

The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER 2010

**Pawns in
Perilous
Plots**

**Robert Barnard
Brendan DuBois
Nessa Altura
Harry Hunsicker**

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Black Mask

Monday, November 1, 2010



WEST OF NOWHERE

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Reviews

WEST OF NOWHERE

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Harry Hunsicker is a fourth-generation Dallas native who makes his living as a commercial real-estate appraiser. His Shamus-nominated, three-book series of mysteries starring P.I. Lee Henry Oswald (see *Crosshairs*, 2008) was said by PW to do “for Dallas what Loren Estleman’s Amos Walker novels have done for Detroit.” Mr. Hunsicker has also received praise for his short stories, one of which, “Iced,” is currently nominated for an International Thriller Writers award.

Danny the Dumb-ass fires once into the ceiling of the bar.

Plaster and slivers from a ruined fan shower the room, a slurry of dust and wood fragments.

I cringe, grip my pistol tighter, face hidden by a Ronald Reagan Halloween mask.

Rule One: The guns are for show only; don't shoot unless absolutely necessary.

"N-n-n-nobody move." Danny's voice, muffled by his own rubber mask, sounds shrill, scared. "Ha-ha-hands where I can see them."

Rule Two: Let me do the talking. Especially if you're a stutterer.

In the middle of the room, a half-dozen men in overalls and work clothes sit around a felt-covered gaming surface. The table is between a bar on one wall and a shuffleboard game on the other. Nobody else in the place except for a scared-looking bartender by the beer taps.

In the middle of the table: a pile of chips and cash, and a spray of playing cards, trapped by a circular fence of long-neck bottles and ashtrays.

Danny the Dumb-ass moves to one side of the front door and unplugs the jukebox.

Toby Keith and Willie Nelson stop singing in mid-verse. "Whiskey for my hors—"

Silence. The bartender is shaking. A mug in one hand, beer slops over onto his fingers. Danny looks at me and nods, apparently now remembering to be quiet.

I resist the urge to slap him. Instead, I flip the deadbolt on the door, stride to the table.

Outside, it's early afternoon and the sign on the bank

around the corner reads ninety-three degrees. Inside it's balmy, the narrow room thick with air-conditioning and smoke, lit only by a handful of neon beer signs.

"Put the cash in here." I drop a canvas bag in the middle of the card pile. "All of it."

The guy at the head of the table is about seventy. He has work-gnarled hands and a leathery face, evidence of a lifetime in the sun, most likely working the rocky soil of Central Texas.

"Boy, you are making a big mistake." He exhales a plume of smoke from his nostrils.

"Less talk, more money." I fire a round into a framed picture of John Wayne. The photo hangs next to a deer's head with a dusty bra dangling from the antlers.

What the heck; the don't-shoot rule has already been broken and my other wingman is a no-show. Time to crank this cash-and-dash up to eleven and get out.

Five of the six people at the table flinch and duck. The old man with the gnarled hands doesn't move, not even a blink. He smiles instead.

Danny hobbles to the table, dragging his foot in the special shoe, the one he told me would allow him to walk normally but clearly doesn't. He grabs a wad of currency and a manila envelope that sits in front of the old man. He stuffs both into the sack.

The old guy tenses, the tiniest movement in an otherwise

still room. Losing that much cash hurts. Danny doesn't notice. I do, and the old man knows it.

"The rest of it," I say. "Get a move on."

The other players shove money toward Danny.

"You know whose game this is?" the old man says.

"W-w-w-wouldja just shut the hell up." Danny's voice is louder than necessary. He jams the muzzle against the man's temple. "It's our ga-ga-game now."

"You nervous or something?" The old guy raises one eyebrow. "People stutter when they get nervous."

Danny's gloved hands shake. He doesn't handle stress well, not the best attribute for the sidecar on an armed robbery, even one as easy as this. Sometimes, however, you've got to run with whoever's on the playground, even if he comes to school on the short bus and has one leg longer than the other.

The old man shrugs. He stares at me. His eyes seem to pierce my mask.

Danny scoops up the rest of the money with his free hand, shoves it in the bag.

Lots of high-denomination bills, a big game. The stopwatch in my head says we've been inside for about fifteen seconds. Another fifteen to wrap things up, and we'll be in the stolen pickup just outside the front entrance.

Danny limps toward the door, sack in hand.

"Don't anybody be stupid." I back away, weapon pointing at

the men. "It's just money."

Danny is at the entrance when the back door we'd locked earlier opens.

A woman in her mid thirties wearing a denim miniskirt and a halter top bounces in, cigarette dangling between her lips.

Everybody turns her way.

She stares at me and screams, a keening sound like the gates of hell just opened up for an instant or maybe American Idol has been canceled. The cigarette falls to the floor.

Danny startles. Fires his pistol again for no apparent reason. The bullet hits the floor.

Several of the men at the table jump up. The bartender reaches under the bar.

The old guy moves faster than everybody. A gun appears in his hand. An orange spit of flame. BOOM. The bullet hits the wall about a foot from my head.

In the same movement, I fire twice and turn to the door. I'm not really aiming, only pointing in the general direction of the table, hoping not to hit anybody, especially the girl, just trying to make the old man quit shooting.

Another round hits the wall near my face. Shouts from behind me. A grunt of pain, too, maybe.

I grab Danny, push him outside. Slam the door behind us.

The joint is on a side street in a little town in the Texas Hill Country, between an antique shop that's always closed for lunch

and an abandoned feed store. No traffic or people visible. Yet.

I rip off the mask and blink at the sun. From the cardboard box we've left sitting by the front of the bar, I grab a battery-powered nail gun.

Thwack-thwack-thwack. Three nails in the door and frame, almost as good as a deadbolt.

Danny takes off his mask too. Sweat drips down his nose. "S-s-sorry about that."

"Get in the truck." I walk as fast as possible to the driver's side of the Chevy parked by the curb.

Inside, we buckle up, all legal. I head to Main Street, driving well under the speed limit.

"Don't forget Chris." Danny's tone has returned to default, a whine somewhere between petulant and pathetic. "We g-g-gotta go to the rendezvous to get Chris."

The urge to rip out a clump of Danny the Dumb-ass's red hair rises in my gorge like week-old anchovy pizza eaten too quickly. I reach over. Danny backs away. I mutter, lean back, keep driving.

We're in the clear so far. There looks to be enough money in the canvas bag to pay off a few debts with some left over to send to the kid and hopefully make the she-beast that is my ex-wife go away.

A sheriff's car idles by in the other direction. The driver's window is down and a uniformed guy who looks like Jabba the

Hutt but bigger sits behind the wheel. He pays us no mind.

I don't look at him either. I keep my hands at ten and two on the wheel. At the next stop sign, I turn toward the rendezvous point, the parking lot of the Baptist church. A few moments later, we stop by a Dumpster behind the sanctuary, windows down. The air stinks of grease from the trash and a charcoal fire nearby.

Thirty nervous seconds stretch to a panic-filled minute before Chris appears, running around the corner of the church.

She's wearing a denim skirt and a halter top, the girl from the bar, our lookout who was supposed to be inside before we got there, sending a text or three on the situation.

"Sorry I was late." She hops in, scoots Danny between us. "But I dropped the key to the back door and then my parole officer called. Figured I'd scream to distract everybody."

"That's okay, Chrissie." Danny smiles, a goofy look on his face. "It's all good."

Danny would give another inch from his bad leg if she'd acknowledge him as something more than a lopsided stump with eyes. He'd give his entire leg if she'd sleep with him. Chrissie, who's made a career out of going to bed with authority figures and dope-addled musicians, would rather French-kiss an armadillo than let Danny touch her.

I pull away from the Dumpster, marveling at the stupidity of my cohorts.

"The old guy's hurt." Chrissie lights a cigarette. "One of your shots hit him in the gut."

"All good" just morphed into something less, more like "all screwed."

"W-w-w-what are we gonna do?" Danny looks at me. "That guy said the operation was connected."

"Somebody owned that game?" Chrissie leans forward, stares at me. "I thought this was an indie?"

I don't reply, trying to process it all. Only so many people who could control a poker table like that, none of them folks you want to mess with. One in particular is especially vigilant when it comes to keeping a watch on his investments: Sinclair, a psychopathic Pole whose problem-solving techniques start with a blowtorch and then get nasty.

"Jesus H." Chrissie flicks her cigarette out the window. "I thought that guy was familiar. I've seen him before. In Waco."

I keep driving, vision tunneling at the news. We pass the city-limit sign on a narrow two-lane farm-to-market road that heads west.

"Waco?" Danny starts to shake.

Waco is Sinclair's base. Which means the game we just robbed was his.

And so was the guy I had shot.

Houston belongs to what's left of the Italian mob, mostly the aging wise guys based in Louisiana. Dallas has gone from an

independent region controlled by local mom-and-pop thugs to being run by the Russians advancing across the country from the East Coast. The border region, everything from the Rio Grande to San Antonio, is controlled by the Cartels.

That leaves Central Texas, the swath of foothills and blackland prairie between Dallas and the Alamo.

The heartland of the Lone Star State belongs to the Bohunk Mafia, the descendants of the Central European immigrants who arrived in the middle of the nineteenth century. The Krauts and Slovaks, Czechs and Poles. In addition to a taste for beer and sausage, they brought the vices of the motherland: whores and gambling, numbers rackets that appealed to their Teutonic sense of order. And a wicked style of loan-sharking picked up over the years from the Jews as they herded them into the ghettos.

The three of us are Czechs from the same town, a little place near the Brazos River famed for its oompah band, sausage house, and second-generation meth labs, the latter of which are run by Chrissie's family. We grew up together and—if we'd stayed in school—would have graduated in the same class, coming up on twenty years ago.

We used to work for the Nemeceks, a local crew recently dispersed by prison and a nasty strain of syphilis too long untreated. I was muscle and transport, moving the weekly take to a friendly bank in Austin. Chrissie ran a strip club and hotsheet joint by the interstate. Danny, dumb as cut hair, worked

as the point guy at a Nemecek dope operation, essentially directing customers to the right aisle of the store, sort of like a greeter at Wal-Mart.

But that was then. Now we are scared and a long way from home, cruising down a farm-to-market road in the western fringes of Central Texas, open territory, or so we thought. The terrain itself is sparse, rocky outcroppings topped with cedars, craggy hills that jut from barren pastures. Wood and stone farmhouses bleached by the elements.

Chrissie pounds the dash with both palms. She is angry.

"Sinclair," she says. "What the fricassee do we do now?"

My cell rings. The caller ID shows the number of an attorney in Dallas, a rabid weasel hired by my ex to get even on the child support. I turn the ringer off.

"We don't know it was his game for sure." I turn onto a gravel road that leads to a grove of wind-stunted live oaks. "Let's keep a positive thought."

The truck shimmies over rain-carved ruts in the caliche surface.

"Don't worry, Chrissie. I-I-I'll take care of you." Danny bounces, presses against her shoulder, then chest. He doesn't bounce back.

"Are you copping a feel, you little pervert?" She elbows him in the ribs.

Danny yelps, jumps away.

On the other side of the live oak trees is a clearing at the base of a small hill. A double-wide trailer with a rotting wooden deck sits in the middle of the open area. The sides are faded metal, once white, half of the windows either broken or weathered plywood.

“Nice place.” I park by a rusted-out barrel smoker.

“You wanted somewhere to lie low.” Chrissie flings open the passenger door. “Next time I’ll get us a suite at the Motel Six.”

We navigate the crumbling steps to the front of the trailer. Step inside.

The interior has orange shag carpet that smells like cat piss. A purple leather sectional sofa. Avocado green tile in the kitchen area. Through the back window I can see a shed and a narrow path leading around the hill.

I sit on the sofa, dump the contents of the canvas bag onto the wagon-wheel coffee table.

A pile of currency dotted with the occasional chip and scrap of paper. And the envelope.

Danny offers to count.

“No offense, Dumbo.” Chrissie rolls her eyes. “But two plus two does not equal ‘a bunch more than two.’”

Danny looks like she just kicked him in the nuts.

“Go outside.” I point to the door. “Keep watch.”

“I can do ’rithmetic, you know.” He puffs up his chest. “I’m

not s-s-s-stupid.”

“Add up how long you’d last with Sinclair making s’mores out of your fingers.” I throw a handful of chips at him. “Now get outside.”

He grumbles, limps out.

I sort and then count. Twenties and fifties and the occasional ten-spot. And lots of hundreds. I open the manila envelope that had been sitting in front of the old guy and dump out another ginormous pile of c-notes. Chrissie licks her lips, smokes.

“Holy crap.” I gulp at the final tally. “There’s over sixty grand here.”

“And this.” Chrissie holds up a key that looks like the kind used to lock a storage locker at a bus station.

The key had been in the envelope.

“What do you think it goes to?” Chrissie purses her lips.

“Beats me.” I’d been expecting a take somewhere around five thousand.

Chrissie drops the key on the pile of money. She takes the envelope and discarded scraps of paper and chips into the kitchen, drops them in the trash. When she comes back, she carries two bottles of Bud Light.

“We can’t stay here.” I accept a beer. “That’s too much cash. They’re gonna come looking.”

“This place belongs to my cousin.” Chrissie takes a drink.

"No way Sinclair can find us here."

"Let's go west." I check the magazine in my pistol, sorry not to have brought more bullets.

"You ever been west?" she says.

I don't reply. Neither Chrissie nor Danny has ever left Texas. I've been the farthest. I've seen the ocean at Galveston twice, New Orleans once.

"We're west of nowhere already," she says. "And look what's happened to us."

We could head toward California, but where? And then what do we do?

"They won't find us," I say more to myself than to her.

Chrissie shakes her head, drinks beer. "I'm gonna call my parole officer, see if he can get me in one of those witness protection programs."

I head to the back. In the narrow confines of the bathroom, my cell vibrates, a text message from a number in the Waco area code.

Give me envelope & ur partners. u can keep cash. Sinclair.

That didn't take long. Who knew it would be so easy to track down a stuttering gimp of a stickup guy and his partners?

I flush, walk to the living area.

Chrissie is still sitting on the couch. She holds her cell phone like it's hot, looking at the front door, an expression of

shock on her face.

Danny stands in the entryway, his cell in one hand, pistol in the other.

“S-s-sit by her.” He aims at me.

“Easy, partner.” I raise my hands. “Let’s be cool.”

“The mo-mo-money’s mine.” He wags the phone at me. “And Sinclair gets you two.”

When I was about twelve—right before he left to get some Skoal and never came back—my old man told me to look out for Danny the Dumb-ass.

“Anybody that stupid’s gonna need all the help he can get.” Pop cuffed me on the head and walked out.

I suppose, looking back, I was a little unclear on the concept, because later that week some buddies and I knocked over a Porta-Potty while Danny was inside taking a dump. Seemed like a good idea at the time.

Danny no longer looks stupid and befuddled. He looks angry. Hope he’s forgotten about the Porta-Potty.

“Go in the kitchen.” He waves the pistol. “Both of you.”

“You just told me to sit down.” I point to the sofa.

Chrissie nods in agreement. Her face is white.

Danny—saddled with the unfortunate nickname since grade school—frowns.

Chrissie and I don’t move. Sweat beads on my forehead.

Danny's frown morphs into something else, a dark spot on the far side of his soul, the cold and brittle crevice where thirty years of insults and playground beatings have been brewing.

His mouth twitches, eyes darken. He grips the pistol tighter, knuckles turning white, muzzle shaking.

"I got the same message from Sinclair." I hold up my phone. "He's on to us."

Danny's eyes narrow, finger tightens on the trigger.

"Ah jeez, c'mon, Danny. Don't shoot us." Chrissie holds up her hands, voice panicky. "We're your friends."

"F-f-friends?" He limps inside. "You treat me like d-d-dirt."

Neither of us respond.

"How much?" He points to the money.

"A lot." I ease a step closer. "Enough to get us gone from this part of the world."

Danny stops by the table. "Where's the envelope?"

"In the trash." Chrissie points to the kitchen, obviously ignoring the key that sits next to her pack of Capris, a few inches from the pile of cash.

Danny turns that way but hesitates. Indecision etches itself across his face.

"Put your piece on the table." He waves his gun at my waistband. "And get the envelope."

"He's not gonna let any of us go," I say. "He's just playing us

against each other.”

“Nuh-uh.” Danny shakes his head. “He’s gonna give me a job, a full-time gig at one of his cathouses.”

Sinclair is not stupid. He’s offered the two things most important to Danny: steady employment and women who have no choice but to pay attention to him.

My phone is still in my hand. It buzzes again.

The same Waco number: too late, sucker.

“He’s lying to you.” Chrissie stands.

“Shut up.” Danny’s face is red, mottled like a moldy tomato. “SHUTTHEHELLUP.”

His phone buzzes, a text message. He looks at the screen and his face turns gray.

I lunge across the small living area, grab for his gun.

He lets me take it, offers no resistance.

Chrissie runs to the door, slams it shut. Her phone rings, a call coming in. She looks at the screen. “It’s my cousin.”

Danny stares at me, a blank look on his face. He seems to get smaller, shoulders falling in on themselves.

“Why are you calling?” Chrissie answers and peers out the remaining window, moving aside a gingham curtain. “I told you we’d be gone in a couple of days.”

The room gets very quiet, nothing but the low rumble of the asthmatic air conditioner.

"You told him WHAT?" Chrissie lets the curtain drop, looks at me. "'Course I know what a blowtorch can do." She rubs her eyes. "How long do we have?"

I throw money in the bag. Grab the key to the storage locker.

She hangs up. "Sinclair knows where we are."

Danny begins to hyperventilate.

"What do we do now?" Chrissie lights a cigarette, takes one puff, and stubs it out.

"He doesn't care about the money. That's what the messages said." I look at her. "He wants the envelope."

"The key." She nods, points to the item in my hand. "It was in the envelope."

A car door slams outside.

"We give him the key, then." I peer out the window.

Sinclair Wachowski stands by the front of a late-model Chevy dual-axle pickup, beefy arms crossed. He's wearing a faded pair of overalls and a wife-beater T-shirt. A large man, if by large you mean obscenely overweight, Sinclair would field-dress three hundred pounds if you were to gut him like a deer.

"Stay here." I hand Danny's gun to Chrissie, leave the money on the table. "Cover us."

To one side of the truck stands a younger, fitter man about the same girth but taller. He's holding a gun. His skin is ruddy and hairless, and he looks like a side of beef straining the thin

material of his sleeveless T-shirt.

“W-w-w-what do I do?” Danny says.

“You’re going with me.” I push him toward the door. “Safety in numbers.”

Outside, I blink at the glare. The key is in my pocket, gun in one hand.

Sinclair watches us descend the rickety stairs, eyes like slits. He doesn’t move except to work his jaws around a wad of chewing tobacco in one cheek.

A blowtorch sits on the hood of the truck.

“I didn’t know it was your game.” I stop a few feet away.

Danny is behind me, out of direct view, whimpering.

“Uppity Czech trash, that’s what you are.” Sinclair spits a stream of brown tobacco juice into the dust. “Your old man thought he was sumpin’ special, too.”

His accent is pure Brazos bottom drawl, as country as smoked brisket.

“I wouldn’t have hit one of your games.” I keep the gun pointed down, next to my thigh.

“Give it to me.” He holds out a fat hand. “And the money, too.” He smiles. “You didn’t think I was really gonna let you keep all that cash, didya?”

I toss him the key, try to squelch my anger. I think about the Dallas lawyer, my bitchy ex-wife. The son I’m not gonna get to

see anymore.

“What the hell is this?” He holds up the key.

I don't reply. My skin gets cold despite the heat.

“Hey, Danny the Dumb-ass.” Sinclair peers around my shoulder. “What is this bull crap you're pulling, huh?”

Danny moans but doesn't reply. He leans against me like he's gonna faint.

“That's what you wanted,” I say. “The key.”

“You're as dumb as Danny.” Sinclair shakes his head. “I don't want some dang old key.”

I blink, running through options, the adrenaline in my system making my brain mushy.

Danny figures it out, once in a row.

“You want the envelope,” he says. “That's what your text said.” He pauses. “It's inside.”

“You better hope so.” Sinclair picks up the blowtorch, points to the trailer. “Let's go.”

The envelope is not inside.

Neither is Chrissie or the money.

The door on the shed out back that was closed is open now, the storage space empty.

Sinclair takes my gun and watches us while his bodyguard, the slab of meat who'd been standing by the truck, searches the double-wide. After a few minutes, Slab-O-Meat returns to the

living room and shakes his massive head.

“Start talking.” Sinclair turns on the blowtorch, and a blue tongue of heat emerges.

“Chrissie.” I lick my lips. “She was in on it. She took the cash and the envelope.”

“That’s funny.” He turns up the flame. “Who do you think put me onto you two?”

“Chrissie?” Danny looks at me. “She s-s-screwed us?”

I nod, the fear a physical presence in the pit of my stomach, a lead brick that sits there.

She screwed us and good. She came in late and screamed so there would be no way she could be tied to the robbery. She arranged the hideout and apparently the getaway car hidden in the shed. She told me the key was important, not the envelope itself.

“Where is she?” Sinclair approaches, my gun in one hand, the blowtorch in the other.

“I don’t know.” I shake my head. “Honestly, have no idea.”

“That’s too bad,” He waves the blowtorch. “Because I REALLY need that envelope.”

I don’t say anything. All I can do is stare at the blue flame. The fire consumes my consciousness to a point that I almost don’t react when he tosses me my handgun.

I catch the weapon, look at Sinclair and his guard.

The Slab-O-Meat holds a pistol by his side but is not aiming it at me.

"You're gonna get that envelope back," Sinclair says.

I nod slowly.

"If you don't—" he holds up the torch—"then I'm gonna start on your toes and work my way up."

I look at my gun, afraid it's a trick. The magazine is still there, a round in the chamber.

Then I get it. Sinclair knows I won't do anything. I'm just poor dumb Czech trash that's been given a lifeline, a slim chance for redemption. His power and reach in my world is all-consuming.

I start to shake and sweat uncontrollably.

He smiles at me like I'm a three-legged dog, his face reflecting the utter self-confidence one gets when dealing with lesser life forms, a look of supreme control.

I grip the gun, think about bringing it up.

"That ain't the way this plays." Sinclair shakes his head. "You coulda taken me out a dozen times over the years, but you didn't. You're not gonna grow a set now."

I lower the gun.

"Just in case you don't get the gist of what I'm talking about," he says, "I'll give you a little demonstration on Danny the Dumb-ass."

Danny gasps, runs for the door.

Slab-O-Meat grabs him with one hand, holds out a skinny arm. His other hand brings up the pistol my way. Danny yells, struggles.

“Not like anybody’s gonna miss him anyway.” Sinclair walks toward my friend, blowtorch at the ready. He pauses, looks my way. “You ain’t got a problem with this, do you?”

I hesitate, breath caught in my throat. Then I shake my head and wait for hell to commence.

TWO WEEKS LATER

The darkness is all-consuming, even in the bright light of day. The permanent night that is in the center of my mind never rests. I have a tiredness about me that no sleep will ever cure, not even death.

But I do have a goal, and that’s important, according to the guidance counselor at juvie lockup way back when and a self-help book I read one time. The counselor had said, “A goal is a good way to break free from lowered expectations that people place on you.”

My goal is Chrissie, and I am as close as fleas on a pound dog to reaching her.

I stand outside the end unit of a motel a block from the beach in Port Aransas, at the north end of Padre Island. Peeling paint, rusty window frames, a couple of old cars and sand in the parking lot. A flickering neon display that reads “Vacancy.”

Early November, and there's only one occupied room and barely anybody in town, most places closed since the season ended months ago.

I grip the shotgun and kick in the door.

Sunlight spills into a darkened room that smells like cigarettes, burnt metal, and sweat.

Chrissie screams, pulls the sheet up to her neck.

A man in his forties with a week-old beard sits in an easy chair by the desk. He's comatose, mouth slack, eyes rolled back in his head. A bent and blackened spoon is on the desk next to a lighter and a syringe.

"Where's my money?" I cross the room and slam the barrel down on her legs underneath the sheet, aiming for a knee.

She screams and babbles, words unintelligible.

I let her cry.

The guy in the chair doesn't move, doesn't appear to breathe. He is thin, cheeks hollowed. His skinny, needle-scarred arms look like twigs sticking out of a San Antonio Spurs T-shirt.

"Please-don't-hurt-me-please-please." Chrissie shivers even though the room is warm.

"The money," I say. "And the envelope."

She cries harder, shakes her head.

I raise the barrel of the gun.

She holds up a hand. "D-d-don't. Please."

I stop.

She rolls off the bed, naked. Wraps herself in the dirty sheet, pads across the room to a dresser, limping from my blow.

"Don't try anything." I shoulder the gun, aim at her torso.

She shakes her head. Tears stream down her face. From a duffel bag on the dresser, she pulls out the envelope. She crosses the room and hands it to me. It's empty.

"Where's the money?"

"What money?" She wipes her eyes, sniffs. "Look around, willya."

A wallet sits by the bent spoon and the syringe on the desk. I open it. No cash. The ID reads "Joel MacIntosh, Parole Officer."

"He promised me we'd leave Texas," she says. "We were gonna start over in California."

"Where did it all go?" I mentally slap myself as soon as the words leave my mouth.

"Where do you think?" She points to the spoon. "Up his arm. At the dog track. Hell, it just blew away like the damn wind."

I read the outside of the envelope, the name of a bank in Atlanta, a phone number, some other cryptic marks. The information so important to Sinclair.

"Please don't hurt me," she says. "I just want to go home."

I point the muzzle at her stomach, and an anger blacker than the darkness in my mind oozes from my pores.

"Jesus please no." She shakes. The sheet drops, and she makes no move to cover her nakedness.

"We've known each other since we were kids." I tighten my finger around the trigger. "And this is what you do to me?"

"I just wanted out." She crosses her arms, covering her breasts now. "I wanted to go somewhere new."

"You finally got to see the ocean at least." I close one eye, aim at her face.

"I could buy my way back home with the envelope, couldn't I?" she says. "It's all I've got. Please tell me I could."

And then, like a light extinguished, the anger is gone.

"I'm sorry about Danny," she says. "But Sinclair told me he needed to make an example out of somebody, you know, to keep people in line."

"You're not fit to say his name." I sling the shotgun over my shoulder by its strap and pick up the lighter.

"You and me," she says. "We could ransom the envelope to Sinclair. Use the money to start over."

I smile, the decision made. I flick the lighter, hold the flame under the envelope.

"NOOOO." She lunges toward the fire.

I kick her away, hold the envelope up high until the flames singe my fingers and the precious slip of paper is consumed.

"See you around, Chrissie." I let the ashes flutter to the dirty carpet.

Two blocks down is the car I've left parked by the seawall. I leave and walk there, the permanent darkness in my mind lessening just a fraction.

The ocean is cold and gray, a line of storms visible on the southern horizon. The beach is empty except for a couple of people surf-fishing and an old guy with a metal detector. The air smells like sea water. Gulls trill overhead.

Danny the Dumb-ass sits on the hood of the car, watching a tanker steam by in the distance. I sit next to him.

"Did you find her?" he says.

I nod.

"What do we do now?"

"I don't know." I sigh. "Maybe we should go to California."

They say every dog has its day, so I guess every uppity piece of Czech trash has a chance to break free from the burden of lowered expectations.

Sinclair, of course, is dead. Every night in my dreams I picture the surprise on his face as I shot both him and the guard right before they went to work on Danny with the blowtorch.

"Yeah, that's a good idea." Danny smiles. He slides off the hood and gets in the car.

I look at the Texas coast one last time and do the same.

An hour later, we're on the highway by the cutoff.

I ignore the road west and point the car toward our place in this world, the little corner of Central Texas where we'd both been born and would die.

Danny doesn't say anything. Neither do I.

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Reviews

Reviews



THE JURY BOX

By Jon L. Breen

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BLOG BYTES

Bill Crider

Sometimes I'm attracted to a blog just because of the name. For example, how can anybody resist one called Rhys's Pieces (<http://www.rhysbowen.blogspot.com>)? It's the work of Rhys...

Top of Reviews

Black Mask

Fiction

THE JURY BOX

By Jon L. Breen



Back in the 1950s and '60s, when Wallace Nichols was turning out stories about Sollius the Slave Detective for London Mystery Magazine, few could have guessed that crime novels set in Ancient Rome would one day become virtually their own subgenre. Recent additions to the ranks of John Maddox Roberts, Steven Saylor, Lindsey Davis, Ruth Downie, and the rest are the first two writers reviewed below.

**** Robert Harris: *Conspirata*, Simon and Schuster, \$26. The second (following *Imperium*) in a projected trilogy about the

great lawyer and orator Cicero, observed warts and all by his biographer Tiro, will rank with the finest novels of Roman political, legal, military, and religious intrigue. The first part covers the year of his consulship, 63 B.C., centered on the attempted power grab of Catilina, the second part the period following, 62-58 B.C., in which Julius Caesar rises to power. Arguably more a mainstream historical than a mystery or detective story, it has more than enough bloodletting and double-crossing to qualify as crime fiction and offers prose, characterization, and narrative impetus of a high order.

*** Bruce Macbain: *Roman Games, Poisoned Pen*, \$24.95 hardcover, \$14.95 trade paper. Macbain deals with Rome of more than a century later, 96 A.D. During the titular festival of plays and chariot races, Pliny the Younger is assigned by the unpopular emperor Domitian to investigate the murder of Sextus Verpa, whose slaves all face execution if the real criminal cannot be found. The poet Martial also plays a role in an impressively written and researched first novel by a scholar of Roman religion.

**** Bill Pronzini: *Betrayers, Forge*, \$24.99. Four separate and substantial mysteries are investigated by San Francisco's Nameless Detective (call him Bill) and his associates in this latest modular private-eye procedural: an 85-year-old woman bedeviled by a possible ghost; a bail jumper; the true identity of Tamara's bad-news former boyfriend; and a shocking discovery in the bedroom of Bill and Kerry's 13-year-old adopted daughter. Pronzini does everything well, from fairly-clued

detection to superior action scenes to the extended-family soap opera that can be so annoying in lesser hands.

*** Joyce Carol Oates: *A Fair Maiden*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt/Penzler, \$22. Katya Spivak, 16-year-old New Jersey nanny, is befriended by elderly Bay Head Harbor resident Marcus Kidder, an artist and former children's book writer. Alternately impressed by and suspicious of her new benefactor, Katya wonders exactly what he expects of her. As in the author's *The Tattooed Girl* (2003), a subtle aura of menace hovers over every page. The reader knows something terrible will happen but not what form it is going to take.

*** John Grisham: *Theodore Boone: Kid Lawyer*, Dutton, \$16.99. In the first of a series aimed at readers aged 8 to 12, Theo Boone, the 13-year-old son of husband-and-wife law partners in the small city of Strattenberg (state unspecified), has his own office and an unofficial law practice for schoolmates. When Peter Duffy goes on trial for the strangulation murder of his wife Myra, the prosecution has a believable but shaky circumstantial case, and Theo has knowledge of a witness who could help convict but can't reveal it without breaking a confidence. Though the action is somewhat simplified (a present-day one-week murder trial?), the novel succeeds as education and entertainment for its target readership, and adults will enjoy it as well. Several loose ends are left dangling to be addressed in the inevitable sequels.

*** Michael Lister: *The Body and the Blood*, Five Star, \$25.95. Florida prison chaplain and consulting detective John

Jordan, a complex man of God who can be as violent as Mike Hammer (well, almost), investigates impossible murder in a locked and constantly observed cell. Meanwhile, he attempts reconciliation with his estranged wife even while yearning for his platonic girlfriend. The novel is solidly contemporary in its determination to pile more and more miseries on the hero but delightfully retro in its classical puzzle plotting, which will appeal to fans of John Dickson Carr, Edward D. Hoch, and other locked-room masters. Lister is one of the most individual and talented newer writers on the crime-fiction scene, with vivid style, ready wit, and a marriage of plot and theme.

*** Michael Lister: Thunder Beach, Tyrus, \$25.95 hardcover, \$14.95 trade paper. This is slightly lesser Lister but also recommended. During a biker rally in Panama City, Florida, journalist Merrick McKnight pursues his off-and-on romance with a strip-club performer while searching for an endangered girl from his regretted past. Despite extremely explicit language and noirish background and plot elements, Lister's protagonists (McKnight as much as Jordan) have a strong spiritual core and a stubborn resistance to non-marital sex. Two mild caveats: The John D. MacDonald-style soap-box tangents, rightly deploring the decline of newspapers and the exploitation of young women, should be better integrated with the narrative. And what's with the pretentious use of dashes rather than quotation marks to indicate dialogue?

*** April Lurie: The Less-Dead, Delacorte, \$16.99. Austin, Texas, teenager Noah Nordstrom, trouble-prone and somewhat

rebellious son of radio's Bible Answer Guy, becomes involved in the search for a serial killer of gay youth. The author's message, designed to encourage gay teens and raise the consciousness of their straight counterparts, doesn't get in the way of an involving, expertly told mystery directed at readers 14 and up. It's no fatal drawback that readers with sensitive whodunit radar—and mine was stronger in adolescence than it is today—may spot the murderer early in the going.

**** Earlene Fowler:** State Fair, Berkley, \$24.95. The Mid-State Fair, actually the county fair of California's fictitious San Celina, is beautifully captured with all its deep-fried, livestock-proud atmosphere in the 14th Benni Harper quilting mystery, set in the year 1997. A cattle drive through town streets to the fairgrounds is especially picturesque. Good writing, likeable characters, gentle humor, and an interesting background partially compensate for a thin and perfunctory mystery plot and what my cozy consultant calls the play-by-play narrative method, in which no move or activity, however mundane, goes undescribed. An outrageous press quote on the back jacket likens Fowler to Ellery Queen, Ross Macdonald, Sue Grafton, and Sara Paretsky, none of whom she resembles in the slightest.

Jim French Productions keeps the spirit of old-time radio drama alive with excellent original programming on CD. The first of two half-hour programs in War Comes to Harry Nile (\$12.95) finds French's flagship P.I. serving as air-raid warden on the night of the 1942 event known ironically as the Battle of

Los Angeles; the second is a neatly clued case of sabotage in a defense plant.

The Anthony Rathe Chronicles (\$12.95), three cases by Matthew Booth about a guilt-ridden former barrister, differs from most other British mysteries from the French stable: It's less lighthearted and set in the present. Daniel McGachey's *The Voice in the Smoke* (2 CDs, \$16.95) includes both a full-length 75-minute version and a 48-minute broadcast version of the title case, in which Holmes and Watson encounter a troubled young medium, plus a comic bonus, "The Estonian Countess."

Old radio lovers will also enjoy the multicast readings of the L. Ron Hubbard novellas *Sea Fangs* and *Destiny's Drums* (Galaxy, \$9.95 each).

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Next Article

BLOG BYTES

Bill Crider



Sometimes I'm attracted to a blog just because of the name. For example, how can anybody resist one called Rhys's Pieces (<http://www.rhysbowen.blogspot.com>)? It's the work of Rhys Bowen, and if you've read her books, you know that there's a lot of entertainment to be found in everything she writes. Her blog is no exception. I particularly enjoyed her comments about beginning a new Royal Spyness book and being in "terrified mode." I know the feeling.

And how about a group named The Sirens of Suspense? What else could they name their blog except The Siren Song. Just go to their website (http://www.sirensofsuspense.com/Sirens_of_Suspense/Home.html) and click on The Siren Song link at the top of the page. The Sirens are R. K. Olson, Chantelle Aimée Osman, and Diana Manley. They're all bibliophiles and they "weigh in on all things

writing.” They’re also willing to consider your questions or ideas for a blog post. Lately they’ve written about beating writer’s block, animals in crime fiction, and how much sex is too much. If that last one got your attention, you might just want to go to the blog right now and find out the answer.

Now for a couple of Pennys. Or should that be Pennies? I like Louise Penny’s blog (<http://louisepenny.blogspot.com>) because she always begins her remarks with a weather report. Since Louise is in Canada and I’m in Texas, it’s fun to see the contrast. Of course, the tricky part is converting Centigrade to Fahrenheit, but I’m getting better at it. Don’t get the idea, however, that all she talks about is the weather. There’s a lot more to the blog than that. She talks about writing and revisions, about kids and cars, about lilacs and laundry. Everything is interesting because she is, after all, a fine writer, and she recently won an Agatha award for *The Brutal Telling*.

The other Penny is Penny Warner (<http://blog.pennywarner.com>), who writes a series about party planning, but her blog’s not about parties. Or not only that. If you’re planning a graduation party, she has a post about how to do it, but there are also posts about writing, among other things, and I’m not including her blog here just because she quotes the opening line from one of my novels in her post about how much she likes “beginnings.” There’s even a post about allergies. I hope for Penny’s sake, and for the sake of all other sufferers, that the allergy season is over by the time you read this.

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Fiction



THE KILLING AT HOLYROODHOUSE

By Robert Barnard

In its starred review of Robert Barnard's new novel *A Stranger in the Family* (Scribner, June 2010), Booklist raved: "Each new whodunit from this highly regarded British master is both ..."



LOON LIFE

By Brendan DuBois

A writer who so impressed two other great EQMM contributors, Edward D. Hoch and Clark Howard, that each once named him among their favorite short story writers and possibly the best of his generation,...

INEVITABLE

By Jennifer Itell

Jennifer Itell earned an MFA from Emerson College in Boston before moving to Denver, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Denver and the Lighthouse Writers Workshop. Her short stories have appeared in a variety of publications, including *Redbook*, *Story Quarterly*, *Cimarron Review*,...

CHEMO BOY AND THE WAR KITTENS

By Brian Muir

The story "Chemo Boy and the War Kittens" has a special significance for award-winning film writer Brian Muir, for he has battled cancer himself, more than once. We're happy to be able to report that his health is currently good, and that 2010 is also treating him well in other...

THE CHANGELINGS: A VERY GRIM FAIRYTALE (BUT FOR OUR TIMES)

By Carol Biederman

Carol Biederman is the author of a number of published short stories and of a volume of related tales entitled *The Oldest Inhabitant* (Trafford, 2006), in which the narrator, the first person buried in a California Gold Rush cemetery, uses his unique position to tell stories of the hardships of some...



A PRAYER ANSWERED

By David Dean

Real-life police chief David Dean has a new case for his fictional police chief Julian Hall. EQMM has been publishing Julian Hall stories for some twenty years, but Julian wasn't always a police...

BEDSIDE MANNERS

By Martin Edwards

Martin Edwards wears several hats in the mystery field: He's the editor of many anthologies, he's a blogger, reviewer, and columnist, and he produces stories and novels, both series and nonseries, historical and contemporary. His 2009 novel *Dancing for the Hangman* is a fictional retake...

THE GODS FOR VENGEANCE CRY

By Richard Helms

A former forensic psychologist, academic counselor, and part-time college professor, Richard Helms has been nominated three times for the PWA's Shamus Award (in 2003, 2004, and 2006). He told EQMM that he currently has nine novels in print, two out of print, four waiting to be published, and...

Top of Fiction

THE KILLING AT HOLYROODHOUSE

By Robert Barnard



Art by Laurie Harden

In its starred review of Robert Barnard's new novel *A Stranger in the Family* (Scribner, June 2010), *Booklist* raved: "Each new whodunit from this highly regarded British master is both predictable and innovative. Barnard is comfortably predictable in that his plotlines are always tightly composed, his characters are created 'in the round' and are not just types, and his writing style is precise. He is innovative because his novels always feature fresh situations for him to explore."

"Oh-ho," said the palace assistant who stood in the doorway of Holyroodhouse looking across the forecourt with its elaborate fountain to the guardhouse, where the tickets were inspected. "She's here again."

The woman assistant, standing at the foot of the Grand Staircase, came to the door to have a look.

"Oh dear," she said. "Poor Gavin. Who's she got with her this time?" The male assistant shook his head.

"Someone to embarrass Gavin with, that we can be sure of. Skip up to the dining room and warn him, will you? Tell him he really should consider bringing the director in on this, get him to deny her entrance. She makes for a horrendous atmosphere in the palace, and it gives visitors a terrible impression of the place."

The woman nodded and dashed away. Meanwhile, and taking their time, the pair approached. The woman, probably in her early forties, had bronze dyed hair, a thick stucco of makeup, and a red skirt halfway up between her knee and groin. Her companion was shorter than she was, a roly-poly figure who was trying to follow her babble of talk while taking in the impressive turreted towers at either end of the facade.

"And when was it builded?" the assistant heard him ask.

"Gawd only knows," said the woman. "A bit here and there, I should think. I do know Mary, Queen of Scots, lived in the left-hand tower, but that is about the sum total of my knowledge. You should have bought a guidebook if you're interested."

"Why are w—?" began the plump young man, clearly wanting to know why they had come if she had no interest in the place's history. He wisely thought better of it.

"You should see the place when the queen comes here in June," said the woman in full, rehearsed flood. "There's inspections of troops, investitures, garden parties in the rain—"

"Pardon, Marge—what is investitures?"

"Like giving away titles and things," said Marge. "Arise, Sir Gavin'—that sort of thing."

"Does the queen always come here in June?"

"Always."

"Why?"

"Bugged if I know. Probably hoping for a day without rain. Not that she gets it. It pours, always does. Mind you, the whole thing is arranged like clockwork, and things go ahead, rain or no rain. Brilliant, like a pantomime."

"Have you been part of these festivities?"

"Not me. They'd never have given me a job—I'm too common. My accent isn't Scottish, which is okay: It's Cockney, which isn't. It's my ex who was involved—Gavin. Still is. It's right up his street. Anything involving lots of niminy-piminy detail is Gavin's sort of thing. He even screwed like he was a clockwork toy."

The young Bulgarian, who had been nicely brought up in Varna, looked a little shocked, but his companion did not notice

and marched through the door that was held open for them.

"Hello, James, hello, Linda." This was to the woman coming down the stairway. "Been to warn Gavin, have you? You know, it should be a pleasure to him, having the woman he once loved paying him a visit at his workplace, but the truth is he never looks pleased to see me. Sad, isn't it? Oh, this is Simon, by the way. He's Bulgarian and a history-vulture, so you can do your spiels on Scotland's bloody history—I'm not swearing, just telling the truth—to your heart's content. Simon is an ice-cream seller."

"Simeon, I'm called Simeon. And in Bulgaria I am a teacher of English, but here I drive a van and sell ice cream," said the young man sadly.

"Well, that's progress for you—getting ahead in the world. And it still involves children, doesn't it?" She turned to James. "He loves children. Beats me why he would. It's not as though they're nice to him. Just shout their orders, try to cheat him on the money, and abuse him for his accent. I always stood out against having children. Not that Gavin was all that keen. He was a teacher then. Puts you off kids, does teaching."

She marched towards the Great Stair and mounted it fearlessly. Simeon puffed some way behind, called out, "Wait, Marge," but was not listened to. Marge steamed into the dining room as if she had a coach party with her and could not fall behind in her schedule.

"Just a lot of old crocks," she said disparagingly. "I've had

too many old crocks in my life.”

“What do all these cutleries mean?” asked Simeon. “Why are they in that order and which cutlery is for what?”

“Search me,” said Marge. “Those bloody great banquets give me the willies. After ten or twelve courses they’re good for nothing—just bundles of lard, fit only for groping and farting. As long as you’re with me it’s pizza, hamburger, or chili con carne. Like Mae West said, it’s the life in my man that’s the important thing.”

At the far door there was a scuffling sound, and Marge’s face lit up.

“Hello! Are you there, Gavin? Still spying and peeping through keyholes, then? They should make a film about you. Get Daniel Craig to play you. He’s got what it takes, but I wouldn’t tell on you.”

She laughed a parakeet laugh and turned to go into the next room. It was quite large by Holyroodhouse standards, but Marge had to emphasize that she was not impressed.

“The throne room. You’d think it was the largest bog in the Western Hemisphere, but it’s not. These two unimpressive chairs are, in fact, thrones. You can tell the Royals have never taken much trouble when it comes to their Scottish subjects, can’t you? Some moth-eaten black velvet, a bit of embroidery, a back that doesn’t come up to the shoulder blades and that’s what they call a throne.”

“It looks quite impressive to me,” said Simeon.

“Gawd ’elp me, I wouldn’t want to see your unimpressive. Believe you me, most of the rooms are no better than this. A bit mouldy, a bit dusty, a bit this-is-the-best-we-can-do. Some of the rooms are just dumping places for unwanted tapestries. You can’t imagine any real person actually living here. Are you listening, Gavin? That’s what most of the visitors say about your precious palace.”

The five or six other visitors in the throne room looked at each other, and made decisions on whether to hurry ahead or hold back. Marge, pleased with herself, turned towards Simeon.

“I bet you have better big houses in Bulgaria, don’t you?”

“We have a big royal palace in Sofia. It is made of wood. It is used as a picture gallery since we became a republic.”

“Didn’t know you’d ever been anything else.”

“I was named after our last king,” said Simeon proudly.

“Never heard of him. What became of him?”

“Well, he became prime minister for a time.”

“I don’t know if that’s going up in the world, or going down. RIGHT—WE’RE COMING ON, GAVIN. MAKE YOURSELF SCARCE.”

They walked on, through two medium-sized, sumptuous rooms. “See what I mean about tapestries, can’t you? Who’d want to look at crappy old embroideries like that all day? This was Charles the Second’s privy chamber—no, that doesn’t mean lavvy, either. Think of all the work a room like this involves

for some poor girl. I don't suppose the second Charles gave that a moment's thought. People like that never do. They just think how generous they are to give the girl a regular job. Makes you puke, doesn't it?"

There was a snuffling sound from the next room.

"Gavin doesn't like me abusing the Royals. He's grateful to be given a job, just like the poor skivvy, I suppose. Fawn, grovel, lick arse—that's Gavin's natural frame of mind. Now we're not far off the king's bedchamber. Come on—you can't be interested in pictures like that—not gods and goddesses in a state of undress ... there's nothing worth seeing here.... But this is the bedchamber. And I'd have to admit it's quite a bedroom. All that pink velvety stuff, and the four posts so you can draw curtains around you and have as much privacy as you like. This appeals to you, doesn't it, Simon."

"Simeon. It is a very fine bed."

"I always feel it's not large enough. Charlie Two, my Gavin said, was a bit of a one for the ladies, and you can just about imagine three in a bed, but with four you'd be cramped, and if you're royal and that's your taste you don't want to be cramped. Still, I don't think Charlie Two came to Scotland after he became king. I expect that was the reason: He knew they didn't make the beds large enough for his appetites."

"It was a long way to come," said Simeon.

"I suppose so. Would they have had the royal train then?"

Not waiting for a reply, Marge made her clattering way

through a couple of rooms which she didn't feel worthy of a commentary before they landed up in a long, well-lit room stretching almost the width of the palace.

"Now—don't laugh—this is the room I call the Gallery of the Nose. See all these portraits? What strikes you about them?"

"All the people have large noses."

"Exactly. It must have been a bit of a status symbol in olden days. These are all supposed to be kings of Scotland, but nobody's ever heard of some of them. Well, the artist—the same bloke painted the whole lot of them, which is a bit of a giveaway, I'd say—he gave every one of them a family resemblance in the form of a long nose. It doesn't enhance their beauty, does it? Imagine when they have a state dinner here—the poor old queen having to explain why all her ancestors had been given that family feature, whether they really had it or not."

"So they have great banquets here, do they?"

"Yes—the ones that are too big for the dining room. Gavin is often involved in the preparation. You've no idea how finicky everything is, every little thing has to be just so, and that's over six or seven courses. Ordinarily you'd call it gluttony, wouldn't you? But I don't suppose anyone could enjoy their food in a situation like that. It would be all 'Yes, ma'am,' 'No ma'am,' and never a joke cracked."

"I can imagine the atmosphere, the elegance," said Simeon. "It must be very splendid."

"Oh, you've really got the Royal bug, haven't you? What you'd usually have at these dos is a collection of frowsty Scottish ladies in their best dresses and smelling of mothballs, and red-faced Scottish husbands smelling of Glenfiddich. And the poor old queen and duke nodding off to sleep with the boredom of it all. Come on—I've got a last treat for you."

She hurried him ahead through rooms she wanted him to ignore, and which he only managed to get a passing glimpse of, until they found themselves at the bottom of a cramped stone staircase. Marge stopped. From above there was a scrambling sound, a cry, and then steps.

"BAD LUCK, GAVIN," shrieked Marge. "NEARLY FALL, DID YOU?"

"Why do you hate your husband?" asked Simeon.

"Hate Gavin? Not at all. He hates me. I DESPISE him."

They began carefully up the stairs, Marge talking the whole way.

"These are the rooms Mary used when she had Rizzio around."

"Who was he?"

"Officially secretary. Really toy-boy. Do you understand 'toy-boy'?" Under her breath but audibly she muttered, "You bloody well should."

"That's an Italian name," said Simeon. "What was an Italian doing in Edinburgh in the sixteenth century?"

"Probably selling ice cream, I should think," said Marge blithely. "That's what half the lites in Edinburgh do today."

They came to a large room, rich in pictures, with extra portraits on flat screens and a burly attendant keeping guard. "Darnley," said Marge. "And his brother."

"Who was Darnley?"

"Mary's husband. English. Not long married. And a real plonker—just like mine."

"Which one is him in the picture?"

"Don't remember. Pick the one who looks a total dead loss and that'll be him.... Now, this is where they were on the night."

They had come to a stop at the entry to a tiny room. It was really a sort of window in the castle's turret. There was hardly room for two, and the inevitable closeness of the people there struck Simeon most forcibly. He stood, for the first time wonderstruck.

"Imagine," said Marge, "what the pair of them got up to in this cosy little room."

"They couldn't have done much," protested Simeon, "not with courtiers waiting and listening in the bigger room—here."

"Ah, but you forget, royalty does everything with the eyes of the world on them—just like footballers today. The skivvies see and hear them, the courtiers do, too—a snooty lot, I should think, then and now. So you couldn't do anything if you were worried about who was looking on at what you were up to. What

do you think they did—their foreplay, let's call it. Did they alternate in licking their ice-cream cornet that David Rizzio had brought up from his horse-drawn van?"

"I think you wrong about ice cream. Not invented then. You didn't have refrigerators then."

"You had the Scottish climate. That could freeze anything, and keep it frozen. Well, forget about ice cream. What would you imagine they might have been eating in—when was he killed?"

"Early March," said Simeon, who had been reading the rubrics.

"Brrr. Not ice cream, definitely. What about a nice treacle sponge? Both of them have spoons, they look into each other's eyes, lovingly, lustfully. And when the dribble of treacle slips down Rizzio's chin, Mary bends down and licks it off."

They jumped at a noise behind them. Peering round one of the screens on which pictures were hung was Gavin, and Simeon had his first sight of him: big, shambling, clutching a mobile, and peering through rimless spectacles at them.

"Oh Lord, it's my Darnley," said Marge.

Not much of a Darnley, thought Simeon. He did not say so, but Gavin saw him looking over to the double portrait of the Darnley brothers.

Marge was not to be interrupted, though, and once again came on in full flood.

“ Mary’s Darnley was followed by three or four macho noblemen, or clan chiefs, or whatever they called themselves. They no sooner got to this point than they took out their knives.”

“What did Rizzio do?”

“Clung to Mary’s skirts—and a lot of good that did him! They dragged him through this room and over to the Outer Chamber, and that’s where they killed him. You can see his blood to this day. But clutching her skirts! Doesn’t that tell you something? Lousy judge of men, Mary. Just like me, I often think.”

“Watch out!” came a cry. Marge turned. It was the burly attendant. He was running forward and pointing at Gavin. Gavin had drawn from his pocket a deadly-looking carving knife, probably procured in the dining room. The attendant ran straight at Simeon and tackled him to the floor. Then he realized with horror that Gavin was running straight past him: He had not been aiming at the foreign lover, but at his wife. The attendant grappled with the lumbering ankles but Gavin kicked him away and continued to where his wife was gazing at the little window-room with an odd smile on her face. She liked being fought over. As she began to turn towards her husband, disdain on her face, she felt the knife go through her shoulder and back. Running footsteps came from the poky staircase, tripping and stumbling, as attendants from the lower floor, alerted by the noise, were coming up to see. By the time they arrived outside the tiny love-nest Marge was lying on her back, her eyes glazing over, and the attendant had Gavin’s arms pinned behind his

back, the right hand dripping blood.

It was the material for a thousand stories in the newspapers and the weekly magazines for the feeble-minded. "Palace Love Triangle," whooped the Sun newspaper. "Royal Slaughter Gets Repeat Showing," said the Daily Mail. "Slaughter in Queen's Love-Nest," said the Express. It didn't worry them that the wrong person had got killed. Perhaps in their blundering, ignorant, sensation-seeking way they sensed that this time it was the right one.

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Next Article

LOON LIFE

By Brendan DuBois



Art by Mark Evans

A writer who so impressed two other great EQMM contributors, Edward D. Hoch and Clark Howard, that each once named him among their favorite short story writers and possibly the best of his generation, Brendan DuBois also continues to be recognized by the field at large. He is currently nominated for a Barry Award for a story that appeared last year in Alfred Hitchcock's *Mystery Magazine*, "The High House Writer." The New Hampshire author has more stories coming

up in EQMM soon.

The Honda SUV I had been dumped in had a handrail up above the door, to assist elderly passengers in getting in and out, but I'm sure the SUV's designers would have been shocked to see how it was being used this evening: My hands were in stainless-steel handcuffs looped through the handrail, stretching my arms above me. I also wasn't wearing a seatbelt, but I wasn't complaining. Earlier complaints about being cuffed had led to the man sitting behind me placing a 9mm pistol against the base of my skull and saying, "Shut your mouth. Just be glad you're riding while you're still breathing."

The man who was driving had laughed. I hadn't. Not much to laugh at.

And all because I wanted to write a book.

My escorts had taken me from a summer cottage I'd been renting along Lake Walker, in a remote part of northern New Hampshire. During my time there I had swum a lot, canoed, and learned about the wildlife that lived in and around the lake. But I wasn't some back-to-nature creature, and coming to Lake Walker hadn't been an accident. You see, a resident on the northern side of the lake was someone famous—infamous, rather—and after my layoff from the Providence Journal, I'd started researching a book about said resident, to pass the time before I had to find a real job, and maybe, if I was very lucky, to get a book contract before my severance package was exhausted.

But luck hadn't been with me this summer. My severance package was within a week or two of being depleted, and the rise of the Internet and the decline of newspapers meant nobody was hiring experienced journalists, so now I really was counting on this book project and the infamous resident to save the day.

However, said resident obviously had other ideas.

The SUV's driver took us along the main dirt road that circled the lake, and despite the uncertainty and the terror of being where I was, I recognized that there was also an element of the ludicrous in it all: Within several yards of me as we drove along were people who were having a barbeque or were watching the Red Sox or playing Scrabble with their grandchildren, and they had no idea that a man was going by in a Honda, handcuffed, with a 9mm pistol pointed at the back of his head.

The motto of this odd state is Live Free or Die. I was hoping the evening would end with me following the first half of this saying, and not the second.

After a while the number of houses and cottages thinned out, and those remaining looked as if they belonged in a pricier neighborhood. I'd only been on the lake for a short while but I'd quickly learned about the conflict between those who liked having small homes and cottages along the lakefront and those who feel there's nothing wrong with building a three-story mansion and cutting down all the surrounding trees. And the

funny thing is, this argument isn't always between old-timers and newcomers. Sometimes it's the newcomers who are most adamant about keeping things the way they were, and the old-timers—if they come into some money—who splurge on building something huge and overpriced.

And my destination this evening was the hugest and most overpriced house on Lake Walker.

The driver made a quick turn to the right, where two stone pillars flanked a dirt driveway. A tall, black, wrought-iron fence stretched out on both sides of the pillars, and the gate between the pillars was made of similar iron. From past experience, I knew that there were small signs on the gate—not legible from my present vantage point—that said NO TRESPASSING, NO SOLICITORS, PROPERTY UNDER SURVEILLANCE, but those signs weren't going to halt my intrepid driver. He pressed a button on the Honda's dashboard and the gate slid open, and after passing through the gate, another press of the switch closed it up.

And it was like entering some sort of playground or fairyland, for the driveway was now paved and curved up to the left, rising up to a huge home. Beyond a line of trees, a manicured lawn was exposed, and little recessed lights on both sides of the driveway illuminated the way. There were two stone fountains and a couple of statues of lions and cherubs. At the top of the rise of land, the driveway widened into a parking area, just before the large house, which had separate wings on each side, big bay windows, and lots of wood and brickwork.

The thought of having to haul all those bricks from halfway across the state made me shake my head.

The Honda came to a stop and the doors were opened. I waited. I let my fingers play a bit with the handle and roof. No escape was possible, of course. These guys—while not very polite—were very good at what they did.

The first guy reached up and undid my cuffs with a twist of a small key, and I got out. I wanted to show these guys how tough I was by not rubbing my wrists and hands, but I couldn't help myself. But if they had any reaction to my apparent weakness, they didn't mention it.

The guy with the pistol made a move with his head, looking like a nervous horse trying to shake off a fly. "You go in there. There's someone who wants to talk to you."

I looked at him and his companion, dressed alike: khaki slacks, black turtleneck shirts, dark blue blazers, polished shoes. "Really? Just like that?"

The first one shrugged. "Yeah. Just like that. Look, get going, or we'll drag you in, and the result will be the same, 'cept your clothes and your face will get a little dinged."

My wrists ached. After a nanosecond of reflection, I decided I had reached the "dinged" limit for the evening.

So I walked up to the large wooden doors, my legs shaking a bit, knowing that the next few minutes would determine if I would leave through these doors on my own two legs, or be carried out, wrapped in plastic. I nervously pressed my

fingertips on one door handle, and then the other, and then I opened one carved door and walked in.

Inside was a tiled anteroom, opening up to a large living room with a stone fireplace off to the left. The floor was polished hardwood, and couches and easy chairs and a couple of coffee tables were scattered about. The walls bore mirrors, bookcases, and framed artwork of flowers and landscapes. On the opposite side from the fireplace were French doors that opened to a balcony, which overlooked the lake. I could hear some of the night sounds, and from out on the cold waters of the lake, the haunting wail of a loon. From one of the couches came the next biggest surprise of the evening, when a woman got up and came over to me.

She was in that odd age range that could be twenty-five years in one kind of light, thirty-five in another. She was slender, wearing tight jeans, black low-heeled shoes, and a sleeveless white knit sweater. Her upper arms had the definition of someone who spent a considerable amount of time in the gym, and her black hair was cut close and styled by someone who had never once set foot in New Hampshire. Gold jewelry adorned her wrists and fingers, and she held out one manicured hand to me as she walked over.

"Stuart Rowland," she said. "So nice to meet you."

"Sure," I said, giving her hand a quick squeeze and release. "And you are ...?"

She nodded. "Melanie Caprica. I appreciate you seeing

me on such short notice. Would you like to sit down?"

I sat down in a cushioned chair with wooden armrests, using both hands to lower myself down. She took a seat across from me on a couch, crossing her legs in what looked to be a practiced move.

I took a deep breath, tried to ease the hammering in my chest. "Excuse me for being dense, but could you repeat what you just said?"

"Repeat what?"

"The part about me seeing you on such short notice. I don't recall I had a choice in the matter."

She gave me a pert smile. "I know Alonzo and Pat can be ... decisive when they seek to do something for their boss. I apologize if their methods ... were disturbing."

Disturbing. Cute way of saying that, and I decided to let it be for now. The hammering in my chest seemed to slow down. "So who's their boss? You or Frank Spinnelli?"

The pert smile remained. "We all work for Mr. Spinnelli. Just as you, Mr. Rowland, used to work for the Providence Journal in Rhode Island. And prior to that, a daily newspaper in New Hampshire, and prior to that, a semi-weekly newspaper in Massachusetts. And now you're unemployed, working on a nonfiction book for which you have no agent or contract, living in a cottage for which you've paid five thousand dollars for three months' rent, and your combined checking and savings account currently totals just over three hundred dollars."

I scratched at the back of my head, felt a couple of bits of hair come away in my nervous, twisting fingers. "Very thorough."

"Thank you. That's what we're known for."

"Among other things."

"Perhaps," she said. "But we're not here to talk about me, now, are we?"

"Depends," I said. "If I want to talk about you, will Alonzo and Pat come in and tune me up?"

She held out a hand. "Please. Let's just keep it quiet and civilized, all right?"

I looked around the house, at the fireplace and the fine furniture. Some civilization. "All right. Go ahead."

She took a breath. "We know you're researching a book about Mr. Spinnelli and his life. What I'm hoping is that we can reach some sort of settlement tonight where you agree to drop your book project, and we can all move on with no more meetings like this."

"Boy," I said, making my eyes wide. "That sure does sound civilized. And what would happen if I were to say no, and walk out that door?"

A slight shrug. "Nothing," she said. "You'd be free to go, and I'd ensure that you have a more comfortable ride back to your cottage. But I feel compelled to warn you that while you'll have a safe and pleasant evening tonight, I can't guarantee the rest of your days and nights will be as safe and comfortable."

“Sounds like a threat to me.”

She smiled. Her teeth were very white. “No, not at all ... but for one who’s been doing research on Mr. Spinnelli, I’m sure you know he has many loyal friends and supporters. And if some of these loyal friends and supporters get the impression you mean Mr. Spinnelli harm ... well, you’re a bright man. I’m sure you can figure out the rest.”

I looked around this fine house once more, and through the open doors of the balcony I again heard the warbling cry of a loon. “Yeah, I can figure out the rest. The usual and customary one-way trip in the trunk of a car or in the hold of a boat. All right, so I’m here. Do you have something to offer me, or do you expect me to drop this book project out of the goodness of my heart?”

Melanie’s pert little smile slipped away and was replaced by a tough businesswoman smile. “No, we’re never in the business of appealing to someone’s good nature, or someone’s goodness. Everyone needs to make a living ... even ... journalists, or writers. So here’s the offer. You drop the project, agree not to research or write anything about Mr. Spinnelli, and we’ll pay you twenty thousand dollars.”

I shifted in my chair, my hands firm against the armrests. “For someone who supposedly places a high value on Mr. Spinnelli’s privacy, that’s a remarkably low offer.”

She clasped her hands together over one knee. “The average cash advance for a nonfiction book last year was ten

thousand dollars. What we're offering you is twice that average amount. I think that's quite a fair offer."

"Certainly," I said. "But there're other factors you're not taking into account."

"Such as?"

"Such as making a splash, an impact, with one's first book. The sales and notice of a success would make the next book's advance that much larger. Not to mention the publicity, the prestige, and the other delights that come from writing a best-selling book. There's more to life than just money."

"So it's been alleged," she said drily. "But I've always found that at the end of the day, it all comes down to cash. So, Mr. Rowland. What can we add to our twenty-thousand-dollar offer to make it more agreeable for you?"

"I'm not sure I can put a figure on that."

She made a move to get up from the chair. "Then I'm afraid there's nothing more to say."

"Wait," I said. "Look ... can I get a drink or something? Being ... brought in like this has made me very thirsty. And then we can talk a bit more."

She stared right at me and I stared right back. Then she made her decision and got up. "Very well. How does ice water sound?"

I was going to make a joke about whether she intended to get the water from the kitchen or just open up a vein in her arm,

but I didn't think Melanie Caprica was in a joking mood.

"That sounds fine," I said.

She left me alone for a moment, and I got up and walked around. I checked out the French doors to the balcony, some of the artwork—nice framed canvases of landscapes and flowers from a woman artist named Varvara Harmon—and checked out the bookshelves as well. The books were leather-bound and looked like they came from a decorating catalogue that said something like, "For Sale, one leather-bound library, books guaranteed unread, perfect to impress those visitors who move their lips while reading."

I heard the clatter of footsteps and, scratching my head one more time, returned to my chair. Melanie came back in, holding a wooden tray with one glass of ice water. I picked up the water, nodded my thanks, and drank half of it in one chilly swallow. I put the glass back down on the tray, now sitting before me on a coffee table.

My host—hostess?—seemed irritated. "Do go on, Mr. Rowland. What did you have to say?"

I shrugged. "I have a counteroffer."

She said, "Name the price, then. Why are you wasting my time?"

"Because the counteroffer doesn't involve money."

"What does it involve, then?"

I gave her my best smile, which was a feat, considering

where I was and how I had gotten there. "The counteroffer involves you."

That got her, and I felt a bit of a thrill that she seemed slightly off balance. "I'm sorry, I don't understand. What do you mean, it involves me?"

"It involves you, Miss Melanie Caprica, who has been in the employ of Mr. Frank Spinnelli for the past seven years. Prior to that, you went to Suffolk Law School, and before that, you were a summa cum laude graduate of Brown University. And curiously enough, your record prior to entering Brown University was a bit ... sketchy. Involving some criminal complaints. Regarding petty larceny, drug possession, unlicensed massage therapy ..."

With each sentence I had said, her face had gotten redder and redder, until now, it was scarlet. I again tried my best smile and said, "See? You're not the only one with impressive research capabilities."

"That's it," she snapped. "That's enough."

"But don't you want to hear more about my counteroffer? I mean, well, excuse me for saying this, but you're taking this very personally, Miss Caprica, and this is strictly business, is it not? For both parties to come away with the feeling that each has reached a compromise, a deal?"

I suppose I have the good professors at Suffolk Law to thank for what happened next, for she composed herself and said, "All right. Go on. But make it quick."

I reached over, finished my glass of water, glad to see my hand wasn't shaking when I put the empty glass down. "Then here's my offer, and no more time-wasting. I still want to do this book. Mr. Spinnelli has had an ... interesting life. The story of men like Mr. Spinnelli often takes place in New Jersey, New York, or Los Angeles. Not quiet little New England. Right there is the hook, Miss Caprica. Something different, something unusual, something that will catch the interest of book publishers."

"And my part in this?"

I shrugged again. "Work with me. Be a co-author, or an unnamed contributor. You know so many secrets, so many tales.... With your assistance, I guarantee the book will be a bestseller and optioned to the movies. An inside view of Mr. Spinnelli and his organization? Instant hit."

I watched her face carefully, and then she burst out laughing. "You have no idea what you're asking."

"I surely do," I said. "Otherwise, I wouldn't have asked it."

Another shake of her head and another burst of laughter. "You ... you ... bone-picker. You scribbler. You skimmer of other people's trash, misery, dirt. You know nothing of loyalty, nothing of serving someone who has helped you out, nothing about me or my way of life."

I toyed with the empty glass and touched the top of the coffee table. "Then explain it to me."

She shifted in her seat and said, "My earlier history ... true."

Nothing I was proud of. But I grew up in a tough neighborhood, with a single mom who did the best she could but which wasn't enough. So the streets called to me.... I answered their call ... but before it was too late, Frank Spinnelli took notice of me and straightened me out. I got my GED, got into Brown ... and after getting my law degree, I began to repay the many services he provided to me. I've had one client during my entire professional career. My savior."

"Sounds like a king. Or an emperor. Not a criminal thug."

Her eyes flashed at me. "Again ... your ignorance is overwhelming, Mr. Rowland. Mr. Spinnelli represents ... represents something that has existed in human society for centuries. A man above society, who lives and exists outside of the normal, who protects his family and friends, and doesn't depend on society to protect him or them. A man of strength, of vision, of power, a man who—"

I interrupted her. "I once did a story, back in my Providence Journal days, about a little grocery-shop owner, lived in a mixed neighborhood. Once he had it started up and running, two associates of Mr. Spinnelli's came by to advise him of the nature of that particular neighborhood. That donations had to be made on a weekly basis to a nonexistent local civic-action group. He refused to pay. And then he had to quickly learn how to run a grocery store with two broken arms. So don't give me any more crap about the noble feudal chief who protects the poor and the struggling. It's nonsense, and deep inside, you know it."

"Then I guess our negotiations are over," she said, standing up. "I'll have Alonzo and Pat drive you back to your cottage. And after tomorrow ... I'd be one prepared man, Mr. Rowland."

I stood up as well. "Sounds nice, Miss Caprica. For I'm sure you're one prepared woman."

Again, that quick puzzled look that pleased me. "You're speaking in riddles again, Mr. Rowland."

I held out my hands in a quick gesture. "Then I'll make this plain and simple."

"Please do."

I took a breath. "How much longer do you think you and your two friends can keep the secret hidden?"

"And what secret is that?"

Another breath. "That Mr. Spinnelli is dead."

My, that certainly got her attention, and her eyes stared at me with such hate and contempt, I had to wonder how she'd ever gotten any customers doing unlicensed masseuse work back in the day. "You ... you don't know what you're talking about."

I went back to my chair. "I most certainly do. Shall I go on?"

She stood there as if debating whether to stand up and have her two boys toss me out, or let curiosity take control and sit down.

Curiosity, I was pleased to see, won out. She sat down. "Go on. Now, please."

I said, "Even though I'm no longer with the Journal, I have contacts with a number of law-enforcement types in Providence and elsewhere. And in doing research for my book, I kept on getting the same story, over and over again. That Mr. Spinnelli had dropped out of sight. That he was no longer being seen at his usual haunts, the bars, the social clubs, the restaurants. And that there were grumblings among other ... types who move in Mr. Spinnelli's circle that they were concerned that they hadn't seen him or heard from him in a while."

She said quickly, "He's an old man. He's not well. Which is why he's up here."

I scratched at the back of my head again. "So you say. But I've been here for a while, Miss Caprica, doing my research. And any of my former editors would tell you, I'm a bear when it comes to being prepared and doing research. And I've contacted every home-health organization within a two-hour drive of this place. Not one of them has a patient on Lake Walker. I've kept an eye on this place as well, and I've only seen you and your two ... men. One of the men, every Thursday, goes out and does the week's shopping. I've seen what he buys, as I've stood behind him a couple of times in the checkout line. Enough food for three ... and maybe four if you would stretch it, but why would you have to stretch it?"

Her hands were clasped so tight I thought the fancy

fingernails would crack. "Anything else?"

"Sure," I said. "There were two things I caught, when I was brought up here. There are just the three of you. Where are Mr. Spinnelli's other associates? His relatives? Nieces, nephews, brothers, and sisters? For a sickly man ... I'm sure there'd be more here than just the three of you."

Her hands were still tightly clasped. "You said two things. What was the other?"

I tried to keep my voice low, even, and cool. "I've done stories before where I was in the presence of the big boss, whether it was a power company exec or a National Guard general. Every time I did a story like that, there was a sense of urgency in the air ... a buzz, if you like, that the head honcho was either in the room or nearby. I didn't get that feeling from Alonzo or Pat when they brought me here, or from you either. Nothing like that at all. Mr. Spinnelli is not in Providence, he's not here, and I doubt he'd be in the witness-protection program. Therefore ... he's dead, isn't he?"

She suddenly stood up. "We're through here. Done. No more talking."

Melanie started to turn and I said, "Think twice before you let your anger get ahold of you, Miss Caprica. Before you call in Alonzo and Pat and have them take me for that quote, ride, unquote."

She looked at me, hands clenched, nostrils flaring. "And what should I think about, you little piece of crap?"

I said, "Think about this. Just so you know, I've secured the services of an attorney. Not one with quite the pedigree of you, but good enough. And he's a former police chief from a town here in New Hampshire, with lots of interesting law-enforcement contacts. And he loves to talk with me ... so much that I talk to him once a day, seven days a week. And he has strict instructions, since I've been working on this book.... A day goes by without my phone call and the police show up here on your doorstep."

It seemed she was trying very hard to control her voice. "When we have to ... we're quite skilled. There's no evidence you've been here. None."

"Oh yes, there is," I said. "Lots of evidence. In the time I've been here, Miss Caprica, I've made sure to deposit my fingerprints on as many surfaces as possible, here and in the SUV, and I've also left some bits of hair, to assist in a DNA analysis down the road, if need be. Maybe you could give the house and the SUV a good cleaning, and then, maybe not. It would just take one fingerprint. So what do you think would happen if I were to disappear and evidence arose that this was the last place I visited? Do you think the cops and the local news media would let that story die? Of course not ... and you can be sure that in the process of trying to find me, the news would come out that your boss is dead. So what's it going to be? Let your emotions take control, or be a cool businesswoman?"

I kept a close eye on her, feeling the hammering in my

chest return, knowing how close this was all going to be, wondering if I was going to pull it off, wondering what she would do . . .

And in another surprise, she sat back down heavily in her chair, buried her face in her hands, and said, "Oh, damn you, why the hell did you feel the need to be a goddamn snoop?"

I wasn't sure what was going on, but it seemed encouraging. "My nature. And my job, I guess. I'm sure it's been pretty hard, trying to keep it all together."

Melanie raised up her head. "You have no idea. No idea at all. We three . . . we've been on a knife edge. The phone calls, the attempted visits, everything else . . . you have no idea."

"And how can you keep putting off the phone calls?"

She sighed. "Alonzo . . . he can do a fair imitation of Mr. Spinnelli on the telephone, when I need him."

"Why? I mean, what's the point?"

"The point . . ." She clasped her hands together, shook her head a couple of times. "The point is . . . Mr. Spinnelli has enemies waiting for him to falter, fail, or leave. And with those three options, comes one more. Alonzo, Pat, and I would leave the scene, because of our connection to Mr. Spinnelli. And that would be a permanent departure. And when . . . when . . . Mr. Spinnelli passed a number of weeks ago, up here in his bedroom, we realized we had to put on a façade, an impression that he's still running the business. Even though . . . well, we found a nice spot on the other side of this hill. With a

view of the lake. He was a Providence boy, through and through, but he loved this place.”

“But you must have known it couldn’t last.”

She wiped at her eyes. “Day to day. That’s all we were doing. Day to day . . . until you showed up. You piece of crap, you.”

I thought for a moment, leaned forward in my own chair. “My original offer still stands.”

Another wipe to her eyes. “A book? Are you crazy?”

From outside, another cry from a loon. “Hear that?”

“What? The loon?”

“Yeah, the loon. You know, one other thing I’ve learned up here is that the loon species is hundreds of thousands of years old . . . and they still live the same. They live on lakes from spring to fall . . . and then they know it’s time to move on, and they migrate, to live on the ocean during the winter months.”

Another loon cry.

“Miss Caprica, it’s time to move on. You and Alonzo and Pat . . . work with me on this book, and arrangements can be made. . . . Like I said, I have connections with law enforcement. We both can get what we want: I get a great best-selling book, a start on a new career, and you and your friends, you get a new life, and safety. This is a good deal for the three of you, before a heavily armed crew from Providence comes up here and won’t take no for an answer. But like the loons out there . . . it’s time.”

She stared at me, and I stared back at her. She wiped at her eyes again and looked over my shoulder, out to the lake, where the loons lived . . . but only for a while.

I cleared my throat. “Miss Caprica?”

She looked at me. Finally smiled. “Call me Melanie.”

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INEVITABLE

By Jennifer Itell

Jennifer Itell earned an MFA from Emerson College in Boston before moving to Denver, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Denver and the Lighthouse Writers Workshop. Her short stories have appeared in a variety of publications, including Redbook, Story Quarterly, Cimarron Review, and Women's Studies Quarterly. She is currently at work on a novel, for which she received a 2006 Rocky Mountain Women's Institute fellowship. This is her EQMM debut, and a promising one it is!

1.

The old woman followed them home from the grocery store. Gwen felt a slight thrill at realizing she was being pursued. She was headed home to an afternoon of hobbling on her knees after the baby, who wanted to walk all the time now but needed assistance—and here was something different.

A stalker?

Well, that was likely the fiction writer in her making leaps. Stalker was a strong word for the elderly German woman who'd taken to her son in the produce aisle. "Oh, look! He has an avocado!" she'd chirped in a pleasing accent, and Gwen had turned to see that Max had stretched from the grocery cart, lifted

an avocado, and bitten right through the skin with his two teeth. He wouldn't relinquish it, so Gwen had let him gnaw on the two-dollar piece of fruit while she chatted with the woman about babies and miracle spot removers and such. They talked until Max began to wriggle and squeal and the avocado slipped from his hands to the floor, and Gwen sensed an imminent tantrum. Then she said she needed to get going, and the woman—Louise, she'd said her name was—dug through a pocket in a worn overcoat, came up with a pad and pencil stub, and wrote out her number for Gwen. "In case you want that recipe I mentioned," she explained. She tickled the baby's avocado-smeared chin before stepping aside so Gwen could get on with her shopping.

Gwen had enjoyed their conversation, but afterward she felt overly aware of Louise's presence in the store as she moved up and down the aisles, and she purposefully kept her eyes on her list, focused now, determined to get what she needed and get Max home. While at the checkout counter, Gwen saw Louise near the door, rearranging some of the items in her bags, and she got the sense that the old woman was lingering. Maybe she craved another baby fix. She had thirteen grandkids, she'd told Gwen, but none of them lived nearby. Maybe this should have struck Gwen as odd—none of them?—but it didn't.

She avoided Louise on the way out, using the door at the far end of the store, for fear of another lengthy interaction. She couldn't risk running into naptime and having Max fall asleep in

the car instead of in his crib at home. She needed to work on an ending. She was a freelance end-writer. She wrote the last chapters for mid-list novelists who got writer's block or lost their oomph in the final weeks before their manuscripts were due. For each project she took on, she drafted a half-dozen possible endings, then mulled them over until one began to stand apart in her mind, then she molded that one until it seemed the only possible conclusion the story could have reached, as if the characters had been heading there, however blindly, since page one. It was a strange profession, and one Gwen couldn't talk about thanks to a menacing clause in her contracts, but it suited her well in that she could work from home. At least, that was the case before Max was born. Now his naps allowed her only enough time to take a quick shower, make a cup of tea, and turn on her computer. That was usually how it went. He'd let out a piercing screech just as her fingers touched down on the keyboard.

Louise was gone by the time Gwen finished loading Max and the groceries into the car. Also, it had started to snow. Light flakes flitted around while Gwen scanned the parking lot, feeling relieved and also a little guilty when she didn't see Louise.

And then there she was again, pulling out of the parking lot behind Gwen in an old VW bus. A coincidence, Gwen thought, until the Volkswagen took a right at the golf course, then a left into the suburban neighborhood in which Gwen lived, and then another left onto her cul-de-sac. Gwen pulled into her driveway; Louise parked by the mailbox.

While Gwen busied herself getting Max out of his car seat, she tried to guess at what Louise might want. Now the situation felt awkward and inconvenient more than thrilling. For a moment, it seemed Louise wouldn't get out of her bus, and Gwen thought she'd simply pretend she hadn't seen the boxy rust-orange relic parked at the end of her drive; she'd head inside and come back for the groceries later. It was cold enough out that they wouldn't spoil. Then the driver's door of the Volkswagen opened.

"The recipe!" Louise shouted, rushing up the driveway toward them. "I remembered the ingredient I couldn't think of before!"

Gwen and Max circled the kitchen island, round and round. Gwen had on her husband's old kneepads, which she'd found in the garage not long after Max took to his feet, and so she thunked on the hardwood as she went. Max held tight to Gwen's index fingers and now and then paused in his bowlegged swagger to point and say dat-dat-dat at Louise, who sat at the table sipping the tea Gwen had fixed over an hour ago.

In the grocery store, Louise had done most of the talking—a lonely old grandmother needing an ear. But now the roles had somehow reversed and Gwen, who didn't usually open up to strangers, found herself going on about how hard it was to keep up with her job (copywriter, she'd told Louise) and look after the baby, especially since Max was such a horrible napper, it was like he was broken or something, missing an Off button (he looked up at her when she said this and gave her a razz),

and then there was her husband, who always worked late, and who probably wouldn't understand if she tried to talk to him about it, this tug-of-war going on inside her between her fierce love for their son and a desire to return to a time when she could sit for hours in front of the computer letting her mind drift this way and that—

Mentioning her husband made Gwen pause to wonder what he would say to the fact that she'd invited Louise into their home. She could hear how the conversation would go:

You did what? A total stranger?

Not a total stranger. We talked in the produce aisle. For like twenty minutes. She's perfectly harmless. She's seventy-something years old. She has thirteen grandkids.

How does that make her harmless? Gwen, you need to look out for our son. It's your job right now to keep him safe.

I am keeping him safe.

It doesn't sound like it.

I am. But you don't know how hard it is taking care of him for twelve, thirteen, fourteen hours a day ...

"I know how hard it is," Louise said. "I remember."

Had Gwen been ranting aloud again? Maybe.

"You need help," Louise continued. "A babysitter. Do you have a sitter?"

"Yes," Gwen said. "She comes a couple afternoons a week, but Max hasn't warmed to her yet. He screams and

screams.”

The babysitter was a young, pretty neighborhood girl whom Gwen had hired so she could keep up with her work and also so that maybe now and then, maybe one afternoon a week, she'd have time for her own writing. It was terrible and embarrassing to have reached the point she was at in her career—churning out surprising yet inevitable endings on the sly—and here she hadn't finished (let alone started!) a publishable story of her own in years. Before Max was born she'd spent too long pursuing a novel draft down a dead end, and since his birth, there'd been no time. Even when she managed to steal a few hours, she couldn't think of what to write about anymore. She was out of ideas. She'd sit at her desk, stare at a blank screen, and listen to Max's angry wails reverberate throughout the house. She essentially paid the babysitter so she could sit in her basement office and feel like a neglectful mother and a professional failure, one hanging onto the tail of a decade-old accomplishment—a short story published in a highly respected literary magazine and then selected for publication in *The Best American Short Stories* series. The series' guest editor, L——M——, an author Gwen had always admired, had touted her as a young talent worth keeping an eye on, and yet she'd slipped from view and become, of all things, a ghost writer.

Max let go of her fingers and ventured on his own toward the cabinets. Gwen stood and stretched, then started unloading the dishwasher. Max moved along the cabinet faces until he reached the dishwasher too; he rattled the plastic silverware

holders. "Are you helping? Thank you!" Gwen said. She handed him a spoon.

To Louise, she said, "I don't mean to complain. Sometimes I complain and then I fear something bad will happen to Max to make me pay for being ungrateful. I realize how lucky I am. I have friends my age who've had so much trouble conceiving, and Dan and I decide to try for a baby and just like that—here he is. Perfect. Well, except for the whole napping thing, but otherwise, what more could I ask for? I have no right to ever wish for anything else."

"Nonsense," Louise said. "You can wish for whatever you want. No harm can come from wishing."

Gwen looked at the clock and saw it was already four—how had two hours passed?—and then she looked out the window above the sink at the snow, which was coming down at an angle now, in sleety flakes. The morning's weather hadn't predicted this—possible afternoon showers, the weatherman had said—but here was an ice storm with no sign of stopping. The sight of it made Gwen shiver. She looked back at Louise, who seemed perfectly at ease at the kitchen table, and in her own age-spotted skin. Her long grey hair was gathered loosely at her neck in a faux tortoiseshell barrette. She wore an oversized, shaggy brown sweater that engulfed her solid frame and looked like something one might wrap up in to go to sleep. Gwen had this thought about Louise's sweater and then immediately realized she was exhausted. It hit her with a swoop, as if she'd opened a door and let months and months of

sleeplessness in.

“Oh,” said Louise, pointing. She started to rise from her seat. “Maybe you don’t want him to play with that.”

Gwen looked down to see that Max had traded his spoon for a knife and was about to put the pointy end in his mouth.

“Oh shit!” Gwen said, grabbing the knife away and causing Max to cry. “What’s wrong with me?”

Then she too erupted in tears. She picked Max up and he looked at her wet face, startled. He stopped his own crying and furrowed his little baby brow.

“Silly Mommy!” Gwen said, wiping her face. “Silly sleepy me!”

Louise appeared at their side. She shut the dishwasher, and then she reached for Max, who had reached out his arms to her. Gwen had never seen him do this with anyone who wasn’t family. It was his level of comfort with Louise—first in the grocery store and again when she’d approached them in the driveway—that had caused Gwen to invite the old woman in for tea, despite the voice in her head that knew what her husband would say. Now Max snuggled into Louise’s fuzzy sweater, which was exactly what Gwen had felt an urge to do just minutes earlier.

“Go nap,” Louise said to Gwen. “You need rest.”

Gwen considered the offer. Her husband was due home at six, but the weather might hold him up, or he might end up

having to stay late at the office, which would leave Gwen by herself to simultaneously fix dinner and deal with Max during his crankiest hours. Would it be insane to leave Max with Louise while she lay down for a short nap so she could revive herself? What could happen? She didn't bother (though later she would) to think through possible outcomes as she did with all the endings she wrote, because her mind landed on what she thought was the inevitable one: She'd take a short nap, then wake in plenty of time to usher Louise out of the house before Dan came home.

2.

She awoke with a start!

Years ago, when Gwen was in school for creative writing, she'd been told never to have a character awake with a start—apparently it had become cliché—yet here she was awaking with one. She wasn't sure what had caused her panic. It was dark in the room and out the bedroom window she could see snow falling steadily in the bullhorn of light from the streetlamp. Six o'clock. The house was perfectly quiet. Wrongly quiet. Max blossomed in her mind, the way he did whenever she surfaced from sleep. His plump face, his drool-drenched chin and mischievous open-mouthed smile. To Gwen, the smile suggested they shared a joke—a joke they only half got and would both soon forget. Her perfect child. Why would she ever wish for anything else? She'd fallen asleep wishing for just one more story idea, and the thread of something had flitted through her mind—an old woman, green-gray eyes, an avocado

dropping to the floor and disappearing into a dark, cobwebbed corner—but then the images dispersed, falling away from the flimsy thread that held them together—whose green eyes? what neglected corner?—and she'd drifted into what felt like a drugged sleep, and now two hours later—

Wrongly quiet.

Her heart pitter-pattered in her chest like tiny feet taking flight.

Her perfect child—where was he?

3.

She found them in the playroom in the basement curled kidney-like in a bean-bag chair, asleep. “Oh!” Gwen shouted, and relief washed over her, a wave of gratitude like the time she remembered she'd left the bedroom door open and ran into the hallway just as Max reached the top of the staircase. A few more seconds and he would have tumbled down. Thank goodness she'd been spared that mishap. She would be a better mom, she'd sworn that afternoon, and she swore it again now. A more attentive mom.

Louise stirred, then opened her eyes and gave Gwen a sleepy smile. “I must have drifted off too,” she said.

Gwen held her arms out for Max and the baby woke during the transfer. He smiled groggily at Gwen and reached to pinch her nose. “How long has he been asleep?” Gwen asked.

“Oh, close to two hours, I think.” Louise pushed herself up

from the beanbag. "He's a good sleeper."

This was ridiculously far from the truth. Had he ever taken a two-hour nap? Maybe during those drowsy first few days of life, but since then it had been half-hour to forty-minute naps at most. Gwen put a hand to Max's forehead to see if he felt hot, but he didn't. "His bedtime's in an hour," she said, aware of the accusing edge to her voice. "He'll never fall asleep now."

"He will," Louise assured her. "When it comes to babies, sleep begets sleep. Tell me, does he usually wake from his naps in a good mood or a sour one?"

"Sour," Gwen admitted. She pictured Max's face all scrunched and puckered, as if in reaction to a lemon sucker.

"Well, he's not sleeping enough, then. Babies should always wake happy."

Max seemed happy now, if a little sleep drunk. Gwen knew she should be grateful—Louise clearly had some magic touch when it came to babies—yet she felt irritated, as if Louise had stolen some intangible thing from her, and she also feared her husband would arrive home at any moment. How would she explain Louise?

Louise must have sensed what was worrying her because she gathered her things—her worn overcoat and a knitted handbag—and said in a breezy voice that she should be going, that it was likely time for Gwen to fix dinner and she didn't want to be in the way. Gwen and Max walked her to the front door. They stood for a moment looking out at the snow as it pelted the

front stoop. Several inches had already piled up on Louise's bus. Gwen felt suddenly sheepish. This woman had done her a kindness and she was sending her out into harrowing weather without offering her dinner or suggesting she stay until the storm let up. She was torn between making this kind of offer and her urgent desire to get Louise out the door. She wanted her gone, and not just because her husband was due home. It had to do with the near-miss feeling she'd experienced when she found Louise and Max sleeping in the basement. She wanted to forget the afternoon and her lapse in judgment; she wanted Louise far away.

"Well," Louise said, "I enjoyed our visit. And this little one—he loves me!"

She crooked a finger under Max's chin and he gave her a happy, dopey look. She turned to Gwen. "You have my number. Maybe you'll call sometime and we can meet in the park."

"Yes, that would be nice," Gwen said, though she didn't intend to call.

Then Louise was off. Gwen stood with Max in her arms watching the tail-lights of the Volkswagen as it disappeared down the street; she wondered if the old woman had very far to drive and remembered that Louise had failed to write down the recipe that had been her pretense for following them home in the first place.

It's just as well, she thought.

She felt relieved as she shut the door against the cold. A

rush of warmth from a nearby heat vent and Max's arms around her neck made her aware for a moment, before it was time to turn her thoughts to dinner, that she had absolutely all she needed.

(Postscript)

The thing about near-misses is that you forget. Relief fades; you get lazy. The door that leads out to the top of the stairs: You swear you won't leave it open again, but you do.

4.

So Gwen had taken a nap that snowy afternoon and woken in time to rush Louise out the door before Dan came home; she'd felt as if she'd gotten away with something; she'd even had a small moment of recognition about the state of her life. A fitting ending for a slightly strange day. Both she and Max had come out unscathed and well-rested, and as a result, a series of things happened: First, Max played quietly while Gwen fixed a dinner that wasn't just slapped-together sandwiches. Then Dan came home and noticed Gwen's relaxed mood and commented on it, and Gwen told him about her day, though not the whole of it—she left Louise back at the grocery store. She and Dan conversed all the way through dinner without the underlying tension that seemed always in the room with them lately, inching up like water in a flooding basement, threatening to corrode everything from the bottom up. All that water gone, as if someone had poked a little drain hole or turned a relief valve in their marriage. Then Max began to rub his eyes in his

highchair and they carried him up to bed together and watched him drift off to sleep without a fuss just as Louise had predicted, sleep begetting sleep.

It had been an exceptionally good evening, which is why, by the following afternoon, with Max writhing in naptime protest in her arms, Gwen forgot all about the near-miss feeling of the day before. Why had she been in such a hurry to get Louise out the door? The answer escaped her as she looked out the nursery window and saw the rust-colored bus parked once again in front of the mailbox.

"I don't understand," Louise said. "How do you decide how a story should end?"

"Oh, it's not as hard as you might think."

They were seated at the kitchen table. Gwen had disregarded the menacing clause and had told Louise about her job. She'd felt in conspiracy with Louise for over a week now, and so this breach of contract didn't seem too terribly wrong.

"A story can end one way, or it can end another. I mean, if you view life as a series of small decisions—and every day we're faced with hundreds of them, right?—then every story has countless possible endings."

"Or only one," Louise said as she bopped Max up and down on her lap, "if you believe in fate."

"Well, I suppose," Gwen said. "Of course I have to go with the one that seems the most satisfactory, or fated, based on

what came before. And it can't be too shocking or too tragic or too happily-ever-after. I guess it's a little tricky in that you don't want readers to see an ending coming, yet you want them to get there and say, Of course!"

"I see. But how do you make them sound right, your endings for other writers?"

Gwen stood to clear the dishes; they'd eaten large slabs of a coffee cake that Louise had baked that morning in Gwen's kitchen.

"I happen to have an ear for voices," Gwen explained with her back turned. It was a skill, the way she could step into other people's stories, but not one she was too proud of, because this ability of hers was tied too closely to one of her deepest fears: that she didn't have her own voice, that each of her belabored sentences was shaped out of latent memories of sentences she'd read. "I can read two-thirds of a manuscript and take it from there. It's kind of like the way some actors have a knack for impersonating."

"You're very talented," Louise said.

"Or easily influenced," Gwen countered.

They hadn't talked about it in any official capacity, but the old woman had become Max's nanny. Gwen wasn't paying her. She felt as if she should be, but the subject of money hadn't come up and Gwen didn't want to broach the topic for fear of possibly insulting Louise and because it would mean admitting to just how much Louise was doing for her, and she wasn't

ready for that admission. Also, she and Dan couldn't afford a nanny, and on top of that, she'd yet to tell Dan about her unspoken arrangement with Louise. Louise arrived each morning soon after Dan left for work and stayed into the early evening. Somehow she sensed when it was time to go, because she was always gone—though sometimes only by minutes—by the time Dan returned.

Gwen's days were a breeze now. Louise played with Max after breakfast while Gwen worked on her endings. In her basement office she could hear Max's quick steps and the thunks of Louise plodding after him in Dan's kneepads. At lunchtime Gwen reemerged and the three of them ate together. Some days, Gwen would give Louise the cash intended for the young babysitter, whom Gwen had fired, and Louise would go grocery shopping. She'd return with ingredients for complex recipes that she patiently taught Gwen how to make. Around three each afternoon, Louise and Max retired to the playroom for a long nap on the beanbags, and Gwen worked on her own writing.

She'd actually begun a story. It was about recent events: an old woman following a young mother and son home from the grocery store and nudging her way into their lives. It had a fairytale-esque quality to it, Gwen thought, though without the dark edge.

So things were good. Of course, there was some unease attached to this new arrangement. Who was Louise? Where did she return to each evening? How did she spend her weekends?

Gwen was curious, but whenever she asked Louise about her life away from them Louise would somehow manage to avoid talking about her current situation and would instead drift into stories about her childhood in Germany. Only later would Gwen realize that Louise hadn't answered whatever question she'd asked. Once, when Louise and Max were napping, Gwen went out for the mail and noticed a gap in one of the flowery, sun-faded curtains that covered the Volkswagen's windows. She stood on her toes for a peek and saw that the bus had been stripped of its back seats. She saw a sleeping bag and a semi-inflated air mattress, a large black trash bag with clothes spilling out in a jumble, a stack of books, a discarded apple core. A sour taste came to Gwen's throat. She stepped away. The mess in the bus didn't fit with her picture of Louise, who was always wiping the counters in Gwen's kitchen and picking up after Max. The bag of clothes? Maybe she'd been meaning to get to a Laundromat. The mattress? Maybe she was a camper. She was very hippie-ish, very earthy. Maybe, during the warmer months, she liked to sleep under the stars.

Gwen didn't look in the bus again. Life was going too well to question the things that were a little off about Louise. The tug of dissatisfaction that had been pulling at Gwen in the months before meeting Louise had disappeared. She and Dan were getting along again. She wasn't tired and grumpy at the end of each day, and he no longer had to work so hard to keep things harmonious. He was taken aback the first time she served spaetzle for dinner, but he was also thankful for the home-

cooked meal. He started coming home from work at a more reasonable hour, and they spent their evenings playing with Max, who, once he pulled himself from the stupor of his afternoon nap, was always in a delightful mood. He was learning a few words now (Daddy and uh-oh!), and they loved to listen to his guttural babble. “He sounds German, doesn’t he?” Dan said one night and Gwen, caught off guard, had laughed.

She finished her story.

She composed a cover letter and sent it off with high hopes to the editor she’d worked with years ago at the highly respected literary magazine. She sent it snail-mail, the old-fashioned way, and she felt lighter than she had in years when she dropped it in the mail.

“Dear Ms. Smith:

Thank you for the opportunity to read “The Secret Ingredient.” There is much to be admired in these pages. Sentence by sentence, the prose is very strong—am I wrong in saying I hear a touch of L—— M—— (minus her finely timed humor) in your voice? The first few scenes were wonderfully promising—Who is this old woman who has found her way into the narrator’s home? What trouble will she cause?—but then the story sort of petered out as all began to go so swimmingly for your narrator. Surely you know that in fiction, trouble is essential! (See Burroway, *Writing Fiction*.) And your ending ... hmmm ... don’t think you’ve quite nailed it yet. Sorry to disappoint on this one.

Best wishes,
(illegible signature)”

“Why aren’t you writing today?” Louise asked.

She’d come up from the playroom to find Gwen at the kitchen table, blowing on a lukewarm cup of tea. Max was still asleep in the basement, in his playpen.

“Just taking a break,” Gwen said.

She’d forgotten how debilitating rejection letters could be. She’d received all types—tiny-slip-of-paper rejections, try us again, if only you’d done x y or z, love it but we ran out of money rejections—and she’d never been able to dismiss them lightly. Once she’d realized that they were part of the whole writing/publishing world, she’d become inhibited, then stalled.

The letter lay before her on the table. Louise bent forward to read it. “Oh, I see. I hadn’t realized you’d written a story.”

“It was nothing,” Gwen said. “Kind of silly, really. Now that I think about it.”

She told Louise how the story had been sparked by their meeting in the grocery store, but it lacked tension.

“Tension? Who wants tension? What’s wrong with a happy story? There should be more happy stories in the world.”

“In the world, maybe. But happy stories don’t make for a great read.”

Louise lowered herself into the chair across from Gwen. “So you need more trouble in your life, is that it?”

"No." Gwen gave a half-hearted laugh. She picked up the letter and creased it down the middle. She thought she heard Max squeal, and she stood to go get him, glad for the distraction.

"It's just the neighbor's cat," Louise said. "He'll sleep another forty minutes."

"Oh." Gwen pulled at the skin of her neck, feeling suddenly annoyed. It irked her that Louise had come to know her son well enough to predict his naps to the minute. She wished Max would wake early; she missed him now that he was doing all this sleeping. She felt like taking back what Louise had taken from her—this intimate knowledge of her son. Or, rather, what she'd willingly given.

"Your story," Louise said, "can you add some trouble and send it again?"

"No." Gwen stood and took the letter to the recycling bin. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. It's just a story."

"But that's not true," Louise said. "I can see that it matters deeply."

That night, the baby was fussy. Gwen had gotten her wish earlier in the day in that Max had woken early from his nap, but it turned him into a little crab apple and he fought going to bed. Or maybe Gwen's own bad mood, brought on by the rejection letter and the fact that Dan had had to stay late at work, had infected him. She tried to shrug off her sadness and keep focused on cheering up Max. "It doesn't matter!" she chattered

in a sing-song voice as she bathed him. "It doesn't matter deeply!"

Then the baby got sick. He threw up in the tub. It wasn't much, but what came out of him was thick and pink and had a medicinal cherry smell that made Gwen wonder, for the first time, how exactly Louise was getting her son to sleep. What secret ingredient had she been slipping him? What magic elixir? And how had Gwen refused to see?

5.

She didn't wake with a start but with a sickly feeling brewing inside her, as if she'd eaten something spoiled and now that spoiled thing was flourishing. She'd taken a nap; she hadn't meant to, but she'd fallen asleep reading. The first two-thirds of someone else's manuscript lay spread on the comforter. She wasn't sure how she knew something was amiss, but she knew. The house was quiet. That morning, she'd told Louise that they couldn't spend their days together anymore, that she needed to get back in sync with Max on her own. Louise had looked stricken; she'd winced and reached for the baby, who was snug on Gwen's hip, but then she'd let her arms fall. "You're right," she'd said. "It's what's best for you and Max. I understand."

They'd gone out to the stoop to see her off. A month had passed since Louise first entered their lives and Gwen couldn't help but feel a little sorry to see her go. There'd been some pink vomit, but Louise, when Gwen questioned her, said she'd given

the baby some of the infant Tylenol Gwen kept in the medicine cabinet because his teeth seemed to be bothering him. She'd been beside herself to hear it had made him sick, and this made Gwen feel bad for suspecting something else. Still, the incident pushed Gwen into acknowledging that it was time to part ways.

When she woke from her nap, she remembered the last thing Louise had said to her. Before driving off, she'd rolled down the driver's-side window of her bus and called out, in a perfectly cheery voice, "I hope you get your trouble!" When Gwen had looked at her quizzically, she'd said, "For your story! I hope it comes to you."

Wrongly quiet.

The baby wasn't in his crib where she'd left him. She searched the house from top to bottom; he wasn't anywhere. The front door was closed but unlocked and Gwen couldn't recall if she'd remembered to turn the bolt before taking Max up for his nap. In all likelihood, she hadn't. She circled the house again and ended in the basement in the playroom trying to quell a dizzying rise of panic. Louise must have returned, she told herself. She'd taken Max somewhere, to the park, maybe, but they'd be back. She stared at the beanbags where Louise had often napped with her son. Her perfect child. There was no sign that Louise had ever been there. Not even a stray gray hair.

Something erupted inside Gwen, a geyser of fear. She thought for a moment that it had lifted her up, that she was

floating, but then she looked down and saw that her feet were still miraculously on the ground. She ran to the kitchen and called her husband at work. She told him to come home; told him she couldn't find the baby.

"What are you talking about?" he asked. "Did you call the police?"

"No," Gwen said. "He's with the nanny. I know he is."

It was quiet on the other end of the line. Gwen tugged at her neck as if trying to free her voicebox. The useless thing. Of course she should have called the police before calling her husband. How had she not thought of that? It didn't matter. Louise would evade the police as she'd evaded Gwen, revealing nothing about who she really was or where she might be headed.

Dan said, "Gwen? Honey? We don't have a nanny. Do you mean the sitter?"

"I fired the sitter. Weeks ago."

"Honey?"

"She's driving a bus. A rust-colored VW bus. He's with her."

"I'll be right home," Dan said. "Stay there."

He didn't say It's your job to keep him safe, though Gwen heard it in her head. She hung up the phone, remembered the scrap of paper Louise had handed her the day they met. She found her purse, dumped the contents onto the floor, and rooted through the mess until she found Louise's number. She dialed.

An upbeat female voice told her she'd reached a day spa.

Gwen asked for Louise. "Don't know any Louise," the woman said.

Gwen read the number on the paper aloud and the woman said, "Right number, no Louise."

"No," Gwen said firmly.

"What do you mean, no? Honey, you sound like you could use a massage. Would you like to set something up?"

The phone slipped from Gwen's hand. The kitchen tilted sideways. The world was un-righting itself. This isn't happening, Gwen thought. This isn't right.

(Afterthought)

There are countless possible endings. Happy endings and sad endings. Abrupt endings that leave readers wanting more. Anti-climactic endings in which a character's been given an opportunity for change or redemption, but she turns and walks away. Near-misses. Joycean epiphanies, Oprah aha's. A character experiences a moment of insight that changes her view of the world forever. Sometimes the insight comes too late. Sometimes the thing a character wanted from the start turns out to be the wrong thing; she didn't want that after all. Be-careful-what-you-wish-for endings. You could be punished for wanting too much, for never ever being satisfied. For averting your eyes a moment too long. For making a silly mistake. For trusting a stranger. The story will end—it has to; it's inevitable—but the punishment might not.

6.

Gwen sat in her car in the parking lot of the grocery store watching the automatic doors open and close. She was here because it was the only place she'd ever seen Louise outside of her own home, and she was hoping the old woman would reappear. She would need food for Max, and milk. If Gwen spotted her, she would follow her in, snatch Max from her arms, turn back time to the way things had been before that ill-fated meeting. She was here because she didn't know where else to go or what else to do. She couldn't go home, couldn't face this particular ending that she herself had made inevitable. She'd left the house before her husband had gotten there. Surely he'd called the police by now and they were looking for Max and also her. She would sit here until the sun went down, until someone came and dragged her away.

Outside the car it was an incongruously sunny day—incongruous considering the storm that raged inside her. It was warm in the car, but Gwen knew that outside, the air was chilly. She felt as if she were in a vacuum, as if in the stale space of her car time had paused, was holding its breath. She thought of something Dan had told her the evening after her first encounter with Louise. He'd come in stomping the snow off his shoes and when she'd asked if the drive had been bad, he'd said it was the weirdest thing—the weather had been clear in the city, just a light drizzle until he'd hit the edge of their neighborhood, and then his view had gone white.

Please, Gwen thought, I'll do anything, give you anything, just bring him back.

A knock on the window broke the vacuum's seal. A policeman stood looking down at her. A young man; someone's grown son. "Ma'am?" he said in a gentle voice. "Ms. Smith? Are you all right? One of the grocery clerks said you've been out here for some time. She called the station. Your husband called too. He's worried. He said to tell you Max is fine."

7.

She found them in the basement, curled on a beanbag. Max was sleeping and Dan had a protective arm around him. When Gwen came in he untangled himself from the baby and stood and put his arms around her. "Are you all right?" he whispered.

She nodded. "What about Max? Where did you find him?"

"Here. We have a little escape artist, it seems. He must have gotten out of his crib and made his way down the stairs on his own. It's a miracle he didn't hurt himself. I guess it's time to get some gates up, huh?"

Gwen shook her head; she started to say that it wasn't true, the baby hadn't gotten from the top floor to the basement on his own—but then she stopped. She sunk to her knees and pressed her cheek to Max's forehead. She kissed his nose. He sighed, eyes still shut, and reached up to pat her face with a pudgy hand. Such a tiny, delicate, perfect being.

"Honey," Dan said, his voice soft. "I'm worried about you."

"I'm all right. I got a little lost. A little confused. I let my priorities get out of whack. But I'm okay."

"I read the letter," Dan said. "About your story. I saw it when I was taking the recycling out this morning. I'm sorry they didn't want it. I know how those letters can get to you."

"It's no big deal. Not after this scare with Max."

"It's been some day, huh? Your phone call terrified me. You weren't making any sense. The nanny? The bus? What were you talking about?"

"Not now," Gwen said. "I'll explain some other time."

Dan accepted this with a sigh. He said, "When I was driving home all I could think was, what if he's really not there? What if, just like that, my world's gone? I offered up one of those bartering prayers: Take anything else, but not my son. Then I got home and he was here and you weren't. I didn't know what to think. I hadn't meant to barter you."

"I did the same thing. Hopefully it doesn't work that way, though."

"Hopefully not."

"But maybe sometimes it does."

Dan lowered himself onto one of the beanbags again and the three of them sat together, a stunned family. "Maybe there's a story in this," Dan said after a while.

"No, I don't think so," Gwen said, even though she knew that a story was exactly what Louise had intended to give her

—a parting gift of sorts. “No,” she said again. “I don’t want it.”

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CHEMO BOY AND THE WAR KITTENS

By Brian Muir

The story “Chemo Boy and the War Kittens” has a special significance for award-winning film writer Brian Muir, for he has battled cancer himself, more than once. We’re happy to be able to report that his health is currently good, and that 2010 is also treating him well in other respects: *Broke Sky*, an indie film he co-wrote, which won nearly a dozen film-festival awards, recently premiered on cable, on IFC. The series to which this new story belongs is surely one of the strongest P.I. series running at short-story length.

On the sole of my boot it spread; a Rorschach smear, crumpled legs reaching out in a quest to crawl, to spin a web, to hide in a dark crevasse waiting for juicy prey. I scraped it off into the kitchen garbage. Spiders have never been my favorite.

If Thumper had seen it creeping around, he would have scampered away, the big sissy. But he was asleep in a cool spot under the bed on this warm April morn.

Summer had made an early cameo in Portland and didn’t want to yield the spotlight to spring’s curtain call just yet, some roses coming out of the wings before their cue, blossoming deep scarlet.

I finished my cereal at the houseboat window. Waves

lapped in the wake of an outboard puttering down the Willamette, fishermen in search of spring Chinook. They were wasting their time. With the warm April and not much rain lately, the river hadn't risen enough for the fish to move. The runs were still holding up on the Columbia, so these guys on the river weren't doing much but moving water around.

I walked up into the Sellwood district and The Coffee Shack. I said my how-dos to Rossa and he slid a brew across the counter, straight up. I slapped down change and he turned to grind beans, not interested in conversation, meaning he'd lost big at the casino the night before. Best to let him stew when he's boiling about bad cards.

Other than me, the place was empty. I checked behind the Blazers' team photo on the far wall, what passes for my P.O. box, surprised to find a folded note stuck there. I stuffed it in my pocket and took off.

Moments later, under a shaded awning, I sipped my joe and read the note. It was from a woman I'd helped a couple of years ago, who was being stalked by her coworker. A dash of the creep's own medicine had scared him off; the woman no longer lived looking over her shoulder and she had a pleasant new coworker.

The problem she needed help with now involved a tortoise named Gamera.

Karen's home was a modest two-story on Tolman not far from Reed College. An old pine snuggled the side of the house,

cooling half of it with shade.

We caught up on old times in the kitchen over coffee; I used my Coffee Shack cup, saving her the wash on a mug. Among Karen's crop of strawberry-blond locks, grey hairs took a proud stand, a middle-aged woman's war paint. Her green eyes and warm smile of white teeth no doubt fueled MILF fantasies for young men at the grocery store, but she seemed satisfied staying single. Raising a teenaged son put more than enough strain on even the most casual of relationships.

The story she told me had been in the news over a month ago: A tortoise had been found in a field not far from here, near death. Someone had snatched him from Karen's backyard, turned him over, and stabbed him with a length of rebar, leaving him on his back to bleed out. When I'd seen the story on TV I hadn't made the connection to Karen's name, so enraged was I at the thought of this defenseless animal being tortured with no way to defend itself or scream for help, slowly dying in silence.

Karen took me into the backyard to meet Gamera. Normally, he'd have the run of the place, but since the attack he was being housed in a large, reinforced chicken-wire cage with fresh lettuce heaped in one corner. A tube protruded from one nostril, leading to an oxygen tank on the far side of the cage; one of his lungs had been punctured by his attacker and the organ was still repairing itself.

Karen opened the cage and let me scratch Gamera atop the head. Hard to tell if he enjoyed it or not, but he didn't pull

back into his armor so I'm guessing my touch wasn't too offensive. For a sixty-year-old (the vet's best estimate) who had undergone a near-fatal stabbing a month ago, Gamera seemed to be faring pretty well.

"He'd lost a lot of blood by the time he was found," Karen said. "But the vets say he'll make it. Psychologically, I don't know. Since he doesn't meow or bark, I can't tell how he's feeling."

"I know what you mean. My rabbit at least squeaks and squeals sometimes, so I can get a feel for what he's going through."

She nodded. "After we got him back, he didn't want to eat. I had to force it down him. But he's doing better."

"The cops have no leads?"

"I can't even get them on the phone anymore. They gave it a lot of legwork at first, especially after the news coverage, but now it's not a high priority."

"You could call the news again, ask them for help. The public is a sucker for a good animal story."

"I tried. They said they would send somebody over but it was the same day that biker got hit."

"The one who rode the hood of the car for six blocks? I remember."

"Pretty soon there's going to be a civil war between bikers and motorists in this city."

"I'm already stocked up for it," I told her.

She smiled but didn't think it worth a chuckle, her mind dark with other matters. "The police figure Gamera was targeted; it seems more likely to them than a random attack."

"They're right."

"I can't imagine anybody I know doing something like this. It doesn't make sense."

"How about somebody your son knows?"

Karen glanced at an upper window, curtains drawn against the sun. "He says no. But I don't know ... with everything he's going through right now ..."

I squeezed her shoulder. "Mind if I talk to him?"

Donny's room seemed par for the course for a boy of nineteen not prone to sports. Comic books lay scattered about the room; sci-fi and horror-movie posters decorated the walls; his computer screen pulsed with a fantasy game: bearded barbarian with bloody mail and gleaming broadsword.

In the chair before the desk, skin pale for lack of sun, Donny's shoulders poked out like chicken bones, jeans hanging off his legs like a scarecrow's wardrobe. His face was open and wide, not even a hint of stubble on his head, bald as a squid.

"Obviously, you'd be pissed if you knew who did that to him."

He glared. "Obviously. Duh."

Nothing but teen 'tude.

"Yeah," I said. "Dumb question."

I scanned the room, eyes falling on a shelf of ornate figurines of Japanese movie monsters.

"I'm guessing you're the one who named the tortoise. Gamera? Wasn't he the giant turtle that could tuck in his head and legs and go spinning through the air like a Fourth of July pinwheel?"

He grinned for the first time since I'd entered his sanctum sanctorum, the smile of someone who'd found a kindred spirit. A gap showed in his bottom teeth. "Touché," he said. "A woman after my own stripe."

"Touché? Your own stripe? Does that gamer-speak work on the ladies?"

He shrugged bony shoulders, "Not really."

"Looks like it worked on that one." I pointed to a photo tacked on the cork-board amidst pages torn from Wired magazine: a cute Eurasian girl and Donny arm-in-arm; Donny with a full head of long blond hair.

As Donny's eyes found the photo, longing flashed and then was gone. "She's not my paramour ... my girlfriend. Not anymore. Since graduation we don't really hang with the same crowd."

"What's her name?"

"Calico. Well, her real name is Marise. But everybody calls

her Calico.”

“Like the cat?”

He nodded. “Because she’s mixed race, like a calico’s fur is different colors.”

He shifted tiredly in his chair, changing the subject: “You going to help track down the scoundrel who hurt Gamera?”

“Scoundrel? Back to gamer-speak, I see.”

He shrugged.

I said, “I can think of a few other descriptive insults for whoever did that to Gamera. Most have fewer letters than ‘scoundrel’ and cut right to the meat of the matter. Not suitable for a family audience, as they say.”

“Using that sort of language might take the sheen off the luster of such a fine maiden.” He grinned.

I grinned back. Maybe that overblown verbiage would work on some of the ladies after all.

He said, “When you find whoever did it, let me have a crack at them. I’ll inflict injuries my avatar hasn’t even been programmed for.”

“Touché.”

Calico had an apartment off Powell, in a run-down complex up around 120th. Sitting in my Willys Jeep outside, I kept an eye on the complex, watching her enter the building in the company of a roughly cute twentyish guy of the black T-shirt set, his shorts ending down around his shins, a chain loop dangling from one

pocket. The stocking cap over his dark curls was a pointless gesture in this heat and made him look like an idiot. But Calico obviously had no problem with it as the two snuggled arm in arm.

As evening fell, I chowed fast food, trying to decipher the tailgate of a pickup parked in front of me, adorned with a Jesus fish that had swallowed a Star of David. Burger grease dripped onto my jeans, making me bounce and curse a blue streak. That stuff is hell to wash out, ruining a perfectly good pair of True Religions. I'd often thought about wearing thrift-store duds on recon, but my vanity precluded such sound rationale. By the time I looked up from trying to dab out the grease spot, Calico and Stocking Cap were climbing into an old VW with mismatched paint, she driving.

As the VW chattered down the block, I shoved the Willys in gear and took off after.

They drove a couple miles, sticking to the Southeast side, pulling over at a little one-story job with a weed-choked lawn. The open garage door spilled light onto the cracked drive. Rolling past, I managed to side-eye a drum set in the corner of the garage, near a wall of hanging tools.

I parked halfway up the block. Sat for a few minutes and waited.

Then I heard the sound.

It slammed into my ears without warning, a pounding, crying, screeching sonic boom. Like the noise a drunk driver

might cause mowing down a marching band at ninety miles per hour, complete with bloodcurdling wail of the entire horn section crumpled in the street, legs snapped in compound fractures.

I got out of the Jeep and walked toward the house, face scrunched, legs not willing to take me into the abyss.

Stopping at the end of the drive, I kept one hand over an ear, not much help. Calico twanged bass licks while Stocking Cap pounded the skins like a serial killer whose modus operandi involved bashing heads with ball-peen hammers. The singer doubled as lead guitarist; he should've picked one or the other, his reach far outdistancing his grasp. Sweat glued his long hair to his cheeks as he wailed indecipherable lyrics.

The sound waves tickled my face. Shouting, I couldn't even hear my own voice over the roar. The band didn't stop playing until the song was finished, many moons for yours truly.

Calico swung her gaze my way. "What did you say?"

"I said, do your neighbors ever complain about the noise?"

The singer answered in a voice much higher than the gravel his vocal cords produced while 'singing.' "As long as we stop by midnight, they're cool."

"Tolerant people."

"Or they like good music," Stocking Cap sneered.

"That's your spin." I tore a flyer off the guitar case leaning against the garage wall. The bright blue paper shouted: Friday Nite at the Rue Morgue! 8 PM! The War Kittens! The graphics

showed four silhouettes, cat people wielding weapons.

“The War Kittens? That’s you guys?”

The singer nodded, surly.

Me: “Sounds like something out of a Zelazny novel.”

The singer: “Who?”

Me: “Never mind. How come there’s four of you on the flyer but only three of you here?”

The singer again: “Had to cut one loose, baby. Call it a clash of personalities.”

“Call me ‘baby’ again and I’ll show you a real clash of personalities.”

He shrugged.

Calico tipped her head toward the hairy singer. “That’s Manx.”

“Why, because he lost his tail?”

“‘Cause my last name’s Manxman—” As if wanting to add an insult directed at me, he smartly cut himself short.

Calico pointed at Stocking Cap. “That’s Rex. A Rex is a type of cat, too. They have curly fur.”

“And high body temps,” said Rex, twirling his sticks, “Because I’m so hot.” He pounded a quick solo, not without its licks but still whiffing of amateur.

“A rim shot would have sufficed,” I offered.

“And I’m Calico,” she said.

"Because you're mixed race," I surprised her. "Donny told me."

"You know Donny?"

"Met him this morning. Helping him out with the Gamera situation."

Rex rolled his eyes. "Not that freakin' turtle again!"

"It's a tortoise," I said.

"Whatever. I just don't see what the big deal is."

"You think it's okay for someone to abuse an animal?"

"It's not like it's a kid or something."

"Cool it, Rex," Calico seemed irritated by his attitude.

"Cops already asked us about this," sneered Manx. "You're not a cop, are you?"

"Just a friend of Donny's. Like you, Calico."

She lowered her eyes. "I haven't talked to him since last year—"

"That's all over," Rex cut her off.

To Calico I said, "If you want to tell me the history—in private—leave me a message at Rossa's Coffee Shack. You guys too, if you can think of anything that'll help me with the Gamera thing."

Rex scowled. Manx tightened guitar strings.

I nodded and turned to go. "By the way, what are the War

Kittens at war with?"

Manx lifted his proud chin. "Conventional rock 'n' roll."

"You certainly are."

Providence Portland up on N.E. Glisan dominated a neighborhood of middle-class homes and shops; the new Center of Hope cancer clinic towered next to it. Between light clouds, sun broke through to warm the manicured grounds.

I've been to hospitals with metal detectors, but Center of Hope doesn't have one. Not yet, anyway. As if patients don't have enough to worry about being sliced and diced in the name of healing, we have to add the possibility some nutball might sneak a firearm in with deadly intent. Problem is, if said nutball's intent is potent, he'll get the gun in, believe it. In terms of true safety, a metal detector is about as effective as trying to stop a spiked mace ball with a slice of cheddar.

At one point during my elevator ride, the doors opened and I heard a patient moaning somewhere like a gutshot bear. I got off on the seventh floor, where family members delivering flowers traversed the halls, dodging nurses in colorful scrubs.

In the infusion clinic, a wall of windows looked out on pinetops reaching to touch passing clouds, hungry for water. Eight or ten black leather recliners lined the walls. In each sat a patient hooked to an IV: a thin, sixtyish man with his feet up, asleep; a Filipino woman with a scarf around her balding head laughing with a friend; a middle-aged woman with a pasty face and garish red wig puzzling over a crossword, chewing pencil

eraser.

In a corner chair near the window, Donny's head lolled back, mouth open, napping. I flagged a nurse checking IV bags but before she could respond, a young woman sidled up next to me, her hair cut in a short bob with faint stripes of green still visible from an earlier visit to the salon. Her eyes were the color of sea foam and her hospital scrubs had Scooby-Doo on them with a nametag: TABIE CASSIL.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"You a nurse?"

She chuckled. "No, just a volunteer. I've only been here a few weeks."

"I thought you seemed a little young. I'm here to see Donny, if that's okay. I'm a friend of his mom's."

"Karen? I know her. It should be cool, but he's probably tired. Varla? Donny okay?"

Varla, the nurse, glanced at Donny in the chair. "Just drowsy." She smiled and swept past.

Tabie informed me, "Some of the meds they give patients during chemo kinda wipe them out." She watched Donny, green eyes warm with friendship. "It's crappy what he's going through."

"Crappy's a good word for it," I offered, before crossing the room and quietly unfolding a chair next to Donny's recliner. I smiled at the Hispanic man hooked to an IV in the next recliner, full head of black hair that hadn't fallen out yet, knee bouncing

impatiently.

Donny's chest rose and fell inside a Joker T-shirt, breaths deep and smooth. A comic book lay cover-down on his stomach along with his cell phone. A needle taped to the back of one hand, the thin IV tube curled up to a half-full bag of clear liquid hanging from a metal stand. This was Donny's third treatment of six in his battle against Hodgkin's. Doctors were optimistic.

I sat and watched him for a few minutes. Eventually he snorted, eyes fluttering as he left a dream to focus on my smile.

"Ah, fair maiden," he said tiredly.

"Sorry to bother you."

He got his bearings, sitting up. His cell started to slide off his lap but I caught it.

"How you feeling?"

"I've fared better."

"Too bad you're not a superhero. You wouldn't have to go through this."

"Didn't help Captain Marvel."

"The guy that said 'Shazam'?"

He shook his head. "The other one. Mar-Vell, Captain of the Kree. Jim Starlin gave him cancer and killed him off in 'eighty-two."

"Raw deal. Who'd've thought a superhero's greatest

archenemy would be the writer?"

He grinned. "Indeed."

"You'll beat it."

He tilted his head to the slowly dripping IV bag. "Though my weapon be of liquid chemical and not forged broadsteel, the enemy shall nonetheless be vanquished. Or like my mom always says, 'One foot in front of the other.'"

"I hear you."

"I'm thinking of having a T-shirt made that says 'Chemo Boy.'"

"What's the logo on your chest, a big IV bag?"

He barked with joy, strong and loud, "Absolutely." Chuckling.

"Where's your mom?"

"I'll text her when I'm done and she'll pick me up. I don't like her hanging around here."

Wanting to fight the good fight on his own. Karen's usefulness came into play at home, where she could cook him meals when he felt like eating and force him to eat when he didn't, put some weight on those weary bones of his.

"Hope you don't mind, I talked to your friend Calico last night."

"About what?"

"Not much. How long were you two an item?"

Donny glanced across the room where Tabie leaned in the doorway, watching. She grinned sadly and turned into the hall.

“Not long. I wasn’t musically inclined ... had no place in the whole War Kittens thing. Not that I wanted to, anyway.”

“And their war against conventional rock and roll?”

He sputtered. “They’re at war with everything. Well, Rex and Manx are, anyway. At war with politics, religion, life. Haters.”

“But not Calico?”

“She never used to be. I don’t know.... Once I was diagnosed ... I guess it was too much for her.”

“It’s a tough thing for some people to deal with. Don’t be too hard on her for it.”

“Never. But that doesn’t mean I have to like that jerk she’s seeing.”

“You think he’d have any reason to hurt Gamera?”

“Does he seem like the kind of guy who would need a reason?”

“Thanks for the ride,” Donny said, weak as he kept pressure on the taped gauze on the back of his hand.

“Don’t mention it,” I answered.

In their backyard, Karen fed Gamera a leaf of redhead lettuce.

“Hey, buddy,” said Donny, and the tortoise lifted his head at the sound of his best friend’s voice. Donny knelt to scratch him

on the chin.

After a moment, Donny stood and nearly lost his balance, his legs wobbly. Karen helped him up, kissed his cheek. "I'll check on you later, hon. See if you want a soft-boiled egg or something."

"kay." Donny shuffled into the house.

Karen stared after him. "You a mother?" she asked.

I shook a no.

"It's tough seeing him sick like this. When he was a little boy he'd scrape a knee and I'd kiss it better, give him some ice cream after a sore throat. But I can't just kiss this better."

"Frustrating, I know. May I?"

I held my hand out for the leaf of lettuce drooping in her grasp. She'd momentarily forgotten Gamera. The tortoise stretched his leathery neck out trying to snatch the greens, but Karen had the lettuce just out of his reach.

"Oh. Sure." She handed the lettuce over.

I knelt before Gamera and he glanced at me with his cold tortoise eyes before fixating on the lettuce in my hand. I held it out for him. The oxygen tube in his nostril didn't seem to be impeding him as he bit down on the lettuce, tearing off a tatter and chewing slowly, jaw grinding side to side. He stuck his neck out in a grand gesture when he swallowed—galulp—and took a step toward me, wanting more.

Karen watched Donny's upstairs window. "You believe in

reincarnation?"

She required no answer, just needing to talk: "I think I do. But before we come back, we're shown the life we're about to be born into. And we're given the choice whether to come back or not. Even if the life we're shown is full of pain and suffering, the only way for us to learn is to come back and live it. You probably think that's hippie-dippie nonsense."

She chuckled, self-deprecating, and continued:

"Anyway, with each life we lead, we learn more and our souls get stronger. Donny's got a strong soul. He'll get through this bump in the road."

I scratched the big tortoise under the chin as Donny had done. "What about Gamera? He have a strong soul?"

"All animals do," she said. "We're the ones who still have a lot to learn."

I nodded my assent, and during the pause that followed, changed the subject: "What do you know about the War Kittens?"

"Marise ... I mean Calico, she and Donny went to high school together. The two guys went to Gresham, I think. There was another one, too ..." She pondered, trying to recall a name.

"Donny's not part of the Kittens so Calico drops him for the drummer? Doesn't make her look so loyal."

"There was more to it than that. By then Donny had been diagnosed. Calico was standing in my kitchen when I told her.

She lost it. Her legs gave out under her. We held each other on the floor for a good ten minutes.”

“Maybe the drummer was her out, so she wouldn’t have to deal with Donny being sick.”

Karen shrugged. “I hoped she’d be bigger than that. I think she still has a flame for Donny, but I’d never tell him that, get his hopes up.”

“Any lingering jealousies that you know of?”

“Boys don’t usually open up to their mothers about their love lives.”

“I meant from the drummer, Rex.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

Karen opened Gamera’s chicken-wire cage, picking his front end up and setting him down pointed in the right direction. She nudged his backside until he crept into the enclosure, trailing his oxygen tube, one hind leg weak and nearly useless from his wounds. But he kept trudging.

“That’s it, boy,” she said. “One foot in front of the other.”

Off Moreland on one of the side streets, not far from Mount Tabor Park, The Rue Morgue crouched between the back of an auto-parts store and a closed carpet warehouse; a giant black stone cat, its gaping-fanged maw curtained off with ebony canvas, being tended by a doorman at a red velvet rope of all things. Rumor was the deed to the club belonged to a Northwest author with heavy coin he’d made selling the movie

rights to his horror novels.

Above the big dark feline's pointed ears, curled inside its tail, glowing marquee letters dripped blood-maroon: WORRY DOLLS! ZUNI FETISH! WAR KITTENS! Hard to believe these unknowns would attract a line as long as the one snaking down the sidewalk. More likely, the manager was using one of the oldest tricks in the book: Keep a line out front even though it's empty inside, tricking people into thinking something's going on in there, causing them to gather like curious crows.

The kids in line ranged in age from about fourteen to college kids from Reed and Warner Pacific; the younger ones dressed too old and the older ones too young. If you ask me, a fourteen-year-old girl with chili red lipstick, halter, and torn fishnets isn't appropriate, and I'm no prude. Glo-green bands decorated many a spindly wrist, indicating the wearer was of age to drink alcohol. Presumably.

I stepped up to the doorman, a thinnish white guy affecting Poe with dark unkempt hair, narrow moustache, high velvet collar, and ascot cravat. He looked like he might be strong enough to stop that aforementioned fourteen-year-old if she got rowdy ... and had one hand tied behind her back.

I smiled, flipping my back-length raven locks. "Any way into this place without standing in line?" With my black greatcoat I figured I was a shoo-in for the club's dress code.

He grinned, all kinds of nasty thoughts going on behind dark, bag-laden eyes.

"And don't get cute," I warned.

His grin faded.

"I'm the War Kittens' press agent. They just hired me."

"Got any credentials?"

"You kidding me?"

He held out a wand. I opened my coat, let him swipe me. I'd left my silver-plated friend in the Jeep. He whipped out one of those day-glo alcohol bands to snap around my wrist.

"You sure I'm old enough for one of those? Judging by half this crowd, you might not be too accurate at guessing ages."

He snarled, "You can't get booze without it."

I snatched it from him and made my way inside.

The interior was cleaner than I'd expected, given its gothic inspiration. Darkly clean, without nihilism and grim attitude; posh goth. The centerpiece of the dance floor was a fountain formed of a pile of skulls, thick red "blood" dripping from eye sockets and open snaggle-toothed jaws.

Clearly the club manager hadn't been playing any tricks on the line outside; the place was packed. Being crowded by this many teens made my skin prickle, sort of like tiptoeing through a field of black wasps. Only I prefer wasps.

I hugged the corner of the bar, barely enough room for both lungs to take a full breath. I got the attention of one of two bartenders, this one wearing Dracula's cape, which didn't really go with his orange curls.

"What'll ya have?" he asked without really caring about my answer.

"I only drink ... wine ..." I intoned in my best Lugosi.

He stared blankly, not getting it.

"Screw it," I said. "Gimme a Hamm's."

"Let's see your wristband," he said without a smile.

"You kidding me?"

He popped a Hamm's and passed it across.

The band onstage finished their set, if that's what you call it, a minor pause in the general cacophony of the place. Five black guys playing rock and roll of some sort was a nice change, though their Watusi-style war paint and grass loincloths didn't seem overly PC to me. This must be Zuni Fetish, saying their goodbyes to the crowd and hauling their gear off to make room for the War Kittens.

I scanned the crowd, ears throbbing from the previous racket. On the floor, some kids made out while others danced to music pumping from house speakers.

A shaggy club bouncer, looking like the orangutan from Poe's tale stuffed into a black sport coat, pulled aside the backstage curtains and shouted. After a moment, Rex and Calico emerged, both dressed much as I'd seen them before, Calico in a short skirt and Rex in his ridiculous stocking cap, dark curls trying to escape from under it.

The bouncer said something to them, to which both shook

their heads, Rex doing so with great vehemence. The bouncer nodded and turned away. Calico wore a look of sad concern. Rex put a comforting arm around her.

Weaving across the dance floor, elbowing any number of goth goofballs out of my way, I intercepted the couple just before they disappeared backstage.

“You again,” sneered Rex.

“Me again. Just a couple more questions, if you don’t mind.”

“Okay,” Calico readily agreed before Rex could cut me off.

I directed my questions at Calico. “I’m trying to get the timeline right. First, you and Donny are an item. At the same time, Rex has his eye on you.”

Rex protested, “Hey, it wasn’t like that.”

I continued, “Then someone attacks Gamera.”

“Not that friggin’ turtle again!”

“It’s a tortoise. Then Donny is diagnosed with cancer. You can’t handle it and break it off with him.”

Calico hung her head, ashamed.

“Then you start shacking up with Rex. Do I have the timeline right?”

Calico nodded.

Rex sputtered, “You saying I attacked the turtle because I was jealous of Donny or something? Like I thought that would

get me Calico? That's the stupidest plan I ever heard!"

I pondered a moment. "You're right. It is a stupid plan, even for a guy who wears a stocking cap in seventy-degree weather."

After a long second or two he realized he'd been insulted and his mouth dropped open, face scrunching like a kid trying to understand the D on his report card.

I stepped out the side exit into an alley and the door clanked shut behind me, locking me out. I looked up and down, hearing only the squeak of a rat in the dark and the whoosh of traffic at the alley mouth.

I sidestepped a stream of soapy water running down the pavement, not wanting to decorate my boots with some homeless guy's secondhand vino.

Coming out of the alley, I swung a glance at the club entrance. The ersatz Poe was still keeping the line at bay. The orangutan bouncer was in heated discussion with a youngish girl, her hair cut in a bob, wearing a wife-beater and cargo pants. I watched the argument for a full minute before I realized I'd seen this girl before: the volunteer at the infusion clinic over at Providence Portland, Tabie.

I thought things over for a moment. A couple of jigsaw pieces fell into place, completing a picture that didn't match the one I had on the cover of my mental puzzle box.

Tabie waved her arms at the bouncer, fingers sending him an uncouth semaphore before she stormed off.

I found her halfway down the block, leaning against a streetlight inhaling a cigarette. In the lamp's phosphorous glow, the streaked highlights in her hair jumped out like a Siberian tiger's stripes.

"Tabie?"

She looked up, glowered.

"We met before," I reminded her, "At Providence."

Her eyebrows scrunched. "Oh. Right."

She sucked her cig, her mind heavy with other things.

"So let me ask you ... Tabie. You sometimes spell it 'Tabby,' with a 'Y'?"

She shrugged. "What of it?" Not the peppy girl I'd met at the hospital.

"Like a tabby cat, the streaks in your hair. You were one of the War Kittens, weren't you? At least, until what Manx called a 'clash of personalities.'"

"Why am I talking to you?"

I ignored her surliness. "Forget talk. Just listen. I'm filling in a sequence of events."

"What sequence? What events?"

I counted them off: "Donny and Calico are an item. Meanwhile, in the band, you were the one with a thing for Calico, not Rex, like I thought. But Calico wasn't feeling it. This causes friction in the band and they kick you out. In a fit of rage

and jealousy, you blame Donny and lash out by hurting Gamera.
”

She clenched her jaw, looked away.

“Then Donny is diagnosed. Bad timing all around, I suppose. You feel bad about what you’ve done and volunteer at Providence as your way of making amends, at least in your own mind. On top of all that, Calico ends up with Rex. You still can’t have her.”

She flicked her cigarette to the sidewalk. Orange sparks exploded.

“But why hurt Gamera? He’s just a poor defenseless animal.”

She lowered her head. Her shoulders jerked up and down as she began to sob.

“I don’t know. . . . I wanted to hurt Donny. . . . It’s because of him . . . and Calico . . . the band doesn’t want me around. . . .”

“No, hon. It’s because of you the band doesn’t want you around.”

Tears fell from her face, sparkling in the passing headlights before splatting to the dark sidewalk.

Her words coughed between hitching sobs, “I . . . I’m sorry but . . . it’s just a . . . just a turtle. . . .”

“He’s a tortoise.”

A few weeks later, I scarfed down a bowl of Cheerios for breakfast, running behind schedule. I was planning on giving

Donny a ride home after his treatment and saying hi to Karen and Gamera. Rinsing my bowl in the sink, I caught sight of Thumper scampering by the open door and down the hall. The rabbit only moves that fast when he's spooked, and one thing spooks him more than any other.

I found it on the floor near the stereo, hiding behind a cabinet leg; a big juicy brown one, ugly as sin. I nudged it with the toe of my boot and it unfurled its many legs, creeping out across the rug where I could nail it with a good stomp, raising my booted foot to do the deed.

Then I paused, the thought flicking through my mind that what if Karen's theory about reincarnation was right? What if I come back as a creepy-crawly?

Hauling across the shag, the spider tried to reach a crack in the wall, the dark spot under the easy chair, any hiding place to let it live another day.

From a pile of junk mail I grabbed that old War Kittens flyer. I set the edge of it on the rug in front of the spider, leaving him no choice but to crawl up onto it.

Holding the flyer as far from my body as possible, I held it out an open window to dump the spider out. He didn't want to go, too stupid to know I was saving his life. I shook the flyer and the thing dropped off, dangling from a glowing filament. I yelped, feeling somehow attached to the spider; it to its web, the web to the flyer, the flyer to my fingers.

I swung the spider to the wall of the houseboat where it

clung above the cold, lapping Willamette.

Before closing the window I watched. The spider appeared to accept its new surroundings, turning and stepping spindly legs in some direction only it had reason to, in slow arachnid symmetry, one foot in front of the other, in front of the other, in front of the other . . .

Like any other survivor.

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THE CHANGELINGS: A VERY GRIM FAIRYTALE (BUT FOR OUR TIMES)

By Carol Biederman

Carol Biederman is the author of a number of published short stories and of a volume of related tales entitled *The Oldest Inhabitant* (Trafford, 2006), in which the narrator, the first person buried in a California Gold Rush cemetery, uses his unique position to tell stories of the hardships of some of those buried after him. The kind of originality of concept displayed in Ms. Biederman's book is also evident in her debut story for us. When she isn't writing, she does Ghost Tours for tourists in the little Gold Rush town she calls home.

Once upon a time, about twenty-seven years ago, a wicked witch switched babies in the delivery room of a small hospital.

(Those among you who are of a pedestrian and pedantic turn of mind would argue she was simply a tired obstetrics nurse, having al-ready worked a sixteen-hour shift with six babies born in that time, this being the nine-month mark of a massive and long power outage when people—unable to cook a meal or watch television—had nothing to do but add an extra blanket and retire to bed for whatever entertainment that might offer, and her mistake was merely due to her fatigue. However, those of us who find a grain of truth in all fairytales will stick with

the theory of the wicked witch.)

It happened thus. The hospital, already a small institution, was in the process of remodeling one of its delivery rooms, hence, only one was available on this particular day.

(Any hospital administrator with a whit of foresight would have calculated the nine-month phenomenon, which has been documented in cities throughout the world for decades, and put off the remodeling project until the crucial date had passed.)

The two mothers in question, Margaret Miller and Anita Singleton, while in separate labor rooms, were rushed by attendants to Delivery at the same moment, very nearly colliding in the hallway outside the door. In the delivery room, their shared obstetrician, also stressed from an extremely trying day of births, wiped his arm across his sweating forehead, washed his hands yet another time, and held them up as the nurse (the aforementioned wicked witch) pulled on yet another set of plastic gloves for him and looked with dismay at the sight of two tiny heads crowning simultaneously.

(For the faint of heart, we will skip the subsequent details of the births and turn our minds to the much more pleasant picture of rosy, chubby babies.)

The wicked witch, with two newborns in her arms (and all thought of transfer of bodily fluids put aside), cleaned and dried the new infants, and carried them (in the opposite direction—and this is significant), both bald, red-faced, wrinkled, and screaming (forget the rosy, chubby picture), to their

unrespective mothers and only then attached the plastic bracelets to their wrists (the wrong wrists, you will understand).

Thus it was in stone.

(Those of you with kind intentions may still put down to fatigue her failure to attach those bracelets the second the babies were born. But what about the merry little twinkle in the nurse's beautiful green eyes?—her sole beautiful feature. However, we will say nothing more of the wicked witch. For now.)

Margaret Miller gathered her infant to her breast and whispered, "Natasha," and so the child was named.

(Yes, a good Russian name for the child—Mr. Gorbachev having made Russian ancestry a fine and exotic thing—although this particular thread to Russian ancestry was thin, and unspooled through many generations and across many continents before it came to rest in the determined fist of Margaret Miller. A boy would have been Dimitri.)

Anita Singleton, too, gathered her infant to her breast, and whispered, "We'll talk it over with Daddy when we see him."

(And where are these fathers? you may well ask. Robert Miller, a CEO for a major food distributor, who spent as much time on the road as possible, was on the road. Johnny Singleton was in the fathers' lounge, having—wisely—opted out of attending the actual birth due to a propensity for fainting.)

We will skip about six months in our story now (Anita and Johnny having agreed to name their—except not really theirs

—little girl Holly), to a scene in the supermarket, where Johnny, running errands for Anita, happened upon Margaret and Natasha.

“She’s very beautiful,” Johnny said, stopping to admire the admittedly beautiful child in her carry seat. “I have one at home just about the same age.”

(Exactly the same age, if truth be known. But truth wasn’t known, was it?)

He reached out his finger to wriggle it in front of her sweet little face, a gesture that brought much giggling from his own (though not his own) Holly. Fast as lightning, Natasha’s tiny fist reached up and grabbed his finger, a grip surprisingly powerful. Margaret stepped in quickly to remove her daughter’s fingers from the strange man’s hand. But little Natasha (with a determination that would follow her through her years—as we shall, to our sorrow, see) clung. As Margaret pried each tiny finger loose, it snapped back in place. Finally, it was Johnny who gently removed the baby’s fingers. Natasha howled.

(Apparently she knew something no one else did. Smart little thing, don’t you think?)

Margaret pulled a baby wipe from her bag. When they got home, she gave Natasha a bath. Another incident occurred. (Insignificant except to those of us who watch such things.)

The babies were now about eighteen months old; walking, jabbering, and climbing. The two mothers met, each with a stroller, walking in opposite directions down the street of their

small town. They stopped to admire the other's child, although each individually thought hers the most beautiful. (A natural thing for a mother to think.)

Except for the hair. Anita commented on Natasha's beautiful dark curls (she would never have said a word to a soul, not even Johnny, but she secretly wished her Holly had dark curly hair like her own) while Margaret stared wistfully at Holly's silken blond hair and ran her fingers through her own blond hair.

(Those black curls! Natasha's recessive genes, Margaret thought, harkening back to those far, far distant Russian ancestors. Oh, well.)

And then those two little girls did an amazing thing. With strollers parked side by side, but facing in opposite directions, and the two mothers openly expressing admiration for the other child (And why not? For were they not admiring their own flesh and blood?), Holly and Natasha stepped up onto their seats and tried to climb, each into the stroller of the other.

(Apparently they knew something no one else did. Smart little things, don't you think?)

Quickly the two mothers reseated their children and continued on their way, Margaret to Sleek and Chic, a high-end dress shop, and Anita to Only Organic. The children leaned out of their strollers and watched the other disappear down the street. And wept.

We will now fast forward to the present day. But no. I lie. A bit of background before we do that. Both girls did well in

school (having been born of remarkably bright parents, the mix-up notwithstanding, and having been given every advantage in the world) from nursery school through preschool, on to kindergarten, elementary school, high school, and eventually college. (All private institutions, you will understand.)

Not that there weren't a few bumps along the way. Natasha's parent conferences, beginning with nursery school, made reference to "born leader," and "must learn to share," a teacher's covert way of saying "bossy" and "grabby." That, someplace around third grade, changed to "leadership qualities, but must learn to lead in a positive way."

(Those teachers! Why can't they just come out and say, "The kid's a major pain in the ass?" Of course, that wouldn't be good for the self-esteem ... of the parents. But I digress.)

And—lest I forget—the beauty pageants! Under Margaret's watchful eye, Natasha walked, pivoted, bowed, curtsied, sang her songs, recited little poems, made tiny speeches, and continually won second place. Until an unfortunate accident that occurred when the first-place winner was in the bathroom. (Nasty sprain!)

Natasha slipped into the winner's crown effortlessly. (Perhaps slipped is an unfortunate choice of words.)

Then there was the incident in sixth grade, when Natasha's science project looked like it would probably come in second, and the terrible crash and destruction of the entry that probably would have taken first place. (Probably. We'll never know for

sure, will we?)

Glass and strange liquids all over the floor. An eleven-year-old boy in tears. Margaret Miller was the first on her knees to help clean up the mess. "Such a shame!" she said. "Such a shame!"

Or how about the time Natasha tried out for cheerleading queen and didn't make it? But, Voila! a place opened up when Queen fell down a flight of stairs (Nasty break!) and the pins all moved over one place. So to speak.

College? Well, Natasha's grades weren't quite sufficient for college, but Grandpa (from that far-off line of Russians and not really her grandfather) intervened, and Voila! all over again. A new wing for the science building at the state university.

(I name no names of places or institutions in the interests of protecting the innocent. Of whom, there seem to be few. So far.)

Yes, the wheels for Natasha were greased, to use a tired but true phrase. That is, those she did not grease for herself.

(We have not mentioned the girls weeping into their pillows as Natasha snatched first one and then the next and the next in a seemingly never-ending line of boyfriends. It was the conquest that challenged her, not the prize—although the sex was good. They were useless when she dropped them. Several took Holy Orders.)

But what of Holly? If you're thinking Snow White and Rose Red (as any lover of fairytales might well be thinking), you would

be quite wrong. Little Holly was no angel and had many time-outs in nursery school, one trip to the principal's office while in elementary school, and a two-day suspension in her sophomore year for smoking pot in the girls' bathroom. While in high school she was moderately popular with other girls, quite popular with the boys—with her long, straight blond hair and brown eyes (What a combination! Rather like Margaret Miller's coloring, would you say?)—and never lacking for a date if she wanted one. But she rarely wanted one. It took someone quite special to take her away from her family on a weekend. Besides, she was determined to get into a major university (again we must offer anonymity) and she spent her time studying. Time well spent. She was selected valedictorian of her class, the only black mark on her record the two-day suspension. (We can forgive that.)

Both girls went on to college: Natasha (having vowed never to marry, since her rapacious sexual appetite could not be satisfied by one man, determined to be a career woman. Besides, she found other women's men much more interesting. Her mother knew nothing of this vow and would have brought up the issue of the Russian genetic line had she known.) taking a law degree and going immediately into the prosecutor's office where she planned to intern only long enough to gather the experience she needed for trial law, and Holly earning a master's degree in Early Childhood Education and planning to work until she had children of her own.

And that brings us almost up to date. However, we should

also mention here that the girls never attended the same school, in fact, never met (nor would they meet that fateful afternoon that we have not yet visited) except for the brief incident in the strollers. Perhaps if they had come to know one another, the disaster that ensued might never have. Ensued.

(However, this is a fairytale, and a grim one at that, and one has little control over a fairytale.)

And now we come to the heart of this story, and why I call it a tale of our times. Because murder is of our times (and ages past—and ages to come) and so is DNA. (Not part of a fairytale, you say. Say on. I care not a jot for your criticisms. Besides, we must move with the times and craft our craft to that end.)

Shortly after finishing her master's degree, Holly married a young man she met in her credentials program. Having pleased her parents for nearly twenty-seven years, she did not please them with her choice. (Not exactly the Prince Charming they had hoped for.)

"It's hard to put a finger on it," Anita said while discussing the upcoming nuptials with Johnny. "He's just a bit, too ..." but she left the sentence unfinished, having nothing with which to finish it.

"Yes," agreed Johnny. "I find him rather ..." And then silence fell from his mouth as well.

And so, Holly and Steven were married. It was a glorious affair: a beautiful and radiant bride, a rather bewildered mother

(who had still not gathered the necessary words. Would it have changed the course of things if she had?), a tight-lipped father (because he had found the word, actually a number of words—WOMANIZER, LECH, and CAD among them; old-fashioned but you get the point—and feared they might escape his lips were he to open them. This information having been gathered the evening of the bachelor party, he tried with all his heart to put the groom-to-be's behavior down to drunken lewdness and not a predatory nature. However, the incident with the stripper's nipples was difficult to attribute to mere drunkenness. Still, he and Anita had reserved the country club and hired the best caterer. Huge nonrefundable deposits!), a well-behaved groom, a slightly tipsy mother-of-the-groom, a beautiful ceremony, and a lavish reception.

One must congratulate the parents of Holly Singleton, now Mrs. Steven McGuire. Once the wedding was a fait accompli, they resigned themselves and made every effort to welcome Steven as their son and beloved family member. Picnics, backyard barbeques, concerts, theater parties (a sizable down payment on a 3 bd. 2 ba.).

All the gracious and wonderful things of Holly's growing up, the Singletons extended to their new son-in-law. Anita found words to finish her sentence: "He's just so ... one of our family now," and Johnny shoved CAD and WOMANIZER to the back of his mind. (Not out of his mind, mind you, just to the back. Or perhaps I should say, toward the back.)

On the day in question (and that seems such an innocuous

statement, “the day in question” when it was anything but innocuous!), the family was to gather at Holly and Steve’s new home on a Tuesday evening for a housewarming/three-month anniversary ceremony with BARBEQUE BY STEVE.

(And here our story takes on the horrors of the average fairytale. Think about it for a moment: kids fattened for eating; a witch shoved into an oven [how traumatizing must that have been on the kids in later years!]; parents deliberately abandoning children; little men demanding the first-born [are we talking pedophile here?]; a father who touches his daughter [Uh-oh!] and she turns into a lump of solid metal; a wolf slaughtered in front of a little girl. HELLO?! What is a little murder compared to that?)

Steve was to come home immediately after his teachers’ meeting, which usually ended by four o’clock (Steve at this point in his career was teaching third grade while working on his administrative credential), to begin the preparations for THE BARBEQUE. Holly was to stop by the store on her way home for a few deli salads and beer.

However, the best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men gang aft a-gley (to quote old Bobby) and when Holly arrived home, she found that Steve was not a-gley (although Steve had aft been a-gley—or often been astray, for those of you who speak no Burns), he was dead.

This was the scene as Holly walked in: ribs marinating on the counter (a tofu burger for Anita, the vegetarian), a bottle of

Merlot breathing on the counter, and Steve (not breathing) on the floor, their best Santoku knife protruding from his chest. There was blood everywhere; a large Waterford crystal vase that had been a wedding gift lay in shards. Holly screamed and sank to her knees, cradling Steve's head against her breast, her tears diluting the blood that still seeped from his wounds. A sharp sliver of Waterford crystal cut her knee. She did not notice.

And this was the scene that greeted (well, greeted is hardly the right word, is it?) Anita and Johnny Singleton when they arrived shortly after Holly (but not in time to provide the alibi that Holly might eventually need—but I get ahead of myself here) bearing a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc and a batch of chocolate chunk cookies. Anita screamed and ran to Holly (Sauv Blanc and cookies all over the floor), gathering Holly and Steve in her arms. She, too, cut herself badly on the broken crystal: she, too, did not notice. Johnny fainted (never did get over that little propensity), cracking his head (a nasty cut that would require stitches) on the edge of the granite countertop before sliding to the floor himself.

It was Anita who groped for the phone on the counter and dialed 911.

The scene had changed little when the police and paramedics arrived. The police called immediately for a forensics team and the rest you have probably watched on C.S.I. (Yellow tape all around the 3 bd. 2ba.!)

Now this tale, which heretofore has not been complicated enough, becomes more complicated. The blood, you know. (We are pleased that the forensics team did notice and take a sample of the smear of blood they found on the front doorframe of the house.)

Holly quickly became a PERSON of INTEREST (it's usually the spouse) but until the various bloods (and so much blood from so many people!) could be sorted and identified by DNA, she would remain just that: a Pol. Also, there was the crumpled note the coroner found in Steve's pocket.

"Stevie,

Hope you can get away from the surly bonds of matrimony for some fine champagne. I have a bottle chilling just for us. I also have something else warming just for you. I'll see you Tuesday after your tedious faculty meeting. Make some excuse to the bride.

Kisses,

R"

(MOTIVE!!!!)

Once again I must back up a bit in my story, as you may well wonder how it is that "Stevie" was already involved with a woman when he was just newly married. (A truly decent man would at least wait more than three months, don't you think? But Steve was not a truly decent man.) Actually, he and "R" had been lovers for about a year. And she minded not a speck when he got married. (And he didn't seem to mind a speck, either.

Oh, Johnny, if only you had spoken the words you found!) In fact, that made him even more exciting to her. Their relationship began when she subpoenaed him about a brawl in a saloon to which he had been a witness. (Well, you've known all along who it was, haven't you?) to appear in court, and the rest, as they say, is history. (The "R"? Russkie, of course. Making the most out of nothing.)

We go now to the office of the district attorney. Entering our tale, Lara Schuller, one of a number of assistant district attorneys in this particular office. (Again, I name no names of places in the interest of protecting the innocent, of which, you have by now figured, there is probably one—and she is still a “person of interest.”)

Literally, enter, as she taps on the door of the D.A. and is instructed to “Come in.” The D.A. is a large, extremely handsome black man someplace in his mid fifties. His voice, deep and rich, seems to come from the very core of his being. His name is Hugh Mosley, and he is used to his assistant D.A.s entering his office and saying, “Hugh-ston, we have a problem.” It happens almost every day. Today Lara says, “Hugh, we have a problem.” His head snaps up. He knows real trouble when he hears it.

“Sit down,” he says.

Lara is a tall, slender, attractive woman in her early forties. She has beautiful auburn hair cut in a no-nonsense boyish style that suits her features well. Her makeup is reserved, as is her

mode of dressing. She loves the challenge of a trial and aspires to nothing higher than her present job; she absolutely loves the work she does. (Or did, until this case came up and the reports flowed in.)

Lara begins her story, most of which we already know. (And from here, dear lover of fairytales, there will be no happy ending. But you realized that, didn't you? Just one sad assistant district attorney laying out the sad facts of a sad case.)

"The blood on the doorframe," she tells Hugh Mosley, "appears to have gotten there by someone with blood on his or her clothes leaving the scene, given the direction of the blood swipe." She pauses. "Hugh, we ran the DNA. It's Natasha Miller's blood."

"What the hell! Natasha Miller works here!"

"Yep!"

"You sure it isn't the victim's?"

"Oh, there's some of that mixed in, but apparently whoever killed Steve McGuire—and I'm thinking Natasha Miller was at least at the scene, given the DNA—got cut in the process, maybe by the murder weapon or by the glass vase that Steve tried to use as a defensive weapon. Anyway, there are two bloods on the doorframe: one is Steve's; one is Natasha's."

"Shit!" (Not the language of fairytales, but we must go with the times.)

"Since she works here, she was in the system, so when we

ran the DNA, Bingo! who pops up but our Natasha. Which means we have the blood of five people at the scene of the crime.” She enumerates on her fingers: “Steve, the victim. Holly, the victim’s wife. Holly’s mother, Holly’s father. And that of Natasha Miller.”

(She leans forward, her hands clasped in “Here’s the church, here’s the steeple.” The steeple points at D.A. Mosley.)

“What was Natasha doing at that house?”

“I think she was having an affair with him. God knows, she’s tried every man in this office.”

Hugh Mosley has the grace to blush, a charming coloration to his already dark skin. (We wonder just how far she got with that. Not very, if we know Hugh Mosley.)

“There was a note in his pocket from somebody named ‘R,’ which doesn’t make sense with Natasha, but maybe it was a pet name.

(Well, we know, don’t we? Stevie didn’t show up for his assignation with “R” after his “tedious faculty meeting” and she got mad. Hell hath no fury ... There’s much to be said for old adages.)

“Hugh, it gets really heavy here,” she says.

“Oh, right! It’s not heavy with a member of the D.A.’s staff at the scene of the crime?”

(Mosley has a penchant for sarcasm. Probably his one fault.)

“Not compared to what I have to tell you. Judy at the lab ran the DNA for us and she came to me with this information. Holly—the vic’s wife—her DNA doesn’t match the DNA of her parents.”

“Adopted,” Hugh Mosley says, sounding happy to have solved at least this issue on the spot.

“That’s what I thought,” Lara says. “So I mentioned adoption or natural child to the parents when I was talking to them—naturally they weren’t exactly pleased to be talking to me since I’m supposed to be prosecuting their daughter—can’t really blame them—and the mother got all huffy and said, ‘She’s our natural child!’ So, I checked the stats on Holly and traced her birth to the hospital where she was born.” Lara sits back in her chair and folds her arms. “Hugh, there were two babies delivered in the same delivery room on the same night at exactly the same time. The hospital was undergoing some renovation and space was limited, so two women ended up in one delivery room. One of the women was Anita Singleton, Holly’s mother, and the other was a Margaret Miller, Natasha’s mother.”

“Oh, shit,” Hugh Mosley says again. “Are you going where I think you’re going with this?”

Lara nods. “The blood we identified as Natasha’s is an offspring match for the blood of Holly’s parents. Hugh, those babies were switched in the delivery room.”

“Oh, Christ! That will be a strong charge to make,” Hugh

says.

"I know. The doctor's dead, but I tracked down the nurse who was on duty that night. She's long retired." Lara takes a minute to look at her notes. "Her name is Ida Shiblebone. Jeez! What a witch! (DID I TELL YOU?!! DID I TELL YOU?!!) "She lives in this tiny furnished apartment. The landlord, who seems to spend all his time in the garden, says she's been there for ages."

"And she said?" Hugh asks. His head is in his hands.

"She was on me like white on rice," Lara says. "Screaming, yelling. I had no right to accuse her—her record with the hospital was spotless—how dare I? I think she doth protest too much. She practically pushed me out of her apartment and slammed the door behind me. (And did a merry little dance around the sad little apartment. But only we know that.) We will probably have to subpoena her."

"And you think the Millers are Holly's biological parents?"

Lara nods.

"Do I want to know why you think that?"

Lara shakes her head.

"Didn't think so. Anything we can use in court?"

Lara shakes her head again. (A lot of head action going on here, but with good reason. Lara struck up a casual, on purpose, conversation with Natasha—Natasha having no knowledge of the DNA report—and found out that Natasha's

parents, who aren't really her parents, but we've known that for a long time—have a date night every Friday night—every Friday that Robert isn't on the road, that is—with margaritas at Pablo's Mexican Restaurant followed by dinner at George's Steak House. "They're so predictable," Natasha had said. "Thank God," Lara had said—to herself. It was a simple matter of an exchange of money and two replacement glasses and Lara had two used margarita glasses to take to the lab. None of this does Hugh Mosley need to know.)

"Is any of this relevant to our case? We can let Holly off the hook and proceed with a case against Natasha—God! I hate to think of someone from our office involved! Shit!" He slams his fist on the desktop. "Ouch. Damn!" He is quiet for a moment, shaking his hand, and then he asks, "Does anyone need to know about the switched babies? I mean, after all this time, is it really relevant? It doesn't have anything to do with who murdered Steve McGuire. Right? Am I right? Tell me I'm right."

"You're right. It doesn't have anything to do with the switched babies." Lara clears her throat and then continues. "However, when these women see the other young woman, the one that is biologically their daughter, they are going to know something is seriously wrong."

The D.A. is doodling on a scrap of paper, apparently totally intrigued with his efforts.

"Natasha is a dead ringer for Anita Singleton, Hugh, and Holly looks an awful lot like Margaret Miller. And I don't know

how you would be able to keep them apart, what with a trial and all.”

(It's all nature vs. nurture, isn't it?)

“It's all nature versus nurture, isn't it?” Lara says. (A rhetorical question if I ever heard one.)

“Huh?”

“I mean, Anita Singleton gives birth to a murderer but raises a beautiful, intelligent, good citizen. Whereas Margaret Miller gives birth to this good citizen but raises a murderer. Be an interesting study for some psychology student.”

Hugh Mosley looks up from his art work. “I need to think about this, Lara. Come in tomorrow morning and we'll hash it out then.”

“Sure. In the meantime, I'm going to depose the wicked witch. (Good luck!) Just in case we need her information.”

“Who?”

“The obstetrics nurse.”

“Whatever,” Mosley says. He has returned to his doodles.

And so our tale continues. Lara Schuller returns to the rented and furnished apartment of the wicked witch. The landlord is still in the garden and she wonders if he ever leaves to sleep. She has to admit the garden is a work of art.

“I'm back,” she tells him.

He looks up from the plant he is tending. “So I see,” he

says. "You here to see Ida again?"

Lara nods.

"Haven't seen her out of her apartment since the day you were here. Not that she ever comes out much. Days at a time, I don't see her."

"I'll just go knock," Lara says and turns to walk up the steps to the second-level walkway. The landlord watches her, his lips pursed.

There is no answer to Lara's knock. (Well, there wouldn't be, would there?)

She leans over the low balcony and calls down to the landlord. "She's not in, apparently," she says.

He frowns and stands his shovel against the fence. "I'll be right up," he says.

"Not a young woman," he tells Lara, this man who will never see seventy-five again. "She could have fallen." He knocks, a perfunctory gesture, and puts his key in the lock. "Ida," he calls. "Ida." Hesitantly, Lara follows the landlord as he steps into the small entryway and closes the door firmly behind them. She's not squeamish, but neither is she wanting to see what they are both expecting.

(However, they would be wrong.)

The apartment is empty except for the furnishings that came with the apartment when Ida Shiblebone rented it. A brief survey tells them both that Ms. Shiblebone is not in the

apartment, nor are any of her clothes or other personal objects.

"My God!" The landlord exclaims. "It's like she never lived here. There's nothing!" He turns to Lara. "But I never saw her leave. And I would have."

(Does the man never sleep?)

"Maybe at night, while you were asleep?" she offers.

"My son takes the night duty," the landlord tells her. "There is always somebody on watch here."

Lara finds that just a bit cloying, but says nothing.

The landlord wanders about the tiny place, shaking his head. The bed is a headboard and bare mattress, the medicine cabinet is empty, as is the refrigerator. Lara opens the dresser drawers, but they yield nothing. Drawers in the kitchen, except for those holding minimal utensils, are also empty. The shelves hold only a few plates, cups, and bowls. One pot and one frying pan are in the oven drawer. Lara is reminded of the time her parents took her camping and they stayed in a "furnished" cabin. "The bare necessities," her father sang.

"I just can't believe it," the landlord says. "She was a model tenant. Always on time with the rent, almost never asking for anything." He runs his finger over a small table that sits beside the one comfortable chair in the apartment, then checks his finger for dust. It is clean. "Oh, once her refrigerator went out and we had to replace that, but nothing else except the occasional plumbing issue. She almost never went anywhere. Had her groceries delivered. I called a cab for her a few times

when she went to the doctor or dentist.”

“Any guests?”

“Never saw a one except the time you came. Your visit sort of surprised me.”

He looks at her questioningly, as though to draw from her the reason for her two visits.

Lara is having none of it. “What a lonely life,” she muses, feeling some compassion for the woman.

The landlord just shrugs, as though the thought of loneliness has never occurred to him. “Well, she watched a lot of television,” he says. “Speaking of which, the television is gone. That was hers. Television sets are not part of our ‘furnished apartments.’” He massages his chin. “How did she get it out? She would have needed help. She couldn’t have carried it by herself.” Again he shakes his head. “It’s like she never was here at all.”

Silently, Lara agrees.

(Well, what did they expect? This is a fairytale. These things happen.)

They are standing by the stripped bed and the landlord is still shaking his head, when Lara feels something rub against her leg. She yelps.

A large and very beautiful (and black, need I mention that?) cat is standing, looking up at her.

“Oh, my gawd!” Lara exclaims. She stoops and lifts the cat

in her arms. "Hello, Beauty," she says. She turns to the landlord. "See, she did have one friend. Would you look at those eyes!" She nuzzles the cat.

The landlord shudders. "Where did that thing come from. PUT IT OUT!"

"It's been in the apartment all this time." Lara says. "She left her cat behind."

"We DO NOT allow pets in the apartments. NO EXCEPTIONS! Ms. Shimblebone DID NOT HAVE A CAT. I would have known. I have a nose for such things." Again he shudders. "Filthy, FILTHY! Put it OUTSIDE!"

"I won't," Lara says. "Ms. Shimblebone went off and left this beautiful animal. I'll take it to the Humane Society and see if it's chipped. (We know it's not chipped, don't we? Of course it wouldn't be.) If it isn't, I'll just keep it. Were you hiding under the bed, Beauty?" she asks. Again, she nuzzles her face in the shiny fur.

"STOP THAT!" the landlord shouts. "How can you STAND such a creature?"

But Lara has left the apartment, the cat in her arms, leaving the landlord still shuddering.

The cat purrs with contentment. There is a twinkle in her beautiful green eyes.

Lara gives up her plans to depose the wicked witch.

And so, my friends, as I said before, there is no happy

ending to this story. (Well, maybe one small one: Beauty and Lara.) But none of the main participants will be living happily ever after. Eventually, Hugh Mosley calls both families in, but separately, and explains the findings of the DNA testing. Natasha is charged on a count of Murder One. A sample of her handwriting, taken from the application forms she filled out when she entered the employ of the district attorney (although any scrap of paper from her desk would have shown as much—however, fruit of the poisoned tree, and all that), matched the handwriting on the note found in Steve McGuire's pocket. That, her blood on the doorframe, and an alibi that is so full of holes it is laughable, are enough for Mosley to go ahead with the charge. She pleads "Not Guilty" and serves as her own counsel. (Did the girl learn nothing in law school?!)

The judge instructs the jury on lesser-included and the jury returns a verdict of Guilty of Second Degree Murder. "Passion of the moment," is how they explain their decision. Lara is disappointed. She tried so hard to convince the jury that the act of picking up the knife showed premeditation. The jury didn't buy it.

Natasha's days are spent in the prison law library, drafting her appeal. Her parents, who are really not her parents, never visit. They have completely washed their hands of her—after all, she is not their child—and try to ingratiate themselves with Holly. (There is that thread of Russian ancestry to consider, and Margaret is reluctant to let go of it.)

Holly is not interested. The Singletons gather round Holly.

(The 3bd. 2ba. having been sold to a very strange man with voyeuristic tendencies who finds the idea of faint bloodstains on the hardwood reason enough to throw cocktail parties.)

Holly has (wisely) determined herself unfit to work in the field of early childhood education, given her bouts of extreme depression (depressed because her husband is dead? Because he was two-timing her? Shock from finding him with the Santoku sticking out of his chest? Because the parents she has loved all her life are really not her parents? All of the above? I, personally, would suggest counseling.), and wanders aimlessly around the Singleton home, weeping intermittently, while Anita makes quantities of chicken-noodle soup (although she will eat none herself) which Holly sips to please her mother (who is really not her mother and now they both know it).

Anita sobs softly into her pillow at night, thinking of the beautiful, lonely (murderous) girl with the wild dark curls (so like her own.—The picture's been in the paper often.) and tries to summon the strength to plan a visit to the prison. Johnny just pats her on the back and says, "Shush, shush."

As usual, Johnny can't find the appropriate words. Surely by now he must realize that had he spoken up after the bachelor party, instead of worrying about his huge nonrefundable deposits, probably none of this would have happened. The catastrophe of mum.)

And Lara and Beauty? They are house-sitting at Lara's parents' home while her parents, Frank and Tatiana Ivanoff

Schuller, are visiting Tatiana's family in St. Petersburg, Russia.

(There is just a bit of delicious irony in this, don't you think?)

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A PRAYER ANSWERED

By David Dean



Art by Allen Davis

Real-life police chief David Dean has a new case for his fictional police chief Julian Hall. EQMM has been publishing Julian Hall stories for some twenty years, but Julian wasn't always a police chief. Like his creator, he's climbed the ranks of the Jersey shore force to which he belongs. This time Juian investigates alongside his priest, in a case that's a test of faith. Mr. Dean is an EQMM Readers Award winner, a Derringer Award nominee, and, currently, for his EQMM story "Erin's

Journal.”

Father Gregory hastily parked the old black Buick a half-block from his destination, running it up onto the curb in the darkness. Driving was still a new experience for the priest and only recently learned. In his native India, his diocese had been far too poor to afford such luxuries as automobiles and, he thought with a sigh, he had been much thinner in those days as a result. With a grunt, he slid out of the tilted vehicle. In one hand, he clutched the valise that contained the Sacraments, while the other struggled to keep the white stole round his neck from being blown off in the rising wind.

A young policeman approached him from a cluster of emergency vehicles that pulsed with red-and-white strobe lights that made the young officer appear to shift from side to side like an apparition as he drew nearer. With what seemed impossible speed for a walking man, he loomed ever darker and larger. Father Gregory unconsciously smoothed his black shirt over his plump belly and smiled nervously. “Hello,” he called out. “I am sent for by Chief J, I believe ... yes, um ... yes, I think so.”

The officer was suddenly in front of the priest, as tall and broad as a tree that had miraculously sprouted forth from the asphalt. How do Americans grow so large? Father Gregory wondered as he awaited whatever the policeman might do.

“Father Gregory?” he asked abruptly, then, not waiting for an answer, said, “Follow me, sir, the chief is inside.” Turning on his heel, he indicated the house surrounded by the police cars

and set off once more. Nearby, an ambulance sat idling, its occupants slumped in their seats, bored-looking and unconcerned in the flickering red wash of lights. Next to them, a white panel van sat empty on the lawn, its rear doors thrown wide, revealing nothing but a greater darkness within. On its side were printed the words MEDICAL EXAMINER.

Father Gregory, hurrying to keep up with the striding officer, managed to ask, "Is there more than one person hurt?"

The policeman glanced back over his shoulder. "Nope ... just one."

"Then why ..." The priest struggled with both his English and his shortness of breath. "Then why is the ambulance still here, may I ask? Surely the injured should have been taken to hospital by now?"

The officer slowed and turned, and Father Gregory thought he could discern an expression of concern on the young man's face. "We had an 'injured' when we got here," he said, "but she's beyond all that now." He nodded towards the panel van, his face hard and set once more. "The meat wagon is for her; the ambulance is waiting for the go-ahead on her husband ... he's paralyzed, you know ... fell down a flight of stairs while giving his wife a drunken beating years ago. The chief is holding on to him until we remove the body ... there's no way he wouldn't see her otherwise, so we're leaving him in his bedroom until you ... do whatever it is you do." The sergeant halted uncomfortably, then continued, "I'm not a Catholic, Father,

and I don't really understand why you were needed at a crime scene in the first place, but I'll let the chief give you the rundown, he's the one that said you should be called."

The "chief" had been amongst the first of Father Gregory's new parishioners to welcome him to Camelot and invite him into his home. This had gone a long way to breaking the ice with the rest of the islanders. Though the venerable Monsignor Cahill was still nominally the head pastor, his slow, painful demise by cancer was steadily robbing him of his vitality, and his availability had been severely curtailed as a result. Many had found the dark little man with the nearly incomprehensible accent a jarring change from the dour old Irish prelate. But with time, an improving grasp of American idiom, and a sincere devotion that needed no translation, Father Gregory had gradually come to be embraced by the community at large. He had heard it remarked of late that his homilies were nearly completely understood. By his own calculations, the congregation laughed at his jokes at least half of the time and this delighted him, as he felt strongly that he was an inspired humorist.

The house itself was a throwback to the seventies and one of the last of its kind on the island. Most of the older homes and cottages had long ago been devoured by the jaws of the wrecking machines and replaced by four-, five-, and six-bedroom vacation homes that were only used in the summer months and on various holidays. It squatted amongst its silent, dark neighbors like a cringing old dog awaiting a kick or a

curse. Even the color, to Father Gregory's eyes, participated in the allusion, being the mangy yellow of an unwelcome cur.

The priest had not been told who occupied this home, and he could not remember ever having visited it before, but he had assumed that the victim within was one of St. Brendan's parishioners. Certainly the man standing in the doorway was. Chief Julian Hall was engrossed in a murmured conversation with a thin young policeman who stood beneath the clouded porch lamp. He held in his hands a notebook, and Father Gregory heard his nervous laughter float out from beneath the bug-filled globe above his head. Chief Hall patted him on the shoulder and turned to go back inside, then spotted the little priest.

He stepped around the rookie officer and hurried down the few steps to Father Gregory. "Father, I'm so sorry to drag you out this late." The two men shook hands as the freshening wind off the ocean several blocks away swirled around them. The breeze carried just a hint of pine, the harbinger of spring.

"No, please, it is my duty to come to those in need. However," Father Gregory paused to arrange his words, "this man tells me that I have come too late. I sincerely hope not, Chief J."

No one else on the entire island called Julian "Chief J," and he winced slightly. Julian put it down as one of the Indian priest's famous attempts at humor and could not bring himself to say anything on the matter, though in recent months some of

his own officers had taken up this new form of address and invariably delivered it with a smile. He threw a glance at Sergeant Dunbar, who had escorted the cleric, but his face remained as closed and stoic as ever.

The police chief paused. "Well, yes and no, Father. When I had you called, Mrs. Fischer was still alive, if just barely..." Now it was his turn to choose his words carefully. "I could tell from her wounds that she didn't have much time left; that's why I had you contacted to respond here instead of waiting to get her into the hospital ... it turns out I underestimated the damage ... she's dead, Father."

Father Gregory still grasped the chief's hand and now patted it gently, as if Chief J were one of the newly bereaved. He knew Mrs. Fischer, of course, "Kitty," as she was known to everyone—though why she should be equated to a young cat the priest was at a loss to understand. He blamed his imperfect comprehension of American speech and promised himself that before he returned to Goa, he would master its intimacies. "I see," he murmured. "I quite understand, dear man." He patted the chief's hand once more before releasing it. Behind him he heard a snort. Unperturbed, he demanded, "Take me to her, Chief J."

Julian responded with, "Prepare yourself, Father," and then nodded at the officer with the notepad, who stood aside to let the two men pass. As they did so, Julian said to him, "Father Gregory Savartha ..." then added for the benefit of the puzzled rookie whose pen remained hesitatingly aloft, "common spelling

on Savartha.” He led on with only the ghost of a smile.

The sixty-five-year-old woman lay on the grimy linoleum of her kitchen floor within full view immediately upon entering the house. Father Gregory found that he was not prepared, and said simply, “Oh...” upon seeing her. “Oh, dear lady.”

In spite of all the medical packaging that lay strewn about her, clearly none of their contents had been useful—she was quite shockingly dead. The blood that had leaked from the numerous gashes in her skull had congealed into a black pool and she lay with the back of her head resting in it, her features grey and slack, the whites of her eyes gone the color of dirty sheets flecked with red. Even to his untrained eye, the priest could see that she had originally been facedown in the mess and had been turned over by the officers and rescue personnel attempting to save her life. As a result, one half of her face was war-painted a sticky scarlet—a final indignity for a woman he knew as a quiet and intensely devout member of his flock.

“She was always kneeling and praying,” he murmured sadly. “I believe she must have lit a thousand votive candles in the brief time I have been here. This is a damn shame.”

Chief Hall threw him a surprised look. “I don’t need to tell you not to touch anything, I’m sure,” he nonetheless reminded the priest. “Though the scene’s been pretty thoroughly photographed and processed up to this point. In fact, I think the investigators from the prosecutor’s office have already cleared.” He glanced over at the Viking-like patrol sergeant who

filled the doorway behind him, completely obscuring the young rookie on sentry duty. The sergeant nodded once but made no move to enter the room. "These folks," and here the chief indicated two figures suited up in what appeared to be paper pants, shirts, and caps and wearing surgical masks and gloves, "are our M.E.'s best." The two sexless, faceless figures appeared to glare at the senior policeman over their masks. "They're a little annoyed with me," he continued in a mock confidentiality meant for the entire room to hear. "They're anxious to package up Mrs. Fischer, the cadaver, that is, and be off—it appears we are holding them up with our superstitious ways."

"I see," Father Gregory replied uncomfortably. "Well, this shan't take but a moment or two, I am thinking, as the time for the viaticum has, unfortunately, passed. Some patience is in order, however, for a simple prayer." He set his valise on the floor, no longer requiring its contents, and knelt next to his unfortunate parishioner, though being careful to stay well out of the blood. As he drew closer, an odor began to reach him, cloying and carnal, that would shortly become rank. How distressingly mortal the poor body is, he thought, even as he grimaced at the smell of new, and violent, death.

Sketching a cross in the air above the corpse, he intoned, "In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," and began to pray for the soul of one Katherine Denise Fischer. Julian automatically followed suit and crossed himself, refraining from kneeling due to some unarticulated concern over

his professional reputation, but bowed his head for the prayer nonetheless. Out of the corners of his eyes, he saw that Sergeant Dunbar and the medical examiner's investigators were all but tapping their feet.

In what seemed an almost inappropriately brief time, the priest completed his prayer with an Amen, and rose once more. With a sigh, Father Gregory removed the stole from his shoulders and returned it reverently to his valise. "Such a shame," he whispered to Julian while studying the sad remains. Suddenly the little priest appeared to remember something and said, "I was too late to administer to her, of course, but perhaps she had last words that I should be informed of. Is this possible?" he asked the chief.

Julian looked inquiringly around the room, meeting the blank, hostile glare of the M.E.'s people and coming to settle on the sergeant. "Anything?" he asked out of politeness.

Sergeant Dunbar backed out of the doorway while simultaneously seizing the rookie and thrusting him bodily in through the same. "He was first on scene," he spoke from the porch. "Says she made some kind of statement. Read it," he demanded of the thin young officer who had suddenly become the center of attention.

With the slightest tremor in both his voice and hands, the policeman flipped back through several pages of the notebook he held and appeared to find the passage in question. Taking a moment to clear his throat and draw himself up to his full and

uncommanding height, he read aloud, "My prayers have been answered ... thanks be to God." He slowly closed his book and looked up to gauge the effect of his reading upon his audience. Everyone stared back at him.

"That's all she said?" Chief Hall asked.

"Yessir," the rookie confirmed. "That's it."

Julian grunted in dissatisfaction. "I guess it's too much to expect that she should name her killer," he asked rhetorically of the room at large.

Father Gregory stared up at him in seeming astonishment. "Chief J," he asked shyly, "may we confer in private?"

Julian gave the nod to the medical examiner's investigators, even as he took his parish priest by the arm and led him into the living room. The last thing he saw in the kitchen was the hasty unfurling of the body bag.

Once in the musty, overfurnished front room, he turned back to Father Gregory. The little man squinted in the dim, dusty light that filtered in through the kitchen. "Is it possible for me to be included in the details of the case?" the priest inquired breathlessly.

Julian studied the priest's round face, with its large, dark eyes and white shock of wispy hair that lay twisted round his neat skull by the restless winds outside. At last, he spoke. "If ... and this is very important, Father ... if I can rely on your discretion. You do understand that we have a murder here?"

"Indeed, Chief J, I do. As to discretion," the cleric paused with just the slightest of smiles, "you can't be serious, my friend ... I am a priest."

From the kitchen came the clack and clatter of the gurney as it received its sad burden. Kitty Fischer will never return to her kitchen again, Julian thought, as he glanced over the smaller man's shoulder. "What we have is an apparently motiveless murder, as Mrs. Fischer was neither robbed nor raped. There was no forced entry—like many folks in town here, they never locked their doors—the locals consider it a point of honor." The chief paused to roll his eyes, then continued, "As she lived alone with her husband and they kept largely to themselves—the 'charming' Mr. Fischer being paralyzed from the waist down—it is hard to imagine how they might have any enemies." The chief paused to arrange his thoughts, then resumed, "As to evidence, the only obvious thing we have is the murder weapon—a ball bat."

Father Gregory repeated this last in puzzlement, "Ball bat, Chief J?"

"Yeah, a baseball bat we found in the yard ..." It occurred to him that the Indian prelate was unfamiliar with the instrument. "Like a ..." He struggled for the appropriate analogy. "... like in cricket?" He raised his eyebrows hopefully, but in vain, then continued, "You know, a bat ... a club ... a shillelagh." He laughed.

"A cudgel!" Father Gregory cried delightedly, catching on.

"Oh yes, I do understand! From whence did it come?"

The chief stopped smiling and answered, "We don't know yet. It could have come from here ... nearly every house in America has at least one in the closet. The victim's husband," Julian winced at his own attempt to distance himself from his newly murdered neighbor, "is too 'distraught' to be of much help right now." He threw a glance down the hall to a closed door.

Father Gregory picked up on the policeman's emphasis and asked, "You do not think much of this bereaved man?"

"I knew Charlie back in the days before he was a ... victim, Father." Julian hooked a thumb over his shoulder at the bedroom. "If all this had happened twenty years ago when he was still walking around, he would have been my prime suspect.

"In fact, if it had been left up to him, Kitty would have been dead long ago, and it wasn't for lack of trying on his part. My God, the beatings he gave her ... That's why he's in there now. He dragged her to the top of the stairs one night by a belt he had looped around her neck, and though Kitty denied it, I think he was going to try and hang her somehow. In any case, fate intervened and he lost his balance and fell down that same flight, breaking his ugly neck on the way down and landing him on his back permanently. In all my years of policing, I've never seen a more hateful, jealous man, nor one with less reason to be so. Kitty was a saint."

Father Gregory remained silent, studying the outraged young officer who had suddenly appeared in place of the steady

middle-aged man who governed Camelot's police department. It faded once more into obscurity even as he watched, then vanished altogether, leaving the drawn and creased face that he was familiar with staring back at him in embarrassed silence with pale, washed-out blue eyes.

"So, certainly there is your motive," Father Gregory pointed out. "Vengeance is a strong motive ... it often crops up in the Scriptures ... Old Testament, mostly."

"Vengeance," Julian repeated, as he turned to study the little priest more closely. "Wouldn't that require that the suspect be able to stand on his own two legs, Father? She was struck repeatedly on the top of the head; I seriously doubt she knelt down for Charlie to have a go at cracking her skull," he finished with some irritation.

"Fingerprints?" Father Gregory queried for no other reason than to return them to comfort.

"Yes," Julian answered with a shake of his grey head, "plenty of those. But it will be some time before we can determine whose are whose ... chances are they all belong to Kitty and Charlie ... possibly the killer. Though if we don't develop any suspects, or his prints are not on file, they won't do us much good."

"What if they are on the bludgeon?" Father Gregory persisted.

"Same," Julian answered.

"What if you find only Mr. Fischer's fingerprints on the

weapon?"

Julian thought longingly for a moment of the days when he smoked cigarettes. "Father, let's not play cat and mouse. We played this game once before and you know I find it irritating." He was referring to a case a few months before when the Indian priest had uncovered a murderess within the pages of a discarded journal. "Spill it."

Father Gregory appeared to think the proposition over carefully before answering. "I believe Mrs. Fischer ... Kitty," he tried on the nickname for size and found it uncomfortable, "has named her killer for us."

"And when did she do this?" Julian asked quietly.

Father Gregory smiled at this seeming encouragement. "In her dying, and recorded, declaration."

"I don't recall that being in her statement," the chief declared flatly.

"No, no, perhaps not," the priest began enthusiastically. "But, she did say," he cocked his round head like a bird with the effort of memory, "My prayers have been answered ... thanks be to God!" He brought his hands together, with their improbably long fingers, in an attitude of prayer and shook them at the policeman. "A miracle," he whispered excitedly: "A miracle!"

"Father, are you telling me that Kitty prayed that Charlie would walk again ... and that he has?"

"Yes, yes, this was her most fervent prayer! She has told me many times! The prayers of a pious and devout woman carry great weight! I knew that you, if anyone, would understand this."

Julian stared back in amazement, unable to speak for several moments. "No," he said at last. "No, I don't. You don't honestly believe that her prayers were answered with murder!"

The joy fled from Father Gregory's face at the policeman's logic and he appeared to consider his previous declarations carefully, then answered, "You are only half right, Chief J—the good woman's prayers were answered, her own words testify to it. As to the husband, I believe this odious man has squandered God's precious grace in that most pernicious act ... revenge. For him, I reserve my greatest pity."

"Pity," the policeman repeated while studying the closed door of the bedroom, and thinking that Kitty had been found as if fleeing from someone coming from that direction—she had been running to the kitchen door, not from it. "Revenge for what?" he muttered.

Father Gregory cleared his throat and appeared embarrassed at the question. "Well, as to that, it is awkward, dear man. You see, it was told to me in confession ... but as she is now no longer among us, I can say at least this—on the night of his terrible 'accident,' he had, or believed he had," the priest added cagily, "discovered the proof he had been unable to beat from her on previous occasions."

“Good God,” Julian breathed. “Please don’t tell me she shoved him down those stairs.”

Father Gregory stared blankly back at him. “He did try to harm her,” he added at last.

“Father,” Julian began after a pause. “You do understand what you’re saying here? If what you believe is true, it means that Charlie Fischer had to keep this a secret once he discovered feeling had returned to his legs. That he had to exercise himself for weeks, or months, without Kitty knowing: prolonged and denied himself the pleasure of walking out in the fresh air; all these things, just so that when he was strong enough, he could both surprise and kill her. Do you understand what all that would mean—the hatred, the ... the evilness?”

Both men remained silent for several moments, then the chief spoke once more. “What do you expect me to do with this?”

“You cannot arrest this man?” Father Gregory asked in obvious disappointment.

“Based on what?” the chief fired back. “I don’t intend to haul him before an ecclesiastical court, Father. I need proof, or at least a good circumstantial case.”

The cleric was not to be deterred. “Is Mr. Fischer not a good suspect? And one that sits like a spider in this web of suspicious circumstances? If he could walk, would you not be interrogating him at this moment?”

“If he could walk, Father . . .”

Someone cleared their throat and the two turned to find the ambulance driver standing awkwardly in the doorway to the kitchen. "The M.E.'s people have taken Mrs. Fischer," he said quietly. "Should I get Mr. Fischer loaded up now?"

It had been Chief Hall's intention to have the victim's husband evaluated by the emergency-room physician for stress and shock, as he had been a witness, at least an audible witness, to the horror of his wife's murder. He stared blankly back at the plump, unshaven young man awaiting his answer, even as he felt the eyes of Father Gregory upon him.

"No," he murmured, "not just yet, Justin. Give me a few minutes with the poor man."

Unconcerned, Justin nodded and began to back out of the room.

"Oh, and Justin," Julian halted the young man's escape. "You've got an EMT riding with you . . . right?"

Justin nodded in perplexity. "Yeah, Chief, we've always got one on board . . . you know that." Then another thought occurred to him. "Is someone else hurt, Chief? We thought there was just the one victim."

"No," Julian reassured him, "the only victim was Mrs. Fischer . . . just checking, that's all."

As the young man completed his exit, Julian extracted a long needle from a pile of sewing that lay in a basket next to the couch, and held it up to the light. "I have been assured that he

has no feeling from the waist down,” he said out of the corner of his mouth.

Father Gregory stared at the needle gleaming like truth in the dim obscurity of the room. “You are indeed a man of faith, Chief J,” he said admiringly.

“Probably an unemployed one as of tomorrow,” Julian replied, as the policeman and the priest approached the closed door at the end of the hallway. The arraignment of Charles Fischer for the murder of his wife created a small sensation as the facts of the matter were made public. Chief Hall, for his part, received a letter of censure from the county prosecutor for his rather extraordinary actions in exposing the killer. Surprisingly, though, the accused chose not to challenge the probable cause that led to his arrest but, instead, accepted a plea bargain that guaranteed him twenty-five years in prison—a certain death sentence at his age. This was a decision he declined to discuss with the press, except to say that he was, indeed, guilty of the crime of which he stood accused and was deeply sorry.

Charles Fischer’s thoughts and feelings, beyond those few words, remained private to all but his confessor, Father Gregory Savartha, who was most pleased to have been able to grant absolution to the wretched man, knowing that he was truly contrite, and now restored to full humanity.

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BEDSIDE MANNERS

By Martin Edwards

Martin Edwards wears several hats in the mystery field: He's the editor of many anthologies, he's a blogger, reviewer, and columnist, and he produces stories and novels, both series and nonseries, historical and contemporary. His 2009 novel *Dancing for the Hangman* is a fictional retake on Crippen, one of true crime's most notorious figures. His new book, *The Serpent Pool*, is the fourth in a series set in England's Lake District. Says Booklist: "Certainly the most labyrinthine of the Lake District novels, but perhaps also the best."

"I've never done anything illegal before," the woman says, fiddling with her necklace.

This seems unlikely to me. She is forty-five if a day, and works as an accounts manager for a motorcar dealership. But I am accustomed to the little ways of my clients. Clients, yes; it is five years since I last cared for a patient. Now I have found my true vocation. Yet there is this about serving clients: They are always right.

So I treat her to my reassuring smile and say, "Trust me, there is nothing illegal about going out to the theatre."

"You deserve a break," the red-faced man tells her. "After all you've done ..."

"This is all about freedom," I say, in my best bedside tone, as I glance at the clock on their mantelpiece. "So you will be leaving in five minutes?"

"Yes, yes," the man says. "We need to make sure the girl on the desk gets a good look at us when we pick up our tickets. If any questions are asked ..."

"There will be no questions." Again I smile, exuding confidence. "Trust me."

"Of course, Doctor. But just in case ... if anyone does ask, there will be witnesses. We were in the foyer of the theatre before seven o'clock. Like I said before, it's a fall-back position."

Absurd. But I humour him with an approving nod.

The woman hesitates. "I must go upstairs."

The man's unhealthy face—he is a candidate for a stroke, if ever I saw one—creases into a frown. He throws me a doubtful glance. "I'm not sure ..."

I nod towards the staircase, encouraging her. "Why not? You wish to share a precious moment."

She scuttles off, heels clacking on the treads. Her lover ventures a rueful smile.

"She'll be all right, Doctor. It's just nerves, that's all. This is what she's wanted for years."

"I understand."

And naturally I do. This is a pleasant house, on the outskirts of the village, its value inflated by the promise of a soon-to-be-built bypass. Who would not wish to own it, and to have that ownership unfettered by obligation? My gift to them, as to all my clients, and all my subjects, is freedom.

The man seeks to engage me in conversation, embarking on a story about his ill fortune in business during the years when he managed a public house. I reply in monosyllables. My priority is to compose myself and prepare my heart and mind for the task that lies ahead.

Soon the woman is back with us, head bowed. Is she murmuring a prayer?

The man claps her on the back. He has decided that contrived jollity is the right note to strike. "Well, then. We'd best be off."

"Yes." It is barely a whisper.

Suddenly she glances at me and I see dread in her eyes. Dread of what is to happen. I have seen that look before, on other faces where previously I had seen nothing more than greed. But this is not a greedy woman. She is weak, that is all. The man in her life has cajoled her into doing something against her better judgment. Not for the first time, I suspect.

"Everything is going to be all right, isn't it, Doctor?"

I am a model of calm and goodwill. "As I explained when we reached our arrangement, my method is tried and tested. I need not trouble you with details, but you may rely on me."

"The laws in this country are an absolute disgrace, anyway," the man says. "In a civilised society, what we're doing would be applauded."

"What the doctor is doing," the woman says hastily.

He offers me his hand. It is large and sweaty. "Well, I'll say it straight. I couldn't do what you do. You deserve a medal."

The woman twitters to the same effect, pays me fulsome compliments. As she runs out of breath, she adds, "I'll never forget the help you have given us, Doctor."

"And to ..." I begin.

"Yes, yes!" Her eagerness is pathetic. "That's what matters most, of course. We aren't thinking of ourselves."

"Well, then." The man hands me the copied keys. "You will ... dispose of these?"

"As we discussed." I cough discreetly. "If I might ask you for the envelope?"

Slowly, as if hypnotised by my expression, he takes a fat envelope from the pocket of his tweed jacket and hands it to me.

"If you don't mind ..." I tear open the envelope and flick through the fifty-pound notes. The final installment, paid in full. "Thank you."

"It's the least we can do," the woman says. "We owe you so much."

The man's face is flushed, irritable. Despite all that we have said, he is far from certain that I shall keep my word. But he has no choice but to trust me. I am anxious for them to be away now. I need time alone.

"Goodbye, then."

To my surprise, the woman steps forward and presses cold lips against my cheek. A kiss of gratitude. Then the man takes her hand and within moments they are gone.

As I hear their rusty little car sputter down the drive, I help myself to a nip of brandy from my flask. Only one, mind. I have no intention of repeating the mistake I once made in the hospital ward.

I allow myself an hour of quiet reflection. For all my experience, each case for me is special. Unique. This is the difference between my past and present careers. One operation is, frankly, much like another except in those frightening instances where an error is made. Nowadays, however, each assignment feels like the first.

I consult my watch. The sedative will be wearing off. This is one of those little details that mean nothing, in truth, to my clients, but everything to me. It is time to pick up my case and climb the stairs.

The room has that musty smell so familiar to me. It clings to the old and infirm. Outside, rain is slapping against the windowpanes. Within, the only sound is a hoarse rattle of breath.

Silently, I move to the bedside and open my case. The subject's eyes are closed. I bend over her.

"Molly," I whisper.

I touch a fleshy shoulder through the thin cotton nightdress. She is by no means reduced to skin and bone. No wonder the GP said she was good for a few years yet.

"Molly, look at me."

No response. I pinch her shoulder and she gives a little moan. Her eyelids flutter. Yes, she can see me. I hear a stifled noise. Is she calling the woman's name? It is impossible to make out the syllables.

I shake my head. "Just you and I are in the house. They have left you in my care. You are . . . mine."

This is the moment.

I lift the small, rose-scented pillow from the case and hold it a couple of inches from Molly's nose. All the time my eyes are fixed on hers. They are grey and rheumy and filled with incomprehension. Also with terror, of course, there is no disguising the terror.

She knows what is about to happen, her mind is not dull. And she knows that there is nothing she can do.

"I am about to set you free," I whisper. "Free from care, free from pain."

All too soon it is over. I do what I always do. I have perfected my method over the years, though I cannot bring

myself to describe my ritual in words. Some things must remain private, they are so special.

When I have tidied, I pat the envelope in my pocket. The man assumes that this is all about money, but he is as wrong as the woman who regards me as a candidate for sainthood. As wrong as my former colleagues, whom I baffled because they could never understand the thoughts rippling through my mind. No doubt they were afraid to understand; perhaps I was not so different from them as they liked to believe.

The truth is, we all have our little frailties. My weakness isn't anything so crass as greed. I first succumbed in my original career, but only now am I able to indulge myself to the full and luxuriate in this exquisite, this matchless pleasure.

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THE GODS FOR VENGEANCE CRY

By Richard Helms

A former forensic psychologist, academic counselor, and part-time college professor, Richard Helms has been nominated three times for the PWA's Shamus Award (in 2003, 2004, and 2006). He told EQMM that he currently has nine novels in print, two out of print, four waiting to be published, and five or six in progress. One of those just published, *Six Mile Creek*, which headed *Five Star's* spring 2010 list, features Judd Wheeler, a character in this new story, Mr. Helms's first for EQMM.

There are sixteen bones in the human hand. I had managed to break five of mine retrieving a poodle, the object of a messy custody dispute. I had also learned an important lesson: Owning a poodle doesn't mean you aren't a tough guy.

Fortunately, I'm also a tough guy. The poodle was returned to its rightful owner, who was so insanely happy that she paid my fee and the medical bills to have my hand set.

The money was dwindling quickly, though. At six-six and two-eighty, I go through a lot of food. I can't cook anything more substantial than a Pop Tart, so I take all my meals in restaurants.

I was quickly joining the ranks of the bucks-down.

I sat in Holliday's, nursing a Dixie Beer, when Shorty

—Holliday's owner and my boss—wandered in from the alley. Shorty is a human fireplug, square as a checkers board and ugly as roadkill.

"Gallegher," he said, "I might have some work for you."

Besides being a recently handicapped cornet player, I make a few bucks on the side looking for—and usually finding—things that have disappeared. Poodles, for instance. Sometimes people don't like it when I show up to recover things. Sometimes they try to resist. They seldom resist for long.

"Remember Katie Costner?" he asked.

"Blond kid. Worked here as a waitress about a year ago."

"She's dead."

I nodded. I think I might have furrowed my brow a bit.

Thousands of young people gravitate to the French Quarter each year. Some adapt. Some don't.

Some die.

You don't like to admit it, but you get used to it.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "What happened?"

"They found her in her flop, down at the far end of Decatur, near Esplanade. She'd been strangled."

"Boyfriend?"

"Word has it she wasn't involved."

"You kept up with her after she quit?"

"I checked in on her once or twice. Brought her some food from time to time."

I nodded. Sometimes, Shorty dumps a boatload of surprise on you.

"The police officers working the case say she was from some flyspeck town in North Carolina. Place called Prosperity. Cops can't locate her parents. There's five hundred in it for you if you can track them down."

Shorty pulled a Dixie from the ice bin and twisted off the cap.

"People ought to hear about it when their kids die," he said.

A check on the Internet revealed that nobody named Costner owned a telephone in Prosperity. That didn't mean much. The number could have been unlisted, or maybe they used cell phones. Listed land lines are going the way of the passenger pigeon.

I also checked with a friend of mine in the Robbery-Homicide Division at NOPD, a scrawny, scarecrow-like guy named Farley Nuckolls. Farley and I had butted heads a bunch of times over the years, but he was reasonably forbearing since I passed along information when I fell across it.

Most of the time.

"She was strangled," he said.

"Harder than it sounds," I noted.

"Do tell. Personal experience?"

"I've never been strangled, if that's what you meant. As a retired psychologist I know a thing or two about the way the brain works. To do a strangling right, you have to cut off a person's oxygen supply for four minutes, minimum, unless you squeeze hard enough to fracture the hyoid bone in the larynx. Killing someone that way means you really have to go in committed."

"The forensic boys concur."

"No clues, then?"

"Not much to go on. The murder weapon was a twisted scarf. The killer apparently wore gloves. No epithelials on the scarf. No prints in the apartment. She was probably killed by a man."

"Or a female wrestler," I added.

"Don't complicate my life."

When Shorty referred to Prosperity as a flyspeck town, he had inadvertently given it a promotion. The main commercial district was confined to a five-acre area at the intersection of a couple of two-lane highways, and consisted of a strip shopping center, a doctor and a dentist, an attorney, and the town hall. At least the strip had a pizza parlor.

I ordered a garbage pie and sat at a booth facing out the picture window as I ate. It was already dusk, the end of a long day on the road. I hadn't seen a motel in town, and I was a little hazy as to where I was going to bunk down for the night.

The parking lot of the strip center seemed to be a gathering place for the disenchanted youth of Prosperity. They hung in clusters and stood around trying to look surly and threatening.

I finished my dinner, dropped a tip on the table, and slipped my Saints hat on.

I was halfway to my car when one of the kids stepped in front of me.

“Got a smoke?” he asked. A stray lock of limp hair fell across his left eye.

“No. I don’t smoke, and you shouldn’t either,” I said.

“I don’t like being told what to do,” he said.

“Imagine that.”

“If you don’t have a cigarette, maybe you can spare a few bucks so I can buy my own.”

Several of the kids had circled around and were now at my six. I was slowly being surrounded. I didn’t think they meant to rob me, not in a place this public. They did, however, expect to intimidate me.

I don’t intimidate easily.

I pulled a five from my pocket.

The kid reached for it. I jerked it back. A mix of confusion and anger crossed his features.

“Tell you what,” I said. “This five goes to the first guy who

can tell me where a family named Costner lives in this area.”

The kid opened his jacket and showed me a knife in his belt.

“I’ll tell you what,” he said. “You let me have the five and I’ll let you get in your car and get lost.”

I palmed the bill and placed it back in my pocket.

Without saying a word, I turned toward my car.

As I expected, I felt a hand grip my shoulder.

“I’m talkin’ to you, man,” the kid said, with a fearlessness born of the pack mentality. He was certain that numbers made him invincible.

He was wrong.

With my good hand, I reached up and grabbed his wrist. Several seconds later, the kid who’d touched me sat on the ground howling over the greenstick break in his radius bone, and the kid who’d tried to help him sat next to my car trying to hold back a scarlet torrent from his broken nose. The other two seemed to vacillate between taking up the attack and running like thieves.

We were interrupted by the whoop of a siren and flashing lights. I knew what that meant. I stepped back and raised both hands to make it clear that I was unarmed.

“What’s going on?” a man said behind me. I turned to face the cop who had stepped out of his cruiser. He was tall and skinny, with rawhide skin and sad eyes. He had augmented his

uniform with snakeskin boots.

"I was going to my car when these punks tried to shake me down."

"He broke my nose, Slim!" one of the youths said.

"And he snapped my arm like it was a twig!" the leader whined.

"Just defending myself," I said to the cop. "The kid with the broken arm has a knife in his belt. He threatened me with it."

The cop leaned down, opened the leader's jacket, and pulled the knife from his belt. Then turned to me.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"No."

"Didn't reckon so. You come with me. I need to file a report. Rooster, you and Sonny head on home, get your folks to take you to the emergency room. You come by the station tomorrow if you want to file a complaint."

"A complaint!" I said.

"That's enough out of you, mister!" Slim said. "Come have a seat in the cruiser. I need to get some information from you."

Half an hour later, I sat in the Prosperity Police Station. The cop, Slim Tackett, hadn't cuffed me, but neither did he seem interested in letting me go.

The front door to the station opened, and another officer stepped inside. He was tall and barrel-chested and athletic. He

wore a gray Stetson over close-cropped dark hair going slowly silver at the temples. His eyes were blue and penetrating.

"This him?" he asked Tackett.

"Name's Gallegher, Chief. Roy Patrick Gallegher. He's from New Orleans."

"New Orleans?" the chief said, as he glanced over the report. "You're a long way from home."

"I can't wait to get back," I said.

"You can go on," the chief told Tackett.

"Thanks, Chief," Tackett said. He left without saluting.

The chief told me to sit tight. He walked to the back of the station and returned with two cups of coffee.

"You take sugar or cream?" he asked.

"Beer," I said.

He grinned, for just a second, reached into his shirt pocket and handed me a couple of paper packets of sweetener. Then he sat behind the desk.

"Judd Wheeler," he said. "I'm the chief of police here in Prosperity. We aren't accustomed to riots in the shopping-center parking lot."

"As I told the other officer, I had just finished dinner and was heading for my car when these kids decided to hit me up for cash."

"So you assaulted them."

"The kid with the broken arm threatened me with a knife. I tried to leave. He decided to press the issue."

Wheeler nodded. "Rooster Broome. You tie fifteen Bliss County Broomes together and you might get a triple-digit IQ. Between you and me, I've kind of hoped for some time now that someone would clean Rooster's clock."

"So we're jake?"

"No, Mr. Gallegher. We are not 'jake.' I got two Prosperity kids in the ER over in Morgan, and you don't have a scratch on you. I'm not certain how to explain that. You some kind of tough guy?"

"Yes," I said.

I thought Wheeler's eyes might have widened a bit.

"Honest, too," I said.

"Are you so honest that if I send to New Orleans for your arrest record they're gonna come up empty?"

"I've been arrested in New Orleans," I said. "Several times. All the charges were dropped. If you want, you can check with Detective Farley Nuckolls in Robbery-Homicide, at the Rampart Street station in the French Quarter."

"Friend of yours?"

"We go back a few years. He can tell you anything you want to know."

Wheeler drew a few circles on his desktop with his index finger, and then took a sip of his coffee.

"What I want to know," he said, finally, "is what you're doing in Prosperity."

"I work in a bar in the French Quarter. There was a girl who waited tables there for a while. She was murdered several days ago. I'm trying to find her family."

"What was this girl's name?"

"Katie Costner."

Wheeler nodded, and took another sip of his coffee.

"Katie Costner left Prosperity about five years ago," he said.

"So you knew her?"

"We crossed paths. Gave her folks no end of grief. Broke their hearts, though, when she blew town."

"Maybe you can help me track them down. My boss in New Orleans wants me to inform them of her death, make arrangements for the funeral."

"Well," Wheeler said. "Now, that's going to be a problem."

"They've moved away?"

"No. They're still here. Will be forever, I reckon."

It took me a moment to catch his drift.

"Oh," I said.

"Katie's father died about three years ago. Cancer. Got it working in the textile dye mill over in Mica Wells. Her mother passed about a year later. Ate herself to death after her

husband died. Diabetes.”

“Tough deal,” I said.

“It seems to me that the person you need to talk to is Quincy Pressley. He’s the preacher at the Lutheran church over off Ebenezer Road. The Costners are buried in his churchyard.”

I glanced at my watch.

“It’s a little late to call on him now. Is there a motel nearby I could flop for the night?”

“Sorry. Nearest motel is over in Morgan, about fifteen miles. Why don’t you stay here?”

“In the jail?”

“Sure. The beds in the cells are plenty comfortable. We serve a first-class breakfast in the morning, from over at the Piggly Wiggly in the shopping center. It’ll be nice and quiet.”

“Am I under arrest, Chief?”

He shook his head.

“Let’s call it protective custody. The Broomes are a clannish bunch—you know, with a capital ‘K.’ They aren’t going to be very happy that some out-of-towner maimed one of their own, no matter how much he may have deserved it. They won’t come anywhere near the jail, though. They seem to be allergic to it. If it makes you feel any better, I’ll leave the cell door unlocked.”

And that’s how I came to spend the night in the Prosperity

jail.

Chief Wheeler hadn't lied. The breakfast carted in from the Piggly Wiggly was top shelf. Market-cut pepper bacon, scrambled eggs, grits, and two biscuits, which I washed down with coffee from the pot in the back of the station. It wasn't Café du Monde, but as country breakfasts go, it hit the spot.

Chief Wheeler had kept his word also about unlocking the cell door.

I was just finishing my second biscuit when he walked in the front door of the station and headed straight back to the holding cells. He carried a thick sheaf of fax paper.

"Your buddy Nuckolls gets to work early," he said. "You failed to mention last night that you used to be a cop."

"I was a consultant. Nashua PD in New Hampshire. Forensic psychologist. I did their profiling."

"Says here you killed a suspect named Ed Hix."

"I don't like to talk about that," I said.

"I can imagine why."

"Read the report, Chief. Hix killed the detective working the case, and it was down to Hix or me. I decided that it was a lot better for everyone in the long run if Hix didn't walk out of those woods."

"You emptied an automatic into him. Fourteen shots."

"That was all the gun held. I'm not going to apologize for what I did, and I'm not going to minimize it either. Either Hix was

going to die, or I was. I can't complain about the way things worked out."

"It seems you've had a very interesting life down in New Orleans. Detective Nuckolls seems to think that you've killed as many as six people over the last decade."

"He's entitled to his opinion."

Wheeler set the sheaf of faxes down on his desk.

"Besides the fact that you seem to be some sort of walking Angel of Death, Detective Nuckolls says you're generally dependable, probably honest, and even says you were responsible for stopping a serial murderer down there a couple of years ago."

"It could have gone the other way very easily."

"Here's my problem, Gallegher. I keep the peace here in Prosperity. This is a quiet little town. We like it that way. I would be very appreciative if you'd complete your business here and then go home, preferably without littering the landscape with bodies I'd have to bury."

We talked for a while longer, as he vetted me by way of the reports he had received from New Orleans, and then he offered to drive me over to meet Reverend Pressley.

"I have a car, over in the shopping-center lot."

"The roads, once you get away from the commercial district, can get a little confusing. Let me drive you out there, then I can bring you back once you have an idea of where

you're going."

I couldn't argue with logic like that. He led me out to one of the cruisers and held the passenger-side door for me as I sat down.

"Have you lived in this town long?" I asked, as he pulled out of the lot onto the Morgan Highway.

"All my life," he said. "My father was a farmer. His father was a farmer. All the Wheelers back to before the Revolutionary War were farmers."

"You're not a farmer."

"Had to end sometime. I wasn't very good at it. Guess I didn't inherit the right genes. Doesn't matter. Nobody's going to be a farmer in Prosperity in a few years."

"Why's that?"

He pointed to a subdivision off to the left of the highway. It was filled with large, boxy, redbrick houses of the style I had come to refer to as "garage-mahals."

"Tax refugees. They think they're getting away from it all, but they insist on having all the comforts of big-city life. These neighborhoods are spreading like seventeen-year locusts. The population in Prosperity has doubled in the last five years. I expect it'll double again in the next two."

"Tough break, suburban sprawl. And you have to keep a lid on all of it."

"That's why they pay me the big bucks."

We drove past an opulent new high school, and over a bridge spanning a tributary called Six Mile Creek. Slowly, the McMansion developments faded away, the land seemed to become more fertile, and farms began to appear on each side of the highway.

“This is the Prosperity I remember from when I was a kid,” Wheeler said. “I’m going to miss it. Now, to get to Quincy’s church, you turn left just past this tobacco-drying barn up here, onto the Ebenezer Church Road ...”

A few minutes later, we pulled into the gravel parking lot of a white frame church. A plaque screwed into the siding next to the front door proclaimed that the church had stood on that spot since 1764.

As we climbed out of the cruiser, a man stepped out the front door and waved at Wheeler. He stood in the high five-foot range, with a paunchy stomach, two and a half chins, and thinning hair. He wore glasses. He stepped down to the gravel lot and extended his hand to the chief.

Wheeler shook with him, and then pointed in my direction.

“This is the fellow I mentioned on the phone,” he said. “Quincy Pressley, Pat Gallegher.”

I grasped Quincy’s hand. Despite looking out of shape, he had a surprisingly strong grip.

“I was so sorry to hear about Katie,” Quincy said. “The Costners have been a tragic family over the last several years. If you’ll follow me ...”

He turned and started to walk around the church. We followed him. As we rounded the corner, I saw a cemetery behind the building. It stretched for almost an acre.

"We have people in our churchyard from pre-Revolutionary times," Pressley boasted. "People come from five counties in every direction just to do gravestone rubbings. Katie's parents are buried just over here."

He wended his way between faded gravestones and depressed patches of earth to a section filled with more recent monuments. We stopped in front of a rectangle of relatively new grass.

"Katie's mother," he said, pointing to the rectangle. Above it was a flat bronze plaque set into the ground, with the word COSTNER in large raised letters.

"There's a space on the other side reserved for Katie. I had hoped that it would be many years before I would have to use it."

"So she's going to be buried here," I said.

"Yes. John and Susan insisted on it. Despite the fact that Katie left them many years ago, they always believed that they would be reunited. And now, I suppose they will. How did she die?" he asked.

"It was murder," I said. "She was strangled."

"How sad. I'm afraid there aren't many people here in Prosperity who will attend the funeral. So many of the young

folks have gone off to the cities, or have married and moved away for new jobs.”

“Hold on a minute,” I said, as I pulled out my cell phone.

Farley was in his office at the Rampart Station. There were no new leads in the case, but the forensic team and the M.E. had completed all their procedures.

“The family belonged to a Lutheran church here in Prosperity,” I reported. “They had arranged for a burial site for her, before they died.”

“Okay. Have the preacher there fax the release papers, and we’ll arrange for transport.”

He gave me the numbers for Pressley to send the information.

I folded the phone and placed it back in my pocket.

“Fastest five hundred bucks I ever made,” I said.

“What?” Pressley asked.

“My boss hired me to find Katie’s parents. I did. I guess my job’s over.”

“Did you know Katie?” Pressley asked.

“A little. She waited tables in the bar where I work.”

“Would you mind, in that case, staying on for a while?”

I guess my face reflected the question in my head.

“For the funeral,” he clarified. “It’s so sad when I hold a funeral and nobody attends. It would be nice to have someone

here who knew the girl. I never really got to know her, personally. Someone should be here who did.”

I know a thing or two about lonely deaths and somber, empty funerals. Next to an advertisement for an unused wedding gown, a funeral without mourners is about the saddest thing I can imagine.

“Sure,” I said. “No problem. I’ll need to find a place to stay until they deliver the body.”

“Why not stay with me?” Quincy said. “The church provides me with a nice little house—three bedrooms, lots of space. It’s just me there. You’d be welcome to stay.”

I thought about it for a second.

“Sounds great,” I said.

“I’ll take you back to your car,” Wheeler said. “And I’ll draw you a map to get back here. It’s trickier than it looks.”

I awoke the next morning to the smell of frying sausage and cinnamon.

I pulled on my clothes, made my bed like a good guest, and found my way to Quincy’s kitchen. He stood there in his black slacks and a short-sleeved shirt, with an apron tied around his waist.

“Thought the aroma might awaken you,” he said, as he sat at the table. “I have oatmeal with brown sugar and cinnamon, sausage, and scrambled eggs. You take coffee?”

“Sure,” I said, as I took a seat.

I picked up the fork with my weak hand and started to sample the sausage, when I noted that Quincy had his hands folded in front of him, and his eyes closed. One eye winked open.

I set the fork down and waited for him to finish his prayer.

"Are you a religious man?" he asked.

"I was raised Catholic," I told him. "Even went to seminary, but I didn't finish."

"Crisis of faith?"

"You know about that sort of thing?"

"Of course. Doubt is a human condition, Mr. Gallegher."

"Please, call me Pat."

"How'd you do that?" he said, pointing to my cast.

I told him the story about the poodle and the tough guy. Some of it was funny, if it hadn't happened to you. He laughed at the appropriate places, but as I finished the story his face seemed to go dark.

"I have a feeling you lead an adventurous life," he said.

"Things happen," I said.

"And then you have to fight your way out."

"It isn't something I do on purpose, at least not most of the time. You get a reputation, though. People know you can do something other people can't, and they come to you when they're in need. I have a hard time turning down people in need,

no matter how badly I want to.”

“So you’re some kind of detective?”

“No,” I said. “I’m a musician. I play a horn in a bar. The rest of it is ... it just happens. I suppose being a musician doesn’t really count for much.”

“Nonsense,” Quincy said. “You have a gift. You can speak a language in which it is impossible to say a mean or hurtful thing. You should be proud of that.”

I nodded and turned my attention to the meal. As I ate, a thought occurred to me.

“Where would you suggest I go to learn more about Katie?”

He hesitated for a second.

“I’m going to be the only mourner at her graveside,” I added. “I think I should know more about her. Where did she go to school?”

“Everyone in this town goes to Prosperity Glen High School.”

“You think there might be people there who’d recall her?”

“There’s only one way to find out,” Quincy said.

It took me about five minutes to reach the school parking lot. I had a feeling it took about five minutes to get anywhere in Prosperity from just about anywhere else in Prosperity.

I first asked to see the principal. If things went as I expected, I would probably ask a lot of personal questions

before the day was out. It would be nice to have the imprimatur of the big guy in the front office.

The principal was a sallow, bleary-eyed man in his fifties named Hart Compton. He invited me directly back to his office.

"How can I help you, Mr. Gallegher?"

I told him about Katie Costner's murder, and how I had come from New Orleans to find her family.

"Yes," he said. "Very sad. The whole affair. So the entire family's dead now."

"Yes."

"I'm not certain what you want."

"The police detective investigating her murder back in New Orleans likes to have as much information as he can get. He's there. I'm here. Maybe I can find out something about Katie's life in Prosperity that had some bearing on her murder in New Orleans."

"An ... official inquiry?"

"Some friendly questions," I said. "You can check with the detective."

I gave him Farley's number. Compton asked me to wait in the outer office while he called. After ten minutes, he opened his door and gestured for me to come back in.

"Your detective friend vouches for you," he said.

"He's in a charitable mood."

“He also asked me to pass along a request, in the interest of good public relations, that you not kill anyone in the course of your inquiries.”

I cleared my throat.

“Is this something you’re likely to do?” Compton asked.

“I’ll make a special effort.”

“Yes,” he said, with obvious discomfort. “I should advise you in advance. You aren’t likely to find many of the faculty and staff receptive to your questions.”

“Why’s that?”

He took off his glasses and rubbed a spot on the bridge of his nose, as if warding off a headache. I had a feeling he did that a lot.

“Katie left town under something of a cloud. People weren’t particularly sad to see her go.”

“Could you tell me more?”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll hear plenty.”

“Where’s your library?” I asked.

“We call it a Media Center.”

“Of course you do.”

“It’s just down the hall to the right. Why do you ask?”

“More background. Would it be all right if I peruse some of your back yearbooks?”

I asked the woman at the front desk in the library where I

could find back yearbooks. She directed me to the reference center and showed me where it was.

"Are you looking for anything specific?" she asked.

"I'm trying to find anything I can on a girl who attended Prosperity Glen several years ago. Her name was Katie Costner."

It was as if someone had flipped a switch on her entire personality. She stepped back half a step. The air between us chilled ten or twenty degrees.

"I'm sorry," she said. "There's nothing I can tell you."

"You don't recall her?"

"I'm very busy," she said, which I found a very facile way of avoiding my question. "The yearbooks are in the reference center."

I shrugged and walked to the reference center. According to the papers Hart Compton had given me, Katie had graduated six years earlier. I flipped directly to the senior pictures. Each one had a quote at the bottom and a list of the student's achievements. It took me a moment to find Katie's picture. She didn't look terribly different from what I remembered, except that her hair was longer. She also seemed somewhat happier in the picture than I recalled her in real life.

Her quote read: "Love looks through a telescope; envy, through a microscope."

She had only one achievement in four years of high school

—Chorus I.

It was as if she had drifted through four years of school and scarcely made a ripple.

Katie's algebra instructor was on a planning break. I decided to stop by her classroom.

Myra Soames was in her fifties, plump, red of cheeks, and going gracefully gray. She invited me into her classroom when I knocked on the door. I introduced myself.

"I'm from New Orleans," I said. "I've been sent up here to look into some background information on a former student named Katie Costner."

Just as the librarian had, Myra Soames suddenly bristled and grew cool toward me.

"Why are you asking about Katie Costner?" she asked. "Is she in some kind of trouble?"

"Only if the theologians are right," I said. "She's dead."

I thought the news of Katie's death might soften Ms. Soames a bit. Instead, she grew even colder.

"I wish I could say I was sorry," she said. "But if you're right, and there is an eternal judgment, then Katie is in a great deal of trouble. I'm a Christian woman, Mr. Gallagher, Bible-raised and river-dunked. It's a sin to speak ill of the dead. I'll say no more on the matter. If you'll excuse me, I have papers to grade."

"Is there anyone you can think of—a former classmate, maybe—who knew Katie when she was a student here?"

"I'd say there were a great number of students who knew Katie, in every sense. You should check at the Piggly Wiggly. The assistant manager there, Rob Kiser, was a friend of hers, as I recall. Now, please, I am very busy ..."

I visited three other teachers, and none of them would discuss Katie with me. I got the strong impression that none of them had cared for the girl, and that none of them was particularly distressed to discover that she had died.

I gave up and drove over to the Piggly Wiggly. The manager there paged Rob Kiser to come to the front office.

Kiser, like Katie, was probably in his early twenties. He had red hair and residual facial acne. His fingernails were ragged and bitten.

I introduced myself, and dropped the news about Katie on him.

"That's too bad," he said, without a lot of emotion.

"I was led to believe that you were one of her friends."

"Friends," he repeated. "Yeah, I suppose you could say that. At least at one time. Katie didn't keep friends for long."

"Why was that?"

"She just didn't. It was her personality, I guess. I reckon most people in this town weren't sorry to see the back of her car when she left."

"Just what did this girl do that was so bad?"

"Sorry, Mr. Gallegher, but you come to the wrong place. I

got work to do, if you don't mind."

The Prosperity Police Department was in a row of buildings on a hill overlooking the strip mall and the Piggly Wiggly. I hiked up the concrete steps and around to the front of the station.

"Chief Wheeler in?" I asked the woman at the front desk.

Before she could page him, Wheeler walked out of his office and stepped into the waiting room.

"You've been busy," he said. "Step back to my office."

I followed him into the other room. He gestured toward a couple of chairs across the desk from his seat, and we both sat facing each other for several moments.

"I've gotten three different calls about you today," he said.

"It's nice to know people care."

"Oh, they care, all right. They care a great deal about people walking in out of the blue and dredging up muck from years ago that ought to be left alone. If I'd known you were going to drive around Prosperity upsetting people, I'd have let you stay at the motel in Morgan."

I leaned back in my seat and soaked in his menacing-cop gawp. People who never hang around the police tend to be intimidated by them. I had learned a long time ago that intimidation is one more coin of the realm in law enforcement.

"Nobody will talk with me," I said. "Just what did Katie do that was so terrible?"

Wheeler stood for a second and stared out the window of his office, his thumbs hooked in his Sam Browne belt. Then he turned and took his seat behind his desk again.

"I had only been chief of police for a couple of years when Katie took off," he said. "Katie was what you'd call wild. I reckon the only way anyone could have contained her would have been with a whip and a chair.

"There was this boy, Roger Thoreson. Nice kid. Lived with his mother. His father was dead. Tall kid. Clear of eye. Athletic. Smart. A real winner. He was the class president at both the middle school and the high school. Three-letter man at Prosperity Glen. He turned down a football scholarship to South Carolina because Duke offered him a full ride on academics."

"A shining light."

"Like a beacon. Everyone loved him, expected great things out of Roger. Thought he was going to put Prosperity on the map. Roger took an interest in Katie Costner. Katie came with a lot of baggage, a lot of whispers behind her back. Everybody knew she was promiscuous. This is a conservative town. People who don't conform spend a lot of time fending off those who do.

"I think, maybe, Roger felt bad for Katie. He started spending time with her. One thing led to another and ... well, by August that boy was just plain girl-stupid over her. Most people think she was his first, you know, in bed. Roger started talking crazy, saying maybe he'd go to the state college over in Parker

County rather than Duke. He even talked about getting married.

“His mother—shoot, just about everybody—tried to talk him out of it. It was like talking to a fish. Nothing got through to him. Then, about two weeks before school was supposed to start, Katie pulled the plug.”

“She broke up with Roger?” I asked.

“Told him it was over. Said she’d taken up with some boy over in Mica Wells. Roger drove over there, looked up the kid, and offered to fight him for Katie. The kid kicked Roger’s butt all over half the county. Roger had to go to the ER over in Morgan, get some stitches in his scalp.

“After Roger got back from the hospital, he and Katie had a terrible fight on his front porch. Stories vary depending on who tells them, but all the neighbors agree that Katie told Roger to get out of her life. Then she stomped off the porch, got in her car, and peeled out as she left the driveway.”

“Tough deal for a young guy.”

“Later that night, Roger’s mother went up to his room to tell him good night. She found him in a bathtub full of pink water, his eyes fixed on some point a billion miles away. When I got there about five minutes later, Karen Thoreson was still screaming.”

“The people in this town thought Katie killed their dreams for Roger Thoreson,” I said.

“That pretty much sums it up. If people didn’t like Katie before that, they plain despised her afterward. She tried to

stand up to it. That only made people hate her more. Finally, she gave up, packed what belongings she had, climbed in her car, and drove away.”

“That’s why people didn’t want to talk about her,” I said.

“There’re people in Prosperity who still think Lee gave up too early at Appomattox. Katie Costner’s affair with Roger Thoreson is still an open wound. You ran around Prosperity today pouring salt in it.”

“You could have told me all this yesterday,” I said. “Could have saved me a lot of trouble.”

“You weren’t looking for Katie yesterday. You were looking for her parents. If I’d thought you were planning to dig up all the bodies in town, I’d have told you. That was my mistake.”

I drove back to Quincy’s house. He had been cutting the grass. I found him sitting on his front steps, sipping from a bottle of beer.

“Got another one?” I asked as I walked up.

“In the fridge.”

I grabbed a bottle and joined him on the steps.

“Nice little town you have here,” I said.

“We like it.”

“You might have mentioned that Katie Costner was the town hump.”

“I’m no gossip, Pat. That kind of thing doesn’t go over well

with the congregation.”

“I think I understand now why Katie’s funeral will be so poorly attended.”

“It’s a sad story.”

“A lot of people hated her.”

“True.”

“You think any of them hated her enough to kill her?”

He had been raising the bottle to his mouth, but stopped halfway.

“What are you suggesting?”

“I haven’t been completely open with you, Quincy. I’ve done a lot of bad things in my life. For the last ten years or so, I’ve been trying to make that right. A lot of the things I do to balance the scales of my flimsy karma involve crimes. Like murder.”

“And?”

“I know a thing or two about murder. I understand some of the reasons why people kill. Revenge is one of the biggies.”

“I don’t know. It seems a stretch to me.”

“How so?”

“You can’t escape yourself. Katie might have fled Prosperity, but she had to take herself wherever she went. Her personality being what it was, she was certain to behave the same way wherever she landed.”

“Meaning that she was bound to make people angry with

her no matter where she lived.”

“Seems reasonable. Maybe Katie pulled the same stunt she did with Roger Thoreson on some poor guy down in New Orleans, someone more inclined to kill her than he was to kill himself.”

“Maybe that makes more sense.”

“It’s certainly a simpler explanation than somebody from Prosperity harboring a grudge for five years before driving or flying all the way to New Orleans to do Katie in. I’ve made the arrangements for Katie’s body to be transported here. We could have her funeral the day after tomorrow, and then you can be on your way back home. Would that suit you?”

My curiosity about Katie had been satisfied. I called Farley and told him what I had learned. I also suggested that he might consider the possibility that Katie had been murdered by a disappointed suitor in New Orleans.

That done, I had little to occupy myself until Katie’s body arrived. Fortunately, Quincy had an excellent library. He left after breakfast the next day to make hospital visits. I foraged his bookcase until I found an interesting collection of stories. Then I settled in his living room to read.

The telephone rang around eleven o’clock. I hesitated answering it, since I was little more than a traveler using his home for shelter. Then I recalled that—as a minister—Quincy had to respond to any number of emergencies on a daily basis. The least I could do was take a message.

"Quincy Pressley's residence," I said.

"Could I speak with Reverend Pressley?" a woman asked. Her voice sounded dry and weathered.

"I'm sorry. He's out. Can I take a message?"

"Who's this?"

"I'm visiting with Reverend Pressley. He's making hospital visits this morning. Any message for him, ma'am?"

"I'd appreciate it if you'd tell him that Inez Stillman called."

I wrote her information on a pad next to the phone.

"Anything else?"

"No, just tell him that I hope his cousin is feeling much better. He hasn't said anything about her, has he?"

"Not to me, ma'am."

"And one more thing. Could you tell him I called to thank him for those delicious pralines he brought back from his trip?"

Something like an electric tingle began at the base of my skull. It was a signal that I'd long since learned not to ignore.

"Pralines, ma'am?"

"Yes, he brought them to me to apologize for canceling our dinner. He picked them up while visiting his sick cousin."

"Of course," I said. "Reverend Pressley didn't say exactly where his sick cousin lives, did he?"

"I think he mentioned someplace in Louisiana. Isn't that where they make the best pralines?"

“So I hear. Do you still have the box the pralines came in?”

“Certainly. They’re so rich, I may be a month finishing them.

”

“As it happens, I’m from Louisiana, and I’m always on the lookout for good pralines. Could you check the box and see where he bought them?”

“Just a moment.”

I tried to keep my breathing and pulse from racing, as the electric tingle became a buzz that filled my head.

At the very best, Quincy Pressley had withheld information from me.

I didn’t like to think about the worst.

“Here it is,” she said, as she got back on the phone. “The box is from the Allons Praline Factory. That part is in English. Then the rest is words I don’t recognize. The first is R-U-E. Then D-E, and after that is C-H-A-R-T ...”

“Rue de Chartres,” I said, in a practiced French accent. “What about the rest?”

“The next line is spelled V-I-E-U-X, and C-A ...”

“That’s all right, Mrs. Stillman. I know the rest.”

“Now how on earth can you know the rest? I haven’t spelled it yet!”

“I know it anyway. I’ll be sure to pass your message on to Reverend Pressley. And you enjoy those pralines, you hear?”

I racked the receiver and stared at the wall for a few moments.

I knew the Allons Praline Factory, and I knew Rue de Chartres.

Vieux Carre was another name for the French Quarter in New Orleans.

Where I lived.

Where Katie Costner had been murdered.

And, as I had just discovered, where Quincy Pressley had been only a day or so before I came to Prosperity.

Perhaps, I tried to convince myself, it was all a coincidence. Maybe Quincy really did have a sick cousin. Maybe he had simply neglected to tell me he had just returned from New Orleans.

I had to know more.

Among the many dubious talents I have acquired over the years is the ability to toss a desk without leaving any evidence that I'd been there. I quickly went through his drawers. Quincy kept his desk in meticulous shape. It didn't take long to find his bank and credit-card statements.

Within minutes, I discovered a set of used air tickets indicating that he had flown to New Orleans two days before Katie Costner was murdered, and had flown back the day after the killing. They were sitting on top of a manila envelope, the only two items in the top right drawer of the desk. I opened the

manila envelope, looked at the contents, and knew almost everything I needed to know.

Circumstantial, maybe. On the other hand, it meant that I had to confront Quincy with what I'd found.

And I needed to make a telephone call.

Quincy returned from the hospital around lunchtime. I waited for him in the living room, with the canceled ticket stubs in my hand.

"Hi, Pat," he said. "Hope you weren't too bored."

"Not at all," I said. "You had a call."

"Oh? From whom?"

"Inez Stillman."

I thought I saw him freeze, for perhaps half a second.

"Lovely woman," he said. "Pillar of the church."

"She likes you, too. She asked me to give you a message."

"What is it?"

I lowered my voice, and tried to sound menacing.

"She loves the pralines."

This time he did come to a full stop, his back to me. I think I saw his shoulders rise and his chest expand in an exhausted sigh. When he turned toward me, slowly, I could see the concern in his eyes.

"You have something to say?" he asked.

“Just a question. Why?”

Quincy shrugged and sat in the wing chair that had been placed perpendicular to the sofa.

“That’s a pretty big question,” he said. “It implies that you think you know something.”

“Let’s say that I’m about ninety-five percent certain that you killed Katie Costner. Can we start with that?”

“Sure,” he said. “You can’t prove anything, of course. I really do have a sick cousin in Louisiana. She provided me with an excellent reason to go to New Orleans. I’d been waiting for some time for an excuse.”

I held up the manila envelope I had found.

“This is a report from the private investigator you hired to find Katie.”

“Yes. Her mother’s request. Susan was all alone after her husband died. She knew she was sick, and she wasn’t inclined to do much about it. She asked me to find her daughter. She wanted Katie to come back to Prosperity for the funeral when she died. I hired that investigator. He did a very thorough job. Doesn’t prove I did anything.”

I laid the envelope on the sofa.

“I’m not a cop,” I said. “I’m not in the proof business. I know you did it, and you know you did it. I only want to know why.”

Quincy stood, slowly.

“I think I may have a sherry. Could I interest you in one?”

“No.”

He crossed to the small cabinet in the front room, opened it, and poured a bit of amber liquid in a cordial glass. He returned to his seat and took a sip.

“I came to Prosperity, oh, thirty years ago, only a few years after I was ordained. I felt a calling. I wanted to work in a small town, where I could make a real difference. I wanted my service to have meaning.

“There was a young man who came to me. He brought his wife. They were having ...” He waved his free hand in the air. “... marital difficulties. The man was depressed. The woman was frustrated, and unsatisfied. They were on the verge of separation and divorce. The woman wanted a child, very badly, and it didn’t appear that she was likely to have one.

“I was in this very room one day, preparing a sermon, when the wife came to my door. She was crying. She was frightened that her husband might be considering leaving her. I tried to comfort her. I offered her a sherry,” he said, holding up the glass. “She accepted it.

“We talked at length. When she left, I felt that I had done a good thing. I liked that feeling. It was the reason I came here, to do good things.

“She returned several days later, again seeking comfort. I did what I could. After a few weeks, she visited every three days or so. Then she offered to volunteer in the church. I needed the help, so I accepted.”

He took another sip from the cordial glass.

"I have no desire to go over the more sordid details. I'll simply say that we became much closer than we should have. I regretted it, certainly. I am a man of the cloth, after all, but I am also a man. A ... very weak man, it seems. The wife came to me after a few months, almost shaking with excitement. She said there had been a miracle and that she was going to have a baby. She believed that this child would mend the torn fabric of her marriage."

"This came as something of a surprise to her husband, I'd imagine."

"I think he ignored the improbability of it all and decided to accept the child as a gift from God—which, in an abstract and indirect sense, it certainly was. They had a boy."

"Roger Thoreson," I said.

"Yes."

"Roger was your son, and the apple of everyone's eye in this town. Everyone blamed Katie Costner for his suicide."

"Yes."

"You blamed Katie for his suicide."

"Well, of course I did. After his father died, I tried to act the role of a surrogate father to Roger. I tried to warn him about Katie. He wouldn't listen. She lured him in, and she drained him, and then she moved on, like the vampire she was."

I tried to pick up the story.

“Katie’s father died, and she didn’t attend the funeral. Her mother became ill, and asked you to find her. You hired the detective. He located her and told you where she was. Katie’s mother died, and you didn’t bother to tell Katie.”

“She wouldn’t have come,” Quincy said. “Katie had no intention of ever setting foot in Prosperity again, after the way she had been treated. There was no point in contacting her.”

“You knew where she was, though,” I said. “You waited until you had a reason to travel to Louisiana. You flew to New Orleans. You went to Katie’s home. She welcomed you, of course. You’re a preacher. You weren’t one of those people who drove her out of town. You passed the time of day, and then you found the opportunity to strike and you choked the life right out of her.”

“And then I bought a box of pralines for Inez Stillman,” he said. “It’s true. Every word.”

He drained the glass of sherry and examined the glint of sunlight in the cut-glass cordial.

“I ... think perhaps another would do nicely,” he said.

He stood and went again to the cabinet. He reached in, but instead of pulling out the decanter, he withdrew a nasty looking revolver.

“It really would have been much better if you had stayed in New Orleans.”

“You don’t want to do that,” I said.

"The gravediggers were at the church this morning. They just finished Katie's grave. The people from the funeral supply will deliver the vault for the casket in an hour or two. My plan is for you to be at the bottom of that grave, covered with a tarpaulin. The vault will be placed on top of you. It's made of concrete, and I daresay it will crush you quite badly. Nobody will ever know you are buried underneath Katie."

"That's not going to happen," I said.

"You're a stranger here. Nobody knows you. Nobody will miss you if you simply disappear. Now, I need you to go to the back of the house. I can't have blood all over my living room. Clues, you know. I watch the television crime shows. I know what to avoid."

"No," I said.

"What? This is a real gun, Pat. I know how to use it. Don't think for a second I won't just shoot you where you sit."

I should have been angry, but Quincy just saddened me.

"You aren't going to shoot me."

"Give me one good reason why I won't."

Judd Wheeler stepped into the room from the kitchen and leveled a pump shotgun at Quincy.

"Because if you do, I'll have to shoot you," he said. "I heard everything. Gallegher called me right after he found the evidence, and explained his theory. He picked me up at the station, so my cruiser wouldn't be here when you got home."

Drop your gun right now, or I will drop it for you.”

Quincy was distracted, so I shot out my hand and grabbed the revolver from him. He seemed mystified. He didn't even bother to resist.

I felt a little sorry for him.

The next day, I stood at the graveside while the local Methodist minister conducted Katie Costner's burial ceremony in Quincy Pressley's stead. I had long since resolved my differences with religion and I allowed myself to focus on the reverence of the occasion.

Katie was buried next to her parents. Just two rows over lay Roger Thoreson and his mother, and the man who died thinking he was Roger's father. It felt a lot like the end of a Shakespeare tragedy—two families brought to ruin by the weaknesses and flaws of a man who believed that he was both an instrument of mercy and a sword of vengeance.

I didn't stick around to see them lower the casket into the vault. I didn't want to hear the scrape of wood on concrete, or the thud of falling earth. I had endured enough of Prosperity and its secrets to last me a lifetime.

By dinnertime I was three hundred miles closer to home.

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LESSON PLAN

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Like a number of other EQMM writers, Canadian Naben Ruthnum has had another artistic career, as a rock musician. He spent the past ten years in Vancouver where he played in a rock band called Bend Sinister. He wrote “Lesson Plan” between tours with the band, then decided that the touring life wasn’t for him. He is now pursuing a master’s degree in English at McGill University, where, he tells us, he just finished a novel in the vein of Kingsley Amis.

I walked out of the school, past my overdressed and insultingly young boss, past the helpless secretary. I was clutching Grace’s narrow forearm through her sweater. It felt like two hot twigs wrapped in cashmere. I took her up the stairs so fast she had to hop. Outside, it happened to be as cold and rainy as people imagine Seattle is year-round. We stood under the canopy for a moment without talking, which is funny. She was

the only person I'd had an honest conversation with since I arrived in this city.

With most people, I wouldn't know how to begin talking about my work. And I certainly don't want to, which again seems a little funny, as my day job involves talking and little else. I've managed to find the separation that self-helpers are always talking about: My job isn't my work. But my work does come out of my job.

I moved to Seattle right after university, coming out West with hopes of finding a band, getting in on a music scene that I'd been picturing in my head. I soon found out it didn't exist. My bass sat around unused. So did I. I grabbed the first job I could get, teaching ESL—that's English as a Second Language—at one of the dozens of schools in town, this one not too far from the shimmering seafood-and-tourist reek of the fish market.

ESL had been my fallback job all through university, the work that kept my small gut full of beer and my nose entertained with whatever I felt like snuffing up there. After my first couple of years teaching, I did what I'd forbidden myself from doing—I slept with a student.

Eun Hee was, of course, my favorite student, a cute Korean girl who had a fair number of interesting things to say. It's painful for me to recall most of the dialogues I had in the identical gray booths of the identical schools I taught at, but hers stood out.

"Yeah, I like baseball, okay, yeah, Koreans do," she said

the first day, impatient at being asked the same question twice. I'd lost concentration. Teaching conversation is harder than it seems—you're being paid to extend small talk that you'd usually be screaming to get away from into hour-long dissertations on emptiness. The students bored me, and I bored them. Eun Hee could talk, though. Her English wasn't perfect, but her interests were. Restaurants, getting drunk, gangster movies, noisy rock, and the inevitable end to that sequence. We spent time together outside of class, and even though we weren't really dating, we were doing something. She quit the school and spent her time with me for the rest of her couple of months in town. On her last morning, she gave me an envelope.

"What's this?" I was practically unconscious from our third bout between the sheets in as many hours. I don't usually screw to impress but I didn't know the next time I'd have such regular access to a pretty girl, so I was getting the most out of it.

"It's for you. Present," she said, getting up and picking a soft towel off the floor to wipe the sweat from her body. She unzipped her already-packed suitcase and picked out a few things to put on for her flight back to Seoul.

"What present? You don't need to get me a present." Especially a green present in an envelope that had this kind of weight. I told her I wasn't a gigolo.

"What?"

"Gigolo. Like prostitute, but a man."

She snapped on her bra. She always put her bra on before any other piece of clothing, and I liked that. “I learned more from you and had more fun with you than in the conversation school. That, in envelope, is my last two months’ tuition. I got a refund. And now you get it.”

“I’m not sure—”

“I learned from you. You keep the money.”

I kept the money. It lasted me the rest of the year—I was stunned to find out what kind of tuition students paid at that slipshod language school, which gave airhead college kids ten bucks an hour to blather and occasionally teach the students a new word. Most of the other teachers spelled like five-year-olds and talked like hasty text messages. I prided myself on being a bit above the pack, and felt even better about quitting.

My angle here in Seattle doesn’t have anything to do with what went on with Eun Hee, and I’m sure she’d disapprove. I disapprove. I work at various schools for about a month apiece, chatting my way through six-hour days. Surveillance sessions, I call them. The male students are the toughest, because there’s no possible benefit, but I find that schools tend to assign me more girls than guys to talk to, based on my one asset: my face. Being twenty-five, handsome, and functionally intelligent is a leg up in a business filled with nascent Dahmers and aging ex-cons with a yen for young Asians. They don’t do background checks at most schools. They usually don’t check your references, either. If the reprobates who teach around me aren’t worried, I

certainly have nothing to fear.

I don't scout for the Eun Hees anymore. She was more of a girlfriend than a source of income. The money was incidental, accidental. I seek out the slightly chubby girls, the ones with a Tommy-gun spray of acne and a stencil of loneliness on their faces. And I give them what they want—which isn't sex, no, not at all—it's a boyfriend, a nice American boyfriend with a hand to hold and time to spend. I pick up new students, girls who've only taken a couple of classes. Eventually I convince them that I'll drop out of teaching if they'll drop out of school and claim their refund. Then it's simple. I live for free while we're together, and gouge the tuition refund out of them by guilt or intimidation when they leave.

I felt pretty bad the first time, standing near the entryway of a bank while Yoon Jin withdrew the last of her spending cash—earned by her father and brother during fourteen-hour workdays in some hellish Pusan office—and brought it up to me. Three thousand, five hundred and sixty-nine dollars. Small earnings for an actual criminal, probably, but to me it was enough for a few months. I paid for our cab to the airport and saw her off. Yoon Jin left too fast to realize how much she should hate me, I think.

I moved from school to school, working a total of six months out of the two years I'd lived here. Eun Hee was a distant and guiltless memory that I conjured up once in a while to cover up the more recent ones. There'd been about five since her, none of whom I'd slept with and all of whom I'd taken

money from.

Grace came into my booth on one of the slow days, in the lag time when the school semester is starting up in Korea. Most of the students who'd been piling up hours of conversation in the previous weeks left on the same day, leaving me with hour-long gaps to fill in my day. That meant trial lessons—free trial lessons that I didn't get paid for. The other teachers, such as Bruce, a cowboy-boot-wearing fellow who dyed his goatee, hated these sessions.

"It's a jack, straight ahead, a jack," he said, leaning over the partition between our cubicles. His breath killed the oxygen around me, replacing it with the gaseous remains of what must have been a pickle-and-cheese lunch.

"I don't mind the trials so much," I said to Bruce. "Less pressure to drive the conversation. What do I care if the kid signs up or not?"

"Oh, you oughta care. Maybe the school gets ninety percent of the cash, but if we don't net that ten percent from a sign-up, we're dead in the water. Only made my rent last month after selling half my guitar collection. How do you get by?"

Half his collection must have been one whole guitar, I thought. Probably a cheap knockoff of some vintage model that he'd seen on a few album covers. Bruce had found out I played bass. Once he stopped trying to get me to join his nonexistent band, he concentrated on forming a bond between us as rebel artists caught in a thankless real-world racket. Meeting him

made me glad that I'd given up on the rock-star ticket.

"I've got other income here and there, Bruce. Not a good idea to anchor your life to such an irregular paycheck—you oughta know that, string-slinger." If I wasn't already gagging on the stink of his breath, I did as those words came out of my mouth. I had to throw him off thinking of my other income stream, and the best way was to get him talking about himself. And he did, blabbing about some alt-country band he'd started with his buddy who'd just moved to Tacoma and was living next-door to an old A&R rep from Universal who'd gotten out of the game ... that was all I heard before tuning him out.

At some point, Grace sat down across from me for the first time. Six months before I ended up dragging her out into the rainy street. She moved light. Bruce hadn't shut up. He liked to make a show of how little the presence of a student affected his real personality, but when his peripherals caught a glimpse of her his jaws snapped shut and the pickle stink gradually receded. He sat down and left us to it.

Grace smiled. She looked older than most of my students—late twenties, maybe. She wasn't Japanese, but didn't quite look Korean, either. She had what I'd have to call raceless beauty, a kind of pretty that was almost alien. A thin face, with an extra curve of pale flesh just above the cheekbones and just below a pair of confectionary-brown eyes. We started to talk, and I could feel the unwanted pressure of Bruce listening to us.

"Who was that other teacher?" she asked. Every second

word was accentless, as is typical with students who've been speaking the language for a while. They start to sound like they're doing an inconsistent impression of themselves.

"He can still hear you," I said. "Bruce. A hell of a speaker," I said, risking a swear in order to be able to teach her an idiom.

"Oh," she said. "I'm Grace." I introduced myself and noticed her glance regretfully at the cubicle wall—as though she would have preferred to have Bruce as her teacher. It was too confusing to be insulting. So I started the conversation, preparing to pile it on, finding out quickly that her English was good and that her conversation was even better—she had things to say. I gave up on her entirely as a potential source of a payout. She'd have guys wanting her company all over any country. So I just sat back and enjoyed the talk, for once. Bruce's inaudible jealousy richly enhanced our banter.

"This is my third trial lesson today," she said after twenty minutes, being either candid or unaware that teachers didn't like to spend time talking to students who had no intention of transforming into a paycheck at some point.

"Three different schools?" I asked. The answer was obvious, but mindless questions were the grease these conversations rolled on. I was enjoying staring at her face, in the way that mechanics enjoy having pinups in their garages. Her prettiness made the bleakness of the job feel remote.

"Yes, three different ones. I'm looking for the right one, with the right teachers. I am always getting very young teachers."

“Yeah?”

She crinkled a tiny eyebrow.

“‘Yeah’ as a question, I meant. You can say ‘yeah’ in that way and it means ‘Please explain more, I don’t understand.’”

“I like older teachers, they have more interesting lives. Things to talk about.” Again, Grace looked at the divider. In the next booth, Bruce’s smile was probably in danger of splitting his face open.

“Oh. Well, they assign students randomly for the trials—”

“Randomly?” She said it deeply, enunciating it like I did, but with a question-mark tail.

“By chance. Luck. Not planned.” I wrote the hasty definition out for her. “You can choose another teacher if you want.”

“Yeah, okay. I think I will take the other teacher. You say he’s a good speaker?”

“Yeah.” Grace got up, picked up her combined purse/bookbag, and started to back out of the booth. She threw a small card onto the desk as she took the paper with the “random” definition from my hand, then went over to Bruce’s booth. The card had a phone number, presumably hers, on the back.

I found out for sure when I dialed it a couple of hours later. I’d just eaten a fish sandwich at a diner, trying not to be bothered by Grace’s abandonment. The boss had let me off early with a disappointed look, as though I’d let down the entire

educational system by losing a student to Bruce. The waitress looked disgusted with me, too, but that was probably because I'd been ordering the same fish sandwich from her for six months. She'd been waitressing in a cheap diner for six months. We could take turns being disgusted.

"Hello?" The word was muffled and coy, the accent uncertain.

"Grace?"

"Oh, yes. You're the teacher!"

"Not much of one, apparently." I could tell that she was outside, walking around downtown, from the sounds of the automobile and sidewalk traffic.

"What?"

"Nothing, just a joke. Did you want to meet with me, or something? You certainly didn't seem too interested in the school."

She must have dodged into a building, because the noise on her end of the line receded suddenly. "I was interested, but wanted the other teacher. Sorry."

"Yeah. Well. It's a little mysterious. So are we going to meet up or what?"

"You like Starbucks?"

"No."

She laughed. The friendliness of teaching was one of the first things that I liked to cast off on the street, although I did

have to keep some of it around when I was with one of my recruited companion-students. I didn't feel like being friendly with Grace.

"You pick," she said. I named a bar. She said it was near her place. "Okay," I said. "Okay." I was ringing the buzzer at her apartment building a half-hour later.

Her place was near-palatial, in a building known to be infested by rich software developers, fathers of the boom that had come and faded in Seattle, just like the music scene that I'd loved. She met me at the door after my elevator ride. The door was a long walk away from the kitchen, which had delicious smells steaming out of it.

"That outfit is too nice to be cooking in." It was. She was wearing a green linen dress that was supernaturally unwrinkled, with black stockings below.

"This dress is thin," she replied. "Good for cooking."

"Yeah. I just ate."

"I wasn't cooking for you, just me. I thought you just wanted to drink?"

"Yes, that would be good. What do you have?"

"Could you get some? I like Kronenbourg." She separated the three syllables.

"Well, yeah, okay. Give me some keys so I don't have to buzz up." She tossed me a key with an electronic fob chained to it and I went on my way. There was a store at the corner, only a

few minutes away, but it was raining hard enough by then for me to be soaked when I got back to the lobby. A few of the other residents looked at me, and I made a display of wagging my fob in front of the elevator's scanner. I was wearing black jeans and a Meat Puppets T-shirt under my open windbreaker. At least I smelled okay.

She'd eaten and washed the dishes by the time I got back. The kitchen must have been well ventilated, because I couldn't smell any spices. Grace's clothes gave off fabric softener and perfume, which combined into a soft, synthetic blooming odor from her side of the room. The first six Kronenbourgs went down fast, and I asked the obvious question. We were both extended on separate parts of her red sectional couch, most of the light coming in from the city outside her massive glass walls.

"I told you there," she said, "I only like older teachers. So much more to talk about."

"But you should know that's not true. Most of them are sad, broken men with very boring lives behind them. I guess if you asked them to list their disappointments you'd have an entertaining hour or six, but beyond that, what is there?"

"There is enough."

"Why did you get me to call you?"

"I liked your hair."

"Really? I guess it's grown quite attached to me." I grinned, knowing what I'd said would be beyond her English. But she laughed. She leaned back, shut her eyes, and laughed. Then

she spoke again.

“That was bad. I hope you reserve those lines for people who won’t be able to understand them.” Her accent had disappeared. Actually, her voice had become Southern Californian, lacking any trace of overseas.

“What’s your deal?” I asked.

“My deal? No deal. I’m a student, just not an ESL student. Part-time theater at the university.”

“So what, you do this little act at downtown schools as a performance piece?” I was disturbed and would have gotten out of there if she didn’t look the way she did, and wasn’t looking at me the way she was. I opened another beer instead, using my thumb and her fob.

“No, it’s not that. I guess the acting practice is good, too. But no, I do it for money, really.”

I froze up and understood immediately. She got herself assigned to the worst sad sack in the office, convinced him somehow that she was his girlfriend, extracted what little cash he had on a day-to-day basis, and then maybe a little more. Grace confirmed all of it.

“And you’d be surprised at the kind of savings those guys have. What they’re willing to give up. Your pal Bruce has two properties, you know that? His dead mother’s house in Bellingham and his own apartment down here. Just works that talking job because he’s lonely.”

“How do you know that’s true? It makes perfect sense to me that Bruce would lie.”

“He carries around folded-up photocopies of the deeds in his wallet.”

This detail was too perfect to be fake. We both laughed and started to drink more. Her scheme was really perfect—she called it a “grift,” feeling that this term classed things up a bit. She did the same thing that I did—offered companionship, pretended to be shy about sex, complained of having money troubles from home, needing a loan to extend her stay in the city, and so on. She never let them come to her apartment, obviously. That would disrupt the whole game. After the rest of the twelve-pack, I felt comfortable telling Grace about my own game. She pretended to be disturbed for a moment, then folded over in giggles. She really was an excellent actress. Then we made our way toward the bedroom and I forgot all about her acting skills.

It was a lot like dating Eun Hee again, only better. We had more to share. Work was a delight, as I got to experience Bruce swaggering around smugly and dropping sledgehammer-subtle hints about the new girl in his life. He spent the early evenings with Grace, and I got all night with her. I managed to pick up a daytime girl for myself in the next week, a pasty unfortunate named Yu Na. Twenty-seven and never been kissed. I could do that much for her. She was out of the city in four days and I had enough spending cash to have an excellent month with Grace. We met at her place and spent lots of money at local bars and

restaurants.

“Are you ever going to let me see your apartment?” she asked one night after we were walking home from an all-night Italian restaurant on Boren.

“Sure, tonight, if you want. We’ll need to cab it there. And it’s a rathole compared to your place.”

“You should get better at your job if you want a nicer apartment.”

“Oh, my gift, as you say? It’s part of my gift. I’m just a poor student on his way up, right? They’d get suspicious if their ten-buck-an-hour teacher was living in Silicon Heights or whatever.”

We got back to my place and Grace looked around. Half-full laundry basket on the floor, packs of guitar strings with dust-mouse colonies forming on them. Exactly what she’d expected.

“Sorry,” I said anyway.

“It’s no problem. We can do all the same things here.” We did.

I woke up alone. That was fine with me, and it fit our regular schedule. She had to be off every Wednesday, early, to have breakfast and a walk in the park with Bruce. She really did deserve a reward for tolerating that guy. According to tradition, my fridge was empty of everything except for half a glass of orange juice. I drank that and had waffles with maple walnut ice cream at the overpriced chain restaurant down the street. After my lean college years, it always felt good to be able to lay down

a twenty without grimacing at the bill. I killed time at record stores and then got to work at about three.

Bruce was slumped in his booth in his customary nap-taking position. When I passed him he came to life, looking at me sadly.

“She cut me out, man,” Bruce said.

“Beg pardon?”

“That girl I was talking about. She said she needed to get back home to take care of some family trouble. She’ll e-mail me in a few days. I’m just broken up about it.”

“But she’ll get back to you.”

“Of course. Man, we really had something. I loaned her plane fare and everything. It was actually that girl who came in—”

“Grace.”

“How did you guess?”

“Prettiest girl in here in weeks, Bruce. I knew you’d be on that like I know you’re you.” This cheered him immensely and he forced me to high-five him. I taunted with a grin for the rest of the day. Grace called when I was at dinner and told me that she’d come to my place after class.

She moved in a special way indoors, a type of walk that would look good on stage. It wasn’t theatrical, just very naked. Maybe that’s why she liked thin fabrics. She walked as though she was nude in her own place and no one was around. We

joked about Bruce for a while and she showed me the manila envelope of bills in her purse. On the outside of it, he'd written "For trips there and back again.—Bruce."

"That has real levels of pathos to it," I said. Grace agreed. Soon, she was naked for real, and so was I. We spent most of the night that way, and the rest sleeping. I was woken by a sharp pain in my back at about four.

"Jesus! Did you bite me?" Grace didn't answer. I assumed it was a spider and swept my hand around on the mattress. I didn't find anything, and soon I fell asleep without realizing it.

I was alone again in the morning, but something was wrong. I felt bad. The sum of a dozen hangovers had added up in my skull and body, and I knew right away that I'd been drugged. Only drugs made you feel this bad the next day, and this was one I'd never tried. My fingers were working so poorly that the bedside lamp only came on after twelve tries. Another ten minutes got me to the bathroom, and what I saw made me glad that I still had some of those numbing narcotics in my system.

"Mlurn," was the first sound to come out of me. My face was the color of polluted sea foam, and my eyes were nearly puffed shut. That explained why it still seemed so dark. I must have had an allergic reaction to whatever she'd injected me with.

I went to the kitchen and swallowed as many codeine pills as I could fit down, cupping handfuls of water from the tap to help their voyage down. Then I went back to sleep with a cold

towel over my face. It was all I could manage.

In the afternoon, I was a little better. My face was still swollen but the rest of me felt okay. I took a closer look at my apartment and saw that it had been tossed in an organized, considerate way. She might have nearly killed me with whatever was in that needle, but she didn't want to leave the place a mess. I went straight for the kitchen cupboard and found a half-full box of raisin bran, but no economy-sized corn flakes box. It was gone. Eight thousand and change in savings, the responsible put-aside part of what I'd taken off the girls. Grace had rightly assumed I was too lazy to get a safety-deposit box. With her plane fare from Bruce, she'd made a little more than ten thousand dollars yesterday.

I went to a dingy Chinese restaurant for some food, a place where the lighting was red and the service hasty. There was no point in looking for Grace at the school, or in asking to see her records there. They'd be fake. Mine always were. I checked my watch for the date: It was the first of the month. I didn't have any doubt that Grace had moved house the day before when she was supposedly at acting class. She didn't need classes.

I waited until my eyes looked almost normal and walked down to the school. I was an hour late, but I ignored the upset staff and went straight for Bruce's booth.

"Do you own two properties, Bruce?"

The look on my face and the look of my face combined to make him talk plainly, for once.

"No, man. I rent a basement."

"Your mother didn't leave you a house in Bellingham?"

"I rent the basement from her."

I quit the school and went home to rest and think. I'd been the target, not Bruce. That meant everything I'd said and thought about him in my month with Grace applied as much or more to me. My last check from the school came in the mail three days later. They'd deducted the price of the stamp. I lived off it for as long as I could before signing up at another downtown ESL factory.

It took me four months to find her. I knew there was a good chance that she'd left town, but I needed to keep working anyway. So I kept an eye open for her. I volunteered for all the trial lessons I could, knowing that she'd turn up if she was still around. And finally there she was, shivering a little in the rain, with her wrist clamped hard in my hand.

"That hurts," she said.

"What did you drug me with? I hope you used a clean needle."

"I'm not a junkie."

"Just a plain bitch."

"There's a word for guys like you, too," she said. I let go of her wrist. She didn't run. I indicated a coffee shop and she nodded. I followed her in. She was wearing a turquoise capelike thing and she still walked the same way. She paid for

the espresso.

“What was in the needle?” I asked. She told me. I couldn’t pronounce what she said when I repeated it back to her, and she laughed.

“Real funny. I just wanted to know what it was that almost killed me.” She stopped sipping and looked at me. I exaggerated my allergic symptoms in a description of that morning, adding in some shortness of breath and vomiting. “Could have died. Are you going to give me my money back?”

“Yes. And you know I didn’t mean that to happen.”

“Yeah, well, tell my lungs. You’re just going to give me the money, no trouble?”

“If I don’t I guess you’ll just try to make my life hell.”

“Good guess.”

She took a sip and undid the one large button on her cape. Underneath was a black silk top with a silly ruffled center. There was nothing ashamed about her.

“Why didn’t you get out of town?” I asked. “You had enough cash.”

“I was going to wait awhile, set up my business, then give you a call. I thought you’d be more interested once you’d seen what—”

I laughed, loudly enough to call attention from other people. They lost interest quickly, as people do. “Once you’d near-killed me and stolen my savings?”

She looked to the side, with the expression of someone who knows she won't be understood, no matter what she says. It was a face I made at students to make them try harder.

"I've been saving seed money for a school. Teachers, students, a full ESL outfit. You said it yourself: Overcharging students and underpaying teachers is an easier way of stealing. Before you said that, I was just taking money from people and putting it away, for nothing. Retirement. It was empty stealing. But I took your money and your idea to make it into something. I was going to get in contact with you when you weren't upset with me anymore. I thought you'd make fun of the idea if I just told you." Her face was earnest, her voice caffeine- and adrenaline-infused. It took some effort to laugh in her face again, but I did.

We walked to her bank in silence and went to her deposit box in the company of a teller. The room was caged and marble. The teller left the room as Grace was opening the lid of the box. It wasn't quite full.

"You can take your money now, or you can stay with me and be part of my school," she said. I laughed, savoring the cold aluminum echo of the sound coming back from the walls at us.

"It's a cute plan, I have to say. But I don't really think we have the basis for a business relationship, do we? Trust and all that."

"Aren't you sick of doing all of this?" She made a circling motion around the deposit box. "It's disgusting."

"What you do is definitely disgusting, Grace. I'd like to think I'm a little more in the gray than you are."

"You're not."

"Give me my eight thousand and you can win the argument."

Grace angrily doled out the cash and popped a bonus thousand on top. "For medical expenses," she said.

"Thanks," I said, tossing her thousand back in her box. I started walking out, putting the wad of bills into my bag. She stopped me. There was a lilt and softness in her voice this time, even a trace of the accent that she put on in class.

"I just need things to end on a better note than this," she said. "If they have to end at all."

"Why would I want to spend another second with you?"

"I told you, because of the school. I need you for this. It was your idea, and I trust you, and I want you to forgive me, at least." Her voice was getting louder, in danger of being overheard. "What do you need to trust me? What?"

"A lobotomy?"

Grace laughed even though she didn't want to. That's the best kind of laugh to get. "How about a key to this box?" she asked.

"For what?"

"So you know that I trust you, absolutely. That has to mean something." Her eyes glossed up a little, like she wanted to

believe that. Like she needed me to say yes so we could both believe it.

Grace signed a few papers upstairs at one of the tellers, and I did the same while she chatted on her cell phone by the bank doors. It was raining harder than before, so I took someone's enormous umbrella from the steel cylinder by the door. It covered both of us as we walked back to her apartment. It certainly wasn't the glass tower that she'd had when we'd been together. Although, I thought, we were technically together again, at least for the next few hours. Until I could go out for a beer run that would take me back to the bank before closing time.

"This is kinda small compared to my last place," Grace said, apologetically. "That actually belonged to an old teacher."

"Where is he now?"

"Japan. He's back soon. Said I could use his place while he was off."

"Oh," I said, feeling jealous despite myself. I suspected that I wasn't the only exception to her method of taking money and goods off guys without actually sleeping with them.

We walked through the lobby and up to her door. Instead of opening the door, though, Grace knocked.

"Who's in there?" I asked her. She smiled and took a step to the side. The door opened to reveal Bruce, in all his paunchy glory. He slammed a fist into my face before I had a chance to laugh. It wasn't much of a blow, but it was enough to knock me

off balance and tilt me into the back wall of the hallway, where my head smacked into the fire alarm. It didn't go off, but my legs gave out as I felt a hot stream start down my neck from the rip in my scalp.

"I know what you do, you bastard," Bruce said, exultant that his punch had had such a dramatic effect. Grace was staring at the streak of blood on the wall, a little shocked, but not so shocked that she couldn't shake it off in a couple of seconds and relieve me of the key and my cash, once again. Bruce pulled me up and dragged me outside before any neighbors could come into the hall. He slumped me against a potted plant just outside the front doors of the place, and both he and Grace stooped down to talk to me.

"Is he still conscious?" asked Grace, with sweetly alarmed concern.

"Don't worry, he's fine. Look, his eyes keep moving. Open them all the way, creep, you're scaring Grace." He sounded plenty scared himself, now that the rush of bringing down a younger man had faded a bit. I opened my eyes to oblige him and to take some final looks at Grace.

"She called me from the bank to tell me what you were up to. And I've known about your filthy life for a while, now. We're going up to Bellingham for the weekend. And when we get back, I'm gonna call the cops on you." Grace prodded his shoulder and shook her head.

"I mean, I'm gonna call them if you don't stay away from my

apartment and—" Bruce kept on babbling out qualifiers. I didn't care. I'd had enough of this job, and it seemed that my sense of people was fading as quickly as my last wisps of consciousness. I kept my eyes on Grace while he babbled on, taking all the warning and all the reward I needed from her stare. I shut my eyes, knowing at least that I'd wake up again soon enough, and that she'd be gone.

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Passport to Crime

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

DEATH ON THE MOUNTAIN

By Nessa Altura

Nessa Altura, who lives in Southern Germany, began writing fiction in 2000. Her publications since then have included two volumes of short fiction, many stories for anthologies, and the novel Die 13 ...

Top of Passport to Crime

Department of First Stories

DEATH ON THE MOUNTAIN

By Nessa Altura



Nessa Altura, who lives in Southern Germany, began writing fiction in 2000. Her publications since then have included two volumes of short fiction, many stories for anthologies, and the novel *Die 13 Klasse* (Grade 13). She is a recipient of the Friedrich Glauser prize for short crime fiction and the short story prize of *Historica*, the annual meeting of *Quo Vadis*, a group of historical writers. Since 2009 she has also authored a popular blog featuring observations and commentary on the literary market.

Translated from the German by Mary Tannert.

Death on the mountain. Good grief, I can think of all kinds of things! You could freeze in a ski lift that someone shut down too soon, starve in a crevasse. Maybe someone cuts your mountaineering rope by accident. Or you drown in a dead-ice hole or get struck by lightning, or torn apart by a Canadian grizzly ...

I racked my brains wondering how to get rid of Anton, or maybe I should say Bud, because that's what everybody calls him. He and his jealousy were driving me crazy. But I couldn't think of anything that was workable. He's too fat to climb mountains, too lazy to ski, he's afraid of thunderstorms, and we don't have grizzlies here. Nothing dangerous wandering around this valley as far as you can see.

At least it's winter, winter in the mountains. For the tourists that means skiing and dancing, for Bud it means schnapps and beer and schnapps and television—and questions: Where've you been? Why are you so late? Where were you, exactly? Why? and Who else was there? I tell you, I can't take it anymore.

Death on the mountain. It'd be the right way to go, but how? I mean, I don't want to get caught.

I'll kill you, I tell him as we're walking home from the pub. It's snowing a little and my new boots are getting an ugly watermark from the slush. Bud's humming the latest winter hit, a pop song you'd have to be stupid to like. But he doesn't notice things like that.

Yeah? he just says. Now how are you gonna do that?

Wait and see, I answer.

He nods. Doesn't give it a second thought. Doesn't take me seriously. It's always been like that. Ever since our parents decided we're a couple, he's treated me as if we were already married. Just another cow in the barn. One to worry about when

she moos, but not before. Or after.

I'll kill him, I tell Elli. She's my best friend, Elli from Hagnerhof. She colors her hair this brassy red, because in the village they all say that red hair is a sign of passion. I wonder whether that's true.

Not much of a loss there, she just says. She had better luck with her Karl, I have to admit.

What I want most is to kill him, I tell my mother, but she just grins and says she'd like to do that to my dad sometimes too. Not really, of course, just in her mind.

You see how it is, nobody here takes me seriously. Out there in the world it might be different, but I'll never get there if it's up to Bud and my parents. And I want to leave, so Bud's gotta go. Listening to the tourists, you can tell where things are happening: Munich, Berlin, Hamburg. You know, where what counts is cities, action, electric lights day and night. Not just stars and old mountains like here.

You just wait, something's gonna happen around here, I tell Alfons. He's our village policeman. We went to school together.

Like what? he asks, curious.

Bud, I say in a meaningful voice. Bud's number is up. Soon.

But he just laughs and laughs, pounds on my shoulder and says, You'd like that, huh?

Yeah, I would. A Murder Is Announced, right? That's the

name of a book I read once and really liked. Sometimes I remember expressions because they're so good. Or true. But how do I do it?

All of a sudden, I know how. I'm not sure it'll work, but it's worth a try. If it doesn't work, I'll think of something else. I mean, I've got plenty of time. Winters are long here in the valley even though the afternoon sun's already warm. It melts the snow on the roof and makes the ice water drip. The water collects in the gutters and spills over the edge, a little at a time, and at night, when the temperature falls, icicles form over the door. Long ones.

I take a look at a huge stalactite and all of a sudden it looks like a sword to me. A sword that could ram itself into Bud's neck. Or the neck of a bull. Like with the toreros in Spain. One, two, you're dead! And then they drag the bull through the sawdust out of the arena. Well, okay, we don't have to go that far, I'd be satisfied with a big zinc coffin for Bud.

And while I'm sitting there imagining that, the man himself comes home with a bunch of brochures from the travel agent.

Taking a trip? I ask.

Africa, he says, Africa'd be nice. Get outta this valley for once, go see some natives, that'd be about right. When winter's over and the tourists are gone, I can be a tourist myself.

I don't know what to say. Bud a tourist? Bud and natives? That'd be something new. But he probably doesn't mean native men, he probably means native women, the kind who've got

twice as much cleavage as me, or more. I've seen the wildest photos. But I like the idea anyway. It'd be something completely different: sun, palm trees, and beaches instead of mountain pines and rocks and snow. So I say I think that's fine. So does my mother, who's already worried we'll never make it to the altar. She's probably thinking that a vacation—even if it's the kind she's only ever heard about—will fix things.

What I really want is to go alone. We book the trip, then he dies, and I leave right after the funeral. Nobody'd understand, but I'd just act like I'm crazy with grief, you know. I don't think they'd hold it against me. Well, maybe Bud's parents, but I don't care about them. The others would say, Poor girl, she needs a change of scenery after a loss like that. Change of scenery? Change of universe is more like it! For good! I'd practice in Africa, far away, I'd work on it until I could do it. Be a city girl. Who just takes ski trips now and then to villages like the one we live in.

That week I work on the icicle, pouring water on it from the attic window, a little at a time. It gets bigger and bigger. There's a whole row of them, big ones and little ones, and one big fat one. That'll be the one. Underneath it, in the snow, I bury a bottle of champagne. That'll be a surprise for Bud. He usually only drinks beer and schnapps. And when he bends over ... I just have to work out how to get the icicle to break off when I want it to. I'm not sure yet how to manage that, but it's been fun all the same just making it—it's a nice change from foremilk a cow, even if the form's pretty much the same.

But it all went wrong, I should have known it would. The moon was bright and I do the romantic bit, Bud's already had a few. I wore this sweater I can push down over one shoulder, I mean, you can't skimp on the skin with a plan like mine. I'd already loosened the icicle, then I put on some music and Bud staggers out and bends over for the champagne I promised him, and I grab the broom I left next to the door and poke at the icicle and it breaks off with a big crack and takes half the rusty old gutter with it—and whizzes down into the snow right next to Bud.

As clean as a sword, it was. Except it hit the wrong target. Instead of Bud's fat, warm body, it speared the cold white ground, damn it all.

That coulda killed me, said Bud, more amazed than scared.

Don't I know it! I think, and bite my fist in sheer rage.

The next morning, it snows. The really deep snow gets here late, too late, the season's almost over. Wasn't much this year, or last year either. It makes us mad: Nature never gives us a break and all the technology in the world never helps. First we got that new ski lift that can transport sixty people a minute, and then the snow never came. Then they brought in snow cannons, and now it never gets cold enough. And we're left holding the bag. Always the losers. The ones who added new guest rooms, they're scared stiff they can't pay their mortgages.

And I'm longing for the light, for color, for the pace of life to

pick up, for, for ... for the lightness of being. You can't say that here, but you can think it. I read a lot, see, my library card's already all creased and gray.

Creased and gray like the landscape out there. Old snow, new snow, stupid snow that comes much too late. Snow, that's the first thing I think when I wake up in the morning, hungover and with a big hickey on my neck. Very embarrassing, but that's Bud's idea of passion.

The snow'll do it. Rescue all of us, and me in particular. It's gotta be good for something if it turns up so late.

You just have to pack it right. Snow's got a lot of mass, it doesn't have to hit a target like an icicle. It's gotta be simpler than that. If it keeps on snowing ... Everybody knows there are avalanches sometimes from our old roof. There's even a sign up to warn people, but nobody looks at it, Bud least of all. But now, now that a piece of the gutter's gone ... Because that gutter held it back, all the snow.

I'll rake it all down tomorrow, Bud promises Dad, playing the son-in-law he wants to be. That's because we've got a big farm and I'm an only child. Yes, fine, says Dad, and I think, No you won't, I'll make sure you don't. It's easy to distract Bud if you know how. So the day goes by and it keeps on snowing. In April!

There's a hatch in the roof. I go up there at night, beat the snow down till it's packed, carefully so no one hears me, and add to it from the other side of the roof, behind the house where

nobody'll miss it. The next night, it snows on top of the pile. It looks like a big hump, but you can only see it from up on the hill, and no one'll look up at the roof, I hope. People here in the valley just stare at the ground, that's another thing I can't stand.

And then I send the snow down on top of Bud when he's chopping wood down below. I do it with the old electric heater we've got for when the heating goes out. I take it up to the attic early in the morning, up where you can see the sky through the cracks in the roof tiles when there's no snow on the roof. I think to myself, it'll take a couple of hours until the roof tiles are warm and the snow melts from underneath and then that packed snow will take off, maybe not all the way to Africa, but at least down the slope. With a firm push from behind, through the roof hatch. And it works! There's a really loud crack when the snow breaks loose, and then Bud's gone. I jump into the shower and pretend I haven't heard a thing. I hope no one else did either—Mom's down in the valley and Dad's at the mayor's office. It takes a little while to breathe your last, I think to myself, and put a heavy-duty conditioner on my hair. You're supposed to leave it on and let it sink in if you want it to work, that's what it says on the bottle.

When I come down, the neighbor's digging away. The axe is lying there, it's not hard to guess who's under the avalanche.

Quick! hollers the neighbor. Someone could be buried! Get a shovel and help me!

Nobody else is here, I say. Dad's not home and Mom's

down in the valley. But then I go and get a shovel out of the shed, slowly. I don't want them talking about me, after all. We shovel and shovel, but it's a lot of snow and it won't be fast enough for Bud.

But then the neighbor uncovers an arm, and everything happens really fast. I start screaming, That's my Bud! My Bud's in there! And people come from all around and finally he's out and the ambulance takes him to the hospital in Oberstadt where he spends three days being spoiled like a baby. I bring him bananas and beer that I hide under my clothes and everything's just like before except that Bud gets on my nerves and everybody else is telling the story of his miraculous rescue over and over.

Death on the mountain, I think, damn it all, doesn't anything work the way it's supposed to? I give up. He wants to go to Africa and I want to go too and when we're back it will be spring in the valley and who knows, maybe it'll help, maybe I'll like Bud better when we get home. And then we plan the wedding and I go along with it, the way everybody wants me to, everybody down in the village and God in his heaven too, it looks like.

And Africa is really incredible. They've even got mountains there, which I didn't know at all. You could see them from the airplane. Travel educates you, that's what they say. The cities are horrible, I learn things there that they don't put in books. And Bud doesn't seem so bad either; he's tanned and the women all look at him, the way he lies on the beach with his legs and his big beer belly in the sand, emptying bottle after bottle. And if

they think he's a good catch, and after all they've got a choice, then he ought to be good enough for me, I think, and chase away the thoughts of murder with cocktails and drumming for the tourists. We're tourists now too. You can't think thoughts like that under this sun, I discover, thoughts like that belong in a dark valley, in the winter. Down here, they seem absurd. I tell myself I didn't really mean any of it, but I know that's not true.

Once we take a jeep ride up into those mountains. They're so green, not gray like ours. And then we drive into a valley, flat and full of coconut palms—they call it a plantation. They give us kaba, a plantation drink with cocoa in it. I remember it from long ago, from the mom-and-pop grocery shop near the church. It's closed now, of course. Kaba was pretty much the only thing in the valley that was exotic, and even that was just a word to us.

And now I'm colossally colonial myself, I'm visiting a plantation. Bud loves riding in the Jeep and I love the warm wind and the foreignness. Maybe we really can ... it was better last night than it usually is. I found my tanned body tempting and Bud did too. Here, nobody cares who's married, some people even do it on the beach, I've seen them. At home they'd be shocked, but they don't even know what a warm tropical night is, or how you drink a fresh green coconut. How could they? People don't broaden their horizons in a narrow little valley full of mortgages.

Bud wants a photo of the two of us under a palm tree to show everybody back home, and we ask our native guide to take the picture. I'm showing him how to use the camera when

Bud goes and stands under the tree, legs planted wide apart in his safari pants. And then—I'm still having to tell the story back home—then a coconut falls and hits Bud right on the head, and he drops on the spot. And I run to him and see that it's split open, not just the coconut, but Bud's head, too, everything's white and red and jelly-like and dripping. And water and blood, and under the hot sun it starts to smell right away, the way it smells on the farm when we butcher a hog.

That coconut weighs more than eight pounds. For a coconut, it wasn't so heavy, they tell me, but from that height it was traveling eighty kilometers an hour when it hit, says the doctor. When he talks I can tell right away that he's from Vienna like my dad's brother. That makes a ton of pressure, he says, not even the strongest skull can survive that. And Bud wasn't the strongest upstairs anyway, I think sadly, and nod, and that's when they tell me that this kind of accident is pretty common down here in Africa. Some people fall out of the tree when they're picking coconuts, and some people get caught down below. Sometimes even kids, and when you look at it like that, Bud ought to be glad he got to live so long. And while they're putting him in the zinc coffin—just like the one I always imagined—I can't stop crying and sobbing. I'm surprised at myself, but the crying's all real.

"Died in foreign lands"—That's what they put on Bud's gravestone. He's the only one in the cemetery who died somewhere other than Tyrolia, and that's rare enough. Bud. Sometimes I cry for him, when nobody's looking. They don't

want us, out there in the wide world, that's for sure. If he'd never left . . . that's what they're saying in the village, and they're probably right. They all feel sorry for me.

Except Alfons. Ever since, he looks sideways at me. But who cares? I've been to Africa and he hasn't and besides, now I'm seeing Karl, and as the only daughter and the heir to the farm, I can have anybody I want. Now that Bud's gone.

Death on the mountain or death down in the valley. It all amounts to the same thing. It's the way people always say: Man proposes, but God disposes.

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