

The Nightroad

Anthology One

By
JG Benedict

Media Hatchery
Orchard Park, NY

The Final Case of Marion Hollister

I.

On the morning of September 28, 2015, Mac woke with a start. Some terrible dream had haunted his sleep, vanishing more and more with each passing minute that his eyes remained open. He was drenched in sweat and paused before rising, sinking into the surreal air around him.

Professor Marion Hollister, “Mac” to his few friends, was an exceptionally average man. Quiet since childhood and with a generally amiable personality, Marion Hollister always managed to be the most easily forgettable person in any situation. Once, while on a school trip when he was ten, he was left behind at an art museum. A mistake that was only noticed once Mac’s parents arrived at the school to pick him up. Unflappable as he generally was, Mac had managed to slip past the notice of the security guards as they closed the museum for the day. Needless to say, there was some commotion once school officials and Mac’s parents returned to the museum to fetch him, but Mac was no worse for wear. He had been looking at the paintings and minding his own business and had yet to notice that the museum had emptied. His parents would credit the extended stay in that museum as the catalyst for his lifelong love of the institutions and his eventual career choice. However, they still worried that the mild-mannered Mac would have trouble with the complexities of life as he grew.

Mac never minded, however, and had managed to settle into a quiet life as the curator of the Eagle Creek Natural History Museum, a small adjunct museum attached to the local Eagle Creek Grand University, located in the eponymous town of Eagle Creek in Hueta County, NY. He

looked the part as well, standing five foot, ten inches tall, with thinning hair of a typical brown coloring that matched his eyes. He wore traditional tweed jackets and a pocket protector, perhaps his only notable accessory.

The Eagle Creek Natural History Museum was something of an oddity in contrast. It had been endowed at its inception with a vast fund that had ensured the museum's continued operation for the intervening two hundred years. This fund was a point of contention at the university, as their bylaws had been amended to prevent the museum's closure or the re-appropriation of said funds. The university was compelled, by access to another similar endowment, to leave well enough alone and to allow the museum to operate as it saw fit, which was what it did. However, the decision never sat right with the succession of administrators that moved through the university over the years. In time, the museum faded into just another neglected department of the sprawling Eagle Creek Grand University, or ECGU, as its constituency called it.

None of this mattered to Professor Hollister, who was entirely content to tend to a small, quiet museum. As part of the arrangement between the two institutions, he was required to teach two classes at the university proper, but this, too, was of little consequence to the easygoing Mac. Instead, Mac used the opportunity to inject his pet passion, forensic anthropology, into the university curriculum.

It was this class, *An Introduction to Forensic Anthropology*, which Mac taught with uncharacteristic zeal that had earned him the campus nickname of "The Bone Doctor" and eventually attracted the attention of the local authorities.

While the city of Eagle Creek was notable for its university, among other things, it severely lacked many of the municipal facilities that one generally associates with a city of its size. Characteristically, it needed a proper coroner's office. So it was that Mac was put into contact with one deputy, Matt Hughes, of the local Hueta County Sheriff's Department. Deputy Hughes would, on occasion, bring remains into Mac's office at the museum for identification and requests for other assistance from Mac that often fell outside of the usual mortuary services that the sher-

iff's office contracted for. This was the highlight of Mac's existence, and he drew tremendous pride from his contributions. In truth, Mac's average contribution was to rule out a set of remains as being human. Usually, the remains were of swine from one of the local farms or coyote, but he had been instrumental in helping to close a tragic missing person case that had gone cold a few years earlier.

That cold case cemented the friendship between Mac and Deputy Hughes and earned each some notoriety. The local paper even ran a piece on Mac, lauding him as a local hero. The attention was not necessarily welcome to either man, as each tended to be something of a loner, but instead, had provided yet more common ground between them. They kept similar hours and were cut from similar cloth, and in a relatively short time, Deputy Hughes had become entirely trusting of Mac and his assistance. Then came the case of university student Heather Gomez.

Heather Gomez was a junior at ECGU. An honor student and, by all accounts, a generally well-liked person, the tall, long-haired former dancer disappeared one night in the late spring after an evening tutoring session. No trace of Ms. Gomez was discovered over the course of a two-month manhunt conducted by the Hueta County Sheriff's Office. Then, in the early summer, when unidentified but recent remains were found, Mac was almost inevitably called in. The remains turned out to be from a missing persons case a few counties over, but it was of little consequence. Mac was involved now and seemed to take it personally that such a thing could happen on campus under his watch.

Hughes and the sheriff's department didn't know that Heather's disappearance was personal to Mac. Two springs prior, when she was a freshman, Heather had enrolled in Mac's sparsely attended *Museum Studies* class. Owing in part to the small class size, only three students at the start of the semester, Heather and Mac quickly got to know one another. Heather was older than her contemporaries, 28 as opposed to the customary 18, and had spent the early part of her twenties as a student at the prestigious Marnse Academy of Dance. A devastating ankle injury ended that part of her life at 26, and she was now in school working

on a degree in social work. Clever and hardworking, Heather quickly earned Mac's respect in the classroom, and it wasn't long before a genuine friendship blossomed between the two.

The following fall, she enrolled in "Introduction to Forensic Anthropology" and finally saw Mac in all his glory. This, much to Mac's surprise, was the catalyst for newfound feelings of affection from the much younger Heather. At first, he played it off, a hazard of teaching adult humans in their prime; Mac was sure that soon enough, Heather would find greener pastures to move onto and leave a silly crush on her teacher behind. Some of his charm was in Mac's obliviousness.

In his office on campus, Mac could still feel the confrontation they'd had in early November of that year, as though it hung forever suspended in the air about the place.

"You know how I feel, how I've felt for a long time now. You can't tell me there isn't something here." Heather had straightened her dark, wavy hair and had a glamorous look that stilled Mac's heart. "I've seen how you look at me, Mac; you aren't as sly as you think." She smiled then, and Mac returned the gesture, feeling that the jig was up.

"Fine. I won't lie about it. I think there could be something between us, but it simply isn't possible while you are my student. I won't risk both my career and your future here on a fling." Mac had regretted saying it the moment it was out of his mouth.

"Is that all I would be to you, Mac, a fling?" The hurt on her face was plain.

"No. I didn't mean it like that. I wouldn't want to have a fling. That's what I'm saying. I do have feelings for you, Heather; I just can't act on them at present." He remembered blushing at the admission and her kind laughter at his expense.

Then came a fateful party on New Year's Eve, thrown by Mac's long-time friend and former student, Anderson. Under the mutual influence of too much alcohol, the pair's affections finally became physical, but it proved a bridge too far for the mild-mannered Mac.

Everything had gone bad then, eventually ending in Mac arranging for rides home for himself and Heather. He spent the remainder of the

school year avoiding her and much of anything happening on campus. This behavior continued into the next school year. Confined as he was to his museum, Mac was unaware of Heather's disappearance before Deputy Hughes contacted him about the case.

Though he was worried it would preclude him from helping, Mac decided to inform Hughes of his connection to Heather after the initial remains were determined to be from another individual. He pleaded with Hughes to look past his close connection with the victim and allow him to continue to aid in the investigation.

Deputy Hughes welcomed the assistance, and throughout the summer, he and Mac poured everything they could into the investigation. Nothing ever turned up. By the season's end, Deputy Hughes was being pressured by the sheriff's department to declare the case cold so as to free himself up for other duties. Hughes resisted for a time but, by the end of September, had to relent. Disheartened, he broke the news to Mac. Mac was determined to press on but was quite crestfallen at their apparent failure.

Now, the easygoing Mac had always had one particular vice, as it were, psychedelics. He had been turned on to LSD as a college student in the 90s and had since developed a taste for psilocybin, the active chemical in the aptly named "magic mushrooms." Though he used them primarily to relax, Mac had been abstaining over the summer due to his nearly daily contact with Hughes. He had even considered letting the sheriff's deputy in on his little secret. However, he decided against it in the end, citing the still considerable stigma associated with such drugs among law enforcement. Besides, Mac reasoned, it wasn't like he was doing anything particularly dangerous or uncommon among his contemporaries.

Mac's close friend, the aforementioned Anderson, happened to be something of a local legend with regard to the production and procurement of such things. With the case indefinitely closed, Mac was quick to dial him up and arrange a meeting.

Mac headed out to meet Anderson, who never seemed to sleep or be unavailable, at his residence about a half-hour's drive from Eagle Creek.

Though it had been unseasonably warm of late, a cold air blew on that gray and ominous evening, and storm clouds could be seen on the horizon. Anderson lived among the vast stretches of farmlands and woods that made up Hueta County, outside of the city of Eagle Creek.

Though he was over a decade younger than Mac, the brilliant and driven Anderson Peate had already acquired more degrees than his former teacher. With bachelor's degrees in Philosophy and Mycology, an MBA, and a Master's in Botany, plus being well-versed in any number of other subjects, it was reasonably easy to see how Anderson came by his legendary reputation, at least among local academics.

Once he had arrived, Mac promptly made his way inside through the always-open side door. Anderson was seated on his decades-old couch in the larger of two downstairs living rooms and greeted his friend as he entered. Arrayed about him on the nearby coffee table was a bewildering collection of jars and containers of all sorts and sizes. Mac could see mushrooms in some, weed, lavender, camphor, and several other, stranger-looking plants he couldn't readily identify in others.

Anderson was busily sorting through the jars, seemingly intent on finding something particular.

"Ah, The esteemed Professor Hollister, welcome. It has been far too long since we've seen you around these parts," Anderson smiled as he looked up to his approaching friend. The lights in Anderson's house were customarily low, but Mac thought the place looked darker than usual for some reason. Intermittently, a blue light bulb in a tall corner lamp buzzed on and off. The noise was grating on Mac's nerves, and he sighed. He was more stressed over everything than he wanted to admit.

"It's been a busy few months, that's for sure." Mac tried to seem more upbeat than he was feeling but imagined that he was doing a relatively poor job. The pair had been friends since Anderson had enrolled in Mac's "Introduction to Forensic Anthropology" class at ECGU some years prior. After graduating with his second degree, Anderson had suddenly moved off campus to a large farmhouse he had inherited from some distant relative. Thus began his career in "pharmacological distribution," as he called it, and the advent of his now considerable venture

into herbal remedies and medications of all sorts. His fields grew the raw materials he used to brew all manner of essential oils, herbal salves, custom herbal teas, and other naturally derived, healing, and wellness products.

That he included the sale of marijuana and magic mushrooms to his repertoire and looked like a character from 'The Big Lebowski' only made him more impressive to the droves of college students who visited Anderson regularly. He enforced a strict "no driving" policy to his guests who partook of those wares and, as such, was almost constantly surrounded by visitors. That night, however, only he and Mac seemed to be in the massive farmhouse.

"I'm sure it has been; there was little doubt after hearing you on the phone. You're still working on the Heather Gomez missing person case, right?" Mac was only mildly surprised that the well-connected Anderson already knew of his current preoccupation.

"Yeah, I am, or at least I was until today. The higher-ups are declaring the case cold and moving Hughes on to something else. It all just sort of leaves me flapping in the wind now, and there's still no trace of Heather."

"I remember her from that New Year's Eve party. What was it two years ago? She certainly knew how to make an impression on people. Though, if my memory serves, she only had eyes for you," Anderson looked up from his jars to meet Mac's gaze. "How did you swing stodgy, old Hughes, into agreeing to your participation in the investigation?" Anderson seemed quite ready to converse with his former teacher about the case.

"Um, I was just upfront with him. Nothing ever really happened between me and Heather. I kind of blew it in classic Mac fashion," Mac smiled sheepishly. "Besides, Hughes isn't that bad of a guy."

"Hughes is a dinosaur. His views on modern society are laughable at best and borderline authoritarian at worst. I won't argue that the man has a knack for sorting out the trouble the county gets now and again, but he oversteps his station. Not everyone who exists within the gray parts of our society is a bad guy." A student of Timothy Leary and

Hunter S. Thomson, Anderson was a counterculture persona, a half-century or so removed from the actual events that inspired his work.

Hughes was also the only member of the local law enforcement cadre that ever hassled him over his various quasi-legal dealings, an act which added no love for the former in Anderson's heart.

"Yeah, he can be a little dated sometimes. They call him "By the Book Hughes" down at the station, but, like you said, he's a good cop. He was our best chance at finding Heather if they would just give us more time." Mac fell quickly into talking about the case, though he worried about exposing anything more than he needed to.

"So then, why haven't you found her yet?" Anderson asked, prodding Mac to tell him more.

"Well, that's just it, though; there's nothing to find. We've been over everything: security camera recordings, local canvassing, forensic examinations of the scene, everything. There's no trace of Heather anywhere. One minute, she was on campus, and the next, she was just gone."

Anderson looked up suddenly from the table with a jar in hand. "Huzzah! Found it!" He exclaimed. In the jar was a collection of small canvas bags about an inch long on each side. "This is an exceptional tea; I concocted it a few months ago with mushrooms and kava root, a dash of grass, and a few other miscellaneous things. It should be right up your alley if I know anything about your tastes in these matters. And believe me, I do." The sometimes cheeky Anderson smiled again at Mac, determined to lift his friend's spirits.

Just then, there was the sound of a car pulling into the long driveway of the farmhouse. "And that would be VanCamp," Anderson said as he disappeared into the kitchen, "he's just back from Europe and said something about a 180-year-old bottle of scotch if you're interested," he called back to Mac.

Mac had always enjoyed the company of Ethan VanCamp, a local real estate magnate and head of a ridiculously profitable construction company. The worldly VanCamp was a little barrel of a man, no taller than Mac, but with the look of someone who could, and likely had, wrestle a bear into submission. Widely known for his flamboyant, over-

the-top personality, VanCamp was someone the anthropologist in Mac loved listening to and the stories of his travels were the best tales of the bunch.

VanCamp entered with his usual pomp and bombast. “Greetings from the Emerald Isles and all points adjacent!” he called to Anderson as he walked into the living room. His longtime girlfriend, Debra, was close on his heels. “Well, what do we have here? Good to see ya, Mac!” He offered a hearty handshake to the much milder-mannered Mac.

Anderson had returned to the living room by then, hot cups of tea in hand. He handed one to Mac and placed the other near where he had been sitting.

“What’s all this?” VanCamp asked immediately upon seeing the mess on the table and the steaming cups Mac and Anderson held.

“You don’t have to know everything about everything, honey,” Debra added. She always seemed mildly embarrassed by her counterpart, though they were otherwise inseparable. Debra was in her thirties, with short brown hair and dark green eyes. She had known Heather as well; the two worked together in the university administration office, and Mac felt a pang of guilt at not being able to offer news or hope of Heather’s eminent rescue.

“It’s my special concoction,” Anderson beamed proudly in answer to VanCamp, “designed to relax you, lift your spirits, and possibly show you strange and fascinating hallucinations. Though it is a milder effect, it only lasts a few hours.”

“Sign me up!” VanCamp enthusiastically added as he produced the scotch from a bag he was carrying. “Plus, we’ll need to get into this.”

“As you wish, though, I expect a grand tale of how you came by this bottle,” Anderson said, examining the surprisingly ancient-looking vessel. “You too, Debra?”

“Not tonight, Anderson; someone has to keep an eye on this one.” She motioned toward VanCamp, who was busying himself, opening the bottle of scotch.

“Um, I’d love to hear about your trip as well,” added Mac. He was about halfway through his cup of tea and was already feeling the effects.

The lights seemed to dance slightly, and an overwhelming sense of calm and peacefulness took over his body.

Soon, the four settled into a friendly conversation. VanCamp was only too eager to regale his comrades with stories from his most recent trip, and before long, all present were involved in deep discussions and generally enjoying the effects of Anderson's tea. Several joints were passed around, and though Mac typically tried to show restraint when visiting with Anderson that night, he felt compelled to go along with the flow and attempt to unwind.

"So let's have it then," Anderson said to VanCamp as the former returned from another trip to the kitchen with a stack of glasses in hand.

VanCamp handed the bottle of scotch to Anderson, who began filling the glasses for those present. "Well, I tell ya, it isn't as grand of a tale as I'm normally used to. No royalty involved or famous folk, you understand. We bought it in an old Scottish manor. Apparently, a cask and several bottles were found in the ruins of an old burned-down manor not far from where we were. Our gracious host had purchased the land that said manor was on and had commissioned an archaeology team to excavate the ruins before he had them turned into a tennis court. Inside, they found the bottle we are now enjoying, along with several others, and the cask, as I mentioned." VanCamp was taking his time as if savoring the memory as much as the drink. "See, that's where things got weird. I asked why he bothered with the excavation in the first place; that sort of shit isn't cheap. The old chap told us that it was on account of the cannibals."

"Wait, what?! Did you say cannibals?" Anderson almost choked on the stiff drink as VanCamp left the exclamation hanging in the air.

"My thoughts exactly!" VanCamp was clearly enjoying the attention his story was getting. "You see, the previous owners of the manor, the one that burned down, they were something of local pariahs. Shunned for any number of superstitious, nonsensical reasons, they were the first suspects whenever something strange happened. Time passes, and all of a sudden, locals start disappearing. We're talking about the early nineteenth century here. Some questionable evidence was produced, and constables were called to search the manor grounds. It seems they inter-

rupted some sort of clandestine feast attended by the family and several people from out of town. In the back kitchen, they discovered several of the missing people, butchered as one would a large hog.”

“It’s giving me goose bumps listening to this again. There was something truly creepy about that place,” Debra interjected, looking mildly lost in the memory herself.

“I couldn’t agree more,” VanCamp continued. “Well, you can probably imagine what happened next. It wasn’t more than a few hours, by our host’s account, before news of the scene had reached the local population. By the end of the day, a mob of “concerned locals” had gathered around the manor, torches and pitchforks in hand. They burned the place to the ground and thought everything was destroyed. And everything was, essentially, except this one cask and several bottles of scotch. You can understand that I had to have it. Shame he wouldn’t sell me all of them and the cask, but what can you do.” VanCamp looked mildly dejected.

“Lord knows you certainly tried,” Debra chuckled, and the brief levity lifted the gloom beginning to gather.

“That is, of course, assuming any of it was true,” Mac said, only catching too late that he was thinking aloud.

“Always the skeptic, eh Mac?” Anderson smiled.

“Yeah, Debs was skeptical, too, when I bought it. But I know a good story when I hear one. Who even cares if it’s true, right?” And VanCamp gave off a hearty laugh.

“Let’s talk about something else, please, Ethan. This story is giving me the creeps all over again. There was something about that old man; he wasn’t right.” Debra looked at VanCamp pleadingly.

VanCamp smiled and relented. “Don’t get all worried, babe; like Mac said, it was probably all just bullshit.” And he turned and gave a telling wink to Mac.

Hours passed, and Mac enjoyed true relief from the stress of the past few months. Though he had hoped to talk more to Anderson about the case, he was more than content to listen to the strange tales VanCamp was full of that evening. Long into the night, the four spoke on many topics, and Mac almost forgot everything back in the real world.

Around 2 a.m., mildly bleary-eyed still, Mac headed back home. There is a deep darkness to the back roads of Hueta County. Very few street lights exist outside the cities, and the homes are spaced considerably apart, most of them being farms. It is surprisingly easy, among such a deep gloom, to lose one's bearings and become hopelessly lost among the turns and twists of the roads only locals tread. Anderson's home sat comfortably at the bottom of a steep hill, nestled away from the sight of passing traffic.

As Mac's light blue sedan crested the hill rising south of Anderson's place, he noticed how clear and crisp of a night it had become. The storm clouds of the early evening seemed to have passed by without so much as a drop. Instead, a slight crescent moon painted the landscape a faint blue-gray. Atop the hill, the vast expanse of the night sky lay bare before Mac's eyes in all of its terrible grandeur, and Mac worried that the effects of Anderson's mysterious tea were not entirely behind him.

There were several paths one could take to return to Eagle Creek from Anderson's country home, and Mac chose the more rural and winding option. He wished not to encounter any traffic on his drive, and though it was longer overall, Mac felt no need to rush in returning home.

Several miles from Anderson's home, as he turned onto a cross street that would eventually lead him back to a main thoroughfare, the lights of Mac's car panned across a farmhouse opposite where he was stopped. There, in the window on the second floor of what looked to be an ancillary building on the farm, stood unmistakably Heather Gomez. Mac slammed on the brakes of his turning vehicle and sat stunned for a moment. How could this be? Quickly, he pulled his car over to the side of the road and burst from the driver's seat, flashlight in hand, ready to investigate this new lead.

When he again illuminated the window, it was empty, and Mac paused. Could he have been mistaken? Coming to his senses, he realized regardless of what he saw, there was little he could do half baked and at two in the morning. Still, he hesitated. Was that indeed Heather? He almost called Hughes and wavered on the edge of action, paralyzed for a moment. After a few minutes, the adrenaline rush passed, and Mac decided to head home before he drew any unwanted attention.

On the drive home, Mac's mind reeled at the possibility of a break in the case. There were more questions now than he was entirely comfortable with. What mad chain of events could have led him to stumble onto such a clue? But he was confident that the tea had passed his system. And he was sure he saw Heather in that window. He would know Heather anywhere. No, this was serendipity beyond explanation, Mac thought. What else could explain it? In the morning, he would contact Deputy Hughes, and finally, they would put the business of Heather Gomez behind them. Mac was sure of that as well. They were going to save her.