

Original Chapter 15: Doug Doug. *This chapter originally came at the end of Part I. In the chapter, Charlie explains why he decided to become involved in the Paul Barkley murder investigation. He recalls a bedtime story he once told his daughter Lucy and once again quotes Yeats. This chapter was replaced by the current “Chapter 15: Paul Barkley”.*

Original Chapter 15: Doug Doug

I'd like to say that my part in the murder investigation of Paul Barkley began with a simple code: someone kills your friend, you track down the killer.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I think I even harbored the belief that I was not all that different from Eddie Mahler. Just a guy asking questions, uncovering clues.

Years ago, I had thought of writing a detective series. It was during that time when I was unable to get a contract for an autobiography. I went so far as to make a pitch to a top New York agent, who had gone to school with Jill and who had agreed to listen to me out of allegiance to their history. In her early thirties, she had recently signed several hot literary stars. She was brimming with optimism—on her own path, she was scaling one of those upward slopes. We sat on either sides of her gleaming desk, which had been cleared of everything but a new pad of paper and a pencil that looked as if it had been sharpened by the hand of God. The office had a window with an aerie view of building tops on the Upper East Side and handsome floor-to-ceiling shelves, the spines of books packed evenly in rows like bricks.

My idea, I explained to her, was to take a distinctive American literary character and imagine him or her as a detective. Retain the physical presence, the voice, the setting—in short, the character—but introduce a mystery, a crime to be solved. The idea, I helpfully pointed out, was to exploit the incongruity. I proposed a few possibilities: Holden Caulfield, Isabel Archer, Huck Finn, Jake Barnes, Rabbit Angstrom, and Moses Herzog. I think I even made a lame joke about Winnie the Pooh—Homicide in the Hundred Acre Wood.

Of course, I intended all this to be nouveau and edgy. But once I started, there was little to disguise my simple inability to imagine an original detective. A lifetime of speaking in someone else's voice bred certain habits. I talked on and on, in a jumble of parenthetical incoherence and restatement, unable to stop even as I

watched the cheerfulness slowly drain from the editor's eyes to be replaced by a look of mortification. Later I learned she had phoned Jill after I left, worried about my mental health. Did I have a compulsion to humiliate myself? Apparently it was common among men of a certain age and circumstance.

On a basic level, my part in the murder investigation of Paul Barkley began with my being beaten by Daryl and Mitch. If Vincent was right, and I had asked the wrong questions of the wrong people, why had someone felt it necessary to send Mitch and his friends to attack me?

I was also motivated by one of those typically male preoccupations—the desire to repay a debt and even the balance between Barkley and me. I thought I owed him something. After all, he had done me a favor. It wasn't all that much of a favor—picking up a phone and making a call—something that my gregarious friend had probably done a dozen times a day. But because it had happened without a chance of my actually returning the favor, it took on a life of its own. I entered into a posthumous bargain. In return for finding me a job, I would try to find out who had killed him.

Then, too, he had come to me before the end with something that he wanted to tell me. "I'll talk to you later," he said. The remark hung in the air after his death. What had he wanted to tell me? And why had he chosen me—who had he thought I was?

Had he wanted to ask my advice, or just show me what he had done? It was true, as I had told Mahler, my relationship with Barkley to that point had been superficial. But in many relationships, there's a time when it can change. Perhaps that moment of change had been about to occur. He was going to trust me with something, and we were going to be closer friends.

Over and over I replayed the scene. I saw his face close to mine. It swayed back and forth, and he continued to dance even as he spoke to me. He had a goofy, carefree smile. Whatever his fears or worries that night, they were held in check for a brief interlude by the fresh new air of the spring evening and the wonderful freedom of moving his body in time to the music.

"Hang on to this," he shouted above the sound system as he handed me the envelope. Had he said something else, drowned out by the music, that would have given me a hint of his reasons for giving me the memory stick?

Days later, the memory stick became something else—a symbol of the legacy that he had given me. To Barkley, I would always be the young writer of the Virginia Hardy book. In his mind's eye, I still had promise, there was one more book in me. He had confidence in my abilities when there was no real reason to have it. Hang on to this, he said and handed me a small piece of the

puzzle of his murder. What he left me was not the gift of writing Patel's biography but all the tangled passages of his own biography.

What did I know of Barkley? He had been born with a sense of entitlement. He worked hard and managed several businesses. He made connections with the rich and famous, and because of this, was an exciting person to be around. He lived on the brink of a deal that he thought would change his life. He sold drugs. He was involved with a strange and beautiful woman. He had something or knew something or did something that led someone to kill him.

What made me think I could understand what all of that meant? I was a writer, and what is a writer after all but someone who knows how to describe a thing?

The truth is, my part in the murder investigation was not just about a code of honor, a repayment of debt, or even a solution to the riddles that Paul had left behind. It was about something that *I* needed. Barkley's murder was a story, and after years of helping my clients tell hundreds of them, I knew the essential fact of stories: that every one is a beginning. Sometimes just starting at one end and recounting the tale can help you out of whatever jam you're in, and at the time Paul Barkley was killed, that—above all—was what I needed.

Tell me a story, Lucy said at bedtime when she was a little girl and couldn't fall asleep. I read her stories, but the ones she liked best were the ones I made up. One ongoing series involved a character named Douglas D. Douglas. This brave little hero was a writer (*what else?*), whose parents had been so devoid of imagination that they had been unable to conceive of an original first or middle name (*the middle initial stood for Douglas!*) for their only offspring. To compensate poor Douglas D. Douglas for the ridiculous name that would follow him for the rest of his life and for his parents' failure of the most minimum of creative accomplishments, the fates had given him extraordinary powers of imagination.

Douglas D. Douglas wrote fiction—short stories, all of them about a character he named Douglas D. Douglas, and as he finished each story, it came true in his own life. The stories amounted to a kind of forward-looking autobiography. They weren't histories of what *had* happened in his life; they were accounts of what *would* happen. His life was a drama invented year by year by the soul of the writer that lived inside him.

Lucy loved this character—the writer of the stories. She called him Doug Doug. It was a child's conceit—she was fascinated (*at least as much as I*) by the idea of someone who could change his life by telling stories.

At the start, Lucy listened without question to Doug Doug's adventures. A caring child, she even worried for him. Doug Doug would need to be careful what he imagined, she told me solemnly. We all need to be careful what we imagine, I thought to myself.

But, as she grew older, Lucy began to be intrigued by the challenges of my invention and to ask questions. "Did Doug Doug have a family—a wife and children?" she asked. "If he did, how would they change and grow unless he imagined them?" (*Here I wondered if she were not thinking of herself. Was she worried that her own life was being imagined by her father the writer? Had I awakened existential questions in her young mind?*)

To my credit, I didn't resent these questions. After all, what good is any fiction if it doesn't honor its own logic? I could have just said that poor old Doug Doug didn't have a family, but by this time there needed to be a reason for everything. I told her that Doug Doug did not have a family because love was the hardest thing in the world to imagine. I told her about Yeats, the greatest poet in the history of the English language. "Love," Yeats wrote, "is the crooked thing."

But Lucy didn't want to hear about Yeats. She was not yet old enough to know love's many different colors and its capacity for pain. Love, as far as she was concerned, was one of life's essential experiences, and she couldn't bear to think of her long cherished character living a life so bereft.

"Really?" she asked. "Are you sure about this, daddy?"

Of course I wasn't sure. Truth be told, in those days, I was taking handfuls of pills. All I was really certain about was forward motion.

Then one night at bedtime, when she was 10 or 11, Lucy asked the question that had obviously been on her mind for some time. "What happens if Doug Doug gets in trouble?"

"Trouble?" I asked.

"You know," she said. "Something bad. Trouble. Can he tell a story and get out of it?"

Here was a trap for any good parent. "Sure," I said. "But it has to be a true story."

For a few years after that, we played a game. Lucy posed a dilemma that Doug Doug faced—his trouble. My job was to tell the story that Doug Doug imagined to escape the trouble.

At the time of Paul Barkley's murder, I had arrived in my own dark wood, and somewhere along the way, I decided his story was going to lead me out. I tried, as I had years before with my clients, to collect the facts and look for the chain of events that defined Barkley. It was what the actor, who I had met years before in a New York restaurant, had conceived of as the single line that makes up a life. In this case, it was the line that had led Barkley at

the end of his life to be shot to death late at night in a parking lot—
and the line that brought me to be there with him.

