

# Marie

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**An extract**

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Worldwide, there are roughly three hundred people for whom Abraham is a town or even a city. The majority live in Abraham, and the rest are scattered over a fairly immense expanse of which the village – or better said: the one-horse town – forms the reluctant centre. There are two churches in Abraham, a school (next to the creek), a grocery store, a prison, but no post office. The mayor of Abraham is Steven Blanker. He was never elected mayor; there have never been elections in Abraham; it either never occurred to anyone to organise elections or no one ever had the courage and energy to get on with it. In addition to being mayor, Steven Blanker is also police chief (the corps consists of three men all told, including Blanker) and manager of a café called ‘Jimmie Rodgers’, an establishment dedicated in its entirety, as the name no doubt suggests, to Blanker’s favourite singer (very occasionally, music by Hank Williams, Johnny Horton or Lefty Frizzell can be heard resounding in ‘Rogers’ as the locals call the place, meaning that Blanker himself is not on the premises).

Steven Blanker is forty six and portly without being obese, although he’s clearly put on several pounds in the last six months. He’s married to Anita and has two sons, one fourteen the other sixteen, but for one reason or another he’s always insisted that they’re twins. He likes to call himself – the pride in his voice unmistakable – the laziest bugger on the planet, suggesting he’s on the casual side when it comes to life and the people that populate it. But you only have to hear his infamous giggle once – and if you haven’t heard him giggle you haven’t met him; Blanker giggles all the time – to know that the ability to put things in perspective is not his strongest feature. Blanker giggles – and here everyone agrees – like a stallion forced to look on helplessly, its front and back legs tied firmly together, as the mother of its foals and the foals themselves are attacked with enormous meat cleavers.

Today, however, on a morning in October, Blanker has other concerns than the sound of his giggle. He has a nagging pain in his belly, a pain he would have more or less ignored if it had started the day before, but now it’s weeks old and has graduated from his belly to a place of prominence in his head. He tries to remember how the pain started, when it first imposed itself on his consciousness, what he had eaten or was doing at the time, but he’s racked his brains before on the matter without result and this present attempt is equally unsuccessful. Sitting on the edge of his bed in a favourite pair of babydoll pyjamas (pink with a white trim), one of a very extensive collection that he himself considers his most precious possession – without babydolls he wouldn’t even attempt sleep – he worriedly rubs his eyes with thumb and forefinger and then massages the bridge of his nose, his huge grey head bowed, his flabby double chin between his bulging hairy breasts. Knowing where and when the pain started would let him draw conclusions about what caused it and – more

importantly – how to fight it, but no, no sudden insights this particular morning, while the pain alas didn't seem to have disappeared of its own accord in the course of the night.

His gaunt, redheaded battle-axe of a wife pokes a cautious head round the corner of the bedroom. She's just the type you would expect to have a whopper of a nose, but she doesn't and its absence leaves her face completely out of kilter. She too is still in her pyjamas, the top buttoned up to the chin, the trousers so baggy and long that it's impossible to tell whether she's barefoot or not (she's wearing socks; she always wears socks).

'I can see you,' says Blanker, although he can't possibly be speaking the truth since his eyes are closed and the position of his head is exactly the same as it was. Blanker also appears to be aware of the fact if what he says next is anything to go by: 'I know you're there, Anita. Either come in or don't'.

'It's not a crime, is it?' his wife protests.

'Either come in or don't.'

Anita decides to enter the room, although she stops at a safe distance from her husband when she asks her next question: 'No improvement?'

Blanker sighs. He clenches his fists and plants them on the mattress either side of his body as if he's about to get up, but he doesn't. He slowly turns his weary head towards Anita and thinks the same as he always does when he sees her for the first time in the morning: as if someone hit her on the face with a pan. Shaking his head and without a word he turns away again and thinks the same as he always does when he's had his morning 'as if someone hit her on the face with a pan' thought, namely: she might be the mother of my children, but I'm going to bury her one day and it won't be in the cemetery. He giggles, scratches both armpits at the same time, then presses the tips of his ten fingers against the bottom of his nose and finally gets to his feet. His wife takes two steps backwards in response. Blanker notices and thinks: scaredy-cat. He rubs his belly and glances in passing at the mirror, paying no attention to his as yet unshaven face but focusing only on the nighty stretched tight over his chubby frame. All he can see is the top. Sexy, sexy, he thinks, giggling aloud.

'Perhaps,' he hears his wife say, 'you should go to the doctor.'

'Not a chance,' Blanker barks. 'I'm perfectly capable of dying without a doctor. Count me out. You don't need a doctor to die. Don't talk to me about doctors. What's gotten into you? The doctor?'

'Anita?' he asks later as he's putting on his uniform. The pink babydolls – still his absolute favourite as he had observed moments earlier – are already neatly arranged on a hanger, waiting until two o'clock in the morning or thereabouts when Blanker goes to bed. A sturdy rope several metres long and coiled eightfold into a hoop is hanging on a nail in the wall not far from the babydolls. A lasso perhaps (but for what?).

'Yes, Steven?'

'Is the café already open?'

'Karla's behind the bar.'

Karla is Blanker's eldest son, the sixteen year old so-called twin. You can always recognise Karla by his invitingly unbuttoned flies, where one but mostly more than one of his fingers can always be found fiddling around. Sometimes it swallows up his entire hand, all the way to the wrist. Karla is the only inhabitant of Abraham who wears glasses and everyone agrees that serious problems with his eyesight are only the beginning and that he's soon likely to lose his eyesight completely and probably his hearing too and that it will all be his own doing. But no one dares to confront him or offer him wise advice: Karla is and remains the son of his father...

'Ah, so Karla's behind the bar,' says Blanker. 'And my wife, where's she?'

'I'm here, Steven,' is her timid response.

'Then it's time,' Blanker giggles lustily, 'that you got a move on!'

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Every time Steven Blanker sees his son Karla, and certainly when it's been a while, he hates his wife Anita more intensely than he usually does: she's entirely responsible; it has to be her blood that's flowing through the veins of this mentally deranged creature. And while he thinks to himself often enough that there's little the boy can do about the way he is, it doesn't alter the sad fact that paternal love or even the slightest form of affection towards Karla is completely and utterly unknown to him. All this, moreover, makes his continued insistence that Karla and his fourteen year old brother Arthur are twins all the more difficult to explain. While Karla tends to fill him with disgust, self-pity and rage, Arthur's appearance consistently cheers his heart, leaving him radiant, as it were, with joy and pride.

The only problem is that Arthur doesn't appear very often. He's sometimes away from home for weeks on end without anyone having the slightest idea where he is. And when he finally reappears and is asked what he's been up to he replies: 'Not much. Kicked about. Saw a bit of the world.' And he pulls a face as if there's absolutely nothing going on and that he just got in from school or the like. Then he asks something like "What's cookin?" or 'So, what's for dinner tonight?' And Blanker is always crazy enough to slaughter a lamb or a foal and to organise a proper feast to celebrate the return of his favourite son. People are invited, sometimes neighbours, sometimes Blanker's police colleagues and their respective partners, sometimes clients who happen to be present in the Jimmie Rodgers at that moment, and everyone is free to stuff themselves and eat as much as they can – and often more – except Karla, it has to be said, who mostly has to be satisfied with an ear or a couple of hoofs.

But today any thought of a feast seems more distant than ever before: Arthur has only been missing for three days and he's likely to be away a while longer, while the sight of Karla behind the bar hits Blanker like a resounding slap in the face.

'I mean,' he lets fly against the boy without further ado and giggles agonisingly. 'In the name of God?' he shouts. 'What happened?'

Karla is on his knees brushing shards of glass into a dustpan. He looks up at his father, his face begging for understanding, and explains: 'I'd just washed this glass, father. So I was about to dry it. And then I dropped it.'

Her blood, Blanker seethes to himself. Her blood, pure and simple.

'Were you holding it with both hands, Karla?' he asks feigning calm. 'Plural? Were you drying the glass with both hands? Were you using both hands, or did one of them happen to be otherwise engaged, not the least bit involved in drying that glass? Tell daddy the truth now.'

'Just leave him be, Steven,' says a man in a pale blue, see-through, short-sleeved shirt, sitting at the bar eating fried eggs and bread in his capacity as only customer. 'It was an accident, I saw it happen.'

Blanker holds a defensive hand in front of his chest. He tilts his head slightly to one side and then draws all the attention – he sucks all the attention towards himself – by remaining completely motionless.

'I didn't say it wasn't an accident, Tom,' he responds in the same alarmingly calm tone, his well-nigh boundless self-control about to come apart at the seams, leaving not the slightest doubt that if Tom had not been present and Blanker and his son had been alone, then Karla might well have had to fear for his life or would at least have run the risk of sustaining a broken finger or two. 'I'm not saying Karla did it on purpose. All I want to know is whether he was using both hands to dry the glass, or was one of those hands perhaps in a certain place, let me think, somewhere at the front, for example, just below the waist. That's all I wanted to know, as a father, as manager of this café, as mayor too, and as chief of police. Or even as a simple human being, if you like. As an interested party.'

'Just leave him be, Steven,' the man advises.

'Perhaps you're right, Tom,' says Blanker, and he curls the corners of his lips downwards as he reflects on Tom's words in silence. He nods slowly. He shrugs his shoulders. He giggles so hard and loud that the café suddenly comes alive: all the flies and other insects that were resting on the tables and the walls buzz criss-cross through the air. 'Karla,' he says, 'Tom's right. Tom, you're right. Karla, give Tom another beer. Give Tom some more eggs.'

'Another beer is fine,' says Tom, at which Blanker points out to Tom that his plate happens to be empty. Was he aware of this fact when he indicated that another beer was all he wanted?

Tom says: 'That was my second plate of eggs, Steven.'

'Then you must have been here early,' Blanker concludes. 'Karla, where's that beer for Tom?'

'The point is, Steven,' says the man in the pale blue shirt, 'I haven't been sleeping well of late. Falling asleep is fine and staying asleep too, but when I wake in the morning I have to get up whether I want to or not. I didn't have that before.'

Blanker joins Tom at the bar.

'Where is my bespectacled son?' he asks Karla.

'Here I am, father,' the boy answers, his eyes downcast.

'Give me a beer too, boy,' says Blanker. And to Tom he says: 'It's an age thing. Nothing more nothing less.'

'I'm twenty-three, Steven,' says Tom. 'If it's an age thing like you say then by the time I'm thirty I won't be able to sleep a wink. I'll be hard at it twenty-four hours a day.'

'You're a busy little bee, you are,' Blanker giggles, but not without a hint of sarcasm. Everyone knows that Tom hasn't done a full day's work since he left school at the age of twelve. If you were to ask him what his ideal job would be he'd say: 'Postman'.

'And you?' Tom asks. 'How's the health?'

'The same,' Blanker sighs. 'No improvement. It's enough to worry a person sick. The pain just nags on and on. Eating doesn't help and not eating's no better.'

'Just leave it be,' Tom advises.

'I'm not sure, Tom,' says Blanker. 'I sometimes think it'll be the end of me.'

'Just leave it be, man.'

'I'm not sure, Tom.'

'You're not thinking of going to the doctor are you?' asks Tom, with a look on his swarthy, reasonably handsome face as if some nasty long-dead piece of business, his flesh so rotten and decayed that the fumes its giving off can be seen for miles around, just walked into the bar and is now staring him in the face.

'Are you mad, Tom?' Steven Blanker giggles as indignantly as he did that time a couple of years back when a drunkard ventured to suggest that they put together a team, head 'south', capture a bunch of negroes, and put them to work in the fields or in other heavy jobs until they dropped dead and could be used as fodder for the pigs. 'I'd burn the whole city down first, including my Jimmie Rodgers album collection,' Blanker had giggled in a fury at the time, 'before I'd ever let a nigger get anywhere near Abraham! Get that into that thick head of yours!'

Now he asks: 'Are you right in the head, Tom? Why would I want to see a doctor? I've got a pain in my gut, I'm not thinking of suicide!'

'Another couple of beers, Karla!'

'A doctor, he says,' says Blanker shaking his head. 'A doctor, would you believe. I mean, the very idea, Tom!'

'It's the lack of sleep,' says Tom. 'Lack of sleep, no more no less.'

'Boy,' says Blanker shaking his head.

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Is it fair, after eighteen months of courtship followed by three years of marriage, to point out to your wife that an important role is set aside for the tongue during oral sex and that 'a blowjob', as they call it in popular parlance, isn't only about 'blowing' or 'sucking', but also has a great deal to do with 'licking'? Can you still say such a thing after so many years?

The risks, in any event, are legion.

The chance is not unreal, for example, that your wife will conclude – and perhaps rightly so – that the last couple of hundred blowjobs were pretty worthless, and as a result there's not only a danger that she'll withdraw into her shell in sexual terms or suffer from fear of failure, but also that she'll take offence at your critique. In a worst case scenario she might even snap: 'Are my blowjobs not good enough? Then try blowing yourself for a change!'

A further question is inextricably bound to such a situation: why now? Has it taken four and a half years to gather enough courage to finally go public with your silent complaint? And the answer is in the question: yes, that's exactly it, it's taken four and a half years – but beside the fact that some things are too embarrassing to admit, you'd still have to wait with bated breath to see if she, your wife, would actually believe you. She might think: someone else has had him in her mouth, someone more experienced than me, and now he's discovered something he's been missing all that time, the adulterous pig. Or she might think: he's fed up with me; sex with me has become routine and this is his way of trying to break the routine and suppress his hunger for other women. Alas he's doomed to failure: I can try to suck his dick a hundred different ways, but it'll always be with the same mouth... Or she might think: I don't want to use my tongue... there are too many taste buds on my tongue...

So the question is: are the aforementioned risks worth taking? And isn't there an additional danger that what he now experiences as a lack might ultimately and unexpectedly turn out to be a hindrance after time, after his wife has retrained, as it were, and obediently made a habit of licking-during-a-blowjob? That he'll be forced to admit, in other words and on second thoughts, that her tongue and the way it presently tends to glide over his male member isn't quite what he'd expected and that it was better before. What's his next excuse? Will I have to live with my doubts for another four and a half years as I wait for an appropriate moment and search for the right words to explain that she can leave out the tongue as far as I'm concerned? What, Mex thinks, should I say? 'Sweetheart, I know you're doing your best, but if I'm honest I'd prefer you to go back to the old blowjobs, back when I wasn't satisfied with your technique. You'll have guessed by now that I was clearly unaware that it could get a lot worse.'

Just shut up, Mex, says Mex to himself in silence, and concentrate a little or it'll be midnight before you come.

He closes his eyes, lifts his chin, and plants his hands a little higher in his sides and a little firmer. He immediately starts to breath heavier and grunt. This way isn't bad either, he thinks, you need to be satisfied with what you have. Not true? Who knows how long it'll take to get fed up that tongue business? Concentrate. Big tits, huge tits, stiff nipples, heavy breasts. And there she blows, he thinks a minute or two later. Abandoning himself to misty elation as his seed flows from his body, he opens his tiny brown eyes and sees Stephen Blanker heading in his direction through the window, beyond the rust-coloured, nicotine-stained net curtains. He's in uniform. The silver revolver on his hip sparkles steel-hard in the sun. He can't hear it, but Mex can see that Blanker is giggling. Mex wonders why. What's gotten into his boss, giggling out there on his own?

Mex has no idea, but Steven Blanker is giggling because he's still mulling over what Anita said although four days had passed she said it. He just can't get it out of his head. Anita came up with the weirdest nonsense, of course, only to be expected, and if it had only been Anita he would doubtless have forgotten all about it. What a brainless freak of a woman, that Anita. No, the strange thing, the really alarming thing was that Tom started on about the same thing less than half an hour later: 'You're not thinking of going to the doctor are you?' Blanker has taken four days to deal with the question to some extent at least, and now that he's finally decided that he succeeded, albeit for want of better, and that he has indeed emerged from the shock, he feels exactly the same as he did when Tom's words were still fresh from his lips, that is to say: astonished and worried sick. The truth? What is the truth? The truth, Blanker has to admit – and this is the moment at which Mex tucks away his member and registers through the window that his boss is giggling again, this time so violently and out of control that it reminds him of a bear snapping irately at flies zooming round it, swaying its head back and forth with agile strength – the truth is that Blanker himself, in spite of his aggrieved, uncomprehending reaction to Tom's question, has been thinking on the quiet and completely willy-nilly about going to the doctor. He has to admit it. He can't put up with the pain in his belly any longer. And if it wasn't going to go away without a doctor, then it only made sense to try something else. Didn't it? Or was he wrong? Did he really have to consult a doctor? This is the moment that Mex, still standing at the window, sees Blanker giggle for a third time, in a manner that inclines Mex to place his hand on the revolver on his belt.

Blanker knocks twice on the door, loud and insistent, but Mex only opens it after he's rolled his wife to the furthest corner of the room where he hopes she'll be more or less safe.

'Boss,' he says moments later in the doorway.

'Mex,' Blanker giggles with the flat of his right hand on his belly.

'What's up? D'you want to come in?'

'Of course I want to come in, Mex.'

Blanker closes the door behind him and then fans air into his face with both hands. 'This place stinks,' he says, then proceeds to tell Mex, perhaps for the two-thousandth time in his life, that Jimmie Rodgers – the singer, not the café – died from tuberculosis, and that it was a sign of disrespect, in light of the aforementioned tragedy, to mess up your own lungs on purpose with tobacco. And perhaps for the two-thousandth time in his life, Mex becomes so nervous at his boss's sermon that the desire for a cigarette is enough to make him ready to kill.

Instead he says: 'I'm planning to stop on my birthday.'



'Hello, Patsy,' says Blanker, greeting the woman in the wheelchair staring at him from a distant corner of the room.

'Steven.'

Patsy, Blanker notices for the umpteenth time, has to have even smaller breasts than his own wife, the horrible Anita, as he silently calls her at that very instant, but her lips are full and they appear soft and hungry.

'And?' Mex asks. 'How can I be of service, boss?'

'I've got bad news, Mex,' says Blanker.

Oh no, Mex thinks, not more of that crap about his belly. The man is dangerously insane, mark my words.

'Bad news, boss?' Mex asks.

'Too right, bad news. William's dead.'

Mex stares vacantly at Blanker, his lips limp, his mouth a sloppy hole.

'What do you mean?' he asks after a minute, during which time Blanker has spirited a half-full pack of Marlboro from the table and tossed it into the unlit fireplace after pretending to have studied it carefully. He also thought to himself: Blanker, I'd rather have that half-crippled creature as my wife than the horrible Anita.

'Your joking, boss, right?' Mex hopes with tears in his voice.

'Me? Joking?' asks Blanker confused.

'It's... it's not really... not really true, is it?'

'What's not true? Christ, Mex, what's wrong with you? I tell you that William is dead and you stand there spluttering like a moron. Hello? Earth to Houston? Are you still there? William is dead, Mex. Your colleague is dead. A grain of respect, maybe? Boy,' Blanker shakes his head. Giggling angrily, he turns to the woman in the wheelchair: 'Sometimes there's just no getting through to him, eh?'

'But... but that's not possible... William? What happened?'

'What happened? What happened who, Mex?'

'What happened, boss?'

'I'm telling you,' Blanker suddenly explodes, grabbing Mex's lapels with both hands, his huge red face inches from Mex's pale phizog, 'that the pain in this belly of mine isn't normal! Not normal, I said. I'm sorry,' he calms down immediately and lets go of Mex's lapels. 'It's the emotions. It's the fucking pain in my belly,' he giggles softly, almost in tears.

'It's OK, boss,' says Mex.



‘What happened, Steven?’ asks Patsy. ‘How did William die?’ Her voice is slightly nasal but still amazingly languid. Mex fell in love with her voice back when they met. It’s a voice, he always says, that stems from the olden days, and he could have a point: most women these days sound completely different.

‘He got up this morning, nothing untoward. Offer me a chair, Mex.’

‘Take a seat, boss.’

‘Don’t mention it. He gets up, he eats breakfast, nothing to suggest that he’s not feeling fit as a fiddle. You know William. William always feels as fit as a fiddle. But how William felt this morning has nothing to do with anything. All you might say is that he didn’t even have the slightest hunch about what was awaiting him. He was in the best of moods, apparently. Nothing to indicate that he would have an accident shortly thereafter.’

‘Was it an accident? What happened?’ Patsy asks for the second time. Mex covers his mouth with his hand.

‘He fell off his own roof.’

‘What? What was he doing on the roof?’

‘Are you suggesting, Mex, that William committed suicide? After me just telling you that William, as always, was in the best of moods? William was on the roof because his little son had thrown his ball into the gutter. You know the one: his name escapes me for the moment. The blonde kid with that ball.’

‘Oh my God,’ Mex groans. The hand that had just been covering his mouth now covers his eyes. As a result he can’t see that Patsy is wheeling herself towards him to comfort him. She throws her arms round his waist. Blanker stares at her lips: pillows of flesh. He thinks: shame to have wasted such lips on an invalid. Mex, he observes is now sobbing unashamedly.

‘Mex,’ he giggles irately, ‘where is my only surviving colleague?’

‘I’m here,’ Mex weeps. His face glistens from the tears as they run over his wrist and under the cuff of his shirt.

‘I’m here who?’ asks Blanker.

‘I’m here, boss...’

‘That’s better,’ says Blanker. ‘Tell me, Mex, what are we waiting for? I mean, it’s a serious question: is there something we still have to wait for before we get to work? Am I missing something? Or would you rather skip a day? Take a day off? You’re not exactly – and let me be honest with you – you’re not exactly looking your best, officer.’

‘A day off, boss...’

Boy, thinks Steven Blanker moments later as he greedily inhales the October air, it stinks in there. Wouldn’t it be a good idea to make Abraham completely cigarette free? Everyone who wants to

smoke is free to smoke to their heart's content, as much as they want, no problem at all, but then in jail. If I'm ever relieved of the pain in my belly, I'll have to make it real, purify the air. The city needs me. The city can count on me. I, city, am at your service! I, city, am at your disposal!

Thus addressing his subjects in his thoughts, Steven Blanker forces himself into a slow saunter. The thumbs of his fists are hooked over his belt and his belly bobs slowly up and down in front of him to the listless rhythm of his footsteps. Should he lose weight? Would the pain disappear together with his belly? He doesn't think so. The pain has to do with something else. If he was just skin and bone, sheer spine and nothing else, the pain would continue to grumble, Blanker's convinced of it.

Two children in blue dungarees, eight years old or thereabouts, are shooting marbles on their knees in the sand at the side of the road. Blanker rubs their blond little heads hard and says: 'I'm at your service, boys. I'm your mayor.' Shooting marbles is good, he thinks. You aren't likely to shoot a marble into the gutter of someone's roof in a hurry. He then continues on his way, thinking about Arthur and where he might be, about Karla and the puzzle he is, about William and his son who's name escapes him, about Mex and Patsy's lips, about Tom and the doctor, and lastly about the horrible Anita and the pain in his belly.

He suddenly stops in the middle of the street. He narrows his eyes and stares straight ahead, more into the future than into the distance. Of course, he thinks as he giggles. That's it, of course. It has nothing to do with his belly as such and a doctor can't do anything about it. No doctor, not on your life. I have to take control. I might be the laziest bugger on the planet, but the time is ripe. I know what I have to do. I've known it for a long time. Much longer even than I've been suffering from this aching belly. The horrible Anita and the pain in my belly. Of course. Why wait any longer? God knows it won't hurt to try...

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