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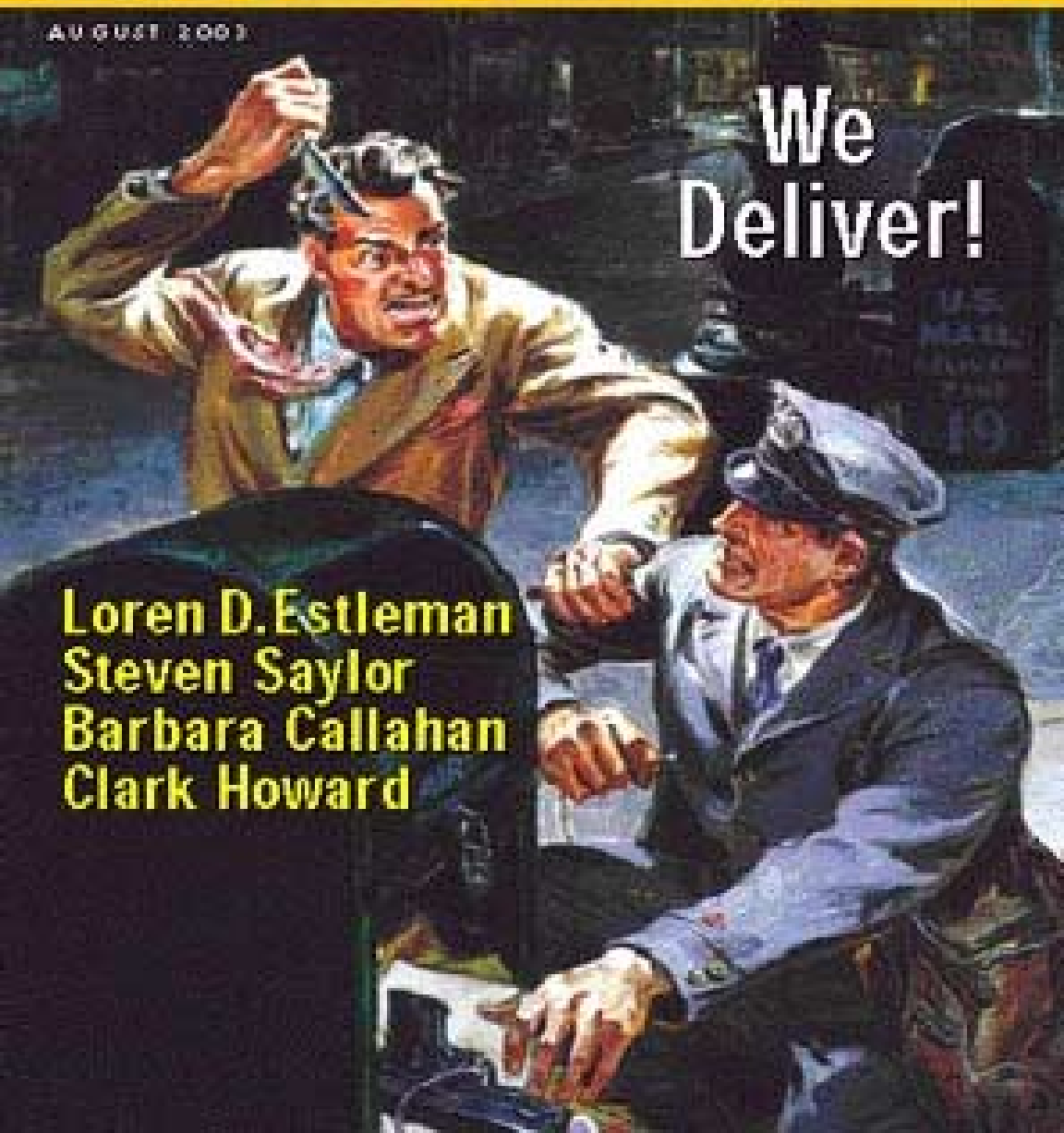

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Bombshell by Loren D. Estleman

Loren D. Estleman's Valentino series involves an intricate interweaving of real Hollywood history and fiction. In this latest case, the background to the story is true. As the author says: “An inordinate number of gorgeous blond stars died early, under tragic circumstances.” As usual, Valentino's role in the story is both to get hold of a valuable old movie and to solve a murder. The latest Estleman novel is *Poison Blonde* (Forge).

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Beata Limerick had turned her back on stardom and fallen into a fortune.

She'd been getting the big buildup at MGM in 1967 ("Not since Marilyn... “) when she walked out on her contract, offering no explanation. The studio sued, then withdrew its suit when she handed the head of production a cashier's check for the entire amount she'd been paid while on salary. The money was accepted, but not before someone actually said, “You'll never work in this town again.”

She never did; but then, she never had to.

Six months after she quit, she married the chairman of the board of the corporation that built Century City. When he died, shortly before their fifth anniversary, he left her forty million dollars in cash and securities and an additional sixteen million in real property, including four hundred feet fronting on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills.

By then, Beata had become a force to reckon with at Hollywood parties. Coat-check girls who wanted to be starlets, starlets who wanted to be stars, and stars who didn't want to be coat-check girls laughed at her jokes and gushed over her diamonds, then came away uncertain whether they should worry more about Beata discussing them behind their backs or Beata not discussing them at all.

Valentino—who was related neither to the silent-screen actor nor the clothing designer—had no wish to star in anything, and so he enjoyed Beata's company thoroughly and without fear. She in turn enjoyed his, having tested him and found that he wanted nothing from her. In addition, they

shared a reverence for Hollywood's rich and gaudy history. For his part, it was his job: He was an archivist with UCLA's Film Preservation Department. For hers, it was a passion: She was the foremost collector of movie memorabilia on the West Coast. It was said that with one bid at Sotheby's—$250,000 for the drapery-dress Vivien Leigh had worn in *Gone With the Wind*—Beata Limerick had upped the ante on everything from Mickey Rooney's Andy Hardy hat to the chariot Charlton Heston had raced in *Ben-Hur.*

She and Valentino encountered each other frequently. Both were regulars at auctions and estate sales where newly discovered reels of film and motion-picture props and wardrobe shared the block. They rarely competed; Valentino was more interested in movies than memorabilia, and Beata's preference ran toward items she could exhibit without having to set up a projector. Often they lunched afterward, celebrating their victories and commiserating over their defeats.

“I don't consider it a secret why I left MGM,” she told him on one such occasion. “It's just easier to refuse to answer the question than it is to repeat the same story over and over. I was afraid of the curse.”

“The curse?”

She smiled, accentuating the striking beauty of her sixty-year-old face. Time, not surgery, had been kind to the woman whom Hedda Hopper had declared “Hollywood's Alice Roosevelt Longworth.”

“The *curse,* foolish boy. Thelma Todd. Jean Harlow. Marilyn. It was still around for Sharon Tate. All the great

blond bombshells came to an early end. I was twenty-five; if I wasn't going to be great, the hell with it, and I didn't want to die. When that truck took off Jayne Mansfield's head, I got the message. I didn't walk away from my destiny. I ran for my life."

"She wasn't really decapitated, you know. It was just her wig they found on the hood of her Buick."

She patted his hand.

"I was being picturesque. I own the wig. I'd own the Buick, too, if Spielberg hadn't outbid me."

"You seriously believe there's a curse on blondes in Hollywood?"

"I believe in astrology, tarot cards, and voodoo. It's my birthright. I'm a native Californian."

They were serious rivals once only, years before they became friends. Beata had annihilated him in a battle over a rare unedited print of *The Sandpiper* at Vincente Minnelli's estate auction. That was the first day they'd had lunch; her treat.

"I couldn't resist," she said. "I doubled Liz Taylor in that one—it was my brunette period—and it's all I have to show for my career in pictures, such as it was. Anyway, you're better off without it. It's a stinker."

"Stinkers have a way of making money. UCLA could have exhibited it in revival houses and made enough to restore half a dozen better films."

"I'll make it up to you one day."

"One day" was fifteen years coming. Valentino had been very young at the time of his disappointment, an assistant to

an assistant. In the years since, he had been instrumental in the recovery of many motion pictures long considered lost. Along the way he'd acquired character lines in his face, while Beata, at threescore, could still pass for forty-five. But she hadn't forgotten her promise.

"I'm cleaning house," she told him over the telephone. "Bring your checkbook and I'll let you have *The Sandpiper* for what I paid."

The film, he knew, had doubled in value since she'd bought it. But Valentino had learned never to display eagerness in a business negotiation.

"I'll need to screen it. Those old Metrocolor features are prone to bleeding."

"So are old actresses. However, I'll forgive you for stabbing me in my aged heart if you'll agree to sample my chicken cordon bleu during intermission. Two o'clock Tuesday?"

At the hour mentioned, he came off the elevator opposite Beata Limerick's penthouse apartment in Beverly Hills and read a sign written in a hasty hand, thumbtacked to the door:

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V.—
Let yourself in and sit down on something. I'm putting on my face, and no man should be left standing that long.

Love, B.

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He placed the package he'd brought under one arm to open the door. The two flat cans bound in gift paper contained Beata's MGM screen test, which he'd acquired in a blind lot along with some more commercial items, and had been saving for a special occasion.

Most of the apartment was one huge room, partitions having been removed to create space for some of the artifacts his hostess had collected over the years. Opposite the groaning shelves and display cases, a vast picture window looked out on West Hollywood and most of the Valley. A forty-year-old Bell & Howell projector in excellent condition stood on a stout table facing a portable screen.

Valentino set his package on an eight-foot chaise that had appeared in *Samson and Delilah* and examined the label on one of the film cans stacked on the floor beside the table. It identified *The Sandpiper* as the contents, along with the production number and a stern warning that it was the property of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

He was accustomed to dining earlier. The aroma of the chicken dish coming from the kitchen made his stomach grumble. Music floated through the door of Beata's bedroom. He distracted himself from his hunger by trying to place the melody. It was “Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend,” Marilyn Monroe's show-stopping production number from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.*

Of all the storied bric-a-brac in Beata's collection, he found two items most amusing: Margaret Hamilton's pointed witch's hat from *The Wizard of Oz* and Fred MacMurray's crutches

from *Double Indemnity.* Only someone of her eclectic tastes would assign equal prominence to props from a fairy-tale classic and the darkest of *films noir.* He put down Francis Lederer's ruby ring from *The Return of Dracula* and looked at his watch. 2:21. Beata was rarely more than five minutes late for an appointment. She would have no one calling her a diva.

The smell from the kitchen turned acrid. A loud, razzing noise drowned out Marilyn, who seemed to be singing on a continuous loop, returning to the beginning of “Diamonds” immediately after the closing bars. It was a smoke alarm.

He pushed through the swinging door to the kitchen, eyes stinging, found the oven control, and turned it off. Tipping open the oven door, he groped for a potholder and swung the smoldering pan from the rack to the top of the range. He switched on the fan in the overhead ventilator.

Soon the smoke dissipated and the noise stopped. Marilyn was still singing.

Valentino passed through the living room and rapped on the bedroom door. There was nothing wrong with Beata's hearing, he knew; she must have been aware of the alarm.

He tried the knob. The door was locked. He banged again, harder, and called out her name. No response.

Well, the worst that could happen was he'd catch her wearing only one eyelash and she'd accuse him of watching too many John Wayne movies. He backed off two steps and threw his shoulder against the door. It didn't yield as easily as doors did onscreen. Two more tries and one giant bruise later, the frame split and the door flew open. He stumbled in

and almost sprawled across Beata's king-size bed, which already contained Beata herself.

She lay on her stomach, diagonally across the satin comforter, clutching the receiver of a white French-type telephone *(Ninotchka? An American in Paris?)* at the end of one outstretched arm. Her hair, which she'd continued to bleach against relentless graying, was disheveled as in sleep, obscuring her profile. There were age spots on her shoulders and her skin sagged in places, but she was in remarkably good condition for a woman even much younger. A CD player built into the wall facing the bed continued to belt out Norma Jean Baker's anthem for gold diggers from concealed speakers, but Beata wasn't listening. She was dead, which was shocking enough. Even more shocking, she was stark naked.

* * *

The detective lieutenant who arrived behind the uniformed police was an unexpected sight. Ranking investigators in Beverly Hills knew how to wear Armani and which gold clip went with which hundred-dollar tie. Ray Padilla wore pumpkin-colored polyester and a bowling shirt.

“Valentino, huh?” Instead of commenting on the name, he barked at a young officer in a trim uniform to turn off the CD player. He needed a haircut, and the dead pipe clamped between his teeth managed to observe the department's smoking ban while violating its spirit.

“Lab rats don't like us touching anything,” said the young man.

“Use your elbow. I'll be humming that damn tune for a week.”

Marilyn stopped singing abruptly. Valentino answered Padilla's questions and watched him scribble in a tiny memorandum book with a short mechanical pencil. The lieutenant wandered the room, recording details. An empty bottle of barbiturates on Beata's nightstand took the better part of one page. Something about the scene reminded Valentino of something, but he couldn't think what. It nagged him.

Padilla leaned one ear close to the telephone receiver clamped in Beata's hand, straightened. “This thing squawking when you broke in?”

“Squawking?”

“You know, that irritating noise telling you the phone's off the hook. Ma Bell hates spending her monopoly money on a dial tone.”

“All I heard was music,” Valentino said.

“Makes sense. The noise cuts off after a minute. Her skin's cool. She'd been dead awhile when you say you showed up. What is it you do?”

“I look for movies.”

“That shouldn't take long in this town.”

“Beverly Hills?”

“Hollywood. The Monster That Ate Southern California. You can't sit on the john without seeing Natalie Wood on a monitor in the stall.”

“The movies I look for haven't been seen in decades. I'm a preservationist, and in some small way a detective.”

Padilla turned his bleak eyes on him. “She seem depressed when she called you?”

“Anything but. So you think it's suicide?”

“No. I'm looking for a reason not to rule it out. I don't like that she left dinner in the oven, or that she chose a time when she was entertaining, or that she's naked. The telephone in her hand could mean she changed her mind and was trying to call for help when she lost consciousness, but it looks like set dressing to me. Also, I'm in some large way a detective, and I notice when something's missing. How about you?”

Valentino looked around, but the lieutenant wasn't a patient man.

“No glass, Sherlock. You can swallow a lethal dose of sleeping pills without water, but I don't know why you'd want to. Why not hang yourself? I mean, as long as you're making it uncomfortable.”

“Marilyn Monroe.”

“Yeah, that damn song. I can still hear it.”

“I mean the missing glass. I'd wondered why all this seemed so familiar: the telephone, the pills, the nudity. It matches the situation in Marilyn Monroe's bedroom when she was found dead. There was no glass there, either. The case was ruled a suicide, but to this day a lot of people are convinced she was murdered.”

“Some think it was the Kennedys,” Padilla said. “On account of her relationship with Jack and Bobby. I really needed a nutball homicide. It's been a week since the last one.” He took a Ziploc bag out of his pocket. It contained the

note Valentino had found on the door and had given to the uniformed officer. “Would you swear she wrote this?”

“I never saw her handwriting. It sounds like her.”

“I'll give it to the department graphologists. There ought to be samples in the apartment. Older woman living alone should know better than to leave her door unlocked. Was that normal?”

Valentino smiled through his sadness. He and Beata weren't close, but she was a bright daub of color in his often-gray academic life.

“I've never heard ‘Beata’ and ‘normal’ used in the same sentence. But I wouldn't say she tempted fate. She was superstitious.” He told Padilla about her belief in the curse of the blond bombshells.

“Ironic; I don't think. I wonder who else she told.”

“I suppose I'm a suspect.”

“If this happened anywhere but the land of fruits and nuts, I'd book you as a material witness. Where else would two grown people spend a sunny day indoors, watching an old movie on a creaky projector?”

“A *bad* old movie,” Valentino volunteered.

Padilla ground his teeth on his pipestem. “I wonder if ‘Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend’ was part of her CD collection or the killer brought his own? You gave this young man your contact information?”

Valentino said he had.

“Good. Now all I have to do is call up Ted Kennedy and ask him where he was this afternoon.”

* * *

Valentino spent much of the next two days on the telephone, tracking down Beata Limerick's executor and asking how he might bid on *The Sandpiper* before her estate went on the block. As an antidote to all the diplomacy involved, he devoted the rest of the time arguing with his contractor. He was in the midst of construction at the Oracle, which was the abandoned movie theater he'd bought to serve as his living quarters and private screening room. On the third day he attended Beata's memorial service.

Lieutenant Padilla plunked himself down on the adjoining seat. He had on the same combustible suit he'd worn to the crime scene, but had traded his fiery madras necktie for a sober black knot. “If I were half the people here, I'd think twice before going to a funeral. The ushers might not let them leave.”

The film archivist surveyed the sea of white heads. “Thirty years ago, you'd have had to pay admission to see them. You don't often find this much Hollywood history gathered in one spot.”

“Thirty years ago they'd all have been suspects. I don't see a set of muscles strong enough to force those pills down even an old woman's throat.”

“Was it the pills that killed her?”

“M.E. says yes. She put up a fight; lesions and contusions and a fractured skull. No other Marilyn CDs on the premises, by the way, and no box for the one that was playing when you found her. No prints, either. And that wasn't her handwriting on the note. Prints are yours.”

“If I'd known she was dead, I'd have worn gloves when I took it off the door. What about Kennedy?”

“Introducing a bill on the Senate floor at time of death.” He grinned joylessly at Valentino's expression. “Did you think I was joking about calling him?”

“I was just wishing I could have been on the extension.”

“I never figured to make captain anyway. I'm not here about the Limerick woman. Where were you last night between ten P.M. and midnight?”

Valentino felt as if the back of his seat had turned to icy metal. He'd heard some version of that question on the soundtracks of countless crime movies, but had never expected to have to answer it himself.

“I was at home, going over construction bills. What happened?”

“Anyone who can verify that?”

“An electrician in Tarzana, though he might not admit it. I called him at his home around eleven to ask why it cost six hundred dollars to install a dimmer switch.”

“You won't need him if phone-company records check out. Did you know a woman named Karen Ogilvie?”

The chill spread to Valentino's face. “I know her husband, Morris. He's a major contributor to UCLA, including my department. Karen used to do television a long time ago; she was Karen Earl then. She quit acting when she married Morris. Has something happened?” An old woman seated directly in front of him, whom he recognized from a half-forgotten commercial for Spic and Span, turned her head and shushed him.

The lieutenant lowered his voice. “Palm Springs P.D. faxed these over this morning.” He slid a manilla envelope from his saddle pocket, removed the contents, and passed them to Valentino.

The pictures were smudged and grainy, but the face of the dead woman was familiar despite the depredations of age. Karen Earl Ogilvie was slumped over a steering wheel with her hair disarranged and dark smears on her forehead, chin, and the collar of her fur coat. Her eyes were open, her lips slightly parted as if to ask the photographer to wait while she fixed her lipstick.

Padilla took back the sheets. “She dined out with girlfriends last night. Husband was in New York on business. When the maid came in at seven A.M., she heard a motor running and looked in the garage. This is what she found.”

“Carbon monoxide?”

“They're testing. That's blood on her face and coat. Someone cracked her a couple times with a blunt instrument. Her Porsche was undamaged, so she wasn't in an accident. Palm Springs cops think the killer was waiting for her in the garage, which meant he had access, and probably to the house as well.”

“Did Ogilvie tell you he knows me?”

“We missed him in New York. He's in the air, on his way back to a surprise.”

“Then why are you here? Am I the suspect of the week?” Valentino raised his voice, and got a chorus of geriatric shushes for his indiscretion.

“I'm not finished. Mrs. Ogilvie wasn't wearing the same clothes she'd had on when she left her friends. They said she was wearing a two-piece suit and no coat. Maid says the coat was hers, but she hadn't worn it in years, on account of all the controversy about animal rights; kept it in a storage bag in a closet. The lab rats are pretty sure someone put her in a dress after death. They found the two-piece suit crammed into a hamper. The extra flourishes made me think of Beata Limerick, and Beata Limerick made me think of you.”

“If he changed her clothes after death, how did blood get on the collar of the coat?”

“It wasn't a spill, it was a smear. Pattern's different. Maybe the killer got blood on him and wiped it off.”

“Maybe he did it deliberately.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Why would he change her clothes?”

“Good point. There's more. The side door to the garage was bolted from the house side. He must have let himself out that way, but it's odd he bothered to bolt the door behind him.”

Valentino experienced an eerie rush of déjà vu.

“The dress she had on,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“Was it blue?”

* * *

“Thelma Todd,” Valentino said.

“Never heard of her.” Padilla looked at the black-and-white photograph of the beautiful curly-haired blond woman with

the huge eyes and pert pointed chin as if he were committing a suspect's features to memory.

Valentino took back the book and returned it to its shelf. They were in the oversize projection booth of the Oracle, which the new owner had converted into temporary living space while the rest of the theater was in upheaval; a square opening looking out on the auditorium showed coils of exposed wires like spilled entrails and jagged sections of old plaster heaped on scaffolds. The crew was eating lunch, oblivious of the mustard and pickles dropping onto the vintage upholstered seats. The pair had come there straight from the memorial service. Valentino drew a tattered paperback from another shelf and ran his finger down the table of contents.

“She was before your time,” he said. “Mine, too. Todd was a glamour queen and a fine comedienne, like Carole Lombard, who was another doomed blonde for Beata's curse.”

“You'd think they'd learn to lay off the bleach.” Padilla looked out at the carnage. “So you live here?”

“Just barely. I went apartment hunting and wound up in a gilt palace, minus most of the gilt. They'd have torn it down by now if I hadn't bought it.”

“Sounds like a good excuse to pass it by.”

Valentino found the chapter he wanted and skimmed. “Todd lived a wild life even for a movie star of her era, including a relationship with Lucky Luciano. In nineteen thirty-five her maid found her in her garage, slumped over the wheel of her Packard convertible. The ignition was on, there was blood on her face and fur coat, the door to the

garage was barred on the other side. Death by monoxide poisoning. She had on a blue dress under the coat."

"This scumwad knows his trivia."

"Maybe he's read this book." Valentino held it up. It was titled *Hollywood's Unsolved Mysteries.*

The lieutenant surveyed the rows of books, which took up most of the space on the shelves not devoted to videotapes, DVDs, and reels of raw film. "I hope, for your sake, your alibi floats. You're a honey of a suspect."

"Good luck finding a motive. I liked Beata, and I never saw Karen Earl outside old episodes of *The Untouchables* and *Peter Gunn."*

"What's good motive? These days, all you need is a truck-stop waitress who short-changes you to take it out on the first meter maid you see." Padilla maneuvered his way around a plaster Buddha on his way to the stairs.

* * *

Throughout the next week, Valentino drew all his information on the murders from *E.T., Access Hollywood,* and the *Los Angeles Times.* Details linking the slayings to the cases of Marilyn Monroe and Thelma Todd had been suppressed, but he learned that Karen Ogilvie had whiled away the afternoon before her dinner with friends watching old footage of herself in her screening room, a staple in the motion-picture community every bit as crucial as swimming pools and tennis courts; apparently there was a smidgen of Norma Desmond in even the most well-adjusted retired siren. Valentino himself was not mentioned, to his relief, but Lieutenant Padilla was quoted often, saying that whoever had

killed the two women was probably known to and trusted by them, in order to have obtained access to their homes and proximity to their persons. Even without the connections to infamous Hollywood fatalities, news that a serial killer was targeting old-time actresses filled columns and airtime. Little was left to cover the death in an automobile accident of Geoffrey Root, a popular female impersonator who played local nightclubs. For years he'd skewered—and sometimes amused—such flashy femmes as Dolly Parton, Zsa Zsa Gabor, Cher, and Madonna with his dead-on impressions of them in sequins and heavy makeup. *E.T.* sandwiched accident-scene footage between the latest on the Limerick-Ogilvie murders and Jennifer Lopez's romance of the month. When the camera panned to the accordioned hood and what lay upon it, Valentino muted the sound and snatched up the telephone.

"Congratulations," Padilla greeted. "You're no longer my prime suspect. Your electrician backed up your story."

"What do you know about Geoffrey Root's accident?"

The lieutenant put him on hold for ten minutes.

"Highway Patrol says a jogger found his Acura folded up against a tree in Laurel Canyon at dawn," he said when he came back on. "Apparently Root lost control on a curve, went through a guardrail, and bounced down a ravine. He wasn't wearing his seatbelt. His head punched a hole in the windshield." He chuckled mirthlessly. "He was headed to a charity benefit, which was canceled when he didn't show; had a bunch of costumes in the car. There were pink feather boas and high-heeled pumps scattered all over."

"I'm more concerned about the wig," Valentino said.

“Which one? CHiPs said it looked like an explosion at the Hair Club for Men. Or rather, Women.”

“The wig on the hood of the car. Do you know anything about the Jayne Mansfield case?”

Padilla swore and told the archivist to meet him at police headquarters.

* * *

Whoever decorated lieutenants’ offices in Beverly Hills had taken pains to keep them from looking as if they were occupied by police, and Ray Padilla had done his best to fill his up with cop. For every African violet and Miró print he had inherited, he'd installed a bowling trophy or a cartoon clipped from *Parade.* That day he was actually wearing a leisure suit, powder blue with a clip-on tie. He wasted no time on handshakes, waving Valentino into the plastic scoop chair facing his littered desk.

“My first partner worked the Mansfield case from this end,” he said. “Kept bending my ear about it till he retired. Jayne was running around with a mob lawyer at the time, named Brody. He represented Jack Ruby, the guy that shot Lee Harvey Oswald. Seems these sex kittens couldn't keep away from gangsters and Kennedys. Anyway, she, Brody, and her teenage son were killed in June nineteen sixty-seven when her Buick rear-ended a truck on I-90 in Louisiana, on their way to do a TV interview in New Orleans. To this day, a lot of people think Jayne was decapitated. She wasn't. Her wig flew out through the broken windshield and landed on the hood and a gawker saw it and leapt to the most sensational conclusion, as gawkers will, especially when a movie star's

involved. I called Highway Patrol again after I spoke to you. There were no pieces of shattered glass in Geoffrey Root's wig, which means he wasn't wearing it when his head hit the windshield. Someone had to have placed it there after the accident."

Valentino said, "I think at this point we can stop calling it an accident."

"Dollars to Ding-Dongs he was knocked out or dead before his car went down that ravine. Our boy aimed it at the guardrail, put it in Drive, jumped clear, and climbed down afterwards to dress the set. Same basic M.O., except his first two victims were women."

"Female impersonators come close; that's the whole idea." Valentino stood and paced in a circle. The office was too cluttered with stacks of file folders to encourage any more movement than that. "I can't help thinking this character got all his ideas from Beata. When I asked her what she meant by the curse, she mentioned Thelma Todd, Marilyn Monroe, Jean Harlow, Sharon Tate, and Jayne Mansfield. Three of those have already served as models for the crime scenes."

"That checks with the profile. The victims had to have known and trusted the killer for him to get so close. Trouble is, by the time we finish questioning all the friends, servants, personal assistants, and presidents of fan clubs, this maniac will have died of old age."

Valentino considered. "Did Root live alone?"

"He had a companion, fellow named Sheridan. What their relationship was isn't police business these days." Padilla straightened his clip-on. "It's a place to start. Let's go."

"Why me?"

"You speak entertainer. I need an interpreter."

Padilla drove better than he dressed. Half an hour later they entered the driveway of Geoffrey Root's Frank Lloyd Wright house in the Hollywood Hills. The late performer's partner, Evan Sheridan, let them inside. Tall and graying with a slight stoop, he was obviously composing himself with effort. The visitors apologized for intruding and said they wanted to ask about Root's activities before the accident.

Sheridan showed them into the sunken living room, where he said he and his companion had been relaxing before it was time for Root to leave for his charity benefit. It was done in tasteful colors with modern furnishings. An Impressionist-inspired painting of a premiere at Grauman's Chinese Theatre decorated the chimney above a fieldstone fireplace. Valentino noted a pair of tiny, state-of-the-art speakers propped on the ends of the granite mantel. He asked if the room was a home theater.

For answer, Sheridan bent and activated a switch hidden beneath the marble top of a huge coffee table. The painting above the mantel slid up noiselessly into a pocket, exposing a canvas screen.

"Rear or front projection?" Valentino asked.

"Front." His host pointed to a square aperture high in the wall opposite the screen. "Geoffrey preferred film to DVD and videotape, using a professional-grade projector. I said we were relaxing, but actually he was working. He always prepared for a show by watching footage of the women he impersonated. Yesterday we saw excerpts from *Some Like It*

Hot, Red-Headed Woman, and *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* You know: Marilyn, Jean Harlow, Jayne. Will you gentlemen please excuse me?" He left the room hastily, tugging a white handkerchief from a pocket.

"Interviewing the widow's the worst part of this job." Padilla spoke without irony. "Harlow was one of the blondes the Limerick woman mentioned. Did she die violently?"

"No. Kidney failure took her at age twenty-six."

"Not promising. From a killer's point of view."

Sheridan returned. "I'm sorry. It's very hard answering all these questions. Is it common in accident investigations?"

Valentino turned aside the inquiry. "Which one of you operated the projector?"

"Neither one of us. Geoffrey was adamant about observing union rules in work-related situations. He always employed a professional projectionist."

The archivist and the detective exchanged glances. Padilla spoke first. "Who'd he use yesterday?"

"Oh, the same one as always, Arthur Augustine. For a young man he's one of the best in the business."

"Who left first, Root or Augustine?" Padilla asked.

"They left together. Geoffrey was his ride home. But he won't be able to give you any information about the accident; his house is between here and Laurel Canyon. Geoffrey would have dropped him off several miles short of where—he ended up." Sheridan swallowed.

"One more question," Valentino said gently. "Where is his house?"

* * *

“Stupid,” Padilla said, driving. He gripped the wheel tightly in both hands.

Valentino was startled. “Who, me?”

“Me. I'm paid to be a detective. These are all pros, and they were all screening or about to screen films the day they were killed. It stands to reason they'd hire a projectionist, one they knew and trusted. That's how he got into their houses. They let him in.”

“We didn't know Root was screening until just now. The other two could have been coincidence. I didn't see it, either, and I know the procedure; screening's a big part of my work. It shouldn't be hard to find out if Augustine ran projectors for Karen Ogilvie and Beata.” Valentino stared out the window, at the same scenery Geoffrey Root had seen on his way to death. “How do you think he killed Root?”

“Probably at some lonely stop sign, or else he made an excuse for Root to pull over. This guy likes blunt instruments. With Root dead or unconscious, he slid him over and drove him to the top of the ravine. You know the rest.”

“Everything but why.”

“Why's the prosecutor's problem. Right now I'm wondering what next. Who was the other blonde Beata Limerick mentioned?”

Valentino hesitated. “Sharon Tate.”

Both men fell silent, and Padilla pressed the accelerator. They were old enough to remember the lurid details of the blond actress's murder in 1969; a ritual slaughter, along with three friends, in a bungalow in Bel Air by the Charles Manson “family” of devil-worshipers. They'd been stabbed multiple

times and Sharon's blood used to smear the word “Pig” on the front door. That sun-drenched drive seemed as bleak as midnight.

* * *

The house was an anomaly in twenty-first-century L.A.: white clapboard with a steep peaked roof and a picket fence, held over from the forgotten days before the movie colony was founded. The door was opened by a woman in her fifties, with skin brown and crinkled by too many tans and a head of fried hair, aggressively peroxided. She was dressed too young, in a tight pink halter and canary-yellow capri pants that squeezed her bare midriff into something resembling a bicycle inner tube. The rest was rouge, mascara, and vermilion on her fingers and toes.

“Arthur Augustine.” Padilla held up his shield.

“Artie's at work. I'm his mother. May I take a message?”

“Where's he working?”

She drew in her chin and turned to Valentino. He pulled a sympathetic face. “It's important we find him.”

“He works all over; he's very popular in his field. He never tells me where. He hasn't been in an accident?” She touched her throat, a theatrical gesture.

“He causes accidents,” Padilla growled.

Quickly, Valentino said, “We just want to ask him some questions. Could we see his room? He might have an appointment book.”

“He rents an apartment upstairs. Artie's no mama's boy. You won't disturb anything? He's particular about his things.”

The lieutenant let Valentino mouth the comforting response, and she stood aside. The front parlor (as it would have been called when the house was new) glittered with professional-quality photographs of a young Mother Augustine in silver frames: cheesecake shots in two-piece swimsuits, glamour poses in evening wear, tough-girl tableaus with a pistol and a dangling cigarette. She'd chosen to display her aspiring-actress portfolio.

“You've learned my secret,” she said. “I tested for everything in town, from soap operas to deodorant commercials. I finally landed a part opposite Bobby Darin, but I got pregnant and had to bow out. Sandra Dee stepped in. I tell Artie it took my little man to knock the stars out of my eyes.”

“Tease him a lot, do you?”

She tipped back her head and looked down her nose at the lieutenant. Valentino wondered if she'd had it bobbed. “He pretends to be annoyed and I pretend to think he's ungrateful, after I gave up the bright lights for him. We laugh.”

“Where's his room?” Padilla said.

“Apartment.” She led the way up a narrow staircase and flicked her bright nails in the direction of a closed door. Padilla tried the knob.

“He keeps it locked,” she said with satisfaction. “As if I'd pry.”

He produced a ring of assorted keys from a polyester pocket. “Okay if I try these?”

“Knock yourself out.” She sounded sincere.

He was halfway through the ring when the latch clicked.

"Oh, my stars." The woman's voice was a squeak.

Posters leapt out from the walls when the door was opened. Some were pricey originals, others reproductions: Marilyn sprawled before the falls in *Niagara,* Jayne's vapid face grinning between her cotton-candy hair and her ice-cream breasts in *The Girl Can't Help It,* Thelma Todd looking fetching in a lobby card for one of her comedy shorts, a chilling rendition of Sharon Tate wielding a bloody stake in *The Fearless Vampire Killers.* There were other four-color images, all of them tragic blondes: Jean Harlow, Carole Lombard, Dorothy Stratten, Inger Stevens—the long, sad Parthenon of yellow hair, gaudy lives, and early death. Someone had taken a four-inch brush and slashed scarlet paint diagonally across every lovely face.

Oh, my stars, indeed.

Augustine's library was a miniature version of Valentino's, apart from its emphasis on the Industry's dark side: *Hollywood Babylon, Fade to Black, Hollywood's Unsolved Mysteries, Helter Skelter.* An empty CD box atop a Sony player caught his eye: a single of Marilyn singing "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend."

Padilla called to him. He joined the lieutenant at a small writing table, where yesterday's *L.A. Times* lay folded to a gossip column, with a check mark beside the fourth paragraph:

> ... Holiday O'Shea, popular road-company star of *Hello, Dolly; Gypsy;* and *Gentlemen Prefer*

Blondes, celebrating her 55th with husband and friends with a private screening of a local cable documentary of her life at Orson's Grill Friday...

Padilla looked at the archivist. “What day is today?”

* * *

Orson's Grill, in a defunct Burger Chef on Cahuenga, featured posters and memorabilia—the latter locked inside shatterproof glass cases—relating to the life and career of Orson Welles, with a menu engineered to replicate the late actor/director's expansive waistline in its clientele. The maître d’ pointed Padilla and Valentino toward a private room in back. The lieutenant drew his sidearm, towing a chain of gasps through the crowded common room.

“Has-beens, also-rans, and wannabes,” he said. “Those are his targets. Life would be simpler if these twisted jerks would just kill their mothers and be done with it.”

Valentino said nothing. He was tense and his throat was hoarse from arguing in favor of his civilian presence at the showdown. He'd finally compromised, agreeing to hang behind in order to avoid being trapped in the crossfire between Padilla and the back-up he'd ordered for the rear entrance.

A burly waiter stood before the door to the back room. “Sorry, fellows. Private party. Not even staff's allowed inside till after the movie.”

“Whose orders?” Padilla showed him his gun and shield. The waiter blanched.

“Why, the young man's, sir. He said he was the projectionist.”

“You see a projector?”

“He was carrying a big black case like one comes in.”

“How long ago?”

The waiter shrugged. “Twenty minutes.”

Padilla told him to stand clear.

The door was locked from the other side. The lieutenant clasped his automatic in both hands, raised a foot, and threw his heel at the latch. The door was more cooperative for him than Beata's had been for Valentino. It swung open and banged against the wall inside the room.

“Police! Drop it!”

Valentino craned his neck to see inside. Four middle-aged people in formal dress sat around a linen-covered table, eyes wide above gags tied around their mouths. One was a woman in her middle fifties with a chrysanthemum head of improbably butter-colored hair. Their hands were out of sight; tied, Valentino supposed, to their chairs.

A reedy young man in cords and a tweed sportcoat stood this side of the table with his back to Padilla, looking over his shoulder at the source of the interruption. Annoyance was plain on his narrow features, which were a younger version of Mother Augustine's. He'd stopped in the midst of drawing a collapsible steel baton—the kind police used in place of nightsticks—from a black case standing open on the table. The case was filled with long-bladed knives and coils of nylon rope.

Just then a door on the other side of the room burst open and two policemen in uniform sprang through, one standing, his partner dropping into a crouch. Their sidearms were trained on the young man holding the baton.

His head spun that way. Then his shoulders sagged and he let his weapon fall back into the case.

Padilla barked another command. Arthur Augustine turned to face him and folded his hands on top of his head.

“Pigs,” he said.

Holiday O'Shea whimpered through her gag.

* * *

The “Curse Killer” stained front pages and breaking newscasts for two weeks, complete with its familiar back story of parental neglect and adolescent jealousy. It made Valentino feel sorry for Augustine, until he thought of Beata Limerick. Ray Padilla was forced to buy a new suit to wear before the cameras. When Augustine was declared mentally unfit to stand trial and remanded to the maximum-security ward of the state mental hospital in Camarillo, the entire episode began to fade, joining the shockers of Hollywood past.

Beata's print of *The Sandpiper* went to auction. Valentino, remembering her now without sadness, topped Ted Turner's bid and claimed it. The restoration experts at UCLA put it on the list behind *Charlie Chan's Chance* and two hundred feet of Theda Bara's *Cleopatra,* which was all of that silent feature that had ever come to light.

Six months after the arrest in Orson's Grill, ABC announced plans to tape a TV movie about the murders. The

producers didn't lack for fair-haired has-beens, also-rans, and wannabes to fill the cast.

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The Forbidden Key by Barbara Callahan

The following story was prompted, says Barbara Callahan, by articles she read about several people who have looked up former lovers through the internet. With the internet now so important a part of many people's lives, it's surprising that we haven't seen more mystery and crime stories in which it plays a central role. Ms. Callahan's story reminds us of the danger that can lie in hitting the Send key.

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The memory of a lost love should be gently awakened—perhaps by a pressed violet slipping out of a dictionary or by a ‘seventies song slow-dancing out of a car radio.

The memory of a lost love should not have intruded into my consciousness through the prosaic medium of e-mail. The reunion with a lost love should not have ended in tragedy.

Two months ago, I logged on to my computer and stared unbelievingly at the Subject line of an e-mail message. It read: “Rosebuddy,” a term of endearment devised fifteen years ago by my lover in my senior year at Warminster College after we left an art-theater showing of *Citizen Kane.* On the way back to the dorm, we discussed the Rosebud motif that ran through the film. Suddenly Bill slapped his forehead and said, “I just realized something. My nickname as a kid was Buddy and your name is Rosemarie, Rose for short. We can combine these names into Rosebuddy, a private confirmation of our indestructible union.”

Rosebuddy, it was—in all our messages to each other, in all our encounters, in all our shared pleasures. Under the canopy of the elm in front of the administration building, Rosebuddy studied French poetry. At the football games, Rosebuddy huddled together under the fleece tiger-striped throw. Late, late at night when my roommate went home, Rosebuddy giggled and threw pillows onto the musical bear that fell on the floor and loudly tinkled Warminster's marching song.

On May 14, 1988, Rosebuddy dissolved. The official closure occurred on the steps of the Warminster Library when the

Buddy half kissed the Rose half of the indestructible union before setting off for a summer's sojourn in England. Bill hefted his backpack over his shoulders—the thin, sloping shoulders of the constant reader and searcher for truth—then brushed a carefully tended stray lock of auburn hair from his eyes and whispered, “I'll only be gone for three months, Rosemarie. This bicycle trip to the Lake Country is essential for my graduate work on Wordsworth. I'll write.”

He shifted the poetry-laden backpack to a more comfortable position, pushed the stray lock back into its boyish-charm position, and climbed onto the van carrying nine other students and Professor Geary.

When did I know that the name Rosebuddy was as permanent as the letters puffed out of a skywriter's plane? Perhaps as early as 4:31 on May 14, 1988, when Bill called me Rosemarie instead of Rosebuddy. Or possibly as early as 4:35 on May 14, 1988, when Bill slipped into the seat in the van next to the ethereally beautiful and incredibly rich Janine Dwyer and beamed at her as happily as Wordsworth spotting his daffodils.

Two postcards constituted the extent of his promise to write. The Tower of London arrived on May 20th and Wordsworth's cottage on July 15th. Hastily written and short, obviously painfully penned on the handlebars of his bike, the cards conveyed his aching and longing—for a shower and a bottle of calamine lotion.

Although the statute of limitations on lost love hadn't expired in the five ensuing years, I married Martin, a sweetly distracted engineer without a shock of auburn hair, in fact,

without any hair at all. Also a classmate of mine, Martin had been cruelly nicknamed Flatliner because his temperament registered no peaks or valleys on the fraternity's personality scale. Our engagement stunned my friend Meg, who told me I was entering into flat-trimony, not matrimony. I responded with a list of Martin's qualities: honest, sincere, steady, dependable.

“You've substituted your love of an exciting poet for the companionship of a boy scout,” she sneered.

“The poet dumped me; Martin never will.”

On the eve of our marriage, as we were checking all the arrangements for the next day, Martin shyly said, “There is something else I need for tomorrow.”

“Oh, what?”

He bit his lip and blurted out, “Your special smile. That special smile you had when you looked at Bill in college. I think of it as your sunrise smile that lights up the world. If you could possibly smile at me that way when we exchange our vows, I'll be the happiest man in the world.”

I tried, I really tried.

* * *

Incapable of reading the e-mail alone, I called Meg and flippantly told her that I had bumped into Bill in Cyberland via an e-mail message.

“Wow! What did he say?”

“I don't know. I'm afraid to open it.”

“Then how do you know it's from him?”

“The subject line was Rosebuddy, the name I never even told you about, the name we called each other.”

“For heaven's sake, open it.”

Afraid that I might be emulating Pandora by pressing a key, I stalled and asked, “How do you suppose he got my e-mail address?”

She sighed. “Oh, he might have volunteered to help with the alumni fund drive and saw your e-mail on the pledge card. Now open the damn message.”

Through the click of a mouse, a question appeared on the screen: “Do you remember putting the finishing touches on Sigmund Freud on Cresthaven Hill?”

“The snowman,” said Meg.

How could I not remember? It was a scene I recalled at the first snowfall every year. Knee-high in snow, Bill and I ploughed our way up the hill, panting out suggestions for the subject of our snow sculpture. Having just completed a psych course, I gleefully clapped my mittens when Bill proposed Freud. Braving frostbite, we labored for hours. With a thin branch Bill carved a fantastic facial likeness out of the snow. “But vat is missing?” he asked at its completion.

“A cigar,” I answered, “because sometimes a good cigar is just a good cigar.”

We rolled down the hill, tacked up an invitation on our dorm's bulletin boards to our Freudy the Snowman party, and headed to the tobacco shop in town. That night pinpoints of light bobbed up and down on Cresthaven Hill as partygoers smoked their cigars in solidarity with the great man.

Breaking into my reverie, Meg said, “And the highlight of the evening was Bill's ersatz Austrian accented, ‘Vat do vimmen really vant?’ and manfully flicking his cigar and

leering, ‘Me! They vant me!’ So what are you going to write back?”

“I'm not going to write back. I don't feel good about it.”

“Why not? It's not like you're cheating on Martin.”

“Of course not,” I snapped and quickly asked about the status of her alimony payments, a subject guaranteed to shift the focus from me to her.

After a ten-minute monologue on the deficiencies of her ex and her lawyer, she concluded with, “Responding to an e-mail message is quite innocent, you know.”

I agreed but consigned Bill's e-mail to Trash anyway.

* * *

That night I slept fitfully on the plain white sheets that Martin preferred. And dreamed about sliding down snowy hills, sliding out of control toward a large trash can. I awoke to Martin's hovering over me, running his hand across my forehead like a parent concerned for the child we never had.

“You slept poorly last night, Rosemarie. I think you're coming down with something. Take it easy today, why don't you? I brought you a tray so you don't have to get up.”

Dear, thoughtful Martin. The tray held a cup of milky tea, a glass of orange juice, and two slices of white, buttered toast. As I stirred the tea, my thoughts swirled around like the snowflakes shaken in a toy globe. I remembered the morning Bill set a tray next to my bed in the dorm when I succumbed to a bout of flu. He left before I could thank him for the steaming cup of apple-cinnamon herbal tea, the glass of pineapple juice topped with a paper umbrella from the Café au Lei, and the two slices of toasted sourdough bread topped

with apricot preserves from the nearby Benedictine monastery. A pink rose peeked out of a paper cup set atop a little couplet: “It's impossible to frolic or study, when not in sync with my Rosebuddy.”

From my forceful stirring, hot tea spilled onto my hand. With the paper napkin I blotted it and resolved to stop all this dangerous dredging. I got out of bed, padded down the hall to my study, and turned on the computer. I checked my e-mail, relieved to find no new Rosebuddy message. That evening I cooked Martin's favorite dinner. Delighted at my swift recovery, he devoured the roast chicken.

At nine o'clock the phone rang. Meg didn't have to identify herself.

“Well?” she asked.

“Well, what?” I answered, glancing over at Martin slouched in his recliner, his face hidden behind a tented newspaper, a sure sign he had dozed off.

“You know very well what well means. How did you answer him?”

“I didn't. I sent the message to Trash.”

Silence. Then a sigh. Then the stream of consciousness. “For a few seconds your e-mail message brightened my dull, boring life ... Here I am stuck at home with a six-year-old ... chauffeuring her to music lessons, soccer games ... I need a vicarious thrill ... There you are in your dull, boring life, working at home, writing press releases for Martin's dot-com ... Gone are our dreams of yesteryear for adventure, romance ... You had your chance once with Bill and moped over him for years, probably still are ... Now life sends you a second

chance and you trash it ... Believe me, if a lost love contacted me ... Oh, what's the use...”

After she came up for air, I said, “Meg, I'm not interested in starting up again with a jerk who dumped me. And I do love Martin.”

“You tolerate Martin's boringness and that's not love, it's...”

“Goodbye, Meg,” and I pressed down hard on the button to silence her.

The next morning she came to the house with her daughter Sarah, who carried a bouquet of daisies.

“Mommy said these are your favorites. Here.”

Sheepishly, Meg said, “Peace offering. I was totally out of line last night.”

We hugged. I let Sarah run water into a vase and told her to bring the flowers into my study so I could enjoy them while I continued working. As we entered the room, a ping sounded from my computer.

“You've got mail,” Sarah said.

“Oh, I'll deal with it later,” I answered.

“Open your mail,” ordered Meg, no longer penitent.

“Please, please open it,” begged Sarah. “I'm learning to read and I love to read e-mails.”

“But this is probably a business message, full of computer terms,” I protested. “Very boring for you.”

“Mommy lets me read hers,” persisted Sarah.

“Open it,” ordered Meg.

Reluctantly, I hit “Get Message.” When the Subject line appeared, Sarah read the first word, “Rosebuddy,” but

stumbled on the second. “It's ‘encore,'” breathed Meg, “a French word that means again.”

Feeling like Bluebeard's wife before she unlocked the forbidden door, I paused to dry my hand before pressing the Enter key.

Bill wrote: “Do you remember The Right of Spring: Revenge of the Flowers?”

After Sarah sounded out the word “revenge,” Meg happily told her the story.

“When Aunt Rosemarie and I were in college, the board of trustees—they're the important people in charge of the school's money—decided to expand the parking lot next to the dining hall, and to do that, they targeted several forsythia bushes to be cut down. The students were very upset about those plans and made some plans of their own.”

“What kind of plans?” asked Sarah.

“Well, the man who wrote this e-mail was very creative and called his friends together and they decided to punish the trustees—not violently, of course, more like a prank. One March evening Bill and several friends crept into the doomed area and while the trustees were eating in the dining hall, cut off branches of the forsythia bushes and tied them together to make long garlands of yellow flowers. They carried the garlands into the parking lot and entwined them all around the cars of the trustees. They looped them over the doors, across the roofs, over the windshields, across the lights, and around the tires. The trustees were hopping mad when they came outside. It took them hours to clean off their cars.”

“Did they get in trouble?” Sarah giggled.

“Not really. The man who wrote the e-mail took all the blame. He confessed in an editorial the next day in the school newspaper entitled ‘Revenge of the Flowers.’ He had to pay a fine for vandalism but everybody involved chipped in.”

“Cool,” said Sarah. “He sounds like fun.”

“He was, is,” answered Meg, leaning over my shoulder, rapidly hitting Reply and typing under the message, “I remember.”

Before I could stop her, she hit Send and the message was sent. She grinned. “Now the die is cast, whatever that means, and we have crossed the electronic Rubicon.”

“I can't do this.”

She patted me on the shoulder. “You don't have to. I will. I'll stop over every day and press the forbidden key. I'll answer his messages. That way your conscience is clear, but you can be in on the fun.”

By simply changing my e-mail address, I could have ended the “Remember” interaction right then, but a tingle of excitement kept me in the game, but not as an active participant, mind you.

On the following day, Meg answered, “I remember” to Bill's question, “Do you remember doddering old Professor Hannigan's Poli Sci class when I presented a slightly reworded and very updated oration of Cicero's as my own and the poor guy actually led the students in applauding my rhetorical skills and political acumen? And we went to the Proper Publican to drink to his deteriorating brain cells? And you wore that tartan tam perkily positioned to graze your left eyebrow?”

“Aha,” said Meg. “You never told me about the perkily positioned tam. Was it a turn-on for him?”

Hoping to conceal the flush on my cheeks, I leaned over the keyboard to delete Meg's “I remember,” but she quickly clicked the Send button.

“Relax. We're just having a little fun.”

Just a little fun, she said, a little *auld lang syne*, no harm in that, and I bought into it. The messages gave me something to daydream about when Martin was extolling the virtues of the Linux operating system. The e-mails gave me the chance to be a spectator at my own drama in flashbacks. So what if the messages were reawakening romantic feelings? I wasn't replying to them, Meg was. The messages were really quite innocent—well, perhaps not the one that referred to my tam, which when worn was always a signal to Bill that roommate was away for the night. Silly of me to read anything into that fifteen years later. Bill was simply Marcel Proust recapturing the past for me.

On three successive days, the electronic scrapbook offered more memories.

“Do you remember the basketball game against State when our frat kidnapped their mascot, Muskrat Morrie, and stripped the kid who played him down to his underwear and locked him in the men's room? And I put on the outfit and staggered around the gym while the teams were warming up like I was one drunken muskrat? And before the security guards could grab me, you and your friends ran onto the court and did an impromptu cheer as a distraction? You were

wearing that miniskirt that properly displayed your gorgeous mile-long legs. Stopped the pursuers dead."

First the tam, then the miniskirt.

"It's heating up," grinned Meg, who once again typed, "I remember."

Two messages that followed removed the innocence from "Do You Remember?" The first asked me to recall the Halloween party that the frat "ghosted" in Restful Hills Cemetery and ended with, "You were lovely in your diaphanous nightgown as you floated through the Remembrance Garden on the arm of the Gruesome Ghoul, me."

"Diaphanous! Wow!" yelped Meg. "Things are really heating up."

"Hardly," I choked. "I was freezing that night."

"I mean here, on the screen."

The last message devoted solely to "Do You Remember?" recaptured the Valentine's Day when he crept into the women's shower room and dumped rose petals into the stall as I was rinsing off.

"Ohmigod," groaned Meg. "You couldn't possibly have forgotten that."

"There's a lot I haven't forgotten," I snapped.

Before she could type "I remember," I leaned over her shoulder and typed, "What I do remember is that you dumped me," and hit the Send key.

"Well, you sure know how to break a spell," sighed Meg. "You won't be hearing from him again."

"Great. Now you can find your fun elsewhere."

Meg slouched out of the house, and after my anger subsided, I felt terrible, like a parent who's punished a child by taking away her favorite video game. Too cowardly to apologize to Meg in person, I logged on to my computer the next morning to do it by e-mail. Hoping that she had messaged me first, I checked my In-box and once again read “Rosebuddy.”

To delete or not to delete. Opening the file might finally bring closure to the unfinished business of my wondering all these years why he had left me for vapid Janine. Deleting the unread file might strengthen my resolve not to continue the innocent betrayal of Martin. Opening the file might expose the painful truth—a deficiency in me that drove him away. Deleting the unread file might bind me more desperately to Martin, whom I, of course, dearly loved.

My index finger hovered over the Delete key, then scraped it to remove a mote of dust. The decision was put on hold until the phone rang. It was Martin apologizing for forgetting that the Volvo was scheduled for servicing that afternoon, and oh, could I pick up his brown suit at the cleaner's on my way home from the car dealer's? After hanging up, my finger flew to the Enter key and opened a file that should have ever remained closed.

The message stunned me. Bill wrote, “I have always loved you"—exactly the words I had scripted over and over again in the fantasy version of my reunion with him, though the setting varied from a misty beach on Cape Cod to a glorious mountain range in the Sierras. Should I write back

immediately or allow time for him to worry that he'd never hear from me again? Was it payback time or honesty time?

I needed advice. I needed my best friend. I called Meg. Giddy with excitement, I relayed Bill's message and drew her back into the game.

“Oh, man, this is just too cool! Go for it,” she squealed. “Message him back that you have always loved him, too.”

“Not so fast. Before I even think of doing that, I've got to know the whys and wherefores of the past fifteen years.”

Together we came up with a one-word response to his declaration of always loving me: “But?”

He answered, “But I was weak. I missed you terribly on that trip to England and I was extremely vulnerable to the aggressive pursuit by Janine. I'm not proud of myself.”

To which I responded: “But I saw you take the seat next to her on the van. There were other places to sit.”

“But you couldn't have seen her through the window tugging at my T-shirt and pulling me onto the seat next to her.”

“But you looked quite happy to be tugged.”

“But I was just trying not to look like a nerd.”

“And I was just standing on the sidewalk trying not to look like Deirdre of the Sorrows.”

“Please forgive me.”

“This is enough for one day.”

The following day's communication, conceived by Meg and me, also consisted of one word: “So?”

To which he responded, “So by just being friendly to Janine, I didn't feel that I was being disloyal to you. And I

was faithful for a while. However, although the spirit was willing, the flesh was weak. And because I succumbed, I was too ashamed to write to you. Please forgive me."

"Why now?" I wrote back. "Are you in a twelve-step program that requires you to contact people you've hurt to ask forgiveness?"

"No, I'm not," he answered. "I need forgiveness now because I've always loved you. My marriage to Janine, which officially ended last week, was a terrible mistake. Basically, she was a rich spoiled brat. Fortunately we had no children. Although I have a great sense of relief that the marriage is over, I still cannot feel completely free because I hurt you. Last week after moving back to town, the town you never left, I went to Warminster to relive those sweet memories of you. I was about to leave the campus when I bumped into Candy Lawler from our class. She commandeered me into the alumni office to help send out pledge cards for the fund drive. When I found your name with your e-mail address, I was thrilled. It took me a week to get up the courage to contact you."

Although Meg didn't like my response to that message, I sent it anyway. "Aside from my e-mail address on the pledge card, was there another item that you could have possibly overlooked—the fact that I have added another name to mine, the fact that I am married?"

Quite capable of playing the one-word game, Bill wrote, "Happily?"

That prompted Log-Off. "Of all the impertinence," I fumed to Meg, like an insulted Victorian lady.

His next day's message would have quickened the heartbeat of any lady, Victorian or not: “I bet you are still beautiful.”

Flushed, I went to the mirror and studied the complexion I had cared for so faithfully—slight wrinkling under the eyes, blemish-free, rather lovely. Actually, very lovely. And my hair—highlighted now, not the mousy dirty-blond of fifteen years ago. And my weight—jogging and workouts had kept me in fighting trim. No, waiting trim. Could it be that I had been waiting all these years for Bill to return to me? Was that the reason I endured daily regimes to maintain and enhance the fifteen-year-ago me? It couldn't have been for Martin, who only cared about the sunrise smile I never gave him. Was I the opposite of Dickens's jilted Miss Havisham, staying fresh and youthful for the meeting with my lost love?

Meeting. There would be no meeting. This encounter between two former lovers was strictly electronic. And platonic. Electronic and platonic. I made it into a singsong. Relieved by the silliness, I thought of sharing the rhyme with Meg when the phone rang.

A masculine voice intoned, “You are, aren't you?”

“Who is this?” I stammered, knowing it was Bill.

“You are, aren't you?” he repeated.

“Are what?” I whispered.

“Still beautiful.”

I couldn't speak.

After a short pause, he said, “Your silence is confirmation of that reality. Let's meet.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow at noon. For lunch.”

“No, I can't,” I stammered. “I don't lunch with men. I am married.”

“Then a walk in Granger Park.”

“Okay,” I answered, believing a walk in the park did not qualify as a marital betrayal.

“We'll meet at the gazebo in front of the weeping willow at noon.”

“Okay,” I managed before hanging up and taking deep breaths to calm myself. I started to dial Meg, but realized I needed to see her. I needed to be with her, not simply to exchange giggles as if I had arranged a prom date, but for her to comfort me, for her to tell me I had done the right thing by agreeing to meet Bill.

As soon as she opened her door, she knew. “He called you,” she breathed. “I can tell. You look radiant. Tell Meg all.”

And I did. And she babbled all the things I wanted to hear. “Nothing wrong ... just meeting an old friend ... Martin wouldn't object, but don't tell him ... makes things more exciting ... this is the real thing, better than my romance novels ... you little vixen, you ... promise to tell all to poor dull Meggie.”

“Maybe you should come, too,” I suggested.

A shriek of laughter dismissed that suggestion as she ushered me to the door.

“Sorry, sweetie, I've got to get these alumni pledge cards back to the Development Office. Wish we could talk longer. Hope you can sleep tonight.”

For a minute, I stood on her scraggly lawn, counting dandelions to control my annoyance. I wanted to talk longer, examine all the nuances, but she was more interested in those pledge cards on the sideboard under the red baseball cap than in me. Then I realized that she had a male visitor, and that's why she'd hustled me out of the house. I'd hear all about it tomorrow.

After a sleepless night spent visualizing myself in a variety of outfits, I strewed dozens of possibilities around our bedroom, explaining to Martin that I was clearing out my closet to give clothes to Goodwill. Long after he left for work, I settled on stone-washed, hip-hugger jeans and a short white T-shirt. I'd tell Meg, who would surely want to know, that I wore gazebo-chic to the reunion, which just happened to show that nary a pound had encroached on my body since college.

He arrived first. When I saw him sitting on the bench, hunched over a book, so reminiscent of his posture in the Student Union building when he waited for me, I felt a pang of longing. When I came closer, I saw the title of the slim volume in his hands—*Shards: Poems for the Archaeology of the Soul* by Bill Nevins—and I stumbled on the step. Bill had made it! He was a published poet.

Meg would swear that I planned the tripping to make him reach for me, as he did.

“Rosemarie,” he whispered as his lips grazed my hair.

As his lips grazed my hair. I would have to put that into my report to Meg.

Quickly, we separated and took our seats primly on either side of the gazebo, allowing him time to place a bottle of Chardonnay (my favorite), two wineglasses, and a bud vase with a single white rose on the bench beside him, next to the volume of poetry.

His graceful busyness gave me time to study him. Fifteen years had sharpened his features, chipped away the youthful residue deposited by pizza for breakfast and beer for lunch, supper, and late nights. The unruly lock of hair, now striated with white strands, rested on his forehead. After setting up the props, he focused on me with the dark blue eyes that I used to liken to the shade of Cape Cod winter seas. At least a minute passed before he said, “You are still beautiful.”

Willing myself not to blush and to take some control over this command performance that I had so eagerly agreed to, I gestured at the wine bottle and said, “Don't bother. It's too early in the day for me.”

He bowed, handed me the rose, and grinned. “It's never too early in the day for a beautiful flower.”

I wish he hadn't grinned. His smile, glowing with innocence, had melted the ire of professors, highway policemen, and the board of trustees whose cars he had festooned with forsythia. Bill had a smile that automatically activated another's. In spite of myself and my fifteen-year resentment, I smiled back.

Which gave him permission to open the book and read:

> She is there
> Always there, her name engraved beneath

many layers of hieroglyphs
scrawled on documents, computer printouts,
unsatisfying literature

She is there
Always there, her lovely face glowing through
the layers of oils on a
canvas profaned by untalented amateurs

She is there
Always there
In a garden, on a mountaintop, in a surging
sea, in a raging storm,
in the firelight by the fireside—the shard that is
missing from
my broken life, my Rosemarie.

He closed the book and slipped it into the pocket of his windbreaker. “Let's walk,” he said, taking the hand of the person immortalized in the first page of his book of poetry.

We walked in comfortable silence until a Frisbee sailed onto our path. Bill picked it up, glanced at the logo, and tossed it to a young boy. “Got this at the Reds game, right?” The boy nodded. “My favorite team,” Bill said, eliciting a grin from the boy, making me think that he, the poet/athlete, would have made a wonderful father.

On the path to the pond, we stopped to admire a cluster of Stars of Bethlehem and I had a sudden urge to pick some. Pulling away from Bill, I ran into the field and plucked a

bouquet. I handed them to him and smiled my forgiveness. “Peace,” I said.

“Peace,” he whispered, and kissed my hand.

As we sat on the ledge of the pond, Bill knotted the flowers together and made a wreath that he placed on my head. “To the loveliest queen of the May,” he said.

Much to the amusement of two little girls, I wore the wreath to the play area. When Bill set me on a swing, they giggled and ran away, instructed of course to avoid strange people. Bill pushed me on the swing and obeyed when I commanded, “Higher.”

With each new push, the dreariness of the past fifteen years flew away. I was the Queen of the May now, soaring over the brokenness, the shards of yesteryear.

He let me down slowly and we resumed our walk back to the gazebo. It was four o'clock. I'd just make it home before Martin.

“Back to the scullery, Cinderella,” I murmured.

“It's that bad, is it?”

“No, not really. Look, I'm glad we met.”

When I reached out to give him a handshake, he pulled me to him and kissed me passionately. When he let go, he whispered, “I'll be in touch.”

The kiss had all the magic and intensity of our very first kiss. Totally flustered, I ran to my car and pulled recklessly into traffic, setting off a barrage of horns. After defrosting a dinner for Martin, I told him I had to go to Meg's to deliver an alumni gift.

Engrossed in the *Evening News,* he nodded.

Meg greeted me with a series of wows—like, wow, I've never seen you so glowing ... wow, you look like you've been with Prince Charming ... wow, I haven't seen you smile like that in years ... and wow, how much are you going to tell me?

“Everything.”

And I did. Never did a Queen of the May have a more appreciative audience. Meg listened eagerly to every word, sighed appropriately at all the romantic places, and vigorously shooed her daughter Sarah out of the room when she said, “I saw you in the park today and I wanted to say hello, but Mommy was too busy taking those...”

“You were in the park?” I asked.

“Yes, taking those shortcuts that lead to Sarah's music teacher.”

“You didn't see us?”

She shrugged. “Ever try to keep up with a six-year-old in the park? Can't see anything but her bobbing pigtails as you scan for spooky strangers. So tell me, what's next?”

“Nothing, he said he'd be in touch.”

“You lucky stiff. A comfortable life with no money worries and now you've got romance on the side.” She sighed. “But I love you anyway. Keep me posted. I need vicarious thrills.”

Three long days passed without an e-mail or a phone call. On the fourth day, I pulled up the saved e-mail files on my computer to get his address so I could contact him, but I forced myself to wait. I felt terribly guilty about being the initiator. For a half-hour I communicated with my conscience and didn't like its advice. The sound of the mail truck pulling away from the curb distracted me from this futile battle.

Grateful for the respite, I went to the mailbox and removed a few letters and a manilla envelope addressed to me.

The manilla envelope contained six 8 x 10 glossy photographs. In the first, Bill was handing me a long-stemmed rose. In the second, we were walking hand-in-hand down the path to the pond. In the third, he was crowning me Queen of the May. In the fourth, I was smiling ecstatically as Bill pushed me on the swings. In the fifth, he was kissing my hand. In the sixth, we were locked in a passionate embrace.

Trembling, I took out a sheet of lined white paper. The message in block letters read, “These pictures will be turned over to your husband unless you put a duffel bag containing $50,000 in cash inside the bole of the oak tree in front of Dillard Hall this Friday at 3 A.M. Leave immediately or your husband will be contacted.”

Panicked, I ran to the computer to e-mail Bill to see if he had received any of the photos, but I stopped, realizing that he was divorced and there would be no reason for anyone to blackmail him for a romantic interlude in the park. I tried calling Meg, but got the busy signal. When I heard Martin's car in the driveway, I shoved the photos back into the envelope and put them under a sofa cushion.

Martin came so quickly to me that I thought he might have already received the photos.

“Rosemarie, what's wrong? You look like you've had bad news.”

Unable to protest, I let him lead me to the sofa, sitting me gently on the cushion that hid the photos.

He knows, I thought. Maybe he's read my e-mails. Maybe he's had a private detective following me and just wants to worry me, to see what I would do, but no, that would be so unlike Martin.

“What's wrong, dearest?” he asked as he gently stroked my hair.

“Nothing, Martin, I'm just not feeling well.”

“Let me help you to bed. And, dearest, I'm going to call Dr. Ryder in the morning and make an appointment for a checkup for you. I've been worried about you lately. You don't seem yourself.”

Gently, he helped me up, and as I stood, I saw the lined piece of paper on the floor, message down. Quickly, I picked it up and shoved it into my pocket.

“No more work, Rosemarie. You've probably been writing some marketing ideas, adding to your stress. The quarterly results are in and we're way ahead of last year. Just rest.”

Just rest. He might as well have said, “Just fly.” I couldn't sleep in the afternoon or in the evening because sleep didn't stand a chance against my torment and Martin's solicitousness. Intermittent pulse-checking, forehead-touching for fever, and suggestions for another sleeping pill kept him awake, too, and I needed him to go to sleep. I needed to put those photos somewhere where they wouldn't slip out if he sat on that cushion.

Feigning sleep, we both greeted dawn. After tea and toast in bed, I convinced him I felt better and he should go to work. He agreed, but said he was still going to make a doctor's appointment for me. I retrieved the photos and ruefully

scanned the last happy moments of my life. I concluded that Bill's ex-wife, unable to bear his happiness, had taken them, to break up our relationship.

Money was no problem. Martin faithfully paid me salary and bonuses for my marketing efforts and insisted I do what I liked with it. Most of the checks were electronically transferred and I almost never touched them. If the bank balked about such a large withdrawal, I'd say I was giving a donation to the university and needed the money as a prop to start off the fund drive. How I'd deliver the money without waking Martin was a problem for later.

At eight-thirty I started out the door, mentally rehearsing my lie to the bank manager, when the phone rang. Could it be Bill, arranging another meeting? Should I tell him? No, I wouldn't, because he'd blame himself, but I had to hear his voice.

“Hi, this is Candy Lawler from Warminster Alumni. How are you, Rosemarie?”

“Okay,” I sighed.

“Sound like you have a cold.”

“I'm on my way out. What is it that you want, Candy?”

“I'm just calling to remind you of your pledge for the fund drive. We haven't received it this year. You can send it to...”

“Look, I don't have time now. Just e-mail the particulars.”

“Sure, what's your e-mail address?”

“You have it from last year.”

“No, we don't. We don't ask for e-mail.”

“We don't ask for e-mail.” Then how did Bill get my e-mail address? Meg said he probably volunteered at the development office and got it from there.

“Are you there?” Candy asked.

“I'm still here,” I answered.

“Lots of people don't like their e-mail stacked with requests so that's why we don't ask for it. Funny, though, Bill Nevins—do you remember him?—he wanted an e-mail address and I think it was yours. Yes, I'm sure it was. Did you hear from him?”

“Who gave him my address, Candy?” I asked.

“Let's see, now. Oh yes. It was Meg Murtaugh, she was working with him that day. You remember Meg?”

“Yes.”

“Actually, she and Bill were having a fine old time, sharing their misery stories, hers about her divorce and Bill's about his ex, the rich kid whose family lost their money because of asbestos in their products or something like it. And Bill saying the only success in his life was his poetry. He handed me a book, and it was self-published by a vanity press. Some success!”

“Did they mention me?” I asked.

“Oh yeah. You were the fairy-tale princess, the one who made good, the one whose husband, with a lot of help from you, had a dot-com company that made it big. And the two of you lived a quiet, modest life in spite of all your money. The Meg-Bill consensus was that you are loaded. They left together, very chummy. I wouldn't doubt that they're having an affair by now.”

I choked out a goodbye and hung up. I had to connect some dreadful dots. The red baseball cap on top of the pile of pledge cards in Meg's house. Bill's comment to the boy in the park that the Reds were his favorite team.

Sarah's remark that same day, “I saw you in the park. I wanted to say hello, but Mommy was busy taking...”

“Those shortcuts to her music teacher's,” Meg had interrupted.

Pictures. Sarah was going to say, “Mommy was busy taking pictures.”

Meg eagerly setting up the e-mail sting by responding to Bill's messages for me.

Bill dredging up the romantic images from our days together, knowing I would be ready for a meeting.

I didn't go to the bank. I didn't go anywhere. For hours, I sat on the sofa waiting for the phone to ring, waiting for explanations *(It was a silly prank, Rosemarie.)* or apologies *(Forgive us, we both needed money.)* that never came. When the phone finally rang, caller ID identified Martin. I didn't answer it, knowing he would come right home to see how I was. When he came in, I kissed him and silently handed him the photographs.

Martin's face registered no emotion as he looked at the photographs. He might have been reviewing still shots of an upcoming television campaign. He showed no emotion when he read the blackmail letter. All the passion came from me as I poured out the Rosebuddy saga and my guilty role in it.

“Forgive me, Martin,” I sobbed.

“Nothing to forgive,” he said, patting my shoulder. “I'm glad you told me.”

For the next three days, he showed no anger, just an infuriating kindness, as if he were the guilty one and I the aggrieved. Occasionally, after dinner, I found him staring at the photographs, which he had promised to throw away.

On Friday morning, Bill's partner in crime arrived to do reconnaissance. Meg came with an angel food cake, which was not as sweet as her cloying smile and feigned interest in my well-being. “I haven't heard from you,” she cooed. “Thought you might be sick. What's next on the agenda with you and Bill? No secrets between you and me, remember?”

It took all my self-control to shrug and say I hadn't heard from him.

“Anything else bothering you, Rosemarie? You don't look well.”

Blackmail, I wanted to scream, from you and that sleazy Bill, but I just shook my head. I was saving the denouement for Friday night. Armed with a high-powered flashlight, I planned to be close to the tree, ready to shine the light on them when they reached into the void inside the elm tree in front of Dillard Hall.

“Sorry to disappoint you, but Martin knows,” I'd say, “and he doesn't care.” Since humiliation was part of my plan, I'd toss a twenty-dollar bill on the ground and say, “So here's a twenty to cover your babysitting and gas expenses.”

But I never had a chance to use my verbal swordsmanship. At nine-thirty Friday evening, I yawned and told Martin I felt as if I were coming down with a cold and I'd

sleep in the guestroom. In spite of my protesting that he might catch my cold, he kissed me and held me close for a long time. I placed the small travel alarm that I set for one A.M. under my pillow and, surprisingly, fell almost immediately into a deep sleep.

When I heard the ringing, I reached for the clock, which was silent and read six A.M. Somehow I must have disengaged the alarm in my sleep. But the ringing, that incessant ringing, had to stop or it might awaken Martin. I reached for the phone, certain the caller was Bill, complaining mightily about the barren tree.

But it wasn't Bill. It was Martin, choking out terrible words—"I'm at the police station ... I gave them the gun ... I didn't hurt Meg ... I couldn't let you go there last night ... I put a sleeping pill in your tea ... I turned off your alarm ... I had to do this ... I had to go to the tree ... I had to..."

"Do what, Martin?" I asked.

"Kill him, Rosemarie."

"Who, Martin?" I whispered.

"Bill Nevins."

"Why, Martin?" I sobbed. "I was never going to see him again."

Silence.

"Martin, are you there?"

"Yes."

"Why, Martin, why?"

"Because in the pictures in the park, you were smiling that special smile, your sunrise smile, the smile I could never receive, not even on our wedding day."

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A Thing of the Past by John H. Dirckx

Archaeology seems to be a popular subject currently for mystery writers, judging by our submissions. We have two stories in this issue alone that deal with archaeological digs. In this one we are treated to some of the early history of glass-making in America as series African-American police detective Auburn solves a case involving a corpse from the 1960s. The author is by profession a medical doctor, not an archaeologist.

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The first rays of the sun shed a colorless glow beyond distant forested slopes, turning the damp of a night in early summer into swirls of iridescent fog and casting feeble, endless shadows along the ground. Professor Lorris had been sitting in his van for nearly half an hour, listening to a cello concerto and watching the world wake up, when the first carload of students pulled off the country road and parked next to him in the weed-choked dooryard of the old Stargil farm.

Other cars arrived at intervals during the next few minutes. Eventually, about a dozen men and women in their late teens and early twenties, some of them restless with the frantic energy of youth and others saturnine as a consequence of nocturnal carousals, had gathered around the professor's van.

Lorris looked at his watch, turned off the radio, stepped out into the dewy weeds, and put on his pith helmet. “Everybody here?” The question was rhetorical; nobody bothered to answer.

“You all know the rules, but I'll go over them once more. You get no wages or recompense of any kind, and what you do or don't do out here isn't going to affect your grades in any way. You've all signed forms releasing the university and me from any responsibility for injuries. The only thing you're allowed to take away from this site is the dirt under your fingernails. If you can't or won't take your turn with the wheelbarrow, please go home now. If you've got beer in your coolers, I'd better not see it.”

He opened the back of the van, which looked as if it had been packed for a thousand-mile trip through the wilderness, and began handing out paraphernalia. “You can leave that where it is for now,” he said to two zealous youths who had begun to drag a folded khaki tent from the van. “We'll be surveying for a day or two before we need to set up a lab.”

He unrolled a large-scale map of the district on the tailgate of the van while his disciples gathered round.

Meanwhile, half a mile across the abandoned fields, a crew of heavy-equipment operators had arrived on the property by another entrance and unloaded a bulldozer and a backhoe from a flat-bed trailer. Eventually, the two groups became aware of each other's presence. As if by mutual consent, Lorris and one of the workers began approaching each other across the rutted, weed-grown ground.

When they were still about a hundred yards apart, Lorris realized that the figure in red hard-hat, orange coverall, and yellow work boots marching resolutely towards him was a woman. “Hard-hat area, bud,” she informed him when they were within hailing distance.

Durward Lorris, who couldn't remember having been called “bud” in about the past twenty years, tried unsuccessfully to square a pair of very round shoulders. “Since when?”

“Since Bushnell Excavating got here.”

“You work for Bushnell?” Another rhetorical question.

“I *am* Bushnell.” She stopped about ten feet from Lorris and put her hands on her hips. “Corinne to my mother, Corky to you.”

“You own the company?”

“Own it and run it. I'm a civil engineer, a bonded surveyor, and a licensed heavy-equipment operator. And it's still a hard-hat area.”

“What do you call this thing I'm wearing?”

“I don't remember what they call it at Abercrombie and Fitch. Looks like an Easter bonnet to me. If you walk into one of my backhoes, that hat's going to be in three pieces, and your brains will get all over your shirt.” She peered off in the direction of his party of students. “What are you doing? Running a summer camp for wayward youth?”

He struggled to maintain some show of dignity. “I'm Professor Lorris from the university,” he said. “I teach archaeology, and those are some of my students. We've got a grant to do some digging here—”

“Well, bud, I've got a *contract* to do some digging here.”

“I was aware of that, but I didn't think you'd be starting quite so soon.”

“In two weeks, this land will be as flat as a bowling alley.” She nodded toward the skeletal remains of some farm outbuildings. “Looks like the scavengers have already got most of the barn siding. What are *you* looking for?”

“The county historical society wants us to do an archaeological survey of the farm, to see if we can find traces of a glass factory that may have been operated here back in the eighteenth century.”

She squinted at the rising sun, and when she looked back at Lorris she was still squinting. “A *glass* factory.”

“Hildebrand Corporation gave us a free hand as long as we don't hold up digging or construction.”

“Well, they didn't tell me anything about it. A *glass* factory.”

Lorris was on the verge of delivering a lecture when his audience turned around and started back across the field.

* * *

Long before Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn reached the gravel road leading into the Stargil property, he knew he was approaching the scene of the action. Here and there cars were drawn up on the shoulder of County Road G and people were trudging along the roadside ditch singly and in pairs looking for gaps in the fence around the farm. Opposite the entrance, the inevitable remote television unit had set up operations.

A patrolman moved a wooden barricade aside to let Auburn's car pass and immediately replaced it. The driveway led to an old red-brick farmhouse, obviously long abandoned, and a group of outbuildings in various stages of dilapidation and decay. Broad rolling fields stretched to the right and left of the house as far as the eye could follow. Behind the house a beetling ridge topped by a long natural balustrade of exposed white rock barred the view to the north. A couple of bulldozers were working far across the fields, adding their exhaust to the afternoon haze.

Jammed into the grassy yard before the house were two police cruisers, two Fire and Rescue trucks, a van from the coroner's office, and a half-dozen private cars. Auburn added his car to the jam.

A ten-by-ten-foot army-surplus tent had been pitched at the edge of the nearest field. Outside it a group of young

people stood around talking and drinking from disposable plastic cups.

“Okay, Cy's here,” he heard a voice saying as he moved toward the tent. “Now the ceremony can begin.”

He turned to see Nick Stamaty, the coroner's investigator, approaching from the direction of the farmhouse.

“Ceremony my eye,” said Auburn. “This is some kind of trick you and the sheriff cooked up.”

Stamaty went on smiling but contrived to look both cunning and aggrieved. “How could anybody ever expect to trick you?”

“You know what I mean. This area was only annexed to the city about six months ago, and already you've got me out here investigating a homicide that was committed back when it was still part of the county.”

"Possible homicide. The geek over there with the salad bowl on his head is an archaeologist from the university. He and a bunch of his students have been poking around in the ground out here for a couple of weeks. Yesterday they started excavating an old well behind the house, and this morning they found a body.”

“So I heard. The lieutenant said you figured it had been down there a long time. How long?”

Stamaty shrugged. “Probably years. The well was capped, but somebody could have taken the cap off to stash the body.”

“How well preserved is it?”

“Mostly mummified. There's no water down there, at least not at the level where the body is. The soft tissues are

shriveled, clothes mostly rotted. The skeleton's intact, though. At least that's the word I get from Fire and Rescue."

"You haven't seen it yet?"

"Hey, my job description's pretty broad, but it doesn't say anything about climbing fifteen or twenty feet down a well."

"Anything yet to suggest homicide?"

"Just the fact that the body was found in a well. We'll have to go the whole nine yards trying to establish an ID and a cause of death. After the autopsy and lab studies are done, the anthropologists and the regional crime lab will get into the act, and we'll be lucky if we have all their reports together by Halloween. Just in case it does turn out to be a homicide, I wanted you guys to be in on it from the start. I thought you'd want to question these people while they're all still here."

"Much obliged." Auburn looked around. "What's in the tent? Video games?"

"Lab stuff. That's where they wash the junk they dig up, and take pictures of it, and write little numbers on it in white ink." Stamaty evidently viewed archaeology as a pastime for losers.

"You going to show me this well?"

Stamaty led him along a flagged walk to an open space behind the house, which was hemmed in on two sides by a neglected orchard and on the third by the collapsed poles and boxes of a kitchen garden. Unofficial onlookers had been rigorously excluded from the area.

In the middle of the open space the Fire and Rescue squad had erected a portable derrick over a hole in the ground. One of the crew was operating a hand winch while another was

feeding an electrical power line into the hole, presumably to a third man who was on the lower end of the cable.

The hole in the ground was surrounded by a weather-worn concrete sill. A cap of wood and sheet metal that had once fitted over the sill now lay torn and twisted on the ground to one side, along with an aluminum extension ladder that had probably been in use in the well before the derrick was set up.

Auburn nodded to the Fire and Rescue personnel, whom he knew by sight, and peered into the hole. A formidable stream of profanity issuing from below told him more about the difficulty of the proceedings than anything he could see in the glare of the afternoon sun.

“Who found the body?” he asked Stamaty.

“One of these kids. He was down there on the ladder with a flashlight, sending up stuff in a bucket on a rope.”

When Auburn tracked down the finder of the body, it was obvious he was no kid. Javier Martínez was at least thirty-five, with crow's-feet at the corners of his eyes and touches of frost in his sideburns.

Auburn showed identification and entered Martínez's name and address on a three-by-five-inch file card. “Are you a student or a faculty member?”

“Neither one.” He spoke with a thick Hispanic accent and his attitude was surly and arrogant. “My girlfriend Sheila go to the university and she here working on this summer program. I come with her and, since I done some rock climbing and stuff before, they send me down the hole.”

“On the ladder?”

“Yes. It's pretty tight, you know? You bend your leg, you get catch. Like in a bad dream. And nothing down there, only sticks and rocks. So I say, ‘I'm coming out, I had enough of this,’ and then I see a shoe. So I say, ‘I get the shoe, and then I come out.’ But the shoe don't come, and then I see, is a foot in it.”

He went on to describe his hasty ascent from the nether regions, and to assure Auburn that he would see that withered leg and foot in his bad dreams for many weeks to come.

Auburn went to his car and radioed headquarters to advise his superior officer, Lieutenant Savage, that an evidence technician would probably be needed on the scene before long—preferably one not subject to claustrophobia.

He found the professor in charge of the project still idling outside the khaki tent, talking to a couple of his students. He was a weedy, bookish type who looked as much out of place in blue jeans as a welder in a leotard.

“Professor Lorris?” Auburn showed identification. “Would you have a minute to answer a couple of questions?”

“Sure. Come in out of the sun.” Flaps on the shady side of the tent were reefed back to admit air. Lorris led Auburn inside, where tools and equipment clustered tightly around a worktable. “Pull up a packing case—it's the time-honored easy chair of the archaeologist in the field. I saw you talking to Javier. What information can I give you?”

“Maybe none. I just wanted to get a full picture of what's going on here.” Auburn took the proffered seat and started another file card, using his right knee as a desk. “I assume

this is a kind of practice exercise in archaeology for your students?"

"Well, it's extracurricular, but what we're doing is genuine archaeology. Only, since it's purely a rescue operation, we had to skip most of the preliminary surveying and focus our attention on the most likely sites."

"A rescue operation in what sense?"

"Let me explain it this way. Archaeology, to quote a very old joke, is a thing of the past. And learning about the past is largely a matter of digging it up, because that's where most of it is. And since we claim to be scientists, we like to do things according to an orderly plan and on a schedule that allows for thoroughness, and for dealing with unforeseen developments.

"But sometimes it doesn't work that way. Whenever the authorities in Rome or Athens decide to replace a downtown water main, a team of archaeologists camp out at the work site and get in everybody's way, trying to unearth just one more classical artifact before the bulldozer starts backfilling the trench. That's called rescue archaeology.

"The owner of this property has held out for years against the county historical society, which wanted to sponsor a dig here. Then, overnight, he sold the property to a developer, Hildebrand, who's going to turn it into an upscale housing project and shopping center. We have the developer's permission to dig, as long as we don't hold up his excavating and construction crews, but obviously we're working to a deadline."

“What are you looking for?” asked Auburn. “Anything in particular?”

“We're looking for evidence that this was the site of the Stargil glass factory back in the eighteenth century.”

“I thought Stargil glass was made up in Carney County.”

“It is now, but that factory only goes back to the early nineteenth century. A lot of us believe the Stargils who farmed here until about thirty years ago were descended from the Stargils who gave their name to a kind of imitation porcelain called milk glass. That's glass with tin oxide added to make it white and opaque. The Stargils brought the technology from Europe, and started producing milk glass somewhere around here in about seventeen sixty-two. Those pieces are priceless collector's items now.

“The people who own the Stargil factory up in Carney County are named Tansky. They just conveniently borrowed the Stargil name. Our county historical society has a lot of evidence to suggest that Stargil milk glass originated right here.” Lorris nodded over Auburn's left shoulder. “Do you see the outcropping of limestone that runs along the top of that ridge? They call it Chalk Rib around here.”

“I passed Chalk Rib Baptist Church about half a mile back along the road.”

“Sure. Established one hundred and forty-two years ago. There are old records showing that the original Stargil glass factory was built in a district known as Devil's Razor, and the historical society people have me convinced that Devil's Razor was an earlier name for Chalk Rib.”

Auburn nodded. “It figures. Devil's Razor Baptist Church doesn't sound too good. Suppose you could prove that this is where Stargil glass got started? Would that give anybody a financial advantage? Or maybe a disadvantage?”

“Possibly. A court might rule that the people up in Carney County have to change the name of their company. On the other hand, there isn't any rival glass factory down here, and the Stargil factory's reputation rests on the quality of what they're making nowadays, which is light-years away from the original milk-glass product.

“The theory is that, over a period of forty or fifty years, the Stargils used up a couple hundred acres of timber firing their glass ovens. At the end of that time they were out of wood but they had lots of cleared land, so they gave up glassmaking and turned to farming.”

“Why did you folks go to the trouble of uncapping that well and sending a guy down there on a rope?”

“As I said earlier, our time is short here and we have to focus on the most likely sites. An abandoned well is like a gold mine to an archaeologist.”

“How's that?”

“Well, in the first place, it's like a boring made by a geologist. If we had the time to take out the brick lining and shore it up with metal sheathing, that well would give us a perfect picture of the thickness and character of the geologic strata for forty or fifty feet down. But that's not what we're interested in. The wonderful thing about a well is that it's a timeline, with artifacts preserved in perfect chronological sequence from bottom to top.”

He swung around to the table behind him and opened a large folder to reveal a meticulously detailed drawing of the objects that had been recovered from the well up to the time the body was found.

“Boulders and brushwood?” commented Auburn. “So far your data doesn't look very promising.”

"Don't."

“I'm sorry?”

"Don't. You said the data *doesn't* look promising. Data is plural. Like strata. One finding is a datum.”

Auburn swallowed and smiled. “Sorry. But you said artifacts. Doesn't that mean—”

“Products of human activity? Yes. They'll be further down. This well has been capped for decades. That probably means that it either went dry or went bad. Back when everybody had a well on their property, one that went dry became a jumbo-sized trash can. Everything from broken household and personal articles to the bones from dinner would go down the well.”

“Including any pieces of Stargil milk glass that happened to get knocked off the workbench?” suggested Auburn.

Lorris shook his head. “We don't think the well is that old. If it is, and if we find much glass down there, we'll know we're on the wrong track. A glass factory would have recycled broken pieces as cullet—added it to the next batch of frit.”

“Would you run that by me again?”

“Frit is the first stage of glassmaking—a mixture of sand and soda that's just starting to fuse in the oven. Cullet is

scraps of broken glass that are added to the frit in the crucible to stretch it out. Waste not, want not."

Auburn glanced at the notes he'd scribbled on the file card. "When I was in school," he said, "I had this habit of asking questions the teacher couldn't answer. Maybe that's why I'm a detective now. If you didn't expect to find any proof for the glass-factory theory in the well, why did you look down there?"

"I'll turn that into a question for you," replied Lorris. "When you're investigating a crime, do you gather evidence impartially, or do you just look for evidence that will support some preconceived theory? An archaeologist gathers data impartially, too, so as to build up as broad and accurate a picture as possible of things as they were in the past.

"We went after the well for the reasons I've already given. But we've also done extensive probing for the remains of factory buildings and ovens on the property, and we've cut about a dozen short test trenches looking for residue from glassmaking operations. No form of glass is biodegradable. All the glass that's ever been made—"

"I get the point," said Auburn. He put away his file card and stood up.

"Good," said Lorris, also rising. "Then I've got one more question for you. When can we start digging again?"

"Digging in the well? That's hard to say. Provisionally, it's considered part of a crime scene. It'll be awhile before the coroner's staff and the Public Safety Department finish collecting evidence. For all we know, there could be ten more bodies down there."

“But you have no objection to our continuing work on other parts of the property?”

“I guess not. An evidence technician will probably be here later this afternoon. I'd appreciate it if you could share what you know about the well with him, and maybe help him collect some more materials from the level where the body was found.”

“That suits me perfectly. I mean, it practically amounts to going on with the excavation of the well.”

“With one difference. Anything he finds, he keeps.”

A patrolman came up to Auburn as he left the tent. “There's a man here who wants to talk to you, Sergeant. Says he's the former owner of the property.”

Auburn looked beyond the patrolman to see a big man with iron-gray hair staring across the field toward the Devil's Razor with an air of uneasy bewilderment.

“Jerry Stargil,” said the man, catching Auburn's eye and stepping forward. His complexion looked unhealthy, like the remains of a suntan in October, and when he shook hands his grip was tremulous and his skin cold despite the dark marks of sweat under the arms of his golf shirt.

Auburn identified himself and guided Stargil to the tent, which was now unoccupied. “I understand you've just sold the property,” remarked Auburn.

“About three months ago,” said Stargil. He sank heavily to one of the packing cases. “Lived here the first twenty-five years of my life. Kind of a shock to see those bulldozers raising dust out where my dad grew soybeans. I heard on the radio you found a body.”

“Some archaeology students did.” Auburn was puzzling silently over the question of where he had seen this man before. “In a well behind the house.”

“My dad had that well capped fifty years ago so I wouldn't fall in. It was dry even back then. We got all our water from a cistern that caught rainwater off the roof.” He gazed forlornly at what was left of the farmhouse. “Was the well still capped when these people started to dig, do you know?”

“I believe it was.”

“Tell me about this body.”

“There's not much to tell yet. There's no identification so far. The body was under a lot of brushwood and stones. The Fire and Rescue people are still trying to clear out the debris and bring it up.”

“Any idea how long it's been down there?”

“Apparently for years.”

“That means it happened while I still owned the farm.” Stargil squirmed and sweated. “I'm concerned about liability. I don't want somebody to sue me for having an open pit on the property. I'm not sure the kind of insurance I carried would cover that.”

“I understand the land hasn't been under cultivation for quite a while,” remarked Auburn.

“My dad quit farming in ‘sixty-six and he died in ‘sixty-eight. My lawyer advised me to hold on to the land until the city annexed this part of the county. Which took a lot longer than I expected.”

It came to Auburn in a flash that Stargil was the owner-manager of the Starlight Gardens, a four-star downtown

restaurant where he occasionally went for the noon buffet when he was working on a Sunday.

“I don't suppose you remember anybody disappearing suddenly, back when you still lived here?”

Stargil closed his eyes in reflection. “No, no. I can't say I do. But that was a long time ago, and we had all kinds of part-time help that would come and go as the spirit moved them.”

Stargil was on his way to take a look at the well when Professor Lorris collared him for a discussion of the history of the property.

* * *

The autopsy on the remains found in the well provided unequivocal evidence of a fatal shotgun injury to the back of the head, thus disposing of any theory of accidental death. The body was that of an adult male and in its advanced state of decomposition revealed no scars, tattoos, distinguishing marks, or deformities. Analysis of what was left of the soft tissues and internal organs disclosed no trace of chemical poisoning. The clothing was largely reduced to tatters, and among the few objects found on the body there was no clue to its identity.

As Stamaty had predicted, the investigation now moved forward with exasperating slowness. Since it was clearly a homicide and the body had been found within city jurisdiction, Auburn was still involved. Three weeks after the discovery of the body, he was invited to the morgue for a conference with Stamaty and an anthropologist who worked on contract for the county.

Stamaty's contribution was a thick sheaf of photographs that looked like production stills from a low-budget horror movie. They showed, from every conceivable angle, the grotesquely wizened remains of a lanky male with shoulder-length hair. The back of the skull had been imploded by a shotgun blast, and numerous lead pellets were imbedded in the skin and what remained of the brain.

Auburn had had previous dealings with Marigold Strauss, the anthropologist. He came prepared for a deluge of facts, presented with exuberance and enthusiasm, and he wasn't disappointed.

Dr. Strauss was wearing sunglasses with flat lenses the size of quarters, and her hair looked like a skein of yarn that had gone through a snowblower. She barely glanced at her notes before launching into her report on the examination of the skeleton. “The height is one meter, seventy-eight centimeters, plus or minus three—that's five feet ten—and the weight is eighty kilos, plus or minus five—say a hundred and eighty pounds. Bone age is twenty-seven years plus or minus two.” Her utterances were typically so lengthy that when she finally stopped and took a breath, it sucked her nostrils shut.

“What about nationality?” asked Stamaty, with a surreptitious wink toward Auburn.

“You mean race. There are no pure races, and no one skeletal trait by itself points to any particular genetic stock. But the cranial index of this subject is incompatible with an Asiatic origin. The skull conforms mainly to the northern European type—blunt orbital margins, flat supraorbital ridges,

depressed glabella. Anyway, it's more like yours than the sergeant's." (Stamaty was Greek, Auburn was African-American.) "I'd bet on a German or Scandinavian name, or maybe English or Irish."

She produced some photographs of her own. One set showed frontal, side, and oblique views of the skull after it was completely stripped of flesh in the autopsy, and a second set showed the same views of a reconstruction of the facial features made by applying putty to a plaster model of the skull. Adorned with a cheap wig intended to match the subject's actual hairstyle, the model presented a degenerate, not to say subhuman, appearance. Maybe Dr. Strauss had spent too much time studying Neanderthal skulls.

"As usual," she said, "unless you have something to match his DNA against, your best chance of a positive identification is going to be the dental findings. Dr. Cannazaro did a complete examination and took X-rays." Stamaty nodded to show that he had already received a report from Cannazaro, the consultant in forensic dentistry. "But that's no help, either, until you have somebody's dental records to match them up with. His upper wisdom teeth had been extracted, and he had some gold restorations, so somebody must have taken some dental X-rays at some time or other. But nowadays dentists don't store X-ray films as long as they used to, because they can sell them for the silver."

"And don't forget," said Stamaty with another wink at Auburn, "he might have come from Germany or Scandinavia."

Dr. Strauss gave each of them copies of her report and photographs. When she had gone, Stamaty took Auburn to a

workroom and produced several plastic storage boxes containing the clothing and personal effects of the body from the well.

When found, the body had been dressed in shirt, pants, underwear, socks, and shoes. Time and moisture had reduced the clothing fabrics to a couple of handfuls of ragged shreds, but the labels in the garments, being of synthetic materials, had survived well enough to permit decipherment of make and size.

The shoes were mass-produced horrors composed entirely of black vinyl. Although the material had suffered little from its sojourn underground, the shoes showed excessive wear. Both soles had through-and-through cracks across the insteps, which the wearer had evidently tried to render waterproof with strips of yellow plastic tape on the inside.

The contents of the pockets, which, luckily, were intact, were limited to two door keys, a nickel minted in 1964, and a cheap pocketknife. An even cheaper wind-up wrist watch, its band inexpertly repaired with wire, had been found on the left wrist. No wallet or other personal effects had been found on the body or in its vicinity in the well.

Auburn made notes of the clothing and shoe labels and signed a receipt for the loose articles, and Stamaty gave him a copy of the dental consultant's report.

Back at the office he sent a request by e-mail to the regional crime lab for background information on the clothing, shoes, knife, keys, and wrist watch. Then he opened a new file on his computer and began building up a systematic

dossier on the unknown homicide victim from Chalk Rib, a.k.a. Devil's Razor.

He knew the man's approximate height, weight, and age at the time of death, and also that he was almost certainly white. The dental examination showed some gold and amalgam fillings but also two badly neglected, carious teeth. That suggested that the subject, or his family, had been able to afford good dental care at an earlier period, but that for some time before his death, he hadn't. Since two wisdom teeth had been extracted, the decline of his fortunes must have taken place after they erupted, which, according to the reference books, was anywhere between ages 17 and 23.

The makeshift repair of the shoes and the watchband also supported the idea that he had fallen on hard times. Auburn took the knife and the watch in their plastic box upstairs to the lab. He found Sergeant Kestrel, the evidence technician, puttering earnestly in an office as immaculate and orderly as a newborn-nursery.

Kestrel's manner toward Auburn had been a little stuffier than usual since the day he'd been sent to gather evidence from the well at the Stargil farm. He seemed less resentful of the chore of descending into the well than of the fact that four other people had made the descent before him, adding, subtracting, and jumbling trace evidence.

Auburn showed him the knife. “Is this what I think it is?”

“Depends on what you think it is.”

“Isn't it what they call an electrician's knife?”

Kestrel nodded almost grudgingly. “They call it that. It has a screwdriver blade with a wire-stripping slot.”

Auburn showed him the wrist watch. One end of its fake leather band had come loose and been reattached with wire, which had imparted a green tinge of corrosion to both watch and band and, incidentally, to the corpse's wrist as well. “If you wanted to fix your watchband—”

“I wouldn't use copper wire,” Kestrel answered before he finished asking.

“Unless it was the only thing you could lay your hands on. Have you got an electrical-supply catalog around here?”

“Sure, but all orders have to go through Purchasing.”

“I know that. I work here, too, remember? I just want to check on yellow plastic electrical tape.”

* * *

After trying all afternoon, Auburn finally reached Professor Lorris at his office at the university and asked about progress on the excavation of the well.

“We hit bottom last Friday at thirty-seven feet. Judging from the way the well was dug and lined, we think it dates from about seventeen eighty, which was when the first farmhouse was built on the property.”

“Any more interesting discoveries down there?”

“No more bodies. Otherwise, just about everything but the kitchen sink.”

“I'd appreciate a copy of your report, whenever you've got it together.”

“It's together now. Where shall I fax it?”

In twenty minutes Auburn was paging through a detailed index of the findings in the well, each entry keyed by number to one or more sectional drawings. As Lorris had predicted,

the excavation had yielded bones (all animal), metal scraps, broken tools, and fragments of household articles, including glass, pottery, and even some wood.

A total of twelve strata had been marked with Roman numerals, starting with I at the bottom, which consisted of mud and silt to a depth of 1.65 meters. Of articles that could be dated, the most deeply placed was an aluminum beer can with a conical neck welded to the body, of a type first manufactured in 1947. Lorris's notes included a learned debate with himself as to whether the can had been lost in the well by someone using the water to cool beer, or had been thrown in empty after the well had gone dry and become a neighborhood trash receptacle.

The stratum nearest the top, numbered XII, was a dense layer, some 2 meters deep, of cut boughs and roots of honeysuckle and other nuisance woods combined with a few large stones, such as might have resulted from a land-clearing effort. For stratum XI the table listed only a single datum: “Human remains; see attachment 5.”

Checking his e-mail before going home, Auburn found a response from the regional crime lab to his questions on the clothes and personal articles. The clothes and shoes had all probably been manufactured in the early 1960s. The watch and knife were older, but not much. As he pasted the data electronically into the dead man's dossier, he wondered why this inquiry had yielded results so quickly, when others pertaining to fresh homicides often took a week or more.

Next morning, after clearing up some current routine business, he returned to the Devil's Razor case. The picture

emerging was that of a white male in his mid twenties, of medium height and build, probably from a good family, who had had a run of bad luck that culminated in his murder. If that murder had taken place in the middle to late 1960s, as the balance of the evidence seemed to suggest, then his birth date would have been around 1945. With a shock, Auburn realized that that made him almost a contemporary of his own father. Some kind of background in electrical work was suggested by the knife, the copper wire on the watchband, and the yellow plastic electrical tape used to repair the shoes.

Newspaper coverage of the finding of a body at the old Stargil farm had elicited no response from the community. It was therefore possible that the subject was a transient or a vagrant with no ties locally. All the same, Lieutenant Savage directed Auburn to keep working on an identification as long as he could do so without neglecting more pressing duties.

Missing-person reports from the 1960s and 1970s were stored in a dusty vault in the basement of the Municipal Building, where they were slightly more difficult of access than the CIA's budget records. Savage suggested that Auburn start with old newspaper files. He could have visited the offices of the newspaper and gone through the files there, but it was quicker and easier to look at them on reels of microfilm at the public library.

He started putting in two-hour sessions at the library whenever he could spare the time, running through two or three months at each session. Although he concentrated on local news, he couldn't help becoming immersed in global events during the 1960s. He learned more than he had ever

known before about everyday life in the decade in which he'd been born—a decade of civil rights and civil revolt, of marches and bad trips and sit-ins, of boycotts and burnings and assassinations; of Beatles, a giant leap for mankind (which Auburn thought he could remember watching on TV), and a war that couldn't be won.

But he found no clue to the identity of the electrician with bad teeth and a nickel in his pocket who had turned his back on the wrong person.

On a hot and foggy day in August, he tackled the old missing-person reports after all. These were stored in the basement of the Municipal Building in pasteboard boxes on rows of steel shelves barely a foot apart. The lighting was terrible, the ventilation worse, and desk space nonexistent. Auburn quickly developed a cough that sent him every few minutes to the drinking fountain upstairs inside the main entrance. There was no question of spending two hours at a stretch in this place. But after a week of steadfast plodding, he found a report filed in 1968 by one Arthur Cavendish, who hadn't seen his son Lance for about five weeks. Lance's birth date was in 1944 and he was described as being five feet, eleven inches tall and weighing 175 lbs. He was a Vietnam veteran and unmarried. He had been living away from home at the time of his disappearance, but had been in touch off and on with his parents, especially when he was short of cash. He had been employed intermittently in construction work and had a part-time job at Branham Electrical Service, a firm Auburn knew was still in existence. He had had problems with alcohol and possibly drugs.

Notations by investigators showed that Cavendish was suspected of involvement in some petty thefts and that inquiries at Branham had turned up no leads as to his whereabouts. Even though the high school graduation photo reproduced in the report didn't look much like Dr. Strauss's reconstruction of the dead man's facial features, Lance Cavendish was by far Auburn's most promising candidate.

No one by that last name was listed in the telephone book or the city directory. At the courthouse he found death certificates from the 1980s for both of Cavendish's parents. He went back to the newspaper files to check their obituaries and learned that Lance had been an only child and that there were apparently no surviving relatives.

After setting Records the task of checking with military authorities for information about Lance Cavendish, including dental records, if available, he visited the premises of Branham Electrical Service north of downtown. The name of this firm was a household word in the community. They did a lot of local electrical contracting, operated a retail electrical-supply store, and carried on an active appliance-repair business.

Auburn arrived at about two in the afternoon and found fifteen customers standing around the salesroom with numbered tickets in their hands. Finding his way to the business office, he asked to see the manager and was immediately directed to Walt Branham, who seemed to be about his own age.

Branham registered acute distress on seeing Auburn's badge, apparently fearing that someone who worked for him

had gotten into some kind of trouble. Auburn hastened to reassure him.

“I think I'm probably on a wild-goose chase. You may have read in the paper about a body that was found in an old well on a farm east of town? We think it may have been a man who worked for your firm back in the ‘sixties. Is there anyone around who might remember him?”

Branham shook his head. “Back in the ‘sixties I was still in grade school, and I'm the oldest guy in the place except for one of our secretaries. But she's only worked here about five years. My dad would probably remember, though.”

“Where could I reach him?”

“I imagine he's at home. He doesn't drive anymore.” He looked at the clock. “Want me to call him?”

“I'd appreciate it. How far away does he live?”

“Half a mile.”

* * *

By 2:30 Auburn was knocking at the side door of Hugo Branham's place, as instructed by Walt. The senior Branham welcomed him to a glassed-in porch where most of the blinds were drawn against the afternoon sun. He was listening to a baseball game on a portable radio and fighting the heat with a cold beer. The place was as blue with cigarette smoke as a coffeehouse at midnight.

He turned down the volume on the radio but throughout the interview he followed the game with one ear. “Walt said you were asking about somebody that worked for me back in the ‘sixties,” he said.

“That's right. A Lance Cavendish.” Auburn showed him the photograph from the missing-person report. “He disappeared in ‘sixty-eight.”

Branham pulled a blind aside and held the photograph in bright sunlight. “Sure. I remember Lance. He didn't look like that when he worked for me, though. He had hair down to his elbows, and he wore a rag around his head. You know, one of those hippies. Came back from Vietnam with knots in his nerves—bubbles in his brains, I don't know. Anyway, one day he didn't show up. His father came around looking for him, and then the police. Don't tell me he finally turned up.”

“I'm not sure if he did or not. A body was found in a well on a farm—”

“Sure. I read about that. Said the guy had been shot. Was that Lance?”

“Possibly. The remains were pretty badly decomposed, but the expert who examined them put the age, height, and weight pretty close to Cavendish's. And these were found on the body.”

Branham leaned forward for a look, but didn't offer to pick up the watch and the knife.

“Do you recognize either of these?”

“No, I don't. That knife is for electrical work, but they're a dime a dozen, or they were back then. Lance may have had one. Probably stole it from me if he did. But I can't remember. That watch doesn't mean anything to me, either.” Branham finished his beer and added the empty bottle to a row on the floor next to the cooler.

“I noticed the band had been fixed with copper wire,” remarked Auburn.

“Looks like eighteen-gauge. He probably stole that, too.”

“Would you happen to remember anybody he hung around with? Maybe somebody he worked with? Or anybody he might have got on the wrong side of?”

Branham's attention wandered briefly as he listened for the outcome of a hit. “Slade,” he said. “Henry Slade. Another Vietnam vet. He and Lance were pals, I remember that. They both worked in the shop—appliance repair. I couldn't send Lance out on wiring contracts because he'd work one day and knock off three. As I recall, Henry trained Lance at the shop.”

“Do you know where Slade is now?”

“Not for sure. Last I heard, he was with a TV outfit, doing institutional sales, but that was probably ten years ago. He ought to be in the book.”

Auburn verified the spelling of Slade's name and asked a few more questions without further results. As he let himself out of the porch, Branham was fishing another beer out of the ice.

Henry Slade was indeed in the book, and he answered Auburn's call himself. He remembered Lance Cavendish and agreed without much enthusiasm to see Auburn that afternoon.

Slade was recovering from hip surgery. Auburn found him lounging in a state of unmitigated inertia in a heavily padded lawn chair on his patio. He was built like a fire hydrant, and had a personality to match. He too was listening to the

ballgame, but he didn't have any beer. Maybe that accounted for his peevish manner.

Auburn showed him Cavendish's graduation picture.

“That's Lance,” confirmed Slade. “Back before he went to ‘Nam.”

“Did you know him in the service?”

“Nope. I was in a motor pool in Da Nang. Lance, he got all over. Electronic weapons. No, we never met till he come to work for Branham.”

“Do you remember when he disappeared?”

“Not exactly *when.* He never was what you could call reliable. Always hung over, or strung out, or whichever.”

“Did he use drugs?”

“Everybody did back then. It was just part of the scene, if you know what I mean.” Slade kept shaking his head as he talked, as if in continual denial of what he was saying. “Lance was always getting hold of cheap junk because he didn't never have no cash.”

“Do you know where he got it?”

“Just on the street.”

“Did he deal?”

“I wouldn't hardly think so.”

“Do you remember who he hung out with? Ever know of him being in any trouble?”

“Hey, that was thirty, thirty-five years ago. I was just a skinny little guy, then. All I remember about Lance, he was this twitchy, mixed-up kid who thought the world owed him a living because he lost a couple years out of his life roasting Viet Cong on orders from LBJ.”

The dead man's watch and knife didn't mean anything to Slade. He professed not to remember the names of any of Cavendish's associates, or to know anything about his activities away from work. Auburn thanked him and went back to the office feeling he wasn't any closer than before to an identification of the man from Devil's Razor.

The inquiry languished for a few days as more urgent business occupied Auburn's time. Then copies of Cavendish's military records arrived. Lance Edward Cavendish had been drafted into the United States Army in 1963 at the age of nineteen, trained as an electronic-weapons specialist, and eventually sent to Vietnam. The list of his assignments bore out Slade's assertion that he had been “all over.” Discharged in 1965, he had evidently become one of the psychological casualties of the war. Here Auburn had to read between the lines. Medical and psychiatric records from the Department of the Army and the Department of Veterans Affairs were unavailable without special authorization.

Dental records, however, having been specifically requested for identification purposes, were included in the file. Cavendish had had both upper wisdom teeth extracted while in the service. Although no X-rays were available, there was a report of his discharge dental examination. Auburn faxed these to Stamaty, since the coroner's office was officially charged with identifying any human remains found in the county.

But he could see for himself that the positions of the gold and amalgam fillings indicated on the diagram by the Army dentist perfectly matched those found by the local forensic

dental consultant in the body recovered from the well. He added the military records to the file and took a look at the whole contents of the folder again. And then he got the brainstorm that ripped the whole case wide open.

He walked the four blocks to the library. This time he didn't go to the old newspaper files—at least not right away. But he ended up there eventually, as a theory began crystallizing in his mind. It was long after his empty stomach started sending distress signals that he finally turned off the microfilm reader.

From the public phone in the lobby of the library he tried to call the National Guard Armory on Hanover Boulevard, but got a recorded message. He had better luck when he called Hugo Branham. Lance Cavendish's former employer was at home and planned to stay there for the evening.

After a sketchy meal in the canteen at headquarters, Auburn headed back to Branham's. There was no ballgame on this evening, but the party continued. Seven empty bottles stood or lay on the floor of the glassed-in porch, and the insect-repellent light bulb glowed as feebly as a February sun through the murk of smoke.

“You ever find Henry Slade?” asked Branham.

“Yes, sir. Thanks for the tip.”

“Getting anywhere?”

“I think so. There isn't much doubt that the body they found is Lance Cavendish. Now we have to find out what happened to him.”

“Who shot him, you mean.”

“Right. I'm hoping for a miracle.”

“Ain't we all?”

“This is a miracle I hope you can do.”

“Hey, wait a minute.” Branham indulged in a tipsy laugh that ended in a coughing spell. “I can't bring nobody back from the dead.”

“I don't need that much of a miracle. I'm hoping you can remember a service contract you might have had back in the ‘sixties.”

“If I can't, I can find it. I've got records going back to the year one. My wife and I did all the bookkeeping and income tax for years, back before computers, and I've still got all those records up in the attic. Ruth!”

* * *

The Starlight Gardens opened at 10:30 A.M. on weekends for early lunchers. Late next morning Auburn found Jerry Stargil in his office surrounded by employees’ timecards, grocery bills, menus, and even a cookbook or two.

“Come out to a booth, Officer,” said Stargil. “This place is too small for two. Is it too early for a drink?”

“Nothing for me, thanks.” He followed Stargil to the last booth, the one next to the kitchen door, and sat down opposite him. “We've identified the body found in the well as Lance Cavendish, who disappeared in ‘sixty-eight. Does that name mean anything to you?”

“I don't think so.”

“When Lance Cavendish's father filed a missing-person report, he gave the police a print of Lance's high school graduation picture. After I looked at that picture for about the fortieth time, it occurred to me that there might be a copy of

his high school yearbook at the library. You know what I found."

Stargil looked gray. "Do I?"

"You and Lance Cavendish graduated in the same class. You had your pictures taken together at meetings of the math club, the photography club, and Junior Achievement. You and he and your dates sat at the same table at the senior prom."

"Okay, I knew Lance," admitted Stargil. "In high school."

"And after?"

"We went different ways. He got drafted, and I—" Stargil hesitated.

"And you got in trouble."

"I made a big mistake. I was just a kid, with my whole life ahead of me, and my old man was a farmer. Every day I looked out my bedroom window and I saw that line of rock against the sky, shutting me in, tying me to that farm for life—slavery all summer, boredom all winter. I had to get away. I needed a stake, so I ripped off a couple of grocery stores. I got caught and I went to jail for sixteen months. That's over and done with."

"Was it before or after the jail stretch that you got back together with Cavendish?"

Stargil exhaled noisily—something between a sigh and a groan. He was peering sharply at Auburn's face, evidently trying to divine how much he knew.

Auburn helped him out. "Which one of you knocked off the armory? Or did you do it together?"

Stargil froze.

“I'm not wearing a microphone,” Auburn told him. “You're talking to just one guy. But you need to be aware that there's a lot of circumstantial evidence implicating you in Cavendish's death.” He went on to give the statutory warnings.

“Let's hear this evidence,” said Stargil resolutely.

“You told people that you bought this restaurant with what you inherited when your father died. But the down payment on the restaurant was thirty-two thousand, and you only inherited three thousand. That's all a matter of public record. While I was looking through newspaper files for a lead to Cavendish's identity, I ran across stories about the burglary at the National Guard Armory. Over thirty thousand dollars disappeared from a safe the day before payday for a Reserve unit that had just completed summer training. A basement window had been forced, but the safe was undamaged, so it was believed to be either an inside job or one pulled off by somebody who had gotten hold of a key.

“The appliance-repair shop where Cavendish worked had a service contract with the armory. According to the shop records, Cavendish worked on a vacuum cleaner from the armory that had a noise in it. On the invoice he wrote that he found a loose nut inside it. That was three weeks before the burglary at the armory. And seven weeks before you bought the restaurant.

“He didn't find a nut, did he? He found a key to the safe at the armory, which some jerk of a noncom probably lost and didn't report. What went wrong?”

Stargil's mood underwent a sudden and dramatic change. He sat up straighter, some color came into his face, and he

seemed much more sure of himself. “Lance looked me up after I got out of jail. He told me he had a sure thing if I wanted to invest a little money in it. I paid him a hundred dollars for the key. He didn't have the guts to do the job himself, but after I cleaned out the safe, he came around and said the hundred was only a down payment.”

“Blackmail? How could he have fingered you without implicating himself?”

“He couldn't. But he had his head so scrambled up on pot and LSD that he didn't even care. Probably figured prison food was better than what he was eating on the outside.” Stargil stopped and toyed with a menu lying on the table before him. “Food,” he said, with a wry twist of his head. “I run the best restaurant in the county, bar none, and I live on oatmeal biscuits, skimmed milk, and every pill known to man. I can't have salt because of my blood pressure, I can't have meat or eggs because of my cholesterol, and I can't have liquor because of my stomach.

“And that's all because I've been living with Lance Cavendish's murder on my conscience day and night for thirty years. Can I have a minute to talk to my chef and the cashier?”

Stargil eventually made a full confession, perhaps in a tardy bid for better mental and physical health, and was indicted on charges of grand theft and first-degree murder. A few weeks later, Auburn read in the paper that the Chalk Rib district now gloried in the name of Stony Ridge Estates, where new luxury homes were priced from $249,900.

They might have called it Stargil Estates if Professor Lorris and company had ever found any trace of a glass factory there, but they didn't—not that first glob of frit.

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Elsewhere by Bill James

Bill James is the author of the acclaimed Harpur and Iles detective series, currently being published in the U.S. at book-length by W. W. Norton. Readers may want to look for the latest entry in that series, *Naked at the Window*. The following story was first published in the British anthology *Crime in the City*. It manages to be, all at once, wry, outrageous, and sad.

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At the time, Graham Campion certainly did not realise he had strayed into a murder. All he experienced—or all Graham *thought* he experienced—was a sad voice answering the early morning phone call he'd made in search of comfort. That kind of call he often made lately.

Naturally, slaughter is out there always in the city—in all cities: London, Los Angeles, Leeds; Miami, Marseilles, Marrakesh. For most people, it remains remote and generally unencountered, thank God, not part of our daily ... well, intercourse. Yet most of us have heard how a killing can abruptly shatter what previously had been the peaceful, carefully ordered, even joyous lives of a family or group. Graham had always appreciated crime as the subject of novels and stories, but thought few such tales caught this constant, huge variability of things in our actual world: the jolting, savage moves from normality to violence and from near-farce to full tragedy.

Listening to the dawn voice on his telephone, Graham could not know that one of these terrible shifts had happened again. Afterwards, when newspapers reported the street stabbing, and Graham recognised some names, he did begin to think a bit, though even now he is not totally sure. And it would be unwise to ask for explanations, wouldn't it?

* * *

Graham had a lover named Alison who lived in St. John's Wood, on the other side of London in a considerable avenue, and who telephoned him very late most nights at his flat in Brixton, a distance away socially and otherwise, though, of

course, part of the same city. Obviously, *he* could not ring *her* because she was married and her husband might get suspicious. But on the pretext of washing her hair or reading in bed she would often slip upstairs to their extension and make this call for romantic talk, while Raymond, her husband, watched television. A short whispered chat could occur. She always used the land line, regarding mobiles as insecure after that famous tapped conversation between Prince Charles and Camilla Parker-Bowles. The point was, Graham had to be at the other end, waiting every night in case Alison came through, and this had begun to bug him. He felt cornered, utilised. Wasn't he larger than that?

It was the same when Alison decided to visit. He had given her a key to his place and she would drop in without warning and expect him to be at home, vivid with welcome. Generally he managed this, but lately had come to feel he was too available. Surely it should be women who sat anxiously, hopefully waiting, not men. His sense of meek passivity seemed worse because Alison and Raymond had all that money: three-dimensional, metropolitan-scale money.

As for himself, Graham ran an adequate business selling novelties: love-spoons, cards, and London-scene watercolours, mostly to tourists from overseas. However, he was making no pile and, since his divorce, lived solo in the Brixton flat. It might also be termed adequate, yet lacked all the grandeur of Ray and Alison's property—and you could call that a property without sounding absurd. The area boasted many such places. Yes, boasted. He had driven past a couple

of times to gaze at their home, as much as he could through those thrivingly thick hedge ramparts.

On the other hand, Graham's own street and district were ... say, problematical. It was true that parts of Brixton had shaken off their harsh image and become almost fashionable, especially among those who despised far-out suburbia but could not afford Kensington, or even St. John's Wood. Upgrading had not quite reached the patch where Graham lived, though.

As a means of upgrading *himself*—since he could not on his own upgrade one whole segment of London—Graham planned to make two changes: He would acquire some new business allure, and he would arrange to become more scarce. Just before the time that Alison might ring, he took to dialing a number he knew would be unanswered—the office of his accountant, Jack Brabond, in the nearby district of Lewisham, sure to be empty so late. This gave Alison the busy tone. To take the receiver off the hook would not do because eventually that produced the “unobtainable” wail to callers, and she would deduce what he had done, and be hurt and/or ratty-contemptuous—most likely ratty-contemptuous—and become sexually punitive for at least weeks. Not to answer would have produced interminable questioning from Alison on why he was out late. She could be darkly possessive.

He would leave the call ringing at Jack Brabond's for twenty minutes or so at about the right time, then replace the receiver. It did not always work, but often when Alison was eventually able to get through on these nights she asked why

his phone had been engaged. He would reply that he'd had a fairly urgent business call from Seattle or Denver, where they were hours behind us and still in their offices. He felt this arrangement gave him commercial brilliance: internationalised him, as well as ensuring that he was not endlessly and gratefully on tap. Also, in some mysterious, even mystical, way the imperturbable steady ringing tone at Brabond's office brought a sense of contact with the world, and a fiscal, important world, at that. It told him he was not, after all, discarded and alone and flimsy in his drab corner of the city. Never mind that the call remained unanswered. It was specifically targeted and *would* have reached someone, had someone only been there. This potential communion buttressed him. Occasionally, if Graham awoke around dawn, miserable again in his deeply unshared bed, he would re-solace himself by dialing Jack Brabond's number again, sure it was now only a few hours before someone would reply. Clearly, he did not let the ringing go on for that long, but having been soothed by the prospect of an answer, he would put the receiver back and find sleep once more as morning arrived.

* * *

Now and then, Jack Brabond took women back to the office after an evening at a club or the casino. He was married and supposed to be seeing important clients in their houses on these nights, so patently could not ask the women home. He kept some drink at the office and had a five-seater leather sofa in his room for when he might be conferring with several client directors. Jack needed regularity, a stable, reliable

pattern: from home to work at the office, home again at the end of the day, then out to the club or casino in the evening, perhaps to the office once more, but for a delightful sojourn now, not work, and finally home again. He had a dread of what he termed to himself the “Outside,” meaning more or less anywhere or anything in the city—in cities generally—which did not fall within the tidy, charted realm he'd fashioned. He recalled Sodom and Gomorrah, the Bible's “cities of the plain,” locations replete with danger and uncorralled evil. Jack feared cities, although he had to live in one: knew they were trouble, knew you must look after your defences.

Recently, on some occasions when Jack had returned to the office late in the evening with a woman friend, his direct-line phone would ring very close to the sofa at unfortunate, crux moments. God knew who would be calling now. It enraged and unnerved him: perhaps an intrusion from that threatening Outside. Without interrupting anything major, Jack would reach down behind the sofa and yank the plug from its socket. Whoever was ringing would get a “no reply” sound, and never know they were cut off. Several women found his decisiveness with the plug ferociously sexy and grew even more loving, otherwise he might have pulled it before they began.

Tonight, though, he was having trouble with a murderously articulate, very beautiful woman called Helen, whom he had asked back for the first time. Jack gave her a couple of brandies and patiently listened as she elaborated a thesis she'd begun in the Grand Manner club about the way to

achieve solid poise in badminton by playing well back from the net and wearing heavier training shoes. He blamed himself for this impasse, since he had mentioned to her that his only child, Ivor, played badminton for Leeds University: With Jack, it was an unwavering rule to be honest and let women know early that he had a wife and admirable family, and was devoted to them. His family were as much an antidote to the infected Outside as were these cheery episodes after hours in the office.

In fact, now and then, if a girl had come back more than once with him and seemed liable to grow what he termed "clingy," Jack would take a few moments of relaxed, post-coital time to ring Ivor—reconnecting the phone briefly, if necessary—while she looked on and listened. The lad seemed to be living these days with his girlfriend, Sally, which was fine by Jack, and he might chat comfortably to one or both of them on such late-night calls. Ivor's student flat, full of love, sporting gear, and academic industry, was one part of the Outside Jack felt happy about, akin in some ways to his own setting. Ivor, like Jack, had to contend with the perils of a city—a smaller, northern city, but still a city, with all its accumulated peril. Jack was glad Ivor had established a refuge for himself and Sally there, just as Jack had built a couple of refuges for himself in *this* city: his home and the office.

When Jack put his hand on Helen's skirt now, as the survey of badminton footwear seemed about to close, she did not tangibly flinch or freeze but glanced down at it and smiled momentarily, as if indicating that this advance was laughable

enough and anything additional would be grotesque. As summing-up, she listed again some brands of heavier trainers she favoured and then said: “I must be off soon, Jack, dear. I only came for a last drink and to see your setup here. AS YOU KNOW.” The telephone rang. Jack, alert for it, leaned over the back of the sofa and, using his free hand, would have disconnected with standard, aphrodisiac flair.

“Don't do that,” Helen snarled.

Shamefaced, he removed his other hand from her thigh area, while continuing his effort to kill the phone.

“No, keep doing that, you dolt, but don't do that to the telephone,” she went on, a throaty tremor touching her words. She picked up his non-plug hand and put it back on her skirt, rather higher up.

“It can't be anyone so late,” he said.

“Oh yes, so late, so late! A caller out there in the noble dark of the thrillingly complicit city trying to get through.” Her voice still thrummed with excitement. She put one of her hands over his on her body and pressed down confirmingly. “Mysterious. It's as if there were a spectator, a witness.”

“You like that?”

“It's special.”

He felt terrorised by the continuing din but moved his hand from under hers, then down her skirt, then quickly up and beneath it.

In a moment she remarked: “There. Now you see what I mean about it tuning me up. The brilliant clamour, Jack—that brutal insistence, the forlorn echo through an empty building. One loves it so.”

Christ, how long would this benign, lubricating racket last? On all previous calls he had disconnected almost at once. Urgently, he began to undress her, then himself. Seize the jangling moment.

“Oh, if only he knew the threesome he makes,” she cried. “I'm sure it's a he. Perhaps somehow, somewhere in the city, he senses what's happening here.”

The ringing went on long enough, though Jack was not sure he did. After all, the circumstances produced some strain. Nevertheless, he felt there had been progress, and, in fact, a few nights later Helen agreed to return with him to the office. “But no messing about,” she said.

“Certainly not.”

Things went pretty well exactly the same again, though: coolness, titanic discourse, and then those sudden hots from Alexander Graham Bell's bell. Above the sound of the ringing, she muttered into his ear on the sofa, “You really reach me, Jacky, love.” Yet he feared that once more he had been too hurried, nervous all the time that a reversion to arid silence might abruptly end her zing.

When next he took Helen to the office, he found a smart way to avert this pressure. They were sitting sedately while she gave some detailed, very up-to-date, rather uncompulsive news on a great-aunt in Tasmania and her knitting prowess. He said suddenly that he must check he had locked the outer door. In fact, he hurried down the corridor to the room of his partner, Hugh Stitson. Hugh had a separate outside line and on it Jack dialed his own office number. Then he left Hugh's receiver off. When he returned to his room, the

telephone was doing its fine, now wholly reliable bit, and Helen had shed her clothes and forgotten Tasmania. “He's with us again, Jack—our blessed adjunct,” she sighed contentedly. “Never, never stop, dear Wonderman,” she cried, gazing at the telephone.

“No, I won't,” Jack replied, but short of breath.

* * *

When Graham Campion, as usual, called Jack's office number that night he found it busy. Crazy. This did not interfere with his tactic for stalling Alison, since as long as he kept the call in to the accountant she would still get the “engaged” note from him if she rang. But he loathed the aggressively sharp tone of Jack's “busy” sound. It made him feel rejected rather than potentially in touch. Who the hell phoned an accountant at this time of night, except him? Or who the hell would be working down there and ringing out so late? He looked in the directory to check he had not made a mistake and found Jack's business had two numbers, obviously one for each partner. Immediately, he rang the other. Jesus, this was engaged, too. Did they now and then have big, emergency audit work, or similar, that kept them at it into the small hours? They actually bothered clients by phone around midnight? Replacing the receiver, he thought urgently of some second-choice number where there would be no answer out of office hours and decided on his solicitor: Those buggers hardly ever turned up even *within* office hours. He was looking for the name in the directory when his own telephone rang. Answering was inescapable. Alison said: “I got straight through to you. No big-deal calls tonight?”

“Later,” he replied. But he feared his image had taken a body blow. She did not talk for long and said she was going to bed. He felt diminished.

* * *

At the office, Jack and Helen eventually let things reach their rich conclusion, although his phone continued to ring; and then they began to dress. While she was putting herself to rights in the women's cloakroom, Jack went to Hugh's office and replaced the receiver.

“Oh, it's stopped at last,” Helen said, reappearing in his room, ready to leave.

“Farewell then, Splendid Presence,” he said, addressing the handset in Helen's reverential style. And he meant it. He was coming to terms. “You look so lovely, Helen.” He put out a hand to touch her face gently, affectionately.

“Now, don't start all that damn smoochy stuff,” she snarled.

* * *

At home, Graham felt a mixture of curiosity, hellish disorientation, and anger over what had happened earlier. He thought that when the night had gone he might give one of his dawn calls, confident that by then at least there would be access to Jack's office. Graham craved this reassurance and notional companionship. But in a while he decided he could not wait until dawn and must try once more now, immediately, in the hope of settling himself for sleep. This time the number rang. Thank heavens! Had he been misdialing both numbers before?

* * *

In the office, Jack and Helen were about to leave. He had thought of giving Ivor a late call, just so that she would get no notions about eternal linkage with Jack on the basis of a few office evenings, but felt all-in and eager for bed, meaning sleep. When the bell reblurted she cried warmly: “Oh, he's with us once more, Jack. Does he never falter, never lose concern for us?” She put her arm around his neck and drew him back towards the sofa. “We must not fail him.”

Fail, he thought. Possibly.

* * *

Graham decided there was no point in letting the phone ring at Jack's for long, since Alison would not be calling again tonight. The damage to his aura had been done. This call was merely a final, rather desperate check: He saw now that his earlier failures to get through must have been some sort of freak breakdown on the lines. He replaced the receiver and went to bed.

* * *

When the bell ceased in the office, Helen looked at her illuminated-dial watch—she never took that off—and said: “I must get home, Jack. You, too. It's an outrageous time.”

“Not quite yet,” he muttered, into irreversible countdown again.

“I must.” As brusquely as his former unplugging, she drew away from him and swung her magnificent legs off the sofa.

“What was that?” he cried.

“What?”

“I thought I heard someone in the foyer. An intruder? Wait here, darling.”

Jack ran swiftly, naked, still creditably aroused, down the corridor to Hugh's office and dialed his room again. He took true solace from these little in-house trips—part of a nicely managed, tidy life, over well-known ground, a portion of his wonderfully safe, niche habitat. When he returned, Helen was lying back, haloed with appetite, and did not ask about the supposed intruder. “Our eternal accompanist from some region of the grand Elsewhere,” she purred, pointing to the noisy phone. “This time, lift the receiver off, Jack. Let him hear our joys. Let him be *truly* with us.”

“But, sweetness, it will stop the ringing,” he replied.

“It's not the bell that gets to my spirit, it's the sense of SOMEONE"—this was a big, pulsating, echoing word—"some Night Person of our City, some Anon., some Enigma from the Streets, some Garnering Ear, yes, some Presence, as you so justly called him.”

Jack took the receiver off and laid it on the desk. Why not? The sounds would be going nowhere except to an empty office. Again, the sense of that small private circuit pleased him. It had nothing to do with Night Persons of their city. Night Persons of their city, or of any city, would scare him tremulous. In a while Helen gave some grand groans and shrieks, and so did he. Staring with affection at the receiver she said: “Jack, wouldn't merely selfish ecstasy seem so skinflint? To share it is an act of blessedness.” She did not suggest actually speaking into the phone, thank heaven. He could imagine her asking the supposed listener in a Florence Nightingale voice if he'd taken therapy from his call.

Before they left, Jack carried out a quick but thorough examination to see that Hugh's phone was not switched on to Record. If it were, Stitson's secretary, Martha, would be expecting only workaday messages about self-assessment and allowable expenses. She had a weak heart and should be spared shocks.

* * *

A night or two later, when Jack and Helen were seated on the sofa with drinks, he inadvertently mentioned he used to wear tooth braces as a child, and afterwards waited anxiously for a small break in her account of the many types of these now available so he could get down to Hugh's room and set up the contact. He had left her in mid chat the other night and felt it would be impossibly rude to do so again. His phone started to ring before she had completed her roundup. “Ah!” she said. “Take the receiver off, Jack.”

“But—”

“I must feel we are with him again, enveloping him, not just having him badger us through a damned meaningless bell. That's *so* one-way. Jack, don't deny me this. Don't shroud our love. I know you, too, yearn for this alliance with our plangent city.”

No, no, NO. But he lifted the receiver and placed it on the desk.

* * *

Shocked to have his call responded to, Graham almost dropped the phone. Covering the mouthpiece, he listened carefully. At first there was virtual silence, except for some rather feverish rustling noises and then, possibly, subdued

voices, perhaps a woman and a man. He could not tell if the man was Jack: Graham usually heard Brabond pronounce words like “docket,” not the kind of word on his lips now. Shortly afterwards, though, came unmistakable sounds, and particularly from the woman. Graham realised, of course, that these exclamations were not directed primarily at him, yet also felt in some gratifying way implicated, welcomed, yes, embraced. This, too, was another life-extension for him. He decided it would be friendly to drive down to Jack's office and see whether he could approach a little closer, show extra fellowship. He did not replace his telephone, in case Alison rang and got no reply in his absence. To tell her where he had gone would be impossible, since that would give away his whole tactical system. She would hear a nice “engaged” tone again.

* * *

Alison's husband Raymond telephoned her from Rotterdam to say there were delays in some deal and he would not, after all, be home that night. It seemed a lovely opportunity to call on Graham. She took the Volvo and not long afterwards let herself quietly into the flat, gently cooing his name. There was no reply but, standing in the little hallway, she thought she heard sounds coming from behind the part-open living room door. For a second she listened and then her rage soared. Graham had a woman there—was having a woman there. Bursting in, though, she was relieved to find the room empty. Then she saw the telephone had been left off the hook and went to pick it up. Meaningful noises still issued. For a while she listened: It must be one of those endless, dirty

recorded calls for the lonely and maladjusted. So this must be the number he rang every night—nothing to do with love-spoon orders from the States! Graham Campion was a pervert. Tonight, he had obviously grown so excited by what he heard that he had been obliged to rush out and gratify himself with a girl, too hurried even to put the receiver back. She banged it down herself now.

* * *

Helen, in the office, was having a small spell of silence and quiet enjoyment and heard a click from the receiver lying out of its cradle on the desk as the call was abruptly cut. Leaning across deftly from under Jack, she picked up the instrument and listened. There was not the humming sound of an open line but the *beep, beep, beep* that showed they were no longer connected. “Time we were away,” she snapped.

“What?” Jack gasped.

“Please. Don't be tiresome. This is an accountant's prestige premises, for Christ's sake, in close touch with the Inland Revenue. Have some decorum.”

* * *

Graham arrived in the street just in time to spot the two cars drive away. The office looked entirely dark. He knew he was too late and sadly went home, feeling solitary. Entering, he grew puzzled: He could have sworn he had not replaced the telephone when he left for Jack's office, yet it was back now. He rang Jack's number to seek a rerun of the previous effects, but there was no reply. Inevitably there was no reply! Hadn't he just seen the participants leave? He replaced the receiver.

A little later, as he was preparing to turn in, his telephone rang. When he picked it up he could hear vigorous sounds very like those that had intrigued him earlier, though louder and even more appreciative. Between the happy yelps a woman eventually said: “Sauce for the gander is sauce for the goose, Graham.”

“Alison?”

“So you like earholing this sort of thing, do you?” she replied. “You deserted me, bastard. I was bereft.”

“Where are you, darling?”

“In a public phone box, with a friend I've just met. It's so easy to get a booth when you urgently want one these days and nights, because everyone's got mobiles. And this *was* urgent.”

“Which friend?”

“A friend in need and a friend in deed.”

* * *

Jack Brabond went home and climbed into bed with his wife, Olive. She stirred, half asleep, and low down put out her hand inquiringly towards him. He turned away, deeply spent. Not long afterwards, he was awoken by the telephone ringing with fierce persistence downstairs. After a while, to his amazement, he found himself aroused by it. Delighted, he realised he had at last learned the full, spirit-lifting lesson from Helen and come to see the city and, indeed, the world around, not as hostile but as an inspiration. A phone bell at night would turn him on. Lovingly he edged towards Olive.

“You'd better answer the call first,” she murmured.

“No, it will spoil things. I'll go in due course.”

“In due course it will have stopped.”

“I don't think so.”

“What?”

“Believe me. I've an instinct about such matters.” Like Helen, he'd come to feel that a magnificent source of desire and power out there was sending its restorative power to him: Elijah's mantle on Elisha.

The ringing stopped, then resumed, as if someone suspected they had misdialed. Olive said: “Please, Jack. I can't relax while it's shrieking like that.”

“Doesn't it intrigue and thrill you? The Someone from the Brooding City. The Mystery from its Streets? The Presence?”

“You gone mad? Just get the blasted thing, will you?” she replied.

He would be considerate. One could not reasonably expect everybody—could not expect Olive—to be instantly in touch with these unspoken, vibrant messages from Outside any more than he had been instantly in touch with them himself previously. A slow revelation was needed.

He climbed out of bed and went down to the phone in the hall. Always he had resisted having an upstairs extension in case one of his more personal calls was overheard by Olive. Expecting no voice—this would be the magnificent Presence who was a Non-Presence, after all—he picked up the receiver. For Olive's sake he was committed merely to stopping the bell. He did not even lift the phone to his ear. Just the same, he heard his name spoken. It was a woman's voice, and for a moment he thought Helen's. What did she mean ringing him

here at this hour, the wild cow? Now he did raise the instrument and said: “Yes, it's Jack. What?”

“Mr. Brabond? Sally. I'm phoning from Leeds.”

“Sally? Sally?”

“Ivor's girlfriend.”

“Oh yes, dear, of course. I was expecting a ... But what is it?”

She seemed to be weeping. “Oh, Mr. Brabond, a terrible fight, outside in the street.”

“Outside?”

“In the street. They had broken into the flat to thieve. We came home and surprised them. Mr. Brabond, there were three, with knives, and they held us prisoner for a while. They would have used me, but Ivor beat them off. So courageous. The fight spilled out onto the pavement. He wanted to draw them away from me, I know it. People saw, but by the time help came Ivor was—” She sobbed.

“Dead? Dead. Oh, why did you choose to live in a city?”

“What? Universities usually *are* in cities, Mr. Brabond.”

“Just the same.”

“The police will tell you face-to-face. They don't telephone such news. But I thought you'd want to know even so late.”

“Yes. I'm used to late calls.” In those idiotically cheerful telephone conversations from the office, why had he never stressed to Sally and Ivor the foul hazards of Outside, the de rigueur, galloping evil of cities?

“And the robbery was so pointless, so trivial,” she said. “All they got away with were a couple of badminton racquets and his trainers.”

Trainers? Were they the heavy style? Although the crazy thought broke into Jack Brabond's head, he stopped himself from speaking it. The banal and the horrific could mingle, as everybody knew, but he did not have to cave in and help them do it.

When Jack went back upstairs, Olive was snoring. Why wake her? Keep the grief to himself till morning. He dressed and drove around the streets, pathetically hoping to escape his own grief that way. At dawn, he found himself near the office, went in and lay blankly awake on the big sofa. The phone rang. He picked it up and said: “Look, Presence, this is no good to you now. I'm utterly alone.”

“What about me?”

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If a Cyclops Could Vanish in the Blink of an Eye by Steven Saylor

Steven Saylor's new story for EQMM appeared first in the British magazine *Candis*. No murders confront series sleuth Gordianus this time, only a household mystery. The latest novel in the Gordianus series is *A Mist of Prophecies*. And the Texas-born author recently took a break from the field of historical fiction, where he has made his mark up to now, to produce his first contemporary thriller, *Have You Seen Dawn?* (S&S).

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Eco was incensed. That was all I could tell at first—that he was angry and frustrated almost to the point of tears. At such a time I felt acutely aware of his muteness. He was usually quite skilled at expressing himself with gestures and signals, but not when he was flustered.

"Calm down," I said quietly, placing my hands on his shoulders. He was at that age when boys shoot up like beanstalks. It seemed to me that not long ago, placing my hands at the same height, I would have been patting his head. "Now," I said, "what is the problem?"

My adopted son took a deep breath and composed himself, then seized my hand and led me across the overgrown garden at the center of the house, under the portico, through a curtained doorway, and into his room. By the bright morning light from the small window I surveyed the few furnishings—a narrow sleeping cot, a wooden folding chair, and a small trunk.

It was not to these that Eco directed my attention, but to a long niche about knee-high in the plastered wall across from his bed. The last time I had ventured into the room, a hodgepodge of toys had been shoved into the niche—little boats made of wood, a leather ball for playing trigon, pebbles of colored glass for Egyptian board games. Now the space had been neatly cleared—the castoff toys put away in the trunk along with his spare tunic, I presumed—and occupying the shelf were a number of tiny figurines made of fired clay, each representing some monster of legend with a horrible visage.

There was a Medusa with snakes for hair, a Cyclops with one eye, a Nemean lion, and numerous others.

They were crudely made but tinted with bright colors and I knew that Eco treasured them. A potter with a shop down by the Tiber made them in his spare time out of bits of leftover clay; Eco had been doing occasional odd jobs for the man and accepting the figurines as payment. He insisted on showing them off to me and to Bethesda whenever he brought a new one home. I always made a point of admiring them, but my beloved concubine made no secret of her disdain for them. Her upbringing in Egypt had given her attitudes different—dare I say more superstitious?—than those of a Roman, and where I found the figurines to be harmless and even charming, she saw in them something distasteful, even sinister.

I had not realized how large Eco's collection had grown. I counted fifteen figurines, all lined up in a row.

“Why do you show me these?” I asked.

He pointed to three gaps in the evenly spaced row.

“Are you telling me that three of your monsters are missing?”

Eco nodded vigorously.

“But where have they gone?”

He shrugged and his lower lip began to tremble. He looked so desolate.

“Which ones are missing? When were they taken?”

Eco pointed to the first gap, then performed a very complicated mime, snarling and gnashing his teeth, until I grasped that the missing figurine was of three-headed

Cerberus, the watchdog of Pluto. He passed an open palm behind a horizontal forearm—his gesture for sundown—and held up two fingers.

"The day before yesterday your Cerberus went missing?"

He nodded.

"But why didn't you tell me then?"

Eco shrugged and made a long face. I gathered that he presumed he might have mislaid the figurine himself.

Our exchange continued—me, asking questions; Eco, answering with gestures—until I learned that yesterday his Minotaur had disappeared, and that very morning his many-headed Hydra had vanished. The first disappearance had merely puzzled him; the second had alarmed him; the third had thrown him into utter confusion.

I gazed at the gaps in the row of monsters and stroked my chin. "Well, well, this *is* serious. Tell me, has anything else gone missing?"

Eco shook his head.

"Are you sure?"

He rolled his eyes at me and gestured to his cot, his chair and his trunk as if to say, *With so little to call my own, don't you think I'd notice if anything else was gone?*

Eco's figurines were of little intrinsic value; any serious burglar would surely have been more likely to snatch one of Bethesda's bracelets or a scroll from my bookcase. But as far as I knew, nothing else in the house had gone missing in the last few days.

At that time I was without a slave—other than Bethesda, whom I could hardly justify calling my slave anymore,

considering that she tended to prevail in any contest of wills between us—so the only occupants of the house were Bethesda, Eco, and myself. In the last three days, no tradesmen had come calling; nor, sadly for my purse, had any client come to seek the services of Gordianus the Finder.

I raised an eyebrow. “Fortunately for you, Eco, I happen to be between cases at the moment, so I can bend all my efforts toward solving this mystery. But the truth can never be hurried. Let me ponder this for a while—sleep on it, perhaps—and I'll see if I can come up with a solution.”

Bethesda was out most of the day, shopping at the food markets and taking a pair of my shoes to be resoled by a cobbler. I had business to attend to in the Forum, as well as a special errand to take care of on the Street of the Plastermakers. Not until that night, after Eco had retired to his room and the two of us reclined on our dining couches after the evening meal—a simple repast of lentil soup and stuffed dates—did I find time to have a quiet word with Bethesda about Eco's problem.

“Disappearing? One at a time?” she said. By the warm glow of the nearby brazier I thought I saw a subtle smile on her lips. The same light captured wine-colored highlights in her dark, henna-treated hair. Bethesda was beautiful at all hours of the day, but perhaps most beautiful by firelight. The black female cat she called Bast lay beside her, submitting to her gentle stroking. Watching Bethesda caress the beast, I felt a stab of envy. Cats were still a novelty in Rome at that time, and keeping one as a house pet, as others might keep a dog, was one of the peculiar habits Bethesda had imported

with her from Egypt. Her last cat, also called Bast, had expired some time ago; this one she had recently acquired from a sailing merchant in Ostia. The beast and I got along passably well, as long as I didn't attempt to interpose myself between Bast and her mistress when it was the cat's turn to receive Bethesda's caresses.

"Yes, the little monsters seem to be vanishing one by one," I said, clearing my throat. "I don't suppose you know anything about it?"

"I? What makes you think *I* might have anything to do with it?" Bethesda raised an eyebrow. For an uncanny moment her expression and the cat's were identical—mysterious, aloof, utterly self-contained. I shifted uneasily on my couch.

"Perhaps..." I shrugged. "Perhaps you were cleaning his room. Perhaps one of the figurines fell, and broke—"

"Do you think I'm blind as well as clumsy? I think I should know if I had broken one of Eco's figurines," she said coolly, "especially if I did such a thing three days in a row."

"Of course. Still, considering the way you feel about those figurines—"

"And *do* you know how I feel about them, master?" Bethesda fixed me with her catlike stare.

I cleared my throat. "Well, I know you don't like them—"

"I respect them for what they are. You think they're just lumps of lifeless clay, a child's toys made by a clumsy potter. You Romans! You've put so much of your faith in the handful of gods who made you great that you can no longer see the tiny gods who populate your own households. There's a spark

of life in every one of the figurines that Eco has brought into the house. It's unwise to bring so many into the house at once, when there's so little we know about any of them. Do you know what I think? I think the three who've gone missing may have left of their own volition."

"What? You think they jumped from the shelf and scampered off?"

"You scoff, master, but it may be that the three who left were unhappy with the company in which they found themselves. Or perhaps the others ganged up on them and drove them off!" As her voice rose, so did Bethesda, sitting upright on the couch. Bast, disliking the change in her mistress's disposition, jumped from her lap and ran off.

"Bethesda, this is preposterous. They're only bits of painted clay!"

She recovered her composure and leaned back. "So you say, master. So you say."

"The point is, those figurines are of great value to Eco. He's very proud of them. They're his possessions. He earned them by his own labor."

"If you say so, master. Being a mere slave, I wouldn't know much about *earning* and *owning."*

Her tone expressed no empathy for Eco at all, and certainly no remorse. I became more determined than ever to make good on my pledge to Eco to solve the mystery of his disappearing monsters.

* * *

That night, after Bethesda was asleep, I slipped out of bed and stole to the garden at the center of the house, which was

lit by a full moon. In an inconspicuous spot beside one of the columns of the portico, I located the purchase I had made earlier that day on the Street of the Plastermakers. It was a tightly-woven linen bag containing a handful or so of plaster dust. Carrying the bag, I slipped through the curtained doorway into Eco's room. The moonlight that poured in through the small window showed Eco soundly asleep on his cot. Reaching into the bag, I scattered a very fine layer of plaster dust onto the floor in front of the niche that contained his figurines. The dust was so fine that a tiny cloud rose from my hand and seemed to sparkle in the moonlight.

My eyes watered and my nose twitched. I slipped out of Eco's room, put away the bag of plaster dust, and stole back to my bed. I slipped under the covers beside Bethesda. Only then did I release a sneeze that broke the silence like thunder.

Bethesda murmured and rolled onto her side, but did not wake.

* * *

The next morning I woke to the sound of birds in the garden—not pleasant singing but the shrill cawing of two magpies squabbling in the trees. I covered my ears with my pillow, but it was no good. I was up for the day.

Stepping out of bed, I inadvertently kicked a shoe—one of the pair that Bethesda had brought home from the cobbler the previous day—and sent it skittering under the bed. Dropping to my hands and knees to retrieve it, I was stopped short by the sight of four objects on the floor beneath the bed, directly underneath the space where Bethesda slept,

against the wall. They were clustered in a little group, lying on their sides. Joining the missing figurines of Cerberus, the Minotaur, and the Hydra was a fourth, Eco's one-eyed Cyclops.

Well, well, I thought, getting to my feet. Sprinkling the plaster dust had been superfluous after all. Or had it? If Bethesda wouldn't own up to pilfering Eco's figurines, the evidence of her footsteps in the dust, and of the dust adhering to the soles of her shoes, would compel her to do so. I couldn't help but smile, anticipating her chagrin. Or would she maintain her fiction that the figurines had walked off by themselves, with the curious goal, as it turned out, of congregating beneath our bed?

Whistling an old Etruscan nursery tune and looking forward to a hearty breakfast, I strolled across the garden toward the dining room at the back of the house. Above my head the magpies squawked in dissonant counterpoint to my whistling. Bast sat in a patch of sunlight, apparently oblivious of the birds, cleaning a forepaw with her tongue.

No sooner had I settled myself on the dining couch than Eco came running out of his room, a look of confusion and alarm on his face. He ran up to me and waved his arms, making inchoate gestures.

“I know, I know,” I said, raising one hand to calm him and gently restraining him with the other. “Don't tell me—your Cyclops has gone missing.”

Eco was briefly taken aback, then frowned and peered at me inquiringly.

“How do I know? Well...”

At that moment Bethesda appeared from the kitchen bearing a bowl of steaming porridge. I cleared my throat.

"Bethesda," I said, "it seems that another of Eco's figurines has vanished. What do you say to that?"

She put the bowl on a small tripod table and began to ladle porridge into three smaller bowls. "What would you have me say, master?" She kept her eyes on her work. Her face was utterly expressionless, betraying not the least trace of guilt or guile.

I sighed, almost regretting that she had forced me to expose her little charade. "Perhaps you could begin..." *By apologizing to Eco,* I was about to say—when I was abruptly interrupted by a sneeze.

It was not Bethesda who sneezed. Nor was it Eco.

It was the cat.

Bethesda looked up. "Yes, master? I could begin by saying ... what?"

My face turned hot. I cleared my throat. I pursed my lips.

I stood up. "Eco, the first thing you must remember, if you ever wish to become a Finder like your father, is always to keep a cool head and never to jump to conclusions. Last night I laid a trap for our culprit. If we now examine the scene of the crime, I suspect we shall discover that she has left a clue behind."

Or several clues, as it turned out, if one wished to call each tiny, padded paw print in the fine plaster dust an individual clue. The paw prints led up to the niche; the paw prints led away. Following a barely discernible trail of dusted prints, Eco and I tracked the thief's progress out of his room, around the

colonnaded portico, and into the room I shared with Bethesda. The trail disappeared under the bed.

I left it to Eco to discover the pilfered figurines for himself. He let out a grunt, scampered under the bed, and reemerged clutching the clay treasures in both hands, a look of mingled relief and triumph on his face.

Greatly excited, he put down the figurines so that he could communicate. He pinched his forefingers and thumbs beneath his nose and drew them outward, making his sign for Bast by miming the cat's long whiskers.

“Yes,” I said. “It was Bast who took your figurines.”

Eco made an exaggerated shrug with his palms held upright.

“Why? That I can't tell you. We Romans don't yet know that much about cats. Not like the Egyptians, who've been living with them—and worshiping them—since the dawn of time. I suppose, like dogs and ferrets—and like magpies, for that matter—some cats display a tendency to pilfer small objects and hide them. One of those figurines would fit quite neatly between Bast's jaws. I'm sure she meant no harm, as none of them seems to have been damaged. She obviously treated them with great respect.”

I glanced at the cat. She stood in the doorway beside Bethesda and peered back at me with a bland expression that admitted no guilt. She rubbed herself against Bethesda's ankles, whipped her tail in the air, and sauntered back toward the garden. Bethesda raised an eyebrow and looked at me steadily, but said nothing.

* * *

That night, after a very busy day, I slipped into bed beside Bethesda. Her mood seemed a bit cool, but she said nothing.

The silence stretched. “I suppose I owe you an apology,” I finally said.

“For what?”

The best course, I decided, was to make light of my mistake. “It was foolish of me, really. Do you know, I almost suspected *you* of taking Eco's figurines.”

“Really?” By the pale moonlight I couldn't quite decipher the expression on her face. Was she angry? Amused? Unconcerned?

“Yes, I actually suspected you, Bethesda. But of course it wasn't you. It was the cat, all along.” The creature abruptly jumped onto the bed and crawled over both of us to settle between Bethesda and the wall, purring loudly.

“Yes, it was Bast who took the figurines,” said Bethesda. She rolled away from me and laid her hand upon the cat, who responded with a purring that was almost a roar. “But how do you know that it wasn't *I* who put her up to it?”

For that, I had no answer.

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The Theft of the Blue-Ribbon Bass by Edward D. Hoch

For many longtime subscribers, Edward D. Hoch's monthly contribution to EQMM is the first story turned to and read. 436 of the 875 short stories the Rochester author has sold to date have been purchased by this magazine. His latest tale for us belongs to the Nick Velvet series. The most popular of all the Hoch series, it began in 1966 and was once the basis for a miniseries on French TV.

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It was Nick Velvet's second trip to San Diego, but his first in more than two decades. The city had grown and prospered in the intervening years and was now far larger than San Francisco. When no one from the East Coast was looking, it had become the seventh-largest city in the country.

Gladys Winfield met him at Lindbergh Field, the city's international airport, on a Thurs-day afternoon following his flight from New York. “You're Mr. Velvet?” she greeted him, immediately recognizing the description he'd given her over the phone. “I'm Gladys Winfield. You may call me Gladys. I have a car waiting.”

She was an attractive woman, probably approaching fifty but trying to hide it. Her hair was blond and her smile dazzling. Only close up were the slight lines of age visible around her throat. Following her lead from the baggage-claim area, he couldn't help noticing her shapely legs. The car was indeed waiting, a chauffeur-driven white Lincoln with a glass partition between the front and back seats.

The first thing Gladys Winfield did was to press the button that closed the partition. “You understand that I'm paying you fifty thousand dollars to steal something of very little value.” The car pulled out of the airport and headed the short distance toward downtown San Diego.

“It's what I do for a living,” he told her with a smile. “What do you want stolen?”

“A fish.”

“Alive or dead?”

“It will be dead when you steal it.”

"Big fish, little fish?"

"A white sea bass, probably weighing close to fifty pounds. You see, Mr. Velvet, there are a great many beaches and bays along the Southern California coastline. Many of them conduct fishing derbies or tournaments during the year. There is a halibut derby in Santa Monica Bay each April, for instance. It's good for the tourist business."

"What does that have to do with—?"

"I want you to steal the fish that wins the white-sea-bass tournament at Maritime Beach this weekend and deliver it to me. The tournament starts today and runs through Saturday. The heaviest fish is the winner, and it's hung from the end of the pier Saturday night until the prize is awarded on Sunday."

"It seems to me a prize-winning fish could be valuable."

The blond woman snorted. "Not in this contest. The winning fisherman gets a blue ribbon and a hundred-dollar merchandise certificate from a local sporting-goods store."

"That seems valueless enough," Nick agreed. "But why do you need me to steal it?"

"A large sea bass is too heavy for me to handle."

"Perhaps your chauffeur could help."

"There are other problems. The pier is guarded on Saturday night to make certain no one tampers with the fish."

"Who would tamper with a dead bass?" Nick wondered.

"The weigh-in is not official until Sunday morning, when the winning fish is re-weighed by a panel of judges. In the past, some unscrupulous contestants have added buckshot or lead balls to their fish to increase its weight by a pound or

more. Sometimes this is done by rival contestants to get the winning fish disqualified. The guard is on duty to prevent it."

Nick smiled, realizing once again that there were countless ways of making a dishonest dollar. "I suppose I can hire a boat and steal the fish off the end of the pier."

"It would be difficult. The pier is lighted at night, and wrestling a fifty-pound sea bass into a boat would be no easy task. The security guard is usually armed, by the way."

"Why is the fish so valuable to you, Gladys?"

"That needn't concern you."

"I get half the money in advance," he reminded her.

She took a fat envelope from her purse. "Here it is. All cash. There's a slight possibility I might call this off at the last minute, but if I do, this much is yours anyway. When and where will you deliver the fish?"

"On your doorstep, wrapped in the Sunday paper, if you wish."

Gladys Winfield made a face. "I don't wish. Here, we're at your hotel. I booked you into the U.S. Grant. It's a fine old place and I think you'll like it. I'll phone your room Saturday evening after six with final instructions on the fish."

"What if I need to contact you before that?"

She handed him a business card from the Maritime Spa & Beauty Palace. "My office number is on there."

The chauffeur edged the Lincoln into a parking place near the door and Nick got out. As the doorman took his suitcase he entered the lobby of the massive Italian Renaissance hotel built by Grant's son in 1905 and dedicated to his father. Nick had stayed here on his previous visit and though the place

had been renovated, he still loved its elegant crystal chandeliers and general ambiance.

He phoned Gloria, back home, to tell her he'd arrived safely, and then decided to enjoy a good dinner after his long flight from New York. Tomorrow would be time enough to think about stealing the blue-ribbon bass.

* * *

In the morning Nick dressed casually and found a fishing-goods store down near the beach. “Sea bass?” the pimply-faced clerk repeated. “You entering the tournament at Maritime Beach?”

“I'm thinking about it.”

“You'd better hurry. It started yesterday.”

“What's best for catching them?” Nick asked.

“Depends. There's a lot of sea-bass fishing up around Catalina. They use squid for bait and that seems to work pretty well. Just south of here, at Imperial Beach, they shoot them with bow and arrow off the pier.”

Nick laughed. “That sounds like my style.”

“Can't do it at Maritime. Hunting fish with bow and arrow is only allowed at Imperial Beach.”

Still, it was an idea worth investigating. Nick thanked him and found a taxi to take him to Imperial Beach. The town was just south of San Diego, the last outpost before one hit the Mexican border. Walking along through the sand, he saw a community of swimmers and surfers riding the waves, waiting for the next big one. The pier itself was easy to spot, a wooden structure about 150 feet long, supported by closely spaced slanted metal piles that seemed capable of

withstanding whatever the Pacific could throw at them. And sure enough, there were men positioned toward the end of the pier watching the water below with bow and arrow at the ready. Surfers and swimmers were careful to stay clear of them.

Nick strolled up to the first of them, a husky Mexican with a bandit moustache and squinty brown eyes. “You do this for a living?”

The Mexican smiled back at him. “Hell no! I'm a plumber. You never get rich shooting corvina with a bow and arrow.”

Nick saw now that a reel of monofilament fishing line was anchored on the bow, with one end attached to the arrow. “What's that for?” he asked foolishly.

The fisherman laughed. “To haul in the fish after I hit it. You think I got a retriever to send after it?”

“I'd like to know more about this sport. What's your name?”

“Gonzolas. But I'm new at it. You want to talk to Razor Fritch, the guy at the end with the baseball cap and the muscles.”

“Thanks.”

Nick strolled down a little farther, to a fellow in cap and sunglasses whose upper arms were like hams. “You Fritch?”

The man flicked a cigarette butt toward the water and said, “That's me. What can I do for you?”

Nick introduced himself. “Mr. Gonzolas said you knew a lot about bow-and-arrow fishing.”

Razor Fritch laughed. “You're the only one who ever called him ‘mister.'”

Close up, Nick could see the old scars on his bare, suntanned arms.

“Sure, there are about twenty of us fish from this pier off and on. Some of them have gone up to Maritime Beach for the sea-bass tournament.” He took a quick count of the others. “We only got five here today.” His eyes had barely left the water as they talked, and now he suddenly pulled back the bow and aimed at something Nick couldn't see. The arrow flew free at an amazing speed, unwinding a trail of monofilament line. It hit the water about thirty yards out, and in an instant Razor Fritch was reeling in a good-sized fish.

“Is that a sea bass?” Nick asked.

“Corvina, a white sea bass, our favorite catch. This is a baby, though. Feels like twenty-five, thirty pounds at best.”

“Could you teach me to shoot one of those things?”

Fritch finished hauling in his catch. “Sure. I give lessons the second Wednesday of every week.”

“Seriously, could you teach me by tomorrow and get me the equipment? I'd pay you a thousand dollars.”

The bowman put down his weapon and felt Nick's arms. “I doubt if you've got the muscle for it, but I'm more than willing to take your money. Come along if you want. I've got my fish for the morning.”

* * *

Nick followed along, carrying the bow and quiver of arrows while Fritch casually slung the dead fish over his shoulder. Gonzolas called to him as they passed, “Hey, you got a helper now!”

“He's in training,” Fritch replied. “See you at Freddy's.”

He went first to a fish processor who weighed his catch at thirty-two pounds and paid him for it. “Better than you expected,” Nick commented as they left.

“Not bad. Let's get some lunch before we start your training.”

Freddy's proved to be a bar with a few booths and tables for the lunch crowd. Razor Fritch knew everyone in the place including the owner, Freddy Pace, a balding, red-faced man with tattoos on both arms. “What'll it be, Razor? The usual burger?”

“Sure. How about you?”

Nick decided a burger would be the safest thing. Then he asked, “How come they call you Razor?”

“See these scars on my arms? In my young and foolish days we used to have razor fights, mostly with the Mexican kids who slipped across the border. It's only five miles away, you know. We tried to catch them out in the desert and rob them of any cash they had.”

“You must have been pretty good to earn the nickname.”

“Hell, I'm still alive. That's something.”

Freddy came back soon with burgers and beer. “How was the fishing this morning?” he asked Razor.

“Got me a thirty-two pounder. You should come out and try it.”

“My fishing days are over. I leave that to you younger guys with the muscles.”

“He used to be a great bowman,” Razor said when Freddy returned to the bar. “Taught me a lot.”

After lunch Razor led the way to a nearby loft above a fish market. Nick could imagine what Gloria would have said about the odor, but Fritch seemed used to it. “Got a lot of space up here,” he said as he opened the door. “Sometimes I use it for target practice.”

His living quarters were at one end of the air-conditioned loft, and Nick was startled to find a thin young woman washing some pots and pans in the kitchen. “You're home early,” she told Razor. “Bad fishing today?”

“Good fishing. Marta, this is Mr. Nick Velvet. I'm going to teach him about bow fishing.”

She snorted and kept wiping a frying pan. “Good luck!”

Razor led him back to the open area of the loft. “That your wife?” Nick asked.

He shook his head. “Marta Schwin's her name. She's just staying here till something better comes along.” Better for him or her, Nick wondered. “She's a waitress at Freddy's in the evening.” Nick noticed that she walked with a slight limp. Perhaps someone like Razor was the best she could find.

The walls of the loft were covered with bull's-eye targets and enough bows to start the Indian wars all over again. “It's my collection,” Razor explained. “You should feel honored. Other than Gonzolas and Freddy Pace, I've never let anyone up here. What I use out on the pier is this compound hunting bow, modified with the open spool of one-hundred-pound-test monofilament.”

“How long a spool is it?”

“Three hundred fifty yards.”

“You couldn't shoot that far, could you?”

“No, but I've hit targets at a hundred yards in archery competition. When I was younger I tried out for the Olympics team one year. You need all this extra line for the same reason rod-and-reel fishermen do, in case your target isn't killed instantly and takes off. Sometimes you have to fight him for a while.”

“You didn't make the Olympics?”

“I had to drop out. They turned up my felony convictions from the razor days.” He seemed to want the subject dropped and pointed up at the wall again. “These are historical things—long bows and crossbows from the Middle Ages. I bought them from a collector once when I had some money. I've got Indian bows, too. I guess we call them Native American now.” Nick reached up to get the feel of some of the relics and came away with dusty fingers.

“What difference does the size of a bow make?”

“Well, long bows are steadier in the hand, but shorter bows shoot a faster arrow. Look, mister, I hope you're not figuring to kill somebody. That thousand won't do me no good in a prison cell.”

Nick decided he had to tell the man what he was planning, without mentioning Gladys Winfield. When he finished, he shifted the bow he'd carried from the pier. “Let me try a few. Can I use one of those targets?”

“I've got some sandbags back here. It's better practice for penetrating the fish. Usually I can send my arrow right through a sea bass unless it's deflected by a fin or bone.”

Razor propped up one of the sandbags for him. “What do those weigh?” Nick asked.

“About fifty pounds each. If you get the arrow through one, try pulling it in to you.” He showed Nick how to attach the monofilament line to the arrow's shaft.

Nick was surprised by the strength it took to draw back on the bowstring. His first arrow hit the wall a good two feet above the sandbag, and his second shot wasn't much better. “Show me what I'm doing wrong,” he said finally.

Razor Fritch demonstrated, placing his first arrow cleanly through the bag and reeling it in across the wooden floor. He showed Nick where to place his hands and how to aim the bow most effectively. This time Nick hit the sandbag, but with so little penetration that the arrow came loose when he tugged on the line.

Marta Schwin came back to watch, smirking over his failure. “You need muscles for this, Nick,” she told him.

After several more tries he managed to drag the sandbag across the floor with great difficulty. “At least I can do it,” he told Razor.

But the muscular man shook his head. “No, you can't. You won't be pulling it across a floor but through maybe fifty to a hundred yards of water. Besides, they hang that winning fish on a hook. You'd have to give it a good yank to pull it free.”

Nick pondered for a moment. “Could you do it?”

Razor gave a shrug. “Sure. It's no big deal if you're in shape.”

“Suppose I raise that one thousand to five thousand. You supply the boat.”

“You've got a deal.” He held out a calloused hand and Nick shook it.

* * *

He wandered back to Maritime Beach where the first of the big fish were already being weighed and measured, with the results posted on a board by the pier. The top fish at the moment weighed in at forty-three pounds, and talk on the pier was that it would easily be surpassed the following day.

Wandering through the crowd, Nick was surprised to see Gonzolas from Imperial Beach coming off one of the boats. He carried a conventional rod and reel this time. “No bow and arrow?” Nick asked.

“They're only legal at Imperial. I come here for the money.”

“A hundred-dollar gift certificate?”

“It's like cash.”

“If you say so.”

Nick went back to his hotel and dined that evening at a nearby restaurant, enjoying a fillet of Barbary duck that Gloria would have loved. With Razor Fritch hired to do the heavy lifting, he felt more at ease with his assignment. Given some luck, he'd be flying home Sunday.

On Saturday morning he paid a visit to the city's public library and used the Internet to learn more information about his employer. He also learned something about the spa business. Gladys Winfield was one of the area's most successful businesswomen, owner of the Maritime Spa & Beauty Palace that attracted women from all over the Southwest. Even her chief rival, Emil Duval of Duval's Beauty Spa, had nothing but praise for her. “She has brought a new excitement to beauty spas,” he'd told a reporter. Nick

guessed that stealing a blue-ribbon bass was part of the excitement.

He spoke on the phone with Razor that afternoon. “I've made arrangements for a boat,” the bowman told him. “It'll be dark before seven, but the longer we wait the fewer people will be on the dock. I can't steal the fish for you while a dozen people are standing around admiring it.”

“Let's figure on midnight, then,” Nick decided. “Suppose I meet you at your place a little before twelve.”

“I'll be there.”

* * *

Right on schedule, Gladys Winfield phoned him shortly after six. “They just named the winner,” she told him. “It's a go.”

“Where do you want it?”

“I'll meet you somewhere and take what I need.”

“You don't want the whole fish?”

“Don't worry about what I want. You're being well paid for this. Meet me at the main parking lot in Balboa Park, by the zoo.”

“What time?”

“Five A.M. The sun will just be coming up and we can beat the crowd.”

“I'll be there, sea bass in hand.”

Nick left the hotel and took a taxi to the Maritime Beach pier. Though it was almost dark, the place was alive with activity. He walked out on the pier to look over the winning fish, a massive white sea bass that tipped the scales at 54.5 pounds and hung there with a hook through its gills. The

proud winner, a sandy-haired young man named Josh Sterling, stood next to it, posing for pictures.

“That's quite a fish,” Nick commented. “Biggest you ever caught?”

“One of the biggest, but not exceptional. They can weigh up to seventy pounds, but the really big ones are usually south of here, in warmer water.”

Nick frowned. “South of here is Mexico. Ever fish down there?”

“Sure, when I can get time off from my job.”

“Where do you work?”

“Duval's Beauty Spa, up in the hills.”

“I see,” said Nick, but he didn't see at all.

It was a warm night and though the previous evening's restaurant had been good, he decided to have a burger and fries at Freddy's, down by the water. That way he'd be close to Razor's loft apartment. Freddy himself was behind the bar, dispensing foamy beer from the taps or occasionally opening a bottle of Corona and placing a lime wedge on top.

“You get a real workout with those beer taps,” Nick said, seating himself at the bar.

Freddy grinned. “Builds muscles.”

“Has Razor been around?”

“Nope. Marta's waiting tables. You can ask her what he's doing.”

She was wearing tight jeans and a T-shirt, with tennis shoes and a little waist pouch to hold her pencil and order pad. Nick watched her moving among the tables, limping slightly, oblivious to his presence. He found himself

wondering how she had ever hooked up with a guy like Razor. Finally, when she came over to the service bar for a couple of Margaritas, he asked her, “Is Razor back at his loft?”

She glanced around, surprised to see him. “Oh, hi, Nick.”

“Razor and I have a business deal going.”

“I know. He's been practicing all day, shooting arrows into sandbags.”

“Maybe I'll go see him.”

“He won't answer the door. I get off at ten tonight. If you want to wait till then you can walk over with me.”

“Fine.”

Nick ate slowly, ordering another beer and going over the plan in his mind. There was always the possibility that Razor Fritch would double-cross him and take the money without doing the job, but Nick was on guard against that. There was also the possibility that Gladys Winfield might double-cross him and refuse to pay the balance of the money. That seemed unlikely, though. She wanted the winning fish, and she wanted it badly. For the first time it occurred to Nick that it might be some sort of drug-smuggling operation. The Mexican border was very close.

The dining crowd cleared out of Freddy's before ten, leaving the place to the drinkers. Marta Schwin hung up her waist pouch and came over to join him. “All set, whenever you're ready.”

“Buy you a beer?”

She shook her head. “I'll have one at home.” It was home to her even though Razor considered her only temporary.

Nick slowed his walk along Palm Avenue so she could keep up with him. “Waiting tables can't be too good for that leg,” he commented.

She shrugged. “I'm used to it. Got hit by a car when I was a kid and it's never been right since. Kneecaps don't mend so well.”

“How'd you happen to hook up with Razor?”

“I needed someone to look after me. Imperial Beach is a tough place, and a girl with a bum leg doesn't have a lot of choices.”

“You from around here?”

“Back East. I came to L.A. to break into the movies, but nobody'd hire me. I drifted down here and took a job at Freddy's. I like the warm weather and this was as far south as I could get without crossing the border.”

They reached the fish market and Marta used her key to unlock the downstairs door to the loft. “Razor!” she called, leading the way upstairs, “Mr. Velvet is with me.”

“This place is freezing,” Nick commented.

“He likes the air conditioner on high when it's a hot night. I'll turn it down.”

The first thing Nick saw at the top of the stairs was Razor's compound bow lying on the floor. His eyes followed the monofilament line from its reel across the floor to the far wall. Razor Fritch was pinned there with an arrow through his chest, like one of the white sea bass he'd tried so hard to catch.

* * *

Marta gasped and let out a low moan, almost a wail. “My God,” she managed to cry, “they've killed him!”

Nick approached the body slowly, hoping for a sign of life when there was none. “Who? Who killed him?” He lifted an arm and then felt the small muscles of the face and jaw. Rigor mortis was just starting to set in. He'd been dead perhaps two or three hours.

“I don't know. One of the other bowmen, I suppose. Who else would have the strength to put an arrow through him at that distance, pin him to the wall with it?”

“He told me Gonzolas was the only other fisherman he allowed up here. You think he did it?”

She shook her head, not in denial but in confusion. “I don't know what to think. They were always friendly.”

“He said Freddy Pace came here sometimes, too. Was he working at the bar all evening?”

She thought about that. “He opens the place up at noon. I come on for the dinner crowd, from five to ten. He usually takes a break for an hour in the evening, but I don't know what time that was tonight.”

Nick tried not to think about his aborted plans for stealing the big fish but he knew he had to do something, and fast. “Razor said he had a boat to use tonight. Any idea where it might be?”

“None. You might ask Freddy. Razor sometimes borrowed his cabin cruiser.”

Nick studied the various bows on the wall display, trying to find one he might use. He lifted the crossbow but immediately decided it was a weapon he'd need practice to use. Shifting

his attention to one of the smaller bows, he wiped the dust from it and decided the weapon was manageable, but attaching the reel of fishing line to it was beyond him, given the time restraints. There was nothing here he could use.

“Look,” he told Marta Schwin, “I have to go. Razor was supposed to help me with something tonight and now I have to do it alone. Call the police and tell them what happened. It might be best to leave me out of it.”

“So they'll think I killed him?”

He could see she didn't like the idea. “You couldn't have shot him with enough force to pin him to the wall, and besides, you were working all evening. You were, weren't you?”

“Never left the place. I've got dozens of witnesses.”

“Then you're in the clear.” He slipped her some money. “Just don't mention me.”

Back on the street he considered returning to Freddy's to ask about the boat, but without a suitable weapon it would do no good. He glanced at his watch. It was nearly eleven. He went over the possibilities in his mind and glanced through the business cards he carried in his wallet for emergencies.

Walking back down to the waterfront, he hailed a cab that was just dropping off some people. “Do you have a veterinary hospital that's open all night?”

The driver thought about it. “There's one in San Diego. You want to go there?”

“Yes.”

“Where's the animal?”

“Back at the house. I need to get some medication for it.”

The trip took about twenty minutes, with Nick counting every second. He paid the driver but asked him to wait while he hurried into the hospital, past the glowing *Open 24 Hours* sign.

“Can I help you?” the nurse on duty asked.

“Dr. Stevenson,” he said quickly, passing her a business card. “I have a client with a large dog that needs to be tranquilized. I have a tranquilizer gun but I'm out of darts. Do you have anything like that?”

“We don't sell medication. It's only dispensed on the premises.”

Nick did some of his best acting. “This is really an emergency. We phoned animal control, but they can't send anyone out till morning. The poor woman is beside herself.”

“Certainly the police—”

“She doesn't want the animal killed, only tranquilized.”

She sighed and seemed to relent a little. “Just a moment. I'll see what the doctor thinks.”

Presently a large jovial man emerged from the back room holding Nick's card. “Dr.... Stevenson, is it? From New York?”

“That's right.”

“This is a highly unusual request.”

“I know, but my client is in desperate circumstances. She's deathly afraid of the dog and he barks and growls all night.”

“It's time she got rid of it.”

“She's only minding it while her sister's away. It'll be gone after the weekend.”

The doctor hesitated a moment and then said, “We have no darts for a tranquilizer gun. All we have are pre-loaded syringes.”

“If you could sell me one of those—”

“How large is the dog?”

“Big! I'd guess he's close to a hundred pounds.”

He disappeared into the back room and returned with the syringe in a plastic container. “You know how to work this?”

“Certainly.”

“I'll have to charge you our list price.”

“That's fine.” As Nick went out the door he called back, “If you're ever in New York, look me up. I'll take you out to dinner.”

* * *

Midnight, but the area around the Maritime Beach pier was anything but deserted. There were about a dozen young people, most of them high on beer or pot, wandering around the wide pier. Some came to inspect the prize-winning bass but the Mexican security guard kept them at a distance.

Nick sighed in frustration. This wasn't going to be easy. He paid special attention to the guard's uniform—short-sleeved blue shirt, dark pants, and peaked cap. Both the cap and his shirt bore a rectangular silver badge of the sort security guards often wore. Around his waist was a gun belt with a holstered revolver.

A few blocks down the beach Nick found a souvenir shop that was still open. He bought a peaked uniform hat like the guard wore, except that it had a San Diego logo on it. He also bought some safety pins, two note pads, and two chocolate

bars. Then he returned to his hotel. He had a shirt in his suitcase that was almost the same color blue as the guard's shirt. He just might be able to pull it off. There was no chance of finding a gun on such short notice but with luck he wouldn't need one.

In his room he slipped into the shirt and tried on the cap. Then he took the cardboard backings from the two scratch pads and used his nail scissors to cut them into rectangles about the size of the two security badges the guard wore. The silver foil from the candy bars was crumpled a bit to make an uneven surface and then wrapped around the pieces of cardboard. He pinned one of the silver rectangles to the cap, covering the San Diego logo, and the other to the left side of his shirt. Studying the result, standing by the bed about ten feet from the bathroom mirror, he had to admit it was barely passable. Still, it was nighttime and the pier lights were not very bright. And the lack of a gun might work to his advantage in allaying the guard's suspicion.

But he still needed a small truck or van.

Just before two he called Freddy's bar and asked for him. When he came on, Nick identified himself and asked, “Do you know where I could borrow an SUV or van of some sort?”

“What? What's going on here? Do you know that Razor's been murdered? The police have taken Marta in for questioning.”

“I know. I was wondering if you might have a vehicle I could borrow.”

“I've got a white panel truck with my name in big letters on the side.”

“That's no good,” Nick told him. “Is there any place I could get a van right now?”

“Sure, rent one at the airport. The car rentals are open twenty-four hours on Saturday and Sunday.”

“I guess I should have thought of that,” Nick said, feeling foolish. “Thanks.”

“Hey, can you do anything to get Marta out? I need her for Sunday dinner.”

“Tell them she was working there all evening. I'm sure they'll release her.”

Nick rented an SUV at the airport and drove back down to the Maritime Beach dock. The same security guard was on duty, but by then it was after three o'clock and the crowd had dwindled to a few homeless stragglers. Nick checked his uniform cap in the visor mirror and backed the vehicle onto the pier. When he saw the guard start walking toward him he got out. “Change of plans,” he said. “We're moving the fish. Help me get it into the back.”

“What?” The man squinted at his badge. “Who are you?”

“Delta Security, same as you.” Nick walked right up to him.

“That badge is no—”

He drove the tranquilizer syringe into the man's beefy thigh, then grabbed him in a bear hug until he stopped struggling. “Anything wrong?” a bleary-eyed bystander asked.

“He's having a seizure,” Nick explained. “I'll run him over to the hospital. I'd better take this fish along, too, since it's our responsibility.” The man made no offer to help, but stood by watching as Nick got the guard into the front seat and

then carefully lifted the fifty-four-pound bass from its hook and carried it to the rear of the SUV. He was more interested in Nick's maneuvering the fish into the back of the SUV and never mentioned the foil badges on his shirt and cap.

Nick headed the vehicle along Harbor Drive and finally stopped at a little park apparently favored by the homeless. Removing the man's revolver and gun belt, he laid the security guard on the ground among the sleepers and went on his way. Nick still had over an hour to kill before he was due to meet Gladys Winfield at the zoo parking lot, but he figured that was as good a place as any to lie low without being seen.

The zoo was in Balboa Park on the north side of downtown San Diego. He found it without difficulty and parked in a remote section of the lot under some trees. There was a car at the other end, near the zoo entrance, and he assumed it belonged to a nighttime security guard. Another car came in but he paid no attention to it. For all he knew, the place might be popular with young couples.

Presently he got out and walked around to the rear of the SUV, opened it, and pulled the sea bass partway out. The sky to the east was beginning to lighten up with the approach of dawn.

“Hold it right there!” a voice behind him commanded. “I have a gun.”

Nick turned slowly to face Gonzolas. He did indeed have a gun, pointed at Nick's chest. Remembering the security guard's revolver in the SUV, Nick wondered what his chances

were of reaching it. “What's this all about?” he asked. “What are you doing here?”

“When I looked over the bass on the pier last night I noticed some stitching up by the fins where it wouldn't show. I was watching from down the block when you stole it and I followed you here. The fish is full of drugs, isn't it? What's inside? Coke? Heroin?”

“That's crazy!” Nick protested.

“Not so crazy. Razor was on to you. He told me he'd steal the fish and keep it for himself. This close to the border, he knew it must be drugs. The two of us were going to head up to Frisco and make a fortune. That's why you killed him.”

“I didn't kill Razor. Why would I kill him before he stole the fish for me? Only someone like yourself would have had the strength to fire an arrow clear through him.”

“I got no time for talk. I'm taking the fish.” He motioned with his gun. “Move away from it!”

Nick saw that he had a knife in his left hand and he cut quickly into the bass up near the fins. Still holding the gun, he put down the knife and reached in to pull something out. In the morning light it appeared to be a plastic bag full of seeds of some sort.

At that moment, in the gradually brightening dawn, another car entered the lot. It seemed to hesitate, like some jungle cat seeking its prey, and then the driver gunned the motor and headed straight for them. Gonzolas realized the threat a moment too late. As he turned and tried to aim his pistol, the car's left fender hit him, tossing him sideways.

Gonzolas was alive but in pain. Nick scooped up his weapon as the car came to a stop. He saw that Gladys Winfield was behind the wheel. “Good thing I came a little early,” she said as she got out. “Who's this?”

“Fellow named Gonzolas, one of the bowmen from Imperial Beach. He was trying to steal the fish.”

“I gathered as much when I saw the gun.”

“No chauffeur today?”

She shrugged. “It's a bit early for him.”

Gonzolas rolled over on the pavement. “I think my leg is broken! I need a doctor.”

Nick bent over him. “Do you have a phone in your car? We should call an ambulance.”

“Later,” she said. “Since he cut open the fish, I can just take the part I need.” She picked up the bag full of seeds and dug inside the sea bass for more.

“What is it?” Nick asked. “Peyote?”

She stared at him, surprised. “Do you think I'd hire you to steal drugs? These are jojoba seeds. They come from a shrub grown in Mexico and the Southwest. Jojoba oil, a product of the seeds, has been used in cosmetics for years. Now the Mexicans have developed a greatly enhanced variety. Because our government refused to grant an import license until the new oil had been thoroughly tested, my competition at Duval's Beauty Spa decided to smuggle it in. These bags of seeds are probably worth the fifty thousand I'm paying you. They certainly are to me, because I keep them out of Duval's hands and sell the oil to my best customers.”

“I don't understand how this smuggling worked. Why was it necessary?”

“With the increased terrorist threats, the Coast Guard has stepped up its border patrols in this area. They often stop fishing boats and check for smuggled goods. One of Duval's people, this fisherman Josh Sterling, got the idea of bringing a supply of jojoba seeds across the border inside a white bass supposedly caught during the contest. They had it frozen down there, then transferred it at sea to his boat. With so many fishermen out for the contest, the Coast Guard couldn't check them all. The bass thawed out on the trip up the coast, as if it had just been caught. I was tipped off by one of their people. As it happened, Sterling's fish won the contest. I thought it would, with that little extra weight inside. But even if it hadn't, they'd still have had the fish and its valuable cargo on our side of the border.”

As she spoke she'd been transferring bags of jojoba seeds to the trunk of her car. “Oh,” she said, “here's the rest of your money.”

Nick took the envelope, counted out five thousand dollars, and handed that much back to her. “You probably saved my life just now. That's worth something, at least to me. I'm leaving now. You can think up your own story for the police.”

As he left the lot and pulled onto Park Boulevard, he saw a police car just turning in, apparently summoned by the zoo's security guard. He wondered what they'd make of that cut-open sea bass and all those bags of jojoba seeds.

* * *

It was full daylight by the time Nick reached Razor's loft at Imperial Beach. He parked his rental car on the street and tried the door. It was locked, but presently Marta Schwin appeared in answer to his ring.

“I was dozing,” she explained. “The police just brought me home a couple of hours ago. They questioned me half the night. Do you want to come up for coffee?”

“I'd like that,” he agreed, following her up the stairs.

“Freddy finally convinced them I was waiting tables all evening. I couldn't have killed Razor. Were you able to get the fish on your own?”

“I took care of it.”

“That's good.” She poured two cups of coffee from the percolator. “Did you get a lot of money for it?”

“Not quite as much as I'd expected.”

“Razor thought it must be full of drugs. Was it?”

“Cosmetics, actually.”

“What?”

He waved a hand. “It's not important, except that it led to Razor's death. When he told you he was pulling out and heading north to Frisco with those supposed drugs, you killed him, didn't you?”

“What, you too? Can't I convince anyone that I'm innocent? I have an alibi, and I wouldn't have had the strength to fire that arrow anyway.”

“Your alibi doesn't mean much. When we walked in last night the place was freezing. The air conditioner had been turned up to delay the onset of rigor mortis in Razor's body. You killed him before you went to work.”

“And how did I do that? You think I got Gonzolas up here to fire that arrow through him?”

“No, if Gonzolas wanted to kill him he'd have waited till after the fish was stolen. You killed Razor with that crossbow up on the wall. When I was here Friday I noticed those old weapons were all dusty. Last night I lifted the crossbow but my fingers weren't dusty until I touched one of the other bows. You used the crossbow at close range. The weapon's lever mechanism bent the bow for you and all you had to do was squeeze the trigger to put an arrow right through him. Then you attached the monofilament line to the end of the arrow to heighten the illusion it had been fired from Razor's compound bow across the room.”

“You think the cops will believe that?” Marta asked nervously.

“I'm not a detective. I don't care what they believe. But right now Gonzolas is in police custody and he might decide to tell them Razor was going to ditch you. That could seem like a pretty good motive.” He finished his coffee and stood up.

“Where are you going now?” she asked.

“Back to New York, where we do our fishing with a rod and reel.”

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Listen to Your Mother by Janice Law

A versatile writer of both mainstream and mystery novels and short stories, Janice Law also teaches college-level literature courses. Her latest novel, *Voices*, published by Forge in June of this year, is a mainstream novel with mystery elements, and is based on a famous fifty-year-old child-disappearance case. Ms. Law's new story takes up the theme of the ne'er-do-well son-in-law.

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“This is the Green Bedroom,” Margaret announced. She had, Toby thought, a particularly carrying voice. “The wallpaper is French and the bedstead is original except for the headboard, although we were able to match the period.... What? The painting? That's Sarah Oatley, my great-grandmother.”

“A lovely room,” said one of the visitors. “Such beautiful colors.”

“Yes,” agreed Margaret, “too bad it's never used. No, no, not since before my mother's time. Mother would never sleep in this room.”

Toby hid a yawn behind his hand and waited for the punch line. He'd heard the tale of the haunted bedchamber and the weeping woman every year since he married Margaret's only daughter and heir, Daisy.

“We don't know. Some say it was a mother who'd lost her favorite child. Some say it was Major Faunce's slave mistress, and some say it was the wife who killed her.”

*Ooh*s and *ah*s from the visitors, members of the Garden Club, who were getting the Faunce Manor house and garden tour, part of the annual two-day Manor Open House. Tomorrow was the archaeologists’ turn, another day for Toby to feign interest in the history and faded grandeur of a property that would, if he had anything to say about it, make him a multimillionaire instead of a despised dependant.

“Have you slept in this room?” some rationalist wanted to know.

“Of course not. My advice is always, ‘Listen to your mother.’ This way, this way now, ladies and gentlemen—and Toby,” she added just loudly enough for him to hear. Margaret hated him, a sentiment he returned with interest. “Careful here in the hallway. The floor's uneven. Settling, of course—and step down for the juncture with the addition. We don't want to lose a visitor and gain a ghost.”

General laughter; Toby had to admit the old girl knew how to work a crowd. She was still a big, robust woman. With the broad forehead, the long family nose, and a mop of white hair pulled up in back like a powdered wig, she reminded Toby of George Washington in drag.

“We're now in the new wing,” Margaret said. “Built by my mother so she wouldn't have to cope with spectral visitors.”

A murmured question. Please, God, Toby thought, not a connoisseur, a history buff, the dreaded enthusiast. He sneaked a look at his watch. He needed a drink and it would be another hour at least. At least!

“No, no, she was the heir,” he heard Margaret say. “You know about the Faunce Advantage, don't you?”

Most did not. “Was that what used to be called the Faunce Curse?” someone asked.

“In the bad old days,” said Margaret. “Major Faunce never got a male heir. They used to say he was cursed by the slave mistress. Be that as it may, the house has not been inherited by a man since the seventeenth century. My grandmother called it the Faunce Advantage, because women have preserved the property virtually intact.”

Which is the curse of my life, thought Toby. He just knew that if he'd been dealing with a man, things would have been different. The women were ancestor-worshiping preservationists, every one of them, even Daisy. Though if Margaret were out of the picture, he thought he could bring her round.

His mouth settled into a hard line and he reminded himself that patience was necessary. When he'd forgotten that last week and bruised Daisy's face, Margaret had noticed. The old lady had screamed at him like a banshee and said she'd rewrite the will so he'd never get his hands on so much as the manure pile. “Tell that damn Bobbie Tailfeathers the same. You tell him he'll see family ghosts for real if he tries to put any claim on *this* acreage!”

She said a lot more, too, and Toby'd understood that even Daisy would be sacrificed to the Manor, a dismal conclusion amplified by the news that the lawyer was coming tomorrow. True, the lawyer was an archaeology buff, but Toby had an unhappy feeling about the visit.

The dig itself was highly undesirable. For the last three summers, the state university had been excavating on the property, cutting neat rectangles out of the front and back lawns and turning up bits of old pottery, charred wood, pig and cow bones, and feeding the obsession that the latest incarnation of the Faunce Advantage had with the age and significance of the old pile.

And there was worse, for besides the professor in charge and a whole lot of hairy undergrads in bare feet, the dig included Justin Stettlemeir, a university fundraiser who had

insinuated himself like the snake in the garden. He was always angling for donations, and Toby feared the wily serpent might get the lot for the university if something didn't happen soon.

Toby was worrying full-bore about Justin's depredations when the tour group made a quick left turn. Margaret's command, “Careful of the step,” came an instant too late for him, and he felt a shooting pain up his right big toe. The house was cursed for him. Without waiting for Margaret to discuss the Cassatt aquatint or the old map of the Manor property, Toby hobbled down the back stair and didn't stop until he got himself onto a barstool beside Bobbie Tallfeather.

This was at the Yardarm, one of the town's upscale watering holes, not Toby's choice. He drank upscale at home; when he wanted serious drinking, he preferred someplace dark and unimproved, where a man could drink without the possibility of meeting his neighbors—and having the intelligence carried back to his mother-in-law.

But ever since Bobbie Taylor started calling himself Bobbie Tallfeather and hanging out with casino promoters, he couldn't get enough of the high life. “I've got to think of the image of the tribe,” he'd say, so that Toby wound up paying a premium for unnecessary ambiance and Bobbie's history lessons.

Tonight, though, Toby was feeling historically minded himself. The imminent arrival of the lawyer had focused his mind in a wonderful way. He told himself that it was now or never, and on the way to the Yardarm, he got himself a plan.

He cast a sidelong glance at Bobbie, his pal, a man who thought he wanted to make money but who really, Toby suspected, wanted to be like Margaret and have ancestors to worship. For a while Bobbie had been heavily into Black Power, called himself Brother Robert, and didn't drink much with Toby. No offense meant. At that point, he'd focused on the slave mistress who was supposed to haunt the Green Bedroom with the damn French wallpaper and the almost, but not quite, complete bedstead.

Then the Pequots had a big success up north, and Bobbie cast an eye at other branches of his family tree and started calling himself Tallfeather. He started reading up on archaeology and the Creek Nation (they'd lived in Georgia and Carolina) and talking about the Ancestor, or, alternately, the Ancestress—the link, that is, between a lot of folks in skins and beads and his ambiguous, multi-ethnic self.

Along the way, he came to the conclusion that the Ancestor, or more likely the Ancestress, had dipped a toe into the Faunce bloodline and thus provided him, Bobbie Tallfeather, with a connection to a lot of prime acreage. Soon after, he began showing a hitherto unsuspected talent for interesting big money. Toby came back into favor as a drinking buddy. No offense meant there, either.

Now was payback time, Toby thought. He gave a little smile to himself and said, “I hear they found a bone today. No, no, not the usual. Human.”

Right away Bobbie looked interested.

“They're keeping it quiet, but I overheard one of the students. Said it was a femur.”

“That's a thighbone,” said Bobbie, who followed the Faunce Manor dig with considerably more interest than Toby. “Question is, where and what level?”

“Right by the house. In the back. You know that little excavation?”

“Sure,” said Bobbie, who never missed a dig Open Day.

“Well, right there.”

Bobbie's face grew dark. “That's the midden,” he said.

“Further down in the soil. Years earlier.”

“Professor said all the Native American sites are closer to the water.”

“He doesn't know everything,” suggested Toby.

“Not the wisdom of the ancestors,” agreed Bobbie, who sometimes forgot Toby wasn't susceptible to New Age hokum. “If those professors would just get out of the yard and look!”

“They're all tied up with the Manor, you know that. They'll outwait you, Bobbie. They're not going to find anything for you.”

“Damn right about that.”

They had another drink on this gloomy thought.

“Too bad the dig's over,” Toby said. “They fill everything in after Open Day.”

Bobbie grunted, but Toby knew he was interested.

“Be another year before they return, before things are opened up again, and interested parties can get a look. Meanwhile, they'll maybe take the bone with them. We're not getting any younger, Bobbie.”

“Well, what do you want me to do? Take a shovel, tell the old lady I'm doing a little amateur archaeology, and help myself?”

“She's out for dinner. She won't be back before eight-thirty, nine at the earliest. You know which excavation. Dig down a foot or so—are they going to know?”

Bobbie gave him a pitying look. “Toby, it's all done scientific. Layer by layer.”

“That's the past, Bobbie. We're talking the future here. We're men of the future.” He raised his glass a little unsteadily. This absolutely had to be his last one.

“Men of the future!” Bobbie agreed. “If we can get to the past.”

“We can,” said Toby, “but we've got to move on this now.” He leaned closer. “Tonight.”

Bobbie thought this over so long that Toby had almost despaired before his companion nodded and raised his glass. “To the Ancestress,” he said.

“To the Ancestress,” said Toby, and he slid off the barstool. He figured he had two hours. Time to go home and make everything sweet with Daisy. Time to wait for Bobbie to get himself seen in the wrong place at the wrong time. And then time to arrange an accident for an old lady. How hard could that be?

* * *

The summer night was hot, and the light, reflected off the broad, slow-moving creek, lingered long after the sun had disappeared behind the big oaks. Margaret was glad to be home, although the dinner had been fun, the company

amusing, herself in good form. But still, it was good to be home and to be going right up to bed. Open Days were tiring, and she had to be bright for another crowd tomorrow. She decided to let Sibyl, her secretary-researcher, put away the car.

"Is that a light?" Sibyl asked as they pulled into the drive. "Did you leave a light on at the back?"

"I don't think so. Didn't you check the back?" It was part of the drill. Margaret locked the house, and Sibyl double-checked that the doors were secured and the alarm set.

"I'll take a quick look," said Sibyl. She was an active, fresh-faced woman who loved historical preservation and didn't take herself too seriously. She was perfectly at home in any company, and she had just the sort of orderly, categorizing mind that the job required. Her employer found her invaluable and, what was more important, amusing.

Margaret had just unlocked the front door when she heard Sibyl shouting, "Who's there? Get away from the dig!"

The old lady hurried down the hall, through the dining room and kitchen to reach the back porch. She was still spry even if she habitually carried a cane.

The moon was coming up; the creek was a sheet of pink and silver. Amidst this splendor, a heavy man was galumphing across the lawn carrying a shovel, and Sibyl, bless her heart, was trying to keep up despite her handsome sheath dress and party shoes. The whole spectacle was so farcical that Margaret was both laughing and swearing by the time Sibyl came panting back, upset, her hairdo frayed.

“Do you know he's dug a virtual grave in the bottom of the dig? There's earth everywhere.”

“I'm sure it was that damn Bobbie Tallfeather—Tailfeathers, I call him. You know, Toby's drinking buddy. His people have lived next-door since forever,” Margaret said. She was aware that in their different ways, she and Bobbie were true devotees of the Manor, but just the same, he had a nerve interfering with the dig. He had too damn much nerve.

“I can't imagine what the archaeologists are going to say when they get here tomorrow,” said Sibyl.

“Oh, don't worry about that. Peter will be here early to see about the last-minute things in the garden. We'll just have him fill in the hole and not worry anyone about it.”

“I still think we should call the police. Suppose you're wrong? Suppose it was some stranger?”

“I know Bobbie Tailfeathers when I see him!” Margaret said irritably. “And we can't call the police before Open Day!” She could foresee journalists, a rehash of Bobbie's ridiculous claims, and an open, and quite unnecessary, debate about the Manor's future. She had that in hand—or she would, after tomorrow.

“Well, all right,” said Sibyl reluctantly. “Just the same, I'd best stay the night. I don't want you to be alone.”

This, too, was nonsense and none of the many guest beds was made up. But Sibyl said she'd always wanted to sleep out on a porch, on the chaise lounge on the back screen porch in particular, and Margaret was too tired to give her the argument this transparent fiction deserved. When Sibyl left to put the car in the garage, Margaret went gratefully up to bed.

* * *

As soon as the ancient sedan passed down the drive, Toby stepped out from behind one of the historic boxwoods. He could hear Margaret somewhere in his inner ear regaling visitors with the story of Major Faunce's first wife who'd brought the original cuttings all the way from England in her muff. Another bizarre, house-proud character who was about to be consigned, along with Margaret, to the further reaches of his memory.

He waved away the mosquitoes that had taken over from the deer flies right at dusk, and walked around the back of the house. Sybil was gone for the night. Margaret's light was on upstairs. The backyard was empty, but, yes, the tarp was up, and a glance into the dig showed a rough rectangle had been hacked into the smooth, hard-packed bottom of the archaeologists' excavation.

The nasty coffin shape of the hole gave Toby a turn, but just momentarily. He didn't think they would have any trouble tracing this work to Bobbie, who was always on about pre-contact artifacts and the last Grand Sachem. No offense meant, but Bobbie would be an ideal suspect. Ideal.

Thinking about that made Toby feel more confident, and he crept soft-footed up the back porch steps, unhooked the screen with his pocketknife, then took out the key that neither Daisy nor Margaret knew he had and unlocked the back door.

Pitch dark, of course. Not a light anywhere; Margaret was big on conservation, on low-wattage bulbs and money-saving fluorescents except in the public rooms. Toby had to feel his

way along the counter and grope for the back stair, a ladderlike shaft up to the “modern” addition. He very much wanted a drink and actually considered a bottle of the vile sherry that he touched on the counter.

But no, discipline. They'd get things settled tonight one way or the other. He'd get some assurances for his future, something in writing, something the lawyer could endorse tomorrow. Or else. He let the thought dangle, aware, as he had been sporadically all the way across the vast, wooded grounds, that he had only vague plans beyond setting Bobbie up to take the fall.

Inspiration of the moment, he thought. Margaret might see reason, and if not ... Before he could finish the idea, Toby started up the stairs.

“The sheets are in that back linen closet,” Margaret called from the front of the house.

Toby stopped. Who the hell did she think it was? There was no one else in the house, and not a single light except Margaret's. He quickly mounted the last few steps to the dark back hallway, and as he came round the corner to the main wing, he saw Margaret's unmistakable silhouette against the lighted doorway of her room. She was standing there between the doorway and the head of the main stairs, leaning on her cane, and he could tell he'd given her a start.

“What are you doing here, Toby?” The usual imperious voice. She was surprisingly, and infuriatingly, unafraid as soon as she recognized him. “Shall I call Daisy to come pick you up?”

He shook his head. “We have things to discuss,” he said.

“I don't have anything to discuss with you ever at all.”

He made up his mind right then; no accommodation. “You're wrong there,” he said, and he'd started down the hall toward her when Margaret reached around the doorjamb and hit the light switch.

The hallway went dark, and Toby, nervous, lunged toward where the light had been, not waiting for his eyes to adjust to the faint moonlight. His foot, his sore foot, hit the single step up to the original structure, and, as he was trying to regain his balance, he tripped over something else, and left the ground, plunging, tumbling, whacking himself on every step, and dreading the bottom which he never knew he'd reached.

* * *

Margaret was too stunned to move for what seemed like several minutes. Astonished to learn that the hand is not only quicker than the eye but than the mind, she lifted her cane as if surprised to see it. Then she groped for the light switch and looked back into her room. Her cordless phone was lying a few feet away on the bed, but her legs were shaking so much she could barely manage the distance. When she reached the phone, intending to summon help, authority, all the usual good-citizen resources, she heard the front door open and close.

He's on the run, she thought, immensely relieved. I have him on the run. Good! Good riddance to bad rubbish. Then she heard a gasp, a little inhaled cry of alarm, and Sibyl's voice, tight with shock.

“I'm here, I'm here,” Margaret called. “I'm all right. That was Toby, wanting who knows what. Quite drunk. I was going

to call Daisy, but he can damn well walk home—" She stopped abruptly, for she had reached the threshold of her room and she could see that Sibyl was kneeling on the floor beside Toby, who didn't look good at all. "He's not hurt, is he?"

"I think he may be dead," said Sibyl.

"He can't be dead just before Open Day! The timing's too awful even for Toby," Margaret said, but she didn't feel confident about that.

"Don't come down," said Sibyl. "You've had a shock. I'll call the police."

"There will be all sorts of questions," said Margaret, starting down the stairs anyway, unsteadily, it must be admitted. "About his fall."

She let Sibyl digest that idea.

"And what will I tell Daisy? She knows the worst about him, but she thinks rather well of me. I really don't think I can cope with all this until after the Open, Sibyl. Besides, it's not as if anyone would really miss Toby for a day or a week or so—or any amount of time, really."

"You can't just wish him away," said Sibyl, but she didn't sound as unutterably opposed as Margaret had feared. She recalled that Toby had made a heavy and disgusting pass at Sibyl over the last holiday season, a memory it might be necessary to revive.

"Certainly he'll have a proper burial; I was thinking his own six feet of Manor property, which is all he's ever going to get his hands on now. Didn't you say Bobbie had dug a big hole in the excavation?"

“Yes,” said Sibyl.

“Aren't we going to have to get that filled in anyway?”

“Right, but, Margaret, you can't imagine he won't be found eventually.”

“I'm old. It may do my time. And you needn't know anything about it.”

“Except getting him outside and filling in the dirt.”

“There is that,” said Margaret. “I'll hold the door for you.”

At last they were done, the earth tamped back neatly on the bottom of the dig, the grass swept clean, the earthy footprints erased as well as could be managed. Margaret sat down on the step and watched Sibyl drag the tarp back over the area. She was exhausted. *I'm really getting old,* she thought, and she wondered how much longer she could be the Advantage and protect the house.

The next day brought out the archaeologists and a crowd that would have been gratifying under any other circumstances. Margaret and Sibyl between them managed to keep a close eye on the little dig in the backyard. It was truly excruciating to watch nice Assistant Professor Hall holding forth on the household midden and the different colors of the soil layers, and to see him passing around stray pieces of pottery.

In the cold light of day, Margaret was sure they'd be found out and could scarcely believe that they'd tried it. But a sprinkle of rain right at dawn had covered the dirty work, and the wind that came with it excused a lack of neatness in the tarp. Still, the whole day was a nervous business, not

improved by the presence of Daisy, looking bleary-eyed and weepy.

“Toby hasn't come home,” she said. “Or rather he came home and went out again. On foot.”

“Probably Tailfeathers picked him up,” Margaret said. She had no reason to protect Bobbie when he'd been digging up her lawn. None whatsoever. She hoped he hadn't found anything, but even that was going to be negotiable. She and Sibyl were, after all, witnesses that he'd been up to no good in the excavation.

“It's just not like Toby,” Daisy whined. “What am I going to do if he doesn't come home?”

“Listen to your mother,” Margaret said. “Enjoy every minute.”

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The Leper Colony by Clark Howard

This May, at a banquet in New York, Clark Howard was honored with another of many short story Edgar nominations he has received over the years. The U.K. magazine *Writer's Forum* had this to say about the Howard story from our April '03 issue: "At best the short story is the perfect literary pleasure. There's one ... by Clark Howard which is sensationally good.... 'The Mask of Peter' is worth including in any future best of best anthology."

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At the end of a long, wide marble hallway in the county courthouse, half a dozen men in suits and neckties sat on wooden benches or stood leaning against the wall, forming a loose group around large oak double doors, on one of which was a polished brass plate that read: GRAND JURY.

The men seemed tense, edgy, nervous. One of them, who was pacing back and forth a few steps, pulled his coat back to reach for a handkerchief. His coat caught for a second on a holstered revolver on his belt. Just in front of the revolver was a police captain's badge. Straightening his coat, he used the handkerchief to blot perspiration on his forehead.

“Why don't you relax, Pulaski?” one of the seated men said.

Pulaski stopped pacing. “Relax, Connor? How the hell can I relax? Four or five of the best cops in my district are probably being crucified behind those doors, and you want me to relax?”

Connor tried to placate him. “It may not be as bad as we think. Turino's one of us. He's a captain, just like the rest of us. He might come through for us.”

“Yeah, right,” replied Pulaski. “And I might win the state lottery, too—but I doubt it.” He began pacing again. “Turino's a straight-arrow and you know it. Every one of us out here is going to lose some good cops before this investigation is over. Sure, some of them take a little on the side once in a while—from bookies, after-hours joints, card rooms, even a few pimps running girls—but nothing big, nothing serious, no drugs, no strong-arm stuff, no organization money. The rest

of the time they're out keeping our districts clean. Does a little taking mean we gotta lose good cops?"

Connor shrugged. "I don't like it any more than you do, Pulaski. But taking is taking. Remember, Turino didn't blow the whistle on anybody; he just got called to testify, like we all did. We've got a new mayor; he's promised to clean up the police department."

"We could've cleaned our own house," one of the other captains in the group said.

"Yeah, but we didn't," another pointed out.

"Face it," Pulaski said. "Turino's gonna torpedo us."

At that moment, one of the big oak doors opened and Captain Vincent Turino, in full uniform, walked out. He was a man of perhaps fifty, obviously trim and in good shape, his black Italian hair thinning and graying. The expression on his face was fixed, determined.

Pulaski stopped pacing again. All of the men in the hallway fell silent and stared apprehensively. After a moment, Connor stood up and, with Pulaski, confronted Turino.

"Tell us you didn't do it, Vince," he said. His tone was almost a plea, but there was hopelessness in it.

Turino was a rock, unyielding. "I did it," he told them flatly. "I did what was right. I told the truth."

With that, he walked past them and down the hall alone. More alone than he'd ever been in his life.

* * *

The next morning, Turino, in civilian clothes, sat ramrod straight in a chair facing the desk of Police Commissioner Harvey Munro. The commissioner's expression, normally

amiable, was distinctly dour this morning, as if someone had put curdled cream in his coffee.

"You're a damn fool, Vincent," he said without preliminary.

"I told the truth," Turino said. His tone indicated that as far as he was concerned, nothing else was of consequence.

"Sure, sure, the truth," said Munro. "The truth is that you shot the careers out from under nineteen cops with a combined total of a hundred and sixty-seven years of service."

"Nineteen cops who were taking payoffs," Turino reminded him.

"Sure, sure," said Munro. "Gambling payoffs," he pointed out. "After-hours drinking clubs. A few poker rooms. A few poor girls trying to earn a living on the streets. Victimless crimes, Vincent."

"Not," Turino said stubbornly, "when they involve bribing police officers."

The police commissioner shook his head and slumped back in his chair. "You're not only a fool, Vincent, you're a sanctimonious fool. You and I worked the street together, remember? How many free lunches did we eat at Calzone's restaurant? How many free drinks did we have off-shift at Doyle's bar? How many—"

"That's different," Turino reasoned. "That was social. That didn't involve money. The nineteen cops you're talking about were running a *business.* They had regular paydays, Harvey!"

Munro sighed wearily. "Talking to you is a waste of time. Just remember, you made your own bed, Vincent. I'm relieving you of your command and transferring you out of

your district. From now on, you work down in the basement at headquarters. You'll be in charge of the Probation Squad."

A knowing smile surfaced on Turino's face. "The Leper Colony, huh?"

"That's what they call it," Munro confirmed. "And frankly, I can't think of a more appropriate place for you—since you've made a leper of yourself in the department now."

* * *

At noon that day, at a little side-street Italian cafe, Turino sat across a table from a mature, full-bodied woman with silver-streaked hair, dressed in a stylish St. John knit suit. Her name was Abigail Lang and she had a master's degree in business finance. Six years earlier, she was head cashier at a local bank branch that had been held up. Turino was in charge of investigating the crime. Today, Abigail was a vice-president of the same bank chain, and she and Turino, both divorced, had shared an apartment since four months after they met.

At the moment, Abigail was frowning across a bowl of penne with pesto. "The Leper Colony?" she said. "What on earth is that?"

"It's a special squad for cops who have unofficially been put on probation for one thing or another, or who are simply trouble-makers in general. It's really a place for people the department would like to get rid of but don't have a legitimate reason to."

"What are they on probation for?"

Turino shrugged. "Could be anything. Repeated incidents of minor insubordination. Disrespectful language to a

superior. Inability to get along with peers. Just about any kind of conduct that falls below the level where the department can bring charges for dismissal."

"I get the picture," said Abigail, nodding. "They make them into kind of outcasts so they'll get disgusted with the whole drill and resign."

"Exactly. But there's more to the picture. See, department regulations won't permit a cop on duty to simply be idle; he has to be given work of some kind. So they give the people assigned to the Probation Squad every scut case that other squads don't want to handle."

"The dangerous stuff?" Abigail asked uncomfortably.

"No, no, nothing like that," Turino assured her. "The scut cases are the aggravating, irritating, irksome ones that drive cops crazy. Neighborhood disputes. Ongoing domestic arguments. Juvenile shoplifting. Crank complaints. That sort of thing."

"Neat," Abigail said. She took his hand across the table. "I've been meaning to talk to you about something, Vin, and now seems like the perfect time for it. Our chief of security at the bank has only a year left before retirement. He's been trying for months to find someone to go to work for him now and take over the job when he leaves. You'd be a natural for it. It's a high-level job, responsible for the main offices and thirty branches. You'd make an easy fifteen thousand a year more than you do now."

The expression on Turino's face told her that it was a futile suggestion. Since he had been a young man fresh out of the Marine Corps and back from Vietnam, he had never been

anything but a cop. From conversations both casual and intimate, Abigail subconsciously knew that he would never be anything else. She squeezed his hand.

“Not interested?”

He smiled a half-smile and squeezed her hand back. “Thanks anyway, sweetheart. But I couldn't. I'm a career police officer.”

Abigail nodded wryly. “Sure. A career police officer who's now a leper among his own.”

“I'm still a cop,” Turino said firmly.

* * *

The following morning, Turino, briefcase in hand, paused in front of a headquarters basement door with a cracked opaque window in it, and a plastic sign next to it that read: PROBATION SQUAD. Scotch-taped beneath that sign was a second one, cardboard, on which was carelessly lettered with a black marker: LEPER COLONY. Turino opened the door and walked into a seedy little squad room with peeling paint, scarred wooden desks, missing floor tiles, and inadequate lighting. Lounging around the room in various stages of uniform and civilian dress were five men and one woman.

All conversation ceased when Turino entered. Closing the door behind him, he paused. His eyes swept the room, studying each of them perfunctorily, as their collective eyes examined him in the same way. If anything, they were more curious about him than he about them. No one as highly ranked as a captain had ever been assigned to the Probation Squad before.

After a moment, Turino, without speaking, walked through the room to a frosted-glass cubicle at the rear. Inside, he hung his coat on the back of a chair, opened his briefcase on the desk, and removed six manilla file folders, each about an inch thick. They were the personnel records of the six officers currently assigned to the squad. Sighing quietly, resignedly, Turino opened the top file and summoned the officer whose name was on it.

“Detective Ryan Riley, come in here, please!”

A tall, square-jawed, lean man with a blond crew-cut, in street clothes, came in and sat down in a chair that Turino pointed to.

“According to your file, they call you ‘Rambo’ Riley, that right?” Turino asked.

“That's right, Captain,” Riley confirmed.

“You've been with the department for eleven years and you've had eighteen excessive-force complaints. You must have a pretty short fuse.”

Riley shrugged. “I believe in hitting before I get hit.”

After another minute or two of conversation, Turino dismissed Ryan Riley and called in another officer. “Officer Lewis Calder!”

Calder was handsome almost to the point of being pretty, with a perfectly proportioned, muscular physique.

“Your file indicates that you study ballet dancing in your off hours. That right?”

“Correct, sir,” the uniformed officer confirmed.

“And you belong to an unapproved radical organization called the G. L. F. What's that?”

“Gay Liberation Front, sir.”

“Why is it disapproved by the department?”

“When we stage protest marches, we carry perfume to spray on demonstrators who confront us.”

“So?”

“So, Captain, the department says the spray bottles are weapons.”

Turino dismissed Lewis Calder and called, “Officer Cornell Robinson!”

Robinson was black, stoic, unsmiling, and unblinking. He had hardhead written all over his face.

“Robinson, you've had two white partners shot up while on duty with you, and you came away unscathed. Why is that?”

“Luck of the Irish, Captain.”

“Very funny. Both of your former commanders say you can't get along with your fellow officers—white *or* black. That true?”

“Must be. White police captains wouldn't lie. *Sir."*

Oh boy, Turino thought.

“Officer Angela Danner!”

Through the door came a face that was plain but still pretty, offset by a body that clearly was more suited to a Victoria's Secret catalog than a police uniform.

“Officer Danner, your transfer sheet just says ‘Ongoing contrary behavior’ to your former commanding officer. That's kind of vague. Can you give me some more details?”

“There's only one detail,” Angela Danner told him. “I like to pick my own bed partners.”

Turino looked sceptical. The captain who had transferred her was a devout Catholic family man. “You expect me to believe you were transferred to the Probation Squad because you refused to go to bed with your captain?”

“No, I don't expect you to believe it at all,” she told him flatly. “But if you'd care to try your own luck, I'll be happy to prove it to you—*Captain."*

As she walked out, Turino could see why the previous commander, family man or not, had tried.

“Detective Al Marshowitz, please!”

In came a Serpico type. Scruffy beard. Cocky beret. Bracelets and earrings. A Hebrew-language newspaper sticking out of his pocket.

“Your sheet says you're a ‘nonconformist.’ Aside from your appearance, how do you not conform?”

Marshowitz shrugged. “I smoke a little pot. Snort a little coke at a party once in a while. Pick up a hooker if I feel like it. Oh, and I've got some good friends in the joint.”

“Sounds like you should be on the other side,” Turino observed.

“Maybe I should be.” Marshowitz paused for effect, then smiled slyly. “But I'm not.”

Turino let him go.

“Officer Arthur Holden, please!”

Holden was short, almost pudgy. He looked affable but confident at the same time.

“Says here your nickname is ‘Doc.’ Why is that?” Turino asked.

“I'm a Ph.D.,” Holden told him. “Sociology.”

“You could be making maybe fifty thousand a year more practicing or teaching,” Turino said. “How come you're a cop?”

“I'm still learning,” Holden said. “For me, being a cop is like being in life's schoolroom.”

“I guess you were a lot smarter than your captain, right?”

“Right,” said Holden. “I'm a lot smarter than *any* captain.”

When he had finished interviewing them all, Turino put his face in both hands and shook his head. He remembered the commissioner's words: *You made your own bed, Vincent.*

Putting the personnel files back into his briefcase, he closed it and walked back through the shabby little squad room to the door he had entered. Before leaving, he turned around and said evenly, “You're all dismissed for the rest of the shift. Be here at seven-thirty in the morning for roll call. And be here ready to go to work.”

There were chuckles behind him as he closed the door.

* * *

The next morning, Turino was waiting there for them as each one straggled in. He stood in the middle of the room, coat off, sleeves rolled up.

“All right, listen up,” he said in his best authoritative voice. “I don't know how long any of you are going to be in this squad, or how long I'm going to be running it. But as long as we're here, we've got police work to do and we're going to do it. You all know without me telling you that the work they throw down here is the cases nobody else wants to work. They're the dead-end cases, the crank cases, the ones where

the cops working them can get caught in the middle of something sticky."

Fists on hips, Turino walked up and down among them. Deliberately, he stared down each one of them.

"You're all in this squad because someone higher up didn't like you but didn't have anything on you that would be grounds for discharge in a departmental hearing. That won't be the case down here. I don't like or dislike any of you; I don't even know you. But I do know *this:* The refusal to accept a case assignment *is* grounds for departmental dismissal, and I'll use those grounds if you make me. If any of you want to resign, do it; if you want to get fired, refuse an assignment; but if for some reason of your own, you want to still be cops—*good* cops—then let's go to work." He went into his cubicle. "Come inside for your assignments as I call your names...."

* * *

Rambo Riley, with his chiseled face, crew cut, and ham-sized fists, and Al Marshowitz, with his Serpico beard and gypsy attire, were the first two summoned.

"I want you two to hit the streets and find a guy named Luis Ortiz," Turino said, tossing a police report across the desk. "He's wanted for overtly threatening the life of a deputy public defender named Charles Hill. He came into the public defender's offices yesterday with a knife, looking for Hill. Got away before deputies could apprehend him. The only known connection between the two is that about two years ago, Hill was assigned by the court to defend someone named Gildardo Ortiz on a burglary charge, and Gildardo was convicted and

sent to Coldwater Prison. There may be a connection between the two men, may not; as you both probably know, the name Ortiz is not uncommon in the barrio.

“So—I want two things done: one, find out *why* Luis Ortiz wants to knife Charles Hill; and two, find a way to resolve whatever's between them, if you can. If not, bust Ortiz for stalking with a weapon. That's all.”

* * *

Cornell Robinson, with his angry black face, and smug Doc Holden, with his Ph.D., came in next. Turino tossed another report over.

“There's a gang dispute building up on the West Side. Two gangs: the Aztecs, who are Hispanic, and the Rattlers, who are black. Their turfs are divided by one block on Maypole Street. A white line has been spray-painted down the middle of the street.

“Yesterday, a black magazine writer who grew up on the block returned for the day to see his old neighborhood. The Aztecs grabbed him on their side of the street, took his wallet, and pushed him across the line into Rattler territory. Word is, the Rattlers are working up to an act of retaliation for what they perceive to be an insult. The Street Gangs Unit doesn't want to handle it because they're afraid it'll blow up in their faces.

“So we get the call. Hit the street, Officers. Try to get that magazine writer's wallet back. And try to keep the peace on Maypole Street.”

* * *

Next to come in were the gay advocate, Lewis Calder, and the body to die for, Angela Danner.

“An old guy over in Little Italy may or may not have disappeared,” Turino said, giving them the report. “His name is Vito Carbone, age seventy-seven. Apparently he's been missing for several days, nobody's sure exactly how long. Now, three times before he's been gone for a couple of days while engaged in marathon card games with some cronies of his. Missing Persons considers it a crank complaint and has elected not to work it. But the case has to be cleared by somebody, so—”

“So they give it to us,” Lewis Calder finished the statement for him. “How sweet of them.”

“Have fun,” Turino said wryly.

“We'll try, Captain,” said Angela Danner. She winked at Turino as they left.

Before the squad dispersed, several of them returned individually to Turino's office to adopt attitudes.

Rambo Riley said, “Look, I'll work with this freak Marshowitz, Captain, but understand that as far as I'm concerned he's not much better than this stalking spic punk we're after. If this little creep tries to interfere with me, I'll bust him up as quick as I would the punk. Maybe quicker.”

Cornell Robinson made it known that, “If you think sending me out with a honky Ph.D. is some kind of clever move, Captain, you're wrong. Think this guy is going to get inside my head and find out why I can't get along with none of my partners? Fat chance.”

And Lewis Calder declared, “It isn't really necessary to partner me with the only woman in the squad, Captain. I mean, come on. I can be trusted with a male partner, really. Especially the ones in this squad. I mean, I do have *some* taste.”

As they all left, Turino announced, “I'll be making field checks during the day, so I'll probably catch up with all of you on the street.”

Filing out the door, members of the Leper Colony left a chorus of moans and groans in their wake.

* * *

After the squad left, the two captains who had confronted Turino in the Grand Jury hallway walked in. Turino stepped out of his cubicle to meet them. There was a moment of silence, then Connor, who commanded Uniform Patrol, said to Pulaski, “He looks right at home in this hole.”

“He should,” said Pulaski, of the Fugitive Squad. “He's a leper just like the rest of them down here.”

Turino did not respond to the slurs. “If you've got business in here, state it. If not, take a walk.”

“Talks tough, don't he?” Connor said.

“Oh yeah,” Pulaski agreed. “Talking is what he's good at.”

“State your business,” Turino said flatly, his words now a warning.

“Our business,” Pulaski said with a cold smile, “is to advise you that Jacob Kalb is at large as of about three o'clock this morning. He overpowered a night-shift guard at the hospital for the criminally insane and escaped. Your name is on the ‘Advise If Released’ list. You helped send him up and I believe

he threatened to kill you if he ever got out. So consider yourself advised."

"Of course, we'll do everything we can to protect you," Connor added sarcastically. "After all, us cops got to stick together, right, Turino?"

As soon as they left, Turino called Abigail Lang at the bank. "I may have a little problem," he said. He told her about Jacob Kalb's escape. "The guy's a psycho rapist I caught and helped send up before you and I met. He's never killed anyone, but I don't want him starting with me—or you. I'd like you to stay away from the apartment when I'm not there."

"But how could he possibly find out where you live?" Abigail asked. "The phone and utilities are in my name, and the police department doesn't give out home addresses, does it?"

Turino grunted softly. "In my case, they might make an exception. I got the distinct impression from Connor and Pulaski that if they apprehended Jacob Kalb, they might happily give him my address and turn him loose. Anyway, promise me you'll stay away from the apartment until we can be home together."

"Of course, Vin, if that's what you want. I'll stay in my office until I hear from you."

* * *

On the street making field checks later that morning, Turino located Calder and Danner working the Vito Carbone disappearance case.

"Any progress?" he asked.

“Not really, but the plot, as they say, seems to be thickening,” Calder replied. “Apparently there's *another* old guy involved in the picture.”

“Yeah,” said Angela Danner. “Guy named Luigi DiRenzo. He and Vito Carbone have always been kind of friendly enemies, until recently, when Luigi's granddaughter wanted to become engaged to Vito's grandson.”

“That's when the two became *real* enemies,” said Calder. “Luigi, as head of the DiRenzo family, refused to bless the engagement. Supposedly that meant that the two young people wouldn't be allowed to see each other.”

“We know this sounds far-fetched, Captain,” Angela put in, “maybe even archaic. But these are a couple of very traditional Italian families—”

“I understand, Danner,” the captain assured. “My name is Turino, remember? Go on.”

“Okay, well,” Calder picked it up, “we've learned that Vito came up with a proposition. They both have the reputation of being very fierce card players, see? Been gambling together for forty years, each claiming to be better than the other. So Vito offers to teach Luigi a new game of solitaire, on condition that if Luigi can't beat the game in two weeks, he'll bless the engagement. And if Luigi *does* beat the game, Vito will publicly acknowledge that Luigi is the best card player in Little Italy.”

Angela shrugged. “It was a challenge that Luigi couldn't refuse. So Vito taught him this game called ‘Prisoner.’ Luigi started playing it. The story we got was that he played it all day, every day, for two weeks, but wasn't able to beat it

once. A few days ago, Luigi stood up and threw the cards against the wall, uttered some Sicilian curse, and stormed out of the house. That night, Vito Carbone disappeared."

"Some members of the two families are afraid Luigi might have done away with Vito," Calder added. "But Luigi won't discuss the matter one way or the other. The only comment he's made is that Vito's 'fate is in the cards.' That's all he'll say."

"Maybe it's got something to do with fortunetelling," Turino speculated. "My grandfather's ninety-three and he sees a Sardinian fortuneteller once a week. Insists that it's his secret of longevity." Turino thought a moment. "Tell you what, you two split up. One of you go home, get into street clothes, and stake out old Luigi; maybe he'll lead us to something. The other one check out all the gypsies in the area who use cards to tell fortunes; see if there's any possible connection there."

After leaving the two officers, Turino radioed Central Dispatch. "Any progress on a fugitive named Jacob Kalb?"

"Spell that, please."

"K-A-L-B."

"One moment, please." Then: "Nothing in the computer, Captain."

The escapee was still at large.

* * *

Next, Turino drove to the neighborhood where detectives Rambo Riley and Serpico Marshowitz were trying to locate Luis Ortiz, who was stalking deputy public defender Charles Hill. They had been checking the various barrio poolrooms and other dives that Ortiz was likely to frequent.

“No luck locating him,” Riley reported. “But we did come up with a possible motive. The man Hill defended, Gildardo Ortiz, is Luis's brother. And Gildardo's wife, Esperanza, divorced him after he was sent up this last time. The mother of the Ortiz brothers told us that Esperanza later started dating Charles Hill. Then she moved out of the neighborhood.”

“Wonderful,” Turino said irascibly. “Luis probably thinks Hill got Gildardo sent up on purpose.”

“Wouldn't you?” Marshowitz asked.

“Shut up, weirdo, I'm giving this report,” Riley said coldly. Marshowitz's eyes narrowed dangerously. *They're like oil and water,* Turino thought. *Better keep them apart from now on.*

“Try to find out where Esperanza lives or works and go see her,” Turino instructed. “See if she knows where we can hook Luis, and find out if she even knows what's going on. It's possible that she could be in more danger than Hill is.”

Turino left the two acrimonious detectives and drove away. Once again he radioed Central Dispatch. “Anything on Jacob Kalb yet?”

Again there was nothing.

* * *

Turino drove to the block on Maypole Street where a spray-painted white line divided the turfs of the Aztecs and Rattlers street gangs. There, in a candy store on the Rattlers side, he found black officer Cornell Robinson and Ph.D. Doc Holden talking to two men, one white, one black.

“Captain, this gentleman is Phil Davis, the store owner,” Holden said, “and this gentleman,” he indicated a casually but

smartly dressed black man, “is Jason Harper, a staff writer for *Today's Truth* magazine.”

Turino was shaking hands when into the store burst four members of the Rattlers, all dressed in black berets and slacks, and white crew-neck shirts.

“Those Aztec bastards!” one of them shouted to Officer Robinson. “They didn't even give this guy a chance to explain who he was! Just took his wallet and threw him across the line!”

“You don't get out of my face, boy, I'm gonna throw you somewhere!” the black officer shouted back, louder. Doc Holden immediately got between them.

“Calm down, Eddie,” the white store owner urged. “Let me explain this to the officers.” He turned to Turino. “This is Eddie Feen, Captain, the leader of the Rattlers. I let his boys hang out at my store and he sees that don't nobody give me no trouble. Jason here is an old friend of mine; we both grew up right on this very block. ‘Course, now Jason's a famous writer and lives in a fancy apartment in a classy high-rise, but once in a while he comes down to see me. He hasn't been down since the Rattlers and the Aztecs divided up the block, so he didn't know he wasn't supposed to be walking on the Hispanic side of the street. And *they* didn't know that *he* didn't know—”

“All right,” Turino said, holding up a hand, “I think I understand the dynamics of the situation.” He turned to Eddie Feen. “I intend to avoid a gang war here, you understand me?”

“I only understand one thing, Captain,” the black youth replied defiantly. “The Aztecs took a black man's wallet and threw him over the line into our yard. That's a slap in the face of the Rattlers. And the Rattlers don't take slaps in the face.”

“We understand that your group integrity is at stake,” Doc Holden interjected. “All we want you to do is stay cool until we can talk to the Aztec leader.”

“Has anybody gone over there and explained to the Aztecs who Mr. Harper is?” Turino asked.

“Not yet, Captain,” said Cornell Robinson. “Only a few minor Aztec members are over there right now. But someone's gone for the leader and the war chief.” The tall black officer stepped over and locked eyes with Eddie Feen. “You'll cool it for just a little while, won't you, boy?” he asked, with just a touch of menace.

“Yeah, okay,” the Rattlers’ leader agreed. He returned Robinson's confrontational stare. “But I ain't no boy, *man.* And don't you forget it.”

Robinson smiled a cold smile. “I won't.”

Deciding to stifle any potential altercation, Turino came over to Robinson. “Do me a favor, will you, Robinson? Get on your car radio and ask Central Dispatch if there's any news on a fugitive named Jacob Kalb.”

“Sure, Captain.”

Robinson broke off his stare-down with Eddie Feen and went out to the patrol car. On the radio, he identified himself and said, “Anything on a fugitive name of Cobb?”

“Spell that, please.”

“I'm not sure. C-O-B-B, I guess.”

After a moment, the dispatcher came back on and said, “The name clears the fugitive list. Subject must have been apprehended.”

Robinson reported back to Turino. “Looks like that fugitive's been caught, Captain.”

“Thanks, Robinson.” Turino felt a slow flow of relief wash through him. Excusing himself from the group, he went to a pay phone at the back of the candy store and called Abigail Lang at the bank. “Looks like Kalb has been picked up, honey. It's safe for you to go home now. I'll be along as soon as I can.” He returned to the arguing group trying to avoid a gang war.

Back at Central Dispatch, Robinson's call-in came up on the computer screen on the desk of Captain Pulaski, commander of the Fugitive Squad. He immediately called his friend, Captain Connor.

“Turino just had someone check on Kalb, but they got the name wrong and it was keyed in as C-O-B-B. It came back negative. Turino's probably been told that the guy's been caught.”

“Isn't that a crying shame,” said Connor.

“Yeah, isn't it,” Pulaski replied.

* * *

Downtown in the Civic Center, an unsmiling man wearing a stolen raincoat over his prison hospital jumpsuit entered the records office of the Registrar of Voters.

“I'd like to get an address for a Mr. Vincent Turino,” he told the clerk.

“What's the purpose of your inquiry, sir?” the clerk asked.

“He's a cousin I haven't seen in many years. I'm visiting for a few days and thought I'd contact him, but his telephone number is unlisted. Voter registrations are public records, aren't they?”

“Yes, sir, if the inquiry is legitimate. Fill out this form, please.”

Fifteen minutes later, Jacob Kalb left the office with Vincent Turino's address.

* * *

In another part of the city, officers Lewis Calder and Angela Danner had split up as Turino had instructed. Danner, having changed into jeans and a windbreaker, was loitering outside a corner grocery, waiting to see if old Luigi DiRenzo was going to leave his building. Calder, still in uniform, was cruising the neighborhood, stopping whenever he saw a “Fortunetelling” sign to ask the occupant if they could interpret Luigi's cryptic comment that the missing Vito Carbone's fate was now “in the cards.”

Eventually, Angela's wait paid off as she saw Luigi emerge onto the street and walk to a nearby deli. Through the window of the deli, she saw the old Italian buy a bag of food to go. Angela followed him as he left the store and walked back toward his own building. Instead of entering by the front door, however, he turned down an alley and went in by the basement door.

Across the alley, Angela took her radio from under her windbreaker and contacted Lew Calder. “Something funny's going on here,” she said, telling him where she was and what she had observed. “I'm going in there,” she added.

“Wait for me to get there, Danner,” Calder cautioned. “You know the procedure: Always wait for backup. I'll be there in about seven minutes.”

Angela went in alone anyway.

Slipping quietly through the basement door, she found a small room behind the building's furnace, and there the missing man, Vito Carbone, sat tied to a chair, his mouth covered with adhesive tape. Luigi DiRenzo sat at a small table in front of him, spreading out his bag of food to eat.

“Okay, Mr. Smart Guy,” Luigi said, “I'm gonna sit here and play this stupid game of Prisoner while I eat. If I beat it, I untie you and give you something to eat.” He smiled tightly. “But you an’ me, we both know I won't beat the game, don't we, Mr. Smart Guy?”

Angela watched from the shadows as Luigi began to deal out the tableau for a game of Prisoner: a straight line of cards from which the player can take three from the right end or two from the right end and one from the left end, as long as the value of the three cards totals ten, twenty, or thirty, with face cards worth ten.

Quickly and deftly, his gnarled hands belying their appearance, Luigi went through the deck—and failed to beat the game. “I lose again,” he said. “Surprise, surprise.”

As he shuffled for another game, chewing away on a slice of hard salami, Angela, behind him, eased her service revolver from under her jacket and moved farther into the room. “Police officer, Mr. DiRenzo!” she said firmly. “Put the cards down and keep your hands on the table! You're under arrest for kidnapping!”

Luigi DiRenzo sat very still and did as he was ordered. Angela moved around the table and peeled the adhesive from Vito Carbone's mouth.

“Shoot him!” Vito ranted weakly. “He's a madman! He's had me tied up like this for two weeks without food or water!”

“Liar!” Luigi retorted. “Two days only!” He looked at Angela and said aloofly, “I am punishing him for being a man without honor. We had a wager and he tried to make a fool of me, teaching me a card game that cannot be beaten—”

"*You* are the liar!” Vito rebutted. “It *can* be beaten!”

“Not,” Luigi claimed stolidly. “You lie through your Sicilian teeth!”

“No, he doesn't,” a new voice interjected. They all turned to look. Officer Lew Calder had arrived. He was holstering his weapon. “I just learned all about the game from a gypsy over on Keeler Street. The game is hard to beat, but not impossible. The gypsy said that she herself has beaten it seven times over the past twenty years.”

Luigi stared incredulously at the cards. As Angela handcuffed him, Calder untied Vito and helped him upstairs. Angela followed with Luigi. As they started to leave the building, various members of the DiRenzo family came out of their apartments. Before the officers got to their cruiser at the curb, members of the Carbone family were hurrying from their own building directly across the street. The two families congregated and merged, all seeming to talk at once. Vito's grandson, Frank Carbone, came over to Calder.

“Officer, may I speak to you in private for a moment?”

Calder stepped aside with him. For several minutes, they engaged in quiet, somber conversation. Then Calder rejoined Angela and they put Luigi in the grille-protected rear seat of the cruiser. Behind them, the two families began to separate, the Carbones taking a shaky Vito into their building. Before the officers got in the cruiser, Angela asked, “What was that all about with the grandson? He try to get you not to take the old man in?”

“No,” Calder replied easily, “he asked me if I had any ideas about how he could get out of the wedding engagement. He doesn't want to marry Luigi's granddaughter. The match is being forced on him by his family.”

Angela rolled her eyes. “You're a cop, not a marriage counselor. Why ask you?”

“I know the guy slightly,” Calder admitted. “I've seen him at some gay bars.”

“Oh, I see,” Angela said. She glanced around at the departing families and the stoic old man in the back of the cruiser. “Sure would have saved both families a lot of trouble if he'd just told everyone, wouldn't it?”

“Yeah. Saved a lot of trouble—and maybe *caused* a lot, too,” Calder replied quietly. “It's hard to know when to stay in the closet and when to come out.”

The two officers got into the cruiser to take old Luigi DiRenzo to jail.

* * *

Detectives Riley and Marshowitz, unable to determine Esperanza Ortiz's address from anyone in the Hispanic neighborhood, decided to go directly to the victim of the

threats made by her former brother-in-law, Luis Ortiz. But when they arrived at the County Building, they learned that deputy public defender Charles Hill had gone home early that day because of some kind of family emergency. Riley and Marshowitz talked to Hill's supervisor, an assistant public defender, and obtained Hill's home address.

Charles Hill lived in an upscale apartment building on the near North Side. The eyebrows of both detectives went up when they saw two names beside the doorbell: C. HILL and E. ORTIZ.

“No wonder Luis is out for blood,” said Riley.

Marshowitz rang the bell. At first there was no answer, but after two more rings, both persistent, the door opened just the length of a safety chain.

“Charles Hill?” asked Riley.

“Yes—uh, what is it?” The man at the door was pale and nervous.

Riley identified himself and Marshowitz. “May we come in for a minute, Mr. Hill?”

“No, I'm sorry. I, uh—I'm sick today—”

Over Hill's shoulder, both Riley and Marshowitz saw in the reflection of a wall mirror that behind Hill stood an Hispanic man holding an open switchblade to the throat of a terrified Hispanic woman. Riley quickly drew his gun.

“Wait, man,” Marshowitz said urgently, grabbing Riley's arm. Riley jerked his arm away.

“Back off, weirdo,” he snapped. “I know what I'm doing—”

Shoving Marshowitz away, Riley shouldered through the door, tearing the safety chain from the wall, pushing Charles

Hill roughly aside. Marshowitz bolted after him, again grabbing Riley's gun arm.

“Luis, let us speak to you, please!” he shouted in near-perfect Spanish.

“Are you crazy!” Riley yelled. “He's threatening that woman with a deadly weapon!”

“Don't shoot him, Riley!” Marshowitz got between his partner and Ortiz. “Luis, don't move, please!” he ordered. “Don't cut Esperanza! If you hurt her, this cop's gonna kill you!”

Riley stared in outrage at his oddly attired fellow officer. “You say ‘cop’ like it's a dirty word, Marshowitz. Why don't you tell him you've got a badge, too; tell him you're carrying a gun same as me!”

“He's right, Luis, I'm carrying a gun. But look at me, man, I'm not *holding* it. I don't want to shoot you, I want to help you.”

“Well, I want to help *her,”* Riley growled. “He's got a knife at her throat, you moron!”

“Helping him *will* help her!” Marshowitz insisted. He turned to Ortiz. “Listen to me, Luis. You're making a bad mistake here. Your brother Gildardo wouldn't like this.”

“You wrong, man!” Luis Ortiz snarled, speaking for the first time. “My brother is *proud.* He would want me to avenge him. This *cabrone,* this bastard, let him go to prison so he could steal his wife!”

“That's a lie!” Charles Hill snapped, stepping forward. “I didn't even *meet* Espe until six months after Gildardo was sent up!”

“That is the truth, Luis,” said Esperanza in a trembling voice, the switchblade point just a fraction from her throat. “Gil and I had already decided to divorce before he was arrested the last time. That's why I didn't even go to his trial; it was all over between us. I only met Charles when the lawyer handling our divorce had me take him the consent papers to send to Gil up at the prison.”

“You think I would believe you two?” Luis said with a sneer.

“Why don't you ask your brother, then?” Al Marshowitz suggested casually, removing his beret and sitting down on a convenient chair. “Call him right now and ask him.”

“Call him? Are you crazy, man? He's in Coldwater Prison. They ain't got phones in the cells, man!”

“If I get him on the phone, will you talk to him?”

Luis stared dumbly at him but did not answer. Marshowitz took a chance and picked up the phone. “Operator, this is a police emergency. I want you to connect me with the warden's office at Coldwater State Prison near Lenox City.”

* * *

At the candy store on Maypole Street, Turino and his two officers, Cornell Robinson and Doc Holden, watched as the leader of the Aztecs, a tall, pockmarked youth named Terry Pilar, walked boldly down the opposite side of the street and stood glaring over at them in an obvious challenge.

“You going over to talk to him, Captain?” Holden asked quietly.

“No, you are,” Turino replied. “You're smarter than me, remember?” Next to Turino, Robinson grunted a laugh.

“Right,” said Holden. He walked out to the center of the street and stood at the white line. Terry Pilar sauntered over to face him. “I'd like to find out how this misunderstanding can be settled,” he said to the Aztec leader. “Is there any way you would agree to give back the wallet you took from the black man?”

Terry smiled. “Is that all you and the Rattlers want? Hey, no pro'lem.” He gestured to one of his gang and the wallet came sailing through the air and landed at Holden's feet. Holden picked it up and returned to the candy store.

“Easy as can be, Captain,” he said smugly.

“Yeah, too easy,” Turino said suspiciously.

Eddie Feen, leader of the Rattlers, put down a Coke he was drinking and stepped over to them. “Check for the money,” he advised knowingly. Turino looked in the wallet. The currency section was empty. He turned to Jason Harper, the writer to whom the wallet belonged.

“How much did you have in it?”

“Probably a couple hundred,” the writer replied, shrugging.

Turino turned back to Holden. “Right now we've got a misunderstanding. But if we don't get the money back, we've got a felony. Tell them that.”

Holden returned to the white line in the middle of the street. Before anyone could object, Eddie Feen strode out to join the officer.

“We need to talk about the money that was in the wallet,” Holden said to Terry Pilar.

“Nothing to talk about, man,” the Aztec leader said, shrugging. “The money has been confiscated.” He smiled

widely. “Tha's a word I learned from the *chota,”* he added. From the police.

Eddie Feen jabbed the air with a threatening finger. “You can't just take a brother's money, man! It ain't right!”

“If we got a good enough reason, it's right,” Terry Pilar replied flatly.

Feen started to argue, but Holden, suddenly interested, stopped him with a touch. “What would be a good enough reason, Terry?” he asked.

“Well, like if we was making up a fund, man, for a girl over on our side who's gonna have a kid, you know?” He turned accusing eyes on Eddie Feen. “A kid that one of *your* guys made, man.”

Feen drew back as if struck. “My guys don't have nothin’ to do with foxes on your side of the line, man.”

“One of ‘em does,” Terry countered. He signaled to a follower, and a young Hispanic girl, obviously pregnant, was escorted out of a nearby building. When she got to the line, Terry said, “Tell him who got you pregnant, Teresa.”

“Leave her alone!” came a sudden shout from the Rattlers side of the street. A tall youth with dreadlocks strode forward, anger flashing in his eyes. Feen stared incredulously at him.

“Leroy? You did this?” He grabbed the youth by the shirt. “You broke the rules and went with a girl from the other side?”

“Yeah, I did!” Leroy said defiantly, knocking Feen's hand away. He straddled the white line and put a protective arm around Teresa. “She's my girl an’ we're gonna get married—even if I have to fight everybody on *both* sides to do it!”

Feen shook his head. “I don't believe this.”

“We got to talk, man,” said Terry Pilar.

The two of them walked down the white line a short distance to speak in private. Turino and the others came out of the candy store. Holden walked back to explain the situation to them. Presently, Eddie and Terry returned.

“We made a decision here,” Eddie announced loudly. “Leroy and Teresa can go together and nobody from either side is gonna bother them.”

“Yeah,” added Terry, “they gon’ have their baby, and when the kid is old enough, the kid can decide which gang it wants to belong to.”

“Right,” Eddie Feen affirmed. “Now this problem is over, hear?”

“Not quite,” said Turino, walking up. “There's still the matter of the two hundred dollars.”

Robinson said, “Captain, let me have a moment with Mr. Harper?” Turino nodded consent and Robinson led the black magazine writer off to the side. After a brief conversation, they returned.

“Captain Turino,” the writer said, “I'm afraid I owe you an apology. I was mistaken earlier. There wasn't any money in my wallet after all.”

* * *

At the apartment of deputy public defender Charles Hill, Luis Ortiz, with the knife still at Esperanza's throat, was now holding the telephone in his other hand.

“Sure, Gil,” he spoke quietly into the receiver. “It's just that you're my *carnal,* my brother, and I'm the only family

you got now. I didn't want you to think I'd let anybody dishonor you—"

The others in the room waited tensely until, presently, the telephone conversation came to an end.

"Sure, okay, Gil. Yeah, I will, *carnal.* Okay, I promise, man."

Luis handed the receiver to Detective Marshowitz. "Hello, Warden? Yessir, I want to thank you for helping us out down here. I know this was a pretty unorthodox request—" Then, after a pause, "Yessir, well, maybe it did some good at your end, too. Thank you again, sir."

As Marshowitz hung up the phone, Luis laid the switchblade on a table and slumped back against the wall. Esperanza hurried into the arms of Charles Hill. Marshowitz turned to Rambo Riley and looked pointedly at his drawn gun. "What do I have to do to convince you that you don't need that cannon?"

"Cuff him," Riley replied, picking up the evidence knife.

Marshowitz stepped over and handcuffed Ortiz's wrists behind his back.

"I guess I'll be joining my bro in the joint now," Luis said glumly. Charles Hill came over to him.

"You got any priors, kid?" he asked.

Luis shook his head.

"No, man, not yet. An' I jus' promised Gildardo I'd stay clean."

Glancing at Esperanza, the lawyer thought about it for a moment, then said, "Let me defend you in court. I may be able to get you off with probation. Deal?"

“Yeah, man, deal,” Luis said gladly. He turned to Esperanza with tears forming. “I'm sorry, Espe. Please forgive me.”

Brushing her own tears away, Esperanza nodded.

As Marshowitz and Riley took Luis out to their unmarked car, Marshowitz said, “I'll ask the captain to give you a new partner tomorrow. You won't have to work with me anymore.”

“Who said I didn't want to work with you anymore?” Riley asked gruffly.

“We're two different types of cop,” Marshowitz reasoned. “We'd spend half our time together arguing.”

“So?” Riley challenged. “What's wrong with a good healthy argument? Besides, maybe I'd learn something.” His tone softened a touch. “I just learned something in there.” He faced off with his outlandish partner. “Look, I'll give it a try if you will.”

Marshowitz studied the tough cop for a moment. Finally he nodded. “All right. Okay. Maybe I'll learn something, too.”

* * *

Vincent Turino, in his patrol car, had left the divided block on Maypole Street and was driving back to headquarters. Odd, he thought, how individual cops could screw up by themselves, but with the right partner could mesh into one half of a damned good team. The black officer, Robinson, would never have been able to get through to the Aztecs, and Doc Holden, for all his education, probably wouldn't have thought of asking the magazine writer to forget about the money in his stolen wallet.

He hoped the other teams he had put on the street today had bonded as well. Wouldn't the big kahunas downtown be surprised if the Leper Colony turned out to produce first-rate police officers—

His thoughts were interrupted by an all-points bulletin being broadcast over the radio. “Attention, all units. All units, attention. This is an updated ID on wanted fugitive Jacob Kalb. Subject is now believed to be wearing a tan raincoat over his institutional clothing. Kalb, a convicted serial rapist, escaped last night from Union Hospital for the Criminally Insane outside the city. Subject is Caucasian, age thirty-seven, six feet tall, one hundred sixty pounds—”

Turino's eyes widened. Snatching up the radio's mike, he called Central Dispatch. “This is Captain Turino,” he said urgently. “Confirm an earlier report that fugitive Jacob Kalb is in custody.”

“One moment, Captain.” Turino waited, breaking sweat on his brow as he listened to background voices in the dispatch center. Then his operator returned to the line. “Captain,” she said, “subject Kalb has not been apprehended.”

“I want you to patch through an emergency telephone call for me,” he said, and gave her Abigail Lang's number at the bank. A secretary answered.

“I'm sorry, Captain, but Ms. Lang has left for the day.”

Getting back to Dispatch, Turino said, “Try this number, operator,” and gave her the number at the apartment he and Abigail shared.

* * *

While Turino was trying her office number, Abigail, wearing a robe, was in the kitchen putting a casserole dish of chicken breasts in the oven to bake. As she turned on the controls of the oven, she thought she heard a noise at the front door.

“Vin, that you, honey?” she called.

There was no answer. Frowning, she went to the door and looked out the peephole. As far as she could see, the hallway was deserted. Shrugging to herself, she went into the bathroom. She smiled, thinking how when Vincent was home, they showered together, but when she was alone, she liked to languish in a warm, fragrant tub of water. Reaching down to the faucet handle, she started running a tub.

In the bedroom, the telephone rang, but Abigail could not hear it.

* * *

Out in the hall, Jacob Kalb pressed one ear to the apartment door and heard nothing, not the sound of the running water, not the ringing telephone. From under the stolen raincoat he was wearing, he took a small crowbar he had picked up earlier at a construction site. In mere seconds, he had pried open the apartment door.

Once inside, he heard the sound of water running in the tub, and the ringing of the telephone. As he stood there listening, the telephone stopped ringing. Smiling, Kalb made his way to the kitchen. From a wooden holder on the counter, he pulled out a thin-bladed carving knife.

Then he moved through the apartment toward the sound of the running water. On the way, he took the bedroom phone off the hook.

* * *

Four blocks away, with his emergency flashers and siren on, Turino turned into a line of stalled traffic. He called Dispatch again and asked that the apartment number be retried. This time, when the operator came back on, she said, “Captain, that number is now busy.”

Looking up ahead, Turino tried to see what was holding up traffic. He could see the flashing yellow lights of a tow truck. *An accident....*

He could neither proceed forward nor go backwards. Cursing silently, he turned off the motor and snatched the car keys from the ignition. Then he got out and slammed the door shut, and desperately began running along the line of stalled cars.

* * *

In the apartment, Kalb peered around the edge of the bathroom door and watched as Abigail removed and hung up her robe. As she turned to step into the tub, she saw Kalb move into the open doorway. Jumping back, terrified, she screamed and instinctively reached for her robe again. Kalb grabbed her arm and shoved her roughly back against a floor-to-ceiling mirrored wall, cracking the glass.

“Don't be afraid,” Kalb said calmly. “I'm not here to hurt you.” His eyes grew excited at the sight of her body. “We'll just have ourselves a little fun before the person I really want gets home—”

Kalb stepped toward Abigail, then there was a thunderous explosion as a close-range shot was fired behind him. A.40-caliber slug from a Glock automatic tore through his

transverse thoracic muscle and blew apart the wide end of his vena cava. The escapee pitched sideways into the partly filled tub and lay facedown, half submerged, blood bubbling from the entrance wound in his back, turning the water pink, then red.

In the doorway stood Captain Pulaski of the Fugitive Squad; directly behind him Captain Connor of Uniform Patrol.

“Nice shot,” said Connor. Stepping around Pulaski, he draped Abigail's robe around her trembling shoulders.

Three minutes later, Turino burst in, gun drawn, panting from his run.

* * *

Later, with crime-scene investigators, photographers, medical-examiner's assistants, two deputy district attorneys, and an Internal Affairs officer all milling around the apartment and hallway, Turino left a finally calm Abigail in their small, cozy den with the landlady attending her, and went into the kitchen where Pulaski and Connor had helped themselves to cans of Coke from the refrigerator and were sitting at the table.

“How'd you know Kalb would be here?” he asked.

“Just a guess,” said Connor. “Pulaski knew you got an erroneous fugitive report and would think your place was safe.”

“We figured we'd keep an eye out for him until you got here,” Pulaski added.

“I don't suppose either of you want my thanks,” Turino said.

“We didn't do it for you, Turino,” said Connor. “We did it for a nice lady we know who now happens to live with a leper.”

They got up to leave.

“Incidentally,” Pulaski said on their way out, “you've got a broken mirror in your bathroom. That means seven years of bad luck. We hope you get every day of it.”

* * *

The next day at roll call, Turino passed out a printed form to each member of the Probation Squad.

“These are resignation forms,” he said. “The commissioner wants all officers and detectives who are on probation to be aware that the department will process without delay or further inquiry any resignation request received from this squad. He stated in a memo accompanying these forms that he realizes that personnel assigned here may resent it and therefore feel that the police force is not the right career path for them. He assures you that he understands that and will personally see that your departure is considered a voluntary termination of service with no unfavorable notations on your records.” The captain glanced around. “Anybody interested?”

Officer Arthur “Doc” Holden shook his head. “I've got to go back out on Maypole Street and make sure everything stays peaceful between the Aztecs and the Rattlers.”

"You've got to go back out there!” Officer Cornell Robinson snorted. He tore his form in half. “A loaf of white bread like you would probably get run off if you didn't have some colorful backup like me.”

Detective Ryan “Rambo” Riley rolled his form into a ball and tossed it to Detective Al Marshowitz, who today was dressed in torn jeans and a Disney World sweatshirt. Marshowitz rolled it into a larger ball with his own form and tossed it all the way across the office to a waste can, into which it dropped without hitting the rim. Riley grinned and held up two fingers. A basket. Two points.

Officer Lewis Calder folded his form neatly into thirds and used it to mark his place in a gay-advocacy magazine he had been reading. Officer Angela Danner opened her purse, removed a lipstick, and scrawled a large “NO” on the form. Then she opened a compact and touched up her lips a bit.

Vincent Turino suppressed a smile and reached for a freshly delivered stack of case files.

“All right then, you lepers,” he said, “let's see what kind of garbage they sent down for us to work today.”

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Angels of the Marquees by Rubem Fonseca

Passport to Crime

For the past forty years, Rubem Fonseca has been one of the best-known literary figures in his native Brazil. He is the author of several best-selling novels, three of which have been published in English. He was the first major writer to chronicle the alienation endemic in the teeming anthills of today's metropolises. If any single story could be said to typify an artist as original as Mr. Fonseca, this one would be a candidate.

Translated from Brazilian Portuguese by Clifford E. Landers

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Paiva continued to rise early, as he had done for the thirty years he worked unceasingly. He could have gone on working for some time longer, but he had already made enough money and planned to travel with his wife Leila to see the world while he still had health and vigor. The airline tickets were purchased a month after his retirement. But his wife died of a sudden illness before the trip, leaving Paiva alone and without plans for the future.

Paiva continued to rise early. He would read the newspaper and then go out, as he couldn't stay home with nothing to do. Besides which, the new maid was constantly bothering him, asking if she could throw out old objects accumulated in the house, making irritating noises as she straightened up; when he went into the kitchen, something he avoided doing, she would be accompanying in a tuneless voice some popular song on the radio, which was on throughout the day. Also, he couldn't stand looking at the ocean anymore, that monotonous mass of water, the unchanging horizon that he saw from the balcony of his penthouse. Often he would leave the house without knowing where to go, and he would sit in Our Lady of Peace Square and watch the bands of parishioners coming out of the church. He wouldn't do that, he wouldn't start going to church now that he was old. He had never had any children with Leila, and he had discovered, too late, that he didn't have friends, just colleagues at work, and he had no desire to see them now that he was retired. But what he missed was not companionship but an occupation; he longed for something to

do, perhaps to use the money he possessed to help others. He knew of guys who retired and were content to stay at home reading books and watching videotapes or spend their time taking the grandchildren to have ice cream or to Disney World, but he didn't like reading or seeing films; he'd never gotten used to either. Others joined philanthropic organizations and dedicated themselves to humanitarian works. He'd been invited to take part in an association that maintained an old people's home, but the visit to the home had left him very depressed. You have to be young to work with the old. There were also those retirees who couldn't take inactivity and died sick and unhappy. But he wasn't sick, only unhappy; his health was quite good.

Whenever, just to get out of the house, he wandered aimlessly through the streets, Paiva would see people unconscious on the sidewalks. For many years he had gone from home to work in a chauffeur-driven car, and surely that scene had existed before without his ever noticing. He now knew, thanks to the suffering occasioned by his wife's death, that his selfishness had kept him from seeing the misfortune of others. It was as if fate, which had always protected him, were pointing out a new path, inviting him to help those wretches whom destiny had so cruelly abandoned. Some of them must be sick, others on drugs, while others had nowhere to sleep and slept there, certainly hungry, not caring about passersby; shame is easily lost once a person has everything else taken away. There was no one as abandoned as some poor devil, filthy and wearing rags, unconscious in the gutter.

Once, he was walking the streets, at nightfall, when he saw a man lying on the ground under the marquee of a bank. The homeless, whether unconscious or not, seemed to prefer bank marquees as their nocturnal refuge, perhaps because for some reason the bank managers did not feel at liberty to run them off. The passersby normally pretended to take no notice of an adult or child in this situation, but that night two people, a man and a woman, were deftly bending over the abandoned body, as if attempting to revive it. Paiva saw that they were trying to lift him from the ground, which they did skillfully, carrying him in their arms to a small ambulance. After the ambulance drove away, Paiva stood there for some time, thinking. Witnessing that gesture of charity had encouraged him: Something, however modest, was being done; someone cared about those miserable creatures.

* * *

The next day, Paiva went out and walked the streets for a long time in search of the ambulance people. He wanted to offer to help in the work they did. He couldn't carry those wretched discards of fate in his arms, for he had neither the inclination nor the skill of the selfless people he had seen that night, but he could, besides giving money, be useful in some administrative capacity. There must be a spot for someone as experienced as he in that group of volunteers he had named Angels of the Marquees, as it had been under a marquee that the gesture of solidarity he had witnessed had taken place. And every night he went out on his pilgrimage. He found several people fallen on the streets and had stood helplessly

beside some of them, wishing for the Angels of the Marquees to appear.

Finally, one night, as he was heading home in discouragement, Paiva saw the pair of altruists lifting a body from the sidewalk and approached them. “I've been following your work and would like to help out,” he said.

He received no reply, as if the Angels of the Marquees, absorbed in their task, had not heard him. A gray-haired man got out of the ambulance and helped the couple place the unconscious wretch onto a kind of stretcher inside the ambulance. Then the woman, who wore the glasses of a very nearsighted person, with her hair tied in a bun, her appearance that of a retired schoolteacher, asked what Paiva wanted.

He repeated that he would like to help in their work.

“How?” asked the woman.

“However you think best,” Paiva said. “I have the time and I'm still pretty vigorous.” He was going to add that he possessed financial resources but thought it better to save that for later. “Please, I'd like to get your telephone number and address to visit you.”

“Give us your phone number and we'll get in touch with you,” said the gray-haired man, who appeared to be the leader of the group. “Write down his number, Dona Dulce.”

“Do you belong to some social agency or health service connected to the government?”

“No, no,” replied Dona Dulce, jotting down Paiva's telephone number, “we're a private organization. We want to keep people from dying abandoned in the streets.”

“But we don't like publicity,” said the gray-haired man. “Your right hand shouldn't know what your left hand is doing.”

“That's how charity ought to be,” said Dona Dulce.

* * *

Paiva waited anxiously for a week, not leaving the house, waiting for them to call. They probably lost my number, he thought. Or else they're so busy that they haven't had time to phone me. He consulted the telephone directory, but none of the charitable organizations he found was what he was looking for. He regretted not having paid more attention to the ambulance, which must have had identification of some kind that could be of help to him now. Maybe it was better to look for it in the streets. He knew the Angels of the Marquees did their emergency medical work at night, so he went back to roaming the streets every night, waiting under one of the marquees next to the fallen bodies for the Angels to appear. One night, during yet another of his walks, he saw in the distance an ambulance stopped at the curb. He ran toward them, and there were the Angels of the Marquees, bent over the motionless body of a young man.

“You didn't call me, I was worried about you, I didn't know how to find you, I looked in the phone book—”

The Angels of the Marquees appeared surprised at Paiva's presence. “Dona Dulce,” Paiva said, “I almost ran an ad in the paper looking for you.”

Dona Dulce smiled.

“I live by myself; my wife died, I have no relatives, so I'm completely available to work with you. You'd be like a new family to me.”

Dona Dulce smiled again, fixing her hair, as the bun had come undone. The gray-haired man got out of the ambulance and asked, “Did you lose his number, Dona Dulce?”

The woman remained silent for a time, as if she didn't know what to say. “Yes, I did,” she answered finally.

“Let me take it down again.” The man wrote Paiva's name and phone number on a pad. “We don't like publicity,” he said as if in apology.

“I know, the right hand shouldn't know what the left hand is doing,” Paiva said.

“That's our philosophy,” said the man. “You can rest assured that I'll take care of getting in touch with you myself.”

“Is that a promise?”

“Just stay home and wait; I'll call you soon. The more people helping out, the better for us. My name is José,” he said, holding out his hand in greeting.

The torpid body of the young man was placed in the ambulance. The Angels of the Marquees appeared to confer among themselves for a few moments. Paiva thought they were going to say something more to him, but the car pulled away, its occupants now silent.

“Please, call me!” Paiva shouted to the car as it drove off. But, he imagined, they hadn't heard him.

* * *

The next day, Paiva received the telephone call he had waited for so long. With pleasure he recognized the voice of Dona Dulce saying that he had been accepted to work with the group. They were in need of people like him to work with them, and they were in a hurry. Could Paiva meet them that night at the same place? “Under the marquee?” Paiva replied. Yes, under the marquee, Dona Dulce confirmed, at the same hour. “There's no place better than that to meet with the Angels of the Marquees,” Paiva said. But the voice at the other end did not respond to this comment.

Paiva arrived early, as soon as night had descended on the city, and waited for the ambulance. Only José was in it.

“You don't know how happy I am with your decision,” said Paiva, approaching the ambulance and verifying that nowhere on it were words or numbers identifying it.

“Get in, please,” said José, at the wheel. Paiva opened the door and sat down beside him. “I'm taking you to our headquarters, so you can get to know our work better,” said José.

“Thank you very much,” Paiva said. “I don't know how to repay you for what you're doing for me. My life was very empty.”

José, who drove fast, but that must be how you drive an ambulance, at one point took out a pack of cigarettes and asked if the smoke would bother Paiva, who told him no, he could smoke as much as he liked. With the exception of that brief exchange, the trip was carried out in silence. Finally, they arrived at their destination, the gates were opened; the ambulance went in and stopped in the courtyard, where in

addition to the cars was a motorcycle with large side bags. Nearby, a rider in a black jacket, gloves, and helmet, the visor covering his eyes, paced back and forth impatiently. “The director should be along shortly. In the meantime, I'll show you our facilities,” José said as they got out of the car. “Let's start with the infirmary.”

Paiva walked down the corridor, accompanied now by two orderlies. When they arrived at the small infirmary he was impressed at the cleanliness of the place, just as he had already admired the immaculate whiteness of the orderlies’ uniforms. Since his wife died, this was the first time he had felt totally happy. At that moment the orderlies immobilized him, tied his hands, and placed him on a stretcher. Surprised and frightened, Paiva could offer no resistance. A hypodermic was stuck into his arm. “What—” he managed to say, but did not finish the sentence.

They removed his clothing and took him on the stretcher to a bathroom. There his body was washed and sterilized. He was immediately taken to an operating room where two men in aprons, gloves, and surgical masks were waiting. He was put on the operating table and quickly anesthetized. Blood was taken from his arm and rushed by an orderly to the laboratory beside the room.

“What can we use from this one?” asked one of the men in masks, his voice muffled by the cloth covering his mouth.

“The corneas, for sure,” replied the other, “then we'll check whether the liver, kidneys, and lungs are in good shape; you never know.”

The corneas were removed and placed in a receptacle. Then Paiva's body was sliced up. “We have to work fast,” one of the men in masks said, “the rider's waiting to deliver the orders.”

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Chairs by Brenda Joziatis

Department of First Stories

Brenda Joziatis received a master's degree in fiction from the University of New Hampshire, where she won the Richard Shea Award for one of her short stories. She has already shown a wide range of talents in fiction writing, having recently completed a children's book and a number of literary as well as mystery stories. We are pleased to be the first national magazine to publish her.

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I'm sitting here in the dark, remembering chairs. Chairs that held the curve of your body, the shape of our marriage. Once, several chairs ago, you were sitting in the living room, drinking lemonade. You had quit drinking bourbon in February; the glass of lemonade was sweating in the July heat. So were we. Every few seconds, I heard the tinkle of ice cubes as you took another sip. You used to try to drain a drink, a real drink, before the ice cubes melted and watered the liquor. I re-member wondering if you still did that with lemonade.

I was sitting on the couch clipping article ideas out of the local paper. Up in one of the Lakes Region towns they were holding a town meeting for summer people. Their votes didn't count, of course, but the gesture was made. It was the kind of item I could expand for *Yankee* magazine. I started to clip it, carefully going around the ad for Blue Seal dog food and down into the jut created by an ad for Pic-Yr-Own raspberries. The paper crackled slightly. I realized that I hadn't heard your ice cubes clink for several minutes.

I looked up. You were sitting, watching me. The lemonade was gone. The ice cubes were melting. I was slightly annoyed. It seemed to me that you could have gotten another drink for yourself if you'd wanted one. But you were trying hard to stop drinking and I was trying hard to be kind, so I asked—I'm sure my voice was kind—Can I get you another? There's none made up, but I could open another can.

You looked at me and said nothing. Then you let go of the glass and wiped your hands once, twice, very carefully on your pants, and got up. The end of the recliner shut like an open mouth. When you left the house, the kitchen door echoed the snap. It was the longest you'd ever gone without a drink.

I wish I could remember which of the two recliners that was. The brown one we got at our first house or the black BarcaLounger we had on Giles Street? It doesn't matter, I suppose: I have them both here now, arm to arm in the living room. Waiting for you.

It was definitely the BarcaLounger, though, that we made love in. I remember because I was in my thirties and beginning to have opinions when it came to sex. I was also beginning to look around, to wonder about the geometry of other bodies. Not that I meant to do anything about it, only wonder. It was a time of kitchen kisses from the neighbor at weekend parties and invented trips with your brother to get cigarettes and the closest store was always out of the right brand. And when we got back—from the kitchen, from the store—there was a tacit agreement not to notice the flushed cheeks, the hastily arranged clothing, of our spouses. It was like high school again, like dating. The groans in the dark, the muttered you're-so-lovelys, the quick last kiss at the end of the drive—all were infinitely more appealing than actually having sex.

So. This time I'm remembering, this chair I'm remembering, was wide and black and made of Naugahyde. When it was hot, your skin stuck to it slightly and released

with a slight ripping sound as you stood up, a muted sound like adhesive tape pulled from a wound. It was one of the reasons you hated it originally, reminding me over and over that your other, your first, recliner had had a fabric seat and back. Christ, Elizabeth, you must want to skin me alive. But you got to like it, I know you did, because you used to make jokes about all the little naugas that had to be sacrificed so the furniture company could get enough hides to make one chair. You said it was like the dik-dik rug at the Morse museum upstate. Hundreds and hundreds of little jungle animals had to be killed, Elizabeth, just so you could buy me this freaking chair. Think of it. Think of the slaughter. And I had laughed and said, No, only one, Ross. Just one giant sleek nauga, left over from the days of the dinosaurs, just one. And you'd slapped my bottom and said, Dead's dead, Elizabeth. They don't come with zippers. Then you went to the refrigerator for a bottle of Budweiser, which was all we could afford after buying the new house.

So it could have been the BarcaLounger in which you were drinking lemonade. I didn't think it was because I don't remember us laughing that much at Giles Street. But I guess we did for a while.

Anyhow, it was definitely the BarcaLounger in which we made love. It was September but it felt like July or August, and you were sweating as much as that earlier lemonade glass. I'd just come in from work and stripped off my pantyhose and was holding them in one hand. I stood in the living room doorway and I remember that the pantyhose were as light as a handful of feathers and that I had deliberately

cocked one hip out so that the air could get under my skirt to my bare skin.

You were sitting only slightly back in the recliner, your feet almost touching the floor. You were in your underwear and there was a tear in the shorts. The fan was turned on high, balanced on the arm of the other chair, my chair, and aimed in your direction. I knew that if I moved a foot or two into the room, I would catch a breeze when it revolved towards me. I stayed where I was and let the pantyhose sift through my fingers. I made my own breeze with my skirt: now a hollow sling to catch apples, now a parachute.

Come here, Elizabeth, you said. That's all. And I did. I had opinions about sex, but not strong ones; I wanted to be told what I wanted. I wanted to be shown. Come here, Elizabeth. That's all.

What? I asked. You patted your lap. I lifted my skirt, front and back, and sat, a leg over each arm of the chair. Our mouths formed a dark tunnel, a hollow log, in which two lazy snakes bumped, rubbed, rolled over and over each other. You pushed up my blouse and bra. I pushed up your shirt. Skin slipped against skin, found purchase, held.

It was so hot. The V of the chair and the V of our bodies were in almost perfect register. I worked at a magazine then. I knew about register, how the four layers of color film had to align exactly so that the photo reproduced with a snap as perfect as the first bite of a crisp apple. You moved the chair back a notch, the Vs became one V. I bit your lip, but gently.

We were rocking, the chair was rocking, I think the floor was rocking. The fan fell and growled into the rug. There was

at least one more position left on the chair, maybe two, but I wanted us to stay poised forever on the lip of the waterfall, on the edge of the cliff. The sun was in my eyes, and a part of me stood off and thought, You fools, the chair's going to tip over backwards. But I only thought it for a second because then I was over the edge and falling, falling, and the sun was a burst of orange behind my lids, and I was biting your lip hard enough to draw blood. The chair ratcheted back against the wall.

When my body remembered again that it was hot, I opened my eyes, amazed to find us right side up. Your eyes were closed, but when I lifted one cramped leg to get free of the chair, you caught me around the back, rolled down your undershirt, and gently wiped me dry. You wiped your cut lip on the sleeve. I stood up, picked up the fan from where it had gnawed the rug. You opened your eyes and looked at me. By Giles Street, we seldom said I-love-you anymore, pleasure was the point.

What was that all about? I said.

We'll have to try that again sometime, you said. Then, Can you get me a drink?

And I think I did. Both get you a drink and try it again. But would it have been Giles Street and the BarcaLounger? Was I still getting you drinks of anything but lemonade on Giles Street? No matter. In the living room, I have the chairs. In the kitchen, I have the bottles. Bottles of bourbon and scotch, some in Christmas gift boxes. Bottles of vodka and gin, clear as the ice on the farm pond, where the geese misjudged and got caught in the ice overnight. You went and killed them with

the splitting maul and brought them home and insisted I roast them.

You were drinking then and I was furious and told you that it was illegal to kill geese that way. Not that I really cared, but you were drinking then and I was furious. Legal, smeegal, you said, with a slur that you thought was deliberate. It was the kind thing to do. Those birds were going to die anyhow. You want them to die out there in the cold, 'Lizabeth? Out there in the cold when they could be (and here you laughed) getting nice and warm in our oven?

And what if the game warden had come by? I was so angry now I was hissing. What if Harvey Littlefield had come along when you were in the middle of your act of mercy? What if ... I wanted to make you angry, wanted to make you lift a hand, not to hit, just to threaten, wanted to give myself an excuse to leave.

Little chance of that. You never got angry when you drank, just funny and foolish and eventually maudlin. In fact, you told me once that it was just the opposite. That you wanted to kill people when you were sober and you drank to calm yourself down. Was that truth or bourbon talking? I know it was a time when we were trying to be rational about what was happening to us and going to marriage counselors and looking for excuses, which we called reasons. All I know was that you never hit me, drunk or sober, although eventually I did teach you how to be angry and you taught me about leaving.

But this time, this time with the geese, you weren't angry, just mellow, slurring drunk and all sweet reason. Harvey? you

said. Harvey Littlefield? Hey, Harve's a good guy, know's what's what. Tell you the same thing I did, kindest thing I could have done. Then you actually called Harvey Littlefield, the game warden, and explained what had happened and said, So, Harve, my wife, my first wife, you know, 'Lizabeth—winking at me over that little joke, that first wife bit—'Lizabeth, she's all upset. You know how women are, Harve. Anyhow, she's all upset and I wanted you to tell her it's okay, perfectly okay, what I did. Okay, Harve? So you tell 'Lizabeth...

You held out the phone and I could hear Harvey Littlefield saying in his slow game-warden voice: Ross? Ross? I want you to hang up this phone and go to bed now. I'm going to forget we ever had this conversation. And when you didn't answer, I heard him say: Elizabeth? Elizabeth, you there? I'm doing you a favor. Get him to hang up the phone. And I did, but not before you'd told Harvey that you couldn't go to bed yet, you still had to pluck those geese, and that if he and Tess wanted to come over Sunday...

You looked hurt at the click and the dial tone, thought Harvey had cut you off. Look at that, 'Lizabeth, you said, sonovabitch hung up on us. And you went and fell asleep in the chair, the wing chair with a nubbly cranberry fabric that you claimed left dents in your skin. The one you insisted on draping in a sheet for comfort. The one that Jenny Thomas didn't want to let me have back. But I took it anyhow, and it, too, is waiting for you.

You hated change, for all that you joked about me being your first wife. Chairs, wives, houses—what you had you

wanted to hang on to. But you got used to changes, I saw it happen more than once. And when you went on to the next thing—chairs, wives, houses—you came around in time to like the replacements as well, or almost. Not that you ever married Sandra, but they tell me three years of living together makes it legal in New Hampshire. I guess she had as much right as anyone to come to your funeral. But not to the house, no, not back to the house where everybody treated me like your widow, which technically I guess I was, since the divorce wasn't final. I didn't want her looking at the couch where you died and then at me with her big cow eyes and saying, He always loved you, Elizabeth. I knew that. But I didn't care, I wanted him to be happy, I just wanted him to be happy.

Easy enough for her to say now, but if she'd ever known you were sleeping with me once or twice a month, it would have been a different story. People get awfully forgiving when someone dies. They get mealy-mouthed and sentimental and past sins melt like ice cubes in July.

Not me. I know what you were. What you are. The casket was closed at the wake until the very end, when only family remained. We had to leave the room while the undertaker unhasped the latch, straightened your tie, touched up your makeup, whatever obscenity such people do. Then we were invited back in.

You looked the same, as if you were stretched out asleep on a gray velvet recliner, tilted all the way back. Only, your mouth was closed and you weren't snoring. In fact, I think there was a little smile almost twitching at the corners of your

mouth. It was then I began to realize this might all be an elaborate joke. That you would sit up suddenly, grab my wrist, and say with a smile: Fooled you, bitch. You didn't, but I couldn't stop thinking it. Would an undertaker have set your mouth that way?

Then, at the gravesite, there was that plump little minister with his plump little words. All about how we aren't burying our brother Ross today, that this was only the discarded husk of his body that was going in the ground, that the real Ross, his spirit, his memory, still lived on.

I sagged, your brother propped me up. I felt myself falling, almost falling. I wanted to scream, You fool! It was his body I loved, each crack and crevice, each wrinkle and fold. I looked at the minister then. His flesh was pink, I'm sure his bones were pink; I wanted to strip the skin from his body and see if he still saw it as a husk, see if he liked living as a memory. But he just looked back at me with his mild spaniel eyes and deflected my hate by not seeing it. We shall meet again, he said. He repeated it. We shall meet again.

I understood then that I had been right. That you weren't in the casket. That it was a joke, one of your jokes, and the minister was in on it. That you wanted to make a clean start. That this was a chance to try again, to sit in a chair and drink lemonade. At a beach, perhaps. Just outside of Rio or Cannes. That you wanted me to buy a string bikini and take the insurance money and meet you there.

I got it slightly wrong, I realized. I know now you have no money to get to Cannes or Rio. No money to buy lemonade. I know now that you will have to come here first to get me and

the money. You will be tired and will want to rest before we leave for the airport. You will want to sit in a chair and put your feet up and sleep until the time is right.

Your chairs are waiting for you so you can have your pick. I have found all but one. It wasn't so hard. There weren't really that many. Chairs live five to six years—some more, some less—in an ordinary living room, and we weren't married quite twenty. The only one missing is the one your great-aunt gave us for our first apartment. The blue plush one that puffed clouds of dust when you flung yourself in it and cocked a leg like a teenager over one broad arm. It was a chair that reminded us of wooden radios shaped like tombstones and pale margarine with a red heart to be squeezed and green enamel stoves with a jug of kerosene in back gurgling like bourbon to keep the flame going. It was not your kind of chair.

We spent most of our time then in bed, in the high-back oak bed, painted with roses and smirking cupids. One Sunday afternoon, we got drunk on red kosher wine and vodka, a concoction you called Cherries in the Snow, and painted blindfolds on the two simpering cupids. Love is blind, you said. So is justice, I said. We tumbled like new puppies, innocent as milk, in the sweaty sheets.

The blue plush chair went to the dump. The one that got filled in for the shopping mall. The last time I saw it, it was approximately where the Toys “R” Us store is now. There is no way to retrieve it, so I got the bed instead. Not the mattress, I'm afraid, but the bed. We'd given it to your younger sister when she got pregnant with Toby and had to

get married her freshman year of college. She gave it to Toby when he and Angie started living together in that old woolen mill they converted to apartments. All I had to do was buy them a new bed and cry a little. They understood sentiment. In fact, Toby and your brother helped me set it up right in the living room. They helped me push the new nonreclining antique chair into a corner. They brought in the new box spring and mattress because the ones upstairs in my room were singles. They wanted to bring down some bureaus, but I said no, I hadn't decided yet which one I wanted. They took the couch, the one you pretended to die on, to the dump.

Most men favor couches. You never did. I asked you why once and you said it was because you remembered coming home to find your father snoring on the family couch, dead drunk. That's not for me, you said. Later, when the drinking got bad, I said, What about your father? And you replied, Look, Elizabeth, I get up, I go to work, I bring home a paycheck. I don't beat you. I don't beat the kid. What more do you want? It was a fair question.

It's funny. When I finally asked you to leave, you and your son each said the same thing: I wondered when you'd get around to it. Perhaps, back in California, our son is even now telling some girl, some special girl, For Christ's sake, don't ever buy me a recliner, I can still remember my old man stretched out drunk in one. That's not for me.

He refused to come East for your funeral. That's not for me, Ma, he said. I may never forgive him, but that is something I can decide later. Perhaps he, too, knew you were still alive.

I came down that morning after we'd made love in my new narrow bed. The one with just enough room for me to sleep. You weren't dead drunk. Only dead. Pretending now, I know, but dead to me then. Because you were so cold. Your lips. Your hands. And your face was mottled, red-purple, but your circulation always was bad, and your face must have had some makeup on it. Shitting your pants seemed a bit much, but maybe that's why you did it, pretended to die, I mean. You were too sleepy or too drunk to get to the toilet in time and you were too embarrassed to face me so you pretended to be dead. Or maybe you just knew that's what dead people did. You sometimes got very clever when you drank.

I remember running to the Thompsons' in my bare feet and rattling their brass doorknob until it almost came off its plate. It was cold. They had to pry my fingers off and bits of skin stuck to the brass. Later, I saw them carry a long bag out from my house. So many people were in on it, in on your elaborate little joke. The rescue squad. The coroner. Tim Thompson. The undertaker. I can see it now in their eyes. They look at me with pity. They want to tell me, but they can't. I want to reassure them, tell them it's all right, I know, I know. I'm waiting, it's just a matter of time. But I don't dare say it because there might be one, just one, who doesn't know, and I'd blow your fine scheme and you might change your mind and take Sandra to Rio or Cannes instead of me.

Except I have the money. Not all of it, but almost. I've been spending it wisely. I had to buy a new bed for Toby and Angie but I got the old brown recliner back for nothing. Remember we gave it to the Snyder boys for their clubhouse?

The clubhouse was an old pigpen behind the Snyder farm and nobody lives there anymore. The pigpen's roof is falling in, but it's too cold for spiders, only their webs are left. The chair was still there. I think even the gray duct tape patching its arms is the same, is ours, holds your fingerprints, the oils of your wrists. I backed the station wagon up to the doorless opening and jockeyed the chair onto the old tan quilt in the back. I couldn't get it into the house by myself so I hired two kids from the village high school to angle it through the door. I'm going to take an upholstery class, I told them. This is my first project.

Then it was time to track down the BarcaLounger. Remember what a fuss you made when it came time for a new chair? By then, I no longer put up with duct-tape patches in the living room. I had the furniture company deliver the new chair during my lunch hour. I paid them a little extra to take the old one out by the trash cans for Tuesday pickup. But when I got home from work, the BarcaLounger was sitting in the garage, the old chair was back in the living room.

What gives? I asked.

'S a perfectly fine chair, 'Lizabeth, you told me. You want a new chair? Fine, you take it. Just leave me and mine alone. So I did. Until the next day, when I got Smitty to come with his bondo'd green dump truck and haul it to the Snyder farm. And when you came home, you had three choices. You could sit on the floor, you could sit on the couch, or you could sit in the new chair. At first, you stayed away altogether, but eventually you came around. Even made jokes about

defenseless little naugas and how their skin would stick to yours in the summer. And when it came time again for a new chair and another call to Smitty, you were just as indignant as the first time.

Smitty had said this one was a keeper so I knew right where to find the BarcaLounger and I brought the boys with me. Of course, I had to wait for Wednesday because the town dump is only open Wednesday and Saturday, and Danny, that was the stronger kid, worked at McDonald's on Saturdays.

We drove up and into the green sheet-metal barn with its little pit leading into the incinerator. There were barrels for bottles (green, brown, clear) on one side and a mountain of black plastic bags on the other. In the little cubby that Smitty called his office was the chair. That's going to be my second project, I told the boys.

I told Smitty I wanted to buy the chair back. Hey, no way, he said. That's the best chair I ever had. He twisted a broom straw in his mouth and looked at the chair. He or Marjorie or someone had cut up an old Oriental carpet and stapled pieces of it over the back, over the arms, and over the footrest, but there were still places where the yellow foam was leaking out. No, sir, that's one fine chair, Smitty said.

I knew crying wouldn't work but that money would. I said, How about ten dollars? Smitty looked indignant and hiked up his suspenders. They were striped like twin rainbows. Ten dollars? For a chair like that? You can't buy a chair like that for no ten dollars.

I tried to be patient but it was hard. I began to see what you meant about drinking keeping you from killing people.

Smitty, I reminded him, it was my chair, remember? I know how much it cost; I gave it to you. I looked over at the boys. Luke was in the car with the radio turned on. Danny was pitching rocks at rats. I doubted if they could hear, but I lowered my voice. It was my husband's favorite chair, I said. I want it back, Smitty. For old time's sake.

Smitty looked uneasy. He chewed his lip a bit, said, Tell you what, Elizabeth. You been through a hard time, that's for sure. But you gotta understand my position. I gotta get another chair. (He shot me a look of pure calculation.) So how's about we say ... fifty dollars?

Fine, I said, and counted out five tens. The boys loaded the car and we left Smitty looking worried, sure that he could have asked for eighty and gotten it.

The last chair, the cranberry wing-back, the one whose nubbly upholstery you claimed dented your skin, was the hardest to get back. Although it had been the easiest to replace. By that time, there was no longer any need for guile in introducing a new chair. You no longer lived at the house. I simply called the Thompsons down the road. They came and got it. The antique dealer brought its spindly-leg replacement in his van.

I found the wing-back in the Thompsons' living room, looking like an oversized candy cane. Jenny had taken an upholstery class, the one I had only hinted at, had covered its broad wings in a stripe of white, pale green, and pink. I explained patiently that I would give them money, any amount of money, to get it back, but Jenny was adamant. It's

my first project, she explained, the first thing I ever finished. I'm proud of it.

I offered an obscene amount of money. She refused. I offered her the new chair, the antique, as well. She refused. Tim looked uneasy, tried to convince her to change her mind, but no, Jenny had always envied me my house, my money, my husband. She had always wanted what was mine. Now she had it. Just by saying no.

I could feel my fingers growing fat with anger, my skin stretching taut. I picked up an ashtray and threw it. The mirror behind the mantel shattered. Jenny called me a crazy bitch. Tim swore and insisted I leave.

Do you remember, Ross, teaching me to shoot? You must have known. I remember I said, But, Ross, you're always coming home late, what if I shoot you by mistake? And you said, Don't worry, 'Lizabeth, I'll always whistle "Dixie" and you'll know it's me. And you always did and between the shotgun and the song, I always felt safe when you were gone and when you came home.

Until I heard you telling Hank Saunders about it one Saturday at a party when we'd all had too much to drink. You were bragging about what a good shot I was, that our back field was littered with clay fragments from the skeet targets I'd shattered, that you never had to worry about leaving me alone at night out there in the country. And Hank, Hank had said, But, Ross, old buddy, ain't you afraid she's going to shoot you some night? And you got very serious and lowered your voice like it was a secret, which it was, and said, No way. I always whistle "Dixie" and she knows it's me. And

Hank had chewed another toothpick and said, That so? And I'd gone home early and shut off all the lights and waited in the living room with the shotgun. And when Hank came through the door whistling “Dixie,” I shot him in the leg.

Not a jury in the world would convict her, you told Tige Morrison, the sheriff. Don't worry, Ross, Tige replied. It'll never get that far. He was right.

Later, you said to me, Nice shot, ‘Lizabeth. Not really, I said, I was aiming for his balls. And your eyes widened and you sucked an ice cube, but you couldn't leave it alone. Presently, you said, Old Hank claimed he was whistling “Dixie.” How come you didn't think it was me? And I answered, Maybe I did.

So shooting Jenny Thompson tonight through the picture window was no sweat. And then I went into the house where Tim was crying over her and saying, Jenny, Jenny, get up, and I told him to get up instead and help me move that damn chair. And he did, although he bumped the doorframes a couple of times and tore Jenny's candy-cane upholstery, not that it matters now, you never did like pink. And when Tim saw the bed and all the chairs in the living room, he said, My God, Elizabeth, they're right, you're crazy. And he ran. And of course, I had to shoot him, too, but too near the road, and I can't move him.

I hope you come soon, before they find him. Yesterday, at the shopping center, in front of the side entrance to Zayre's, a young man with a tiny gold star in one ear handed me a pamphlet and whispered, He is coming. And I asked him, In

the flesh? And he had looked surprised but nodded. Yes, sister, in the flesh.

It's clear it will be soon. So I sit here in the dark, in the living room, waiting for you to come through the back door. I know you will be whistling “Dixie,” slightly off-key and with an extra slurred note or two. I sit on the bed, the shotgun in my lap, the smell of fresh paint from the cupids’ new blindfolds strong in the room.

The chairs are here, all of them. From time to time, I count them and wonder which you will choose. The brown recliner? The BarcaLounger? Jenny's wide wing chair with its pink-white-green stripes? I doubt if you'll take the narrow one, the new one with the ball-and-claw feet, but you might, just to confound me, to keep me off balance. It was what you did best.

It's black in the living room, but I see the chairs as if they were outlined in neon and glowing. Even the bed shines with a phosphorus glow, like a decaying swamp, like a painting on velvet sold by the roadside. Love is blind. So is justice. Fingering the shotgun, I sit, remembering how we were, several chairs ago.

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The Jury Box

Reviews by Jon L. Breen

A few years ago, attending a panel discussion on humor in crime fiction, I asked Gregory Mcdonald and Donald E. Westlake, two masters of criminous comedy, if they believed humor was more effective at shorter lengths. Mcdonald, whose dialogue-driven novels are usually briefer than most in the current market, said yes. Westlake, many of whose comic novels run 300-400 pages or more, said not necessarily. Of course, they were both right and can prove it. Here are their latest, plus books from three newer writers with comedic gifts ranging from light to very, very dark.

**** Gregory Mcdonald: *Flynn's World,* Pantheon, $23. The Edgar-winning author of the classic *Fletch* (1974) brings back another series character, the unconventional Boston police inspector Francis Xavier Flynn, last seen in *Flynn's In* (1984). The various mysteries—why the boyfriend of Flynn's teenage daughter had his ear nailed to a tree; who is threatening a Harvard professor with the temerity to believe some ideas are better than others; how a high-ranking detective comes to arrest minorities only—serve the cause of Mcdonald's pointed satire on contemporary American life in general and academia in particular. Among the many amusing elements is the way Flynn's five children have picked up his quirky, indirect speaking style. Flynn gets this department's comeback-of-the-year award.

*** Donald E. Westlake: *Money for Nothing,* Mysterious, $24.95. For several years, New York adman Josh Redmond has been receiving a monthly check for $1000 from a mysterious entity called United States Agent. He has no idea why until the day he learns he has been an unwitting sleeper agent for a foreign power and is being activated. This riveting thriller is not as purely comic as many by Westlake, who can turn the laughs off and on like a faucet. In the early chapters, you may even take it for one of his “straight” crime novels in the tradition of *The Axe* or *The Hook,* but in some sections, as when Josh attends a bookstore reading by the author of *Enchantress of Nyin,* Volume VII in the Farbender Netherbender series, Westlake is in full comedic mode.

*** Donna Andrews: *Crouching Buzzard, Leaping Loon,* St. Martin's Minotaur/Dunne, $23.95. In her fourth adventure, Meg Langslow seeks the killer of a practical joker among the programmers at her brother's computer gaming firm, Mutant Wizards, which shares office space with a one-winged buzzard and a variety of psycho-therapists, one of whom distributes “affirmation bears.” Nothing is harder to do well in the mystery field than the pure comic novel—not just a novel with humor, but one that maintains a comedic tone from start to finish without wearing out the reader. Andrews, whose climax reminded me of the stateroom scene in the Marx Brothers’ *A Night at the Opera,* has the knack.

*** Dean James: *Faked to Death,* Kensington, $22. In his second novel-length appearance, Simon Kirby-Jones, American author now resident of the English village of Snupperton Mumsley, makes a command appearance at a

mystery writers' conference in the local stately home and finds one of his own pseudonyms has come to life. James, well-known in the mystery world as a dealer and compiler of reference books, delivers an entertaining assortment of characters and amusing enough narrative to forgive the lack of fair-play clues. Kirby-Jones's status as a gay vampire is not central to the action but provides some intriguing sidelights.

*** Ken Bruen: *Blitz,* Do-Not/Dufour, $29.95 hardback, $14.95 trade paper. In another relentlessly readable and risibly nasty account of London cops Brant and Roberts, previously seen in the author's White Trilogy, the titular serial killer is targeting police. This is not Bruen at his very best. The plot carpentry is a bit too visible. And while friendship of polar opposites is a time-honored dramatic device—for example, some of those high-schoolers in *Grease* and *American Graffiti* would have had nothing to do with each other in real life—I had a hard time believing the relationship of black WPC Falls and a neo-Nazi skinhead.

*** Michael Connelly: *Lost Light,* Little, Brown, $25.95. In his ninth case, Harry Bosch makes the transition from LAPD cop to clientless private eye, and his creator moves from third person to first person. Are these salutary changes? It's too soon to say. In a Chandleresque opening at the palatial home of a movie producer, Harry revisits an unsolved case from his police days, the death of a production assistant in the course of an on-set armored car robbery. Later his efforts run afoul of the FBI's post-9/11 anti-terrorism efforts. As he has done before, Connelly provides a fresh variation on a venerable whodunit surprise. Though this belongs in the bottom half of

Connelly's work, everything he writes makes compelling reading. The jazz compilation CD *Dark Sacred Night: The Music of Harry Bosch,* distributed with review copies and as a throw-in at some signings, makes this one of the few mysteries with its own soundtrack album.

** Jeffery Deaver: *The Vanished Man,* Simon & Schuster, $25. Quadriplegic criminalist Lincoln Rhyme, an armchair detective with both physical challenges and technological advantages unknown to Nero Wolfe and the Old Man in the Corner, goes up against a magician turned New York serial killer. The book is packed with enough impossible situations and conjuring lore to attract fans of John Dickson Carr and Clayton Rawson, but the big-screen-oriented thriller elements may turn them off fast. Unlike Deaver's best short stories, this novel crosses the line between satisfying deception and jerking the reader around. Still it's hard to argue with a bestseller: Clearly, for many, the action set pieces and research nuggets are sufficiently entertaining to justify the extraneous detail and repetitiousness.

As I've noted here before, a disproportionate share of the most distinguished crime fiction in recent years has come from the police procedural subcategory. The elder statesman of the field, and the one with the greatest degree of influence on his colleagues, is of course Ed McBain. In a happy event for 87th Precinct collectors, the 1960 novel that introduced the super-criminal known as the Deaf Man, *The Heckler,* has been reprinted with a new afterword by the author (Pocket Books, $7.99).

G.K. Chesterton's Sherlock Holmes: A Facsimile of the Original Unpublished Drawings (Baker Street Irregulars, $35), edited by Steven Doyle, may sound like an esoteric volume for the specialist, but it serves as a fine introduction to Chesterton's detective fiction via three essays about and four by the creator of Father Brown. The centerpiece is a group of 19 unfinished drawings, with critical comments by Scott Bond. The multitalented Chesterton worked on them before his death in 1935, apparently for an unrealized new edition of the Holmes stories.