My Name is Josh

The parents grieve, but there is no closure, and the wounds never heal when children disappear without a trace, never to be seen again. The investigating Task Force has no evidence, nothing to go on, and no suspects until a lonely draftsman lands in their lap, only to be mysteriously yanked from their grasp.

Detectives Frank Hill and Remy Delgado park in front of the clapboard bungalow. Most homes in this gentrified inner-city neighbourhood showed modest house pride. The Bryan's house did not. Hill rang the bell.

The door was opened by a short, thin woman in a plain shift. Her eyes drooped and her face looked timeworn.

"Yes?" she said.

The smell of cheap alcohol followed her through the doorway.

"Mrs. Bryan?" Hill asked.

"What do you want?"

"Mrs. Bryan, I'm Detective Hill and this is my partner Detective Delgado. We'd like to ask you a few questions."

She squinted her eyes, trying to focus on their faces.

"You're with the Task Force," she said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes, we are, Ma'am," he replied.

"Fat lot of good you've done. My Crystal's still missing and so are all the other kids. Now there's another one! What are you doing about it? Nothing! Just asking more questions."

"Yes, Ma'am."

The detectives were used to the accusations. It was the same from the other families. For some it was like cutting open old wounds. For others, like Shawna Bryan, it was pouring salt into a wound that never healed. She shrugged and walked listlessly down the hallway.

In the car, afterwards, Delgado sighed and said, "that went as well as expected."

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The engineers and technicians erratically file out of the offices of MSTK Engineering. It's past five and the office is soon empty, except for Peter McCarthy, considered the best draftsman the company has. He hunches over his drawing table, putting the final touches on an intricate detail of the company's latest turbofan.

Peter never leaves with the others. He's not unfriendly, but he likes to keep to himself, and the other draftsmen have never known him to engage in small talk. They stopped asking him to join them for drinks years ago.

Satisfied with his work, Peter carefully and lovingly puts away the tools of his trade, slightly caressing each instrument as it goes into his velvet lined, cherry-wood box. He pulls on his tattered, tweed sports coat, and leaves, going out the rear entrance into the dark laneway, interrupting a rat scavenging behind the trash bins.

At Sami's Bodega he picks up his bi-weekly pack of Gitanes. He lights one while he waits for the cross-town bus to arrive. He gets out at the last stop and begins the twenty block walk to his place, across the tracks from the abattoir and next to the abandoned warehouse. He wrinkles his nose at the stench from the slaughterhouse, barely livable some days, but OK today.

* * *

The child lies spreadeagled on the vinyl tabletop, firmly secured with leather thongs knotted around his wrists and ankles, his cries for help muffled with a cloth gag. The man, who told the child his name was Josh, watches him struggle. He considers him one of his best

specimens yet — pale, lightly freckled, with short blond hair, and well nourished. He caresses the boy's arm and runs his finger along his cheek.

"Timmy," he said. "Such a nice name for a most beautiful, little boy. You and I are going to have fun together."

The man pulls a cherry-wood case from below the table and withdraws one of his favourite tools, his number seven scalpel with the ebony shaft. He runs his forefinger down the heel, grasping the handle gently with his fingers. Timmy's eyes bulge and he pulls violently at his restraints.

"Yes, Timmy," he said, "we're going to have so much fun."

* * *

Pictures of the children that have gone missing over the past four years are pinned to the institutional green walls of the Incident Room.

Detective Judy Hildegaard is putting up another picture along with an evidence bag.

"This is Timmy Kellerman. Didn't make it home from school last night. He hasn't turned up in any of the usual places," she said.

Hill nodded. She continued.

"All last known locations are being treated as potential crime scenes. Officers scoured the streets, sidewalks, boulevards, playground, and school yard, turning up the usual detritus — chip bags, newspaper, syringes, thankfully few of those, and cigarette butts, including one interesting specimen."

Hildegaard points to the bag.

"According to our evidence tech, this is a French Gitanes. Very unusual around here," she said.

"Who's following up on that?" asked Delgado.

"I gave it too Palmer. It seemed important."

"Agreed," said Hill.

* * *

The children playing on the climbing bars keep a watchful eye on the man sitting on the swing. They've seen him here before. He watches them, but he keeps to himself and doesn't say anything. If they shout to him, he simply looks away.

Peter takes a few more drags of his Gitanes and grinds it out on the bottom of his shoe. He squeezes the tip and puts the butt into his pocket. He takes another look at the children, then starts to pump. Legs out, lying back, then springing forward and putting his feet underneath him. Over and over until he only sees the sky.

* * *

The man, who told Timmy his name was Josh, carefully scrubs the table, ringing out the cloth into a wooden bucket. When he's satisfied that he has removed all the blood and tissue, he sprays the table, floor, ceiling, and walls of the tiny room with disinfectant. He drops the used cloths into a waxed canvas bag. A small hand falls out onto the floor.

"Oh my," he said, "we can't have that."

He puts the hand back into the bag and pulls the cinch rope taut. He sprays more disinfectant, then carries the bag and the bucket to the basement of the abandoned warehouse, tossing them into the old furnace. He stays until both have been reduced to ash.

* * *

Sami's Bodega carries every essential you forgot to pick up at the grocery store, but suddenly need, or crave, at the last minute, as well as more cigarette and cigar brands than Hill knew existed.

"Yes. I stock Gitanes. Only a few packs. You want some?" Sami asked.

"Do you sell a lot of them?" said Hill.

"No. Not many. A few."

"Who buys them?"

"Oh. Kids mostly. Buy them once to find out about the French glamour. A couple of regulars that like them for the taste."

Sami laughs at his joke.

"Who might those be?" Hill asked.

"There's this old woman who claims she's some kind of movie star; an old man, must be in his nineties, speaks with a French accent; and one other guy, middle aged, very quiet. Asks for his Gitanes, puts exact change on the counter and leaves. Comes once or twice a week to pick up one pack."

* * *

Peter hovers over his drafting table, putting pen to vellum. James Holder, chief engineer, comes up behind and looks over his shoulder. Peter stops and turns on his stool. He stares at James.

"Looks great, Peter. I always love your work," said James, nervously. "Looks almost done. Another five minutes?"

Peter nods and goes back to work. In a few minutes he sits up and brushes off the drawing. He reaches into his drawer and pulls out a scalpel, running his forefinger down the heel, grasping the handle gently with his fingers. He carefully trims the tape from the edges of the vellum, then rolls it up and hands the completed drawing to James who nods and goes back to his desk.

Peter puts away his tools, making sure the scalpel is properly embedded in its case. He gives his table one last brush before putting on his jacket and leaving for the day.

* * *

The detectives parked down the street from Sami's where they had clear view of the front entrance and of Sami behind the counter. Traffic into the Bodega has been steady but light.

An average, middle-aged man goes in, and Sami waves to confirm that it's the mystery man who likes Gitanes. Delgado steps out and follows him on foot. She calls Hill when the man gets on the cross-town bus. They tail it to the end of the line where Delgado once again follows on foot. She calls Hill when the man enters a small house next to an abandoned warehouse. Noting the number, she gets back into the car at the end of the block.

* * *

It's early morning. The Task Force team have been at their computers all night. Coffee cups, Chinese take-out and pizza boxes overflow the waste baskets.

"OK! What have we got?" asked Hill.

Delgado speaks first.

"One Peter McCarthy. He's been in town for five years, making him right for our timeline. He came from outside San Francisco where he held a similar job. He left because the company went out of business. Apparently, he came here highly recommended."

Hildegaard takes over.

"While he was on the West Coast, six children went missing. No trace. There were no more similar cases after McCarthy left and came here. The disappearances started a year after he arrived. Too much of a coincidence to be a coincidence."

"I agree," said Hill. "Don't forget the Gitanes. Also conveniently coincident, but, I like him for this, and he's the best lead we have so far."

He shrugs and added, "the only lead."

* * *

"Except for swinging in the playground, which is kind of creepy, the man does nothing," said Delgado.

The detectives are watching Peter's house. There are lights on inside, but the street is otherwise dark.

Benny Westerman and Ricky Jones, reporters for the *City Enquirer* are sitting in their car in the next block, watching the two detectives.

"This is the most activity we've seen out of this so-called Task Force. Think that's a suspect they're watching?" asked Benny.

"Dunno," replied Ricky, "maybe."

"How long have we been on this story, Rickster?"

"Too long. I'm sick of talking to grieving relatives. Bupkis is all we ever get from these guys," Ricky said, nodding in the direction of the detectives.

Hill and Delgado exit their car and walk up to Peter's house. The door opens and Peter looks blankly at the two detectives. The smell of cabbage and sausages assails their nostrils.

"Peter McCarthy?" said Hill.

"Y-y-y-yes."

"Detectives Hill and Delgado," said Hill. They show Peter their badges.

Peter stares at them.

"May we come in?" Hill asked

"W-w-w-why?"

"We have some questions about an on-going investigation that you may be able to help us with. We'd like to talk with you for a few minutes."

Peter says nothing, then silently turns and motions for the detectives to follow him inside.

The news hounds do a slow crawl past the house.

* * *

The man, known as Josh, is hurried, but efficient and effective, as he reverses the screws out of the waxed drywall of his tiny room in the warehouse. The table and door have already

been incinerated. Once the drywall is removed, he dismantles and breaks up the studs and carries them to the furnace. The drywall was second last, going into the inferno in pieces. He watches it sputter and burn for a few minutes, then tosses in his dissecting paraphernalia. When he's satisfied that there's nothing left, he picks up his cherry-wood chest and walks out.

* * *

"Detective Hill. We believe you have a suspect in your sights. Is that correct?" Ricky asked, while Benny takes pictures. They cornered the lead detective when he walked past the Desk Sergeant.

"No comment," said Hill.

"We understand that you've been interviewing one Peter McCarthy. Is that correct?"

Hill is startled by the question, but he replies without missing a beat, "no comment," then walks away.

* * *

Benny presses Peter's doorbell. Peter opens the door on the second ring.

"Y-y-y-yes?" he said.

"Peter McCarthy?" asked Ricky.

Peter stares at the two men.

"A-a-a-are you the p-p-p-police?"

"No. Not at all, Peter. We're with the *City Enquirer*. We'd like to take a few minutes of your time to talk."

Peter says nothing. He stares at the two reporters.

"W-w-w-what about?"

Benny said, "just about what you were talking to the Task Force about."

"Task f-f-f-force?" asked Peter.

"Yes. Those two police officers that were here the other night."

Peter fidgets nervously and looks behind him. He closes the door without comment. The reporters hear the bolts being thrown. The lights go out inside and on the stoop. Ricky leans on the ringer, but there's no sound from inside.

* * *

Detective Delgado storms into the Incident Room.

"Did you see this?" she asked.

She slams a copy of the *City Enquirer* onto Hill's desk. The headline reads *Local Man Under Investigation*. Hill nods and frowns.

"Factually correct, for a change, but where the hell did they get his name?"

"No idea. Not out of here," she said.

"There's going to be trouble. Let's make sure none of it finds McCarthy. See about putting a rotating detail on him."

"I don't imagine the Captain and Commissioner will be too pleased, either," said Delgado.

* * *

Detective Hill strides into the Incident Room and throws himself into his chair.

"Jesus, what a mess," he exclaimed.

“The Captain on a rant?” asked Hildegaard.

“Yup. First the paper publishes the name of our prime, and only, suspect, and then he turns up dead, burned to a crisp. Of course he’s on a rant.”

“What do we do now?” asked Delgado.

Hill stewed, swivelling back and forth in his chair.

“Find out how our suspects name got leaked to those bozos at the *Enquirer*. Hildegaard, follow up with the arson team. They said it looked like a fire bombing, but our officers didn’t report any suspicious activity last night.”

* * *

“Commissioner, to what do we owe the pleasure?” asked Hill.

“I thought I’d break the news myself, Frank. The Task Force is being disbanded. It’s been two years without any leads and no more missing kids, so it’s way past time to pull the plug.”

Frank knew the day was coming, ever since they lost their only suspect, but it struck home, never-the-less.

“So that’s the end, then?” asked Frank.

“Afraid so. Inevitable, but necessary. Box everything up and send it over to Cold Cases.”

“Yes Sir.”

* * *

The man sees the child walking along the pathway. He squashes his Marquise on the bottom of his shoe, pinches the end and puts the stub into his pocket. He misses his Gitanes, but giving them up was a necessary precaution.

“What’s your name, child?” the man asked.

The little girl pauses, unsure what to do. The man is sitting cross-legged on the grassy verge. He looks like Mr. Rogers, with the blue sweater, converse sneakers, and the school tie, like her brother’s.

“I’m not supposed to talk to strangers,” she said.

“That’s very wise. My name is Josh. There, now we’re not strangers,” he said.

“Did you go to school at St. Michaels?” she asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“My brother goes there.”

She watches the man that calls himself Josh. He smiles at her.

“I’m Cherise,” she said.

“That’s a very pretty name,” the man said.