

a novel
Andrew Wilmot



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A Buckrider Book

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Scandal turned out to be addictive. Going forward, the movie-star discourse – the many levels of public conversation connected to famous people onscreen – was inextricable from what we all suspected the stars did when the cameras stopped rolling. That became the other movie, the shadow drama: the drinking, fornicating, homicidal ghost in the machine. For some it became the only movie that mattered, precisely because it was the one we weren't supposed to see.

- Ty Burr, Gods Like Us

"I can allow myself to stray dangerously close to the truth, and all anyone will ever see is metaphors."

- Amélie Nothomb, Hygiene and the Assassin

1. A Single Thread

Posted: 11/08/2013

I never know who to wear. It doesn't matter the situation. When I glance inside my closet it's like nothing fits – like I've amassed an entire wardrobe of impractical uses and pointless endeavours. I often don't know what I was thinking – in what world did I imagine I'd have occasion for an Italian restauranteur with such calloused hands? Or a pale, waiflike artist, a trust-fund baby from SoHo whose fingertips and nails are permanently crusted with oil paint? Or a tall, Black lifestyle and boudoir photographer from just outside of Richmond, Virginia?

Staring at the outfits at my disposal, one hand on the pronounced bone of my hip, my mind stumbles back to the very beginning of this mess. It felt so silly then, to be so ... excited, I guess. Giddy. Ecstatic. Pulsating with energy and uncertainty, but not in a bad way, not with any degree of anxiety.

Which is all the fucking dumber in retrospect. But hindsight's a motherfucker. Almost as much as you were.

Few outfits still remain in my wardrobe, hand-stitched composites hung in protective plastic sheaths like the sort you get from the

dry cleaner. I take them out every other day and lay them on the floor of my 350-square-foot one-room cockroach hostel, and gently rub them down with a solution of salt and lime to preserve them, keep them pliant, keep them from smelling of dismemberment. Fix whatever I can — wear and tear, gaps where the threading has come loose. Every now and then I'm forced to dig into the scraps I keep soaking in a Tupperware container in the fridge, fishing out a patch of human skin of as similar a tone and texture as possible, though my options are increasingly limited — it's been some time since I've stocked up on swatches, or for that matter full sleeves, and supplies are running low. The work seems more effort now than it ever used to be. I suppose that's what happens when you get accustomed to doing things not on your fucking own.

Will anyone read this? If I hit *post*, will this leave any trace or imprint upon the world? If I finish this bottle of Xanax, right now, will I slip into a coma and die before finding out? Inquiring minds, and all that shit.

Fuck it, I'm ready. I'm jumping and you're coming with me, even if I have to tie a goddamn rope around your neck. We can hit bottom together, bleed, together, until there's nothing left. Because this isn't just my story to tell, and I'm absolutely, for-fucking-real, not doing this on my own.

Act I

2. The Scorpion and the Frog

Posted: 11/09/2013

COLD OPEN ON BLACK, THE SOUND OF TIRES SCREECHING TO A HALT. THE BRIEF ENSUING SILENCE IS BROKEN BY MUFFLED SCREAMS AND THE DULL THUD OF A FIST PUNCHING THE INSIDE OF A CAR'S TRUNK.

 $\label{eq:MALORIE} \textit{MALORIE (V.O.)} \\ \textit{You died the day we met.}$

CUT TO:

EXT: ABANDONED SHIPPING YARD -- NIGHT

CHARLIE ELLINGTON -- AKA "CHARLIE THE CHIN" -- (45-year-old White male) is pulled forcefully from the trunk of a LATE-MODEL BUICK CENTURY and thrown onto the rain-soaked ground. He lands hard on his hands and knees, WINCES. He looks up at his assailant, a tall, outhouse-wide brick of

a human named MICKEY O' (late-40s White male).

MALORIE (V.O.)

I remember it frame for frame.
(Beat)

We had cappuccinos and split a raspberry croissant. You laughed when I smiled and showed two rows of seed-marked teeth. If Chiclets could have freckles, you said. God, it was corny -- but cute, definitely cute. That was one of your gifts, you know; you didn't even have to try -- charm poured out of you like water off a duck's back.

CHARLIE raises his hands up to his face. They're shaking, wet, covered in dirt from where he'd landed on the ground.

CHARLIE

I didn't do it, Mick! I ain't no stoolie, goddamnit! I swear on my grandmother's grave.

MALORIE (V.O.)

God rest her arthritic Irish soul.

CHARLIE starts to weep openly. He drops his face into his filthy hands.

MICKEY steps in front of CHARLIE. He calmly slips a BLACK LEATHER GLOVE over each hand before reaching around to his back and pulling a HANDGUN from his waistband.

From around the corner of a nearby WAREHOUSE, MALORIE MARCELLO (32-year-old White female) watches as MICKEY screws a SUPPRESSOR to the end of his HANDGUN and presses it against the right side of CHARLIE'S head.

MALORIE (V.O.)

Charlie the Chin — that was what they called you, back when you were still on the up and up, back before it all came crashing down around you like a house of straw. It wasn't your fault — you didn't know those bills were marked. You weren't no stoolie, you cried again. No double-crosser, no minuteman's wanker. You were a good man. An honest man. A Family man — capital F, the Family, the one you don't fuck with.

MICKEY shakes his head. He moves the HANDGUN down, points it instead at CHARLIE'S knee. He FIRES. CHARLIE SCREAMS and falls over on one side, starts writhing in place. Without saying anything, MICKEY walks around to the other side of CHARLIE and points the HANDGUN at CHARLIE'S left arm. He FIRES again. CHARLIE'S SCREAMS INTENSIFY as he flops around on the ground in pain.

MALORIE (V.O.)

Mickey, that Protestant son of a bitch, dressed up and down from the sales racks of a Big & Tall, he pulled out

a .45 and shot you in the knee; blood, bone and muscle turned to confetti, sprayed all over the concrete. He shot you a second time, in the arm -- straight through the bicep.

(Beat)

I saw the pity in Mickey's eyes as he stared down at you, watching as you slowly bled to death from your wounds. I knew it then, sure as I knew anything: he was going to give you one last chance to earn your wings.

MICKEY steps back, moving in front of CHARLIE, and crouches down to face him. He holds the HANDGUN carelessly between his knees.

MICKEY

C'mon, Chin, take the righteous path here. Admit what you did. Accountability -- ever'thing's about accountability.

CHARLIE musters his remaining strength and raises his head. He stares menacingly at MICKEY. Says nothing.

MICKEY stands back up and once more points the HANDGUN at the right side of CHARLIE'S head. He FIRES a final shot and CHARLIE'S body falls limp. BLOOD pools from his mouth.

Out of sight of MICKEY, MALORIE clamps both hands over her mouth and retreats back around the far side of the WAREHOUSE.

MALORIE (V.O.)

Blood flowed out of you like red paint staining your white button-up, caulking the cracks in the pavement with straight lines and ninety-degree turns.

(Beat)

I'd watched your life -- your light -extinguished in less time than it took
to shake someone's hand. It wasn't
some stretched out life-before-youreyes thing you hear people talking
about when they drum up the event,
making it into something big, into
something other than shit. You didn't
beg, break or even begin to crack. You
took it like the man you were, the man
I fell in love with.

(Beat)

It was over before it had even begun, and all I could think about, all I had left, was what it felt like last night when you kissed me.

CUT TO:

INT: MARCELLO MANOR / FOYER (FLASHBACK) -- NIGHT

MALORIE, wearing a midnight blue sequin dress, is standing at the top of the stairs looking down into the foyer as a half-dozen men in black and grey suits file into the dining room.

The last man left in the foyer, CHARLIE, pauses, waiting until the rest of the group

has disappeared into the dining room before darting up the stairs, careful not to make a sound.

At the top of the stairs, CHARLIE takes MALORIE by the arm and leads her to the far end of the darkened hallway.

CHARLIE

(Whispers)

You gotta get gone, babe, before this whole thing goes sideways.

MALORIE (V.O.)

Your accent was just a little bit off, slipping between "heritage" and "new world." I smiled nervously, not wanting you to know that I could see, clearly, the cliffs of your ability.

CHARLIE

(Whispers)

Mickey can't know about us. Goddamn neanderthal can't learn we've been together. I don't know what he'll do to either one of us if he finds out.

CHARLIE pulls MALORIE in close and they KISS. It lasts for several seconds and then he pulls away, leaving her alone in the upstairs hallway. He hurries downstairs, to rejoin the others in the dining room.

MALORIE (V.O.)

I didn't listen when you told me to

run. That wasn't my job -- it wasn't what was on the page. I was supposed to stand up straight, back arched, quarter-turn to the camera, waiting for the sky-splitting crack of the first shot. Right then, upon hearing it, a single tear rolled down my face. I waited, hoping that by the time the second and third shots had been fired they would have gotten what they needed and I wouldn't have to live through this again.

CUT TO:

EXT: ABANDONED SHIPPING YARD -- NIGHT

MICKEY reaches out with his foot and NUDGES CHARLIE'S body. He KICKS him in the ribs, once, just to be sure that CHARLIE is dead. His hand is still tightly wrapped around the HANDGUN.

MALORIE (V.O.)
Hold -- one hippopotamus.

3. First Impressions

Posted: 11/10/2013

"Cut. All right, people, let's run it again."

The illusion of our time together was ruptured by a sudden swarm of bodies crowding onto the set, buzzing around one another with practised urgency. I watched in astonishment at how in just minutes they had pulled you off the ground, given you a new shirt, a new suit jacket, reapplied your makeup and tussled your short, dark brown hair just right, just like it was before Dwayne – Mickey – first pulled you from the cramped trunk of the car. They wiped the blood from your cheek, your lips, your Norman Rockwell chin. They straightened you out, gave you some water, made you look all new again. In the rush to reset the stage for the next take, you were, however briefly, the most important person in their world – their bend-over-backward-to-make-him-look-perfect superstar.

I watched as you scrambled out from the cluster of hands picking at you, scuffing your clothes to make it look like you'd actually been in a fight.

"Did you get it?" you asked eagerly. "How'd it look?"

Twenty feet away, standing next to a black folding chair with his name stitched in block letters across the back, the director, a short man with grey sideburns poking out from beneath his signature Yankees baseball cap, was animatedly discussing changing the angle of the shot for the next take with his DP – director of photography.

"How was it?" you asked again, approaching from behind.

The director turned around, stared at you for a second or two longer than he would have if he'd remembered your name. His discomfort was obvious in the vacant way he scratched the three-day growth on his chin, like I'd seen him do – like he always did – when he was trying to think of a way to end a conversation before it had even begun.

"Good," the director said at last. "Real good. Real, real good." It was perfunctory, dismissive, like he was swatting away a fly. "We're going to run it again, though. This time, I need to see more ... oomph."

"Oomph?"

That's right, Charlie the Chin. Oomph. Excitement. Passion.

"Feeling," the director said. "Do it ... do it for *love*. You're going down" – he turned his head and pointed – "for her. Remember that."

You glanced over to me and nodded, knowing, right then and there, precisely what it was you had to embody – what you had to *sell* to your audience: actual love, or your closest possible approximation. You turned back around, but the director had walked away and was already deeply engrossed in another much more interesting conversation. I saw it then for the first time: the almost imperceptible twinge of panic brewing behind your eyes, and in the way you nervously rolled your head and loosened up by shaking your hands and arms, ragdolling like you were taking the stage in a first-year acting class. I'd seen others on different sets exhibit such discomfort once or twice before, but never someone with as many credits to their name as you. It was evident from the way you tried to brush off the director's avoidance as nothing special, nothing uniquely targeted: you wanted more than he'd given you – more specifics, more purpose – because you wanted to get it right.

I think it was the length of it – the role – that made you nervous. I didn't realize it at the time, but now, so long after the fact, it couldn't be more obvious. The part amounted to fifteen, maybe sixteen pages, flashbacks included, but it was more than you'd had by this point in your career. Likely more than you'd ever wanted. I'm positive it wasn't you who'd sought out a role of that size, but that it was someone in your camp who had pushed, had really fought for you to take on something new, to step outside your career-long comfort zone and be something more, for a change, than just another corpse. I mean, still eventually a corpse, just not, you know, right away. Someone, perhaps, with a salt-and-pepper perm, bright pink Dolce & Gabbana corset eyeglasses, and who was already reeking of wine by one-thirty in the afternoon.

But you did it. You sucked it up and gave Mister Perennially-Snubbed-for-Best-Director everything you had.

I never told you this when we were together, but I always admired how you never once brought your ego onto the set. You were there to work and that was all there was to it. There were some, yes, who mistook your commitment for hubris or even arrogance, but in time I saw beyond their first impressions of you. There were no grudges in your world, no directors you couldn't stomach. Just total commitment to your craft.

While you busied yourself getting back into the proper head-space, I began to feel it again, a terrible itch on the back of my hand, just beneath the surface. I started to scratch, massaging the skin covering my knuckles, kneading the flesh of the slightly too large body sleeve. It was hot inside the skin, but I tried my best to ignore it, to keep my hands away from my face and the makeup that had been so carefully applied by a timid mouse of a girl wearing a plastic Hello Kitty hair band, which pulled her long, blond hair back and over her ears. When I first saw her I wanted to reach out and pull out the band, to let her hair fall down over her face. There was something there, something held back, held in. I saw it in how she looked at me while she worked, her almond-shaped eyes a focused, steaming mix of longing and bottled ferocity, that she'd

wanted to be something more than what she'd amounted to - she was a hopeful, maybe-one-day movie star who'd been reduced to methodically reapplying layers of blush and mascara between takes. Though I couldn't tell you her name or anything about her, I felt right away as if I knew all the parts to her story, because in reality it was no different than yours, mine or any other.

"Don't forget," the director said to you as he took his seat. "You love Malorie. You're ready to die for her."

And you would, again and again, until they got it right.

"I'm ready," you said, energetically snapping your head to one side, then the other – light pops both times. Hands on your thighs, deep breath, you crawled back into the Buick's trunk.

"Places," said the director. "And, action!"

And I watched for another three hours and forty-five minutes as you screamed and bled out and died, over and over again.

4. No One Special

Posted: 11/12/2013

The very last thing I expected when flipping channels this past Friday evening was for you to come crashing into my life again. But there you were, on my television screen, all tuxed out and walking a red carpet for a premiere somewhere – North Hollywood, from the looks of it. You appeared sheepish, looking around uncomfortably with your hands stuffed in your pockets, like you desperately wanted to make a run for it as you were sandwiched impossibly between Eden Grant from *Access Hollywood* and multiple-award-nominated filmmaker Andreas Rain. Cameras flashed an electrical storm. I watched as you put a hand up over your eyes, to shield them, while your co-stars filed into the theatre.

"I'm here with Director Andreas Rain at the premiere of his new film, *Child of Honour*," Eden said to the camera, half-shouting above the cries of the gathered crowd. "Andreas, two years ago your film *Only the Dead Know*, both a critical and commercial success, was left out of the running for Best Picture at the Academy Awards – a glaring oversight to many. What do you think your chances are of *Child of Honour* landing a coveted spot on next year's ballot?"

Rain, dressed in his usual combination of dark blue jeans and a black button-up dress shirt, with a salmon-pink scarf tied loose around his neck and oversized egg-shaped sunglasses that covered most of his face, crowded close around Eden's mic, almost pushing her out of frame. "You know," he said, "I don't like to speculate. If my work isn't to the Academy's tastes, I'm not going to try and change their minds. I'm just going to keep doing what I do best. But if you really want to know the film's chances come award season, this guy —" he glanced back then, saw you and pulled you in front of the camera. He threw his arm around your shoulders. *He hugged you*. "This is the man to ask; he's seen it all. D_____ here is one of this industry's unsung heroes. Do you know how many films he's been in? Tell her, D

And like a deer in headlights you just stood there, stunned, not at all sure what to do or say. You just shoved your hands back in your pockets and glanced into the camera for a split second before awkwardly staring down at your shoes. "A few, I guess," you muttered, your shyness palpable.

Rain laughed boisterously. "He's modest. Do you have any idea how much arm-twisting I had to do just to convince him to come out here tonight and celebrate with us?" He laughed again, patted your arm while you grew increasingly uncomfortable. I could see you anxiously doing the math inside your head, estimating just how many eyes were on you at that moment, televised or not. "This guy's a harder worker than anybody I know. He's been in dozens of films. Hundreds. He's ... well, there's no two ways about it: he's the world's greatest living redshirt."

Eden gave her best, punctuated television host chuckle. "What's a redshirt?" she asked.

"For more than twenty years," Rain continued, "D_____here has been dying like nobody else." He spoke excitedly, like he'd discovered you – like he was somehow responsible for your entire career up to this point. "This guy ..." Then I watched in disbelief as Andreas Rain, a man who'd been called on more than one occasion

the affable reinvention of Stanley Kubrick, an *auteur* in the most exhausting sense of the word, swept you into his arms and gave you one of the most emotional bear hugs I've ever seen, arching back, nearly lifting you off the ground. "You did it," he said, practically crying into your shoulder. "You gave my story its *soul*."

Now Eden's no fool. She's been around long enough to know a story when she sees one. She watched as the director named "Oscar's Biggest Threat" in last December's *Empire* magazine lost all composure in the arms of someone who, just moments prior, was an unknown, and stepped up to the plate. "How do you respond to that, D_____? How does it feel to know what an important part you played in bringing *Child of Honour* to life?"

The camera pulled away from Rain, who made a show of things using the tip of his scarf to wipe tears from his eyes, and focused, instead, on you. How did you handle it? True to form: you went a little red in the cheeks, offered a noncommittal shrug and said, "It was just a small role. I really didn't do much — I just showed up on set and did what Mister Rain asked me to do."

"My boy," Rain said, his large hands on your shoulders as if he were gripping the top rung of a ladder, "you did so much more than that. So, so much more." With that he let go of you and headed into the theatre with the rest of the cast and crew, leaving you alone on the red carpet with Eden for your moment of ... glory, I guess?

"I should probably ..." you began, nodding to the theatre's entrance.

Eden, however, continued talking; if she noticed your discomfort, she certainly didn't let it stand in the way of her curiosity. "Wow," she said. "That must feel pretty great, hearing your praises sung with such enthusiasm!"

"Yeah ... I guess."

"He said you've been acting for twenty years. Where have you been hiding all this time? Is this your first major Hollywood production?"

"No, but listen, I really should -"

"I'm not sure I should let you go." She fake-laughed again. "There's so much I want to ask you. Who else have you worked with? What's next for you?"

"I really need to get going." You started walking toward the theatre's entrance. Then, as if to deflect whatever follow-up she might have had, you turned back around and said, "Honestly, I'm no one special."

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I don't suppose you know what it does to a person to hear those words uttered by someone they once loved. Five times I watched that interview, listening for some sign or tell in your voice — something to indicate you weren't being as serious as deep down I knew you were. But each time I got to the end, the words stung anew: "I'm no one special."

Then forgive me for asking, but what the fuck was I?

For three hours I let it fester, what you'd proclaimed, live on television, to the entire world. I drank and shouted and cried out loud until my upstairs neighbours started pounding on the floor, threatening to call the cops if I didn't cut the noise. But I wasn't listening to them – I was too busy feeling pissed off and hurt and not nearly as important as I'd been trying to convince myself I had been for going on a year now. After everything we'd seen and done together - the lives we'd appropriated, all those bodies left behind, half-buried in the dirt – it was like you were stabbing me in the heart all over again. It's obvious now I was blowing things out of proportion – we're ex, and you're free to feel whatever the fuck you want about who you are and what you've done – but to see you on television, in about as uncomfortable a position as I could ever imagine for you to be in, and to hear you so wilfully tear yourself down, in front of millions, while someone was trying desperately to pull you into the spotlight ...

Yeah. You might say it hit a little close to home. The whole time we were together I lived in your shadow, not the other way around.

It was *your* sandbox, not mine. You made that very clear. And if you were – are nothing, then I ...

That night, clearer heads prevailing, I registered this blog and started stitching the past back together again. It began as a writing exercise: I wanted to see if I could go back to it, to the very beginning and the first time you spoke to me while I sat next to you on top of an audio equipment trunk, and we shared that raspberry croissant you'd snatched from the craft services cart. I wanted to remember what it was I'd been so attracted to in the first place. The more details from that day that I gradually pieced together, the clearer the overall image became. It started to feel like here I was and there you were and nothing at all had changed, like time had stopped for us and you were still pointing and laughing at the seeds stuck between my teeth as I rummaged through some poor production assistant's unguarded purse, searching desperately for dental floss or a toothpick or even a credit card — something, anything I could use to clean up my smile.

"It's okay," you said, beaming, revealing your own set of raspberry-spotted teeth. You closed your mouth, ran your tongue back and forth across your teeth, and smiled again — spotless. I blushed. You rested your hand on my thigh. If we only had a few minutes more, a few seconds even, we might have ... maybe ...

You say you're no one special, but I've done the numbers. Television and film combined, all online aliases accounted for: seven hundred and sixty-three. Seven hundred and sixty-three on-camera deaths in your twenty-one-year career. That averages out to approximately 36.3 deaths a year. Throw in uncredited one-day walk-ons as a background body in the periodic disaster film or zombie apocalypse and that number rises considerably. Andreas Rain was right: you are the greatest living example of cannon fodder to ever grace the screen. And I wonder, and I'm not sure why I never asked this when we were together, but as you stumble ever closer to your forty-sixth birthday I have to know: Why? Why after twenty-one years are you still doing this to yourself? You sink into someone else's shoes, put on a good show, give death everything you've got — and for what?

Whatever. You wanna say you're no one special, that's your prerogative. But I'm not ready to follow you to the gates of obscurity. There's been enough of that already, and as it is I'm running out of time to tell our tale. I never wanted the spotlight for myself, not really, but I wanted ...

I just wanted to stand in enough light that you could see me.

You probably won't read any of this — I doubt you're able to sit in one place long enough to make it to the end of even a review of any of your films — but if by some chance during what I'm sure will be an amazingly meta mid-life crisis you do manage to stumble upon this blog, know this: you're more special than you give yourself credit for.

Also, you're an asshole.



ANDREW WILMOT is a writer, editor and painter living in Toronto, ON. He holds a BFA in Visual Arts (with a minor in Film and Video Studies) and a master's degree in Publishing, both from Simon Fraser University. He has won awards for screenwriting and short fiction, with credits including Found Press, *The Singularity*, *Glittership*, *Turn* to Ash, Augur and the anthologies Those Who Makes Us: Canadian Creature, Myth, and Monster Stories and Restless: An Anthology of Ghost Stories, Dark Fantasy, and Creepy Tales. As an editor, he's worked with Drawn & Ouarterly, ChiZine Publications, Broken River Books, ARP Books, Playwrights Canada Press, Freehand Books, Wolsak & Wynn and NeWest Press, and is a freelance academic editor specializing in matters of body dysmorphia and eating disorders. Books he's worked on have taken home multiple awards from the Sunburst Awards, the Eisner Awards and, most recently, the Shirley Jackson Awards. He is also co-publisher and co-EIC of the online magazine Anathema: Spec from the Margins. The Death Scene Artist is his first novel. Find him online at: andrewwilmot.ca, anathemaspec.tumblr.com and on Twitter, hating everything about Twitter, @AGAWilmot.

Praise for

The Death Scene Artist

"From the jaw-dropping opening pages when we meet a protagonist perusing their remarkable inventory of 'outfits,' up to the very last page, this novel kept me riveted. This is a wonderful book, surreal, disturbing and liberating in the very best way."

Suzette Mayr, author of

Dr. Edith Vane and the Hares of Crawley Hall

"Wilmot brings a sensually complete sense of reality to the unreal worlds of on- and off-screen Hollywood. Wilmot's serious play with language and with form makes *The Death Scene Artist* a hypnotic, surprising novel that doesn't sacrifice emotion for irony."

Nathan Ripley, author of Find You in the Dark

M_____ is dying of cancer. Only thirty-two, an extra with a meagre list of credits to their name and afraid of being forgotten, M_____ starts recounting the strange, fantastic and ultimately tragic path of their love affair with the world's greatest living "redshirt" – a man who has died or appeared dead in nearly eight hundred film and television roles.

In a compelling narrative of blog entries interspersed with film script excerpts, *The Death Scene Artist* immerses readers in a three-act surrealist exploration of the obsessive fault-finding of body dysmorphia and the dangerous desires of a man who has lived several hundred half-minute lives without having ever experienced his own.



