

# New Fiction: Excerpt from Hilary Plum's Strawberry Fields

An excerpt from the novel [\*Strawberry Fields\*](#). Alice, a reporter, and the detective Modigliani are both working on the case of five murdered veterans of the Iraq War (including Kareem, named below). The investigation has extended in many directions, including toward the private military contractor Xenith, with whom the victims were involved.



## Alice

Modigliani came over, a bottle brown-bagged in his hand. I'd hoped for wine but it was gin. He poured for us both and produced a jar of olives from his jacket, with his fingers dropped three into each glass. Thank you, I'm sure, I said, eyeing the greasy floating pimentos. Your table sucks, he said, rocking it back and forth with his hand.

The death of Farzad Ahmad Muhammad, I said.

OK, Modigliani said.

You remember it, I insisted. He was murdered in US custody. A British journalist got interested, and so there was an actual military follow-up. A few guys were held responsible, or kind of—I pushed photos toward him, tapped each face in turn—this one spent two months in jail, this one was demoted, this one not even discharged. These photos, I added, were Kareem's. He was working on some kind of amateur investigation.

OK, Modigliani said.

Modigliani bent down and slid the lid of the olive jar under the short leg of the table. Now we have to finish these, he said. How did he die?

I said: He was hanging from the ceiling by his hands, which is common practice, but he was left there for days, and they beat his legs to interrogate him, the backs of his knees. *Pulpified*, is how the autopsy describes his legs—if he hadn't died, they'd have had to amputate. They said the beatings were normal, but none of them realized how many teams were going at him, how many altogether, and blood pooled around the injuries until his heart stopped, with him just hanging there. They found him on the morning of the fifth day.

Modigliani nodded. And where does Kareem come in?

He knew one of the guys who was later held responsible, the guy who went to jail. They were based out of the same compound for a while, they met socially, if that's the right word. I'm trying to see if maybe Kareem is the one who tipped off the journalist in the first place. Like, he gathered this evidence to give it to her.

And this works out to a motive for killing Kareem, what, seven or eight years later?

Fuck, I said, fuck.

Modigliani stacked the photos and pushed them back toward me, maneuvering around drinks and olives. He said: If the guy who killed the prisoner was Kareem's friend, Kareem could have been looking to get him off, not get him punished. But you know that. Not to mention, he added, that we have four other victims.

I know, I said. The photo on top was of the bruised legs, and I covered it with both hands.

Alice—Modigliani said, looking in the direction of the air conditioner—your thinking is the opposite of conspiratorial. It's the web without the spider.

He said: I think I've always liked that about you.

Later I understood this was the one thing he ever said that I truly believed.

If I were a conspiracy theorist, he went on, I'd think you were trying to distract this investigation from its real target.

Bill LeRoy, I said obediently, Xenith.

Right now he's angling to replace the military in Afghanistan, Modigliani said. All private contractors, private air force. British East India Company model.

I said: At the same time he's selling his forces to countries hoping to keep migrants in or migrants out. Or rather, Muslims out. Turn back the boats at gunpoint.

Modigliani shifted and I thought he was going to lay his hands over the photo, over my own.

What happens, I wondered, when a spider mistakes itself for a fly?

Modigliani finished his drink and rose. The table rocked again.

Have you ever noticed, he said, how rarely I ask a question?

After Modigliani left I went on: I'd called the guy who'd served time, the guy Kareem knew. He was punished most severely because he'd visited the prisoner the most and was supposed to be the one signing off, keeping track of the others.

I was only halfway through Kareem's name when the woman who had answered the phone interrupted: He doesn't know anything. Don't call here again. She was gone and with her the background sound of a child's off-key singing. I called again. I thought of going out there, to the Midwestern farmland where they lived, not far from where I used to visit a long-dead uncle of my mother's. Amish in buggies or on bicycles on the road's shoulder, cornfields, trampolines in yards that back then I'd coveted. He was a farm boy, this man, and at first I thought this should damn him. Shouldn't a boy like that have known, have understood the body and what it won't endure? Only once did they unhook Muhammad from the ceiling and by then he could no longer bend his knees. But tonight, the refrigerator assuming the role of crickets, the floor athrum with someone's

bass, I understood why this made no difference.

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*Strawberry Fields* was published in April, 2018 and is available from [Fence Books](#) or your local bookseller.