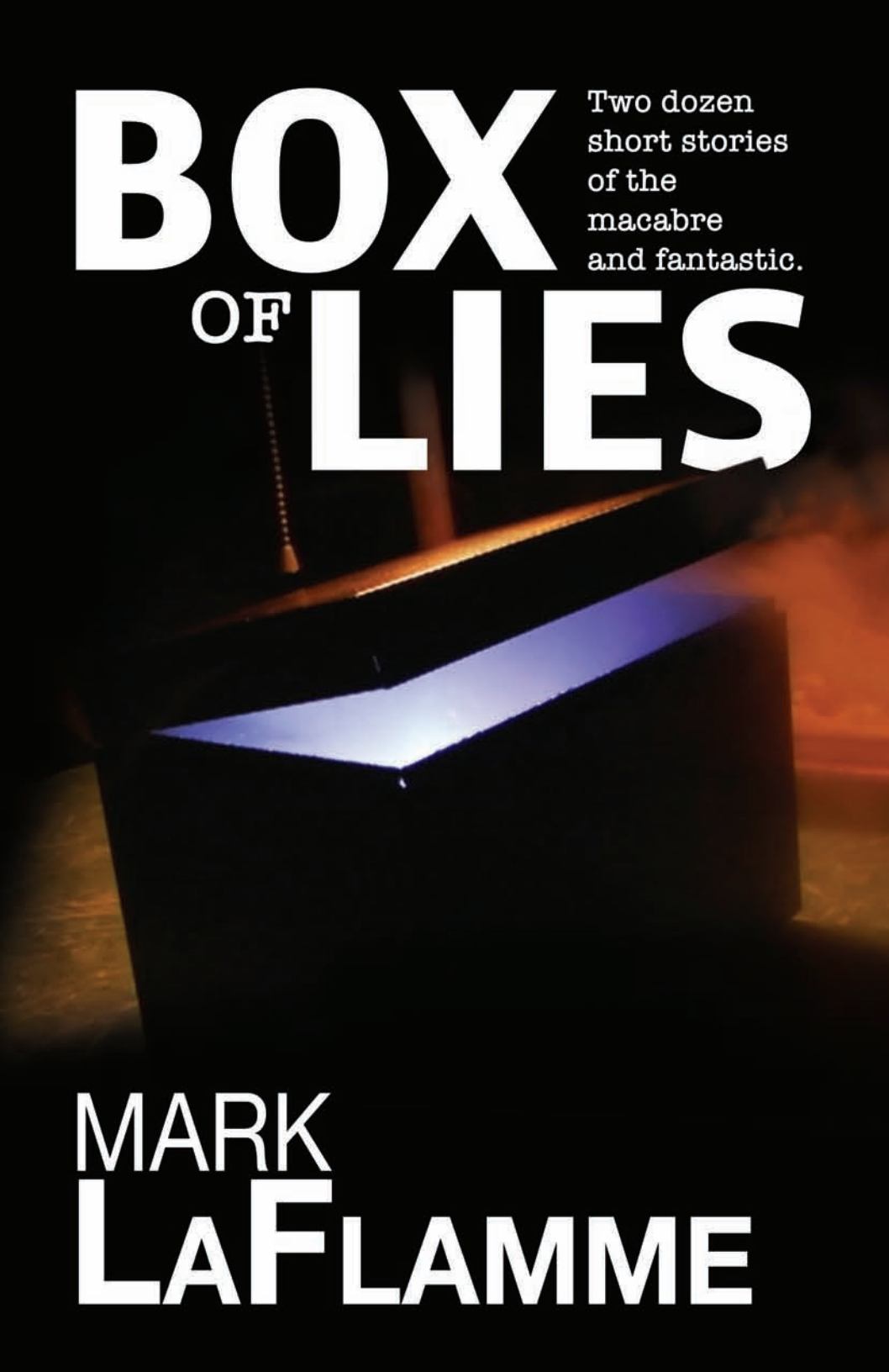


Explore a world of treachery and terror. A crazy lady frets over pennies on the sidewalk. Men and women are forced to march for their daily bread. And the end of the world doesn't guarantee you a trip out. In this book of 27 disturbing tales, Maine author Mark LaFlamme questions everything. Who killed JFK? What are they hiding at Area 51? What really happened on 9/11 and where do we go when we die?

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TABLE FOR ONE

My name is Stanley Almond and I have no trouble dining alone.

When you eat in a group or as a couple, you don't tend to look at the people at nearby tables. You don't watch them butter their rolls or fork salad greens into their mouths. You don't study the way they slice their meat and how they handle their cutlery.

But I do. I have a special relationship with the strangers dining around me. They don't know of this bond we have, special as it is.

There. A man at the table is cutting one tender piece from a porterhouse steak. He is a big man in an expensive suit. A banker, maybe, or a stock broker. He probably dines out three nights a week and will die of a heart attack at 50.

I don't care about any of that. I only care about the knife in his hand.

This man handles the cutlery without any care. He cuts a slice of meat, thrusts it into his mouth, and waves both knife and fork to emphasize whatever point he is making to the woman across the table. It's just a simple steak knife, bought in bulk from some restaurant supplier, but it hypnotizes me. When the light catches it just right and the blade gleams, it's like the knife is winking at me.

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Is it the one? Is it the knife I held in my hand just a week ago?

Of course, there is no way to tell. Which is part of the thrill.

The woman across from the man with the porterhouse is older, but pretty. A bit of surgery, I suspect. Her skin is a little too tight, her breasts a little too perky. She is nodding in all the right places. This might be a business meeting. Or perhaps they are married. I don't know.

All I know is that the woman is working on a filet and that she handles her knife with more delicacy. She holds it with a loose grip and cuts her next bite with a long stroke. I watch her make that cut, wait for her to fork a morsel of meat into her mouth, and the moment is very intense. It's almost sexual because for me, it is revisiting a very sexual moment.

Is that the one? Does the woman with the perky breasts have the very knife I sneaked back here just days ago?

Maybe, maybe not. On the other side of the room, close to the aquarium with exotic fish, another man in a suit is eating sirloin. This man is thin and dark, like his suit. He looks like a Jew. He's wearing wire rim glasses and sipping red wine. He holds his knife in a full fist, like I do, and that gives me a bit of a thrill. Maybe his unusual grip on the cutlery is a sign that *this* is it. This is the very knife indeed.

Or it could be the pretty blond woman at the table of three. She is having chops while her companions, also blondes but somewhat less pretty, eat fish. They don't call them chops at a restaurant of this caliber, of course. They call them pork-T-bones.

The pretty one likes to cut several bites at once before she gets to eating. I like that style, it's efficient. I want to believe that *this* is the one. I want to believe that this confident lady is nibbling on meat cut with a blade previously used to torture and murder a woman quite like her.

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That's what I do, you know. I steal cutlery from restaurants. I use them to cut up whores and street people. I get them filthy with blood and gore and I bring them back to the establishment from which they were taken.

I cannot describe the joy that fills my heart to know that a diner just like these people – or just like you – is having such an intimate thing as a meal with a tool I used to elicit pain and screams.

That's the connection. That's the very personal connection I have with these people.

I just don't know which of them is the one.

For a period, I started using forks instead of knives. I used one to gouge out the eyes of a homeless man I enticed back to my home. I used it to rip vicious lines down his pale and scrawny chest. I used it to stab him in the throat.

It was a fantastic killing. Two days later, I brought the fork back to The Bravo, an upscale restaurant downtown. A week after that, I was back there, eating alone and watching my fellow diners.

But somehow, the excitement was not the same. True, the fork is the implement used most intimately of all of them – one presses it to his lips with each bite, after all.

But a fork has no personality. There is no romance about it. The knife was invented to stab and cut and rip. It was essential for human survival. The fork was an afterthought, a helpful item but not a crucial one.

It makes a difference.

I went back to knives. I used one from Dandy's Restaurant to chop the fingers from the hand of a teenage streetwalker I had lured into my car. I did that while she was alive. After she was dead – from blood loss, or possibly from the force of her

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shrieking – I disemboweled her with the wood handled knife from the mediocre restaurant.

It was a particularly vicious killing for me. But as elevated as the crime was, so was the exhilaration of watching the men and women eating at Dandy's a day after I returned the knife.

Was it the middle-age mother cutting up baked halibut who ingested traces of the butchered street walker? Or the handsome man carving prime rib two tables down?

I don't know why I do it. Were it not for this ritual I have with knives and restaurants, I might not kill at all. There is some satisfaction in killing, but not enough to sustain me. The act itself is not euphoric enough. I need to share it with others, even if those others are strangers who remain oblivious.

I have trouble connecting with people; do you suppose that's it? All my life, I've felt apart from my fellows. I've felt shunned, and my inability to connect with anybody at all leaves me embarrassed and angry. Everywhere you turn is a couple holding hands, or a family laughing together in their private circle. You don't see many people alone in restaurants and this is why. Most of you have forged bonds. When you are young, you have schoolyard friends. When you get older, boyfriends or girlfriends. Then wives or husbands, then families and extended families.

Me, I have nothing. Nothing except the killing and this culinary way of making you a part of it.

I travel a great deal. I've been to every state in the country, most of them more than once. I've been in all the major cities. Everywhere I go, there are victims. They are so easy to come by and so easy to cast away when they are mutilated and dead. It comes easy to me.

I dine at restaurants wherever I go. Maybe I've seen you. Maybe you've seen me. I'm the man at a table for one. You

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might have spotted me a time or two and given it brief thought.
Poor soul. All by himself.

Or maybe you didn't notice me at all.

But you should. Because you and I may have a relationship that is unique and more intimate than any other you will have. You should think about it each time you slice into a meal at your favorite restaurant. I might not be there. But the knife you hold in your hand might be the very same that I held in mine.

Enjoy your dinner, my friend. What we share is special.

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