Uninvited, he sat down in front of a young prosecutor. She was no one he recognized. That didn't matter.

"You have to arrest me," Carl said.

"For what?" she asked.

"For first degree murder. I served twenty years for second degree murder and now I'm confessing that I premeditated it, I killed her intentionally, I deserve life in prison, arrest me." He raised his hands and offered them for handcuffing.

She said, "Look, mister who-ever-you are. We can't arrest you for a crime that you've already paid for. You have a constitutional protection against double jeopardy."

"I'm waving my right to that protection. Arrest me. Now. Today."

"I sorry. Really I am. From what you say, if it were up to me, I'd lock you up and throw away the key."

"Do it," Carl insisted.

"I can't," replied the prosecutor. "Now, get out of here and stop wasting my time. Or I'll call security."

"Will he throw me in jail? That will do in the interim."

"No. He'll just throw you out."

That seemed pointless so Carl left on his own.

On the street again, the thought of being haunted by Fiona's ghost for the rest of his life so terrorized him that for a brief moment he considered suicide. But he dismissed that as an old saying from the game of Monopoly came to mind: "Go directly to hell, do not pass Go, do not collect \$200." So suicide was out of the question.

So, what could he do?

As painful as he knew it would be, he had to think through all of it — again.

How much did he know about Fiona anyway? He knew a lot, maybe everything. During the interrogation, to break his will and wrangle a confession, they had played the guilt card heavily. The police and the prosecutors had told him all there was to know about this lovely lady.

She was an undocumented migrant just trying to earn enough money to bring her husband and three small children across the border to join her. And if not that, just to keep them fed. He

had met them. The police had brought them to Los Angeles to identify Fiona and return her remains to Mexico.

She was in the bar that night alone because she had no friends and wanted none. She just wanted a few drinks to help her face the next day's work.

She worked as a seamstress in the garment district of Los Angeles. She sewed clothing for children, like her children, and sometimes her boss gave her a bonus for good work which she sent home to Mexico.

This little family of hers lived in Tijuana not far from San Diego. Carl knew where they lived, and what they did. Over the twenty years, he kept track of them. He wasn't stalking them, he just wanted to know that they were all right. He learned that Fiona's oldest son, inspired and enraged by his mother's murder, became a police officer.

Then, suddenly, he knew what he must do — to preserve what little sanity he had left.

At 10:00 A.M. he was on a Greyhound bus heading for San Diego. At 4:00 P.M. he was in San Diego and on another Greyhound heading to the border and Tijuana. At 8:00 he was in the Tijuana terminal. With some directions, by 10:00 he was in the local police station

Carl walked to the first Federale he saw. He was sitting at a desk. Carl sat in the chair facing the desk. It was only 10:00. He still had time before the unwelcome midnight visit..

"I need some help," Carl said.

The bi-lingual Federale asked, "How can I help you."

"I have murdered a Mexican citizen and I'm here to turn myself in."

The Federale leaned back comfortably in his chair and said, "Go on."

"I murdered her in Los Angeles. But that shouldn't matter, should it? She was a Mexican citizen so you have arresting authority, don't you?"

"Yes," the Federale confirmed, "I do."

"And there's no such thing as double jeopardy in Mexico?"

"Curious question. No, there is not," answered the Federale. "But why don't you turn yourself into the police in Los Angeles?"

"I did. They can't arrest me. It has to do with double jeopardy. You see, I killed this woman twenty years ago."

That brought the Federale upright. He looked sternly into Carl's face and studied it very carefully.

"You are Carl Sweeney," he said with a growl.

"Yes, I am. You know me?"

"I am Pedro Flores. You murdered my mother, :Fiona Flores."

Carl was caught completely by surprise by that revelation. He had been talking to exactly the right person, but was unsure what he should say.

Finally, after an unpleasant silence, Carl said, "Yes, I did." He offered his two hands and said, "Arrest me."

The Fererale did. Carl was tried, convicted, and lived happily ever after in a Mexican prison, safe from Fiona's ghost. Well, for a few years anyway until he was hung. After that, who knows. Maybe he apologized to Fiona. Maybe he told her how well her family was doing. Maybe he avoided hell by finally paying his full price to justice. But, as I said, who knows.