

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Eyes of a Child

Richard North Patterson

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Chapter 1

Acknowledgments

About the Author

RICHARD NORTH PATTERSON studied fiction writing at the University of Alabama with Jesse Hill Ford; his first short story was published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, his first novel, *The Lasko Tangent*, won an Edgar Allan Poe Award in 1979 and his last novel, *Degree of Guilt* was an international bestseller. Until recently a trial lawyer, Patterson lives with his wife, Laurie, and their family in San Francisco and on Martha's Vineyard.

'Patterson is a fluid prose writer clearly at his best in the taut courtroom scenes . . . *Eyes of a Child* is a gripping story . . . a well crafted book that deserves to do well and almost certainly will.' *The Times*

'Utterly compulsive' *Publishing News*

'Destined for celebrity status alongside Scott Turow and John Grisham . . . he belongs among the elite.'

Los Angeles Times Book Review

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Degree of Guilt
The Lasko Tangent
The Outside Man
Private Screening
Escape the Night

Richard North Patterson

EYES OF A CHILD



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Epub ISBN: 9781407059976

Version 1.0

www.randomhouse.co.uk

Published by Arrow Books in 1995

3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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First published in the United Kingdom by Hutchinson 1995
Arrow Books Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London, SW1V 2SA

Random House Australia (Pty) Limited
20 Alfred Street, Milsons Point, Sydney,
New South Wales 2061, Australia

Random House New Zealand Limited
18 Poland Road, Glenfield,
Auckland 10, New Zealand

Random House South Africa (Pty) Limited
PO Box 337, Bergvlei 2012, South Africa

Random House UK Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN 0 09 952711 1

Typeset by Deltatype Ltd, Ellesmere Port
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
BPC Paperbacks Ltd, a member of The British Printing
Company Ltd

*FOR FRED HILL
AND SONNY MEHTA*

The Nightmare

OCTOBER 16

Chapter 1

Ricardo Arias's face filled with fear and disbelief.

'If you're going to kill yourself,' the intruder repeated softly, 'you must leave a note.'

Richie's eyes would not move from the gun. Pulled from damp and darkness, it had not been fired for years; the intruder wondered if it would fire now. But Richie Arias did not know this.

Sitting at his desk, Richie began groping for a pen.

His movements were sluggish, like those of a man struggling under water. Fixated on the gun, he seemed blind to the darkened living room: the worn couch and armchair, the cheap coffee table, the computer on the desk, the answering machine he used to screen creditors, the faded posters. A chrome standing lamp cast a pall on his skin.

His face was thin, with black eyes that shifted from softness to anger, as suited his needs, and yet never quite lost the alert, almost fevered expression of a bright graduate student running on too much coffee and too little sleep. Blood had begun to trickle from one nostril.

'I never write.' His head twitched toward the computer. 'Everyone knows I use that.'

'Suicide is different.' The intruder's voice was strained now. 'The handwriting must be yours.'

Richie's face looked drawn. Slowly, he picked up the pen, holding it gingerly.

"'I am ending my life'" – the intruder spoke for him – "'because I have faced what I am.'"

An instant's pause, the instinct to resist. Then Richie's pen began to inch across the paper. The effort was awkward and hesitant, that of a child learning to write, pausing in the middle of letters. Heavier on some than others, spidery at the end.

"'What I am,'" the voice instructed him, "'is selfish and pathetic.'"

Richie stopped writing. His eyes filled with resentment. '*Do it,*' the intruder ordered.

Wiping the blood from his nose, Richie stared at the paper. It was a moment before his hand moved, and when it did, there was a red smear on the back of his fingers. The word 'pathetic' took too long to write.

"'My only business is extortion. I have used my wife and child, out of greed and shamelessness, because I myself am nothing.'"

Richie flushed with anger. He stopped, staring at the words he had already written. His hand would not move.

The intruder hesitated, irresolute. Then saw, on the bookshelf next to Richie, a photograph.

Gun aimed at Richie, the intruder retrieved the picture and placed it carefully on the desk. A dark-haired girl, her solemn brown eyes gazing at Richie Arias.

It was far better than a note, the intruder realized: a last expression of cheap sentiment would seem so very like him. A shrine to his own suicide.

Turning from the picture, Richie's face showed that he understood the rest.

‘You see,’ the intruder said softly, ‘I know who you are.’

As if by instinct, Richie stood, backing from his chair. ‘Wait,’ he cried out. ‘No one commits suicide from across a room.’

Their eyes met. The intruder did not speak.

‘You can just *leave*.’ Richie’s tone became a shrill wheedle. ‘I won’t tell anyone. We just let it go, okay?’

All at once, staging a suicide did not matter. ‘Only *you*,’ the intruder said quietly, ‘would think that I could “let it go.” Only *you*.’

Richie’s gaze darted to the gun. Slowly, the intruder started toward him.

Five feet, then four.

Richie’s face was taut with fear and calculation. Backing toward the coffee table, he seemed to have forgotten it was there: his eyes flickered toward the bedroom hallway, searching for a way out. His throat worked. ‘Shoot me now, and it’s murder.’

The intruder stopped, raising the gun.

Richie’s eyes changed. In that moment, he seemed to accept – despite his deepest instincts – that one person could truly love another.

‘I’ll give her up,’ he whispered.

In silent answer, the intruder’s head moved from side to side.

Richie turned to run.

The gun jerked up at his first panicky step. As he stretched forward, straining for the hallway, Richie’s leg slammed into the coffee table.

There was a sharp sudden scream of pain.

The next few seconds were like freeze-frames. Richie snapping at the waist, arms flailing. Sprawling forward in a face-first dive, head bobbing like a rag doll. Temple hitting the corner of the table. Another sound: a sickening crack. And then Ricardo Arias rolled sideways, flopping onto the carpet, and was still. He lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. The lamp bathed him in a circle of light.

Gun hand trembling, the intruder knelt beside him.

There was a red gash on his temple. Blood dribbled from his nose. The luminous wristwatch on his arm read 10:36.

Tentatively, almost gently, the intruder pushed open Richie’s lips with the barrel of the gun.

It did not require much room. As the barrel slipped into his throat, Richie’s mouth clamped down, the reflex of choking. The only sounds were Richie’s shallow breathing, the whir of air-conditioning.

Eyes shut, the intruder took one breath and pulled the trigger.

A metallic snap. It was only an instant later that the intruder, forced to look at Richie’s face, knew the ancient gun had not discharged.

Richie blinked, the first tremor of consciousness. Watching him taste the black metal, then discover it in some state of half awakening, the intruder prayed that the gun would fire.

Four more bullets.

Richie’s eyes widened in terrible comprehension. His head rose, twisting feebly. His mouth opened around the barrel to form a single word.

‘*Please . . .*’

The child shuddered.

It was dark. She was damp from the struggle to escape: her legs could not move, and her voice could not cry out. Knees drawn up tight against her stomach, she lay there, waiting.

The banging on her door grew louder.

As the door burst open, the little girl awakened with a soundless scream, torn from her nightmare.

She did not know where she was. But in her dream, she had imagined what would break down the door: a savage dog, with bright teeth and black curly hair, eyes searching the room for her.

A shadow moved toward her.

The girl shivered, stifling her scream, hugging herself so tightly that her fingers dug into her skin. And then her grandmother spoke softly, in Spanish, and Elena Arias stopped trembling.

‘It was only your dream,’ her grandmother repeated, and swept Elena into her arms. ‘You’re safe now.’

Elena held her tight, tears of relief springing to her eyes, face buried in her grandmother’s neck. She would know the smell of Grandma Rosa anywhere, sweet skin and perfume, the scent of cut flowers. As her grandmother gently lowered her head onto the pillow, Elena shut her eyes.

Elena felt Rosa’s fingertips gently touch her forehead: in her mind, she saw her grandmother’s jet-black hair, the slender face still almost as pretty as that of Elena’s own mother, Teresa, whose room this once had been. The sounds of Dolores Street came to her then: Latin voices on the sidewalk; the squeal of cars at a stop sign. Outside, the streets were not safe, and Dolores Park, where Elena could not play, was filled with men who sold drugs at night. The window that her mother once could open wide was nailed to the frame. But here, with her grandmother, there was no black dog.

‘Where is Mommy?’ Elena asked.

Tonight, before bedtime, her grandmother had taken her mother’s old world globe and traced a line with her finger from San Francisco, showing the route that her mother would fly tomorrow. But now Rosa repeated the words like a favorite story.

‘Your mother is still here, at her house. Tomorrow she’s flying to a place called Italy. But she’ll be back in ten more days. And in the morning, when you get up, we’ll find Italy on the map again.’

Elena was silent for a moment. ‘But Daddy’s not with her, is he? Mommy’s going with Chris.’

‘Yes.’ Her grandmother’s voice was quieter still. ‘Mommy’s going with Chris.’

Elena opened her eyes. In the faint glow of the night-light, her grandmother’s gaze looked tired and sad.

Turning to the window, Elena listened for the sounds of the world outside. ‘Will I see Daddy tomorrow?’ she asked in a tentative voice. ‘After Chris and Mommy leave?’

Her grandmother watched her, fingers still resting on her forehead. ‘No, Elena. Not tomorrow.’

Tomorrow was as far ahead as Elena wished to think. She turned back to Rosa. ‘Please, Grandma, sleep with me. I’m afraid of being alone.’

In the dim light, her grandmother started to shake her head and then stopped at the look in Elena's eyes.

'Remember what I told you, Grandma? About being scared?'

Her grandmother looked into her eyes. 'Yes,' she said gently. 'I remember.'

Neither spoke again. Her grandmother rose slowly from the bed and then, pulling her dress over her head, slid into the bed next to Elena, wearing only her slip.

Nestled in her grandmother's arms, Elena felt the rise and fall of Rosa's wakeful breathing as the caress of love and safety, until she fell asleep.

THE ESCAPE

OCTOBER 19 – OCTOBER 24

Chapter 1

Three days later, seven months after they had first made love, Teresa Peralta found herself in Venice with Christopher Paget, astonished to be in Italy, fearful that their time together was coming to an end.

Chris stood on the balcony of what had once been a thirteenth-century palazzo. He was dressed only in shorts, the late-afternoon sun on his skin. From the living room of their suite at the Danieli, Terri watched him as she held the phone to her ear.

Halfway around the world, Richie's telephone rang again.

Listening, Terri imagined its sound filling his small apartment. It was her third call in an hour.

Ten rings later, Terri slowly put down the telephone.

She was fresh from the shower, a slim, dark-haired young woman who barely came to Chris's shoulder, with olive skin and a sculpted face that he kept trying to persuade her was beautiful: a chiseled nose, too pronounced for her liking; high cheekbones; delicate chin; a quick smile that transformed her seriousness without ever quite changing her green-flecked brown eyes, watchful by habit. Pulling the towel around her, she studied Chris in silence.

Chris did not see her. He gazed out at the Grand Canal, standing in the posture Terri had come to know: hands in his pockets, head tilted slightly, taking something in.

She walked toward him, making no sound, until she could see what he watched so intently.

At another time, it would have enchanted her. A broad stone walk below, filled with people ambling among food and curio stands and the white-covered tables and umbrellas of outdoor restaurants, the edge of the walk lined with gaslights and gondolas and cigarette boats, their pilots chatting with each other as they waited for business. And, beyond them, the Grand Canal.

The azure sweep of water stretched in glistening wavelets through a city of stone and marble, grey and dusty rose, blue water, blue sky. Across the canal, perhaps a half mile, San Giorgio island appeared as an orange sphere, a white marble dome, a great hall with columns, Byzantium meeting the Renaissance in some gentle suspension of time. A faint sea smell came with a breeze that cooled Tern's skin. There were no cars; save for the motorboats, there was little Terri saw through the iron frame of the balcony that was not as it had been five hundred years before.

'It's timeless,' Chris said without turning. 'I don't know why, exactly, but I take comfort in that. As if we can survive Richie after all.'

Terri was quiet for a moment. 'How did you know I was here?'

'Because you're wearing almost nothing. It's a sixth sense I have.'

As Terri smiled, Chris turned to face her.

He looked ten years younger than he was: his face was barely lined, his coppery hair had no hint of grey, and spartan self-discipline kept him trim and well-muscled. The ridged nose, a certain angularity, lent his features strength. But what struck Terri now was the startling blueness of his eyes, and the concern for her she saw there.

'His machine is off,' she said.

Chris's eyes narrowed. 'Perhaps they're out.'

‘No way. It’s eight in the morning, California time. Richie picked Elena up from my mother’s last night for her week at school.’ Her voice quickened. ‘We’ve been gone two days, and now I can’t reach her. It’s part of the mind games Richie plays with her – “Your mommy doesn’t love you like I do.” Richie’s far too smart to ever hold her incommunicado. But as long as he doesn’t answer, Elena will never know I called.’

Chris studied her face. ‘It’s hard,’ he said at last. ‘But somehow, at least for a few days, we have to leave him behind.’ He smiled a little. ‘After all, we’re two people in love, who’ve never been away together, alone in a beautiful place. We ought to be able to do *something* with that.’

His tone, as so often, combined irony with seriousness. Terri knew by now that this was another way he protected them both: to say how deeply he felt made him too vulnerable, and Chris did not want others to feel responsible for him. But buying these few days of freedom had been the only thing that Chris could do for her.

He kissed her forehead. ‘Until we get to Portofino,’ he said in the same quiet voice, ‘I’d like to talk about this mess we’re in – Richie and our children – as little as we can. It’s quiet there, and we’ll have time enough. Even to decide our future.’

Silent, Terri took his hands in hers.

His right hand, she saw, was still swollen and discolored. Just as it had been two mornings ago, when he picked her up to drive them to the airport.

‘Terri?’ His voice was tentative, an inquiry.

Looking up at him, Terri met his searching gaze. And then slowly she backed away from him, letting her towel drop to the floor.

‘Make love with me, Chris. Please.’

His eyes changed.

Terri led him to the bed and, lying skin to skin, looked into his face. His hand, slowly tracing the bone of her back, made her shiver.

Her eyes closed. In the last instant before becoming lost in Chris entirely, Terri thought of the day eight months before when her life – and Elena’s – had changed forever.

It began, quite unexpectedly, when Terri had taken her five-year-old daughter to the beach at the end of the Carelli hearing. As they walked along the sand, hands entwined, the late-afternoon sun glistened at the water’s edge, and the sound of the waves was deep and lulling. She was only Chris’s associate then, not his lover; her sole thoughts were of Elena.

They found a small cove carved into the cliffside, sheltered from the wind. As Terri gazed out toward the Golden Gate Bridge, Elena played at her feet: with a child’s solemn concentration, she arranged toy people around pieces of plastic furniture. There seemed, Terri realized, to be a mother, a father, and a little girl. She wished that she could see into Elena’s mind.

Elena began talking to her plastic people. ‘You sit *here*,’ she insisted, ‘and Daddy sits there.’

‘Who are you talking to?’ Terri asked.

‘You. You’re sitting next to Daddy.’

‘And where do you sit?’

‘Right there,’ Elena said triumphantly, and placed a little girl between its plastic

parents.

A child, Terri thought sadly, ordering the world of adults. Terri had been certain that she had given Elena no sign of the marital problems she felt like a weight inside her – the fights over money and Richie’s failure to get a job; the fantasy businesses he had used her money to finance; the ways he chose to isolate the three of them from others; the subtle manipulations, always denied, intended to erode her sense of self. But Elena must have some intuition; she had spent an hour at this game of family. Terri had seldom seen her so intent.

‘Do you like playing that?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’ Elena stopped, gazing at her imagined family, and then looked up at Terri. ‘Why are you so mean to Daddy?’

Her daughter’s voice was part inquiry and part accusation; there was an eerie certainty in it, as though Elena were speaking an indubitable truth.

Terri was momentarily speechless.

Keep it neutral, she told herself, as if you’re merely seeking information.

‘How am I mean to Daddy?’ she asked.

Elena did not answer. But her voice held deep conviction. ‘Daddy cries, you know.’

‘Have you seen him?’

Elena shook her head. ‘No. He doesn’t want to cry in front of me. He does it when he’s alone, after you hurt his feelings.’

Terri felt herself stiffen. Quite calmly, she asked, ‘Then how do you know?’

‘Because he tells me.’ Elena’s voice held a kind of pride. ‘When we’re alone, and he tucks me in at night, we talk about our feelings.’

Terri recognized the note in Elena’s voice now: the false wisdom of a child, flattered by the contrived confidences of a manipulative adult. When she spoke again, it was without thinking. ‘Daddy shouldn’t say those things to you.’

‘He *should*,’ Elena said most angrily. ‘Daddy says I’m old enough to know things.’

She had been foolish, Terri realized. This could not – should not – be resolved between Elena and herself. But it would not do, she realized, to confront Richie with this conversation fresh in Elena’s mind: the child might see the cause and effect.

‘Can I play with you?’ Terri asked.

Elena’s mood changed. ‘Okay,’ she said, and smiled up at her mother.

For a half hour, Terri forced herself to remember that she had come to play with her daughter. They did that, talking about everything and nothing, until the breeze grew cold.

As they drove home, Terri only half listened to Elena. Her mind felt as cold as the breeze had been.

Richie was in the kitchen. At the sight of Elena, he flashed an incandescent smile, bending his dark curled head to hers. ‘How’s my sweetheart?’

His voice was almost crooning. Perhaps it was her mood, Terri thought, but something about it made her more edgy. ‘Can you put away your toys?’ she asked Elena abruptly, and watched the little girl scamper down the hallway. She was unusually cooperative, Terri thought; she found herself wondering if, subconsciously, Elena had begun trying to keep her parents happy.

‘How was *your* day?’ Richie asked. ‘Court all right?’

‘Fine.’ Tern’s voice was cool. ‘And yours? Or did you spend it crying?’

Richie looked startled and then tried a puzzled half smile. As he looked at Terri, it died there.

‘The funny thing,’ she said, ‘is that you never cry. Sometimes I’d feel better if you did. But the deepest feeling you can dredge up is self-pity, and that’s only to manipulate me. Of course, Elena, doesn’t see that yet.’

Failing sun came through the window. It was dusk: facing Richie, Terri felt darkness closing around them. ‘Quit being abusive,’ he finally said. ‘People express their emotions in different ways, you know.’

‘What have you been telling Elena?’

Richie’s wiry body straightened; Terri saw the faintest glint of satisfaction in his bright black eyes. ‘I’m just being a parent,’ he said coolly. ‘I want Lainie to know the difference between real love and infatuation.’

There was something frightening, Terri thought, in the way Richie appropriated a five-year-old to justify his needs. ‘Oh, and what *is* real love? I’m not sure I’d recognize it.’

‘Then let me explain it to you.’ Pausing, Richie spoke with exaggerated patience. ‘Real love is when people make a commitment to family and carry it out, even through the bad times. It’s the opposite of this stage you’re in with Christopher Paget, an infatuation with surface instead of substance . . .’

‘Then maybe I’m too shallow to deserve you.’ Terri stopped there; what she felt was too deep for sarcasm. ‘Don’t you understand? I like working with Chris. Period. He has nothing to do with this and never has. And *I* never cared if you were the world’s greatest promoter. That was *your* dream. I just wanted us to live a real life.’

He shook his head. ‘Nothing makes you happy. It’s like right now. You want me to parent Lainie, and then you complain when I do. I can never win.’

Terri replied softly. ‘You always win, Richie. But this time I won’t let you.’ Her throat felt dry. ‘I won’t let the rest of Elena’s life be about her father.’

Richie placed his hands flat on the kitchen counter. ‘Lainie’s *not* like you, and she’ll never see me like you do. She’s imaginative, like me. We communicate on levels you don’t understand.’ His voice filled with authority. ‘You should rise above your jealousy and learn to see how good I am for our daughter.’

Terri could not answer. All that she could do was let the truth sink in – his deep certitude, his irreparable self-involvement. He would always see Elena in terms of his own desires, and if one of his needs was to use her to control Terri, he would do that without hesitation, certain it was best for Elena. Perhaps, Terri realized, *that* was the most frightening perception of all. Richie was *not* merely calculating: some unfathomable part of him could make himself believe that Elena’s happiness derived from his own.

‘I’m leaving you,’ Terri said.

Richie stiffened. They watched each other in the semidark.

‘You can’t do that,’ Richie said at last. He made his voice calm. ‘Not without counseling. I’ll set up an appointment. Six months down the road, we’ll see where we are.’

It took her a moment to accept what she had said, another to tell him what she believed most of all. ‘You have an uncounselable problem, Richie. And so do I.’

Richie looked wounded. ‘What’s so wrong that we can’t fix it?’

His voice was suddenly plaintive; for an instant it made Terri want to comfort him. But it was too late. ‘You can’t see other people as separate from you,’ she told him quietly. ‘Elena most of all. I can’t change it, and I won’t fight it.’

‘You can *help* me, Ter. That’s what marriage is about.’

His shoulders slumped. He looked so alone, Terri thought, and then she remembered Elena. ‘No,’ she answered. ‘Only *you* can help you. It’s too late for us, and I have Elena to think of.’

His voice rose. ‘If you were thinking of Elena, you’d give her an intact family.’

Terri’s chest felt tight. ‘It’s all I ever wanted, Richie – a family. But there’s a difference between “intact” and “healthy.” We’re no good for Elena.’

The room was dark now. Richie moved closer. ‘It’s not up to you to say what’s good. It’s up to a judge, and he’ll listen to me.’

Terri realized that Richie was prepared for this moment, perhaps had been prepared for months. ‘And what will you tell “him”?’ she managed.

‘That *I*’ve been the caretaking parent while you’ve worked long hours with a man who just may be your lover. That I want Elena.’ He paused; the smile that followed seemed a reward for his own cleverness. ‘That I can’t provide care for her without sixty percent of your income.’

‘That’s crazy.’

His voice filled with triumph. ‘It’s the *law*, Ter. I’ve checked it out. And even if you get custody, you think it’s easy to find a man who wants to raise someone else’s kid? You’ll be all alone.’ His tone became insinuating. ‘You should know by now how much you need me, Terri.’

Terri tried to keep her own voice steady. ‘I don’t love you,’ she said. ‘I don’t think you’re a good father for Elena. I don’t think our “family” is good for Elena. So if I have to be alone, I will. And if I have to fight you for Elena, I’ll do that too.’

‘You’ll lose.’ His next words were softer yet. ‘But don’t worry, Ter. Every other weekend, I’ll let you see my daughter.’

It was near the surface now: her fear of Richie, which connected them more deeply than love. Richie could not let Terri go and so would not let Elena go with her. Instead some stranger Terri did not know would decide whether she could raise Elena and, in deciding, would set the course of Elena’s life. Richie would be smooth and plausible; how could Terri explain to a judge how things really were? Even the thought made her tired.

She forced herself to speak slowly and evenly. ‘I’m taking Elena and going to my mother’s. We need to decide what to tell her.’

Richie moved closer, biting off his words. ‘*We’re* not telling her anything.’

‘We should. And we should do it together.’

He was standing over her now. In the dark, she could barely see his face. ‘*We’re* not telling her anything,’ he repeated. ‘And you’re not going anywhere.’

His voice trembled with an anger she had never heard in him before. When she tried to step past him, he moved with her, blocking her way. Terri felt her own voice quaver. ‘Please, don’t make this worse.’

‘You don’t understand, Ter. I’m not letting you do this.’

Terri’s heart was racing. She put her hand on his shoulder, trying to move past him.

‘You bitch,’ he spat out.