
Prologue

“They killed him when he was still young. They blew his head off the same week I became major-leaguer. He never got to see me play. Not one game, not an inning. But I knew he was watching me... and I never let him down. Never.”

—*Tyrus Raymond Cobb, Royston, Georgia, August 8, 1905*

Amanda had just finished tightening the belt on her robe when a creak sounded from the balcony outside her second story bedroom window. Her oldest boy, Tyrus, was playing baseball in Augusta, while the younger two—a daughter and another son—were at friends’ houses.

She quickly stepped, barefoot, to the bed, squatted, and felt under the bed for the double-barreled shotgun her husband kept for protection; William was out of town on business.

Standing, Amanda strained to cock the first barrel on the heavy shotgun. Struggling to aim the unwieldy twin at the window, she tilted her head to listen, over the rush of running water from the bathroom, for sounds from the balcony. A faint scratching came from one of the windows. She was grateful that she’d locked them.

Amanda made her way stealthily to open the shade. Seeing nothing, she moved to the second one, on the other side of the chimney, and opened the shade. The scratching came again, from the first window. She crept around the chimney to find William’s round, white face staring at her through the glass.

Amanda gasped in surprise and backpedaled until the backs of her

legs struck the bed; the water suddenly stopped its mad rush, and silence, as it often did, filled the void between Amanda and William.

William appeared startled by the sight of his wife armed with the shotgun; but then Amanda watched her husband's gaze move from the twin barrels aimed at his midsection to a place over her right shoulder. A moment later his dark eyes narrowed on his wife's face.

The pane of glass separating them, save for its transparency, seemed to Amanda a sort of metaphor for what their marriage had become. Meeting her husband's angry gaze bravely, a corner of her mouth twitched and rose slightly.

Too late, William realized his grim fate.

Amanda savored, for a moment, the transition from the typical stern cruelty on her husband's face to fear before she pulled the first trigger. Recoiling from the blast, the glass shattered and a gaping red hole appeared in William's abdomen.

William stumbled backward, landing hard against the balcony railing, and stutter-stepped forward again with a groan, framed within the remnants of the window. The pistol with which he'd armed himself for the occasion clattered to the balcony.

Amanda cocked the second barrel and stepped forward before she pulled the second trigger, and the top of William's head exploded.

Turning to look behind her, to where her husband had confirmed the town's talk of her duplicity, Amanda told her lover, "You need to go, quickly. There'll be questions."

One

“Be good and dutiful, conquer your anger and wild passions that would degrade your dignity and belittle your manhood. Cherish all the good that springs up in you. Be under the perpetual guidance of the better angel of your nature. Starve out and drive out the demon that lurks in all human blood and ready and anxious and restless to arise and reign.”

—*From a letter to Tyrus from his father, January 5, 1902*

Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2009

The forceps grasping Cagney’s right pinky finger tightened, so he ceased to struggle. He glanced up at the nurse—a pretty woman in her early forties with dark hair and eyes to match: Freyja. She smiled at Cagney demurely through ruby red lips, trying to assure him that all would proceed well so long as he didn’t struggle. The armrest of the chair in which he sat shielded her legs from his sight. Dancer’s legs—long, shapely, and oh so well toned—those assets of hers that had driven him to his adulterous affair. Under different circumstances the mere thought of her firm, freckled thighs and sculpted calves would’ve aroused him.

The face of a doctor now loomed above him; his head mirror reflected the light that shone from a nearby table lamp, leaving Cagney temporarily blind. When he opened his eyes the doctor’s visage filled his

vision: a round, fat face with multiple chins; mustache waxed into the shape of handlebars; thin, oily hair combed over from above the left ear in a failed attempt to cover a bald pate, sun damaged and mottled with age spots; steely blue eyes rimmed in red from their addiction to laudanum. Heavy perspiration covered the doctor's face, beaded on his mustache as he smiled, revealing a good-sized gap between his two front teeth—teeth blackened by tar—a feeble effort to assure Cagney that he was in good hands.

The doctor raised his hands—his fingers sausage-like, gnarled, more akin to those of a hard laborer than a doctor—to show a scalpel in one and forceps in the other.

Cagney struggled and Freyja squeezed the forceps that gripped his pinky; frozen, Cagney was mute to give voice to his pain.

“It will be more painful for you if you resist,” the doctor advised in an accent with which Cagney was unfamiliar. “Now, open wide for me.”

Cagney was here for a tonsillectomy, but wondered why he hadn't been given anesthetic. He struggled again to find his voice and fought against the onslaught of panic; yet his breathing remained even, if labored. The doctor seemed oblivious to the terror he was certain must be reflected in his eyes.

“Come now,” the doctor said. “The sooner you open, the sooner we can be done with this.”

Freyja gave her forceps a squeeze, and Cagney reluctantly complied.

The doctor leaned in, exhaled, and Cagney was accosted by the virulent scent of laudanum, its herbal base mingling with that of burnt rubber. Cagney wanted to retch but was paralyzed; indeed, when the doctor reached into his mouth with his forceps and, a moment later, scalpel, his gag reflex was immobile.

Conscious of the pressure on his pinky, Cagney thought that surely he was dreaming. Yet his efforts to rouse himself proved futile.

The doctor sighed loudly and whispered something in a foreign language that Cagney took as a curse; Freyja giggled. Pain seared the back of his throat, and a moment later the doctor removed the forceps from his mouth to reveal in their grip a bloodied baseball...



With a prodigious effort, Cagney forced himself to awaken.

Breathless and drenched in perspiration, he took several deep breaths and threw off the blanket to allow the night air to cool him. Outside his bedroom window chirping crickets, croaking frogs from the pond a quarter mile away, and the distant rumbling midnight train crossing the trestle beyond the pond soothed him. He felt lonely, abandoned. Although Charlene would argue that he had been the one to abandon her, and she would be right.

Cagney had been suffering sleep paralysis since beginning the affair. In the first such dream, a hideous demon stuck its head through a trapdoor that appeared out of thin air above his bed to shout a string of vicious obscenities at him while he lay, paralyzed and fully aware he was dreaming, unable to awaken. In another, he was being ravaged by a pack of wild dogs. So long as he lay still, like Freyja holding his pinky in her forceps, they merely held his limbs in their mouths, growling ominous warnings. But when he moved, even tried to rouse himself from sleep, they tore at his flesh.

Eventually Cagney managed to wrench himself awake, breathless and perspiring heavily.

Then the episode a few weeks ago: Charlene sat on the edge of his bed whispering incantations and blowing a strange dust over him while Sam, the golden retriever they'd rescued from an animal shelter a few years ago, held his right hand tightly between his teeth as an omen against struggling.

His doctor, who looked nothing like the specter from his dream of a moment ago, assured him the dreams were harmless. He explained that sleep paralysis occurs when the brain awakens from a REM state, but body paralysis sets in, leaving the person fully conscious yet unable to move. Hallucinations often occur, usually forgotten immediately upon full waking. He then asked if Cagney was experiencing narcolepsy. Cagney sheepishly asked what that was and, after a brief explanation, confessed that, no, he wasn't experiencing excessive daytime tiredness, nor was he falling asleep at inopportune moments.

Cagney's own research into sleep paralysis revealed that it often was the result of a sudden change in lifestyle, which he was convinced was the result of his affair and subsequent separation from Charlene. The dream in which Charlene tried to cast some spell over him he likened to her attempts, during his waking hours, to control and belittle him.

Despite having filed for divorce, Charlene stated she had forgiven Cagney even as she went on to heap abuse on him for being evil. Her anger seethed, just below the surface, threatening to bubble over at the smallest provocation—often *without* provocation—and what better person at whom to direct that anger than the person responsible for it?

Yet Cagney, riddled with remorse, couldn't hope to heal from his sin as long as she continued to reject his apologies as insincere and remind him that his act of infidelity was the result of his being a bad seed.

To forgive is to forget, he thought, in biblical terms. He understood that something as painful as an affair is impossible to forget. But in order to move on, Charlene needed to stop throwing his dirty deed in his face.

Cagney wanted a sense of normalcy restored to his life. Feeling his body chill, he pulled the blanket back over himself and considered this last episode of sleep paralysis.

Cagney, a lifelong baseball aficionado, had always admired Ty Cobb for his baseball accomplishments. When he saw the movie *Cobb*, starring Tommy Lee Jones in the title role, he became interested in Cobb the man—the demons that drove him to greatness on the field as well as to commit the atrocities attributed to him off the field. Fascinated that Cobb's mother had been found not guilty of involuntary manslaughter of her husband, Cagney decided to write a piece of historical fiction based on the premise that William Cobb had indeed found out that Amanda had taken a lover, that his death had been the result of his discovery and not so accidental as Amanda claimed.

In the spring of 1906, just before the start of the baseball season, Ty had contracted a severe case of tonsillitis, which, fearful as a second year player might cost him his job, he attempted to play through. Finally, with a temperature of a 103, his throat so swollen he could eat only soup, he consented to have them removed by a doctor in Toledo, Ohio. Over a

period of three days, Cobb had his tonsils removed without the benefit of anesthetic. Several years later, the doctor was institutionalized, his removal of Cobb's tonsils without anesthetic palpable evidence of his insanity.

To Cagney, this latest bout with sleep paralysis, with Freyja playing a role obviously a result of his regret over the affair, was easily tied to his recent block to further his novel.

Freyja. Arousal surged at Cagney's memory of her body against his, the image of her legs in one of the many miniskirts she seemed to always wear once she'd learned the effect they had on him, and cursed his penis, wondering if Charlie was right about a sex addiction.

He'd broken off the affair upon Charlie's discovery and Freyja had complied, no doubt for reasons of her own. Even with impending divorce, Cagney had no desire to pursue Freyja as a replacement—it was sex and sex alone that had been the allure. The attraction for Freyja, he suspected, had been his unavailability. Yet breaking it off had done nothing to deter Charlie from pursuing her present course, and it didn't look as if separation, discussion, forgiveness, efforts to work through it, patch things up, the marriage counseling he suggested and that she shot down, would ever be options.

Cagney was saddened by the thought of divorce but not fraught over it, and so he wondered if he loved Charlene, had ever loved her. He associated sadness with his guilt, but no real loss; if anything, he felt relief. Charlene didn't understand his creative spirit, never provided feedback on his works in progress, and their lovemaking was merely comforting, rarely passionate, as it had been with Freyja. Yet, for some unknown reason, it had improved during the affair.

Cagney cursed himself yet again, this time for being unable to recall the reason why he'd asked Charlene to marry him. Maybe it was because, as he neared thirty, he felt it was the thing to do; and Charlene, because she was who he'd been dating at the time, was the logical choice.

He recalled asking her, during one of their many arguments after she'd discovered the affair, why she'd married him. She had replied angrily that she didn't know. Anger aside, Cagney wondered if there

might have been truth in her reply. He bristled over the notion that it had taken twenty years for him to discover that they weren't suited for each other, bristled further over the realization that Freyja had been no more well-suited for him.

Therapy had done little to bring him closure or to understand the why behind his betrayal. And so the vicious cycle continued: self-loathing followed by all too short periods of wanting to move on, embrace his inner being and creative self, lose himself in the new novel, and the unanswered question: sex addiction or evil man? The notion that these things just happen brought him little comfort. Inquisitive by nature, Cagney needed a reason.

There was a third option—that the marriage wasn't a healthy one. Cagney had never considered it *un*healthy, but perchance their apathy toward one another *was* symptomatic of his infidelity. Their marriage was not passionate in or out of the bedroom, save for Charlie's vehemence in punishing him. The truth was they had little in common to bond them. Cagney couldn't say that he had been unhappy in the marriage; but in retrospect he couldn't say that he'd been happy either. That Charlene was pushing for divorce seemed to indicate that she'd reached the same conclusion.

Like many creative types, Cagney tended to be a depressed personality. The marriage had become stagnant, until Freyja came along. Younger, sexier, with the body of a porn star, far more attentive, seemingly taken, at least outwardly, by his being a writer, despite never having read any of his published work.

Cagney assumed blame for the affair, but whose *fault* was it—Freyja's for flirting with him, for not taking his initial "I'm flattered but no thanks, I'm married" as final? Charlene for taking him for granted, for writing him off as old and unattractive to younger women? Or was it his fault, for marrying the wrong woman, or for not working harder at bonding with Charlie, to take more interest in her interests even as she ignored his?

And did it really matter whose fault it was when the blame had already been placed squarely on his shoulders?

The Cobb Legacy

Sighing and wondering when, or if, he'd ever overcome these maddening bouts of paralysis, Cagney rolled out of bed. If he couldn't sleep, maybe he could push the book forward.

Instead of working on the novel, Cagney reread an article he'd found on the Internet and printed off. The article cited an impromptu 1992 interview with Joe Cunningham's daughter, Susie Bond, in which she stated that her father never thought another man shot Ty's father. She went on to say that her father knew another man had been with Amanda that night, and that he even knew who the man was.

The interview concluded with Susie stating that her father always believed that Amanda pulled the trigger, twice, and that she knew, beyond doubt, who her target was.