

Can animals talk? Don't ask Mr. Hooks, the catfish/film critic ("DeNiro's over rated") who encounters lawyer, Potter Weeks, drowning himself in Hooks' river. With film theory, Bogey and Bacall, Hooks saves Potter's body and his soul and nudges him toward the gift he and his wife have prayed for.

Mr. Hooks

by Lance Levens

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LANCE LEVENS



MR.
H **O** **O** **K**₂

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First Edition

Chapter 33

From blocks away the glow from our house lit up the sky. When I pulled into our driveway, the feminine touch hit me: pink balloons and a sign above our front door in big letters:

*Welcome Home, Rosie!
Now two women to rule my life!*

Inside, I peeked through the kitchen window onto our back patio where colleagues from the office downed oysters and Chablis. A duo of longhaired, local college girls—fiddle and guitar—entertained with melodies from Hank Williams and Pasty Kline. The singers' tresses fell over their instruments and the music drifted out toward the star-dazzling sky. The air smelled of smoke and freshly mown Johnson grass. On the edge of the crowd Pepe kept Booger's two bowls filled, one with Fritos and one with Pabst.

Nothing much changed in this town. And I embraced that, loved it. The bulldozers still pushed earth to widen the interstate and cram even more traffic into the clogged artery to Atlanta. The history-minded still struggled to understand the slave-owning, tobacco-spitting days of the city's past. In summer practice, soaked in sweat, high school football coaches still berated their party-boy jocks who puked their previous weekend, green and lumpy, into the bushes around the football field.

I had no idea about the future, but the moment in my recovery I feared the most had arrived: explain myself—to everybody.

Emmy got there before me. My suggestion was to tell them I took time off, camped and fished by the river, cleared my head, and now I'm working again, hawking my L.L.Bean gear on eBay. She countered that the others needed to learn the truth, especially the young ADAs. We were obligated to guide them around the pitfalls that claimed my heart. Plus, telling about Hooks would help me heal. According to her

everybody has an animal in their life—a dog, a bull, a catfish—present in a crisis. It understands when no one else does, so before my arrival she told the story of Old Plug, and then how Hooks understood me better than I understood myself. Sure, she added, maybe the fish was just an image to support my shaky psyche when the mental winds were ripping off the roof.

“You can think that,” she said, “if you want ...”

My entrance onto the patio prompted Carlos to rise, push his iron chair back with a loud scrape, and raise a wineglass.

“To Potter Weeks,” he said, “who tried to take a holiday, but took down a drug ring instead!”

I shook my head, “No, no,” but the crowd applauded. Several of the office group, secretaries and paralegals, came forward to give me hugs. Stupidity and embarrassment giggled inside me.

Roxanne Delacourt squeezed me. A perky brunette from Bogalusa, Louisiana and proud of it, she always called me “Chief.”

“Chief, I figured you had flat lost it when you were protesting sex out there by the General,” she said. “But then I recalled that case in Forsyth, the hit-and-run that killed the sheriff. You were so outraged about it. You went at the accused like Muhammad Ali tearing somebody’s head off with jabs and hooks and uppercuts. It was a barrage of questioning the likes of which they had never seen in that little courtroom. Well, your sex protest was all that prosecutor power turned in on itself.”

“Roxanne, that’s better than my explanation.”

“Which was?” she asked.

“I was out of my head.”

Emmy entered with our daughter in a blanket. I pecked Em on the cheek. “Here’s the real star,” I said. “Miss Rosie Weeks!”

The women gathered in their age-old adoration. The tough expressions worn daily of the young female ADAs melted away as their eyes glistened and swelled with tears. After everyone had fawned over her, they took their seats in the patio chairs beneath a gibbous moon. A half-dozen flambeaus, head high, gave off a mysterious, flickering light.

How can I begin to describe our precious daughter?

This evening her skin was ruddy with a tinge of blue and above her left eye was a red spot the nurse called an angel kiss. It will go away. I gave her my index finger and she gripped it hard. That’s my girl. Hold

on to Daddy, I whispered in my mind. Her eyes, deep blue, tried to focus on me, but they hadn't the knack of working as a team yet, so they sweetly wandered off. I tried not to feel offended, but I wanted my sweetheart to look at her daddy. Emmy snuggled on my shoulder as we breathed in her fresh scent.

Dear God in heaven above, I thought. Forgive me for ever doubting. Only You could fashion this gift to us. Only You could bring such life out of such pain. I recalled how much Hooks had given me back a sense of joy. The mystery I had traveled in seemed even more filled with grace now that I could hold my daughter incarnate. Her spirit now flesh. Flesh and spirit in one. And my precious Em's suffering was the manger in which Rosie had been born.

Joy followed me everywhere. Sleep returned, even if it was a doe sniffing the leaves for a whiff of predators. This morning I awoke refreshed, though anxiety burglar-lurked around my house.

The delirium babies create always baffled me, but these days I spouted clichés and babbled burps and diapers. During a trip through Toys “R” Us I spent an hour riding a train with my knees sticking out, honking and waving to strangers.

Finally, Emmy put her arms around me and we kissed. The gathered applauded.

“What did it feel like when the real Mr. Hooks swallowed your arm?” a woman asked.

“And took your finger?” another ADA asked.

I raised my missing digit.

“Unh! Unh-h-h-!” Emmy countered. She lifted my whole right hand, showing the wedding band recovered from Mr. Hooks's stomach. “Now this is the finger that counts.”

Later, Carlos filled me in on the upcoming Head brothers' indictment. “Lee must have suspected something about the drugs, but he didn't want to rat on his old friend Bear. That's just me talking. But any way you cut it, his name is bound to come up at the trial—because of Bear.”

“All hell will break loose in my family,” I said.

He unwrapped gum and offered me a piece. “But at least he's not pressing charges about the shooting.”

I refused the gum, relieved.

Carlos continued. “Not just your family. This trial—it may bring his whole financial world crashing down around him.”

Father Bean sat alone. No one else among the gathered knew him so Emmy and I joined him at his table. The flambeau above us flickered in the sweet evening breeze. Its flame in the wind nearly extinguished, but when the breeze passed, the flame leaped up and danced and its light seemed even brighter.

I'd forgotten how imposing my priest was up close, his white hair thick and rich, and that long face, enigmatic, yet certain. Emmy had explained to me earlier that he and she had held long conversations in preparation for Rosie's baptism. The old priest knew all there was to know about our story, including the role played by Mr. Hooks.

He also seemed to know what I wanted. His eyes fell on me and I gave voice to a question I'd asked myself a thousand times in the recent weeks.

"Father Bean, what happened to me?"

Emmy rolled her eyes. "Potter, we're supposed to be celebrating Rosie, not indulging in self-analysis."

Father Bean chuckled. "Emmy, I suspect it's a question your husband's asked himself many times."

She sighed. Her hand found mine underneath the table. "You're right. I've asked myself the same question."

"Did I have a psychotic break? Would that explain it?"

He leaned forward and stirred his drink and sipped.

"In the Book of Tobit poor Tobias is forced to set out into a strange, forbidding country to help his father. Only himself and his dog, much like Booger. But in his mercy God provides a seasoned companion who guides Tobias and keeps him safe."

My stupid expression told them I had no clue, but Emmy knew her Bible.

"But that's an ..." She paused. There was a word she seemed to know but didn't want to utter. She blinked as she peered into the old priest's face. He nodded at her and told her with his eyes that he was speaking from his heart.

She drew back, a flicker of a smile playing across her lips.

Something led me to sit up straight and look around.

"What is it?" she said.

"Nothing. I'm just trying to understand." I drew in a deep breath.

Father Bean chuckled again. "Potter, you had, dare I say it, an exalted experience. Give thanks. That's my pastoral word for the day. Give thanks, the both of you."

The rest of the evening passed with baby stories and tears from young women who had persuaded themselves as employees in the DA's office never to cry in public.

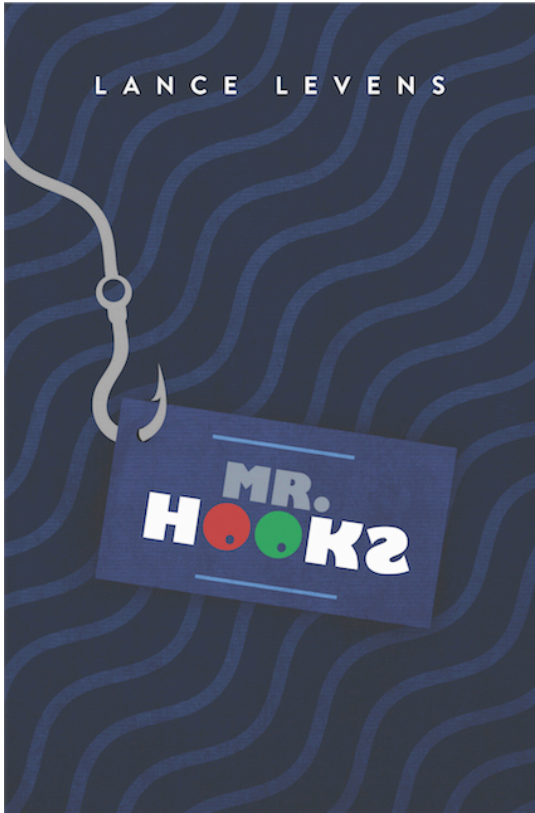
After the party wound down, I said, "Let me have your attention, everyone. My fashion-maven wife informs me—and she assures me this is Rosie's idea—that we are off tomorrow to Phipps Plaza for courtroom clothes that weren't designed for Clarence Darrow. I'm deeply hurt. Although Hooks believed Frederick March overacted, I confess here before God and Judge Holmes that the black-and-white *Inherit the Wind* is my favorite film—lots of delicious, sweaty seersucker. Now, let's see a show of hands if my sartorial tastes are out of step with the times."

Strange how our intuitive powers work. As I looked out at the crowd of friends and well-wishers, and as every hand rose, and even though my knowledge of scripture was sketchy, reason told me what the word must be that Emmy wouldn't utter.

Angel.

And I was sure I heard someone say, "*Good night, Mrs. Calabash, wherever you are!*"

The End



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