

THE GREAT DICK

A Tale of Terror

BY

Barry Maher

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Advance Praise

“If debut author Barry Maher set out to write a book consumed with mayhem, peopled with borderline Ivy Leaguers in desperate circumstances who seem to care little or nothing for each other, and make it a story so compulsively readable that you’ll carry it to the kitchen in the middle of the night while you’re waiting for your tea kettle to boil, he did, and this is it. *The Great Dick* is pretty great fiction.”

Jacquelyn Mitchard, No.1 New York Times bestselling author of *The Good Son* and *The Deep End of the Ocean*, which was the inaugural selection of the Oprah Winfrey Book Club.

“What a page turner! Witty, literate, scary, sexy, and powerfully evocative of Southern California trying to leave the Sixties behind. I can’t wait to read his next novel. Barry Maher is a brilliant new literary talent.”

Gayle Lynds, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Assassins* and *Masquerade*. *The Hades Factor*, co-written with Robert Ludlum, became a CBS miniseries. *Library Journal* called her “The reigning queen of espionage fiction.”

“Powerful sexual tension . . . wry self-knowing humor . . . and a pitch-perfect evocation of an era—Barry Maher’s debut novel is the Comp Lit classic you always wanted to read, a witches’ brew of sexual tension, metaphysical speculation, lurid crime, tabloid scandal, and black magic, all served up with sly wit and some unexpected grace notes. And yes, it’s called *The Great Dick*, so it’s got that going for it, too.”

Michael Prescott, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Shadow Hunter*. Michael has sold well over two million books.

“I love the writing! Incredibly readable—the pages just fly by—and hands-down the most unique tale I’ve read in years.”

Lisa Black, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Every Kind of Wicked*

“Barry Maher is a highly original and completely delightful new voice in crime fiction. I loved it!”

Deon Meyer, international bestselling author of *The Last Hunt*, winner of many awards including the Barry Award for Best Thriller in the USA; Le Grand Prix de Littérature Policière and Le Prix Mystère de la Critique from France; the Deutsche Krimi Preis (twice); the Swedish Martin Beck Award; the ATKV Prose Prize (three times); the ATKV Suspense Fiction Prize (five times); the M-Net Award for Most Filmic Novel (twice). *Dead Before Dying* and *Trackers* were turned into international TV series.

“Novels about catastrophic failures are often the best kind of novels, and Barry Maher’s *The Great Dick*’s unforgettable Steve Witowski proves himself an indelible part of that canon. Echoes of Denis Johnson, Carl Hiaasen, even Thomas Pynchon—those hilarious laureates of American calamity—abound, but Maher has a deadpan command that’s entirely his own. *The Great Dick* is an absolute blast. This book is an utter delight and exceptionally well-realized. Reading it was a total joy.”

Matthew Specktor, author of the *New York Times Book Review* Editor’s Choice, *American Dream Machine* and *The Golden Hour*. Founding editor of the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

“With a voice that jumps off the page, Barry Maher delivers a smart debut novel with a wink and a smirk that is part thriller, part supernatural horror. *The Great Dick* is like the product of a lusty, literary one night stand between Anne Rice and Lee Child. Here’s hoping Maher progresses his lead character into a follow-up story.”

Pamela Fagan Hutchins, *USA Today* bestselling author of The Patrick Flint novels. Pamela has sold over 3 million books and is the winner of the Silver Falchion Award for Best Adult Mystery.

“Time and again, I found myself stopping and admiring the way [Barry Maher] has put together a sentence, the words he used. A man on the run, a beautiful woman, and a spooky old church combine with crackling writing, laser humor, and a little bit of magic to create a book that will keep readers turning the pages. Add a touch of the paranormal, a dash of intrigue, and a missing body, and *The Great Dick* is a great read!”

Casey Daniels, bestselling author of *Don of the Dead*.

“Barry Maher has got a wicked voice and a razor-sharp tongue to match. He’s found a countercultural cad for the ages with his anti-hero Steve Witowski. Don’t be surprised to hear that name echoed alongside Raoul Duke, Old Bull Lee or Mark Renton in the future . . . a great book.”

Clay McLeod Chapman, author of *The Remaking* and *Whisper Down the Lane*. Co-author of the film, *The Boy*, starring Elijah Wood. Clay teaches writing at The Actors Studio MFA program at Pace University.

“WOW! What a fascinating read. Barry Maher has created the ultimate antihero in Steve Witowski. *The Great Dick* is a powerful supernatural thriller that scares the crap out of you. Just when you think you know what’s going on, you discover you don’t. A well-written, haunting debut that grabs hold and refuses to let you go. This is a book I’m not going to forget. Different and impossible to put down.”

Chris Goff, bestselling author of *Dark Waters* and *Red Sky*, Military Writers Society of America Gold Medalist for Mystery/Thriller.

“A rollicking, off-kilter joy ride in the vein of Bret Easton Ellis and Jack Kerouac, *The Great Dick* hits all the laser-sharp high notes of a modern-day hero on the run, as told by one of the more accessible voices I’ve read in ages. Compelling, twisting, irreverent, and entertaining, *The Great Dick* blends creative fiction and literary thriller in an unstoppable story for current times.”

Claire Fullerton, five-time award-winning author of *Little Tea* and *Mourning Dove*. Winner of the 2020 International Book Award.

“Brilliant! Witty, fast, and fun. Maher’s novel makes your own relationship issues pale compared to the protagonist, Stephen Witowski. A failed small-time drug dealer on the lam, his problems are just beginning when he stumbles across a stunningly beautiful woman under assault by a crazed assailant mumbling in Latin. A taste of *Fatal Attraction* with a rewrite by Stephen King gives you a sampling of how Witowski’s ‘harmful to worse’ scenario is about to play out in twists and turns you cannot predict. Best manuscript tossed my way, ever.”

Kevin Tinto, author of the Indie Mega-bestselling *Ice Trilogy*, with over 500,000 copies sold and 4,700 reviews on Amazon.

“An enormous amount of fun. Wholly fresh and original. Wickedly funny. Within a couple of chapters, you’ll think you know where this is going . . . a few chapters more and you’ll realize you were very wrong. *The Great Dick* is a hot, sweaty, magic- and murder-infused rollercoaster of a story that takes you in every direction except the one you’re expecting. I laughed. I gagged. I loved it.”

David Moody, author of *Hater* and *Autumn*. Mark Johnson (producer, *Breaking Bad*) and Guillermo Del Toro (director, *The Shape of Water*, *Pan’s Labyrinth*) bought the rights to *Hater*. *Autumn* became a film starring Dexter Fletcher and David Carradine.

“I loved it . . . imaginative, told in an exciting voice, and altogether fascinating—reminded me of Graham Greene.”

John C. Sheldon, co-author with Gayle Lynds of *A Triumph of Logic*

“Barry Maher’s *The Great Dick* is a romp equal parts Indiana Jones and Elmore Leonard, with a smidge of Ira Levin for good measure!”

John F.D. Taff, multiple Bram Stoker Award-Nominated author of *The End in All Beginnings* and *The Fearing*.

PREFACE

On Wednesday October 13th, 1968, a faculty panel recommended the dismissal of Professor John Harris—in absentia, as no one at Harvard had seen or heard from him in weeks. Harris later bragged about delivering his final lecture on “one shitload and a half of LSD.” According to the recording made available to the faculty panel, this was the sum total of that lecture:

“Good afternoon. Wow. American Literature, hunh? Let’s see. *Moby Dick* today. Right?”

“*Moby Dick*?” asked a confused voice. “No. What happened to *The Scarlet Letter*?”

“Right. *Moby Dick*,” Harris continued. “Great book. None of you have read it. None of you are going to read it. Nobody ever does. What you need to understand is that as far as I’m concerned—and I’m the fucking professor—*Moby Dick* is the same story as *The Great Gatsby*, which some of you may read. I call it, ‘the half-assed struggle of the individual to put their world to rights in the face of a failure that threatens to define their life.’ I think that’s from my thesis. Though maybe it’s not pretentious enough.”

Harris laughed. “Hey! How about this? *Great Gatsby/Moby Dick*: same story, different era, right? So, if someone someday tries to write that story for this generation, they

should call it *The Great Dick*. That'd be perfect, wouldn't it? *The Great Dick*. Alright, that's got to be almost fifty minutes. See you next . . . whenever. Wow."

SUNDAY, MARCH 21, 1982

Two Women and One Corpse

“Any fool can tell the truth, but it requires a man of some sense to lie well.”
—*Samuel Johnson*

CHAPTER 1

Okay, let me start out by admitting that I was an asshole. I know that. The ludicrous amount of fame and acclaim and money I've had dumped on me since that time only makes it more glaring. The fact that we lived in a different world back in 1982 is no excuse. It was the same world. It just wasn't the world we thought it was.

I remember it was a Sunday night. Sundays always feel different. Looking back now and Googling a 1982 calendar, I'd guess it was Sunday, March 21st. I remember waking up and within minutes making the decision to leave. Quickly, before I could change my mind, I eased myself out of the rickety hide-a-bed.

Immediately, Maria rolled over into the spot I'd just vacated, breathing loudly through her nose and mouth, not quite snoring. I hate to say it, but she looked every minute of her thirty years. Her thick dark hair clung damply to her face; her heavy arms stretched outward. The cast on her left wrist looked like a giant manacle.

The grandfather clock beside the cigar store Indian read 1:37, though a few minutes before, it had chimed four times. That made as much sense as anything else in my life. I was thirty-five years old, a Harvard grad who'd spent the previous two years faking his way through

a \$13,500 a year job as a territory rep for the Richmond Tobacco company. That \$13,500 was the most money I'd ever made. You're probably thinking that when you adjust for inflation and translate that \$13,500 into today's dollars, it's a lot more impressive.

No, it's not.

I slipped on my jersey and my jeans and gathered the rest of my things in my old gym bag. Fortunately, enough moonlight crept in around the edges of the tattered drapes to give the room a dim glow. I wondered if it would be safe to hitchhike out of there, or if Indiana had already notified the California Highway Patrol that I was wanted.

My situation was bad. But not bad enough to, say, crawl into a grave with a rotting corpse.

That would come later.

Carefully, I wove my way through the assorted clutter and opened the front door to let in more light. The scents of honeysuckle and the sea mingled with the room's stale air. For some weird reason, with my life in shambles, the old, abandoned church across the way suddenly reminded me that briefly, as a child, I'd wanted to be a priest—though not as much as I wanted to be Zorro. I'd read the fourth-grade version of *The Lives of the Saints*, and I thought if I became a missionary I could have a shot at sainthood, maybe even martyrdom. Which was as good as you could get saint-wise. Another realistic goal I hadn't quite achieved. But at least that one was when I was nine.

It took a while, but I finally found a pen on a table back over by the hide-a-bed. Maria had kicked off the covers. I pulled them back up around her. Something clattered to the floor. A diaphragm case, recognizable even in the faint light, probably beige, maybe pink. We hadn't had sex that night, though I'd realized she'd wanted to. If I stayed with her I wouldn't be in the mood

more often than not. Maria's body was the earth-mother type I once found so plushly erotic. But in bed and in the back seat of the car that afternoon, all I could see were stretch-marked breasts and puckered thighs.

Okay, I already admitted I was an asshole. And no saint. It's going to get worse.

I tore a piece off a Kentucky Fried Chicken bag and tried to work out a good-bye lie. Something that might leave Maria with a soft memory instead of an acid stomach. She wasn't falling in love with me, and I wasn't breaking her heart, but I had mentioned that once we got to California I might settle down in this area. I'd meant it when I'd said it; going as long as I had without sex can lead to an overactive imagination and the emotional equivalent of premature ejaculation.

But that imagination deserted me now on the note. I finally started it with the truth, explaining that I was running from a drug bust.

"I was no big-time dealer," I wrote. "A friend and I just tried for one good score and messed up. But in Indiana the minimum sentence would be seventeen years, and I couldn't handle jail again. Not anymore. Not for seventeen days."

So much so true. Then I did get creative. "Now I've discovered that I'm not safe even out here."

Since I couldn't figure out when or how I could have made this discovery, I kept it vague. Fortunately, a note wouldn't have to answer questions.

"So, I've got to go. To stay out of jail, and to keep you from getting involved in my crime. Thanks again for the ride and everything. You helped a stranger when he needed it most. I wish we had more time. You're a wonderful lady, and I'm very, very attracted to you. Be sure to thank your uncle for putting me up tonight, and for being so nice. And best of luck with your

new life.”

I signed it, “Love, Steve.”

I stopped short of telling her she was too good for me—a blatant brush-off—though of course she was. The “very, very attracted,” was probably overkill. I was making amends for not getting it up in the motel that morning. Fortunately, our second attempt, in the car, had been better. Although it still took me awhile and she must have known I didn’t cum. I hadn’t had much practice faking orgasms.

Her jacket hung over a nearby chair, and I stuck the tab of the zipper through the note, so she couldn’t miss it. My own jacket wasn’t around. When we’d arrived, the evening was so balmy I must have left it in Maria’s car with my sleeping bag. No problem, I was sure the car was unlocked. Almost sure.

In spite of the dim light and the junk all over the room, I managed to get outside without knocking anything over. I crossed the concrete slab to the car, stepping between two ancient gas pumps, humming a sophomoric lament under my breath. Once more my subconscious had dug out an appropriate soundtrack, a song I’d written years before. I decided to take a moment to roll a joint to bring with me and smoke before I hit the road.

The car was an old Checker cab with a back seat that smelled like a urinal. Three and a half days ago, I’d talked my way inside—in a rest stop a few miles outside of Hamilton, Illinois. I was rumped and maybe even a touch wild-eyed—if not particularly threatening. At first Maria told me she was only going as far as Iowa, which was just across the river. Within fifteen miles, with a relieved and embarrassed grin, she admitted the truth, and fifty miles later I was sharing the driving. I was never particularly conscious of that smell until the previous afternoon, parked out on that deserted back road near the Arizona-California border, tangled up with Maria in the

back seat. With the stench of piss in my nostrils and the corner of one of her paintings digging into my bare hip, it wasn't exactly a romance novel.

Now I climbed into the shotgun seat and cracked a window, letting in the cool night breeze along with the throb of the nearby surf and then the rumble of a semi down on the highway. My jacket wasn't anywhere in the car. *Shit!* The plan—to the extent there was a plan—was to head down to Estero Beach just south of Ensenada. My sleeping bag had fallen apart back in Jerome, Arizona; I'd need that jacket. What had I done with it?

And then I remembered.

The damn jacket was locked in the trunk. The only way in was with the key.

Brilliant.

Oh well, maybe a face-to-face goodbye was what was called for anyway. Though it would be messier for me and possibly more painful for Maria. The note had been fairly believable. Face to face, I'd probably screw it up. I started to get out of the car, then decided I might as well roll that joint first.

I thought I heard a small cry. I paused, listening. Probably an owl.

“Nowhere to go, nowhere to stay,” I sang softly. “Wandering down the dark highway.”

Christ, I'd really had a way with a cliché even then. In 1966, we'd all been vagabonds. Supposedly. I wrote the song in an expensive dorm my freshman year at Harvard. Fortunately, originality hadn't been an admissions requirement.

How had I ever allowed myself to believe for all those years that I could become a songwriter? Though during my “musical” years, I *had* made it to vagabond. My fellow alumni might have said, “bum.”

Through the open window came a snatch of what sounded like a distant conversation. It

could have been a TV, except there were only two buildings in sight—and one was dark and the other apparently abandoned. But who would be chatting out here in the middle of nowhere at 1:45 in the morning?

I found the pot right away, but I had to rummage through everything else in my gym bag to find the papers. Not that I had all that much to rummage through. Just what I always carried with me in the trunk of the Richmond Tobacco company car—shampoo, deodorant, toothbrush, toothpaste, a change of underwear—plus a few extra shirts and things I bought at a Salvation Army store in Chicago before ditching the car in front of Richmond’s regional headquarters.

A can of hair spray fell out and landed on my lap. I never used it except at big sales meetings or when the upper brass was riding with me. No need for that anymore, but I shoved it back into the bag.

Now I definitely heard human voices. I couldn’t make out the words, but the anger was unmistakable.

I had one cigarette paper left.

Another semi roared by, trailed by several cars. Their headlights winked along the line of trees and bushes bordering the road. The squat cinder block house Maria’s uncle lived in was once a store on the old Pacific Coast Highway. Now the new road curved around the house a hundred yards to the south and west, isolating the house and the old church in an empty field. The new road was still only one lane north, one lane south. Serious traffic took Highway 101, twenty miles inland.

One of the voices was definitely a woman, the other clearly a man. Maybe they’d broken down over on the highway. I envisioned a couple arguing while changing a tire.

A small stick in the pot poked a hole in the cigarette paper. The marijuana was cheap and

as usual I hadn't bothered to clean it properly. I almost never smoked dope anymore; I just kept it around from force of habit. I'd brought it with me by accident, forgetting it had been in the bag in the car. That was stupid, and it would be idiotic to hitchhike any farther with it. People were still doing serious jail time for tiny amounts—even in California. And of course, once I was fingerprinted, things would quickly get a whole lot worse.

The shriek was tortured—shrill and sexless—singeing with a hot-ice chill. Once again, I envisioned a man and a woman down by the highway. But now one of them was impaling the other with the tire iron.

CHAPTER 2

The shriek's residue seemed to hang in the air. Suddenly, I felt alone and exposed. Maria's uncle, Jonathan O'Ryan was old and half-senile; his closest neighbor might be all the way back in Santa Lucia, ten miles away. The joint lay shattered in my lap. The pot was sprinkled across my jeans. I held my breath, listening, mentally rerunning the cry. It had been mindless, hadn't it? An animal, run over and dying by the roadside. It'd come from that direction.

Of course, the voices had come from that direction as well.

The second shriek felt electric—as if I was feeling it as well as hearing it. Was there actually a prickling in my fingers and among the hairs of the beard that traced my jawline? Quieter, yet overfilled with terror and pain—or could it have been fury?—it wasn't any animal.

It wasn't any animal.

For a heartbeat, I sat there. I noticed the plain-faced Chesterfield girl painted on the wall of the old store had lost her nose. The small copse of trees behind the building—though nowhere

near the screaming—now seemed alive and menacing.

I climbed out of the car, slamming the door loudly behind me, whether to scare off villains or—like a biker revving his engine—to show my potency, I wasn't sure. I told myself that things that go bump in the night almost always turn out to be nothing. Two cats getting romantic in the moonlight. *It wasn't any animal.* Maybe a couple of teenagers with a couple of six packs. Maybe a lovers' quarrel. Him coaxing her back into the car, and her doling out some piercingly loud psychic punishment before coming around. Odds were good Jack the Ripper and the Manson Family hadn't joined forces someplace in the darkness ahead.

Still, heading for the highway, I skulked through the undergrowth like it was a mine field. As I got closer, the grass gave way to ice plant riddled with bottles and cans and paper. I was still hanging on to my gym bag. I thought about going back for the lead pipe Maria and I had found under the old cab's front seat the day before. But I really wasn't a lead pipe kind of guy.

A sheltered clearing held the remains of several campfires. The junction of state road 64 from Bakersfield was a half mile to the north, making this a perfect campground for transients.

I stumbled upon a narrow path and followed it between two large bushes. In front of me, a small embankment led down to the road. A cursory examination and I'd be out of there. Through a lull in the traffic, the ocean's soothing backbeat sounded close, somewhere just on the other side of the road.

I almost stepped on them.

"Damn you, you frigid bitch," the man sputtered at the woman struggling beneath him. He let out a small, pained cry and muttered something incomprehensible that almost sounded like Latin.

He was tall and thin but wiry—a praying mantis overwhelming a butterfly. She held off

his right arm with both hands. He flailed at her with his left.

I froze. For an eternal half-instant. I was aware, without actually focusing, of their labored breathing and soft grunts, of the scent of pinecones, of water running under the highway through a flood control ditch, of a vehicle approaching.

A sliver of reflected light flashed in the man's right hand—a knife, oddly shaped and the color of the moonlight. The lead pipe was back in the cab. A car rounded the corner, lighting the scene. I was staring into the frightened, pleading eyes of the woman—watching her watch me as I did nothing. Finally, I started forward. Then the hand clutching the knife was free. It swooped downward. She gasped. He leaped off her, spun around, and smashed into my chest. Clinging together we toppled over, rolling and sliding down the ice plant covered embankment toward the road.

An elbow caught me in the Adam's apple. My head slammed into the asphalt. I grabbed a handful of his hair, and he flipped over on top of me, rolling us farther out into the street. A horn sounded. The tires of another car hummed by my head—the wind in their wake a warm breath against my skin. He flung dirt or something in my face. It missed my eyes, but my mouth was open; the grit had a sour, metallic taste and smelled like decaying garbage.

I smashed my knee up into him, trying for his groin and hitting his leg. He must have lost the knife because he was crushing my throat with both hands, lifting me off the ground, forcing me out ahead of him into the road. Clutching his jacket, I tried to pull myself down his body, back toward safety. Loose pebbles ground into my skin. I couldn't breathe.

The gaunt face inches from my own reeked of alcohol. Wized, with a stubbly beard and hair that grew in unhealthy clumps around his head, he was at least fifty, possibly older. Christ, I thought, I was being murdered by the strongest wino in California. My right hand

stumbled into his coat pocket, seized on a heavy metal key ring and yanked it out.

Darkness constricted the edges of my vision. The night was pounding rhythmically. Still, I caught the animal terror in the bulging eyes staring down at me.

I lashed out, the keys clenched in my fist like a roll of nickels, but I got no real force behind the blow. Under the pressure of his hands, my throat was collapsing inward. My lungs were on fire. I tried to slash the keys into his face, but they slipped from my hand. Instead, I gouged with my fingers, rending the flesh, groping for an eye. Fabric tore somewhere, and another horn blasted. I was going limp, melting into the night, giving up. Tires squealed. Close. I jerked my head around.

“Introibo ad altare dei,” he repeated, clearer this time. It *was* Latin.

“Ad deum qui laetificat juventutem meam,” I croaked out in response.

