

untouchable

a novel

Scott O'Connor

They come in the abandoned hour of the night, moving through quiet arterial streets, empty intersections, past gated storefronts and darkened windows, homeless men curled into bus stop shelters, prostitutes walking the desolate concrete stretches.

They come in a pair of white Ford Econolines, identical vans, flanks unmarked, windowless and blank. They sit parallel at stoplights and the drivers raise their eyebrows at each other and yawn, sip coffee from Styrofoam cups, roll forward when the lights change, toward the motel, the apartment complex, the house in the hills.

There is always someone waiting when they arrive, someone standing in the driveway or doorway, looking more than a little shell-shocked, still not quite able to believe what they've seen, that what has happened has actually happened. The police have left, the coroner's people have left, but someone slipped them a business card on the way out, passed along a company name and phone number and told them to call and wait. Mothers, husbands, wives, motel night clerks, apartment managers, security guards. Whoever was unfortunate enough to be the one to open the door, to walk into the room and see something they will never forget.

They weren't going to call the number. There was a moment after all the noise and commotion, after the police and the coroner's people left, when the person waiting in the doorway was alone in the new silence of the place, just outside the room, a moment where they thought they could handle it themselves, thought they could take care of things quickly and efficiently, that it would be the right thing to do for their son or husband or tenant or employer. That it would be unpleasant but possible. But then they remembered the sight and the smell and the profane mess, the horror of the thing, and they dialed the number on the card and spoke to a sweet-sounding old woman who took their information and told them that help was on the way.

The white vans pull to the curb, engines cooling, ticking in the stillness.

Two men get out of the first van, stretching and yawning in the bad light. These are not the kind of men the person in the doorway expected. The person in the doorway is not sure what kind of men they expected, but these are not those men. One of the men is tall, buzz cut, with full sleeves of multicolored tattoos. The other is short and gym-built, with a thinning cap of flaming orange hair. These are rough-looking men, truckers or sailors, heavy-lifters, men who look like they're in the habit of breaking things, dropping things, banging around in small rooms. They do not seem equipped for the

subtlety and reverence required for the task at hand. The grandmother on the phone had used the term *technicians*, had said that she was sending a *crew of technicians*, but these men do not appear to have the degree of precision that the term implies, the level of scientific expertise.

The person in the doorway considers redialing the number on the card, canceling the job, dealing with this themselves. But then there is the memory, that first moment when they opened the door and came upon the scene in the room, the unspeakable thing. So they do nothing, they hold the business card and wait as the men move to the backs of the vans and pull out their equipment, red plastic buckets, squeeze bottles and spray cans, wire brushes and putty knives, roll after roll of paper towels.

Another man, the driver of the second van, steps down onto the sidewalk. He approaches the person in the doorway, walking slowly, head down. He is terrifically fat. He has a graying ponytail that stretches down between his shoulder blades and a thick, bushy mustache that turns up at the ends. There is a name for this type of mustache, an antiquated style, but the name escapes the person waiting. Remembering it seems important, suddenly, proving that they are still capable of simple acts, putting names to things. It seems like this would restore a level of normalcy to the night, having a name for

it, that style of mustache. But the term is just out of reach and they are left at a loss, again.

The two men at the vans are pulling on blue paper body suits, they are pulling on rubber gloves. They are duct taping each other's suit sleeves closed around the gloves. They are pulling safety goggles out of the vans, plastic-and-rubber respiration masks, a box of disposable surgical booties. More duct tape for the pant cuffs of their suits, a man standing on one leg, balancing with a hand against the side of a van while the other rolls the tape around his ankles.

They look like something out of an old science-fiction movie. Moonmen. They look like moonmen.

The fat man approaches, the fat man arrives. He is even bigger up close, towering, damp-browed, breathing heavily from the short walk. He smells of cigarettes and coffee. He looks down at the scuffed toes of his work boots. He is about to speak and the person in the doorway has absolutely no idea what he is going to say, what anyone could possibly say on this night, standing outside after the police and coroner's people have gone, after the facts have been given and recorded, the known details. The person has no idea what's left, what words would still have a shred of relevance, what words wouldn't fail, utterly.

The fat man nods and looks up and speaks in a low, rich rumble.

What he says is, *I'm very sorry for your loss.*

And maybe this is the moment when the person in the doorway cries or screams or lets loose a fusillade of vulgarities, a seething mass of profanity and loss. Maybe this is the moment where the person falls to their knees, dissolving into guilt, sobbing convulsively, and has to be helped up by the fat man, held under the elbows and lifted, gently. Maybe this is the moment when the person hits the fat man, when they punch the fat man in the chest, just to put a physical action to the feeling, just to strike some kind of blow. Maybe this is the moment when they speak in tongues, when they resurrect a primal language, finding comfort in the acceptance of extreme things, babbling in God's own voice. Or maybe this is the moment when they say nothing, when they stand silent, when the weight of the thing that has happened finally settles upon them, and they sag a little, in the shoulders and knees, the smallest thing, the way they will sag from now on, the way they will carry this night in their bodies from this moment forward, and maybe this is their only response to what the fat man says.

The moonmen pass inside, carrying their equipment. Their blue paper suits crinkle and shush. The fat man stays for a few minutes, and maybe he says something else and maybe he doesn't. Maybe he just stands and waits as the

person in the doorway gets used to the sagging weight, their new posture, the slight adjustment in bearing. Then the fat man returns to the vans and pulls on his own moonman suit, gathers the equipment the others have laid out for him, passes by the person in the doorway and enters the motel or apartment or house in the hills.

And maybe this is when it comes to them, when it arrives unexpectedly, the lost identifier. Maybe this is when they remember. The name of the thing. The fat man's facial hair. Maybe it comes to them then, just like that, a gift.

Handlebar mustache. The name of the thing is handlebar mustache.

David Darby hauled his gear down the narrow hallway and up the stairs to the fourth and top floor. Jerry Roistler followed half a flight behind. They set their buckets down outside the numbered door and waited. Bob Lewis was downstairs speaking with the person who'd been waiting when they arrived. The apartment manager, Darby guessed, a harried-looking man with a gold hoop dangling from one ear. Bob would get whatever information he felt necessary for the job, probably more than he needed, then he'd come up and look at the room and give the manager an estimate, a timeframe for completion.

Darby could already smell the job on the other side of the door. The room had sat for a while. A week, he guessed, maybe longer.

Roistler winced at the smell, pulled on his respiration mask.

“What do you think, Tattooed Lady?” Roistler said, voice muffled by the mask. “Vectors or no vectors?”

“Not interested.”

“Five bucks says vectors.”

“No interest.”

“With that smell, five bucks says *mucho* vectors.” Roistler worked his knuckles, his neck and shoulders, an irritating sequence of firecracker pops. Darby ignored him, listened to the stairs groan as Bob lumbered up to the top.

“Apartment manager was in Reno for a week,” Bob said. He pulled a loose strand of tobacco from his mustache. “Came back to a phone full of messages about the smell.”

“Nobody called the cops?” Roistler said.

“Older people in the building, mostly. Keep to themselves. Nobody called anybody until it was time to complain about the smell.”

Bob pulled on his mask, lifted the instant camera out of his bucket, unlocked the door with a ring of keys the manager had given him. He would

take a picture of the room before they started work, what they called the *Before* photo. He stepped into the doorway, filling the frame.

“Studio apartment,” Bob said. “One main room, small kitchen off one side, smaller bathroom off the other.”

He lifted the camera to his eye, snapped a picture. The light of the flash echoed back out into the hallway. The print slid from the face of the camera, slowly developing. Bob pulled the print, shook it with his free hand. Darby strapped on his safety goggles, picked up his equipment and entered the room.

The trick of the job is to forget what had happened. The trick of the job is to acquire as little information as possible about the site, the former occupants, the current occupants, the thing that happened there, and then to forget that information. Not to see the big picture, the whole story. There is no big picture, there is no whole story. There are only details that need to be sprayed, scrubbed, bagged, disposed of.

The trick of the job is to use an alternate vocabulary for these details, a list of terms developed over the years by the technicians, sanitized for their own protection. Once inside the room, there is no blood, or skin, or hair, or teeth, or chunks of brain, heart, lung, stomach. There is no evidence of violent death,

self-inflicted or otherwise. There is no detritus of a human body left to decompose for days or weeks. There is only fluid and matter; there are only spots, stains, leakage.

The trick of the job is not to listen to the people who are waiting in the doorway, in the driveway, in the parking lot when the vans arrive. Often they will have a lot to say, a lot to explain. It is important to understand what those people do not: that there is nothing to explain. There is just fluid and matter. There are just spots and stains. There is only a mess that needs to be cleaned up.

Remember those things, understand those things, and the job is possible. The room can be cleaned, finished, set right. Remember those things and the picture taken once the job is complete, the *After* photograph, will show evidence that the trick is more than a trick. It will show what has been achieved through hours of spraying and scrubbing and scraping and bagging, what future occupants of the site will believe, safe and unsuspecting. That the trick of the job is now the new truth of the room:

Nothing happened.

The recliner would have to be disposed of. That much was immediately clear. The recliner was a lost cause, soaked in fluids and studded with matter. Once Bob came back up from the manager's office, they'd need to wrap it and carry it down to the vans. After the cleanup was complete, they'd drive it to the disposal facility with the other red biohazard bags full of all the other things they couldn't salvage, contaminated items that were impossible to clean.

The carpeting around the recliner was dark with dried splotches, stipples trailing out toward the wall a few feet behind. Darby pulled a spray bottle from his bucket, squirted the liquefying enzyme across the first splotch, softening the dried fluid, creating a low mist around the recliner. He gave it a few seconds to burble and hiss, then pulled a fistful of paper towels from a roll and soaked up as much as the towels would hold. He red-bagged the towels and sprayed the next splotch.

Roistler came into the apartment carrying the fogging machine. He closed the door behind him and shut all the windows, sealing them in. He set the machine down in the middle of the room. The fogger would flatten all smell in the room, years of cologne and cooking and cigarettes and a week's worth of fluid and matter sitting in the heat. It also helped with the flies, though it didn't do much about the vectors.

Roistler had been right. There were *mucho* vectors. Flies gathered almost immediately at a job site, and given enough time, flies laid eggs that became vectors and vectors multiplied at an alarming rate, squirming around in any fluid and matter they could find. A week was more than enough time for a complete generation of vectors, maybe two.

Roistler flipped a switch on the fogger and the machine jumped to life. Darby could feel its low rumble in his knees, vibrating through the floor. The machine chugged and pumped, releasing a thin white mist in a steady stream. Roistler said something Darby couldn't hear, then laughed at his own joke.

Darby sprayed another splotch at the foot of the recliner, tore more paper towels from the roll, scooped the softened fluid. There were sharp shards of broken glass near the toe of his work boot, the remains of a shattered vodka bottle. There was another empty bottle on the TV, a third lying on its side on the bed. Darby caught himself, stopped himself from looking around the room. He narrowed his vision, refocused on the recliner.

“Darby,” Roistler said. “Look at this.”

Roistler was standing at the bookshelves on the other side of the room, inspecting picture frames and detective paperbacks, anything that could have been hit with flying fluid or matter.

“Darby, look.” Roistler raised his voice to be heard over the fogger, through the hood of Darby’s suit. He was holding something between his thumb and forefinger, dangling it for Darby to see.

Darby didn’t look. He nodded like he’d looked, nodded and grunted loudly as a false confirmation that he’d looked, because sometimes that was enough, sometimes that satisfied Roistler and he’d get back to work without any further conversation.

“Darby, look. You’re not looking.”

Darby didn’t look. He nodded and grunted and scooped the last of the fluid from the carpeting. It wasn’t going to be enough. The carpeting would have to be disposed of. He picked a scoring razor out of his bucket and started cutting the carpet into record album-sized squares, pulling the squares loose, stuffing them into a red biohazard bag.

It was already hot in the room. Darby sweated in his suit, used his forearm to lift his goggles a half inch from his face, clear the condensation.

There was a large, shrieking splash of fluid on the wall behind the recliner. Above the fluid was a fist-sized hole that had contained the discharge of the weapon used. The discharge would have been taken by the cops, but

there would still be other things in that hole, things that clung to the discharge as it made its way from the recliner to the wall.

Darby pulled a plastic dustpan from his bucket, sprayed the stain on the wall with disinfectant and held the pan underneath to catch the fluid as it ran. The disappearing stain revealed more matter stuck to the white paint, little wads of what could easily be mistaken for colorless chewing gum. Darby kept the dustpan pressed to the wall with one hand, tore paper towels with the other, picked the matter from the wall. Sprayed the entire area again, wiping it clean.

He carried a short stepladder in from the hall, climbed up to the hole, sprayed disinfectant and shone a flashlight around inside. Tough to see what the situation was. He grabbed a wad of paper towels and pushed his hand into the hole. Came away with enough on his towel to repeat the process a few more times.

Roistler stopped talking. Bob was back in the doorway. Darby tilted his head toward the recliner and Bob nodded. They tore long sheets of black plastic from a four-foot roll and wrapped the recliner, Bob rocking the chair one way and then the other while Darby pulled the plastic tight. They each took an end and carried it out of the room, down the hallway to the staircase, the gaps under the doorways shadowed as they passed, eyeholes darkening, a few doors

cracking open along the way, braver souls, long faces peeking out, older men and women, mostly alone, one per room, nightshirts and pajamas, woken by the sirens and the sounds of people and equipment trampling through the building, fearstruck now by the two moonmen. They pinched their noses when they saw the recliner. The recliner didn't carry much of an odor, but they saw the hoods and the masks and a chair bound in plastic and thought that it must smell, assumed that it must stink like cellophane-wrapped meat gone bad.

Down the stairs, third floor, second floor, the recliner heavy from the liquid weight it carried. They stopped at each landing for Bob to regain his breath. Finally they were out the front door of the building into the early light, the sun-gathering haze. Bob wedged a wooden block into the doorway to keep it from shutting, locking them out. Darby covered the floor of the first van with a large sheet of plastic and they lifted the recliner up and in.

They peeled off their gloves, pulled back their hoods, took off their goggles and masks. Breathed deeply. Traffic was starting to thicken on the freeway overpass a block away, headlights and taillights in the gloom. Bob readjusted his ponytail up under his hair net, pulled the tape from his wrists, rolled his sleeves to get some air on his skin. His moonman suits were special-ordered for his size. One of Roistler's favorite jokes was to open a new shipment

of suits at the garage, rummage through the box and announce that the supplier had refused to make Bob-sized suits any more, that the techs would have to sew two large suits together to make new Bob-sized suits.

Bob looked at his watch. "What do you think? Three hours? Four? We're back at the garage by ten?"

Darby nodded. He looked up at the apartment building, a gray stucco slab, counted up, counted back, looking for the light, the closed windows of the room.

"Which is it?" Bob said. "Three or four?"

"Three."

"Fifteen bucks on three?"

"Sure."

"Dinner on three?"

"Sure."

Bob tapped his watch, marking the time. He pulled two new pairs of gloves from a toolbox, handed one pair to Darby. He closed up the van and Darby kicked the wooden block loose from the front door of the building as they went back inside.

Darby stood in the center of the room, pulled off his goggles and mask, pulled back his hood. The cleanup was complete. Roistler was hauling out the last of the redbags and equipment; Bob was settling the paperwork with the apartment manager downstairs.

Midmorning light through the windows, soft orange and yellow. Citrus light. The beginning of another hot day in a string of them. Too warm for this late into October. He tore the duct tape from his wrists, retrieved the camera from where Bob had left it on the table by the TV.

The room had no smell, thanks to the fogger. There was a blank spot where any smell should be.

Darby lifted the camera to his eye, stepped back toward the door, getting as much of the room in frame as he could. There was a small, hard knot behind the bridge of his nose, the kernel of a headache that spread quickly out toward his temples, the back of his skull. A rushing in his ears, a loud white noise that threatened to fill the room. This had been happening for a while now, this feeling that came upon him when he was making his final check of a site. A nagging disquiet. The feeling that the room was unfinished.

He looked for something they had missed, some detail that would be discovered in days or weeks, after the carpeting had been replaced, after the wall had been patched and repainted, a telltale sign that would betray the secret of what had happened here. There was nothing. The room was clean, the job was done.

He tried to shake the headache. He held his breath to steady his hands and snapped the picture. The room flashed white.