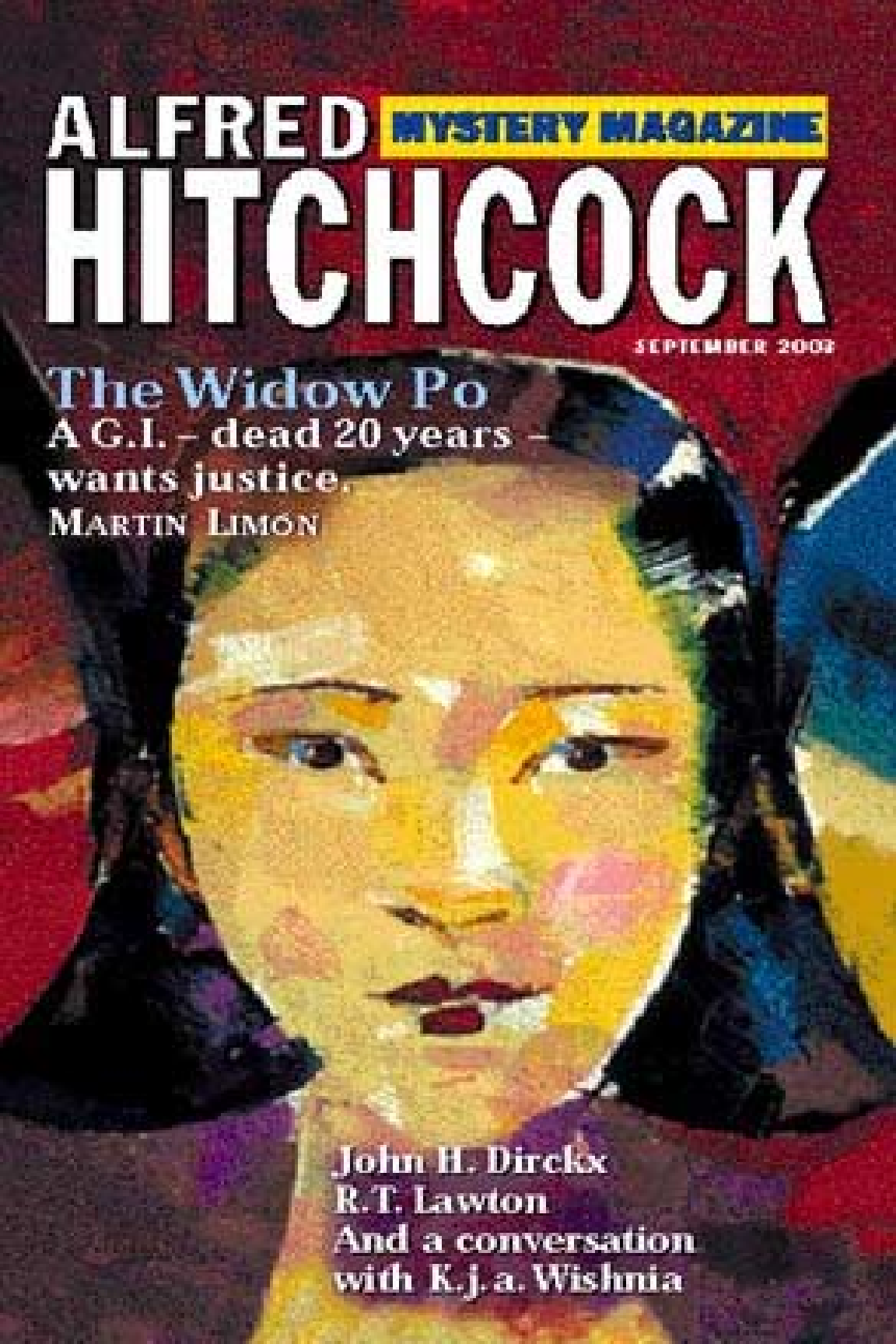
ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER 2002

The Widow Po

A G.I. – dead 20 years – wants justice.
MARTIN LIMON



John H. Dirckx
R.T. Lawton
And a conversation with K.j.a. Wishnia

Dell Magazines

www.dellmagazines.com

CONTENTS

Editor's Notes
Paperweight by Ben Town
The Bond Servant by R. T. Lawton
The Widow Po by Martin Limón
Unusual Floral Organs by K. j. a. Wishnia
Conversation with K. j. a. Wishnia
Counter Measures by Doc Finch
Nailbiter by Robert Lopresti
Murder on the Rise by John H. Dirckx
And Justice for Doll by Will Ludwigsen
Mystery Classic: **The Bacteriological Detective** by Arthur B. Reeve
Busman's Holiday: The Mysterious Galaxy
The Mysterious Photograph
The Story That Won
Booked & Printed

Alfred Hitchcock's
Mystery Magazine
September 2003
Vol. 48 No. 8
Dell Magazines
New York

All stories in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* are fiction.
Any similarities are coincidental.
Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine
ISSN 0002-5224 published monthly
except for a combined July/August
double issue.
[Back to Table of Contents]

Linda Landrigan: Editor
Jonas Eno-Van Fleet: Assistant Editor
Willie Garcia: Technical Assistant
Victoria Green: Senior Art Director
June Levine: Assistant Art Director
Abigail Browning: Sub-Rights & Mktg
Scott Lais: Contracts & Permissions
Peter Kanter: Publisher & President
Bruce Sherbow: VP of Sales & Mktg
Sue Kendrioski: VP of Production
Julia McEvoy: Print Advertising Sales
[Back to Table of Contents]

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine
Editorial Correspondence only:
475 Park Avenue South
New York, NY 10016
alfredhitchcock@dellmagazines.com

Subscriptions to the print edition
One Year $29.97
Call toll free 1-800-220-7443
Or mail your order to Hitchcock's
6 Prowitt Street
Norwalk, CT 06855-1220
[Back to Table of Contents]

Editor's Notes

TWO BY TWO ... Our stories this month (mostly) come in pairs.

Two stories, for instance, feature a military backdrop, though one, Doc Finch's “Counter Measures,” takes place here in the United States, and the other, Martin Limón's “The Widow Po,” unfolds on the streets of Seoul.

Meanwhile, the use, and abuse, of scientific knowledge is the basis of both K.j.a. Wishnia's story “Unusual Floral Organs” as well as our Mystery Classic, “The Bacteriological Detective,” in a case solved by Arthur B. Reeve's well-known sleuth Craig Kennedy, the “scientific detective.”

Another pair, Ben Town's “Paperweight” and Will Ludwigsen's “And Justice for Doll,” finds legal professionals putting their skills to very different uses.

And finally, two stories united simply by their offbeat nature: the inimitable Cletis Johnston returns in R. T. Lawton's “The Bond Servant,” while Robert Lopresti's short-short “Nailbiter” explores the nature of compulsion.

Our Busman's Holiday column helps the Mysterious Galaxy celebrate its tenth anniversary this month with a profile of the San Diego bookstore. We were especially intrigued by the store's book discussion groups. And if you are looking for something a little different to pick up, check out Don Herron's reviews in our Booked & Printed column, where he looks at a recent crop of literary mysteries.

We also welcome two new authors to AHMM this month. Mr. Wishnia is a professor of English and writing at the State University of New York on Long Island. He tells us a little about himself and his series of novels featuring Ecuadorian immigrant Filomena Buscarsela in a conversation following his story. Mr. Ludwigsen is a technical writer in Jacksonville, Florida, where he produces “reams and reams” of computer software documentation. Although this is his first publication in a mystery magazine, he has published a dozen or so stories in the horror, fantasy, and science fiction genres. He tells us it was Nancy C. Swoboda's story “Roomer Has It” (AHMM, November 1985) that inspired him as a teenager to try writing a story with “the same suspense and dark humor.”

—Linda Landrigan

[Back to Table of Contents]

Paperweight by Ben Town

Vessely waited, turning in his hand a heavy glass globe, which sprouted in its heart what the lawyer had sometime ago begun to think of as an exploding red and blue star. He turned the globe and stared into the center of the exploding star, magnified by the thick glass, and the light from the desk lamp running through it showed the nodules of glass and globs of glue that were the paperweight's imperfections.

It had been a gift from his wife ... four Christmases ago? He couldn't remember. It was before the divorce anyway. He hadn't cared for it immediately, but after sitting so long on his office desk he thought it had acquired his imprint and was now a mark of himself.

There was not another significant item in the room, for Vessely needed nothing more than the paperweight to distract his eye whenever he felt a change of focus necessary.

He waited and turned the glass globe, watching the red and blue streams swell and shrink as the angle changed at a twist of his wrist.

The tap at the door was not unexpected. Vessely was sure it was the man he'd been waiting for. He looked at his watch. It was not yet five minutes after the hour, and the few minutes past punctuality revealed some hesitancy in the lawyer's visitor. That was not unexpected either; Mr. Carl Goodman had cause to feel unsure and concerned.

“I'm glad to see you could make it, Mr. Goodman,” said Vessely, not taking his eyes from the exploding star.

“I probably shouldn't be here...”

“Why don't you have a seat?”

Goodman took a chair to the side of the lawyer's desk. He brushed hair off his forehead, wiped his mouth, rested his hairy red hands on his knees.

“Would you like something to drink, Mr. Goodman? Coffee, soda?”

“Nothing, thanks,” said the young man.

Vessely stood, carrying the paperweight. “I think I'm going to have some coffee, if you don't mind,” he said.

“No, go ahead,” said Goodman. He scratched under his eye.

Vessely fixed himself a cup of coffee. He said, with his back to Carl Goodman, “I don't want you to be nervous at all, Mr. Goodman. I'm just going to ask you a few questions.” He turned to face his visitor. “The prosecuting attorney doesn't ever have to know we met. How's that sound—okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Good.” Vessely returned to his desk and set down his coffee cup. He held up the paperweight for Goodman to view. “What do you see here, Mr. Goodman? I mean, inside this paperweight, what do you think that's supposed to be?”

Goodman was confused. He looked at the glass globe and lifted his shoulders. “I don't know,” he said.

“No, please, look closely.” Vessely turned the object in the lamp's light. “What do you think it's supposed to be?”

“I don't know. A blooming flower?”

“Good, yes. A blooming flower, very good.” The lawyer pretended to study the paperweight. “A blooming flower. Isn't

that interesting. This thing has sat on my desk for two, three years, something like that, and I've never seen a blooming flower in it."

"Well," said Goodman.

"No," said the lawyer, "no, that's very good. I mean, it shows how two people can see things differently, interpret them differently, right, don't you think?"

"I guess so," said Goodman.

"Good," said the lawyer. "I'm glad you agree with me." He leaned back in his chair, still cradling the paperweight. He asked, not suddenly but thoughtfully, "Mr. Goodman, how old are you?"

"Why?"

"Just curious. You look to be about twenty-eight, thirty on the outside."

"Twenty-seven," said Goodman.

"Twenty-seven, I was close. Are you married?"

Goodman scooted forward in his chair. "I don't think I'm supposed to be talking to you, Mr. Vessely. I mean, I don't think I'm even supposed to be here."

Vessely smiled like a patient father. "It's all right. I just want to ask some questions, that's all."

"I thought they gave you a copy of my deposition."

"Oh, they did," said Vessely, coming forward. "They did. I just want to be sure of a few details."

"Like what?"

"Well, why don't you just tell me what you saw, and we'll take it from there, okay? And remember," Vessely raised the paperweight, "sometimes people see things differently. Maybe

a blooming flower is something else altogether. It is perfectly human not to be sure." He slowly lowered the paperweight and reached across the desk to bring it down, along with Goodman's attention, to press upon a hill of hundred dollar bills.

"This isn't right," said Goodman, shaking his head.

"I'm not talking right," said the lawyer, "I'm talking wise. You're married, you have three kids, ages six, four, and eighteen months, there's a mortgage on your house, payments on a car that's nowhere near worth what you paid for it four years ago, day care, tee ball, swimming lessons, and that's not half of it. You know that better than I do. Understand, I am not talking right. I am talking about living and making it easier to live." He pointed at the paperweight. "I'm talking about a blooming flower."

Goodman shook his head. "This is wrong. I can't do this." The man got up to go.

"All you've got to do is pick up the paperweight, Mr. Goodman," said Vessely. "That's all there is to it."

"No. That's not all there is to it. You want me to change my story, to lie about what I saw. Well, I'm not gonna do that." He was closer to the door now.

"That's not what I want you to do, Mr. Goodman," said the lawyer. He still leaned on his desk, his hands steepled beneath his chin as if he were praying. "I asked you to see things differently. To be unsure. That's all I'm asking."

"I already told the D.A. what happened." Carl Goodman's hand was already on the doorknob, but he had turned and was listening.

Vessely was still uncertain he had him. He unclasped his hands and spread them in a simple manner. “All you have to say is that it was dark. You've been thinking about it and you're really not sure now that it was Gordon Rayburn driving the car.”

“I identified him in a lineup. I know it was him.”

The lawyer nodded at the chair beside his desk. “Why don't you come back and sit down? We'll talk about it.”

“No. I don't think that's a good idea. I don't want to talk about it.”

Vessely could tell he did. He almost had him; all he had to do was show him a way and he would take it.

But first the lawyer looked at the paperweight. “Twenty-five thousand dollars,” he said. Goodman trembled and Vessely could all but feel it. “I was instructed to offer you less, see what you would take, but I've decided to ignore those instructions and offer you all of it. It'll buy a lot of baby shoes.”

“Let me explain something to you,” Carl Goodman said, coming toward the lawyer's desk. His voice was tight, like his throat was closing. “I saw him hit and kill that nurse. I don't care that he was drunk. I don't care how much money his daddy has. This is wrong, can't you understand that?” He was close to leaning over the desk, his voice pleading with Vessely to stop this tempting.

The lawyer leaned back, away from the man. “You were coming off your job as the stage-door security guard at the Carlson, weren't you, when you saw it happen?”

“Yes.”

“That's a second job, isn't it? I mean, you have a day job as well, don't you?”

Goodman stood straight. “Yes. I'm a machinist.”

Vessely nodded. “The problem is, Mr. Goodman, you keep looking at this as right and wrong. That's not the way it is. There's just smart and dumb. It's smart for you to see things differently and to remember things differently. It's dumb to pass up this off—this opportunity.”

“Then I guess I'm dumb,” said Goodman, giving a weak shrug. He started for the door again with determined steps.

I'm losing him, thought Vessely, surprised. “Let me ask you one thing before you go,” said the lawyer, pulling back on his words to restrain their rush. Goodman paused at the door, but he did not turn around. “If you testify as you plan and Gordon Rayburn goes to jail, how are you better for it?”

“I don't understand,” he said to the door, his head slightly bent as if he were trying to hear a soft faraway sound.

“What do you get out of it?”

“Justice,” but he said it more as an inquiry than an answer.

Vessely shook his head. “Mr. Goodman, I'm a lawyer, and I don't know what justice is. Do you?”

“I know what it's not.”

He's almost gone, thought Vessely. He said, “Is justice working two jobs? Is it breaking your back to pay for a house with no yard? Is it telling your kids they have to go without—when no one else is? Is it your wife having to clean other people's houses? Is that justice, Mr. Goodman?”

Goodman didn't say anything. His hand was bloodless where he gripped the doorknob.

“I don't think so,” continued the lawyer. “And let me ask you another thing. Do you think the D.A. is worried about justice? The judge? Well, don't count on it. Justice is the furthest thing from their minds. They gave up on it years ago, just like I did. How about a jury then? Are they going to be more concerned with justice or with getting it over so they can go home? I've never met a juryman that wanted to be there. I'm telling you, Mr. Goodman, the only one concerned about justice here is you. And what is it to you? Why should you have to be the point man? Why should you be the only one worrying about what's right?”

Carl Goodman turned now and looked at the lawyer. “Maybe exactly because I am the only one.”

Vessely thought, Oh, don't make him a martyr, you'll lose him for sure. “Well, if that's your reasoning, Mr. Goodman, I really can't argue it. I will say this, though, being noble doesn't pay for braces and it doesn't buy bikes. Maybe it comes down to what you value more. Justice or the quality of your family's lives.”

Goodman leaned back against the door, looked at the ceiling. “You make it seem so simple.”

“That's the way I see it,” said Vessely.

After a full minute of silence, neither of the men moving, Vessely knew he had him and was not surprised when Goodman snorted his disgust with himself and walked across the room to pick up the paperweight.

He did not sit down and could not meet the other man's look. After a fortifying sigh, he asked, “What should I tell them?”

* * *

After Goodman left, Vessely locked the office door. From the bottom drawer of his desk he removed a large envelope. He counted from it a portion of cash and returned it to the drawer. He placed the remaining money in another envelope and fitted it into his inside suit coat pocket before reaching for the phone.

As he listened to the line ring, he picked up the paperweight and studied it, turning it this way and that. Earlier, when it had appeared that Carl Goodman was going to turn down the offer, Vessely, in glancing at the paperweight, had thought that the globe's spreading center might actually be a blooming flower, as Goodman had imagined. Looking at it now, after Goodman had left with the money, Vessely was more confident than ever that it was in fact an exploding star.

“Yes, Mr. Rayburn, it's Jim Vessely,” the lawyer spoke into the phone. “He accepted the offer, and I'm pretty sure everything's going to be all right for Gordon. I would expect the D.A. to drop all charges by Friday at the latest.” Rayburn asked about the money. “I did exactly what you said. I started with twenty-five, and I got him for fifty. So I saved you fifty thousand, how ‘bout that?” Rayburn asked if Goodman was hard to bring around. “Not really,” said Vessely, turning the paperweight in his hand, looking into its exploding red and blue center. “I told you he wouldn't be. I'm damn good at breaking people down.”

[Back to Table of Contents]

[Back to Table of Contents]

The Bond Servant by R. T. Lawton

As the twelfth job applicant departed the inner sanctum of the Twin Brothers Bail Bond Company, the door swung quietly shut behind him. A lingering sound hung in the room from the soft click of the door mechanism. Only then did Cletis Johnston, the proprietor, push his executive leather chair back from his rich mahogany desk and stand up.

“That's done. Now all we have to do is pick the best four candidates and have our friend, the precinct captain, run a background on each.”

Carefully, he smoothed out the wrinkles in his new pearl gray suit of shantung silk and checked the cuffs of his shirt, a subtle shade of dusky rose. Lastly, he straightened the knot in his French silk tie that glistened with the wet sheen of impenetrable black to match his midnight skin. He was about to remove the black mourning cloth from around the upper portion of his left sleeve, when Theodore Oscar Alan Dewey, bail agent for the company, spoke up from his standing position several paces to the left of the executive desk.

“Sorry, sir, but there seems to be one more applicant waiting in the outer office.”

Cletis's shaved, bald head snapped up. His long, black bandit-style mustache bespoke a dark side, though his voice remained low and level.

“Theodore, you mentioned only twelve applicants for the firm's position of executive secretary. Furthermore, you only

provided twelve resumes for my review last night. Where does a thirteenth person now fit into this hiring process?"

Theodore quickly placed his left hand, the one with the now permanently rigid pinky finger displaying a yellow two-carat diamond ring, behind his back as if to protect it from future injuries. The unusually straight bones of said digit seemed to project the impression of a once traumatic incident having been later attended to by an amateur or, at best, a first-year medical student. In other words, it had no free will of movement. Therefore, Theodore now did his utmost to stay on top of any current breaking situation.

"I don't know, sir. I didn't count the number of bodies this morning when we started interviewing. This last guy is the type of man you tend to overlook. What I mean is, he just kind of blends into the woodwork. When I went out to call in the final applicant, I suddenly saw we had an extra person sitting there."

Cletis slowly lowered himself back down into the executive leather high-backed chair.

"Give me his application. I'll find a way to dispose of him. We have more important things to do, not to mention funeral arrangements for Old Henry and the fact that someone's been following me for the last week."

Without looking up, the proprietor held out his left hand for the document as he continued his thoughts out loud.

"Damn Henry for dying on us anyway. He wasn't a bad secretary, but the only really good thing he did was take the company's secrets to the grave with him. However, I do suppose that at eighty-three, he was fast approaching senility

and in a couple of years, we would have had to make our own arrangements to deal with him in order to keep the business secure."

This downturn in the conversation toward the inevitable demise of the lately expired executive secretary aggravated Theodore's ulcer in a quick bout of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which turned his feet suddenly fidgety. In the normal course of business, Theodore was the one assigned to conduct any final rectification of the proprietor's problems in order that the bail bond firm could make an inordinate profit from the timely extinction of their special clients. Or else to erase any security situations caused by expendable witnesses to the firm's operation, which included business associates not destined to share in the profits. But since in this particular case Old Henry appeared to have passed away from the natural causes of a stopped heart, Theodore's termination services had not been called upon, a source of great relief to the bail agent at the time. However, now he wasn't sure that the proprietor would be in any type of positive mood for discussing the subject of hiring a new employee for the vacant secretary's position. Between the unknown stalker on the streets and the uninvited job seeker waiting in the outer office, everything seemed out of joint lately. And when he thought about the circumstances, it was a rather odd applicant that had shown up this morning.

"Well, sir, this applicant doesn't exactly have a resume."

"What do you mean no resume? If he's not adequately prepared for the interview, then there is no room for him in our firm. Turn him away."

Cletis retracted his outstretched hand and returned his attention to the twelve application files resting on his desktop.

Beads of sudden moisture popped out on Theodore's round, prematurely balding head. He thought desperately about whisking away the perspiration, but much preferred the safety of keeping his short, not quite webbed fingers behind his back.

“Yes, sir, I was going to do just that, but there is something strange about his eyes. They tend to look right inside your mind, almost hypnotizing in their glare. Before I knew it, I was nodding my head and agreeing to deliver his message.”

“And what was his message?”

“He says he has a handwritten note from out of the past and that it must have been karma that caused him to arrive on the very day our firm was interviewing for the position of executive secretary. Whatever that means.”

The proprietor sat back with growing interest in his almost Oriental eyes.

“Bring me the note.”

“Sorry, sir, I tried that, but the man said it concerned you personally and he would only hand the note over to you.”

“Then please describe this man with the hypnotic gaze, the one who allegedly blends into the woodwork.”

Theodore rolled his bulbous eyes up in the direction of his forehead as if he were trying to locate a photograph on the frontal lobe of his brain.

“Well, sir, he's tall, thin…”

At this point, Theodore dropped his gaze and surreptitiously consulted the scrap of paper concealed in his hand upon which he had printed his latest Reader's Digest Word of the Week.

“...almost ca-da-ver-ous, yeah, with thick black hair and a swarthy complexion. His suit is brown with a beige shirt and a brown tie. And when I walked into the room, he was drinking water from a glass. Not like you and I drink with the glass to our lips, but rather, he held the glass away from his lips and poured a thin stream of water into his open mouth. When he saw me staring, he suddenly quit like I'd caught him doing something wrong. He's a strange one, boss.”

“Sounds as if he comes from a Third World country where sanitation is a problem. Does he look like a foreigner to you?”

“Now that you mention it, sir. He does speak English with a slight British accent. Personally, I think he's an Indian, not one of our Indians, but one of those India Indians.”

“Very well, Theodore. Show him in. Let's see what we have here.”

In a couple of minutes, Theodore returned with the swarthy man in the brown suit.

Cletis Johnston stood, tented his hands in the praying position customary as a greeting for those in the subcontinent of India, and gave the slightest of bows.

The man started to reply in a like manner, then appeared to suddenly catch himself. He thrust out his right hand for a formal handshake as his voice came across soft and controlled.

“Such a pleasure in meeting you after all these years, Mr. Johnston. My name is Moklal Feringheea.”

Cletis quickly released the crushing grasp of the other's handshake, retook his seat and motioned for the man to do the same.

Theodore, who had been standing throughout all the previous interviews, was now torn between journeying over to the far wall for a chair so he could be comfortable, or staying where he was so as to not miss any of the conversation. In the end, he opted to remain where he stood, especially since the proprietor had not yet given him permission to do otherwise. He turned to his boss, hoping to catch some hint of how they should handle this intruder.

The proprietor's eyes seemed fixed on the newcomer.

“You've come for the secretarial position?”

“That is correct.”

“Yet you have no application nor resume?”

“I believe you will find that my talents shall prove themselves to be far superior to the other applicants.”

“And what talents might these be?”

“I have the necessary office managerial skills that you require, of course. Plus, I bring a certain expertise from my country that you may find beneficial to your business when you have the need to deal with your special clients.”

Cletis sat very still as if listening for any unspoken words. The silence lengthened.

Finally he said, “I believe you have a note for me?”

“Yes. My family was recruited in India several years ago to do some work in Hong Kong for your family...” Feringheea

removed a white number 10 envelope from his inside jacket pocket and passed the envelope across the desk to the proprietor. “...concerning a private matter involving a disrupted business deal with another party.”

Cletis extracted a folded paper from the envelope, opened it, and commenced to read to himself as the swarthy man continued speaking.

“You'll notice that this note to you is signed by your twin brother, Mr. Daryl Johnston.”

At the mention of this name, Theodore glanced at Cletis in time to see the proprietor's face turn an ashy gray, almost the color of overcooked oatmeal recently tossed in the garbage bin.

The man appeared not to notice and kept talking.

“Your brother was highly satisfied with our solution to his business problem and therefore acquired me to deal with a sticky situation that he claimed to have in the United States. As I recall, it had something to do with his bail bond business here in Bay City. He instructed me to go to America and wait at his firm until he returned from Hong Kong, at which time he would provide me with the final details of the job. Unfortunately, I was detained for some time, shall we say, by the authorities of a foreign country. Upon my release last month, I made my way straight here as best I could to fulfill my obligation. Do you know where I might find your brother, the Mr. Daryl Johnston?”

Theodore's mouth dropped open and his bulbous eyes almost popped as he swung his gaze around to the swarthy man. Quickly, he swiveled back to Cletis.

The proprietor coughed as if clearing something from his throat. One hand went immediately to his chest. The ticking of the clock on the wall grew louder and it seemed to Theodore that several minutes went by before the color returning to the proprietor's face began to match the midnight sheen of his French silk tie.

Theodore took one more look at each of them and developed a sudden warning ache in his left pinky finger. He now found his fidgety feet to be taking small prudent steps to the rear. It was only with immense effort that he halted their retreat when the proprietor finally regained his voice.

“I'm afraid my twin brother and I had a disagreement a few years back over how the firm should be run. In his anger, Daryl stormed out of the office, left his clothes and other belongings behind in his apartment, and allegedly relocated to another city back east. We haven't seen or heard from him since.”

A long quiet fell over the office. Theodore almost thought he could hear his own heartbeat drumming in his ears, but felt that he'd also lost contact with his feet and wasn't sure where they were now headed, if anywhere.

“Ah,” said the swarthy man, “then I shall wait for him. I believe the note instructs you to provide me with employment until his return. The position of executive secretary will suit quite nicely. Being a traditional Hindu, my needs are small. I will begin my duties tomorrow.”

The proprietor leaned back in his chair.

“That won't be necessary. I have yet to select the top four candidates for the position. This will take much consideration

to see who is the most qualified. Besides, I have no idea when my brother will return or even if. Therefore, you are free to return to your homeland."

"My apologies, sir, but I am not yet free to leave. Your brother saved the life of my father in the back streets of Calcutta during an unforeseen incident; thus I currently find myself in his debt and will be his servant until the contract is completed."

Cletis stroked the sides of his long silky mustache in contemplation.

"I see. In that case, fill out an application and we will consider you as one of the top four candidates for the job. Now, if you will be so kind as to wait outside, I will have Theodore bring you the necessary paperwork. Good day."

Feringheea rose from his seat, fixed the proprietor with a measuring gaze for several heartbeats, then abruptly turned and left the executive office.

As soon as the Hindu had cleared the doorway, Cletis motioned for Theodore to come closer.

"I knew Daryl was planning something. My brother meant to do away with me and have the company all for himself. I've suspected this for years, now the proof shows up in my very office. That Hindu was contracted years ago to kill me, but unfortunately for my brother, the assassin was delayed long enough that the plan fell apart."

Theodore now felt safe to bring his hands out in the open since none of the focus was falling on him nor any dereliction to duty on his part.

"Yes, sir, because now your brother is..."

Cletis held up a warning hand.

“Both the firm and I are better off with my brother gone. You know we do not discuss this matter, especially if other ears may be listening.”

At this point, the proprietor leaned back in his chair and appeared to gaze off into the dark recesses of the ceiling.

“Theodore, make sure that our Hindu friend fills out every question on the application. I want enough identifying information to find out his entire background. There may be something in there to help us find a way to get rid of him. Otherwise, I'll feel like Death is constantly breathing down my neck. Now go!”

Theodore hurried as fast as his stubby legs and undecided feet could move.

* * *

Late the following morning, Theodore entered the outer office and found the swarthy man sitting behind the executive secretary's desk.

“What are you doing here?”

The Hindu fixed his unblinking gaze on Theodore.

“The divine law is that man must earn his bread by laboring with his own hands.” Moklal Feringheea then flexed his outstretched fingers.

Theodore watched the sinuous movement of the muscular hands and took a step sideways.

“Mr. Johnston didn't say nothing to me about hiring you. We still have several applications to go through.”

“Then consider me as temporary help. I am merely here to serve until you find a full-time replacement.”

The phone on the executive secretary's desk rang. Both ignored the shrill clamor intruding from the outside world.

“We'll see about that. Mr. Johnston relies heavily upon me, I'll have you know.”

The phone rang again.

Feringheea smiled in a way that intimidated Theodore even more than the Hindu's piercing eyes. The Hindu then picked up the receiver and answered in a deep mellow voice.

“Twin Brothers Bail Bonds. How may I help you?”

Theodore immediately lit out for the inner sanctum, closing the door behind him.

“Sir, that Indian out there is answering your phone. I tried to tell him what's what, but he just spouted gibberish to me about divine law, bread, and something concerning his hands, whatever that meant.”

The proprietor, seated behind the desk, seemed lost in thought as if trying to unravel a dark puzzle. His reply came slowly.

“I know, Theodore, I know. He's been quoting the sayings of Mahatma Gandhi to me, too.”

“We've got to get rid of him, sir.”

“Me more than anyone, Theodore.”

“Then tell him to go away.”

“He's waiting for my twin brother's return, which we both know won't happen in this lifetime. Bad blood between brothers is a nasty thing. But remember, it was my brother who hired him, so here the Hindu waits for an event that would be termed a modern-day miracle if it should happen to occur.”

“Tell him the job is filled.”

Cletis tented his fingers and swiveled his chair slightly to one side.

“Odd you should mention that. I called the first candidate on our applicant list last night. His phone has recently been disconnected and a short investigation into the matter determined that his mail is now being forwarded to a small foreign island in the Pacific.”

“But, sir, we still have several others to pick from.”

“Of course we do. Our second candidate committed suicide by hanging himself some time during the last twelve hours. It seems he tied a rope to the bedroom doorknob, looped the rope over the top of the door and around his neck. A tumbled chair lay on the floor beneath his slumped body. There was no note. Luckily for us, the shocked landlord answered the telephone in the deceased's apartment this morning and responded to all my questions before law enforcement arrived on the scene.”

“Two of the top candidates could just be a coincidence, sir.”

The proprietor's somber reply floated in the office air.

“Theodore, in our line of work, I don't believe in coincidences. Every action has a meaning. It's up to us to determine what that meaning is.”

“Okay then, sir, call up our third choice.”

“I did that, Theodore, and the police were already searching his premises. A quick call to our friend, the precinct captain, informed me that our third choice was strangled in a city park last evening. They believe it to be the work of a

serial killer since some of the evidence matched the same method of operation of a particular killer loose on the West Coast for some time now."

"What about the fourth name on our hiring list?"

"If you will recall our conversation of yesterday afternoon, Theodore, I believe the fourth name is now answering the telephone in the outer office."

"You mean we're stuck with him?"

"Not entirely. I do have a plan, but it requires the acquisition of his fingerprints."

Because of Theodore's previous assignments at the behest of the proprietor concerning the finalization of the bail bond firm's special clients in order to make an extraordinary profit upon their demise, his first thought of the proprietor's statement involved the mental picture of a pair of hands resting in a cardboard box being wrapped for parcel post. And Theodore naturally figured it would somehow be his job to get the hands into the box.

However, Theodore quickly realized, the proprietor was still speaking on the subject.

"I want you to set out three of the clear glass coffee mugs on a silver tray. Be sure that the glass is wiped sparklingly clean, no smudges or prior fingerprints on them. Check our supply of coffee, tea, and milk. And we will need a Phillips head screwdriver."

Theodore didn't see how crystal mugs, milk, and a screwdriver could be used to detach a man's hands, but he also knew better than to ask too many questions at a time like this. After all, he still had nine mobile fingers.

“And, Theodore,” the proprietor continued while holding out a pair of white cotton gloves, “please wear these for the next half hour. I don't trust you to not smear your own fingerprints over everything. Put them on, then ask our friend to come in for a moment.”

Within ten minutes, the Hindu was seated across the mahogany desk from Cletis. Theodore had boiled milk, not water, to make hot tea and three steaming crystal mugs were lined up neatly on a silver tray. The door to the inner sanctum was closed and locked.

While in the process of serving tea, Theodore quickly noticed that the Hindu, while seemingly relaxed on the outside, appeared to sit in a coiled state of alertness, aware of the actions of all those around him, missing nothing. Reflecting on his own paranoid state of mind, the bail agent found the funereal silence rapidly becoming unbearable.

“I believe,” hazarded the proprietor to fill a moment of vacuum in the conversation, “that you are from the northern states of India and therefore are Aryan, as opposed to the darker and ancient Dravidian race residing in the south.”

The slight raising of Feringheea's left eyebrow conveyed a note of astonishment.

“You've studied my country?”

“In our line of work, one must learn or one dies.”

The Hindu carefully sipped the hot tea with his lips barely touching the mug, both hands wrapped around the glass. He took his time before answering.

“The Mahatma says that death is as necessary for man's growth as life itself.”

“I believe he was talking about the death of others, not mine ... nor even yours.”

The Hindu nodded.

“Since nothing can be done until the return of your brother, I will therefore consider your statements in the meantime. Is there anything else?”

Cletis replaced his crystal mug on the serving platter.

“Not at the moment.”

The Hindu finished his tea and stood up. Pulling a long yellow silk scarf from the left sleeve of his suit coat, he carefully wiped the crystal mug completely clean and set it gently on the serving tray.

Theodore stared at the yellow silk scarf knotted on each end, then glanced at the white cloth gloves covering his own hands and quickly realized his meticulous actions with the mugs had been for naught. He lifted his attention to the proprietor's face, but saw no change of expression.

“Then I will return to my duties,” said the Hindu. He turned and walked to the door. His quick muscular hands twisted the deadbolt latch and opened the door.

“One moment,” replied the proprietor. “I need you to mail a package for me. It's right there in the chair to the right of the door. Should only take you ten minutes to go the post office and back.”

Without a word, the Hindu picked up the manila-paper-wrapped box and passed through the doorway, closing the stout wood behind him.

“Now what, boss?” asked Theodore.

“Now you bring me the Phillips screwdriver and we remove the doorknob. The precinct captain should be able to obtain sufficient fingerprints from the metal to identify our new executive secretary.”

“Nicely done, sir, nicely done.”

Cletis handed the screwdriver back to Theodore.

“Flattery does not become you, Theodore. Now hurry, you only have ten minutes to replace the doorknob and dead bolt. And be careful not to smudge his prints. The captain will be waiting for your delivery. It's time we knew much, much more about our newest employee.”

* * *

The following afternoon, Cletis hung up the phone from his private line—one that did not go through the secretary's office—and drummed his fingertips on the mahogany desktop.

“That was the precinct captain. He received a report back from Interpol.”

Theodore leaned over the desk in interest.

“What did he say?”

“The good captain said that according to India's central intelligence agency, our new secretary in the outer office is a member of an old-time Thuggee family.”

“A what?”

“Pay attention. The predecessor of India's CIA was known as the Thuggee and Dacoity Department. This department was established back in the 1830's by the British Army to identify members of a cult of professional stranglers that robbed and killed travelers entering their domain.”

Theodore ran his left hand over his balding head.

“You mean there was a whole community of stranglers at one time?”

“Quite correct. The Thuggees’ signature mark was the use of the rumal, or silk kerchief, as the ritual weapon of murder.”

Theodore's left hand froze on top of his head, with his rigid pinky finger standing straight up toward the ceiling.

“You mean like that yellow silk scarf the Hindu carries up his sleeve?”

“Congratulations on your excellent eyesight. I presume you noticed the knots in each end to keep his hands from sliding?”

“Where did all these guys come from?”

“They consisted of a fraternity of families that had a secret language and practiced religious rites that sanctioned murder in the name of the goddess Kali. Since the cult was alleged to have hereditary membership, sort of a transference of the killing genes from grandfather to father to son, Act XXX of 1836 permitted the arrest of entire Thuggee families with the wives and children being fit targets for punitive and corrective measures. So, in those days, to be a member of a named Thuggee family meant you went to prison whether you personally did anything or not.”

“And we have one of those Thuggee guys answering our phone in the outer office?”

“So it would appear.”

Theodore's left hand now seemed anchored to the top of his head.

“We got to get rid of this guy, boss. I think we better shoot him before he strangles us with that scarf.”

The proprietor leaned back in his executive chair, tented his fingertips, and gazed off into the dark recesses of the shadowy ceiling.

“Not yet, Theodore. It seems we have a more pressing problem at the moment.”

“What could be more pressing than some guy out to kill you?”

“You are correct, that is the problem, but I don't think it is Moklal Feringheea trying to do the killing. Our Hindu said he was waiting for my brother's return in order to receive his final instructions. No, this is someone else that wants me dead.”

“How do you know that?”

“This afternoon when I returned from lunch, I found a body in our office supplies closet. The ink had dried up in my eighteen-karat gold pen, so I was looking for...”

Theodore's hand slowly slid off the side of his head.

“A body? Here? Supplies closet? You mean that maniac has already strangled someone?”

“I believe you're right, Theodore. The ligature marks on the recently deceased's throat do tend to point an accusing finger at our secretary.”

Theodore became reflective.

“Anyone we know?”

“As a matter of fact, I did recognize the deceased. He's a local assassin for hire that prefers to kill at close range. Lying across the man's lap was a pistol with attached silencer. As it turns out, the deceased wasn't a very competent fellow, but the question is, who hired him and why?”

In the fog of a mild stupor, Theodore trudged across the expensive oriental carpet to the nearest wall, grabbed the back of a cherry wood chair with an upholstered seat, and dragged it back to the front of the desk. Without the proprietor's permission, he plopped himself down onto the chair. This was only the second time during his ten-year career that he'd been seated within the confines of the inner sanctum.

“Think it was the same guy that was following you all week?”

“Probably. I only managed a glimpse here and there from a distance at the man conducting surveillance on my movements, but the two do have many physical similarities.”

Theodore pulled his black rubber-soled shoes up to rest on the wood rung running across his two front chair legs while his elbows planted themselves on top of his knees and his chin dropped into his open palms.

“Too bad we didn't take him alive. Now the person who hired him could send another killer and we wouldn't know either the killer or the sender.”

“The thought has crossed my mind.”

“What do we do then?”

The proprietor's gaze descended to the top of Theodore's balding dome.

“I believe the smart thing to do is to give our Thuggee a raise in pay. We should probably keep him close to me ... and the office. After all, he is doing what he does best. Then we will focus our resources toward finding out who wants me

dead and why. However, I do have a small job for you in the meantime."

Theodore raised his head.

"Yes, sir, what can I do?"

"First off, you will remove your shoes from that priceless chair rung."

Theodore leaped to his feet as if he had startlingly found himself in unfamiliar circumstances.

"Sorry, sir."

Cletis stared at him.

"As for the future, the three of us will operate as a team."

"Yes, sir."

"In which case there are a few more things you need to know about the Thuggees, Theodore. They operated in teams. The sotha lured the victim into the trap. In this case I believe I shall fulfill the position of the sotha as we search for my unknown enemy."

"I see your point, sir. You intend to be the bait."

Cletis leaned forward in his executive chair.

"The next part of the Thuggee team was the bhuttote, the one that performed the ritual strangulation. Our very own Hindu seems to have already filled that position."

"Yes, sir. And which part of the team am I?"

Cletis placed both palms flat on the desktop.

"You, Theodore, are the lugha, the one that goes ahead of the others and prepares the grave. The disposal service, as it were. Now kindly get that body out of my closet."

Theodore hurried toward the door.

"Oh, and Theodore, do be nice to our new executive secretary. I want him to feel right at home here. As if we were just one big happy family."

[Back to Table of Contents]

[Back to Table of Contents]

The Widow Po by Martin Limón

“Talking to dead people,” Ernie said, “isn't exactly my idea of a good time.”

Stone walls loomed above us as we wound our way through narrow cobbled lanes that led up the side of Namsan Mountain in a district of Seoul known as Huam-dong. Night shadows closed in on us. Pressing down. A few dark clouds. No moon yet.

“You won't be talking to dead people,” I told Ernie. “That's the job of the mudang.” The female shaman.

Using the dim yellow light of an occasional street lamp, I glanced at the scrap of paper in my hand, checking the address against the engraved brass placards embedded into wooden gateways: 132 bonji, 16 ho. We were close. A little farther yet.

My name is George Sueño. Me and my partner, Ernie Bascom, are Criminal Investigation Division agents for the 8th United States Army in Seoul, Republic of Korea. The request had been a simple one, from Miss Choi Yong-kuang, my Korean language teacher: Come to the kut. I'd learn something about ancient Korean religious practices and I'd be able to observe a famous Korean mudang firsthand. I'd also be able to hear from an American G.I. A G.I. who'd been disrupting this mudang's seances for the last few months. A G.I. who—so the mudang claimed—had been dead for twenty years.

“Bunch of bull, if you ask me,” Ernie said.

“They'll have soju,” I told Ernie. Rice wine. “And lots of women.”

“Men don't attend these things?”

“Not unless invited.”

Ernie gazed ahead into the growing gloom. “And you'll be able to get near your Korean language teacher. What's her name?”

“Choi,” I told him.

Miss Choi was a tall young woman with a nice figure and a smile that could illuminate a hall. When she asked me to meet her after class, I would have said yes to just about anything. Even a séance. Ernie and I hadn't made this trip official. We were off duty now, carrying our badges but not our.45s. And we hadn't told anyone at 8th Army CID about our plans to attend a kut.

Who needed their laughter?

The lane turned sharply uphill and became so narrow that we had to proceed single file. Beneath our feet, sudsy water gurgled in a brick channel. The air reeked of waste and ammonia.

Finally, the lane opened into an open space in front of a huge red gate. Behind the gate a large house loomed. Upturned blue tile pointing toward the sky. Clay figurines of monkeys perched on the ridges of the roof, frightening away evil spirits.

At the heavy wooden door, I paused and listened. No sound. It appeared from here to be a huge house and there was no telling how far the grounds extended behind this gate.

Ernie admired the thick granite walls. “Not our normal hangout.”

Once again, I checked the address against the embossed plate and then pressed the buzzer. A tinny voice responded.

“Yoboseiyo?”

In my most carefully pronounced Korean, I explained who I was and why I was here. The voice told me to wait. A few seconds later, footsteps. Then, like a secret panel, a small door hidden in the big gateway creaked open. An old woman stood behind, smiling and bowing. Ernie and I ducked through into a wide courtyard.

Neatly tended ferns, shrubs, small persimmon trees. In a pond beneath a tiny waterfall, goldfish splashed.

We followed the maid to the main entrance of the home and slipped off our footwear, leaving our big, clunky leather oxfords amidst a sea of feminine shoes spangled with sequins and stars and golden tassels.

The maid led us down a long wood-slat floor corridor. Oil-papered doors lined either side. Finally, we heard murmuring, the sound of prayer, and then we entered a large hall. Women knelt on the floor praying. When we entered, they turned to look at us. I couldn't spot Miss Choi anywhere.

“They're all mama-sans,” Ernie said.

“Hush.”

Most of the women were middle aged and matronly. And extremely well dressed. Expensive chima-chogori, the traditional Korean attire of short vest and high-waisted skirt, rustled as they moved. The dresses were made of silk dyed in

bright colors and decorated with hand-embroidered dragons and cranes and silver-threaded lotus flowers.

The far wall was covered with a huge banner: the Goddess of the Underworld wielding a sword and vanquishing evil.

“Wasso,” one of the women said. They've arrived.

Then all the women rose to their feet and started rearranging their cushions into a semicircle. Miss Choi Yong-kuang, smiling, appeared out of the milling throng. She wore a simple silk skirt and blouse of sky blue. Less expensive than most of the other women, but on her it looked smashing.

After bowing and shaking our hands, Miss Choi turned Ernie over to a small group of smiling women, who pulled him off to the right side of the hall. Miss Choi led me to the left side and sat me down cross-legged on a plump cushion. The women brought out low tables that were piled high with rice cakes and pears and sliced seaweed rolls. These were set in front of a long-eared god made of bronze who sat serenely on a raised dais in front of the banner of the Goddess of the Underworld. Incense in brass burners was lit and then an elderly woman dressed in exquisite red silk embroidered with gold danced slowly around the room, waving a small torch. Miss Choi whispered to me that she was the mistress of this home.

“Why's she waving the torch?”

“Chasing away ghosts.” Embarrassed, Miss Choi covered her mouth with the back of her soft hand.

Gongs clanged so loudly and with so little warning that I almost slipped off my cushion. Then sticks were beaten against thin drums. I glanced back and discovered that three

musicians were hidden in shadows behind an embroidered screen.

The ambient light in the hallway was switched off and now the only illumination in the room came from the red pinpoints of light from the smoldering incense and the flickering candles lining either side of the long-eared bronze god.

More drums and now clanging cymbals. Then silence. Breathlessly, we waited for what seemed to be a long time. Finally, the clanging resumed with renewed fervor. A woman dressed in white floated into the center of the kneeling and squatting spectators. A pointed hood kept her face hidden in shadows.

“Who's she?” I asked.

“The mudang,” Miss Choi answered. “Her name is Widow Po. Very famous.”

Miss Choi Yong-kuang is an educated and modern woman. Still, there was reverence in her voice when she spoke of the Widow Po.

Across the room, Ernie reached toward one of the rice cakes on the low table in front of him. A middle-aged woman slapped his hand.

The mudang continued her dance, eyes closed as if in a trance. The musicians handled the percussion instruments expertly, keeping the rhythm. Finally, when the first beads of perspiration appeared on the mudang's brow, other women rose to their feet and began to dance. Soon about a half dozen of them were on the floor, swirling around like slightly overweight tops.

One of the women yanked on Ernie's wrist, trying to coax him to his feet. He hesitated, holding up his open palm, then pointed to one of the open bottles of soju dispersed amongst the feast for the gods. She understood, grabbed the bottle, and poured a generous glug into Ernie's open mouth. Rice wine dribbled out the side of his mouth and onto his white shirt and gray jacket. Ernie didn't mind. He motioned for another shot and the woman obliged. Then he was on his feet, dancing as expertly as if he'd been attending ancient Korean rituals all of his life. Arms spread to his sides, gliding in smooth circles like some pointy-nosed, green-eyed bird of prey.

The Widow Po danced toward Ernie. When she was close enough, she grabbed his wrist and started twirling Ernie around faster. Soon the other women took their seats as my partner, Ernie Bascom, and the mudang, Widow Po, swirled around the entire floor. The rhythm of the cymbals and drums grew more frenzied. The Widow Po reached down, gracefully plucked up an open bottle of soju, and once again poured a healthy glug down Ernie's throat. One of the women in the crowd stood and pulled off his jacket. The Widow Po's hood fell back. She wasn't a bad looking woman. At least ten years older than Ernie but with a strong face and high cheekbones. The blemish was the pox. The flesh of her entire face was marked by the scars of some hideous childhood disease.

Ernie didn't seem to notice. Especially when the Widow Po started rubbing her body against his.

The matronly women in the crowd squealed with delight. Even the modest Miss Choi covered her face with both hands, attempting to hide her mirth.

Ernie motioned for more soju and the Widow Po obliged, but then, after another glug had dribbled down Ernie's cheeks, the Widow Po suddenly stopped dancing. The music stopped. Ernie kept twirling for a few seconds and then stopped dancing himself. He glanced around. Confused.

The Widow Po stood in the center of the floor, her head bowed, ignoring him. Sensing that his moment in the spotlight was over, Ernie grinned, grabbed the half-full bottle of soju off the low table, and resumed his seat on the far side of the hall.

No one moved for what seemed a long time. Maybe five minutes. Finally, the Widow Po screamed.

The voice was high, bansheelike. The Korean was garbled, as if from a person who was ill or in great pain, and I could understand none of it. The attention turned to one of the women in the crowd. She was plump, holding a handkerchief to her face, crying profusely. The Widow Po approached her, still using the strange, falsetto voice. Finally, the crying woman burst out.

“Hyong-ae! Wei domang kasso?”

That I understood. Why did you leave me, Hyong-ae?

The Widow Po and the crying woman went back and forth, asking questions of one another, casting accusations, arguing. I leaned toward Miss Choi with a quizzical look on my face. She explained.

“Hyong-ae was her daughter. She died in a car accident last year. Now she's blaming her mother for buying her a car.”

“The Widow Po is playing the part of her daughter?”

“Not playing. Hyong-ae's spirit has entered her body.”

I stared at Miss Choi for a moment, wondering if she believed that. She blushed and turned away from me. I left it alone.

The crying matron and the Widow Po screamed back and forth at one another. The mom saying now that Hyong-ae, when she was alive, wouldn't let her rest until she bought her a car. Hyong-ae countering that a mother should know what is best for her child. They were bickering like any mother and willful young daughter and yet it was eerie. How did the Widow Po know so much about other people's lives? I didn't bother to ask Miss Choi about it. I knew her answer. The Widow Po was possessed by the spirit of Hyong-ae.

Suddenly, the Widow Po let out a screech of pain. She knelt to the floor, hugging herself, and remained perfectly still for a few minutes. Without a cue, the musicians started again and then the Widow Po was up and dancing and a few minutes later she yelled again and this time an old grandfather took possession of her body. Another woman in the crowd spoke to this ghostly presence, giving him a report on the welfare of the family. When she was finished, the old man scolded her for not forcing his grandchildren to study hard enough.

Then this grandfather was gone and a few minutes later another spirit took possession of the perspiring body of the Widow Po.

The kut continued like this for over an hour. Ernie was growing restless but the women surrounding him read him like a book and kept pouring him small glassfuls of soju and stuffing sweet pink rice cakes down his throat.

Ernie must've already polished off a liter and a half of soju by the time the Widow Po growled.

Her eyes were like a she-wolf. She stalked toward Ernie. He stared up at her, half a rice cake in his mouth, dumbfounded.

“Choryo!” she shouted. Attention!

Ernie didn't understand but the women around him shoved him to his feet.

“Apuroi ka!” the Widow Po commanded. Forward march!

Again the women pushed Ernie forward and he marched to the center of the floor.

“Chongji!” the Widow Po told Ernie. Halt!

Ernie understood that one. “Halt” was the one Korean word that 8th Army G.I.'s were taught, so they wouldn't be shot by nervous Korean sentries. Ernie stopped, standing almost at the position of attention, a half-empty bottle of soju held loosely in his hand.

Miss Choi leaned toward me. “The soldier,” she said. “The one I told you about.”

Ernie reached for the Widow Po, thinking she was going to start rubbing her body against his again, but she would have none of it. She slapped his hand away and stepped forward,

her hands on her hips, screaming into Ernie's face. The words were coming out so fast and so furious—in a deep, garbled voice—that I could understand little of it. Miss Choi translated.

“He's angry. ‘Why have you kept me waiting so long?’ he says.”

“Who's kept him waiting?”

“You,” she said. “Mi Pal Kun.” The 8th United States Army.

“Waiting for what?”

“To talk to him. To let him explain.”

“Who is he?”

Miss Choi listened to the rant for a few more seconds and then said, “I'm not sure. The name sounds like mori di.”

Mori means “hair” or “head” in the Korean language. Di meant nothing, unless the spirit was referring to the letter “d” as in the English alphabet.

Ernie was becoming impatient with being screamed at. He lifted the soju bottle and took a drink. The Widow Po slapped the bottle from his lips and it crashed against the belly of the bronze god. Then the Widow Po leapt at Ernie, throwing left hooks and then rights, punching like a man.

The matronly women bounded to their feet and grabbed the Widow Po and held her on the floor, writhing and spitting. Ernie wasn't damaged badly, just a bruise beneath his left eye.

The Widow Po kept shouting invective in garbled Korean, her burning eyes focused fiercely on my partner, Ernie Bascom.

“What's she saying?” I asked Miss Choi.

"He," she corrected. "Mori Di, the spirit who possesses her. He says that you must start your work immediately. There must be no further delay."

"What work?"

"I thought you understood."

"No. The Widow Po is speaking much too fast for me to follow."

"Mori Di was an American soldier," Miss Choi explained. "He died more than twenty years ago. He wants you to start an investigation and find the person who did this."

"Find the person who did what?"

"Find the person who murdered him."

The Widow Po let out one more guttural screech and her eyes rolled up into her head until only the whites showed. Then she let out a huge blast of rancid air and passed out cold.

* * *

Ernie slapped dust mites away from his nose.

"This is bull," he said.

I tried to ignore him. Instead I continued down the row in the dimly lit warehouse, shining my flashlights on walls of stacked cardboard. We were looking for the box marked SIRs, FY54. Serious Incident Reports, Fiscal Year 1954.

Exactly twenty years ago.

The NCO in charge of 8th Army Records Storage hadn't been happy to see two CID agents barge in unannounced. He pulled his boots off his desk, hid his comic book, and pretended that he'd been working. When I told him what I wanted, he was incredulous.

“Nobody looks at that stuff.”

But when we flashed our badges he complied and escorted us into the warehouse. After showing us where to look, the phone rang in his office. He used that as an excuse to hand me the flashlight and return to the coziness of his cramped little empire.

When we were alone, I turned to Ernie. “You sort of liked that Widow Po, didn't you?”

“Yeah,” Ernie responded. “Nice body.”

“So we do her a favor. That's all. See if any G.I.'s were murdered twenty years ago. Any G.I.'s named Mori Di.”

I stopped at a row of boxes. There, up at the top, Fiscal Year 1954. Grabbing a handhold, I started to climb on the boxes below. Ernie helped hoist me up.

“You don't believe any of that stuff, do you?” he asked. “Good show, but it's all an act.”

I grabbed the box, blew dust off the top, and studied it. Bound with wire, no chance to check the contents up here.

“Pretty convincing act,” I replied.

“But still nothing more than an act.”

I slid the box down to Ernie. He broke its fall, but it was still heavy enough to land on the cement floor with a thump.

“Wire cutters,” I said.

Ernie returned to the office and brought back a pair.

“The sarge says we'll have to rebind it ourselves.”

“Screw him.”

“That's exactly what I told him.”

Ernie snipped the thick wire, pulled the top off, and then held the flashlight while I crouched down and thumbed through the manila folders.

I pulled a few out.

Fascinating stories. About G.I.'s assaulting, robbing, and maiming other G.I.'s. About G.I.'s assaulting, robbing, and maiming Koreans. Very few about Koreans assaulting, robbing, or maiming G.I.'s. The Korean War had ended only a few months before. The Koreans were flat on their back economically. G.I.'s, comparatively, were as rich as Midas. Still, Confucian values dictated that the Koreans use their wiles, not their brawn, to obtain a share of U.S. Army riches. I could've spent hours here studying these cases but we didn't have time. We were on the black market detail and this was our lunch break. The CID first sergeant would be checking on us soon.

Then, like a sharp slap across the face, I spotted a thick manila folder.

“What is it?” Ernie asked.

I pointed.

There typed neatly across the white label affixed to the folder was a name and a rank: Moretti, Charles A., Private First Class (Deceased).

We had found Mori Di.

* * *

That evening, as was our wont when we were off duty, Ernie and I repaired to Itaewon, the red light district in southern Seoul that caters to G.I.'s and other foreigners. This

time we didn't hit the nightclubs. Instead, we walked into the Itaewon police

station. Captain Kim, the officer in charge of the Itaewon police district, was waiting for us; I had called him earlier that afternoon. Sitting behind his desk he stared at us from beneath thick eyebrows. The square features of his face revealed nothing.

“No one remembers Mori Di,” he told us. “Too long ago.”

“Surely you have records.”

“Most burn. Before Pak Chung-hee become president.”

There were serious civil riots in Seoul and other major cities of South Korea when the corrupt Syngman Rhee government was overthrown in the early sixties.

“Still,” I said, “the murder happened only twenty years ago. There must be some cop somewhere who remembers the case.” I glanced at the notes I'd taken while reading Moretti's case folder. “An officer named Kwang. A lieutenant. The given name Bung-lee. Most of the Korean National Police reports were attributed to him.”

Captain Kim nodded. He already knew this. For him, playing cards close to his vest was a lifetime habit.

“Why,” he asked, “is the American army so interested in an old case?”

Ernie glanced at me but held his tongue. I hadn't told Captain Kim that our interest was unofficial. If I had, he wouldn't have cooperated at all.

“Long story,” I said. “Are you going to tell us how to find Lieutenant Kwang or not?”

Captain Kim sighed, reached into his top drawer, and pulled out a slip of brown pulp paper folded neatly in half. He slid it across the desk, his fingers still pressing atop it.

“Before you make your report, will you talk to me?”

“Yes,” I promised.

He handed me the slip of paper.

“You must be nuts,” Ernie said.

He was driving the jeep and we were wearing civvies, faded blue jeans and sports shirts. The day was Saturday.

“On our day off,” Ernie continued, “chasing around the Korean countryside after some murder case that happened twenty years ago all because you've got the hots for your English teacher.”

“It's not just that,” I said.

Ernie swerved around a wooden cart pulled by an ox. Rice paddies spread into the distance, fallow now after the autumn harvest.

“Then what is it?”

“You read Moretti's folder.”

“No, I didn't.”

“Well, I told you what was in it. His murder was never solved.”

“He's been dead twenty years. What difference does it make now?”

“He was a G.I., Ernie. One of us.”

That shut him up for a while. After a few minutes, he resumed cursing softly beneath his breath.

The village of Three White Cranes sat in a bowl-shaped valley about halfway between Seoul and the Eastern Sea.

Most of the world refers to the Eastern Sea as the Sea of Japan, but the Koreans aren't particularly fond of that nomenclature.

After two hours of winding roads and narrow country highways, Ernie slowed the jeep and rolled past clapboard hovels that lined the main street of downtown Three White Cranes. The largest building was made of whitewashed cement and the flag of the Republic of Korea waved proudly from a thirty-foot-high pole out front. The Three White Cranes police station. Two cops inside had already been alerted by Captain Kim in Itaewon and they drew us a map to a pig farm about two clicks outside of town.

* * *

An old man stood in front of a straw-thatched hut. He wore a tattered khaki uniform of the Korean National Police that hung on him like a loose sack. When I climbed out of the jeep and approached him, he waved his bamboo cane in the air.

“Kara,” he said. “Bali kara!” Get lost!

Ignoring rudeness is an important skill for any investigator. I approached the old man and started shooting questions at him, in Korean, about his involvement in the Moretti case.

Ernie stood by the jeep, staring over at a pen full of hogs. The fence was so rickety that he was worried some of them might break out.

“You go,” the old man told me, using broken English now. “Long time ago. No use now. You go.”

“Who murdered Moretti?” I asked the former Lieutenant Kwang.

“You go. No use now.”

I kept at him, badgering him with questions, sometimes in English, sometimes in Korean.

“Why you cause trouble?” he asked me finally. A watery film covered the old man's eyes. “He dead now. Life hard in Korea that time. You no ask question.”

“You know who killed Moretti,” I said.

“No. I don't know. I don't want to know. Just like before. I don't want to know.”

I started to ask more questions but the old man hobbled quickly toward the pigpen. Using his bamboo cane, he knocked loose two supporting beams and the rickety wooden fence collapsed. A herd of hogs charged out. I ran toward the jeep and jumped in. The huge animals swarmed around us, snorting and pawing and trying to climb into the vehicle.

Ernie started the jeep and backed down the dirt road. The hogs followed.

“If I had my.45,” Ernie said, “I'd land us some pork chops.”

Instead, he turned around, slammed the gear shift into first, and sped away.

When I looked back, the old man was still waving his bamboo cane.

* * *

An oil lamp guttered in the small office adjacent to Haggler Lee's warehouse.

Although he might've been the richest man in Itaewon, Haggler Lee had a habit of keeping expenses to a minimum. Electricity was seldom used in his place of business. He wore

traditional Korean clothing, a green silk vest and white cotton pantaloons, and didn't believe in wasting money on haircuts. Instead he kept his black hair tied above his head and knotted with a short length of blue rope. We sat on the oil-papered floor in his office.

“Moretti,” Haggler Lee said. “Nineteen fifty-four. Only one person I know of was in business back in those days.”

“Who?” I asked.

Ernie sipped on the barley tea that Haggler Lee's servant had served shortly after we arrived. The entire room smelled of incense. A stick glowed softly in a bronze burner.

Haggler Lee rubbed his smooth chin. “Why would two famous CID agents be interested in a case so old?”

“What do you care?” Ernie said. “Your operation is safe. We're not after you.”

“Thanks to my ancestors watching in Heaven,” Lee replied. “Still, nineteen fifty-four. Unusual, is it not?”

“Unusual,” I said. “Who was in operation then?”

“The black market was small in nineteen fifty-four. Koreans were so poor they could afford few of your imported American goods.”

“Who is it, Lee?” Ernie asked.

“Whiskey Mary.”

“Whiskey Mary? What's her Korean name?” I asked.

“I don't know. She's been called Whiskey Mary so long even we Koreans call her that.”

“Where can we find her?”

“Last I heard she worked at a yoguan in Munsan-ni. An unsavory place.”

A yoguan is a Korean inn. Haggler Lee gave us the name of the place. Ernie finished his tea and we left.

* * *

Munsan is a small city about thirty kilometers north of Seoul, near the DMZ.

DMZ. The Demilitarized Zone. But the area is about as militarized as it is possible to be. Half of the Army of the Republic of Korea of more than four hundred thousand men occupies the southern side. The Communist People's Army of more than seven hundred thousand men occupies the northern side.

Ernie and I cruised through the narrow main road of the city of Munsan. This was Sunday morning so Korean soldiers were everywhere, elbowing their way past farmers pushing carts full of turnips and grandmothers balancing pans full of laundry atop their heads.

The Dragon Eye Yoguan sat in an alley just off the main drag.

It was a ramshackle building, two stories high, made of old varnished slats of wood. When Ernie and I slipped off our shoes and stepped up into the musty foyer, a woman wearing a long wool skirt and wool sweater emerged from a sliding oil-papered door.

“Andei,” she said. No good. “Migun yogi ei, andei.” American soldiers aren't allowed here.

Ernie didn't understand and I didn't bother to translate. It was understandable that the woman wouldn't want American G.I.'s staying here. If her main clientele were Korean soldiers, that would be asking for trouble.

I ignored her remark, showed her my badge, and spoke to her in Korean. When I mentioned the name Whiskey Mary, her eyes widened.

“No trouble,” I said quickly. “We just want to ask her some questions.”

Shaking her head, the woman led us down a long, narrow hallway. Sliding doors were spaced along the walls every few feet, some of them open showing rumpled blankets and porcelain pots inside. The aroma of charcoal gas and urine filled the hallway. Occasionally Ernie and I had to duck to avoid bumping our heads on overhanging support beams.

Out back was a muddy courtyard with a few skinny chickens behind wire and two neatly spaced outdoor latrines made of cement blocks. The woman motioned with her open palm, turned, and left.

Ernie and I crossed the courtyard.

Whiskey Mary was bent over with her back to us, kneeling in one of the latrines, scrubbing with hot soapy water and a wire brush.

“Whiskey Mary,” I said.

She froze in mid-stroke.

Then she turned around. Two teeth missing up front, the others blackened around the edges. Wiry gray hair, face full of wrinkles, and a suspicious squint to her eyes.

“Why?” she asked.

“Moretti,” I said.

She squeezed the wire brush, leaned on it, and began to cry.

* * *

In wine is truth, as the Romans used to say, and maybe that's what happened to Ernie and me. When we returned to Itaewon that night we sat at the bar in the Seven Club and rehashed what we knew about the Moretti case.

Whiskey Mary had owned her own bar and run a successful black market operation out back. She wasn't worried about arrest because the U.S. Army authorities had no jurisdiction over her and the Korean National Police were being paid off. She even showed us photographs of herself in those days. Sitting with the girls who were hostesses in Whiskey Mary's, all of them with new hairdos and makeup and wearing expensive silk chima-chogori. G.I.'s brought in the PX-bought whiskey and cigarettes and instant coffee and Whiskey Mary turned it into cash and other favors from her hostesses. A sweet deal.

Until Moretti was killed.

He was one of her best customers. And went so far as to hustle other G.I.'s, especially those new in-country, to use their ration cards to make a little money. And if they were worried about being caught by the M.P.'s, Moretti would handle all transactions for them, taking half the profit for his efforts.

He was a good boy, Whiskey Mary told us. Most of the money he made, he mailed home by U.S. Postal money order to his mother in Newark, New Jersey.

Then someone stabbed him to death.

Crime-solving techniques in those days, for both the Korean cops and the American M.P.'s, were limited mostly to rubber hoses and the occasional sucker punch to the

stomach. Neither the K.N.P.'s nor the M.P.'s had a clue as to who had murdered Moretti. But his body had been found in the middle of the street in Itaewon, apparently attacked just as he left Itaewon after curfew at four in the morning. He'd been stabbed in the solar plexus and left to bleed to death on a muddy road.

A senator from New Jersey raised hell and the Syngman Rhee government was under pressure to do something to ensure the safety of American G.I.'s. If the G.I.'s left Korea, they'd take military and foreign aid money with them. The Rhee government couldn't tolerate anything like that so the pressure to charge someone with Moretti's murder was enormous.

Whiskey Mary was chosen.

“They wanted to take over my operation,” she said. Her English was heavily accented but still understandable after all these years. “Somebody up high.” She pointed up. “In the government. The Americans were happy and the Korean big shots stole my business at the same time.”

The charge was murder. She was arrested, tried, and sentenced to five years.

“Why only five years?” Ernie asked.

Whiskey Mary answered as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “Because I wasn't guilty.”

“But 8th Army kept the case open,” I said.

She waved her hand in the air. “They never happy with what Korean police do. American CID man, he know I no kill Moretti.”

“How would he know that?”

She smiled her toothless smile. “Because he sleep with me that night.”

When I asked her who did kill Moretti, she didn't know.

“Mori Di, he knew everybody,” she said. “He have many friends and many girlfriends. I don't know why anybody want kill him.”

When we finished our questions, I handed Whiskey Mary a few dollars. She stuffed them in her brassiere.

Probably an old habit.

The Seven Club's new all-Korean country-western band clanged to life. Ernie and I sat through the yodeling and the twanging guitars patiently, both of us thinking about what we'd learned. When the Korean cowboys finished their first set, Ernie swiveled on his barstool and faced me.

“We both know who we have to talk to.”

“We do?”

“Sure. We've been looking at this case in the wrong way from the beginning. All that kut mumbo jumbo bent our heads the wrong way.”

I thought about that for a moment. Finally, I said, “I see what you mean.”

“Tomorrow,” Ernie said. “We wrap this damn case up.”

We ordered two more draft OBs and drank to that proposition.

* * *

It was Monday now, so we had to wait until after work. During the day, I called Miss Choi and tried to convince her to give me an address. When she figured out what I had in

mind, she refused but promised to show us the way. Reluctantly, I agreed.

That night, driving through the crowded Seoul streets, Ernie and I didn't talk much. Miss Choi sat silently in the back of the jeep. At a park on the northeast side of downtown Seoul, she told us to pull over. A huge wooden gate painted bright red was slashed with Chinese characters: Kuksadang. Altar for National Rites.

“We have to walk from here,” Miss Choi said.

On the other side of the gate, stone steps led up a steep hill.

Miss Choi wasn't wearing her usual Western clothing. Instead, she wore a long white skirt and white blouse, very similar to what the Widow Po had worn during the kut. Also, a large canvas bag was strapped over her shoulder.

“Why no blue jeans?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I must protect you.”

“Protect us?” Ernie asked. “From what?”

“From the Widow Po.”

When I asked her to explain she shook her head and would talk no further. We climbed the long flights of steps in silence. Slowly, we wound our way toward the top of a line of steep hills—small mountains, actually—guarding the northwestern flank of the capital city of Seoul. Square stone parapets lined the summit, built during the Yi Dynasty as protection against Manchurian raiders and Japanese pirates. Below, the glowing lights of the city sparkled in the darkening sky. To the east, a red moon started to rise.

While tossing back wets at the Seven Club, it had occurred to Ernie that the one person who knew more about the Moretti case than anyone in the world was the Widow Po, either because the spirit of Moretti took possession of her during a kut, if you believed in ghosts, or because she had specific knowledge of the case, if you don't.

Neither Ernie nor I believed in ghosts.

Behind the ancient battlements, a dirt pathway led through a small grove of quivering elms. Miss Choi marched in the lead, staring straight ahead. Ernie and I glanced at one another. She looked exactly as if she were going into battle.

Once past the grove of trees, we descended into a dry gully. On the other side a clearing held maybe a dozen hooches, all thatched with straw. Candles flickered in one of the windows. No street lamps or cars or electricity up here. Down below, the modern city of Seoul hummed vibrantly.

Miss Choi stopped and waited until we were close.

“Only I talk,” she said. “Not you.”

“We have to question her,” Ernie said. “About Moretti.”

“I do that. You listen.”

Without waiting for further comment, Miss Choi Yong-kuang turned and strode toward the one home with a light in the window. As she walked, she reached into her canvas bag and pulled out a small drum made of wood and leather. Using a short stick she banged the drum lightly, only once, and then in a steady rhythm. In front of the hooch, we waited.

Ernie grew impatient. “Why don't I just knock on the damn door?”

Miss Choi shushed him.

In the other hooches there didn't seem to be any life whatsoever. But someone must live here. Wash fluttered on lines behind the houses. A skinny rooster flapped its wings and scratched into soil. Were they all gone? Or were they sitting silently behind dark windows, watching us?

This afternoon on the phone, Miss Choi had told me that the entire village was reserved for mediums. Wealthy people from the city below climbed up here to have their fortunes told or to talk to dear departed loved ones. But there were no customers tonight.

The front door of the hooch creaked open. Miss Choi drummed a little faster. A figure in white stepped out onto the porch. Then she stepped off the porch, slipping into her plastic sandals, and followed a flagstone walkway until she stood just a few feet from us. Moonlight reflected off a pockmarked face: the Widow Po.

I expected her to smile at Ernie. After all, they'd practically been intimate during the kut. Instead, she ignored us and frowned at Miss Choi.

“You insult me,” the Widow Po said in Korean.

“These are good men,” Miss Choi retorted. “And you asked me to bring them to the kut. This is your doing.”

“You expect I will hurt them?”

Miss Choi stopped drumming, slipped the instrument back into her bag, and pulled out a long red scarf embroidered with gold thread. I couldn't make out what it said but the embroidery was stylized Chinese characters. She draped the scarf over her head.

The Widow Po took a step backward.

“You are insolent,” she said. “Do you think I can't ward off evil spirits on my own?”

“Not evil spirits,” Miss Choi said. “I want to ward off you. You must have some plan. It is not I who brought these men here tonight. It is you.”

The Widow Po turned to me and then slowly turned to Ernie. She smiled.

“I should offer you tea,” she said in English.

“Not necessary,” Ernie replied. “We just want to ask you some questions.”

“Will you be able to appease the troublesome spirit who has been haunting me?”

“That's up to you,” I said. “How old are you?”

Her eyes widened. “A woman should never answer such a question.”

“American women shouldn't,” I said. “Korean women are proud of their age.”

She smiled again. “I am older than you think.”

“Old enough to have known Moretti?”

Miss Choi pulled a small prayer wheel out of her bag, started spinning it, closed her eyes, and chanted softly beneath her breath.

We waited.

Far below in Seoul, neon sparkled and an occasional horn honked. The orange moon was completely above the horizon now. Miss Choi's gentle chanting seemed to encourage its glow. Finally, the Widow Po spoke.

“I knew him,” she said. “I was young then. And beautiful. Yes, beautiful,” she repeated, as if I had challenged her.

“Despite the marks on my face I was beautiful. We were never married in your Yankee way, what with all your military paperwork. It was only there to discourage American G.I.'s from marrying Korean women. But we were married in the proper way, taking vows before the Goddess of the Underworld, swearing that our devotion would be eternal. That we would never part. Not like you Americans who change husbands and wives so often.”

She was speaking Korean now. Ernie couldn't understand but he was following the intensity in her voice. I struggled to understand every word.

“But Mori Di was like all you Americans, consorting with evil. With that woman called Whiskey Mary...”

Ernie understood that.

“...and with the girls who worked for her. And who knows who else? He wouldn't come home. He wouldn't perform the filial rights during the autumn harvest or visit the graves of my ancestors and introduce himself to them. He laughed at such things. Laughed!”

Now she was crying, her lips quivering in rage.

“When he was gone, I had to make a living. Not by finding another G.I. like so many women did but by honoring my ancestors. By doing this.”

She waved her arms to indicate the totality of the little village of shamans and mediums.

“When he was gone,” I said. “He was gone because you killed him.”

The Widow Po stared into my eyes a long time. Miss Choi's chanting grew more rapid.

"Yes," the Widow Po said. "I killed him. I had no choice. He was dishonoring me. He was dishonoring the Goddess of the Underworld."

"And the Korean police left you alone."

The Widow Po smiled through her tears and thrust out her chest. "They were afraid of me."

"You allowed Whiskey Mary to go to prison."

Widow Po shook her head rapidly. "For a while. There was no choice. But I sent spirits to protect her."

I briefly translated everything that had been said to Ernie. He took a step toward the Widow Po. Miss Choi stopped chanting, alarmed.

"Why did you ask Miss Choi to bring us to the kut?"

"Because Mori Di kept interrupting me," the Widow Po answered, looking surprised, as if it should be obvious. "Sometimes he took over the whole ceremony, upsetting everyone. Making my clients unhappy. How can they talk to their dead parents if some G.I. is always in the way?"

Miss Choi translated the answer for Ernie.

Ernie grabbed the Widow Po's elbow. Miss Choi gasped.

"Moretti won't be interrupting any more kuts," Ernie said. "Because you'll be in the monkey house. No kuts allowed."

The Widow Po understood the G.I. slang. Monkey house meant prison.

I was watching intently and as best I could tell, the Widow Po made no move. But maybe the light was bad, or maybe the glow from the orange moon and the candlelight in the hooch and the neon flashing from the city below caused me to miss something. But suddenly a rush of air escaped from

Ernie's mouth and he doubled over as if punched by a two-by-four.

Miss Choi resumed her chanting. Frantic now, garbling her words.

Ernie knelt in the dust. The Widow Po spoke once again in broken English.

“No monkey house. The Widow Po no go there. I show Mori Di he can't beat me. That's why I called you. No one will ever know what I did to him. No one alive.”

A glimmering butcher knife slipped out of the Widow Po's long sleeve. Before I could move, Miss Choi shouted and leapt toward the Widow Po.

The knife was in the air but Miss Choi rammed head first into the body of the Widow Po. Amazingly, the mudang maintained her balance and hopped back a few steps, still holding the knife. I ran toward Ernie but he was in so much pain that he couldn't rise to his feet.

The Widow Po bounced nimbly on the balls of her feet, holding the butcher knife aloft, her long hair swaying loose in the mountain breeze, daring us to come at her.

I grabbed Miss Choi and held her. She bowed her head once again and started her chant. A different one this time, more guttural. Not Korean, I didn't think. As if she were speaking some ancient language of the dead.

The Widow Po stopped bouncing. The knife dropped from her hand. She took a huge intake of breath, held it, and then a roar emitted from her frail frame. A roar of pain. Deep voiced. Thundering. The voice of a wounded man.

The Widow Po staggered back, clutching her chest. She twisted, turned, knelt to the ground. She roared again in her deep-throated voice and then spat blood straight out into the air.

I rushed toward her but before I could reach her she crumpled to the ground. I turned her over. Still breathing. A pulse in her neck but she was out cold.

I rushed back to Ernie. He was on his feet, staring at me. “What happened?”

“She sucker punched you.”

“How the hell did she manage that?”

I looked back at the Widow Po. She still hadn't moved. “I don't know.”

Miss Choi was on her feet now, no longer chanting. She pulled off her white skirt and blouse, revealing a red T-shirt and blue jeans underneath. Carefully, she stuffed the white clothing in her canvas bag.

Lights flickered on throughout the village. Electric bulbs. A television chattered to life. The announcer spoke in rapid Korean: Ilki yeibo. The weather report.

People emerged from their hooches, completely ignoring Miss Choi and Ernie and me, except for three neighbor women who approached and tried to help the moaning Widow Po to her feet. The exhausted mudang collapsed, the muscles in her legs like straw. I stepped forward to help, but the women waved me back. Unbidden, two men emerged from a nearby home. Together the five of them carried the Widow Po back into her hooch.

Ernie and I looked at one another.

Miss Choi grabbed our hands and led us back down the dark pathway to the bottom of Kuksadang.

* * *

The next time I attended the classroom of Miss Choi Yong-kuang, I sat up a little straighter and paid a little more attention to her instruction. After the lesson, I waited behind until the other students had left. I didn't have to say anything. Miss Choi read my mind.

“The Widow Po is crippled,” Miss Choi told me. “She hasn't moved from her hooch since the night we were up there.”

“How will she live?”

“Rich people make offerings to her.”

“They're still afraid of her.”

Miss Choi nodded. I watched as she packed her lesson notes and her textbook into her leather briefcase.

“You knew what was going to happen,” I said.

She shrugged.

“The Widow Po brought all this upon herself,” I continued. “Because of a guilty conscience.”

Miss Choi clicked the hasps on her briefcase and looked me in the eye. “The Widow Po is a brave woman.”

I nodded in agreement.

“What about Moretti?” I asked.

“No need to do anything further. Mori Di's taken his revenge.”

I studied Miss Choi for a long moment. “You really believe that, don't you?”

“Yes,” she said. “I do.”

I helped her lock up the classroom and then walked her out the main gate of 8th Army Compound and escorted her to the bus stop. No muggers jumped out at us.

Neither did any evil spirits.

[Back to Table of Contents]

[Back to Table of Contents]

Unusual Floral Organs by K. j. a. Wishnia

The glass terrarium hit the floor and shattered, spewing discord among the notes of the Vivaldi concerto tripping lightly from the lab's acid-stained boom box. Dana looked up from the closed, circular world of microscopic cells and saw three unfamiliar men tracking potting soil across the pristine floor, glass crunching under their hard black shoes.

More students.

“Need help finding the gym, boys?”

“Jeezus, Ozzy, will you look where you're goin'?” said the pale, bent one.

“Sorry, man,” said the young Latino. Maybe they weren't students.

“Excuse me, can I help you?” Dana said, irritation being replaced by something worse.

“Oh, you can help us all right,” said the one with the blue-black dragon snaking three times around his left bicep.

“Yeah,” the bent one nodded. “You can help us all right,” he said, talking sloppily, as if he were chewing on his own tongue.

Her mouth froze open as they put a gun to her head.

Her eyes focused on the plate of communal brownies as they forced her out the back door and down the stairs.

They made her lie on the floor of a dented green Dodge something-or-other. Dana's jaw clamped shut and she damned herself for not knowing the model and year. But she had never owned a car, choosing to bike the eight miles from

the flatlands of Oakland every day. They wrapped her in a filthy scrap of carpet full of dust and ashes and rough fibers that itched like hell, but she didn't dare move to scratch herself after they put their big heavy feet on top of her. She made herself breathe, and she almost gagged on the grit.

“Sorry about breakin’ that glass thing, man,” said Osvaldo.

“Don't sweat it,” said Cal, from the front seat.

“Sure,” said Dogg. “We get all the way in the freakin’ place without anybody givin’ us a second look then he goes and freakin’ tells the whole world we're there and you say don't sweat it?”

“Hey, it's her fault anyway for leavin’ it there,” said Cal, using only the left half of his tongue.

Dogg stared at the blue-black scorpion on his right wrist and dug the heel of his boot into the lump on the floor.

She thought of her mother back in Loveland, Colorado, and the unfinished plate of brownies that Ma had sent for the lab technicians, and her tear ducts began to operate against her will.

They started talking about women.

“That girl Bethany, man?” Osvaldo said.

“Excuse me,” said Cal, correcting him, “but I think the word you're lookin’ for is bitch. That bitch Bethany. Got it?”

“Sure, Cal,” said Osvaldo. “Anyway—”

“No, no, no, let me hear you say it,” said Cal.

There was a pause.

“That bitch Bethany.”

“All right,” said Cal, approving.

“So anyway, this Bethany?”

And he said something that made her groin tighten.

Dogg laughed heartily, drilling the lump under his feet.

She wondered how long it would take for someone to notice that she was missing.

They traveled for an hour or more, sailing up steep curves and then turning off to crawl slowly up a pitted mountain road. When the car stopped, they wrapped a strip of burlap around her eyes and told her to get out. It was hard to stand.

She felt the sun still shining on her as the wind blew some of the coarse fibers out of a thousand itchy places that God seems to have designed especially for the human body. But the sand and grit remained mired in place by fear sweat.

She tripped twice as they led her up the steps to the metal door. Someone put a hand on her arm to lead her in, but it was harshly slapped away.

“Don't ever do that,” Cal's voice instructed.

“Sorry,” Osvaldo said.

“Sheesh,” was Dogg's contribution.

The door opened into a cool, wet place.

“Where the hell have you guys been?” said a new voice, echoing through the open space. “You have any trouble?”

“Naw, we stopped for burgers on the way down,” said Cal.

“Yeah, man, I was munched,” said Dogg.

An army travels on its stomach, thought Dana.

“All right. What have we got?”

Cal yanked the burlap blindfold off, leaving a slight burn mark on the bridge of Dana's nose. She was in a low, barracks-like room, made blindingly bright by the artificial sunlight of multiple tiers of halogen lamps hanging over table

after table of potted plants. Tending the plants, facing her, was a fat, muscular man in his forties with a round, freckled face and wild, thinning red hair. With the eyes of her abductors upon her, the suddenness of her exposure made Dana feel as if she were living in one of those I'm-naked-in-a-public-place dreams, as if Cal had just yanked a towel off her, and she almost instinctively reached for the blindfold to put it back on.

“That's it?” asked Lupo.

“She's all we need.”

“I told you to bring a bunch of their lab equipment with you!”

“But Lupo—” Osvaldo began.

“Don't you freaking ‘but Lupo’ me, what good is she without the equipment?”

“Easy, man, we'll go back for the stuff after dark is all,” said Cal.

“Yeah, it was hard enough getting her out of there with twinkletoes here breakin’ stuff all over the place,” said Dogg.

A red-rimmed eye glowered at Osvaldo.

“Besides, we didn't know what to take with us yet,” said Cal.

“But she's gonna tell us,” said Dogg.

“Is that right?” said Lupo, finally looking at Dana. “You're gonna tell us what we need to do, right?”

“Depends,” she said. The four men stiffened. “What are you trying to do?”

They relaxed a little.

“It's gotta do with some homie's box,” said Cal.

“No, it's some homo's box,” said Dogg.

“Shut up, you,” said Cal. “And we don't want none of them wussy genes, either.”

“You don't want what?” said Dana.

“Come here,” said Lupo. “I'll show you.” He took her over to a long bench crammed with four rows of a dozen pots each, budding with tall, sweet-smelling flowers. Closer in, she recognized them.

“You're going to do some of that mutta-gene-esis for us.”

So that's what they were after. Homeobox genes. Wuschel genes. Mutagenesis.

“You want me to create mutant poppies,” said Dana.

Dana saw the big man smile for the first time.

“Yeah. Or coke. Coke's fine, too, if you can do it.”

“I can't.”

The smile froze like a stuffed shark on display.

“Aren't you—” He fumbled with some papers, and began reading slowly, as if climbing a tight, squeaky stairmaster. “—Miss Dana Fisher, USDA Plant Gene Ex-pres-sion Center and adjunct as-sist-ant professor at the Berkeley Tech Plant and Micro-bi-al Biology Department?”

“Yes, but—”

“So get moving, you got a lot to do,” said Lupo.

“A lot of what to do?”

“You know, stuff like setting up the microscope and the other shit so you can start grafting the cells—well, not grafting—what is it, exactly?”

Lupo yanked a set of papers from the pile, printout from some Web site, and shoved it under Dana's nose.

The text boldly proclaimed:

[Back to Table of Contents]

JUST LIKE THEY'VE DONE
WITH POT AND HYBRID ROSES!

Scientists at the USDA and Berkeley Tech have discovered a way to manipulate genes to produce genetic mutations, including supersized flowers, in a single generation! No more transplanting! No more crossing! No more waiting!

[Back to Table of Contents]

“Oh, that site's not authoritative,” Dana told Lupo.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It's the undergradu—uh, the student-run site. They're always getting their facts wrong.”

“Don't give me that crap. Then what about this?”

He held up an article torn from last week's Chronicle.

Damn the reporter for writing that article, thought Dana.

He showed her a passage that was marked with a yellow highlighter and circled with a black ballpoint pen:

> “It means that instead of breeding a larger plant in five to six generations, we can genetically mutate it in one,” said Ms. Fisher, whose mountain-girl complexion and short, dark hair come with a brain full of ideas about increasing the yield of peaches in the valley.

She resolved to kill the reporter who had written those words, someday, if she ever got through this. She had wanted to keep talking pure science, and he kept whining, “But what practical application does all this stuff have?” until she finally gave up and explained it in terms that even the local drug gangs could understand. Hoo-hah. What a victory.

“Enough of this bullcrap, lady,” snarled Lupo. “Time to get set up.”

“Well, you must be doing something wrong,” Dana told him. “You've got twenty thousand-watt lamps going in here

but it's still kind of chilly. That's a climate control issue, not a microbiological one."

Lupo wiped his forehead, leaving it smeared with potting soil.

"Man, why do so many women scientists gotta work with plants?" asked Cal.

"Yeah, just like Pakis and convenience stores," said Dogg.

"Probably 'cause they can't do the math for those harder sciences," said Osvaldo.

Great, I'm stuck here with the Three Stooges, thought Dana.

"I've never worked with opium poppies before," she said, trying to explain big science to a group of asocial thugs.

"Excuse me," said Lupo, gripping another sheet of printout with his big, red hands, "but did you or did you not post a summary on the Berkeley Tech Web site that says—and I'm reading this, here—'All plants have a similar underlying structure'?"

"Yes, but the key to understanding and manipulating plant form lies in unraveling the communication machinery that enables shoot apical meristem cells to continuously coordinate the processes of stem-cell proliferation and organ primordia initiation."

"Oh. So what's the problem?" said Lupo.

"Didn't you hear her? She said she needs some communications machinery," said Dogg.

"Some special kind of cell phone," said Cal.

“Now we're getting somewhere,” said Lupo. “Somebody give me a pencil. Okay, now I want you to make a list of all the communications machinery you're gonna need.”

“No, you don't understand,” said Dana.

“Now what?”

“Mutagenesis—causing a change at the DNA level—changes the function of a gene, which changes a protein, which changes a trait—like, say, turning a small, wild tomato into a big, supermarket tomato.”

“Right. Even I understood that. Well, most of it, anyway,” Dogg admitted.

“The shoot meristemless gene is required for expression of the unusual floral organs gene.”

“And?”

“And you don't make a big change in a trait by mutating a single gene. Usually you have to mutate several at once to get a big change.”

“So mutate several at once,” said Lupo.

“Well, you've got to figure out which ones.”

“So figure out which ones.”

“Look,” said Dana, reaching for an analogy. “Your plant's genetic information is basically like a megastore full of CDs.”

“Okay. So?”

“And you've got to figure out which tracks on which CDs are the right ones.”

“Yeah. So?”

Okay, forget that. Dana felt herself losing ground, as her brain searched for answers in the moiré patterns of the mosquito netting over the narrow windows, in the random

splatter of mud against the curved walls, until she finally locked onto the red-and-white pair of dice rolling a lucky seven down Dogg's left forearm.

“It's like a deck of cards with ten thousand suits, or—” She did the quick math under intense pressure. “—or, a hundred and thirty thousand cards, okay?”

“Okay.”

“And you've got to come up with a straight flush.”

“Oh.”

“Ooh...”

Understanding, finally.

After a silence, Lupo spoke slowly: “So you're saying you can't do this.”

A new fear began pricking at the soles of Dana's feet.

“I'm not saying that,” she said. “I'm just saying it would take a long time in the lab, working with the right genetic material, and a bit of trial-and-error before we got it.”

“How long is long?”

His curly beard was smoldering, and his bushy eyebrows were two wisps of reddish smoke.

“I'm asking you how long it would take.”

“Oh, at least six months. Probably two or three times that,” she admitted, weakening. “Can I sit down?”

“So,” said Lupo. “No instant super poppies?”

Dana slunk down in a chair.

“So what do we do with her?” asked Cal.

“Let's kidnap her,” said Dogg.

“We already did that, jerkface!” said Cal.

“No, I mean, let's hold her for ransom.”

“No, too heavy a rap,” said Cal. “I'm not doing time for freakin’ kidnapping.”

“Excuse me,” Dana interrupted them, “but haven't you already done that?”

“This isn't kidnapping,” said Dogg. “We were just taking you for a ride, you know, just showing you around town.”

“Fine. So you haven't committed a crime yet. So let me go and everything'll be fine. We're even.”

They looked like they might have been considering it when Dogg said, “No way. We got a right to get something for our troubles.”

“Yeah,” said Cal.

“I'm in,” said Osvaldo.

“Anyone going to ask my opinion?” said Dana.

“Sorry, girl,” said Lupo.

They told her to write down the numbers of her closest friends and immediate family, and called every one of them while she sat under the watchful eyes of two humans killing time by working their jaws.

“You know, they don't like copper pennies down south,” said Cal.

“Why not?” said Osvaldo.

“Because Lincoln's on them! Man, they hate those Lincoln head pennies. I knew a guy who worked around there. He'd go into a town, set up on a corner, and give a fiery speech saying what a prick Lincoln was and come back with a couple of sackfuls of pennies. One time he came back with twenty grand in pennies.”

“Hey, I'm gonna try that with quarters. Say, who's that dude on the quarter?” Osvaldo asked Dana.

“Washington,” she answered flatly.

“Do they hate Washington as much as they hate Lincoln?”

“I don't know, you could check it out,” said Cal.

“Damn straight I will.”

“Bad news,” said Lupo, coming up to them.

Nobody was home at any of the numbers. Most of her family were off skiing in the mountains, and as for the close friends, well, it was a short list.

“You could try my work number,” said Dana, hopefully.

They did, and after eight rings, they heard an annoyed “Hello?”

“Who's this?” asked Lupo.

“Who's this?” said the voice indignantly. “I'm the one who should be asking that. Who the devil are you?”

Oh, no. Dana's hopes came crumbling down. Of all the people keeping late hours on a Tuesday night, the department's prima donna had to answer the phone. Professor Capibara, who came late to every faculty meeting and sat there grading papers while his colleagues spoke, as if his work alone were more important than anyone else's.

As Lupo laid the situation out for the voice on the other end of the line, the voice began to hem and haw and Dana swore that she could actually hear the professor rubbing his hands together in gleeful anticipation of this opportunity to stab her in the back and eliminate her from the competition.

“I make it a policy never to negotiate with terrorists,” he snapped, declining the offer. And he hung up. And they stood

gaping at the pin-sized holes in the receiver, waiting for the plastic and wires to deliver a different message.

“So what are you going to do now?” asked Dana. “Chop off one of my ears and mail it to somebody?”

They looked at her the same way they had looked at the phone.

“Man, why you hang out with a scumbag like that, huh?” said Dogg. “You got more in common with us than with some freaking stone-cold fish like him.”

“Thanks for the bulletin,” she said. “You pull that off the Internet, too?”

“Screw you, girlie.”

“Yes, I suppose I deserved that,” said Dana. “Mind if I smoke?”

It was not the answer they expected.

“Sure,” said Lupo generously.

“Outside?”

There was a pause.

“Okay. Dogg, go with her. We gotta talk.”

Dana sat on the steps inhaling a señorita and gazing at the stars coming up over the western ridge, with Dogg standing watch over her.

They were too far up to hear the rush of the highway, but Dana was able to orient herself by the faint, orange glow to the southwest.

“If you're such a—” Dogg stopped himself. “If you're so smart, why do you smoke those little cigars? Aren't all you slick babes supposed to know how bad smoking is for you and stuff?”

She looked up and tried to reach inside that predatory brain of his.

“Smoking relaxes me,” she said. “And since it's been medically proven that relaxing helps you live longer, I'm actually prolonging my life by smoking cigarillos.”

“Even as they slowly kill you.”

“It's a trade-off,” she admitted.

“But you'll take it,” he said, nodding.

There was a moment of hidden recognition. Of something shared. A warmth. Dogg was cute, in his way, with a set of muscles that could chop wood all day and carry on well into the night. Too bad his mind was canine.

“You gotta right to choose your poison,” he said.

And Dana smiled for the first time in a long, long while.

* * *

Dogg and Cal dumped her in the alley behind the lab. No apologies. Nothing. Still, she considered herself lucky.

Dana looked up at the desolate lab, a black diamond against the sky, except for two lights that she recognized.

She had learned something new tonight.

And she went inside to have a few words with Professor Capibara.

[Back to Table of Contents]

[Back to Table of Contents]

Conversation with K. j. a. Wishnia

Filomena Buscarsela is a former NYPD cop turned private eye, a single mother with a wry sense of humor. Beginning with *23 Shades of Black*, K.j.a. Wishnia has sent Filomena on cases through a New York that one reviewer described as "like a subway train—fast, dirty and dangerous." In the fifth and latest book, *Blood Lake*, Filomena returns to her native Ecuador, where her past as a former revolutionary is ever present while she investigates the death of a politically active priest.

[Back to Table of Contents]

AHMM: How did you come to create a character like Filomena Buscarsela with her particular background?

KjaW: When people ask me how I can possibly write in the voice of an Ecuadorian woman, I usually say that I have been married to one for seventeen years. But in fact, Filomena is a composite—she has my mother-in-law's childhood (shoeless poverty in the southern Andes), my wife's immigrant experiences (encountering ethnic and gender stereotyping), and the rest of her craziness is pure me. Thanks to a background in theater, I've had many experiences that typically only happen to women in our society, such as being looked at as a body type and judged purely on those terms. So when I sought to combine my allegedly “masculine” traits of sputtering anger and the aggressive pursuit of linear goals with my “feminine” traits of networking, nurturing, and especially vulnerability (I've been chased by heavily-armed Ecuadorian riot police), I had to choose between creating a wimpy man or a strong woman. It was no contest.

Since this is *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, I need to mention that, all in good fun, my actual self makes momentary Hitchcock-like cameo appearances in four of my Filomena novels. Try to spot me.

AHMM: How does her background and her life experiences inform her behavior in your novels?

KjaW: As a Latin American woman in the United States, Filomena is in some ways the ultimate outsider, and as such she is a genuinely working-class character. It has almost become a cliché of the PI genre that the protagonist works in a crummy office overflowing with unpaid bills and drives an aging car while pursuing a case that involves the richest family in the state, who have a secret that they will kill to protect. I tend to reject this notion of the wealthy individual villain-we-love-to-hate as the ultimate source of evil in a novel. Filomena often discovers that the entire system is corrupt in ways that cannot be fixed merely by nailing a powerful, but single, perpetrator. This makes her job

much harder, and blurs the simple lines between black and white that Hollywood loves so much into those wonderfully complex shades of gray that are the realm of the best crime and literary writing.

AHMM: Over the course of the series, you seem to have set the stories in all corners of NYC—Manhattan, the Bronx, Queens, Long Island. Was that your intention, or did things just work out that way?

KjaW: I've traveled a lot in Europe and South America, but I've lived in or around New York City for most of my life. There's nowhere else like it, good or bad. Queens, where I set Red House, is the most ethnically diverse patch of ground of its size on the planet, and is a true microcosm of the country, of the promise that America holds out to immigrants, whether they are fourth generation or just off the boat.

AHMM: Why did you take Filomena back to Ecuador in Blood Lake?

KjaW: I spent three years living in Ecuador, where I had some pretty outrageous experiences, the kind of things most Americans only read about, so it would be insane not to use them in my writing. The country suffered from earthquakes, floods, landslides, food and gas shortages, hyperinflation, riots, rampant political and police corruption, shoot-outs, and bad roads, but they also had a resigned, sometimes humorous attitude toward it all, coupled with a fierce tenacity, and an astonishing ability to redeem themselves from all this suffering through carnivalesque celebrations, devotion to family, dedication to improving their situation, and a generosity that, frankly, our government could learn from. And I think that Filomena embodies these qualities. I also had several near-death experiences there, only one of which made it into Blood Lake. That generally describes my research methods: I gather enough notes for five novels, then I write one.

AHMM: What are you working on now? Will Filomena return, or are you working in other areas?

KjaW: I'm always getting material for the next Filomena story, because she's truly become my alter ego, but I also need time away from the voice and conventions of her novels. Hence the story in this issue of AHMM. So I have the material for another Filomena adventure, but right now I'm deep into the research for a stand-alone—a Jewish-themed historical crime novel that I've wanted to write for a long time. Naturally, this parallels my own experience. When I was about to get married—to a Latin Catholic, no less—I decided to learn about my wife's culture by reading the New Testament. The result was a reverse revelation: I realized that I already knew most of the major events, parables, and sayings relating to the life of Jesus and his followers, that by growing up in the United States, I had absorbed Christianity by osmosis. So I decided to start learning about my own Jewish culture and history, including the Yiddish language that my grandparents spoke, and I have since published several articles on Yiddish literature in academic journals. Now my fiction is following this same path: after five novels featuring my shiksa heroine, I'm ready to start writing about a Jewish protagonist.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Counter Measures by Doc Finch

The morning they stole the ghost-maker and killed a man for it, and before he became involved, Gunnar McManus was doing what he usually did in the morning. Drinking coffee on his porch.

He took his coffee out onto the barroom porch to watch the January morning light wash past the jagged peaks of the Organ Mountains. The air smelled crisp and dry and rode on a thirty-knot breeze coming up the mountain from the south. Nice for a New Mexico morning, he thought. He looked at the Rio Grande river valley stretching from the northwest to the southeast and then watched the traffic labor up the grade on U.S. 70, headed for the pass a few hundred feet up, and on to the vast military reservation that lay in the valley beyond.

Behind him, he heard the door to the bar slam and boots rapping the thick pine planks of the covered porch. Sam Guzman, his bartender-manager, came up and set his cup on the rail as he searched his pockets for a cigarette.

“You going down to the Army trading post today?” Sam asked. Sam claimed to be part Apache, but refused to specify which part.

“Yeah. Gotta restock the household kitchen.” Gunnar was retired Navy and rated commissary privileges on the military post. A civilian truck came out from Las Cruces with the bar's food and liquor supplies every week, but the household supplies came from the Army post.

“Might be you stop by the NCO Club,” said Sam, with only a hint of a question in the statement.

“Might be.”

“I'd appreciate it, you see that Sergeant Nowicky, you kinda remind him about my money. Hit me up for fifty dollars early last week and I ain't seen him since.”

He started to caution Sam about loaning money to customers, but sipped his coffee instead and turned to watch the light begin to spill through the peaks to the east. Sam went in for the shopping list.

Gunnar turned as Sam pushed open the front door and brought over the list. Gunnar could see the door lock swinging loose.

“Gonna have time to fix that lock today?”

“Ummm ... need to catch up on the books this morning. Maybe this afternoon if it warms up. I hate working with my ass hanging out in the wind.”

“You hate working. But it's okay. It's been loose since—when, July?”

“Naw. September at most.”

Gunnar shook his head and went down to his crew cab pickup. While the engine warmed, he went over the shopping list, and called to Sam.

“I better get on down to the post. Could you stand the wind long enough to drive over to the barn and make sure the animals got food and water?” Gunnar kept three horses on a leased area north of the highway.

“You bet. I like talking to horses. They don't know nothing about broken locks.”

Gunnar grinned and waved, then pulled out of the parking lot and turned northeast toward San Augustin Pass. Crossing the pass, he could see the highway stretching to the vanishing point across the flat Tularosa Basin. It was a desolate, nearly no-exit highway all the way to Alamagordo. At the bottom of the long slope, Gunnar turned off the highway and followed Army Road 1 to the Post Area gate. The gate was closed.

Gunnar, in serving on the post for three years and visiting at least every month for five more years, could not remember seeing the gate this closed. Flanking the highway were several Army Humvees, each half filled with armed M.P.'s. Several more M.P.'s with automatic weapons stood at the barrier. Gunnar slowed his pickup gently to a halt and sat, carefully keeping his hands on the top of the steering wheel. A corporal with a rifle and a wary look nodded at the window. Gunnar slowly took one hand off the wheel and lowered the window.

“Problem?”

“Nossir. Can I see your ID, sir.” It wasn't a question.

As Gunnar slowly slid his wallet out and extracted the ID card, a first sergeant detached himself from the group by the gatehouse and walked around to the pickup's window.

“Hi, Gunnar. Going shopping? Or you just checking up on our security?”

“Good morning, First Sergeant Brickman, sir.” Gunnar looked around at the scene. “Someone needs to check security for anyone who works for an oxymoron.” The first

sergeant was with Military Intelligence. “You getting your annual readiness exercise out of the way early?”

“Wish it were that, Gunnar, but they blew the whistle for this one at zero four thirty this morning. And these troops got live ammo today. Want to go on the post?”

“Can I get out again?” Gunnar grinned.

“I really don't know,” said Brickman, unsmiling. “Certainly they'll take apart everything you buy and inspect it.”

Gunnar pictured the grim privates and corporals rummaging through his groceries. “How about I turn around real slow and go back up the hill?”

“Seems like a wise move to me. And slow's good. They've got orders about that.”

“Looks serious,” Gunnar said. “Climb up the mountain when this gets settled. I'll buy you a beer.”

“Sounds good. But I wouldn't open that beer yet, was I you.”

* * *

Gunnar drove back past the Horse Trough Bar and on down into Las Cruces, where he shopped at a chain market and bitched under his breath at the prices and over his breath at the crowd. It was already past three when he got back to the bar. He tapped the horn and Sam came out to help carry in the bags of groceries.

“Oh ho, went to the Big Trading Post, did we? They take coupons?” Sam said, glancing into the pickup bed.

“Shut up and carry.”

“So what happened at the post? They cut off your retirement privileges and stomp on your toes?”

“Something big, but I don't know what yet. Brickman didn't call, did he?”

“Yeah, he called around noon. Said he'd drop by later today. He also said to ask you if retreating in the face of M-16s is a Navy thing. What's that about?”

* * *

Around five thirty Gunnar glanced out at the parking lot and saw an Army sedan scattering gravel as it parked. First Sergeant Brickman came in a minute later. He was still in uniform and looked unhappy.

“What? Can't a man do his job without you checking on it?” said Brickman, waving his hand at the window. He took a stool at the long pine bar. “How about that beer, a Dos Equis?”

Sam already had the cap off by the time he asked and gave him a chilled glass with the beer.

“I only got time for this one,” said Brickman. “Need to brief some people down in El Paso. Border Patrol types. And there're some people flying in from D.C....” He trailed off, shaking his head.

“I take it you've got a full-scale flap.”

“No kidding. And it's a need-to-know basis on top of that. And I gotta ask you—officially now—have you had any strangers in here this week or last? Somebody you never saw before. Maybe someone who just didn't fit in, you know, clothing, accents, something like that.”

“Sure. Every day. Motorcycle types last Friday, camper full of Japanese day after that. I think I even had some clowns in Army khaki yesterday and today.”

“Dammit! I'm serious. I didn't come up here just for this beer. I need some information right now, and if the answer's ‘no,’ I'll take that, but quit screwing around.”

Gunnar considered the first sergeant. He was apparently completely serious, a rare condition for him.

“Okay. The motorcycle types are a fact, but they come in frequently. The Japanese tourists are a fact, but they looked like genuine tourists—lots of cameras—thought the horse trough in the parking lot was quaint. Had a well-dressed guy with a snotty attitude—hell, just an attitude. Been in here couple of times in the last two weeks. He was here day before yesterday with an Army man in civvies. They sat in one of the booths for about an hour and just talked. Had a guy with a Slavic accent and a big beard, but when he left he took his backpack out to the highway and stuck out his thumb. Probably not your perp.”

“Who was the Army man who talked with—the one with the attitude? Seen either around before?”

“Might be. Army man looked familiar and I think he's a sergeant, but I don't have a name. Short blond hair, stocky, pale complexion, little scar on his left cheek. Not much to go on.”

“Yeah, right. Well, thanks. You see him again, see if you can ID him. Ask Sam to card him or something. Sorry I can't give you anything else on the flap. Maybe later. Gotta get to El Paso.” And he left, still looking unhappy.

Gunnar looked at the Dos Equis on the bar. Half full. Something was really bothering the first sergeant.

Sergeant Major Abercrombie appeared at the bar exactly on time. He came in at eight thirty every night on his way home somewhere out toward Las Cruces and left at exactly eleven thirty. In between, he leaned his bulk on the end of the bar and drank exactly six beers and talked continuously to whoever was nearest. Sam said that he went to the restroom exactly three times, on the hour, but Gunnar never checked. The man was predictable enough without including his bladder control program.

No one seemed to know just what it was Sergeant Major Abercrombie did for the Army. They knew he was counting down his thirty years and that the count was nearing the end. They also knew that if you needed to find him on the post you had only to check the NCO Club. Between noon and four thirty he would be there, standing at the end of the bar, holding office hours and talking. He seemed to know everything that happened, and was more than happy to tell you all of it. Few people listened after the first two minutes.

“And a good evening to you, Chief Gunnar,” he boomed, settling in at the end of the bar and watching as Sam placed a beer and a glass before him. He took a careful sip of his first beer and began to talk to Gunnar.

“Ah, and that's mighty good, first one today, in here anyway. Mighty tough wind coming down from that pass, thought it'd run me right off the road. How do you manage to live up here in this wind, in the winter...”

Gunnar listened for a few minutes and then tuned out.

Gunnar was preoccupied. He was trying to develop a description of the two men sitting in a front booth near a

window. The man he thought was a sergeant was in civilian clothing and sitting with a tall, balding, clean-shaven man of about Gunnar's age. The older man was neatly dressed, with a bright red tie and a new blue and white ski jacket. There were no lift tags on its zipper. There were two aluminum cases shoved under the table.

The men were leaning into each other's space, taking turns talking while two draft beers went flat on either side of them. The older man was speaking often, and flipping his hand as if brushing the other's responses out of the air. The sergeant was stiff, his expression flitting between anger and what looked to Gunnar like fear.

“Wish I could hear that conversation,” muttered Gunnar.

“...but the man was clearly, very clearly, dead. Head smashed right in with a bronze non-sparking wrench of all things. And the ECCM was nowhere in the assembly building.” The sergeant major paused and finished his beer.

“What? What did you say? It must be the noise in here, I didn't get all that. What about the E sí sí M?” Gunnar was now closely attentive to the sergeant major.

“Not E sí sí M, Gunnar. E-C-M. But with an extra C—E-C-C-M. You know what an ECM package is, right?” The sergeant major paused to look hard at Gunnar, then at the clock.

“Yeah, some kind of electronic befuddlement gear, isn't it?”

“Right. Electronic Counter-Measures it's called. Tinkers with the enemy guidance radar signals by providing a frequency-shifted return.”

“Gives them a picture of something that isn't there, doesn't it?”

“Right, an electronic ghost-maker, and if you're going after an enemy plane that has ECM, you want your engineers to build you an anti-ECM device, to see through the ghost image and give you a clear sight of the target. They call that electronic counter counter-measures. ECCM.”

“Yep.” Gunnar paused. “So then if they wanted to mess up your counter counter-measures, they'd make an—”

“No! No!” The sergeant major lifted his lip in a one-sided smile, almost a sneer. “No such thing, you just start all over again. Lord, this acronym b.s. is bad enough already, don't you start contributing.”

Gunnar said, “But what you mentioned about a dead guy? What was that?”

“A moment, please.” The sergeant major turned and headed for the restroom. Gunnar glanced at the clock behind the bar. It was ten minutes of nine. He sipped his beer until Sam returned, then nodded toward the clock.

“So much for your guess on his punctual head calls.”

“Maybe his bladder can't see the clock from there.”

Gunnar turned to look at the two men in the booth. He was in time to see the sergeant returning from the restroom, carrying his metal suitcase, and joining the taller man, who was already standing and looking around the bar. He noticed that their metallic suitcases were the same—both Halliburton cases. They shook hands, the Army man saying something to the tall civilian. Gunner couldn't hear it over the barroom clamor.

The man in the blue and white ski jacket turned and walked through the front door, carrying his case. Gunnar

moved to look through the window, but lost sight of the man in the darkness toward the front of the lot. He continued to watch for a few minutes and saw a dark Lincoln rapidly drive out of the lot and turn down toward Las Cruces. It had what looked like Texas plates.

Sam came over to Gunnar and nodded toward the sergeant, who was looking unhappily at his flat beer. “Did you ask him?”

“I believe that is a non sequitur. Or perhaps just an Apache trick. Ask who what when?” Gunnar said.

“Nowicky. Sergeant Nowicky. About my fifty dollars—he's right over there. He was with the guy in the fancy ski jacket.”

Gunnar was silent for a moment. “No. No, I didn't recognize him. I knew he looked familiar, but it didn't connect.”

“Never mind, he's coming over here. Gonna stay awhile, I guess, ‘cause he's bringing his suitcase.”

Sergeant Nowicky took a stool and smiled at Sam. “How you doing buddy? How about a, oh, a Heineken? Buy yourself one, too.”

Sam nodded at him and grabbed the green bottle out of the ice, placing it and a glass in front of the sergeant. “Doing fine. Gotta pass on the beer, but thanks. Say, you remember that fifty from—”

“Oh hell, I almost forgot. I'll take care of it right now, well, in a minute. Gotta hit the head first. Right back.” And Nowicky slid off the stool and went back to the restrooms, suitcase in hand.

Gunnar looked up when Sergeant Major Abercrombie came in from the front porch and took a position at the corner of the bar.

“As I was saying—” he continued, then paused to allow Sam to serve his beer, glancing at the clock and drinking half the glass at once, “—the dead man was one of two engineers from an aviation electronics company. They were escorting their precious anti-ghost maker. But they got their toy taken away from them. Biggest flap I've seen in years; it shut down everything fast. You couldn't have gotten anything bigger than a pinky ring off the test range after that.”

“And they were—who? The other engineer, was he attacked too?”

“No. The second engineer—fellow named Paulson—wasn't even there. He had called in sick about ten in the evening.”

“And they took, what, one of these ECCMs?” Gunnar asked.

“ECCM package,” the sergeant major replied absently. “Really a top secret sort of device. Only one or two in the world, I suspect. Valuable thing to the right person.”

At that moment, Sergeant Nowicky returned to the bar, carefully placed his suitcase on the floor, and laid two fifty-dollar bills in front of Sam.

“Here you go, Sam. One for you, one for the bar—buy ‘em all a drink.”

“Uh-huh. Payday come early?”

“Sold some property,” said Nowicky, laughing.

Sergeant Major Abercrombie turned and became involved in explaining to the two cowboys on his left what the Army

was testing Friday morning. Gunnar listened for a while to the highly technical launch details and timing scheme, and watched the cowboys. They looked dazed. Or maybe drunk. He went behind the bar to relieve Sam so he could get out front and pick up some tips to report to the IRS.

Nowicky was drinking steadily, telling jokes, laughing, now running a tab and buying rounds for the bar each time he got a fresh beer. When Sam wasn't busy, Nowicky talked to him. Sam nodded occasionally. Once, Gunnar noticed, Abercrombie paused and spoke briefly to Nowicky on his way back from his second restroom visit.

Shortly afterward, Nowicky leaned on the bar in front of Gunnar. “Gotta settle up that old tab and get going. Lots to do tonight.”

Looks like you'll be doing lots of sleeping, thought Gunnar.

Nowicky paid his tab with several more crisp fifties pulled from his jacket pocket, waved to his new friends, and went out the door.

Gunnar walked over to the window in time to see a very dusty Army truck leave the lot and head down the mountain.

It got quieter, and Gunnar started cleaning up, letting Abercrombie's non-stop lecture flow by him as he washed glasses. He allowed a few of the sergeant major's statements to register, just tracking occasional phrases.

“...whoever stole it can make a fortune, if he can keep it...” He was back on the ECCM theft. “...may not even recognize what he's got—probably not trained people buying the thing...”

Gunnar thought about the hot topic of the day for a moment and turned to Abercrombie to ask a question when he noticed a blue and white ski jacket in the room.

He hadn't seen him come in, but the tall, balding man was standing near the same booth he had occupied earlier, scanning the room carefully. He looked angry. He saw Gunnar watching and stalked over to the bar.

“Did you see the soldier I was talking with tonight?”

“Yes, I saw him.”

“When did he leave?”

“I didn't notice the time,” Gunnar said, remembering that it was thirty-five minutes after ten, exactly, when Nowicky left.

“Where did he go?”

Gunnar was deciding whether to answer when Sam spoke up. “Went to see his girlfriend.”

“What's her address?” Ski Jacket demanded, then almost pleasantly added, “It's important.” A tic near his eye contradicted the voice.

Sam hesitated for a moment. “I'll give you the number. You can call, ask if it's too late to come over.” He wrote out the number on the back of a drink coaster and handed it to the man, who glanced at it and strode quickly out of the bar.

“Polite s.o.b.,” said Gunnar. “Why'd you give him anything?”

“Angry s.o.b., too. Without his intended target, he might turn on us. Or worse yet, me.”

Gunnar went looking for Abercrombie with his question. The sergeant major wasn't at the bar. When he hadn't

returned in fifteen minutes, Gunnar figured he had gone home early. He remembered that he had promised to call Brickman, so he went out into the porch's fresh January air and used the outside pay phone to call the first sergeant.

Brickman sounded as if he had never gone to bed, nor intended to.

“Military Intelligence. Brickman.”

Gunnar briefly outlined the events of the evening and said, “Oh, yeah, Nowicky left in an Army truck and the civilian left in either a black or dark blue Lincoln. Texas plate. Easy to spot, I'd think.”

“Yeah, you'd think so. But nobody's seen it yet.”

“You already knew about the car?”

“State Highway boys got a tip. Anonymous of course, but the caller convinced them the guy was involved in our problem in some way—enough so they started looking. Between them and the Border Patrol, they got the border closed—well, filtered anyway. No sign of him yet though.”

“I should have called earlier. He came back looking for Nowicky. Left again less than fifteen minutes ago.”

“Damn. Let me get that out to the cops. Thanks. Maybe we'll get him with a sighting that recent. And Nowicky—we've been looking for him, turns out he works on the same project that had the trouble. I'll have him by the short hairs at morning muster.”

Gunnar thought about Nowicky and Abercrombie until the wind chilled him, then went back in and helped close up the bar. He spent a long time checking the restroom. He walked around the bar, then the parking lot. Nothing seemed out of

place. Sam was turning out the lights, but he paused to watch Gunnar strolling about.

“You're acting like a coyote's in the chicken coop. Something wrong?”

“No. I don't know. I'm just getting the feeling that someone is using us for something. Maybe something illegal, or worse. I just haven't figured out what or how yet.” He paused, and then grinned a little. “Nothing to worry about tonight. See you tomorrow.”

* * *

Gunnar was on the front porch the next afternoon watching the sunset when Deputy Sheriff Jefferson pulled in alongside the porch and lowered his window.

“Got a minute?”

“Got a few. Just helping the sun go down.”

“We're still chasing that blue Lincoln you saw leave here last night. Do you remember the exact time it left and which way it went? We got a discrepancy in descriptions.”

“Left almost exactly at nine last night the first time. Went down toward Las Cruces. Came back in pretty close to eleven, and I didn't see which way he went that time.”

“Thanks. That may help—wish we had a name and picture of the driver. You want to come down and help a sketch artist work up something if we don't have him by tomorrow?”

“Sure. Tomorrow afternoon do?”

“Be fine. See you then.”

Gunnar went back inside as the desert chill moved in. Sam was waving at him from the bar.

“That first sergeant just called. Wants to know if you seen Nowicky. Said he didn't show for work today.”

Gunnar went to the office phone and called Brickman. “No Nowicky here today. You have charges against him?”

“Nothing firm except they want to list him as AWOL. We were just going to ask him about his work on the project and this civilian in the blue car, then this afternoon, some technician out where the murder happened says he saw Nowicky out there the night of the murder. So now we really want to talk to him.”

“What about the ECCM thing? Still missing.”

“Oh yeah, and—how the hell'd you know about that? Never mind. We're up to our hips in people from the alphabet agencies. All helping us look. Any more help and I couldn't see the damn horizon.”

“How about Sergeant Major Abercrombie, he know anything?”

“Hell, he knows everything, whether it happened or not. Just today I ran into him, he tells me he's got the duty or he'd help me investigate. No, we've sort of gotten away from asking him for hard facts.”

* * *

The evening went quietly. Sam asked once where the sergeant major was and Gunnar spoke at length on the improbability of a duty day for a sergeant major with thirty years in. The small crowd began to break up early and around eleven Gunnar asked Sam to close up.

“Got a long day tomorrow,” he said. “Might as well prepare for it.”

Gunnar walked back to the north wing and his bedroom and bath. He stood in the hot shower for a long time thinking, then had a glass of water and lay down.

The alarm's quiet tone woke him at two thirty and he lay there, listening to the night. It was quiet, with only the hum of the big refrigerator up front and the infrequent distant rush of a car up or down the highway breaking the silence. After a bit, he got up and, in the dark, dressed in jeans, boots, and a wool shirt. He collected a blanket, battery-powered spotlight, and a 12-gauge pump shotgun. He checked the shotgun to ensure it was loaded, then took his gear into the dark and quiet barroom. He laid his equipment in the last booth in the corner and went to the bar, where he picked up a bottle of Bushmills and a glass and returned to the booth. He poured a short drink, wrapped himself in the blanket, settled himself in the dark corner of the booth, and waited.

It was a little after four when he heard the quiet crunch of gravel, as of a car traveling very slowly, in the parking lot near the front. He moved the shotgun and spotlight to the table and waited. Ten minutes later he heard metal lightly scraping on metal at the door, then the door opened softly and a dark shape stepped in and immediately moved sideways out of the door frame as the door was quietly closed. A few seconds later a small penlight came on and briefly flashed around the dark barroom. It did not come near Gunnar's booth. Then the dark shape moved softly through the barroom to the restrooms in the back.

Gunnar listened to the soft sounds from the restroom. Once he heard the clink of porcelain as someone stepped on

or jarred the lid of the toilet, and once a thump as if something heavy had been set down quickly. When the sounds stopped, the door squeaked open and the penlight flashed briefly around the barroom again.

When the dark shape was halfway to the front door, in the middle of the barroom dance floor, Gunnar tapped the ON switch of the spotlight and immediately racked the shotgun slide. The chilling sound of the shotgun and flare of light froze the figure in the center of the room, who looked around, eyes wide.

"And a good evening to you, Sergeant Major Abercrombie. Or should I say good morning?" Gunnar said. "You may set the suitcase down. If you have any weapons, you may also put them down—carefully—so I can quit holding this trigger quite so tight."

Abercrombie slowly placed the aluminum suitcase on the floor and carefully lifted the edges of his field jacket to show his belt. "No weapons," he said.

"Have a seat," said Gunnar. "No, on the floor. Keep your legs straight out in front of you. Fine. Now spread them apart. Good. Want to hold your hands, inside of your wrists together, above your head? Very good."

Gunnar walked over to the bar, shotgun in the crook of his arm, spotlight pointed at Abercrombie, pinning him like a solo act on a bare stage. He reached around and turned on the barroom lights, then picked up a looped nylon tie from under the bar and walked up behind Abercrombie, slipping the loop over his wrists and cinching it closed.

“Now let's relax a little. Want a drink?” Abercrombie nodded once. Gunnar poured several ounces of Bushmills into a glass and placed it between Abercrombie's palms. Then he put the suitcase on the bar and sat down nearby, laying the shotgun on the table.

“Care to talk about it? We've got a while to wait.”

Abercrombie shook his head. “I'm quite sure I'll be invited to talk again when your, ah, help arrives. Anyway, I don't feel like talking just now.” That was a first for him. They sat, looking at each other, each occasionally sipping from his glass.

Around five, Gunnar went over and poured a little more whiskey into Abercrombie's glass. The sergeant major sighed, looked up at Gunnar, and said, “You were waiting for me?”

“No. I knew somebody would be back—that sick engineer Paulson, Nowicky, Mr. Ski Jacket, or you. Turned out to be you.”

“The others—they could have come early last night—you wait up for them?”

Gunnar shook his head. “No, last night they were probably hiding and you certainly were. You saw a tall, balding man the night before barely controlling his anger and you went to a foxhole somewhere, didn't you? Last evening too, I'd bet.”

“You'd lose. Why would I hide? I don't know those people you mentioned, I simply saw the sergeant hiding something and thought it might be Army property. I thought I'd retrieve it.” The sergeant major seemed more relaxed.

“Picked a funny time to do Army work.”

“For all I knew you were in on whatever it was—buying Army property maybe?” Now he had an accusing tone in his voice.

Gunnar shook his head. “You're fast on your feet—and with your mouth.”

“How about getting this strap off? All I'm guilty of is entering your place after hours to retrieve some Army property. Can't even charge me with breaking and entering—your door's already broken.”

Gunnar shook his head again, “We'll see. Were you going to sell the ECCM package again?”

“Don't know what you're talking about,” Abercrombie said, and they went back to sipping occasionally and watching each other.

* * *

Sam was the first to arrive. They heard him in the kitchen, and soon they could smell fresh coffee. Then he walked into the bar carrying a steaming cup and scratching his stomach. He stopped abruptly, taking in the scene in the barroom, then he returned to the kitchen and came back with two more cups of coffee. He walked to Gunnar's table, put down a cup, and poured a generous shot of whiskey into his own coffee. He placed the last cup next to the sergeant major. He sat down at the bar, sipped his coffee, and joined the silent waiting.

First Sergeant Brickman came in next, looking tired and frustrated. He was flanked by two M.P.'s. He looked over the scene.

“Where's the coffee?”

Sam got a tray and brought out three more cups of coffee, looked at Gunnar, and went back for a pot. Brickman gave one of the M.P.'s a list of people to call, then waved at the suitcase on the bar.

“That it?”

“Probably,” Gunnar said.

Then everyone came in a rush: Two more M.P.'s; a fellow with a conservative necktie and a blue jacket that said FBI in immodest letters; the provost marshal, himself a major; a man in a conservative suit and dark sunglasses, a civilian, who went immediately to the case on the bar. The civilian unlocked the suitcase, looked inside carefully, powered up the internal battery, flipped a switch or two while he looked at the readouts, nodded at Brickman, and shut down the device and relocked the case.

“Looks like the gang's all here,” said Brickman. “Anyone want to start? Gunnar?”

* * *

It was almost ten before they left, taking the sergeant major with them, although they had cut the nylon tie off his wrists. Brickman stayed behind for a few minutes.

“I think you overreacted a little, Gunnar, there's no proof that Abercrombie was involved in the theft or the deaths. Maybe he did intend to resell the device, but we can't prove it. Neither can you. We'll keep him on a short leash for a while, but nothing will really come of this unless you want to press charges with the county for burglary—but then, you didn't own the device either, did you? Breaking and entering may be out, too. Your door was already broken, right?”

Gunnar snorted. “You said deaths. Who else is dead—Ski Jacket? Maybe an aviation engineer named Paulson?”

“No. Forgot to tell you, but Paulson's back in California, claiming he was scared of whoever killed his partner. We're asking for extradition. How the hell do you find out these things before we do?”

“I read the paper?”

“And we found Nowicky, or rather, his girlfriend found him when she came home from a party about five this morning. He was lying on the floor with about nine new holes in him. No suitcase, no money. There was a coaster from your place ... it only had his girlfriend's number on it. The county boys are still out there but I doubt they'll find anything new.”

“How'd Ski Jacket find him?”

“There you go again, jumping right in. You have no proof it was the man in the ski jacket.”

“Sam wrote the number on the coaster and gave it to Ski Jacket,” Gunnar said. “Eleven o'clock, night of the first murder. I saw him hand it to the man in the ski jacket.”

Brickman blinked. “Ah. Guess we do have something then. He probably used a reverse directory to get the address.... She lives over in that little town of Organ ... at One Furnace Avenue—it wouldn't take an Apache tracker to find that. Excuse me, I need to call the sheriff on this.”

Brickman took out his phone, then stopped and looked at Gunnar and grinned. “Don't get so upset about the sergeant major out-flanking the Navy. He's been doing it for a lot of years.”

Gunnar watched Brickman walking away, talking to his phone, then he walked to his pickup, gritting his teeth. He got in and followed the familiar route to his horse pasture. They must think I've forgotten them, he thought. As he turned in at the pasture and jolted his way to the barn, he saw all the horses standing at the fence. He got out and walked toward the horses, suddenly noticing that they had bridles on and the reins were tied to the fence.

As he reached for the first horse, he saw the dark blue Lincoln, parked deep in the opening to the barn. The car was very dusty. A man in a blue and white ski jacket stepped out from the barn. He was holding a 9-millimeter automatic in his right hand and pointing it directly at Gunnar's forehead.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Gunnar McManus. I was about to give you up, but a creature of habit is a creature of habit and will persevere come hell, high water, or a cold body.” He smiled. The smile touched only his thin lips. “Oh don't be surprised, Mr. McManus—or can I call you Gunnar?—I do my homework. If I must use your, um, Horse Trough Bar to do business, then I must know all about you. Not that there is that much to know. In less than a week I knew you were utterly predictable. A man of thought-sapping routine. A man retired in work, body, and mind. Fortunately I am here to tell you what you will do for me in the next week or so. Even if I didn't foresee this particular twist, it is working out as perfectly as if I had planned it.”

“The police are still watching the roads,” Gunnar said, trying to slow things down.

The man laughed. “So predictable! It's like you're reading from a script I wrote! But forgive me my manners; my name is Tschirky. Howard O. Tschirky. You may call me Howard, if you wish. It doesn't matter, as my passport is in another name and you won't be leaving the country with me.” He smiled that lips-only smile again. Gunnar liked the laugh better than the smile, but not by much.

“But, enough. We are behind schedule. You saddle two of the horses, pack those two Halliburton cases on the third horse, and gather whatever water you have here available. Food and camping supplies are in the Lincoln—pack them too. Pack quickly. I will stand here with this pistol and watch you. Eh?”

Gunnar nodded his understanding and began the tasks, watching Howard carefully out of the corner of his eye for mistakes. Howard hadn't made any by the time he finished strapping the aluminum cases to the pack horse. He tapped on a case.

“What's in this?” he asked as innocently as he could manage.

Howard looked at him briefly.

“It's a decoy device for missiles and planes. Worth a hundred thousand or so, I believe, if you sell it in the right place.”

“An ECCM package,” Gunnar said.

Howard started, then recovered. “You've been talking to Military Intelligence—but no, it's not electronic. My ex-partner decided to hide that one from me—this one's worth considerably less, but I may sell it to cover expenses. It's a

new infrared decoy device. It outsmarts the better heat-seeking missiles and lures them away from their real targets.

“Then, of course,” Howard continued, “there's the two hundred fifty thousand dollars in the other case. Nowicky ... ah ... willed it to me when he couldn't remember what he did with the genuine ECCM package.”

Gunnar nodded. “Then all you need is to hide out until they start looking somewhere else, skip across the border, and sell this decoy. Not bad. What're you going to do when they come looking for me and find a blue Lincoln and no horses?”

Howard smirked. Gunnar watched carefully; he had never seen a real smirk before. “Taken care of. I called your establishment when I saw your dust. You've met an old Navy buddy—me—and gone hunting out west. We will have fun, and they won't even come looking for a week. That should be sufficient time.”

Yep, thought Gunnar, that should be plenty of time.

* * *

They drove north. On Howard's map the road was marked as “secondary, improved.” That meant that the gravel was only fist size and there were markers every four or five miles, maybe. Howard sat behind Gunnar in the crew cab seat, presumably with his gun in hand. He was still boasting about his plan.

“This map shows a canyon that goes into the San Andres Mountains and dead ends. It's totally isolated from the range. No one will think to look there. I doubt even helicopters can follow these narrow little canyons. We'll go as close as possible, park under cover, and ride in where no car can go,

not even four-wheel drive. Then we'll just camp up there for seven or eight days and come back out free to travel again. At least—" He paused to lean forward and look at Gunnar. "—perhaps we will.... You may walk out later."

Gunnar agreed with the plan except for a few details, such as the particular canyon they were looking for. He thought Howard's plan would probably work. It did show planning: Howard had picked up food and supplies before the kidnap; he had brought a good map of the edge of the Missile Range, a map that should not have been available to the public; he knew almost exactly how long the roadblocks and search would be maintained; he had selected a canyon that was secure. But if I can change his canyon selection, maybe the plan will unravel.

Gunnar crossed into the military restricted zone just after dark. He drove without lights, depending on the moon and the highly visible sand road to keep out of the brush alongside the road. Driving in darkness kept the Range Riders, the Federal security men who patrolled from horseback rather than in vehicles, from seeing them enter the San Andres foothills. Driving in darkness also kept Howard from reading the occasional road marker, so he was reduced to doing dead reckoning navigation without anything to reckon against. Gunnar was sure Howard would miscalculate something. He counted on it.

When Gunnar turned into a narrow, rough road that perceptibly rose into the mountains, Howard accepted it as the desired end to his excellent navigation and planning. He was only ten miles off.

It was fully dark when Gunnar downshifted and nosed into a dry wash sloping up into the mountain's heart. The pickup and trailer tops were below the edges of the wash and mesquite bordered both sides of the wash. Gunnar was careful to drive only far enough to shield the rig from above. He wanted to be able to back out again. He set the brake, dropped the keys in the ashtray, put his heavy coat back on, and went for the horses. Howard kept him in sight, but seemed more relaxed about it than before. When they were ready to travel, Howard handed a pair of handcuffs to Gunnar.

“One on your wrist, the other tightly around the saddle horn,” he said. “If you run, you'll carry a lot of baggage with you.” He laughed. Gunnar was rapidly tiring of that laugh.

For the rest of the moonlit night they followed the canyon's tortuous path—narrow in places, wide and rocky in others, almost totally washed away in yet others—into the mountains. No vehicle Gunnar knew of could have managed it.

It was a few minutes past four when the ravine began opening up, revealing a white, ghostly plain stretching away below them. Howard rode forward and reined in.

“You son of a bitch! You took us into the wrong canyon! That's the test range down there! They'll see us from any helicopter that comes up here. I will shoot you here! Now!”

“Sorry! Sorry. I really am,” said Gunnar, sounding scared without really trying. “It's hard to tell these canyons apart. Don't do anything reckless. I know this place. It'll work. Look, there's a little plateau, a rock ledge, up here with a ravine

behind it. Keep the horses down in that ravine and out of sight. Keep a small camp up there on the flat part. You can see anything that moves on the whole range. Plenty of time to get the horses and keep our heads down if we see something. It'll work fine."

Howard was silent, considering his options. Gunnar put the spike in.

"We can't go back now anyway. It'll be light in another couple of hours and you can see riders in that canyon from the mountainsides. We've got to wait until dark to move again."

Howard sounded angry, but seemed to see no alternative at the moment. "All right, get down. Make a camp."

"Can't. Cuffed to the saddle horn."

Howard dug the key out, said "Here," and tossed it to Gunnar. Gunnar snapped it out of the air, unlocked the cuff from the horn and began to curse.

"Now what?"

Gunnar was off the horse, scuffing his boot through the sand. "Dropped the damn key. Now I can't get this other one off my wrist."

"Guess you'll have to do everything with your hands in front of you. Lock your wrists together." Gunnar could hear the safety snick off the automatic. He locked the other cuff, brushing a wrist against his watch pocket to make sure the handcuff key was secure.

Before the first pink tinges of light began to show in the sky, camp was set up. The horses were down in the ravine behind the small ledge, scuffling for the dry bunch grass

there. They were still saddled. Gunnar told Howard he would unsaddle them when he got a good look at the range and was sure they wouldn't have to retreat. He stacked flat rocks into a low wall and built a small fire behind them to take the edge off the night chill. He filled the coffee pot from a canteen and rigged it over the small fire. He unpacked a cold breakfast for them while they waited for the coffee.

“How did a master planner like you,” Gunnar drawled, “let a tech-head Army sergeant outsmart him?”

Howard looked around sharply.

Gunnar mused aloud. “Kid must have been smarter than I thought. Swapped away your fortune from under your nose and gave you something hot enough to send you to jail forever instead of a metal suitcase full of bricks.” Gunnar paused for a few seconds. “Maybe he thought you'd recognize a brick.”

“Nowicky did not think,” Howard snapped. “It was someone else! But not you. You have no talent. Look where you are.” He waved a hand at the mountainside and plain below them.

Right where I want to be.

Gunnar put the needle in again.

“Aw, I can't believe that. The other engineer—Paulson—he didn't do it. Engineers think linearly. They don't do devious. Besides, Nowicky's always looking for money. Always has a scheme working.” He tried to sound like the argument was won.

Howard yanked a journal from his pack and shook several sheets of dark-stained paper from it.

“See this? Nowicky wrote it. It's a confession. He woke up hung over and scared of the ultimate justice—wrote the whole thing out and was going to send it to the Army as soon as he found a priest and became right with himself and God.” Howard stuffed the letter back into the journal. “He tells who coached him through this and who paid, and that would have been embarrassing. But I arrived first and gave him peace.”

“Shoot him with that thing?” Gunnar nodded at the automatic.

“Let us say just that he will not mail any confessions.”

At first light, Gunnar, slumped against the rocks near one of the suitcases, casually checked his watch and said, “What's this thermal decoy look like anyway?”

Howard put down the journal, where he had been busily writing something by the firelight, and considered his prisoner. Finally, he stood and walked over to the case and unsnapped the lid. “You may as well look at it, I need to make a sketch of it anyway. For sales purposes.” He laughed again. He's turning into a regular happy fellow, Gunnar thought as he looked at the infrared decoy.

It was familiar. It had many of the same controls he had once worked with, but there were several new switches with protective hoods—safeties or interlocks, he thought. The heat sources—thermite packs—were different. They were in two clusters with the familiar silver thermite tube in the center, but they had several different colored tubes clamped to them. Gunnar figured when the thermite burned, the other tubes would burn, too, and lend their heat signature to the thermal

flare the missile was seeking. Thermite burned fast, and was hot enough to ignite most metals.

“Can't make heads or tails of it,” said Gunnar, sitting down close to the case and visually locating the thermite activator leads.

From the ravine, a horse snorted and stomped, the stirrups clattering as it moved. Howard sprang to his feet, and in a bent stance he scuttled to the edge of the ravine with his gun extended in front of him.

Gunnar quickly yanked a thermite activator lead out of its supply plug and peeled insulation from the broken end with his thumbnail. Clumsily, with his hands locked together, he twisted the bare lead around the battery outlet terminal and pushed the wire out of sight under the switch. He prayed that Howard was unfamiliar with wire color codes and sat back away from the device as Howard returned to the fire, pushing the gun back into his belt.

“Just a horse,” he said.

Howard sat and began sketching the layout in the suitcase. Gunnar started asking simple, innocent questions about the equipment. Howard glanced at him, ignored him at first, and then began to answer. His answers soon grew longer, more detailed. His voice gradually rose and assumed a lecturer's tone, which covered the faint sound of a target drone crossing the range just north of them. Gunnar turned his head, coughed, and slid the handcuff key out of his watch pocket. In seconds the cuffs were off and hidden in the sand between his legs. He kept his head and hands down. Howard flexed his

back against the warmth of the small campfire and continued sketching and lecturing.

Gunnar checked his watch and glanced again toward the sunrise. He saw the launch aircraft appear from the south as the missile test that Sergeant Major Abercrombie had talked about in such detail began.

“The test of an air-to-air infrared guidance system. The heat seeker demonstration,” the sergeant major had said.

Gunnar, head turned toward the sunrise, watched the launch aircraft—a jet fighter, he now saw—grow rapidly larger as it came up the range. Howard paused in his lecture and cocked his head toward the sound.

When Gunnar saw the launch aircraft bank suddenly and drop in their direction—locking onto the now fully audible target drone, he rolled onto his back and kicked Howard as hard as he could into the campfire. Howard screamed and beat at the fire; Gunnar rolled to the thermal decoy case and began flipping covers and switches as fast as he could. He hesitated at the last, the battery activation switch, then glanced at the aircraft, watched for and finally saw the puff of smoke as the missile leapt out from beneath the wing. He clamped his eyes shut, flipped the switch, and rolled violently away from the case.

Howard was on his feet, raising his gun and staring wildly at the case where he expected to see Gunnar when the thermite went off. Gunnar heard it and rolled faster than he thought possible; he rolled over the edge of the ravine and fell among the horses. The thermite's pure white expanding glare threw a wash of light and heat high up the side of the

mountain. Howard screamed and began pulling the trigger until he fell off the rock shelf and onto the scree below the infernal thermite heat and light.

As Howard struggled to his feet in the loose rock and began firing blindly up the slope, the two hundred pound, fifteen hundred mile an hour heat seeker, tracking the hottest source in its view, arrived. The missile was twelve feet short of and six feet below its thermite target, but dead on Howard. It had no high explosive warhead, but it didn't matter.

Gunnar had the horses' bridles clutched in his hand when the missile arrived and its remaining fuel blew up. The wall of the ravine reached out and slapped him. One horse stumbled into him, the others rearing and screaming silently in the roar of the missile disintegration. An aluminum suitcase fell off the rock shelf and spun, dented but still closed, into Gunnar's legs.

Gunnar held the horses until the noise and light faded and rock quit falling, then got slowly to his feet. The horses had a number of cuts from ricocheted rock or metal shards, but the bleeding was minor. He looked down at the wreck of his clothing and slowly touched his face. Blood, some pain, but bearable. Quickly, he led the horses toward the mouth of the ravine and tied them to a mesquite tree. He climbed up to look at the camp then dropped down to see the impact area.

There was nothing on the flat ledge where the camp had been but a blackened area where the thermite decoy had burned. On the scree slope in front were violet, purple, and yellow flames and a strong smell of sulfur mixed with something slightly familiar that he did not wish to identify.

Scraps of metal were everywhere. He didn't see Howard; he didn't look for Howard. He saw pieces of blue and white nylon, smoldering at the bottom of the slope.

Slowly, he went back to the horses, mounted, and rode into the canyon. After a few minutes he stopped and sat in thought, then went back to the ravine. He painfully got down, picked up a few pieces of debris and a scorched notebook, shoved them into a saddlebag, and then tied the last aluminum suitcase onto a saddle. He remounted and pointed the horses out of the canyon, away from the test range.

* * *

Gunnar managed to get the horses loaded in the trailer and the rig out of the sheltering ravine and off Federal land before the need to rest overcame him. He parked along the road and slept for several hours, until the horses stomping in the back awoke him. Carefully, he crawled out of the cab and saw to the horses. Then he found a first-aid kit, and with the help of the rearview mirror, tried to make himself look presentable enough to prevent frightening other motorists. Finally, he drove the horses and himself home.

* * *

It was almost ten that evening when Gunnar drove into the Horse Trough Bar parking lot. There were fifteen or sixteen vehicles in the lot. He limped up to the pay phone on the porch and called Brickman.

“Thought you'd gone hunting,” said Brickman. “Heard about our aborted test uprange and come back to tell us how the Navy woulda done it?”

“I heard it,” said Gunnar.

“Yeah, right, sure you did. What can I do for you this far after working hours?”

“If you show up at the Horse Trough Bar tomorrow morning at eight I'll tell you why your heat-hunting bird crashed. Bring Abercrombie. And, just to get you here on time, I'll tell you who that bird of yours fell on.”

“What! They didn't release that—what you pulling this—” Gunnar hung up, then he walked into the dim barroom and went to the end and collapsed on a stool.

Sam came toward him down the bar. “Can I help you...” and then recognized Gunnar. “My God! What was hunting you? I thought your buddy said you were going for sport. Can I get you something? An ambulance? What can I do?”

“Would you get me some Irish whiskey? Bushmills. Just bring the bottle and a glass. And Sam, if anyone calls before eight tomorrow, you haven't seen me.”

When Sam returned with the glass and whiskey, he put the big first-aid box on the bar, turned on an overhead light, and whistled lightly when he saw Gunnar in the full light. “Want a bullet to bite? Or will the whiskey do?”

Gunnar sat quietly, washing down aspirin with the whiskey and counting the aches and stings of his punished body while Sam worked on the facial cuts and burns.

“Okay if I stitch a little here?” Sam asked.

“Long's it's not a fancy knot.” Gunnar took a long sip of whiskey.

“Naw, it's an Apache knot. Heals ugly, but with character.” He took a tug and cut off the ends with the bar knife.

Sam stood back, stoically surveying the result.

“Better than new,” he observed. “Or with more interesting features, anyway. You gonna tell me about it or pretend you're an Indian?”

“Tell you tomorrow morning at eight. Right here. Probably gonna need a lot of coffee ‘cause we'll have company,” said Gunnar. “Even on Saturday morning.”

* * *

Gunnar met them on the porch the next morning. First Sergeant Brickman had Abercrombie and an M.P. with him. The provost marshal and a range safety officer came together. Deputy Sheriff Jefferson arrived to represent Doña Ana County's interests.

Gunnar greeted them, ushered them in, and thanked them for coming, then offered coffee and fresh rolls.

“I'm sorry to get you all out on Saturday morning, but I am too beat up today to get around to all of you, and this is as equidistant to all your areas as I could think of. I hope to offer some aid in closing out this problem we've all had this week.” Then he briefed them on his part in Howard's end, mostly without interruption.

“You went on the range without permission!” the provost marshal said. Loudly.

“Yes, Major, but I was under duress. You might want to see about adding that charge to Howard's list. Kidnapping, murder, undue duress, violating range rules, and above all, stealing horses.”

“You destroyed a U.S. Army tactical thermal decoy! Government property!”

“Yes, Major, I believe it was, and, Major, this is a small group. We can hear you without you having to shout.”

Brickman helped with confirmations. “The investigator's initial report said they found what was—probably—a melted thermal decoy and part of its box near the aborted test missile. Also found some handcuffs in the sand nearby and an empty handgun down on a scree slope. They found some pieces of what could be Howard—they'll eventually know for sure.”

“Can we get the gun—for comparison with the Nowicky murder?” asked Jefferson.

“Of course, come down and sign for it later this morning. We recovered some fired slugs in the sand up there and it's the right caliber, so we'll be happy to turn it over. We also found a half-burned passport up there—didn't say Tschirky, but it matched someone who came in from Mexico about six weeks ago. That name matches what, uh, one of our sources told us is one of the names of an arms buyer, or dealer, I suppose.”

The major stood up. “Looks like a wrap to me. Gunnar, is it? We'll send you a letter of appreciation, and probably drop the trespassing charges.” He turned to Brickman and said, “Just one thing, First Sergeant, why in hell is the sergeant major sitting in on this? I thought he was up for a hearing on misappropriation of government property.”

First Sergeant Brickman looked uncomfortable. “Gunnar thinks Abercrombie masterminded the whole thing.”

“Nonsense,” the major said. “We're bringing the perpetrator back from California.”

Gunnar looked at Abercrombie, who smiled slightly. Gunnar sighed and said, “You may have to rethink that charge. Paulson bailed out of here when he figured out that Nowicky was trying to steal the ECCM device. Check and you'll probably find he flew out of Roswell before the theft and killing at the site.”

The group went silent. Gunnar continued.

“The sergeant major is the source of your problems. He set it all up and almost made it work. Nowicky was his ghost image, his counter-measures persona, everyone saw Nowicky and went after him. He used Nowicky against you and against Howard. It just happened that this last time the signal took a bad bounce, or maybe it came back a little wrong, or maybe there was a counter, counter measure at work. Anyway, he went off course.”

“Why are you listening to this crap?” the sergeant major said loudly, standing up and pointing at Gunnar. “We went through this the other day after he stuck a shotgun in my face while I was retrieving the Army's property from his bar. There was no proof of anything then. There is no proof of anything now.”

Gunnar looked at Brickman. “You tell anyone at all what the murder weapon was out at the assembly building?”

“No. That was held back.”

“Then why not ask Sam what it was?”

Brickman turned to Sam, who was leaning against the bar. “You know what killed the tech out there?”

“Sure,” said Sam.

“So! What was it then?”

“Was a no-spark wrench.”

Brickman blinked. “Who told you.”

Sam jerked his chin toward the sergeant major. “Told everybody at the bar, night after it happened.”

The sergeant major's angry look began to fade. He reached for his chair.

Gunnar picked up a blackened, edge-charred journal from a nearby table, took Nowicky's letter out of it, and held it up.

“This is as close to a deathbed confession as you can get, I think. Nowicky was precise in his writing, and he covered details. Details like who told him where the ECCM would be late that night with only one caretaker; details like who priced it and provided a number for a buyer; details like how to double your profit by doing the switch game on the buyer. There's a signature, bloodstains that may be tested, and enough dates, times, and places to keep your investigators busy for a week.”

He handed the letter to Brickman.

Sergeant Major Abercrombie sat down heavily. There was dead silence in the room. The major cleared his throat. “So why'd you get into this? It's mostly a military thing,” he said, frowning at Gunnar, the outsider.

Gunnar looked up at him from under his eyebrows.

“I don't like being used for criminal activities. I don't like my place being used for them either. I won't act as a cover—a counter-measure—for any clown who thinks I'm easy.” He turned and looked hard at the sergeant major.

“Then too, you're going to find out that the call that dropped a dime on Howard's car came from my front porch,

so I'd like to show you someone who had the motivation to make that call. In other words, Major, I'm covering my ass as fast as I can by uncovering his."

Brickman said, "All right, all right. Sounds like the rest of this is going to be paperwork. You wouldn't know where the money went, would you? It burn up in the missile test failure, too?"

Gunnar shrugged and walked over to look out the window. "I dunno. You think there was enough in there to pay for that smudge pot the Army's all upset over?"

After a long silence, Brickman spoke. "Probably was. There might even have been enough to fund a finder's fee."

Gunnar shrugged again. "Well hell then, it's right out there in the bed of my pickup. Oh, First Sergeant?"

"Yeah?" said Brinkman.

Gunnar grinned at the first sergeant. "Don't get so upset about me outmaneuvering the Army. I've been doing it for a lot of years."

[Back to Table of Contents]

[Back to Table of Contents]

Nailbiter by Robert Lopresti

“I will not bite my nails. I will not bite my nails. I will—”

“Excuse me?”

“Sorry. I didn't mean to bother you.”

“It sounded like you were saying you won't bite your nails.”

“Look, just forget it. I'll be quiet.”

“Hey, it's gonna be a long train trip and we're the only people in this car. We might as well talk a bit. Where are you headed?”

“Home to Seattle. And you?”

“I got business in Portland. So what's all this talk about nail biting?”

“Oh. It's called behavior modification. If you're trying to stop a bad habit, you make it less pleasant. So whenever I bite my nails I just repeat that phrase five times.”

“Huh. And does it work?”

“It seems to help.”

“ ‘Cause I seem to notice that some of your nails are bitten down to—”

“I'm just starting the program. That's what I was doing up north. They have a clinic up there that teaches the method.”

“Huh. I thought most people grew out of nail biting long before they reached your age. How old are you?”

“Thirty-two.”

“Really? I would have taken you for forty.”

“What's your point?”

“None, I guess. So how much did you pay these people to teach you to say the same thing over and over?”

“That's none of your business.”

“I guess that means you paid a bundle.”

“Besides, there's a lot more to the method than just repeating that phrase.”

“Huh. Let me guess. You close your eyes and tap your heels three times.”

“That's not funny. And I wish you wouldn't joke about it.”

“You're the joke, pal. I'll tell you how to stop biting your nails. All you need is plain old will power.”

“That is a very old-fashioned concept. Psychologists say that the term ‘will power’ doesn't mean anything, and—”

“Not to them, maybe. And definitely not to you. But I've got plenty of the stuff. Two years ago I quit smoking cold turkey. Just like that! No patch, no Twelve Step program, no New Age banana oil. And you say you can't even quit biting your nails without a magic incantation?”

“It's not the same as smoking. You don't always have cigarettes at your fingertips, so to speak.”

“Excuses. Weak people always have an explanation for being weak. It's society's fault. Or Mommy raised me wrong. Or I was victimized—What was that?”

“Nothing.”

“Yes it was. You said—I know! You said, ‘I will not lose my temper. I will not lose my temper.’ Is that another one of your little phrases?”

“As a matter of fact, it is. Now let's drop the subject.”

“Well, I think it's too late, buddy boy. You have already lost your temper.”

“That's the whole point! You say it after the bad habit reasserts itself! I can't believe you're too thick to understand a simple—”

“Hey, relax, sonny. And sit down. It's no wonder you look ten years older than you are. You're a nervous wreck, that's all. You really think it's smart to try to get rid of all your bad habits at once? Huh. A neurotic like you. Hell, I bet there isn't much to you except your bad habits, your temper, and your twitches. If you got rid of them all at once, you might just disappear. What's the matter, sonny? Nothing to say?”

* * *

“Seattle! All off for Seattle! There you are, sir.”

“Thank you. By the way, Conductor, there's a man in the last car who doesn't look well. You should probably take a look at him.”

“Thank you, sir. I will. All aboard!”

“Porter, would you take these bags for me? Thanks. Now where was I? Oh yes. I will not kill people who annoy me. I will not kill people who annoy me. I will not kill people who annoy me...”

[Back to Table of Contents]

[Back to Table of Contents]

Murder on the Rise by John H. Dirckx

Justin never knew when the urge would come or where it came from. At odd intervals of weeks or months, an irresistible compulsion would draw him back again to The Place, lure him to walk once more among its mysterious silences and savor its atmosphere of latent menace, its vague promise of forbidden delight.

It always started like one of his migraine headaches, with a faint uneasiness, an indefinable malaise, building by slow degrees into a force that dominated his whole being, brooking neither distraction nor delay. And then he was off, hustling through the woods, drifting deeper into that trancelike state of abstraction as he came closer to the gap in the hedge.

Justin always thought of it simply as The Place—never as the abandoned Wheeler estate, or as the broad tract of unkempt land, enclosed by high walls and thick hedges, that lay just beyond the north loop of Scatcherd Reservoir Road. And for reasons that even he couldn't have formulated, he never recorded his visits there in the secret journal he kept in a language of his own invention, written from right to left.

Each visit to The Place proved more exhilarating, more terrifying, more satisfying than the one before. These visits were like successive steps in the solution of a calculus problem, each a more daring leap into thin air, bolstered by hopes of landing on one's feet, yet tinged with a delicious uncertainty and sense of danger.

It was cool and damp in the woods. The dense foliage, just beginning to turn red and yellow, muffled the sounds of traffic on the Interstate a quarter of a mile away. There was a kind of sighing or singing in his ears, and he seemed to be floating in some fourth dimension as he approached the entrance to that somber, still world known only to him.

After a quick look around to be sure he wasn't observed, Justin slipped through the hedge.

* * *

Porter, the investigator for Allied Assurance, climbed out of the window well at the back of Hammond Depository and wiped his hands on a handkerchief. He was a small man in his mid-fifties, with a curt, peppery manner. In his double-breasted three-piece pinstripe suit, he looked like a bank president in an old black-and-white movie. “Same paradigm as in Detroit,” he said. “Same paradigm as in Atlanta.”

If he says “paradigm” just one more time, Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn told himself, I'll strangle him with my bare hands. But he'd told himself that several times already, and Porter was still strutting around criticizing all interested parties as if the stolen shipment of diamonds had been his personal property.

It was almost two o'clock in the afternoon on a humid gray Sunday in October, and Auburn hadn't even had lunch yet. He'd spent the latter half of the night here, investigating the burglary when he wasn't busy preventing the owners of the missing stones from murdering the proprietors of the depository. Then he'd spent the whole morning going over the premises again with other detectives and an evidence

technician from headquarters, and now most of the afternoon playing second fiddle to the insurance investigator, who'd flown in from Boston.

The theft, as Porter kept reminding Auburn, matched the M.O. of a gang that had pulled off at least five successful jewel heists in the past eighteen months. Hitherto unidentified, they were known unofficially as the Trenton gang, after the site of their first hit.

A large and heavily insured shipment of diamonds had arrived Friday afternoon by courier and had been placed in a safe at Hammond Depository, a warehouse and central holding area used by a number of downtown retail establishments. Late Saturday night, the guard on duty at the depository had been decoyed away from the rear of the building and delayed in making his normal rounds for almost an hour by a woman who collapsed on the sidewalk in front of the depository.

Although she insisted that she only needed a rest and a drink of water, she had looked seriously ill to the guard, who had finally called an ambulance after she passed out the second time in the lobby of the building. The paramedics, who could find no ID on her, removed her in an apparently semicomatose condition to the emergency department of Chalfont Hospital, from which she vanished as soon as she was left alone in an observation bed.

While the guard at the depository was thus distracted from his duties, thieves had entered a closed court at the back of the building and cut through five bars on a sunken window with an oxyacetylene torch. Since the depository was built

like a fortress and had twenty-four-hour security, interior storage facilities weren't designed to offer much protection against theft. The thieves had opened the “safe” in which the diamonds had been stored by knocking off its lock with a six-pound sledgehammer and had gotten away with their spoils, leaving the hammer behind, before the guard resumed his rounds.

The guard's first clue that something was wrong was a side door that he found blocked wide open, evidently an alternate escape route prepared by the thieves in case of premature detection. According to Porter, that also fitted their standard mode of operation. And as in previous heists, they seemed to have had accurate knowledge of the arrival of the stones, as well as the geography and security arrangements of the depository. The fact that none of the spoils of their previous heists had ever been traced suggested some connection with the wholesale jewelry business.

“But the cones are new,” Porter was saying. “That's new. That doesn't fit the paradigm.”

The thieves had placed six orange cones across the driveway to the court behind the depository, evidently to discourage anyone from driving into the court and accidentally discovering them at work. The cones were the property of the Division of Streets, and might have been stolen from any of several work sites, or even from the Victoria Street public works yard, unfenced along its river frontage, where security was notoriously lax.

“Your company seems to have built up a pretty complete profile on this Trenton gang,” remarked Auburn. “Would there

be something on paper, or on a disk somewhere, that we could get a look at?”

Porter's smile looked like a frown, and his frown would have scared a shark. “It's not just my company,” he said. “These clowns have never hit us before. But in the insurance business we pool our information on a thing like this. And we're willing to share what we have with the authorities, too, up to a point.”

Auburn had worked with insurance investigators before. They were usually very good at what they did, but their ultimate goal was to recover lost or stolen property independently of law enforcement authorities. Despite a show of cooperation with Auburn, Porter was clearly determined to spare his company the expense of a reward, while no doubt hoping to snare a substantial bonus for himself.

Porter had hauled the hoodwinked guard back out of bed and grilled him for an hour, asking the same questions Auburn had asked him that morning and concluding the interview in typical sarcastic fashion: “Well, Frost, your stupidity is going to cost my company between five and six million, but it probably saved your life. The guard in Hagerstown wasn't such a jerk, and they shot him dead on the spot.”

Porter already had lists of all the employees of Hammond Depository and all the employees of Carlyle Jewelry, the firm that owned the diamonds, and he was waiting to hear from the wholesale dealers who had consigned them and the courier service that had delivered them. He had also talked to the paramedics, soundly berating them for scrubbing down

their equipment and thus removing any fingerprints that might have permitted identification of the woman who had monopolized the guard's attention while the theft was taking place. And he had tried, with no more success than Auburn, to find somebody at the fleabag hotel across the street from the driveway to the depository who had seen the thieves arrive or leave.

It was only after carrying out all these peripheral inquiries that Porter had condescended to examine the evidence at the scene. Here he bustled around at Auburn's heels, taking pictures and making copious notes in a long, narrow book bound in black leather.

Sergeant David Kestrel, the police evidence technician, had been working nonstop since early morning. He had taken possession of the sledgehammer, which was brand new and probably untraceable. He had lifted a number of fresh fingerprints from the opened safe and its immediate environs, but with scant hope of identifying the thieves, since there was evidence that they had worn leather gloves.

The vehicle used by the thieves had left clear tire prints on two of the cones, which they had simply run over in making their getaway. The tread suggested a medium-sized utility vehicle. A still more promising clue was a track left in the court where the handtruck carrying the oxygen and acetylene cylinders had been dragged across a strip of soft earth. The treads of the two balloon tires didn't match. Kestrel had made plaster casts of the prints, and a clerk in Records was assembling a list of agencies within a fifty-mile radius from which welding equipment could be rented.

Auburn's cell phone was burbling from his car. “Sergeant, you have a call from Mr. Stamaty at the coroner's office. Please hold.”

While waiting, Auburn slid down in the seat and closed his eyes, trying to drain some of the ache and fatigue out of his muscles.

“Cy? Nick Stamaty. I hope you're not out on your yacht.”

“Fat chance. What's happening, Nick?”

“Got a citizen down with a couple of slugs in his chest. Probably been dead between one and two days. I tried to run it by your watch commander, but apparently the ranking officer on Sunday afternoons is the guy that refills the pop machine.”

“Where are you?”

“Are you familiar with Senator Wheeler's place? Big stone house, all boarded up, yard full of weeds—”

“And mysterious lights at night.”

“I don't know about that. Anyway, a kid was wandering around in here this morning and he found a body in a fishpond. His dad called you guys, and the patrolman who responded thought it looked like an accidental drowning. The answering service pulled me out of church, and to make a long story short I'm standing here looking at a couple of holes in this poor chap's shirt front. I'd guess they're about six inches deep.”

“Any weapon?”

“I don't see one. But I don't drag fishponds. Not on Sunday. And this is no suicide, as you'll see when you get here.”

"ID?"

"A Theodore John Watkins, age forty-six. Lives on Skycrest. Insurance agent." Involuntarily, Auburn looked across the court at Porter, who was back in the window well, only his head showing. "Your people say he hasn't been reported missing."

"Next of kin?"

"He's wearing a wedding band. City directory shows a wife at the same address. I don't want to do it by phone. I'd be on my way there right now if the scene were secure, but the patrolman says he could get a call any minute. Something interesting going on?"

"Big jewel heist downtown. That's where I am now, and I've got Kestrel here making mud pies and gathering moss from the north side of the telephone poles." He looked at his watch. "Let me touch base with headquarters and see what we can work out."

He advised Porter that he had to leave and turned him over to Kestrel, who rewarded him with a bleak scowl. Then he went back to the phone, opening his glove compartment with his free hand and pulling out a fistful of granola bars.

The former residence of the state senator was an ugly stone mansion lost amid acres of woods, formal gardens, and lawns. Because of some complicated and insoluble legal tangle, the Wheeler house had been boarded up for nearly a generation and left exposed to the ravages of weather, rodents, and vandals. Coarse weeds grew shoulder high, and a dense growth of underbrush had taken over spaces where garden club teas had once been held.

Access to the driveway was blocked by huge iron gates that hadn't been opened in years. Auburn parked on the gravelly shoulder of Scatcherd Reservoir Road between a police cruiser and Stamaty's van. Just under a rusty NO TRESPASSING sign a rough gap yawned in the long-untended hedge that bordered the road. After studying the ground carefully for vehicular tracks and footprints, and finding none, Auburn squeezed through the gap. Stamaty stood up from a stone bench and dusted off the seat of his pants.

Ten paces inside the hedge, the body of Theodore Watkins lay on the stone verge of a fishpond that was smaller than a bathtub and half full of murky water and dead leaves. Watkins was a big man with a heavy shock of graying hair and a walrus mustache. Immersion and early decomposition had bloated his features and imparted a ghastly lividity to his skin. He was wearing a tan leisure suit with a service club pin on the jacket lapel and a silk tie. Both of the neat holes drilled in his sodden shirt front fell within the area indicated by the solid black heart on the human targets at the police firing range.

Auburn looked around to get his bearings. A more melancholy scene could hardly have been imagined. The atmosphere was dank, a chilling breeze rattled the branches of the trees, and the birds foraging in the scrub squawked mournfully. The whole place seemed touched by desolation and decay. But even though the gloom was already thickening here at three in the afternoon, the tracks made by the dead man's heels when his body was dragged from the road were plainly evident in the thick carpet of leaf mold.

“I can understand why the first man on the scene didn't pull him out of the water and see these bullet holes,” said Auburn, “but how could he have missed the tracks?”

“It's Meyers. He got called in on his day off and he's hung over, big time. He would have missed a green gorilla on a pogo stick.”

“Where is he now?”

“Checking out the house.”

Auburn examined the tracks more closely. “What do you think, Nick? One guy or two?”

“I've been pondering that for the last half hour. I can't make out any footprints anywhere. If one guy dragged the body, the trail left by the dead man's shoes would probably have obliterated his own trail. And you'd think if there were two guys, they would have carried him instead of dragging him.”

Meyers eventually turned up and reported that there was no evidence that anyone had broken into the house. Stamaty gave Auburn a heavy paper envelope containing the contents of Watkins's pockets, except for his driver's license and about thirty dollars in cash.

Auburn examined the articles in the envelope by shifting them around without touching them. “No keys?”

A faint commotion at the roadside announced the arrival of Kestrel, who soon appeared laden with camera and field kit.

“I hope you and Porter parted friends,” remarked Auburn, in hopes of averting the feud that usually broke out whenever Kestrel and Stamaty were within shouting distance of one another.

Kestrel grunted. “That old boy was starting to get up my nose. He seems to think I'm on his payroll.”

“You're jealous because he has a digital camera and you don't.”

“Wouldn't do me any good if I did have one,” growled Kestrel, who was constitutionally incapable of seeing a joke, much less laughing at one. “Digital images can be edited. They're not admissible as evidence.”

Stamaty gathered up his equipment from the stone bench. “You ready, Cy?” As he moved towards the road he tossed a remark back at Kestrel. “This shouldn't take me more than an hour. Don't you and Meyers both leave before I get back.”

Kestrel, peering into the turbid waters of the fishpond with a jaundiced eye, made no reply.

The last time Auburn had traveled with Stamaty in the latter's van, he had privately come to the conclusion that there should be a law against flute concertos. They drove separately to the Skycrest Court address on Theodore Watkins's driver's license. The house was a brick ranch in a well-kept yard with a sign out front advertising Watkins's insurance agency—life, home, auto.

The thin, pasty-faced woman who came to the door was wearing a black and red satin kimono and no makeup, and she looked as if she'd just gotten out of bed. Yes, she was Mrs. Theodore Watkins. Stamaty gave her the bad news with his trademark gentleness and compassion. She reacted as if he had punched her in the face.

“Oh, no, no, no.” She turned away, shaking her head in vehement denial. After a moment she turned back toward

them, her chest heaving with sobs of grief. “He never meant anybody any harm. He just wanted to make people happy, and proud...”

“Do you have some idea who killed your husband?” asked Auburn.

“I'm not a well person,” she said, instead of answering him. She pulled the sash of her kimono tighter. “And this is just about going to finish me off.”

“Is there someone who can stay with you, someone you'd like us to call?”

“My son. He just lives a couple blocks away. I'll see if he's home.”

She used the phone on the big desk in the living room, which was fitted out as an office with file cabinets and a computer. An expensive attaché case lay open on the desk. A rack of pipes stood on the mantelpiece, and the carpet and furniture exhaled a pungent aroma of stale smoke. A family portrait showed the late Ted Watkins mugging for the camera with a jovial, inane, somewhat wolfish smile. Auburn and Stamaty waited in the entry hall while she called, pretending not to overhear her half of the conversation.

“He's coming right over. What do I have to do?”

“Nothing for now,” said Auburn, “but I'd like to get some information from you if you feel up to it.” He got out a three-by-five-inch file card and a pen. “When was the last time you saw Mr. Watkins?”

“Friday at lunchtime.” She stepped into the kitchen, returned with a handful of facial tissues, dabbed at her eyes, and blew her nose.

“Were you expecting him to be away overnight?”

“No. But I never worried if Ted was gone for a day or two. Things sometimes came up unexpectedly.”

“You mean he was sometimes away on business? Out of town?”

“I was never sure,” she said a little vaguely. “He was into some other things besides insurance.”

“Do you have any idea what his plans were for Friday afternoon?”

“I'm sorry, but I just don't.”

Auburn's eyes strayed towards the desk. “Did he keep an appointment book?”

“No. He wasn't that organized. He'd write notes to himself on little pieces of paper and then lose them.”

“Did he have any business partners or employees?”

“No. But I would have known if he had any appointments, because I've been helping him with the phone since I've been home sick.” A car door slammed in the driveway. “There's Jake.”

The younger Watkins was tall and broad like his father, deeply tanned, and in his mid-twenties. He was wearing a black dress shirt with white piping around the lapels and pockets, a black sombrero, and black boots with heels that screeched on the stone steps. Auburn listened in vain for the jingle of spurs.

Jake Watkins and his mother embraced wordlessly for a long moment and then he turned his attention to Auburn and Stamaty. “What happened?” he wanted to know.

“We're still trying to figure that out,” said Auburn. “Your father's body was found this morning on unoccupied residential property east of town. He had apparently been shot somewhere else and—”

“Where's his car?” Watkins moved into the living room, threw his hat on the desk, and sat down on a footstool. His mother sat next to him on the couch and put her hand on his arm, and he put his hand over hers.

“There wasn't a car at the scene,” said Auburn, “and no keys in his pockets. If you'll give me a description of the car, I'll see if it's been reported abandoned.”

He wrote down the description and the license number. Stamaty remained in the background, letting Auburn do what he had to do first.

Auburn addressed Mrs. Watkins. “Apparently your husband hadn't been robbed. A while ago you said something about him not meaning anybody any harm. What did you mean by that?”

Mother and son exchanged glances. “I think I can answer that,” said Watkins. “Dad was—what can I say?—sort of a con man. You know what they say about people who make their living by selling things—they've got a license to lie?” His mother squirmed but he patted her hand and went on.

“Dad did genealogies—family trees.” He nodded toward the computer, whose screen was dark now. “Most beautiful things you ever saw. Colored inks, coats of arms, pedigrees leading back to the Mayflower, if not the Crusades. Thing is, they were mostly fake. He'd play it straight for a couple of generations back—check birth and death records at the

courthouse, maybe pull some stuff off the Internet—and then pure fiction would set in."

"And you feel that his death might be related in some way to that activity?" asked Auburn, again addressing Mrs. Watkins.

"Oh, I don't know." She was trembling slightly and looking gray around the edges. "It was just the first thing I thought of."

"Had he had any trouble on that score that you know of? Complaints, threats?"

The Watkinses agreed that they didn't know of any real trouble recently. But there had been people who refused to pay for genealogies that Watkins had done for them because they could prove they'd been falsified. Auburn asked a few more questions. He borrowed a spare set of keys to Watkins's car in case the car should be found minus the keys. He also advised Mrs. Watkins to keep the chain bolt on the door until her husband's own set of keys turned up. Then he let Stamaty take over.

The coroner's investigator gave Mrs. Watkins the money from Watkins's wallet and asked her to count it and sign a receipt. He explained that an autopsy by a forensic pathologist was required by law, and that the release of Watkins's body might be delayed as much as two more days.

Mrs. Watkins wanted to know if they could see the body. Stamaty kindly but firmly opposed the idea, advising her to wait until the funeral director of their choice had prepared the remains for viewing.

“It's just that Ted was such an optimist,” she sighed, “such an outgoing person, so full of life, I can't believe he's not still alive ... somewhere.” Auburn and Stamaty both happened to have firm convictions on that point also, but they left the discussion of such matters to the clergy.

On leaving the Watkinses they went their separate ways, Stamaty to return to the Wheeler estate and Auburn to interview the boy who had found the body that morning.

It was four fifteen when he rang the doorbell at Justin Prastoe's house. The boy's father admitted him and took him to the family room, where Justin was doing homework at an antique school desk. Auburn heard kitchen noises in the background and could smell Sunday dinner cooking.

Justin wore orthodontic braces, and his fingernails were gnawed to the quick. What Auburn took at first for a bruise turned out to be a birthmark like a splash of purple paint on the left side of his neck. The boy pushed aside his papers when Auburn entered the room, but throughout the interview he sedulously avoided making eye contact. His father stayed in the room, standing in the doorway with arms folded like a prison guard monitoring a visit.

“Sorry to intrude this afternoon,” he told Justin, repeating what he'd just said to his father, “but I'd like to get your impressions of what you saw this morning, while they're still fresh in your mind.”

He took out a file card and verified some basic data first. Justin was fifteen, a sophomore in high school but taking advanced courses one day a week at the university.

He had had no particular reason to be at the Wheeler estate that morning. He had been there a few times before, just walking in the woods, not doing any damage or removing anything from the premises. Auburn didn't press the issue of illegal trespass, since he suspected Prastoe, Sr., had already had a few things to say about that.

On discovering the body in the fishpond, Justin had immediately returned home and told his parents. He hadn't touched the body or anything else in the vicinity. He hadn't noticed the tracks leading from the gap in the hedge to the fishpond. He hadn't seen anyone in or near the estate. He hadn't noticed any vehicles, moving or stationary, on the road.

On the way to the Prastoes' home, Auburn had called Traffic and Parking Control to check on Ted Watkins's car. The car had been spotted by a patrolman the evening before in a ditch paralleling Fitch Hollow Road, about a mile from where the body had been found, and tagged as abandoned. When found, the car had been unlocked, with the key in the ignition. It was now locked, the keys on file at headquarters. Since the car hadn't been reported stolen, attempts to inform the owner of record by telephone would begin tomorrow, the first business day after the tagging.

Auburn went from the Prastoes' to Fitch Hollow Road. He found the car canted sharply over, with its right wheels deep in a culvert. Getting it back on the road would probably be a job for a wrecker. In the failing light he could see no marks in the weeds or mud other than those made by the tires of the car as it ran off the road.

Taking care not to touch any surfaces that might retain fingerprints, he unlocked the door on the driver's side, opened it, and stuck his head inside. The interior of the car was permeated by the same smell of pipe smoke as Watkins's house, but sharper and staler. A plastic rack below the dashboard contained two pipes and three cheap pens carrying advertising for Watkins's agency. A search under the seats with a flashlight disclosed an unopened can of soda, a tube of sunscreen, and a windshield scraper. The glove compartment contained only the usual rubbish—owner's manual, service warranty, maps, and a lot more pens.

In the trunk Auburn found a spare tire, a jack, a set of jumper cables, and two boxes of printed leaflets and forms pertaining to Watkins's insurance business. These had spilled over the floor of the trunk, and showed obvious stains of dried blood. After relocking the car, Auburn went back to his own car and made two phone calls—one to headquarters to arrange for the car to be moved to the police garage for examination, the other to postpone a dinner date from six to seven.

The next morning, both the jewel theft and the Watkins murder made the front pages of the local papers. They also occupied most of morning report at headquarters. Afterwards, Auburn met with his immediate superior, Lieutenant Savage.

“Lieutenant Dunbar asked me to thank you for helping him choreograph things yesterday afternoon,” said Savage. (Dunbar, of the Department of Unplanned Giving, a k a Robbery and Theft, had had Sunday duty as watch

commander.) “He was tied up most of the day at the depository.”

“I know,” said Auburn. “I spent a little while there myself.”

They discussed the jewel theft briefly and then went on to the murder case. An autopsy performed during the night had confirmed that Watkins had died of gunshot wounds. The forensic pathologist had recovered two 9-millimeter steel-jacketed slugs, one of which had penetrated the heart and the other the superior vena cava. These had been fired from a Beretta automatic pistol, and if they hadn't lodged in the spine they would have gone straight through. There was powder granule tattooing on the victim's shirt and skin, but not on his hands. Blood alcohol and drug studies were pending.

Watkins's car was at the police garage being dissected and scrutinized by Kestrel. Consultation with the family had revealed that a CD player and about twelve CDs had disappeared from the car, possibly after it had been ditched by the killer or killers. The bloodstains in the trunk matched the victim's blood type. The murder weapon hadn't been found yet. Records was working on background checks on the dead man and his family.

“The family's reaction looked pretty genuine to me,” Auburn told Savage, “but I wouldn't be surprised if they had some idea who did it.”

Savage strode to the window and looked pensively down into the street. “A faked family tree doesn't sound to me like a very plausible motive for murder,” he said. “But he could have turned up some information while he was working on a

genealogy that somebody didn't want him to have. Might be a good idea to get the wife's permission to look over his papers and records."

The decor of Lieutenant Savage's office perfectly reflected his personality—no crooked lines, no rounded corners, only a family photograph in a chaste steel frame to afford a glimpse of his human side. The chairs were as uncomfortable as church pews, and Auburn had often thought that was probably why Savage so often paced from one window to the other instead of sitting at his desk.

"She seems to have been used to him disappearing from time to time for a day or two," said Auburn. "And she said he was an optimist. Maybe he tried to pull off something really shady and got in over his head."

"Or pulled it on the wrong dude. An optimist, huh? Well, that fits the business he was in, doesn't it? I mean, insurance companies have to hope they'll take in more from their customers than they'll ever have to pay out. Any thoughts on why they dumped him in the fishpond instead of just leaving him in the trunk of his car?"

"I imagine that'll become clear when we find out who did it."

Lieutenant Savage returned to his desk and began shuffling file folders, a maneuver that Auburn interpreted to mean, roughly, "Well, then, let's bloody well get on with it and find out."

Auburn went back to his office and took the contents of Watkins's pockets from a locked drawer. The pipe, tobacco pouch, pipe lighter, handkerchief, and wallet, all of which had

been in trousers pockets, showed no signs of wetting. A silver pen, a pocket comb, and a packet of breath mints from shirt and jacket pockets were filmed with moisture.

Except for the cash, Stamaty had left everything just as he'd found it in the wallet.

Auburn made a careful inventory of the contents, coming up with just one possible lead: a machine-printed receipt, from the Bureau of Parks, for an audiocassette identified only as “SELFTOUR.” It was dated at one thirty P.M. Friday, the day of Watkins's disappearance and probably of his death.

After a call to the garage to verify that no audiocassette had been found in Watkins's car, Auburn walked across the street to the courthouse, where the administrative offices of the Bureau of Parks were located. There he learned that the receipt had originated from the store at Heron Creek Park, in the southwest corner of the county. The audiocassette was intended to be played on the tape deck of a car, directing the user on a self-guided tour of scenic and historic sites around the county.

Without returning to the office, Auburn went to his car and headed for Heron Creek Park. Visitors there in October were few. The clerk at the park store remembered Watkins perfectly, but had exchanged only the necessary civilities with him in selling him the tape. Auburn bought a copy of the tape.

Then he returned to the spot on Fitch Hollow Road where Watkins's car had been found abandoned. It took him twenty-five minutes of hard searching in tall weeds and slimy mud to find the cassette. Cracked and dripping with dew, it had

probably been thrown away by whoever had ripped off the CD player.

Confident he was on to something, he took the tape back to his office. First he subjected it to a careful examination to ascertain that it bore no fingerprints. In its present condition the cassette was unplayable, but the tape inside appeared to be intact and dry, or nearly so. With a Phillips screwdriver he removed five small screws, opened the cassette, and lifted out the two tape spindles.

He found an old training tape in a cupboard, opened its cassette also, and replaced the spindles with the ones from Watkins's car, carefully avoiding advancing or rewinding the tape. As a precaution against slipups, he made a small mark on the free segment of the tape with a pen. Then he put the cassette into a tape player.

What he heard was a set of directions to a covered bridge on Dwight-Stillwell Pike. After repeating the directions, the narrator instructed the user to switch off the tape until the bridge was in view. Letting it run, Auburn heard the history of the bridge and sundry related trivia. Then he rewound the tape and played it from the beginning. The narration that came just before the directions to the covered bridge referred to Hubbell's Rise, the highest point in the county and the scene of an historic Indian treaty.

If Watkins had been playing the tape and following the prescribed route when he was murdered, then the last stop he ever made in his life had apparently been at Hubbell's Rise. It was after eleven when Auburn tucked both copies of the tape into his pocket and went back to his car.

Hubbell's Rise was a barren, windy knoll with a precipitous drop on one side and a panoramic view of the city, which Auburn had enjoyed more than once by night. The Bureau of Parks had acquired about a hundred acres of the surrounding land and tried to turn it into a recreational area, but with limited success. There was no water, little shade, and nothing to do when one reached the top except admire the view and then turn around and go back down again.

A winding road led to the top of the hill, where a three-sided rustic shelter containing a couple of picnic benches offered protection from sun, wind, or rain, depending on the season. Partway up the hill stood restrooms and a metal utility shed. Auburn drove on up past the outbuildings and stopped at a graveled parking area at the top, next to the shelter.

Had Ted Watkins, seller of insurance and fabricator of family trees, really come up here Friday and got himself shot? Auburn climbed out of the car. The day was overcast, and up here, as usual, the wind was raw. The park was entirely deserted. The only human being in sight was a worker near the bottom of the slope who was hauling a load of dead wood behind a tractor with a cracked muffler. Even at a distance of a hundred yards, its engine sounded like a garbage disposal trying to eat bricks.

Auburn read a brass tablet giving the history of Hubbell's Rise, which matched verbatim the material on the tape. Then he stepped into the shelter and sat down on one of the benches to scan the horizon. The buildings of downtown loomed dull and gritty through the autumn haze. Around to

the south, five vertical rows of frantically winking strobe lights showed the positions of a row of radio towers too far off to be seen.

The wind was rattling something metallic under the bench. He stooped and retrieved an empty soft drink can from among the dead leaves and litter. The can was the same brand as the full one he'd found under the seat of Watkins's car yesterday afternoon. And it wasn't quite empty. With a little patience he teased out an angular length of wire that had once been a paperclip, exactly like one he'd seen in the ashtray on the desk in Watkins's home office.

As a teenager, Auburn had bought a pocket magnifier with three plastic lenses, made in Taiwan, for sixty cents. In the past twenty years he had seldom left home without it. After examining the wire closely, he slid it into a small plastic envelope and tucked it into his pocket, more than half certain that Kestrel would be able to prove the traces of dark viscous material adhering to it matched the muck in the pipe Stamaty had found on Watkins's body.

“Botany, geology, or archaeology?”

Even before turning to face the questioner, Auburn sensed his mood of gentle mockery. But he was a little surprised to discover that the speaker was the groundskeeper he'd last seen astride the saddle of the tractor. He'd been so absorbed in his investigation that he'd failed to notice that the tractor was now silent.

The man was in his middle thirties, tall and blond, burnt by sun and wind. He was wearing a tan coverall with patches on both shoulders bearing the logo of the Bureau of Parks and a

patch over the heart with the name “Thor” stitched in cursive writing. A long, ragged ponytail hung through the back of his cap.

Auburn tapped the soda can with the magnifier, uncertain whether the other had seen what he did with the paperclip wire. “Just a compulsive snoop,” he said, hoping to come across as a harmless idiot.

Thor peered at the can. “At least you're not guzzling booze in a public park,” he said. When he smiled the skin at the corners of his mouth buckled like sheet metal.

“Doesn't seem like quite the spot.”

“You wait till dark. There's drinking in here every night of the week. And drugs. The kids that hang around in here are all on a roller coaster ride to hell.”

Auburn raised his eyebrows in indignation. “Where are the cops?”

The man snorted contemptuously. “The cops don't come in here. In the first place, the kids can see a cruiser half a mile away, and they ditch their booze over the cliff long before they get up here.” He nodded in the direction of the split-rail fence that ran along the edge of the bluff, apparently to prevent the unobservant and the stoned from dropping about a hundred feet into the impenetrable and otherwise inaccessible thicket below. “In the second place, the parks are supposed to be patrolled by quote-unquote rangers, who pack about as much clout as the ushers at a wedding.”

The honk of a horn drew their attention to a car idling on the road, halfway up to the top. Thor, moving around to the other side of the shelter, suddenly seemed restless and eager

to get away. Was that because he'd just caught sight of the license plate on Auburn's car and recognized it as one assigned to a city vehicle?

“Later, pal,” he said. “Chow time.” He loped down the road. As he approached the car, the driver got out and moved around to the passenger side—a youngish woman with a sulky, china-doll face and platinum hair, who looked as if she might have been a prom queen about a thousand dreams ago. Thor slid behind the wheel and the car vanished down the wooded slope, but not before Auburn had recorded its license number.

Now a compulsive snoop in good earnest, he examined every scrap of trash in the shelter. Then he removed the lid from the trash barrel outside and raked through its fetid and viscous contents with a dead stick. These inquiries having failed to yield any further finds, he moved down the hill toward the restrooms and the corrugated iron shed. Probably because of the lateness of the season, he found the restrooms padlocked. In contrast, the door of the shed stood ajar.

The two discharged 9-millimeter cartridges on the floor of the shed weren't the only interesting discoveries he made there.

On the drive back to town, he called in the license number and learned that the car was registered to a Courtney Wesselweid. Revisiting the offices of the Bureau of Parks before returning to headquarters, he was able to get a printout of the Bureau's entire work force. He dropped the cartridges off at the forensic lab, where Kestrel pointed out to

him, for probably the twentieth time, that ballistics is the science of the behavior of projectiles, not of their identification. Whereupon Auburn reminded Kestrel for the twentieth time that the facility to which he was going to send the cartridges for examination was officially known as the Regional Ballistics Lab.

By the time he got to the canteen for lunch, he had to settle for a serving of lukewarm Salisbury steak, which went down like a boiled Army blanket. Residual hunger enticed him into the folly of overdosing on maximum-strength coleslaw.

Back in his office, he found some background checks he'd requested waiting for him on his desk. The late Ted Watkins had served a brief prison sentence in his raw youth for petty larceny. On a number of occasions more recently, he'd attracted the attention of the state attorney general's fraud squad, but hadn't been charged. Despite living rather high on the hog, or maybe because of it, he had a poor credit rating. Anyway, the optimist label seemed to fit.

His wife was an occupational therapist on extended medical leave from her job at the veterans hospital. Her diagnosis wouldn't be released without a court order. The son had a degree in business, managed a local firm that fabricated and installed aluminum windows and doors, and owned an interest in a riding stable called Black Stallion Trails.

Auburn called Records to request two further checks.

* * *

At The Space Bar on Second Street downtown, happy hour had already started around eleven that morning. Arriving

after five P.M., Auburn had to park nearly a block away. Before getting out of the car he twisted in his seat and held a last-minute conference with his two companions, Emmie Bartas and Devlin McCrate.

Emmie, who was wearing a pink sweatshirt reading “Real Women Bait Their Own Hooks,” cast a wary glance up and down the street. “I'm not sure I want to be seen socially with this guy,” she said, nodding sideways at Devlin. “It could bust up my marriage.”

“No fear,” said Auburn. “I'm your chaperone. I need both of you—Emmie to clinch the ID, and Devlin to back me up in the beef department.”

“I got just as good a look at her as Emmie did,” said Devlin. When he sat forward in the back seat, the top of his head brushed the ceiling liner. “Maybe better.”

“Could be. But if she's changed her hair or her makeup, Emmie will pick up on it quicker than you or any other guy.”

“Okay,” said Devlin, “but about this beef stuff—I don't beat up on women.”

“I hope not. But she might have a friend in the background who'd object to a police officer taking her into custody.”

“I seem to remember,” remarked Emmie, coy as a Christmas angel, “my father telling me one time that they have bouncers in these places.”

“My father told me that too,” said Auburn. “But what if the friend in the background and the bouncer are one and the same incredible hulk?”

“Okay, Cy,” said Devlin. “It's your show. I haven't had a good barroom fight since I got my nose broken. I assume the department will pay to have it fixed if it gets broken again.”

“Which department are you referring to—Public Safety or Fire and Rescue?”

“I have a question,” interrupted Emmie, who obviously wasn't planning to get anything broken. “What if we're both sure she isn't the same woman?”

“In that case, we have one nonalcoholic drink apiece—at the expense of the Department of Public Safety—and retire from the scene in good order.”

They got out of the car and started along the sidewalk toward The Space Bar.

“Speaking of a change of appearance,” said Emmie, “she's probably gonna recognize Devlin and me immediately if we walk in together.”

“That's all in the script,” said Auburn. “I'm betting that, when she sees two people who can make her at the scene of the crime, she won't try a bluff or call in the reserves.”

As they entered the bar, Auburn's digestive system was just about to succumb to the coleslaw. Or maybe it was just that, as playwright, director, and male lead all in one, he was having opening-night jitters. Was he really staging the scenes of this melodrama in the most effective sequence?

The decor of The Space Bar, which catered principally to people who worked downtown, was meant to recreate the ambience of a modern business office. The bar stools were stenographer's chairs with extra long stems and the booths looked like work stations set off with panels of fuzzy gray

sound-swallowing fabric. Illuminated images resembling computer icons decorated the walls and pointed out the phone booth, restrooms, and emergency exit. The workaday atmosphere was enhanced by a photocopying machine, a watercooler, and a bulletin board cluttered with notices.

The place was crowded and noisy but at least it was smoke free, and the band (which called itself Loudware) wouldn't arrive for hours. Auburn had barely set foot inside the door when he spotted their quarry standing near one end of the bar between two vertical rails, in the space reserved for waitresses. In keeping with the office setting, she wore a travesty of a business suit with a flowered tie and a short pleated skirt. But there was no mistaking the platinum blonde hair and the pouting, jaded features.

Following the direction of Auburn's gaze, Emily and Devlin both gave him affirmative nods. He worked his way through the jostling throng around the bar until he was directly behind her. Intent on unloading a tray and pocketing tips, she didn't know he was there until he touched her on the shoulder. When she turned he held up his badge and said, “Where can we talk?”

She froze momentarily, her eyes wide with fear. Then, although she was virtually trapped between the rails, she glanced right and left as if she were looking for an escape route, and saw Emily and Devlin flanking Auburn. Turning back, she caught the bartender's eye and shouted, “I'm going to have to leave.” He accepted the announcement with stoic indifference.

With all three of them at her heels, she made her way to a dim passage that led to the office and the restrooms. Then, facing around like a wildcat at bay, she shrieked, “I don't know what—”

Auburn let her get no further. “Courtney Wesselweid,” he said, “I have a warrant for your arrest on charges of homicide and conspiracy to commit burglary.”

* * *

It was eight that evening before Auburn finished taking formal depositions from Emmie and Devlin, interviewing Courtney Wesselweid, and seeing her booked and conducted to the cells. The two paramedics positively identified Wesselweid as the woman who had feigned illness while the burglary was taking place at Hammond Depository. Auburn had helped her find a lawyer but she hadn't been permitted to make other phone calls and was being held without bail.

He was entering details of the case in the computer when Patrolman Fritz Dollinger called in.

“He knows, Sergeant,” Dollinger reported. “He went to The Space Bar about twenty minutes ago and came out again in fourth gear. I think you better get down here fast.”

“Where is he now?”

“Back at his apartment on Wessex.”

“What's he doing?”

“He's changing a tire.”

“So? What's wrong with that?”

“It isn't flat.”

“We're on our way, Fritz. Don't get too close to him. That machine gun of his spits out fifteen rounds in about three seconds.”

Auburn headed for his car on the double. Once en route to Wessex Avenue, he radioed to the dispatcher for backup and then reestablished phone contact with Dollinger, who was in a car parked across the street from Thor Lydecker's apartment. Auburn left his car around the corner and proceeded on foot. He passed Dollinger's car without seeming to notice the bulky figure hunched down in the back seat.

The night was damp and chilly, with a fitful wind carrying a threat of rain. Auburn made a careful detour so as to keep from getting between the nearest street light and Lydecker, who was still working at his car in the paved court between the apartment building and the garages behind it. By the time Lydecker realized anybody was near, Auburn had him covered.

“All right, Mr. Lydecker. Keep your hands in sight, stand up slow, and leave that jack handle right where it is.” Lydecker swore volubly but remained squatting, only his eyes darting from Auburn's weapon to the jack handle to the open street. Auburn moved closer. He sensed rather than saw Dollinger moving in from the other side of the garage.

“When I have to work this late at night,” Auburn told Lydecker, “my fingers start twitching. Especially my right index finger. Come on, sir. It's all over. She sold you out.”

“She didn't tell you anything.”

“She didn't really need to. I found the cartridges from the slugs that killed Watkins in the shed at the park. Not to

mention the truck and the welding rig you used Saturday night."

Lydecker swore again. "I knew I was in trouble when I saw a guy from City Hall messing around up there with a magnifying glass."

An instant before Lydecker decided to try jerking the Beretta out of his pocket, Dollinger growled, "Freeze, fella," almost in his ear. "Hands over your head or you're just a memory and a helluva a lot of paperwork."

The two backup patrolmen emerged from the alley as Auburn was relieving Lydecker of the Beretta. It was an antique that hadn't been cleaned since the last time it was fired, and two rounds were missing from the magazine. The tubeless tire Lydecker had been wrenching off its wheel contained a long sausage-like bundle done up in an old piece of quilting. When they opened the bundle, diamonds sparkled in the gleam of Dollinger's flashlight like ice crystals by moonlight.

* * *

At eleven thirty that night, Porter turned up at headquarters and found his way to Auburn's office. He was freshly shaved and wearing a different three-piece suit, this one with six buttons on the vest instead of five. "I've been told you recovered the entire shipment of diamonds," he said, his frankly incredulous tone implying that, even if Auburn confirmed the report, he might not believe it.

"Yes, sir. We've handed everything over to the Carlyle people already. They identified the pieces to our satisfaction.

We didn't want our property room upstairs to be the scene of the next heist."

"And you've got two of the thieves in custody?"

"Yes, sir. A man and a woman. They're being held without bail on charges of homicide as well as the burglary. We don't have any reason to believe anyone else was involved in the theft."

Porter blinked and nodded. "Looks like you've got a pretty good case against them, if they were in possession of the diamonds. How did you get on to them?"

"One of the people on the list of employees we got from Hammond Depository had an unusual first name. Earlier today, in the course of an apparently unrelated investigation, I ran across a man with that name—"

"Thor," said Porter. He consulted his black leather notebook. "Thor Lydecker."

"Yes, sir. Age thirty-four, fired last March—"

"Must be a glitch somewhere. I've got that list too, but there's no Lydecker on it."

"One small correction, sir. You asked Hammond for a list of their employees, and that's what you got. We asked them for a list of their employees and former employees going back two years. Lieutenant Dunbar and I offered you a copy of our list yesterday, but you told us you preferred to gather your own data. Lydecker was fired in March from his position as a security guard at Hammond Depository because of chronic absenteeism. He tried to get a job with the Bureau of Parks as a ranger, but he had to settle for seasonal work as a groundskeeper."

Porter had a habit of expressing impatience or perturbation by pursing his lips noisily, as if he had something stuck in his teeth. “And how does all that tie in with the jewel theft? Or does it?”

“The woman I saw with Lydecker matched Frost's description of the decoy who kept fainting at the depository. The paramedics who took her to the hospital confirmed the identification, and she was arrested. In hopes of a lighter sentence, she pretty much spilled the beans. According to her, she went to see Lydecker on Friday afternoon at the park where he was working to report that the jewel delivery they were watching for had been made and to firm up their plans for the heist they were going to pull off the next night. They were standing next to a tractor, yelling at each other so they could be heard over the sound of the engine, and apparently their voices carried further than the engine noise.

“A genealogist named Watkins, who happened to be in the park collecting information on local history, heard them. Being slightly crooked himself, and chronically short of cash, Watkins tried to butt into the operation. Lydecker invited him into a utility shed to talk it over and quickly adjourned the meeting with a couple of bullets from an assault weapon he happened to have handy.

“Then he and the woman stuffed Watkins in the trunk of his own car, drove out in the country, and dumped the body where they figured it wouldn't be found for several days. Since Lydecker had worked at the depository, they planned to stay in town for a few days after the heist so as not to excite

suspicion and get the authorities on their trail. They ditched the car a quarter of a mile from a rural bus stop—"

Porter, manifesting increasing boredom with Auburn's exposition of these secondary details, was pacing around in a little circle like a windup toy whose churning legs never seem to be getting it anywhere. "Well, it's all give and take," he said. "I'm sure our profile played its part in your investigation. Matched up the paradigms, eh?"

"Not really, sir. I don't think these people will have any trouble proving they're not your Trenton gang. I can tell you right here and now that they're rank amateurs. The woman folded the minute I read her her rights. Professionals don't crack like that."

"The man, though, this Lydecker—"

"If Lydecker were a professional, he wouldn't have had an amateur working with him. They had to look up lawyers in the Yellow Pages. A professional criminal has a defense attorney lined up in advance. Always. And professionals wouldn't have gone ahead with the operation after the fiasco with Watkins. Or held on to a firearm that had been used to commit a homicide."

"Oh, I don't know about that," objected Porter stubbornly. Seeing his bonus melting away before his eyes, he wasn't going to let Auburn have all the laurels without a struggle. "You might not throw away a perfectly good weapon if you were pretty sure—"

"Sorry, sir. That just won't work. Professional criminals aren't optimists, they're realists. They don't take chances like that. That's why they stay in business so long before we run

them down. It's the amateurs we catch. They're inexperienced, they're optimistic, and they're careless. And they're copycats. That reminds me...”

He removed a folded paper from his pocket. “Here's a copy of that profile of the Trenton gang that your company worked up. Apparently they sent this to Hammond Depository a few months ago. We found it when we searched Lydecker's apartment. He seems to have used it as a sort of working script. Or you might even call it a paradigm.”

[Back to Table of Contents]

[Back to Table of Contents]

And Justice for Doll by Will Ludwigsen

I think my grandchildren enjoy my company solely because I am too slow to get away. While their parents escape to work all summer, I am a captive audience for a parade of magic shows, puppet shows, song recitals, recorder concerts, and art gallery expositions that my son's kids contrive to entertain themselves between school years.

Of course, few things entertain three intelligent and independent kids more than arguing over whose turn it is to vacuum or who gets the last Coke or who left the moldy towel in the tub. I've arbitrated more disputes in my son's living room than I did over thirty years before and behind the bench.

Don't get me wrong: I love my son's children. Holly, fourteen, loves me to take her to the modern art museum, the only place her disdainful Dorothy Parker gaze melts into awe. Eric, thirteen, tinkers with electronics and computers; he wrote a program so we could track the player statistics for the Giants together. But Jessica, eight, stands out to me most of all.

Maybe there's something special about the youngest, the one who can't reach the cabinets or be a part of every conversation. Maybe it's her earnestness while orchestrating Christmas morning or trying to teach the cats to read. Maybe I'm just endeared to her ambition to be a lawyer when she grows up, like her grandfather.

Like any youngest child, Jessica has inherited a legion of dolls and stuffed animals in various stages of hand-me-down decay. They appear throughout the house, keeping Jessica's seat warm at the dinner table and waiting by the mailbox for the latest issue of Ranger Rick. I've even crushed a few sitting in my favorite chair in the living room.

This summer, they organized as a democratic body to establish Babytown, a community within my son's house where toys would not be discriminated against on the basis of age, condition, or third world country of manufacture.

The pun between Babytown and Jonestown was inadvertent but apt: this utopia also followed a single charismatic leader. Lavinia, the alpha doll chosen to go to restaurants and the Fourth of July fireworks, won a landslide victory in the mayoral race. The masking tape patch over the crack in her plastic skull probably didn't help during the debates, but it did motivate enough of a sympathy vote to vault her into power.

Lavinia and the other Babytown dignitaries weren't above a little politicking, even on the morning of their revolution. They took the time to introduce themselves in a variety of heavily accented voices that Jessica imitated from television. The list seemed endless, at least measured by how long it took me to read the Metro section while Jessica trooped them past. I met in turn the hospital administrator (an Ewok with a Scottish brogue), the school superintendent (a Cabbage Patch doll with Martha Stewart's calm monotone), the theater proprietor (a Kermit with a nasal twang I couldn't place), and a dozen others.

“And this,” said Jessica, holding up the last, “is the chief of police.” My son's first teddy bear, mouth agape in surprise to see the millennium, wore a tin badge pinned to his chest.

I looked up from my paper. “Chief of police?”

She held him up to her face and drawled on his behalf, “Howdy, stranger. Welcome to town.” She extended his paw.

I shook it. “Is there crime in Babytown?”

Jessica shrugged. “Not yet. But you never know.”

“Is there a crime lab? A forensics team?” I imagined dolls clad in white coats considering crayon marks and filling plaster casts of hind paw impressions.

“No, silly.”

“What about a legal system? What protects the rights of the accused?”

Jessica narrowed her eyes at me like she often did when I mentioned ancient concepts like full-service gas stations. “They're just babies, Grandpa. They don't do bad things.”

“Is that so? You'd better check with your mother about that.” I lifted my paper again. I'd heard other misguided government officials claim low crime rates didn't require well-funded courts.

Jessica, Lavinia, and the people of Babytown conducted their daily business and spread through every room like invading hordes. Their town hall was the living room, and I tried to tune out the whispering and giggling between Jessica and her minions as they discussed the pressing issues of their fledgling democracy.

They'd just passed a resolution condemning green beans when someone got hungry enough to take a break. Jessica

turned to me and said, “I'm going to get Popsicles for the council. Do you want one?”

“No thanks.”

I heard the footstool scrape across the kitchen floor and the freezer door open. I was folding the comics page into a square to do the crossword when her ear-withering scream sent my heart into arrhythmia.

I rushed to the kitchen, afraid Jessica's head had cracked like Lavinia's against the tile, but she stood pointing into the freezer.

There, nestled in the clumps of snow and encased in a block of ice, was Fun in the Sun Barbie.

“W-who did that, Grandpa?”

I pulled Barbie from her icy tomb and set her in the sink to thaw. “I don't know. Looks like a case for the Babytown police.”

It wasn't long before the authorities discovered Barbie was only the first victim of a grim toyland Helter Skelter. Innocent citizens found dolls and stuffed animals displayed in grisly poses: a plush cat crushed under the couch leg, a baby doll hanging from the ceiling fan chain, a Weeble wobbling at the bottom of the toilet, and others too hideous to describe.

The chief of police announced during one of Jessica's frequent news conferences that he would focus his scrutiny on Eric, known for taking sick glee in teasing his little sister and previously implicated in the Great Bacon Grease Frosting Debacle and the Great You Were Adopted Hoax.

Eric, no fool, decided to make a hasty escape. A game of Risk tucked under his arm, he waved on his way to the door.

“I'm going over to Mark's for the afternoon, Grandpa.”

“That's fine. Be back by four.”

Jessica's olive face flushed in a burgundy rage. “No, you're not!” She leaped, knocking the game from Eric's grasp in a shower of plastic armies.

“Hey!” He shoved her back and ran outside to his bicycle.

“Okay, now.” I rose from my chair.

Jessica grabbed an angry stuffed animal posse and chased Eric into the yard, shrieking “Murderer!”

By the time I got out there, she was pounding her fists against his stomach, her pigtails whipping around like a nest of angry asps. “You killed them, you monster!”

The mailman halted at the end of the driveway, clutching my son's bills to his chest.

“Just a little childhood conflict,” I said, forcing a laugh.

I pushed the kids apart and tugged them inside by their elbows. “Let's pretend we're not a family of sociopaths, shall we?”

Eric and Jessica both nodded curtly to the mailman.

After the screen door clattered shut behind us, Jessica renewed her assault. “Murderer! He killed my baby dolls!”

“Yeah?” Eric grinned. “Prove it.”

“I don't have to. Grandpa knows you did it.”

I tried to climb to neutral ground. “I didn't see anything.”

“Neither did she.”

“The babies were in every room. They all saw it. They're witnesses!” An idea crackled through Jessica's brain and glowed behind her eyes. She jabbed a finger at Eric in true Banquo fashion and cried, “You are under arrest!”

“For what?”

“For murder. First-degree murder.”

“Where are you going to prove it, you twisted little gnome?”

“In Babytown court with Grandpa as judge.”

“Oh, no,” I said, holding up my hands. “I have to recuse myself for conflict of interest. I'm related to both the defendant and the prosecution.”

“So you're saying you love one of us more than the other?” asked Jessica.

“What? No, of course not.”

“Doesn't that make you the most impartial judge around? Aren't you more fair because you love both of us the same?”

Had the trial already begun? If I didn't think fast, she'd have me back on the bench. “Well, maybe. But I retired as a defense attorney, not a judge.”

“Fine,” said my grandson. “You're hired.”

“Wait a minute—”

“Holly!” Jessica called her sister with a shrill voice capable of penetrating solid lead.

Holly leaned out from her bedroom, dance music throbbing behind her. “What is it?”

“We need you to be a judge.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I'm putting Eric in jail for killing my babies.”

“I'm doing my nails.”

“All you have to do is listen.” Jessica put her hands on her hips.

“No. Get somebody else to play along.”

“Well, I guess we could have one of my friends come over, but that'd take a long time.”

“ ‘Oprah’ is on at four.”

“If we had a judge we might be done by then.”

The music stopped. Holly shuffled into the living room with tufts of cotton between her drying toenails. “Whatever. Let's get on with it.”

Jessica gathered a courtroom crowd of Babytown citizens and pointed every pair of eyes toward the couch where Eric and I sat. Holly shoved the recliner into position so she could take the bench.

“All rise!” cried Jessica. “The Babytown Criminal Court is now in session, with the Honorable Judge Holly Driscoll presiding.”

Eric and I rose. Holly waved to us to sit down and opened her sketch pad. She drew excellent portraits in pencil, especially when inspired by boredom.

Her Honor sighed. “What's first?”

“Opening arguments,” I said.

Jessica strode to the front of the living room.

“Murder.” She shook her head. “Murder isn't supposed to happen in Babytown. It's a happy place, where we make special nametags for everyone at Thanksgiving and where we help Mommy with the laundry even when everyone else is too busy. Then Eric—always an enemy of the babies and Babytown—attacked us for no reason. I intend to prove to the court that Eric planned these crimes and isn't sorry he did them.”

She was better than many prosecutors I remember.

“Grandpa?”

I cleared my throat. “Your Honor, I believe you will find the prosecution's case is circumstantial, relying on my client's previous crimes to convict.”

“That's it?” Eric whispered.

“Short and simple, son. Judges like that.”

The prosecution called her first witness, the mayor.

Lavinia's plastic hand rested on the Illustrated Bible for Children while an Admiral Ackbar action figure swore her in. “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”

“I do,” said Lavinia in a baby voice emanating from the prosecution's pursed lips.

“Oh, boy,” said Eric. “Here we go.”

I nudged him with my elbow.

“Mayor Lavinia,” said Jessica with drama observed from watching “Law & Order” with her mother. “Please tell us what you saw earlier today.”

The mayor quivered. “I saw...”

“It's okay, Lavinia,” soothed Jessica. “We'll protect you here.”

“Come on,” Eric groaned. “This is going to take a hundred years.”

The prosecution stuck out her tongue at my client.

Lavinia continued. “I was in the back bedroom and I saw Eric wrapping the chain of the ceiling fan around Baby Helen's neck. She swung there for a second before she fell to the ground.”

“And what did the bad, bad defendant do at this point?”

“Objection!” I cried. “Leading the witness.”

“Sustained.”

Jessica scowled. “What did Eric do, Lavinia?”

“He laughed.”

“He laughed. No further questions.”

I tried to redirect, but Lavinia's focus couldn't be shifted.

“Was there anyone else in the room at the time?”

“No. Only Eric, the murderer.” Jessica turned Lavinia's head to face Eric with defiance.

“Are you certain? Not Jessica?”

“No. Just me and that evil boy.”

“No further questions.”

Brown Bear, more beige now than brown when he was once my client's property, took the stand.

“Could you describe to the court what you saw, Brown Bear?”

“Yes,” said Brown Bear. “I—”

My client cut him off. “For God's sake, she's making them talk. She's just using different voices!”

Judge Holly looked up from her pencil sketch of my client. “One more outburst and you'll be held in contempt.”

“Is he even allowed to testify against me? He was my bear when I was little. Isn't that a conflict of interest or something?”

“Sorry, son,” I said. “We're in Babytown jurisdiction now.”

Eric kicked the coffee table.

The prosecution patted Brown Bear's paw. “Please continue.”

“I watched Eric as he took down one of Daddy's large beer glasses—”

“—strictly forbidden to every kid in this house, correct?” Jessica interrupted herself.

“Yes,” said Brown Bear. “But it was the only one tall enough to contain Barbie. So I saw him fill it with water from the sink, drop Barbie in it, and put the glass in the freezer behind the orange Popsicles.”

“To hide her long enough to freeze.”

“Yes.” Brown Bear's voice cracked with emotion.

“Thank you.”

Something seemed wrong to me. “How could you have seen Eric place Barbie in the beer glass when Jessica was out here conducting Babytown meetings?”

“Because Jessica left me on the counter to guard the Babytown food supply when she came in for breakfast.”

The bear had me. “No further questions.”

More witnesses offered further damning testimony. Elmo affirmed he'd watched Eric position Chairman Meow's head under the left forward couch leg in the den. Robot educator 2-XL droned that he observed my client shove Gumby into the mailbox with the obvious intent of melting him into a green goo in the summer heat.

Each new witness confirmed the prosecution's case, and the outcome was almost certain: Eric would be found guilty. I requested a recess from the court to consult with my client in the kitchen.

“Grandpa, she's winning!” Eric reached into the refrigerator for a Sprite. “Dad said you used to get criminals off all the time.”

I forced myself to smile. “I didn't get criminals off. I protected their rights from an overzealous criminal justice system that wanted them to go to jail because they were black or poor. Your dad listens to Rush Limbaugh too much.”

“Then why are you letting an eight-year-old girl win?”

That's a hard question to ask a grandfather, especially one with a career of three hundred successful defense cases.

“We're not letting her win. We're letting her think she's winning. The trick of defense is to let the prosecution weave a quilt of facts and assumptions. Then we yank a thread and unravel it. The more the prosecution says, the more we have to work with.”

Eric nodded.

“Now, in case it comes to it, I need to know if you'd be willing to enter a plea.” I shivered at the thought of Eric in the Babytown tombs, but I had to cover all the bases.

“Are you asking if I did it?”

I held up my hand. “You never ask that. I just want to know if you'd be willing to negotiate with the prosecution for a lighter sentence.”

I could see in Eric's eyes an endless stream of makeovers delivered by the barbarous Babytown penal system.

“No. I'll take my chances.”

I put my hand on the boy's shoulder. “It shouldn't come to that.”

“If you say so, Grandpa.” Eric gulped his soda.

We returned to the courtroom.

“Any further evidence from the prosecution?” Holly nudged Jessica with her foot.

“Nope. The prosecution rests.”

“Grandpa?”

I rose and clasped my hands behind my back. Old habits die hard. “Your honor, the defense recalls Brown Bear to the stand.”

The front door swung open just as Jessica ran to get him, and my daughter-in-law Julie staggered inside balancing her briefcase and several grocery bags on her knees and arms.

“Hey! You demons want to help me with these?”

The court declared another recess as Eric and Holly donned shoes and trudged outside to fetch the groceries. Jessica scrambled outside barefoot.

“What are you doing standing by the door, Howard? The kids weren't giving you a hard time, were they?” Julie shuffled into the kitchen.

“Oh, no,” I said absently, considering my cross-examination and watching Jessica hopping on the hot driveway with a single plastic bag in her hands. What a firebrand she is, I thought. Serious and indignant and ready to right wrongs and serve justice.

Grandfathers—and keep this big secret to yourself—don't always compete to their full abilities. Sometimes we've been known to take a dive. We don't see the move that puts a child's king into checkmate. We don't block all angles in Connect Four. We forget to demand rent when a piece lands on Boardwalk. Something happens to a grandparent that

diminishes the need to win, even in an old prize fighter like me.

I'd been known to throw a fight to make Jessica happy. Like any girl with attorney blood surging through her veins, she loved to win. She beamed and walked taller for an hour after. When she won, I won.

I wouldn't need to throw this one for her. She'd pleaded a persuasive case. She'd gathered strong testimony against a client who we all assumed was guilty.

Assumed. Was my granddaughter railroading a client without due process?

I'm a grandfather. I wanted Jessica to win. But I'm also a defense attorney, and she was sandbagging my client with circumstantial and hearsay evidence in a prejudicial venue. Eric's civil rights were in jeopardy, and—guilty as he probably was—he deserved the same vigorous defense guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States.

The kids stormed inside one after the other, fumbling with bags. My client lugged the milk jugs and twelve-packs of soda.

This wasn't Chutes and Ladders anymore. I left the bench to defend clients from slick-haired, shiny-suited prosecutors with political ambitions; I couldn't raise my granddaughter to become one.

Once the kids helped put away the groceries, the prosecution retrieved Brown Bear to take the stand. Admiral Ackbar swore him in again.

I started off slowly. “Brown Bear, of what material is your eye constructed?”

“Plastic?” The bear seemed confused.

“Your honor, I'd like to introduce into evidence The New York Public Library Science Desk Reference.” I pulled the book from the bottom shelf.

Jessica grabbed for it. “That's Daddy's book.”

I held it out of her reach. “He won't mind if we borrow it. I direct the court's attention to page 168, describing the function of the eye. To summarize briefly, a lens focuses light in the eye which is then converted to nerve impulses by the retina.”

“Objection!”

We all turned. “For?” Holly prompted.

Jessica squirmed in her seat. “Being sneaky.”

“Overruled.”

I returned to the witness. “Brown Bear, is the plastic of your eyes photoreceptive?”

Brown Bear seemed off balance, like many a perjured witness. “Photo what?”

“Photoreceptive. The retina is photoreceptive, with rods and cones absorbing light. How do your eyes do that?”

“They don't.”

“If your eyes cannot perceive light, how could you have seen the defendant wrap the chain leading to the ceiling fan around the victim's throat?”

The bear had no answer.

“Is it not true, Brown Bear,” said I, whirling to point at him dramatically, “that you are completely blind?”

The bear stuttered nonsense syllables.

In quick succession, I called each witness in turn and asked pointed questions. Are you manufactured of plastic? Are you too short to see my client? Is it not then impossible that you observed my client committing the crime?

The prosecution had no rebuttal.

I always save the best witness for last. “Your Honor, the defense calls Mayor Lavinia to the stand.”

Jessica folded her arms.

“The prosecution will produce the witness or be found in contempt,” said Holly.

The prosecution stomped to her room, grabbed Lavinia, and set her on the stand.

I cleared my throat. “Honorable mayor, can you describe the circumstances under which you received—how can I put this delicately—your grievous injury?”

“Unfair!” cried the prosecution.

“May it please the court that this line of questioning speaks toward witness credibility.”

Judge Holly nodded. “I'll allow it.”

The mayor replied through Jessica's clenched teeth, “One night when Mommy washed me two years ago, I hit my head in the washing machine.”

“And you now wear a protective patch of masking tape?”

“Yes.”

“Could you please remove the tape to show the court exactly what your head contains?”

The scowling prosecution peeled back the patch to reveal the dark cavity in the mayor's plastic brain case.

“May the court observe the witness's empty head.”

“So noted.”

“You claim before the court that you recall seeing the defendant at the crime scene. Do you stand by your statement?”

“Yes.”

“If so, where do you store those memories without a brain? Is it not possible that any brains you had drained into the washing machine as you banged and spun into unconsciousness that fateful day?”

The mayor stammered.

“No further questions.”

Jessica fumed and had no questions for redirect.

“The defense rests.”

Holly checked the VCR clock. “Is that it?”

“Closing arguments! Closing arguments!” Jessica cried.

“ ‘Oprah’ is on in three minutes. Haven't you said enough?”

“Grandpa!”

“It's Holly's courtroom.”

“I've got enough information to make my judgment.”

Her Honor retired to the kitchen to pour herself an iced tea and deliberate over the case. Eric and I tried to avoid Jessica's glare.

“You know you did it.”

Eric leaned back. “Did what?”

“Killed those babies. I'm writing about this in the Christmas newsletter so nobody will buy you presents this year.”

Yellow journalism, too. She learned fast.

“Maybe they all tried to kill themselves to avoid a life in your totalitarian state.”

“Shut up.”

“No, you shut up.”

Holly returned. “Both of you shut up.”

As she settled into the recliner, we rose halfway and sat again. “After due deliberation, this court finds the defendant Eric Charles Driscoll not guilty of murder in the first degree and orders him released on his own recognizance.” She tapped the coffee table with her glass. “Court adjourned.”

“I hate you all!” The prosecution ran crying to the bathroom and locked herself inside. Come to think of it, that might be what I did when I lost my first case, too.

I grasped Eric's arm on his way outside and said, “Next time might not go as well, Capone. Don't push your luck. Follow my meaning?”

“Sure, Grandpa.”

Holly turned on the television and I walked back to the hallway bathroom. Jessica wailed behind the door.

“Sweetie, you can't win every case. I didn't win every one, even.” Her crying grew louder. Had I ruined her love for arguing the law? Had I shattered her innocent zeal for justice?

“You can't just line up witnesses to say whatever you want. Even criminals have rights.”

“Go away!”

I pressed my hands against the door. My attorney blood diluted with the grandfatherly kind, and I whispered, “There's always the civil case.”

The sobbing stopped.

[Back to Table of Contents]

[Back to Table of Contents]

Mystery Classic: **The Bacteriological Detective** by Arthur B. Reeve

Kennedy was deeply immersed in writing a lecture on the chemical compositions of various bacterial toxins and antitoxins, a thing which was as unfamiliar to me as Kamchatka, but as familiar to Kennedy as Broadway and Forty-Second Street.

“Really,” he remarked, laying down his fountain-pen and lighting his cigar for the hundredth time, “the more one thinks of how the modern criminal misses his opportunities the more astonishing it seems. Why do they stick to pistols, chloroform, and prussic acid when there is such a splendid assortment of refined methods they might employ?”

“Give it up, old man,” I replied helplessly, “unless it is because they haven't any imagination. I hope they don't use them. What would become of my business if they did? How would you ever get a really dramatic news feature for the Star out of such a thing? ‘Dotted line marks route taken by fatal germ; cross indicates spot where antitoxin attacked it'—ha! ha! Not much for the yellow journals in that, Craig.”

“To my mind, Walter, it would be the height of the dramatic—far more dramatic than sending a bullet into a man. Any fool can shoot a pistol or cut a throat, but it takes brains to be up-to-date.”

“It may be so,” I admitted, and went on reading, while Kennedy scratched away diligently on his lecture. I mention this conversation both because it bears on my story, by a

rather peculiar coincidence, and because it showed me a new side of Kennedy's amazing researches. He was as much interested in bacteria as in chemistry, and the story is one of bacteria.

It was perhaps a quarter of an hour later when the buzzer on our hall door sounded. Imagine my surprise on opening the door to discover the slight figure of what appeared to be a most fascinating young lady who was heavily veiled. She was in a state almost bordering on hysteria, as even I, in spite of my usual obtuseness, noticed.

"Is Professor Kennedy in?" she inquired anxiously.

"Yes, ma'am," I replied, opening the door into our study.

She advanced toward him, repeating her inquiry.

"I am Professor Kennedy. Pray be seated," he said.

The presence of a lady in our apartment was such a novelty that really I forgot to disappear, but busied myself straightening the furniture and opening a window to allow the odor of stale tobacco to escape.

"My name is Eveline Bisbee," she began. "I have heard, Professor Kennedy, that you are an adept at getting at the bottom of difficult mysteries."

"You flatter me," he said in acknowledgment. "Who was so foolish as to tell you that?"

"A friend who has heard of the Kerr Parker case," she replied.

"I beg your pardon," I interrupted, "I didn't mean to intrude. I think I'll go out. I'll be back in an hour or two."

"Please, Mr. Jameson—it is Mr. Jameson, is it not?"

I bowed in surprise.

“If it is possible I wish you would stay and hear my story. I am told that you and Professor Kennedy always work together.”

It was my turn to be embarrassed by the compliment.

“Mrs. Fletcher, of Great Neck,” she explained, “has told me. I believe Professor Kennedy performed a great service for the Fletchers, though I do not know what it was. At any rate, I have come to you with my case, in which I have small hope of obtaining assistance unless you can help me. If Professor Kennedy cannot solve it—well, I'm afraid nobody can.” She paused a moment, then added, “No doubt you have read of the death of my guardian the other day.”

Of course we had. Who did not know that “Jim” Bisbee, the southern California oil-magnate, had died suddenly of typhoid fever at the private hospital of Dr. Bell, where he had been taken from his magnificent apartment on Riverside Drive? Kennedy and I had discussed it at the time. We had commented on the artificiality of the twentieth century. No longer did people have homes; they had apartments, I had said. They didn't fall ill in the good old-fashioned way any more, either—in fact, they even hired special rooms to die in. They hired halls for funeral services. It was a wonder that they didn't hire graves. It was all part of our twentieth century break-up of tradition. Indeed we did know about the death of Jim Bisbee. But there was nothing mysterious about it. It was just typical in all its surroundings of the first decade of the twentieth century in a great, artificial city—a lonely death of a great man surrounded by all that money could buy.

We had read of his ward, too, the beautiful Miss Eveline Bisbee, a distant relation. As under the heat of the room and her excitement, she raised her veil, we were very much interested in her. At least, I am sure that even Kennedy had by this time completely forgotten the lecture on toxins.

“There is something about my guardian's death,” she began in a low and tremulous voice, “that I am sure will bear investigating. It may be only a woman's foolish fears, but—but—I haven't told this to a soul till now, except Mrs. Fletcher. My guardian had, as you perhaps know, spent his summer at his country place at Bisbee Hall, New Jersey, from which he returned rather suddenly about a week ago. Our friends thought it merely a strange whim that he should return to the city before the summer was fairly over, but it was not. The day before he returned, his gardener fell sick of typhoid. That decided Mr. Bisbee to return to the city on the following day. Imagine his consternation to find his valet stricken the very next morning. Of course he motored to New York immediately, then he wired to me at Newport, and together we opened his apartment at the Louis Quinze.

“But that was not to be the end of it. One after another, the servants at Bisbee Hall were taken with the disease until five of them were down. Then came the last blow—Mr. Bisbee fell a victim in New York. So far I have been spared. But who knows how much longer it will last? I have been so frightened that I haven't eaten a meal in the apartment since I came back. When I am hungry I simply steal out to a hotel—a different one every time. I never drink any water except that which I have surreptitiously boiled in my own room over a

gas-stove. Disinfectants and germicides have been used by the gallon, and still I don't feel safe. Even the health authorities don't remove my fears. With my guardian's death I had begun to feel that possibly it was over. But no. This morning another servant who came up from the hall last week was taken sick, and the doctor pronounces that typhoid, too. Will I be the next? Is it just a foolish fear? Why does it pursue us to New York? Why didn't it stop at Bisbee Hall?"

I don't think I ever saw a living creature more overcome by horror, by an invisible, deadly fear. That was why it was doubly horrible in a girl so attractive as Eveline Bisbee. As I listened I felt how terrible it must be to be pursued by such a fear. What must it be to be dogged by a disease as relentlessly as the typhoid had dogged her? If it had been some great, but visible, tangible peril how gladly I could have faced it merely for the smile of a woman like this. But it was a peril that only knowledge and patience could meet. Instinctively I turned toward Kennedy, my own mind being an absolute blank.

"Is there anyone you suspect of being the cause of such an epidemic?" he asked. "I may as well tell you right now that I have already formed two theories—one perfectly natural, the other diabolical. Tell me everything."

"Well, I had expected to receive a fortune of one million dollars, free and clear, by his will, and this morning I am informed by his lawyer, James Denny, that a new will had been made. It is still one million. But the remainder, instead of going to a number of charities in which he was known to be interested, goes to form a trust fund for the Bisbee School of

Mechanical Arts, of which Mr. Denny is the sole trustee. Of course, I do not know much about my guardian's interests while he was alive, but it strikes me as strange that he should have changed so radically, and besides, the new will is so worded that if I die without children my million also goes to this school—location unnamed. I can't help wondering about it all."

"Why should you wonder—at least what other reasons have you for wondering?"

"Oh, I can't express them. Maybe after all it's only a woman's silly intuition. But often I have thought in the past few days about this illness of my guardian. It was so queer. He was always so careful. And you know the rich don't often have typhoid."

"You have no reason to suppose that it was not typhoid fever of which he died?"

She hesitated. "No," she replied, "but if you had known Mr. Bisbee you would think it strange, too. He had a horror of infectious and contagious diseases. His apartment and his country home were models. No sanitarium could have been more punctilious. He lived what one of his friends called an antiseptic life. Maybe I am foolish, but it keeps getting closer and closer to me now, and—well, I wish you'd look into the case. Please set my mind at rest and assure me that nothing is wrong, that it is all natural."

"I will help you, Miss Bisbee. Tomorrow night I want to take a trip quietly to Bisbee Hall. You will see that it is all right, that I have the proper letters so I can investigate thoroughly?"

I shall never forget the mute and eloquent thanks with which she said good night after Kennedy's promise.

Kennedy sat with his eyes shaded under his hand for fully an hour after she had left. Then he suddenly jumped up. “Walter,” he said, “let us go over to Dr. Bell's. I know the head nurse there. We may possibly learn something.”

As we sat in the waiting-room with its thick Oriental rugs and handsome mahogany furniture, I found myself going back to our conversation of the early evening. “By Jove, Kennedy, you were right,” I exclaimed. “If there is anything in this germ-plot idea of hers it is indeed the height of the dramatic—it is diabolical. No ordinary mortal would ever be capable of it.”

Just then the head nurse came in, a large woman breathing of germlessness and cheerfulness in her spotless uniform. We were shown every courtesy. There was, in fact, nothing to conceal. The visit set at rest my last suspicion that perhaps Jim Bisbee had been poisoned by a drug. The charts of his temperature and the sincerity of the nurse were absolutely convincing. It had really been typhoid, and there was nothing to be gained by pursuing that inquiry further.

Back at the apartment, Craig began packing his suitcase with the few things he would need for a journey. “I'm going out to Bisbee Hall tomorrow for a few days, Walter, and if you could find it convenient to come along I should like to have your assistance.”

“To tell you the truth, Craig, I am afraid to go,” I said.

“You needn't be. I'm going down to the army post on Governor's Island first to be vaccinated against typhoid. Then

I am going to wait a few hours till it takes effect before going. It's the only place in the city where one can be inoculated against it, so far as I know. While three inoculations are really best, I understand that one is sufficient for ordinary protection, and that is all we shall need, if any."

"You're sure of it?"

"Almost positive."

"Very well, Craig. I'll go."

Down at the army post the next morning we had no difficulty in being inoculated against the disease. The work of immunizing our army was going on at that time, and several thousands of soldiers in various parts of the country had already been vaccinated, with the best of results.

"Do many civilians come over to be vaccinated?" asked Craig of Major Carrol, the surgeon in charge.

"Not many, for very few have heard of it," he replied.

"I suppose you keep a record of them."

"Only their names—we can't follow them up outside the army, to see how it works. Still, when they come to us as you and Mr. Jameson have done we are perfectly willing to vaccinate them. The Army Medical Corps takes the position that if it is good for the army it is good for civil life, and as long as only a few civilians apply we are perfectly willing to do it for a fee covering the cost."

"And would you let me see the list?"

"Certainly. You may look it over in a moment."

Kennedy glanced hurriedly through the short list of names, pulled out his notebook, made an entry, and handed the list back. "Thank you, Major."

Bisbee Hall was a splendid place set in the heart of a great park whose area was measured by square miles rather than by acres. But Craig did not propose to stay there, for he arranged for accommodations in a nearby town, where we were to take our meals also. It was late when we arrived, and we spent a restless night, for the inoculation “took.” It wasn't any worse than a light attack of the grippe, and in the morning we were both all right again, after the passing of what is called the “negative phase.” I, for one, felt much safer.

The town was very much excited over the epidemic at the hall, and if I had been wondering why Craig wanted me along, my wonder was soon set at rest. He had me scouring the town and country looking up every case or rumor of typhoid for miles around. I made the local weekly paper my headquarters, and the editor was very obliging. He let me read all his news letters from his local correspondent at every crossroads. I waded through accounts of new calves and colts, new fences and barns, who “Sundayed” with his brother, etc., and soon had a list of all the cases in that part of the country. It was not a long one, but it was scattered. After I had traced them out, following Kennedy's instructions, they showed nothing, except that they were unrelated to the epidemic at the hall.

Meanwhile, Kennedy was very busy there. He had a microscope and slides and test-tubes and chemicals for testing things, and I don't know what all, for there was not time to initiate me into all the mysteries. He tested the water from the various driven wells and in the watertank, and the

milk from the cows; he tried to find out what food had come in from outside, though there was practically none, for the hall was self-supporting. There was no stone he left unturned.

When I rejoined him that night he was clearly perplexed. I don't think my report decreased his perplexity, either.

“There is only one thing left as far as I have been able to discover after one day's work,” he said, after we had gone over our activities for the day. “Jim Bisbee never drank the water from his own wells. He always drank a bottled water shipped down from a camp of his in New York State, where he had a remarkable mountain spring. I tested a number of the full bottles at the hall, but they were perfectly pure. There wasn't a trace of the bacillus typhosus in any of them. Then it occurred to me that, after all, that was not the thing to do. I should test the empty ones. But there weren't any empty ones. They told me they had all been taken down to the freight station yesterday to be shipped back to the camp. I hope they haven't gone yet. Let's drive around and see if they are there.”

The freight-master was just leaving, but when he learned we were from the hall he consented to let us examine the bottles. They were corked and in wooden cases, which protected them perfectly. By the light of the station lamps and the aid of a pocket-lens, Kennedy examined them on the outside and satisfied himself that after being replaced in the wooden cases the bottles themselves had not been handled.

“Will you let me borrow some of these bottles tonight?” he asked the agent. “I'll give you my word that they will be

returned safely tomorrow. If necessary, I'll get an order for them."

The station agent reluctantly yielded, especially as a small green banknote figured in the transaction. Craig and I tenderly lifted the big bottles in their cases into our trap and drove back to our rooms in the hotel. It quite excited the hangers-on to see us drive up with a lot of empty five-gallon bottles and carry them upstairs, but I had long ago given up having any fear of public opinion in carrying out anything Craig wanted.

In our room we worked far into the night. Craig carefully swabbed out the bottom and sides of each bottle by inserting a little piece of cotton on the end of a long wire. Then he squeezed the water out of the cotton swab on small glass slides coated with agar-agar, or Japanese seaweed, a medium in which germ cultures multiply rapidly. He put the slides away in a little oven with an alcohol-lamp which he had brought along, leaving them to remain over night at blood heat.

I had noticed all this time that he was very particular not to touch any of the bottles on the outside. As for me, I wouldn't have touched them for the world. In fact, I was getting so I hesitated to touch anything. I was almost afraid to breathe, though I knew there was no harm in that. However, it was not danger of infection in touching the bottles that made Craig so careful. He had noted, in the dim light of the station lamps, what seemed to be finger-marks on the bottles, and they had interested him, in fact, had decided him on a further investigation of the bottles.

“I am now going to bring out these very faint finger-prints on the bottles,” remarked Craig, proceeding with his examination in the better light of our room. “Here is some powder known to chemists as ‘grey powder'—mercury and chalk. I sprinkle it over the faint markings, so, and then I brush it off with a camel's-hair brush lightly. That brings out the imprint much more clearly, as you can see. For instance, if you place your dry thumb on a piece of white paper you leave no visible impression. If grey powder is sprinkled over the spot and then brushed off, a distinct impression is seen. If the impression of the fingers is left on something soft, like wax, it is often best to use printers’ ink to bring out the ridges and patterns of the finger-marks. And so on for various materials. Quite a science has been built up around finger-prints.

“I wish I had that enlarging camera which I have in my laboratory. However, my ordinary camera will do, for all I want to do is preserve a record of these marks, and I can enlarge the photographs later. In the morning I will photograph these marks and you can do the developing of the films. Tonight we'll improvise the bathroom as a dark-room and get everything ready so that we can start in bright and early.”

We were, indeed, up early. One never has difficulty in getting up early in the country: it is so noisy, at least to a city-bred man. City noise at five A.M. is sepulchral silence compared with bucolic activity at that hour.

There were a dozen negatives which I set about developing after Craig had used up all our films. Meanwhile, he busied

himself adjusting his microscope and test-tubes and getting the agar slides ready for examination.

Shirt-sleeves rolled up, I was deeply immersed in my work when I heard a shout in the next room, and the bathroom door flew open.

“Confound you, Kennedy, do you want to ruin these films!” I cried.

He shut the door with a bang. “Hurrah, Walter!” he exclaimed. “I think I have it, at last. I have just found some most promising colonies of the bacilli on one of my slides.”

I almost dropped the pan of acid I was holding, in my excitement. “Well,” I said, concealing my own surprise, “I've found out something, too. Every one of these finger-prints so far is from the same pair of hands.”

We scarcely ate any breakfast, and were soon on our way up to the hall. Craig had provided himself at the local stationer's with an inking-pad, such as is used for rubber stamps. At the hall he proceeded to get the impressions of the fingers and thumbs of all the servants.

It was quite a long and difficult piece of work to compare the finger-prints we had taken with those photographed, in spite of the fact that writers descant on the ease with which criminals are traced by this system devised by the famous Galton. However, we at last finished the job between us; or rather Craig finished it, with an occasional remark from me. His dexterity amazed me; it was more than mere book knowledge.

For a moment we sat regarding each other hopelessly. None of the finger-prints taken at the hall tallied with the

photographed prints. Then Craig rang for the housekeeper, a faithful old soul whom even the typhoid scare could not budge from her post.

“Are you sure I have seen all the servants who were at the hall while Mr. Bisbee was here?” asked Craig.

“Why, no, sir—you didn't ask that. You asked to see all who are here now. There is only one who has left, the cook, Bridget Fallon. She left a couple of days ago—said she was going back to New York to get another job. Glad enough I was to get rid of her, too, for she was drunk most of the time after the typhoid appeared.”

“Well, Walter, I guess we shall have to go back to New York again, then,” exclaimed Kennedy. “Oh, I beg pardon, Mrs. Rawson, for interrupting. Thank you ever so much. Where did Bridget come from?”

“She came well recommended, sir. Here is the letter in my writing-desk. She had been employed by the Caswell-Joneses at Shelter Island before she came here.”

“I may keep this letter?” asked Craig, scanning it quickly.

“Yes.”

“By the way, where were the bottles of spring water kept?”

“In the kitchen.”

“Did Bridget take charge of them?”

“Yes.”

“Did Mr. Bisbee have any guests during the last week that he was here?”

“Only Mr. Denny one night.”

“H'm!” exclaimed Craig. “Well, it will not be so hard for us to unravel this matter, after all, when we get back to the city.

We must make that noon train, Walter. There is nothing more for us to do here."

Emerging from the "Tube" at Ninth Street, Craig hustled me into a taxicab, and in almost no time we were at police headquarters.

Fortunately, Inspector Barney O'Connor was in and in an amiable mood, too, for Kennedy had been careful that the Central Office received a large share of credit for the Kerr Parker case. Craig sketched hastily the details of this new case. O'Connor's face was a study. His honest blue Irish eyes fairly bulged in wonder, and when Craig concluded with a request for help I think O'Connor would have given him anything in the office, just to figure in the case.

"First, I want one of your men to go to the surrogate's office and get the original of the will. I shall return it within a couple of hours—all I want to do is to make a photographic copy. Then another man must find this lawyer, James Denny, and in some way get his finger-prints—you must arrange that yourself. And send another fellow up to the employment offices on Fourth Avenue and have him locate this cook, Bridget Fallon. I want her finger-prints, too. Perhaps she had better be detained, for I don't want her to get away. Oh, and say, O'Connor, do you want to finish this case up like the crack of a whip tonight?"

"I'm game, sir. What of it?"

"Let me see. It is now four o'clock. If you can get hold of all these people in time I think I shall be ready for the final scene tonight—say, at nine. You know how to arrange it. Have them all present at my laboratory at nine, and I promise

we shall have a story that will get into the morning papers with leaded type on the front page."

"Now, Walter," he added, as we hurried down to the taxicab again, "I want you to drop off at the Department of Health with this card to the commissioner. I believe you know Dr. Leslie. Well, ask him if he knows anything about this Bridget Fallon. I will go on uptown to the laboratory and get my apparatus ready. You needn't come up till nine, old fellow, for I shall be busy till then, but be sure when you come that you bring the record of this Fallon woman if you have to beg, borrow, or steal it."

I didn't understand it, but I took the card and obeyed implicitly. It is needless to say that I was keyed up to the greatest pitch of excitement during my interview with the health commissioner, when I finally got in to see him. I hadn't talked to him long before a great light struck me, and I began to see what Craig was driving at. The commissioner saw it first.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Jameson," he said, after I had told him as much of my story as I could, "will you call up Professor Kennedy and tell him I'd like very much to be present tonight myself?"

"Certainly I will," I replied, glad to get my errand done in first-class fashion in that way.

Things must have been running smoothly, for while I was sitting in our apartment after dinner, impatiently waiting for half-past eight, when the commissioner had promised to call for me and go up to the laboratory, the telephone rang. It was Craig.

“Walter, might I ask a favor of you?” he said. “When the commissioner comes ask him to stop at the Louis Quinze and bring Miss Bisbee up, too. Tell her it is important. No more now. Things are going ahead fine.”

Promptly at nine we were assembled, a curious crowd. The health commissioner and the inspector, being members of the same political party, greeted each other by their first names. Miss Bisbee was nervous, Bridget was abusive, Denny was sullen. As for Kennedy, he was, as usual, as cool as a lump of ice. And I—well, I just sat on my feelings to keep myself quiet.

At one end of the room Craig had placed a large white sheet such as he used in his stereopticon lectures, while at the top of the tier of seats that made a sort of little amphitheater out of his lecture room his stereopticon sputtered.

“Moving pictures tonight, eh?” said Inspector O'Connor.

“Not exactly,” said Craig, “though—yes, they will be moving in another sense. Now, if we are all ready, I'll switch off the electric lights.”

The calcium sputtered some more, and a square of light was thrown on the sheet.

Kennedy snapped a little announcer such as lecturers use. “Let me invite your attention to these enlargements of finger-prints,” he began, as a huge thumb appeared on the screen. “Here we have a series of finger-prints which I will show one after another slowly. They are all of the fingers of the same person, and they were found on some empty bottles of spring

water used at Bisbee Hall during the two weeks previous to the departure of Mr. Bisbee for New York.

“Here are, in succession, the finger-prints of the various servants employed about the house—and of a guest,” added Craig, with a slight change of tone. “They differ markedly from the finger-prints on the glass,” he continued, as one after another appeared, “all except this last one. That is identical. It is, Inspector, what we call a composite type of finger-print—in this case a combination of what is called the ‘loop’ and ‘whorl’ types.”

No sound broke the stillness save the sputtering of the oxygen on the calcium of the stereopticon.

“The owner of the fingers from which these prints were made is in this room. It was from typhoid germs on these fingers that the fever was introduced into the drinking water at Bisbee Hall.”

Kennedy paused to emphasize the statement, then continued.

“I am now going to ask Dr. Leslie to give us a little talk on a recent discovery in the field of typhoid fever—you understand, Commissioner, what I mean, I believe?”

“Perfectly. Shall I mention names?”

“No, not yet.”

“Well,” began Dr. Leslie, clearing his throat, “within the past year or two we have made a most weird and startling discovery in typhoid fever. We have found what we now call ‘typhoid carriers'—persons who do not have the disease themselves, perhaps never had it, but who are literally living test-tubes of the typhoid bacillus. It is positively uncanny.

Everywhere they go they scatter the disease. Down at the department we have the records of a number of such instances, and our men in the research laboratories have come to the conclusion that, far from being of rare occurrence, these cases are comparatively common. I have in mind one particular case of a servant girl, who, during the past five or six years, has been employed in several families.

"In every family typhoid fever has later broken out. Experts have traced out at least thirty cases and several deaths due to this one person. In another case we found an epidemic up in Harlem to be due to a typhoid carrier on a remote farm in Connecticut. This carrier, innocently enough, it is true, contaminated the milk supply coming from that farm. The result was over fifty cases of typhoid here in this city.

"However, to return to the case of the servant I have mentioned. Last spring we had her under surveillance, but as there was no law by which we could restrain her permanently she is still at large. I think one of the Sunday papers at the time had an account of her—they called her 'Typhoid Bridget,' and in red ink she was drawn across the page in gruesome fashion, frying the skulls of her victims in a frying-pan over a roaring fire. That particular typhoid carrier, I understand—"

"Excuse me, Commissioner, if I interrupt, but I think we have carried this part of the program far enough to be absolutely convincing," said Craig. "Thank you very much for the clear way in which you have put it."

Craig snapped the announcer, and a letter appeared on the screen. He said nothing, but let us read it through:

> To whom it may concern:
>
> This is to certify that Bridget Fallon has been employed in my family at Shelter Island for the past season and that I have found her a reliable servant and an excellent cook.

A. St. John Caswell-Jones.

“Before God, Mr. Kennedy, I'm innocent,” screeched Bridget. “Don't have me arrested. I'm innocent. I'm innocent.”

Craig gently, but firmly, forced her back into her chair.

Again the announcer snapped. This time the last page of Mr. Bisbee's will appeared on the sheet, ending with his signature and the witnesses.

“I'm now going to show these two specimens of handwriting very greatly enlarged,” he said, as the stereopticon plates were shifted again.

“An author of many scientific works, Dr. Lindsay Johnson, of London, has recently elaborated a new theory with regard to individuality in handwriting. He maintains that in certain diseases a person's pulse beats are individual, and that no one suffering from any such disease can control, even for a brief space of time, the frequency or peculiar irregularities of his heart's action, as shown by a chart recording his pulsation. Such a chart is obtained for medical purposes by means of a sphygmograph, an instrument fitted to the patient's forearm and supplied with a needle, which can be so

arranged as to record automatically on a prepared sheet of paper the peculiar force and frequency of the pulsation. Or the pulsation may be simply observed in the rise and fall of a liquid in a tube. Dr. Johnson holds the opinion that a pen in the hand of a writer serves, in a modified degree, the same end as the needle in the first-named form of the sphygmograph and that in such a person's handwriting one can see by projecting the letters, greatly magnified, on a screen, the scarcely perceptible turns and quivers made in the lines by the spontaneous action of that person's peculiar pulsation.

“To prove this, the doctor carried out an experiment at Charing Cross Hospital. At his request a number of patients suffering from heart and kidney diseases wrote the Lord's Prayer in their ordinary handwriting. The different manuscripts were then taken and examined microscopically. By throwing them, highly magnified, on a screen, the jerks or involuntary motions due to the patient's peculiar pulsations were distinctly visible. The handwriting of persons in normal health, says Dr. Johnson, does not always show their pulse beats. What one can say, however, is that when a document, purporting to be written by a certain person, contains traces of pulse beats and the normal handwriting of that person does not show them, then clearly that document is a forgery.

“Now, in these two specimens of handwriting which we have enlarged it is plain that the writers of both of them suffered from a certain peculiar disease of the heart. Moreover, I am prepared to show that the pulse beats exhibited in the case of certain pen-strokes in one of these

documents are exhibited in similar strokes in the other. Furthermore, I have ascertained from his family physician, whose affidavit I have here, that Mr. Bisbee did not suffer from this or any other form of heart disease. Mr. Caswell-Jones, in addition to wiring me that he refused to write Bridget Fallon a recommendation after the typhoid broke out in his country house, also says he does not suffer from heart disease in any form. From the tremulous character of the letters and figures in both these documents, which when magnified is the more easily detected, I therefore conclude that both are forgeries, and I am ready to go farther and say that they are forgeries from the same hand.

"It usually takes a couple of weeks after infection for typhoid to develop, a time sufficient in itself to remove suspicion from acts which might otherwise be scrutinized very carefully if happening immediately before the disease developed. I may add, also, that it is well known that stout people do very poorly when they contract typhoid, especially if they are old. Mr. Bisbee was both stout and old. To contract typhoid was for him a virtual death warrant. Knowing all these facts, a certain person purposely sought out a crafty means of introducing typhoid fever into Mr. Bisbee's family. That person, furthermore, was inoculated against typhoid three times during the month before the disease was devilishly and surreptitiously introduced into Bisbee Hall, in order to protect himself or herself should it become necessary for that person to visit Bisbee Hall. That person, I believe, is the one who suffered from an aneurism of the heart, the writer, or rather the forger, of the two documents I have

shown, by one of which he or she was to profit greatly by the death of Mr. Bisbee and the founding of an alleged school in a distant part of the country—a subterfuge, if you recall, used in at least one famous case for which the convicted perpetrator is now under a life sentence in Sing Sing.

“I will ask Dr. Leslie to take this stethoscope and examine the hearts of everyone in the room and tell me whether there is anyone here suffering from an aneurism.”

The calcium light ceased to sputter. One person after another was examined by the health commissioner. Was it merely my imagination, or did I really hear a heart beating with wild leaps as if it would burst the bonds of its prison and make its escape if possible? Perhaps it was only the engine of the commissioner's machine out on the campus driveway. I don't know. At any rate, he went silently from one to the other, betraying not even by his actions what he discovered with the stethoscope. The suspense was terrible. I felt Miss Bisbee's hand involuntarily grasp my arm convulsively. Without disturbing the silence, I reached a glass of water standing near me on Craig's lecture table and handed it to her.

The commissioner was bending over the lawyer, trying to adjust the stethoscope better to his ears. The lawyer's head was resting heavily on his hand, and he was heaped up in an awkward position in the cramped lecture room seat. It seemed an age as Dr. Leslie tried to adjust the stethoscope. Even Craig felt the excitement. While the commissioner hesitated, Kennedy reached over and impatiently switched on the electric light in full force.

As the light filled the room, blinding us for the instant, the large form of Dr. Leslie stood between us and the lawyer.

“What does the stethoscope tell you, Doctor?” asked Craig, leaning forward expectantly. He was as unprepared for the answer as any of us.

“It tells me that a higher court than those of New York has passed judgment on this astounding criminal. The aneurism has burst.”

I felt a soft weight fall on my shoulder. The morning Star did not have the story, after all. I missed the greatest “scoop” of my life seeing Eveline Bisbee safely to her home after she had recovered from the shock of Denny's exposure and punishment.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Busman's Holiday: The Mysterious Galaxy

One of the West Coast's best-known mystery bookstores celebrated its tenth anniversary recently: Mysterious Galaxy in San Diego was established in May 1993, by Terry Gilman, Jeff Mariotte, and Maryelizabeth Hart. Though the store is now in its third location, the three founders are still the owners.

“Mysterious Galaxy specializes in mystery, speculative fiction, horror, and suspense,” says co-founder Hart, “because these are the books we love to read ourselves.” In fact, Hart has just finished up a two-year term as director of the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association.

The store hosts about a hundred author events per year; many are readings or simple Q&As, but some of their more elaborate and memorable events include a tea with Elizabeth George and a sit-down dinner with Diane Mott Davidson.

The store also sponsors other events, such as a recent writing workshop that featured Doug Lyle, M.D. (*Murder & Mayhem*), Trina Robbins (*Tender Murderers: Women Who Kill*), and a local FBI agent talking about the nuts and bolts of research. “And we participate in genre conventions and activities large and small within Southern California,” says Hart.

The owners have applied their love of multiple genres to the store's book discussion group, which meets every two weeks. The group picks a theme or setting—such as “cats” or “small towns” or “mid-twentieth century"—and then works its

way through the four genres, reading one book from each that fits the topic. “We try to structure the discussion groups so that they will be welcoming to people whether or not they have read the book,” notes Hart.

Asked to recommend some area authors, Hart quickly reels off over a dozen: Pat Benke, John Brizzolara, Taffy Cannon, Ken Kuhlken, Martha C. Lawrence, William Murray, Abigail Padgett, T. Jefferson Parker, Alan Russell, Janice Steinberg, Robert Wade, Joseph Wambaugh, Carolyn Wheat, Don Winslow—"and probably others who are slipping my mind.” She is pleased to say that they see most of these writers in the store. Five mysteries set in San Diego: Lawrence's *Pisces Rising*; Murray's *The King of the Nightcap*; Padgett's *Child of Silence*; Parker's *Cold Pursuit*; Russell's *Multiple Wounds*.

Mysterious Galaxy
www.mystgalaxy.com
7051 Clairemont Mesa Blvd.
San Diego, CA 92111
800/811-4747

[Back to Table of Contents]

The Mysterious Photograph

If Wishes Were Horses

[Back to Table of Contents]

We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry “September Contest,” and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

[Back to Table of Contents]

The Story That Won

The March contest was won by Sylvia D. Nugent of Lucedale, MS. Honorable mentions go to Marion Ungrich of Downingtown, PA; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, TX; Brooke Lum of Valencia, CA; David Magnusson of Hialeah, FL; Marian R. Applegate of Roseville, CA; Pat Scannell of Framingham, MA; Rhonda Keith of Cincinnati, OH; Nick Aires of Port Moody, BC; and Daniel Diaz of Temecula, CA.

[Back to Table of Contents]

When Pigs Fly by Sylvia D. Nugent
[Back to Table of Contents]

Homer stood pressing the center of his aching back. Looking around he saw that his brothers were doing the same. It was a back-breaking job hoeing potatoes. Suddenly he spotted something in the bright autumn sky, but he could not be sure of what it was. His brother Judd was also looking up.

“What do you suppose it is?” he whispered, almost as if to himself. Shrugging, Homer squinted trying to get a better look.

“Don't know,” he mumbled back. “Looks like a pig.”

Judd let out a short, nervous laugh. “A pig!” Shaking his head he slapped Homer on the back as if he had told a great joke. Homer, feeling heat rise up his neck to invade his face, glanced around at the others. Breathing a sigh of relief, he saw that they were all still watching the sky and had not heard his and Judd's conversation. “Well,” he defended, “that's what it looked like to me.”

Suddenly a shot rang out, and the men jumped in unison at the sound. With wide, disturbed eyes they watched the flying object fall into the nearby woods. “Well, that's that,” Homer said, picking up his hoe to get back to work.

Later that night, Judd crept through the dark woods and found what he was looking for. Falling to his knees, he picked up the small pink bundle lying lifeless on the cold ground. Tenderly he spread the soft tiny wings. With a sad shake of his head he mumbled, “Well, back to the drawing board.”

[Back to Table of Contents]

Booked & Printed

Reviews by Dan Herron

The world of great literature is a living place, ready when you are to step into and enjoy. You can visit homes and haunts, maybe travel to the parsonage where the Brontes lived, next to the raven-haunted graveyard looking down on the narrow winding lanes of Haworth in England. Or perhaps tour Beauty Ranch in California's wine country, where Jack London spent his last years—just two among hundreds of literary sites open to the public. The best books by such familiar writers are available in numerous editions, always in print, whenever you get around to taking the plunge. And if you want a really wild ride, the Detective Thursday Next series by Jasper Fforde will toss you, laughing, headfirst into the classics.

Introduced in *The Eyre Affair* (2002), Next works for Special Ops in the Literary Detectives division in an alternate world version of England that is dominated by the Goliath Corporation, where ChronoGuards police Time and vampire hunters track down blood-suckers. It is the mid-1980's, but vacuum tubes shoot people about the globe and zeppelins rule the air. Bioengineering has recreated Neanderthals and the curious can watch the semi-annual mammoth migration. Even Next has a pet dodo named Pickwick, although she, like everyone else, is stuck watching such surreal and unbelievably bland telly programs as “Name That Fruit!” In her first outing, Next trapped the villainous Jack Schitt in the

gloomy stanzas of Poe's The Raven and also managed to improve the ending of Jane Eyre so that it is no longer so darn depressing. Yes, that's right—these folks can travel through time and literally enter a supra-real world of literature.

Lost in a Good Book (Viking, $24.95) carries on the action. The Powers That Be at Goliath want Next to liberate Schitt from his Poe-tical prison, and to coerce her into the deed, they have eradicated her husband from Time. He's gone, memories of his very life are fading, and if our heroine wants him reactualized, she needs to do some deep text literary detective work. Diving in and out of Dickens and Austen, Kafka and Carroll, training under Miss Havisham, and chatting with that wide-lipped Cat from Alice, Next races through her crazy and delightful universe, from one hilarious encounter to another. Since anything is possible, you can't give Fforde too many points for his plotting skills (unlike, say, J. K. Rowling in her equally fantastical Harry Potter books, as tightly clued as any crime fiction). He's more like Monty Python or Douglas Adams, master of sudden invention, coming up with something amusing in each and every chapter, and seems poised to hurl Next through many more fun adventures.

Amateur sleuth Karen Pelletier enters the closed stacks of the college library in her fifth case and has the sort of feeling you can get from the Thursday Next novels. “I had a sudden eerie sense of disconnection from the present, as if we had somehow escaped the confines of time and matter and entered simultaneously into all the worlds pressed in ink and bound into these volumes, as if we had penetrated the

collective consciousness of brains long since reduced to scattered molecules of insensate matter." *The Maltese Manuscript* (Poisoned Pen, $24.95) by Joanne Dobson offers her English professor investigator the puzzles of a convoluted biblio-mystery. Many rare books are missing from the library, and it's discovered that even the priceless hand-corrected typescript of Dashiell Hammett's The Maltese Falcon has been stolen. Soon a body is discovered in the stacks. Into this scenario of bibliomania gone berserk, Dobson adds the presence of a bestselling female private eye writer, Sunnye Hardcastle, author of the "Kit Danger" series, ready to help out on the case—plus a conference on crime fiction and a mysteriously missing student. Light, funny, if lacking urgency, this novel in passing provides a nice overview of the literary history of mysteries, though I should note that the typescript of Hammett's most famous book is not known to exist. Also, given that the cover from the 1930 Knopf first edition of *The Maltese Falcon* has been reused here, I feel it is incumbent on me as the Grand Poobah of the Hammett Cult in San Francisco to warn hard-boiled fans that there's not a glimmer of Hammett between these boards. It's soft-boiled all the way.

If you are a devotee of Dante, however, don't miss *The Dante Club* (Random House, $24.95) by Matthew Pearl, which is about as deeply connected with a writer and his work as a novel can get. After the Civil War a circle of friends assemble to assist Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in doing the first American translation of The Divine Comedy, when suddenly bizarre ritualistic murders begin to occur, based on horrific

descriptions from Dante's tour of Hell. The publisher J. T. Fields and the poets James Russell Lowell and Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes investigate (any excuse is a good excuse for mystery fans to hear that great phrase, “my dear Holmes,” again). Pearl edited a recent Modern Library edition of Dante's Inferno from the Longfellow translation, and has this plot and cast of characters burned onto the page. A brilliant idea, wonderfully executed, with the era and Harvard setting brought to life.

If Hammett is now classic and Dante is a Classic, Samuel L. Clemens falls somewhere in between. I would never have expected to ever have to say this, but the new mystery by Mark Twain is a complete dog. *A Murder, a Mystery, and a Marriage* (Norton, $16.95) was written in 1876 but not released until 2001, and it's not hard to figure out why. Twain had this odd idea that he'd sketch out a weird crime story with Jules Verne as the bad guy and have other writers, such as Henry James, continue the action. Take my word for it: terrible. But then old Mark did Tom Sawyer before he started it and Huck Finn after he finished. Two out of three, we all know that's not bad.

[Back to Table of Contents]

A Bonus from Jonas

Carrie Carlin is back in her fifth adventure, *Slippery Slopes and Other Deadly Things* (Perseverance, ($13.95) by Nancy Tesler, and this time the ski slopes of Vermont are the setting for murder. While attending a conference at a ski resort, Carrie meets Dr. Hubert Freundlich, an important figure in her field of stress reduction through biofeedback. Dr. Freundlich's assistant is later found murdered with Carrie's scarf wrapped around his neck, and she finds herself in the middle of a killer plot to discredit the doctor. It takes a heroic effort for the high-strung Carrie to maintain her composure in the face of the violence that breaks out at the Snowridge resort, as her friend Joe is severely beaten and Carrie herself is shot at. Poor Carrie is beset on all sides by such pressures—the adulterous advances of Dr. Freundlich, her antagonistic ex-husband, a well-meaning but over-protective boyfriend—yet her stubborn curiosity won't let her give up the trail. Author Nancy Tesler uses the delicious irony of the stressed-out stress therapist to wonderful effect, rarely giving Carrie, or the reader, a chance to collect her thoughts. Tesler, a biofeedback practitioner herself, employs gentle slapstick and a constant barrage of distractions and anxieties to make Carrie an easy character to root for.

—Jonas Eno-Van Fleet

If you are connected to the Internet, take a moment to rate this ebook by going back to your bookshelf: Click Here