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STORM SEASON
SLICES OF NIGHT

J.T. ELLISON

THE FIRST DECADE

A SHORT STORY COLLECTION



For My Mom.
Love you more.

The First Decade: A Short Story Collection

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I've always looked at short stories as a way to have a bit of fun with my writing. In my day job, I write psychological thrillers. I'd written three novels before I ever tried my hand at short fiction. But when I did, I discovered an entirely new world.

I spent a great deal of time telling my peers I couldn't write short stories. They kept pushing me, and pushing me, until I finally gave it a shot.

That story was "Prodigal Me." I submitted it to *Writer's Digest* and promptly forgot about it. You can imagine my surprise when I received an email from Chuck Sambuchino saying I'd won an honorable mention in their annual short fiction contest.

Perhaps I could write shorts after all.

Soon after, I attended my first writer's conference, where I met a fabulous writer named Duane Swierczynski. I asked Duane about some short fiction markets, and he suggested I send a story to his friend Bryon Quertermous, who ran an e-zine called *Demolition*. I quickly wrote another story and submitted it. Bryon loved everything but the title, which we agreed to change to "X." It was my first published piece.

My love of the short form grew from there. I began placing stories, writing for anthologies, the works. I grew to love the freedom and limitations of the form, and I still use it as a playground

of sorts, a way to stretch my wings and explore genres I wouldn't normally write in.

My short stories are little slices, vignettes. Crimes of the heart, the mind and the soul. The bits and pieces that fell from my mind while I was writing long-form novels, the ideas that didn't have a place in my current work. Some are quite short, others bloomed into novellas.

With the advent of independent publishing, I decided to start my own house, Two Tales Press, in order to share these sweet little lies with you. I do hope you'll enjoy them.

—J.T. Ellison

Nashville, Tennessee, 2016

THE STORM

The sky is transparent, a thick gray rain moving up the valley. Lightning dances, long silver-white forks hitting the ground, thunderbolts thrown from Zeus's hand.

The lights flicker as I look out the window. The wet blanket of virga slips closer and closer. The mountains hover, blue and wrinkled, old men with knowledge to share. The outcropping of rock known to the locals as Indian Head glowers at me. Hummingbirds race the wind, trying to gather one last sip of sugar water before the storm drives them to their invisible nests.

He is coming for me.

You may wonder how I know. Perhaps it's the palpable sense of heaviness that hangs over my small cabin. Perhaps the foreknowledge of inevitability. Perhaps someone who still cared slipped me a copy of the paperwork. This isn't an industry that helps one cultivate friends, but there are always people who feel sorry for you when things go south.

We don't last long in my profession. One wrong move is so easy to make. One job unfinished, one job left undone. One job refused.

Honestly, none of this matters.

The storm will blow in, bringing his acrid breath to the nape of my neck. He will stand over me. I will be powerless. The soft *ppft* of the strike will be lost to the raging winds.

If it gets that far, if he gets the upper hand, I'm done for.

Looking back is something I try not to do. I live in the moment. I am a shark, perpetually in motion, always forward, ever forward.

But in this case, a reminiscence is in order. One tends to revisit the past when the future is no longer clear.

These are the long-lasting ramifications to every action I took that day. For a moment, I wish I could go back to the early days, when my mistakes were overlooked because I was young, and being trained.

Now that I am who I am, more is expected of me.



Three Months Ago

Doing overwatch in Florence can almost be called fun. Lying face down on a rooftop for seven hours, wearing a diaper and not allowing my body to even twitch is my second greatest talent. Usually it's done in baking lands where I must be hidden beneath a tent so I don't die in the boiling sun. Florence, on the other hand, is cool and foggy today. The piazza is full of happy people, enjoying a respite from the summer heat.

The mark is expected at seven p.m. He eats at the café opposite my position every evening. He is an early diner for an Italian. He comes alone, orders a prosecco, then a carafe of chianti, eats mussels in red sauce, never touches dessert. He is fit, his legs long, the muscles rippling under his suit coat. He wears sunglasses most of the time, mirrored Ray-Bans. His hair is dark and oiled. He is a good-looking man, careful with himself.

He is also a monster.

Everyone who comes across my crosshairs is, to some extent. His monstrous activities are lauded by some and hated by others.

I don't care what he does. I don't care who he is. The money looks and smells the same regardless of their sins.

In another life, I would have killed him softly. Gently. In bed, after we were both satiated. It is my favorite way, to ingratiate myself. I get more information that way. A blunt killing isn't my usual forte.

But I can do it, and this is what the clients have asked for. Clearly a message is being sent.

I glance down the scope once more.

It is time. He has come.

And he is not alone.

Her hair, all one length down her back, the color of the pasta being served.

Her dress, white with pink and yellow embroidered flowers across the chest.

Her hand, lost in his.

She skips every third step.

Those bastards.

They sit at the table. Prosecco for him, milk for her. Milk, of all things.

This is not going to happen.

This must happen.

You don't get to choose.

Do the job.

This is a mistake.

My finger on the trigger.

The glass of prosecco explodes.

The cries and screams below carry me off the roof and into the darkness of the city.



The call went as well as I expected.

“You missed.”

“I didn’t miss. I chose.”

“That is not your decision to make.”

“I wasn’t going to kill him in front of his child. I’ll go back and do it myself, in the night, when she can’t see.”

A pause of sheer incredulity. “Don’t you understand? *His* death is not the goal.”

“The child is the target?”

“The child must learn a lesson. The child must be taught what happens when she speaks.”

“That’s what this is about? *The child*? You’re insane.”

“And you’re fired. Clear out. The contract is pulled.”

The phone went dead in my hand.

I had to move, now. They would be coming for me, yes, that was inevitable. But not right away. It was the target and his flax-haired daughter who were in mortal danger, immediate and ever-present.

If I could move quickly enough, I might be able to save them both.



Now

Lightning crashes. The thunder follows so quickly it shakes the house. The sensation of the floor moving under my feet reminds me of an earthquake I was in once, in Chile. Shivers of movement climbing my legs, coiling in my gut. It feels the very same.

I know who they hired, of course I do. It is my business to know these things.

He is the best, which is difficult for me to say. It’s hard to admit that you may not be the most accomplished expert at what you do. But I’m a realist, and it’s the truth. I have no reason to hide it from you. It’s not so much that he’s better than me, more a matter of his experience. He is the legend. He is the west wind. He is the assassin no one knows, no one has ever seen.

And he is coming for me. He is the only one who can.

I’ve reinforced the doors and windows, put a stock of weapons at hand in each room, places I will know where to look, but he won’t. I don’t plan to go down without a fight.

I shift, slightly. I’ve been in position for over an hour now. I hope I won’t have to wait much longer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo credit: Krista Lee Photography

New York Times bestselling author J.T. Ellison writes dark psychological thrillers starring Nashville Homicide Lt. Taylor Jackson and medical examiner Dr. Samantha Owens, and pens the Nicholas Drummond series with #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Catherine Coulter. Cohost of the premier literary television show, *A Word on Words*, Ellison lives in Nashville with her husband and twin kittens.

For more insight into her wicked imagination, follow J.T. online and join her email list at jtellison.com/subscribe

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