EVERYBODY COMES TO THE RED DOG

JOHN HERRMANN

When people from a small mountain village in Montana begin going missing, a Columbia University professor of psychology studying rural life in Montana works with others and detectives investigating the cases. A pivotal event is the discovery that it was sabotage that brought down a corporate jet, which appears to be connected to what ultimately is seen as a string of brutal murders. Corruption at highest levels of big business must be stopped.

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No one missed her at first. She had always been pretty much not there, they said. Invisible when she stood right in front of you. A pretty girl, too, but you could see the coffee urn behind her, it seemed, by looking through her, they said. And then it was formally established, it was clear—Rowena Soreeno was nowhere.

I was in the ladies room at the Kootenai Falls Café, and a woman standing in front of the mirror next to me combing her hair asked if I knew about the waitress who was missing. She was a woman whose thinness was not becoming. She stood in a tentative way, as if the floor were uneven, swaying slightly, steadying herself with the tips of the fingers of one hand on the sink. What waitress, I asked. Rowena somebody, the waitress with no friends, she said. She hasn't been to work for five days.

I didn't know which waitress it was. The woman said it was the girl who, when she got off work, would sit at the counter and watch the people at the tables eating with their friends.

It wasn't news, it wasn't even something you mentioned over coffee, if Rowena Soreeno wasn't around to be teased about her boyfriend taking off with someone else, or maybe about her short skirt, or just about how her walk was too sexy for the old men sitting along the counter, the same thread-bare Seattle Mariner baseball caps every morning, social lives revolving around mugs of coffee and the waitresses at the Kootenai Falls Cafe. What finally forced the issue was the borrowed old junker she was using, parked north of town, doors unlocked, one window rolled part way down.

There had been other news of much importance anyway. Distractions. A woman, some said a Washington, D.C. journalist, had fallen with her horse hundreds of feet off a mountain trail. Her husband was due into town soon. He was some major advisor to the White House. It was the big deal of the hour, not a missing waitress no one really knew.

The Cafe had its regulars, of course. They were the Old Fellows Cafe Club, and if talk wasn't about the country going socialist because of the liberal press it was about Rowena or Dewie and how tight their T-shirts were. If they thought about the women at all, they thought of their T-shirts, and it would not have occurred to any of them to wonder about where Rowena was, or least of all to go looking for her. She was also often just invisible and you could easily miss her, like looking all over the house for your car keys while holding them in your hand.

It wasn't until she didn't show up for work on the fifth day that one of the men asked the owner, Gordon Wickly, where Rowena had got to.

"Who knows?" Wickly said. "Maybe to Hollywood making a movie for Spielberg, maybe to the funny farm. They come and they go."

"Talking of Michelangelo, "John Bock said. "That's T. S. Eliot."

"No shit, Professor?" one of them said. "And who is this T.F. Eliot?"

"S," Bock said. "T.S. Thomas Sterns. An American poet. And Rowena is from *Ivanhoe*," Bock added.

John Bock was always either thinking or reading, they said.

"Ivan who?"

"Ivan *HO*, not Ivan WHO," Wickly said. "As in "She a *ho*. Ivanhoe—it's a Russian book."

Bock said, "It's an English book, by the way. Pretty good title, ay? *Ivanhoe* is a British novel."

"By T.S. Eliot?"

Bock looked down into his coffee mug and sighed. He had been an undistinguished professor of American literature at nine or ten of America's fifth-rate universities, leaving each position about the time he would not have been awarded tenure. "And would I do it all again?" he said. "No, I don't think so. Like Verlin Cassill said a long time ago, 'I don't know if I could. In many ways I've lost heart'."

"Castle?" they said.

Bock was being serious now and his seriousness was not understood.

Then Wickly said, breaking the silence, "She hasn't come around for her paycheck. But that's standard. They meet some dude and off they go. Forget their whole goddamned lives. One of them we had—remember that JoLynn?"

One of the men took off his cap and rubbed his balding head with it. "I think so," he said. "The little one."

"She left her husband and two kids and ran off with some guy in a '47 army jeep. We never saw her again. I think they went somewhere down to Arkansas."

"Anyway," Bock said, loudly. "We were talking about Rowena who has maybe gone missing."

"Missing?" Elmer Cole asked. Elmer Cole retired from commercial fishing in Alaska at forty-seven and spent his time since looking at girls and wondering how anyone could live with a woman. "You live with women always on their terms. I don't understand how anyone can put up with that. The rules I live by are no jeans and sneakers to funerals, and leave your teeth in until nine o'clock at night."

"Listen—what I mean is that Rowena isn't here and we haven't seen her, so she is technically missing," Bock said, leaning back, swatting a fly from his face. The front of his red sweatshirt was spotted with gravy stains. "Missing from this sorry venue. But maybe that's not all bad." He looked around. "Is anyone listening to me, for Chrissakes?"

Elmer Cole looked down at the Formica counter and shook his head. "We got more to worry about in this place than a girl going off to another place. There's no damned work here, and any that comes around is five bucks an hour. This waitress probably didn't make that in tips. I'd like to ask the President if he ever tried living on $940 a month Social Security."

Days before, even weeks before her absence was noticed, John Bock, Elmer Cole, old Dorothy Kuckel and the others at the counter had overheard Rowena tell a man and a woman at a table near the front windows that she could "write a book and a half" of what she knew about the people who came into the Cafe. The front floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows, like bodies of water, amplified the sound and Bock had noticed several people in that corner of the room and in a booth look up when she said "write a book."

A nurse sitting nearby with a visiting ophthalmologist giggled. "If gossip is what you want, I think our office is a leader, big time."

"There's a lot to ignore," the doctor with her said, straight faced.

The man and woman Rowena had spoken with were passing through from Seattle, Rowena said, later. "They're both writers," she said. The man told her she wouldn't recognize their names but that they had both published books and magazine articles for many years. "I think they were famous," Rowena said, "and they didn't want to be recognized. They both had dark glasses with them." She had spent too long a time at their table for Wickly's comfort and he had spoken to her about it. She returned several

times to their table with leaded and decaf coffee pots in her hands, smiling down at them and saying that there were a million stories in a little town, a million, and she someday would write them down. She had leaned down once and said something so quietly to them that neither Bock nor anyone else in the Cafe could have heard. Then she filled their cups and, in the manner of a mischievous child, straightening her shoulders and swinging her hair, she moved on to other tables.

2

Rowena Soreeno, who told anyone who would listen that she was the great-great granddaughter of the early 20th Century writer Italio Soreeno, was the kind of woman who knew a lot of people as a waitress at the Cafe but had only a few acquaintances outside of work. It had been six years since she graduated from Bertrand Russell High School in a city in western Massachusetts, and it had been that long since she'd had a best friend. She moved many times after her graduation. She had first moved to Manhattan, then to a rural area in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, where she worked as a nanny for an old architect and his twenty-two year old wife. Then there were a series of small jobs in Madison, Wisconsin, and Ames, Iowa, as she worked her way west, perhaps to a grand and free-wheeling life in beautiful San Francisco or Carmel. She knew nothing about those places, but she knew there were opportunities for young people with no connections or baggage, as they say. It was as much her passion to leave as it was to seek the next life ahead. She imagined her name meant *Wind* in some exotic Eastern language.

After all of the moving around, she landed in Kootenai Falls with only a few dollars and, finding out she'd gotten off the Amtrak at the wrong stop, shrugged, grabbed her rolling bag and moved on down the main street toward whatever there was ahead for her. She remembered Huck Finn heading for "The Territory Ahead," and Mineral Avenue in Kootenai Falls, Montana, was as much *Territory Ahead* as she required. She sauntered down the main street at 1:00 a.m. of an early autumn morning in a confusion of travel and yearning for the unknown.

It was supposed to be Bellevue, Washington, where she had a job interview lined up. But she had been on the train for too many days and too many sitting-up nights, and had drunk too much Merlot. She had wandered off the train when it stopped, leaving two large bags behind and taking just the small rolling carry-on along with her down onto the platform of the tiny station, the bag with her dollars, her driver's license, changes of underwear,

T-shirts, running shoes, and little else. Little money, almost no clothing, no cell phone, no earrings even, she wandered along the deserted avenue in sandals and jeans and a T-shirt with "global" printed beneath her right breast and "warming" under the left, just as the two downtown bars were emptying out their staggering, wrinkled humanity. A thickly built woman in gray jeans and a white sweatshirt who was standing in front of the Chicken Shed Grill offered a ride and a bed for the night, and after that night she stayed on until she received her first paycheck from her new job as waitress at the Kootenai Falls Cafe. She had never worked in a restaurant and it seemed to her as the most fun she'd had in a long while and the most people she'd known since high school.

She considered the old fellows at the counter her friends and bantered with them about her hair being loose and maybe getting in the soup and her full barrel chest that was greatly admired. She often heard them mumble, "Got a nice rack, ay?"

She wore eyeglasses framed in small rectangular black plastic that made her look studious and sexy at the same time, like the pent-up sexuality in the clichéd manner of the old maid librarian. She often wore the Cafe's logo T-shirts above fashionably faded designer jeans too tight for comfort but perfect for getting good tips from the men who mostly paid the checks and tipped, with the occasional scowl from a disapproving wife. The fellows at the counter seldom tipped more than change, but she didn't mind so long as the couples and families were more mannerly and generous.

Rowena was a pretty girl if a bit older looking than her twenty-four years, and in the manner of an actress of the 1940s perkiness about her for the tourists who breakfasted at the Cafe on their way to and from Glacier or Yellowstone. Someday, she told the men at the counter, a man would park a new Jaguar out front and come in and when he left, she would go with him, maybe to Alameda, California. She had heard all about Alameda from an older couple who had moved there from crowded Oahu. Or he might be an agent for television actors and she would ride along to wherever he was going and get out of the Jaguar wherever it stopped, the way she got off the Amtrak in Kootenai Falls.

But neither Professor Bock nor Elmer Cole nor any of the regulars at the Cafe thought much about Rowena being among the absent until the fifth day. She would have come in to say goodbye, or we would have seen who she met and left with, they said. We ought to go find her, they said.

Something could be wrong, she could be sick, she may be locked in her bathroom. Where does she live? they asked.

I had coffee with her at a time when she seemed troubled. I don't know what was happening, but she told me she was dreaming in fits and pieces and that she thought her waking mind was like that now. She said sometimes she didn't recognize where she was or if what was happening was real. "It's like a slice of a movie, then a shot of a broken up building, then I am supposed to be handling some papers, but they become slabs of metal, and I place them in a wall and they turn out to be bricks. Last night I dreamed I was walking into a movie theater. I turned around and saw it was theater seats down a ways and then tables and chairs of a restaurant. I turned and a very tall man stood right behind me, staring down. At one of the tables a moment later I asked who the man was and someone at the table merely nodded. I went back to confront him, but he just walked away, smiling as though he could kill me now or later."

I told her that fearful dreams are often just results of our stresses and they can make sense only in the way we feel about them, not the specifics of the dream themselves which are always deeply embedded in symbol, that there is seldom one-to-one. I told her that she should not take anything from dreams other than her feelings. Only occasionally is a dream a metaphor that can be tracked down and connected. The logic of dreams is not the logic of the waking mind. I don't know very much about it and had always left dreams to others. But I thought my ramblings might help her relax about her mind falling apart. She trusted me because I had the credentials—something that has always worried me.

One thing she told me that got the beginnings of tears to my eyes was that Professor John Bock once told her quietly at the Cafe that he cared about her and that he went into the place because of her, not because of the others. She told me she was not used to people even noticing her let alone offering affection.

3

It was more than a week after they had noticed Rowena was missing that she became an official missing person and local law enforcement got involved, and that was only because the old truck she had borrowed from a friendly neighbor had not been moved in a week. The neighbor had told Rowena he wasn't concerned about his vehicle and was glad someone could get around in the old bucket. It was found parked in Mill Road Park and had been ticketed several times because there is no overnight parking there. Finally a city cop linked it up to Rowena by asking Dispatch to ID the plate for him. He received a name and address of the owner and drove right over to Frank Silvee and asked him about his truck. He then relayed the information to the Sheriff's detective.

An editorial in *The Western Sunrise* bi-weekly read: "Things like that, like investigations, aren't much on the minds of our law enforcement officers here in Kootenai Falls." It was a gentle indictment of the sheriff's department and city police—gentle because the editor played poker on many Friday nights at the KF Casino and Restaurant and wrote the editorial only because she felt obliged to do something. Rita Rollings had been editor for three years and ran things her way, having lived through the rise and fall of two former publishers. The third, who had been appointed by the owners in Spokane, Washington, knew enough to stay well back from the news and features and be concerned only with ad sales and glad-handing. *The Western Sunrise* was Rollings' baby, period. A strong editorial leadership had been established several years before by a gifted journalist originally from California, Brewster Moore. His legacy was that the editor was absolute boss of the copy and the publisher kept to ad sales and matters of distribution and kept the hell out of the way of what stories went in and why. It was therefore a good small-town newspaper, unlike many that exist merely to make money and whose publishers cozy up to advertisers by dictating to editorial what stories can and cannot be printed.

As time went on, a few of the men at the Cafe had already wandered around the town asking about Rowena and trying to find where she lived, sauntering past the few sagging multi-unit apartments on the side streets that looked more like several trailers patched together. One older fellow, a retired high school biology teacher who had worked for years watching and counting gray wolves released into the area, asked Rita Rollings to check out what the cops were doing. The rest stayed clear of her, declaring her a ball-busting feminist.

Some townsfolk, including Chloe Wheatlock, a local attorney who the OFCC referred to as a raging feminist leftist commie pinko card-carrying ACLU liberal freak, thought Rowena had been murdered. But while Chloe wouldn't waste her time searching for a body, she did do some digging into what possible motives there might be for wanting her silenced. "She said she could write a book, right? You all heard that," Chloe, told them. "I know lots of you wouldn't much like that." Chloe said she had heard Rowena went so far as to put Velcro pads under a few tables and was able to stick a small tape recorder under with a voice-activated on-off mechanism. It was there to collect stories for the book she would write, Chloe said. No one took that seriously.

And so the writing of a tell-all book became the motive for murder in the rumor version of Rowena's disappearance.

* * *

It then became the unpleasant duty of Hayden Kidman, the local detective—there was only one in Elk county—and Sam Willow, a deputy sheriff, to go through her apartment and belongings to find out just what happened and of doing a search for next of kin to inform them of Rowena's official missing status plus questioning them for what they might know.

Their investigation went like this:

Kidman, a lean man in his mid-forties known to locals as "The Thin Man," drove up to the Lake Street Apartments and, with Willow, got a pass key from the manager to open the front entrance to Number Four. Both men stood at the open doorway for a few moments looking down, looking at the wood of the door frame and the door itself. Then as they entered the apartment they both pulled on white latex examination gloves, Kidman took the living room; Willow headed into the first room on the right, a bedroom.

"It doesn't look like anyone lives here," Willow called from the bedroom. "It doesn't feel right."

Kidman bent over an end table and didn't answer immediately. Then, looking at the side of the table at a deep scratch, Kidman said, "It's like she never walked on the carpets or set a coffee mug down on anything. No fucking rings even on the surfaces, no nothing."

The bed was made with a green comforter and two pillows lying flat at the top of the bed were unwrinkled. There were no clothes out anywhere. Nothing on the floors out of place. Everything was in drawers and hanging neatly in two walk-in closets. In the kitchen, silverware and dishes were in drawers. Cabinets empty of food, dishwasher empty. No stains or grease on the stove top, salt and pepper shakers side by side against a wooden napkin holder, perfectly placed at the center of the kitchen table.

"It's a goddamn movie set," Sam Willow said. "How could anyone live like this?" Kidman nodded and walked slowly into the hallway and into the bathroom.

"It *has* to be a sanitized job, Sam," Kidman said. "No one lives day to day like this. I think someone came in here looking for something and then brought in their clean-up crew."

"Sure looks that way. So—what do we look for that's not here?"

"Good question. I don't know, but one thing you need when you do a cleanup is water. And if it takes a long time, you need to use the john. I think this is where we bring in the forensics." Kidman retraced his steps from the bathroom into the hallway, walking slowly backwards, then into the living room.

"Too much time," Willow said. "Whatever's here will be gone or so diluted that we'd be just as well off skipping it. Forensics is so backed up in Missoula that we couldn't get them here for weeks, maybe a month."

Kidman moved to the center of the room and stood looking at the windows for a few moments. "What's wrong here? Something's wrong."

"What? I don't see anything."

"Something here isn't right but I don't know what it is." He moved away and looked back. "Damn," he said. "Something's trying hard to tell us what isn't right." He went back into the bathroom. "First thing, Sam – let's turn off the water at the main." He looked into the sink and in the shower, opening the sliding glass door slowly. There was a used bar of soap in a holder hanging from the shower head; there was no hair or soap scum on the floor. He slid the door shut, turned back and lifted the toilet seat and peered in. Blue water. A full box of Kleenex on top of the toilet tank lid, one piece half out. A small basket on the floor with a clean plastic liner in it. New, unused bar of Dove hand soap in the ceramic dish on the sink.

Clean towels neatly folded hanging from wall bars. No finger marks or spots on the medicine cabinet mirrors or on the toilet's chrome flushing lever. Cabinet empty, no dust. Nothing in the cabinet below the sink. No extra towels, no extra soap, Kleenex or toilet paper. It *was* a movie set, Kidman thought.

"I don't think she lived here," he said. "This looks like a clean-up job, but her living here wasn't what they were cleaning up."

"Maybe."

"Not maybe, Sam. If she lived here, she never brushed her teeth. No tooth brush, no toothpaste, no white spots on the mirror. You have at least those things wherever you live. And nobody ever touches your toothbrush. Nobody touches your eyes and nobody fools with somebody else's toothbrush. She didn't live here. Or else it was the best cleanup job in history. We have to be careful about making any assumptions. Paying rent and some coming and going doesn't mean she lived here. We'll check on that landlord later, but you know as well as I that a lot of girls live with their boyfriends but keep their apartments. But this is how it is, and we have two projects now —to find out what went on here and, and then to find where she did live..."

"... and why she didn't give any address," Sam said, under his breath. He knew his place; he was the junior man. He had no experience as a detective, only the desire to someday become one. Hayden Kidman, the occasional bad drunk, the regular at the Red Dog Saloon, knew the job. He had been schooled long ago in San Diego. Kidman had fled the big time and the dreadful life of a big city cop. So Willow knew his place, he knew he could learn from Kidman. He would watch the man's hands as he worked, he would look where Kidman looked. He would listen to what Kidman listened to. He would become Kidman.

Kidman stood in the center of the bathroom and, looking up at the ceiling, said, "I know what it is."

"What what is?"

"What thing they—whoever *they* are—overlooked." The Thin Man stood grinning.

"So?" Willow said.

"The toilet paper roll."

"Toilet paper?"

"It's not quite a full roll."

"So?"

"It's been used. Torn off slightly ragged. Look here," he said, pointing.

Willow looked at the roll.

"It's the only thing in the whole apartment that tells me someone has been here and that someone used something. The toilet. They knew enough to erase any figure prints on the flush lever..."

"But missed putting on a new roll. Dead giveaway. Damn! How did I miss that?"

"Easy to miss, Sam. I missed it, too. Except now we don't know what it tells us."

"We know one thing—it was a female," Willow said, taking delight in his own discovery. "Look how little of a full roll was used. It wasn't used for the backside."

"OK," Kidman said. "So we come away with several things to ponder – a completely spotless apartment sanitized on the inside that shows only one mistake and that mistake was made by a female who had to pee, maybe before leaving."

"Or while scrubbing the floor, or at any time during the process. You made an assumption, about the time."

"OK. Yes, I did. Now—was it Rowena?"

"Interesting," Sam Willow said, "that the only big question we come away with in the whole of the apartment is: Who was the woman who had to pee?"

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