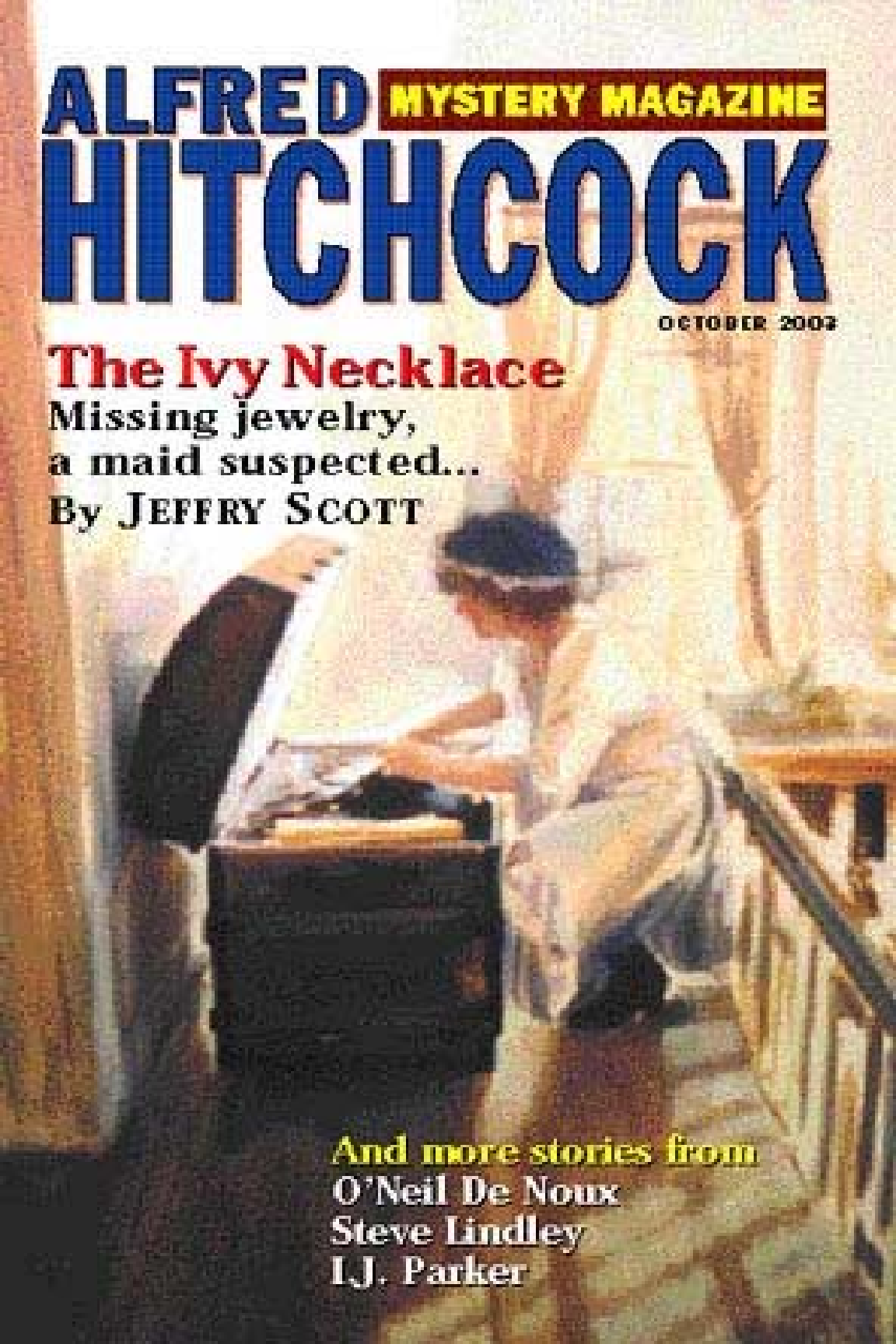
ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE

OCTOBER 2002

The Ivy Necklace

Missing jewelry,
a maid suspected...
By JEFFRY SCOTT



And more stories from
O'Neil De Noux
Steve Lindley
I.J. Parker

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Alfred Hitchcock's
Mystery Magazine
October 2003
Vol. 48 No. 10
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 combined double issues in
January/February and July/August.
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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine
Editorial Correspondence only:
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Subscriptions to the print edition
One Year $29.97
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Editor's Notes

From the Deep South to the British Isles, from Japan to outer space: This month's stories are nothing if not far-flung.

An author new to our pages takes us south to the bayou country of Louisiana in “The Body in Crooked Bayou.” O'Neil De Noux is a former police officer and private investigator turned graphic designer; he is also the author of more than one hundred and fifty published short stories, five novels, a true crime book, and two short story collections. Meanwhile, rounding out a swing through the south, Robert C. Hahn considers some exciting Florida mysteries in this month's book review column.

We are also pleased to welcome Susan Oleksiw, debuting in *AHMM* with “A Murder Made in India.” The author of four novels, Oleksiw is also the editor of a six volume series of reader's guides to the mystery novel, and she is the author of *A Reader's Guide to the Classic British Mystery*, in addition to numerous articles and short stories. Oleksiw is a co-founder of Larcom Press, a Massachusetts-based publisher, where she takes a particular interest in their Larcom Mystery imprint. Her new story, however, takes her all the way to India.

Our two northeastern stories each offer a new twist on a familiar setup. Much of the humor of Gregory Fallis's “Dem Bones, Dem Bones” is rooted in regional cultural differences as a private investigator originally from the South attempts to identify some bones that a pair of Massachusetts siblings have found in their father's attic. In Frederick Irving

Anderson's “The Half-Way House,” meanwhile, upstate New York is the setting for a surprising tale about a “haunted” house.

Just across the Atlantic, Jeffry Scott's “The Ivy Necklace” has Wessex Inspector Jill Tierce investigating the disappearance of some precious and not-so-precious items from the home of Birdie Gleed, her former landlady. And a tale that begins on terra firma, Steve Lindley's “The Void,” soon finds its protagonist to be anything but “down to earth.”

Traversing both time and space, I. J. Parker returns to medieval Japan with a new Akitada Sugawara story, “The Kamo Horse.” The author discusses her new novel, *The Hell Screen*, and shares her insights into ancient Japanese culture and the pleasures of research in a conversation following her story.

—Linda Landrigan

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Dem Bones, Dem Bones by Gregory S. Fallis

Jared Bowditch and his sister Lisa came to our office on a fine summer afternoon, toting a human skull in a Pottery Barn shopping bag. First time anybody ever brought a skull to our office. To my knowledge.

Kevin Sweeney, my partner in G&H Investigations, handled it pretty well. He just raised his eyebrows a bit and nodded. Like he was used to folks pulling skulls out of shopping bags. Then he shot me one of those looks. Like it was my fault. Like I'd known the Bowditches were going to show up for their appointment toting an extra skull. Like I'd planned the whole thing to liven up a dull Tuesday afternoon.

The day before when Jared Bowditch made the appointment, he hadn't said word one about skulls. All he'd said was he and his sister might have a problem and wanted to discuss it. I'd asked what the problem was, of course. You always ask what the problem is. But he didn't want to discuss it on the phone. That's not unusual; a lot of prospective clients say that. And none of them had ever brought a skull to the office. How was I to know?

At first sight the Bowditches were everything you'd ever want in clients. They were clearly upper middle class. Which meant we probably wouldn't have to worry about getting stiffed on the fee. They looked to be in their early to mid-fifties. Which didn't mean they were stable, but it reduced the odds they were involved in some of the more serious forms of

weirdness. And they were punctual. Punctuality almost makes Sweeney swoon.

They were obviously siblings. Both had sandy blond hair and a square jaw. They each had a ruddy, sports-induced complexion. The sort you can only get from years of amateur sports. Just looking at them put me in mind of prep school blazers and squash courts and field hockey.

In other words, the Bowditches looked like solid, Volvo-driving, old family, New England Yankees. The type that registered Democrat but sometimes secretly voted Republican. There wasn't anything about them to make a body think they'd be pulling skulls out of Pottery Barn bags.

I'd noticed the bag when they walked in, but hadn't paid any attention to it. I figured they'd been out shopping. Buying a new set of pasta bowls, maybe. Or some place mats made from natural fibers by indigenous Paraguayan peoples.

We got ourselves settled around the conference table and Sweeney took control. He's good at taking control. Before we started this private investigation gig he'd been a police detective. Control is second nature to him.

The Bowditches declined my offer to fetch something to drink. I started to say something polite about the weather, but Sweeney, like so many Northern folks, doesn't have much patience for small talk. He asked how we could help.

That's when Bowditch put the Pottery Barn shopping bag on the table, reached inside, and pulled out the skull. It was your basic human skull. Sort of grayish. No lower jawbone. A couple of teeth missing from the upper jaw.

Bowditch didn't say anything. Nor did his sister. Nor did Sweeney. Like I said, all he did was raise his eyebrows and nod. And shoot me that look.

Which left it up to me. I nodded at the skull. “When did the Pottery Barn start carrying those?” I asked.

Bowditch blinked. “What?” he said. “No, no. It's a skull.”

His sister sighed. “They can see it's a skull.”

“We surely can,” I said. “Where did you get it?”

“That's why we're here,” Bowditch said. “We found it in a trunk in our father's attic. We're not sure what to ... we don't ... we're uncertain...”

“We don't know quite what we should do,” Lisa said.

Which seemed perfectly reasonable to me. I doubt many folks would know what to do with a skull they'd found in their daddy's attic. I wouldn't.

“Just the skull?” Sweeney asked. Which was a good question. Skulls usually come attached to skeletons.

Bowditch nodded. “Just the skull,” he said. “We were going through the attic and ... he's moving, you see. Father's just retired and he's planning to sell the house. He's moving to a golfing community on the South Carolina seacoast.”

“They don't need to know where he's moving to,” Lisa said.

“I'm from the South Carolina seacoast,” I said. “Georgetown. Just a tad north of Charleston.”

“I knew you were from the South,” Bowditch said, smiling. “The accent. Lovely country down there. Those live oaks and the Spanish moss and...”

Lisa nudged him, and he hushed up.

I nodded, but didn't say what I was thinking. Which is that the South Carolina seacoast really is lovely. And that it's a damned shame it's been overrun by Yankees. It started when I was a boy. They came down and bought up the wild sea islands, and turned out the folks who've been living there for generations, mostly descendants of former slaves. And then they'd built a bunch of well-mannered, tidy golfing communities for retired white guys.

But it had nothing to do with skulls in shopping bags, so I just nodded politely.

“Father's down there now looking at properties,” Lisa said. “He told us we should go through the house and decide what we wanted to keep. He's going to sell most everything else.”

“And that's when you found the skull?” Sweeney asked.

Bowditch nodded. “That's correct,” he said.

“What did your father say about it?” Sweeney asked.

Bowditch winced. “We haven't spoken to him about it. He's still in South Carolina.”

“They have telephones in South Carolina now,” I said.

Bowditch and his sister exchanged one of those family secret looks. We see a lot of those in the detective biz. Most families have things they'd rather not discuss in front of other folks. Even in front of private detectives.

“There's a problem,” Bowditch said.

Of course there was. You don't go see a private detective unless there's a problem. And let's face it, every parent-child relationship in the entire history of the world has rocky points. Most families get over it. Or learn to get around it

enough to talk about important things. Like skulls found in attics.

“What's the problem?” Sweeney asked.

“Well, about twenty years ago...” Bowditch began.

“Eighteen,” Lisa said.

“...eighteen years ago,” he continued, “our mother disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” I asked.

Bowditch nodded. “She was going to Connecticut to play in a charity golf event. She left home and she ... well, she never ... she didn't...”

“She didn't show up at the event,” Lisa said.

“...she never showed up at the event,” Bowditch said. “And she never came home. She just disappeared. There wasn't any hint of ... of...”

“Foul play,” Lisa said.

“...wasn't any hint of foul play,” Bowditch said. “At least there was no suspicion of foul play directed at Father. But...”

Sweeney nodded toward the skull. “But you're worried this might be...?”

“Well, I don't know ... I'm not sure...” Bowditch said.

“Yes,” Lisa said.

“Yes,” said Bowditch. “Maybe. We don't really ... we're not...”

“We're not certain,” Lisa said. “That's what we want you to find out. Discreetly. Before Father returns, if possible. He'll be gone another ten days.”

“We'd rather not involve the police,” Bowditch said. “Not until, well...”

“Until we know something for certain,” his sister said. “You understand.”

“Sure,” I said. Which wasn't just a polite lie. I really did understand. They didn't want to involve the police if it was just some stranger's skull they'd found in their daddy's attic.

“I'm not clear on this,” Sweeney said. “Do you want us to identify the skull? Or just find out if it's your mother's? Those might be two entirely different jobs.”

Bowditch looked at his sister.

“We just want you to find out if...” She flicked a hand toward the skull. “...if that belongs to Mother.”

“And if it does?” I asked.

Bowditch frowned. “I'm not sure,” he said. “I suppose if it is ... well...”

“Then we'll have to go to the police,” Lisa said.

“And if it's not?” Sweeney asked.

She hesitated. “I don't know,” she said. “We can decide that later.”

Bowditch nodded. “We can make that decision later. We may want to find out whose skull it is regardless. And why Father had it in a trunk in the attic. Could you do that? Could you find out who it belonged to?”

“I'm sure we can find out if it's your mother's,” I said. “But probably not in ten days. The DNA testing would take longer than that.”

“What can you do in ten days?” Lisa asked.

“We can...”

Sweeney interrupted me with a cough. “At this point I'm not sure we should take the case. I'm not sure it would be in your best interests.”

“Why not?” Lisa asked.

“Human skulls don't just magically appear in trunks in attics,” Sweeney said. “Somebody put it there. If we investigate this, we might learn something that would put us all in an awkward legal position.”

“Awkward how?” Lisa asked.

Sweeney shrugged. “It's impossible to say,” he said. “The danger of any investigation is that you never know what you'll learn. We may learn something that would obligate us to notify the police, even if you don't want us to. For example, if we uncover evidence that a crime's been committed, we may have to let the police know. If we didn't, we could lose our licenses.”

“That's true,” I said. “Right now, we're ignorant enough to be safe. Right now we don't even know if this is a real skull.”

“I'm sure it is,” Bowditch said.

“We don't know that,” Sweeney repeated. He gave Bowditch a dose of Cop Eye. I think it's something they teach cadets in the police academy. How to give somebody a cold, serious look that says, “You'd best pay close attention to what I'm saying here, boy.” Sweeney's got Cop Eye down cold.

“Oh,” Bowditch said. He looked at his sister. “Oh, I get it.”

“So before we agree to take the case,” Sweeney continued, “we need to check on our legal obligations.”

“We'd best call Kath,” I said. Kathleen O'Mara is our lawyer. She's kept us out of trouble a bunch of times. I think that's an attractive quality in a woman.

I called Kath and asked a hypothetical question about our legal status in regard to human skulls found in attics. She said that unless we had specific knowledge that the skull was evidence of a crime, we were under no obligation to inform the police. There could be a rational and entirely non-criminal explanation for how a skull could wind up in somebody's attic. She didn't offer up any examples of rational, non-criminal explanations, but she said they could exist. Which was good enough.

So Sweeney and I agreed to take the case and see what we could come up with in the ten days before Poppa Bowditch returned. We asked the Bowditches to leave the skull with us. And the Pottery Barn shopping bag to tote it around in. Even the Bowditches knew you couldn't walk around town with a human skull tucked under your arm like a football.

Lisa Bowditch opened her purse and pulled out a fat Montblanc pen and a checkbook with a mauve corduroy cover. She wrote a check for our retainer and asked for a receipt for the skull.

I don't know why she wanted the receipt. Maybe she thought we might make off with the skull. Maybe she thought we had a secret skull collection in the back room. At any rate, I kept a straight face and wrote out a receipt. “Received this date from Jared and Lisa Bowditch: one skull, human, no lower jaw.”

After the Bowditches left, I picked up the skull to put it back in the Pottery Barn bag. But I held onto it for a moment. I'd never held an actual human skull in my hands before. It was an odd feeling, knowing that at some point in time there'd been a face stuck on that chunk of bone.

With eyes and hair. And a working brain inside. And an entire living person attached at the bottom. It was spooky, is what it was.

I also felt a powerful urge to do the “Alas, poor Yorick” scene from Hamlet. I managed to control that impulse long enough to put the skull back in the shopping bag.

Sweeney, in the meantime, had a call to Dr. Angie Vecchio. She's a forensic anthropologist Sweeney and I have worked with on occasion.

That woman knows more about old bones than is probably healthy. What I like about her, though, is she's got this one long eyebrow that goes all the way across her forehead. It's a truly spectacular eyebrow. For some reason, it pleases me she doesn't bother to pluck it into two normal-looking eyebrows.

“She can't look at the skull today,” Sweeney said when he got off the phone, “but she said we could drop it by her lab this afternoon.”

“I'll do it,” I said. I wanted to see that eyebrow again.

Dr. Vecchio was busy working when I got to her lab. She had a skull affixed to a metal stand and was carefully applying layers of clay to it.

She barely glanced up at me as I entered. All I could see of her was a halo of dark bushy hair and that one massive eyebrow stretched out over a pair of functionally ugly glasses.

“Hey there,” I said.

“Whatcha got, Joop?” she asked. She says my name like it's got no vowels in there at all. Jp.

“Got me a skull,” I said. I started to open the shopping bag.

“Just put it on the counter,” she said, nodding toward the stainless steel counter that lined one wall. “You can leave it in the bag.”

“Don't you want to see it?”

“Is there anything unusual about it?”

I wasn't sure how to answer that. “I don't think so,” I said.

“I see skulls every day,” she said. “I can wait until tomorrow to see another one.”

“Yes'm,” I said. I set the bag on the counter and attached a note saying what was inside and who brought it in and what we wanted done. It was the only skull there in a Pottery Barn shopping bag so it wasn't likely she'd get it confused. But you can't be too careful.

“What are you working on?” I asked. Partly on account of I was curious and partly to be polite. It's rude to just drop off a skull without stopping to chat for a bit.

“Dead guy,” she said.

I declare, the art of conversation is near death in New England. The entire population of the northeastern United States could probably get by in life with just a couple dozen words and a few grunts and whistles. Southern folk are

trained from birth to make polite, pointless conversation in almost any social situation. There was no way I could just breeze in and say “Here's a skull, gotta go, bye.”

So I stood there for a couple minutes, smiling and struggling with the cultural obligation to make conversation. And she kept on working and ignoring me, entirely unaware she was violating some of the most basic tenets of Southern social life.

“Well, I should probably go then,” I eventually said. “Thanks.”

“Okay,” she said. She didn't even look up when I walked out.

* * *

The next morning Sweeney and I set to work. As usual, we divvied up the chores according to our interests and skills. Sweeney focused on the wife. He took himself down to the police station to try to wangle his old cop buddies into letting him look at the old Bowditch missing person file. I began to look into the background of Matthew Bowditch, recently retired father to Lisa and Jared, owner of trunks filled with skulls.

I spent the next few days working the phones and talking to folks. I learned that Poppa Bowditch was born in 1922, the second son of a prosperous New England shoe manufacturer. He attended good prep schools in New Hampshire and Connecticut. He'd just turned nineteen and was in his first year of a business program at Brown University when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

He could have stayed in college. He could have stayed home and helped his family make a whole lot of money churning out shoes and boots for Uncle Sam. Instead, he quit college and joined the Marine Corps. After he finished basic training, he married Dora Stedman, his college sweetheart. A couple of weeks later he shipped out to fight the war in the South Pacific. He was gone for two and a half years.

One of the very first things you learn in the P.I. biz is this: stay objective. But I have a soft spot for old guys who fought in the South Pacific. Probably on account of my daddy. He'd been a marine, too. A jarhead is what he called himself. Like Poppa Bowditch, he'd fought in the South Pacific during World War II. I used to make him tell me the names of the islands he'd been to. The names made me giggle when I was a kid. Makin, Kwajalein, Peleliu, Eniwetok. My daddy got the last two fingers on his left hand shot off, a source of pride and embarrassment to me as a kid. I was proud on account he took a wound in the war. Which is the sort of thing kids are proud of. But I was embarrassed on account his hand looked funny with only two fingers and a thumb and because he always said getting his fingers shot off was the best thing that had ever happened to him because it got him out of the war. Which is the sort of thing kids are embarrassed about.

Matthew Bowditch picked up a wound, too. He came back to his wife two and a half years later with a limp in the left leg and a uniform covered with medals, including the Distinguished Service Cross. He also brought back a powerful resistance to the idea of rejoining the family shoe business.

With his young wife's support, Matthew went back to college and got himself a degree in architecture. He spent a few years working for a Boston firm, then opened his own business. He focused on commercial structures and created himself a niche designing office buildings. His work, according to a trade magazine article, was architecturally interesting enough to please the eye but bland enough not to alienate conservative New England building buyers.

By 1960 Poppa Bowditch had himself a family, a thriving career, and solid professional reputation. His name made the newspapers every so often, usually in regard to some architectural project. In the early 1970's he made the news for fighting to change the membership policies of the Appleby Valley Country Club. He helped change the club's charter to let women, minorities, and even non-Protestants join as members. The last mention of Bowditch in the newspapers was a couple of years old. A local Korean Methodist church had been destroyed by a hate-motivated arson. Bowditch designed them a new building for free.

In short, there wasn't any hint of scandal about Matthew Bowditch. In fact, there wasn't even the faintest glimmer of an inkling of a hint of anything scandalous. Except, of course, for the disappearance of his wife Dora.

I made some phone calls to his friends and associates, posing as a freelance writer doing an article on Bowditch's retirement. Nobody mentioned Dora Bowditch unless I brought up the subject. Even when prompted, nobody had much to say about her disappearance. Which wasn't surprising since it had happened eighteen years earlier.

Everybody assumed she'd been kidnapped and killed by a wandering lunatic. Nobody could imagine she'd just run away from him and the kids. It was inconceivable.

Of course, they'd probably have said it was inconceivable for Matthew Bowditch to keep a skull in a box in his attic.

I didn't see much of Sweeney during those two days. It was late Thursday afternoon when he returned to the office, toting a six-pack of Canadian beer and two bags of Cape Cod potato chips. I was typing up my notes. He cracked open a pair of beers, set one on the desk beside me, and collapsed into a chair.

“How'd it go—bunk?” I asked him.

“I'd have been smarter to spend the last two days at home with the wife,” he said, “working in the garden.”

“Didn't learn anything?”

“Oh, I learned a lot,” he said. He took a long pull off his beer. “But none of it was helpful.”

I stopped typing and picked up my beer. “Tell Uncle Joop all about it,” I said.

What Sweeney learned was this: Dora Bowditch went missing eighteen years earlier and nobody had a clue what might have happened to her.

It took place pretty much the way Jared and Lisa Bowditch had said. Their momma left home one morning to catch a train at Boston's South Station. She was going to play in a charity golf event in Connecticut. She never showed up. The friend who was waiting to meet her in Connecticut called Poppa Bowditch, who called the local police, who called the Connecticut police.

As usual in missing-person cases, it took a few days before the police really took interest. The Boston police found her car parked near the train station, but nobody at the ticket counters recognized Dora's photograph. For a week or so a pair of detectives took trains from Boston to Connecticut and back, showing Dora Bowditch's photo to everybody on board. Nobody on the train recognized the photo.

The police spent some time trying to see if Dora Bowditch might have had a reason to disappear. A secret lover, a secret past, a secret desire to get away from her husband and two kids, a secret something or other. They didn't find anything.

They also took a close look at Matthew Bowditch his ownself. When a wife goes missing, the husband is always a prime suspect. Always. It's a universal law. Did he have a mistress? Did he argue or fight with his wife? Was he in financial trouble? Was she having an affair? Did he have any reason at all to dispose of an inconvenient wife? Again, they found nothing.

After seven years Dora Bowditch was legally declared dead. Bowditch got a significant chunk of change from the insurance company and was free to marry again.

He never did.

“So we got ourselves two possibilities,” I said.

“Three,” Sweeney said.

“We got ourselves three possibilities,” I said. “First, Momma got on the train, but for some reason didn't get off at her destination.”

“Her supposed destination,” Sweeney said. “Maybe her real destination was somewhere other than a Connecticut golf event.”

“Second,” I said. “Momma never got on the train. She either walked away from South Station or was taken away.”

Sweeney nodded.

“Third,” I said. “What's third?”

“Third is that she never went to South Station at all,” he said. “Third is that something happened to her, then somebody left her car there to make it appear she'd taken the train.”

“So she either got on the train or she didn't,” I said. “If she got on, she was either prevented from getting off at her stop or decided not to get off there.”

“That's it,” Sweeney said.

“In other words, we don't know anything.”

“Nothing at all,” Sweeney agreed.

* * *

Dr. Vecchio called the following afternoon, Friday. “What's the background on this skull?” she asked.

“I can't tell you much,” I said. “Client confidentiality and all that. Basically, our clients’ momma disappeared a couple decades ago. We're trying to find out if the skull might be hers.”

“Nope,” she said. “It's not.”

“How can you say that?” I asked. “You don't even know who the clients are.”

“Doesn't matter,” she said. “It's not the clients’ mother.”

I paused for a moment. “I suppose you're going to explain that,” I said.

“It can't be your clients’ mother,” she said. “Not unless their mother was an Asian man.”

“Pardon?”

“The skull you brought me,” she said. “The one in the Pottery Barn bag? It belongs to an Asian male.” Skulls, she told me, are particularly handy for establishing race. Hipbones are better for determining sex and age, but there were enough indicators on the skull that she was confident it belonged to a man.

“An Asian man,” I said. “Well, that confuses things. How old is it?”

“Depends on what you mean by ‘how old,'” she said. “Do you want to know the age of the person when he died or how long ago he died?”

“How long ago he died,” I said.

“Difficult to say,” she said. I could almost see her frowning in concentration over the telephone. That one long eyebrow all furrowed up. “It'd be easier if there was still some soft tissue left, but there isn't. Looks like it's been boiled. But I can run some...”

“Boiled?” I asked. “The skull's been boiled?”

“Looks like it,” she said. “It's awfully clean for a skull. As to when he died, there are some tests I can do. They're not very specific, though. I can see if there is an immunological reaction between the bone extract and anti-human serum.”

“And that would tell us how long ago he died?”

“Didn't I just say that?” she asked. “But that reaction stops within months of death and I'm pretty sure this guy has been dead longer than that. I can check for blood pigments. If they're present, that shows the skull has been around less than a decade. Or I can...”

“Why don't you hold off on the tests,” I said. I was thinking of Lisa Bowditch and her mauve corduroy checkbook. She didn't seem like the sort of woman who'd be happy to pay for a lot of expensive forensic tests.

“There's more about the skull,” Dr. Vecchio said. “You want to hear it?”

“Well, yeah,” I said. Did she even have to ask?

“Whoever this was, he suffered some head trauma before dying,” she said. “There's a shallow crease in the cranium just superior the squamous suture with some fracture associated with it. Probably caused by some sort of missile.”

“A missile?”

“Not a missile missile,” she said. I could hear the silent “you idiot” added. “Something fired through the air. A bullet, maybe, or an arrow. A rock hurled by a sling. I don't know, a missile. It was a glancing blow. Didn't kill him, but must have hurt like hell.” She began an incomprehensible medical explanation of the injury and why it almost certainly had been sustained before death.

“Wait, wait,” I said. “You're saying he got whacked in the head before he was killed, right?”

“Right,” she said. “Whacked in the head, that's what I meant.”

“Well,” I said. “Lawdy.”

“Oh, and it looks like at least one of his teeth was forcibly removed.”

“Forcibly removed?”

“Right. There was no attached mandible, as you know, but there are tiny marks in the maxilla ... the upper jaw ... that suggest some sort of ridged instrument, maybe a pliers or something similar, was used to remove a tooth. Maybe more than one tooth, but I'm only confident about one.”

“Somebody yanked a tooth out of his head?”

“Whacked him in the head,” she said, “and yanked out his tooth. That's correct.”

“And then the skull was boiled.”

“You're catching on,” she said.

“Lawdy,” I said again.

“Lawdy, indeed,” she said. “You want anything else? I can do a facial reconstruction for you. Show you what this guy looked like when he was alive. Just take a few days.”

“No, no,” I said. “Just put it back in the bag for now. I'll let you know what our clients want.”

“Okay,” she said. “I'll type up a preliminary report this afternoon and send it off to you. Bye, then.” And she hung up.

“Uh ... bye,” I said. Abrupt is what Yankees are.

* * *

“An Asian male?” Lisa Bowditch asked. “Are you certain?”

Sweeney nodded. “Dr. Vecchio is certain,” he said, “and that's good enough for us. She's an expert at these things, and she's cautious about what she says. She knows anything

she says might end up on the record in court, so she doesn't make any claims unless she's certain."

After telling Sweeney about the skull, I'd called the Bowditches and set up an appointment for the following afternoon. They arrived in their Saturday afternoon attire. Which was still more formal than my usual workday clothes.

"An Asian man," Jared Bowditch said. "I don't see how that's possible."

"Then it's not Mother," Lisa said. "That's all we need to know." She reached into her purse and pulled out the Montblanc pen and her mauve checkbook. She unscrewed the pen and looked at Sweeney. "And the final bill amounts to...?"

They always look at Sweeney when it comes time to pay up. Like I have "Financial Dunderhead" tattooed on my forehead. I try to blame it on anti-Southern prejudice. But the fact is Sweeney is the one who handles the books for the business. And I really am a financial dunderhead. Still, I can't for the life of me figure out how other folks can tell it just by looking at me.

Before she could write a check, her brother spoke up. "But Leese, we don't know who the skull belongs to."

"We know what we need to know," Lisa said.

He shook his head. "This isn't right," he said. "We should still try to find out who the skull belongs to."

"It's not our concern," Lisa said. She gave Bowditch a look. Sort of a sisterly version of Cop Eye. "We can talk about this later."

Bowditch shook his head again. "But Leese..."

She took a deep breath and let out a slow, patient sigh. I know that sigh. I've heard it a gazillion times. Back when I was a boy in Carolina my sisters used to sigh like that whenever I was being a pain in the butt. Which, I admit, was pretty often. It's a sigh that says, “I declare, you haven't got the sense God gave a possum.”

“Jared,” she said in her patient sister voice, “there's no way they could possibly discover who that skull belongs to. It simply cannot be done.” She turned to me and gave me some Sister Eye. “Am I correct?” she said.

But I wasn't afraid of any Yankee sisterly look. I'd faced worse. “I don't know,” I said. “We might could learn something.”

She upped the wattage of Sister Eye. “What could you learn?” she demanded. “And where would you start?”

“We'd start by checking any connections your father might have to the local Asian community,” I said. “And we'd start looking through old missing-person reports for Asian men.”

“We might come up with something,” Sweeney said. He knew I was just reacting to Lisa Bowditch. He knew trying to trace that skull to any particular person was about as practical as making staples from rocks. But he was backing me up. Which is what partners do. “It would be time consuming and expensive. And we couldn't guarantee any results. But it's always possible that we...”

“What about Mr. Park?” Bowditch asked his sister. “The gardener? Remember him? He used to sing those weird songs to the fish?”

Lisa shook her head, not in denial but in irritation. “Mr. Park,” she said. “He's been gone for years.”

Bowditch nodded. “I know. I was just trying to think of ... Leese, what's wrong?”

Her face had gone pale and she sat back in her chair. Her eyes went wide and she put her hand to her chest.

Heart attack, I thought. I've done pestered the woman into a heart attack.

Sweeney leaned forward. “Are you okay?” he asked. “Can I get you something?”

She shook her head. “I'm fine,” she said. “It's just ... Mr. Park. Father never liked him. He'd been our gardener for five or six years. Father let him go shortly after mother disappeared.”

Sweeney and I looked at each other. I tried not to grin. I know it's wrong. I know it's probably a sign of some deep-seated psychological disturbance, but I do seriously enjoy this part of detective work. The part where things start happening fast. The part where the world gets all slippery and almost anything is possible.

“Maybe you should tell us about Mr. Park,” I said.

What they knew about Mr. Park was this: not much. When the Bowditches were growing up, their home had the usual upper-middle-class New England landscaping. A few shrubs, a border hedge, a handful of trees, some flowers. It had been cared for by a landscaping service. I guess none of the Bowditch kids ever had to earn their allowance by doing lawn chores.

About the time Matthew and Dora Bowditch became grandparents for the first time, Dora underwent a sort of personality change. She began to play golf again, something she'd done in college. She took classes in painting and sculpture. And she developed a serious interest in gardening. She convinced her husband to let her hire a part-time gardener. Mr. Park.

Dora Bowditch and Mr. Park worked together and over the course of a few years they turned the backyard of the Bowditch estate into something remarkable. They put in new shrubs and flowers and trees. They built a winding path of native stone that led to a vine-covered bower.

They put in three small ponds, including one with brilliant orange and white koi. They put in plants to attract butterflies and hummingbirds.

“Father loved the garden,” Lisa Bowditch said. “But he never liked Mr. Park. He put up with him for Mother's sake.”

“Why didn't he like Mr. Park?” Sweeney asked.

“Mr. Park wasn't a particularly friendly man,” she said.

Bowditch agreed. “He was pretty odd. When the kids ... my two and Lisa's daughter ... when they were little, they were terrified of him. But fascinated, too, in a way. You know how kids are.”

Sweeney and I assured Bowditch we knew how kids are, although neither of us have any.

“When he was working in the garden he always had a scowl on his face,” Bowditch said. “Like he was angry at the bugs or something. And that frightened the kids. But sometimes he'd give them some fish food and let them feed

the koi. And he'd sing these strange Japanese songs to the fish."

"Korean," I said. "I'm guessing he probably sang to them in Korean. Park is a Korean name."

Bowditch shrugged. Korean, Japanese, it was all the same to him.

"Anyway, Mother adored Mr. Park," Bowditch said. "They were always out in the garden, the two of them, getting dirty. And when they weren't in the garden, they were in the potting shed talking about the garden. Remember Leese?"

Lisa Bowditch nodded.

"How long after your mother disappeared did your father get rid of Mr. Park?" I asked. The moment the question left my mouth I realized that "get rid of" probably wasn't the best choice of words. But the Bowditches didn't seem to notice.

"Three, four months?" Bowditch asked his sister.

"Something like that," Lisa said. "He let Mr. Park go, then hired a landscaper to keep up the yard. Oh, he got rid of the koi, too. The lovely koi. He said they were too much trouble."

"You think the skull ... you think it could be ... perhaps it's Mr. Park?" Bowditch asked. "Could this all be linked somehow to Mother's disappearance?"

"That's an awfully big leap to be making on such little information," I said. "It's probably just a coincidence. But it could be worth investigating."

"Remember what we warned you about, though," Sweeney said. "If we investigate this, we may discover information we'll have to report to the police."

Bowditch looked at his sister.

She had a steely-eyed, square-jawed look of determination that I suspect would have intimidated even my sisters. She nodded twice, decisively. “Investigate it,” she said. “Find out what you can. Father will be home in six days. Find out what you can in that time.”

* * *

Our first chore was to learn Mr. Park's name. So we sent the Bowditches to their daddy's house and had them rummage through his filing cabinets to find his canceled checks from eighteen years earlier.

Bowditch called me at my apartment the next morning while I was fussing over the New York Times Sunday crossword. The gardener's name was Jin Gui Park. I figured it would be less frustrating to look for a Korean gardener who'd been missing for eighteen years than to try to finish the crossword, so I headed out to the office.

Here's a true thing about detective work: at least ninety percent of what you do is a waste of time. You go here, you go there, you talk to this person and that person, and in the end most of what you learn is of absolutely no use to the case at all. So in order to avoid wasting even more time, you do the obvious things first. Like check the phone book to see if there's a Jin Gui Park listed. That took about ninety seconds. I also called Directory Assistance just to be sure. Nothing. Nor was he listed in the directories for the other local towns, including Boston.

That didn't mean anything, of course. Lots of folks have unlisted phone numbers. Just because your telephone number isn't listed in the phone book doesn't mean your boiled, tooth-

yanked skull has been sitting in a trunk in the attic of a local architect for the last eighteen years.

So I went to that great bastion of good detective work, the public library. I love the library. A public library is a staggeringly radical concept, is what it is. A building devoted to giving common folks access to a wide range of information and ideas. You don't have to be rich, you don't have to belong to any political organization, you don't even have to be a citizen. All you have to do is be interested in something.

What I was interested in was old editions of the phone book. Some libraries keep an archive of old phone books. They're historical documents, sort of. They're like a mini-census of the community. They tell you who lived where, they tell you what businesses and social agencies existed at the time, they tell you what the world was like back then. Old Yellow Pages are like a time machine.

Forty-five minutes later I walked out of the library with the information I wanted. Actually, it only took about ten minutes to get the information I wanted. I spent the other half hour or so looking at the newly arrived titles. There's nothing in the detective rule book that says you can't mix a little pleasure with business.

What I learned was that Jin Gui Park had been listed in the local directory eighteen years earlier. But he wasn't listed the following year. Nor in any of the subsequent years.

Again, that didn't mean Mr. Park was dead. There were lots of reasons he might not be in the phone book. Maybe he'd moved. Maybe he'd stopped paying his phone bill and had his line disconnected. Maybe he'd had some sort of

Unabomber moment and decided telephones were a manifestation of the creeping evils of technology.

The important thing was this: I had an eighteen-year-old phone number and address for Mr. Park. It wasn't much, but it was enough to start.

Here's another true thing about detective work: on a fairly regular basis you're going to look like an absolute idiot. One really good way to look like an absolute idiot is to knock on the door of a house and when somebody answers, tell them you're looking for an old Korean gardener who lived there eighteen years earlier.

This particular house was in a neighborhood of classic post-immigration homes. A lot of immigrants arrive in the U.S. without much money. They end up living in crummy tenements or apartments until they can scrape together enough money to take that first step toward the American Dream. A home of your own. In southwest Hobsbawm, Massachusetts, there is a neighborhood of inexpensive two-bedroom tract homes that were built for veterans just after World War II. A lot of the veterans moved out when African-Americans from the South arrived looking for manufacturing work. And a lot of the black folks moved out when Koreans immigrated here after the Korean War. And a lot of the Korean folks moved out when there was an influx of Southeast Asians after Vietnam. Now a lot of the Southeast Asians are moving out as Jamaicans and East Africans move in.

The Jamaican family who lived in Mr. Park's old house didn't know anything about him. Which was hardly a surprise.

They'd only been living in the neighborhood for a couple of years. But they reminded me there was still a Korean-owned market in the neighborhood.

I'd driven by the market a million times, but never had a reason to stop in. It was just a small mom-and-pop operation with a sign out front that said GROCERIES and windows full of hand-lettered signs letting you know that cantaloupe and the large size container of some laundry soap were on sale.

There weren't many shoppers at that hour. I asked the black woman behind the register where I could find the owner. She picked up a phone, punched in a couple numbers, and a moment later a short, skinny Korean woman came hurrying down the aisle.

She was a nice woman and tried to be helpful. She was as ignorant of Jin Gui Park as the Jamaican family who sent me to her. But she suggested I try the Korean Methodist Church around the corner.

As I pulled into the church parking lot, I was glad to see it was partly empty. Church services were over, so I wouldn't have to wait around. I also remembered something about a Korean church in the Bowditch file. I opened the file and thumbed through it until I found the newspaper article. It reported that Matthew Bowditch, out of the goodness of his white Yankee liberal heart, had volunteered to design a new church for a congregation of Korean Methodists whose church had been ruined in a racist arson attack.

And hey, what do you know? It was this very church. Just around the corner from Jin Gui Park's old home.

Coincidences happen. They happen all the time. That's why we have a word for it. But private investigators learn to be suspicious of them. So when I walked through the front doors of the church I was in Full Detective Alert mode.

But being on FDA won't always keep you from being surprised. And there was a surprise waiting for me in that church.

Lawdy, I love this job.

* * *

“Say that again,” Sweeney said.

I had dropped by Sweeney's house after leaving the Korean church. “Mr. Park is alive and living in Erie, Pennsylvania,” I said. And I told him the story. The minister at the Korean church hadn't known our Mr. Park. But he called the previous minister, who did remember him. Park had helped take care of the church grounds. He recalled that Park had moved to Pennsylvania to live with his daughter, whose husband was a greenskeeper for a golf course. I got the number for Jin Gui Park in Erie from Directory Assistance and gave him a call.

“It was our Mr. Park, sure enough,” I told Sweeney. “He spent a few years working at the golf course with his son-in-law. He's retired now and plays golf on the same course where he used to mow lawns. Is this a great country, or what?”

“Golf,” Sweeney said. “What's the deal with all this golf? Dora Bowditch disappeared on the way to a golf tournament, Matthew Bowditch is looking to buy a retirement home in a golfing community, their old Korean gardener plays golf in

Pennsylvania. That skull ... it's probably the skull of Arnold Palmer."

"I don't think Arnold Palmer is actually dead," I said.

Sweeney gave me one of those looks.

"Now what?" I asked.

Sweeney sat there and frowned for a couple of minutes without answering me. He's got a frown that would frighten the Elephant Man. Mary Margaret, his wife, has been known to thump him on the back of the head and tell him to stop frowning.

"We're idjits," he finally said.

I agreed in principle. Of course we were idiots. In a general sort of way that all humans are idiots. And maybe idiots in a specifically male sort of way. But I had the impression he thought we were idiots in some specific fashion, too.

"Let's call the Bowditches," he said.

"Surely." I picked up his phone. "Before I dial," I said, "maybe you could tell me why we're calling them?"

"To tell them about Mr. Park," he said. "And then to arrange for them to let us into their father's house. We need to see what else is in the trunk where they found this skull."

I looked at him for a moment. "We are idiots," I said.

He nodded. "We could give a course on being idjits," he said.

* * *

The Bowditch home was one of those upper-middle-class homes built in the 1930's to look stately. After seventy years, it was working. In front of the house was a tree-dotted front

lawn large enough to support a sizable herd of sheep. The drive was about a quarter of a mile long and it curved in and out of the trees. It curved for no particular reason I could see except that curving in and out of trees is pretty.

Jared and Lisa Bowditch were waiting for us in front of their daddy's three-car garage. Lisa was stiff with disapproval. Maybe on account of we were interrupting her Sunday afternoon. But I suspect she spent a lot of time stiff with disapproval.

“If it's not Mr. Park,” she said, “and it's not Mother, then who is it?”

“We're hoping the trunk will give us a clue,” Sweeney said. Then he surprised me. He said, “Before we go inside, could we take a look at the garden? The one your mother and Mr. Park worked on.”

He surprised Lisa Bowditch as well, it seemed. “Why?” she asked.

“I don't know,” Sweeney said. “I'd just like to see it.”

“Of course,” she said. And she smiled. It was the first time I'd seen her smile. It had the foundation for a rather nice smile. She just needed to practice it a bit. “Of course. I'd be happy to show it to you.”

Even eighteen years after Dora Bowditch disappeared and Mr. Park moved away, the garden was remarkable. It felt crafted, yet unstudied. Every element of the garden complemented every other element. The trees, the shrubs, the patches of flowers, the three ponds, the strategically placed lichen-covered rocks ... they were all perfect. Everything fit together into a seamless, harmonious flow. You

sensed that this was what God could do if He were paying attention.

Bowditch and I hung back a bit while Lisa led Sweeney around the garden, pointing out and identifying the plants. Even from a distance I could see her face was animated as she spoke. Her voice was pitched in a more sociable, intimate way. She actually looked like she was happy.

“She loves this garden,” Bowditch said. “I don't think she minds so much that father is selling the house and moving away, but it shatters her that he's selling Mother's garden.”

I made one of those noncommittal social noises, the sort of soft grunt that both acknowledges that you've heard what the other person has said and encourages them to keep talking. You get good at noncommittal social noises in the detective biz.

“This was Lisa's haven after Mother disappeared,” Bowditch said. “She won't admit it ... not to me, maybe not even to herself ... but I think she's always felt Father was somehow responsible for Mother's disappearance. Oh, not that he killed her or anything. Just that he must have somehow driven her away. No child wants to think their mother just abandoned them.”

I made another noncommittal noise.

“Father has always been sort of ... I don't know ... distant,” Bowditch said. “But after Mother disappeared, he seemed to retreat even more into his work. And Lisa, I think, felt rather rejected. She always wanted ... well ... here they are.” He shrugged and smiled. Sweeney and his sister were waiting for us at the end of the garden.

Lisa Bowditch looked over at the house and I could see her face and posture begin to tighten up again. “Well, let's be done with this, then,” she said. And she stalked off for the house, leaving the three of us to follow.

The Bowditch home was huge. Three stories in the main wing, some big columns out front, lots of porches, an oval solarium off the south wing. The place was big enough to house three or four normal-sized families. Far too big for a single, retired guy.

She brought us in through one of the two kitchen doors. It might have been the servants’ entrance. I've never seen a servants’ entrance before, so I can't really say. She surely made it feel like a servants’ entrance. She led us up the back stairs to the third floor. Part of the third floor was a bedroom. The rest was attic.

But it wasn't an attic like my grammy's attic. Which is a dark, cobwebby space of slanted roofs and old, exposed wooden beams. The Bowditch attic was paneled and well lighted by dormer windows, and smelled of cedar. My grammy's attic smelled like spiders.

There were a lot of heavyweight cardboard boxes, all neatly stacked and all labeled in a firm hand with a Magic Marker. Christmas ornaments. Jared's prep school uniforms. Lisa's sports trophies.

“Where did you find the, uh...?” Sweeney asked.

“Over there,” Lisa said. She pointed to a wall where several trunks were lined up. A few were fairly modern, brass-hinged, metal footlockers but most were old wooden

steamer trunks. The sort that sell for a small fortune in antique stores.

“Which trunk was it, Jared?” she asked.

He poked at one of them with his foot. “This one,” he said.

I knelt down and opened it. There was a removable shelf unit on top. Scattered on the shelf were a couple packets of old photographs, a wad of letters actually tied up in a red ribbon, a half dozen velvet cases for medals, a long bayonet in a metal sheath, and a K-bar ... the standard issue Marine combat knife.

“It was under that drawer,” Bowditch said.

I lifted out the shelf and set it to one side. Stacked neatly beneath it were some old uniforms. Marine dress blues, service tags, a single pair of faded fatigues, a couple service caps with the Marine Corps emblem. Plenty of space for a skull.

I looked at Sweeney. He was testing the point of the bayonet on his thumb.

“Is this helpful?” Bowditch asked.

“I don't see how it could be,” Lisa said.

“You never know,” I said. I sat on the floor and reached for the ribbon-tied letters in the trunk drawer. The red ribbon that bound them together was brittle and faded. The letters were those Matthew Bowditch had written to his new wife Dora while he was away fighting the war.

She'd saved them.

I scanned a few. I wanted to read them, but not in front of Lisa. I put them aside and picked up one of the packets of old photographs. From Matthew Bowditch's days in the Marines.

There's something about old black-and-white photographs of soldiers.

Everybody looks impossibly young. And impossibly fit and improbably optimistic.

I picked one showing a bare-chested young man in fatigue pants, his cap set at a cocky angle, standing in front of a large canvas tent, casually holding an M1 rifle. I handed it to Lisa.

“That your daddy?” I asked.

She nodded. “That's Father,” she said, examining the photo. “He looks so young.” She looked at it a moment longer, then thrust it back at me.

Sweeney methodically searched the uniforms in the trunk. Checking pockets, running his hands along the seams, carefully feeling the linings.

I thumbed through the photographs. Bowditch must have packed a camera with him during the war. All those faces of young, anonymous marines. There were more photos of Matthew Bowditch, some showing him with several days’ growth of beard, looking bone-tired but cheerful.

Several photographs seemed to have been taken shortly after a battle. They showed a shattered Pacific island terrain, the palm trees snapped off and burnt, a few bodies littering the ground.

One photo caught and held my eye. While the Bowditches weren't looking, I slid it into my pocket. As I was doing that, Sweeney spoke up.

“It looks like we may have wasted your Sunday afternoon,” he said. He put the uniform he'd been searching

back into the trunk. I replaced the photographs in their envelope and set the shelf back in its place.

“I didn't think this would be helpful,” Lisa said. She turned to her brother. “Didn't I say this wouldn't be helpful?”

“Yes,” Bowditch said. His voice was patient. “Yes, you did. But it was worth trying, don't you think? All it cost us was some time.”

“Time and money,” Lisa said.

“And money, yes,” Bowditch agreed. “But Leese, we've got plenty of both, haven't we? It was worth trying.”

She was about to reply when Sweeney interrupted. “We're sorry for the inconvenience. We thought it might be worth the effort. You never know.”

“You never know,” I agreed.

Lisa Bowditch didn't look convinced. She probably always knew.

* * *

“It would be a terrible mess, this driveway,” Sweeney said, “in the winter when it snows. But they've probably got a man who comes with a tractor and plows it for them.”

“Probably so,” I said. We were back in the car and heading out on the winding, tree-lined Bowditch driveway. Jared had walked us down the stairs and let us out through the front door. Lisa had remained in the attic. I got the impression Bowditch wanted to apologize for his sister.

He didn't, though. Which was okay. You have to back up your partner.

“So, what did we get?” Sweeney asked.

“Pardon?”

“The picture,” Sweeney said. “The one you shoved in your pocket?”

“You saw that?”

“Would I be asking about it if I hadn't seen it?”

I pulled the photo out of my pocket and handed it to Sweeney. “You tell me,” I said. “What did we get?”

He looked at it and muttered, “For the love of Jesus.”

The photo showed young Matthew Bowditch and another marine standing on a beach beside a large metal pot. They're both thin and haggard, but grinning at the photographer. Behind them is what's left of the jungle, all splintered and scorched and wrecked from shelling. Steam rises from the pot. The other marine has a sort of stick in his hand, which he's using to stir the pot. In the pot you can see a pair of human skulls.

* * *

“Of course,” Dr. Angie Vecchio said. She slapped herself in the forehead. “Of course. I should have figured that out.”

Sweeney and I'd gone to her office first thing Monday morning.

“If you'd told me somebody in the case had served in the South Pacific during World War II, I'd have got it,” she said. She glared at me from underneath that one colossal eyebrow.

“How was I supposed to know it would be important?” I asked.

She gave me a Sweeney-like frown. Like it should have been obvious. “This explains the missing teeth,” she said. “They used to pull the gold teeth out of the skulls of dead Japanese soldiers.”

“I'd heard about that,” Sweeney said. “But taking heads? American soldiers actually did that?”

“Japanese heads, yep,” she said. “That sort of thing didn't happen in the war in Europe, but it wasn't uncommon in the South Pacific. Marines and sailors were known to take souvenir heads from Japanese soldiers. Hold on...”

She stalked over to a shelf full of forensic medicine journals, pulled a few out, and thumbed through them. “Here it is,” she said. “I knew I'd read something about this. There have been some murder cases, mostly back in the 1950's, that got confused when trophy skulls turned up.”

“American soldiers took heads?” Sweeney asked again.

Dr. Vecchio nodded. “In fact, there's a famous picture from Life magazine back during the war. A young woman looking at the Japanese skull her boyfriend had sent her. According to this article, one guy even sent President Roosevelt a letter opener made from the thigh bone of a Japanese soldier.”

“It's hard to believe,” Sweeney said. “This guy was a war hero. He won all sorts of medals.”

She shrugged. “You don't get medals for being a nice guy,” she said. “And the war in the South Pacific was particularly brutal.” She looked at the journal again. “Listen to this. Back in 1984 the Japanese government went to the Mariana Islands to reclaim the remains of their soldiers who'd died there. It says here about sixty percent of the bodies were missing their skulls.”

“Lawdy,” I said. My daddy had fought in the Marianas.

“There was even a poem written about taking trophy skulls,” she said, looking at the article. “Some guy named

Winfield Townley Scott wrote a poem called ‘The U.S. Sailor with the Japanese Skull.’ Oh, and here ... this says a war correspondent named Edward L. Jones wrote about boiling skulls for souvenirs in the February 1946 issue of Atlantic Magazine.”

“It's hard to believe,” Sweeney said again.

“The war in the South Pacific wasn't like the Gulf War,” Dr. Vecchio said. “It wasn't like Vietnam, where you did your tour and rotated back to the States. Some of those men fought under the most hellish conditions imaginable for two or three years. In the European war, there were cities ... or the remains of cities ... to remind the soldiers that civilization existed. In Europe there was room for troops to retreat or maneuver, places where men could at least fall back for a time and recover. In Europe, the enemy surrendered when he was defeated. But in the South Pacific all you had were tiny coral islands filled with jungle and caves and soldiers whose culture had trained them to die rather than surrender. There weren't any cities. There wasn't any room for fancy military maneuvers, and there wasn't anyplace to retreat to. There wasn't even anyplace you could desert to. The Marines just landed on the beaches, then kept fighting until everybody was dead.”

She sighed and leaned back. “I don't think you could live like that for two or three years and not become situationally insane.”

I'd never heard her put that many words together before. I'd never heard her speak about anything with that sort of

passion before. I wondered if her father had been a marine, too.

"But to take heads," Sweeney said. "As trophies."

"That sort of thing has been going on forever," she said. "Soldiers mutilating the bodies of their enemies. In the Iliad, Achilles mutilates the body of Hector after their battle and drags it behind his chariot."

Sweeney looked skeptical.

"You want a scientific rationale for it?" Dr. Vecchio said. "Okay. When humans are in situations of extreme stress a lot of hormones get secreted by the adrenal gland. Adrenaline and a whole group of steroids known as glucocorticoids. These all work together to induce a known range of physical and emotional reactions. Give yourself a steady dose of those hormones for two years, combine it with two years of unrelenting brutality and two years of seeing your buddies die, and you'll start taking heads, too."

She tossed the journal to Sweeney. "Here, take a look."

I sat there while Sweeney read through the article and thought about my daddy and the war. And I finally understood why he'd said getting his fingers shot off was the best thing that had ever happened to him. But I couldn't imagine him taking heads.

I wondered how I was going to tell the Bowditches that their war hero daddy had taken the head off a Japanese soldier.

I suppose taking a dead soldier's head as a souvenir probably wasn't quite as bad as decapitating their mother. Or

decapitating the gardener, for that matter. But I found it more troubling. Probably on account of my own daddy.

Even so, if the skull had belonged to Dora Bowditch or Mr. Park, there was something that could be done. Call the police, arrest the man, get some sort of justice, find some sort of reparation. What justice or reparation could come out of this?

“Lawdy,” I said again.

“I guess you won't want that facial reconstruction now,” Dr. Vecchio said.

Sweeney looked up from the journal. “I have an idea,” he said.

* * *

Wednesday afternoon we returned the skull to Jared Bowditch and asked him to put it back in the trunk where he'd found it. The following day, Poppa Bowditch returned home from his Carolina expedition. On Saturday afternoon Lisa and Jared visited him at his home. Which we'd asked them to do.

Sweeney and I showed up at the Bowditch home just after two o'clock in the afternoon. We brought along a man named Inoki Noboyu, a nice old gent from the Japanese embassy office in Boston.

Lisa answered the door. As we'd arranged, she acted like she'd never met us. “Father,” she called out, “there are some gentlemen here to see you.”

I've done a lot of odd things in this job. I'm used to doing odd things. I like doing odd things. But for some reason, this gig had me feeling a tad nervous.

Matthew Bowditch came to the door with Jared trailing behind him. I'd seen his photo, of course, but that image was

more than fifty-five years old. Back then he'd been a wiry, grizzled war veteran. Now he looked like Jacques Cousteau in his last years. Thin almost to the point of being frail, a prominent nose and an elegant bearing. He didn't look like the sort who'd remove a person's head and keep it in a box for five decades.

He smiled curiously at us when he came to the door.

“Mr. Bowditch?” I asked. Sweeney and I had fussed a bit over who would do the talking. I'd argued that he should, since we were using his idea to resolve this. He thought I should do the talking since the whole damned thing was my fault. Which was pretty hard to refute.

Bowditch nodded. “Yes? Can I help you?”

“Maybe,” I said. “We're contacting former marines who served in the South Pacific. I understand you were with the Third Battalion, Fifth Regiment of the First Marine Division?”

“Yes, I was,” he said. He looked at Noboyu, then back at me.

I paused for a moment. “This is sort of awkward,” I said. “We're involved in a project to repatriate the remains of Japanese soldiers who died during the war. It seems a number of marines, including some in your old unit, collected ... well, let's call them souvenirs. Including some skeletal remains. We're trying to recover...”

That was all it took. Matthew Bowditch sort of folded up. He leaned back against the wall and slowly collapsed. He started sobbing. Jared tried to support him as he collapsed. Lisa stepped back and looked at him like he was a stranger.

Then she knelt down beside him and took his hand.

"Thank God," he said. "Thank God you've come."

* * *

Peleliu, that island whose name made me giggle when I was a boy, wasn't an island at all. It was just a chunk of coral five miles long and two miles wide. In September of 1944 there wasn't anything on Peleliu except jungle and eleven thousand Japanese soldiers. It was thought Peleliu would be a good spot for an airfield to support General MacArthur's invasion of the Philippines. After sixteen thousand marines had been put on ships and sent on their way to Peleliu, it was decided they didn't really need an airfield there after all. But it would have been a bother to recall the ships. Besides, they figured the battle wouldn't take more than four days.

It took two months of fighting in a hundred and fifteen degree heat. The Marines took more than six thousand combat casualties. Twice that many were incapacitated by the heat. The fighting was so fierce the bodies of the dead could not be retrieved. The blowflies feeding on the decomposing, heat-bloated corpses got so fat they couldn't fly. Of the eleven thousand Japanese soldiers defending Peleliu, only three hundred surrendered or were captured.

Each coral rock the Japanese lost caused them to defend the next one even more strenuously. Matthew Bowditch spent two years fighting for those coral rocks before he was wounded in the leg. He wasn't shot. A mortar round dismembered his buddy. Bowditch's leg was speared by his buddy's jagged rib bones.

* * *

Matthew Bowditch told his story that night. He cried a lot. So did Lisa and Jared. So did Noboyu-san. I may have gotten a bit weepy my ownself.

Noboyu-san returned to Boston that night with a skull belonging to one of his countrymen. He said he'd ship it back to Japan with all honor and see that it was properly interred. Or whatever it is you do with unidentified human skulls.

Matthew Bowditch decided not to move to South Carolina after all. Instead, he moved into one wing of the massive house. Lisa Bowditch and her family moved into the rest of the house. She takes care of her father and works in her momma's garden.

She's put koi back into one of the pools.

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The Ivy Necklace by Jeffry Scott

Birdie had been Nesta Gleed's nickname since school—and she had giggled at the obvious pun on her first name without realizing that unkind peers were hinting at her brain capacity, too. The name followed her through life, and some friends, never having heard any other, assumed that Miss Gleed's parents had been fey or eccentric enough to put it on the birth certificate.

Inspector Jill Tierce was fond of Birdie, who'd been her landlady for a while. Miss Gleed did not take lodgers at her pretty house, built in the reign of King William IV. On learning that Wessex-Coastal Constabulary had transferred Jill to the city, Birdie insisted on sharing her home. There'd been a tussle over allowing Detective-sergeant Tierce, as she was then, to pay for the privilege, proper rent book and all. “It's like playing shops,” Nesta laughed, every time the book appeared.

Jill tried to keep in touch after moving out to a flat. Having been injured on duty and given the make-work assignment of reviewing unresolved investigations until it emerged whether she was fully fit or doomed to civilian life on a disability pension, there was more time for socializing and she'd drop in regularly.

Birdie was good value if you liked that sort of thing. Miss Gleed's ancestors had been places and seen things, keeping some of them as souvenirs. There was Captain Gleed's traveling desk, complete with ugly gash where he'd used it as

a shield during the Indian Mutiny and which accounted for him surviving that spirited bid to topple the Raj. Or the note to an otherwise obscure, bygone Miss Gleed from her (then) equally obscure acquaintance in Hampshire: a certain Miss Jane Austen. That was locked away in a drawer for fear of further fading; just as well, Inspector Tierce felt in hindsight.

Sitting in Birdie's drawing room with sunlight filtered by wisteria cascading past the windows, abstractedly admiring the lines of the teapot (fashioned in Dublin the year Napoleon burnt Moscow), Jill didn't mind that her hostess had reached the age when we tend to repeat ourselves without realizing it. Inspector Tierce knew some of the tales well, and that was part of their charm. One in particular was romantic enough to bear repetition...

So when Birdie Gleed lost the ivy necklace, Jill was saddened. “It was my fault,” Miss Gleed tormented herself. “Shelley told me the catch needed repairing but I took no notice. Oh, why didn't I listen to her?”

Jill made a noncommittal noise and avoided eye contact. She was not an admirer of Birdie's daily help, Shelley Piper. There was no point in reminding Miss Gleed that young Shelley's track record was deplorable. That was why Birdie had hired the girl.

“Shelley's so farsighted, I should have taken it straight to a jeweler. That's what she wanted me to do.”

Inspector Tierce was careful to sound neutral. “You wanted to show it to somebody, went to the drawer, and there it was—gone?”

Birdie's eyes widened. “Whatever gave you that idea? No, it wasn't like that at all. I went for a stroll in Alexandra Gardens and possibly on past the pier to that new boutique place, unless that was another day ... Obviously the catch gave way and there you are, it's a judgment on me for ignoring good advice. But I do miss it.”

Well, yes, she would. It was one of a kind, silver ivy leaves on a fine gold chain. The largest, central leaf trapped a drop of rainwater, only it was a diamond. Made to order in the 1870's for Birdie Gleed's great-grandmama, whose name was guess what, and presented when great-grandpapa went down on one knee to propose.

Alexandra Gardens, Inspector Tierce mused. A pocket park around the corner from Miss Gleed. Little more than a tangle of paths laid out to offer sea views, some benches, ditto, and two or three pine trees. Well used in summer and a shortcut for locals all the year round. If Birdie had lost the necklace there, the stealing-by-finding factor was high. If she had...

“Are you sure it went missing while you were out? Think back, don't you remember putting it away when you got back?”

Uncharacteristically, Birdie became testy. “You sound like Shelley; I have been through all this with her. When you have been doing something for I-don't-know-how-many years, you just cannot be sure. I thought I put it back in the case but it wasn't in there next time I looked, so it must have fallen off. Let's change the subject, it's gone and that is that.”

“Have you checked with us? Things do get handed in.”

“Yes, and kind Shelley got her boyfriend to—'print out,’ is it?—posters on his computer and they put them up around the park and all along the promenade, offering a hundred pounds reward. Nothing happened, of course. I almost hope somebody did pick my poor ivy leaves, at least it would be appreciated then. So frustrating to think of the necklace lying under a bush forever, or trampled into the ground ... wasted.”

Hmm, thought Inspector Tierce, and in deference to Birdie's evident wish, she changed the subject.

* * *

Shelley Piper was hurrying home to catch her favorite soap when she ran into the rigid bar of Jill Tierce's forearm. “I want a word with you, madam. I like Miss Gleed and I don't like you.”

“S'mutual,” Shelley countered, breathless from the collision. During World War I, units of the Portuguese army—allies against Imperial Germany, those blasted Huns—turned up in Wessex and they had a way with them, affecting the gene pool. Shelley Piper, ripe, olive skinned, and blessed with strikingly blue-black hair, was an example.

“Shut your face and listen. Whoever you flogged that necklace to, get it back. Find it, like behind the grandfather clock, and we'll say no more. You've got a week, and I am being a fool to myself.”

Ms. Piper gobbled for a moment, eyes blazing. “I never took it! I tole her and tole her to get it fixed.” Her shoulders slumped. “Your sort never give us credit. I love that daft old biddy, I'd do anything for her, so there.”

“A week,” Jill repeated flatly, but her heart wasn't in it. Shelley Piper's indignation rang true, though Inspector Tierce had no illusions: she'd been conned rotten by Oscar-worthy liars too often to have much faith in patent sincerity. More to the point, she was checkmated.

The week passed, and more besides, and still Birdie Gleed was bereft of her heirloom. Typically, it had not been insured. “A waste of money,” she argued, and by her logic, it was. “Having a copy made would cost more than insurance would cover. And it wouldn't be the same, in any sense of the phrase.”

* * *

Nearly two months later Jill paid Miss Gleed a visit and wondered what the heck was going on. Birdie was up to something. Her eyes sparkled; the corners of her mouth kept twitching upwards. Had her hostess not been nearer seventy than fifty, and far too well bred up to indulge in vulgar japes, Inspector Tierce would have been wary of whoopee cushions or a pail of water balanced atop the drawing room door.

The Dublin teapot poised, Birdie coughed stagily and lifted her chin. She might be absurdly non-streetwise and hardly safe out on her own, but affectedness and pose-striking were not among her foibles. Attention drawn, Jill Tierce performed a classic Laurel and Hardy double take.

“Wow! You did have had a replica done after all.” Silver ivy leaves lay on Birdie's silk-covered, negligible chest, single raindrop glittering, golden links so tiny that the leaves might have been sewn in an arc with an occasional glint of sunshine between them.

“It's not a copy,” Birdie gloated, pouring tea at last. “Now what do you think of that?”

What Inspector Tierce thought was that Shelley Piper had been extremely slow to get the message, a conclusion she kept to herself. Now that Shelley had been scared into disgorging the loot, she could be persuaded to stop working for Birdie, ending the problem without disillusioning her employer.

“Where did you find it, on the floor in a corner somewhere?”

“Where indeed. My dear, such a saga!” Birdie had a new story for her collection. “Really, it makes one believe in the workings of Providence. I mean, what are the odds against anyone going to Holmdun in the first place? As for the odds against passing that very shop when the little man was actually putting my necklace in the window ... billions and trillions to one.”

I'm going to enjoy this, Jill thought grimly.

It was unfair, though not very, of Miss Gleed to doubt whether anybody needed to go to Holmdun. An erstwhile market town about ten miles from the city, market long gone and the branch railway line along with it, the only pressing reason to seek out Holmdun is that one lives or works there.

Shelley Piper's boyfriend, Leo, had a new car, Birdie began. Well, not new, you understand, but new to him. He'd taken Shelley for a drive, just following their noses, and ended up in Holmdun of all places. Stretching their legs, they'd paused outside a ... well, not even an antique shop, more your superior junk shop, just in time to witness a silver

necklace being arranged in the window. “The dead spitting image of yours,” Shelley reported the following morning; Birdie had doubted that.

“But she was so full of it,” Birdie Gleed recalled, “and Shelley's a dear girl but she can be very assertive ... I couldn't get her to understand that it might be similar but not identical. Impossible. Great-grandfather designed it himself and made the silversmith—”

“Burn the plans or whatever and swear never to make another.”

Birdie beamed at Inspector Tierce. “What a memory, it must be the police training.” She was not being sarcastic. “We nearly had a falling-out. I felt so sure it was pointless trekking to Holmdun—and what a tragedy that would have been.”

She touched an ivy leaf and smiled mistily. “Shelley was so insistent that I did go. I knew as soon as I saw it, and when he put it into my hands ... Sweet little man, too. When I told him what had happened he was most embarrassed. He had no idea it was stolen and he'd paid rather a lot for it—by his lights, two hundred pounds. So that was all he charged me and he was downright apologetic about that.

“Isn't it extraordinary, though? If Shelley and Leo—well, it isn't just them going to Holmdun, if they'd been five minutes earlier they'd never have seen my necklace, it was in a drawer and out of sight, and they would have strolled on past.”

Jill studied Birdie covertly while pretending to settle the bone china cup in its translucent saucer. The dear ninny truly believed an insultingly blatant pack of lies. Further, it

delighted her. And Shelley Piper was two hundred quid to the good. “It defies belief.”

“Doesn't it just! Beyond belief, exactly. As if my necklace had to come back to me.”

Inspector Tierce nearly choked on her tea. Birdie was right, while remaining serenely unaware of why her property had to come back. Out of curiosity, not mockery, Jill asked, “Didn't you ask the chap in the shop how he came by the necklace?”

Nonplussed, Birdie shook her head. “He bought it from somebody,” she said, evidently surprised that Jill could be so slow on the uptake. “They came here from Holmdun, found it in Alexandra Gardens or lying in the street and kept it, obviously. There's so much dishonesty nowadays.”

* * *

The next time she found herself in Holmdun, Inspector Tierce located the “superior junk shop” and showed her ID to the owner. She felt quite sorry for Jack Vickery, an honest if foolish fellow who was slowly yet inexorably going broke. He had watched every antiques program TV offered and believed himself an expert on the strength of it, sinking his redundancy money in the Holmdun shop.

Mr. Vickery was happy to share his knowledge of the ivy necklace and but for one crucial detail it matched her expectations. “Sexy, lot of dark hair—yeah, not the sort you forget in a hurry.” He'd leered wistfully. “But she didn't sell it to me, that was another one. Took me right in, she did, had a law firm's card, said she was settling up an estate, trying to

get maximum value for a few bits and pieces. Made sense to me."

And to Jill Tierce, on reflection. Shelley Piper had used a friend to do the deal in case the shopkeeper doubled as informer, which wasn't unknown.

A couple of weeks afterwards, Inspector Tierce saw Shelley in the street and ticked an item on her mental Things To Do list. She guessed that Leo, he of the not-new new car, was Shelley's escort. His body language, one arm around Shelley's thick waist, radiated pride, protectiveness, and affection.

Fairly soon light-fingered Ms. Piper would need no persuasion to quit Birdie Gleed's employ. She would be far too busy looking after the baby.

* * *

"Goodness, this is..." Birdie Gleed, taken aback by Jill's broom-closet working space, made a swift recovery. "...cosy and, er, efficient? I hope you will forgive me troubling you at work."

"Welcome surprise. But let's go and have a coffee."

"I'm a coward," Birdie confessed, moving slowly away from Wessex-Coastal headquarters. Miss Gleed took teeny-tiny steps and Inspector Tierce, fighting not to limp as the damaged leg asserted itself, was happy to match her pace. "I must do something beastly and I haven't an inkling how to go about it."

"Maybe you shouldn't be approaching a police officer then," Jill said lightly. Lord knew what counted as beastly in her friend's innocent book. Cheating at bridge? Reading the

end of a whodunit first, and pretending to be sharper than the detective?

Refusing to be amused, or not hearing the remark in her agitation, Birdie gripped Jill's arm. “I need support and you are the very person. So much more experience, you know how to handle these things...”

It cannot be blackmail, Inspector Tierce thought, praying that it wasn't. She nearly laughed in relief when, safe in an eavesdropper-proof corner of the cafe, Birdie said, “I have to sack Shelley.”

It was very Miss Gleed to sound defensive and close to tears. “I don't want to but she has to be protected from herself. If I ignore it she will turn to other sources and they'll tell the police—I'm telling the police but that's different, this is strictly confidential and if you get stuffy and say there's no such thing as confidentiality on your side I shall refuse to prosecute—” Breaking off, Birdie admitted plaintively, “I've lost my thread.”

“Calm down. Step by step now. Shelley has done something...”

“Has she not!” Mortified rather than angry, Birdie sighed sharply. “It's so silly and needless, especially in her situation. She's pregnant, you know, the child is due soon. I was looking forward to helping her out, and when she was ready she could have come back with the baby. I'm good with infants, it would have been nice to have one in the house.”

“But?”

Getting her retaliation in first, Birdie snapped, “Shelley did not steal my necklace.” Disconcertingly, her glance was

shrewd. “I knew you suspected it at the time, and you were so wrong. As events proved. She'd never take anything meaning so much to me.”

Double hmm, Inspector Tierce commented inwardly. Ruefully Miss Gleed admitted, “But she has started taking things. I went to the attic in case I'd left my specs there, and something made me open the Uglies Trunk.” That was where she stored ungainly trophies and unwanted gifts received by the family before she was born.

“I keep meaning to ask a charity shop to come and take anything they might sell. There's an umpteen-piece tea service, hideous, a case of stuffed birds, well, you can imagine...

“In among all that is an old hatbox with smaller things, mainly Aunt Dolly's.” Birdie cheered up a little. “She was a bad lot—not a you-know-what per se, but my word, she expected presents! There was a gold and platinum cigarette case, sort of Art Deco gone wrong, and no end of crystal scent sprays with gold tops. Rona might like them when I've gone. Or before ... the oddest things come back into fashion.”

Rona Baxter was what Miss Gleed called “an honorary niece” whom she had acquired along the way, through enduring friendships with 1945-vintage boarding school chums. Birdie had virtually fostered Rona while the parents were working overseas.

“Anyway, the minute I opened the trunk ... there were marks in the dust on the hatbox and the strap wasn't through the buckle. Of course when I opened it, most of the odds and

ends had gone. One person besides me knew they were in the Uglies Trunk to be taken."

Jill wanted to clasp her temples and groan. "Why on earth didn't you put that sort of stuff in the bank with the rest of your jewelry? Honestly, Birdie—"

"What jewelry? So much for the trained observer, I don't go in for it, dear. Oh, cheap brooches and the little garnet ring Daddy gave me, and the ivy necklace, but that's different."

"Oh. Yes, now that you mention it ... Okay, what does Shelley have to say for herself?"

Birdie subsided into gloom. "That's it, I haven't confronted her yet. I'm scared of saying something I'll regret. I can be very fierce when I lose my temper, you know."

Inspector Tierce coughed explosively to cover a guffaw. Birdie was still speaking. "—don't know where to start if I do accuse the silly girl. It's a sickener, Jill. I'm not Lady Bountiful, Shelley earns every penny I pay her. She's a worker, and she couldn't take more pains with her own home." Jill suspected that Ms. Piper took considerably less care of her own home, but she let that pass.

"But as you pointed out as soon as I let her past the front door, not many people would have given Shelley the chance, so I deserve better from her. Fiddlesticks to that, I believed we were friends. She has to go..."

"You want me to tell her."

"Would you, Jill?"

“Probably. Leave it with me.” Inspector Tierce decided to divert the conversation. “How is Rona, haven't seen her in ages.”

“Nor have I, well, never for long.”

Irked by the complaining note, Jill felt empathy for Ms. Baxter. “Come on Birdie, they may be flying visits but at least she makes them. London's a long journey and she has a demanding job, not the normal nine-to-five.”

“I know, she's a lovely child.” There was the cause of friction, Jill thought. Rona was twenty-seven and ambitious. And for all her denials of the Lady Bountiful role, given the slightest encouragement Birdie Gleed would drag Rona into a cradle of decorative idleness in the provinces. “I just wish she'd stop striving, there's no need. Do you know, she was looking so peaky last year when all that flu was raging, and I begged to treat her to a cruise, just a short one, hardly a month, and she bit my head off. There's such a thing as being too independent.”

Sometimes one had to be, Jill mused. She'd had terrible battles with her father over becoming and then staying a police officer.

Birdie, head on one side, tapped Jill's wrist. “Slyboots, you've got me Rona-ing and I feel heaps better. Will you attend to ... the other thing? Be there with me, at least. I shan't say anything about stealing, simply tell her not to come to me any more.”

“I don't know. Give me a day or two.” It was the second time that Inspector Tierce had stalled, and she wondered why. She might get a reprimand for implicitly trading on her

official status while interfering in a private matter; Shelley Piper was the child of criminals and she had been—apparently still was—another of the same, so she knew how to make trouble. Yet that wasn't it.

“Please, Jilly. I have to keep out of her way, go to my room, and plead migraine. It's an impossible situation.”

* * *

Visibly larger since last sighted, Shelley Piper glared at the visitor. Behind her loomed Leo, putting Jill in mind of a dog awaiting the signal to attack or welcome any newcomer.

“Go round the pub, you can have a pint. Just the one, mind,” Shelley ordered. Picking up tension, Leo began shaking his head. Inspector Tierce was in her usual boring blue suit over a white sweater. She hadn't told him what she was when he opened the door of the basement flat, but Rover divined that she wasn't a friend.

“Women's talk,” Shelley told him, and taking Inspector Tierce for a health visitor, Leo blushed, mumbled that it was nice to meet her, ‘scuse him, and bolted.

Shelley said, “He knows all about me, I only packed him off ‘cause Leo goes ape if anyone hassles me and that's all we need, him inside for assaulting a copper.

“I should have known, the old biddy hasn't looked me in the face all week, you would think I was a stranger. Something's up.” Color left her face as fast as it had filled Leo's a minute ago. “She never thinks I nicked something, like before?”

As Inspector Tierce's lips parted, Shelley cut in, “That came out wrong. The bloody necklace went missing, I meant, but it was just lost, it turned up again.”

“With help.”

Rising awkwardly, Shelley Piper spoke quietly. “Get this through your nasty, squinchy-eyed head—my little boy is never going to be ashamed of his mum. Yes, I'll say, I made some mistakes early on but I have been straight from before you was born.”

“Admirable.”

Dropping back into the chair, the other woman mumbled, “It's happened again, Birdie's been ripped off. Great. She was going to lend us the deposit on a house at the Marsden, you know. That's all down the toilet now.” And to herself, heavy with irony, “Funny how things turn out.”

Jill Tierce hoped that the stab of pity did not make her a patronizing snob. Marsden Hill, a derelict industrial site on the outskirts, was sprouting a crop of “starter homes” she would pay not to live in. Shelley made a huddle of meager boxes for humans sound like Paradise Lost.

“For argument's sake, you've never stolen from Miss Gleed. But stumbling on the ivy necklace at Holmdun was a pack of lies. What was that all about? Your version and Jack Vickery's don't agree, and I know which one is true.”

Shelley didn't react to the name, and she wasn't acting—it meant nothing. “He's the shopkeeper. You showed up all innocent-like, said you were looking for a necklace like your Gran's, and described what he had sitting in a drawer. The X-ray vision was working well that day. Then you slung him a

load of moody about your husband buying it for you and he was on night shift, couldn't come when the shop was open so please put the necklace in the window. Vickery's a twit, you were lucky there, any half-awake trader would expect you to be back after dark with a brick to put through the glass."

"He wasn't too bright," Shelley conceded grudgingly.

"Nor are you. If you didn't get a mate to flog the thing to Jack Vickery, how did you know where to look for it?"

"No comment." Ms. Piper had learned that as a Young Offender, if not at her mother's knee. Contradicting herself immediately by adding, "I never stole nothing, 'specially off Birdie. After what she's done for me? You people make me sick."

A pause lengthened into steady silence, broken by Shelley's nervous "You all right?"

Jill Tierce, mouth half open, squinchy little eyes delivering a thousand yard stare, was motionless. She was an expert in the vocal nuances of "No comment," she'd heard it so many times in interview rooms.

"Hellfire, you're covering up—no, shielding somebody. Shuddup, I'm nearly there..." Jill nodded to herself. "Shielding Birdie Gleed." Shelley's expression confirmed it.

"Hang on, hang on," Jill mumbled. She'd jumped to a conclusion, outlandish and yet she was sure of it. "Playtime's over. Think very carefully, woman—you are looking out for Birdie, but it isn't just you any more, or even you and Leo, you have the baby to look out for. Now—did Rona Baxter tell you what was going on, or did you work it out for yourself?"

Shelley Piper started visibly. Then she started telling the truth.

* * *

It had not been friendship between Rona and herself; Rona Baxter was a user and Shelley was useful.

Some three years back, Rona had taken Shelley aside and whined that she was going crazy with boredom. Miss Gleed retired early and slept soundly, so where might the late-night action be?

“I took her round the clubs after the old girl was in dreamland. This was before Leo, and Rona's not bad looking and comes on classy, I thought we was bound to pull. Only she wasn't after fellahs.” Shelley closed one nostril with a finger and sniffed hard. “She's into that, and I showed her a guy, and next time I looked round she was gone. Soon as she knew where to score, see...

“I felt bad afterwards, helping her con poor ol’ Birdie. Rona can't stand her,” Shelley explained matter-of-factly. “You know how Birdie carries on, let me get you this, wouldn't you like that darling, and that little cow started making faces behind her back and expected me to laugh up my sleeve. I wished I'd never gone out with her.”

Shelley sniggered in self-mockery. “Well I didn't again, for a long time. Till the Croc Shop got raided so Madam didn't know where to go, and then it was all down to We-must-have-a-girls'-night-out. Right, I thought, you can buy all the drinks. Which fair enough, she did, and we both got well hammered on voddies.

“Rona kept trying to get us off to the clubs but I wasn't having any, just to spite her, and come one in the morning she was so drunk she forgot about looking for marching powder and really let rip.” Shelley wagged her head, incredulous at the memory.

“Talk about bitter and twisted! Called Birdie every name under the sun, banged on about how she got on her nerves, and I went, ‘Remedy's in your own hands, girl, nobody's making you keep coming down here.’ I could have bit me tongue out straight after, in case I put the idea in Rona's head. The old girl thinks more of her than the real nieces. They never come near her and it's all they can manage to send birthday cards and that.

“I needn't have worried. When I said that, Rona looked at me as much as to say don't be stupid, and I caught on. She reckons to be in for a lot of dosh when Birdie pops her clogs, and the two-faced bitch isn't wrong.”

“Whoa there,” Inspector Tierce protested. “I've known Birdie and Rona a lot longer than you have. Rona could have all the money she needs, within reason, just by asking. Nothing would please Birdie more. Rona has always refused handouts; they often argue about that.”

“Wash yer ears out; Rona hates the old biddy. Yeah, she could have it easy but only if she lived in Birdie's pocket. Rona's a goer, there isn't enough money to keep her in the sticks. Anyway, ask Birdie for anything? She'd sooner die. It's like a contest, see, ‘cept Birdie don't twig there is one. Take the stuff about Rona being an ad-vertising executive...”

Having stumbled over the long words, Shelley blew a raspberry.

“She is secret'ry at some office or other, that's all. Lies her head off to make out she is smart and successful and that. Next time they are together, listen out for Rona and you'll hear it—she's doing this, that, and t'other and look at the silly old girl, she could never make her own way in a thousand years. That's what she is getting at.”

“Ah ... very well, back to the necklace, please.”

“I told Birdie the catch needed fixing. I see Rona taking notice, too. Then Birdie takes her for ‘a nice little walk’ and it'll end up at that new shop by the pier and she will buy Rona something. That's Birdie, like a kid, thinks herself so cunning, she told me all about it before they set off.”

There it was, Jill understood, one of the subconscious burrs under her saddle. Birdie had spoken of going to the boutique, and it was definitely for younger women; Birdie wasn't a boutique person anyway, she used the same three or four shops where one was still addressed as “Madam” and offered a chair...

“When they got back, Rona was full of herself about something, you could tell. Next day she took herself off to Battlebridge, seeing a school friend, she said. Only I popped out for light bulbs and who should I see on a bus to Fellhampton but Rona. Can't tell the truth to save her life, that's the opposite direction to Battlebridge, was all I thought of it at the time.

“Must have been a week later that Birdie missed the necklace. Now she wasn't wearing it when they went to the

park. I'd taken to keeping an eye out, somebody had to—didn't matter if the catch give way indoors, we'd find the necklace easy, but outdoors ... And I remembered Rona looking cat-and-canary when they got back, and then being on the wrong bus..."

"You believed she'd stolen the famous ivy leaves."

"Believe hell, I knew it. But what was I to do, eh? Couldn't tell Birdie. For one, she wouldn't believe it, two, I could never prove it, and three, even if I could prove it I would do no such a thing. It'd kill the old girl, knowing her pet would do that to her."

"So?"

"I worked out how to put things right. Couldn't think of any other reason for taking that bus and lying about where she was going, than to get rid of what she'd nicked. Wouldn't risk it closer to home, nach'rally. There's not that many shops in Fellhampton, I got Leo to drive me round on my days off and I checked them all, no joy. Holmdun is the other town on that route, and that's where I tried next."

Shelley grinned at Jill. "I just did what you lot do, but there was only one of me so it took longer. All right, the old girl had to buy what was hers, but she can spare it. Cheaper than breaking her heart."

Inspector Tierce stopped listening. She'd made an incoherent snatch at the answer and now that the details had been given, it seemed obvious. Birdie Gleed had walked on through Alexandra Gardens to a boutique where there was nothing she wanted to buy. Shelley Piper was grateful to Birdie and liked her, into the bargain. She had nudged Birdie

towards her necklace, rather than denouncing the thief. Rona Baxter was Birdie's favorite and she'd had opportunity if not evident motive. When Miss Gleed stated that only two people knew of the hatbox in the attic, the police officer in Jill had objected. There'd been daily helps before Shelley Piper, for instance, and surely Birdie's occasional guests had the run of the house and might have explored it...

“Why in the world risk an inheritance for the sake of a few hundred quid?”

“I reckon she nicked it out of spite, first off. Knows how Birdie worships that old thing, saw a chance to take it on the sly—make Birdie think she'd been careless, was getting past it—and then Rona thinks she might as well sell it. Now more things are missing, I s'pose.”

“Yes.”

“There you go, Rona's got the taste for it. Birdie has so much stuff, it's tempting.” Ms. Piper's tone was wistful as she glimpsed the land beyond recall.

Dismissing that, she pleaded, “Don't go telling on Rona, it'll crease the old girl. I'll watch out when she's in the house and—”

“Grow up, Shell'. Birdie means to fire you, and you'll be otherwise engaged very soon, anyway. I can't close my eyes to what happened. Even if I did, it's only postponing the trouble.”

“I knew it. All coppers are bastards.”

“I must remember to ask Mum and Dad about that.” Inspector Tierce was unruffled. “‘Thank you’ would be more appropriate. I can clear you with Birdie Gleed, but only if you

keep your trap firmly shut, and that means to Leo and anybody else. If Birdie asks, you know nothing, it's all news to you. Deal?"

A long, suspicious pause. "All right, but what are you going to do?"

Jill got up, absentmindedly rubbing the fire in her thigh muscle. She smiled sweetly. "No comment."

* * *

Birdie Gleed replaced the silver teapot on its silver tray. "You're sure, my dear? Oh, what a relief. But—"

"Shelley did not take the ivy necklace; in fact, she was instrumental in getting it back. She did not take anything from the attic. She has never stolen from you and she is not about to start. I ... think I can guarantee there will be no more thefts." She was still seeking Rona Baxter's address in London; the lady seemed to change them frequently. For obvious reasons Jill hadn't asked the one person sure to have the information.

"But if it wasn't Shelley—Oh."

Damn and blast and damn again—though Inspector Tierce had feared that Birdie would understand the implications. Miss Gleed was fluttery and girlish and silly but that did not make her stupid.

"Are you going to be all right?"

Birdie nodded and made a teacup chime as she reached to take Jill's hand. "Why steal?" she whispered.

"For what it's worth, I think it was pride. She needed money and she couldn't bring herself to ask. Maybe she was

afraid of worrying you if she did," Jill lied. "She's made such a thing of managing fine on her own..."

Better to let Birdie think that than consider the possibility that malice had been the crucial motive, with profit an afterthought. Until during another brief visit Rona's expensive habit had called for cash she didn't have at the time, and she'd remembered the hatbox in the attic.

"Everybody has a little larceny in them and sometimes it leads them astray. Think of all the good times you've had together—okay, Rona crossed the line, but before that she saw more of you than the rest of your family put together, that is worth remembering." Jill was arguing to solace Birdie; she had no time at all for the thief.

"But she stole," Birdie Gleed insisted, voice trembling.

"People who give in to temptation can be helped along by some very iffy rationalizations. You've made no secret of mentioning Rona in your will—I don't mean making a big thing of it, but the other day you said you had put things aside for her and you keep asking to make her life easier. I imagine she thought it was hardly theft at all, she was just taking an advance without asking. After all, if she had asked for that cigarette case or—"

"Be quiet!" Goodness, Birdie hadn't been kidding, she could be fierce. "I'm sorry, dear, but really ... Yes, Dolly's rubbish was hers in any case. But not the ivy necklace. That has to stay in the family."

Inspector Tierce noted that she'd read Birdie wrong. The old lady's voice had not been tremulous from shock or grief, but temper. Kindly and warm or no, her heart was proof

against breakages; Birdie's temper, while rarely roused, was less durable.

This was a woman whose clan had died bravely in the cause of extending an empire, or fought just as savagely to protect personal, business kingdoms. One way and another, what they'd had they held.

“My will,” Birdie Gleed repeated thoughtfully. Her lips thinned in what was not really a smile. “We'll see about that.”

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The Kamo Horse by I. J. Parker

Heian-Kyo (Kyoto), at the Kamo festival, sometime in the eleventh century.

Not even the fastest horse can overtake the human tongue. Rumors about Watanabe Wataru's most recent good fortune spread with such rapidity and thoroughness that even Akitada, who lived well outside that sphere of wealth and worldly success, heard about it within a day.

Not that Watanabe Wataru had not been blessed before. Born into a wealthy and powerful family, he was endowed with more talents and grace than the average nobleman needed. At this time in his promising life, he was in his mid-twenties, wealthy, handsome, accomplished, and recently married to one of the most beautiful women at court.

But Wataru's fondest wish concerned the emperor's new horse, a horse more magnificent than any other and rumored to be the fastest in the land. Since boyhood, it had been Wataru's dream to win the great Kamo race, and this year the young emperor's new horse was entered. When Wataru laid eyes on the splendid animal, he was lost to all other desires.

And now the emperor had selected him to train and ride his horse in the great Kamo race.

If Wataru should win, his future at court would be assured.

But the horse was rumored to be unlucky. He was a large and very handsome stallion, solid black except for four white fetlocks. Black horses with four white fetlocks had always brought disaster to those who rode them.

Opinions at court were divided on Wataru's chances. Half the court thought the unlucky horse would end his promising career or even his life, while the other half was convinced that a man so obviously blessed by the gods would overcome the ill omen.

Akitada had no opinion in the matter. He did not believe in omens, good or bad. His mind was occupied with leaking roofs, empty granaries, and the shrinking supply of silver in his possession. He was between assignments—a euphemistic way of saying that he was out of favor at court and could not hope for a post in the foreseeable future.

His poverty was particularly depressing at this time of year. It was spring, the world was filled with blossoms, the days were warm and sunny, and his friends lavished their wealth on the upcoming festival. Since the Kamo virgin was an imperial princess whose annual devotions at the shrine ensured a plentiful rice harvest, the nobility devoted three days to an uninterrupted series of parties, processions, horse races, wrestling matches, and dance performances.

As it turned out, the festival drew Akitada out of the grim reality of his penury and into the world of the fortunate people. Though Akitada's family was neither wealthy nor powerful, he was one of the “good” people by birth and education and had friends among the wealthy. In this instance, his best friend Kosehira invited Akitada to a pre-festival party at his mansion.

Akitada accepted the invitation reluctantly. He had little in common with the other guests nowadays. Besides, Kosehira's parties often involved the extemporaneous composition of

poems, something Akitada was very bad at. To make matters worse, his best silk gown was stained and threadbare. But Kosehira insisted and, since there was always a chance that one of the guests might recommend him for a post, Akitada went.

His hopes were dashed, but he met the fortunate Wataru. About ten years Akitada's junior, the young man was surprisingly shy, considering his looks and talents had made him the envy of his friends. Until his recent marriage he had wrought havoc in the hearts of high-born ladies, who called him another Prince Genji.

Akitada sat near Wataru and his two best friends, Sato Yoshikiyo and Endo Morito. These two had recently returned from military service up north where they had won such honors that they now served in the imperial guard. Morito in particular was rumored to be a fierce warrior and a man who hated to lose. He was the one who first brought up the matter of the unlucky horse.

“Well, gentlemen,” he drawled to the assembled company, “how will you place your bets in tomorrow's race? Will you wager by Wataru's luck or his animal's bad reputation?”

Wataru flushed. “He has no bad reputation,” he protested. “That's foolish gossip. The horse has never lost. He runs like the wind. I just hope I do him justice tomorrow. He's the gentlest and most beautiful creature in the world.”

“Dear Heaven! Such passionate words for a horse,” mocked Morito. “Is not the Lady Kesa jealous?”

The other guests’ hearty laughter embarrassed Wataru. Yoshikiyo clapped a hand on his shoulder and cried, “Pay no

attention to Morito. He knows he'll lose tomorrow. No more talk about horses."

An older man, flushed with wine, shouted, "Yes, let's talk about the beautiful Kesa instead. The light has disappeared from our lives like stars on a rainy night. Nobody has seen her since you took her into your household, Wataru. It's not fair to the rest of us."

"Hear, hear," cried the others.

Morito raised his cup. "To Kesa, hidden from the world by a cruel husband who probably beats her."

Wataru looked taken aback, but he laughed and drank with the others. "I'm innocent," he said, "and to prove it, you're all invited to my house to see my two treasures together."

They accepted eagerly, and Akitada, relieved that this jaunt canceled the poetry segment of the evening, trailed along, half curious about horse and lady.

A full moon was hanging like a great silver mirror in the sky, and the streets were filled with revelers. Wataru led their noisy group to his residence, seated them on a verandah overlooking the large garden, and then disappeared. He returned quickly, followed by servants carrying trays of wine and refreshments.

Akitada had expected him to bring the Lady Kesa with him, to greet her husband's guests and then withdraw again, but Wataru waited until all had been served before clapping his hands three times. A gate squeaked somewhere in the garden, and they heard the crunch of hooves in gravel. Then suddenly, between two banks of white azaleas, there she

was, a slim figure in pale green silk, walking toward them slowly and proudly, leading the beautiful horse.

When she reached the open area in front of their verandah, she stopped and bowed deeply. The horse whinnied and flicked its tail. In the silvery moonlight the slight figure of the woman and the magnificent, gleaming black stallion seemed apparitions, creatures of supernatural perfection. Akitada half expected this fairy creature to jump on the stallion's back and fly off on a starry highway toward some cloud paradise on the western horizon.

From the others came a few indrawn breaths, but neither rude shouts nor whistles. The Lady Kesa was not only very beautiful, but very young, with that mixture of shyness and trembling joy that men associate with innocence. Her eyes were on her husband. She smiled at him, and no one could doubt the adoration in her eyes.

There was a long silence until Wataru burst out, “Well, what do you think of him? Isn't he wonderful?”

They dutifully looked at the horse. He was very handsome: tall, with a wide chest and smooth powerful haunches, and his black coat gleamed in the moonlight almost like the long, glossy hair of Wataru's bride.

They complimented the horse, and Wataru ordered his wife to walk him around so his gait could be admired. She obeyed, and the guests were again distracted by the lovely girl and her grace. She seemed not at all afraid of the animal, and the great beast followed her obediently, once even nuzzling her shoulder. Someone sighed and muttered audibly, “Oh, how I wish I were that horse!”

Lady Kesa smiled with perfect composure until the first of the guests descended from the verandah, ostensibly to get a closer look at the horse. Others followed, clustered around horse and girl, and Akitada caught the panic in her eyes as she looked to her husband for help.

Wataru did eventually recall himself and dismissed both wife and horse. Soon after, the impromptu party broke up to rest before the grand festivities of the next day. Akitada left Wataru's elegant home in a somber mood, disillusioned by the pursuits of men like Wataru and worried about his future.

He did not participate in the next day's festivities. The roof of his stable finally collapsed during an early morning rain, and he worked with his people freeing the horses and repairing the worst damage, while glumly wondering where he would get the funds to rebuild, or for that matter to feed the horses and his growing family. In time, the news came that Wataru had won the Kamo race and that he had been most generously rewarded by a highly pleased emperor. His closest competitor, his friend Morito, had taken the loss badly and accused Wataru of cheating. Those who believed in omens said that even if the horse had not lost it had managed to break up a friendship.

* * *

It is said that fortune and misfortune are like twisted strands of rope. Wataru flourished in the benevolence of imperial favor for the span of five days before disaster struck.

Akitada was one of the first to hear of the trouble because Wataru sent for him. A servant brought the scrawled note and looked so distraught that Akitada tied on his hat, slipped on

his shoes, and followed the man to the Watanabe home, very curious about what had happened.

The first sound he heard was the mournful wailing of women and the chanting of monks. Someone must be dying or dead, Akitada thought, and remembered the ill-omened horse.

The servant took him directly to Wataru's study, a large masculine room with painted scrolls, books, elegant writing utensils, and the family sword displayed on a stand. Its owner sat hunched in the middle of the room with his head in his hands.

“What is wrong?” Akitada asked, too startled to waste time on polite greetings.

Wataru raised his head. His eyes were red from weeping and his face looked ghastly. “Thank you for coming quickly,” he said. “A dreadful thing has happened. Incomprehensible. And they blame me.” He staggered to his feet. “Please come!”

Akitada now saw that he still wore his nightclothes, a white silk robe rather horribly stained with what looked like dried blood. The stains covered the front, wide sleeves, and hem of the robe, and had even soaked into his white silk socks.

They entered an adjoining room, comfortably and luxuriously appointed like the study but evidently used as the master's sleeping quarters. The outer shutters were still closed, but enough sunlight filtered in to show that the night's bedding had not yet been removed. Translucent mosquito netting suspended from the ceiling hung in careless folds around a tangle of silken coverlets. A tall candlestick stood

nearby, its candle consumed into thick ropes of hardened wax which had dripped to the gleaming floor.

Akitada smelled blood. It gagged him for a moment and he stopped, but Wataru waved him forward and pulled back the netting.

Akitada saw an outflung arm, slender and fragile as a child's.

“They say I killed her.” Wataru's voice broke. He began to shake violently.

Akitada made himself move forward and look.

This was not the moonlight fairy. Among the tangled, bloody bedclothes lay something altogether more real and ugly. A headless corpse.

Now, a headless female had once played a particularly tricky role in one of Akitada's murder cases, and his first question was, “Is it the Lady Kesa?”

Wataru looked at him without comprehension and then—horribly—began to giggle. “Is it Kesa? Of course it's Kesa. Who else would be in my bed?”

Akitada bit his lip. “Forgive me, but there is no head. Unless...” Akitada bent to lift the tangled covers.

“Don't touch her,” cried Wataru, pulling him away. “The head ... has disappeared. Oh, what will I do?” He burst into tears.

Akitada regarded him with surprise. Grief for his wife he could understand, but this sounded more like fear for himself. He had expected better from this paragon of manly accomplishments. “Go back to your study,” he said firmly, “drink a cup of wine, and wait for me.”

Wataru gulped and shuffled from the room.

Akitada immediately pulled back the spattered, tangled quilts. Kesa's body was only partially covered by the thin silk robe she wore. Even in the dim light, the beauty of the well-shaped limbs was unmistakable. Akitada thought back to the delicate creature in the moonlight. He had expected her to be frailer, less supple and well rounded. But impressions can be mistaken, and the voluminous layered silk gowns of court women might hide anything. He touched her wrist. She was quite cold. The bedding around her shoulders was heavily soaked in blood, and the wooden neck rest lay on its side in a puddle of it. A corner of the headrest bore a deep cut and the wood showed through the black lacquer.

One of the silken coverlets was also slashed, and the white silk floss had soaked up Kesa's blood. When Akitada bent for a closer look, he noticed a strand of her hair on the floor beside the bedding.

Akitada rose, studied the arrangement, and decided that the killer must have stood above the sleeping woman and cut off her head with a single stroke of a sword.

More splatters of blood were on the mosquito netting and on the floor, and faint trails of bloody footprints crossed the room. Akitada went to open the shutters. Outside, a narrow verandah wrapped around the house a few feet above the garden. The verandah was empty, and the garden lay peaceful in the sunshine. A gravel path curved through islands of mossy hills, flowering shrubs, and stands of rustling bamboo toward a small wooden gate. Akitada stepped outside. On the bottom tread of the stairs lay a few small

pieces of gravel. As he bent to pick one up, he noticed a thread caught on the rough edge of the verandah. It was of cotton, black with some white in it. He detached it and folded it into a sheet of tissue he carried in his sash. Then he went down the steps and scrutinized the path, keeping well away from its center. He found neither footprints nor traces of blood, but at the gate he detached another thread like the first one from a splinter about a foot below the latch.

The latch kept people from entering the private garden from the outside. He opened the gate. Beyond was a vegetable plot and woods. Locking the gate again, Akitada returned to the house. This time, he noticed a small drop of congealed wax on the floor just inside the threshold. It was quite hard and signified only that at some time in the past a candle had dripped there.

* * *

Wataru was sitting in his study as before, his chin tucked into his chest and his fingers plucking at his bloody robe. Before him stood a porcelain wine flask and a cup. He had stopped shaking except for an occasional shudder.

Akitada looked at him. If Wataru had killed his wife in a fit of passion, he might well put on an act. On the other hand ... He asked, “Were the shutters to the verandah closed when you found her?”

Wataru raised his head and stared at him blearily. Then he said, “Yes. I touched nothing.”

“Are you sure?” Akitada looked pointedly at Wataru's bloodstained gown.

The other man flushed. “I knelt to see if I ... well, I knew she was dead, but I thought ... it was the shock, you see. It makes you hope for impossible things. And then when I realized ... I took her into my arms. I held her for quite a long time, I think.” He gave Akitada a pitiful look. “You won't mention it to anyone, will you?”

For a man to admit to passion or affection for his wife was in very bad taste, but in this case Wataru's diffidence could cause problems.

Wataru burst into speech. “I know it looks bad. They think I did it and that I carried away her head to hide it. Who would do such a thing?”

Akitada felt some pity. “A deranged person perhaps. Or a killer who wished to hide the identity of the victim. That was what happened in my last case like this. Or perhaps there was something about her head which might give the killer away. You are quite certain that it is your wife?”

Wataru wrestled visibly with shock and grief. “Yes. It is Kesa. I know my wife's body.” He gulped and turned white. Akitada quickly poured him more wine.

“You said that ‘they’ think you killed your wife. Who are ‘they’ precisely?”

“The police. They didn't say so, but they whispered and stared at me. I sent for them because I thought a robber had got in. But they said the gate was latched and nobody could have got in.”

“Do you recall who came? Constables? Officers? A coroner?”

Wataru frowned. “I don't remember. There were six or seven. They looked at my sword and searched the house. Then they wanted to dig up the garden. But the people from the palace sent them away.”

Akitada sat up. “From the palace?”

“Yes. Yasuhira with some of his guards. They placed me under house arrest. The police officer had wanted to carry me off to jail. Can you imagine?”

Akitada was startled by this development. Fujiwara Yasuhira was an imperial counselor and commander of one of the guard regiments. He was also the younger brother of the chancellor.

Wataru was looking at Akitada. “It looks bad, doesn't it?”

Akitada thought again of the unlucky horse and wondered why the court was meddling in the affair. “Possibly. Unless they find the real killer quickly.”

Wataru gave him a reproachful look. “But that is why I sent for you. Didn't I make it clear? I'll pay you anything—absolutely anything—to clear my name. Will you do it? I hear you are good at this sort of thing and surely you can use some gold.”

Akitada flinched at the crudeness of the offer, then reminded himself that he was in no position to refuse it.

“Here.” Wataru got up and went to a small strongbox on a low table. Picking it up with a grunt, he brought it back and plunked it on the floor between them. The box made a clinking sound. Muttering to himself, Wataru pulled a key by its string from inside his robe, and unlocked the box. He reached in and started to pile gold bars on the grass matting.

“Ten bars? Twenty? I can go as high as thirty.” He searched Akitada's face anxiously. “Maybe more.”

Akitada swallowed his injured pride. “Twenty, unless something unforeseen happens.”

Wataru smiled with relief. “Twenty-five.” He pushed the gold toward Akitada. “I rely on you completely, but you'd better be quick. They may decide to send me away before people start talking.”

Akitada put his hands into his sleeves. “Keep the gold until you are satisfied with my results.”

Wataru nodded and put the gold back, relocking the strongbox. “But you simply must succeed,” he said anxiously.

“Let us get started then. Tell me how you discovered the murder. I take it you did not spend the night with your wife?” And that was the first peculiarity of the case. Why was Kesa in her husband's bed, when customarily the husband visited his wife in her quarters?

“No. I fell asleep in my study.” Wataru avoided Akitada's eyes.

“You fell asleep here and heard nothing?” Akitada could not hide his disbelief.

“I ... I drank some wine that made me very drowsy. I didn't wake up until just before dawn. Feeling still very drowsy, I got up to go to bed.” He closed his eyes. “It was dreadful. She was ... the way you saw her.”

“It must have been dark in the room.”

“I had a candle.”

“Was the Lady Kesa accustomed to sleeping in your room?”

Wataru flushed. “Sometimes.”

“Why last night?”

Wataru jumped up. “What can it matter? She did. And she is dead. Why not start looking for her killer instead of wasting time like this?”

“It matters,” said Akitada, “because the murderer may have known she was there.”

“Oh.” Wataru subsided on his cushion and frowned. “Then he must have been watching the house.”

Akitada thought of the gravel on the verandah step. It was possible that someone had lurked outside until he was sure the occupant of the room had gone to sleep. Perhaps the gate had not been securely latched. Or perhaps someone—an accomplice among the servants?—had left it open on purpose. When all was dark, the intruder had entered the room. What happened next depended. A common thief discovered might feel forced to kill the Lady Kesa before she could cry for help. But in that case, why had he taken her head? A paid assassin, on the other hand, could have needed proof that he had carried out his assignment. A gruesome and far-fetched thought. He asked, “Did the Lady Kesa have enemies?”

“No. You saw her. Everyone loved Kesa. She was both beautiful and good.”

“You met at court?”

“Yes. She was lady-in-waiting to the empress.” Wataru said it proudly. “She had only been there for four months, and already everyone talked about her beauty. Some even thought His Majesty was enamored.” He chuckled a little. The emperor was thirteen and still getting used to the presence of

an empress in his palace. “You should have heard Kesa play the lute and sing. And when she danced ... she was so talented that His Majesty has called her back several times.” He broke off and buried his face in his hands again.

Akitada waited until Wataru had composed himself. “I take it you courted her?”

“I sent her poems. She never answered. I thought she was completely out of my reach until Her Majesty sent for me. She asked me in the kindest way what I thought of Kesa. And when I confessed that I was deeply in love, she murmured that someone had told her that the Lady Kesa was not indifferent to me.” Wataru shook his head at the memory. “Kesa agreed to be my wife the moment I offered her marriage. I thought I was the luckiest man in the world.”

An awkward silence followed his words. Wataru did not realize immediately what he had said, and then he burst into hysterics. “It's that horse, that infernal horse.” With an anguished cry, he jumped up, snatched the sword from its stand, and rushed out.

Akitada ran after him. Wataru's position would not be improved if he killed the emperor's favorite horse. A short struggle ensued. He was only able to disarm Wataru by shouting into his ear, “Do you want me to help you or not?”

And that, of course, sealed his own decision.

They returned to the study, where Akitada resumed his questioning.

“What made you think of a robber? Have your servants reported suspicious characters?”

“No. This is a very safe neighborhood.”

Wataru was not helping. “What about Lady Kesa's associates?”

“What do you mean?”

“Anyone close to her.”

“Only her mother and aunt were really close. Nobody else. We've lived quietly here since we've been married. Of course at court she had many friends and admirers. She was very popular. I could not believe my good luck.” Again he choked on the phrase.

Akitada sighed. “Perhaps I'd better speak to her maid. And then Lady Kesa's mother and aunt. Where do they live?”

Wataru gave directions and called for the maid.

Akitada cleared his throat. “Er, perhaps this is a good time for you to get dressed. No doubt there will be more visitors.”

Wataru looked down at his stained robe, paled, and departed.

The maid was a country woman, sturdy and plain-faced. After kneeling and singing out, “This insignificant one is called Osen,” she sat up and regarded Akitada expectantly.

“You know that your mistress is dead?” Akitada asked.

She nodded, accepting the fact without undue sentimentality. “They say the master did it,” she said, adding bluntly, “Cut off her head.”

“Do you believe that?”

She shook her head. “He's always been good to her.”

“Do you know why she slept in the master's room last night?”

“She did sometimes.” She grinned. “My lady enjoyed lovemaking.”

The artlessness of that pleased Akitada. “Did you serve her before she came to this house?”

“Since she was a girl. But not while she lived in the palace.”

“What do you think happened, Osen?”

The maid cocked her head and gave him a shrewd look. “She was very beautiful. Some people hate their betters.”

For a moment the phrase puzzled him. “What do you mean?”

“At court are many beautiful ladies. Perhaps some of them hated her for being better liked.”

“How do you know? Did she talk about anyone in particular?”

“Never. I knew.”

It was hardly reliable information, but Akitada thought she might well be right. “Did you help her prepare for bed last night?”

“Yes. She was sad. She had me move the candle away from the bed because she didn't want his lordship to know she'd been crying.”

“She had been crying? Why? Did anything happen?”

The maid pursed her lips. “Maybe it was something her mother did. She went to visit her yesterday.”

At that interesting moment they were interrupted. The door opened and Wataru entered and stepped aside, bowing deeply, to admit two noblemen in formal court robes. The first was middle-aged, heavy, and dressed in pale purple silk; the second, thin and elderly, wore black. Akitada knelt and bowed deeply.

Wataru told the maid in a tight voice, “Go and help Doctor Shigemori's men prepare your mistress for the funeral.”

Osen bustled out, leaving behind an uncomfortable silence. Akitada wondered what had brought the two powerful men back to Wataru's house.

The man in purple was Fujiwara Yasuhira. His companion was the young emperor's private physician, Shigemori. When Wataru rushed forward to place cushions for his guests, Akitada raised his head and asked hopefully, “May I be excused?”

Shigemori said, “No. Since you were called in and are aware of the tragedy, we wish to speak to you. You are Sugawara?”

Akitada admitted it. He became aware that Lord Fujiwara was glaring at him.

Shigemori said, “It has been decided that the death of the Lady Kesa will be handled as privately as possible. Watanabe should not have involved you. It will be best if you forget the matter and go home.”

This high-handed dismissal angered Akitada. He disliked having murders swept under the mat like so much dust. Besides, he remembered too vividly the enchanting young woman who had led the emperor's horse into the moonlit garden. He said, “May I be told the reason, sir?”

Fujiwara grunted, and Shigemori snapped, “That should be obvious. Because it is none of your business.”

Akitada said, “If I may be permitted to explain, sir. Lord Watanabe has asked me to investigate the death of his wife because he is afraid that suspicion may attach to him. If you

can assure me that you know who is responsible, I will gladly withdraw from the case."

Shocked silence. Wataru turned white and started shaking again.

Shigemori stared at Akitada, then turned to Fujiwara and whispered something. Fujiwara seemed to swell with suppressed outrage, but after a moment he nodded. Shigemori said, "You may proceed to make discreet inquiries, provided that you report your findings to me."

Relieved that he would receive no immediate punishment, Akitada bowed. "Thank you, sir." He took a breath. "In cases of murder, the background of the victim often provides a clue. Before her marriage, the Lady Kesa served as lady-in-waiting to Her Majesty. May I be permitted to speak to her former associates?"

Lord Fujiwara rose to his feet. "He is mad!"

Shigemori said quickly, "Absolutely not. Her service to Her Majesty has no bearing on the murder."

"You are quite certain that the motive does not have its roots in her life at court?" Akitada persisted.

Shigemori lost his patience. "You overstep your bounds, Sugawara. While at court, the Lady Kesa associated with no one but those permitted access to Their Majesties. Your question is impertinent."

The physician nodded stiffly to Wataru and followed Lord Fujiwara from the room. Wataru rushed after them.

Akitada thought about the encounter. The emperor's chamberlain and his personal physician had stopped a murder investigation, and the victim's body was being prepared for a

funeral. Why these unorthodox proceedings? What interest did the court have in Kesa's murder? And how could Shigemori be so certain that no one at court had reason to hate the Lady Kesa? Surely it meant the opposite: he either knew or suspected something and was afraid that Akitada would find out. It seemed unthinkable, but the idea of a paid assassin crossed Akitada's mind again.

When Wataru returned, he was mopping his brow. It occurred to Akitada to ask Wataru what his status was when heavy steps in the corridor announced the removal of the corpse. Wataru threw him a look of despair and burst into tears.

Recalling the man's obsession with a horse, Akitada hardened his heart. “The court does not want the murder investigated,” he said. “I think your visitors were speaking either for His Majesty or the chancellor. What do you intend to do?”

Wataru sniffled. “Do? What do you mean? Nothing. That's what I hired you for.”

“You mean our agreement stands? You still want me to find the killer?”

“Of course. I said so, didn't I?” Wataru wiped his blubbered face with a sleeve.

The interference of the court had raised certain ugly suspicions in Akitada's mind. He asked, “Was your wife expecting a child?”

Wataru gasped. “How can you ask? For heaven's sake, can't you see I'm nearly mad with grief? Go ask your questions elsewhere.”

* * *

Being bachelors, Wataru's friends Sato Yoshikiyo and Endo Morito lived in the Imperial Guard barracks, but only Yoshikiyo was in.

Akitada found him at breakfast, fully dressed for duty and dully staring at a bowl of rice gruel. When Akitada came in, he looked up. “I know you,” he said. “Sugawara, right? You were at Wataru's party. Or was it Kosehira's?” He frowned. “Too many parties. And too much talk. And now this.” He pushed a flask and cup toward Akitada. “Help yourself.”

Akitada refused the wine. “I take it you heard about the murder?”

Yoshikiyo groaned. “So it's true? Kesa's dead? When?”

“Last night. Her husband is under suspicion and has asked for my help. I thought you might be able to throw some light on the tragedy.”

Yoshikiyo did not seem to take in Akitada's words. “Kesa's dead,” he muttered, his eyes squeezed shut. “Amida! I can't believe it. What happened?”

“Wataru found his wife's body early this morning. Someone had decapitated her.”

“Decapitated?” Yoshikiyo's eyes popped open. “Great heaven.”

“The court has stopped the investigation. Any idea why they would do that?”

“Kesa used to serve the empress.”

“But surely that doesn't explain why they sent the emperor's personal physician to arrange for the funeral when there should be a murder investigation.”

Yoshikiyo muttered, “No. How strange!”

“Do you think the emperor wants to protect Wataru against a murder charge?”

Yoshikiyo shook his head. “Everybody knows Wataru worshipped her.”

“Tell me how they came to marry.”

“Kesa's aunt, Lady Rikuchu, made the arrangements. Wataru had seen Kesa in the palace. He took one look and started sending her love poems.” Yoshikiyo's voice broke. “Anyone would. She was the loveliest, gentlest creature I ever knew.” Abashed by this outburst, he hung his head.

There was a brief silence. Then Akitada asked, “You also courted her?”

Yoshikiyo flushed and nodded. He heaved a deep sigh. “I keep thinking that something that perfect is not really ours to keep. She was like cherry blossoms and morning mist. Like bird song. Of all of us, only Morito was untouched. He keeps his mind on his career and goes to the pleasure quarter.” The broad-shouldered Yoshikiyo smiled sadly, but his voice turned bitter. “Kesa liked Wataru. He's handsome and gentle. I'm just a big brute.”

Akitada glanced at Yoshikiyo's sword and wondered. Jealousy could make a man kill the thing he loves. Perhaps Morito would be a more objective witness. He asked about him.

“There was a call from the commandant's office for him, but he must be out. It's not like him to miss parade.” Yoshikiyo fell into a brooding silence, and Akitada took his leave.

* * *

Lady Rikuchu received him seated behind a screen in a heavily scented airless room. Only the hems and sleeves of her many-layered silk gowns peeked from underneath. A silent maid knelt nearby for propriety's sake. They had also heard of the death. Lady Rikuchu punctuated her words with deep sighs and dainty sniffs.

“Oh, the poor child! So young, so beautiful, so fortunate—to throw her life away. If only she had listened.”

Akitada said, “How so, madam? The Lady Kesa was cruelly murdered.”

A new burst of sobs. “It's all the same. She caused her own death, the headstrong girl. Great fortune was in her hands. The greatest! But she threw it away. And for what? For the man who took her life?”

“You believe that her husband is responsible?”

“Who else? Spoiled young men like that think they rule everything, even women. It wasn't enough that she sacrificed a great future for him. No, he had to take her life from her.” She broke into a soft wailing.

When the maid had managed to soothe her, Akitada tried again. “Did anything happen to make you think Wataru would hurt your niece?”

“Nothing much needs to happen to turn a jealous man into a monster. When she served in the palace, he pursued her relentlessly and wrote her the most passionate poems. He fought with other young men over her. Kesa had many admirers, you see. Not that she cared for any of them.”

“What makes you think Wataru had reason to be jealous?”

There was a loud sniff and a “Pah!” Lady Rikuchu said, “A jealous husband does not need a reason to set him off. Perhaps her silly maid talked or Kesa herself.”

“Talked about what?”

“Oh, anything. Perhaps that meeting in the market.”

“The Lady Kesa had an assignation with a man?”

“Certainly not. I was there. It happened purely by chance. We were shopping for silk, when she ran into him. They spoke briefly and she came right back.”

“Did she tell you who the man was?”

“Only that he was an old family friend she had not seen in a long time. I warned her against keeping up with unsuitable persons from her past.”

Akitada wondered if this was useful information, but he was even more curious why Lady Rikuchu had taken so against Wataru who was, by all accounts, a very eligible match. “I was told that it was you who arranged the marriage,” he said.

The silken sleeve twitched. “To my deep regret and on the urging of Her Majesty. Kesa's father, my twin brother, was a brilliant man with a great future ahead of him, but he died while serving as governor of Mutsu, leaving behind a wife and daughter. Kesa's mother wrote about their terrible hardships, and I took it upon myself to bring my poor brother's child to the capital. Kesa's mother is a provincial and has no connections, while I have lived here all my life. I managed to procure Kesa a post in the palace because my brother had once done the chancellor a favor. She was assigned as lady-in-waiting to the new empress, the chancellor's

granddaughter." Lady Rikuchu heaved a deep sigh. "Oh, the waste!"

Favors carried long-term obligations, and so a naive young girl from a distant province had found herself suddenly transported to the inner apartments of the imperial palace. It must have been a daunting experience. Akitada said, "I imagine the young lady and her mother were excited and grateful to you."

Lady Rikuchu gave a ladylike snort. "You would have thought so, but neither knew anything of the great world. Kesa used to be a scrawny little thing and hopelessly awkward when I saw her last, but she turned into a beauty. I knew I could make her a great success."

"She was fortunate in having you to guide her."

"Ah, the foolish girl!" Lady Rikuchu sighed deeply. "Besides being beautiful, she had the loveliest singing voice and could play several instruments quite well. She had many admirers. I even came to wonder if His Majesty might take an interest in her. To my delight, he did. He sent for her to sing with him. But the silly girl would not try to encourage him. His Majesty is young, only thirteen. At that age, a man is still playful. It would have been so easy, if Kesa had just ... played with him."

Akitada imagined the instructions this woman had poured into the innocent young ears and was sickened. He said sharply, "Surely it is improper to discuss the emperor's private affairs."

She gasped, the silks of her gown rustled in protest, and he knew he had offended her and must hurry before she

dismissed him. He said, “Let us talk about Lady Kesa's marriage. You eventually arranged that. Why? And what of her mother? What was her role in all of this? Did she approve? What were her views on her daughter's future?”

Lady Rikuchu made an impatient sound. “Ah, the ingratitude! If Kesa had not pleaded so and if Her Majesty had not encouraged it, the marriage would not have taken place.” She sniffed. “And if I had known what would come of it, I wouldn't have troubled.”

So Kesa herself had chosen Wataru, possibly also to escape the palace intrigues and to obey the wishes of the empress. “But surely Kesa's mother could see the advantage of such a match. Wataru is wealthy and with the emperor's favor he has a great career ahead of him.”

“Of course. Anyone else would have been overjoyed. After my brother's death, they were in desperate circumstances. My sister-in-law wanted to marry Kesa off to a common soldier. I could not let this happen to my brother's only child when her fortune might be made.”

Like a steady, dull drumbeat, the word “fortune” had punctuated every person's view of the situation. The fortunate Wataru had won the hand of the equally fortunate Lady Kesa. The Lady Kesa had, by all reports, rejected an even greater fortune—the emperor's favor—in order to marry Wataru. Wataru, not content with his good fortune, had pursued an ill-omened horse. Akitada shook his head. It seemed that both young people had brought the tragedy down upon their innocent heads by willful choices.

A sigh came from behind the screen. Lady Rikuchu said, “Everyone said it was the perfect match. He seemed devoted and Kesa was happy! I was almost consoled for my disappointment.”

The disappointment, of course, was that Kesa had not become an imperial concubine. Akitada thought that the empress and her family had seen to it that the all-too-popular Kesa was removed from His Majesty's presence. And Kesa's continued relationship with the young emperor, whatever it had been, must account for the court's covering up of her murder. But what exactly were they afraid of?

If Kesa captured the young monarch's interest and perhaps conceived an imperial heir, it might make her a threat to the childless empress. And what of Wataru? And that disappointed lover Yoshikiyo? Too many possibilities.

And none explained the missing head.

Akitada wished he could see Lady Rikuchu. Expressions, gestures, body movements showed if a person was lying. He suspected that the lady said only what suited her and suppressed the rest. He asked, “Perhaps, since you were close, Lady Kesa confided in you. Was your niece expecting a child?”

A brief rustling and an indrawn breath was all he got for his effort. Then Lady Rikuchu said primly, “I do not consider it proper to discuss such private matters. You will have to ask others.”

And so she had her small revenge. Well, Akitada would see Kesa's mother next. And he would try to find out why Kesa had wept the night before.

* * *

When he returned home for his midday rice, a noticeably meager meal these days, he found a letter from the Ministry of Justice. Hoping that he was being recalled to his old position, he opened it with eager fingers. But the letter instead announced an assignment to a judgeship in a distant province. He was to report at the ministry immediately and prepare to leave the following day to take up his new duties.

The news ruined what little appetite he had had for his meal. He could refuse the assignment, which paid enough to support his family, but that would mean losing all chance at future work. On the other hand, if he accepted, he would lose Wataru's fee and any possibility of finding Kesa's murderer.

The timing of the letter seemed suspicious. Had an order come down from the chancellor himself to remove Akitada? The chancellor was the empress's grandfather and the great uncle of the young emperor. Defying such a man was professional suicide. Akitada considered the state of his finances and decided it might well be suicide, period.

On the other hand, he had a duty to the dead young woman. Perhaps Wataru had not deserved his good fortune, but most certainly Kesa had not deserved her death. Akitada's nature rebelled against the injustice of it. There was only one option: he must try to solve the case in the next few hours and report at the ministry afterwards.

* * *

Lady Koromogawa, widow of the late governor of Mutsu province, had sought refuge in a temple outside the capital. Apparently she lived there piously as a lay-nun.

Directed to a small wooden house, Akitada climbed the steps to the verandah and looked in. Nobody had announced him, and no maid watched over the proprieties. No silken screens hid the pudgy, middle-aged figure in plain nun's clothing from his view. She was alone, kneeling on a mat, thick fingers clutching her beads and eyes squeezed shut in a face glistening with tears as prayers fell from her lips like long drawn-out moans.

Feeling a surge of pity, Akitada cleared his throat. “Lady Koromogawa? May I talk to you?”

At first he thought she had not heard him, but then her eyes opened and stared at him. He looked in vain for the ethereal beauty of the dead girl in the mother's sagging features. Lady Koromogawa resembled an ordinary tradesman's wife.

“My name is Sugawara,” he said. “I am a friend of your daughter's husband and came to pay my condolences.”

She hissed and turned her face away.

Puzzled by this reaction, he decided to remain outside. “Your son-in-law has asked me to find your daughter's killer,” he explained. “Will you help me?”

Her head swiveled back. “What killer? Kesa killed herself.”

“No. Who told you that?”

“Nobody. I thought...” The swollen eyes widened. “Murder? She was murdered?”

“Yes. Apparently someone entered the bedroom where she slept.”

“How? Did her husband do it?”

There was no point in varnishing the facts. It would get him nowhere and just confuse her more. “No. The killer came from outside, cut off her head, probably with a sword, and took it away with him.”

She gasped and covered her mouth. The news had been a shock, but he saw her expression change to something more furtive, almost speculative. Akitada reconsidered his empathy for Kesa's mother. “What made you think she would take her own life?” he asked.

“Kesa was very strong willed.”

Yes, her aunt had said as much, but it was a strange answer to his question. Kesa had refused an emperor's advances and insisted on marrying Wataru. But she had been happy, so why would her mother assume she was suicidal? “Your daughter's maid said that she wept after her visit here yesterday. Can you tell me why?”

She shuddered. Again he saw the evasion in her eyes and something new: fear. “Nothing happened,” she said. “That maid is a fool.”

It was a stupid lie. She could have thought of some harmless explanation. It convinced Akitada that something had happened and that Lady Koromogawa had believed it had caused her daughter to kill herself. Only there had been murder instead.

Footsteps crunched in the gravel. She looked past him, her face relaxing with relief. “Ah, here comes my spiritual counselor,” she said with a little gasp. “Thank you for taking the trouble to bring me the sad news about my daughter.”

Akitada turned and saw a monk approaching. He bowed and retreated. The monk was elderly and gave him a curious look as they passed. Akitada nodded to him and got on his horse. As soon as he was out of sight of the house, he dismounted and returned on foot. The lady had kept her secret from him, but he thought she would pour out her fears to her “spiritual counselor.”

As he approached the back of the house, he heard raised voices. Kesa's mother wailed something indistinguishable, and the monk's deeper, calmer speech cut in quickly and firmly. Both speakers lowered their voices. Akitada looked at the space under the house and sighed. He had no choice and very little time. Getting on his hands and knees, he crawled in. It was dark, and the dank air smelled of dead and rotting things. He had to keep his head down under the heavy beams, his hands touched unidentifiable matter, cobwebs brushed against his face, something crawled down his neck, and somewhere small creatures scurried away. But when he reached the section under the main room of the house, he found that he could hear quite well.

Kesa's mother was speaking rapidly, anxiously. “How could I know?” she pleaded. “I never thought it would come to this. He begged for just one short meeting to change her mind. Reverence, I owed him that much. I told Kesa so. I told her she had broken her word and brought shame on me.” She sobbed once and burst into another wail. “It's all that high-born slut's fault. She should burn in hell for what she's done.”

The priest's voice was firm. “The things of this world are like dust which the wind blows here and there. It was no one's fault. It was the will of heaven.”

“Oh, if only I had your faith,” she whimpered. “What will happen to them now? What will the empress do?”

Akitada was distracted by the sudden appearance of two small red gleams in the darkness. They seemed to hover, then grow larger. Something was coming towards him. He jerked away and lashed out at it with his arm. The creature, whatever it was, was furry and exploded into an unearthly screeching before it fled.

Above, the voices ceased abruptly. The monk asked, “What was that? Something under the house? I'll take a look.”

Steps descended the stairs. Akitada muttered a curse and crawled back.

Lady Koromogawa must have followed her visitor. She called out, “It was only my cat. There she is.”

Heaving a sigh of relief, Akitada waited until the monk had departed and then left also. He was excited by these new revelations. So there was another man involved. It gave Wataru a motive, but Akitada no longer believed him guilty. He wanted to know about the mysterious stranger who had obtained an interview with Kesa on her mother's urging. If he was the same man who had approached Kesa in the market, he was from Mutsu province and not connected with her life at court. Perhaps the court had over reacted, fearing a connection where there was none.

His ruined clothing meant he had to go home to change. He was afraid of finding another communication from the ministry, one that could not be ignored or postponed. This did not turn out to be the case, but other problems seemed to have multiplied like flies on carrion. Distracted by the noisy and massive collapse of the stable roof, nobody had checked the main house. Now Akitada's wife Tamako and her little maid were running about with wet gowns, robes and bedding in their arms. On every stand and railing pieces of clothing were drying so they would not become mildewed and permanently ruined. Tamako was groaning over Akitada's best robe, now marred by new large splotches of wetness.

“Never mind,” he said, trying to console her. “I needed a new one anyway.”

Her eyes widened when she saw his dirty clothes. “You'd better see Seimei,” she told him with unusual bitterness. “I gather we won't be buying luxuries for a long time. Something about a flood at the farm ruining the crop.”

With a sinking heart, Akitada went to face the new financial catastrophe and heard her call after him, “The cook is leaving after tomorrow. She has another place and wants her wages.”

After a painful interview with old Seimei, a lifelong family retainer and substitute father to Akitada, the future looked, if possible, more hopeless than he had feared. They had never had enough income from their farm to live without Akitada's salary as an official in the Ministry of Justice, but it had helped. Akitada knew that he must solve Kesa's murder and

earn the gold promised by Wataru, and he must do so today or face the wrath of the chancellor himself.

As he changed into his last decent robe, he thought about the case. He had talked with everyone close to Kesa and her husband except Endo Morito. Morito would know about Yoshikiyo. They had both served up north. Yoshikiyo could have met Kesa and her family in Mutsu. Kesa's aunt had mentioned that Kesa had almost married a common soldier. Yoshikiyo was no common soldier, but Lady Rikuchu was likely to bend the truth to suit herself. It all fit. Yoshikiyo, who had admitted to being deeply in love with her, had met Kesa in the market and later at her mother's house. Lady Koromogawa had forced her married daughter to meet the man she had been betrothed to. That was why she had spoken of a broken promise and why she had feared Kesa had committed suicide. If Yoshikiyo had insisted that she honor her commitment, Kesa would have been deeply distraught, and that would explain her tears after her return from her mother's house.

Akitada was very pleased with his progress. All that remained was to get Morito to confirm the relationship.

As he walked to guard headquarters in the Greater Palace, he noted a change in the weather. The air had become hot and oppressive, and black clouds were gathering above Mount Hiei. Towards the west the sky was still bright, and the slanting sunlight cast a strange sulphurous hue over the western hills. The day was drawing to a close, but he only needed this last piece of information to find Kesa's killer.

Less than a week ago he had walked along this same street to meet the beautiful young woman for the first and last time. He was not superstitious, but he had always been intensely aware of the demands of the dead. Now he wondered if her restless ghost had haunted him into action all along.

At guard headquarters, Akitada asked for Morito and was told that he had just missed his second roll call, and that his captain was furious. With a sinking heart, Akitada sought out the harassed looking officer.

“Endo Morito?” barked the captain, turning red with anger all over again. “That slippery bastard? He can go back where he came from as far as I'm concerned. Never liked him in the first place, regardless of his reputation. Discipline is what is needed here, not swordplay. Reliability and promptness, not claims of past heroics. Otherwise there's chaos. Yes, I'll see to it he goes back to the front where he belongs. Let him fight the barbarians. Bah!”

The tirade relieved enough pent-up frustration for him to give Akitada a second look. “Aren't you the fellow who solves crimes? Sugawara? How about that Watanabe murder, eh? You heard about that, have you? Terrible thing. Watanabe's one of ours. Good fellow. Not much use with a sword, but a fine horseman. Won the Kamo race. We had a little party for him afterwards. That bastard Endo made a scene, calling him a cheat. Claimed he cut him off on the turn. Hmph. Could've been fatal for Watanabe if he'd challenged Endo.” The captain shook his head at the memory.

“But where is Endo now?” Akitada asked, thoroughly nervous by now. “I was going to have a word with him.”

The captain cocked his head. “About the murder? You're on the case, are you? Excellent. Got to keep myself informed. Exchange of information suit you? I tell you about Endo and you tell me what you know.” He led the way to the barracks.

The captain's style of shooting rapid short comments and questions at the other person reminded Akitada of archery drill. The man engaged in rapid fire until his quiver was empty.

His office was bare except for a stand for his sword, hooks holding his bow and quiver, a few shelves with company documents in tightly rolled scrolls with wooden tags, and a rather large pitcher of wine on a footed tray.

They sat down and Akitada accepted a cup of wine. The captain poured for himself, drank, smacked his lips, and said, “You go first.”

There was much to be said for the spare military style of communication. It got to the bones of the matter quickly. Akitada thought it best not to mention his suspicions about Yoshikiyo and said, “I am told Endo was one of Watanabe's friends. He might throw some light on the motive for the murder. Is Endo in the habit of taking unauthorized leave?”

The captain refilled his own cup since Akitada's was still full. “Certainly not. He'd not have lasted this long. I keep a close eye on my men. He's a strange fish, though. Moody. Don't know what Watanabe saw in him. Endo has a sharp tongue. Nobody liked him much. Good on a horse and with the sword. Fine shot, too, I'll give him that.”

Morito's continued and uncharacteristic absence troubled Akitada; apart from being extremely inconvenient, it did not fit his theory. He suddenly wondered about the quarrel and asked, “Could he have carried his resentment over losing the race to the extreme of taking revenge?”

The captain pursed his lips, then scratched his mustache. “Wouldn't have thought he'd sneak into a man's house to kill his wife,” he said dubiously. “Now if it had been Watanabe it would be different. Endo thinks nothing of taking another man's life.”

“How long has he been here?”

“Even a short time is too long. I could tell he was trouble from the start. He sneered at our regulations and drills. Actually he came before the first snow. The gods-absent month it was. Endo and Sato came together. Transfers from Mutsu.”

So Yoshikiyo and Morito had arrived together and recently. And, like the Lady Kesa and her mother, they had come from Mutsu province. Finding Morito suddenly became imperative.

“Do you have any idea where he might be? Did he have any friends besides Sato and Watanabe?”

“I pay no attention to what my men do in their time off. None of my business, unless there's trouble. With Endo there wasn't until the race. Now it's my turn. What exactly happened?”

Akitada gave him the bare outline of events, without reference to the interest the palace was taking in the case, and then took his leave. He decided that he might as well start his search for Morito with his client.

For Wataru, reality had finally settled in. No more distracted moods, hysterical laughter, or bursts of tears. He was in his room writing letters and greeted Akitada soberly.

“Well, have you discovered anything?” he asked. “I don't think there is much time. They've been back to warn me against you. I could tell they've decided to be rid of me. Exile. It's just a matter of days, hours—I don't know—before they'll come to fetch me.”

Akitada reported. Wataru listened quietly and without protest to Akitada's theories about the young emperor's involvement, or Kesa's meetings with the stranger.

“Do you think the man was her killer?” he asked.

“I don't know yet. Your mother-in-law knows who he is but denies that the meeting took place.”

Watanabe scowled. “Then she must be made to talk.”

“Perhaps, but I'd like to speak to Morito first. He seems to have disappeared. You were friends before the quarrel. What do you know about him?”

“Morito gets into moods, but he wouldn't ... well, he wouldn't kill Kesa.” Wataru made a helpless gesture with his hand. “He thinks I cheated in the race, cut across and made his horse stumble. I didn't. We were at university together. After he left for military service up north, he changed. Now he drinks too much and chases whores. If he hasn't reported to the guards, he's probably lying drunk in some back room in the pleasure quarter. He's ruining his life. Though hardly as completely as mine has been.” He heaved a deep sigh and reached for a large lacquer box on his desk. “The maid found this under her bedding.”

Akitada lifted the lid and saw a thick glossy twist of hair. It was tied with a white silk ribbon just below the ragged cut. “This is Kesa's?” he asked, startled.

Wataru nodded. “What can it mean? Why would he cut off her hair?”

Akitada lifted out the heavy twist. It must be almost all of Kesa's long, silken hair. He looked for traces of blood but found none. “It was under her bedding? Perhaps she cut it herself and put it there.”

Wataru closed his eyes. “But why?” he groaned. “It is what a woman does when she renounces the world. When she plans to become a nun. It doesn't make sense.”

Akitada did not argue. He was as puzzled as Wataru. “Perhaps it will be explained when we find out what happened,” he said, replacing the hair in the box and closing it. “If you want me to pursue the case, I'll look for Morito.”

Wataru nodded. Then, surprisingly, he said, “I think you're taking a great personal risk in this. I won't have you destroy your career. If you want to drop it, I will pay you anyway.”

A generous gesture, but Akitada was committed—to Kesa, if no one else.

* * *

By the time Akitada reached the pleasure quarter, threatening dark clouds were spreading across the capital. Already a light wind rustled in the trees. The colored lanterns bobbed at the doors of the houses of assignation as customers hurried to their pleasures. Akitada did not look forward to peering into every room to locate the missing Morito among the entwined bodies.

As it turned out, he did not have to. Morito was well known in the quarter, and Akitada was directed to a wine house called, inappropriately, “Long Life-Great Happiness.” The unkempt hovel had an odor of sewage about it and was staffed by some of the dirtiest and ugliest women Akitada had ever seen. He was astonished that a man like Morito, of good birth and an officer in the imperial guard, patronized the place.

He was not there, but a very young prostitute, short and badly pockmarked, told Akitada that he had spent the night before the murder with her, and that she had seen him enter the Western temple only this morning.

That was strange, since Morito had been on duty. Something made Akitada ask, “Was he in uniform?”

She shook her head. “He had on some old black and white cotton thing. I thought I'd made a mistake, but it was him all right. You can't miss a man like that.”

Akitada had her repeat what she had seen. Morito had been too far away for her to make out details, but she was sure it had been him. He was tall and sun darkened from years of military service and carried himself with a sort of swagger that neither courtiers nor townspeople could imitate. Akitada dropped a few copper coins into her hand, and hurried to the Western temple, his mind in turmoil.

A temple was probably the last place where he would expect Morito to go, but here he was wrong. He found a monk who remembered Morito because he had been missing a sleeve from his robe, seemed distraught as he prayed, and had asked directions to Narutaki rapids when he left.

Akitada's heart plunged. Narutaki rapids in the western mountains was a picturesque waterfall where people went to commit suicide.

* * *

The journey to the falls would not take long by horse, but the storm was about to break. Akitada's situation was too desperate to allow postponement, and while his trip might well be futile, he hoped to be in time. He rushed home to saddle his horse and then took the road into the mountains.

He was riding into the sunset. Above him black clouds roiled, behind him lightning stabbed through coal-black murk, but ahead the mountaintops burned like a huge conflagration in the rays of the sinking sun. Dust whirled up like angry ghosts from the dirt road and his horse twitched its ears nervously at each clap of distant thunder.

With the wind at his back, he made good time and soon entered the narrow mountain valley where the road began the climb to the top of Narutaki rapids. Here was semidarkness, and the air was saturated with the rich scent of pines. The waters of the falls thundered from a great craggy height into a churning pool far below, raising ghostly mists of water vapor and drowning out all sound. He reached the top and dismounted as the first large drops began to fall. Beside the abyss stood a small stone Buddha, and there he found Morito's sword, his sandals, and a bundle of black and white cotton clothing. Akitada undid the bundle and saw that the jacket was missing one of its full sleeves. Small dark spots marred some of the white areas. Blood.

Too late! Akitada's effort had been wasted. He stared hopelessly down into the boiling pool below. It had swallowed Kesa's killer and with him any chance to avert the misfortune which threatened both Wataru and Akitada. All because of an unlucky horse.

The rain fell steadily now. With a sigh Akitada took the narrow road to a nearby shrine and temple to seek shelter and report the suicide.

The abbot was an old man who sat in his dark room, staring at him from unblinking eyes like an ancient statue. Outside the thunder rumbled and small gusts of wind came through the chinks of the shutters to stir the candle flame. The abbot seemed disinclined to discuss the matter. Akitada's frustration caused him to pour out the story of Kesa's murder, of Wataru's imminent exile, and of his conviction that Morito had committed the crime and then killed himself. The abbot listened without comment. When Akitada was done, he sighed and sent one of his acolytes for “Mongaku.”

Akitada thought bitterly that he was being passed on to another temple functionary, but the young monk who entered, at the very moment when the bluish brilliance of lightning lit up every detail of his figure, brought Akitada to his feet with a cry.

For a moment he thought he faced a ghost. The change in Morito was complete and shocking. With his head shaven and wearing a rough monk's robe, he shuffled in slowly, looking like a dead man, or at least like someone suffering a dreadful illness. Ugly bruises marked his face and head. His mouth was

twisted in pain, and in the uncertain light of the candle his eyes glittered wildly.

He recognized Akitada, groaned, and turned to the abbot. “So soon?”

The old monk nodded. “The time has come, Mongaku. May your faith see you through.”

Akitada could only stare. However he had expected his search to end, it was not this way. Out of the jumble of thoughts and surmises, of the words of those who had known Kesa and Morito intimately, the truth had crystallized. Their shared background in Mutsu, Kesa's prior betrothal, Morito's erratic behavior over the past weeks and his hostility toward Wataru, the threads left on the verandah and gate, and the prostitute's description of Morito's clothing, had all come together. Not Yoshikiyo, but Morito had murdered Kesa.

Another flash of lightning and the deafening sound of thunder. Rain roared on the roof above, but here no one spoke for a long time. Morito seemed to suffer from a continuous tremor which made him twitch and jerk as if he were possessed by some evil spirit.

Akitada's voice sounded harsh in the dreadful waiting silence. “Why did you take her head?”

Shockingly, Morito laughed, as hollow and ugly a sound as Akitada had ever heard. “What does it matter? Perhaps I could not bear to part with it. She was finally mine forever.” In another flash of lightning, his face contorted into a demonic mask. “No. Because looking at it made me know myself for the monster I am.”

Thunder rolled and crashed overhead, and Morito fell silent. Another fit of trembling shook his body.

"It must be returned," said Akitada in his sternest tone, when the noise abated. "And you must confess to the crime. Do not imagine that you can hide your deed behind the robe of saintliness while your friend suffers for your crime."

The other man pulled himself together, clenching his hands to control the tremors. For a moment the old Morito was back as he sneered. "My penance will last until my death. Of course, you legal experts don't like to waste time, so you may wish to shorten it to a few days. My life is quite at your disposal."

The abbot sighed and looked down at the rosary between his gnarled fingers.

Angered that Morito should have sought faith and sanctuary here to release him from his guilt, Akitada snapped, "You killed Kesa because you could not have her—because she had chosen Wataru over you and refused to leave him. And you hated Wataru for winning the Kamo race, for always being the lucky one, no matter how hard you tried to outstrip him."

Morito burst into another hollow laugh. "Wrong. Kesa agreed to be mine. We were betrothed long before she came to this cursed place. I went to her house to kill Wataru."

"To kill Wataru?"

Morito controlled another fit of shaking. "I met Kesa at her mother's house. She promised to help me. She would drug his wine, and when he was asleep, she would unlock the garden gate and light a candle at the door to his room."

The thunderbolt which lit up the room and shook the ancient timbers was less staggering than Morito's confession. Akitada sucked in his breath. It finally all made sense. Wataru dozing off in his study, the hair, the candle wax near the verandah, the latched gate. “Dear heaven!” he muttered. “She tricked you by taking her husband's place. She cut off her long hair to fool you into thinking she was Wataru.”

Morito groaned. “It was dark. All I saw was a shadowy figure under the netting. A head on a wooden headrest. I struck, aiming at the neck.”

The abbot sighed again and shook his head.

Staring at Morito in horror, Akitada asked, “And then?”

“I got the candle and looked.” Morito drew a shuddering breath. “I could not leave her head, so I tore off my sleeve and wrapped it in it. I don't remember much after that.”

Akitada's blood boiled. “Kesa sacrificed herself to save her husband,” he shouted over another peal of thunder, “because you hounded her with your demands, you and her mother. And you told her that you would kill Wataru. In her despair she decided that she could only end your mad lust and save her husband's life by dying herself. Dear heaven! How can you go on living?”

The abbot answered for Morito. “He jumped into the rapids to die, but Buddha had another purpose for him.”

Akitada turned on him. “Yes,” he snapped, “to stand public trial for the murder of Kesa Gozen.”

* * *

But that was not to be. When Akitada returned to the capital to report to Wataru, he found him in the company of

Fujiwara and Abe. They had come to send Wataru into exile for murdering Kesa, but after they listened to Akitada's report of what had really happened that night, they looked at each other and left. Wataru wept and paid Akitada the agreed fee.

The following day Akitada reported to his ministry. He found to his relief that the chancellor had changed his mind about sending him away and that he was to return to his old post in the ministry instead. He had again a career and a comfortable income. That afternoon, as he was supervising the carpenters rebuilding the stable, he received a messenger from the palace. A letter from the chancellor's office advised him that, in the interest of guarding the privacy of the palace and to prevent bringing public dishonor to the imperial guard, the monk Mongaku had agreed to leave the capital and serve his faith by tending to the poor in a distant province.

Akitada showed the letter to Seimei with some harsh words of disapproval. Seimei, grown old and wise in his service, murmured, “Too much good fortune attracts demons. Let us be grateful the roof leaks.”

Author's note: Those familiar with Japanese literature will have recognized the story of Kesa Gozen. It appears in the twelfth century Heike Monogatari, though the incident may have an even older Chinese source in a Han morality tale. The story of the wife's self-sacrifice has been retold many times and in many languages, though never, to my knowledge, as a detective story.

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Conversation with I. J. Parker

I. J. Parker has been publishing her sleuth Akitada Sugawara mysteries with *AHMM* since October 1997. Set in Japan during the late Heian period of the 11th century, her first novel in this series, *Rashomon Gate*, has Akitada looking into a case of blackmail at the Imperial University, which turns into an investigation of murder and conspiracy involving high-ranking nobles. It is now just out in paperback from St. Martin's. Her second novel in the series, *The Hell Screen* is due out this September. Born and raised in Germany, I. J. Parker is a former university professor of German and English literature.

AHMM: Tell us a little about *The Hell Screen*.

IJP: *The Hell Screen* is my second published novel, but the fourth in the Akitada series. I think of it as the first where I truly hit my stride, and I'm currently on number seven. My plots are complex, and so my sympathies are with reviewers and writers of blurbs who have to summarize my books. *Hell Screen* contains three separate cases, each of which has a personal impact on the protagonist. The hell screen plot (the idea of the eccentric artist came from Akutagawa's short story “The Hell

Screen") involves serial crime with more than a touch of madness, while the murder of the woman in the mountain temple is straightforward mystery, and the disappearance of the imperial treasures is a puzzle. In addition, there's a good deal of character development in this novel as Akitada deals with a dying, hate-filled mother, two sisters with their own problems, and the abduction and possible murder of his little son.

AHMM: What draws you to the Heian period of Japan?

IJP: I discovered the literature first and developed an admiration for the sophistication of this society. The Japanese of the 11th century were culturally well in advance of Western Europe. For me, there is enormous appeal in settings that are both historical and exotic, and the Heian period is very rich in all that is beautiful and strange, mysterious and very human. In addition, contemporary source material for upper-class life is excellent, and while it is very early in history, it is possible to imagine the lives of the people based on various historical and literary sources. It was

also the last time in Japan when government and life were reasonably stable and peaceful. In the 11th century things began to break apart; I find that transitional stage enormously interesting from a historical and human perspective.

AHMM: How do you research the daily life of this period?

IJP: The lives of the nobility are well documented. Everything else must be pieced together by reading between the lines of contemporary chronicles, checking later sources, and even consulting Chinese materials (since the Heian culture was based on that of China). We know about the architecture, the layout of cities, the road system, how the government worked, how religion was practiced, what people believed, ate, wore, and thought about. But we know little about the common people's lives. Such scenes must be recreated through commonsense assumptions and imagination. I add a brief historical note to the novels where I explain customs and account for possible anachronisms. Occasionally Japanese literary sources suggest

plot ideas, as for example in Hell Screen and in the story in this issue.

AHMM: In your research for The Hell Screen, what interesting aspects of life during 11th century Japan did you discover?

IJP: The customs relating to death and dying and the many taboos connected with them are prominent in Hell Screen. Shinto forbids contamination with death (or for that matter, birth), and so people avoided each other a good deal and turned to Buddhism when the end approached. I also found that I needed characters who were entertainers, and since Noh theater is a later development, I had to dig for its antecedents. Fortunately I discovered proof of the existence of acrobats and professional actors when I had not expected to find anything. (The noble ladies who produced most of the literature of the time did not attend such low-class entertainment, and their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons rarely wrote about anything other than their work.)

AHMM: How does the experience of writing a short story differ, for you, from writing a novel?

IJP: Short stories are harder. I learned that not only from the length restriction, but also from my critics in a local writers' group. They invariably offer criticism requiring rewrites of stories, but usually pass novel chapters with encouraging remarks. Since I write stories of detection (rather than crime), I cannot cut the plot much. That means I have to be incredibly selective when working with character, setting, and atmosphere. The current demand for a style heavy in dialogue and light on exposition additionally handicaps the short story writer. Then, since the reader consumes the story at a single sitting, he or she is aware of all its parts and they must all work together smoothly. In a novel, you have time to develop theme and character, and readers are willing to let the author take care of loose ends eventually. I should add that there is a close relationship between my stories and the novels. Not only are the stories a part of Akitada's life, but stories sometimes turn into novels. *The Hell Screen* started as a short story, and "The O-

Bon Cat" (*AHMM* February 2003) has become part of my current novel.

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A Murder Made in India by Susan Oleksiw

Anita Ray lifted the camera and studied the back, trying to read through the window the tiny print that indicated the number of shots on the roll of film, a minor point of information she should not have forgotten between yesterday, when she slid the roll into the camera, and this morning. But the truth was that yesterday afternoon, standing atop the Rockland Hotel, with palm leaves brushing against the upper floor and the sun setting over the ocean, with music playing softly in one of the rooms below, she was charmed to the point of foolishness. The culprit was one Amit Chaudhry, the owner of the hotel on Kovalam Beach, near Trivandrum, on the southwestern coast of India.

"Many rocks, Missi, many rocks." The man carrying a load of rocks on his head scurried by, taking just enough room to avoid knocking the entire array to the dusty ground. His bare feet padded along the dirt road, made soft and silky by a thousand bearers scooting by over the years, until he reached the compound wall at the end and halted abruptly, jolting the pile on his head to tip forward and fall crashing to the ground below. Apparently this was his intent because he pulled away and shook himself, then headed back down the lane the way he had come. Anita barely gave him a glance as she set her sights on the hotel opposite. The Rockland Hotel, just an ordinary two story hotel with a flat roof, sitting higher up on the ocean cliff, looked inordinately lovely, it seemed to her. There was no sign of Amit Chaudhry in the lobby or on the

veranda; she imagined him charming one of his guests, and, surprisingly, it didn't make her jealous. Such was the force of his charm.

“Anita!” An older woman called from a window from Hotel Delite, sitting opposite the Rockland in the narrow lane. “What are you doing this morning, Anita?” The woman glanced down at Anita, her camera grasped in front of her chest. “Anita, Anita,” she said with obvious disapproval. Anita ignored her. She was used to her relatives’ fear that the oldest child of the oldest daughter, now in her forties, was an undisguised failure—a woman who wandered around the world with a camera and no apparent career. It shamed them. “The office could do with your help.”

A bearer came scurrying by with another load of rocks and Anita stepped aside.

“I'm off to town, to the photo shop.”

With another groan of disapproval, Anita's aunt withdrew and closed the window.

* * *

Four hours later, Anita's autorickshaw driver pulled over to the side as a policeman waved him to a halt. Ahead, at the mouth of the lane to Hotel Delite, stood two police cars and a constable waving back a crowd of onlookers. Anita climbed out and made her way to the lane. The constable let her pass when she explained that she was staying at one of the hotels.

Two police officers in mufti passed her in the lane, giving her a practiced look before climbing into their cars. Anita hurried on to Hotel Delite.

“What happened?” Anita asked her aunt Meena in the lobby.

“A foolish maidservant threw herself off the parapet. A love triangle, surely,” she said.

“Why do you say that?”

“What else could have happened?”

“Lots of things. She could have jumped, yes; she could have fallen; and she could have been pushed.”

“Anita! The things you say.” Meena glanced around to see who might be listening. “Don't speak so!” She disappeared into her office, leaving Anita alone in the lobby, which was little more than the large living room of an Indian house converted to a hotel.

“Your aunt is very busy now,” the desk clerk said. “She is preparing for the visit by the bank manager, Mr. Venkat; it is not easy this, making the building improvements.”

“I forgot about those.”

“She cannot forget for an instant. Another floor and another wing! We shall be the largest hotel on this lane. Kovalam Beach is growing, Memsahib. And we are growing with it.” He went off, smug and excited.

* * *

Anita made her way down to the end of the lane, where a constable was stationed at the wall. He kept his eye on her but did not shoo her away as long as she didn't try to climb over the wall.

“Do you know what happened?” she asked the constable.

“A body has been found. There.” He nodded to the ground below. The houses along the lane were built on ledge and fill,

and the ground fell away precipitously at the end of the lane; a wall had been built there, and fill, in the form of dirt and rocks, was being tossed over the wall in anticipation of new construction.

"How was it found? Did it look like she was killed by falling rocks?"

"It is possible; there are rocks scattered across her chest."

"How was she lying?"

"On her back."

"Did anyone identify her?"

The constable studied Anita, then waggled his head from side to side, his eyes drifting shut, in a way of saying, yes, it is known.

"So who is she?"

"A maidservant. She is working for Rockland Hotel."

* * *

The Hotel Delite served wonderful lunches and was the most popular restaurant for foreigners staying at other nearby hotels—Aunt Meena knew how to set a good table—but Anita Ray, the daughter of a Hindu mother and Irish-American father, knew she'd learn more from the servants than the other guests. She slipped into the kitchen when her aunt wasn't watching and fixed herself a thali with rice and vegetables and condiments. The Brahman cook watched her out of the corner of his eye, then returned to his pans, where a delicate fish curry was simmering; it would be perfect—a pleasing blend of spices delicately cooked—and all without his tasting a single morsel. He was, after all, a born vegetarian.

After a few minutes of silence, Anita said, “Odd about that girl, isn't it?”

“She has killed herself. It happens.”

“What was she like? Did you know her?”

He turned a disdainful face to her. “Why would I know someone like that?”

“I just thought maybe you ran into her in the lane, or heard some of the gossip.” She knew Brahman cooks had nothing but contempt for most of the other servants, and he was unlikely to pass along anything important in his view, but it might be important to her, Anita.

“She is only a maidservant with a pleasing face.”

“Where is she from?”

“I am not inquiring, Memsahib,” he said. “But I tell you she is not seeking work at any other hotel. Only Rockland Hotel.”

“So she got work at the first place she tried? That is interesting.”

* * *

Early afternoon was a good time to poke around and ask questions because most people were at home resting or napping in the heat of the day. With that in mind, Anita crossed the lane to the Rockland Hotel. She hoped Amit was around, but if not she could check out the hotel on her own. She had met him several weeks ago and was amazed that he was so relaxed and easygoing; he went out of his way to charm the guests, telling them jokes and inquiring after their needs—not at all like most of the hotel owners around here, who acted like every other person was pilfering the towels and cutlery.

The Rockland Hotel had a good view of the ocean over surrounding buildings. Its roof poked up high above the palm trees and was dotted with tables and chairs and chaise lounges, the perfect venue for late-night suppers and romantic rendezvous. Aunt Meena might scoff at the idea, but foreigners liked that sort of thing and they flocked to Amit's evening suppers. These were inexpensive but limited to a small number because of the size of the roof, and invariably they had the feel of a private party.

Since no one was in the lobby, Anita climbed the stairs to the roof, walking straight to the parapet. Everything was as she remembered it from earlier in the week when she had spent an enjoyable evening with Amit—the tables and chairs scattered about—but it had that shabby feeling of the day after a party. She walked along the parapet to the corner where she suspected the maidservant had gone over—if she had indeed plunged from the roof—and looked down. If the woman had pitched herself over, or had been thrown or had fallen, she would indeed have landed on top of the near edge of the rock pile. The work of the laborers later in the morning would have sent a few rocks tumbling over her body. The area where the woman had been found was not one anyone would walk through; it was separated from the path along the cliff by a low stone wall.

“You are wanting something, Memsahib?” A quiet voice broke her reverie. Anita turned around.

“Ah, Mani.”

A young man dressed as a waiter hovered a few feet away. “You are wanting something?”

"I was just looking down on where that woman was found this morning. Did you know her?"

He waggled his head yes.

"What was her name?"

"Asmita Panja Amma."

"How did she come to this place?"

"She is working here."

"I have not seen her around before; is she new?"

"No, but she is not seen much at her duties."

"Lazy, eh?"

His eyes slid closed and Anita got the impression that Mani didn't approve of the woman.

When Anita first met Amit she had at first thought him nothing more than a charmer, but after a while he seemed sincere. When he began paying her even more attention, inviting her to dine and paying her court, as her father would say, she thought he might be trying to influence her to persuade Aunt Meena to scale back her building plans, but he insisted that he felt no concern over Meena's plans to enlarge Hotel Delite. It would have no impact on him whatsoever. He was going to stay put even if Meena's expansion cut off every view from his hotel. He was quite happy where he was. He only wanted to enjoy her company. Anita's defenses crumbled. She could easily imagine him letting the staff slack off.

"When did she come?" she asked Mani.

"Perhaps a year ago. She has been here since before I arrived."

"What did she do here?"

“Some work.”

“What sort of work?”

“Some little things. The folding of the laundry, the arranging of the plants.”

“A maidservant?”

“Yes. These are her tasks.”

Anita thought this over. These were tasks for a higher-caste housekeeper or a wife, not a maidservant. Or perhaps she meant more to him than a mere servant. “Where did she come from?”

“I am not knowing this but she is having the same accent as Sahib. She speaks the peculiar manner of people from the north. Near Calicut.” He gave a smug chuckle typical of the southern Malayali when considering the speech of the Northerner.

“That's where Sar Chaudhry is from, isn't it?” She frowned, wondering if the woman was possibly sent by a relative or business acquaintance seeking a favor from an old friend. “Where is Sar Chaudhry now? I missed him last night.”

“Last night is Shiva Ratri, Memsahib. Sahib goes to his teacher and they meditate through the night to avert evil. We have no supper on the roof on Shiva Ratri—it is too dark, as you can imagine, the darkest night of the month.”

“Is that his usual practice, Mani?”

“It is. At least as along as I have been here.”

“Now that's not something I would have picked up about him.” Her mind drifted over the few evenings she had spent with him.

“Mr. Venkat said he wasn't surprised at all,” Mani said.

“Did he? When was that?”

“Last night. He came close to nine o'clock to speak to Sahib, and he was upset when I told him Sahib was away for the entire night.”

“What did Mr. Venkat do then?”

“He asked for coffee in the dining room, which is closed at that hour. He wanted to calm himself, I think.”

“Did you wait on him?”

“Not me, Memsahib. I had other duties. I asked Asmita to do that work.”

“Was she agreeable?”

“She did what she was told—with a nudge.” Mani coughed. “Memsahib?”

“Hmm?” Anita realized she'd been daydreaming. “Oh, nothing for me, thank you, Mani.” He turned to leave. “Wait, Mani. Is there any chance I could see the dead woman's room?”

“You are curious, Memsahib. I too. Come.”

* * *

Anita followed Mani down the stairs and out the back door. Expecting him to turn onto the lane that led to a row of huts for servants high up on the cliff behind the hotels, she almost bumped into him as he turned left instead. They descended three steps to another walkway that led to a row of individual rooms connected by a veranda—the modest accommodations for foreign students traveling on a budget. He pulled a bunch of keys from his waist and selected one, which he fitted into the lock.

“She lived here?”

"Even so, Memsahib, even so."

"Very nice quarters for a maidservant, I must say." Mani made no comment but cast a practiced eye over the room. Apparently finding it disappointing, he bowed politely and moved away. Anita entered the small room and shut the door behind her.

The humid room was dark until she felt her way along the smooth plastered wall and pulled open the inner wooden shutters, letting fresh air and warm light fill the room. The furniture, which she could now see, was simple. There were two single wooden beds—the mattress on one still rolled up and tied—a desk and chair, a small bookcase, and a Victorian armoire. Taking up one corner of the room was a bathroom, fully tiled with a shower head in one corner and a toilet and sink along the opposite wall.

Anita opened the armoire and discovered a piece of rope strung across the interior, on which hung several items of clothing—the choli blouses and two-piece saris typically worn by lower-caste women. She had two or three good saris, but nothing of any great value. The woman's clothing looked humorously incongruous in this piece of Victorian British furniture. On the floor of the armoire sat a pile of cheap plastic bangles, some cheap books, towels, and a black plastic zippered purse. Anita picked it up and felt a thick lump in the center.

Anita shook the contents of the purse out on the desk—a train schedule, an envelope with nine hundred rupees, toe rings, several receipts from area stores for things like talcum powder, and a number of formal photographs. Anita was

fascinated by Indian photographs. Men and women at the height of their careers today posed for professional photographers as though they were having their likenesses sculpted or painted; they stood with a severity of purpose and expression that recalled the photography of the 1840's. Anita peered at the photographs, and although the faces seemed familiar, she assumed they were familiar in the way those of some of her relatives seemed familiar after not having seen them for a dozen years or more. The most formal photograph was obviously a wedding picture, with the bride and groom standing solemnly with wedding garlands around their necks and gifts in their outstretched hands; not even the wisp of a smile flickered on either one's face. Anita didn't recognize either bride or groom at once, though she assumed the woman must have been Asmita Amma. Anita studied the shapes of the faces, the brows and noses, working to discern the bone structure underneath, and imagine how the shape of the face might have changed over the last several years. She stared hard at the photograph, trying to get the image to merge into that of a woman at least fifteen or twenty years older whom she might have encountered at the hotel. The images began to swim in front of her eyes. Anita gave the room another look but there was nothing here that was not to be expected in the room of a maidservant.

* * *

Aunt Meena was sipping tea in the dining room, just off the lobby area, when Anita returned to Hotel Delite. The guests were starting to emerge from afternoon naps or shopping excursions and were heading for the beaches again, now that

the sun was no longer striking down on everything not hiding under a tree or a roof.

“You look exhausted, Auntie,” Anita said, coming up to the table.

“I am, but I am prepared for whatever the banker throws at me. Mr. Venkat comes this afternoon to inspect my books and tell me the news. I went to him because he has been doing business with many of the hotel owners on this end of the resort—and his bank has done well. I thought he would be the easiest one to approach. How wrong I was! Mr. Venkat is a dragon!”

“What do you think will happen?”

“I either get my loan and move forward, or I sit in my room and cry.” A widow since her early twenties, Meena Nayar had shown herself a natural businesswoman at a young age. Hotel Delite thrived in her hands. Anita couldn't imagine her not succeeding with the banker.

“You've never had any trouble before. Why should this loan be any different?”

“Because Mr. Venkat is different,” Aunt Meena said. “He is a monster of a man. He came here last week with a look that gave me chills and sat me down and told me all the documents I would have to produce and the income projections down to the tiniest glass of tea with cream and sugar! ‘Banking is not a charity, Mrs. Nayar,’ he said to me. To me!” She shook her head and sighed. “Have I not always repaid my loans?”

“It's the new generation, Auntie. We're such demons when it comes to making a living.” She winked at her aunt.

“How would you know?” she said, eyeing the camera hanging around Anita's neck.

“You know, Auntie, in all seriousness, I was surprised that Amit wasn't bothered by the competition your expanded business will be for him. He doesn't seem to care that his guest rooms will lose their ocean view.”

Meena snorted in contempt. “He is not a businessman, Anita, not at all. All his plans for expansion have just evaporated as far as I can tell. A sweet man, but he probably doesn't even balance his books. Since he bought that house three years ago he has done nothing to make it a success; he has coasted all this time. I have seen Mr. Venkat come out of Amit's hotel mopping his brow and muttering to himself, looking like the darkest monsoon cloud. That will not happen to me, I can assure you.”

“I'm sure it won't,” Anita agreed.

* * *

Mr. Venkat arrived promptly at five in the afternoon, armed with a large black briefcase that threatened to pull its bearer off balance. The desk clerk ushered him into the hotel office at once. Anita concealed herself along the corridor until he was safely out of sight.

“I think I'll just go over and see Amit for a minute,” Anita said to the desk clerk. “I'll be back.” Anita slipped across the lane and ran up the few steps to the lobby of the Rockland Hotel. A fan circled lazily overhead, barely ruffling the pages of the day's newspaper sitting abandoned on the laminated coffee table.

“Is Sar Chaudhry available?” Anita asked.

“He is resting,” the desk clerk said.

“I'll wait.” Anita took a chair. She didn't wonder at the desk clerk's surprise as she positioned herself for a good view of the front door. She picked up a popular magazine and began to read; every now and then she checked her watch. It was nearing five thirty. It wouldn't be long now, she reasoned. The Trivandrum police are prompt, and they will make all the logical deductions, as I did, she thought.

Five minutes later a police car pulled up in front of the lane and an officer in mufti followed by a uniformed constable entered the lobby. Anita put down her magazine. They barely glanced at her as they marched to the lobby desk.

“Mr. Chaudhry, please.”

The desk clerk nodded and slipped into a back office. A moment later Amit Chaudhry emerged with a bemused expression on his face.

“We are here to arrest you for the murder of Asmita Panja Amma,” the detective said. Amit Chaudhry was aghast and protested passionately, but in the end the police led him away. Anita offered her sympathy amid expressions of surprise until he was safely pocketed in the back of the police car.

“What does it mean, Memsahib?” Mani asked her as the police car drove away.

“Nothing. Sar Chaudhry is a married man and has failed to tell anyone here of that fact. Asmita Amma was his wife. A photograph in her room shows her in her wedding sari with gifts—both she and her groom are very young, but if you look closely you can see that the young man is Amit, before he

grew well off and complacent down here. Do not worry. He will spend the night in jail telling the police the truth about his marriage, and the police will release him tomorrow as soon as they check his alibi." She sauntered across the lane.

"What was all that?" Aunt Meena asked as Anita entered the lobby.

"Amit Chaudhry has been arrested for murdering his wife, but he will be released."

"You don't think he did it?"

"Oh no, of course not. Why would he murder his protection?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Where is Mr. Venkat?"

"He left. All the commotion outside disrupted our business talks; he'll come back tomorrow."

"No, he won't, Auntie. I'm afraid you'll have to start all over with your loan application."

"But why?"

"Because Mr. Venkat will be in jail."

"For what?"

"For the murder of Asmita Amma."

"How can you think such a thing?"

"Last night, when Mr. Venkat went to confront Amit about his overdue loans once again, he found he was gone on a retreat for Shiva Ratri. So there he is stewing in anger in the empty dining room when who should wait on him but the maidservant who was in fact Amit's wife. Mr. Venkat must have figured out who she was by listening to her talk—I think she must have been a vain woman—and in a fit of rage he

took her out back along one of the alleys and just hit her over the head and tossed her body over the side of the walkway, where her body tumbled down to the construction site."

"This is horrible. Why would he do such a thing?"

"Amit was deeply in debt. He borrowed money to expand and never expanded. He just spent the money. But, you see, Auntie, it didn't matter how much money Amit borrowed and didn't repay as long as Asmita lived a long and healthy life. Every time Mr. Venkat tried to collect on his loans, all Amit had to say was this property is my only asset and it is my wife's stridhana, her women's property. And no one can touch a woman's stridhana, no matter how large her husband's debt. So, you see, Amit would never kill his wife. But Mr. Venkat would. He had to if he ever wanted to get his money back."

"And what about Amit?"

"He will spend an uncomfortable night in jail while the police question him and check on his alibi. They'll let him go, but not before they give him a good scare." Which he richly deserves, Anita added to herself.

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The Body in Crooked Bayou by O'Neil De Noux

She'd been eyeballing Beau during the wake, but waited until the service at the cemetery was over to walk up and say, “I remember you, John Raven Beau.”

Beau checked out the nameplate pinned above the left pocket of her light green uniform shirt—Dreaux—then looked back at her hazel eyes, her face vaguely familiar.

She smiled and extended her hand. “Barbara Dreaux.”

She had a firm handshake, stood only a few inches shorter than Beau's six-two, a full-figured woman, looked a few years older than Beau's thirty years.

“I was three classes ahead of you at Holy Ghost,” she said, pulling up her gun belt, nine millimeter on her left hip, portable police radio in a pouch on her right hip. “Came back to watch you play a couple times. Heard you went off to L.S.U. What happened?”

“Tore up my knee in the spring game, sophomore year.” Beau leaned to his right to get a better look at the blue patch on her shoulder.

“Best running quarterback I've ever seen,” she said. “Ran a little like Gale Sayers.”

He'd never heard that one before.

“Cannes Bruleé Police Department? When did this happen?”

“Last year. There's only three of us. I hear you're working Homicide. In New Orleans.”

Beau nodded.

Barbara took in a deep breath and said, “Can we get a cup of coffee? I need your help.”

“Okay.” He followed her through tiny St. Bernadette Cemetery, past oaks dripping Spanish moss and white tombs built above ground because, like New Orleans, the water table was too high. Dig two feet and you found water.

A sweet swamp breeze flowed over them, the familiar scents of home, Beau thought. And for a moment, his mind returned to that rickety house on Bayou Brunét where he grew up with his Cajun father and Oglala Sioux mother, living off the land and the water, fishing and hunting in a lush world of plentiful game. Beau thought he was rich in paradise, until he went to school and found out from the other kids he was dirt poor. Catholic Relief paid his tuition, even to Holy Ghost High where he excelled in the lonely world of sports, track and football, running away from everyone.

“How well did you know Adam Le Boeuf?” Barbara stopped next to her police car.

Beau looked back at the cemetery. “He was my favorite teacher. You take his classes?”

“No, I never liked history.”

For a moment, Beau could see Adam Le Boeuf standing in front of the class, explaining Caesar's Gallic Wars, telling them all about the French hero Vercingetorix, a name Beau had never forgotten.

“The Crazy Weasel, okay?”

“Fine,” he said. “See you there.”

* * *

Beau parked his old dark green ‘79 Thunderbird in the shell parking lot of The Crazy Weasel Café, an aluminum building that looked like an Airstream camper, with windows added along the side facing Landrieu Avenue, the main drag of Cannes Bruleé village. He took his notepad and pen from his black suit coat, leaving the coat inside the car. He slipped the pad into his rear pocket, the pen in the pocket of his white shirt, before loosening his charcoal gray tie. Beau ran his fingers through his dark brown hair. He was a square-jawed man with hooded brows over light brown eyes and a sharp nose that gave him a hawk-like appearance.

Barbara was waiting outside, hands on her gun belt.

“Nice car,” she said. “I like the original T-Birds better, those little sleek suckers.”

Beau nodded. There was nothing sleek about the ‘79 T-Bird, a big car with a long hood and a rocking V-8 engine. Barbara led the way in. They sat in the rear booth, Barbara facing the door, like a good cop. She was still in uniform after all, so Beau accepted facing the rear wall.

A waitress with graying hair approached with menus and Barbara told her just coffees, please. The coffees came fast, along with a stainless steel creamer. Barbara sniffed the cream before pouring a thick slug into her coffee. Beau poured the cream, adding two sugars to his. The coffee was strong coffee-and-chicory and tasted freshly brewed.

“You staying the night?” Barbara asked.

Beau nodded. “At the Come Back Inn.” As if there was any other place in Cannes Bruleé. Seeing the determination in Barbara's eyes, Beau thought, so much for the Elmore

Leonard novel he'd brought to read out on the back verandah of the inn, overlooking the swamp, listening to the call of cicadas, letting the incessant chatter of insects and the musty scents of the swamp draw him back to the memories of his childhood.

"So," he sighed. "How can I help?"

"We found a slash across Adam Le Boeuf's belly when we pulled him from Crooked Bayou. Everyone said it was from a gator, but the pathologist in Abbeville says it was too clean, more like a knife wound. There were wounds from a gator along the back of the legs, but not like the slice along the abdomen."

"I thought he drowned."

"Drowning was the cause of death," she said. "You and I are usually more concerned with the manner of death."

Beau took another sip of coffee. "It's listed as an accidental death."

"Yep. But I think he was murdered." The hazel eyes stared at Beau's eyes.

"What does your chief say?"

"He's in the hospital in Baton Rouge. Broken leg in a car wreck. Needs corrective surgery."

Beau looked out the window as a tractor-trailer rig moved slowly along Landrieu Avenue. "What does the sheriff's office say about this?"

Barbara reached into the top pocket of her shirt and pulled out a white business card, passing it to Beau who recognized the name, Detective James Atkins, Vermilion Parish Sheriff's Office.

“Says he knows you,” Barbara said.

“Yeah, we spent an exciting evening on Bourbon Street last year tracking down a good ole boy from Pecan Island. Wife never let him go anywhere, so he beat her up, almost killed her, then took off for the big city. Wasn't a homicide case, but I hate wife-beaters more than my ancestors hated the cavalry.”

She gave him a quizzical look.

He lifted his cup to his lips. “I'm half Sioux.”

“I thought you were part Mexican.”

Beau coughed up a mouthful of coffee, spraying the table, barely missing Barbara, who grabbed a napkin and started wiping up immediately. The waitress came with a towel.

When Beau recovered, Barbara said, “Atkins is too busy to look into the case right now and told me, since I have as much jurisdiction as the sheriff's office, go with it. So I'm going with it.”

The waitress brought both fresh cups of coffee. Beau was more careful this time. Barbara was too, waiting for him to finish swallowing before asking, “Do you know Doctor Shelton?”

“Heard of him. Never met him.” Dr. Shelton's private practice catered to the more prosperous residents of the parish. His office was in a wing of his mansion on Landrieu Avenue, where patients could park in back beneath the magnolias, next to the large white gazebo.

Beau waited for her to continue and she didn't disappoint him, leaning closer, elbows on the table. “Mrs. Le Boeuf. Denise. Was seeing Dr. Shelton.” She paused a moment and

lowered her voice. “Seeing him too often, for a normal patient.”

Don't tell me, Beau thought. Peyton Place South. “The doctor's gotta be pushing seventy. How old's Denise?”

“Shelton's sixty-one and Denise is forty. Have you ever met her?”

Beau shook his head. “Saw her for the first time today. She's a second wife.” Denise Le Boeuf was a thin, handsome woman with light brown hair.

“Third actually. Adam was married for six weeks when he was eighteen. But I don't need help lining all that up. I think I'll be able to prove they were having an affair.” She set her lips, took in a breath, and said, “I need help with Luke Fenice.”

Beau tried not to react, tried to keep his face as expressionless as a good plains warrior, but he couldn't stop the coffee from churning in his belly, sending an acidic taste up his esophagus.

“You all right?”

He picked up the small glass of ice water their waitress had brought with their first cups and drank it down.

“What does Luke have to do with this?”

Barbara lowered her voice. “Last couple years Luke and Adam became friends, if anyone can become a friend of Luke Fenice. Luke took Adam fishing. Adam visited Luke the night he died.” She let out a long sigh. “Luke was the one who found the body in Crooked Bayou, not a hundred yards from his camp.”

The first suspect in any murder case was the person who found the body. Usually they weren't involved, but they were the first one a good homicide detective looked at.

“What does Luke say?”

“That's the problem. He won't talk to me or anyone else. Wouldn't even talk to us when we came to collect the body. He just pointed to it and went back in his cabin.”

It was called City Primeval, the Elmore Leonard paperback Beau knew he wouldn't get to start. Beau thought, this is sounding like village primeval by the moment.

How had she put it? “If anyone can become a friend of Luke Fenice,” she'd said. Beau's father had become a friend of Luke, so much so, Luke gave money to Beau's family when they were hard-strapped for cash. Beau remembered his father explaining to his mother, late one night, that Luke had a trust from his mother's family from some old mine in Arizona. Not much, just a few bucks a month, but he passed some on to them when they needed money.

Beau pulled out his notepad and pen and jotted several notes before asking, “What was Denise Le Boeuf seeing Dr. Shelton for?”

“Migraines. Started seeing him once a week about a year ago. Been seeing him three times a week lately.” Barbara's right eyebrow rose. “In a year he's never written a prescription for her. No medication.”

“You talk to Shelton's nurse?”

Barbara sipped her coffee. “My uncle is the only pharmacist here. He checked Abbeville all the way to New Iberia and Lafayette. I also talked to Shelton's neighbors.

Lady next door swears she saw Denise and Dr. Shelton in his upstairs bedroom window. Denise was in her bra."

Nothing like nosy neighbors, he thought.

Beau kept jotting, didn't look up as he said, "Isn't that standard treatment for migraines?"

When he looked up Barbara was smiling. "Does tend to make headaches go away."

Barbara said she would talk with Le Boeuf's relatives and neighbors, as discreetly as possible, which wouldn't be possible in the small village.

"Sometimes," Beau said, "stirring things up is the thing to do."

Motive was one thing, but a good homicide detective didn't work from a motive. He or she went with the facts. Proving a love affair, or a sex affair, didn't prove murder. They would need more. If there was more to this.

Barbara insisted on paying the bill. Beau left a tip that matched the bill and thanked the grayhaired waitress again, especially for cleaning up after him.

"Think nothing of it, chér." She smiled and scooped up her tip.

"One more thing," Barbara said as they stepped outside. "I forgot to mention the mark on the victim's left ankle."

Beau stared into her eyes, waiting for her to go on.

"Bruising actually. Looked like a rope burn."

Son of a gun. It's sounding more like a murder every minute.

* * *

Beau checked into the Come Back Inn, getting the promised room at the rear of the long, one story building that was once a cotton warehouse. Along with his room key, Beau was handed a brochure explaining how the old warehouse was converted into an inn back in 1921, how the verandah was added and the rooms constructed. The tin roof had been replaced three times after hurricane damage, the current tin roof painted dark green.

In a room decorated as it was in the twenties with arched doorways and windows, black ceiling fans, cedar chifforobe, frosted glass lampshades, and a large console Zenith radio, no TV, Beau changed into a pair of faded jeans. He opted for his light blue Police Association T-shirt with its white NOPD star-and-crescent badge across the chest and white tennis shoes. He decided the direct approach with Luke Fenice would be best, rather than trying to worm information from the old man. Just ask him, flat out.

Sitting on the double bed with his notebook and pen, he opened the small phone book from the nightstand and called the Vermilion Parish Coroner's Office. When he was put through to the pathologist, Beau introduced himself in the usual way—NOPD Homicide.

Pathologist Samuel Bristow had a New England accent. “Yes, I performed the autopsy on Mr. Le Boeuf. What can I do for you, Detective?”

Beau asked about the slash along Le Boeuf's abdomen and learned it was a very sharp cut, straight, as if done with a long-blade knife. “It will be in my autopsy report. The wound was postmortem,” Bristow explained.

“How long after?”

“Not long, but definitely occurring after death. There were also postmortem wounds consistent with animal bites. Alligator, most likely.”

“Did you notice any bruising on the body?”

“Yes.” Bristow explained and Beau noted, Bruising around the left ankle.

“Could it have been a rope burn?”

“Could have. I plan on filing a revised death certificate, listing the manner of death as undetermined pending investigation. Now I have a question for you.”

“Go ahead.”

“Why is the New Orleans Police Department looking into this case?”

“I'm assisting the Cannes Bruleé Police,” Beau said. “Adam Le Boeuf was a friend.”

“Well, if I can be of any further help, just call.”

Beau thanked him and was also thankful Bristow was so talkative. Coroner's reports were public record, but most pathologists were too closemouth or just too weird to talk to anyone. Beau half expected the pathologist to just say, “See my report.”

Beau slipped his nine-millimeter Beretta into the waistband of his jeans at the small of his back and pulled on a pale blue, shortsleeved dress shirt, leaving it hanging out to cover his weapon.

He rolled down the T-Bird's windows on his way to Luke Fenice's camp, letting the warm, marshy air flow through as he passed the familiar oaks and magnolias along Landrieu

Avenue. The white masonry facade of his old high school looked freshly painted, the grass still sparse beneath the huge oaks out front. The long Spanish moss beards hanging from the oaks blocked out most of the sunshine. Between the oaks stood a large white sign with red and dark blue letters reading, GO RIDERS!

He passed Dr. Shelton's place with its white columns and circular drive and three-car garage, one door open with a white BMW parked inside. As the houses fell away and the avenue wound through stands of cypress trees, Beau took a right on narrow blacktop Crooked Bayou Road. A mile down the twisting road, the blacktop gave away to gravel. Slowing to avoid potholes, the T-Bird followed the roadway along the curves of the bayou.

The humidity grew denser as the trees closed around the road. Beau smelled the brackish bayou before seeing it through the trees, sunlight glittering off the brown water. The dark foliage was broken only by the occasional snowy egret standing along the banks of Crooked Bayou.

As the bayou bent to the left, the road rose to the right and Beau pulled over at a flat area, parking beneath a tremendous magnolia, the largest he'd ever known, a tree he'd climbed many times when he was young. He stretched as the high-pitched squawking of a crow echoed, followed immediately by the chirping bark of mockingbirds. Shielding his eyes, he spotted them, two mockingbirds chasing a large crow, diving at it, like fighter planes strafing a bomber.

Crossing the road, Beau started down the timeworn wooden planks leading to the bayou and Luke Fenice's camp.

The canopy of trees closed over him, tall bottom-land hardwoods—oaks, cypress, and sweetgum trees, an occasional elderberry and sugarberry tree.

Keeping to the right to avoid the prickly palmetto bushes, he could almost hear his daddy's voice telling him how its fruit was favored by raccoons, back when they hunted coons and squirrels and large swamp rabbits. Stopping beneath the last oak before the land fell away to the bayou, Beau leaned against the long trumpet vines dangling from the oak's thick branches.

Fenice's camp, a one story wooden structure with a rusted corrugated-metal roof, sat perched on creosote pilings a good ten feet above the edge of the bayou. The gallery running around the place was dotted with nets drying in the sun—crab nets, crawfish nets, fish nets. Beyond the place stood a ramshackle dock with three pirogues, those so familiar flat-bottom Cajun boats.

He took a moment to steel himself, to strengthen his mind in the way his Oglala ancestors emboldened themselves before battle. His mind must be sharp. He must control his emotions, something the Oglala were so good at, something his Cajun ancestors could never master. Every time Beau envisioned his father's face, it was always smiling, while his mother's lovely face was always set in grim determination.

Beau stepped away from the oak to the half-broken steps, knowing which ones to avoid even after ten years. Hand on the tilting rail, he saw how the wood had silvered beneath the unrelenting south Louisiana sun.

A warm breeze washed over Beau, bringing the strong scent of highly seasoned cooking from the camp. His jittery stomach flinched as he realized he'd eaten nothing all day. The door was open and he saw Luke inside, moving from the kitchen into the front room. He looked much older, his salt-and-pepper hair mostly salt now, his face sunken with age, and brown age splotches dotting his craggy complexion as he stepped up to the screen door and blinked at Beau. Luke was in his late sixties now.

The deep-set eyes became wide and the old man's lower lip trembled as he mumbled, “Sacré bleu. Mais John, is dat you?”

Beau tried to smile as he opened the screen door.

Luke took a step back and blinked twice, his eyes suddenly wet as he gasped and came forward, reaching up to grab Beau's shoulders, pulling Beau down to kiss him on both cheeks, the old man's beard rough against Beau's face.

They shook hands after, the old man's grip still strong. “Mais, I am so surprise to see you. Come an eat.” Luke led the way through a front room cluttered with mismatched furniture, a green sofa, tan recliner, crates used as end tables, and a large wooden guy-wire spool used as a coffee table. There was a portable TV with a rabbit-ear antenna atop a second guy-wire spool.

The kitchen ran the length of the place with a long table at one end and gas stove at the far end, sink and cutting aisle along the center of the floor. Three black kettles sat atop the gas stove. Luke turned the burners off all three, pulling the

smallest over to the aisle, lifting the lid to reveal steaming white rice.

“Crawfish etouffee.” Luke explained the second pot as he pulled it to the aisle and waved to the third. “And filé gumbo wit crab for later.” The strong scents smelled wonderful when mixed.

Cooking enough for a week, Beau noted as he watched Luke pull two white bowls from the cupboard and spoons from a drawer.

“You want a Dixie or a Bud?” Luke reached into the refrigerator.

“You got Barq's?” Beau sat at the table and wondered when he should start. Eat first, he thought. He let the old man serve him, pouring the etouffee over a bed of white rice. Hot and spicy crawfish tails floating in the soupy gravy, both men dipped slices of French bread into the etouffee as they ate, Beau washing his down with Barq's, the root beer with bite.

They ate in silence, Beau looking out the windows at the trees across the bayou and the blue sky beyond. He wasn't sure when Luke noticed the emblem on the chest of his T-shirt, but spotted the old man's eyes checking it out twice before they finished.

“You want more?” Luke got up for another bowl.

“No, thanks.”

Luke brought Beau another Barq's, sat and took a spoonful of etouffee, and said, “You wit de police now?”

Beau leaned close and looked into Luke's eyes. “That's why I'm here.”

Luke looked at his bowl as he ate, slower now. He spoke to the bowl. “I still remember dat game. De only I seen. Dat was a night.”

Beau's senior year. A big Catholic high school from New Orleans, the Archbishop Rummel Raiders, undefeated state champions of 5-A, came to play the small Catholic school along the bayous, 2-A Holy Ghost High School. Beau returned the opening kickoff ninety-seven yards, weaving through the Raiders, knocking two over as the crowd erupted in Abbeville Stadium.

It was a gorgeous autumn night beneath a brilliant full moon, the November air crisp with nice low humidity. Beau threw a ten yard touchdown pass, ran another in from twenty-seven yards to tie the score in the fourth quarter.

“I remember de play,” Luke said, still looking down at his bowl, “dat won de game. People here still talk about it, mais yeah. Never seen yoar daddy smile like dat. Like de jack-o'-lantern.”

Fourth down and inches on the fifty yard line. Less than a minute left. Beau handed off to their running back who raced toward right end, Beau drifting around left end, the running back stopping and throwing to Beau, the ball drifting high, Beau having to wait for it, catching it, running through three Raiders and hitting the afterburners, outracing everyone, even the speedy black defensive backs, to the end zone.

The Riders mobbed Beau in the end zone, the cheerleaders mobbed him on the sidelines after. Even the pretty blonde cheerleaders he adored from a distance were nice to him that evening. But he still had no date for the senior prom. He'd

asked two of the cheerleaders but there wasn't a girl at Holy Ghost who would actually go out with a dark-complected boy who lived in a swamp shack. Cheering was one thing. Kissing, quite another.

Beau almost smiled to himself, thinking of those lonely nights. No problem with women now, although he still lived on water, in a houseboat at the edge of New Orleans, along Lake Pontchartrain's Bucktown. Women found his place “quaint” and “charming.”

Luke had a woman who lived with him a long time ago. Beau could almost see her face, but didn't remember her name. She left when Beau was still small.

Looking up, Luke said, “Dey sent you, huh?”

Beau nodded and Luke put his spoon down.

“Dey would send you. I won’ talk to dem, dey know it.” Luke picked up both bowls and spoons and took them to his sink, running water in the bowls, drying his hands with a dishrag. “I jus’ hire out de pirogue. Dat's it.”

“You going to start lying to me?”

Luke grabbed another beer from the refrigerator and headed for the living room, Beau following with his Barq's. Luke sat in the recliner, Beau on the sofa. Luke leaned back in the chair, putting his feet up, closing his eyes.

Beau waited. One of the first tricks he'd learned in Homicide was to wait. Let them restart the conversation.

“Been hard times fo’ me, since de trust done give out,” Luke said, eyes still closed. He sucked in a deep breath. “It weren't my idea, mais no.”

“I figured. Whose was it? Dr. Shelton or Denise Le Boeuf?”

Luke's eyes opened and he stared at the ceiling, blinking twice before he said, “Denise is one pretty women, yeah.”

He looked at Beau, eyes damp now. “She come to me all pretty at night. Kissin’ on me. You know what I mean?”

“Yes.”

The old man looked back at the ceiling. “She in love wit de doctor and he in love wit’ her. He give her de money and say he done want notin’ more do wit’ it.”

Beau waited, knowing it was coming. Luke couldn't lie to him. They both knew it. He felt his heartbeat rising and steeled himself again. A son of the Lakota always hid his emotions.

Another deep breath and Luke said, “Denise bring Adam here and I take him out fishing for de catfish. At de front of de pirogue, I got de iron rail under de canvas and a rope tie to it. He dozed, like he always do, and I slip de rope on his foot and roll de rail over de side and it pull him in.”

“He came up didn't he?”

Luke looked back at Beau, eyes narrow, and nodded.

“Rope came loose?”

Luke nodded again and leaned back. “I wait and he float up. Dead already. So I pull him over and see de rope come loose so...”

Beau finished the sentence. “You sliced his belly to let the gases out, so he'd sink.”

Luke suddenly sat up, the recliner folding under his legs. “He come right up de next day wit police comin’ up de bayou in de police boat so I point to de body.”

Beau stood and stared at the old man, thinking even when the solution comes easily, it's never easy. He had to take this man away from the only place he'd ever lived. Forever. Beau hid his heartache and narrowed his hawk eyes with a fierceness.

* * *

The Cannes Bruleé village jail was behind the courthouse, a brick building with two small offices in front and two cells across from one another in back. Barbara Dreaux sat typing at the receptionist's desk when Beau came in with Luke Fenice and the long-blade knife he'd used on Adam Le Boeuf. She bounced up and said, “I need to talk with you.”

Beau asked Fenice to sit in the waiting area in front of the receptionist's desk as he and Barbara stepped into the chief's office, leaving the door open so he could watch Luke, who sat staring straight ahead, arms at his side.

“The time line's all wrong,” Barbara started excitedly, then lowered her voice. “Denise says she was home at nine o'clock and Shelton says she was with him at the drug store, having root beer floats.”

Beau opened his mouth, but she wouldn't let him cut in.

“Both deny having an affair but both admitted seeing a lot of each other. Shelton says he was playing marriage counselor. Denise claims he made moves on her, only she rebuffed him.” Barbara's eyes were alight. “They haven't had time to get their statements straight.” She suddenly pointed to Luke and asked, “How'd it go?”

“You were right, sending me to talk with him.”

“Yeah?”

Beau raised the knife, blade pointed down, and said, “He copped out.”

She bounced back. “He did?”

Beau rubbed his chin. “We need to get his statement down. Ya'll have a video camera?”

“No. We have a tape recorder.”

“Good. Let's get started.” Beau pulled the Miranda Rights card from his ID folder as they brought Luke into the chief's office. The recorded statement started with Beau reading Luke his rights and Luke saying he understood each right and agreed to talk with them. The statement closed with Beau asking, “How much money did Denise give you?”

“A tousand dollar. I got it here in my pocket.” Luke reached into the front pocket of his jeans and pulled out ten crisply folded one hundred dollar bills, laying them on the chief's desk. “Denise say dey got ‘em from de ATM ting dat mornin'.”

Barbara called in a third Cannes Bruleé police officer, while Beau pulled on a pair of rubber gloves and slipped each hundred dollar bill into a separate clear plastic sheet protector.

“Think their prints might be on them?” Barbara asked as she stepped back in.

“Pretty new bills. The sheriff's crime lab just might get a latent or two. You need to start on your arrest report.”

Barbara filled out the form with Luke next to her, providing the pertinent details. The old man said he was born on the Marinneaux Plantation in Cameron Parish. “May twenty-firs', nineteen and twenty-seven. Same day Lindbergh land in

Paris. Mais, yeah. Plantation, she got wiped out in nineteen and fifty-seven by dat Hurricane Audrey."

Cannes Bruleé's third cop was named Gaston Voison, a wide-body Cajun who looked a little like Dom DeLuise, without the sense of humor. He was asked to watch Luke.

"I'm puttin' him in a cell."

"That's where he belongs," Barbara agreed on her way out with Beau.

* * *

Dr. Shelton wasn't home, so they went by the Le Boeufs' middle-class brick home. Turning the corner, they spotted a white BMW pulling away from the house. Barbara glanced at Beau who nodded toward the Beamer. They ran the plate and it was Shelton's all right, so they tailed it back toward his house, pulling it over a block away, getting Shelton into the police car headed back to the jail.

"Sure, I'll help all I can," Shelton agreed, but by the time they parked in front of the jail, Beau could see the doctor was nervous, his eyes batted around, a tic had developed on the right side of the man's mouth.

Shelton was over six feet, thin, with silver hair carefully parted down the center and wore a light gray linen suit and expensive-looking black shoes, a thin gold watch on his left wrist.

"I was just at Mrs. Le Boeuf's," Shelton volunteered as they sat around the chief's desk. "Consoling her."

Barbara shot Beau a look that read, "I'm sure."

She turned on the tape recorder as Beau read Shelton his rights.

“Am I under arrest?”

“No. You are, however, suspected of a crime,” Beau said. “You wanna talk about it?”

“Of course. I've nothing to hide.”

Beau fought back a smile. He'd heard that line before.

Shelton sat up straighter, the tic still clicking on his face as he signed the waiver of rights form.

Barbara took over the interview, going over Shelton's previous statement, catching him in several inconsistencies, which she pointed out, Shelton growing more agitated. He almost broke, but recovered, so Beau pulled a copy of the Louisiana Criminal Code Book from the shelf behind the chief's desk and read aloud the appropriate crime, “Revised Statute 14:30, first-degree murder is the killing of a human being when the offender has specific intent to kill or to inflict great bodily harm and is engaged in the perpetration or attempted perpetration of aggravated kidnapping, aggravated escape, aggravated arson, aggravated rape, aggravated burglary, armed robbery, or simple robbery...”

“There are five parts, I'll go to the one that involves you.” Beau stared into Shelton's eyes. Tic still going strong.

“Part four, when the offender has specific intent to kill or inflict great bodily harm and has offered, has been offered, has given, or has received anything of value for the killing.”

Beau closed the book and shrugged to Barbara. “A thousand dollars qualifies as anything of value, wouldn't you say?”

Barbara nodded, pulled her chair closer to Shelton, and took over the interview again. Beau liked the way she was going with this, smooth, like a Homicide veteran.

But Adam Le Boeuf wasn't murdered, the doctor contended. “He drowned.”

“You can't be that naive, Doctor.” Barbara lowered her voice. “The cause of death was drowning. The manner of death was homicide.”

She sat up. “You took a thousand dollars from an ATM Monday night. That's high for an ATM. You must have a high allowance amount, Doctor. ATMs have cameras now. They take pictures of people who withdraw money from them and pictures of anyone else in the car at the time.”

She let that sink in a moment, then asked what he did with the money. “It's going to have your prints on it.”

Shelton covered his face, then sat back. “I gave it to Denise Le Boeuf. I don't know what she did with it.”

Barbara turned to Beau, who leaned across the desk. “You're insulting our intelligence, Doctor. You gave her the money. She gave it to Luke Fenice and he turned it over to us. Along with you.”

Ten minutes later, Dr. Shelton was playing Let's Make a Deal—he'll tell everything as a state's witness against them. Barbara explained the district attorney's office made deals, not cops. “We just investigate.”

Shelton perked up and the tic went away. “I know the D.A. Play golf with him.” Then he told the whole story. It was all Denise Le Boeuf's idea. They booked him, let him make his call to the D.A.'s office up in Abbeville. The D.A. wasn't in at

ten P.M., so Shelton called a lawyer friend who would meet him at parish prison in the morning. They put Shelton in the cell across from Luke. Neither man would look at the other.

* * *

Denise Le Boeuf wore a tan blouse and brown linen slacks. She'd brushed her lips with red lipstick, but didn't have time for eye shadow or blush. Beau couldn't help thinking she was a looker, all right. A very attractive forty-year-old woman, she was slim with sad, brown eyes and light brown hair, freshly brushed and hanging past her shoulders. He couldn't help checking her out at the funeral earlier but had brushed those thoughts away. She was a widow then, and now, a suspect.

Denise didn't respond well to Barbara as she was read her rights. Denise started talking to Beau, so he took over. He was about to play nice cop in this interview, until she flipped her hair and gave him that look that told him she was interested. He caught a whiff of her perfume and decided to come right out with it.

“You're under arrest for first-degree murder.”

She sat back as if slapped across the face.

“Luke Fenice has given us a statement implicating you. Dr. Shelton corroborates that statement. They're both in holding cells in the back. Shelton plans on making a deal with the D.A.” Beau stared into the brown eyes and saw them mist, before Denise wiped them and said, “I suspected Dr. Shelton may be involved in my husband's death.” She leaned forward, conspiratorially. “He's been infatuated with me for a while now.”

Beau checked the tape recorder to make sure the tape was still running as he said, “Tell me about it.”

She did, leaving out what she thought would make her look bad. Her relationship with Shelton was never consummated. She gave Luke Fenice the money because he was so poor. She loved her husband and had no idea what Shelton and Fenice had done. It all sounded smooth. Well rehearsed.

* * *

A pair of sheriff's office cruisers drove Luke and Shelton to the parish prison. Luke refused to look Beau in the eye and for a moment Beau remembered the man's kindness, helping his father, teaching Beau how to hunt coons and swamp rabbits. He brushed the thought and feelings away. A man was dead.

Barbara put a handcuffed Denise in the back of her police car, stepping back to Beau as he stood outside the jail.

It was a beautiful night with a brilliant full moon and low humidity. A breeze brought in the familiar scents from Beau's youth, the thick odors of the deep swamp, the musty smell of bayou water.

Barbara bounced on her toes.

“It isn't a perfect case,” he told her. “But it's pretty damn strong. Better get that ATM film.”

“I will.”

She bounced again.

“Feels good, doesn't it?”

“God, you know it.”

“Always does when you nail them, and you nailed them, lady.”

“With your help.”

Beau looked her in the eye. “I was just a tool. It was your idea to send me to talk with Luke. You did it. A little like Gale Sayers slicing through a defense.”

“Yeah,” Barbara laughed. “A little.”

As Barbara's police cruiser drove away, Beau rid himself of the good feeling, on purpose, remembering his old teacher lying in a coffin, sealed in a concrete tomb built aboveground because they all lived atop a marsh. Beau's daddy called it the floating prairie.

Adam Le Boeuf was gone, but not forgotten. His name would echo through the courthouse when Beau came back for the trials. As Barbara's taillights disappeared down Landrieu Avenue, Beau yawned and headed for the T-Bird, figuring he'd get to start on that Elmore Leonard book after all.

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The Void by Steve Lindley

Strange that, in the end, it would be hard science that would fill the void. Peterson had never been interested in the subject, for the same reason he had always been bad at mathematics; he simply wasn't suited to a field where men were required to narrow their vision in a meticulous, eternal analysis of the nuts and bolts of how things worked. After all, did it really matter? Was one's enjoyment of a Beethoven symphony enhanced by an understanding of the modulation of the radio waves that carried it through the air and into the stereo where the notes were reconverted and diverted to the speakers' woofers and tweeters? Was the appreciation of a van Gogh print deepened by a knowledge of the compounds contained in oil paint? If anything, he would argue the contrary, and he supposed that was why he found himself, tonight, so alone out front of the thousands of men who had sweated and scribbled away their lives in half-empty classrooms and unheated laboratories in the hope of standing just where he was now.

The front man. It was a position he hadn't asked for, but one in which he'd learned to grow comfortable over the past few years at Exaucer Labs. The front man, projecting that broader vision that had carried him this far through life.

Not that that ride had been smooth and direct. If there was one nuts-and-bolts thing of which Craig Peterson was acutely knowledgeable it was the workings of Craig Peterson. He had walked down many a wrong path, but he was

convinced it was his determination to follow each path to its end, then turn and evaluate it on its merits, that had provided him such a worldly education that he could now step out of this world, turn back, and evaluate it.

Which was precisely what he had just done—not spiritually, but physically. He, the front man, had been the first, aside from Dr. Jerry Stanner, to take a step that, one day, would be taken by every man and woman on earth. The enormity of this accomplishment just now hit him, made him giddy, and even a bit dizzy. He carried his drink to the hotel room's window, opened the window wide, and breathed deep the cold December air over New York City.

So many paths. He had dropped out of school at sixteen and turned to manual labor on the road. From Austin to Chicago, San Francisco to Buffalo, he had worked in fields or factories, learning the ways of the country's working men and women. At twenty-one, he was back in school and discovering hallucinogens—not the most enlightening path, but certainly the most amusing, and he still believed the drugs had opened doorways in his mind. The Peace Corps took him overseas. When he grew bored with their work, he chose not to return home, but to move farther abroad. His tour of the Far East culminated in a nude celebration of the ringing of the temple bell at sunrise in the Himalayas, a morning he, sadly, still remembered chiefly for its stinging cold on his ... appendages. Then there was his brush with Hinduism. A short stint as a Christian. TM. Scientology. The martial arts. EST had led him to a career as a motivational speaker, with a self-published book on the subject providing his credentials and,

the mix, a comfortable income. Still, something was missing. Still, there was that void.

Enter Exaucer Labs of Atlanta. He had been introduced to the relatively small outfit through a group called the Coalition for the Exploration of New Frontiers through Science. CENFS was a loose association of total lunatics, most from Europe and the West Coast, but it included on its list of donors a handful of wealthy widows and celebrities and so was able to fund not only Peterson's salary, but those of a good dozen scientists whose work was too far out of the mainstream to be backed by any conventional school or organization. Each scientist was given a staff of ten or so, and left free to work on his or her pet project. The projects were about as hopeless and nonsensical as the minutes of a monthly CENFS meeting, and Peterson considered Dr. Jerry Stanner as mad as the next, until that afternoon one week ago when the association had set up a luncheon meeting between the two. It seemed the doctor had to say something Peterson needed to hear.

“I'm done,” was what he had said over shrimp cocktail in a leather booth in Peterson's favorite bar just outside of Atlanta proper. “Finished.”

“I understand,” Peterson said, taking off his glasses and rubbing the bridge of his nose. He had been nearsighted all his life. When asked why he chose not to undergo laser surgery, he would reply that he was not so vain as to bother looking into the matter, though the true reason was that, even at this date, he refused to entrust his eyesight, his vision, to a science where the slightest mistake might leave that vision impaired, or worse, leave him to live the rest of his

life blind. “I understand,” he repeated, leaning back in the booth. “Why don't you begin by telling me what the problem is and how much it will cost us to keep you?”

“No, you don't understand. My project is completed. The device we built works when used in tandem with a receptive subject. I have, personally, passed through our neighboring universe. Twice.”

Peterson leaned forward, blinked, put his glasses back on. He had never known a project at Exaucer Labs to have an ending, in this or any other universe. “Just what is it you were working on again, Doctor?”

A traversable bridge from one quantum world to the next. Peterson hadn't been aware there was more than one quantum world. Stanner explained that, in theory, there could be billions, but he could, today, prove the existence only of the one most easily accessible.

“Its night is our day, its day our night. Our histories may be exactly the same, might have moved in opposite directions, or may run in helixes, I don't know. But, I found it because I wasn't looking for a parallel universe, but rather a perpendicular one. You are familiar with the quantum theory of an object being in two places at the same time, Peterson?”

Something about a photon passing through two slits simultaneously, subatomic particles being indistinct, behaving like waves or particles, existing neither here nor there, but everywhere at once. On a larger scale was the theory concerning a dog in a vacuum that is alive and dead at the same moment. Or, was it a cat? No, that was Descartes's cat.

Pavlov's dog. Then again, what was the damned animal doing in a vacuum in the first place?

In fact, Peterson wasn't familiar with any quantum theory at all.

Stanner's in-depth explanation, along with the food and the dark, comfortable booth, only served to make Peterson sleepy. After lunch, they drove back to Stanner's office at Exaucer. Stanner closed the door behind them.

“I chose to tell you, personally,” he said, unlocking the drawer of his desk, “because of your background in transcendental meditation. You once told me you've had several out-of-body experiences. Exiting the body is the first step toward exiting this quantum world. The device propels you out toward the next.”

From the drawer, Stanner extracted a lead box about eight inches square, placed it on the desk, motioned for Peterson to open it. Inside, on a bed of black velvet, was what appeared to be a large, old-fashioned pocket watch, but without hands. Instead, an LCD display was counting the current time in hours, minutes, seconds, and tenths of seconds.

“Go ahead and pick it up,” Stanner continued. “Don't be afraid. I've taken pains to make it virtually unbreakable. It does emit a slight bit of radiation, but as long as you don't keep it close to your skin over an extended period of time there should be no tissue or organ damage.”

The device was heavier than Peterson would have guessed. Stanner explained it was synchronized through radio waves to the same system of cesium atomic clocks and

hydrogen maser atomic clocks that served the U.S. Naval Observatory.

"That is," he added, grinning like a schoolboy, "this world's USNO. Set it for the next, and your flight begins."

His flight to another world's U.S. Naval Observatory? Peterson made a crack about preferring to remain in Atlanta, and Stanner's grin disappeared. That afternoon turned ugly, and the week following it grew only worse. Peterson still wasn't sure what had caused it, but guessed that Stanner had expected a receptive and delighted audience, while Peterson's skepticism, despite his efforts, showed through his politeness and condescension. A wall seemed to grow up between them, one that would never be broken through, no matter how Peterson tried.

Funny, Peterson thought, standing now at the hotel room window, how he and Stanner, two men about the same age, had started on the same metaphysical path at about the same time, but had veered off onto two circuitous routes only to meet again coming from opposite directions, like...

Like two quantum worlds.

It had been some time since he'd had an out-of-body experience, but his personal ritual sensitizing him to one had come back easily enough. He had phoned the hotel's front desk and insisted he not be disturbed except in the case of an emergency, then had a light dinner, followed by a cigarette and one drink, cognac. When the drink was half finished, he turned off every lamp in the room and turned on the television set. The days of finding a channel offering nothing but the snow of a lack of signal were long gone, and he had

to disconnect the cable in order to get the screen to play its soft, animated glow. He turned the sound down low, took off his shoes, stripped the double bed down to bare mattress, sat upon it in the lotus position, clipped the chain of Stanner's pocket watch onto his front belt loop, and set the watch ahead precisely twelve hours.

Its night is our day, Stanner had told him. The watch would, immediately, attempt to move back to our world's atomic calibration. In doing so, it would be traveling back from the atomic calibration of the next world. In our perception, the resetting would occur instantaneously, but, in the quantum world, it would take the watch twelve hours to return. And, if a receptive human subject were able to separate himself from his own physical calibrations to this world, he would be able to travel along with it, though moving in the opposite direction, something Stanner had labeled quantum-tandem.

The watch had already reset itself to the present time. Peterson, then still dubious, let out a sigh, closed his eyes, and began reciting his mantra. Odd, he thought, that a word he hadn't considered in years had been lodged in his mind all the time, never forgotten. Eventually, he thought of nothing, and, when he sensed there to be no sound, no sight, no feeling, nothing but the word, he lay flat on his back, his breaths slow and measured, his limbs heavy, chin slack.

Then, there were no limbs, no measured breaths. The room was turning, slowly, the desk, pictures, television set sinking deep. He was staring down at his prone body on the bed, noticing the open mouth, the way the stockinged feet

were pointing outward, the fingers laying flat on the mattress. He stayed there for some time, how long he couldn't know because there was no time. At some point, however, he noticed the shadows of those fingers on the mattress, then the same of his arms, legs, torso. The shadows were growing. His body was rising toward him. This certainly had never happened in the past, and the experience of it nearly jarred him out of his trance. Carefully, deliberately, he maintained his focus, as the body continued to rise, now itself a shadow before the room so eerily lit by the television's screen, the mattress empty, so far below.

They met, and spirit transferred into body like vapor into a vessel. With the sense of confinement came the freedom of being able to feel his fingers, move his legs. The room turned again, as he was seeing now through his body's eyes. Still, he continued to move upward, through the room's ceiling, and through that of the room above his, and the next, and the next, until he was out in the cold sky floating forty stories above Fifty-seventh Street.

Peterson's arms and legs flailed, but their movement had no effect on the direction he was drifting. He was moving out over the park and its blackness below, and still rising higher. And, the black square that was Central Park was not growing smaller as he rose away from it, but was spreading. The lights of Manhattan were becoming dim and winking out, as were the stars above him. He tried to shake himself out of his trance, but couldn't, because he wasn't in a trance at all. He was in his own body, physically floating over New York City and beyond. As the darkness enveloped him, he clutched at

the watch; its time had leaped forward again, eleven hours plus, and the minutes on its face were ticking backwards, the seconds and tenths of seconds moving so quickly they were a blur. On instinct, his thumb came down on the stem, and the watch stopped.

For a moment, nothing changed. Then, a sharp tug yanked him downwards, a feeling similar to that sensation of falling one sometimes gets when just drifting off to sleep, and he was staring up at his hotel room ceiling, one hand gripping the edge of the bed's mattress, the other holding the watch. The television screen was showing snow.

Behind him now, it still was. He finished his cognac at the window, put on his glasses so he could distinguish each pinpoint of city light whose vanishing had so frightened him as his journey had just begun. Sylvia, his ex-wife, was out there, one of those pinpoints somewhere on the other side of the East River. The marriage had been a brief, failed partnership, her career being hers and his being his. A little over a year ago, when a job offer opened in New York, she had fled home to Queens, leaving him to the lawyers. It had all ended neatly enough, and he wondered why he felt such an urge to contact her now, tonight. Was it because he knew her to be so close, or did he simply need to share the exhilaration of this experience with someone, anyone?

Naturally, the person he would be most anxious to compare notes with about the journey would be Dr. Jerry Stanner, but that was impossible, because, by this hour, Stanner was dead.

They, at the head office in Atlanta, had assured Peterson it would be diagnosed as a heart attack. Just in case, however, he might want to fly out to the New York branch on the day of the occurrence seeing as how he had been the liaison between CENFS and Stanner all week.

“There really is no other option,” Devreaux had said just yesterday, sliding an airline ticket package across the desk at Peterson. “I don't know what the man is thinking.”

“He wants the watch as his own,” Peterson had replied. “That's all I can figure. As far as he's concerned, his use for us is done.”

Peterson had reminded Stanner about the contracts he had signed. Stanner had argued loopholes, and CENFS's lawyer had done the same. The case was likely to be tied up in court for years. In the meantime, how many other Stanners, strictly in this universe, working in the same field, might be spurred to leap forward in their research by the publicity of this lawsuit, a window of opportunity opened for everyone but Exaucer Labs by Exaucer Labs.

Peterson's offers of compromise had been spurned by Stanner. When Stanner cut off all communication, Devreaux made his decision.

“You might want to know if the damned thing actually works,” Peterson said, glancing over the airline ticket, then slipping it into his breast pocket, “before doing anything you can't undo.”

“Oh, we have faith in Stanner. If we didn't, we wouldn't have funded him in the first place. You might want to give

New York a look at the thing, though. It's your excuse for going out there, after all."

The lead box followed the airline ticket's journey across the desktop, making a heavy grating sound. Peterson did not reach out for it.

"But, what if it does turn out to be a bunch of hooey?"

"It won't."

"A man's life—"

"I told you, we believe in Stanner. And—" Devreaux narrowed his eyes. "—I was under the impression you did, as well."

Peterson certainly did now. The night's cold caused him to shiver, and he closed the hotel room's window. As elated as he was, he felt suddenly overcome with a welling up of exhaustion. He set down his glass, lay down on the bare mattress, and was instantly asleep.

* * *

The maid's knock on the door woke him at noon. Noon. It had been years since he had slept past seven. Though there was no reason to, he apologized to the maid through the door, opened only a crack, though he was still fully clothed. He nearly missed his flight back to Atlanta, had to leave the watch in his checked luggage (a lead box containing an oversized ticking clock emitting radiation was not the sort of thing one chanced carrying past an airport screener), didn't relax again until the box was securely sitting on the dining room table of his townhouse.

He showered, dressed as the sun was setting, and phoned Devreaux, who welcomed him back, then informed him that

Stanner had been found in his home dead of a heart attack. Peterson muttered sympathies. Both men let a moment pass.

"So," Devreaux said, "how did New York go?"

"Better than I expected."

"I understand some of our people out there are disappointed. They were under the impression you were going to stop by this morning so they could get a gander at the thing."

"Turns out I didn't need to."

"Good enough. You work up a report, I'll set up a meeting with the board for Friday."

Peterson sat at his computer but couldn't concentrate on his report. He was still thinking of Sylvia, had been all during his flight home. It wasn't only that he was anxious to share with her last night's experience; he'd always had the impression that she suffered through his stories waiting for a point where she could begin her own. But something about the occurrence had created in him an ache, a longing to be with someone, to carry on an unguarded, carefree conversation, even to laugh with a person close enough to touch. The fact she was his only option to fill that slot made him realize how very alone he was at this time in his life.

He went through his desk, found her New York number, carried it to the phone. As he dialed, he wondered what he would possibly say to her, wondered if the number was still hers. The connection rang twice, and then he heard her voice on her answering machine. It was almost enough. When the machine beeped, he, still having found nothing he dared to say, hung up.

He made no more progress on his report. The house was too quiet. He found himself standing in front of Stanner's watch. His experience, his trip, had been so brief, cut short because he had become afraid, just as tonight he was too afraid even to speak a few words into a telephone.

“Some front man,” he said to himself, pacing the house. Here, Stanner had traveled to other worlds, while he, Craig Peterson, had dared to pass only a few blocks north of Fifty-seventh Street. Some front man, indeed.

Peterson shook out a cigarette, poured himself a stiff drink, and disconnected the cable wire from the back of the television set.

* * *

The separation came more easily this time, the reunion of spirit and body more fluid. The room turned, and he floated up through the ceiling and into the attic. Determined to put fear behind him, he even managed a smile at the familiar clutter that filled the dark room he hadn't entered in months. Then he was outside and moving up beyond his own rooftop.

He didn't feel the cold of the night, though he could sense the touch of his fingers to his legs, even noting the texture of his trousers’ fabric on his fingertips, these very trousers, the ones he had slipped on after his shower tonight. Curious. He rubbed his palms together and could feel the heat of friction between them. He tucked in his knees, rolled himself into a ball, and gently somersaulted around so his back was to the sky and his face to the ground, then spread his arms out and drifted, feeling giddy again, flying higher with every minute that ticked so swiftly backwards on the face of the watch.

The grid of streets that was his suburb shrank until he could no longer chart them on the map in his mind. The entire Atlanta metropolitan area glowed beneath him, the flashing lights of its airport, the dark beyond its spread. Then, it all began to grow dim. Peterson braced himself, noted the time on the watch. He was only sixteen swift minutes backwards into a twelve hour ride to the next quantum world.

The pinpoints of light flickered, and were gone. There was nothing below him now, nothing above. In fact, there was no above or below, only nothing. Black absence of light.

Still, he floated, or imagined he did. He wasn't cold, wasn't hot, was neither hungry nor thirsty. Yet, his heart beat. His lungs expanded and contracted, though they took in no oxygen, as there was no oxygen. He could flap his arms and feel no resistance, fan his face but stir no air. He could tuck himself, again, into a ball, but not somersault, as there was nothing out there to reference a flip. In fact, there was no “out there” at all.

The watch was running even faster now. Another hour clicked backwards. Peterson held it up to the face of his wristwatch which was steadily counting forward the seconds as it always had. An experiment: he pulled the button off his left shirt cuff, flipped it out before him. The button turned once, twice, slowed, and stopped, suspended six feet in front of him, perfectly still yet traveling along with him through time and space at an incredible pace. He reached out for it, leaning in toward it, and the distance between them shrank until the button was within his reach and he could grasp it, hold it in his palm.

Strange how none of the physical properties he was familiar with seemed to exist here. Time moved in two directions at once, at two different speeds; he could create friction with his hands but couldn't feel it as he moved through space, yet it existed, as the button had slowed and stopped; and, while he felt no resistance, he was able to propel himself forward toward the button.

He flipped it again, harder, but it went no farther, slowed and came to rest in the same spot. He stared at it, perplexed, was still staring at it when a wall of form and light came upon him in a screaming rush. Though two-dimensional, it was huge, stretching infinitely in height and width. He was through it as quickly as he was aware of its presence, and then it was receding as rapidly as it had approached.

He reached into his shirt pocket for his glasses, but the pocket was empty. Cursing his luck, he squinted after the image, as something about the section he had passed through, though the passing had occurred in an instant, felt comfortingly familiar. But, the entire wall was already too far away to appear as anything but a pulsing blur, and then it was gone, winking away like one of those points of light.

Peterson cursed again. Not that he blamed himself for forgetting to bring his glasses; after all, he had never considered the need to pack for an out-of-body experience. But then, this was an in-body experience, as real physically as it was spiritually, and what more proof of that did he need than what he had just encountered: the physical limitations of his own eyeballs? Indeed, for the first time in his life he felt like a scientist, an absent-minded professor stumbling onto

the hardest truth of all through a combination of exploration, determination, oversight, and pure, dumb luck.

He checked the face of the watch. It had run past the twelfth hour and was still counting backwards. Could that wall of light have been Stanner's second quantum universe? And if so, how did one manage to slow down and get a decent look at it? Perhaps by resetting the watch...

Peterson pressed down on the stem.

The jerk back into his world came instantly this time. And while the beginning of this trip had been more fluid, his return was even more violent than the ending of his first voyage. He sensed being virtually slammed back into his bed. He opened his eyes wide, gasped air into empty lungs. His legs twitched, back muscles convulsed. His hands were frozen claws. Struggling against his own tortured limbs, he managed to roll himself into a sitting position, stared down at the floor as the rasping of his breaths diminished, his heartbeat slowed, and his muscles began to relax.

It was like waking from the most horrible nightmare, he thought, rubbing life back into his cold hands. But, it hadn't been a nightmare at all, had it, because, as his fingers moved up to massage the blood into his forearms, his eyes focused on the cuff of his left sleeve which flapped loose and open, its button missing.

He searched the bedroom, overturned the bed's mattress, upended the box spring. On hands and knees, he ran his palms across the room's carpet from corner to corner. The button was gone, that much was certain. Lost somewhere. Out there, where there was no “out there.”

Peterson remained on his knees, too exhausted to get to his feet. He crawled to where he had flipped the mattress, reached up to turn out the light on the bed stand. He felt his glasses there, beside the lamp, just where he had left them, and he smiled then, his last thought before falling asleep being that this meant he would have to go back once more in order to clearly see that wall through which he'd passed. He had no choice.

* * *

When he woke, the bedroom was full of the gold of sunset. Disoriented by the time of day and the mattress's position in the room, he lay staring at the ceiling for a long while, reliving his trip, trying to make sense of its details. His muscles ached; his mouth was parched. Incredibly thirsty, he stood, groaning, to go downstairs for some water, stopped when he saw the light blinking on his answering machine. Four messages. He hadn't even heard the phone ring.

All the messages were from Devreaux, the first coming at nine-oh-five, irate, wondering where in hell he was; the next an hour later, calmer but colder. The third was labeled noon, a trace of worry and a reminder that the meeting with the board of directors was to take place in under twenty-four hours. Finally, just thirty minutes ago, Devreaux had left the simple message to call him, at the office or at home, as soon as was possible.

Peterson drank from the upstairs bathroom sink, drank and drank, ran water over his face and through his hair, stumbled back to the bedroom, phoned the office first, and found Devreaux still there.

“Where on earth have you been? I thought you were ... Hell, I didn't know what to think.”

“I was here the whole time,” Peterson said, still feeling elated in spite of his exhaustion. Where on earth, indeed. “Actually,” he added, holding down a chuckle, “I haven't walked out my front door since I left New York. Maybe the ringer on the phone is broken.”

“I sent Anne over to your house a couple of hours back; she said your car was out front but there was no answer to her knocks on your door, said she was at it a good five minutes.”

Hell, he had been out cold, hadn't he, and for so many hours. He wondered what it was about these trips, which took, according to his wristwatch, mere minutes, that could sap so much energy from him, and he longed to put the question to Devreaux, but didn't. There was something about the enormity of the experience that he was afraid he couldn't convey through mere words. He wanted to wait and present it for all its grandness in his report. Perhaps that was why he'd had trouble even beginning his report last night.

“Sorry, but I think I caught a bug on the plane,” he lied. “Whatever I took last night must have knocked me out.”

There was silence on the other end of the line, then Devreaux said, crisply, “I don't suppose there's any chance of your getting that device back to Exaucer tonight.”

The idea came as a shock; Peterson hadn't even considered it. “Not if you want my report in the morning.”

Another pause, then, “All right. I'll drive over to get you first thing.”

“You don't have to bother. I have my own car.”

“I'll be there at six sharp. And don't take anything else for that cold. I want your head clear for that meeting.”

“Devreaux—” Peterson began, but the man had already hung up.

He wrapped his arms around himself, looked about him at the corners of his own bedroom. Suddenly, every aspect of it looked unfamiliar, foreign. He lifted the receiver to call Devreaux back, thought better of it, set it back in its cradle. He was still so cold, shivering as he stood over the silent telephone. He went back to the bathroom, took a hot shower. The water, set as hot as he could stand it, boiled his flesh lobster red but couldn't warm his bones. Getting out, he insulated himself in pajamas under a long flannel robe. Then, lighting a cigarette, taking the dry heat of its smoke into his lungs, and holding a snifter of warm brandy, he stood for a long time staring at Stanner's watch, back in its lead box beside his bed, nestled in its crush of black velvet.

Return the device to Exaucer tonight? Peterson couldn't imagine. After all, how could he be guaranteed access to it again once it was in their hands? And what the hell did those loons on the board of CENFS plan to do with the device once they got hold of it?

New York was already upset because he hadn't let them get their hands on it. He could guess the kind of grasping and infighting bound to go on once he convinced the board of directors that the thing was capable of doing just what Stanner had claimed.

But how did he plan to convince them? A narrative of the experience would have to do in lieu of a demonstration, as any demonstration would mean passing the device away to any one of them. The device was built for solo flight, and so far, with Stanner dead, Peterson was the solo flier, along the line of the first jet test pilots or the Mercury mission astronauts. His one asset propelling him into that position had been his experience with transcendental meditation. But what asset could possibly warrant his remaining in that position?

Only his experience in quantum flight.

He tugged the mattress back onto the bed's box spring, set the television to snow, was putting out his cigarette when the ringing of the phone interrupted him. He expected Devreaux, and it took him a second to peg the voice on the other end of the line as belonging to Sylvia. She said his name once, twice. He pictured her as he had known her when on the phone during their marriage, in their kitchen, her fingers twirling around the cord as she leaned back against the stove.

She repeated her “hello,” and didn't sound as if she would again.

“Yes, I'm here,” he finally blurted out. “I'm just surprised to hear from you.”

“But, you called me,” she said.

Yes. He had. But, how...

“I got you last night,” she said. “On my caller ID.”

Of course.

“Craig, are you all right?”

“Yes.” He rubbed his temple with his free hand. “I'm fine.”

“Is this about the house again?”

The house. It had been the only sticky point about the divorce and only because it wouldn't sell at a price they could agree upon. It was the one thing they'd owned together, and each refused to stay in it, so they had found a renter and set up a realtor with power of attorney. Occasionally, however, something would come up that demanded their agreement, her signature above his on a form. Funny, he just realized now, how his only communication with her over the past year concerned a home neither of them lived in. During their marriage, it had been their sole shared focus, constantly in a state of change, from rec room floors to kitchen cabinets, bathroom fixtures to window treatments. He had no clue as to what its interior might look like now, had never seen the faces of the family currently living in it.

“No,” he told her. “I was in New York. By myself. I just thought we might get together for a drink. Or lunch.”

“I don't understand. You're home now?”

“Yes,” he said, staring at the snow on the television screen. “But I'm planning another trip.”

“When?”

“Soon.”

Silence.

“Just lunch.” His eyes shifted to the dark on the other side of the bedroom window. It was late. Still in robe and pajamas, he had yet to consider breakfast. “Or a drink.”

“All right,” she said. “Give me a little notice...”

“Of course.”

The line clicked, then she was back. “I've been meaning to talk to you about that damned house, anyway.”

Of course. The house.

The line clicked again. “Craig?”

“Yes.”

“I've got another call. I'm sorry. Is there anything else?”

He could think of nothing.

“You sure you're all right? Honestly.”

She waited for his response. He told her he was fine, and then she was gone.

* * *

He rose, up, out of his home, into the night, the departure so fluid now, so effortless. Unconstrained. He felt no apprehension as the points of light all around him dimmed and blinked away, as it was the space beyond them he was intent upon studying during his journey, his solo flight into the darkness.

He was no longer cold. All sensation was gone except for the superficial. It was like the droplets of shower water whose heat had burned his skin but couldn't penetrate any deeper into him. He could run his fingertips along the terry cloth robe and note its texture, but the robe itself no longer warmed him.

No cold. But all warmth gone, as well. His lungs expanded and contracted, but were neither filled nor emptied. Another experiment: he puckered his lips together and whistled, or attempted to. He heard nothing, felt no air pass through them. He brought his left hand beside his ear and snapped his fingers. He could feel the middle finger rub against the

thumb, land sharply in his palm, but there was no sound. He lay still (or supposed his did) and listened. There was no sound at all, just as there was no sensation of movement. Nothing.

But there had been sound, an incredible noise, when he had come upon the wall of light, or it had come upon him. He put on his glasses, which he had been careful to bring with him on this trip, and waited. Waited in a realm in which time did not exist, a realm which wasn't even a realm, as it had no boundaries.

A void.

A creeping dread coiled its way up his spine, and he felt the urgent need to touch something solid, something real to his senses, even wished he could feel the sensation of falling if only to experience the futility of groping out in vain for something to hold onto.

But there was something, some thing out there. There was that wall, that next universe. It held form. It held light.

And it now approached, growing up out of nothing, coming so swiftly, too quickly. He turned himself in a half pirouette to face it as it shrieked toward him, all sound, all light, stretching infinitely up, down, left, right. Still it grew enormously, so that when he passed through it, he passed through only a minute piece of it, passed through it in an instant, skin tingling, ears so full of noise they hurt, eyes squinting against the light. On the other side, he twisted his neck around to view it as it receded, the tiny portion through which he'd traveled already invisible, but leaving an image

burned onto his retina that he could see clearly only with his eyes squeezed shut.

It was his bedroom, his own bedroom. Seeing it only in a flash, the image remained frozen like a photograph, but fading, slowly fading. Though the television screen still showed snow, the room was lit by daylight from a world set twelve hours apart by the setting of the watch. There were three people in the room ... no, four. Two were policemen, and Peterson immediately thought of Stanner's “heart attack” and of what they might suspect. Except, the way they stood, calmly, looking somewhat bored, suggested whatever had brought them onto the scene was finished. And Devreaux was in the room as well, just as calmly staring down at the stand beside the bed. Calmest of all was the fourth person, himself, Craig Peterson of the next quantum world, lying on the bed, asleep in pajamas and terry cloth robe.

But not asleep...

“Its history may be the same as ours,” Stanner had said. But he hadn't known, had he? And the reason Stanner hadn't known was that, as he'd put it himself, he had only “passed through” this world, exactly as Peterson just had, unable to stop and view it, much less touch it, experience it.

And it was gone now. The image of his bedroom had faded completely. As horrible as the image was, Peterson longed to have it back, as all that was left was nothing again. And he realized that, on this journey, this path, that was all there was, and all there ever was to be. Nothing. Eternal separation. The void.

He opened his mouth to cry out, but no air passed through his lips. He grasped at his front belt loop for the watch's chain, found only the sash of his robe, clawed desperately at the robe's pocket.

But the pocket was empty.

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The Half-Way House by Frederick Irving Anderson

A Mystery Classic

Shortly after the old chimney clock struck nine, Grinder, the jaunty dog combing burrs out of his stump tail by the fire, suddenly lifted his head and looked keenly at his master, Belden, the bridge builder, and his good friend, Armiston. The pair were poring over chess.

The two men, in rough homespun and with neglected beards, were wholly unconscious of the sudden alert pose of the dog. Inside, only the muffled ticking of the old clock and the faint rustling of the fire on the hearth disturbed the silence.

Grinder quietly arose, on stiff pins. Something was on the wind. Something was coming up the hill. Grinder moved stiffly to his master's side and halted, expectant, listening. Grinder nudged his master's wrist with his shoe-box nose, and Belden absently stroked the great dog's head. It was incomprehensible to Grinder that these two precious foolish humans should sit here dreaming.

Belden, who was to build a bridge in the Andes, had come up here to his abandoned ancestral hulk to be alone and think. Oliver Armiston, extinct author, now living on the royalties of a past career in fiction crime, had invited himself, saying he would be cook and bottle-washer.

If this had been the old days, there would have been excitement enough in this house by now. The thoroughbrace coach, tugging up the steep grade, would announce itself with

a triumphant blast of the horn. The old tire-iron still hanging from its stout gallows in the front yard, under the battered sign of the Three Crows, would moan its rhythmic lament, summoning ‘ostler and maidservant. The coach and four, bound up from Hartford for Albany, would pull up at the gate on haunches; and the ladies would flutter in and gentlemen would thump pewter mugs on the cherry bar and drink to news, from north and south, which met here. But that was long, long ago. The sign, with its three crows dilapidated, still creaked on its weathered hinges; but mine host was gone, and even the road had stopped coming up that hill—or was little more than a torrent-gashed gully now.

“Queen check,” said Belden.

Grinder moved to the door and putting his muzzle to the crack, he whined. Belden rose to let the dog out. It was a nasty night; the drizzle was beginning to freeze as it fell.

Belden peered out.

“Isn't that a motor?” he said, puzzled. There was the sound as of huge wings beating the air. As he stared at a point in the dark, two ghostly headlights appeared. The car came on slowly, feeling its way. It reached his gate, passed it.

“Hello! Hello!” cried Belden, and the dog barked. But the car continued on. Belden ran to the tire-iron, and seizing the chained sledge, hanging there since the beginning of time, struck it a blow, and the moaning thing responded with eerie clamor. The car stopped and slowly backed to the gate.

“Hello, the house!” cried a voice; and then, “Where does this road lead?”

“Nowhere,” shouted Belden. “This is the end of it. You should have followed the river. How did you climb that hill?”

“Heaven knows!” responded the voice from the car. A searchlight picked up, in its luminous spray, Belden and the dog standing under the old gallows; then, as if endowed with a curiosity of its own, the luminous spray investigated the old gallows tree, climbed it, and came to rest on the battered sign of the Three Crows.

“Oh, a road-house!” the unseen driver exclaimed. “That's better!”

“This isn't a road-house. There are no accommodations here,” put in Belden.

“It isn't? You're displaying a sign, aren't you?” The voice in the dark became suddenly aggressive.

“That sign has been there for a hundred and fifty years,” said Belden.

“Read Blackstone,” retorted the voice. “He settled the matter of signs—just about the time you hung that one. I believe his dictum still stands as good law. In any event, I am not going down that hill till daylight.”

“I will not go another step!” announced a woman behind the curtains. Belden fairly cringed. He must make the best of it. Oliver came up with the lantern.

“They take this for a road-house,” chuckled Belden in his ear. “Let them dream on.”

Going on ahead with the lantern, he piloted the car down the overgrown drive to the barn. Two vague figures in furs got down.

“You'll find two bags in the rumble,” said the man.

“I'll take one. You take the other,” said Belden, smiling to himself.

He set down the bag in the kitchen and went out to get fresh wood. When he returned the man was drawing off his gloves in front of the fire. The woman was caressing the jaunty Grinder, cheek to cheek. Laughing, she stood up and let her furs slip from her shoulders, revealing a modish outline. Her hair, prematurely white, sparkled with tiny facets of rain; her face, as round and smooth as a child's, showed high color that suited admirably her vivacity. She held off the playful dog long enough to take stock of the room.

“Lovely!” she cried; and she clapped her little hands ecstatically. In the flickering light from the fire and the candles, with their delicate scent of bayberries, the room and its antiquated furnishings showed mellow and inviting. In her tour she came to the cherry bar.

“Is this the register?” she asked gayly, discovering an old book chained to the bar. “Are we to sign our names?”

“So the law prescribes, madam,” said Belden, opening the book at the last blank page. He took a quill pen from a drawer. She laughed, delighted, as he passed it to her.

“Who was the last one to register?” She read: “‘Jonathan Croyden, Gent., his lady; and two servants, one free. Thursday, fifth month, seventeenth day, eighteen fifty-four.'” She drew a long breath. “Eighteen fifty-four!” she repeated. “And I come next!” Then, with sparkling eyes, she wrote, in a prim hand, trying to match the chirography of the remote Jonathan Croyden, Gent.

“Business has been quiet of late years,” said Belden drolly. This to the man, who was examining the page on which the lady had written. She seized him by the lapels and turned him around.

“Isn't it romantic! Our coming here—out of a night like this!” To Belden: “I wonder—how did Jonathan Croyden, Gent., come, with his lady and his two servants, one free?”

“In the good coach, Lightning Express, madam.”

“Yes! In their coach and four!” she said. “And we—in our coach and—what is it, Angus—forty?”

“Eighty, I believe,” said the man.

She burst out, dramatically:

“‘Twas a wild night. Only knaves were abroad, on the high road!” Smiles played about her lips. “The landlord was a surrly fellow. He would turn us away! But ... we said—” and her dancing eyes were turned upon the man beside her—” ‘Sirrah, why dost thou display a sign? Dost thou not know that Blackstone—Blackstone—hath said that whosoe'er displays a sign obligates himself to provide food and lodging, for whomsoe'er may apply?'”

“I'm afraid I did labor under a slight misapprehension,” said the man mildly.

“My fathers kept open house here for a hundred years,” said Belden. “I could do no less on such a night. Have you eaten?”

“Oh, yes,” replied the man comfortably. Then, for the first time, he noticed the set game of chess, and he moved over to it and sat down.

“Ah, Philidor, eh?” he said musingly. “Rather archaic, isn't it?”

“We're trying it out.”

“Proceed,” said the man. “I'm interested, really.”

“And might I look about?” asked the lady.

“Just where are we?” demanded the man abruptly.

“Don't tell us,” she interjected, placing a hand over his lips. “We don't want to know.”

The three men lapsed into the silence of chess. The woman's little French heels beat a tattoo on the hard maple floor, as she moved from one object of adoration to another. The quiet became so profound that the three men started nervously when she asked:

“Might I look upstairs?”

“But, my dear!” the man protested.

“Let me give you a candle,” said Belden.

When she came down again, the game was finished; the three men chatted idly in front of the fire with the easy fellowship and anonymity of a club car or a smoking-room.

“Is there a ghost?” the woman asked, dropping down beside Grinder.

“I believe there is—a horse.”

The pair exclaimed in unison:

“A horse?”

“Yes—a horse.”

“But how, a horse? Ghosts are the residue of souls. A horse has no soul.”

“I don't know anything about that,” said Belden. “It comes to the front lawn, to graze, nights. It stamps. It has a dead

man tied to its heels." A loose shutter banged violently, and they started, then laughed.

"It's a bit of history of our family we don't usually relate," explained Belden. "This house and these lands—so the story runs—were won in a game of cards, with the aid of a mirror, from some poor drunken devil, by one of my distinguished progenitors—two of them, in fact; it was the wife, I believe, who held the mirror."

"Didn't the victim revenge himself?" she said in an awed tone.

"Yes. He stole a horse from the stables—one of his own horses he had lost at play—Oh, he had lost everything! He tied himself fast to its heels, and blew out his brains—and the horse galloped home.... They heard it stamping all night. In the morning, they found him."

"I see." She was smoothing Grinder's head. "Angus," she said, softly.

"Yes, my dear."

"This is the place."

"Oh, my dear—Please!"

"It is!" she persisted, holding up Grinder's head and gazing into the dog's eyes. "I knew it the instant I came into the room."

"My dear, I beg of you. We have thrown ourselves on the mercy of these two gentlemen; and I am sure they have put a very good face on it." He turned to Belden as one asking indulgence for a wayward child. "Madam," he said, with somewhat ironical emphasis, "is a trifle inclined to abruptness. If she sees a thing that pleases her, there is no

intermediate step between liking and possession. Evidently, she has taken a fancy to your ancestral hall, sir. I warn you."

"I have never seen another room like it," she murmured. "It has been in your family all this time?"

"Since 1789—since the lady manipulated the mirror." Belden was watching her narrowly.

"And these things?"

"They came gradually. Nothing in the last seventy years. You see, the road went away, and left our front door hanging over space."

"I'll buy it—just as it is." Her eyes were aflame.

"I must protest!" ejaculated the man, rising, and showing his irritation.

"I want nothing disturbed," she went on, "not even the ashes on the hearth."

"And the ghost?" Belden threw in.

"Oh, I insist on the ghost!"

"Did you look in the pink room? The one over in that corner?" asked Belden, pointing at the ceiling.

"The one with the great rope bed?"

"Yes. That's something else we don't usually talk about in the family. It may chill your enthusiasm. People don't sleep there. Several have tried. They woke up dead in the morning."

"Angus! Angus!" she cried ecstatically. She jumped up and threw her arms around his neck, though in his pettish mood he tried to hold her off. "Think of it! It's all here! A ghost horse—that stamps! And a lethal chamber! And this room! It

is all mine! I knew it the moment I entered." She turned to Belden. "What is your price? I want it now—instantly!"

The man's face twisted into a scowl.

"This promises to be an unpleasant sequel to a rare evening," he said shortly. "I don't know your name, sir; nor yours, sir," turning to Oliver. "You haven't asked mine. I don't know where I am. Strange as it sounds, I could not tell at this moment if this is New York, Massachusetts, or Connecticut. All I know is that, after being unnecessarily rude, I am the guest of a most gracious host." He turned to the woman. "And now you propose to take the roof from over his head," he said, with ill-concealed chagrin.

She laughed lightly. "You don't know where you are? What better could you wish?" she said. There was a moment of tension. Oliver glanced curiously at Belden.

"You are really willing to let her have it?" asked the man. "Forgive me ... it seems like sacrilege."

"On the contrary, I'd be glad to be rid of it. It's too full of unholy memories. Its actual value is small. There are four hundred acres of land—abandoned. Here is the house, as you see it—abandoned, too. There is no way to get here. You came up the hill tonight, sir, with fool's luck. On a second try, you would surely break your neck. You see the appraisal is largely fantastic. These ... things—" Belden said, indicating the relics of antiquity crowding about as if straining their ears to catch what was afoot. "For another, they might have sentimental attachment. Not for me! I never liked the place.... There is something, upstairs—in that pink room. I don't know what. But it's there! I warn you."

The woman drew a deep breath.

“Ten thousand, cash?”

“Too much—it will cost you that to build a road.”

“That is satisfactory to me,” said the man shortly.

“Ha!” she cried, as she fell on her knees and hugged the compliant Grinder. Belden rose and went to the escritoire. He wrote, reading aloud as his pen moved:

“‘For one dollar paid, I grant option of sale of the land known as the Belden Half-Way House and Farm, situated in the town of—'”

“Please! No!” interrupted the woman imperiously, in high-pitched tones. “We don't wish to know where it is situated.”

“‘In the town, county and state, of blank,'” rumbled on Belden, “‘—to—'” He turned. “To whom? I can't sell a place at Nowhere to Nobody.”

The woman questioned the man with her eyes. There was a slight pause. Belden abruptly stepped to the register and read aloud what she had written:

“‘Agnes Witcherly, lady; and her Gent. Both free.'”

“Grant it to Agnes,” she said; and Belden returned to the desk.

“‘To Agnes Witcherly, of the city and state of—’ Another blank?” She nodded quickly. “‘Blank, together with the contents of the dwelling, barns, outbuildings, including the ashes on the hearth. And it is agreed, in further consideration, that the said Agnes Witcherly pay to the Newsboys’ Home of New York City the sum of Ten Thousand Dollars—as from an anonymous donor—within thirty days from date. Signed, Webster Belden.'”

“Webster Belden?” said the man, turning slightly in his chair.

“Webster Belden,” repeated Belden. “Witness, Oliver, like a good fellow. You sign, too, madam. Thank you. Would you like to see it, sir?”

The man folded the paper, put it on the mantelshelf, produced a dollar bill, and handed it to Belden. There was a moment of embarrassed silence. It was astonishing how the atmosphere had changed. The man shivered; he threw some more wood on the fire. With an effort at levity he said, “I suppose I may, now. It's mine. Or, at least, hers.”

The woman, singing, mounted the stairs, holding a candle high above her head. They could hear her rummaging around up there. She came down presently carrying two bags, which she let fall to the floor. She went to the hall and returned with a fur coat.

“Is this your coat, sir?” she asked sweetly of Belden.

“Yes, madam.”

“And might I help you on with it?”

“My dear! My dear! This is carrying things with too high a hand!” broke in the man.

“You understand, don't you?” She turned to Belden.

“Perfectly,” he replied, taking the coat from her. She went again to the rack, and this time brought back Oliver's coat.

“I don't know where your caps are. I packed your bags—just the things in your rooms. That was all, wasn't it?”

“But—you can't turn them out like this!”

“It's my house! I own it!” she replied.

She opened the door. “The moon has come out again. It's freezing. I think you will find the walking good, sir. Thank you.” An icy blast swept in, tossing the ashes into fantastic eddies. Grinder stood waiting, eager. The two men stepped across the threshold.

“A boy from the village will be up early in the morning to clean out the furnace and build a fire,” said Belden.

As the door closed on them softly, Belden, turning up his collar, remarked to Oliver: “What an astonishingly coldblooded woman!”

* * *

It was four days later.

“Hello! I thought you were off for Antofogasta,” exclaimed Armiston, as the bridge builder entered his study. “No, I'm not busy,” said Oliver, quickly, as Belden looked inquiringly at Armiston's visitor. The visitor shifted uneasily. It was Parr, deputy of police. Belden drew up a chair. “What's the trouble?” asked Oliver.

“Money,” growled Belden. With a childlike smile he added, “Could you let me have a couple of millions?”

“As bad as that?”

“Worse. Did you notice the market this morning?”

“My dear fellow!” said Oliver in gentle reproof. “I invest. I don't gamble. I only notice the market afternoons.”

“It sagged again,” said Belden glumly. “Hit a whale, or something. Nobody seems to know just what. Probably somebody's got a toothache. I'm building a bridge, a railroad, a power plant. I need money. They said, ‘Wait—market's soft.’ I can't wait. I told them so. They,” muttered the

engineer, referring to some remote hierarchy of money, “They said, ‘Go down and see Winchester.'” Armiston and Parr picked up their ears. They exchanged a glance.

“Winchester is ‘Light-and-Power,'” explained Belden. “You may not know it, but every time you turn on a light, you do it by royal warrant from a man named Winchester.”

“Did you see him?” demanded Parr.

“I went there, like a fool,” said Belden. “Nobody home.”

“What did they tell you?”

“Oh, he's having a conference in Kalamazoo—or Kamchatka. You know what satisfaction you can get out of a frozen-faced clerk. The Chileans have got a time-limit on me. I've got to have money! I've got to find Winchester.”

“So have I,” remarked the deputy of police blandly.

“Eh?” ejaculated the bridge builder. Armiston chuckled.

“I don't believe in using coincidence in my stories,” said Oliver. “But occasionally in real life it is necessary. Eh, Parr?” He fixed a quizzical look on the old man-hunter. “It seems that several gentlemen, whom we may designate generically as They"—he shot a look at Belden—"waited on Mr. Parr last night. They had a ‘hush’ job for him. They explained that a certain mogul of the Street, at a critical moment, had casually tossed everything he owned over his left shoulder, including a wife and family at Coronado, and stepped off the earth—with a left-handed lady.”

“Winchester?” exploded Belden. Oliver nodded.

“They want him back. That's Parr's job. Not to save his mortal soul. They don't give two whoops for that. But to save themselves.”

Belden cursed softly under his breath. That his enterprise, involving thousands of labor, and millions of dollars, must wait on the mad hour of one weak human being seemed too ironical for credence.

“Would you know him if you saw him?” asked Parr. Belden shook his head and Parr produced a photograph from his pocket.

“Good God!” roared Belden and Oliver in unison, both jumping up.

“You do know him?” cried Parr.

“Know him!” bellowed the engineer, galvanized into action. “Know him? Didn't he let his woman kick me out of my own house four nights ago?” He seized his hat and stick. “He'll know me, before I get through with him.”

* * *

There was a dog howling. They had just crested the hill.

“Isn't that Grinder?” This from Armiston, in sharp-drawn exclamation.

Belden and Armiston started forward at a sharp run. Parr caught up at the turn of the road.

“It is Grinder. Under that window,” said Oliver, and they hurried on.

On the kitchen porch, half covered with drifted snow, was a pile of things, supplies left by the boy from the store. The boy had stuck a note in the crack of the kitchen door. It read:

DERE SIR. The eggs and milk are in the potato bin. I built a fire. I saw a rat. I set the trap.

“Made their get-away, eh?” remarked the sardonic Parr.

Belden threw open the barn door. The car had not been moved. He looked up at the chimneys; they were cold.

He and Oliver put their shoulders to the stout old door. Parr added his weight to the task, and the door fell with a crash.

The room was as they had left it. Her mink coat and toque and a purple veil lay on an ottoman; the chess book, leaves open, rested on its stool before the fireplace. The fire was dead, its ashes stone cold. With a curious constriction of the throat Belden started for the stairs, his companions shuffling at his heels. The pink room they left to the last.

“Damn that woman!” Belden was muttering under his breath, obsessed now with horror. He thrust the door open. A faint musty odor met his nostrils. The wintry light struggling in through half-drawn curtains discovered to them what they sought: First their eyes picked up on her little intimate luxuries of dress—a pair of tiny mules lying before a chair, a peignoir dropped carelessly across the foot of the bed; there, as if in serene sleep, lay the woman, one long white hand resting on the coverlet. As they stepped into the room they saw the body of Winchester, where he had dropped before the window.

“He was trying to open that window,” said Parr, in his businesslike tone.

* * *

It was dark when the old village doctor came, summoned by Parr, who had gone down to the station to wire discreetly to the hierarchical They, so they could make ready props for

the crash. The old man, his long beard and furs tinseled with snow, came in shaking himself like a big dog.

His eyes rested on the woman's garments on the ottoman. Thoughtfully he followed them upstairs; at the door of the pink room he stopped, sniffing. “Humph!” He took the candle from Belden's hand. “Here, eh? I thought old Jeduthalum had finished sharpening that ax!”

“ ‘Ax,'” said Oliver.

“Ah, there's the other.” The doctor swung the candle, and the great shadows of the room revolved with it. He bent down over Winchester. “Cyanosed—do you see that?” Armiston nodded, curious. “Didn't they know about this room?” asked the doctor.

“I told them. But—that woman! She had to find out for herself,” said Belden.

“Well, she knows now.” The old physician added after a pause, “I don't believe in spirits—but I like fresh air.” He threw up the windows, then joined them outside, drawing the door tight behind him. As they descended, Parr was coming in.

“What was it, Doctor?” said Parr. The old man shook his head, thumbing his beard. “Something that has yet to be solved,” he said in his quiet voice. “They have been dead for days.”

Belden was thinking of the blind blows the dead can strike.

“We must obliterate that woman,” he said.

“And that room,” said the old man.

Belden took from the mantelshelf the paper by which only four nights gone by he in a moment of absurd whimsy had

granted the option of this house and these lands to that woman, in consideration of one dollar. He put the paper in his pocket.

* * *

The afternoon papers of the next day carried the news of the sudden death of Winchester from an old heart affection, while sojourning for a few days' rest in the hills of Litchfield County, where he had planned to accumulate lands for a preserve. There was a distinct shock evidenced in the Street, but They had placed their props well, thanks to Parr. An obscure notice in another column recited the death of one Agnes Witcherly, a name that attracted no claimants.

"I'll run to town for a day to gather up loose ends," said Belden. "You and Grinder can hold the fort."

"I intend to," said Armiston. "May I prowl? Are there any family records?"

Belden produced the old family Bible and a batch of ancient records. Armiston rescued the eggs and milk from the potato bin. It was while he was thus engaged that Grinder made the noisy discovery of a cage full of trapped rats.

There was something almost providential in this discovery, at least to the eager mind of the extinct author, seeking for leads. He carried the cage with its cowering creatures upstairs to the pink room, and put a supply of cheese and water handy for them. Then he shut the windows and withdrew.

It was three days before Belden reappeared.

"What do you make of it?" he demanded as they smoked by the fire. "Nothing, I suspect. No one ever has."

“No one has ever tried, so far as I can find out,” retorted Oliver. “I want to ask some questions.” Belden nodded. “Two of your granduncles died on the same day—December 5th, 1844. Ebenezer and Jeduthalum. Jeduthalum was the man with the ax. Your grandfather, the surviving brother, wrote against his death, here in the family Bible: ‘The Lord is a god of recompenses; He will surely requite.’ What about that ax? Was Jed suspected of murder?”

“My grandfather always said he caused Ebenezer's death,” said Belden. “Ebenezer was the first to die in that room. The morning they found him dead, they went down to the water-mill to tell Jeduthalum. He had gone down to grind his ax. They found him dead on the snow—brained. A belt had broken—snapped like a whip—crushed his skull. But there was nothing to show he had any connection with his brother's death.”

“Then that same winter, Constance Hagar, maiden aunt, died in that room,” said Oliver.

“Yes.”

“And then what?”

“My grandfather attached no significance to her death,” said Belden. “Mortals do die in bed, you know—one bed or another, it's all the same. Still, they did shut up that room. No one used it after that.” He paused. “Wait,” he said. “There was another, ten years later. No connection—he's not in the Bible. One winter night, in 1854, I think, a no-account toper, Cyrus Whitman, crawled in there when no one knew—dead in the morning.”

“And then?”

“That was the last straw. Things had been going from bad to worse—road leaving them, and all that. My grandfather closed up the place, abandoned it. When my father came into the property he never occupied it permanently.... It's queer,” said Belden slowly. “I myself have slept in that room several times.”

“You have?” Armiston leaned forward.

“Sheer bravado. When I was in college, my father and I used to come up here summers, fishing. Does it surprise you?”

“No,” said Armiston unexpectedly. “I've got a cageful of rats up there. I feed them every morning. They seem to like it. Tell me more about this Jeduthalum. The chain seems to start with him.”

Belden combed his memory. His disjointed recollections came out in scrappy sentences: Jeduthalum was wild—had been a sailor, a gold digger, a traveling tinker. He had spent his patrimony, and would return now and again to cajole and threaten his brothers. His visits weren't all bad, however. Occasionally he would come back in funds, and bring some ingenious implement from the outer world, or some idea for improving the place. He had induced them to put water in the kitchen. He put up the furnace, an old wood-burning affair—an innovation.

Oliver walked about while Belden talked. When Belden ceased he continued his prowl from one room to another. When he returned, Belden was in the cellar. He had started a fire in the furnace and was bedding it down for the night.

Just before breakfast the next morning Armiston walked in with his cage of rats—all dead! He set it down outside, and regarded it queerly.

“Last night?” gasped Belden. Oliver nodded. The thing had struck again, while they slept.

“Now I go to the bottom of it!” cried Belden savagely. “This house must stand till it gives up its secret.”

“Does anything occur to you?”

Belden shook his head.

“I can make a long guess,” said Armiston. He turned at the sound of the dog barking. “In fact, here comes the man now who sent Winchester and that woman to their reward.”

The grocer's boy came stamping up the creaking steps.

“Son,” said Oliver, “what time was it when you built the fire the other morning—last week Tuesday, I mean.”

“ ‘Bout six o'clock in the mornin',” said the boy. “Why? Did it go out? I couldn't raise nobody. But I left a note.”

“No, it was all right—I just wondered. Tell the doctor we'd like to see him later in the day. Will you, like a good fellow?”

As the boy went off, the mystified Belden turned to Armiston.

“What are you driving at?”

“It was in winter when Ebenezer, Constance, and the no-account man died in that room. Wasn't it?” asked Armiston.

“Yes. What of it?”

“That boy, on your instructions, built a fire in the furnace at daybreak while Winchester and that woman were still asleep,” said Oliver.

“Good God! What do you mean?” cried Belden.

“You built a fire last night in the furnace. This morning my rats are dead. Do you follow me?”

“Yes—yes—”

“Jeduthalum built that furnace,” went on Armiston. “Well, there you are. There is something in that room—what it is I cannot pretend to say. I don't know. But I know it gives off deadly fumes when the heat strikes it. If Jeduthalum put something there to finish Ebenezer, he probably intended to take it away as soon as it had done its work. But the hand of God had struck him while he was grinding his ax. The stuff has been there ever since. Whenever the heat has been turned on in the pink room, someone has died. Other times it is harmless. Let us find out the answer. First, we will draw the fire.”

They waited until they thought it would be safe for them to investigate the room upstairs, then they went to work. They had ripped up the floor around the register when the old doctor came up the stairs, sniffing.

“What have you got there?” asked the doctor. Oliver passed him, on a dustpan, the fragments of an old box. The doctor pushed aside the pieces with a pencil.

“Jed really did it, eh? I always thought so. I've been wondering,” he said vaguely, “about that smell ... It has haunted me ever since ... I was coming up here myself to find out.”

“But what is it?” demanded Belden.

The doctor uncovered a dusty lump of some substance the size of an egg. “Cyanide,” he said, peering. “Heat it—to

ninety, or a hundred degrees—it gives off a deadly gas—cyanogen."

* * *

The Half-Way House still stands. It was restored, and a road built to it, and a modern heating plant installed. The shutters have been so well repaired that no longer on stormy nights can one hear the ghost horse "stamping."

The pink room is now a sun parlor.

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Unsolved by Robert Kesling

The security staff straggled into the briefing room, most carrying Styrofoam cups of coffee. It was four in the morning. When all were seated, Chief Ray Beame declared, “As if we didn't have enough problems with this national convention, now I have information that a couple of the delegates, who are ticked off with the party's new platform, plans to blow up the presidential candidate. Politics!”

“What can you tell us?” someone asked.

“Only that they are husband and wife who work as a team,” replied the chief. “My informant has narrowed the list to six couples who always travel by train. They all come from different cities—one couple is from El Paso—and are due to arrive here this morning, one couple every hour starting at seven. One husband is named Arthur, and one wife is named Laura. I want you to go to the train terminal and head off this potential disaster.”

“Okay, Chief,” said Tom Gunn. “We'll report back at one o'clock, hopefully with the guilty couple under arrest.”

The security team discovered that:

1. The six husbands included Donald (who didn't arrive at nine), Mr. North, Kathy's husband, the man from Denver, the man from Abilene (who isn't married to Helen), and the one who arrived on the ten o'clock train.

2. The six wives included Helen, Mrs. Queen (who isn't Greta), Mrs. Roller (who is either from Chicago or from Fargo), Carl's wife, Frank's wife (who is not from Fargo and did not arrive at noon), and the lady who came at seven o'clock.

3. Elbert arrived after nine and before noon.

4. Julia (who isn't Mrs. Queen) is neither from Chicago nor Fargo.

5. The three ladies who arrived after nine o'clock were Mrs. O'Dell, the one from Buffalo, and Ida (who arrived sometime before Mrs. Mason).

6. Mrs. Parker (who isn't Kathy) is neither from Abilene nor Denver.

7. Brad is not Mr. North, and Donald is not Mr. Parker.

The team reassembled back at headquarters. “Success, Chief!” declared Tom Gunn jubilantly. “We made the arrest and got enough evidence with no trouble.”

“How?” asked Chief Beame.

“Sniffer dog, sir. He smelled the explosives being carried in the luggage of the last couple to arrive in the terminal.”

Who was the devious duo planning to murder the presidential candidate of their political party?

The solution will appear in our next issue.

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The Mysterious Photograph

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Now Where?

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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 “October Contest,” and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

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The Story That Won

The April Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Michael Penncavage of Upper Montclair, NJ. Honorable mentions go to David Magnusson of Hialeah, FL; G. Rene Colls of El Cajon, CA; Daniel LeBoef of Lake Orion, MI; Art Cosing of Fairfax, VA; Georgina Robinson of Delta, BC; Dan Pawlowski of Oceanside, CA; Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, MD; Paul C. Low of Riverdale, MD; and Martha Jean Gable of Midland, TX.

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Through the Glass, Darkly by Michael Penncavage

It was the day before Glendale's Eighty-Third Petunia Festival and the O'Hara boys thought it would be great fun to cause a little mischief. Flashlights in hand, they made their way to the warehouse that stored the floats.

Ron, the youngest of the three, was carrying the heat lamps that would guarantee to dry out the flowers by morning. Clyde carried the flashlights, which he shone on the warehouse door. “This the one?”

Sam, the oldest of the three, nodded. “Yep. This is it. 4520-21.”

Quite stealthily they entered. In the pitch dark, Ron carefully set up the lamps throughout the warehouse. “I can't wait to see their faces in the morning.”

Unfortunately, what the three had failed to take into consideration was Sam's dyslexia. He had led his brothers to the wrong warehouse. 4520-21 was where they kept the floats for Glendale's annual Popcorn Festival.

The next morning, the warehouse manager found the brothers up to their necks in popped corn.

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Booked & Printed

Reviews by Robert C. Hahn

Florida may be a retirement paradise with beautiful beaches and theme park attractions and sports aplenty for both spectator and player, but in the hands of Randy Wayne White, or Les Standiford or James W. Hall, Florida is transformed into a breeding ground for powerful and exotic thrillers.

White's Marion “Doc” Ford has made the beautiful islands of Sanibel and Captiva into his headquarters for adventure. And the marine biologist with the shady past and the quirky friends ups the ante to mega-thriller status in his tenth novel, *Everglades* (Putnam, $24.95).

White was a fishing guide at Tarpon Bay Marina on Sanibel Island for more than a dozen years before he began writing this series. He displays an intimate knowledge of Florida's geography and geology in his books, and this information it is at the center of *Everglades* as Doc Ford confronts a cult and a plot that could alter Florida's Everglades beyond redemption.

When old friend and lover, Sally Carmel Minster, shows up at Doc's stilt house on Dinkin's Bay, it is not just to renew acquaintance. Sally's husband, Geoff, a wealthy Miami developer, has disappeared, supposedly fallen overboard on a fishing trip six months previously. Now, with her husband's insurance company facing a large payoff, she's noticed a man

following her for the past two weeks. He's even followed her across the state to Sanibel.

Before his disappearance, Geoff had gotten involved with a cult under the leadership of Jerry Singh, better known as Bhagwan Shiva, founder of the International Church of Ashram Meditation, Inc. Izzy Kline, a Mossad-trained "security" expert is Shiva's right-hand man and a deadly psychopath. Together they have concocted a bizarre plot designed to enhance Shiva's reputation as a prophet and make him wealthier at the same time.

Doc finds himself drawn into investigating Geoff's disappearance in order to help Sally; his involvement also forces him to examine his own problems. As Doc rounds into shape and the action heats up, White delivers a doozy of a plot that keeps building as Doc pursues leads that take him to Shiva's latest gated community, Sawgrass, and into the Everglades and to a nascent Indian tribe following the tortuous bureaucratic trail to official recognition. The danger to Doc and his friends and to Florida increases throughout, as White misses no opportunity to ratchet up the tension.

White has dressed his thriller up with the usual complement of Doc's unusual Sanibel friends such as the wonderfully eccentric Sighurdhr Tomlinson, who is not enjoying his current status as an international cult figure based on the resurrection of an undergraduate paper he had published years before. That is just one of the delightful touches that White plays on throughout the book. White's unique blending of ecological concerns, raw action, and

colorful characters has garnered an avid, growing audience and has never been more effective.

James W. Hall unintentionally launched a series in 1987 when his first novel, *Under Cover of Daylight*, featured a reclusive and reluctant hero named Thorn. The success of that novel led to demands for a sequel, and Thorn has proven to be a hard character to kill both literally and figuratively as he has been featured in seven novels prior to the release of *Off the Chart* (St. Martin's, $24.95). Also featured here is Alexandra Rafferty, the Miami police crime scene photographer who first appeared in *Body Language* and who teamed up with Thorn in the explosive *Blackwater Sound* (2001).

Thorn was a loner but his little house in Key Largo has become almost a real home with the addition of Alex and her endearing father, Lawton, who has good days and bad as dementia takes its toll. While Alex makes the daily commute to Miami for her job, Thorn ties flies, his specialty, and looks after Lawton.

This peaceful existence ends when Thorn and his property come to the attention of modern-day pirate Vic Joy, who owns various marinas, waterfront properties, and a casino on a stretch between Islamorada and Key Largo. Vic wants Thorn's property and doesn't care what he has to do to get it. Thorn never backs down. And while that is the core conflict, the battle threatens other casualties, including Thorn and Alexandra's strong but fragile relationship. Even Thorn's old friendship with Sugarman may be doomed when Sugar's young daughter is kidnapped to put pressure on Thorn.

The description of modern piracy on the oceans, as the high-tech world is adapted to that barbarous trade, is fascinating. Sugar's tenuous connection to his kidnapped daughter and the desperate and inventive measures he takes to locate her are ingenious. And Thorn risks all to counter Vic Joy and the threat he represents to all that he loves. Hall brings it all to an emotionally draining but satisfying conclusion that will leave readers insisting that Thorn take yet another bow.

Les Standiford may not have same name recognition as some of the many Florida-based novelists working today but his John Deal novels, from *Done Deal* in 1993 to the recently published eighth book in the series, *Havana Run* (Putnam, $24.95), are top-notch. Deal is owner of a Miami construction firm that he has spent much of his adult life re-establishing after his late father almost ruined the firm with shady dealings and a messy suicide. Now working in Key West as well as Miami, Deal's business is humming along, when he is approached about the intriguing possibility of getting in on the ground floor of a profitable rebuilding task. The reconstruction of post-Castro Cuba promises to be huge when it happens. Deal is offered a chance to visit Cuba to make contacts, to scout it out, and to make big bucks just for making the trip. Before Deal can decide on that offer, however, another is made that promises not only monetary rewards, but something even more precious. Soon Deal is off to Cuba where getting in is much easier than getting out, especially when you have no idea who is on your side. Standiford turns Deal into an unwilling double-agent, but Deal

acquits himself as well as any super spy as he discovers that Castro's Cuba hides secrets that are keys to his own past, if he can only live long enough to discover them.

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A Bonus from Jonas

If one were going to name the ideal qualifications for writing a how-to book on mystery and suspense fiction, the resulting resume might look a lot like Carolyn Wheat's. Her novels have been nominated twice for the Edgar and her short stories have garnered most of the major awards including the Anthony, Agatha, Macavity, and Shamus. She has taught mystery writing at the New School in New York City and at the University of California in San Diego. She has edited two anthologies of short stories.

In other words, when it comes to putting words on paper Carolyn Wheat is a master. So it is no surprise that her newest book, *How to Write Killer Fiction* (Perseverance, $13.95) is an accessible, lucid analysis of what makes a mystery or suspense story tick and the various approaches writers take to creating their stories. Wheat's dissection of the novel gives the writer a framework that works as well for cozies as it does for hard-boiled; as effective for romantic suspense as it is for spy fiction. Her discussion of what distinguishes the various types of mystery novels is first-class. Her analysis of the series as a meta-novel should be very helpful to writers planning (or in the process of creating) a series. Examples of how successful writers handle problem situations are useful as is the bibliography of sources. Wheat's book deserves a place on any writer's bookshelf.

—Jonas Eno-Van Fleet

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