"Daniel Taylor blends a passion for theology, civil rights, and the saving grace of story in a mystery involving an unlikely pair of underdog investigators—the psychologically broken Jon Mote and his ever hopeful, developmentally challenged older sister, Judy. Known primarily for his nonfiction books, Taylor displays the natural skills of a crime writer in his debut novel set in the world of academia. His plot begins conventionally, but eventually evolves into something much deeper. *Death Comes for the Deconstructionist* is a fascinating exploration of what is ultimately good and true."

—NAOMI HIRAHARA
Edgar Award-winning author of the Mas Arai and Officer Ellie Rush mysteries

"This whodunit from Dan Taylor is a cause for celebration. His Jon Mote rivals Harry Bosch, and Taylor's ventures into literature, religion, and notions of progress shine, challenge, and stun. With his remarkable sidekick, Judy, Jon Mote, 'an expert on things he wished he didn't know,' is not simply looking into a puzzling death. He is exploring his own odds of finding transformative life. Great books are those that force readers to reexamine the very ground on which they stand. *Death Comes for the Deconstructionist* is such a book—a luminous performance."

—DALE BROWN
Director of the Buechner Institute

"In *Death Comes for the Deconstructionist*, Daniel Taylor has written not only a highly engaging murder mystery but also a metaphysical page-turner—a strange and wonderful cross between Walker Percy and G. K. Chesterton. His oddly reluctant Sherlock Holmes is accompanied by the most unusual and heartwarming Watson in my reading experience."

—PAUL J. WILLIS
Author of *The Alpine Tales*

"Jon Mote—by his own admission a clueless detective—is asked to solve the murder of a renowned English professor. Despite his bumbling efforts he discovers truth, not only concerning the murder but, more profoundly, concerning himself and his painful past. This witty, tragicomic novel slices a scalpel into the heart of the modern university and lays bare the intellectual and spiritual bankruptcy of its reigning ideologies."

—HUGH COOK
Author of *Heron River*

"One part academic satire, one part mystery, and one part theological investigation, this pleasingly disorienting novel packs a wicked punch. Like life itself, Daniel Taylor gives us a story in which all sorts of incongruous elements are jumbled together. (Reality is not fastidious.) But is there—could there be—a pattern nonetheless, a great design amid all the confusion?"

—JOHN WILSON
Editor, *Books & Culture*

DEATH
COMES FOR THE DECONSTRUCTIONIST

A NOVEL

DANIEL
TAYLOR

Marylebone House

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"My name is Legion, for we are many."

—R. BARTHES, AFTER ST. MARK

"I do suck most wondrous philosophies from thee!
Some unknown conduits from the unknown
worlds must empty into thee!"

—AHAB TO PIP

"Where the wolves are killed off,
the foxes increase."

—FOLK SAYING

ONE

Something is wrong.

I'm not well. The voices are back.

I apologize. That's a bleak way to start. And too confessional. The world doesn't need another Underground Man or daddy-killing poet. Everyone these days is confessing everything, which leaves no space for genuinely confessing anything. Confession requires a standard, an agreed-upon line that has been crossed. It requires "ought" and "I'm sorry" and "Forgive me" and "I will not do that again." Not for us. We confess and absolve ourselves in the same breath. "I did it. I wouldn't change anything. It's who I am." To quote that great mariner-philosopher Popeye, "I yam what I yam." Self-absolving confession. How efficient. Cuts out the middleman.

Of course I'm referring to someone you've likely never heard of—Popeye. A cartoon character from the 1930s and beyond. How can I make myself understood, for God's sake, to people who don't share the same shards of pop culture that I have shored against my ruins? (Name the poet just alluded to. It's an easy one.)

Here I go again. I have to calm myself. My mind starts rolling downhill and it gathers neither moss nor meaning (Rolling Stones). Faster and faster ("Like a complete unknown / Like a rolling stone"). It's not six degrees of separation for me, it's no degrees (Sly and the Family Stone). Everything is connected—directly and remorselessly—to everything

else. At the same time, nothing is connected to anything. Monism (all is one) hooks up with solipsism (one is all), and I am their bastard child.

And you have no idea what I'm talking about. And neither do I. But I do not apologize. After all, "I yam what I yam."

And the "I yam" that I am playing at the moment is detective. It's what Mrs. Pratt thinks of me, so it is what, for a time, I will be. Her husband is dead, found on the street below his thirteenth floor hotel room, a hole in his chest and a pool of blood spread nimbus-like around his head.

I like that—"nimbus-like." It just came to me this very moment. One of those synapse-leaping connections. A nimbus is a stylized halo in medieval art—which is the first thing I thought of—but also a kind of cloud, and an encryption algorithm and a Danish motorcycle and more than one literary magazine and, of course, a flying broom. And if he were alive, Dr. Pratt could make connections among all these things. Because that was his gift—making connections between things no one else would ever think to connect. And it left your head spinning.

I know because I was once a student of Dr. Pratt's. He was, for a time, a kind of intellectual saint to me—nimbus and all. And he certainly left *my* head spinning.

Dr. Pratt has been dead since spring, almost six months now, and his wife has just called me. I tell her, indirectly as usual, that she is wasting her time. I'm not a cop, or a criminal investigator, or any kind of detective. (The only thing I'm good at detecting are my own deficiencies, at which I am a master—a talent I share with my soon-to-be ex-wife.)

I'm actually nothing official, almost officially nothing. You might say I'm a researcher, with an emphasis on searcher. I search. I look into things. I don't probe people—or even events. I collect information. And then I try to make something out of it—a kind of artist of found data, you might say (think Duchamp and urinals). I try to burrow new tunnels through old hordes of information. I marry scattered facts to see if I can turn data into knowledge. (I had once hoped to turn knowledge into wisdom, but Dr. Pratt cured me of that.)

I've been a searcher all my life, but I started getting paid for it by this lawyer I know. He needed someone to interrogate the Tet Offensive in order to establish a post-traumatic shock defense for Vietnam vets. I was out of work and knew how to use a library. Since then I've become an expert on Legionnaires' disease, universal joints (General Motors and Toyota, not Ford), tempered glass, emotional stress in flight controllers and junior high social studies teachers, recidivism rates for women car thieves, bite rates for Chows, flow rates for dams, and insurance rates for epileptics. And expert on a thousand other things I wish I didn't know. My mind is clogged with a million bits of information, not one byte of which gives me a good reason to get up in the morning.

My job is not the kind that shows up on those career tests they give you. I took one in high school and they told me I was suited to be a forest ranger. The possibility had never entered my mind, but it was kind of nice knowing there was a niche for me somewhere, if I ever really needed it. You know, say I was fifty and things weren't going real well. I could maybe show up at a fire lookout tower in some forest somewhere and sort of casually bring up this test I took thirty years back and just see if I hit it off with the rangers like the test said I would. To tell the truth, I've found myself thinking of the woods lately. Lovely woods, dark and deep.

Anyway, I've been working for lawyers off and on, and Dr. Pratt's widow somehow finds out about it. I'd gotten to know her a little when I was a graduate student. You see, Pratt was my advisor as well as my professor. And guru and model and, you could say, nemesis. Mrs. Pratt was young then—thirty-something. I liked her. Okay, maybe I even had a crush on her. She was good-looking and friendly, two things you didn't see a lot among faculty wives. Most of them seemed kind of worn and faintly bitter. Too many years living with men whose first love is books.

Anyway, the phone rings, and it's Mrs. Pratt. I know of course about Dr. Pratt's murder. In fact, I had heard him speak downtown at the Midwest Modern Language Association convention only a few hours before he was killed. I went to hear him for old times' sake. I had even planned to look him up afterward to see if he remembered me. To tell the truth, I'd been a little nervous about it.

When I tell Mrs. Pratt on the phone that I had heard her husband's talk that night, she seems disconcerted. Says it's eerie—that's her word—eerie that I heard him speak just before he died. It doesn't seem eerie to me—hundreds of people heard him speak just before he died. Dying after speaking isn't any stranger than dying after eating or dying after washing the car. It always comes after something, you know what I mean?

I tell Mrs. Pratt that I'm not a private investigator or anything like one, that I am extremely unlikely to solve the crime, and that the police will only see me as a nuisance. But she insists I "look it over." She says she doesn't expect me to find the killer. She just wants more information.

"I just feel like there's something there to be seen that the police wouldn't recognize if they tripped over it. I think you can help."

It's a new concept for me. To be thought capable of helping, by a woman no less. I let the idea roll around in my psyche for a moment. I'm sure it's the main reason I say I'll think about it, even though the ache in my stomach makes me immediately wish I hadn't.

TWO

I don't decide right away. I should talk to Judy first. We haven't been back together long, and I don't want to mess things up. I have a long history of making seemingly innocent decisions that end up deflecting the universe. Zillah (my soon-to-be ex) calls it a gift for the cosmic screw-up. Big Bang-sized disasters that create galaxies of pain and black holes of confusion. It's true that I have a kind of congenital clumsiness about life that I can't seem to shake. Zillah found it moderately charming when we were dating, but it was a different story when she moved in with it.

Anyway, I decide to talk to Judy. We live together now on a rented houseboat in the Mississippi, in the shadow of the Wabasha Bridge in downtown St. Paul. Kind of an oxymoronic place—out on the river, like Huck and Jim, but going nowhere, towered over by government and office buildings on the far bank. Illusory freedom. It's not a big old tub, as houseboats go. Two tiny bedrooms up top over a fair-sized living room and galley kitchen below. Engineless, like me, neither houseboat nor occupant seaworthy.

Judy sits across the small galley table slowly chewing a hot dog on a fork that she holds up close to her face. She takes a bite and then stares at the end of the hot dog while she chews, slowly but inexorably, balanced between the pleasure of the hot dog in her mouth and the anticipation of the next bite to come. A perfect illustration of the now and not yet—the once and future hot dog.

Actually, Judy does everything slowly. Sometimes it's maddening, like being stuck in traffic behind a Grandma Moses in a Studebaker when your whole life depends on you being somewhere else. But I've decided Judy's slowness gives her a kind of dignity, like the massive stillness of a glacier. She is protracted, as God is, grinding slowly but exceedingly fine.

Now I know when I say "back together," you're thinking "girlfriend." You can't help it. We've been trained. But think sister instead. If you never thought "girlfriend," I apologize.

Yes, Judy is my sister. She is a short woman, using up most but not all of five feet. Leans toward stocky. Her hair hangs very straight and thin from the top of her head, as though placed on the crown like pick-up sticks and allowed to fall equally in each direction. She has almond-shaped eyes with sleepy, bulging lids.

Judy takes a certain pride in her shortness. "Good things come in small packages," she says with a smile.

Only Judy doesn't say it the way you or I would. She speaks very slowly. Painfully slow I would have said at one time, glacially slow. Now I prefer to think she speaks carefully, with a stateliness won of hard labor.

She doesn't actually say individual words slowly, except when she stutters. It's that she pauses between words, her eyes rolling up into her lids, trying various doors in the dim hallways of her brain, searching patiently for a word or phrase that might befriend the one already in the air. It is important to her that words, like companions, get along.

Judy's speech patterns mirror the discoveries of quantum physics. The words do not roll smoothly off her tongue in a steady progression. Rather, they leap from her lips in interrupted bursts: "Good things … I should say, good things come … in in … in small packages." She often finishes in a delighted rush, much as someone crossing a stream on a narrow log hurries the last few steps and jumps to shore in relief and triumph. Then she smiles, pleased with herself and how well things turned out.

And she repeatedly inserts the phrase "I should say" into her sentences, a product of decades of correction and efforts to please. It gives her time to line up her words in a row and affords them a faintly aristocratic

air. Judy has a high sense of propriety—what one *should* say or *ought* to do. It was drummed into her by our parents and by the nuns at the home. They all lived in the old world of right and wrong, and they passed it on to Judy. If you didn't know what the rules were, how were you going to know if you were doing okay?

"Well, Jude. This woman called and wants me to do some work for her."

"That's nice."

"We could use the money."

"Yes, we … we could use the money. That's for sure."

"But it would mean you'd have to be by yourself sometimes. More than now."

"Oh?"

"Well, I would have to be driving around a lot."

"I like … driving around."

"And I'd have to talk to a lot of people."

"I … I should say … I like talk … talking to people, Jon."

I chew on that.

"Of course you do. Well, why not? You wouldn't have to stay here. You could come along, at least most of the time."

Judy rosebuds her lips, raises her eyebrows, and smiles. "I could be … I should say … your sidekick."

"Sure, my sidekick."

"Like … like the Lone Ranger and … and Tonto."

"Like Pancho and Cisco."

"Like … like, I should say, like Mr. Huntley and Mr. Brinkley."

David Brinkley was Judy's first love. He gave the network news every night from Washington, while Huntley reported from New York—the only two American cities of consequence to the media at the time. Judy was a Brinkley fan. "I like his pointy nose," she used to say. "He's cute." When I was nine, I wrote a letter to Brinkley asking him to skip his signature "Goodnight, Chet" some evening and say instead, "Goodnight, Judy." It would have delighted her to no end. If he ever did, we missed it.

THREE

The next morning I call Mrs. Pratt. She invites me to her place to talk and I tell her, with a minimum of explanation, that Judy will be coming with me. Her home is on Summit Avenue in the original upscale area of St. Paul. In the nineteenth century, not long after the citizens had been sharp enough to change the name of their capital from Pig's Eye, the quality started building along and back from the bluffs overlooking the town and the Mississippi River. Dr. Pratt had taken a lot of pleasure living there, only a few blocks away and a couple of levels up the scale from where Scott Fitzgerald once lived.

I remember reading *The Great Gatsby* in one of Pratt's classes. He spoke at length about unreliable narrators, centers of consciousness, and the like. Said we couldn't trust Nick's telling of the story because Nick was *in* the story, and we couldn't trust Fitzgerald because he *wasn't* in the story, and we couldn't trust what the critics said *about* the story because they were a bundle of cultural prejudices, and we couldn't trust *him* because he wasn't us, and, most obvious of all, we couldn't trust *ourselves* because … well, I don't remember why we couldn't trust ourselves, but Dr. Pratt was very adamant about that point.

Anyway, the inside of the house, which I remember from my grad student days, is exactly what you'd expect from a man like Dr. Pratt—cosmopolitan, refined, subtle, and tasteful as hell. Everything possible has been done to minimize the rectangularity of the rooms. Screens or potted trees blunt the corners. Paintings hang just above or below where

you expect, sometimes stacked three high on the wall. Most are aggressively non-representational—a slash of color here, a formal conundrum there. Nary a picture of dogs playing cards in sight.

In the living room the mostly white sofas and chairs announce in precise tones, "Admire me—do not sit." There is an undertone of metal—gleaming, reflective, polished—but the room is warmed by rich, dark cherry, floor-to-ceiling bookcases. Many of the books are beautifully bound, each in its appointed place, waiting to be opened. Just as Dr. Pratt's students waited to be opened.

I was once such a student. The first time I encountered Dr. Pratt, I thought I was already as opened as one could be. I had long since freed myself from the medievalism of my childhood. I had been in the army and lived abroad. I had seen violence and death. I was married. I had gone to college late and thought I understood what was up by the time I started graduate school in the late 1980s.

Dr. Pratt helped me see that I had simply left one fundamentalism for another. I had moved from relying on Holy Writ to relying on Holy Reason, and the difference between the two was far less radical than I had thought. Both assumed a stable, knowable world. Neither, therefore, understood that the god of this world is Proteus the shape-changer, giver of multiplicity.

Dr. Pratt was always kind to me—and I greatly needed kindness. I am, as I said, not entirely well—"a sort of sick" as Ahab said. I carry the wounds of Adam—that orchard thief—like everyone. But I have a few that Adam knew nothing about. They have not been enough up to now to kill me, but they have kept me swimming in circles most of my life, like a whale with one flipper. And now the voices again.

I don't know whether Dr. Pratt saw that in me back then or not, but he seemed to offer a kind of salve for my wounds. I was bound up, and he spoke of freedom. I was mournful, and he talked about play. I had no center, and he offered the possibility that having no center might be a good thing. Dr. Pratt gave me a new way of explaining my life to myself—or perhaps he simply made me feel better about having no explanation. Either way, I was grateful. And maybe that gratitude explains my

finding myself, a few months after his death, standing at his front door, despite an ache in my stomach and a damp, drizzly feeling in my soul.

Judy smiled the whole way over in the car, but puts on her game face when I ring the doorbell. Mrs. Pratt answers and invites us in. She is still attractive, but has been introduced to middle age. She doesn't exactly have lines in her face, but you can see where they're going to be soon enough.

She looks quizzically at Judy as we come in, but receives her graciously. Judy is all formality and soberness.

"My name is Judith Mote. I am here with … I should say, with my brother, Jon."

"Glad to meet you, Judith."

"And you, I am sure."

I haven't seen Mrs. Pratt since I dropped out of graduate school years ago. She was quite a bit younger than Pratt. She won't be a widow for long, unless she wants to be.

Judy sits beside me on the "don't sit on me" white sofa, her feet not quite reaching the floor. I talk generally with Mrs. Pratt about the possibility of working for her. I try to be discouraging, something I'm quite good at.

"What do the police think about me working on the case?"

"I haven't told them. I didn't know if you were going to agree to it."

"They won't like it."

"Why not?"

"It's a vote of no confidence, sort of like showing up at your girlfriend's house for supper carrying a bag of cheeseburgers."

"Well, I *don't* have any confidence. My husband was murdered months ago and they've made no progress at all."

"I understand your frustration, Mrs. Pratt. But it's highly unlikely I would do any better. Those people are professionals. I've never been part of a criminal case before. I work with civil cases, and then only in the background. My last case was eight months ago, and it had to do with a patent infringement for microwave popcorn. Do you see what I mean? I

research things like the history of popcorn. I don't know anything about criminal science, or forensics or poisons or weapons, or anything. I don't even know anything about the law—indictments, grand juries, the rules of evidence. None of that."

I want to add, "I can never figure out Sherlock Holmes stories until the last paragraph. Even Watson catches on before I do." But I hold that back.

"Mr. Mote, my husband was a good man. He didn't deserve to have his life end this way. I believe that whoever killed Richard knew him and knew the academic world. You knew Richard, and you know about the academic world. I believe you could pick up on something the police would miss. I would simply like you to look into things and see what you find."

"I'm just afraid you'll be wasting your money. I don't want to raise any false hopes."

"My life is one long lesson in false hopes, Mr. Mote. Don't worry. Even if you find nothing, I'll feel better for your having tried."

I look at Judy. Unfortunately, she takes it as a signal that she should say something.

"Sister Brigit says we … we should always try. If … if … at first you don't sneeze, try … I should say, try, try again." She flashes me a big, how-do-you-like-them-apples smile and then resumes her formal face for Mrs. Pratt.

Mrs. Pratt interprets my not saying no as an indication that I am saying yes, a mistake the women in my life have often made.

"Just for background, let me tell you something that very few people at the university know. I am not Richard's first wife. He first married when he was very young. She was a high school sweetheart. He went to college but she never did. They got married a few days after their high school graduation. She was cute but not, I used to think, very bright. It was a strange match. But of course he wasn't the same person then that he became later.

"His first full-time teaching job was at Memphis State—I think they've changed the name recently. He was there three years, teaching

four courses each term, trying to write scholarly articles so he could escape the place, and just failing to live on an assistant professor's salary. Completely overloaded. His wife sat home and dusted their thrift store furniture and waited dutifully and expectantly for the children to start coming. She never knew he was mixing birth control pills in with the vitamins he insisted she take every morning. Poor woman couldn't figure out why she was gaining weight.

"Like I said, I used to think she wasn't very bright. I realized later I never gave her enough credit. I ran into her every once in a while after Richard and I were married. It was strange. She spoke very civilly. I got the distinct impression she felt sorry for me. It was clear she wasn't as dull-witted as I had thought. And she wrote me a very perceptive letter last summer after Richard's death."

"Perceptive?"

"Oh, just about how Richard was, not about anything related to his death. I'm telling you this because I want you to know everything that might be helpful."

We talk for a few minutes more about the little she knows about Pratt's hometown and first marriage; then Mrs. Pratt pauses.

"There's one more relevant thing I think you should know from the start."

I raise my eyebrows, trying to look as professional and encouraging as possible.

"Something was bothering Richard in the last month before his death. Bothering him tremendously. He wouldn't say what it was. In fact, he wouldn't even admit that anything *was* bothering him. But I'm his wife. I could read him like he could decipher a text, and I know for certain that he was greatly troubled. If we could find out what it was, I think we'd know why my husband is dead."

I shoot Judy a stern look to forestall any of Sister Brigit's insights about the dead. That Pratt was troubled by something is not exactly a hot lead, but maybe his state of mind is the best I'm going to get at this point. Since Mrs. Pratt has assumed I will accept her offer, I decide not to fight it.

"Well, Mrs. Pratt, if you think it would be helpful, I'm willing to see what I can come up with. We'll just take it week to week. You tell me to stop anytime you want. I'll bill you every two weeks."

"That's good, Mr. Mote. When do you think you can start?"

"I can start right now."

"Good."

"So there was something bothering your husband. Do you think there was also a who?"

"Yes. Professor Abramson."

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