



Tomorrow Won't Be Any Better is a collection of short stories in the noir fiction genre. The stories are reminiscent of the writings of Georges Simenon and Pascal Garnier.

Tomorrow Won't Be Any Better

By Edward Fotheringill

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TOMORROW
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EDWARD
FOTHERINGILL

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Alone

Buckingham County, Virginia 1951

In broad daylight, the forest was dense and dark, the thick canopy of pine trees blocking the light of the sun, and at night the forest knew no moonlight; but in the clearing where the cabin was, the sky was open and vast and majestic, and the sun and the moon and the stars were present in granular display.

Casey Bannister sat at one end of the bar at the *Highfield Inn* in *Seneca, Virginia*. Her curly, dirty-blonde hair looped across her forehead like a series of doodles drawn by a bored child. She drank *Budweiser* from the can and smoked unfiltered *Camel* cigarettes. She was tall and lanky and had brown eyes that turned yellow in the back-bar lights. The bartender, a big man named Roy, stared at her covertly from the other end of the bar. After some time, he sauntered over to her: "I haven't seen you in here, before. You just passin' through?"

Casey sipped her *Bud* and placed the can on the silky blonde wood of the bar. "Actually, I'm lookin' for someone."

"Is that right?" said Roy. "Who might it be that you're lookin' for?"

"Lookin' for a man. His name is Prium Gill."

Roy blinked a few times, as if in a state of confusion, his bushy eyebrows and full beard unable to mask his perplexity. He

slowly shook his head. "Well, I'll be damned. Never thought I'd hear that name again... Prium Gill."

"You know him?"

Big Roy torqued his mouth and snorted. "Well, can't say that I *know* him, but I know *of* him."

Casey nodded. "That's a start. Could you tell me where he lives?"

Big Roy took a deep breath, his barrel chest heaving like a sudden ocean chop. "Let me ask you somethin'. You look to me like a nice young woman. I hope you're eighteen, or my ass is in trouble for serving ya alcohol."

"I'm nineteen. Need to see my license?"

"No, no. I trust ya. Thing is, I just don't see why a nice young woman like you would want to associate with Prium Gill."

Casey shrugged her thin shoulders, nonchalantly. "Just want to talk to him. That ain't no crime, is it?"

"No, no. It ain't no crime at all." Roy scratched at the beard-scuff hanging from his broad chin. "Look, do you *know* what you're dealin' with when you deal with Prium Gill?"

"I know I want to find out what I'm dealin' with. I know that."

"Do you know that he spent fifteen years in the State Penitentiary for beatin' a man to death?"

Casey downed the last of her *Budweiser* and turned the can methodically in her slight hands. "Didn't know that. But I'm not

surprised.” She pursed her lips. “Look, you gonna tell me where he lives, or ain’t ya?”

Big Roy nodded. “Last I hear, he lives out in the woods by *Swan Creek*. You know, he’s a hermit.”

“And how would I get there?”

Roy shook his head, disconcerted. “Don’t know that I should send you out there...but I reckon you’re gonna figure it out anyway...so, you’ll wanna go West on 626 and then look for *Clays Ferry Road*. Once you get out there, ask someone for directions to *Swan Creek*. Last I heard, he was livin’ out there by the creek.”

Casey nodded and placed a ten-dollar bill on the bar. “Thanks for the beers and the directions.” She got up and walked toward the doorway of the bar.

Roy stared at the bill. “Hey, don’t you want your change?”

She waved him off without turning.

*

The Vault Motor Lodge was pitch black when she pulled in, the gravel parking lot crunching beneath the tires of the *Dodge* Pickup. In the darkness, she fumbled with her key in the lock, but eventually opened the door to her room. It smelled of mothballs and ammonia. She hit the light switch, and a yellow bulb from the lamp on the nightstand next to the bed palely illuminated the walls wallpapered in dark brown paisley figures, a concoction of shapes and forms that could only be

called hallucinatory. Casey brushed her teeth, and with her clothes still on, sank into the soft, spongy mattress and died to the world.

5:50 am. It was dark and chilly, and the birds were rustling in the woods, singing morning songs and searching for nourishment. Prium Gill sat on a bench on the front porch of his log cabin and stared into the darkness. In his hand was a hot cup of Nescafe coffee, the steam rising from the rim of the cup like a gray ghost. He stared into the black sky, the cloud cover so thick that no morning light graced the clearing from above.

8:00 am. Casey Bannister rolled over and was awakened by the sound of rain hammering on the tin roof of her motor lodge room. Her mouth tasted like burnt wax. Too much beer and not enough sleep. She struggled out of bed and pulled the brown plastic curtain to the side of the window. The rain was bouncing off the black gravel in the parking lot like electrified silver jacks.

By 11:30, the rain had stopped, and Casey was sitting in a diner on Rt 626, eating a breakfast of eggs-over-easy, with hashbrowns and buttermilk biscuits. She sipped on a cup of coffee as she looked out the rain-streaked window. She thought about her mamma back in Georgiana, Alabama. Mamma told her not to go. Told her to leave well enough alone. But Casey couldn't do that; she just couldn't leave well enough alone when there was nothin' *well* about any of it.

An eighteen-wheeler pulled into the parking lot of the diner and got Casey to thinking. When the trucker came in and sat

by himself in a corner of the diner, Casey got up and approached him. "Excuse me," she said, "I was wonderin' if you might know how I might get to *Clays Ferry Road* and beyond that to *Swan Creek*."

The trucker was tall and thin and wiry and had an enormous bald head that looked outsized on his slight body. There was no telling how old he was, but when he opened his mouth to speak, mossy green teeth presented themselves behind his razor-thin lips. "Well, if you're lookin' for *Clays Ferry*, you're nearly there. Just another mile West on 626 and you'll wanta make a right." He squinted his beady eyes in thought. "Now, *Swan Creek* is a ... well it's a creek. It ain't a road. There are some country roads back there, but it ain't a place for no eighteen-wheeler, so I can't say with any certainty I know much about that."

Casey nodded, as if everything he said made perfect sense, and in fact, it did. "Alright," she said. "Thanks for your help."

She made a right on *Clays Ferry Road*. A few cabins were scattered on either side of the road, but a mile in, the gravel road turned to dirt and there were no more cabins and she found herself engulfed in a dense pine forest where there was no light and whatever was there in the forest was seen as through a dusty-gray optical filter. She drove cautiously until she came to a fork in the road. She got out of the *Dodge Pickup* and stared quizzically in one direction and then the other. The odor of stringent pine filled the air. In the near distance to the left, she saw what looked like a road sign. She got back into the truck, turned left, and drove about an 8th of a mile. The sign

was a wooden post driven into the ground with a cross-board nailed to it. The words *Swan Creek* were painted on it. Casey headed down the road toward the creek.

Prium Gill was out behind the cabin chopping wood. Although it was a pleasantly cool day in September, he knew winter was coming, and if he wanted heat in the cabin, it would be heat from the fireplace and nowhere else. As he paused momentarily, his axe resting on his bony shoulder, he heard a sound that he'd never heard before out there by the creek. It was the sound of automobile tires slowly navigating the dirt road leading to the clearing.

When she saw the cabin, her heart went tachycardic. She slowed the truck and stopped about twenty yards into the clearing. The cabin was another twenty yards beyond. The sun was just breaking through the cloud cover and the cabin looked like a heavenly mirage with streaks of golden light raining down upon it.

Prium Gill was poised and hidden by the side of the cabin, a *Stevens Model 67 12 Gage Pump Shotgun* secured in his strong and wiry arms and hands. He listened intently.

Casey quietly got out of the truck and gently closed the door. She was dressed in tight blue jeans, a gray long-sleeve V-neck cotton sweater, and *Converse* tennis shoes. She put her hands on her hips and stared at the cabin. The truth be known, she didn't know what to do. All the time and effort and thought that brought her to this decisive moment evaporated like an indifferent ghost. Her breath quickened and she felt like she

was going to cry. But then, she steadied herself autonomically: A man in green overalls stood at the corner of the cabin with the barrel of a shotgun squarely aimed at her.

Prium called out: "Who might you be? And why are you here?"

Casey put her hands out in front of her, palms up. "I just want to talk to you. That's all." Her voice was shaking from tachycardia.

Prium lowered the shotgun. "I don't see no reason for you to want to talk to me. We don't know each other. I think it's best if you just drive off right now."

Casey took a hesitant step forward and then stopped. "You don't know me, but I know you. That's a hard fact."

"What the fuck you talkin' about? How could you know me?"

"I know you cause you're my fuckin' father."

Prium scowled, his jaw tightening. "I ain't got no family. That's for sure. I'm all alone in this world."

"I know your name: Prium Gill. I know my mother: Abbie Sartain of Georgiana, Alabama. And I know I'm your daughter."

Prium Gill felt his heart bump at the recognition of the name Abbie Sartain. He lowered the gun further and rested the heel of the weapon in the dirt by his feet. He was dead silent for several seconds. Then, he spoke, his voice hoarse with emotion: "I'll talk to ya...but I swear to God, if you're lyin', you will be in a world of pain." He shook his head as if she had been adequately forewarned. "Come on into the cabin."

They sat at a wooden table by a window at the back of the cabin. Through the window, an enormous pile of firewood covered by an olive-colored tarp could be seen some ten yards away. “You cut all that firewood?” she asked.

“No one else is cuttin’ it. Must be me.”

“That looks like hard work.”

“It is.”

A dead calm fell over the cabin, a deafening silence, a disconcerting silence. They each felt their heart pounding in their chest. “I’m here,” she said, “‘cause I just don’t know why you upped and left. I wasn’t even born yet, and you upped and left.”

Prium clenched his bony jaw. “I didn’t know your mom was carrin’ ya. Didn’t know.”

“Youdda left even if you did know.”

Prium bent his head down in shame. “Yes. I cannot deny that.”

Casey took a deep breath. “Are you tellin’ me the truth about you not knowin’?”

“It’s the God’s truth.”

“And if you did know, you still woulda left?”

“Most likely.”

A single tear cascaded from her left eye and lodged in the ridge of her nose. “And why is that?”

Prium was silent. His throat was dry. He could feel his pulse in his ears. "I think fear and cowardice pretty much sums it up."

Casey wiped her running nose with the back of her hand. She pursed her lips and slowly shook her head. "Well, if that don't beat all." She looked out the window. An enormous black, white, and red bird was sitting on top of the woodpile staring back at her. "What kind of bird is that?"

He looked out the window. "That's a Pileated Woodpecker."

"It looks prehistoric."

He nodded. "I agree."

"I never seen a bird like that."

"They're around. But you pretty much gotta be in dense forest to see 'em. They like to eat the insects offa dead tree trunks." Prium stroked his bushy beard, his eyes filled with tears. "How's your mom?"

"She's okay, I guess."

"She ever marry?"

"No." A painful silence engulfed the cabin. "I can't blame her."

"No, I can't either."

Casey abruptly got up from the table. "I'm goin' home now."

"Back to Georgiana?"

"Yes."

They walked to the truck together. The sun was shining full in a clear blue sky. "It's nice out here," said Casey. "Really nice."

"I like it," said Prium.

Casey nodded. "I'm glad you're happy."

Prium nodded. He looked out into the pine forest and rested his gaze. "You happy?"

Casey nodded. "I'm okay now. I'm good now."

"I'm glad to hear that."

She climbed up into the *Dodge* pick-up and leaned out the open window. "I'm glad I met you, Prium."

Prium swallowed hard. "You never told me your name."

"You never asked."

"Will you tell me?"

"Casey."

"Casey."

"Just Casey."

"Well, Casey, thanks for stoppin' by. I mean it."

She started the engine. "Bye dad."

"Bye daughter."

She turned the truck around in the driveway and drove off.

Body Parts

Winchester, Tennessee 1950

Buddy Walpert waved his hands at the tourists in an act of supplication: “Oh, he won’t hurt yee. We fence him in ‘cause he cain’t act right. He’s harmless. No worries on your part.” The tourists got back in their car and drove off.

Buddy went into the country store. Mildred was stacking canned goods on the shelf behind the counter. “Mildred, I think we need to put Lester’s pen behind the store. He’s scarin’ off customers.”

Mildred nodded. “Probably for the best. I leave that to you.”

Buddy locked Lester in the tool shed while he pulled up the fencing and hauled it ‘round back. By noon, the fencing was in place, and Lester was reinstalled into his caged playground. Lester was thirteen years old. His physique was turnip-like, and he had the mind of a three-year-old with the social skills to match. Buddy and Mildred took him in at the age of six when Lester’s father and mother died in a lightning storm. The mathematical odds are astronomical, but life is nothing if it isn’t a series of anomalies. Both parents went down in a flash, and that was that. Lester was the product of what the doctors call in-breeding. In *Winchester, Tennessee*, that was going around. It just seemed natural – fuck who you know.

As time passed, Buddy and Mildred took to trusting Lester, and they would allow him to take early morning walks by himself

on their twenty acres of mountain forest in the Tennessee countryside. Lester loved to walk in the woods. He communed with the trees and animals in the most receptive way. Mildred came to call him "a child of God." One August morning, Lester came upon a human ear in a dried-out riverbed. He picked it up out of the silt and contemplated it as if it were a valued icon. He took it home and placed it in the *El Producto* cigar box where he kept all his treasures. A few days later, he found a finger; and a week later, a small piece of a human jawbone. They were all placed in the cigar box for safe keeping.

Well, as sometimes happens, people think they're doing good, when in fact, they're not. A well-meaning customer at the country store saw Lester out back in the playpen through the rear window of the store. Miss Hollander was her name. She was an elementary school teacher in *Winchester* and thought it might be best if social services came out to see if Lester was getting the care he rightly deserved. As was customary, the social service agents came out to the store, spoke with Buddy and Mildred, and then kindly asked if they could see Lester's room. Lester's room was above the store as was the rest of the household living area. Gene Bellows and Margie Kellogg gently surveyed Lester's room, noticing that the child had a penchant for dried flowers. The room was saturated with the carcasses of flowers long gone. Gene and Margie found that kind of sweet...but then they discovered the cigar box. Well, that's when things got out of hand. The next thing you know, Sheriff Henderson is putting poor, confused Lester into handcuffs. Lester was taken to the county jail and then to a hospital for the criminally insane in *Franklin County*. Now, you may be

thinking that what happened here is unfair and untoward, but the thing is we're talking about human nature and its capacity to jump to conclusions that are, quite frankly, *draconian*. In the Bible, Lord Jesus inspires us to be compassionate, loving, and forgiving. That message somehow did not reach the ears of the brethren in *Franklin County*.

Buddy and Mildred continued to run the country store and tend to their twenty acres of land in the beautiful Tennessee countryside. But as time passed, the locals and tourists, aware of the rumors about Lester, shunned their good-natured enterprise, and they went bankrupt. They lived on their social security pensions, which was barely enough to get by. Good folks as they were, they would visit Lester once a month in the *Franklin County Institute for the Criminally Insane*. As you might expect, Lester was not doing well. The drugs he was given deadened his congenial spirit. One time, when Buddy and Mildred left the mental facility, they sat in the car in the parking lot, surrounded by barbed wire. They talked with a sense of bewilderment about what had happened to Lester. As Mildred succinctly put it: "He ain't hisself."

Life in *Winchester*, Tennessee continued to schlep along. People come and go, as it is in life. Lester died in the *Franklin County Institute* at the age of twenty-nine. Banged his head against the concrete wall of his ten-by-twelve cell until it split open like a cantaloupe. As for Buddy and Mildred, they now live in a nursing home out in *Tullahoma*. Buddy likes to pat the asses of the cute nurses and then smell his fingers. Mildred sits by a large bay window in the parlor and watches the birds build

their nests in the eaves of the porch. On rare occasions they recognize each other and smile anxiously.

In The Time Of COVID

St. Thomas Aquinas Church, Fort Ann, New York

The snow had been falling for thirty-six hours. Father Joseph Jewel stood at the ground-floor rectory window. The snow had drifted half-way up the cross-hatched windowpane. The landscape was awash with the cold, icy edge of winter white. The priest could not see the horizon for there was no distinction between earth and sky. If there was a heaven, the priest could not picture it. Miss Gertrude, the good father's live-in concierge, appeared behind him: "Father, would you care for a scotch? It's another day shut in."

The priest turned away from the window and shrugged: "What time is it?"

"Three thirty."

"In the afternoon?"

Gertrude smiled, her pretty cherub face blushing: "Yes, silly, in the afternoon."

The priest opened his hands out in front of him, palms up, as if expressing an act of supplication: "A scotch at this hour, in the time of COVID? I think that is certainly in order."

Father Jewel sat at his desk in his book-lined study. He was reading Thomas Merton's *The Seven Story Mountain*. He sipped from a crystal tumbler *Dalwhinnie 15-Year-Old Single Malt Scotch*. The caramel-hued nectar warmed the bottom of

his belly. The good father was fifty-six years old, his short-cropped hair graying at the sides. His face was rugged, yet handsome. He was in good shape, accustomed to hiking four miles a day, but the snow put an end to that for the time being. The snow and COVID had put an end to many things, many routines, it was not unlike death, Joseph thought, the snow and COVID. He lit a *Shimmelpennick* cigar and leaned back in his chair. He lost himself contemplatively in the smoke rings that billowed from his pursed lips.

Gertrude was busy in the kitchen prepping for dinner. She had procured a rack of lamb from the meat freezer, and it was thawing nicely. After whipping some potatoes and chopping some green beans, she walked to the kitchen bay window and looked out at the cosmic whiteness. She touched her ruby-red lips with the fingertips of her left hand, lost in thought over what wine to serve with dinner. Gertrude was forty-one years old, pleasantly plump, with full, heavy breasts. Her long blonde hair was streaked with silver, serving to accentuate her pale-blue eyes. It was not an overstatement to say that she was voluptuous.

Gertrude descended the concrete steps to the wine cellar. It was cold and damp in the dimly lit wine reservoir. Gertrude knew what she wanted: A bottle of *Greg Norman Shiraz*.

Father Jewel had finished his scotch and was now wandering through the books in his massive floor-to-ceiling library. He stopped and fingered the spine of Ralph Harper's *On Presence*, and then thought better of it. He peered out the frosted glass of a French door. A curtain of darkness was descending. The

snow had stopped, and there was nothing to see but the last vestiges of whiteness in the fading light. Father Jewel leaned against the window, his cheek cold on the surface of frozen glass. He wondered if something had gone terribly wrong in his life. In the time of COVID, he was no longer useful. His parishioners were hiding behind their masks in their sequestered abodes. And he...he was thinking forbidden thoughts.

The dinner was simply scrumptious. Father Jewel sat at one end of the long mahogany dining table, and Gertrude sat at the other end. This was customary at the parish house in the time of COVID. The sustained isolation was unnerving, and the priest and concierge made a concerted effort to comfort one another when possible.

As Gertrude cleared the table, Father Jewel finished the last of the bottle of Shiraz. He retired to his study, his belly full and his mind at peace. He tried to read a bit of Merton but was seduced by the weather outside the study window. The snow glistened in the light of a full moon, a mystical incandescence engulfed by the infinitude of outer darkness. Gertrude knocked at the study door: "Father, do you need anything before I retire?"

Smiling, the priest turned his head toward the sound of her voice: "No, my dear. Sweet dreams."

Father Jewel had fallen asleep in his leather recliner, warmed by the blue blaze in his study fireplace. He had been contemplating the final pages of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

Logico Philosophicus. When he woke from his slumber, the book fell to the floor from his lap. He drowsily made his way to the study window. The bright light of the moon lit up the drifting mounds of snow with such illumination that the priest wondered if this is what it would be like to arrive on some alien planet and feel some uncanny prescience into the meaning of it all.

He ascended the stairs to the second story of the parish house in gleeful stealth. The door to Gertrude's bedroom was cracked open, a heavy presence of moonlight filled the room with divine allure. The priest went into the bedroom and quietly closed the door behind him. As if in a dream, he removed his clothes and crawled into Gertrude's bed. She turned to him and brought his lips to her swollen breast. The priest sucked her nipple as if he were a newborn desperately seeking nourishment.



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