

## Discovering Susan Belle

By Sean Michael

New York City traffic! The most unattractive aspect of this city. Forget about the pickpockets who work over the crowded sidewalks and subways in broad daylight, the traffic is far worse! As the driver ahead of me attempted to squeeze his Cadillac into an impossibly tiny space at the side of the road, I leaned on my horn and spat a few choice words. He gave up his wishful thinking and the slow procession of cars resumed.

I glanced at the clock on the dash, 9:31 A.M. I'd been in traffic for an hour with less than five miles to travel. I'd have been better off jogging it, minus the six-inch heels, of course. About a block from the scene I found a place to park and quickly walked the rest of the way. My heart sank into the pit of my stomach when I arrived and saw that the area was bereft of the usual swarms of people that tend to gather when there's a tragedy in the city. Then I spotted two detectives in black suits climbing into a Crown Victoria.

"Excuse me. Excuse me, detectives, can I have a moment of your time?" I called. "Would you mind giving a statement about what happened here this morning?"

"No, you can't, and yes, I would," replied the short, overweight curly-haired detective climbing into the passenger seat.

"Ongoing investigation," added his tall, robust counterpart on the driver's side.

"A young woman died here today," I persisted. "Has it been determined whether her death was accidental, suicide, or homicide?"

"You're a little late getting here. The scene's been cleared," the driver said. Curly hair was already in the car jotting in a leather-bound notebook.

"There was an accident on the way, as if the traffic isn't bad enough already, right?" I stated in my defense, then extended my hand. "Michelle Wisely with the New York Post."

He shook my hand, then said, "Detective DeMarco, Homicide division."

"So the woman was murdered?" I began digging in my handbag for my pen and pad.

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"I didn't say that. Homicide is called to investigate all deaths in the city. But we aren't releasing any official statements to the press as to what happened here today. A woman died, that's all I've got for you."

"Wait. How about something unofficial, detective?" I said, giving him my best pearly white, if not coquettish, smile.

Briefly thinking this over, he said: "How's about I give you the scoop over lunch. I know a nice Italian Bistro in Brooklyn, best stuff in town."

"Engaged," I said with, hopefully, a rueful expression and lifted my left hand so that he could see the diamond on my finger.

"You're new, right? I haven't seen you before. It's usually that other lady, what's her name, with the Post."

"She left. This is my first real assignment. That's why you've got to help me out here, detective."

"Let's get a move on!" Curly hair hollered from inside the car. "Jesus H. Christ, I'm dying here!"

"Next time, wisely show up on time if you want the story, Wisely." DeMarco said with large emphasis on the word wisely. I gave him a "not-so-amused" look and he said: "Alright, this one time you get a pass. The lady's name was Susan Belle. She was young still, in her thirties, and it looks like a suicide, no sign of a struggle. Took a dive from the window, fifth floor," he gestured to a tall red brick building behind me, "and ker-splat. Right there on the sidewalk, pretty messy."

I looked to my right where he had pointed and saw the vestige of a blood stain the size of a manhole. "Uh, thanks, Is there anything else you can give me?"

"Nope!" he said smugly. "Tubby here needs to be fed, burped and put down for a nap. Be seeing ya, Wisely."

"Be seeing ya," I said as the Crown Victoria pulled away from the curb and left me there on the sidewalk pondering my next move. Susan Belle, the name tugged at some corner of my

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brain. I was sure that I had heard it before but where? Susan Belle... then it struck me like a ton of bricks. "Susan Belle, the author!" I shouted at myself.

She had written at least one book that I knew of, a collection of poetry called, Belle's Lettres. I remembered my Language Arts teacher, Mr. Mark, recommending it to the class in my senior year of high school. Never much into poetry, I hadn't read it. But this development made my story that much better, maybe front-page material. Thank you, Mr. Mark, I thought. Then came the guilt. A woman had purportedly committed suicide, and I was jumping for joy because she had been an author and it might lend stature to my story. Forgive me, Susan...

I found her name on the directory board of the complex and pressed one of the call buttons at random. A gruff voice answered, and I pretended to be a tenant who had locked herself out. I rode the elevator to the fifth floor.

The air in the hall was stale and musty. The dust appeared to have been gathering for years on the yellowing walls and in the stained brown carpets. I found apartment 513. The edges of the door were sealed with crime scene tape. I tried the knob but it didn't budge. I knocked on 512 and, when there was no answer, knocked again. Someone inside yelled, "Go away!" Then I tried 514. The second time I knocked a very hairy, pot-bellied man in speedo underwear answered the door.

"What can I do for you? I'm busy," he said tersely. He seemed to brighten up a bit as I explained who I was.

"Hi, my name is Michelle Wisely with the New York Post. I was wondering if you knew the woman who lived next door, Susan Belle."

"Course I knew her, though not very well. She kept to herself mostly. Heard she offed herself this morning. That's what all the cops and ruckus was about."

"Is there anything you can tell me about Susan? Why do you think she would take her own life?"

"Put my name in your article?"

"Sure, quote you by name if you give me something worthy."

“David Grey. Not my real name, of course but more fashionable than Juan Santos. I’m an artist. Well, I paint, haven’t sold anything yet. Come on in!”

“Mind putting on some pants first?” I requested.

“Oh honey, you’re not my type. He’s in the bedroom naked, as we speak. I was just about to...”

“Alright! Alright!” I said brusquely. “I get the point, thanks.”

“Paint his nude portrait is what I was going to say. He has an excellent physique. So you coming in or what? I’ll tell you everything I know about Ms. Susan, so long as you keep your promise.”

“Promise?” I asked following him into the apartment. My sense of smell was bombarded with the stench of cigarette smoke. I noticed canvases, many of them unfinished, spread throughout the living room.

“That you’ll put my name in your article, right?”

“Oh! Yeah, sure. Your full name--David Grey,” I agreed.

Grey ushered me to a recliner, offered me a drink that I declined, then left the room. Thankfully, returning with a robe wrapped around his body. He sat on the sofa across from me and retrieved a pack of Light 100s from the table, offering me one. Again, I declined.

“So, what do you want to know about Susan?” Grey asked, placing the cigarette between his lips and flicking the lighter. Thank God for small favors, it would not light.

“What was she like?” I asked as he tossed the cigarette and lighter back on the table.

“One time we rode the elevator up together, and she had this mangy little kitten with her. I think it was a stray. Susan seemed like a nice enough person, but I think she also had a bit of a dark side, if you know what I mean.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, sometimes she would go out and return with different men, and sometimes women, and these walls are thin. I heard everything. One night, she came back with this good looking guy, she was cursing and asking him to hit her. It lasted about an hour. After he left, I

listened to her cry for another hour. And the scars on her arms..."

"Do you have any idea who the man that came home with her was?"

"No. Never saw the same one twice, assumed she was picking them up at bars or something."

"Okay. You said something about scars?"

"I helped Susan carry in her groceries one time. I couldn't help but notice the scars, deep scars. Up and down both of her forearms. I don't think a piece of flesh wasn't ruined. I think that Susan might have been hurt badly at some point in her life and never healed," Grey observed pensively.

I didn't think that I was going to get any more information about Susan from Grey, but I'd gathered enough for now. I had learned that Susan Belle was a bit of a recluse, though her sex life, if a bit grotesque, was not lacking. She took high risks in her promiscuity, picking up strangers from bars and bringing them to her apartment. I got the impression that she did not think very highly of herself. She apparently attempted suicide previously or had found some sort of morbid joy in self-mutilation. She was young and attractive, had authored at least one book... What had happened to Susan Bell?

I was preparing to leave when David Grey said: "Could I show you some of my paintings? Not this stuff you see here, I've got better work in my studio. Maybe you could write a little something about them--in another article."

"Thanks, maybe some other time," I said. "I have to get back to the paper."

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At my cubical, I called the mental and medical hospitals in the area and asked if Susan Belle had ever been admitted to their care. Of course, they cited patient confidentiality, and I was unable to persuade them using the newspaper. I hurried to my boss's office on the second floor. "Hello, Mr. Kelly, I ..."

"It's about time you showed up!" he bellowed.

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“The traffic was terrible. There was a ...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. What have you got for me?”

“Susan Belle, the author. That was the call we heard this morning. It looks like she committed suicide. I was able to gather some information from detectives and a neighbor, but I think this has the potential to be a much larger story. If you would allow me to ...”

“Susan Belle was a one-hit wonder. She hasn’t written a book in ten years. This story can’t get any better unless it turns out she was murdered. Write up the story, have it on my desk by five. We’ll follow up in a few days. If it doesn’t go anywhere, forget about it. What else?”

I was taken aback by Mr. Kelley’s apathy, then I remembered my own reaction upon recalling that Susan Belle had been an author. I guessed that being a bit jaded was a requisite to making an art of scribing the world’s miseries.

“That was the only assign...”

“That’s right! Have the article on my desk by five, no later, and keep it brief. I’ll find a spot for it on the back page.”

“I went back to my cubicle and typed this brief piece:

Author Susan Belle has died on August 29, 2012 in an apparent suicide at the age of 31. It is unclear exactly what factors have led to the author’s death or if drugs and alcohol played a roll. Susan Belle is the author of Belle’s Lettres, which was published in 2003 by House of Poets. It was her only book.

Mr. Kelley approved the article and I went home. I decided to stop at Barnes & Noble along the way. After an unfruitful search of the shelves, the young woman behind the register informed me that the store could order Belle’s Lettres for me from the publisher. I gave her my name and address and charged the cost to my credit card. It would take approximately two weeks for the book to arrive.

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My cat, Brady, greeted me at the door. No fiancée, I'm not really engaged--not anymore. I called off the wedding a few months ago after discovering that the man, who had proposed to me, was sleeping with not one but two different women the entire time we were together. I'm glad I found out before making the biggest mistake of my frickin life! I wear the ring now as sort of a repellent. Maybe I shouldn't blame all men for another's indiscretions but, for the time being, I do. Hell hath no fury, right? You should see the damage a diamond can do to a paint job, if you disagree. I also called the other two women and calmly explained to them what they may or may not have already known.

Brady meowed and caressed my legs. "Oh, you're just hungry. So am I, come on," I said and went into the kitchen with Brady at my feet. I opened a can of cat food for Brady and made a lettuce, tomato, and ham sandwich on toasted wheat bread, no mayo, for me. I took a bite and decided to meet Mr. Kelley's advice about dismissing Susan Belle's story with quiet sedition. Or maybe I'd already made this decision subconsciously when I ordered her book. I finished eating, changed Brady's litter, took a shower, then crawled into bed and promptly fell asleep.

The next day I was sent to the courthouse to view the sentencing of a man who had been convicted of murdering his mother and stepfather during a domestic dispute at their upper Manhattan home. Before surrendering, the man had barricaded himself inside with the bodies for more than three hours. Police had used non-lethal rounds to subdue the man, who had finally run from the house screaming, "Kill me!"

Upon entering the home, investigators had found the reposed bodies of his parents, stabbed multiple times with a large kitchen knife, then apparently stripped nude and scrubbed clean with a towel, lying side-by-side beneath a white sheet. The killer was found to be mentally ill and, in a plea bargain, that avoided the death penalty, was sentenced to serve two consecutive life terms. The story was printed in section A3 of the front page.

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A week passed and I wrote a brief follow-up piece regarding the death of Susan Belle, only adding that drugs and alcohol were not considered a factor in her death, and both the medical examiners and investigators have concluded that her death was suicide. That night I returned to Susan Belle's apartment complex and used the same trick I'd used before to gain entrance.

As I stepped off the elevator I noticed that the door to 513 was ajar. I knocked on the door and called: "Hello? Is somebody here?" I was about to knock again when the door swung open.

An exceptionally handsome man with dark eyes and hair, wearing khaki pants and a black T-shirt stood in the doorway. "Can I help you?" he asked.

"Hm, yes, hi. My name is Michelle Wisely from the New York Post. Are you a friend of Susan's? Would it be okay if I spoke with you?"

"Not interested in speaking to the media. Susan wouldn't be either." He began to close the door.

"I'm not actually here on behalf of the newspaper," I said quickly.

The door swung back open and I was again met by the sober countenance of the man who had suddenly caused me to reconsider living a single and sexless life. Without deliberation I quickly had my ring finger in a fist at my side.

"Are you a friend of Susan's?" he asked.

"Not actually. I was sent here by the paper a week ago to investigate Susan's death. My editor has since told me to drop the story, but I'm not ready to," I explained. "I think there's more to her than the fact that she wrote a book in 2003 and killed herself ten years later. And her story deserves to be told."

"What do you plan to do, convince your editor to print a story he's already nixed and forgotten? What makes you think Susan's story is so fucking great? The New York Post doesn't give a damn about Susan Belle. They're only concerned with how sensational a story her death can be. Well, I've got news for you. There's nothing sensational about it! God, why do people

thrive on the misery of others?”

“I’m sorry if I offended you,” I said. “That wasn’t my intention. I’m here, actually... Truth be told, I’m not sure why I’m here. At first, I came only for the story but now I can’t explain it. Susan’s like a -- black rose in my garden. She makes me wonder.”

The man eyed me pensively and I said: “Could I ask you your name? Or you could just tell me to go away and I will. I see you’re packing the place up...”

“My name’s Michael. Come in. Help me box some of this stuff. I followed Michael into the living room, a small radio was playing quietly on the coffee table. “What are you listening to?” I asked conversationally and, remembering the ring on my finger, slipped it off and dropped it into my handbag when he wasn’t looking.

“Whatever is on the radio; I needed some sounds, you know. Couldn’t survive in here if it were completely silent. I’m actually kind of glad you showed up.”

“Me too. So how do you know Susan?”

“I’ve known her since we were kids. We were best friends, inseparable, until she moved away. I haven’t spoken to her in ten years; she cut us all off. Only reason I’m here now is because she sent me a letter with a key to her apartment before she died. Would you mind grabbing those books off the shelf over there?”

“Where are you from?” I asked at the bookcase. I retrieved a couple of books and perused their titles: “The American Experience: Fiction” from MacMillan, “How to Talk to Your Cat” by Claire Bessant.

“Small town in Nebraska called Lincoln. Put the books in that box right there please. How long have you been a newspaper reporter?”

“Honestly, Susan was my first real story. Before last week I spent most of my time winnowing papers.”

“That explains it.”

“What?”

“Why you can’t let it go. You always lived in New York?”

“Brooklyn girl through and through.”

“Really? Is it true what they say about Brooklyn girls?”

“What do they say?” I asked defensively.

Michael chuckled. “Nothing. I’m just kidding with you.”

“Good one! Hey this book’s funny.” I held up “How to Talk to Your Cat.”

“I can’t stand cats,” Michael said.

“Oh, come on! I have a cat. And Susan’s neighbor told me she brought in a stray one time, must be why she got the book.”

“Doesn’t surprise me. Susan’s always loved animals. I remember once she found an injured bird and nursed it back to complete health. She had a heart the size of Texas. I don’t think she could have hurt a fly.”

“She didn’t mind hurting herself though,” I stated carelessly.

Michael eyed me for a moment. “Neighbor tell you that too?” he asked harshly. Then, “I’m sorry. This situation has got me all messed up, I loved Susan. I guess I’m being a bit protective. That’s what she needed, you know, somebody to protect her. I should have never let her go or I should have gone with her. But I couldn’t convince her to stay. All she ever talked about was getting away and going to New York to be a writer. I remember the first poem she ever wrote; she was fourteen. We were sitting in a field beneath an oak tree with a rope swing hanging from its branch when she read it to me. The rope swing was swaying slightly from side to side.” Michael recited the poem to me.

The flower was pretty,  
Growing amid the thorns,  
Tall above the rest.  
But the thorns overwhelmed and strangled the  
flower to death.  
I collected its petals,

I wanted to save them,  
But a vicious wind swept and stole them,  
And I knew that I would never see the pretty flower again...

“I think the flower she wrote about was symbolic of herself. I think everyone else was the thorns.”

“You loved her. I don’t think she thought of you as a thorn,” I said.

“You don’t understand! You don’t know Susan like I do! She could not allow herself to be loved. Believe me, I was a thorn. Anyone close to her was a thorn because we couldn’t save her from her pain. The worst part is we were the ones who hurt her the most.

“Her father got his drunken kicks by beating the shit out of her and her mother as often as possible. And for some unexplainable reason Susan’s mother blamed her for all their problems. Because she was born I guess.”

“That’s horrible,” I said quietly.

“The last time that I saw Susan I had gone to her home to pick her up for the movie theater. I could hear them through the screen. Her father was drunk. Susan was wearing a jean miniskirt and a low-cut T-shirt. Her father said she looked like a whore, and if she wanted to be a whore, he’d show her how to be a whore. You know what Susan did? She spit on him! You know what her mother did? She stood there and watched.

“I ran into the house to pull him off of her but not before he’d blackened both her eyes and split her lip. Then he bloodied my nose. As we ran from the house, her mother and father stood at the door hollering that we had better come back. Susan vowed that she wouldn’t. I didn’t know that she’d been saving money, planning her escape to New York.

“That night, we made love for the first and last time beneath the oak tree, and I begged her to wait until I saved enough money to go with her. She said that she couldn’t wait any longer. She had to go now before it was too late.”

I was speechless.

"If I had known that was to be the last time we spoke, that we would never speak again, I'd have come out here a lot sooner and tracked her down. She wouldn't be dead now."

"You can't blame yourself, Michael, you loved and protected her as much as she would allow you to. And if you had come to New York and she didn't want to be found, then you wouldn't have found her. There's over eight million people in this city."

"Well, I would have tried! God, you New Yorkers can be such cynics. No wonder Susan felt at home here. Anyway, there are some boxes in the bedroom. Would you mind taking care of some of that stuff while I finish up in here?"

"No problem," I said and headed toward the bedroom. "And I am NOT a cynic. This city's just full of harsh realities."

The mirror of the vanity was shattered. I gathered the few items that were there and packed them, emptied the dresser drawers, stripped the bed of linen, then moved to Susan's neglected closet. A few blouses, an ugly wool scarf, and a black leather trench coat hung on plastic hangers. In the corner on the floor was a white file box with a lid. I carried the box to the bed and removed the lid. It was filled haphazardly with handwritten pages of poetry. I pulled one out at random and read it. Then another. I continued to peruse Susan Belle's esoteric poetry until Michael found me on the edge of the bed, my face tear-streaked with mascara.

"What's the matter, Michelle?" he asked entering the room.

I quickly brushed away the tears and said: "Oh, I was just reading some of Susan's poems. There are hundreds of them."

Michael stooped down and grabbed the poem that had fallen from my hand and floated to the floor. He read it silently, then said: "Talk about harsh realities, huh?"

"Jeesh, I never really liked poetry. Always thought it was flowery hillsides and monarchs floating in golden rays of sunshine. I certainly never thought a poem would move me to tears!"

"Susan'll do that to you. Here," he said pulling a black bandanna from inside his pocket. "Susan is the deepest, darkest, most beautiful poet I've ever read. But I guess I'm a bit biased."

"No, you're right. She can give profound meaning to the simplest of words."

“Why couldn’t she give it to herself?” he wondered out loud. The question hung in the air between us. “I don’t know,” he finally said answering himself, and we sat there a minute in silence, pondering that which we would never be given the answers to.

“I need to use the bathroom,” I said. “Would you excuse me?”

“Sure. It’s back in the living room to the right.”

I found a bar of soap in the drawer beneath the sink and scrubbed my hands and face, then repaired my makeup. Michael was in the living room when I returned.

“So now that you’ve got your story what will you do with it?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “I’m hungry. I can’t think on an empty stomach.”

“Can I take you out to eat? I’m a bit hungry myself.”

“Have you found any good restaurants since you’ve been here in New York?”

“No, but I’m sure that you could point me in the right direction if you were to accept my offer.”

“So, this is an official date then?”

“Yeah. It’s an official date.”

“Well, I accept your offer.”

“Come along then, I’m dreadfully famished,” he said in a horrible imitation of a New York accent, and I laughed. He smiled and extended his hand. I accepted it, and we left the sadness of Susan Belle’s apartment, taking a piece of her with us in our hearts.

The End

**Sean Michael bio:** Sean Michael is 28 years old, currently incarcerated in California and writes to retain sanity. He is holding on by a string. His grandmother manages his blog and you can visit it at [www.madpoetenchained.wordpress.com](http://www.madpoetenchained.wordpress.com).