

# That Demon Life

by Lowell Mick White



Arlington, Virginia

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All these people do is drink and drink and drink to boredom...and screw and  
screw and screw to death.

—J. Frank Dobie

It's just that demon life  
has got me in its sway

—The Rolling Stones

# Chapter One

After a dull night of crisis—a lonely night of pacing, of fretting, of drinking and smoking, of making telephone calls to so-called friends who all seemed to be either drunk or sleeping or “busy”—Linda Smallwood stepped into her bedroom and found that one of her two monk parakeets had died.

Linda felt slightly ill. Not so much from the sight of the dead bird, a sad crumpled fluff of green and white feathers in the corner of the brass birdcage, as from the beginnings of a hangover. The drinking was starting to catch up with her—the fretting, too. She just couldn’t seem to get a handle on her life: an image, a hazy idea of what had gone wrong would appear, but before Linda could bring herself to examine it, the idea would sort of—flutter away. It was the damndest thing. Frustrating! All night long Linda felt empty-headed and confused—vexed, tormented, tortured. She would have another glass of wine, make another fruitless phone call or two, and wait for another wispy, ill-formed idea to appear—and disappear. It was frustrating.

Now there was this dead parakeet—a small crisis compared to the larger crisis of her apparently wasted and ruined life, but a crisis nonetheless, and disturbing. The birds had been a gift of her ex-fiancé, and she had, over the years, become attached to them, though she never got around to naming them, and, indeed, had trouble telling them apart, referring to them vaguely as “That One Bird,” and “That Other Bird.” Right now, That One Bird was alive, rocking on its little swing. Linda thought it was the male, which would mean that That Other Bird was the female—dead.

“Well,” Linda said aloud. She obviously couldn’t go to sleep with a dead parakeet in the room. “*This* sucks.”

Linda lifted the cage from its hook—That One Bird thrashing around to keep its balance—and carried it down the stairs, through the messy, cluttered living room to the front steps of her condo. Outside the morning was quiet and bright and hot....

*Hot*, she realized. Texas was hot in the summer. Hot. Those fluffy pink-tinted clouds that floated up to Austin from the Gulf in the early mornings would burn away by mid-day and the hard white sun would beat down, reflecting off the city’s glass buildings, off the cars and SUVs on the expressways, heat radiating up from the

concrete and asphalt. The day would be hot. Linda spent as much time as possible in dim, air-conditioned rooms, and she had tried to forget the sun, the outdoors, the Texas summer heat. Now she wondered if That Other Bird, the dead one, would start to stink.

Linda had a notion to call up her ex-fiancé, Gilbert Hardison, and tell him to get busy and dispose of the poor dead thing, except that Gilbert was too often unresponsive and difficult to motivate, not to mention lazy and argumentative and deliberately incompetent, and the dead bird really *would* stink by the time he to work.

Also, Linda had a blurry memory of calling Gilbert in the middle of the night and getting his fat new wife, who had sounded cranky.

Bitch.

That One Bird squawked and fluttered around the cage.

“What a mess,” Linda said. “*Life.*”



Part of the problem, Linda knew, was her job: she was a criminal defense attorney. What a stupid career choice *that* had been! She wanted a legal career like on television, where an attorney might get motivated enough to file a motion or something but would still have enough time to go to Happy Hour and have adventures. What had happened, though, was that she had been hired by a firm whose senior partners took the law seriously. For them it was a *calling*. They believed in justice, in the rule of law—and they expected her to believe in those things as well. She had heard all the stories about easy-going, relaxed Texas lawyers who blew cases or fell asleep in court or showed up drunk, only to find that in real life her bosses frowned on incompetence. Even worse, she had to get up in the goddamn *mornings* and try to be competent; she had to stagger around through the day half-asleep, unfocused, ill-tempered, quarrelsome, depressed. Mornings, Linda thought. Mornings. When am I supposed to sleep?

Maybe my life would be better if I just *quit*.

Linda tightened her grip on the cage and walked across the courtyard and banged on the door of her friend, Paige Davenport. Live oak and pecan trees shaded Paige’s side of the complex, and wild birds, mostly great-tailed grackles, were happily croaking and hissing in the branches above. She banged on the door again, and it opened.

“Linda!” Paige said. She looked awfully bright and chipper for a Saturday morning—after what had probably been a long Friday night. Linda looked past Paige into the house and saw not only Paige’s boyfriend’s bicycle parked in the hallway, but also a large, naked black man stretched out on the couch, snoring.

“Oh, I guess you really *were* busy,” Linda said. Paige led an—active—life.

“Are you feeling better?” Paige asked.

Linda shook her head. “One of these little birds died.”

Paige stepped aside and Linda went past her and set the cage on the coffee table by the couch.

“Oh, that’s too bad.” Paige knelt down to look at the birds. “What happened?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Linda said. “Maybe they have avian flu. Do you think?” She stared at the cage. It would be like Gilbert Hardison to give her sickly birds. “Maybe they’re contagious—maybe we’ll all get sick.”

“You’ve had these birds for years,” Paige said.

“So? Maybe it’s a slow-acting flu.”

“I doubt it.” Paige shook her head and went back to the kitchen and picked up a mop. Linda watched her, marveling, as she usually did, that Paige, with her busy life—Paige, who worked, worked out, studied, tutored, drank, drugged, and had an unseemly if not totally absurd sex life—could find the time to keep her townhouse so utterly immaculate. Paige was manic, though. Maybe that helped.

“So you’re not feeling better?” Paige asked.

“It’s just one damn thing after another,” Linda said. She lit a cigarette and blew smoke toward the ceiling. Paige went back to her mopping. That One Bird hopped around the cage, apparently untroubled by his dead mate. The black man sighed in his sleep, a deep sigh just this side of a moan. Linda felt another hollow wave of depression wash through her body. Really, it *was* just one damn thing after another. What a life. What a mess.

“I guess I need to find another job or something,” Linda said. “I can’t take this legal thing much longer.” She thought for a moment, and sighed. “It’s too much trouble to get up in the morning, and then when I do people are rude to me.”

“You spent all that time in law school,” Paige said.

“I *liked* law school,” Linda said. Maybe I can go back, somehow, she thought. Well, no. Maybe not.

“There’s other kinds of law you can do.”

Linda shook her head. Mornings lurked everywhere. Rude people, too. She said, “I guess I need to get rid of That Other Bird.”

“I’m not going to touch it,” Paige said. “Poor little bird.” Paige straightened up and stretched, immodest almost to the point of exhibitionism, wearing a black thong and a black t-shirt cropped so high on her flat belly that the bottoms of her breasts were showing. Paige was an athlete—track and field, body-building, tennis—and was in perfect shape.

“I didn’t *ask* you,” Linda said. “What about your boyfriend?”

Paige looked up the stairs to the bedroom and shrugged. She said, “*You* ask him.”



The strange black man on the couch rolled to his side and mumbled something in his sleep. With an effort, Linda got out of her chair and trudged up the stairs. Maybe it was all a matter of *competence*, she thought. Maybe I'm—how goddamn embarrassing—*incompetent*. It could be, though. Probably. Maybe I was just born inept. Or maybe it was a matter of experience—maybe lack of experience could lead to incompetence and ineptitude. Linda had never had a real job before this stupid legal thing, and this stupid legal thing certainly wasn't working out. Always before in her life she'd gotten other people—mostly men—to do basic things for her: pay the cable bill, wash the car, dispose of dead parakeets—

Linda pushed open the bedroom door. Raul Ledesma was sleeping with his mouth open, boyish-looking and tranquil. Linda touched him on the shoulder.

“Raul, wake up.”

Raul jerked awake, wild-eyed.

“I need some help.”

Raul sat up and swung his legs off the bed, looking puzzled. Raul was soap opera-star handsome bordering on beautiful: late-twenties, dark hair, dark eyes, fine features. Linda thought he was retarded.

“There's a dead bird out there you need to deal with.”

“What?” Raul pulled a sheet across his lap to cover his nakedness; he was unusually modest, for someone involved with Paige. “Deal with a dead bird?”

“Dispose of it,” Linda said. “Come on.” She turned and headed back down the stairs, assuming Raul would follow. Paige was scrubbing the already-gleaming sink. Linda leaned against the kitchen counter and sighed.

“I'm not even sure what's wrong,” Linda said.

“Just try to isolate one problem,” Paige suggested. “Then you can concentrate on fixing that one thing.”

“One thing?” Linda shook her head. “Every goddamn thing.”

Raul came out of the bedroom and started down the stairs, the sheet wrapped around his waist, but then he stopped—staring in surprise at the naked black man on the couch.

“Paige? Who's this—this *black* guy?”

Linda lit another cigarette and watched Paige.

“Oh, I don't know,” Paige said. She looked at Linda and winked. “He just sort of showed up this morning. It's not important.”

“What?”

“What do you mean—what?” Paige was suddenly furious—violet blue eyes bulging, lip curled. “Who the hell are you to ask who I have for a guest in *my* home? Fuck you!”

Raul glared down at Linda as if she were somehow responsible for the black man

on the couch. Linda wasn't afraid of Raul but she took a step back just the same – and another step, and another, out the still-open door. Raul stomped down the stairs and slammed it shut in her face.

Linda heard Paige yell “Fuck you!” again, followed by the thump and crash of something—a lamp, maybe, or an ashtray—hitting the wall. The then door opened and Paige set the birdcage on the step. She looked at Linda and rolled her eyes. Then she ducked back inside and the door slammed again and Linda heard “*Motherfucker!*” followed by another heavy thump.

That One Bird in the cage – the living bird, the survivor – flapped its wings and screeched. Linda suddenly decided that it was all Gilbert Hardison's fault. What the hell kind of engagement present were a pair of parakeets, anyway? Why hadn't he given her some pearls or something—diamonds, emeralds, a watch—something normal? Chocolate, even. Roses! Goddamn birds. It was crazy.



Gilbert Hardison was a big man, dark and powerful, yet he stepped lightly, cheerfully, coming down the stairs of his home, fumbling at his necktie. When he stopped at the mirror at the foot of the staircase to knot it properly, he could see around the corner into the living room, where his wife, Delia, was eating and watching television.

“You hear that phone ringing last night?” Delia asked.

“The phone? What phone?”

“You didn't hear it?”

“My cell phone?” Gilbert asked. The knot was wrong, the tie lopsided. Gilbert undid it and started over.

“It was ringing all night.”

“Did you answer?” Gilbert was so big—his chest and his belly stuck out so far—that the tie looked too short. He wondered if they made especially long ties, somewhere.

“You need to turn that thing *off* when you go to bed.”

“Who was it?”

“You need to stop giving your number out to people.”

“Who was it?” Gilbert asked again. There was a long silence. Gilbert knotted the tie more or less adequately and went on into the kitchen. The remains of a huge breakfast cluttered the counters—broken egg shells, the crudely slashed rind of a grapefruit, slices of half-melted cheese in pools of congealing bacon grease. Gilbert frowned. “Hey, didn't you fix nothing for me?”

“Now, why would I fix something for you?” Delia asked. “I told you, that *phone* was ringing all *night*.”

“Well, I'm hungry.” Gilbert poured what coffee was left in the pot, about half a

cup. Half empty, he wondered, or half full. Or just half.

“I never did get back to sleep.”

Gilbert looked around the corner at his wife. Delia was about to take a bite of a piece of crisp bacon. Gilbert lowered his gaze: he couldn’t bear to watch his wife eat. Too often stray bits of food missed her mouth and tumbled down between her great, soft breasts. Popcorn was especially bad.

Delia noticed him and popped the bacon—most of it, at least—into her mouth. She slapped at the crumbs on her chest. “I said, I never *did* get back to sleep.”

Gilbert said, “So take a damn pill.”

“I have to work today!”

“So fucking work.”

Delia turned and looked at him with cold, flat brown eyes. She was proud—ridiculously proud, Gilbert thought—of her job as a “dating consultant.”

Gilbert asked, “What’re you so pissed about?”

“I never said I was pissed.”

“Well, you’re *acting* pissed.”

“You’re not very observant.”

“Well,” Gilbert said, “something’s going on, or else you wouldn’t be acting this way.”

“I said, you’re not very observant.”

“Maybe not,” Gilbert said. He considered hurling the now fully empty coffee mug at the back of Delia’s bitching, didn’t get a wink of sleep skull, but he restrained himself. *I am restraining myself*, he thought. *I can do this*. Aloud, he said, “I got a murderer to go see.”

“A murderer,” Delia said. “On Saturday morning?”

“It’s important.”

“Important. Well, good for you.”

“Yeah, it is,” Gilbert said. “It’s very good for me.” He picked up his jacket and briefcase and went out into the garage, shutting the door behind him.



There was a brown-gray haze of smog lingering over the hills to the north and west, but the morning itself was sunny and traffic was, thankfully, light. Gilbert eased up Escarpment Boulevard, cheerful—a little more cheerful, at least—to be out of the house and away from Delia’s griping. His neighborhood was brand new and fiercely suburban, and as he drove slowly along Gilbert read the passing street names. Many had Old West themes: Convict Hill Road, Abilene Trail, Open Range Trail, Wheel Rim Circle. Other streets were named after famous Texas cattlemen, like Richard King Trail, Issac Pryor Drive, or Robert Kleburg Lane. People liked the Western images, after all these citified years they still sold, they were still useful,

they still somehow meant something to people. Gilbert in the past had sometimes even worn a cowboy hat to court until Delia told him he looked like a fool and made him stop.

Gilbert merged onto the expressway and zipped along to his exit, at Manchaca Road. Hungry, thinking of Delia and her selfish big breakfast, he drove through Taco Cabana for tacos and enchiladas and coffee. To get back around to Lamar Boulevard and his office, Gilbert cut through another neighborhood behind a strip mall, a somewhat older neighborhood but still with the Western street names: Frontier Trail, Roundup Trail, Western Trails Boulevard, Arapaho Pass. Those names, Gilbert thought, those Western names, they were something important—something he could maybe use.

Gilbert liked to brag that The Justice Store was the city's largest discount legal firm: starting with nothing, he had managed to build a minor empire with three locations—another on North Lamar, and one on East Seventh—employing a half-dozen paralegals and clerks. Tucked away in the dark, sunless corner of a red-brick strip-mall, the South Lamar location had been his favorite—*had* been, until Delia claimed half the space for her stupid dating service.

It was still kind of a shock. Delia had taken three offices on the left side of the hallway and had knocked out the walls, making one long, narrow room. She painted the walls purple and pink, and there were ferns and ivies and bright balloons hanging from the blue ceiling, with televisions and computers and jamboxes cluttering the desks and tables. There were giant fans in the corners blowing constantly, causing the plants and balloons to bob and toss around, and pieces of confetti to billow, and too often Dr. Dee's DateLine promotional material came sailing out into the hallway. Gilbert's clients, most of them poor, grim people in the middle of some serious crisis or other, would peek into the DateLine room—amazed, confused—as they passed down the hallway to the conference room or to Gilbert's personal office.

The office was at the back of the building, and Gilbert felt comfortable there, and safe—at least, when Delia wasn't around. There was a wide, sturdy sofa for napping between clients, and a television, a desk, and the usual diplomas on the walls—no one in Gilbert's family had been to college, much less law school—and photographs from his days as a linebacker for Baylor University. Gilbert had never been a star at Baylor, but he worked hard and was determined—he *had* played, just as he had graduated, had gone on to law school, and had made The Justice Store a successful business. Yet when he passed Delia's DateLine office and looked inside, it wasn't enough. Seeing the bobbing balloons, the swinging ivies, seeing Delia wrapped up in an apparently intense conversation with some rich young lonely computer professional, he felt amazed, too, and confused—and, somehow, mocked.

Now, though, Delia was safe at home, probably finishing off her second pound of bacon, and Gilbert felt secure. He dumped the bags of food onto his desk, tossed his jacket onto the couch, and sat down to eat his breakfast. He punched a button on

the speakerphone to listen to his voicemail.

“Gilbert!” a familiar voice hissed. Gilbert was about to open the Styrofoam box of enchiladas. He stopped and stared at the phone. A familiar voice—still familiar, though he had not heard it, had indeed been avoiding it, for something like over a year.

“I need to talk to you, goddammit! *Call me!*”

Gilbert reached over and punched the 3 button on the phone—delete.

“Message deleted,” a flat computer voice said. “Save, delete, or next message.”

Gilbert punched 6 – Next Message.

“Goddammit, Gilbert, your wife answered the *cell* phone! Why’d you let her do that for? I mean—”

“Why’re you whispering for?” Gilbert asked the phone. “Jesus.”

“—I need help, you know? So call me—call me!”

“Crazy bitch,” Gilbert said. He hit the 6 button.

“Message deleted. Save, Delete, or Next Message.”

Gilbert hit the button for the next message.

“There are no more messages.”

“Good,” Gilbert said aloud. He looked down at his food and smiled. “Crazy bitch.”



After her engagement with Gilbert collapsed, Linda had other men in her life, but they were about as distinct as the parakeets: there was That One Guy, That Other Guy, That Last Guy, That Little Guy, That Stupid Guy, and so forth. Linda was a demanding girlfriend, and tended to exhaust her guys with endless, tedious errands, most having to do with some form of cleaning, cooking, or car-repair. Some guys ran away, and some were dismissed because of performance problems, but Linda always seemed able to find another guy.

“It’s amazing,” Paige said once. “You treat these guys like shit, and they still do whatever you say.”

“Yeah,” Linda said, and a smile broke slowly across her face. “Yeah, and I don’t look so good, either.”

Which was not true, really. Linda was a tall, rangy woman, with sandy hair and warm brown eyes, and a decent figure that was beginning to sag a little in strategic areas as she slid into middle-age. She was, however, unusually indifferent to her appearance—her makeup was applied haphazardly, her hair stuck out at odd angles, and her clothes were rumpled even when she had a guy to do her ironing.

Now, though, Linda was between guys. The last one, a housepainter named Harold— was very good with a vacuum cleaner—had taken a load of trash out to the dumpster and had never returned. Since Paige wouldn’t help, and Raul wouldn’t

help, and since she obviously couldn't touch the poor dead bird herself, the only thing to do was to get a new guy. Linda picked up the cage and crossed the courtyard and knocked on Tim Newlin's door. It opened immediately.

"I've got a problem here," Linda said.

"Yeah, I was watching," Tim said. He had sort of a dazed smile on his face—dazed, and sort of nervous. "Out the window. I like to sort of watch what goes on out here, you know?"

Linda looked at Tim's window: the bottom blades of the window blinds were broken back, and the glass was smudged, where Tim's face had apparently been pressed against it.

"Oh, you're a spy, too. I like that." Linda had known Tim for a couple of years but had never taken him seriously as a—guy. He was ten or twelve or maybe even fifteen years younger than she was, and seemed to lack focus—he spent all his time smoking pot and managing a couple of pornographic web sites. Still, he was convenient and available. "You've got to help me with this bird."

"Oh." Tim looked at the cage for a moment, blinking. "Uh, which one?"

"The goddamn dead one! Jesus!"

The door to Paige's townhouse opened and Linda and Tim turned to look. The large black man stepped out, looking sleepy in the harsh morning sunlight, fully clothed but ruffled in a Dallas Cowboys jersey and a pair of striped shorts that hung down below his knees—they looked like kilts, Linda thought. When he noticed Linda and Tim staring at him, he straightened up and walked off, almost swaggering.

"Help me with the bird," Linda said again.

"Oh, right." Tim disappeared into his apartment and came out with a plastic grocery bag. He knelt down by the cage. "Just throw her away?"

"Yes!" Great, Linda thought, another stupid guy.

Tim stuck his hand inside the cage. That One Bird was hopping around, getting in the way. Tim tried to nudge it aside with his wrist, but just as he picked up the dead bird, the living bird panicked or something and scraped up past his forearm toward the door.

"Hey!" Linda yelled. "Watch it!"

Tim tried to block the parakeet – he pinned its little wing to the cage for a moment—but it got past him and fluttered up into the trees.

"Well, goddamn," Linda said. "I didn't want you to let That One Bird *loose!*"

"I'm sorry," Tim said. He stood with That Other Bird dead in his hand. "I'm sorry. I just—"

"Screwed up," Linda finished. "Yeah, I saw. Damn."

Tim didn't say anything. He put the dead bird in the plastic bag. Linda was staring anxiously up into the trees. After a moment he asked, "You want me to—throw her away?"

“Yes—and be quick about it.”

Tim trotted off to the dumpster with the bag—with That Other Bird. Linda lit another cigarette. Grackles fluttered in the branches above her but there was no sign of That One Bird. She heard a door open and turned to see Raul, shirtless but wearing a pair of red gym shorts, wheeling his bicycle out of Paige’s townhouse. “Don’t come back!” Paige shouted. The door slammed shut. My life has changed, Linda thought, looking back up into the trees for the lost parakeet. All that old stuff is—over. Flown away. She watched Raul mount his bike and ride off, passing Tim coming back from the dumpster. Over.

“Well, that’s done,” Tim said.

“Yeah, it is,” Linda said. “Listen, you think That One Bird can live outside?”

“Sure, I guess,” Tim said. “I read in the paper there’s like this whole flock of feral parakeets living south of the river.”

“Feral parakeets,” Linda repeated. What an ominous sounding phrase. Linda looked up into the trees again, but now even the grackles seemed to have flown away. The sun-dappled branches were empty. Her eyes teared. It was all over. “*Goddamn.*”

“I’m really sorry,” Tim said. “Wasn’t he—they—a gift?”

“Some goddamn gift,” Linda said bitterly. “Where’re my pearls?”

“Yeah,” Tim said, though he didn’t know what she was talking about.

“Maybe if we set some food out he’ll come back,” Linda said. “Sort of set a trap.”

“Sure,” Tim said. “It’s worth a try.”

“Good,” Linda said. “You can get to work on that later.”

“Oh, okay,” Tim said slowly. He thought, Later?

Linda threw her cigarette to the ground and stepped on it. “Listen, are you busy now?”

“I—I guess not.”

“Good. I need some more help. C’mon.”

Linda walked away, leaving the birdcage on its side in front of Tim’s door. Tim hesitated—what he really wanted to do was smoke some more pot and update his gay porn site and maybe think about how he was supposed to trap That One Bird—but after a moment he followed her up the stairs to her townhouse. Linda was in the kitchen, opening a bottle of merlot.

“Okay,” Linda said, “first, I need you to take these empty bottles down to the dumpster.” She pointed at a box full of empty wine bottles. “And I want you to make sure that people don’t *see* the bottles—I know how people talk.”

“Right,” Tim said. “Sure.”

“Then you can wash the dishes and do the vacuuming. I’m going to bed.”

“Okay,” Tim said, looking around the kitchen, the living room, noticing a half-dozen or so dirty wine glasses and coffee mugs, at least four overflowing ashtrays, a

bowl's worth of spilled popcorn stomped into the carpet, and odd clumps of clothing Linda had shed during the night as she paced and worried. A pile of newspapers, a beer can or two, stale pizza crusts, a stack of junk mail. Messy, messy, Tim thought. Messy. The room of a depressed person. But I guess I maybe owe her for the bird. Plus maybe I can get laid.

"Take those pizza boxes out, too." Linda poured another glass of wine.

"What about all these folders?" Tim pointed to a box of multicolored file folders—red, blue, yellow, green—that had overturned on the couch and spilled to the floor. Various legal-looking papers were sticking out of the folders—many of the papers had footprints on them, or soggy splotches of spilled wine.

"Just stack 'em somewhere," Linda said.

"Aren't they important?" Tim bent over and picked up a green folder that had been mangled or bent or something. Not only was there a footprint on it—there was a tire track, too. He frowned. "Aren't these your client folders?"

"My clients are just a bunch of goddamn criminals," Linda said. She slowly started up the stairs to her bedroom. "To hell with 'em."