

MICHELLE SAGARA

— SHORT STORY —

What
She Won't
Remember

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REMEMBER



MICHELLE SAGARA

Rosdan Press

INTRODUCTION

Mike Resnick made his early anthology name collecting alternate histories from various writers, of which I was one. This was for *Alternate Outlaws*.

I'm not much of a historian, and I honestly haven't read a lot about outlaws, and I was pretty new to short fiction and to writing in general—or at least published writing.

I also had very little in the way of functional brain; when I wrote it, my son was not yet a year old, and sleep was almost a myth in the household. I explained all this to Resnick, who was not terribly impressed when I told him I couldn't even think of an outlaw that I'd want to research, and even if I could, I didn't trust myself, strung out on lack of sleep, to do a good enough job that I'd be coherent.

Resnick then came up with suggestions for various possibilities, and when I offered the electronic equivalent of a blank stare, he explained that my definition of what he wanted was far, far too narrow.

As it had been for *Alternate Celebrities*. So I went and thought about it, and this is what I came up with.

WHAT SHE WON'T REMEMBER

I.

“**Y**ou know nothing about the criminal mind. You sit there in your affected modesty, while you derive some incomprehensible satisfaction from your ‘art’. And you know nothing, understand nothing, explain *nothing*.”

These were the only words that stayed with her at the end of the long luncheon — a charity luncheon at which she had been the honoured guest. The words themselves had been uttered in the quietest of tones, and the speaker carried himself well. He spoke with the most placid of smiles, but his eyes — his eyes conveyed the depth of his words. She could not forget them.

Of course I don't know anything about the criminal mind. Her hat and parasol were taken from her; her shawl and her gloves followed. She took her seat at the bench and watched absently as her boots were unlaced. *What sort of woman ever understands anything about the criminal mind?*

“Are you feeling unwell, ma'am?”

“No, of course not,” she replied curtly, the flush in her cheeks deepening. “I'll be up in my study, and I don't wish to be disturbed.”

“Shall I call you for dinner then?”

She thought about it for thirty seconds. Maybe sixty. But she didn't want to see anyone, not especially after such an annoying day. “No; bring it up after the hour.”



THIS WAS NOT THE LIFE THAT SHE HAD THOUGHT TO LEAD.

Married, surrounded by the walls of a sedate house, a stately life — one that she practically financed herself. A woman wasn't supposed to sully her mind with money matters and the outer trappings of the 'business' world; that could taint or challenge her very soul. Still, she was the person responsible for it in her own home. She took well to it; some even thought too well.

Restless, she pushed the ink-stand around on the desk. Once, she had thought there would be adventure, travel. Romance. Her pen, at ease above the blotter, remained poised in mid-word.

It was the rudeness that annoyed her. Really — how often had an over-jolly reader come up to her and insisted upon discoursing, at length, about the flaws in her latest work? It should be put aside as just another occurrence which had to be endured, however poorly.

The pen remained frozen. She set it down, shoved herself back from her large, partner's desk, and began to pace the room in a rustle of skirts. Her passage across the mirror's surface arrested her; she caught a glimpse of the deepening lines in her forehead, around her eyes; saw the grooves at the corner of her mouth. She hated these symptoms of age.

She had never thought that would happen either — that she would hate them.

You know nothing. Nothing.

“And should I?” She said, glaring at herself. “What decent person does?” That's what she should have said; just that, primly and coldly. But the opportunity was lost. As many, in the passing years, had been.

This was not the life she had wanted to lead.



HE WAS A YOUNG MAN, WITH A YOUNG MAN'S FIRE AND INTENSITY. Not, of course, that all young men radiated this particular sort of heat, but in her experience, when it could be found at all, it was found in young men who had yet to learn — if they ever learned it — that there was a limit to their power and their reach.

He wasn't handsome — his face was a little too gaunt and too long for that — but he carried himself well, and besides, what exactly did handsome mean? He was attractive, certainly, but whatever this combination of fire and looks produced was not a comfortable attraction.

Not, particularly, for Agatha.

She had seen him, in and around the library and the various reading organizations that she frequented, for some three months now. She did not elect to remember the exact date, but that was a force of will and not any absent-mindedness; when he walked into a room and condescended to join a conversation, he spoke sharply and with a cutting perception that could not simply be ignored.

"Too rude," Mrs. Hanson had said — and indeed, she was completely correct. He was brash, arrogant, and discourteous. And powerful. And completely self-assured.

"Yes, Mrs. Hanson," she replied. "Terribly rude. I imagine he'll grow out of it."

"Can only be hoped," was the dark reply.

She wondered if any of the other ladies, all with their own quiet but public opinions, held the same private fascination that she did. Wondered if they watched him out of the corner of their eyes, both wanting and dreading some sign of his regard. There was an intellect behind those eyes — some motivating force that could not be contained in the men's clubs and gatherings of the day.

He was not congenial, but Agatha wasn't so old that congenial was what she desired out of life. Still, she hesitated just beneath the grand arch of the sitting room entrance, dwarfed by its height.

There.

He looked up from his book, and she saw by its colour and the

lines across its pages that it was one of the old city guides that had long since ceased to describe any recognizable part of London. There was no room for hesitation. A brisk first step brought her over the threshold and into the room. She looked neither to the right or the left as she walked toward where he sat.

He rose to greet her; this level of politeness, at least, she could still expect. “Lady Agatha.”

“Daniel.” She strove to be natural, but her chin was rigid, her smile too tight.

“Join me, if you wish.”

She didn’t sit. Instead, she folded her arms and looked down her nose at him. It was a look that had taken some time to develop, and to be honest, she was rather proud of it. “I only came to ask you a question.”

“Ask, then. And please don’t consider it too rude if I sit.”

“What do *you* know about the criminal mind, if you’re so quick to judge, and so certain?”

He laughed. His voice, always distinctive, rose above the muted, colourless conversations that surrounded them in ones and twos. “I? Why Agatha, how do you think I *am* so certain?” He rose again, quickly and lightly; the languid movements and smiles of moments past were burned away.

Before she could pull away, he caught her hand and kissed it quickly. “I thought — I almost didn’t dare to think — that you would return. If you’d chosen to stay away, well,” here he shrugged, “I would have guessed wrong. Come.”

“Where — where are we going?”

“Out. Out of this dusty old building with its dusty old inhabitants. There’s more life out in the streets today than there ever will be here.”

One foot after the other, she followed in his wake. She was curious; she could feel the strange flush in her cheeks and wondered if she, like some over-eager debutante, had shining eyes and rather too pert a step.

“But — but Daniel,” she ventured to say, when he’d donned his overcoat and hat, “where *are* we going?”

“Does it really matter, Lady Agatha? Does it matter in the slightest where we talk? It’s not dim surroundings and parlours or cafes which will make, or break, our afternoon. The skin can still be cut, and the heart of any matter exposed, wherever two people speak in earnest.” But he drew himself to his full, slim height, and his expression grew suddenly remote. “Or did you not come to actually have an answer?”

She thought of the faerie, the Sidhe of legend, and for a moment cast him in his proper role as one of the fey and dangerous folk. Drawing her cape tightly around her shoulders and fastening the clasp while studiously avoiding his aid, she found the strength to meet his eyes. “Of course I did. It doesn’t matter to me where we go.”



AND IT DIDN'T. ALTHOUGH SHE WASN'T USED TO WALKING, OR more accurately, strolling through the town's streets, she found it natural to be at his side, her arm across his, their shadows touching.

“That,” he said quietly, is a jeweller’s shop. You see, through the window?”

The window, a yellowed glass that had become, over time, quite thick at the bottom and thin at the top, barely shed enough light to see through. She looked in, sun at her back, Daniel’s arm shielding her shoulder. “Yes.”

“What do you see?”

“Two men and a very young lady speaking with the jeweller.”

“All three speak with him?”

“The oldest man does.”

“And?”

“The younger man is listening to their chat.”

“The girl, then?”

“Wandering. Looking at the jeweller’s wares.”

“Will she steal anything, do you think?”

“Of course not!”

The full force of Daniel's laughter was contained in the chuckle that tickled her ear. "Why not?"

"Look at how she's dressed, Daniel — and look at who she's with. Why on earth would she need to steal anything?"

"*Need* to steal?" The amusement left his eyes. "Come away, Agatha. It's clear that you're either more naive or more attached to pretence than I thought."

It nettled her, to be talked down to this way by a man ten years her junior. She pulled her arm away with definitive force and turned back to the window. The young lady — and to Agatha's observant eye, she was a little too old and well-heeled to be called a 'girl' — had indeed continued to peruse the various counters, picking up an earring or a bracelet for closer examination.

Although the glass obscured as much as it revealed, Agatha thought the girl's face sweet and quiet. "No," she said, much more confidently. "She isn't the type to steal."

"What type is that?" Daniel caught her arm again, and this time Agatha moved away from the window and back into the boulevard. "Do you think only poor or ugly people steal? Only old people? Only small children who haven't been taught any better?"

"Since you obviously have an answer, Daniel," she replied, the edge to her voice quite brittle, "why don't you either share it or cease to speak of this at all?"

He fell silent for long enough that Agatha was almost convinced he had elected to ignore the entire issue. Her disappointment was strong, her pride stronger; she would not withdraw her words. She watched their shadows along the ground as they slowly lengthened and nestled into the cobbled stones.

And then he turned to her, and once again the laughter was in his eyes. "You believe in angels, Lady Agatha. I believe in human nature."



"... BUT IF HUMAN NATURE IS SO BASE, DANIEL, DON'T YOU THINK

that all of society would have crumbled into anarchy and chaos by now?"

"No, Lady Agatha — and that is the secret. You think that society is held together by some basic tenet of decency. I think," he paused and rummaged in his jacket for a cigarette, "that it's held together by fear." Gentlemen didn't smoke in the presence of ladies, but Agatha took no offense as Daniel's tobacco and paper began to burn. "Cowardice."

"I hardly think that acts of heroism constitute cowardice, Daniel. Will you try to tell me that there are no truly great acts of heroism?"

"What does heroism have to do with society?"

"There are acts of courage and goodwill that occur every day. Some *are* heroic. You can't deny that."

He shrugged. "I won't try." Smoke left his lips in a sparse, strange cloud. "And I'll allow that some people have impulses towards the heroic. But those impulses they act on; they don't fear the consequences of their actions, and they therefore don't spurn their desire."

Her lips were a tight, thin line; she shivered and drew her cape more tightly about her shoulders, pretending to be cold in the evening air.

"Society," Daniel continued quietly, "is all about giving in to your fear and turning away from your desire." He turned toward her, then; she lost the stark line of his profile to his unblinking gaze. "Women understand this far better than men, I think."

"Understand?" The word was a whisper.

"Do you have what you desire, Lady Agatha? Have you ever had, in the end, what you desire? Do you even know what that is? You are a good daughter, a good wife, a good mother. Your life has always been measured by everyone else's. Come, Agatha." He threw his cigarette into the street at his back, then caught both of her hands in his, pulling her close. "Come stand in the sun. It will be gone soon."



IT WAS TRUE. IT HAD GOTTEN HEAVY, THE SUN. DARKNESS WOULD

follow. She had been out, late, walking through the streets of the town with a lunatic.

She didn't want to return.

Freeing her hands was difficult; his fingers were tightly knit and warm about her own. "I have to get back," she said, bracing herself for contempt, for ice.

He froze for a moment before his whole body relaxed. "Very well. Allow me to escort you."



THE LONG, LOW CRY OF NIGHT BIRDS PIERCED THE CLOSED window, underlining the distance between the pen Agatha held and the paper beneath it. No ink connected them, or left some quiet tale of the hours she had sat, in the flicker of lamplight, working productively.

It was wrong, what he'd said. All of it.

But the words — her words — wouldn't come. They were held back, unsaid, unspeakable.

I need a change. Scenery. Locale. Something. The moment she thought the words, with their mixture of quiet defiance and penitent confession, she knew they were more true than anything she had written, or would write, for a long time. She set her pen aside, pushed her chair back. As a woman of independent means, she could travel as she pleased, within certain social confines. Of course, she would have to leave an itinerary. She would have to make calls, plans to visit friends or relatives in any area she should visit — perhaps even arrange a few readings. She would, no doubt, be accompanied by at least one other person, most probably two, and the only moments of peace and privacy she would gain would be these ones: Shut in a small room that passed as a study, staring at a blank page.



THREE DAYS LATER, SHE LEFT FOR THE LIBRARY.

By the following morning, she had not returned.



2.

The village of W— made the perfect retreat. As Miss Julie Edens, she wore rather drab and demure spinster's clothing and looked every inch the maiden aunt. Her brother, she explained, had passed away a mere six months ago, and she simply could not continue living under the roof that they had shared for all of their lives; it was still too painful. Nor did she wish to be alone in London or any of the other rather wild and dirty cities — it wasn't safe, you see — so she was doubly grateful for the welcome that she had received in Mrs. Staples inn.

"You stay as long as you like, poor dear," Mrs. Staples had said, for perhaps the thirtieth time, each time more sincere than the last. Her curiosity was evident in the way she examined, out of the corner of her eyes, the fabric and style of the dresses that Miss Edens chose to wear. She thought money might be involved, and while she was a genuinely generous person, she was also a businesswoman.

Agatha found it both touching and amusing; as she had gained age and experience, she found most of the human condition one, the other, or both. She thanked Mrs. Staples profusely, and meant every word she spoke. Here, close to the heart of the village commons, she could smell freedom as it drifted, lazy, on the air. The arguments of sons and fathers echoed up the lane; she could hear the crying of a child and the sharp words of an older voice, a grandparent. The air had a clarity about it; she fancied it to be charged with possibility, with life.

She did not try to write that evening, but took pleasure in just observing. She sat and knit with Mrs. Staples, listening to the village gossip.

"That one," Mrs. Staple's said, her voice heavy with disapproval, "that young Ned Barnes. He's a bad one, mark my words. We'd hoped to lose him to the big city, but we only lost his money. Him, he came back, more of a problem than he was before."

"Problem?" Miss Edens said politely.

“Problem. He’s been eyeing the young girls a little too much these days. Young Anne Netterson, especially. And you know how young girls are. Don’t care a whit for sound advice — heads are all in the clouds. They want a bit of danger, they do. And they don’t have the common sense to balance it all.” She sighed. “Her parents are right worried; she’s a good a girl, but a headstrong one.”

“Some young woman are,” Miss Edens said. “But isn’t that what youth is all about? Reckless dreams, and the sense that you can do anything?”

“Aye, that it is,” Mrs. Staples frowned. “I’ve had six children, and I know what you mean. I was even a young girl myself.” She pulled at the carded wool until it formed a loose pile in her lap. “But you’ve got to survive your own recklessness — and I’d choose another man to be foolish about.”

So, Agatha thought, would I. Ned Barnes didn’t have any appeal at all; he was already most of the way to becoming a rather coarse drunkard; his voice was so loud, it was grating, and his eagerness to please — his over-eagerness, rather — was evident nearly a room away.

No, if she could be a young girl again, and choose her danger, her foolish dalliance, she would choose someone a little more like Daniel.

“Are you cold, dear?” Mrs. Staples said, rising at once to her feet. “Wood’s probably ash in the stove by now. Let me get Gill to add some more.”



HE CAME, OF COURSE. AS AN ACT IN A PLAY, SHE WOULD HAVE thought it entirely too foreshadowed. But she knew, somehow, as she waited in the inn in W—, that she would see him soon.

“Who is that young man by the fire, Mrs. Staples?”

“Another visitor,” Mrs. Staples said primly. “Came last night, and a bit on the late side, if you ask me. Looks like some sort of city person.” Which was enough to condemn anyone. Still it might be worse — she might have said ‘Londoner’.

“Well,” Agatha said, a little apologetically, “I come from a city as well.”

“Didn’t spend all your life in one, I dare say.”

“Not all, no. Will he be staying long, do you think?”

“And why would you want to know that?”

There wasn’t a good reason. Especially not to ask Mrs. Staples, of all people. “I’m terribly sorry,” Agatha said, although what she felt for the most part was simple annoyance. “It’s just that you know so much about everyone, I’ve gotten used to asking you questions.”

Pleased, Mrs. Staples nodded. “Well, then. Well. He’ll probably be here for a week or two, at best guess. Not enough to disrupt anything, just enough to annoy the neighbours. did you want to meet him?”

Agatha shrugged uncomfortably. “That isn’t necessary. I dare say that we’ll run into each other soon enough.”

Daniel looked up at just that moment, and smiled softly over edge of his paper.



“IT TOOK ME A WHILE TO FIND YOU,” HE SAID, AS HE UNFOLDED his napkin and set it across his lap. Dinner lay in a rough but plentiful arrangement between them; Mrs. Staples was with her children, and there were no other travellers in the inn.

It was warm; Agatha felt the hint of a breeze at her neck. “Why did you look?” She asked at last.

He raised a brow. “Why do you think?” Before she could answer, he shook his head. “Don’t play at games. It doesn’t become your age, and it doesn’t become you. You know why I came. We haven’t finished our conversation yet.”

She nodded, but once again she found the edge in his voice unpleasant. She almost pointed out the difference in their ages, but subsided, knowing that it would make little difference to Daniel, and none of it positive.

“I’m happy to see you here, Miss Edens. I hope that there’s much

we can learn from each other.” He raised a glass and held it up, rim at eye level.

After a moment, she raised her own, although it contained nothing stronger than water. “Yes,” she said, because she could think of nothing else to say. The glasses clinked, a cold little sound that trickled into silence.



SHE WORE NO WEDDING BAND, NO JEWELLERY, NO SIGN AT ALL OF a previous life’s mementos. Even the ring she’d been given by her mother had counted as too much of a weight and an anchor to the past; it was gone. She stared at her hands in the lamplight; they were shaking.

Daniel didn’t ask her if she was cold; he gave her no room to maintain her pretense of control or dignity in. “Agatha, look at me.”

But she’d already tried that, and had, at the last, been forced to look away as he’d carelessly let his dressing gown drop to the floor. She’d reached for the lamp, but he’d stopped her.

“Why,” he said, as he crossed the length of the room,” should there be anything hidden between us? What are you afraid of? Look at me.”

“I don’t know if I want you to look at me that way,” she said at last, meeting his eyes as if his eyes alone were safe.

He shrugged; she caught the movement of his shoulders at the periphery of her vision. “Agatha, it is your body, but I find you attractive. Does it matter? Before the end, there will be more between us than simple sight.”

Her hands were still shaking as he caught them. “Only give me the word, and I’ll leave if that’s what you wish.”

She almost told him to go, the apprehension was that strong. The desire was stronger. “Can’t we — can’t we douse the lamp?”

He caught her shoulder with his left hand, the curve of her jaw with his right. “You want the darkness, Agatha. I want the light.” And he kissed her.

In the end, she won; the oil was low in the lamp.



“DO YOU FEEL ANY DIFFERENT?” HE ASKED, AS THEY WALKED along the winding pathways behind the inn. They were kept — or so Mrs. Staples claimed — by the innkeeper’s husband, and there was even some sign that these footpaths were used. On occasion.

“Different?”

“You’re an adulteress, my dear.” He caught her suddenly and tilted her off-balance. “A scarlet woman. You’ve deceived your husband for the sake of a passing young man. Do you feel any different?”

“Yes.”

“Really? Are the fires of hell already burning for you?”

She laughed as she tried to right herself. “I don’t care if they are!”

But later, she did think about his question. And aside from the sense of freedom, she felt very much like the same Agatha she had always been. If she had ever really known that person at all.



ALTHOUGH DANIEL CLAIMED NOT TO BE INTERESTED IN subterfuge, he still insisted on discretion, and often left Agatha at the side of Mrs. Staples while he toured the countryside or went about his business. What exactly his business was, Agatha couldn’t guess. She wasn’t completely certain that she wanted to know.

“You’re looking better, dear,” Mrs. Staples would say, and Agatha would smile demurely. And wonder.



HE BROUGHT HER A NECKLACE FIRST. IT WAS A LOVELY PIECE OF jewellery, with heavy gold knots and a golden petalled flower with a heart of ruby. Each of the twenty knots had a diamond at its centre, and the clasp was itself a small miracle of craftsmanship. He slid it around her neck and fiddled with the clasp at her nape, letting it dangle between her breasts. It was cold.

“Where did you get this?” She said, barely whispering, not even daring to touch it.

“You’ll hear about it soon.”

She looked at it as it nestled against her skin. “This was made for another woman,” she said at last.

“So? It was taken for you. I think it perfect, although it’s best not to wear it outside of this room.” He smiled. “I imagine that its former owner will hardly miss it all, and if she does, so much the better.”



IT WAS STOLEN OF COURSE, AND WORD TRAVELLED AROUND THE county quite quickly. Mrs. Staples herself told Agatha the dreadful news.

“Yes, a robbery! I’ve heard that no one was injured, but Lady Feltham is beside herself.”

“What was stolen?”

“Heirlooms,” Mrs. Staples answered promptly. That she didn’t expand on this meant she didn’t know more.

Agatha sat by the fire, rocking slowly and thoughtfully in her chair. She folded her bare hands in her lap and studied them.



IT WAS ON A NIGHT THAT DANIEL WAS AWAY FROM THE INN, SOME several days later, that she encountered Ned Barnes. Or rather, that he stumbled over her. Mr. Staples, out in the pub, had clearly served Ned a little bit too much — or not enough.

“What can I do for you, Ned?” Mrs. Staples said, in a very non-nonsense tone of voice. “You aren’t allowed back here — this isn’t a place for the men.”

Ned nodded sagely. “Know it well, Mrs. Staples. But I wanted to take a gander at the guest you been hiding.” He sauntered over the threshold.

Mrs. Staple’s forehead developed a few lines that had been used

so seldom they weren't etched in permanently. "Ned Barnes," she said, her tone warming, her eyes narrowing. She set aside her wool and needles. "Get out of here right now, before we both do something we'll regret."

Ned took a step back; Agatha thought the danger had passed. But alcohol had its own hold on a man, and before Mrs. Staples words had driven him back, he staggered into the arch.

"Damned if I will," he muttered. Mrs. Staples tried to interpose herself between Ned and Miss Edens; Ned merely pushed her aside. Force of personality, although it counted for most things, didn't make up for all.

Agatha sat, almost spellbound, in her chair as Mr. Barnes approached. She could smell his breath long before he reached her and bent over her chair.

"May I help you?" She said, in as stiff and cold a voice as she had ever used.

"Maybe," was the mumbled reply. He reached out; she struggled with herself, forcing stillness and heavy silence over her sudden panic. Although she had, once or twice in her career, written of leering men, she had never actually seen the expression until now. The words would never have the same pale meaning again.

He caught both of her shoulders in his hands and hauled her to her feet. In the distance, Agatha could hear Mrs. Staples shouting something. Names, perhaps; the syllables didn't have the texture that words normally did. She saw his face move towards hers, still bearing that upward turn of lips, that ugly expression. And then it stopped. He squinted, frowned, and let her go.

Mrs. Staples continued to shout, but the only thing that Agatha heard were Ned Barnes' words.

"Ah — you're old."



DANIEL KNEW. ALTHOUGH SHE MENTIONED NOTHING, HE KNEW. She had never met a man like him; only women had ever been so sensitive to her pain — and women were usually in no position to do

anything at all about it. He held her, in the flickering light and the darkness of late evening, and his arms were like iron bands, but warmer, softer. Safer.

“What shall we do about Mr. Barnes, Agatha?”

He meant it; she knew it. A thousand fantasies and dream fragments skittered past her lips before she could utter them. In the end she offered him silence.

“Leave it to me, then. This is a new life, Agatha. You need never feel helpless again.” He rose; she felt his absence as the cooling of skin. “But promise me that you’ll learn from what I do. This is an experience that few will ever have.”



MRS. STAPLES WAS QUITE APOLOGETIC THE NEXT MORNING; SHE offered Miss Edens tea and the solace of friendly company. “It’s these men,” she ventured at last. “What can you do about them?”

“Nothing,” Agatha said softly.

“He’ll do something violent one day,” Mrs. Staples continued. “Mark my words. He won’t have a peaceful death, and he won’t deserve one.”



IT WAS FOUR DAYS LATER THAT AGATHA FIRST HEARD WORD. IT was Mrs. Staples — it seemed that it was always Mrs. Staples — who told her the news. “I don’t know if you’ve heard it yet, Miss Edens. The news I mean.”

“News? No, I don’t believe I have. Is it something terribly bad — you’re very pale.”

“Nothing like this has ever happened before. Not here, not in my time.”

Agatha leaned forward in her chair and caught the older woman’s hand firmly in her own. “What’s happened, Mrs. Staples?”

“But we’ve got him,” Mrs. Staples said, and at this, her voice became steel. “And he’ll hang for it.”

“Hang for what? Mrs. Staples, please — what are you talking about?”

“Young Anne Netterson’s been killed, and it was Ned Barnes that killed her — she told her younger brother she was off to see him, and no one else saw her again. Not alive.” Mrs. Staples looked very old and very tired; for the morning, the fire and knowing glee had gone out of her gossip. “But it’s safe to stay here, dear. You don’t have to worry anymore.”

Agatha rose very quietly. “Thank you, Mrs. Staples. Where is Ned Barnes being kept?”

“In town, dear.”



SHE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT HAD BROUGHT HER TO NED BARNES. SHE was numb enough that she wasn't certain if she wanted to gloat, to satisfy some prurient interest, or to talk with him at length. It hadn't been easy to gain access to him, and to do so, she'd had to traverse the angry crowd that milled outside. But she had to come; that much she knew clearly.

The young man that let her inside didn't understand it either, and he certainly wasn't going to grant them any privacy. She didn't object to his presence; she thought she might take comfort from it, until she gazed, at last, on the face of Ned Barnes. It was a broken face, both in spirit and in the meaner, physical sense of the word; one eye was completely swollen, and the blackened bruise at his jaw was the worst she had ever seen.

“Mr. Barnes?”

He looked up quickly and made to rise; the sound of metal scratched metal told her that the move was futile. “Ma'am.” Without alcohol to line his words he was meek. “Do I know you?”

“I — I write a bit, Mr. Barnes. Not for the papers, no. But I've — I've published a work or two.” She hadn't meant to say even that much of the truth, but she couldn't hold it back. *You're old*, he'd said, and it had stung. It didn't hurt now.

He brightened, in a slow, heavy sort of way. “Published? Books,

you mean?” When she nodded, his eyes lightened again, and his lips worked around his broken jaw to offer a smile. “What about?”

“Crime,” she said quietly. She saw him stiffen; started to reach out, and then let her hand fall back into her lap. “Mr. Barnes — you don’t have to answer me, but I have to ask why. Why did you kill Anne Netterson?”

Ned Barnes shook his head from side to side, once again slowly, dully. But he met her eyes squarely, and he didn’t flinch at all. “I didn’t, Ma’am. I swear, I didn’t kill her.”

Agatha swallowed; the walls of her throat clung together. “You — you realize that you’ll stand trial for her death?”

He nodded. “But I didn’t do it. The truth’ll come out.” He struggled to believe it. She didn’t have the heart to do anything but offer comfort.

“Ned,” she said, and this time, before the guard could move to stop her, she placed a hand very gently on his shoulder. “I believe you. I’m certain that you didn’t kill Anne.”

She thought it couldn’t get any worse than being here in front of this beaten rather slow man; she was wrong. The minute the words left her lips, he started to cry at the benediction of finally being believed.

Agatha left the prison, left the angry crowd that she knew to be barely held in check, and began to walk in deliberate isolation through the streets of the near-deserted town.



“WELL, AGATHA?” DANIEL OFFERED HER HIS ARM. HE WORE A dark suit, with a perfectly pressed shirt and a single lapel flower. As if he were going to the theatre. “Mrs. Staples said you went into town today.”

She took his arm almost cautiously. “Where are we going, Daniel?”

“Into town — or rather, just outside of it. I have a feeling that a drama is about to be played out to its proper conclusion.” He smiled gently. “As I promised, Agatha, all has been taken care of. You *will*

come, won't you?" His hand pressed into hers tightly. It relaxed only when she nodded.

"He's innocent, isn't he?"

"Of course he is. Don't be naive."

She knew that that would be his answer. Knew it, and felt no shock at the edge in his voice. "I thought so," she said quietly. "I couldn't have done this, Daniel."

"No. But I could. This is crime, Agatha, on a very refined level. For I am killing Ned Barnes tonight without raising a finger, and no one will even think to stop me." He smiled; the sun was a semi-circle of reddish light that gave little warmth. "Do you understand it?"

"No." She took a breath, then another, deeper one. "He's really very pathetic, Daniel."

"Of course he is. He's going to die for a crime that only three people in the world know he didn't commit. He'll die with no belief in justice, no faith in his god, probably no faith in the quality of his own innocence. That's what makes his death interesting. This — this is something that you might play at, pretend at — but Agatha, you've now talked to an unjustly condemned man in a very real way. You know what almost no one else will ever know." He bent down and brushed her lips with his; he was tender.



THEY STOOD ON THE INNER RECLINE OF THE HILL THAT LED TO the commons. It was darker now, and the air was chilly — but she could clearly see and hear the people that gathered below. Neither she nor Daniel used the lamps that they had carried; they had no need for them; torches and lamps in plenty illuminated the great tree and the drama that struggled to fruition beneath it. Shouts wafted up on the wind, but the words themselves, while hostile, were indistinct.

"Look at him," Daniel said, and the contempt in his voice was clear. "He's almost too stupid to understand what's going to happen. Is he crying, Agatha? I can't make it out. Do you think he's suffering enough?"

“Enough, yes.” She had told Daniel about Ned Barnes and his drunken unpleasantness. She’d wanted the power to hurt him back, hadn’t she? The ring of light surged in and out; she could clear see Ned struggling, and if she closed her eyes, she could see the trail of his tears. *He isn’t guilty*. Movement was denied her; frozen, she watched in fascination. What was guilt? What was innocence? She didn’t know anymore. But surely, if he were innocent, if he weren’t guilty of some other crime, some other offence —

his body fell, heavily, from the high tree branch. He dangled, kicking, struggling to free his hands. They were laughing, some of his executioners, and some turning for home. One lone voice suddenly bellowed, loudly and clearly into the dark, damp air:

“JUSTICE IS DONE!”

Daniel began to chuckle. “Justice indeed. This is the justice that we choose to make, Agatha. Come; there’s really nothing left to see.” He bent down to retrieve his lamp.

“Daniel?”

“Yes?”

“You killed Anne, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Why? She’d done nothing to harm us.”

“Why? Agatha, did you see nothing at all that happened this evening?” He was annoyed. “How else were we to permanently put Ned Barnes in his place?”

“We could have killed him ourselves, if it came to that.”

“I didn’t judge you ready for it.” Daniel’s reply was curt. “You couldn’t have killed Anne.”

“Not as you did, no.”

“No other way would have sufficed. You aren’t jealous of it, are you?”

She was silent again. In the darkness, Daniel began to fumble for light, for a way to strike the lamp’s wick with fire. His breast pocket was empty. He reached into his vest pocket when the lights came on, in her hands. Her face was pale, pained.

“Agatha —”

“I have learned a lot from you, Daniel. You were right. I knew

nothing at all about the criminal mind, the criminal motivation. Everything was neat and orderly; everything was clean. Now, I think I understand some of it, but some of it I will never, ever, understand.”

“That’s it, then?” The lines of his face grew taut. “You give me this, but no more? You wish to stop, having come this far?” He laughed, and the laugh was wild. “Do you think that’s even possible?”

“Yes,” she said simply. “Because I *have* learned something.” It hurt to see the surprise spread across Daniel’s face because she knew that she couldn’t afford to hesitate, and there was so much more that she might have said had she the time.

Killing a man wasn’t so hard after all.



AMNESIA WAS WHAT SHE CALLED IT. INABILITY TO REMEMBER. Things were blurred; fuzzy. She was perhaps a little cold, and perhaps a little run down; she was tired, and needed some bedrest and seclusion. But her home was waiting for her when she returned, and with a little effort, she could remember that it was what it had always been.

She wrote.

Not right away, of course, and never with the conviction and the truth that she had been ridiculed for avoiding. There was no crime that was ever committed that was unresolved, no truth that was ever too hard to reach; she no longer believed this, but struggled to make her readers believe it. Beliefs, after all, defined a person, didn’t they? And if they were strong enough, sure enough, they might pass into truth at last.

This silence was hers to choose.

This hope was her only hope.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle writes as both Michelle Sagara and Michelle West; she is also published as Michelle Sagara West (although the Sundered books were originally published under the name Michelle Sagara).

She lives in Toronto with her long-suffering husband and her two children, and to her regret has no dogs.

Reading is one of her life-long passions, and she is paid for her opinions about what she's read by the venerable *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. No matter how many book shelves she buys, there is Never Enough Shelf space. Ever.

Although she doesn't have a newsletter, if you subscribe to her blog, you will get everything that's posted there—book news, cover reveals, random answers to questions, etc.

If you would like news about new books as they're published—with no other clutter—sign up for my news only mailing list.

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OTHER SHORT STORIES

The first six stories released are connected to the Essalieyan Universe of the novels I write for DAW as Michelle West. Since those are my most asked-for short stories, those are the ones I wanted to make available first. The rest of the stories will be released in chronological order from the date of their first appearance, which are listed in brackets beside the titles, along with the anthology in which they first appeared. All of the stories have introductions (which will probably come through in the samples if you've already read the stories but want to read those.)

In the Essalieyan universe:

1. Echoes (2001, *Assassin Fantastic*)
2. Huntbrother (2004, *Sirius, the Dog Star*)
3. The Black Ospreys (2005, *Women of War*)
4. The Weapon (2005, *Shadow of Evil*)
5. Warlord (1998, *Battle Magic*)
6. The Memory of Stone (2002, 30th *Anniversary DAW Fantasy*)



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7. Birthnight (1992, *Christmas Bestiary*)
8. Gifted (1992, *Aladdin, Master of the Lamp*)
9. Shadow of a Change (1993, *Dinosaur Fantastic*)
10. For Love of God (1993, *Alternate Warriors*)
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12. Four Attempts at a Letter (1994, *By Any Other Fame*)
13. Winter (1994, *Deals with the Devil*)
14. What She Won't Remember (1994, *Alternate Outlaws*)
15. The Hidden Grove (1995, *Witch Fantastic*)
16. Ghostwood (1995, *Enchanted Forests*)
17. When a Child Cries (1996, *Phantoms of the Night*)
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19. Turn of the Card (1997, *Tarot Fantastic*)
20. The Law of Man (1997, *Elf Fantastic*)
21. Flight (1997, *Return of the Dinosaurs*)
22. The Vision of Men (1997, *The Fortune Teller*)
23. By the Work, One Knows (1997, *Zodiac Fantastic*)
24. Under the Skin (1997, *Elf Magic*)
25. The Dead that Sow (1997, *Wizard Fantastic*)
26. Kin (1998, *Olympus*)
27. Step on the Crack (1998, *Black Cats and Broken Mirrors*)
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37. Pas de Deux (2000, *Guardian Angels*)
38. Déjà Vu (2001, *Single White Vampire Seeks Same*)
39. To Speak With Angels (2001, *Villains Victorious*)
40. Lady of the Lake (2001, *Out of Avalon*)
41. Truth (2001, *The Mutant Files*)
42. The Last Flight (2001, *Creature Fantastic*)

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44. Legacy (2002, *Familiars*)
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55. The Colors of Augustine (2004, *Summoned to Destiny*)
56. Unicorn Hunt (2005, *Maiden, Mother Crone*)
57. The Snow Queen (2005, *Magic Tails*; with Debbie Ohi)
58. Shahira (2006, *Children of Magic*)
59. Choice* (1997, *Sword of Ice: Friends of Valdemar*)
60. Winter Death* (2003, *The Sun in Glory: Friends of Valdemar*)
61. Childhood's End (1998, *Tad William's Mirror World*)

*Set in Mercedes Lackey's Valdemar, as the anthology titles suggest

