
William Lashner

Past Due
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William Lashner on *Past Due*: An interrogation

The following interrogation of William Lashner was performed in the basement of the Roundhouse, Philadelphia Police Headquarters. As per police regulations, the room was dank, full of shadows, and the single light in the room was focused on the subject's face. The subject was read his rights and declined representation of counsel, but he did ask for a pair of sunglasses and a cruller.

Do you know why you're here?

Because I have a book coming out in May called *Past Due*? Could that be it?

Don't be smart with us, smart guy. We're trying to get a lowdown on some bird name of Victor Carl. You know him?

Sure I do. A Philadelphia lawyer, strictly low rent, always looking to make a dishonest dime.

A real ambulance chaser, huh?

Victor chases ambulances with the same devotion and enthusiasm as dogs chase cars. Whenever an ambulance stops short he cracks a tooth. But he also handles the occasional high profile murder case when it falls into his lap, like in *Fatal Flaw*. Or now and again a wrongful death suit, like in *Bitter Truth*. Or, just recently, the investigation of a murder as recounted in *Past Due*, when a client, a career criminal named Joey Cheaps, gets his throat slit on some pier down by the waterfront. Victor decides he owes it to his client to find out why he was killed. It is sort of a moral decision, to find the killer, and it has nothing to do with the pictures of the naked woman he finds and obsesses over, or with the suitcase full of money that is out there, waiting to be snatched. Really, it isn't those things at all. Victor is just trying to do the right thing.

And we're supposed to believe that?

Well, no. But as his partner says, Victor usually does the right thing, just for the wrong reasons.

So how does it turn out?

Not so well. Victor stumbles on the remnants of a drug ring, decades old, and that leads to a sitting Supreme Court justice who might be involved in Joey's murder and another murder that happened twenty years before. As soon as the justice gets involved the law seems to turn against Victor. The DA starts giving him a hard time, a client gets unfairly slammed in court, and a routine appearance in Traffic Court ends with Victor behind bars. I mean, he was speeding and he ran a stop sign but still.

A jailbird, is he? That figures. He must have had a tough time, a lawyer behind bars.

Not really. It turns out Victor is able to drum up quite a bit of business. You would be surprised how many people in prison are having legal troubles. Can I have another cruller?

No, but this is police headquarters so there are always donuts.

No thank you, the jelly might stain my tie.

And that would be a problem how?

Is that part of your bad cop routine?

So what are you, some kind of writer?

Some kind, yeah. I write novels with a lawyer as the hero, no matter how oxymoronic that might sound. I try to write stories that are thrilling and full of mystery and funny all at the same time, stories that raise moral questions but come up with very few moral answers, stories that emotionally touch readers through the characters. And the law is merely one of the tools my protagonist, who happens to be the Victor Carl you're so interested in, uses to find out what's going on and to try find a resolution that makes some sort of moral sense. He's not so much a reflection of me as he is a reflection of the type of lawyer I might have been had things gone very differently in my life. I like to think I'm writing in the tradition of Raymond Chandler, although I don't ape his style.

So this Victor Carl, is he some hero type, like Chandler's Marlowe? Is he a hard guy?

Oh no, he's a pussycat. The only thing he knows about guns is that he's afraid of them. And he's also very polite. He says please and thank you even when he's picking your pocket. Except in court, he's not polite in court. In court he's a tiger. Trust me, you don't want

to meet up with him in court. But outside, he's got all the fighting instincts of a pill bug. And sure, maybe he drinks too much, and maybe he's a little too clever, a little too glib, but basically he's a coward. In fact, he's proud of his cowardice. He thinks it's one of his finer traits, along with his unbridled venality and the horniness of a horned toad.

He likes the ladies, huh?

Oh yes, but unfortunately more than they like him. He's hung up on beautiful sad-eyed women who refuse to give him the time of day. In fact, in *Past Due* he finally meets a normal, well adjusted woman. She's pretty, young, and a doctor — a doctor! — which, because he is Jewish, Victor finds especially appealing. She's perfect for him in every way except that she is very sincere, which he has trouble with, and she's a vegetarian. It's at a Chinese restaurant, while the two of them are sharing a plate of tofu, while platters heaped with beef and chicken and shrimp pass him by, that he realizes it won't work with the doctor. "This is what I have learned of life from eating in Chinese restaurants," he writes, "the meal that would make me most perfectly happy is always being served at the table next to mine."

A pathetic loner, is that it?

Not at all. He's got a partner, Beth Derringer, who is his best friend, and a private investigator named Phil Skink, who is just as ethically challenged as Victor so they get along perfectly. And then, in *Past Due*, there is Kimberly Blue, who is astonishingly beautiful and astonishingly young and yet is already a vice president at some shady corporation that, for some strange reason, is also keenly interested in Joey Cheap's murder. Kimberly reminds me of my middle school daughter — in fact, amazingly, some of the expressions they use are identical, how did that happen? — and that might explain why Victor is not so interested in making her as in saving her. (Beth opines that it's because she's not sad enough for Victor and Victor, always as self-aware as a moth, wonders what the heck she's talking about.) Anyway, it turns out that however vulnerable Kimberly might appear, she is absolutely able to take care of herself, which, come to think about it, is a lot like my daughter too. And then of course there is Victor's father.

How is Victor's father doing? I heard he was sick.

He's in the hospital actually, which is pretty convenient for Victor because Victor's cable's out, due to his inability to pay that pesky little bill which comes every month, and so having a father in the hospital gives him a chance to watch the Sixers play on ESPN. But it's not all good. His father is actually dying, and his dying father feels compelled to tell his only son about the true love of his life, the girl who got away, the girl in the pleated skirt. It's a story Victor doesn't want to hear — who does want to hear the details of his father's failed love life — but a story that turns out to have had a huge impact on Victor's life. It's a story of love, of sex, of greed and murder and betrayal, all fun father-and-son-bonding stuff which, through the telling of it, strangely heals the relationship between Victor and his dad.

Aw, that almost sounds sweet.

Not too sweet, because Victor's father is a grumpy old pessimist and Victor does everything he can to avoid opening up to the dying man. As Victor says in the book, "The unexamined life might not be worth living, but the examined life is pure murder."

Is there a point to all this?

Gosh, I hope not. I don't trust novels with points, do you? If a novel is only about a point, the writer should just say it in as few words as possible so we can take it in and go back to watching *The Bachelor* on television. But *Past Due* is a story about dealing with the past, the price of burying it, the futility of trying to cure it as if it were a disease, and the value of embracing it and learning from it before moving on. Or maybe it's just a fun story of murder and revenge with a swordfight at the end, sort of like Hamlet without the tights. Which is too bad, actually, because Victor would look good in tights, like an albino flamingo with a thyroid condition.

This Victor creep, are we going to see him again or is he gone for good?

No, he'll be back. Victor is like the piece of gum that sticks to your shoe, then to your thumb, then to your other thumb, then to your palm, then to your nose, the piece of gum you just can't get rid of and that ruins your day. Yeah, Victor's just like that. But in the next book he'll be battling an enemy so fearsome, so brutal and sadistic, that it makes my skin crawl just thinking about it. He makes Dr. No look like a yes man. He makes Dr. Strangelove look like a missionary. The most savage of all professionals.

You don't mean ...

That's right. In the next book, Victor goes up against a dentist.