

CHEMOTHERAPY  
A Greywalker story

By Kat Richardson

My would-be client started off by standing in the door, his face and front sticking out of its surface like a mortuary bas relief. His puff of white hair looked like laundry lint arrested in its earthward-drift by something sticky on the door's inside panel. He wasn't quite looking at me. In fact, he was dead, which made getting information out of him a bit tricky.

I knew I didn't want the case--whatever it was--but it's often easier to say "yes" to the dead and inhuman than to say "no." They can make persistent pests of themselves, turning up at odd times, knocking on the walls, and being general pains in my backside if I refuse. I'm the only PI in Seattle--possibly the only one anywhere--who can operate in their world as well as the normal one and they all seem to know it.

"They killed me. They killed me." His voice quavered with distress and indignation.

I nodded. "OK. I get that. Why don't you take a seat, give me some details, and I'll see what I can do for you?" I asked, but he just continued on the same complaint.

I rolled my eyes in disgust: a repeater. Ghosts come in a lot of varieties, from the ephemeral wisps and harmless unexplained cold spots in the hall, to revenants--conscious and alive in all but body. Repeaters have limited consciousness, looping through thoughts or events left over from their lives again and again. They're difficult clients; not very helpful if I can't knock them off their loop, and they never pay.

I tried another tack. "Who are you?" I demanded. "What's your name? Who killed you?" Questioning ghosts usually respond to offers of help or requests for information, but not this one; he just kept blithering.

I heaved a sigh and got up to lock the door. I'd have to conduct this interview in the Grey if I were to get anything useful out of him, and I'd need assured privacy to do that.

The Grey--the slippery overlap between the normal and the paranormal realms--is difficult and exhausting to work in for a naturalized citizen like me, though it's native country for ghosts and such. I didn't want anyone walking into the office while I was busy in it. My first Grey client said I "flicker." I don't know if that's the way anyone else sees it, but I don't want to freak out my normal clients if it's true.

I had to stick my hand into the ghost's left arm to reach the lock. A shock of cold electricity ripped up my forearm and plucked a profound chord on my ribs. I stifled the urge to gag and flicked the latch over, pulling my hand back as fast as I could. Greywalking had gotten easier with time, but it had never gotten much more pleasant.

The ghost jerked and stared down at his arm where I'd intersected it. Then the moment of volition ended and his gaze de-focused again.

I rubbed my now-aching elbow a moment, then took a deep breath and let go of my usual hold on the normal world.

The cold, unraveling feeling always starts in my chest, now. When all this began, there was a curtain between me and the Grey and I'd have to go through it. Now I have to filter it to keep it in check. Dropping that filter lets the Grey well up around me, but the feeling of the change starts in the knot of Grey-stuff that had been rammed into my chest way back at the beginning.

The Grey power grid snapped into view; bright, hot lines limning the world in neon. That was the easy part. The ghost in front of me was just a hazy mess afloat in a blazing wire-frame world. I'd forgotten to filter it to his level. I concentrated on it and the world became an overlap of misty images on images--time and place stacked on each other like overlapping film projections. Noisy with whisperings and clangings nothing to do with what was seen. And cold that stunk, suddenly, of disinfectant over persistent mold and old death.

I found myself face-to-face with a black man in his late sixties or so. He was very well-dressed in a suit he'd probably bought at Nordstrom and worn often to some office job--his residual concept of himself, complete with a memory of aftershave. He was a little stooped at the shoulder, but was still a tall guy.

"Hi," I started. "You wanted to see me?"

He blinked at me and looked me over as if I were the ethereal one. "They killed me...."

"So you said. How 'bout you come all the way in and sit down and you can tell me why I should give a damn."

He didn't move. "You're certainly rude enough for the job, young woman."

At least he'd gotten off his loop, though the tenor of the comment could have been nicer. I took half a step back before trudging across the misty floor to sit down in the gleaming shape of my desk chair. "I'm the only game in town, Mister. So, get to it, or go away and leave me alone."

In the Grey overlap of the room's past and present, there were a couple of extra ghost chairs and desks standing around, some sticking out of the living fog of the walls. Most had been gone so long that only the memory of their shape remained. My potential client finally came in and seated himself in one of the missing chairs--a Scandinavian shadow from some late-80s incarnation of my office space. But then he stopped. At this rate, it was a miracle he'd gotten to me at all. I had to lean over the desk and poke him--literally--to get his attention again.

"They killed me...."

"Yes," I said. "OK. What's your name?"

"Francis de Fayette Parker."

"And you believe you were murdered?"

"My family killed me like a dog in the pound."

I frowned. I can't count on ghosts to tell the truth, or even to know what it is. Death does not impart wisdom. Or common sense. "Who in particular? Which of your dearly beloved did the dirty deed?"

“They killed me.”

I gave in to the urge to sigh. “And what do you expect me to do about it?”

“Stop it!”

I leaned forward and braced my arms on the unseen surface of my desk. I was tired already. “Bit late, Mr. Parker: you’re dead.”

He glared through me. “They killed me! They killed me! Stop it!”

Damn, damn, damn. Looping again. The temptation was to hit him, but it’s not so easy to smack someone who’s only sort of there. I get lucky, sometimes, but it’s not a sure thing and it’s not pleasant for me to touch them. The dead press into me as much as I into them. It’s a bit stomach-wrenching to be plunged into whatever emotions and physical turmoils they’re still carrying around. Not to mention they’re dead.

I’m not and I have that unfortunate level of sanity that abhors attempting to be both at once. This would not be inconvenient if every conscious dead and undead thing west of the Cascades didn’t drift in and play hob with my life whenever the fancy took them. Plenty of not-so-conscious ones have a go, too.

I watched Francis Parker chant for a moment. As a ghost, he was a wreck. Short trigger radius. Short loop. He seemed to have retained his intelligence, though, but only some on-again-off-again willpower. It had to be hell being him. Like a paralysis victim who could only blink but was fine mentally.

That, I suppose, decided me.

“Parker!” I yelled at him. “Frank!”

He went on.

I braced myself and snatched at his wrist.

It felt as if he’d punched me in the gut. He flooded into me on a rip curl of chill, sucking my breath out and cracking me open. Gasping, airless, burning from the inside, ice-sheeted skin, crumble-boned in toxin-wracked flesh.

His eyes flared into incandescence and glared into me, breaking the loop. My body resonated with his voice.

Poison!

It burned into us, through the age and the illness and the exhaustion....

I tore myself loose with the sensation of leaving skin behind on a hot stove. I swallowed convulsively and caught my breath, kept my distance.

Parker stared at me, his eyes as bright and alive as if he still wore flesh. And then the dulling started.

I couldn’t let him go just yet. “When did you die?” I demanded. “I’ll find out what happened, but give me a place to start.”

“Feb’wa...” The left corner of his mouth turned up as he slipped into a seam in the mist.

I ripped my way out of the Grey and slumped at my desk, shivering and uneasy. There was something more than usually strange about Francis Parker.

Once I'd put myself back together, I headed up the hill to the County Records Office to dig up Parker's death certificate. I started in the current year, but finally found him in February about two years earlier. He'd died of complications related to cancer and his chemotherapy. He'd been seventy-two. This didn't look like a murder, but the corpse was convinced. Maybe he'd believed his pain pills or chemo were meant to kill him. I'd have to poke around a bit more if I was going to get him off my back. I wrote down some details to follow up, then made a phone call.

Detective Solis answered his own phone. He always says his name with the emphasis on the second syllable: "sol-EES." It strikes me as oddly appropriate, since "solace" doesn't seem like his gig.

"Hey, it's Harper Blaine. Can you answer a question for me?"

"Ask the question." The noises below his Columbian accent sounded like the Criminal Investigations office in the black-glass Justice Center a few blocks away. I imagined he was hunching the phone into his shoulder as he transcribed from one of his scribbled notepads, a frown creasing his round, pock-marked face.

"First, was there ever any kind of homicide investigation into the death of a man named Francis de Fayette Parker in February about two years ago?"

He paused before replying, "None I see here."

"And what would be required to open one?"

"On a two-year-old non-suspicious death? Evidence. Strong evidence. Maybe a confession, medical report, some physical evidence. Otherwise, we got enough to do here."

"What about an autopsy?"

"You have a suspicious report?"

"Nope. Death was while under doctor's care. No autopsy."

"Then you need an exhumation--if you got a body. If you got ashes, you're probably out of luck. But you need evidence to convince the M.E. to issue the exhumation order."

"That's nicely circular."

"Typical. But nine times outta ten on a cold homicide the perpetrator confesses as soon as we show the badge. Most people, they can't live with the guilt. You get a confession, you can get an exhumation to confirm it."

So I'd be working backward. I'd have to solve the case to prove that there was one. Or not. I did not bless Frank Parker for bringing his death to me.

Seattle has a reputation for cancer treatment, but there are still only a handful of hospitals doing long-term care. The doctor's name was on the death certificate, so it didn't take long to find out where he was working and make an appointment to see him. Parker's physician didn't remember him, particularly. He was in a hurry and aside from confirming the cause of death, he had nothing to say and refused to give me a copy of the medical record.

The long-term care ward Frank Parker had died in was just down the hall from his office and I discreetly headed that way. I had to steel myself against the brush of ghosts and streamers of emotional residue that hung the walls like rotting drapes. The area hummed with fear, pain,

and despair amid that strange odor of hospitals: chilled flowers, bland food, and cleaning fluid.

I hunted around, just shy of making a pest of myself and being run off, until I found a nurse who'd been on the long-term oncology care ward when Parker was a patient. She also didn't remember him, but she was more willing to talk and to look into the files. She wasn't any less tired or harried than the doctor, so I suspected she was using me as an excuse to sit down for a little while. She paid no attention to the swirling fog of switched-off lives that flowed through the room as if it were a cul-de-sac in the stream of the afterlife.

"Looks like... two sons and a daughter-in-law came around a few times," she said, her aura a thin smog of exhaustion around her. She looked up from the file, creasing her face with thought, then smiled, a momentary blush passing through the dull color of her energy corona. "Oh, yeah... the couple had a toddler with them once or twice. Rambunctious little thing. Sad way to see grandpa, though. Hmm. There's a note in here about one of the sons carrying in a gun, once. We asked him not to come back, but we didn't enforce it."

"A gun?" I asked. "Why?"

She shrugged. "Who knows? Probably just a punk acting tough."

"Did anyone else visit Parker, volunteers, friends from church?"

The tansitory color around her died. "No. We do have a few volunteers, but they don't come down here if they can avoid it. They call this Death Row, y'know. Every patient here's gonna leave in a bag. It's kinda depressing for the kids, so they bring us coffee and drop things off, but they find excuses to leave real fast. The older volunteers are better, but even they don't linger."

That was sad, but it didn't help me figure out what was driving Frank Parker out of his grave. "Were any of the family here when Parker died?" I inquired.

"Looks like they all were," she said. That didn't make it any easier for me, since it didn't narrow the field of suspects.

I tried a different approach. Maybe motive would be more enlightening. "What was Parker like; was he an easy patient?"

"I really don't remember," the nurse replied, shaking her head in an off-hand manner, little green spikes of dishonesty dashing away from her, into the darkness that crept at the corners of the room. "This file indicates we had him on a morphine drip, so he must have been in pain most of the time. Bad reactions to the chemo--the usual thing: nausea, pain, rash, vomiting, headaches, hair loss. He got a bit of a fever a few times, was too weak to move himself, needed a lot of help. The family seems to have pitched in a lot."

"Could his symptoms have been poisoning?"

She looked bemused. "Well sure. That's what chemotherapy is--calibrated doses of potentially toxic substances to kill off the cancer, but not enough to kill off too many healthy cells. All drugs are potential poisons and a lot of the drugs we use are heavy metals in the same broad family as arsenic and so on. Toxicity is all about the dosage. Chemo is low-dose. Poison is high-dose. But Parker must have been pretty bad, or we wouldn't have given him the morphine. It does nothing but reduce the pain, so once we've got 'em on morphine, we're just waiting it out."

She made a face that hardened into a shell of professional distance, her aura going darker and colder before she went on, “Let’s be real: this is the bargain basement of oncology. We’re not going to work any miracles in a county hospital with no research funds and patients who are at the end of their insurance money. We do our best, but everyone knows this is the last stop and if we let every patient into our hearts, we’ll go crazy. We can’t let ourselves love them or become angels to the family. Some nurses do weird things when they think they’ll be loved for this. The family can be just as bad. We can’t let that happen, for all our sakes. It’s bad enough knowing that some of these guys could go just a little easier, but we don’t have the legal option to let patients opt out of life. If you think that makes me cruel... well we’re the cruelest bunch of stone-hearted monsters you’re ever going to meet.”

She shoved the file back into a drawer as she colored under a sudden red flush of impotent anger, slammed it closed, and stood up. “I have to get back to work.”

“Just one more question,” I said. “Do your patients ever... get a little help out of here from their families or friends?”

Her eyes narrowed to wary slits, colors flickering in her energy corona like suspicious satellites reflecting distant suns. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Afraid of cracking that stone heart of yours?”

With a snort, she turned her shoulder to me and began stalking down the hall, the colors around her form bleeding to the hue of a dark green sea. “I bleed gravel.”

I shook my own head and left the hospital. I already knew about Parker’s family from the death certificate and obit files: two sons, a daughter-in-law, a grandchild. If he’d been poisoned, it would have to have been one of them. The grandchild was out, being a mere toddler at the time and not likely to have slipped something clever into granddad’s medication cup. I’d have to talk to the sons.

I put in another call to Solis. My mysterious leads had paid off for him in the past, so he reluctantly agreed to meet me at the address I provided. But he didn’t like it and he said he’d be late. That was fine with me.

I used my cell phone to call ahead. Daniel Parker, Frank Parker’s younger son, was just as reluctant to talk to me as the doctor, but he agreed, since I was nearly on his doorstep. He let me in when I arrived.

Daniel was about thirty and had the trim, quick wariness of a feral cat and a dark, old scar down the length of his left temple and cheek. He had a curious yellow-orange light around him as he ushered me in with a finger to his lips. “Tanika just fell asleep. Today’s been rough, so can we keep this quick and quiet?” I guessed the color of his aura was anxiety over something that wasn’t just me.

“Sure,” I said, following him into a tiny home office lined with heavy tomes and stacks of discarded bar-review guides, files, and scribbled yellow pads. “Is Tanika your daughter?”

“Niece,” he said over his shoulder as he closed the door behind us. He took a seat near me. “She’s been sick a while. Been a rough couple years for all of us, y’know, with dad and all. And what did you want to ask me about him, anyway?”

“I wanted to ask you about what happened at the hospital.”

He closed his eyes and shook his head. “Man, that was two years ago. Who’d make a big deal out of that now?”

I just kept my mouth shut and my eyes level on his face.

He dropped his gaze and rubbed one finger nervously over his scar. “Look, I was stupid, I ran with the wrong guys when I was a kid. It was hard to get out. But some of those guys... they don’t let go easy and they kept showing up. The gun--that was the only way I thought I could be safe, then. I wasn’t gonna shoot him. I just wanted to be left alone. If it came up, now, I could be disbarred. But it was nothing. Nothing happened. Why ruin me over that?”

A thin scraping sound moved down the corridor outside.

“You didn’t poison your father, then.”

He jerked and stared at me. “What?! No! Dad died of cancer!” His professional demeanor and careful speech slipped back to his gangsta days. “Why you think anybody’d kill him? He was dyin’ already!”

“There’s a reason they call it ‘mercy killing,’ Mr. Parker.”

He stared around the room as if trying to find an answer in the dim, book-filled corners of the tiny office. “God... they couldn’t...” Something thumped into the door. Daniel’s eyes widened and the muscles in his jaw bunched, making the scar writhe. He jumped to his feet. “The little mother--.”

He yanked the door open and nearly stepped on the tiny child who tumbled into the room. He stooped and scooped her into his arms. She shivered and made a gagging sound against his chest.

She was the smallest five-year-old I’d ever seen and to my senses she flickered in and out of the Grey with the sighing of wind over dry grass, the flickering of someone who was dying. Skinny, with mahogany skin patched with rashes like ash smears, and wispy dark hair that grew unevenly on her head. Something about her symptoms seemed horribly familiar.

Daniel Parker cuddled her close, in spite of the reek of vomit that clung to the child. “Baby, baby. How y’doin’, girl?” he crooned to her, still kneeling on the rug, rocking, with his whole body wrapped around her.

I felt the pieces click together. “When did she get sick?” I asked.

“Year, year-and-a-half,” he mumbled back. A couple of miserable tears squeezed from the corners of his eyes before he could bear to look at me again.

He started to say more, but a woman ran into the hall and saw us. I guessed this was Janeece Parker, Daniel’s sister-in-law. She was too thin, but beautiful in it, burning with an unpleasant inner glow that shone through from the Grey like shipwreck lights through Welsh fog, sending hungry green tendrils seeking in all directions. She stopped a moment, then darted forward, holding out her arms.

“Give her to me, Daniel.” Command resonated in her voice and she gleamed brighter with unnatural avarice and twisted love. Her horrific aura thrummed and sent toxic creepers over Tanika, stroking and tightening with possessive pride. The sight made me ill.

Daniel’s jaw bunched again and he started a retort, cut off by the doorbell.

I looked Frank Parker's daughter-in-law in the eye, almost feeling his presence against my back, like a bad spy. "That's probably the police. Answer the door. We'll take care of Tanika." No way I'd let her near the girl, again; the ugly green threads of psychic avarice and sickness that tied her to the child told me she was responsible for Tanika's condition. I just needed some proof, which might be found in Frank Parker's remains.

Janeece flared her nostrils and glared at me, but she turned and went to the door to let Solis in. Daniel and I followed her into the living room.

Janeece jabbed an accusatory finger my direction. "That woman broke into our house! She's trying to steal my baby!"

Solis turned his impassive face to me. He looked at Daniel and Tanika. Then back at me.

"I believe she's been poisoning this child for more than a year," I explained. "My guess would be arsenic or another heavy metal." The rash and hair loss, the perverse pleasure her mother took in the girl's wasting illness, had all clicked into place with what the nurse had said and I knew what must have happened. I glanced at Daniel and lifted my eyebrow. Should I go on...? He gave a grim nod over Tanika's bowed head. "My guess is she poisoned her father-in-law, Francis de Fayette Parker, also. Exhumation should prove the link."

"What are you saying?"

We all looked around at the new player standing in the open front doorway, clutching an attache case. In thirty years, he'd be a dead ringer for his father.

"You're Frank Parker Junior?" I asked.

"Yes. What's going on, here?"

Solis fell back and to the side where he could see us all. He offered his ID to the newcomer. "Detective Solis, Seattle P.D. Homicide. I'm sorry. I'm here to arrest your wife for poisoning your daughter and your father."

Frank Jr. stared at Solis in horror, then looked at his wife. "Dad wanted to go. But... not our little girl.... Janeece? Why--?"

Daniel lost it. "You killed Dad?" he shouted. Still holding Tanika, he started toward his older brother, his scar dancing as hard feelings flickered across his face.

I could hear Solis muttering into his handheld for back-up.

I tapped Daniel on the shoulder. "Don't. You're all she's got."

He stopped moving, but quivered where he stood, clutching Tanika to his chest and staring at his brother and sister-in-law.

Four of Seattle's finest arrived a few minutes later and broke the party up, arresting both Frank and Janeece Parker. Family Services would come later for Tanika, but for now, she was still in her uncle's arms and, I thought, safe.

Solis just looked at me and shook his head as I slipped out in the press and confusion of cops.

I found my client lurking by the door. He wafted behind me for a block, then stopped. I opened my cell phone and pretended to make a call.

"They killed you because you asked them to, didn't they? 'Like a dog in the pound' you

said. An old, sick dog that any decent human being would put out of his misery. But the law says you can't do the same for a man."

"Frank is a good boy. Always does as he's told," he replied.

"And Janeece?"

"Janeece used to bring me custard every day--my favorite."

The oblique replies annoyed me, but there wasn't much I could do. As a repeater, Parker's communication was limited, but he made do, just as he had in my office.

"You gave them up to save your granddaughter. But you know it's your fault, don't you? Janeece was a martyr to your illness--even while she killed you--and I'll bet she liked being admired for her apparent selflessness. There nurse on your ward warned me about that. Once you were gone, Janeece just replaced you with Tanika."

Parker looked past me. "She's the shining star of my life, that child."

"Yeah. Well. There's still a long road ahead for her and Daniel. You could have moved a little sooner, you rotten old corpse."

He finally looked right at me and I wished he hadn't. He grabbed my elbow, his phantom fingers sinking into my bones with a jolt of energy. I felt time reel and stumble. I wrenched myself away and looked at my phone. Six minutes had vanished in an instant. "OK. Point taken. Are you satisfied? I stopped Janeece from killing Tanika the way she did you. When you said 'stop them' that's what you meant, isn't it? That's what you asked for. Are we done, now?"

The left corner of his mouth lifted into a smile, then he flashed into brilliance and faded away.

I would have to content myself with the thought that a young life was probably saved. The gods knew there was little else to prize in that situation. I rubbed my eyes and closed the phone.

###