

## THE HIGH-TENSION MAGAZINE

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MORRIS COOPER

# PATTERN FOR *DYING*

**T**HE ONE thing that kept me from going mad was what the other prisoners termed the deadly, monotonous routine. I have a passion for orderliness; for a life set and patterned. I like to know in advance what I will have for breakfast; I like the assurance that every event in my day is the result of planning.

I came to anticipate the hour each night after the prison lights went out. The thin, tight mattress held my body suspended, and for sixty minutes I thought of Tom Westdrake. Sixty minutes a night for ten years; an eternity of time to hate and remember—to hate Tom Westdrake

*Justice, like love, serves mankind best when blind . . . so poets have argued since the days of Homer (blind himself). The taut bit of poetic justice which follows therefore places its author in distinguished company; and not for the first time, either. Along with other young argonauts, he became a widely traveled man in the East during the late unpleasantness—after his sleep had been rudely shattered at the Central YMCA, Honolulu, on a certain Sunday morning in December, 1941.*

with a fervor that was my religion, to remember Lydia and the plans I had built around her. Those plans had been smashed the day Westdrake told me Lydia and he were going to marry.

We were in the cabin near Clear Lake—the same cabin we had bought the summer after we'd gone into business; the same cabin I'd brought Lydia to after fishing her out of the

lake when her boat had capsized.

Westdrake sounded like he was telling me about a fish he'd caught. "Lydia and I are going to be married next month."

A huge log blazed in the open fireplace, but I felt as chilled as though the icy waters of Clear Lake had engulfed me. My throat was dry and a sudden hatred of Tom Westdrake surged in my veins.

"So your money finally got her away from me," I said.

"You know that's not true, Harry," Westdrake spoke quietly. "We draw the same amount from the business. It's no fault of mine if your share slips through your fingers as though it were water."

"Look," I shouted, "the money's mine and I can do with it as I please."

Westdrake nodded his head. "I agree with you, Harry, as long as you rid yourself of the fool notion that Lydia is interested in money. We happen to love each other."

I tossed the trout fly I'd been working on into the fire and got up. I stood there, looking at Westdrake sprawled in the easy chair, his long legs thrust out in front of him, the flickering red of the fire throwing dancing shadows on his ruggedly handsome face. I jammed my fists into the pockets of my corduroy trousers and walked over to the window. The rippling waters of Clear Lake were silvered ebony in the moonlight.

When I finally spoke, I tried to keep my emotions under control. "Look, Tom, I'm in love with Lydia and I've planned a whole future

with her. You can't ruin my life like this."

Westdrake laughed. "The longer I know you, Trommer, the more your ego amazes me. Your life, your plans"—he slouched deeper into the chair and laughed again—"that's all that interests you. You're no more in love with Lydia than you are with the man in the moon. If you were, your first concern would be for her happiness."

The smile left his face. "If I thought for a moment you could make her happier than I could, I'd gladly step aside. But you're incapable of loving anyone except yourself."

I listened to that speech without moving a muscle, and when he finished, Tom Westdrake leaned his head back and closed his eyes, dismissing me. And suddenly I knew what I must do. Tom had become an impediment to me, an ink blot on my blueprint. Either I would have to draw up a set of new plans—or erase him.

I took the single-barreled shotgun from the rack next to the door, picked up a number-eight cartridge. He opened his eyes when he heard the click as my thumb cocked the hammer.

I gave him one more chance. "I don't want to kill you, Westdrake. But I promise you I will, unless you call off this marriage with Lydia."

Westdrake said, "You've been seeing too many movies, Trommer, and bad ones at that."

I squeezed the trigger.

Tom Westdrake didn't die, and I

got ten years. The judge said that it was an insufficient penalty to pay for the eyes Tom Westdrake lost, but that was the maximum the law allowed him to impose.

I tried to explain that it was all Westdrake's fault, that none of it would have happened if he hadn't upset my plans. The judge called me a homicidal maniac.

Tom Westdrake and Lydia were married the day I was sentenced, and that night I began my ten years of hate.

I closed the cabin door and leaned my back against the rough-knotted pine. Tom Westdrake sat in the same easy chair, his long legs sprawled in front of him, his hands crossed on his lap. The log fire danced shadows over his face, and for an instant it seemed as though the past ten years had never been—it seemed as if we were back to that day Tom had told me of his engagement to Lydia.

Then his voice broke the momentary spell. "Hello, Harry." It seemed softer, and held a strange understanding never there before. There were streaks of gray at his temples, and dark glasses hid the eyes which I had robbed of life.

"You don't seem surprised," I said.

"I knew you would come. That's why I've been waiting here for you . . . alone." The dark lenses of his glasses seemed to sparkle at me and a sudden suspicion came into my mind. I crossed the room in swift strides and jerked off his glasses.

I saw the twin holes; the dead scars that covered them looked like

the weatherworn ground over long-forgotten graves. Westdrake put out a groping hand and I leaped back as though it were stretched forth from hell.

He turned his head and his scarred eyes seemed to hold me in their grip. "If you're satisfied, I'd like my glasses."

I hurled them to the floor and ground them with my heel; the glass splinters ate and tore at the wooden floor. Then I laughed and sat down and the pounding left my heart. "So you had me followed," I said.

Westdrake shook his head. "No one followed you. I know how your mind works."

"Then it won't come as a shock that I mean to kill you."

Those dead eyes of his seemed to bore through me. "I know," he said. "That's why I've been waiting."

I went to the window—the clearing was deserted and there was no sign of life on the dead-calm lake. Westdrake followed my movements with his ears. "We're alone," he said, as though reading my mind.

I turned from the window. "You took ten years from my life and you took Lydia."

Tom Westdrake said, "They'll catch you. They'll catch you and they'll hang you."

I nodded agreement, as if he could see me. "I've been dead for ten years. They'll be hanging a dead man."

"You're crazy," Tom Westdrake said.

"Maybe." My hands felt cold and I walked over to the open fireplace.

"I'm in no hurry. I've waited ten years for this, and I want you to have time to think. Think of Lydia—and think of the life you stole from me." I felt the gentle warmth of the fire on my fingers.

Tom Westdrake sat there, silently. I wanted to see him hurt, to hear him cry out in pain. "You've got a couple of kids, haven't you?" I laughed. "A couple of kids that I made sure you'd never see."

His voice came so low I could barely hear. "A boy and a girl. That's why I waited here for you."

"Do you think they're going to change my mind?" I looked across the room at the gun rack, at the same shotgun I had used ten years before.

"No," Westdrake answered my question. "But I knew you'd come back to finish your job—to kill me, no matter where I was. And I didn't want to take a chance on any of them getting hurt."

"How thoughtful," I said. I walked over to the gun rack, slowly . . . so very slowly. His ears counted my steps, and I felt the concentrated hatred of ten years course like living fire through my veins. I took the shotgun from the rack and put a cartridge into the breach.

I watched Tom Westdrake. He sat there, waiting, like an actor who knows the lines in the script. There was no tenseness in his body, no sudden tightening of muscles for a last minute effort at escape. I clicked back the hammer and put the butt against

my shoulder.

"Damn you!" I cried. I wanted to see that look of peace vanish from his face. I wanted to see fear. And I knew how I could tear at his heart before he died.

I centered the barrel on Westdrake's face. "You think you've won, don't you? Then take this to hell with you. Before they get me, I'll send Lydia and her kids to keep you company."

I squeezed the trigger and the world flashed and thundered and blew up in my face.

My life is set now; I have my pattern of darkness that knows no difference between day and night. Tom Westdrake gave me this . . . in payment for the plans he upset.

Sometimes I hear again the voice that came when the thunder had died in my ears; and I remember the words spoken with startling clarity.

"Westdrake figured this joker would make another stab at him and he knew how his cracked brain worked. So he poured solder down the barrel of that shotgun until it was as solid as an iron rod. When Trommer pulled the trigger and fired that cartridge, the exploding gas had to go somewhere, and it blew the breech right into his face. He's a mess, but he'll live."

I wonder, sometimes, if the dead scars that cover my eyes look like the weatherworn ground over long-forgotten graves.