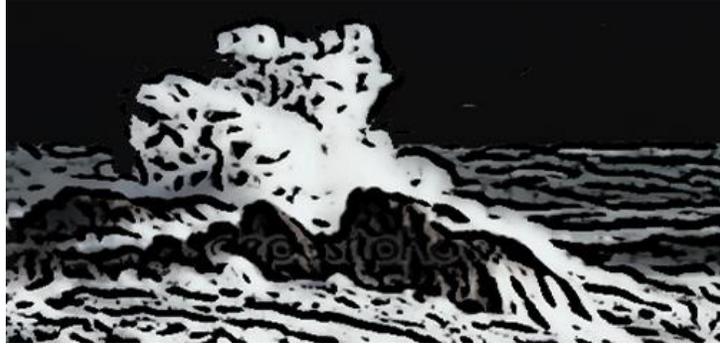




## NOTIFICATION OF KIN

*The Death of Hippolytus*

By Helene Baron-Murdock



**He let drop the keys** to the sedan into the left pocket of his slacks and walked toward the flashing lights staying to the inside of the flare pattern.

“Hey, Donovan! They got you doing accident investigations now?”

He glanced in the direction of the taunt and waved a hand at Tom Baxter, the fire chief for this stretch of coast highway. It was a perfunctory wave meaning either ‘hey, howyadoing’ or ‘don’t bother me.’ Baxter was standing by the rescue rig with a few of his volunteers framed against the wide horizon now just a creamy orange line above a placid metallic gray expanse of ocean.

Kyle Bradley, the Park Ranger, intercepted him as he approached the wreck. “Why’s the Sheriff’s Office even getting involved in this?”

Everything west of the highway was Bradley’s jurisdiction. What was left of the vehicle had landed on the beach just off the pavement. The accident itself was in the Highway Patrol’s bailiwick but it was one of those incidents that everyone was going to have a hand in.

Donovan shrugged. “It’s the CYA routine. Considering the identity of the road burger, everyone who’s politically connected is going to want to be in on it, if for no other reason than to cover their asses.” He stopped a short distance from the carnage, a crumpled upended vintage sports car. “That an old Porsche?”

Bradly nodded. “Yep, 550 Spyder, James Dean death machine.”

The Highway Patrol officer looked up from her clipboard with a severe frown. She was young, intense, and concentrated on going by the numbers on the first fatality of her probation.

“Excuse me, you’re . . . ?” If nothing else, Donovan looked official without trying and she was giving him the benefit of the doubt.

“Jim Donovan, Sheriff’s Office. I’m here to help you in any way I can.” When most people heard that line, they usually checked their backs for knives.

“It’s a traffic fatality. I don’t need any help.” Her dark eyes snapped resolve.

At least she was standing her ground. It was going to be a turf tug of war. How to look good while making the other agencies look bad. “Being who this is makes it more than just a traffic fatality.” Donovan dropped to his haunches and took in the length of bloodied partially clothed corpse.

“Dragged himself clean nekid,” Bradley opined.

Donovan blinked and frowned, standing up. It was one of the worst he’d seen. At least it was an adult. And male. “Tell me that’s not what I think it is.”

The Ranger and patrolman looked at where he was pointing.

“Rumor had it he was a stud, hung like a stallion.”

“I’d hate to see that thing angry.”

They both turned to look at the patrolman. She rolled her eyes.

“This is my incident. My accident scene. The only reason Bradley is any way involved is because the vehicle landed in his sand box. I don’t remember calling for a County detective.”

“Your shift commander hasn’t contacted you? There’s to be a thorough investigation by all jurisdictional agencies involved. T.C. Hughes has a lot of political clout and that’s his kid there with the python between his thighs.”

The patrolman’s ears reddened ever so slightly. “I haven’t heard anything from my shift commander.”

Donovan smiled thin. “Be that as it may, notification of kin is done by the coroner who delegates that unpleasant task to the Sheriff’s Office.” He indicated the young deputy directing traffic. “Ordinarily that poor bastard would be delivering the bad news. But you’ve got a high profile casualty here and I pulled the short straw. That ok with you?”

She nodded looking over Donovan’s shoulder and drawing her lips into an angry line.

The black and white sedan came to a stop behind them and killed the headlights. The shift sergeant had just arrived. He would be taking charge of the accident scene.

**The patrolman used her hand** to describe the path of the vehicle once it got airborne, indicating the bluff and rise of the highway to the south as it first turned east and then made a sharp switch back to the west before dropping in a graceful asphalt parabola to where they were standing and where the front end of the Porsche had come to a stop.

“One of the witnesses said they heard a loud noise like a pop or a thud. Then they saw the vehicle go airborne right after the

first turn. The victim was ejected, with the vehicle dragging him across the pavement to where the forward momentum was arrested by the berm at the top of the pathway down to the beach.”

“What was it, a pop or a thud?” The shift sergeant, a large square headed older man, was not happy to be caught up in the political quagmire. “It can’t be both.”

The patrolman studied her notebook certain she was being harassed because she was a rookie and a woman. “One witness stated that it sounded like a pop. Another thought it sounded like a loud thud. They all said that it happened so quickly they could barely comprehend what was going on until it was all over.”

The sergeant sneered. “Comprehend? Did they actually use that word?” He glanced at Bradley and Donovan and smirked. “College kids. Book smart, brain dead.”

Even in the encroaching twilight, the patrolman’s rage, a bright red face containing anger and embarrassment, was more than evident. “I interviewed a dozen witnesses,” she stated, her voice straining to control her emotions. “Only three of them actually saw the vehicle flip and crash. I have their contact information for follow-up if necessary.”

The sergeant had stopped listening to her. “Yeah, flip and crash, pretty typical out here on the coast highway, wouldn’t you say?” He addressed Bradley. “This is a popular spot. Seems to me there should have been more than just twelve witnesses.” His smile was sadistic.

“We get a fair share of visitors considering it’s not one of the bigger stretches of sand.” Bradley pointed out to the water’s edge. “Locals call it Sculpture Beach because people build things out of driftwood and what have you. Come the really high tides most of it washes out. But they keep doing it anyway. Actually had some pretty well known artists come down and make sculptures recently.”

Donovan pushed himself off the fender of the black and white he had been leaning against and stretched as if he were awakening from a nap. He glanced at the motley array of driftwood constructions silhouetted against the darkening sky and sea and draped in a fine twilight mist, abstract figures arrested in mid frolic. “Well, I’ve got work to do,” he said to no one in particular.

“Notification of kin?” the sergeant asked. “I’ll go with you.”

Not to be left out, Bradley anted up. “Yeah, I’ll go, too.”

Donovan shook his head. “I’m delivering bad news, not intimidation.”

**T.C. Hughes looked like** a Greek god, approximately. A mat of tight white curls crowned his head, a salt and pepper beard stip-

pling his square jaw and around his liver red mouth. The blue eyes were clear, untroubled, with no hint of sadness, pain or regret. "Thank Phil for his discretion. I appreciate it."

Donovan nodded. Phil Collins was the Sheriff, his boss. A woman was sobbing behind the frosted glass double doors that led out to a balcony. "Someone has already informed you of your loss, is that correct?"

"Yes, Bobby Temis, a friend of my son's. She saw it happen. She felt it incumbent upon herself to inform us immediately."

Who talked that way except people who read books and thought of themselves as characters in books. Donovan flipped open his notebook and scanned the names he had copied from the patrolman's report. "Bobby? A woman? I don't have her down here as a witness."

"Perhaps she didn't actually witness the accident. She was there, at the beach, as part of the sculpture event they were having. My son was on his way to meet her when. . . ." Hughes didn't finish, turning his head as if he were hearing the sobbing for the first time.

"How can I contact Bobby? Temis, was it?"

Hughes smiled vaguely. "Oh, Bobby. . . Roberta, actually. She owns the Huntress Gallery in town, on the left after the hairpin curve just past Harbor Road. She's an artist." He said the word as if it were distasteful.

"Was she your son's girlfriend. . . ?" Donovan let the question hang.

It was almost a chuckle. "No, no, nothing of the sort. But I don't see what this has to do with anything, detective. My son died as a result of a tragic accident. I appreciate that Phil personally sent one of his top men to make the official notification. That is, I'm afraid, the end of it."

"Of course. Please accept my condolences and convey my sympathies to his mother." He was referring to the sobbing unseen female. And he too could talk like people in books when needed.

Now it was a derisive snort. "I'll inform my lawyer and he will inform her lawyer. His mother and I are not on speaking terms." And then following Donovan's gaze in the direction of the sobbing, "Faye is my son's stepmother."

"I see."

"Again, detective, thank you for your discretion. Now I must see to my wife. Please, this way." Hughes indicated the massive oak front door with an outstretched arm.

Donovan stared at the notebook, having flipped back a page. "Two nights ago one of our deputies responded to this address for the report of a domestic disturbance. Can you tell me what that was about, sir?"

Storm clouds formed above the bushy white eyebrows, the blue eyes flashing electric, angry. “That has nothing to do with any of this!” Hughes thundered. “You have a lot of brass bringing that up. Collins will be hearing from me about your insensitivity and unprofessional behavior! The door!”

Donovan finished his cigarette before getting back into the sedan. From the circular drive that led up to the Hughes citadel, a ferrocement monstrosity set in among the gentle folds of the coastal hills, the view was of a dark ragged coast and isolated offshore sentinels against which the sullen sea spent itself as splashes of phosphorescence. To the north, almost within view, was the accident scene. He turned back to the mansion. At night, with its wide sweeping wing-like roof and brightly lit windowed walls, it looked like a cruise ship from another planet.

**Donovan opened the folder** on his desktop, found the Notification of Kin form, and entered the Coroner’s Case number which linked it to the Coroner’s Report. The name of the deceased populated the open field. He tabbed down to the comment field and let the cursor blink while he consulted his notebook. A lot of the younger guys had smart phones or digital recorders. He was old school.

The phone rang. “Donovan,” on the second ring. “Yeah, Phil, I just now got in. I was gonna call you. . .he didn’t waste any time. . .yeah, yeah, I know. . .unhuh, Parks, Highway Patrol, they all want a piece of the action. . .ok by me. . .whatever, I understand. . .well, you know me, I like to have my t’s dotted and my i’s crossed.” He laughed with the caller. “Listen, Phil, I’ll have this wrapped up tomorrow, just a few things I need to follow up on. . .no, no, I know you’re not telling me how to do my job. . .yeah, it just sounds that way. . .yes, I will keep you in the loop. . .don’t I always. . .yeah, I know, I’m an asshole, what’s your excuse? Yes. . .Soon as I wrap it up, you’ll be the first. . .ok.”

“**Are you interested in art**, Detective?” Roberta “Bobby” Temis was lithe and sleek and sophisticated. Her eyebrows arched up onto her wide brow like the antennae of a big butterfly, the eyes, those of a doe, large wing-like lashes, and the mouth, a double bow between which a pink tongue darted in amusement.

Donovan glanced about the gallery at the large paintings of animals with human faces and the sculptures of humans with animal heads. “I know what I like.”

“Ah, an expert.” She smiled. “I would love to know what you think of my paintings.”

The paintings were rendered realistically, almost photographically. “Got anything on velvet?”

“Your wit verges on the insolent, how quotidian!”

“I’m not here to talk about art.” Donovan had unholstered his notebook and flipped to a page.

“Would you like to know my technique?” She had stopped in front of a painting of a doe with the face of a sad woman. “I capture my subjects with a camera and project their likeness onto a canvas, in this case superimposing the physiognomy of the hominid over that of the ungulate from which I can then trace their images.”

“Isn’t that cheating?”

“Art is just another word for cheating, detective.”

Donovan shrugged. He couldn’t argue with that. “You were friends with Apollo Hughes?”

“Yes, Pol, he hated being called Apollo. He, Pol, lit us, the world, with his presence. He was a bright ray, a golden ray of sunlight.”

“You were present when the accident happened?”

“Yes.” She said it slowly, lingering on the sibilant. “We were all to meet at the beach to celebrate the high tide and the destructions of our sculptures.”

“Wait a minute, you were celebrating the destruction of your. . .” Donovan hesitated. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d spoken that word. “. . . sculptures?”

“Of course, nothing lasts forever. Art is a celebration of the life cycle. As artists, we party at the creation of our work, and we party at its dissolution.”

Donovan shook his head. He felt like he was in the middle of a vocabulary quiz. “Did you see it happen, the accident?”

“No, I was focused on the sea. It is always such a powerful spectacle. And the breakers were unusually large that day. The moon, you know, it’s full.”

“Did you hear a noise, like a pop or a thud?”

“Yes, I heard an explosion, a boom.”

“From the direction of the highway?”

“Oh, it may have echoed up the wash and against the hills, but it came from the sea. It was a boomer.”

“A boomer?”

“Yes, when a large wave breaks close to shore it makes a thunderous noise hitting the sand. The ancients called it the ‘bull of the sea.’ They meant Poseidon, of course.” She pointed to the slide show on a flat screen TV mounted on the wall. “Here are some photos of the recent sculptures we assembled. And the artists. And their friends.” She froze a frame with the remote. “And this is Pol.” The photo was of a young, very handsome man with a long dark mane and a captivating demeanor.

“You saw him? After the accident, I mean. How could you be sure he was dead?”

She gave a sad smile that said she did not suffer fools gladly. “The impact alone would have killed him. But he was dragged behind his Porsche as well. His hair, his beautiful long hair, caught on something. . . .” She hesitated, taking in his full measure. “. . .after that, death can only be merciful .”

“And you felt that you needed to notify his family.”

“I told his father. He lives close by. His mother is Anne Ti-ope, the actress. I would assume that Terrence, Mr. Hughes, will somehow communicate the news to her.”

Donovan nodded. He hadn’t made that connection. The mother starred on TV as an Amazon princess. “I didn’t get the impression that Mr. Hughes was too broke up about his son’s death.”

“Terrence affects a godlike stoicism. . .it protects his inner child.”

“But the wife. . . .”

“Faye?” Bobby gave a dismissive laugh. “Faye D’Era is a child, a spoiled child. And not very bright. I don’t think she realized that her selfishness. . . .” She pursed her lips and blinked innocence as if to indicate she has said too much already. She drew his attention to the small wood sculpture of a man’s nude body surmounted by a horse’s head. “Pol was my model for this piece.”

Donovan threw a sidelong glance at the statuette. At least she had the proportions right. He referred back to his notebook. “Three days ago, the Sheriff’s Office received a report of a disturbance at the Hughes estate. The deputy reported that there had been a violent argument between Mr. Hughes and his son and that it had comes to blows. Mr. Hughes was adamant about his son remaining on the premises and demanded that the deputy arrest him. The deputy also reports that some of the statements made by Mr. Hughes could be construed as veiled threats. The deputy concluded that the situation was mitigated by the departure of Apollo Hughes who had declined to press charges. Do you know anything about this incident?”

Bobby nodded her head and closed her eyes briefly. “Yes, yes, it is so tragic but so inevitable. In the classical sense, if you know what I mean. The situation there was a powder keg. There was bound to be bad feelings, particularly after that nasty divorce. And to take a wife who was younger than his own son was like putting fire to the fuse. Faye was smitten by Pol. And who can blame her. He was incredibly handsome. What most women who fell for him did not understand was that he had no interested in them.”

“You’re saying he was gay?”

“In men? No interest at all. He delighted in life. He was quite evolved. The carnal aspects of his nature were subsumed within an esthetic of being. He cared only about fine things. Art,

music, poetry. His image.” She smiled slightly, remembering. “To say he was a little narcissistic would be an understatement. He was drawn, as are most idle wealthy young men, to extremes. . .fast cars. . . sky diving. . .rock climbing. . .but to liaisons of a sexual nature, he was ambivalent.”

“Not even. . .” Donovan had the insolent thing going for him.

“No, not at all.” The laugh said she thought him ridiculous. “Pol and I were the best of friends, running buddies, partners in crime. We were wild in such similar ways.”

“Too bad,” Donovan mused, “He had the equipment.”

“Crass, but true, detective. However, he considered himself on a higher chakra than most mortals.”

“Ok, so why was that a problem?”

“Faye threw herself at him. And she took his indifference as a rejection. The night of the blow up, Faye lied to her husband and accused Pol of trying to seduce her.”

Donovan gave an understanding nod. He saw where it was heading. “Father and son get into a fight. Someone calls the cops. Threats are made. A couple of days later, son is killed driving vintage sports car belonging to Mr. T. C. Hughes.” Donovan made to close his notebook. “End of story?”

“Yes, detective, end of story. Or end to this cycle of life and on to another. Nothing sinister. Terrence owns a dozen sports cars and any one of them were available to Pol. He never drove the Maserati or the Porsche or any one of them two days in a row. There’s nothing more to it than that. We die and are reborn. The energy never goes away.”

Donovan closed his notebook and turned to leave. “Thanks for your time. Sorry if I inconvenienced you.” He stopped at a small shelf near the entrance to the gallery to look at a bronze statue of a nude woman with a stag’s head that would make a nice base for a table lamp. Inscribed on the pedestal was the artist’s signature, *R. Temis*.

“Aren’t you curious as to what I told Terrence when I delivered the news of his son’s death?”

Hand on the chrome door plate, he turned to look over his shoulder.

She gave a wicked knowing smile. “I said, ‘Be careful what you wish for.’ And don’t you for one minute doubt that he didn’t know what I meant. I could read the guilt in those soulless blue eyes.”

Donovan sat in the sedan watching the sea gulls fight the steady ocean breeze. A fog bank like a big chunk of lead sat on the horizon. There was a certain kind of beauty to the way the muted light settled on every mundane thing and made it somehow special.

He'd have to make the drive out to the coast on his own time one of these days. He glanced at the glass and chrome door to the gallery pulling away. Maybe invest in a little art.