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APRIL 2004

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By ELAINE MENGE

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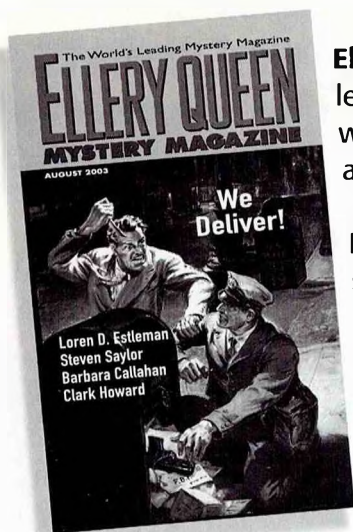


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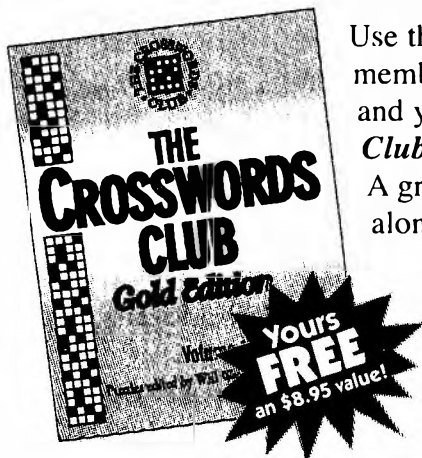
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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

Something for everyone!

One of the pleasures of editing this magazine is the opportunity to bring together each month mystery short stories that feature a range of styles. The April issue is a good example—each story brings a certain tone and setting to bear on its crime, and each one offers a distinct pleasure.

If a good whodunit is what you're looking for, Anne Weston's "By the Monkey-Ladder Vine" not only presents a puzzle, but also takes you to the rain forest of Costa Rica and introduces you to the hardscrabble, but happy, life of Efraín and Sulema. If you like to time travel with a historical, you'll find an enjoyable moment with Catherine Mambretti's "The Mute Monja, or the Walls Could Talk," which takes place in medieval Catalunya and offers the wry perspective of a female artist's apprentice. Alex Auswaks gives us a peek into the beautiful manse of a lonely Russian widow in the British countryside, as his private investigator looks into a suspicious insurance claim in "Russell Davenport and the Countess."

If you are looking for something a little grittier, we have O'Neil De Noux's New Orleans-based police procedural, "Don't Make Me Take Off My Sunglasses," in which detective John Raven Beau parses the story behind a robbery homicide, and L. A. Wilson, Jr.'s private eye tale featuring the mentally unbalanced Riley Jacks in "Heart of the Matter" as he looks into the somewhat opaque reality of political intrigue.

For suspense, check out Elaine Menge's "A Period of Adjustment"—a woman's new home is ideal in every way, but the real estate agent neglected to tell her the real reason the previous tenants sold in such a hurry. Ed Hoch penetrates the nightclub scene in "Bar Sinister," where a young journalist is tagged as a murderer. And our Mystery Classic this month is "Conscience in Art," a charming tale by O. Henry with a devious twist.

And if you still haven't had your fill of short mystery stories, Don Herron looks at a variety of short story anthologies that have come out recently that showcase both new and classic fiction.

BY THE MONKEY-LADDER VINE

ANNE WESTON

A flash of shining gold caught Efraín's eye as he waded the river toward home. The bright seedpod of some rainforest tree, or a chunk of true gold? Holding his old rubber boots high in one hand, Efraín reached into the clear water with the other and seized the object. When he felt the weight he knew it was gold.

Before his hand brought the nugget out of the water he heard hoofbeats, muffled by the thick leaf mold of the forest floor. He straightened up but kept his hand under the waist-deep water.

A dark-haired young man rode out of the trees. He reined in his big bay horse when he saw Efraín but didn't speak. Again Efraín saw the glint of gold, this time from a chain and medallion the rider wore around his neck. His white shirt was half unbuttoned, to show off the gold, Efraín supposed.

Efraín recognized the man as one of his neighbor Soto's sons. "Good morning," Efraín said, walking out of the river but holding the nugget hidden between his thumb and palm. It was just as well not to flaunt his good fortune in front of someone he didn't know well.

The man stared at Efraín, his wet shirt and pants. "What were you doing? Looking for crayfish?"

That excuse was as good as any. "I've seen them as big as lobsters in this river."

"Be careful what you grab: it could bite."

Efraín set his boots on the black pebbles at the river's edge. He slipped the nugget into one boot as he slid his foot in.

Soto's son kept his eyes on Efraín. Then he urged the horse into the river, casting an unsatisfied glance over his shoulder as he rode off.



"You'd like to know what I found in the river, wouldn't you?" Efraín said softly when the rider was out of sight. Efraín hobbled on toward his house, afraid to take the nugget out of the boot too soon in case Soto's son doubled back.

Before the palm-thatched hut came into view Efraín heard Sulema singing. She was in the yard opening a coconut, pounding it on a sharpened stick stuck in the ground. Her fire-orange dress set off the glossy black hair coiled on her head. The baby swung in a hammock nearby.

Sulema looked up and smiled. Efraín pulled off his boot, upended it with a flourish, and caught the nugget as it fell out. It glowed in the sun, a filigreed ball the size of a wild almond, polished by the river. "I thought Epifanio would like to play with this," Efraín said, handing it to the baby.

Epifanio gurgled with delight. He clutched his new toy and waved it in the air.

But by the end of the day Sulema told Efraín that she was afraid the baby would swallow the nugget. "We'd better sell it," she said. "Look, it already shows teeth marks."

Their neighbor Catalino the Indian was visiting. He said he knew of a man who would buy gold over in Río Azul.

"It'll take you a half day each way on foot," Catalino said. "The Sotos go over there a lot; that's where they're from. It only takes them a couple of hours, but they have horses."

Sulema laughed. "You sound like my grandmother. When we didn't want to do something she would tell us, 'That's how life is. Some ride and the rest of us walk, so you may as well get used to it.'"

"I suppose you told her that someday you were going to be one of the riders," Efraín said.

"Of course."

Efraín put the nugget in his pocket and set out at first light the next day, following Catalino's directions as to which paths to take.

The trail emerged from the rainforest and entered a settlement of scattered huts and small cornfields. When he thought he must be near the gold buyer's house he saw a thin young woman on the porch of a house he was passing. She sat in a rocking chair in a dress patterned with faded flowers, leaning forward, watching the trail.

"I'm looking for the man who buys gold," Efraín called to her.

"The next farm," she said. "But he's upset. A bushmaster just killed his mare."

Not a good time to bother someone, Efraín thought. But he'd come all this way, he might as well go on.

He was almost past the house when the girl called after him, "Did you see anyone on the trail?"

"No, no one," he answered. Her eyes lost interest in him and returned to the path where it came out of the forest.

Soon Efrain heard a man's voice raised in lamentation. Following the sound, he ducked through a barbed wire fence and cut across a pasture toward a group of people gathered around a white mare that lay unmoving in the grass. Blood clotted in her nostrils. A heavy-built man bent over her, and a fuzzy gray foal stood to one side.

The man threw up his hands. "And what am I going to do with this filly?" he demanded. "I don't have time to raise her."

Efrain was glad the neighbor girl had filled him in on what had happened. He shook his head in sympathy. At the same moment a bold idea occurred to him.

Half an hour later, after commiserating with the gold buyer and gradually leading into the business matter of the gold nugget, Efrain was the proud owner of a horse—a very small horse, but a horse nonetheless. The gold buyer had accepted the nugget and gone to get a shovel to bury the mare. His wife waited for Efrain to finish the lunch she'd brought him so she could take the tin plate back to the house.

"Your husband won't change his mind?" Efrain asked.

"No. And I don't want her either. The last thing I need is another mouth to feed." The woman reached out to separate two toddlers squabbling over a lime green parrot feather that had fallen from a flock passing overhead.

"She'll be a fine horse when she grows up."

"We wouldn't bother keeping her alive till then. She'll die unless you take her."

Efrain searched his pockets and found a piece of string. He looped it around the foal's face and neck, then tugged gently. The filly braced her spindly legs and stretched toward the mare sprawled in the weeds.

"You live a half day's walk from here?" the woman asked. "That little creature will never make it, even if you take the shortcut I told you about. You'd have been better off taking cash for your nugget instead of letting my husband talk you into trading it for a weakling like her."

"Maybe so." Efrain sighed. He realized the filly wasn't going to walk far on her own. He knelt down, grasped the foal, and draped her across his shoulders before she could react. Efrain held her sharp-hoofed legs firmly as she squirmed. He stood.

"It's your choice." The woman shrugged. "Don't come back here complaining if she dies." The woman picked up one child, grabbed the other by a hand, and headed for the house.

"Do you know if she had a chance to nurse this morning?" Efrain called after her.

"She must have. That bushmaster didn't strike her mother till after I carried water to the house and fed the hens. I heard a shriek. By the time I got to the pasture, the mare was already down."

Efrain set out along the path. The tropical sun beat down. He raised an arm to wipe sweat from his face. The filly neighed shrill and desperate as they drew away from the mare. He felt her tremble.

The young neighbor woman was still on her porch, watching the trail. Efrain nodded to her but kept going. If he'd had more time he would have stopped to chat. Efrain's neighbor Soto and his ten sons had come from somewhere along here. Sulema would be interested to hear about Soto's previous life, and why his family had picked up and moved. But to reach home before dark he had to keep a steady pace.

The path entered the rainforest and Efrain stepped gratefully into the shade of tall trees. The trail was used enough that he didn't need his machete to chop back overhanging vines—just as well, since it took both hands to hold the filly.

How surprised Sulema would be to see him come home with a horse! Well, a foal. "But you'll grow, *chiquita*," he told the filly.

The path was easy to follow in the diffuse green light that wavered through the thick canopy of leaves overhead. Efrain's eyes automatically scanned the ground for fer-de-lances or bushmasters like the one that had killed the foal's mother. Trains of leaf-cutter ants, each carrying a fragment of green leaf, hurried across the path. Now and then a purple and orange land crab, sometimes dragging a shiny seed or other treasure it had collected, skittered into its fist-sized hole. A nighthawk, invisible among the gray-brown leaves, flew up as he approached.

The gold buyer's wife had told him to watch for a shortcut path just after a soapberry tree. Efrain wouldn't have any trouble recognizing the tree; one grew in his yard. Sulema used its waxy yellow berries to wash clothes in the river.

He soon spotted the tree and found the shortcut, less traveled than the path he was on. He turned onto it.

The filly was calmer now. She began to take an interest in the landscape, flicking her ears to catch jungle sounds, flaring her nostrils for the scents. He loosened his grip on her legs.

No matter what the woman had said, he was pleased with his trade.

Efraín couldn't see the sun through the forest roof, but from the texture of the light he judged it to be midafternoon. He was half-way home.

The plate of rice and beans the gold buyer's wife had given him was a fading memory to his stomach. He shifted the filly's weight a little. Neither one of them was comfortable, but this was the only way to get her home.

Efraín laughed. "You know what, *chiquita*? I'm carrying you now, but in a few years, you'll be carrying *me*." How quickly he'd be able to travel on a horse. And if Sulema needed something from the store when he wasn't home, she could put the baby in the sling on her back and ride there. Come to think of it, by the time the filly was old enough to be ridden, the baby would be big enough to ride behind Sulema.

Suddenly the foal flailed out with her legs. She squealed, convulsed with panic. A hoof struck Efraín on the jaw. He caught her legs again and held her. White showed around her wide brown eyes as she stared into a thick bush by the trail.

Efraín couldn't see what had frightened her. Warily, he peered into the bush expecting an eyelash viper but saw nothing.

He heard the ponderous flap of a vulture's wings.

He tilted his head back. He couldn't see the bird for the dense leaves, but he saw a sturdy branch swaying from the buzzard's weight.

He listened for another sound that belonged with the flapping.

Yes, there it was, the dull hum of flies.

Efraín cautiously parted the branches of the bush to see past it. What he saw made him stop breathing.

A dozen yards beyond the bush, a thick monkey-ladder vine tumbled from out of sight in the treetops to the ground. But it wasn't the vine that held Efraín's attention. It was what lay at the vine's base.

Efraín needed his hands free in case he had to use his machete. He hurried down the path, away from the bush, until the filly stopped struggling. He laid her on her side and tied her feet together with the twine he'd tried to use for a halter so she couldn't wander off.

Efraín slid his machete out of the worn leather case that hung from his rope belt. He stood still, listening. When the filly had screamed, all animals but the carrion visitors had paused in their

activities. Now, gradually, they resumed. The drone of cicadas, the mournful cry of toucans, the rustle of a coatimundi in dry leaves, all returned to normal for this time of day and year. No living soul

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of a vulture's wings—and the
dull hum of flies. What he saw
made him stop breathing.

but Efrain was present.

Silently Efrain crept back along the path. When he neared the bush he stepped off the trail into

the forest and angled toward the monkey-ladder vine. Someone else had recently passed this way, trampling wild begonias and ferns.

At the foot of the twisted vine a man sprawled faceup in the dry leaves, empty eyes staring at the vine. Deep gaping cuts crisscrossed his shoulders, chest, and arms. His washed-out blue shirt was sliced to rags; it and his khaki pants were stained with dried blood. He wore old black rubber boots that showed a zigzag line of wire where the sole had started to come off and had been wired back on.

His arms were flung out to either side, palms up, showing cuts where he'd tried to fend off his attacker. The hands were callused, with dirt worn into them from work in the field.

Only a machete would make cuts like those. Why would someone be driven to such rage, to go beyond killing?

Efrain didn't recognize the man even though the face remained undamaged. Efrain studied it to see who the man might be related to. The Mendoza family? He had the same broad face and short thin body as they all did. This might be one of the cousins who, he'd heard, lived over this way. The man appeared to be twenty-five or thirty.

What had he been doing here? Efrain observed the monkey-ladder's convoluted bark and traced the vine's winding course into the treetops but saw nothing unexpected. He studied the ground. Broadleaf plants near the body were trodden down and mottled with patches of blood. He crouched to see under the leaves of the few plants that weren't crushed. He wished it had rained recently, but this was the dry season and the earth revealed little.

An empty, clear glass bottle lay on its side under a philodendron's jagged leaf. Efrain picked it up and smelled the raw bite of *guaro*, harsh sugarcane liquor. That probably explained what the man had been doing here. Efrain considered taking the bottle, a useful item, since the man wouldn't need it any more, but decided he'd better not. It wasn't his.

A cheap flashlight of rusting metal rested under another leaf, about to slide down a crab hole. Efrain tried the switch and saw a feeble glow.

He stuck the flashlight in his pocket. That was a different matter from the bottle. The sunlight filtering through the trees came from lower in the west now; even if he hurried, darkness would catch him. A flashlight could make the difference between life and death on the moonless path.

Even with it, he had to be on his way. These batteries wouldn't last long.

But a chore remained.

Once night fell the vultures would retreat, but other carrion-seekers would arrive. Quickly Efrain cut short lengths of sturdy branches from nearby shrubs and the bush by the path—that would also help mark the spot for whoever came to get the body. With his machete he whacked a point on one end of each post and forced the posts into the loamy soil around the man. Then he stripped bark off a balsa tree and used it to lash branches into a loose mat over the man's torso and head. It wouldn't stop a large predator but would discourage smaller ones.

He glanced at the right hand, then looked closer. The flesh bulged out around a machete cut, but there was a fainter mark, hardly more than a red line across the inside of the fingers. The line bit deepest on the index and little fingers where they began to curve to the outside. This mark wasn't made by a machete.

Efrain finished covering the body. Then he quickly searched the area for some distance outside the trampled spot. Ground cover was sparse; not enough light made it down to the lowest level of the forest for plants to grow thick. He found nothing odd until he reached the place where he—and someone else—had left the main path to approach the monkey-ladder vine. There he noticed a sapling with its bark rubbed raw at chest height. Around the sapling's base the black loam was churned up. He ran his fingers through the loose soil.

Efrain knew he had to go. He returned to the filly, who neighed softly as he approached. "Never been alone before, have you?" he asked. He untied her legs and settled her across his shoulders. "It'll be a rough ride for you now." He needed to reach the store near his house before the flashlight gave out. At the store he'd tell the storekeeper what he'd found, buy new batteries for the flashlight, and walk on home. By next morning word of the murder would have spread far and wide through the store's customers. The matter would be out of his hands.

He hurried along the trail through the dimming light. From habit Efraín avoided stepping on the roots that stretched across the path. Soon they would be indistinguishable from snakes.

Efraín halted abruptly as he rounded a bend, and the filly shuddered.

A dark mass blocked their path. Surely not another dead man—no, this one was shaking, convulsed with sobs, his face pressed into the ground. His hands clawed the earth beside him.

"Excuse me," Efraín said. "Can I help you?"

The man jerked. He raised his face, splashed with muddy tears. "Oh, *señor, señor*, no one can help me. I have killed my brother." His face contorted.

Efraín had recoiled when the weeping man looked up. For an instant he thought the dead man had come back to life and somehow crawled ahead of him on the trail. Then he noticed small differences in this man's face and clothing, and of course he wasn't cut up.

Efraín set the filly on her feet and squatted beside the man. He put a hand on the man's back. "What happened?"

"I went to Juan's house yesterday afternoon. I had to talk to him, we'd had a quarrel." The man rolled onto his side, leaned on an elbow, and rubbed his eyes with his dirty shirttail. "I wanted to make up."

"Juan was your brother?" Efraín asked quietly.

"My brother, my best friend . . . we went out in the banana patch to talk in private. His *doña* does gossip, and we didn't want her repeating our trouble to the neighbors."

"Did you work things out?"

"Yes, we talked a while and decided it didn't matter who was right, we wanted to be friends again. Before I left he offered me a little drink of *guaro* to celebrate. His *doña* won't let him have liquor in the house, she only just moved in and he doesn't want to make her mad, so he keeps—kept—the bottle hidden here by the monkey-ladder vine. 'That *guaro* will be the end of you,' she'd tell him. Ah, why didn't he listen to her?" Tears flowed down the man's face.

"So you and Juan walked out here?" Efraín asked.

The man snuffled. "Yes. He hides—hid—the bottle under some leaves below the vine so it's easy to find. We had a drink. Then we had another. We sat down. It was peaceful, listening to the cicadas. I must have dozed off . . . I don't remember anything else till I woke up this morning."

"What was your quarrel about?" Efraín asked softly.

"Father's mule. When Father got so sick, he told me I was to have the mule, but after he died, Juan came and took it. I was furious. I told everyone that it was supposed to be *my* mule. But yesterday we made up! At least—I thought we did . . ." The man looked confused.

"How did you settle the quarrel?"

"Well, the mule died last week, so it didn't matter anymore who'd ended up with it."

"Maybe he mentioned it while you were drinking, and you got angry again."

"I was sure we worked things out." The man pressed his hands to his face.

"You don't remember anything until you woke up today?"

"Nothing. The sunlight hurt my eyes. I didn't know where I was. I felt awful. I turned my head—and there was Juan, all cut up. I screamed and ran. I had to get away."

Efraín saw the image in his mind, the panicked man running through the forest, tripping, falling. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Pablo. Pablo Mendoza I was baptized, and my mother will curse the day she bore me."

"Did you have a flashlight with you?"

"Juan did. He always carries a flashlight when he goes into the forest in the afternoon in case he's caught by darkness. I mean, he used to."

The light turned from gray to orange as the sun's rays from below the horizon lit the clouds, reflecting afterglow to the earth. Specks of blood showed on Pablo's worn beige shirt.

The deceitful brightness wouldn't last long. Efraín grasped Pablo's arm. "We have to go now. Stand up."

"Just leave me."

"You can't stay here at night. Come on."

"I deserve it if a jaguar gets me."

"You'll be lucky if it's just a jaguar." Efraín bent close, trying to hold the man's unsteady gaze. "Remember, *he's still back there.*"

It took a moment for Pablo to understand. His bloodshot eyes widened. "You mean—"

"Yes, and he knows who killed him."

Pablo lurched to his knees. Bracing himself against a tree, Efraín managed to get the man on his feet and prop him against the tree while he picked up the filly. She was unresisting, numbed by too many shocks.

"Where's your machete?" Efraín asked.

Pablo looked around, struggling to remember. "I didn't bring

mine. Neither did Juan. We were only going to be in the forest for a few minutes, just for one drink. I'll never touch a machete again."

Where was the machete that had killed Juan? It hadn't been by the monkey-ladder, and it wasn't here. Efraín would have seen it if Pablo had dropped the machete along the trail, unless he'd thrown it well off to the side.

He'd have to puzzle over that later. The cloud light had faded. Efraín switched on the flashlight and tucked it under his arm. He balanced the foal with one hand and gripped the man's upper arm with the other. "Let's go," he said.

The cleared part of the path wasn't wide enough for two people, and there was no longer enough light to reveal any fer-de-lances that might be in the ferns at its edge. But Efraín couldn't worry about them. He was too busy trying to keep the man on his feet, the filly from being badly jostled, and the flashlight aimed at the trail. He was sweating, and welcomed the cool brush of air from the velvety wings of bats fluttering past.

The path fed into another, then another. The forest thinned out and Efraín could see the sky, spangled with stars now at the dark of the moon. The trail emerged into pastures and cornfields and Efraín knew where he was. Fireflies drifted by, their light so bright they illuminated the ground as they passed. The flashlight batteries had given out but the stars and fireflies created enough light for him to follow the path. Soon he saw the welcoming glow of the kerosene lamp at the store. He quickened his steps.

Efraín called out as he approached the unpainted wood structure. A small, plump dog jumped off the porch, yapping fiercely. Pablo stumbled over the step up to the store's porch. Efraín eased him down against a post and set the filly on her feet beside him. She staggered a moment, then got her footing. Efraín shrugged his weary shoulders to loosen them.

Lencho the storekeeper emerged from the recesses of the store and leaned out the big front window through which he did business. "Fanny, that's enough!" he yelled toward the dog, who retreated to the shadows. "Efraín! What are you doing here so late? It must be eight o'clock."

"I had an errand to do over in Rio Azul. On my way back a delay occurred."

Pablo groaned. The storekeeper held the lamp up so it illuminated the porch. He gasped. "Who's that? What's the matter with him? Is he hurt?" He hurried around to where a sheet covered the store's doorway, came out on the porch, and bent over the man.

Lencho's family, obviously getting ready for bed, emerged from their living quarters at the back of the store and came to the window to see what the commotion was. "He's dying!" cried a girl.

"I wish I was, I deserve to be dead," the man wailed. "I've killed my brother."

"What!" The storekeeper gaped at Efraín. He noticed the filly standing to one side, head down. "And where did this foal come from?"

Efraín quickly explained about his visit to the gold buyer and what he'd found on the way back. "This man had better sleep here on your porch tonight," he said. "In the morning you can send word to the Mendozas who live near here. They can go to Río Azul to tell Juan's family and help with the body," he finished.

Pablo slumped over and began snoring.

"María, bring a sheet," the storekeeper called to his wife. He and Efraín straightened the man and María tucked the sheet around him.

While they worked, the filly nosed at something on the porch floor. She squealed and jerked back as the dog growled.

"Fanny, leave the poor orphan alone!" Lencho turned to Efraín. "It's a mango seed. Fanny doesn't want it any more, she's chewed all the sweetness out of it, but she won't let anyone else have it."

Fatigue had overwhelmed Efraín now that he was standing still. "If you'll get me two batteries and put them on my account, I'll go home," he said. He'd meant to pay his store bill with money from the sale of the gold nugget, but he'd taken the filly instead. Well, in another month or so his rice crop would be ready. He could trade the harvest to the storekeeper to pay his bill.

"Sulema will be wondering if you're all right." Lencho handed over the batteries. "Why not leave the foal here and come back for her tomorrow? My kids will take care of her. Probably dress her up in their mother's clothes."

Efraín checked the flashlight, its light strong now. "I'd better take her home tonight. I won't feel like walking back here tomorrow."

To tell the truth, he was eager for Sulema to see the filly. If they could keep her alive she would be one good thing salvaged from the day.

The last stage of the journey home passed quickly. The filly sagged across his shoulders like a sack of firewood. Her legs flopped against Efraín's chest with every step.

From a distance he saw the soft radiance of a candle flame shining through the split-cane siding of their hut. "Sulema, look what I have!" he shouted as he neared the house.

Sulema stepped into the doorway. Efraín flashed his light up at the foal draped over his shoulders. "Is there any milk?" he asked.

Sulema smiled and reached out to touch the filly's neck. "Yes, I kept some warm on the back of the fire, in case you wanted a cup when you got home. Bring her in."

Efraín ducked through the low doorway. He set the foal down on the neatly-swept dirt floor. She stood spraddle-legged, wobbling, head drooping. Efraín peeked into the small hammock where the baby slept, then collapsed onto a stool he'd made from a round of tree trunk.

Sulema brought a tin cup of milk for Efraín. He gulped it down. She refilled the cup, seized the filly's head, and tilted it back. She wedged the cup against the foal's clenched teeth and began to pour. After some sputtering, the foal swallowed greedily. Sulema then brought a bowl of stew for Efraín and milk mixed with cornmeal for the foal.

While he ate, Efraín told Sulema about the day's events. He was too tired to give her more than an outline.

"Sleep now, tell me the rest in the morning," she told him, when the spoon slipped out of his fingers. "I'll put your *chiquita* in the shed with the cows."

Efraín was too exhausted to ask how she planned to move the foal by herself. But when he woke up in the morning and went out to check, the filly was snuggled up next to the older cow. Sulema stood nearby with an empty cup and a banana peel—the remains of the foal's breakfast, Efraín thought.

"The young cow with the calf tried to run Chiquita off, but the old cow decided to protect her," Sulema explained. "Now, the hens have laid their eggs and the tortillas are hot. Come have breakfast. Then you can tell me more about yesterday."

By midmorning Efraín felt he'd lazed around long enough. His shoulders were stiff, but they'd only get stiffer if he didn't move. "I'll walk over to Catalino's," he told Sulema. He pulled on his rubber boots, found his old canvas hat and string bag, and tied his machete at his waist.

Catalino the Indian lived only a short walk through the rainforest. "You here, Catalino?" Efraín called, approaching the thatched hut.

A sturdy figure crouched over an old piece of canvas, spreading cacao beans to dry in the sun. Catalino straightened up. "I heard you had quite a day yesterday, Efraín."

Efraín wasn't surprised that the old man already knew what

had happened. "Yes. Who's been by here this morning to tell you about it?"

"No one. I was at the store early today. Lot of people there, listening to the storekeeper's news." Catalino tugged at his broad-brimmed tan and brown hat.

"You finished your hat," Efraín commented. Catalino had been working on the hat in odd moments for almost a month. The strands of palm fiber were so tightly woven that the hat would shed rain as well as an umbrella.

"Yes. I made a new pattern."

Efraín studied the design of dark diamonds and lighter X's that edged the hat. "Fer-de-lance," he guessed.

Catalino grinned. "That's right. Lucky you didn't step on one last night."

"I was almost too tired to care. Was Pablo Mendoza still at the store when you got there this morning?"

"No. The storekeeper said he went back to Río Azul to break the news to his mother."

"Alone?"

"No. A couple of the Mendozas from around here went too. People said Pablo wasn't in any condition to go, but one of Soto's sons was at the store with his horse. Someone asked if he was going that way, would he carry Pablo on the horse with him."

Efraín watched a sapphire blue butterfly float by. "I hoped you'd get to see Pablo."

Catalino gave the russet beans a stir. The faint aroma of bitter chocolate wafted through the air. "I did see his clothes."

"How?"

"The storekeeper lent him clean ones to wear. When I got to the store, a girl was carrying Pablo's clothes to the river to try to wash the blood out."

"I think she'll be able to get them clean."

Catalino nodded. "Not much blood on them, was there?"

"No." Efraín sighed. "Less than when you kill a chicken."

Efraín helped Catalino pull the canvas a little to one side, away from where the shadow of a papaya tree was beginning to encroach on it.

"I hear you've moved up in the world—you're a horse owner now," Catalino remarked.

Efraín smiled. "Yes, and I ought to get home to check on her."

"Give me your string bag." Catalino poured in some of the sun-warmed cacao beans. "You have cinnamon for hot chocolate?"

"Yes, our tree has plenty of bark. Sulema will grind the beans this afternoon and we'll have the chocolate tonight." Efraín opened his hand to take the bag. He stared at his palm. "There was a strange mark on the dead man's hand."

"Not a machete cut?"

"No. Not a clean slice. And it curved around the outside of the fingers."

Catalino gazed at a brown tree fungus that was really a resting moth. "People said Pablo didn't have his machete with him. Did you find it?"

Efraín shook his head. "I suppose he could have thrown it."

"Hard to throw a machete very far."

"Yes, and risky. Too much chance it would flip around and cut the thrower."

"Possibly it will appear later."

Efraín nodded.

The next morning Catalino, whistling, walked into Efraín's yard. On his shoulder was a freshly butchered hog quarter resting on a huge breadfruit leaf to protect his thin shirt. "I had to go over to Gordo's at dawn," Catalino said, setting the pork on a stump. "Where's the filly?"

Chiquita ambled out from behind the house, the old cow sauntering after her. The filly began to nibble scarlet flowers off a hibiscus bush. She turned her bright eyes on Catalino, observing him while he studied her.

"You made a good trade," Catalino said at last.

Sulema handed him a glass of sweet dark coffee and Catalino settled down on the bench under the rose-apple tree. "Gordo owed me a pork quarter from last year, when I made a hat for him," he said. "I heard he was going to butcher today so I went early to be sure of my share. I'll set it to smoke this morning. By the way, I passed the store on my way back."

"What kind of wood will you smoke the pork with?" Efraín asked, sitting beside him.

"Guava, I think."

"Nothing wrong with guava. Some people like orangewood."

Catalino nodded. "Orange gives a fine flavor. Gordo said he was going to try ax-breaker wood to smoke his pork. What do you think of that?"

"Too much trouble to chop it," Efraín said. The men discussed various kinds of woodsmoke until Sulema ran out of patience.

"Catalino, you've already gathered whatever kind of wood you're going to use," she interrupted. "What news did you hear at the store?"

Catalino drained his glass. "The police in town heard about the murder. Yesterday they came out to see the body and arrested Pablo—he went back to Río Azul with a group of people from around here, you know."

"Efraín told me," Sulema said. "Pablo still admits he killed his brother?"

"Yes. Everyone in Río Azul knew they'd quarreled over the mule."

"Pablo claims they made up," Efraín remarked.

"Yes, but he has no witnesses to that. Juan's *doña* only knew Pablo came over and the two men went out in the bananas to talk. She didn't hear what they said."

Efraín rubbed his chin. "It doesn't make sense that Pablo would confess to murder but deny the motive. Did the brothers have problems, besides over the mule?"

"Not that anyone says."

"Was there money or land coming from the father for them to fight over?" Sulema asked.

The old man shook his head. "The mule was all the father owned."

"Did Juan own anything that Pablo might have killed him for?"

"No, he lived on someone else's farm and did a little work to pay rent."

They sat in silence a few minutes. Catalino coughed. "The machete appeared."

Efraín straightened. "Where?"

"Just a long frog-hop from the body, according to what I heard."

"My eyes must be getting bad," Efraín said, reaching over to flick a tiny ant off the baby's hair.

"Umph. What are you planning to do this morning?" Catalino asked.

"I thought I'd cut palm fronds to put a new roof on the livestock shed, now that our herd is growing," Efraín said, "but that can wait. Would you like some help setting the pork to smoke?"

"All right."

The two men set out on the path through the rainforest. Soon muted hoofbeats and squeaking saddleleather let them know someone was riding cross-country from their left, hidden by the forest. Efraín politely called out so the horse and rider wouldn't be startled.

A bay horse carrying a young man jogged out of the trees. Efraín

recognized the rider as one of Soto's sons, the same one he'd seen at the river crossing when he found the gold nugget.

The man slowed his horse. "You're Ezequiel, aren't you?" he said, ignoring Catalino.

"Efrain. And you know my friend Catalino."

The young man gave a short nod.

"I don't remember your name," Efrain said.

"Narciso." He stopped his horse. "Weren't you the one who found that dead man in Río Azul?"

"Yes."

Narciso rubbed his neck. "I can't imagine any of my brothers killing each other."

"No?"

He leaned down from the saddle. "You being the first to see him dead, did you—"

Efrain interrupted. "The second. His murderer was the first."

Narciso nodded impatiently. "Of course. Anyway, if I found a body I'd look around, see if there was something worth picking up. Nothing wrong with that; the dead man won't need his stuff anymore. Did you take anything?"

Efrain met his gaze. "Yes."

Narciso leaned lower. "You did?"

"I borrowed his flashlight. My wife's going to take it to the store this afternoon. Somebody's bound to go from there to Río Azul in the next day or two. They'll give it to Juan's family. There's a horsefly on your ear." Efrain reached up and slapped Narciso's ear a little harder than he had to. Narciso gave him a sharp look.

"Missed," Efrain said.

"You'd better put some lard on your horse's face there where it's scraped, so it won't scar," Catalino suggested. "Well, Efrain and I have work to do. *Adiós.*"

Soto's son wasn't used to being dismissed. He set his heels to his horse and galloped off without saying goodbye. Bits of twig flew up, stinging Efrain's face.

"My eyes are worse than yours," Catalino said, once Narciso was out of sight. "Big as a horsefly is, I couldn't see that one."

Efrain smiled. "I expect you did see what I was trying to get a look at."

"A red line across the back of his neck, curving around the sides."

They didn't speak again until they were at Catalino's, cutting strips of pork to hang across a pole propped above smoldering guava wood.

On a sunny morning a few days later, Efraín was walking home from Catalino's with his string bag full of smoked pork when he was surprised to see someone approaching on the path. He was even more surprised to recognize the gold buyer from Río Azul.

The path was getting so much traffic lately it could almost be called a highway, Efraín thought.

They shook hands. "How's that filly doing?" the gold buyer asked.

Efraín grinned. "Someday you'll be sorry you gave her up."

"That may be, but we couldn't take care of her. Listen, I'm glad I ran into you. I'm trying to find Narciso Soto's place."

"You're not far off." Efraín picked up a stick and sketched a map in the dirt. "Just don't take the wrong fork at the barrel-belly tree."

"I've got it. Thanks."

Efraín was curious to know why the gold buyer was going to see Narciso, but it would be rude to ask. "On your way back, why don't you stop at my house for lunch?" he suggested.

"Wish I could, but I'm in a hurry to get home before dark."

"My wife was shelling tree beans when I left. She'll cook them with cilantro and garlic and stir in this smoked pork my neighbor just gave me." He lifted his bag, bulging with fragrant meat wrapped in banana leaves. "She serves it with fresh tortillas and salsa. Too bad you won't have time."

The gold buyer licked his lips. "I might be able to stop for a moment. I ought to give my legs a rest. I'm not used to walking, but since the mare died, how else can I get around? Was that your house I just passed, the one with all the flowers?"

"That's it."

Efraín was confident he'd see the gold buyer shortly. He doubted Soto's parsimonious wife would offer the man more than a little leftover rice.

The pork was sizzling in coconut oil over the outdoor fire when the gold buyer hailed Efraín from the edge of the yard. "Come on over," Efraín called. "Have a seat here in the shade."

Sulema stepped out of the forest with a clay jug of rose-apple juice she'd had cooling in the spring. She poured a glass for the gold buyer and began to fill the tin plates with food.

Before long, their guest was feeling replete and eyeing the hammock. Efraín feared he would fall asleep. "So, did you get your business done with Narciso Soto?" he said more bluntly than was courteous.

The gold buyer blinked. "Yes, I wanted to show him a nice gold chain I had for sale. Narciso broke his when he was fishing at the river mouth. He came by my house one day to see if I could fix it. I couldn't, it was too damaged, so he sold it to me for the gold value and asked me to keep an eye out for a new chain."

"Did he buy the chain you showed him today?"

"Yes, and now he wants me to look for a medallion of Saint Narciso, to replace one he lost when his chain broke."

"How did it break?" Sulema asked.

"He'd gone down to the beach to fish in the river mouth. He hooked a big snook and was trying to pull it in by himself when his necklace got tangled with the fishline. He saved the chain, but the medallion fell into the water. He lost the snook, too."

"That's too bad. More business for you, though," Efraín said.

"If I can find one—medallions of Saint Narciso are scarce. In fact, that was the only one I've ever seen. I sold it to him a couple of years ago when the Sotos lived in Río Azul." The gold buyer heaved a sigh. "I'd like to take a nap after that lunch, but the sun won't stay in the sky for my convenience."

"Lot of travel between here and Río Azul lately," Efraín commented. "When did Narciso bring you the broken chain?"

"I won't forget that! It was the day we heard the news about poor Juan Mendoza. Narciso said he'd come to Río Azul with Pablo and some of the Mendozas from over here, to take care of the body and tell Mrs. Mendoza. They shouldn't have let Pablo come. Narciso said when they got to where the body was, Pablo fell into a frenzy of weeping and hid his face in his hands. What a shame about Juan."

"Hard to believe his own brother would turn on him that way, like a wild beast."

"I never would have expected it. And over a mule! If it had been over a woman, people might understand. But Pablo wasn't interested in Juan's *doña*. She's lost her looks, and now she's sharp-tongued to boot. She used to be with the Soto boy, you know. I guess he made her like that, the way he treated her, and then leaving her behind when the Sotos moved up here." The gold buyer shook his head.

Efraín took a deep breath. An idea flickered through his mind. "Which Soto boy?"

"The one I just went to see. Narciso." The gold buyer stood and turned to Sulema. "Thank you, *señora*, for the excellent lunch."

"Maybe I should walk down to the beach and look for that medallion around the river mouth," Efraín said.

The gold buyer shook his head. "I said the same thing to Narciso. He told me it was hopeless to try to find it there, with the river pouring out and the ocean pounding in."

As soon as the gold buyer left, Efrain took a knife and hurried to the edge of the rainforest. He found a deer-eye vine the width of a gold chain and cut a length of it. Tying the strong vine loosely around his neck, he headed back to the house.

"Sulema!" he called. "Narciso isn't the only one in the neighborhood with a fancy necklace."

Sulema laughed. "I see. And you want me to try to pull it off you."

Efrain's mouth fell open. "When did you figure out what happened?"

"Just now, when I saw you cutting the vine."

Efrain arranged the necklace with the knot to the back of his neck. "All right, grab the vine and jerk with all your strength. Well, not all your strength, but pull hard." Sulema's hands were strong from wringing out clothes and shelling ears of dry corn.

"Wait," Sulema said. "You need something to use for a machete." She glanced around and spotted a tall mozote weed trying to hide among the zinnias. She yanked up the fuzzy stalk and handed it to Efrain. "Here."

"Juan must have been sitting down, the way the machete struck him."

Sulema took an old rice sack off the bench, spread it on the ground, and sat.

Efrain looked at the weed.

"Go ahead, or else *I'll* wear that necklace and *you* try to break it."

"Why don't you put a rag across your hand so it doesn't get cut? It'll be enough to see how the vine marks my neck."

"We need to see both marks."

Efrain knew better than to argue with Sulema. He bent over her, brandishing the mozote weed as Juan's killer must have slashed with the machete.

Sulema reached up, seized the vine, and gave it a hard yank. Efrain grunted. The vine resisted. She let go, opened her hand, and held her palm out where they could both see it.

A red line ran across the inside of her fingers, curving around at the sides.

Sulema stood up. "Let's see the back of your neck."

Efrain bowed his head and did a slow pivot.

"I'll get my mirror so you can see if it's like the mark on Narciso's neck." Sulema disappeared into the house and returned with the mirror.

Efrain held the mirror to one side and looked from the corner of his eye. "Yes," he said, serious now. His mind began to fill with hazy images and he spoke slowly, sorting them out. "Juan and Pablo were at the monkey-ladder drinking *guaro*. Pablo passed out. Narciso happened to pass on the trail—he must have been on his way to Río Azul the day I saw him, when I found the nugget. Narciso noticed the men at the monkey-ladder. Maybe Juan was talking to himself. Narciso stopped and attacked Juan—"

"But why?" Sulema interrupted.

Efrain shrugged. "I don't know. He struck Juan with his machete. Juan flailed out and grabbed the chain."

"Juan may have thought the medallion was *la Virgen Maria*, and that she would help him."

"Yes." Efrain closed his eyes and watched the shadowy figures in his mind. "Narciso was upset. He stuck his machete back in its case, out of habit. He didn't notice Juan had broken the chain. He fled."

"Why did Narciso have the broken chain later, but not the medallion?"

Efrain thought. "Maybe the chain dropped inside his shirt. The medallion, being heavier, fell to the ground. At home, when he calmed down, he realized people would blame Pablo for the murder if he could get the machete back to the monkey-ladder."

Sulema took the mirror from Efrain's hand and polished it with her skirt. "The medallion was a loose end. If someone from Río Azul found it, they'd know Narciso had been there. He was on his way to look for it the next morning—"

"—but when he passed the store he learned I'd already found the body, and the Mendozas asked him to take Pablo to Río Azul. He couldn't refuse, and then he was seen out that way." Efrain opened his eyes. "I need to talk to Catalino." He reached for his own machete and tied it at his waist. He left the vine around his neck.

"What happened to the medallion, since you didn't see it, and Narciso didn't find it the next morning?" Sulema called after him.

Efrain didn't answer. He was afraid. Solving that mystery might have deadly consequences.

Catalino sat on a log in front of his house, fingers darting back and forth, weaving thin strands of bark-fiber twine into a short

rope. Beside him was a longer piece of finished rope. "A halter for your filly," Catalino explained.

Efrain joined him on the log. "How did you dye the yellow strands?"

"Ginger-root." Catalino stared at Efrain's neck. "So that's how Narciso got the mark on his neck."

Efrain nodded. "Narciso claims he lost his gold chain fishing at the river mouth."

Catalino squinted for a better look. "I don't think so. Not if the line you saw on Juan Mendoza's hand was like this one on your neck."

"It was." While Catalino spliced the noseband to the headstall, Efrain explained what he believed had occurred at the monkey-ladder vine.

Catalino worked a yellow strand under a brown one. "That makes sense, except for one thing. Narciso, riding, got to the body before the Mendozas did. But Pablo was on the horse with him. Wouldn't he have seen Narciso drop his machete, and wondered why he was searching the ground?"

Efrain frowned and tapped his fingers on the log. "The gold buyer mentioned something . . . I remember. Pablo couldn't bear to look at his brother's body. He hid his face in his hands."

Catalino tugged on the halter to even out the splicing. Then he asked the same question Sulema had. "Where's the medallion?"

"I don't know, and I'm not sure if I want to."

Catalino set the halter on the log. "Tell me again about that place."

Efrain closed his eyes and described the scene.

"You looked over the ground well?"

"Well enough that I would have seen a gold medallion."

"In the loose soil by the tree with the scraped bark?"

"I ran my hands through it."

"Caught in a crevice of the monkey-ladder vine?" Catalino asked.

"I would have noticed."

"There wasn't anyone living nearby? Someone who heard the struggle and found the medallion after Narciso left?"

"No, there was only—" Efrain paused. "Oh, *that's* where it is." He told Catalino where the medallion must be.

"I expect you're right," Catalino agreed. "Let's go try this halter on your filly."

Halfway to Efrain's they saw Narciso riding toward them on the bay horse. A new gold chain glittered at his neck. Efrain and

Catalino stepped aside to give him the trail.

Soto's son gave them a curt nod and was about to pass on when something in their expression seemed to draw his attention. He pulled up the horse right in their faces, too close for courtesy. "What?" he demanded. "Do you have a problem with me?" He laughed. "My father's cattle got into your cornfield? Too bad."

Efrain and Catalino looked at each other.

"It's not about cows," Efrain said softly, turning his gaze back to the horseman.

"Then what's it about?"

"Your fishing trip."

"What fishing trip?"

"When you lost your medallion."

Narciso's bridle hand twitched. The leather noseband rubbed the still-raw patches on his horse's face. Ears back, the bay threw his head up and stamped a forefoot.

Catalino looked up at Narciso towering over him. "Suppose we found the medallion?"

Narciso exhaled sharply. "You couldn't have. I lost it in the ocean."

Catalino shook his head. "No."

The rider turned to Efrain. "You lied! I asked if you took anything when you found the body!"

"I didn't take the medallion, but I know where it is." Efrain met his gaze.

The rider stared at them, fear and confusion in his face. Then he gave a short burst of laughter and bent forward in the saddle. "I don't believe you." He spoke so low they could hardly hear. "I searched the whole place the next morning. A buzzard ate it—that's the only way it could have disappeared." He straightened up and spoke normally. "Mind your own business and don't bring trouble on yourselves—or on your pretty wife, Eduardo, or whatever your name is. Stay out of this." He jerked at the horse's mouth and spurred him forward. Efrain and Catalino had to jump back to keep from being trampled. Efrain's foot caught in a straggly thorn-weed and he fell on his back.

Catalino helped him up. Narciso had disappeared down the trail. "He did kill Juan," Catalino said. "At least we're sure of that."

Efrain was pulling thorns out of his hand. "Yes. We also learned why the ground was roughed up around that sapling near Juan's body, and why its bark was scraped." With the toe of his old rubber boot Efrain pointed to the disturbed soil on the path where Narciso's horse had bolted forward. "Narciso had his horse tied to

the sapling. When he attacked Juan the horse panicked, trying to get away from the screams and smell of blood. It reared, tearing up the soil, and pulled back on the rope till its face was cut and the tree bark was rubbed off."

The old man sighed. "No one will believe us, since Pablo's already confessed. I shouldn't have let that girl wash Pablo's clothes. There were only specks of blood on them. Narciso's clothes must have been drenched."

Efrain nodded. "When Narciso left, he cut through the forest so no one would see his bloody clothes. Once he got home, he was safe. The Sotos would never tell on one of their own."

They walked on.

Sulema was in the yard hanging up wet laundry, the foal trailing after her. When Sulema wasn't looking the filly would seize a garment with her lips and try to pull it off the line.

Efrain told Sulema about their encounter with Narciso. "If we go to town and tell the police to look in the crab hole, the Sotos will find out," he finished. "They won't rest until they take revenge on us. But if we keep the secret, the judge will send Pablo to prison for something he didn't do. For the rest of his life Pablo will believe he killed his brother. What can we do?"

Sulema waited till she had finished hanging the clothes and taken the last homemade clothespin from her mouth. "I know," she said, walking into the house. The men followed.

Inside, Sulema reached up to where a small plastic bag was tucked into the cane siding of one wall. She pulled out the bag, opened it, and removed a folded paper. "I found this by the side of the road the last time I was in town," she said. "I saved it—you never know when you might need something to write on." Unfolding the paper, she looked at the few words written at the top of one side. "1 kilo soup bones, 2 kilos potatoes, 1 onion," someone had scrawled. She took a pencil stub from the bag and drew a light line below the phrase. "Take your knife and cut the paper along this line," she told Efrain. "And let's go outside so I can see to write." She picked up a tin plate before going through the doorway.

Efrain trimmed the paper. Sulema folded the cut-off scrap, put it in her skirt pocket, and settled herself on the bench. Efrain sat on one side and Catalino on the other. She turned the plate upside down on her lap for a desk and began to write. "Dear Judge," she printed, reading aloud as she wrote, for Efrain and Catalino's benefit. The two men peered at each letter as she formed it. "Please

know that it was not Pablo Mendoza who killed the man in Río Azul. If you will take witnesses and go to the place of the murder, you will find proof of this in the hole of the land crab which lives there. In the depths of this hole is a gold medallion which neighbors will identify as belonging to Narciso Soto, and which he lost while committing the crime."

"Is that enough?" she asked.

"I think so," Efraín said. "They'll know how to find more evidence. But how can we get this letter to the judge without people knowing it came from us?"

"This afternoon I will visit my nephew in the next valley." Catalino spoke slowly. "He's young, a good walker, and always eager for an excuse to go to town and look at the peculiar people there. He will take this letter and make sure the judge receives it. No one will know who he is. Town people think we all look alike."

"Even if the Sotos learn the judge got an anonymous letter telling him where to find the medallion, they'll assume neither of you can write," Sulema said.

Efraín grinned. "And they'd never dream that my wife would be able to write, if I can't. They'll believe the letter was sent by someone else who went to see where the murder happened. A hundred people must have gone there by now. The Sotos will never be able to decide who wrote it."

Catalino stood up. "Well, that's taken care of." He pulled the halter from his pocket. "I saw your filly headed east, following the cow. Can you whistle her back?"

Efraín and Sulema stayed close to home after Catalino took the letter. The old Indian came by a week later. "My nephew happened to visit me yesterday," he said. "He was in Río Azul to sell some gold he got from a river."

"Did the gold buyer tell him anything new about the murder?"

The corners of Catalino's mouth crinkled. "A few days ago the judge and other people from town showed up in Río Azul and hiked in to where Juan died. The next day the police brought Pablo back from the jail and said he was free. The police went on to where Juan used to live and found Narciso on the porch, trying to talk to Juan's *doña*, but she wouldn't open the door. They searched him and found dried blood inside his machete case. They took it with them, for testing, they said, and arrested Narciso."

A month later Efraín had harvested his rice, cutting the heavy heads from the stalks with a tiny sickle-shaped knife. He and

Sulema had spread the brown grains on a worn cloth to dry in the sun. Now he would go to the store to see about trading the rice crop for his store bill.

Catalino went along. "I think I have almost enough rice to pay my bill," Efrain told him as they walked. "But not quite."

"The rice you turn in is better than other people's. Lencho can sell yours for more money." When the storekeeper had taken in enough rice from customers paying their bills, he would send sacks of it by oxcart to a wholesaler in town.

As they neared the store, Efrain saw a wiry young man sitting on the porch chatting with the storekeeper and his daughters. All were eating ice cream bars, Lencho sitting on a stool near the young man, the dark-eyed girls decorously confined behind the counter. Even Fanny the dog had an ice cream wrapper pinned beneath her paws. She paused long enough to give the new arrivals one sharp yap and returned to licking the wrapper.

Apparently this man had managed to ride a small motorcycle out the rough trail from town. The motorcycle was parked under a mango tree with a battered red ice chest tied behind the seat.

The young man stepped off the porch and called to Efrain and Catalino. "Good morning, gentlemen! You must be ready for some ice cream. Direct from town, packed on ice. Very reasonable, all things considered." He started toward the ice chest.

Efrain waved him back. "I'm afraid you'll have to wait for a richer customer. I'm here to sell, not to buy."

The enterprising salesman sat back down on the porch step. "Another time, then," he said good-naturedly. "I may be back. It's really not such a bad road."

"A few years ago another man tried riding a motorcycle out here," the storekeeper remarked. "He was selling ice cream, too. But after a while his back gave out and he had to quit."

"You're young, you'll last longer," the storekeeper's oldest daughter put in, giggling. A chunk of melting ice cream slid off the wooden stick. She caught it just before it hit the counter.

"This fellow was telling us about the latest excitement," Lencho said. "The Soto boys—except Narciso, who's in jail—rode their horses into town and surrounded the judge's house while he was taking his after lunch nap. They yelled and threw guavas at the front door until the judge came out on the porch. Then they demanded to know how he got the idea to dig around in that crab hole, if someone had suggested it, or what. The judge has a telephone in his house, so he just went inside and called for the police to come." The storekeeper turned to the ice cream man. "What happened next?"

"The police told the troublemakers that if they bothered the judge any more, they'd all be arrested. The judge was awfully mad. His wife, too—she was planning to pick those guavas to make jam."

"Why did the judge go look in that crab hole, anyway?" Efraín asked.

"He decided he ought to look over the place of the murder more thoroughly, and when he saw the crab hole he realized something important might be in it. That's what my aunt heard. She works for the judge's cousin."

"I see. Say, Lencho, I've got some fine rice drying for you," Efraín said, and the conversation turned to business. Efraín explained how much rice he thought he'd harvested, then took a deep breath and added, "Suppose we make an even trade for my bill?"

"I know you bring clean rice, with hardly any chaff," Lencho admitted. "But other people will let their rice go for less."

"And you have to sell theirs for less, because so many of the grains are broken." Efraín played his hole card, pulling a handful of long sleek rice grains from his pocket and handing them to Lencho.

"Nice, I admit," Lencho said, running a finger over the grains.

"Efraín could carry his crop to town and sell it there for more," Catalino pointed out. "But he's willing to let you have it all if you throw in five of those ice cream bars."

Lencho rolled his eyes. "I need you two to help me bargain with my wholesalers." He nodded to the ice cream salesman, who brought the bars. The storekeeper counted out coins to him while the girls wrapped the bars in thick layers of newspaper.

On the walk home, Efraín asked Catalino, "Why five bars? You, me, Sulema, and the baby—that's four."

Catalino looked embarrassed. "Oh, I just wondered what the filly would think of ice cream."

Once at Efraín's house, they unwrapped four bars and sat on the bench under the rose-apple to enjoy them. Efraín held the baby, who cried when the cold first touched his lips but was soon enjoying the treat.

Sulema smoothed out the sheets of newspaper and put them into their proper order. She glanced over the headlines and laughed. "Look." She pointed to a headline. "This says, 'The Long Arm of the Law Turns Out to be a Claw.' The article starts, 'An unusual collaborator has provided evidence to free an innocent man, and to put a guilty one behind bars.'" Sulema skimmed the rest of the article. "The helpful crustacean apparently scavenged a medallion which

the criminal lost in his struggle with the victim, and dragged the object into its burrow. Police discovered the piece of jewelry when they used a long wire to probe the crab's home. Experts identified a partial fingerprint on this medallion as belonging to the victim.

"Police located Narciso Soto at a house in the community of Rio Azul. Upon searching him, they observed what appeared to be traces of dried blood inside his machete case. This blood was subsequently found to be the victim's.

"These facts were sufficient to establish his guilt.

"The murderer refused to make a formal statement. This newspaper, however, in its effort to provide its readers with as much information as possible, has learned of remarks Soto made to a warder, as follows: Soto was riding along a forest path to Rio Azul when he heard a man talking to himself. Curious, he turned off the path and found his former neighbor, Juan Mendoza, obviously inebriated, and Juan's brother, who had already passed out.

"Mendoza offered Soto *guaro* and the two proceeded to finish the bottle. Then Mendoza made a remark which Soto interpreted as boastful in some way. Soto became incensed and attacked his former neighbor."

Sulema looked up. "The newspaper doesn't explain why Narciso, who thinks he's God's gift to women, felt he had to kill someone as poor and insignificant as Juan. It just mentions a boastful comment. What could Juan possibly brag about to Narciso?"

Efrain cleared his throat. "I think it was over a woman, after all . . ." He hesitated. "What do you think, Catalino?"

Catalino unwrapped the fifth bar and walked over to the foal. She took a delicate nip of the ice cream, snorted, and curled her lip in disgust.

Catalino returned to the bench with the ice cream. "I guess we'll have to eat this one ourselves." He handed the bar to Sulema and sat with his thick gnarled hands resting on his thighs. "Why did Narciso kill Juan? Because his pride couldn't bear it, that the girl he discarded would find another man. He was through with her, but he couldn't stand for someone else to have her."

Sulema gave the bar to Efrain, who took a bite and nodded. "That's the same reason Fanny the store dog growled at the foal the night I carried her home. Fanny didn't want that old mango seed but she wouldn't let anyone else have it either."

The ice cream was almost gone. Efrain let the baby suck the last of the sweetness from the stick. 🐾

MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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Footloose

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "April Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the October Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

DON'T MAKE ME TAKE OFF MY SUNGLASSES

O'NEIL DE NOUX

Ever since I bought these extra dark Ray-Ban Balorama sunglasses, two weeks ago, I won't take them off during the day. It annoys people, especially my sergeant and lieutenant. I like that. I like the way the thick black frame wraps around my face, the way the curved lenses give me that predatory, bug-eyed look, the way they hide my eyes, especially while I'm sitting in bumper-to-bumper rush hour traffic on a steamy New Orleans Friday afternoon.

Thankfully, my AC's working fine as I inch my unmarked Chevy Caprice into the right lane of I-610 to creep up to the Canal Boulevard exit. Don't want to be late for another date with Angie.

A man in a black pickup leans on his horn next to me, as if that'll do any good. Just as I reach for my PA mike to tell him to lay off, my portable police radio blares, "Headquarters. 3124."

This can't be good news. Not at four thirty. I'm about to get nailed just before knocking off. Picking up my radio I answer, "3124. Go ahead."

"The subject at Charity just expired."

There it is! Another evening ruined. No way I can punt this to the evening watch. Son of a bitch!

Slapping my blue light up on the roof of my car, I tap the siren and take to the shoulder.

"3124. 10-4?"

"I'm en route," I tell headquarters.

My sergeant cuts in—if I need help, let him know.

Yeah. Yeah.

Now, what had Officer Cruz told me when she called an hour

ago from Charity Hospital's emergency room? She had a robbery victim shot in the upper leg. He'd lost a lot of blood and might not make it. I told her to call back if he dies, giving her the old cliché—"It's not *almost* Homicide. It's Homicide Division!"

It takes me a good half hour of creative driving before I park my car in the "Police Only" zone behind the hospital. I climb out and stretch my six-foot-two frame, brushing my hair out of my eyes. I need another haircut.

I leave my suit coat in the car—my gold star-and-crescent badge is clipped to the front of my black belt, holding up my dress gray pants. My charcoal tie is loosened. My stainless steel, nine millimeter Beretta 92F rides in its canvas holster on my right hip, my portable police radio in my back pocket.

With a homicide detective's most important weapons in hand, notebook and ball-point pen, I walk up the ramp into one of America's busiest emergency rooms. The air inside is cool and damp and smells of antiseptic, sweat, and faintly of blood. I ease around rows of folding chairs filled with people patiently waiting their turn.

Two women in the far corner of the room are crying. The man standing next to them wears a pink shirt streaked in blood. He eyeballs me as I pass, heading straight for the pay phones in the hall outside the E.R.

I call Angie but get her answering machine.

"Sorry, babe, but I just got nailed *again*. I'm at Charity. I'll call you in a little bit."

Stepping back into the E.R., I come face-to-face with Officer Cruz. Thick-bodied, standing on the short side of five-five, she's very pretty, with hair as dark brown as mine, worn in a bun at the back of her neck. She focuses her chocolate brown Latina eyes at my sunglasses and holds out her right hand. She's young, in her early twenties. I'm pushing thirty-one.

"Juanita Cruz," she says.

"Beau. Homicide." We shake hands and that familiar look comes to her eyes as she realizes . . .

"As in John Raven Beau?"

"Yeah." I pull my hand away and let her take a long look at this half Sioux, half Cajun detective the newspapers love to describe as a one-man-judge-and-jury killer-cop. Thankfully, the grand juries haven't agreed, declaring all five shootings justifiable homicides. Still, I'm a killer.

"So what we do we have?"

Cruz clears her throat and explains how one Charlie Langford was brought in by his friend after he was shot by an armed robber.

"They were in a car on France Road when a 'big black man' tried to rob them, panicked, and shot Langford in the upper leg.

"The friend is Andy Platt—" She points across the room to the man in the pink shirt and the two crying women. "—and the big girl is—*was*—Langford's girlfriend. I have their IDs." Cruz passes me three Louisiana drivers' licenses. "The older woman is the girlfriend's mother."

I smile at Cruz and tell her that's good work, getting their IDs before they disappear.

"They taught us that at the academy."

I'm not rude enough to ask if she's still a rookie, but her eagerness tells me she hasn't been on the street long.

"Where's the victim?"

She leads me back into the hall next to the trauma rooms, stopping at the third room. She opens the curtain for me. The body of the victim, lying naked with tubes in his mouth and arms, is streaked with blood. A nurse with curly red hair pulls the tube from the victim's mouth as I move around to get a better look at the entry wound in the upper leg.

The wound is consistent with a small caliber gun.

"Where are his clothes?" I ask the nurse, and she points to a plastic bag attached to her side of the trauma table. I explain they aren't to be touched until the crime lab technician arrives to secure them.

She's tall and thin, this nurse, with a prissy expression on her face as she asks, "Something wrong with your eyes?"

I stare at her eyes. "Ever read the *X-Men*?"

"The what?"

"Comic books. Fella named Cyclops wore sunglasses like a visor to keep the lasers from shooting out of his eyes."

Cruz chuckles behind me. I like her. The nurse isn't amused and is less amused when she tries to sponge down the body and I tell her it's not to be touched.

"Let the coroner's people bag him."

"Fine by me." She steps back and pulls off her plastic gloves. "We'll just let the coroner's men bag him."

"Thanks. I need the name of the doctor who declared."

She gives me the doctor's name and time he declared death, cause of death listed as exsanguination due to penetrating gunshot wound. I jot it all down, along with her name, which I read from her name tag, A. Jones.

"The bullet's still inside," she volunteers on her way out, "lodged in the hip."

"Ex what?" Cruz asks.

"Exsanguination. He bled to death."

Stepping through the curtain, I spot the girlfriend hurrying our way. She's pushing six feet, with long brown hair and a reddish, contorted face. She wears a yellow sundress and white high heels.

"Donna Porter," Cruz tells me before the angry girlfriend arrives.

"Where's Charlie!" Donna demands, hands on her hips.

"You can't see him now," I tell her softly. "I'm Detective Beau. We need to talk." I point to the waiting room. She huffs twice, turns, and stomps back out.

I lean over and ask Cruz if the doctor's told them he's dead.

"Yes."

"Good."

I follow Donna and catch her before she reaches her mother. I lead her to the other side of the room where we sit away from her mother and the man in the pink shirt. Both give me owly stares, so I nod toward them and Cruz immediately moves their way, giving me time to speak with my victim's girlfriend.

"I knew something was wrong." Donna wrings the bottom of her dress in her hands. "He's never late." She's talking to the floor now. "He was late once. Just one time." She suddenly looks up at me. "And I chewed his ass so much, he's never been late since."

Tears stream down her face and she raises the bottom of her dress to her eyes and cries. It takes me a moment to realize she has her dress up to her waist now. Glancing around, I see two elderly men checking her out. At least she's wearing panties. Pink bikinis.

I wave to Cruz, who's quick to see what's up and comes over. I move toward the man in the pink shirt. As I pass Cruz, she reminds me his name is Andy Platt. I know that but can't help liking her enthusiasm.

Donna's mother passes me, heading for her daughter.

Andy Platt folds his arms as I arrive and introduce myself. Looking into Platt's eyes from behind my Ray-Bans, I say, "So what happened?"

He tells me quickly how he and Charlie pulled over on France Road and got out to switch positions in their car. Charlie wanted to drive. He was in a hurry to see Donna. Didn't want to be late.

Cruz quietly steps next to me.

"And a guy came up and pulled a gun. Said to give up our money. And he shot Charlie for no reason and I think the gun fell into Charlie's pocket."

The gun fell into Charlie's pocket?

"And the guy ran off so fast." Platt waves his arms. "And Charlie was bleeding, man, like unbelievable."

The gun fell into Charlie's pocket?

Platt folds his arms again and stares at my sunglasses.

"What did the man look like?"

Platt leans close and says, "Black. Tall and skinny."

"What was he wearing?"

Platt shrugs.

"Tuxedo? Jock strap?"

"Black T-shirt and jeans and black running shoes."

"What kind of gun?"

"I dunno."

"Silver colored like mine?" I twist so he can see my stainless steel Beretta. "Or blue steel?"

"Blue, I think. I think it fell into Charlie's pocket."

Cruz bumps my elbow and I tell Platt to sit down and relax. I head straight back for the trauma room with Cruz following.

"The gun fell into his pocket?" she whispers as soon as we're out of hearing range.

"I'll be getting back to that."

"He told me the shooter was big and black but never saw what he was wearing."

We step back into the trauma room.

"He's making this up as he goes along," I tell Cruz as I lean over the bag of clothes. Nurse Jones comes in for a blood pressure cup. I ask for a pair of rubber gloves. She points to a box on the other side of the table and watches me pull the gloves on.

"Could there be a gun in the victim's pants pocket?" I ask.

"A gun? No way."

I carefully reach into the bag and fish out a pair of dark blue pants. They're heavy enough and I slip my hand into the left front pocket. When I put the small revolver on the foot of the bed, Nurse Jones takes a determined step forward and says, "Son of a bitch!"

It's a blue steel Charter Arms .22 revolver with a black plastic grip.

"How the hell did I miss that?" Nurse Jones stammers.

"Don't beat yourself up over it. You're only human."

"No I'm not." She turns to leave. "I'm a nurse!"

Just as I'm explaining to Cruz how Jones was probably pretty excited when she was cutting off the victim's clothes, the crime lab technician steps in. Although he knows the routine, I ask him for photos, and to fingerprint the gun and secure the clothes.

I lose the rubber gloves and head back for the wonderful Andy Platt, who's leaning forward in his chair with his beefy arms around his belly.

When he looks up at me, I ask, "Did you come in contact with the gun?"

"Huh?"

"Did you touch it in any way, try to block it or anything?"

He looks at Cruz and says, "No."

"Where is the car?"

Platt leads us out to a dark green Honda Accord, parked at the bottom of the ramp, a parking ticket already affixed to its windshield. I pull the ticket off and stuff it into my pocket. It'll have a time on it, for my report.

Blood is streaked outside the front passenger door and the seat is drenched. The steering wheel appears clean. So does the driver's seat.

"Show me how it happened."

Platt explains how he was driving when Charlie insisted on driving.

"It's his car," Platt explains. "Like I said, he was afraid he was gonna be late. Donna would give him ten shades 'a hell.

I look at my notes as I ask, "Y'all got out and a man approached and tried to rob you?"

"Yeah."

"If y'all got out for Charlie to drive, how come he was shot while in the passenger seat?"

"Huh?"

"Twice you said y'all got out and switched positions. For Charlie to drive. But he was shot while in the passenger seat." I point to the bloody seat.

Platt looks at the seat as if it held the answer, then says, "He was getting out. I was out."

"How'd the gun fall in his pocket?"

"I guess the guy dropped it. He must have."

"And you saw it fall in Charlie's pants pocket."

Platt nods and wipes perspiration from his brow. He won't look me in the eye. I spot the crime lab tech approaching and ask him to swab Platt's hands.

"What?" Platt asks.

"You're part of the crime scene, Mr. Platt, and we need to swab your hands in order to conduct a Neutron Activation Test."

Platt folds his arms and asks what's that for.

"Did you fire a gun recently?"

"No!"

"Then it'll prove you didn't." I point to the tech who already has the vial and swab out of his case. "We're going to swab Charlie's hands, too."

As the tech swabs Platt's hands I tell him, "See? It doesn't hurt."

I point to the car and ask the tech to do his magic there, too. He rolls his eyes and nods.

"Any powder burns on the victim's pants?" I ask.

The tech shakes his head.

Turning to Platt, I ask him to come with me to the Detective Bureau so I can secure his formal statement.

"But I want to stay with Donna and her mother."

"They'll be fine," I assure him firmly as I take his elbow to lead him to my car.

"Can I come along?" Cruz asks. "I just got off. I'll turn in my unit and meet you at the Bureau. Okay?"

"Sure."

After jotting down the information from the mother's and Donna's driver's licenses, I pass them to Cruz and ask her to return them and get their phone numbers.

"Okay!"

She sure is eager.

I put Platt in one of our small, windowless interview rooms. Sit him behind the small table on a hardback chair whose front legs have been shaved a half inch so he'll have to fight from leaning forward, awkwardly.

Starting a pot of coffee and chicory, I go over to my desk and call Angie.

Her answering machine picks up and I leave another message.

Calling my home, I check my messages and she's left me one.

"Babe. Got your message. I'm coming over to wait for you." I erase her message and leave one for her to wait there. This shouldn't take long.

Officer Juanita Cruz, still in uniform, walks into the Detective Bureau just as I pour myself a cup of thick coffee. I drop in two sugars and pull out another mug for her.

"Thanks," she says as she passes between the government-issue gray metal desks.

We move over to my gray metal desk in the center of the Homicide Division area. She sits at the next desk as we drink our coffee. She gets up immediately to pour in more cream and sugar.

"I like mine strong," I explain.

"Where's Platt?"

I explain how I'm letting him sweat, letting him try to get comfortable in that hard chair, letting him fester for a good half hour before I go in.

"Can I go in?" Her eyes bounce in anticipation.

"Sure."

Sitting back, she smiles and says, "What's with the sunglasses, really?"

I pause, as if I'm thinking, before saying, "I look cool, don't I?"

She giggles.

Forty minutes later, we step into the interview room. I put my mini-cassette recorder on the table as Cruz puts a cup of coffee in front of Platt. She steps back against the door as I take the only other chair in the place, one with small cushions, across from Platt. I open my ID folder, pull out the laminated Miranda warning card, turn on the tape recorder, and start the introduction.

"The date is . . . The time is . . . This is Detective John Raven Beau speaking. This tape will contain the statement of Andrew Platt." I list his vitals. "Also present in the room is Patrol Officer Juanita Cruz of the Fifth District, first officer at the crime scene."

Then I read Mr. Platt his rights. "Before we ask you any questions, you must understand your rights. You have the right to remain silent. You understand?"

"What's going on?" Platt leans far back in his uncomfortable chair.

"Do you understand what I just said?"

"Yeah, but what's happening?" He looks over my shoulder at Cruz, but she's too smart to say anything.

"Anything you say can and will be used against you in court."

Platt interrupts me again and I tell him he can ask any questions and talk all he wants as soon as I finish reading him his rights. He lets me finish and asks excitedly, "What's going on?"

"You are a suspect in a crime," I explain calmly.

"What crime?"

"The shooting of your friend Charlie Langford."

"But . . ." His lower lips quivers and his eyes redden.

Come on. Cry. When they cry, they're usually close to confessing something.

Platt catches himself and looks at the blank wall.

After a minute, I say, "Staring at the wall isn't going to solve your problem."

He tries staring at me, hard at first, then slowly slipping into a puzzled look.

"Well?" I ask.

He shrugs.

"Tell me how your friend was shot."

Platt stammers out his explanation in less than thirty seconds, giving us the details, putting in this time how Charlie was sitting in the passenger seat. He finishes in a flurry and tries to lean even farther back.

I wait a couple of seconds before telling him, "It's time to quit lying, Andy."

"Huh?"

"Don't make me take off my sunglasses!"

He sits up slowly and looks at Cruz again.

"That Neutron Activation Test the crime lab tech did on your hands checks for antimony and barium. Those elements are pretty rare, but common in the gunpowder."

Platt's eyes widen.

"A revolver, like the one from Charlie's pocket, emits gases from its cylinder when fired. Microscopic particles are embedded in the hand of the person who fired the weapon. What do you think that test will show us about your hands?"

Platt closes his eyes and shakes his head.

I try another tack. "How long have you worked for NASA?" I have to ask it twice.

"I don't work for NASA."

"That's right. You're no rocket scientist, Andy."

He nods almost imperceptibly.

"And you're not smarter than us. We know you haven't told the truth."

Platt stares at his hands folded in front of him on the desk. He's breathing heavily now. I wait until he looks up at me.

"You're gonna make me take off my sunglasses, aren't you?"

Even through my glasses I see his eyes are red.

I snatch off my sunglasses. And no, lasers do not shoot out of my eyes. But he does recoil from the glare of my light brown Sioux eyes.

"There's no way on heaven or earth that gun just *fell* into Charlie's pocket!"

Tears flow down Platt's face.

"Did you put it there or did he?"

"He did!"

Platt starts bawling and I tuck my Ray-Bans into the top pocket of my shirt and move my chair around to his side of the table. I lean close to Platt and soften my voice. "Go ahead. Let it out."

Between sobs, Platt tells us, "It . . . was . . . an *accident*. He . . .

was so . . . late he didn't . . . want . . . Donna . . . to be mad . . . at him."

I put my Ray-Bans back on.

It takes even longer to get the whole story of how girlfriend-frightened Charlie Langford came up with the bright idea of letting his buddy shoot him in the leg so he'd have a reason to be late and have a reason for his girlfriend to fawn all over him.

Why did he have Platt shoot him? Simple. Charlie knew from watching cop shows on TV that if he shot himself, there would be powder burns on his leg.

"He wanted me to shoot him."

"I know."

"He wasn't supposed to die. He just didn't want to be late again."

"I know."

I ask Platt if there's anything he wishes to add or take away from his statement, before turning off the recorder. Cruz and I go out for fresh cups of coffee.

"What are you booking him with?"

"First degree murder," I tell her as I refill her mug.

"Technically it isn't . . ." she starts to tell me.

"Always book 'em with the most serious charge. Keeps him from making bail easily. Let the D.A. negotiate the charge."

I can see she's hesitant.

"What if his story changes tomorrow? What if we find out Donna paid him to kill Charlie? After all, Donna and Platt are both wearing pink."

It takes her a moment. She nods, a smile returning to her eager face.

After filling out Platt's arrest report, Cruz and I take him around the corner to parish prison for booking. She beams when she realizes I list her and me as the arresting officers.

"Thanks for letting me hang around," she tells me as we walk out of the booking area.

I tap my Ray-Bans down, *gleeking* at her, telling her no problem. I like smart cops.

Buck hears me approaching my houseboat and starts barking before I reach the gate. I have to lift my sunglasses to see well enough in the dark to unlock the gate. Buck runs in a tight circle, yelping as I step on *Sad Lisa*. He's a Catahoula hound, with the usual mottled coat of black and brown spots on a gray background and those clearwater blue eyes. I found him during the great May flood, a puppy lost in the rain.

He jumps up on me and licks my hands.

I see food in his dish as I cross to the cabin door. Angie's fed him.

Buck follows me into the main cabin of my houseboat. The scent of meat sizzling on the gas stove has my stomach grumbling before I put down my briefcase. I step into the kitchen area where Angie stands holding a frying pan with two thick steakburgers inside. She's in a yellow T-shirt and cutoff jeans. She's given up on me taking her out tonight—again.

She finally turns to me and brushes her long brown hair away from her face and in that moment, I feel it again, that warm flush inside at the sight of this woman. She's twenty-two and stone-innocent gorgeous, doesn't even realize how gorgeous.

Turning down the burner, Angie steps over and pulls off my sunglasses. I look down into those aquamarine eyes. Her face is so serious as she stares back, letting out a long breath.

"So what was it this time? A police shooting? Triple murder?" She digs a teasing finger into my side. But I don't pull away. I lift my hand and trace my finger gently over her sculptured lips she's painted with deep crimson lipstick.

"You are so beautiful," I tell her and she sighs again.

"Don't start putting those Cajun moves on this city girl." She's trying to stay angry, but it isn't working.

I lean forward and brush my lips across hers. She pulls back and fights to keep from smiling.

"So, what was it? They need the Sioux tracker to chase down a desperado?"

I step back and tell her, "A guy named Charlie Langford was late for a date with this girlfriend, so he got his buddy Andy Platt to shoot him in the leg so she wouldn't kick his ass."

Angie closes her eyes.

"Only Charlie bled to death and I had to book his buddy."

Angie turns back to the stove and flips the burgers.

"You can just tell me the truth, you know."

"That is the truth." I reach into the fridge for an icy Abita beer. I show it to Angie and ask if she wants one.

"He was late for a date?" She puts a hand on her hip.

"Seriously." I try to take a swig of beer, but I start laughing instead. "He's dead because he didn't want to be late for a date."

Angie shakes her head and goes back to cooking.

I look down at Buck, who twists his head as he looks up at me, and I can see in those blue Catahoula eyes he doesn't believe me either. 🐾

THE MUTE MONJA, OR THE WALLS COULD TALK

CATHERINE MAMBRETTI

WINTER, 1199 ANNO DOMINI

“I would have become an alchemist’s apprentice if all I wanted was to mix lime and white lead,” Ermessenda complained to Ramón, master fresco artist of the school of Solsona. Ramón’s only female apprentice, Ermessenda was rarely permitted to do more than that.

He stopped picking tangerines from a gnarled tree through his workshop’s window, then gestured with both hands exactly the way the saints in his paintings welcomed the faithful dead into heaven. She could smell the citrus oil on his palms from where she stood all the way across the room. The scent overpowered even the old-egg smell of her tempera paint.

“Now you want me to slop whitewash on old plaster.” It was a violation of the first rule Ramón had taught her: Opposites can sometimes be conjured to unite as one, but wet paint will never adhere to dry plaster. “I thought you said your own master painted the Pallarses’ portrait.”

“Woman, do as you are told. The bishop of Barcelona wants the repairs before Christmas. He already paid me, and one of his knights is on his way to oversee your work.”

“Which one? Senyor Taul of Girona? Not that it really matters, I suppose. All the bishop’s lackeys are the same.”

The peeling fresco of which they spoke was in the church at Aristôt, a village in the Pyrenees foothills. It was a portrait of



Gerau de Pallars surrounded by his family. He was shown stretching his arms toward Sant Juame, who sat on a throne with a woman prostrate at his feet. Beside Gerau, his son Llorenç held a gold chalice. Kneeling before the saint was a toddler, a second woman, and an adolescent girl—striking for her copious blonde hair and intense blue eyes. Everyone in Catalunya knew Gerau de Pallars. Though now senile and an invalid he was once lord over vast lands, with dozens of serfs and Saracen house slaves.

"Of all people, Senyor Guillem should have done the job properly. Or did he leave the background for an apprentice—you perhaps? Even at that age you should have known whitewash over dried plaster will peel," she said.

"Of course his apprentices assisted him," said Ramón. "But we didn't touch the Pallarses' portrait, just the scenes near the confessional."

"The tortured martyrs and saints?"

Ignoring her, he picked another tangerine. "About the time he started the portrait, he sent us all to work on another commission."

"So you say."

"It was the last thing he ever painted, you know. He was murdered soon afterward on the road to Bigis." With his empty hand, he stroked the drooping strands of his mustache.

"Did you ever wonder how long it would have taken you to finish your masterpiece if Guillem hadn't died then?" She was beginning to think she would never have a chance to paint even a single angel, let alone a whole masterpiece.

He arched his eyebrows, giving his face a look that Ermessenda called "Ego Sum Lux" because it reminded her of the deities he painted. "The *only* thing I wonder is what technique he used. I always thought there was something odd about it."

"Now you want me to compound his error and apply more whitewash over dry plaster."

"Either that or get thee to a nunnery, woman."

Early the next day, Ermessenda took Ramón's donkey cart to the Church of Sant Juame, where tied just outside the front portal she found a huge, black stallion with silver trappings. It forewarned her that the bishop's knight, Taul of Girona, was already there. Once inside, she quickly spied the thick-set, beady-eyed man sullenly leaning against a pillar.

The two were not alone in the church's murky light for long. Soon a nobleman entered, a nobleman so wealthy that even his riding boots' soles were new, as she noticed when he knelt before

a shrine. Taul stepped out of sight into a nearby niche while Llorenç de Pallars mumbled prayers for his mother's delivery from Purgatory. After a decent interval Llorenç rose, adjusted his sword belt with a scowl at the knight, and walked slowly toward Ermessenda as she dragged one of the church's long oak ladders down the aisle.

"Are you here to clean the painting?" the tall, blond nobleman asked her with a surprisingly kind smile.

"Sí, senyor," she replied. She dropped the ladder and bowed her wimpled-and-scarved head to indicate a deference she did not feel.

Taul stepped out of the shadows. "The church ceiling is the bishop's business, not yours."

"Is that right?" said Llorenç, turning abruptly away. Taul followed him, no doubt to the rectory in search of the priest. Ermessenda wondered what bad blood there could be between Llorenç, the bishop's nephew, and one of the bishop's knights. She had never heard the slightest gossip that the Pallarses and the bishop of Barcelona were at odds. The bishop's elder sister had been Gerau de Pallars's first wife—one of the women in the painting. True, Gerau was known to be loyal to the Count de Berenguer. What nobleman wasn't? And, true, the count and the bishop did not always see eye to eye, but then, what count and what churchman did?

With Llorenç out of the way, she stooped again to pick up the heavy ladder and finished dragging it to the wall near the shrine. She was too short and weak to lift the ladder herself, so she scoured the church's shadows for a man. The church was empty, not even a priest surreptitiously sipping the altar wine. As she stuffed strands of wiry brown hair out of the way under her scarf, a boot sounded on the stone floor behind her. Taul was back. Llorenç was nowhere to be seen. "Sir, if you expect me to repair the bishop's ceiling, you must help me with this ladder."

Taul grunted his displeasure, but walked over and lifted the ladder with one hand, slamming it against the wall as if he were preparing to stage an assault on a castle. Within minutes she found herself perched on the ladder with her nose not two inches from the ceiling, repairing yet another patch of old plaster. Then the winter sun shot through the clerestory and across the plaster, bringing into sharp relief a field of blisters like a pox victim's skin. It began to look as if she might be painting white background patches all day long, rather than finishing her work before noon as she had planned. Her first task was to remove the peeling paint.

In irritation, she attacked it with the scraper, wishing she weren't in a church so she could curse Ramón. What kind of fresco peels in dry Catalunya, she thought. Within seconds she answered the question—a fresco that hid something, something far more interesting than old plaster.

"What's that?" Taul asked.

"Nothing," she said, gathering her gown with one hand and with a toe cautiously finding the next rung down.

"What are you doing? Did you deface the painting? Where are you going?"

"To find Father Arbert."

A few minutes later she returned with the priest in tow. "See for yourself if you don't believe me." She edged in under the ladder to steady it for him.

"Must I?" asked Father Arbert, looking up at the spot high overhead where the ladder was propped.

"Can you see from here what is hidden beneath the whitewash?"

The priest sighed, glanced at Taul, then bunched his tunic around his knees.

"I suggest you use both hands, Father." Ermessenda was accustomed to climbing ladders with one hand, but it took practice.

"I see snakes," said Father Arbert when he reached the ceiling. For almost fifteen years, beneath the whitewash, the prayer-clasped hands of the women and girls in the painting had been holding writhing snakes.

"Beautifully rendered," she said. "No rough sketch you would expect to be covered over. It looks to me as if they're offering them to Sant Juame. If the snakes were an error, they should have been chiseled out of the plaster. I don't understand why this was whitewashed. No real artist would have done it."

"Such is the veil of obscurity behind which mortal woman lives," said Father Arbert.

This, Ermessenda had to admit, was true, but she had never liked veils. Veils were the reason she decided to become a painter instead of a nun. How could you study the beauty of God's creation through a veil? Ramón knew this. Whenever she nagged him about a chance to paint something, he threatened to force her to take the veil. "And what about the chalice with a woman's pap?" she asked. That's what she uncovered in the chalice—a bloody, severed breast.

The priest drew a sharp breath and sniffed as if she had asked him to administer the last rites to an overripe corpse. "Stand back," he said as he descended, apparently afraid she was looking up his

tunic. "They were obviously painted over for good reason. Do as you were told. Patch the white. Often what is hidden should remain hidden."

"Revelations have been known to be beneficial," she said. Recognizing how sarcastic that sounded, she added quickly, "I'm afraid to cover up something that must have been part of the original composition. Seynor Ramón may want me to save it."

"Just this morning Llorenç de Pallars ordered me to have the whole scene obliterated," said the priest.

"The bishop won't permit that. This is the only portrait of his sister," said Taul. "What was his reason?"

"Senyor Llorenç thinks it's improper for mere mortals to be portrayed with saints. He fears the sin of pride," said the priest.

Ermessenda loathed to think she might have to destroy the painting and then replaster half the church's ceiling. "I may be able to restore the fresco for less than it would cost to patch it. Surely the bishop would like that," said Ermessenda.

Taul laughed. "Pay to restore snakes and a pap in a cup! Just replace the paint you scraped off."

"Of course, I support His Excellency," said the priest, "but the Pallarses paid for the ceiling in the first place, and they supply us with communion wine."

Taul frowned.

"From their own vineyard?" she asked.

"Sí. Their vineyards produce an especially sweet grape, too," Father Arbert said, "covered in botrytis mold, 'the noble rot.' A heady wine. I should not like to have to find another vineyard to supply us."

"Which one is the bishop's sister?" asked Ermessenda.

"We shouldn't gossip about our betters," said Taul.

"Her," said Father Arbert, unconcerned. He craned his neck up at the ceiling and pointed to the prostrated woman. "Llorenç is their son. The older girl is their daughter—the one with the blue eyes. Over there on the left, that's Gerau's second wife and their baby daughter."

"The second wife is dead now, too?" Ermessenda asked, so curious about this painting that she could not stop herself from gossiping.

"Sí," Father Arbert said. "She and that little girl died shortly after this was painted. Why have you scraped off their hair and half of Gerau de Pallars's face?"

"The paint was blistered. Now I can see an ashen cross mark on the nobleman's forehead and flowers in the females' hair," said Ermessenda. "All are dead?"

"All but the older daughter, Lucy. She has taken the veil and lives in the monastery."

A cough sounded behind them. Ermessenda was startled to see that a few villagers had quietly gathered in the aisle along the wall. They were an ill-looking lot—three laborers with bruises on their cheeks and plucked beards from being bullied by men like Taul, one hulking youth, a toothless old crone, and a gaunt Saracen slave. Only these few of all the villagers had dared to enter the church when the bishop's knight was there.

"These villains are from the Pallarses' estate," said Taul. "Say no more in front of them." He gestured to Father Arbert to follow him.

Ermessenda climbed the ladder. She barely had time to finish scraping off the remaining blisters of paint—revealing that the bishop's sister was lying in a pool of blood—when a messenger arrived asking for Father Arbert. He stood at the base of her ladder while the hulking youth went on his behalf to find the priest. When Father Arbert and Taul halted at a spot directly below her, she pretended to continue scraping.

"The Abadessa wonders, Could old Father Pau come to the monastery until the bishop appoints a new priest?" the messenger said.

"The bishop won't like this," said Taul. "No, not having to appoint two priests in as many months."

"You mean Father Julian is dead? But he was in good health when he left here—not so much as a month ago," said Father Arbert, his bald head gleaming up at her from the shadows. "Is the monastery beset by demons? Does it need to be exorcised?"

Gabriel's trumpet sounded in her head. Old Father Pau would never be able to walk all the way up into the Pyrenees foothills, not with his wooden foot. He would need her to take him in the donkey cart. Naturally, she would have to rest in the monastery. What better opportunity to ask Lucy de Pallars for permission to properly finish work on the fresco? A daughter would be eager to salvage her mother's only portrait. Surely she would pay to have the worst images replaced. Ermessenda would fill the chalice with wine and paint bouquets in place of the snakes.

Early the next morning they left for the monastery. This must be what martyrdom is like, she thought. It was being pressed shoulder-to-shoulder with an ancient priest. It was the monotonous whack of his wooden foot as it hit the cart's side. It was worrying he might remember her from the time years ago, before she was adept at her craft, when she plastered his church

at Solsona and dropped a large blob on the altar. And worst of all, it was Taul of Girona following them on his black steed—both in chain mail. Like Taul, the horse wasn't very clean, and she could smell them even from where she was seated inches from the donkey's rump.

She sighed. "I hear the Abadessa is an ogress. She favors hair-cloth and self flagellation."

"I've never heard that," said Father Pau.

She turned around as the orange sun was rising behind them to shoo Taul back a few feet. There on the horizon she spotted a hulking human figure. "Look," she said, then hastened the donkey on with a sharp rap of her stick.

"What?" Father Pau asked.

She groaned. "I've never seen a church's patrons in a ceiling fresco."

"Gerau de Pallars had many reasons to supplicate Sant Juame, I suppose."

"The snakes in the female figures' hands. The chalice with the pap. What about them?"

"It's obvious," he said. "The severed breast represents St. Agatha and her devotion to Christ. The serpent stands for Original Sin. The ash mark means penitence. The chalice, the Blood of Christ."

"What about the flowers? I can see why someone might want to cover the snakes and the bloody pap, but what could be wrong with wearing flowers in your hair?"

"Every flower signifies something. Find out what kind of flowers they are and you will know what they mean. Perhaps the artist made a mistake. Most flowers stand for the Virgin Mary—it would be wrong to paint them in the hair of a man's two wives."

"The whitewash looks like vandalism to me."

Father Pau thought for a moment. "The Devil's doing? Witchcraft, you think?"

After that, she asked him no more questions. He was either concealing something or he was as senile as Gerau de Pallars. For reasons known only to the beast, the donkey stopped short just then, almost hurling the old priest out of his seat and headfirst into a boulder. Taul pulled his horse up short, too. Ermessenda looked back. "There," she said, pointing to the silhouette following them. "Don't you see him?"

Taul grabbed his saddle horn with a steel-gloved hand and twisted around to look. "Who?" the knight asked.

"What?" Father Pau asked.

Ermessenda couldn't help but think that women weren't the only people who lived behind a veil of obscurity.



The monastery of Sant Joan de les Abadesses was a squatty, sprawling stone structure built in the time of Guifré the Hairy. A jumble of towers and rectangles, it looked like something giant toddlers might construct from toy blocks—not as ominous as she imagined, but not a place where she would want to spend her dying days.

Taul's metallic knock at the massive door sounded deep inside the building like approaching doom. A *monja* dragged the door open. "Father Pau?" No need to introduce the bishop's knight to anyone in the monastery.

"Sí," the priest said. When she looked questioningly at Ermessenda, he added, "This woman is keeping our church looking nice. She brought me here." The *monja* dragged the door open wider, then asked the visitors to stand in a foyer decorated with crucifixes and family crests of nobles who had taken refuge there over the centuries. "That's Guifré the Hairy's crest," said Father Pau. "Three red stripes for the three bloody fingers his son streaked on the wall near his deathbed. And there is the Pallarses' crest."

"What do the wavy lines on it signify? Snakes?" asked Ermessenda.

"Silence," said Taul as the Abadesa entered, her silk veils flowing behind her like an angel's wings. Hardly sackcloth or a hair shirt, as Ermessenda had expected.

"Sir," the Abadesa nodded curtly to Taul, "to what do we owe the honor of your visit?"

"The bishop won't like to hear about Father Julian's death so soon after the other priest's," he said.

"Father Pau, welcome." She offered the priest her ring hand to kiss. "Such a tragedy. Mayhap this will convince the bishop we need more priests in the parish." She glanced at Taul. "Let us pray no one else dies suddenly in his sleep." The four crossed themselves and bowed their heads in prayer.

"Father Julian was so young," said Father Pau, raising his head. "Is it true about his drinking? The rumor is you found him dead in the wine cellar."

The Abadesa indicated Ermessenda with her eyes.

Misinterpreting the look as a question, Father Pau said, "Before she leaves, Ermessenda would like to ask the lady, Lucy de Pallars, about repairing the family portrait in the church."

"Oh?"

Ermessenda opened her mouth to speak, but the usually slow old priest for once was quick. "Ermessenda is an apprentice to

Ramón de Solsona." The Abadessa knew Ramón. Most of the region's noblewomen knew the handsome master artist.

"The bishop paid him to fix some peeling paint on the church ceiling," said Taul. "I would prefer to discuss this in private."

"And Llorenç de Pallars demands that Father Arbert destroy his family's portrait entirely," said Father Pau.

"Oh? The Pallarses paid for the fresco. Why would they want it destroyed?" asked the Abadessa. "And why did not Senyor Ramón simply write to Llorenç or Sister Lucy?"

"He cannot write," Ermessenda said.

The Abadessa frowned. "All right, then. I'll ask the lady if she will see you, but you know she's taken a vow of silence."

"I suppose that means she won't be able to help you much, Ermessenda," said the priest as if catechizing a child.

"She can write, can't she?" asked Ermessenda.

"Of course," said the Abadessa. "Father Pau, you may read the lady's writings to this woman." She must have assumed that like her master the apprentice was illiterate. She had no way of knowing Ermessenda was a Barcelona merchant's heiress, a *pubilla*, who could read and write not only Catalan but Latin.

After that, Father Pau went to the wine cellar where Father Julian's body awaited him, and the Abadessa and Taul left Ermessenda in the foyer. She stood there so long and grew so bored that she actually began to count the cracks in the plaster. This must be what *monjas* do all day, she thought.

The door opened again and in swooped the Abadessa, her veils flying out behind her like a cormorant's wings. She glared at Ermessenda, who winced and made a face that Ramón called her raisin look—wrinkled, dry, and dark.

"Lucy de Pallars does not wish to see you," she said. "Go back where you came from."

Ermessenda drove back to Aristòt alone, looking over her shoulder all afternoon for Taul or the shadowy man. She was certain she had seen someone—and she liked to think her painter's eyes never deceived her. The next morning she returned to the church, intent upon making a copy of the flowers. They were the only pretty images painted over. She would show the copy to her herbalist friend. Hilda de Llosses would know what they were, what they signified, and everything else about them. And there was certainly something about them worth knowing.

"Isn't the bishop's knight here to watch you?" asked Father Arbert the instant she stepped into the church.

"I imagine he has gone to inform the bishop. Would you help me lift the ladder so I can get a good look at something?"

"No. It's time for confession. Have you anything to confess?"

"Sí, but I have work to do first." After the priest left, Ermessenda looked at the knot of parishioners huddled around a basalt pillar. They were the same bedraggled lot who had been there before. She coughed and smiled at them, hoping one would volunteer to help her with the ladder. Most just stared down at their feet. The hulking churl, who reminded her of a certain silhouette in the morning sun, stared at her unblinking. Then a bell sounded announcing that the priest had entered the confessional, and they all moved toward it, all but the Saracen slave. She took hold of his sleeve and dragged him back to the ladder. Once atop it, Ermessenda would have liked to lift her skirt and make an ink copy of the flowers on her linen shift. She was a skillful copyist, especially with a pen, and could have forged the Count de Berenguer's signature. For decency's sake she drew the flowers in charcoal on a canvas scrap instead.

A few moments later as she put away her tools, she noticed the hulking churl step out of the confessional with Father Arbert, who left the church, despite a long line of sinners. The slave followed the two. Her happiness at being spared confession to Father Arbert was somewhat dampened by the sight.

Just after sundown, she reached Hilda's cottage, with its spike-nard and mandrake placard—a gift from Ermessenda—creaking on iron hinges in the chill evening wind. As in all her recent travels, she felt someone must be following her.

She knocked on the low door. Before she could blink twice Hilda drew her in, kissing her on both cheeks. Even tiny Ermessenda had to duck her wimpled-and-scarved head to keep from brushing against the herbs dangling from the rafters. Regrettably, she could identify only the smell of tarragon and basil. She had never been very good at identifying botanicals—not like minerals and chemicals, which she knew well. Besides, she spent so much time breathing church air that she usually traveled in a cloud of frankincense and myrrh, like the Three Wise Men, and could smell little else.

"You say they're bluish purple? Of course I know what they are," said Hilda, pointing a tincture-stained finger at Ermessenda's sketch. "Larkspur. Can't you see the hooded petals? And the unmistakable shape of the leaves."

"You mean, it's monkshood?" asked Ermessenda.

"*Sí*," said the herbalist. "It's sometimes called that and old wife's hood and aconite. You've rendered it so true to nature. As always. What skill you have."

"Not a very holy plant, then, I suppose," she said.

Hilda laughed. "The Devil's plant, more like it."

"What would you say if I told you that Gerau de Pallars's first wife used to wear these flowers in her hair?"

"I'd say those aren't flowers a great lady wears for decoration. A hex sign, perhaps."

"She was the bishop's sister, you know," said Ermessenda.

"*Sí*, I know," said Hilda. "It makes monkshood all the less appropriate for her."

Only days later did Ermessenda learn that, after she left, Hilda's cottage had another visitor. He came on horseback. By the time he was gone, Hilda had lost her tongue.

She traveled the whole moonless night to reach Ramón's house, barely able to control her childish fear of the dark. The next day they stood in the cellar watching a carter unload bags of plaster lime from a wagon.

"The images are clearly part of the original composition. Go see for yourself. That fresco is talking to us," she said. "Even Father Pau admits as much. He just can't understand it. But I am sure I do—now."

Ramón looked at her as if she were a brick missing from a wall he was preparing to paint. "I see. While I thought you were working, you were traipsing around from Aristòt to the monastery and the Lord knows where else. You caused Llorenç de Pallars to withdraw his patronage from the church. You offended the bishop of Barcelona."

"No. The bishop insists that the painting be saved. It's the only portrait of his sister," she said.

Ramón sighed. "All right. I suppose many parts of that ceiling need repainting by now. We'll go to the monastery and tell them what you suspect. But let me do the talking."

"I have asked many favors of the bishop lately," the Abadessa said to Taul, who followed Ermessenda and Ramón to the monastery a few days later. "The least I can do is to assist him in preserving his sister's memory. I have some funds of my own for the purpose."

"Does Lucy de Pallars agree with you?" Ramón asked, unable to conceal his surprise.

"Not likely," whispered Ermessenda.

The Abadessa led them with Taul to the monastery's library, a long, narrow room bathed in the watery gray light of windows glazed with alabaster. Father Pau was already there. They all sat on a hard bench, folded their hands before them on a polished oak table, and waited for Lucy de Pallars.

"As everyone knows, by the time Gerau de Pallars inherited his estate, the family was land-poor," said Ramón.

"This is not the place to gossip about the Pallarses," said the Abadessa.

"This is hardly gossip, lady. It is a revelation," Ermessenda said.

"Everyone knew he married the bishop's sister for her money," said Taul. "What of it?"

"After the marriage Gerau was surprised to learn her dowry was little more than worthless land and a few gold plates," said Ramón.

"He should have known," said Father Pau. "The bishop was already buying his way into heaven by then." He caught himself and cringed as Taul looked displeased. "Well, where did he think the money came from?"

"Gerau tried to squeeze every last dinar from his tenants," said Taul. "No one can blame the bishop or his sister for that."

The Abadessa shook her head. "The Count de Berenguer approved."

"Their first child was a boy," said Ramón. "That made Gerau's situation easier. No question as to whom the estate would pass next. The second child was a girl, the lady Lucy."

"Of course that was a problem," said Ermessenda. "No one wants a daughter. We girls need dowries."

"Why stir up memories of what happened so long ago?" asked the Abadessa.

"That meant Gerau would have to take the money for Lucy's dowry from his son Llorenç's inheritance," Ramón said.

"Then, as if the Lord wished to help Gerau, his wife died," said Father Pau, chuckling into his fist. "That left him free to seek a richer wife."

"The Lord giveth, and He taketh away," the Abadessa said.

"Sí," Ramón said. "Gerau's second wife gave birth to a girl, too, and the gentleman commissioned the frescoes. A sort of bribe to Sant Juame to favor him with no more female children who needed dowries. While we were working on the ceiling his second wife became ill and the little girl, too. Both died soon after the frescoes were finished. Guillem's workshop gossiped about little else for days. Gerau never married again."

"The offering must have worked," said the Abadesa. "After that, the estate and vineyards prospered. Llorenç is set to marry a niece of the Count de Berenguer, and Gerau has lived to a ripe old age."

"Senile, though." Father Pau crossed himself. "A more querulous old sinner I have never known. Bah! You should hear some of the things he says in confession."

The Abadesa ignored the priest's indiscretion. "Sister Lucy brought us only a small dowry, but her family has been very generous with gifts. Why, just a few weeks ago they sent two casks of their finest wine."

"One question, sir knight, if you don't mind," said Ramón. "Why did the bishop send someone to follow Ermessenda whenever she left the church?"

"Follow? I know nothing about that."

The Abadesa turned to the door, through which a veiled figure now passed. The figure glided to a stop in front of the Abadesa, then tossed aside the veil to reveal her Visigoth-blue eyes. Other than those eyes, Ermessenda recognized in the *monja's* face not a single feature of the girl in the painting. Her golden hair was completely covered by a veil, and a wimple hid her ears and her cheeks. Indistinguishable from any other *monja* on earth, she could be in disguise, thought Ermessenda.

"This woman has questions about the frescoes in the Church of Sant Jaume," said the Abadesa. The silent *monja* seemed to shudder.

"I shall read your writing to her," Father Pau told Lucy. "Her name is Ermessenda. A virgin who has devoted her life to plastering church walls."

"I am an artist apprentice to Senyor Ramón," said Ermessenda.

The *monja* sat down beside the Abadesa and picked up a quill and sheet of parchment. Then she dipped the quill into an inkpot and wrote. She handed the page to Father Pau.

"'You mean our family portrait?' That's what she wrote," said Father Pau.

"Yes," said Ermessenda. "The whitewash has begun to peel off, and I—"

Lucy's face turned alabaster gray.

"What is it, Sister Lucy?" asked the Abadesa.

Lucy gestured for the parchment.

How, Ermessenda thought, does one interrogate a woman who insists upon remaining as silent as a fresco? She decided to be direct. "Your mother was poisoned, wasn't she?"

"Poisoned?" the Abadesa said, her eyes round as tangerines. She looked at Lucy.

Lucy might have clenched her jaw then. Her wimple made it difficult to be sure. She bowed her head in prayer. Are my conjectures correct? Ermessenda wondered. The *monja* was denying none of it.

When Lucy looked up again her blue eyes were icy. Then she wrote with shaking fingers for several minutes. Finally, she handed the page back to the priest.

" 'We don't have enough parchment in this monastery for me to tell you the whole story,' " he read. " 'I shall begin when a painter named Guillem de Solsona came to our *masia* to draw our portraits. Guillem was an observant man, much as you are an observant woman, Ermessenda. I suppose that is a characteristic of artists such as you.' "

Ermessenda ducked her head. She could remember no one ever having called her an artist before, but she did not want to let the *monja* see her smile.

"Why were the images painted over?" Ramón asked through clenched teeth.

The *monja* wrote a few lines. " 'My brother insisted the priests do it. He said he disliked the way it looked,' " the priest read, then added, "Yes, I remember now. He particularly wanted it corrected, he said, before the bishop should see such a disgraceful depiction of his dead sister."

"The flowers in her hair are deadly aconite," said Ermessenda. "Also called monkshood. It's in all their hair, suggesting to me that your mother, stepmother, and sister were all poisoned."

Once again the *monja* wrote rapidly. At last she handed the page back to Father Pau, who took it, glanced at the marks covering it, and then read silently. Ermessenda itched to grab the page from the priest and read it for herself. The priest read: " 'One day, when Guillem was sketching me, he told me he knew all about it.' "

"That's why you entered this monastery," said Ermessenda.

The *monja* looked at Ermessenda with those deep blue eyes.

The priest read on. " 'Guillem said he could tell from a certain purple spot beneath their eyes that they were dying.' "

"Guillem could have been a physician, he saw so many things," said Ramón. "I owe much to his training."

" 'Guillem told me to take refuge in a convent,' " the priest read. " 'I agreed, of course. My father had no objection to my choosing poverty. A convent demands a more modest dowry than most husbands.' "

"But," Ermessenda said, as the priest slid the page back across

the table's polished surface, "your father—for all his faults—is not their killer."

The *monja* shook her head as she dipped the quill into the inkwell. When she finally paused and held the pen aloft, Ermessenda reached for the parchment, but Father Pau was too fast and snatched it first.

"'At last I can tell the truth,' " he read. "'If you mean that my father did not poison the wine, then you are right.'" The priest held the page in front of Ermessenda. "There's no more room for answers," he said. "You should stop now."

"I see," said Ermessenda. "Unthinkable as it is, her own child murdered your mother."

"Do you accuse the bishop's niece?" shouted Taul. He jumped to his feet and drew his sword, ready to behead the next person who spoke.

As she wrote one more sentence in the margin, Ermessenda wondered if the silent *monja* ever wished she could break her vows just once.

"It says, 'I suppose there's nothing to be done about my brother now,' " Father Pau read.

"Who?" asked Ramón, as if he misheard the priest.

"Llorenç de Pallars, of course," said Ermessenda.

The Abadessa uttered a short "Oh," then covered her mouth with her kerchief. Taul dropped his sword back into its sheath with a grunt. Ramón arched his eyebrows.

"Your brother produced a special vintage, as his first experiments in winemaking—an especially sweet wine to cover the taste of aconite," said Ermessenda. "He made certain only the women of his family drank of that vintage. Am I right? First your mother. Then when your father bedded a new wife and another child cried out for attention, he killed them too. I suppose the reason you didn't die was that you drank your wine well watered. Guillem saved your life at the risk of his own. Was it only coincidence that he died so soon after?"

Lucy shook her head.

"The painting seems to show your brother offering the saint the pap from which he first sucked life," said the Abadessa, sadly.

"I wish I'd seen that before it was whitewashed," said Ramón. "I painted my section and then left to work on the frescoes at Bigis. No wonder the priests agreed to Llorenç's request."

"I don't understand," said the priest. "Why kill his own mother?"

"For the dowry, of course," said Ermessenda. "Free to marry again, his father would receive another dowry from the second

wife's family. A wealthy stepmother would invest in improvements to the Pallars estates—a new winery, perhaps, or new vines. He killed his stepmother and sister before another Pallars daughter could further diminish his father's estate."

"Your brother sought to hide Guillem's accusation before the bishop saw it by having the priests whitewash the fresco's background," said Ramón.

"This little shrew was right, then," said Taul. "No artist would have been so foolish as to cover dry plaster with wet paint."

"I suppose one of the wine casks went missing soon after they showed up at your door," said Ramón. "And the priest who came to confess you before Father Julian also died then."

The Abadessa nodded. "Sí, Father Joan died in his bed the day after we received the gift of the wine."

"But a vow of silence?" asked Ermessenda. "Why did you not speak out?"

Lucy wrote on the margins of the parchment and handed it to Father Pau. " 'Llorenç insisted I keep silent,' " he read. " 'Nothing could save me from his spies, he said, even in a convent. Nothing but to acquiesce to his demand. I never thought my brother would risk poisoning the whole monastery to get rid of me, though. It's all my fault. All of it. Just because I needed a dowry.' "

"But why now?" said the Abadessa.

"Because he feared the frescoes would reveal his crimes before he could marry the count's niece," said Ermessenda.

"Of course! As soon as Father Arbert asked him to pay for the repairs and he refused, Llorenç knew the priest would go to the bishop," said Taul. "His Excellency would soon hear about the snakes—he always said his sister's death was suspicious."

"It seems a shame to let so great a murderer go unpunished," said the Abadessa.

At Ermessenda's suggestion, that same day Lucy sent her brother a message claiming that she was slowly dying of a painful tumor in her gut. "My last request is for a cask of that memorable vintage of our youth, the one you produced just for the Pallars women," she wrote. Overnight, Llorenç complied with her "last request" and sent her a whole hogshead. The monastery's pig—the one the Abadessa chose to guzzle the wine on Lucy's behalf—died within the day, proving beyond all doubt that the wine intended for Lucy was poisoned.

Ermessenda and Ramón were not present at Geráu and Llorenç's arrest shortly after that, but they could easily envision the scene: it was so like scenes their workshop had painted of

Saracens defeated in battle—Taul of Girona's sword tip beneath the murderer's bearded chin—the bishop looking on with his self-satisfied smirk—their caparisoned horses breathing smoke in the cool morning air.

Soon after that, the senile old nobleman died under torture without remembering his crimes. Llorenç committed suicide in prison by drinking poisoned wine, brought to him from the Pallarses' estate by the hulking churl who tended to all his dirty work.

The affair appalled Ramón—especially Geráu's death on the rack. "We should not have interfered," he said, peering up at the frescoes in the Church of Sant Juame through a fog of incense and candle smoke.

"Do you suppose Llorenç would have killed me, too?" Ermessenda asked. "Or simply cut out my tongue as he did poor Hilda's?"

"Why else have you followed? But don't tempt me into a remark about your tongue. Do as you were told. Destroy the images. Then hie thee to a nunnery, woman. Whatever possessed me to accept you as an apprentice?"

"My dowry?" Ermessenda asked with a tiny smile. She knew he didn't mean it—not yet anyway. Maybe in another fifteen years.

Ramón arched his eyebrows as if to say, *Ego Sum Lux*.

So, she chiseled the snakes and other murderous images out of the ceiling, applied fresh plaster, and then, as Lucy wished, painted bouquets of lilies in the female figures' hands. She was even permitted to replace Llorenç with her first angel. But after Ramón left her alone, she took the liberty of skipping a step or two. She applied a little wet paint over dry plaster on Geráu's forehead and the flowers in the ladies' hair. She could not help but wonder whether she would be there in another fifteen years to see it peel or whether by then she would be cloistered in some convent painting frescoes for nuns. 🐦

BOOKED & PRINTED

DON HERRON

As long as I can remember, I've been hearing about the death of the short story. Certainly the marketplace has changed, with our own *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* being the only crime fiction publications to survive from their origins in the digest era of the 1950's. Some folks consider the digests a later "Silver Age" of the short story, with the Golden Age to be found in the huge numbers of pulp and slick paper fiction magazines of the 1920's, 30's, and 40's. But if the short story indeed is dead, I'm here to tell you it's got a very healthy Evil Twin out there, messing around.

The easiest way to figure it, the theme anthology is stepping into the evolutionary niche left vacant by the demise of regular newsstand magazines. If you assemble the many "Cat Crime" anthologies, for example, and simply reformat them you'll find yourself with a solid run of a pulp—Feline Felonies, let's call it, if that title hasn't been snapped up already.

Even gambling as a theme has racked up a few books, with Robert J. Randisi's paperback anthology **High Stakes** (Signet, \$5.99) the most recent. Appropriately published to premiere at the Bouchercon held in Las Vegas in October 2003, this book features eight stories, six brand new, covering many different facets of gambling in a satisfying mix of narrative voices and styles. Randisi's "Henry and the Idiots" riffs on winning streaks and a husband escaping his domineering wife, while Jonathon King's "Snake Eyes" takes us back to Florida in the twenties in a neo-pulp action yarn about looting a gaming hall. Leslie Glass in "For Sale" features her series detective April Woo of the NYPD caught up in a mess when her mother apparently loses her house in a round of dominoes. "Sex and Bingo" by Elaine Viets puts Helen Hawthorne, her on-the-lam heroine, up against a mystery on a cruise ship in the Caribbean. Judith Van Gieson's "Lucky Eight" stops in on Indian casinos, with a clever twist, and Jeff Abbott's "Bet on Red" follows an enforcer in Vegas—"But see, that's all Vegas is about. The potential of every single moment." Reprints include Donald Westlake's "Breathe Deep," the nastiest story in the collection, and "Let's Get Lost" by Lawrence Block.

Block also serves as editor for the most recent hardcover anthol-

ogy from the Mystery Writers of America, another steady venue for the short story. **Blood on Their Hands** (Berkley Prime Crime, \$23.95) features nineteen tales, all new, on the theme of what happens when someone is pushed to the limit, from Jeremiah Healy, Brendan DuBois, G. Miki Hayden, Noreen Ayres, and other current members of the MWA. You'll never convince me that no one is writing short stories anymore, and if you want a great argument against the idea that the short story is dead, consider Block's own collection *Enough Rope*, issued by William Morrow in 2002. At almost nine hundred pages, it doesn't even gather every short story he's ever written, but does include a dozen tales never before published! A genuine one-man monument to the form.

Another monument in the making is appearing year by year from Crippen & Landru, a small press devoted exclusively to publishing the criminous short story. Since their first title in 1995, *The McCone Files* by Marcia Muller, Crippen & Landru have released dozens of titles. For collectors they issue signed limited hardcovers, but for the average reader they do most of their print run in trade paperback. A specialty feature hidden in the art on many of the covers is a hangman's noose and gallows, so not only are they busy, with new books coming out all the time, but they're having fun, too.

Among recent releases is Jeremiah Healy's **Cuddy—Plus One** (Crippen & Landru, \$18.00), a follow-up volume to *The Concise Cuddy* published in 1998. Gathering more short crime fiction featuring Boston private eye John Francis Cuddy, introduced in the novel *Blunt Darts* in 1984, this title provides entertaining, conversational, and fully contemporary detection. "Rest Stop," the first of thirteen stories about the P.I., originally appeared in AHMM in 1992—Cuddy witnesses a child abduction at a roadside stop and pursues the kidnappers, only to end up captured. In keeping with my ideas of how short stories are working their way into new niches, four more of these tales first appeared in EQMM, but the majority hail from theme anthologies. The "Plus One" from the title, by the way, is a fourteenth story about lawyer Mairead O'Clare, which Healy wrote under the penname Terry Devane for the anthology *Women Before the Bench*.

Liza Cody's **The Lucky Dip and Other Stories** (Crippen & Landru, \$17.00) probably has more kinship with Raymond Carver than the usual crime puzzle, and features quirky, dark tales—an excellent collection. Creator of Anna Lee, a character introduced in the novel *Dupe* and featured in an A&E series, Cody gathers seventeen stories in all, with two written specifically for this book and another previously only heard as broadcast on the BBC. The title story, about a street kid surviving on the mean streets of London, won the Anthony Award for best short story of the year in 1993.

If you prefer more traditional crime fiction, Crippen & Landru has a "Lost Classic Series," of which Helen McCloy's **The Pleasant Assassin and Other Cases of Dr. Basil Willing** (\$17.00) is the latest entry. McCloy premiered her sleuth in the novel *Dance of Death* in 1938 and wrote ten short stories about his adventures over the years, all collected here. For puzzle fans or those who enjoy the more relaxed atmosphere of the classic detective tale, these are top notch. How can you beat Willing (and I admit I never can figure out these things) stepping into the mystery of "The Singing Diamonds" and saying, "There were just two things. First, all those who died had asthma, except the pilot, Sanders, and—this is a curious detail—he had a fiancée who had asthma. Second: three of the six—Amherst, MacDonald, and Mrs. Kusak—had a box of candied ginger in the house."

While it might seem that Crippen & Landru is cornering the market on the mystery short story, the field is more than wide enough for some competition. Five Star Mysteries did several story collections before deciding to concentrate on novels. The hardcover **Quarry's Greatest Hits** (Five Star, \$25.95) collects some of the exploits of Max Allan Collins's hit man anti-hero, but with an interesting twist. Collins hasn't done that much short fiction featuring Quarry, so three shorter works surround the novel *Primary Target*, which has been out of print for years.

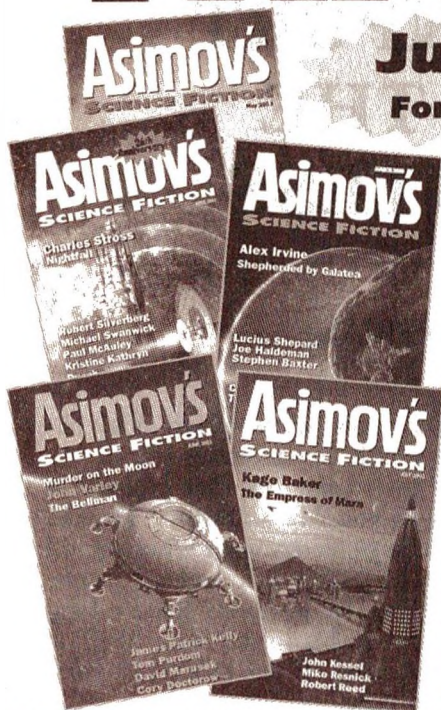
Wit's End Publishing is another new venture, and they've done fans of the wonderful crime writer Charles Willeford a real favor by releasing **The Second Half of the Double Feature** (\$17.95) as a trade paperback. Essentially, this title collects the contents of the Dennis McMillan limited edition, *Everybody's Metamorphosis*, long out of print and very pricey, and also includes seven stories never previously published. Willeford, of course, is one of my absolute favorite writers, and has become a cult favorite since his death in 1988. Worth noting is that two of these stories, "Some Lucky License" and "Citizen's Arrest," first saw print in AHMM in the sixties, when it was based in Florida and Willeford was working as an associate editor, so it gets a personal plug, from one Hitchcock contributor to another.

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RUSSELL DAVENPORT AND THE COUNTESS

ALEX AUSWAKS

From long experience, Russell Davenport knew which of his clients it would be from the time at which they telephoned.

The telephone rang just as the news came on. One o'clock. It must be Mr. Kynaston. "Good day to you, Mr. Kynaston." He had never met him, but he pictured a large, fleshy man who arrived late, left early, wore a small rose in his buttonhole and, of course, a small bowler on his large bald head. He probably lived a long way from London and worked through his lunch hour. Well, it didn't matter, reflected Russell, switching off the radio. Listening to the news was a habit wasteful of time.

"Ahem," said Kynaston. "Minor problem, but a very, very touchy one. Great tact and diplomacy."

Kynaston's problems always required great tact and diplomacy. The company he worked for arranged insurance for the greater and lesser nobility (greater were those who inherited, lesser were those ennobled for a lifetime merely for services).

Wars, taxes, the egalitarian and permissive society notwithstanding, their numbers grew. The annual honors lists (Queen's Birthday, New Year's) were enough to keep the reps busy. The names on the boards of companies were constantly combed. If the greater or lesser nobility did not actually own the company, it lent the glitter of its title to the masthead.

But, and there was a but, great tact and diplomacy were required.

"I'll spell the name for you," said Kynaston. "NOVGOROD. SEVERSKAYA. Xenia, Countess Novgorod-Severskaya. Actually her real name is Mrs. Jameson, widow of the construction man. Started small. You still see his name over the building sites, but she's reverted to her maiden name."

"Do you think she bumped him off?" asked Russell facetiously, knowing Kynaston had no sense of humor.

"Good heavens, what an idea!" spluttered Kynaston. "Whatever made you say that!"

"Think of the motivation! She was able to revert to her maiden name, boom, boom!" Russell had come to St. Albans from the East End, where a bad joke was signaled in this way. Kynaston was unaware of the ritual and had to be assured it was a joke before he could go on.

"We've just had another claim from her. This time on the serious side. A silver chalice, two French serving dishes, seventeenth century, ivory cigarette box, Sevres vase and . . . and . . . three silk blouses," he said disapprovingly.

"Can you let me have a list of previous claims, a copy of the policy document, and can I see the lady?" asked Russell.

"The countess," Kynaston corrected him gravely. "The countess. Her late husband, if I may give you the background, her late husband set up a trust fund for her, administered by the chaps who run the construction company. Don't want to upset them, y'know what I mean. They bring in a lot of, uh . . ." Kynaston was silent, as though collecting his thoughts. "The point is, old man," he went on after a while, "that there is no earthly reason why the old girl should be putting in fraudulent claims. She's got enough, y'know. So if there is something wrong, y'know what I mean, we'd be obliged . . . well, we'd like to be able to tell the trustees ourselves."

Kynaston fell silent again. "She insists on getting in touch with you herself. Noblesse oblige. Don't ring her. She'll ring you. She wants to know if you are *sympatico*."

There was another silence and then Russell realized the other man had hung up.

The countess telephoned late in the afternoon. She had a strong Russian accent and sounded as if this sort of conversation was beneath her. "Meester Kee-nass-TON," she said, stressing the final syllable, "say you are investigating. I not understand why thees should be necessary. I pay premium. Is not verree nice. If my husband alive . . ." She stopped.

"Oh, I'm sure it's only a formality," Russell said soothingly.

The countess lived in a small, very beautiful manor house on the border between Cambridgeshire and Russell Davenport's own Hertfordshire. The late afternoon sun was setting its bricks and windows on fire when Russell pulled up outside it. It was like seeing a beautiful painting for the first time. He was impervious to wealth, mere opulence disgusted him, but a house as beautiful as this, set so perfectly in its own grounds against trees as tall and taller than its upper stories, stirred him.

He did not hear the bell ring.

The door was opened by a Slavic-looking maid speaking French. Russell smiled to himself and summoned up his schoolboy French. "Madam la Contessa, *s'il vous plaît*."

The maid grinned condescendingly as if he couldn't fool her and escorted him inside.

The countess was dressed in a long velvet gown and wore lots of gold jewelery. She had high cheekbones and a youthful complexion. Russell thought she must have been stunning in her younger days. He bowed. "I am very honored to meet you, Countess. May I use your name and patronymic?"

The resentful look vanished. "You know Russian custom."

"But of course," he murmured.

"Then I allow you to call me Xenia Dmitrievna. You are very cultured for private detective."

Russell winced. He was an insurance investigator, not a private eye. "I've read a book or two," he said.

"Aha," she declared triumphantly. "Bree-teesh understatement."

She sat him in a chair opposite hers. They were in a tiny study, a small *escritoire* by the french doors.

"It's like this, Xenia Dmitrievna," said Russell. "Whenever a policy holder makes a claim, they are required to inform the police of the theft. I believe you found it unnecessary to do so. The present claim is a larger one than the two before, and your insurance company wants me to have a look around."

"So, please, look. Word of countess not longer good."

He gave her a look as if to show that was not so. "Perhaps you could let me see where all the items were taken from, Xenia Dmitrievna. Those from the other two claims, also." He noticed how the use of her name and patronymic pleased her.

"I take you myself. I not wish servants know who you are."

There were, of course, no security arrangements of any kind. Massive french doors opened on terraces. Windows overlooked

landscaped gardens. Going over houses like this made Russell wonder if the country squire of previous times kept an army of retainers to protect himself. Or perhaps in the good old days there was less villainy, despite greater poverty. He loved the house and told her so. Some of the Russian artifacts he had never seen before except in pictures; he asked about them.

She was no great authority on art. Instead, each object brought a flood of memories, and he found himself listening to reminiscences from a world he only knew dimly about. That icon there was a gift of former serfs, when they had been freed by ukase of the tsar-liberator. Of course they had been perfectly happy on the family estates outside Novgorod, but the law is the law, the countess said firmly, or had been before those awful Bolsheviks came. That cup there, great-grandfather had won it at the races. The very same one, very likely, she said with a girlish look, where Vronsky had had his fall, causing such distress to Mme. Karenina. Did the family know the Tolstoys? Oh, very likely, she couldn't tell for sure. But *maman* had met Korolenko. Lovely writer! Lovely man! Alas, not so well known in England, but in Russia . . . ah! Russell swore he wouldn't let a day pass without borrowing him from the library.

Her conversation confirmed what Russell had worked out for himself. She had never been to Russia, having been raised amongst fellow Russians in Paris. Everything she related had been heard from parents or grandparents. She had worked in a bookshop, and one day Mr. Jameson came in looking for books on architecture.

Russell thought how lonely she must be, how very much alone. He wondered if he was staying because he was sorry for her or because he loved beautiful things or because this was a world he wanted to know more about.

At one point, she was reminiscing (apropos of nothing in particular, she was such a superb raconteur) about tea parties at home. She struck her forehead with her palm. "What you think of me!" She raised her voice. "Mashenka, samovar! *Pastaff* samovar!" She turned to Russell. "Forgive me for speaking in another language. I am telling Mashenka to prepare samovar."

Bells rang, feet bustled, and they were in "morning room, although now evening, but only nomenclature." A real samovar, not an electric one, brewed tea in a pot warmed by steam from below. Plates of cold meats, pickles, gherkins, breads of various kinds, a chocolate gateaux, were all spread around it.

"Are you drink tea with lemon or with milk?" she asked.

"Tell me, Xenia Dmitrievna, is it true that Siberians drink tea with milk and Russians drink it with lemon?"

She laughed. "You are read more than one or two book. Very true. Sometime I think all English are Siberian—drink tea with milk. But Siberian pipples very warm pipples." She stopped. "Forgive me. I not think you English. Perhaps not so?"

Russell smiled. "That's all right. I am just about to be very English and come down to earth. I don't suppose I could see your guest book. I saw it in the entrance hall."

She sighed. "You are really Mr. Detective! I bring." She got up and came back with it. "Only very best pipple are come here."

He was puzzled by the fact that the guests, mostly out of *Burke's Peerage*, he reflected, signed their names with full styles and titles and with great flourishes, unusual for British aristocracy, he thought. Moreover, from the dates, they came on weekends only, so they were working aristocracy. "Have you known them long?" he asked.

"Oh, Mr. Detective, I keep a salon like great aristocrats in my country in old days. Important pipples. They are in House of Lords. They make laws. Sometimes, I am know what goes on in House of Lords before happen. My friends share their secrets with me." She gestured secrecy with one finger. "And I respect their confidence."

He asked whether he could make a note of their names. When at first she demurred, he promised to respect their privacy, not to get in touch with them directly, unless absolutely necessary.

The surprising thing about the stolen items was that some of them came from parts of the house less accessible to casual intruders from outside. The Sevres vase came from a room that opened over a terrace and could have been easily taken by a passerby, assuming he could get near the house unobserved. But the chalice was taken from Mr. Jameson's study upstairs. The widow had left it exactly as it was when he died because, she said, "Vee Russians are very senteemental pipples."

Russell talked to the servants, too. She had given in on that. Mashenka, the cook, was a huge and silent Russian, probably from Paris. Her English was nonexistent. She smelt strongly of vodka. Russell's French wasn't up to asking her anything.

The butler had been with the family for about thirty years. He was a small, mousy man, with a parade-ground voice that came as a surprise from such a small body. His replies were all "yes, sir" and "no, sir," barked out standing to attention. Then there were two old ladies who came in to clean the house, and two gardeners, both young, both refreshing. They, too, loved the house and gardens, and since the countess knew "buggerole about nothing," as they

put it, they were free to do as they liked. So they laid out gardens that took one's breath away.

"Just imagine," one of them said, "if you love to garden and someone gives you all this and pays you for your hobby. I hope the old girl lives to be a hundred, as she always wishes everyone around her. She's very generous. Soft as butter under all that countess guff."

It was late when Russell left. Xenia Dmitrievna's cheeks were high and her eyes were bright. She had enjoyed having company, and he thought wryly, it didn't matter who it was. As long as it was company, that's all that mattered. Before he left, she had offered him the guest book to sign. "Please write name as friend. No more Mr. Detective. You come again and I show you more Russian things," she promised.

Russell Davenport drove slowly back to St. Albans. Slowly because, although it was dark, before his eyes he could see the lovely manor house as he had first seen it that afternoon. The sun had lit up the windows of the long wing, the red brick was afire, the doorways with hoods on carved brackets glistened. In his mind he could see the gardens with the two old farmhouses where the gardeners lived. The farmhouses were made of brick and timber with projecting porches. He remembered his mother, when she lay dying, saying to him, "I wish you hadn't gone to university. You must work with your hands, and then you will always have a roof over your head and never lack for a meal."

Well, he had a roof over his head, though most of it belonged to a building society, and he never went short of a meal, but as he turned his car onto the street where he lived, he grew dissatisfied and even disgusted. He felt disenchanting with himself, his house, his profession. This would not be a case like any other. It was going to be another one of those where he would be torn between being an insurance policeman and . . . and what?

The next morning he checked all the names from the countess's guest book against *Burke's Peerage* and *Who's Who*, cross-checking with as many telephone directories as the post office had. The pattern didn't come out right.

Take Lord Darking. His home address was listed in Hampshire and he was a director of a corporation whose head office was in London. That must be his son, then, who visited the countess. Same Christian name, obviously, but the son would not sign himself as Lord Darking unless his father was dead. Russell rang the family home, asked for Lord Darking, and was told His Lordship was out of the country. What about the young, um, Lord Darking? But he was at Cambridge, said the ancient voice.

"Could I be reminded what college he is at?"

"Yes, certainly," said the ancient voice, "but why not ring him at home?" The number was supplied as if from memory.

"Many, many thanks," Russell said.

"May I ask who is inquiring?" asked the voice.

"Davenport."

"Knew your father, sir," the voice said joyously. "How very, very nice. Very great gentleman."

"They don't make 'em like that any more," prompted Russell.

"Well, sir, I shouldn't be saying it here—" The ancient voice lowered. "—but you've got a point there."

Russell telephoned the Darking heir in Cambridge. A cheerful, pleasant public school voice answered. Russell introduced himself. The cheerful voice asked him what it was about.

"It's about the countess," Russell said, then remembering that whereas there was only one countess in his life, there were probably many in the life of the young lord, he added hastily, "Countess Xenia Dmitrievna Novgorod-Severskaya."

"Who?" came the puzzled response.

Russell repeated the name, adding, "She is legally Mrs. Jameson."

"I don't know anyone by either name."

"But you signed her guest book last weekend," Russell said.

"I say, are you sure? I was home all weekend, wasn't I, Babs?"

Russell heard someone assenting.

"Look," said Russell urgently, "I think something strange is going on. Can I come and see you right now? I could be in Cambridge just after lunch."

"Well, do come up. I'm mystified," was the laconic response. "Just the excuse to cut classes."

The young Lord Darking, actually the Hon. Peter Scott Darking until his father passed to probably even greener pastures than Hampshire, was tall, slim, and elegant. His clothes were the trendiest, as was his girlfriend, and their poodle and two Siamese.

Russell told them the story.

"I really don't know anyone by that name," said the Hon. Peter Scott Darking. "Never been to any such house. Wouldn't sign my name as Lord Darking, which you well know. It wasn't Dad, as he's been abroad and he does spend all his weekends at home. He says he only works to go home at weekends and enjoy the family home."

"Is anyone using your father's name, do you think?"

"Can't understand why. I say, shall we go and see this old girl?"

"Give me another day or two," said Russell.



Russell went back to the list of guests who had ostensibly signed their names, back to his reference books and the telephone, which he hated most when it was an extension of himself.

Hours later there was no more doubt in his mind. The names were genuine enough, but every singled titled signature in the visitors' book was a fraud.

Toward evening Russell telephoned the manor. The butler answered. Could he speak to the gardeners? Yes, they had their own line. He rang them and asked whether they would come out for a drink. They arranged to meet at Ayot.

Russell came straight to the point. Did they know anything about the weekend visitors, and how did they arrive?

One of the gardeners guffawed, "Funny you should ask. I've seen them dropped off at the end of the drive, but well out of sight of the house, usually in a real old bomb. But Sunday nights they get collected at the door by a Rolls."

"Bet it's hired," said the other.

"What makes you think that?" asked Russell.

"Dunno, just a feeling I have. It's a cream Rolls Royce. They usually get hired out for weddings."

"How many get into it?" Russell asked.

"Usually four."

"Split amongst four or even five, it wouldn't amount to much each," Russell mused.

Late in the afternoon of the following Friday, Russell drove out to the manor and waited outside. At about six o'clock a car drove up. It had seen better days long ago. A cheeky-looking young man with a funny cap on his head sat at the wheel. Four well-dressed young people emerged: two women and two men, probably in their early twenties. They carried fairly new suitcases, such as ones bought by mail order through the Sunday supplements of newspapers. Incongruously, they walked up the drive and rang the bell to be admitted by the butler.

On Saturday morning, Russell rang round all the car hire firms, starting with those he knew personally. One firm did have a cream Rolls, and yes, it was fairly regularly booked for the manor. Would the owner of the car hire firm let Russell take the Rolls that Sunday night and collect the passengers? No hesitation. Yes. Russell hoped a large cap and glasses would disguise him. He was lucky. Sunday night it rained, and the four rushed out of the house and piled into the Rolls.

They were like any four young people who had had a pleasant

weekend: they ignored him totally. He gathered their major problem was how to get into each other's beds without their old-fashioned hostess knowing. There was some talk about "What did you get this time?" and "Show you afterwards. It's rather sweet. I think I'll keep it for myself," and so on. If Russell hadn't known what was happening, he would have taken it all as innocent. Driving them home, he wondered how they had met the countess and discovered her weakness, wanting to have a salon like the great aristocrats in her own country once upon a time.

He dropped them off at different addresses in Cambridge. He was paid in cash, and a decent tip was added. He remembered to touch his cap.

The next morning he telephoned the countess and asked to see her. He also asked if anything was missing. She said she would have to check. The house was full of beautiful things for which there was an inventory somewhere. The trustees had sent someone round ages ago to draw one up, but she had no idea where it was kept.

Russell found her waiting for him and looking flustered and helpless. The butler was in a flap.

"I think two, three pieces missing. I have no idea what I have. Perhaps you make new list," she pleaded.

"I'll make arrangements," Russell said. He didn't relish the job himself, but he knew one or two people who would love to do it, who would welcome being paid for it and enjoy her company.

She offered him sherry, insisting that he stay for lunch, and led him into the long dining room. Huge mirrors ran along one side, and the gardens were reflected in them. She sat him at one end of the long table, covered with a gleaming white tablecloth, and sat herself at the other. She must have been quite exotic when she was young, exotic enough to have been the dream of the architect and builder who had parleyed his father's little factory into an empire. Her fingers were small and delicate; she had tiny pink ears; in profile, thought Russell to himself, she still looks a treat. Her bad grammar irritated him, but her accent was charming.

He would have liked to sit closer, to lessen the impact of what he had to say. As if reading his thoughts, she declared no business till after lunch, which happened to be smoked salmon with white wine, homemade vichyssoise soup, and then the lightest of Kiev cutlets with sautéed potatoes and a choice of wines. The strawberries, out of season, were red and large and round (they used to have barmaids like that in the old days, I am told, thought Russell), and there was cheese to follow. Kynaston didn't send him many clients like this, but when he did, it was worth waiting for.

They took their coffee and liqueurs into the library.

"Now business," she said. "My darling husband . . . it took me years to stop him talking about business over food. Then, I have him trained and . . . he command to live long. Are you know what means this expression?"

"Yes, I do. It's a very beautiful way of saying that someone . . ." He hesitated. ". . . is no longer with us."

"Your mother not say this about your father?"

He held her glance for a moment and then looked down. The old girl was more perceptive than he had given her credit for when they first met.

"And now tell me, Mr. Detective, what have you detected?" She spoke without irony; Russell suspected she thought this was a proper use of the word.

"Xenia Dmitrievna, I have some very unpleasant news for you. I think your friends have been taking advantage of your good, kind nature and generous hospitality."

As gently as he could, he told her that her guests, for the most part, and certainly the titled ones, were fakes. Not only fakes, but they were stealing from her little by little. He spoke slowly and hesitatingly because she began to crumple before him. First her hands and then her body shook. She began to cry quietly, and then sob loudly.

The butler and the cook rushed in, looked at Russell venomously, lifted her under one arm each, and led her out of the room. Russell sat there feeling like something swept under the carpet, but to leave now would be improper.

After a while the butler came down. "Her Ladyship . . . Her Ladyship would wish . . ." He gulped and stared wildly. "It is Her Ladyship's express command . . . look, guv, she says would you do nuffin till tonight, when she'll give yer a bell, if yer get my meaning."

She telephoned that night, all the life having gone out of her voice. She stated that she would like him not to inform the insurance company of the circumstances until she had seen him personally at his office, and would he see her the very next day? He offered to come to her, but she was adamant that she was to come to him.

She arrived punctually at noon, refused tea, coffee, port, or sherry, and insisted they sit in his tidy, untidy study-cum-office.

Her butler had traveled into London that very morning and had had to wait. The office had not been open at eight A.M. No wonder the economy was in such a state. Her husband had started work at half past seven. The butler had a signed check to refund the two previous claims and the third had been withdrawn. Mr. Kynaston had been informed that the articles for which claims

had been made had simply been overlooked. She insisted on paying for the time of their Mr. Russell Davenport. She laid a perfumed envelope before him.

There was a pause.

Her lips tightened.

Russell did not know what to say. He looked away.

Her eyes filled with tears. "I am a lonely old woman, Mr. Davenport. I not in my country. There is saying, you can take man out of country but not country out of man. The country nobody can take me out of is now dead. Oh, Mr. Davenport, I so lonely. And who will come and talk to silly old Russian countess, boring old Russian countess. At least they talked to me. At least they visited me. Gold and silver are cheap things to give for good company, for friends."

"I'll come and see you," Russell said impetuously.

She shook her head. "Thank you, Mr. Davenport, but not often enough, you see. You will just come occasionally, when you feel guilty, or full of pity. Now," she straightened herself, "no reports, no police."

"Of course not," he said.

"Thank you, Mr. Davenport. Nevertheless, my home is your home. Please to be in it like in your own."

Russell sat there until Kynaston rang at his usual time of one o'clock. "I say, how did you do?" he asked.

"They were there all the time. Her inventory is out of date, and things have been moved around. I think she ought to have a new inventory drawn up, room by room," said Russell.

"I suppose a copy left in every room wouldn't be acceptable?" Kynaston said hopefully. "We are suggesting this to some of our clients. Does deter the odd dishonest guest?"

"I'll speak to the butler," Russell said.

"Will you make all necessary arrangements, report on security? I understand the countess insists on paying you, but as a gesture there will be a little bonus."

"Very nice gesture. But also as a gesture, by the way, you might hint to the trustees she feels a little neglected by them and by Jameson's former colleagues. I know it may not be the sort of thing . . ."

"My dear chap, we're not just a business. We do pride ourselves on the personal touch." Russell practically saw him touch a finger to his nose to indicate the depth of his understanding, and that it was just between the two of them. 🦋

BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY

“**T**here is a whole culture of book people out there,” says Joanne Sinchuk, “who are fascinated with all things Floridian.” As the proprietor of **Murder on the Beach Mystery Bookstore** in Delray Beach, Florida, Sinchuk is in a position to know. “We have customers who come from Germany twice a year and schedule their visits to coincide with book signings at our store.”

The store opened in 1996 as Murder on Miami Beach, but when it moved in 2002, it shortened its name. In both locations, Sinchuk has been happy to satisfy her customers' demands for things Floridian. “Our store specialty is Signed Florida Mysteries,” she says, but adds, “we carry not only the Florida mystery authors, but also Florida authors of non-fiction, fantasy, and any other category.”

Some thirty percent of the store's business, she notes, is Internet and mail order, mostly to collectors of Floridiana.

The store has also developed an interesting sideline in creating Murder Mystery Parties for local businesses, organizations, and individuals. Working from a set of template scripts developed by a local mystery writer, Sinchuk adapts each performance to suit the setting and hands out prizes such as chocolate handcuffs to the guests who identify the most clues.

The store also maintains a full slate of author appearances and is active with the Florida chapter of Mystery Writers of America. It publishes a newsletter and hosts two book discussion groups a month. Sinchuk credits her staff as a big draw for her customers: “Most of our customers are repeat; they come here because they want to be waited on by someone with whom they can ‘talk books’.”

Doing a little “book talk” herself, Sinchuk suggests: “To get an idea of the craziness that is South Florida read *Florida Roadkill* by Tim Dorsey; to understand the beauty of Florida read *The Man Who Invented Florida* by Randy Wayne White; to discover life in the backwoods of Florida read *In The Spirit of Murder* by Laura Belgrave; to see the mean streets of Florida read *The Blue Edge of Midnight* by Jonathon King; and to see some of the contemporary issues facing Florida, read *Suspicion of Madness* by Barbara Parker.”

MURDER ON THE BEACH MYSTERY BOOKSTORE

www.murderonthebeach.com

273 Pineapple Grove Way, Delray Beach, FL 33444; 561-279-7790

A PERIOD OF ADJUSTMENT

ELAINE MENGE

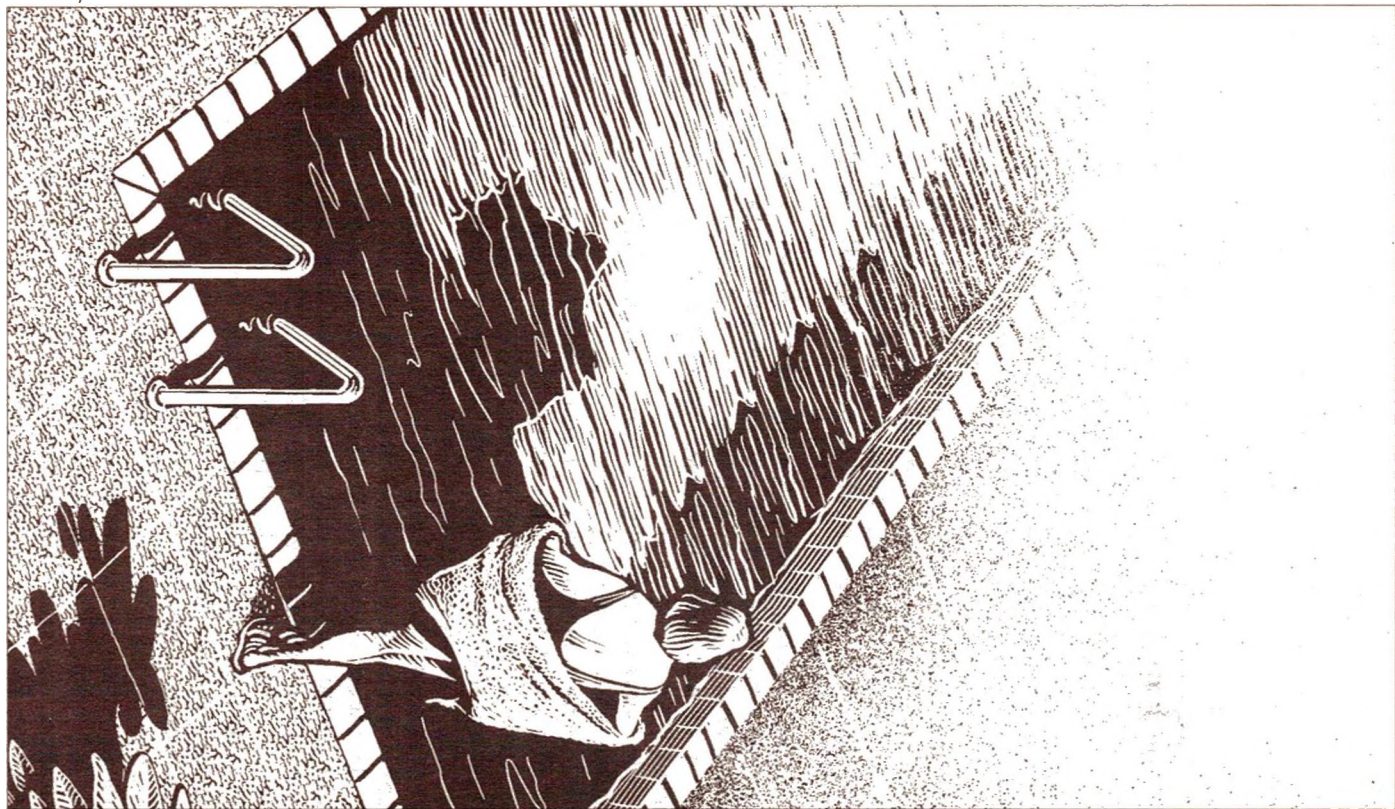
Once she closed the front door behind her, Rebecca pried off her tan pumps and stood barefoot on the foyer's pickled wood flooring. A mesh bag dangled from one hand as she smiled down at her pink-enameled toes. She pranced like a pixilated faun down the center hall, passing clean, furnitureless rooms on either side. She liked the bareness of the rooms, as it matched an uncluttered interior landscape she'd been cultivating of late.

The hall's smooth, cool boards finally dead-ended at the kitchen's expanse of even cooler cobalt tile. Rebecca set her bag on the island counter and began pulling out the essentials: swimsuit, lotion with an SPF of 30, towel, sunglasses, plastic wineglass, small twist-top bottle of Cook's champagne.

The kitchen's empty walls glowed in welcome. To them she said, in a delicious tone of voice, "You're mine." The words were spoken out of love, not possessiveness. "Mine," she told the sleek Jenn-Air stovetop, though cooking was not her bailiwick. "You're mine," she whispered into the fatal maw of the garbage disposal as she ran a jet of water in the real china sink to rinse her hands.

The act of sale had reached its conclusion only an hour ago. Once the tedious papers had been signed, Gloria Englehart, Rebecca's agent, whose styled raven hair was so perfectly molded that not even a major replaneting of the solar system could dishevel it, announced, "Congratulations, you're my newest homeowner." Gloria shook Rebecca's hand and seemed a shade too relieved, as if she'd been holding her breath through the last signature. Otherwise, everything seemed right. All parties concerned rose and proceeded to the exit, exchanging the requisite small talk on the way.

There had been one awkward moment, though. The selling couple, young thirty-something Doris and Frank Reed, said, a bit out of sync, "I hope you'll love the house as we did."



"I know I will," Rebecca answered. "The first thing I'm going to do, in fact, is kick off my shoes and go swimming."

Odd, how quickly Doris's smile morphed into a rubbery facsimile of itself. "Oh yes. Gloria mentioned you like to swim," Doris said with a lilt, but her eyes stared dark, wary. For a moment she looked like someone who'd stayed up all night warding off a vampire with garlic that had lost its kick.

Actually, the pool had sold the house for Rebecca, and though saying so to this upwardly mobile couple might seem unsophisticated, she went ahead and added, "I've always wanted a pool, since I was little. Don't know much about upkeep, but I guess I'll learn."

At that remark, Doris faded into the pallid tea rose wallpaper of the bank's conference room. Frank's white face, flushed with sudden patches of crimson, poked into Rebecca's space to fill the void. "Not much to it," he said. "I left directions and a barrel of chlorine. I've taken care of the pool myself, till recently. Too busy. But it's a snap."

Agent Gloria, always an enthusiastic dealer of business cards, stepped forward. "And I can recommend a great pool cleaning company," she said, charm bracelets jangling as she dug for the card in her nylon briefcase. "You've used them, haven't you, Frank?"

He nodded forcefully. "Clearwater, sure. But there are other companies you might prefer."

"I hope you and your children enjoy your new place, too," Rebecca said. Gloria had told her that the selling couple had two children, a ten-year-old boy and two-year-old girl, and that the husband was being transferred. "Where are you moving?" Rebecca asked. "Out West, I think Gloria said."

"Yes, west." Frank's head bobbed up and down again, his waning smile reminiscent of the West's sinking sun.

And then it was over. The couple nodded and smiled their way out of the room, saying, "Best of luck" one last time. Rebecca stayed a moment longer with Gloria, who handed over a plastic folder containing the legal papers Rebecca would need. "Oh, and I've left you a little housewarming gift, too," Gloria said, patting Rebecca's arm and smiling demurely, like an angel who knows she's done good.

How wrong Dad was, Rebecca thought when she left Gloria. He'd warned her to get an agent of her own instead of using the sellers' agent. "That's as dumb as sharing a lawyer in a divorce settlement," he said. "The agent is going to favor one party over another, and that's usually the seller."

But Rebecca felt Gloria had watched out for her interests. The final price agreed on was incredibly good, considering the perks the house offered. Aside from its three bedrooms, two baths, garage, and spacious den with a view of the pool, the kitchen was newly remodeled with dark granite countertops, glass-doored cabinets, spiffy white faucets; she loved the master bath's tub, armed with Jacuzzi jets, and the electric towel warmer. Gloria said the Reeds had made the improvements just over a year ago. They must not have expected the transfer, Rebecca thought—had probably planned to be here for some time.

The neighborhood was much in demand. Though many of the houses were built in the sixties, a process of gentrification had set in. Less well-endowed homes were going for high prices even though they were subsequently torn down and replaced by boxes three times as big, bursting with all the latest amenities. Buying this house was a sensible investment if nothing else. Barring a collapse of the economy, she couldn't lose. But the purchase meant much more than dollars to Rebecca.

She had always rented a one-bedroom apartment, had hoped to marry and share a home with a husband, raise a family. But now, pushing thirty-five, successful in her career, but disappointed in love several times, she decided to stop waiting for a man to render her worthy of a home of her own. If she ventured solo and bought a house herself, the rest might follow. Or not. But at least she wouldn't be living in the static mode that is the renter's domain, that purgatory delimited by a lease's expiration date.

How to feel about this big step? That was a matter of choice, she was beginning to see. She could feel keenly alone, a dreary, desperate singleton, or she might toast her own daring, an opening up to the world instead of a shrinking in—even celebrate her shiny new floors, kitchen, and Jacuzzi jets. Rebecca chose the latter course. To validate her decision, she twisted the top off the little champagne bottle and poured the fizzing liquid into her plastic stemware. She might clink glasses with someone else someday soon, or never. For now she was content to toast herself.

Outside, it was June. Clouds filled the sky, but hung white and puffy and innocent. The warm air was blessedly intimate, like a hug that says you are loved; now jump in, cool off.

Rebecca's eyes lit on two foil-wrapped pots set on either side of the stepping stone path leading to the pool. They contained tall, robust rubber tree plants with large dark green waxy leaves and new rosy pink conical leaves about to open. Each plant was choked by a big yellow bow. *You might consider purchasing some*

nice ceramic pots to hold these babies, the note read. Now you've got your house and your rubber trees, you angel. Love, Gloria. A business card for Audubon Nurseries was attached. *Ask for Ray,* Gloria had added. *He has a great selection of pots.*

Rebecca's throat and eyes ached with a spurt of emotion that had come on too quickly to produce tears. During one of their house-hunting outings, Rebecca had confessed to Gloria how much she'd always wanted to have rubber tree plants on either side of her front steps, just as her parents had had outside the home where she grew up. It was a sentimental wish, her personal slant on the cozy home with white picket fence, including husband and children. Sweet of Gloria to remember. Although her parents' rubber plants had framed their front door, these seemed to belong back here where they could be enjoyed, either along this pathway where Gloria had set them, or farther back, framing the pool. She would find out how much sun they could stand, and decide later. Gloria was a dream. Rebecca would have to tell her mom that every charm on Gloria's bracelet was a little gold house, one for each sale. She owned fifty bracelets now, and Rebecca's house would be the first charm on her fifty-first.

Rebecca crossed the dark blue slate to the pool's edge, ready to toast the crystalline water. The solitude might be deafening now, but her new home would not always be this quiet. She had friends. She would entertain. First, of course, as Gloria had lectured, she must expect to go through a period of adjustment.

The movers were due tomorrow, and Rebecca would be very busy. But once she settled in, she would give a party. Standing at the pool's edge, taking one last sip before slipping into the water, she imagined her friends sitting around the pool in the patio furniture that the departed Reeds had included in the deal. Rebecca pictured her guests' animated talk, a holistic togetherness they would share—food and drink that she would supply, and coming from their side, the tendering of a few sweet housewarming gifts she would have warned them against bringing. She would invite some of her co-workers and others who had nothing to do with work; they should mix all right. One woman in that number, a consultant with Rebecca's firm, had mentioned introducing her to a man she knew, a really great guy whose ten-year marriage had pattered out amicably—friend of her family, someone who shared some of Rebecca's interests and who . . . but she was getting ahead of herself.

Rebecca shut her eyes. Stop. Hold back. Don't picture the party. For now, this house was enough. She would take her time, go

through the period of adjustment Gloria spoke of, and then good things would come to her.

She opened her eyes.

The clouds had turned a shade darker, and to her puzzlement,

She caught sight of the doll,
its eyeless head cocked,
watching her like a corpse.

she noticed something she hadn't seen on the pool's surface when she'd first stepped out of the back door. But then, she had mainly been absorbed with Gloria's gift. What she

saw now, floating at the far end, was a dark oblong shape, about a hand's breadth across.

She set her plastic glass on the slate edging and squinted. The thing looked like a child floating face down, its rear end poking up. A very small child. She ran to the fence where a long-handled skimmer net was secured, lifted it off its hooks, and used it to touch the dark floating shape. A round, flesh-toned, rosy cheek bobbed up. The object was a doll, a boy doll.

Rebecca's laugh came out like a relieved belch. A doll, one of those chubby, air-filled, soft plastic babies. No doubt the Reeds' ten-year-old son had tossed it in. Maybe the doll belonged to his sister. How cute, its little rear end poking up out of the water.

She sat on the pool's edge and tested the temperature. Nice, not too hot, not too cool. She slipped in, pushed her way toward the doll. Not alone after all, she thought, lifting the fat plastic body so that water poured from its clothes. "Hi there, fella," she said, grabbing its waist, marveling as she did so at its odd clothes. They looked handmade: denim shorts of a type she'd never seen on store-bought dolls, and a little knit T-shirt that looked hand-sewn as well. Though the stitches were a bit amateurish, she could tell great care had been taken in making them.

She turned the body over and sucked in her breath. It was the kind of doll that had been designed to have moveable eyes that rocked back and forth. The eyes were missing. From out of the two black cavities poured twin fountains like gushing tears. Ghastly. In a spasm of horror, Rebecca flung the doll aside.

Later, head submerged as she finished her tenth lap, Rebecca felt the scattershot sting of raindrops against her arms, heard random splats pepper the surface. She stopped kicking and looked up. The dark fluff overhead had merged into an immense, expanding black stain.

Rebecca mounted the broad cement steps in the shallow end. Odd, she thought, how the pelting drops topside felt wetter than the water in the pool. She paused, catching sight of the doll, sprawled in the garden where it had landed among the moss roses and cyclamen, its eyeless head cocked, watching her like an alert corpse. Rain spanking her legs and shoulders, Rebecca grabbed the doll by the wrist and placed it, face down, in the trash can the Reeds had been kind enough to leave behind.

In the days following the move, Rebecca established a nodding acquaintance with her neighbors. One, a fiftyish woman from across the street, came over with a plate of brownies. "I know you're busy. Off to the races, myself," she said with good-natured hurriedness. "I'm Sadie, hope you like chocolate, and, oh, here's a copy of the neighborhood association's member list—addresses, phone numbers. If you need anything, call." Keys jangling in one hand, she launched a backhanded wave with the other as she crossed the street again. "Welcome, welcome to Mirabeau Gardens."

An older man, Mr. Tremont, late sixties, lived on one side of Rebecca. They met at the curb one evening while setting out their garbage cans. He was a retired accountant, a widower, with two grown sons living in Florida. "These kids," he said, "before you know it, they up and leave. They want me to move down there, say I'll love it. But I'm staying put." As they chatted, he gazed at Rebecca's house like a beneficent appraiser; but then something in his manner changed, as if an errant, unpleasant thought had intruded. A tremor snuck into his voice, a defensive note: "But Mirabeau Gardens is a good neighborhood. No matter what some people say . . . really, it is. I hope you'll like our little enclave." He held up his hand and turned toward his house. "Nice meeting you," he called louder. "Hope you stick it out."

The couple who lived on the other side were in the same age bracket as the departed Reeds. Rebecca had only glimpsed the husband once as he stood partly concealed by the front door, watching his wife back out of the driveway. The wife, Brook Strasser—Rebecca learned her name from the neighborhood directory—looked trim and athletic. More than once, Rebecca saw her heave a set of golf clubs into a silver Toyota 4-Runner and take off in the middle of the day. Rebecca's driveway bordered the Strassers' and she noticed that a white Volvo remained under the carport, probably the husband's. Perhaps he worked out of an office in their home.

Rebecca planned to introduce herself to the wife soon. She sensed that Brook was someone worth knowing and that they would like each other. And since several friends had praised golf as an excellent way to meet eligible men, Rebecca had decided to begin playing again. Perhaps she and Brook might partner up for a game.

In all, Rebecca was pleased with the new neighborhood. A wonderful health food store wasn't far, also a drug store, bank, and post office.

In the grocery, a week after the move, oddly enough, she saw Doris Reed pushing a cart down the baby food aisle, an aisle Rebecca herself was always quick to avoid since it hurt to see the paraphernalia on the shelves that she might never use. Was it really Doris? Rebecca wondered, as she cruised past boxes of cereal two aisles over. But the Reeds had moved out West. Gloria said they would leave right after the sale. Rebecca made a U-turn in the middle of the lane and scooted back to baby food to check. The aisle was empty.

“Hello there,” Rebecca heard a cheery voice call when she came home from work one afternoon two weeks after the act of sale. She'd arrived earlier than usual, eager to swim before going in to unpack the last of her boxes. Her athletic neighbor stood beside the lifted tailgate of her 4-Runner. With the slap of a hand, she pushed the tailgate down and it snapped closed. “What the hell,” the woman said, folding her arms and leaning against the vehicle. “I'm tired of lugging these clubs in and out.” She cracked a smile. “Might as well leave them in, don't you think?”

“Makes perfect sense,” Rebecca said, approaching, glad that the ice had finally been broken.

“Brook. Brook Strasser,” the woman said, advancing. Her short brown hair ruffled in the breeze. A startling, inch-wide patch of gray showed at the hairline above her right eyebrow. She was very tan, and her large green eyes were unnervingly bright and focused on Rebecca's face.

Rebecca thought Brook was about to put out a hand, but instead she just stood there, arms still folded, smiling. Brook's eyes were trained on the front of Rebecca's house as if she had only then noticed it standing there.

“What's your handicap?” Rebecca asked.

“Oh my.” Brook's eyes took on a dreamy, faraway cast. “How am I handicapped, let me count the ways. Actually, I've lost track of

the number. I just whack the ball and say, 'Go!' " Brook tossed her keys up and caught them. "Come on, I'll have a pot of coffee brewing in a minute. Follow."

What a quick, unexpected invitation. Though Rebecca had just then driven up, like one of the enchanted children of Hamelin she followed Brook up her driveway to a side door and took a seat in the breakfast nook which was built into a bay window. Unfortunately, the view was limited to the Strassers' driveway and Rebecca's six-foot wooden fence.

The kitchen was homey, if almost too neat. The only object that appeared misplaced was a trumpet that stood on the counter next to the sink, bell down. "Someone is musical," Rebecca remarked. Brook frowned and said, mock-peeved, "Seth has a habit of leaving it there." Rebecca was about to ask who Seth was, but then Brook, clinking coffee mugs, began peppering her with questions.

Rebecca enjoyed the attention, but after thirty minutes, which seemed about the time to be leaving, she realized she'd told Brook about her family, her job, interests, yet had learned nothing about Brook or her husband. The late afternoon sun glared against the fence, reminding Rebecca of her pool, waiting on the other side.

"Thanks for the treats." Rebecca stood. "Now I'm going to peel off these clothes and go for a swim."

"Hmm." Brook wrinkled her nose. She ferried the empty mugs to the counter and set them beside the overturned trumpet. "You like to swim."

"Love it. I'm crazy about that pool."

Brook gazed at the fence through the bay window. "We used to have a view, through there. The fence used to be iron—see-through. A view of the pool. Pretty, I thought. Past tense. Last fall they put up this wooden thing."

"Too bad. Did you know the Reeds?"

"Oh yes. We were friends. Big friends." Brook laughed a laugh Rebecca didn't know what to make of. "But anyway, the pool is an issue I wanted to talk to you about."

"An issue?"

Brook's eyes flashed with such sudden vehemence, Rebecca couldn't quite match her expression or her next words with what had gone before. "I believe that pool needs to be filled in," Brook said. One of her hands sliced the air in a definitive hip-level salute.

Rebecca laughed. Brook's remark was so cracked, she guessed it must be a private joke. Issuing breezy statements seemed to be her

style, and this one must have its origins in a joke she possibly shared with the Reeds.

But Brook didn't laugh along with Rebecca. Her playful, sardonic posture vanished. The shock of gray hair seemed to quiver with righteous authority.

Rebecca reassessed things. From somewhere in the house came the sound of a door closing. Brook's husband? Rebecca let one hand drop onto the table for support. "Did you and the Reeds have some problem? Is that why they put up the wood fence and blocked your view?"

Brook didn't answer. She stood in the middle of the kitchen, arms folded, her bright, avid eyes fixed on Rebecca.

"Maybe, maybe they just wanted their privacy, you know," said Rebecca, backing up to the side door. "You have something . . . against pools?"

"Pools?" Brook repeated. Her hair seemed to vibrate under the bright fluorescent lights.

"The noise?" asked Rebecca. "I might give a party now and then, but you don't have to worry about loud music or anything. I abhor loud music."

"You'll give a pool party?" Brook's tone was accusing.

"Only a few friends. A housewarming." She giggled. "A pool-warming. You're invited, of course."

"A bunch of jokesters yukking it up around that pool?" Brook's eyes were surely living entities, but unblinking as granite. "I don't think so. It needs to be filled, and it will be." She flicked her wrist at the door, inviting Rebecca to avail herself of this exit. "So, that's all until further notice."

Rebecca tilted her head, eyed the trumpet sparkling beside the sink. "This is a joke, right?"

"Let's chill just now," said Brook. "I want the pool filled in, okay? It has nothing to do with you, or with noise. And it will be filled. It's that simple. Now I think you'd better go before my husband pokes his nose in here."

Rebecca squinted. Only one explanation presented itself: Brook was nuts. Maybe her husband was crazy too, or he was her keeper, or he was long gone. Whatever, this was the most bizarre let's-get-acquainted session she'd ever endured.

Later, lying on a lounge chair beside her pool, she felt thankful that the Reeds had put up the wood fence, if also apprehensive about what Brook might be planning on the other side. She swam only three laps before flopping back onto the lounge. Along with a cockeyed sense of threat, she felt a loss. Until dropping her weird

comments about the pool, Brook had seemed like a lot of fun. Rebecca thought she was on the verge of making a new friend—a quirky, interesting friend. Then it was all taken away.

"You mean your agent didn't tell you?" Mr. Tremont said when Rebecca hauled her garbage can to the curb that evening.

From him she learned that the Strassers had had a son, nine-year-old Seth. He played trumpet, among other things. He and the Reeds' boy had been friends. The two couples enjoyed back yard barbecues, even went on a trip to Florida together. Then last August, while the Reeds were away on vacation, Seth had entered their yard, and without anyone's knowledge, he went swimming. Whatever happened, happened. He went missing for part of one day. When the police were called to search, they quickly found him floating in the Reeds' pool.

"Horrible," Rebecca said, and Mr. Tremont nodded slowly. Ever since, he explained, Brook pestered the Reeds about the pool. She wanted it closed, period—couldn't stand the idea of others using it, enjoying themselves. After many months, the Reeds could no longer take the harassment. Neither could they bear the memory of Seth and the accident's effect on their own son. They listed the house with Gloria. It did not go quickly. Other folks expressed interest, but once they found out about the property's history, they moved on.

"No wonder," said Rebecca. "Then that *was* Doris Reed I saw at the grocery the other day. They were supposed to have been transferred out West."

Mr. Tremont shrugged. "That's news to me."

"My agent Gloria didn't tell me." Rebecca stifled an urge to give her garbage can a kick. "I wish someone had. Now this Brook, she wants me to fill the pool in."

"No one can make you do that."

"No. It's crazy." Rebecca stopped short. She thought of the baby food aisle, then of Brook. "How awful. Their only child. She must be grieving so much."

"Needs help," said Mr. Tremont. "Maybe in time she'll get some. They should move, get away from here. Maybe they will. She'll have to stop carrying on about the pool. A person can't go on like that forever."

"Yes," said Rebecca. "Poor Brook. She must play all that golf to keep her mind off what happened."

"The husband, he took it hard too. He's taken a leave of absence, I heard. To help with Brook, I guess."

That night Rebecca unpacked her last box of books. Before bed,

she sat in the den and gazed through the large picture window. Illuminated by underwater spots, the long rectangular pool quivered like a slab of aquamarine Jell-O, the warm flow of light beaming upward like a beacon to the heavens. Showing off. Look how beautiful I am, the pool seemed to say. But a child had drowned here.

She remembered the eyeless doll and shivered.

Touched by the evening breeze, the water began to move, casting lines of rippling light up to play on the lone palm tree and the house's overhanging eaves. An idea occurred to her: might this display of light be offensive to Brook?

Rebecca's shoulders tensed. She rose, went to the switch. The Strassers' two-story house stuck out so far into their back yard that a view of Rebecca's pool from the upstairs dormers could only be had at a very severe angle. But one window on the wall facing Rebecca's house did overlook the pool. Small, frosted, closed, it was obviously a bathroom window. Brook would have to be truly deranged to spend any time checking on the pool from that vantage point.

No matter, Rebecca dithered about the pool lights. The scene was so beautiful. Her pool, her house. But just for tonight, out of respect . . . She clicked off the switch.

Next day, Rebecca knew what she must do. She waited until Brook drove up, then approached. "Please," she called. "Please. I'd like to talk."

Brook turned, her green eyes less intense, but shut down.

Rebecca noticed a golf tee cocked at a crazy angle behind her ear, then said: "I just wanted to say, I'm sorry. I didn't know. Now I do. And I'm sorry."

Brook laughed as if she were attending some minor social function. "No one told you? Not even that bitch of an agent? You poor babe in the woods."

Rebecca didn't like her tone, but decided not to show it. "I can't begin to know what it's like," she said.

"The usual cliché. But the point is, what are you going to do about it?"

"Do?"

"The pool needs to be filled in."

"But I can't do that."

"Can't?"

"Won't. I have nothing to do with this."

"Had nothing—that monster is yours now, yours to deal with."

"But this is irrational. I'm sorry, but if someone dies in a traffic

accident, do we close the street down? I care about your feelings, but—"

"But . . . not really," said Brook. She folded her arms and started walking. "You know what to do. Fill the pool. Do it. Then, who knows. Ha! Maybe we can even be friends."

"The pool isn't a hazard," Rebecca called out. "The gate is locked, in case you worry it could happen again."

"Again?" Brook turned and slapped her hands on her hips. The stripe of gray hair seemed to have grown an inch in the last fifteen minutes. "Again has nothing to do with it." She shook her head as if disbelieving her own ears, and then repeated the word *again* with boundless disgust, implying that she couldn't care less if it ever happened again. She reached her kitchen door and disappeared inside.

Rebecca opened her own front door. She remembered her first day here, how she'd pranced down the hallway barefoot. It had seemed an auspicious occasion. Now that the rooms were filled with furniture, the stacks of boxes emptied and discarded, she felt bedraggled and defeated. The plans she'd made had been only bright delusions, the life squeezed out of them by her awareness of the weight of other lives around her, other sufferings.

How could she give a party now, in the midst of universal awareness of the boy who drowned here only last August? Though, for that matter, she hadn't told anyone—yet. Her parents, who lived in another city, didn't even know, though she longed to call her mother, receive words of sympathy. But if she called, then her father would find out and chide her about using the sellers' agent.

"Damn Gloria!" Rebecca marched down the long hall to the den. She stood in front of her picture window and eyed Gloria's rubber tree plants. Three days ago, she had bought two honey-colored ceramic pots for the plants and set them on the blue slate at points equidistant from either end of the pool, about two feet from the water's edge.

"Damn her stupid housewarming gift!" Rebecca sank into her sofa and began crying. Those plants were a symbol of the life she wanted, the life she didn't have but thought she might still win, and now, now—

Her tears finally slacked off. She gazed at the dark waxy leaves picked out by the pool's lights. They're beautiful all the same, she thought. She shouldn't hate the rubber tree plants on Gloria's account. The pool was gemlike. Aquamarine, like her birthstone. Why should she let Brook, a stranger, take it away?

Aside from "I told you so," what would her father say if he knew about Brook? Stick to your guns! That was his motto. The place is yours! Stick to your guns. Throw your party. And when I visit, arthritis be damned, I'm diving in.

Rebecca laughed in spite of her red eyes. Too bad about the boy Seth. She'd shown her care, but Brook had shoved it back in her face as if she were to blame. "These people!" Rebecca rose, pushed to her feet by a burst of resentment. She paced the room. "The Reeds—they're all set. What do they care? They've got their kids, and Brook had hers. I don't have any, but I don't count to them. Maybe if Brook had watched her son better, he'd still be here. Sad, but I'm not paying for her mistake."

She *would* give her party. Wait a few weeks first, hope Brook wouldn't bring it up again. Of course, she wished she could talk to someone, unburden herself, but she decided not to tell even her closest friend, Carla. She refused to let her house get slapped with a black label: the place where that little boy died. No, she wouldn't have a child's ghost floating in her pool forever.

That night she let the pool lights burn. The house was hers now and she vowed to start acting like its owner instead of like Brook's vassal.

The following day after work, Rebecca was prepared to greet her pool without guilt or fear. But just before plunging in, she was surprised to find clumps of some kind of vegetable matter floating on top, probably cedar mulch.

Again and again she worked the skimmer net across the water's surface only to find more of the stuff, volumes of it, massing in the pool's deep end. Her suspicions grew. Other than a tidy dwarf palm, Rebecca had no trees in the back yard. The nearest tree was a tall cedar which happened to grow on the Strassers' front lawn.

After scooping out the worst of the stuff and running the pump to filter the rest, Rebecca stood with folded arms and eyed the cedar, just visible above the Strassers' roof. What was the likelihood that its loose fronds might rain into her pool eighty feet away? What rogue wind—more like a freakish tornado—had blown up during the day to create this mess?

That evening, her anger grew until finally she called Gloria. Breathing heavily, Rebecca said for the answering machine's edification: "I wish you'd warned me about the situation next door, told me that a child drowned here. It's called *ethics*. You said you were big on full disclosure. Thanks a lot, Gloria."

This communication did nothing to douse Rebecca's ire. Minutes later she couldn't resist the urge to call again. "You need

another house to wear on your tacky charm bracelet, Gloria—one painted black, to represent this place.” Yet she felt impotent and silly after that one.

The next day it rained, but the day after that she swam in her pool and then floated on a blue air mattress she'd purchased the day of the sale. If cedar mulch was the worst Brook could muster, what of it? She tried to relax on the mattress, enjoy the quiet and the water. An unpleasant image, the memory of the eyeless doll floating face down, popped into her mind. Rebecca pushed it out by planning the party in her head. She would install an outdoor sound system, engage a catering business, buy a few of those floating, pastel-hued, solar-powered lights to set out in the water for romantic effect.

After that swim, for three days in a row, Rebecca had to work late. The pool waited for her patiently. Saturday morning, the water seemed cleaner, more sparkling than ever. She dove in with the passion of a lover, but immediately shot to the surface, skin burning, eyes screaming with pain. Blindly, she fought her way to the side and pulled herself out, ran, stumbled into the house, found the bathroom. She struggled to inhale a real breath of air, so thick was the chlorine smell that clung to her. She opened the tub faucets full force, switched on the shower. Afraid of falling, she sat on the tub's bottom, water streaming down on her head.

Sabotage. This was clear. Brook.

Once she emerged from the shower, skin stingingly raw, eyes adjusting to natural light, she noticed from the vantage point of her den a sign rearing above the wood fence on the Strassers' side. Two simple words painted in red against a white background: **FILL IT!**

Rebecca lay down on her sofa, head pounding. Three hours later, she got up, dressed, and called the police. Her complaint was not high priority. An officer didn't arrive until six that evening. By then, the sign had vanished.

“Do you think you might have put too much chlorine in yourself? By mistake?” the officer asked, chewing nicotine gum like an antsy relief pitcher. When he'd first introduced himself, he'd bragged that this was his third smoke-free day.

“I put in what the Reeds told me—a half cup, mixed in a bucket with a lot of water,” said Rebecca. “The woman erected a sign over my fence. She wants me to fill the pool. She's against me, trying to poison the water.”

“But we have no proof.” The officer held his hands up as if to fend off Rebecca's reasoning. “You might have over-chlorinated yourself. And anyway, it's pretty diluted now.”

"Well of course it is. The sun's been shining down hard all day. Sun disperses chlorine, but it's still strong. Can't you smell it?"

The officer sniffed the air and shrugged. His cigarette habit had obviously numbed his nose. "There's no way for us to know how bad it was."

"Right." Rebecca's eyes fluttered closed. "Thanking you in advance," she added, and escorted him out of her yard.

That night, sleep wouldn't come. Rebecca let the underwater spotlights blaze away in her pool, Brook be damned. She lay on her sofa, alternately drifting into brief, unsettling dreams, then sitting up and keeping watch for long stretches.

Except for a quick trip to the grocery on Sunday, she spent most of her time guarding the pool. She did a lot of thinking, but the lack of sleep left her groggy and confused. A recurring theme was the need for some kind of surveillance equipment, but she wouldn't have time to buy, much less install, anything like that tomorrow. Around three A.M. she fell asleep and didn't wake until six.

That Monday morning, Rebecca called in sick. Trying to revive herself with cups of coffee, she watched the pool and alternately spied on Brook's driveway. Around ten, Brook emerged from her side door wearing checked golf shorts; the wicked patch of gray hair flared above the top edge of a pink sun visor. Her expression was set, determined. She looked more like a tough forty-something than the thirty-two year old she was. Rebecca thought she must be a ferocious competitor on the course, could well imagine the rage that flashed in her eyes every time she whacked a golf ball.

Now would be a good time to drive to an electronics store and inquire about motion detectors or a closed-circuit camera to erect along her fence. But with Brook safely gone for at least four hours, Rebecca couldn't resist the desire to go outside and commune with her swimming pool.

Although she was careful to stoop down and check the water before slipping in, she didn't notice the thin shards of glass, blue tinted on one side, metallic on the other, that glittered on the pool's bottom in the shallow end. She paused after two laps, touched down, winced. Peering through the water at her feet, she saw the shiny blue flakes and a thin stream of blood curling around her left big toe. Suddenly, she felt a stick in her right foot as well. Eyes wide, she pulled her knees to her chest and began treading water. Her breaths, coming fast, turned into frantic, high-pitched yelps. Fearful of what might attack next, she pummeled the water to reach the pool's side, and kicked, raised herself up onto the slate. She choked on horrified sobs as she sat with her

legs crossed Indian style, and lifted one foot and then the other to assess the damage.

Both feet ran with blood, though the cuts on her left toes were only small slices. The gash on the ball of her right foot was deeper, with some bits of broken glass embedded in the flesh. Rebecca stanching the flow of blood with her beach towel. Then, putting her weight on her heels, toes up, she hobbled inside.

After a lengthy session in the bathroom with a pair of tweezers and a strong light to aid her vision, Rebecca limped into her backyard and stood between the twin rubber tree plants, her bandaged feet tucked into her softest pair of socks and slippers.

She eased her way over to the shallow end to investigate. Several bits of glass lay on the pool's stone edging. She stooped and picked up a one-inch-long piece. The blue side of the glass reflected her own eye back at her. Yes, she knew what this had been—one of those big glass lawn ornaments, a reflecting ball. Brook had probably stood here and broken it against the pool's edge. Some of the pieces on the pool's floor were large. She could see the curve of what had once been a globe.

With her net, Rebecca fished out the larger pieces. Evidence. She had no way of knowing whether the globe belonged to the Strassers. They might well have had one in their backyard, hidden from view by the fence. More likely, the ball had been purchased for this very purpose.

Rebecca suddenly felt that she was being watched. She glanced up at the Strassers' small bathroom window that overlooked the yard. Was it her imagination, or had the window just then clamped shut?

If only to have another report written up, Rebecca once again phoned the police. A different officer came out this time. "Could be kids, you know. The folks behind you—they got kids? Or some kids could jump the fence. A prank."

"I don't know the children in this neighborhood," Rebecca said. "I just moved here. They have no motive to trash my pool. Brook Strasser does." Though feeling as if she were talking into the wind, she described recent events.

"Pretty crazy," the officer said. "I'll have a talk with these Strassers then, all right?"

When he reported back, Rebecca was not surprised by his words. "This lady, Brook, she seemed real nice and very concerned about what happened to you. She says she hasn't done anything to your pool. She played golf this morning and she wasn't around to see if anyone was trespassing."

"But she probably did this last night, don't you see? Did you speak with her husband?"

"Not at home."

"He is too home. His car's in the garage. He's always home, it seems."

"What can I say?" The officer smiled politely. "I'll write a report. That's all I can do."

"Yes, and my lawyer will be requesting records of other incidents at this house. I want to know if the previous owners lodged complaints." But Rebecca herself doubted there would be any, outside of the report of Seth's accidental drowning. The Reeds probably felt too bad about Seth to call the police on Brook. They just gave up, got out.

That evening, Rebecca considered going next door, confronting Brook herself, but that could be dangerous. Instead, hands shaking, she phoned the Strassers. A man answered: "Hello?" His voice seemed tired and faraway.

"This is Rebecca Swift, your neighbor. I wonder if you know that your wife has been tampering with my pool. Today I stepped on broken glass that she threw into the pool."

Rebecca paused for an answer. None came.

"Two other incidents occurred last week, one involving chlorine. Hello, is anyone there?"

She heard breathing, then a rustling sound, as if the listener had changed ears.

"I will be contacting my lawyer," she continued, keeping a firm tone. "I'm going to see a doctor tomorrow about my feet. I'll also engage a pool company for cleanup. I am going to sue. If this harassment continues, you're going to pay much more than you can imagine."

She heard ice tinkling in a glass. Then, to her surprise, the man spoke: "She says it's sacred ground, you see? Sacred." Rebecca noted a choked, pleading strain in his voice. Before she could respond, the dial tone hummed.

Rebecca took a personal leave day on Tuesday. She spent it supervising as the crew from Clearwater suctioned glass from the pool's bottom. While waiting, she sorted her mail. Among bills and junk offers, she found a video cassette labeled "Happy Days." What advertising ploy could this be? she wondered as she pushed the cassette into her VCR. She gazed blankly at the shaky camerawork until she realized that the setting was her own back yard. She recognized the palm, if not the grill set up next to it. Frank Reed held a spatula and mugged for the camera while flipping

burgers. And there was Doris Reed gesturing with a cocktail glass as she sat in a patio chair that was now Rebecca's. Brook rushed into the picture, pretending to be afraid of a little boy. Was that Seth, or the Reeds' son? Rebecca wondered. The camera followed the boy, who cannonballed into the pool. Arms akimbo, he fought the water laboriously until he reached another boy, secure in an inner tube. Grabbing on and catching his breath, he grinned for the camera, stuck a thumb to his chest as if he'd accomplished a heroic feat. He had Brook's eyes, her nose. Unmistakable.

Rebecca hit the stop button. What a sick, maudlin trick, to try to personalize the boy, make him real for Rebecca, who had never seen him before. "Right on, Brook," Rebecca said, tears stinging her eyes. "First poison me, maim my feet, then appeal to my emotions. Brilliant."

That evening, Rebecca didn't turn on the yard lights. She crept out of the house holding scissors and a spool of fishing line. Tomorrow she simply had to go to work. The pool would be unsupervised, but at least she could take this half measure. She tied one end of the line to one of the rubber tree pots about a foot off the ground, then strung the line along and tied the other end to the second pot. That took care of the side facing her own house.

She peered up at the Strassers' bathroom window. Light cast from the street showed it to be closed, mute and blind. She continued her mission, running another invisible line along the Strassers' side of the pool, from the palm to a leg on the wrought iron patio table. She found other objects on the remaining sides to secure the fishing line to as well. If she came home to find the lines disturbed, then she'd know someone had trespassed.

In the morning, the lines were still taut. Later, when she returned after work, her across-the-street neighbor, Sadie, waved at her. "Did you hear about all the commotion?" Sadie called. "An ambulance, an hour ago, pulled up in front of the Strassers'. Brook went out of there on a stretcher. Something about electrocution—she shocked herself."

Sadie didn't know much more, except that the husband accompanied Brook in the ambulance. It was the first time she'd seen him leave the house in months.

Rebecca approached her front door with some trepidation. She walked down the center hall slowly, reluctant to view her backyard. But everything was as she'd left it, the nylon lines tight, the pool clear.

Hours later the phone rang. Rebecca couldn't believe her ears. The man, Brook's husband, was speaking to her in a measured,

reasonable voice—apologizing. He'd discovered Brook lying on their patio. Beside her was a bucket and an electrical chord. He believed she'd been experimenting, trying to see how she might electrify Rebecca's pool, but had accidentally shocked herself. Brook was alive, doing very well, but she would not be coming home again. "She needs help," he said, "We both do. But it's been very hard, I've been—paralyzed, you could say. This thing with Brook, it's shocked me too. She'll move to another hospital tomorrow, to get therapy, and I'm selling the house. Should have a long time ago. I just wanted you to know and to ask you not to sue. I'll pay for the bills you've had, but I hope you won't sue. Money's tight, and—"

"No, I won't sue," Rebecca said, moved by his voice, the earnestness in spite of his pain. He thanked her, and then she mentioned that Brook had sent her a family video through the mail. "You might want it back. I'll be glad to put it in your mailbox."

There was a long pause. "It's a copy, probably," he said at last. "Keep it, or do what you want with it. If you can understand, I'm not up to thinking about that right now. Thank you, and I'm sorry for everything. Truly sorry."

That night, not knowing why, Rebecca watched the video in its entirety. She saw many shots of the boy named Seth, not only in her pool, but playing trumpet in a school concert, hitting a golf ball at the driving range with junior clubs, riding his bike down the street.

In the following week, Rebecca left her pool alone. No one seemed to be at home next door. A FOR SALE sign appeared three days after her conversation with Brook's husband. In the evenings, after work, she would sit in her den and drink several glasses of wine while listening to classical music. She'd survived the siege, won the war. Sometimes she said this to herself: "I won." But the expected smile could not be summoned. She felt inert, had no desire to plan her party. Her father called and asked when they could come down to visit her new house. "Not yet," she said. "I still have finishing touches to make. I'm just worn out lately."

"Everything's all right, huh. You like the house?"

"It's wonderful," Rebecca said. "Only a bit overwhelming. Maybe I'm not meant to be a homeowner."

When she got off the phone she said: "I've won, but I can't live here." She looked out of her picture window, at the blue air mattress she'd left floating in the pool. Of course it had been horrifying to learn that Brook had planned to sink a live wire in there. But Brook was gone now. Gone for good. As long as Brook had

been an active enemy, Rebecca had the energy to fight and claim what was hers. Now, Brook was out of the way, but she had left something behind—the floating ghost child. Every time Rebecca looked at the pool, she saw the grinning boy in the video.

She knew what she must do. Sell. Start again.

Her next call was to Gloria Englehart. Rebecca had no intention of listing the house with her, but she wanted Gloria to know what an ordeal she'd caused her. She didn't know how, but oh, she wished she could "get" her. The thought shocked her. She'd never been vengeful before.

"It's Rebecca Swift," she said when Gloria's full-throated Mrs. Business-USA voice came on.

"Swift? Swift?"

"You know who. The one you unloaded the Friday the Thirteenth house on? The rubber tree plant victim."

"Hmm, yes, Rebecca. About the house, I meant to get back to you, by the way, but I hope you can understand, this is a business and, well, the Reeds were anxious to leave, as you can imagine. They were having a terrible time of it, having trouble selling the house, their son in therapy, et cetera, and so, I felt it not quite appropriate to advertise anything unpleasant. We agents always emphasize the positives, you know."

"Uh-huh," said Rebecca. She'd been ready to land a few more snide comments on Gloria's crocodile-thick skin, but decided to let the fickle, money-grubbing woman rattle on.

"You see, dear, if you understand the real estate trade, a house such as the Reeds', it's known as a—well, I won't say what we call it—but it's in the neighborhood of a white elephant, if you know what I mean, although the house itself is perfectly wonderful. But it's a house with a history, isn't it? On average, it takes two, sometimes three transactions to sanitize such a house."

"Sanitize?" Rebecca blurted.

"That's real estate lingo, insensitive perhaps, but it simply means that after such a house trades hands several times, its unpleasant history fades. Extremely unfortunate, of course, that the couple next door remained there. The woman, she looked very fit, but she was not exactly . . ."

"She tried to electrocute me," Rebecca said matter-of-factly.

"Really. My, my. Well, I'm so sorry. Are you all right, dear?"

"I'm still here. Brook is gone. They're selling."

"How wonderful. So those crazy people are finally out of the way, then."

"I'm not celebrating. The house is ruined for me all the same."

Today I realized I'm going to have to put it on the market. I can't live here. I keep seeing the boy, Seth, floating in my swimming pool."

"You're putting it up for sale, are you? Now you'll do well to let me advise you. Because of the circumstances, the Reeds had to come down on the price. But now that the problem next door is resolved . . . I wonder who'll handle their property, by the way. I might leave my card. But going on—since the problem is resolved I think you'll find that even in this short time you can make as much as ten thousand on your investment. More."

This woman thinks I've contacted her to handle the sale, Rebecca thought, almost laughing for the first time in weeks. Why not grant her that delusion?

Gloria quickly established an appointment for the next day. Rebecca said she would meet her at the house at four, though she had no intention of coming home that early. Why not let Gloria waste some of her precious time, if only fifteen minutes of it. No doubt, when Rebecca didn't show, Gloria would step next door and stick her card in the Strassers' door.

The following day Rebecca forgot about the bogus appointment and didn't arrive home until six. Since facing the fact that she must sell, she felt calmer, the blank calm of resignation. She would contact another agency soon. As for where to live next, perhaps her old apartment might still be available. A step backwards, maybe, but it seemed a more expanded life was not meant for her.

The sun would be up for another hour. From the den, Rebecca gazed at the pool. The blue air mattress floated in the middle. The water's surface was opaque and unmoving in the late afternoon light. An old desire stung Rebecca. It had to do with the water and the rubber tree plants, friends chatting around the pool, gentle laughter, and a special man whose features she could never see clearly.

She went into her bedroom and pulled on her swimsuit, faded to an almost-white pink since Brook's chlorine attack. Funny, that seemed years ago now. Before the sun set on this warm July day, she would go for one last swim.

Barefoot, her cuts healed now, she walked to the deep end and executed a shallow dive, aiming just short of the air mattress which she planned to use. As she arched upwards from the bottom, rising, eyes closed, arms extended to find the mattress, her hands bumped into, then closed around, other limbs. Her eyes snapped open to descry in the dusky water a mass of jet black hair

still partially molded in the helmet shape that was Gloria Englehart's trademark coif.

Moved more by disgust than horror, Rebecca pushed free and swam to the cement steps in the shallow end. Only then did she remember the fishing line she'd strung the night after Brook's glass attack. The section between the palm and patio table was still tight, but that between the two rubber tree plants was limp, sagging like a loosely strung power line. Facing the pool again, she raised up on her toes and squinted into the water. One of Gloria's high-heeled pumps lay on the bottom. The other still clung to her foot.

But the gate! After the pool cleaners left, hadn't she locked it? So much had been going on, she wasn't sure.

No. She could not remember locking it.

Gloria, with a real estate agent's ingrained habit of trying doors, gaining entry whenever it suited her, had decided to wait in the yard. Perhaps she wished to see her plants' progress, how they thrived, thick and healthy, in the honey yellow pots she'd recommended. The first time Gloria showed Rebecca the pool, in fact, she'd dramatically marched to the edge, christening the scene with words of gushing admiration. Had she done something similar on her own time? One overconfident foot had snagged an invisible line. Possibly she hit her head, or the surprise knocked the wind out of her. Perhaps, like Seth, she couldn't swim.

When Rebecca went into the house for the phone, she also picked up a pair of scissors and the spool of fishing line. No one need know about her primitive motion detector. Wasn't it her property? She had been under siege, and the police had been no help. Before placing the required call, she went from pot to pot, to palm, to patio table, snipping the encircling line, winding it around the spool.

"How horrible," Rebecca said as she snipped. "How horrible for poor Gloria!" But even as those words gained mantra status through repetition, she was aware that she only uttered them as a matter of convention, to fill space. Her emotional disconnect was troubling, but she wouldn't blame herself on that account. Shocking, but true: from time to time, accidents happened.

Once the fishing line was safely tucked away, she marveled at her own calmness as she held the phone up and viewed its keypad. A dawning awareness buoyed her spirits. This was no longer the house where a poor little boy drowned. It was Gloria's pool now; Gloria's death trumped Seth's. The woman's sudden exit, though unfortunate and unexpected, simply did not carry the

same emotional weight. For Rebecca, at least, the pool was now "sanitized." Gloria had accomplished this for her.

The boys from Clearwater could polish off the job, administer their deluxe pool-cleaning treatment, one last time.

Of course, Gloria's grown daughter, whom Gloria herself said rarely called, might conceivably bring a lawsuit over the unlocked gate, but that didn't worry Rebecca. After all, her agent was an adult who'd taken it upon herself to enter the yard. In any case, Rebecca's homeowner's policy would cover any claim. She had a very good policy. Gloria had seen to that.

Rebecca thumbed 911 and stood, phone to her ear, admiring the rubber tree plants' shiny green leaves and the new pink growth that looked like strange conical flowers ready to unfurl. Once the call was completed, she said, "Maybe I can live here." The dwarf palm's fronds seemed to nod in agreement. ♡

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Agents and editors attending: Donald Maass, Donald Maass Literary Agency; Lucienne Diver, Spectrum Literary Agency; Emily Sylvan Kim, Writers House; Susan Rabiner, Literary Agent; John Betancourt, Wildside Press; Michele Coppola, Dutton's Children's Books; Anna Genoese, Tom Doherty Associates; Cindy Hwang, Berkley; Barbara Kuroff, Writer's Digest Books; Linda Landrigan, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*; and Ben Sevier, St. Martin's Press.

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UNSOLVED



LOGIC PUZZLE BY ROBERT V. KESLING

The antique car rally at the Wayne County fairgrounds was always an exciting event, but it was especially thrilling this year. The numerous entries had been pared down to six finalists—an Apperson, a Bugatti, a Citroën, a Daimler, a Excelsior, and a Ferrari. All six cars had been faithfully restored to mint condition. Their chrome was gleaming and their paint polished.

Inspector Rector was caught up in the fervor, but he reminded himself of his reason for attending. He was after a notorious safe-cracker who insolently left a card that read "Freddy" (without fingerprints) at the scene of each robbery. A cocky devil, thought Rector. Discreet inquiries around the underworld revealed that this Freddy was an antique car buff, who had invested his ill-gotten gains in buying and restoring old automobiles. The informant also hinted that Freddy would surely attend this grand rally.

Inspector Rector also learned that among the finalists at the rally, one wife was named Flora and one couple came from Wyoming. Inspector Rector then provided his men with walkie-talkies and stationed them in the crowd for any emergency.

The antique cars moved onto the track, each driven by its proud owner with his wife sitting beside him. Each couple was attired in duster, goggles, and period costume. The rally had begun! The crowd cheered wildly.

As he watched the rally progress in a colorful parade around the track, Inspector Rector reviewed what he had learned so far:

1. Among the contestants, no husband and wife have the same first initial.
2. Alfred, Bertie (who is not married to Doris), and Cedric are the husbands of Mrs. Garcy (who is not Ellen), the lady from South Carolina, and the woman riding the Excelsior (in some order).
3. Mr. Jarvis, Mr. Kilmer, and Mr. Levine include David, the man from Virginia (who is not married to Doris), and the one driving the Ferrari. Mr. Kilmer is not Cedric.

4. Bertie, Mr. Levine, and the man from Texas are driving the Bugatti, the Citroën, and the Daimler (in some order). None of the three is married to Celia.
5. Mrs. Jarvis, Ellen, and the lady in the Daimler come from Tennessee, Utah, and Texas.
6. Alice (who is not the passenger in the Bugatti), Betty, and Celia are married to Edward, Mr. Irwin, and the man from Tennessee.
7. Edward is not from Virginia.
8. Neither Celia nor the lady in the Apperson (who is not Mrs. Hawkes) is from South Carolina.

Suddenly it dawned on Inspector Rector: He had all the information he needed to figure out who the safecracker was!

As the cars pulled up before the judges' stand, he went to make the arrest, but to his surprise the criminal sped off.

"Don't worry," he told his men, "Freddy can't get far. He's too conspicuous in that antique _____ of his. Just issue an APB!" Then he added to himself, "Gee, I hope he doesn't wreck that beautiful old car."

*What is the safecracker's full name?
What antique car is he driving?*

We'd like to know what your favorite AHMM stories are

In anticipation of our fiftieth anniversary in 2006, we are asking our readers, especially our long-time subscribers, to tell us what stories over the years were the most memorable, captivating, enjoyable, or otherwise remarkable. We also invite you to contribute your comments about the stories you've particularly liked.

We'll print some of the stories from your suggestions as Mystery Classics during our anniversary year. We'll also run a selected list in the magazine, including some of your comments.

Please write to: The Editors
Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine
475 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10016

HEART OF THE MATTER

L. A. WILSON, JR.

A small twin-engine plane sliced through the darkness. It was a clear but moonless night, and the plane headed south toward Atlanta. Its altitude began a gradual but imperceptible decay as its passengers quietly talked among themselves. Then there was an abrupt and unexpected lurch as its wings clipped the tips of the first trees. There was no time to react. In less than a second the nose of the plane tore into the earth, disintegrating it and the lives inside.

Riley Jacks sat straight up in bed. He was trembling for no explainable reason, and his heart rapidly accelerated. There was a pain ripping its way through his brain. He didn't understand it, but there was so much baggage in his life that he didn't want to ponder that or anything else. He reached for the bottle of Dalmane that lived on his nightstand and swallowed two of them. He didn't exactly believe in premonitions, but crap like this always meant something. He just didn't want to deal with it at this moment.

His phone's harsh ring, which had been intentionally left at its loudest setting, rammed its way through the calming effects of his sedative. He squinted at the clock, confirming that he had only been asleep for two hours, as the shrillness of his ex-wife's voice began rapidly finishing him off.

"Dr. Marshall's dead," she cried. "Oh, Jesus! What's my dad going to do?"

"What? What happened?" he asked.

After some initial resentment and animosity, Jacks had settled into a peaceful coexistence with his ex-wife that bordered dangerously close to friendship. He had accepted the fact that his mental derangement, which had resulted in his dismissal from the

police force, coupled with his dependence on prescription drugs to keep him functional, had been a death knell for his marriage. He had acknowledged that this had been something that no reasonable woman could have tolerated. Rachel had tolerated more than most women would have. He couldn't blame her for leaving him. Hell, sometimes he couldn't stand himself.

"His plane crashed," she explained. "He was flying in from Washington with part of the cardiovascular surgery team. They're all dead, Riley. They're all dead."

"Damn!" The expletive slipped out unconsciously. He reached for one of his tranquilizers before another one escaped. "Then J. B.'s dead too," he added.

Jacks had known about the flight. His ex-wife had been bending his ear as if they were still married. Rachel's father had what they called an end-stage cardiomyopathy. He could barely breathe and his legs stayed swollen like balloons. His cardiologist, Dr. George Marshall, had gotten him on the transplant list. The doctor had been in Washington, D.C. on business. He was a well-respected cardiologist whose opinion was frequently sought all over the country. He was flying back into Atlanta with a team of his colleagues who would perform his former father-in-law's transplant by the end of the week.

It was an interesting coincidence that one of the pilots of the small aircraft was J. B. Hogue. Small world, he always said. James Butler Hogue was an old military buddy with whom he shared neuroses as well as friendship. They had first become friends over a bottle of whiskey and eventually over bottles of tranquilizers. J. B.'s drinking had washed him up as an airline pilot. The only job he could get since becoming clean several years ago was flying small planes for private concerns. J. B.'s death was like a dagger in his heart. He could count his friends on one hand, and now he didn't even need an entire hand.

The days that followed were relentlessly chronicled by the news media. The conclusion of pilot error was advanced and accepted before the NTSB had finished collecting the parts of the aircraft. But Jacks was plagued by questions that no one was asking.

He descended into the bowels of Metropolitan Hospital unaccompanied. He had been there a thousand times during his time with the police force. Familiar faces greeted him as if he was still on official business. The place teemed with activity. This was a health center supported by city, county, and state funds. It was the place where indigent citizens and injured government employees were brought

for care. Ailing city and county prisoners often occupied stretchers next to wounded police officers. It was also the place where the dead victims of the plane crash were brought for identification.

"I'm looking for the pilot of the plane that crashed," he informed the clerk at the morgue. "His name is James Butler Hogue."

"Are you a relative?" the clerk asked.

"He's got no relatives," Jacks replied. "I'm his best friend. That's as close as you're gonna get."

The clerk scanned through the computer files.

"Hogue wasn't the name of the pilot," the clerk answered.

"There were two pilots weren't there? Hogue must have been the other one," Jacks insisted.

"No, just one pilot. He's been identified. His name wasn't Hogue."

"What's your business here?" an authoritarian voice demanded.

"I'm looking for J. B. Hogue."

"There was no one on the plane by that name," the man informed him in a tone that was clearly meant to be a dismissal.

Jacks made an instant assessment of the man. He was in his late twenties and dressed in the familiar dark suit that served as a near uniform to federal law enforcement types. It started Jacks's wheels turning. Why the hell would federal law enforcement types need to be in a county morgue housing victims of a civilian plane crash?

"I *said* there was no one on the plane by that name," the man stated more forcefully, as if annoyed by Jack's continued presence.

"There was someone by that name on the plane when it took off," Jacks retorted.

The man turned his head and whispered into something that Jacks couldn't see, and another similarly dressed man approached from around the corner.

"I think you need to come with us," the man informed him.

"Screw you," Jacks replied as he turned and walked away.

"You don't want to do that," the man said.

Jacks turned and unbuttoned his coat.

"Neither do you," he replied.

They stared at each other for several seconds before Jacks spoke again.

"I ain't going quietly, and it's gonna take more than the two of you to kick my ass. How loud do you want me to be?"

Jacks watched the young man simmer indecisively. Hanging out in mental institutions gave him an almost academic perspective on other people's psychological inadequacies. The young man didn't understand the limitations of his authority or the precise nature of

his orders. He was either unwilling or unable to improvise. Jacks would make it cost him if he had to do so.

"You having trouble with one of my men, Agent Ross?"

Daniel French, the chief of police, stepped off the elevator and interposed himself between the two men.

"If you don't mind, I need him for a moment. You can talk to him later if there's a need."

Jacks followed the chief onto the elevator and regretted it as soon as the door closed. He tried to thank the chief for extricating him from that situation, but he was quickly interrupted.

"I don't know what you're up to, Jacks, but if it has anything to do with police matters, I'm gonna put you so far under the jail you won't be worth squat when you get out. When they told me you were seen near the morgue, I knew you'd be sticking your nose somewhere it shouldn't have been."

"I think J. B.'s dead," Jacks informed him.

"Hell, he's damned sure abused himself enough to be dead. Should have been dead years ago, just like you."

The elevator stopped on the lobby level.

"Get the hell out of here," the chief growled. "I don't want to see your ass again. If I do, I'm gonna let the feds have you."

Danny French had cut him slack when no one else would. He had tried to be Jacks's friend during the tough times. He was pissed because he had been disappointed. People get tired of friends who are constantly using up favors while never bestowing any. This rescue tonight may have been one of his last ones.

Surviving in life's underbelly meant giving and taking, dealing in dirt, doing favors that no one else wanted to grant. Information didn't come from the top. It ended up there. Jacks called in some favors to get what he wanted.

Ken Harmon was one of the first people at the crash scene. Ken was with the fire/rescue squad. Jacks knew him and knew his wife. Ken liked pretty women. On more than one occasion, Jacks had made sure that Ken's escapades never had repercussions beyond the precinct where he had screwed up.

"You know how it is, Jacks," Ken explained. "You spend half the time tryin' not to puke and the other half tryin' to find all the pieces. They were busted up pretty bad, but your boy wasn't on that plane."

"How can you be sure?"

"All the bodies were white. J. B. was black the last time I saw him."

Jacks took a deep breath and swallowed. It wasn't what he had

expected to hear, but he had absolute confidence in its veracity.

Rachel's father was dying, and the pain in her heart became an added torture in Jacks's brain. Jacks supplemented his regular medication with a lorazepam tablet. That allowed him to float through Rachel's feelings about making her dad a no-code. He couldn't recall whether he didn't hear much of it or just couldn't remember. Either way worked to his advantage.

As he headed back to his car, a suited man across the street who seemed too well-dressed to be loitering caught his eye. He was certain the man was following him, but then, he was always certain about such things. Somehow it seemed as if someone was always following him. Lorazepam didn't do much to diminish his fears.

A nondescript car seemed to trail him from a distance and disappeared as he pulled into his driveway. The house was dark, cloaked by aging pine trees and evening shadows. A tiny piece of cellophane tape he had left attached to the bottom of his front entry door had been disrupted. Jacks looked over his shoulder to make sure no one was behind him when he pulled out his pistol.

"I'm getting sick and tired of this crap," he announced as he pushed through the door.

A shadow moved to his right in the room next to the foyer. He resisted the temptation to squeeze the trigger of his gun and barreled into the darkened room. The shadow moved again, and Jacks tackled it, crashing the intruder into the couch. Jacks shoved the gun into the man's face.

"Hey! Hey! Riley, it's me."

The voice was sufficiently familiar to freeze his trigger finger.

"J. B.! Is that you? What the hell! I thought you were dead. Where'd you come from?"

"I'm in trouble, Riley," J. B. said. "Somebody's trying to kill me."

"What the hell for? What have you gotten into?"

J. B. had that blinded-by-the-headlights look on his face. He apparently didn't have an answer that he wanted to give. If he had given it, Jacks wasn't sure he would have believed him.

"Look! You're supposed to be dead. There are a bunch of federal spooks following me just because I asked about you. There's a car parked down the street watching my house right now. You owe me an answer. Were you on that goddamned plane?"

J. B. wouldn't look at him. He peeked nervously through the window's blinds.

"I'm tired man . . . worn down," he said, being intentionally evasive. "I just need a place to crash for a while. Just let me get a few

hours of sleep, and we can talk. You got any sleeping pills?"

Jacks sighed and conceded. He was too close to J. B. He had been in the same place—so depressed and exhausted that his brain wouldn't function. He gave J. B. a Dalmane and waited.

The next morning he wasn't surprised to find J. B. gone. He was just pissed that he hadn't had the courage to get in his face earlier.

It didn't take long to learn what had happened to J. B. The clerk from the morgue buzzed his cell phone as soon as he turned it on. Guys like that wanted to be the first to deliver a revelation in hopes that it would put them first on the list for a future favor.

"Jacks, you remember that guy you were looking for . . ."

By noon, it was all over the television news. The body of the other pilot had been found. He had been thrown from the plane and so obscured by mud and brush that searchers initially missed him.

"Jacks, listen to what you're saying. What do you expect me to do with this?"

"I expect you to print it. I expect you to tell the story."

"Jacks, c'mon."

John Randleman looked sincerely sympathetic, but he was in the newspaper business, not the sympathy business.

"We've known each other for a long time, Jacks, but look at it from my perspective. You want me to publish a story that the NTSB and some unidentified federal agency is involved in some shady business about a plane crash and the murder of a pilot, and the source I've got to cite is you—mental patient, discredited cop, alcohol and drug user, you name it. If I don't quote you, I've got to credit the proverbial anonymous source. That won't wash. It gives me a credibility problem. I'd be crazy to print something like this."

"He was in my house the night before they found his body. You think I'm lying?" Jacks asked.

"I think it doesn't matter."

"Check it out, John . . . please."

"Give me something better and I'll see what I can do," Randleman said. His tone was that of finality, and Jacks knew that further conversation would be futile.

Jacks had been near the heart of evil long enough to know how the game worked. Something foul had happened. Whatever it was, only a limited number of people had known the truth, and he feared most of them were dead. Even though he knew next to nothing, he was a loose end. And if the spooks wanted him, they'd

get him. They had too much power and knew too many ways. He had to move fast.

J. B. and the other pilot were essentially nobodies; there was no reason to put a lot of effort into killing people like that. Every city had a hundred unsolved murders of people whose lives didn't demand the attention that more prominent citizens obtained. There had to be something else—someone else.

Dr. Marshall's wife was reluctant to talk, but Jacks had enough fake credentials to put her at ease. Sandra Marshall didn't have much to offer. Her grief only allowed her to cite those wonderful and positive things that Jacks already knew about her husband.

"He said nothing to you that was unusual?" Jacks asked.

"No. Nothing."

"And nothing unusual has happened that you're aware of?"

"No. No . . . except . . ."

"Except what?"

"Well, his teaching slides arrived by mail yesterday."

"Teaching slides?"

"Yes. John lectured at the medical school, but he usually kept his slides with him. He was afraid they would get lost. I was surprised to see them arrive in the mail. He must have mailed them before he got on the plane."

"May I see them?"

"Of course, Officer."

Jacks persuaded Mrs. Marshall to allow him to take the slides with him. He had perused them briefly, but he didn't know squat about medicine with the exception of tranquilizers and other narcotics.

Somebody was there, just across the street. He was dressed casually, but he had that steely glint that indicated he wasn't an ordinary citizen. Jacks watched the man intently for several seconds until a small boy ran out of a nearby house and took his hand.

"Damn!"

He was getting so screwed up he couldn't tell the good guys from the bad. Jacks continued to his car. He resisted the urge to suck down another pill. He watched a car far behind him in his rearview mirror. He couldn't be certain if his paranoia was working overtime or whether this was the real deal. Sometimes paranoia was a blessing. He accepted it as such and called his psychiatrist.

Jacks's shrink wasn't very happy to get an unexpected call from him, but he was thrilled that it wasn't a call for treatment.

Jacks took a circuitous route to a private hospital, a glass and

chrome edifice with valet parking. It looked more like a five star hotel than a place for medical care. The cardiologist was expecting him, thanks to a phone call from a golfing buddy, Jacks's shrink.

"Mr. Jacks, I understand you have something interesting for me to see. You can set it up right here."

They projected the slides on a screen that floated down from the ceiling at the push of a button. All of the slides were technical in their perspective, and none gave a view of the patient's face.

Milton Carlyle smiled pleasantly at the familiar information. Dr. Carlyle knew Dr. Marshall quite well and had attended his lecture on cardiac arrhythmias and pacemakers on a previous occasion.

"Nothing unusual here, Mr. Jacks. This is just lecture material."

"What's that?" Jacks asked as the next slide projected.

"That's just demonstrating how the pacemaker is inserted. They are placed in an incision, usually under the skin in the left upper chest— Now . . . hmmm . . . that's strange."

Carlyle stood and walked closer to the screen in order to get a better view of the slide. "What the hell is that?" he mumbled to himself.

Jacks eyes widened with curiosity. "What is it, doc?"

"I don't think that's a pacemaker. Look at it. It looks like a pacemaker, but see the way the wiring is configured? I'm not aware of any company that manufactures one that looks like that."

"Could it be new? Maybe it's some kind of research version."

"I do these every day, Mr. Jacks. I've even helped to develop some of these. If it's in the pipeline, I know about it. Who's the patient?"

"Uh . . . I don't know." Suddenly this had gotten far more complicated than Jacks had anticipated.

"Can I keep these for a while?" Dr. Carlyle asked. "I'd like to study them. I could get back to you in a couple of days."

"I don't think so, doc. A lot of people close to these slides have ended up dead. You don't want to be one of them."

Jacks lived in a world of favors. Private investigators thrive on a cadre of diverse people who know only small bits of information.

One or more of the doctors on that plane had operated on someone, and for some reason they had all ended up dead. Jacks's overwhelming fear at this point was that he could be next. His concerns had suddenly shifted from what this was about to how to save his own butt. Even J. B.'s fate had rapidly become secondary. This had to be big, and there were people trying to sanitize this who were

too big to fight. His only hope was to make the answer public knowledge, which would in turn make him irrelevant.

Jacks drove to Washington. His paranoia made it impossible for him to fly. The twelve-hour drive over desolate stretches of interstate gave him time to ponder a plan.

He had acquaintances and even a few relatives in the D.C. area. The fact that he never stayed in touch was somewhat of a problem, but what the hell, that should make them all the more happy to see him.

Annie Lois Wilkins was one of those something-once-removed relatives whose relationship could never be explained because no one understood it. Since nobody wanted to admit that, they simply kept trying to clarify the explanation until everybody was confused.

"Honey, pleeeeze! They all come over to University Hospital to get treated. They be sneakin' too, but I sees 'em."

Annie Lois was an incessant talker, and she loved talking about the intrigues of Washington. She loaded his plate with a second helping of red beans and rice as she continued.

"Yeah, honey. They talked about *our president* like a dog, but I knows which one of 'em been over there, up on that floor where the regular folks don't go. Them big politicians gits treated for the claps, and don't nobody ever hear about it. They treatin' one of 'em for AIDS right now, and I knows how he got it."

If nothing else, Jacks was sure Annie Lois was a part of his family. She was about as screwed up in the head as he was.

Annie Lois had left Georgia in the sixties. She had worked in housekeeping at University Hospital for thirty years. She had raised five children, and two of her daughters were registered nurses at the same hospital.

Jacks didn't need much. All he needed was a name. He knew when the crash victims had been in Washington. He needed to know who had received a pacemaker at University Hospital during that time period. Maybe they did a lot of pacemakers there, but this one was done by one or more of the doctors on that plane, and it damn sure didn't go into Joe Six-pack.

To Jacks's amazement, the information that he needed was neither difficult nor cumbersome to obtain. Annie Lois's daughter simply walked into medical records wearing her nursing uniform and asked to review the cardiovascular surgery charts for the designated date. The very mention of the Utilization Review Committee instilled enough anxiety in the Records Department personnel that she had a stack of twenty-six records in her possession in a matter of minutes with no questions asked. And armed with the names of the

dead physicians, it took only a brief period of time to identify which patient's operative notes had been signed by one of them.

The patient's name was unfamiliar to Jacks, but Annie Lois was like a six o'clock news anchor.

"Charles Whitworth—federal judge. On his way to the Supreme Court if one of them old bastards dies or steps down while this president's still in office. Y'all better hope none of 'em dies, 'cause this boy's neck is as red as they gits. Hell, if he gits in they might bring back slavery."

Jacks couldn't suppress a small smile in response to the unlikely thought.

"I ain't laughin'," Annie Lois said, chastising him for minimizing the veracity of her remarks. "You don't see me laughin'."

His fake credentials still worked, even in Washington. They were invaluable assets in a private investigator's armamentarium—at least for those of Riley Jacks's ilk.

The Whitworth's housekeeper regarded him with a jaundiced eye. Jacks knew there was a certain lowbrow aura surrounding him. It endeared him among the sleaze he usually needed to patronize, but it didn't get him any brownie points at this level.

Mrs. Whitworth seemed to read him, too, so Jacks did his best humility act, and she melted.

"Let me be honest with you," Jacks began. "I'm not a cop anymore. I'm a private investigator, but hear me out."

Judge Whitworth started to stand.

"Your life is in danger, and so is mine."

Whitworth's eyes widened, and he sat back on the couch. His wife moved closer to him, her concern suddenly evident.

"The device in your chest is not a pacemaker." Whitworth's hand unconsciously moved to the left side of his chest.

Jacks explained how his physicians had died in a suspicious plane crash, how a pilot's body was mysteriously discovered when it was known that he was alive after the crash, and most importantly, how his own life seemed threatened because he was the only one who knew that J. B. hadn't been killed in the crash.

By the time Jacks had finished, the judge was clearly rattled.

"You know what this is about, Judge Whitworth. There are people who don't want you to sit on the Supreme Court. They're hoping you won't get the appointment. If you get the appointment, they're hoping you won't be confirmed. If you're confirmed, a remote transmitter could send you into cardiac arrest. If they suspect you know, they may trigger it preemptively."

"Oh my God!" Mrs. Whitworth cried.

"I'm calling my doctor," the judge announced.

"What makes you think you can trust him?" Jacks asked pointedly.

"Why should I trust you?"

"Because I'm a dead man just like you if I can't figure a way out of this."

The judge paused, then sighed deeply, resigned to the possibility that what he was hearing was the truth.

"What do you suggest?" he asked, still observing Jacks closely.

"The doctor I spoke to this afternoon will remove the device. He can remove it tonight, but it mustn't be suspected by anybody. Go to your garage, get in your car, and go to this address. It's a row-house on Webster Street. He'll meet you there and remove it."

"You think I'm going to some ghetto neighborhood and let somebody out of the blue cut my chest open on a kitchen table? You're crazy."

"The guy out of the blue is vice chairman of cardiology at Georgetown. I don't think he has a credibility problem."

"I don't know the vice chairman of cardiology from Dick's hatband."

"Your alternative is to go to the police with what I've told you and hope that this band of spooks aren't in cahoots with them. It's your life. You take the chance."

Jacks watched the man shake with indecision. It reminded him of his own demons that could suddenly leave him paralyzed with fear. He could have offered the judge a pill that would make all of his anxiety go away, but he would have lost him for certain. He wanted to take the pill himself, but he fought the urge and tried again.

"Look, I know I'm asking a hell of a lot of you. A strange black face walks into your house and asks you to go to a questionable address and let another stranger perform a life-threatening procedure on you. Hell, I probably wouldn't do it myself. You can look at me and tell that I'm not one of your constituents. Rest assured that I'm not doing this for you. If they kill you, they've got to kill me, because I know too much. If they don't kill you, they've still got to kill me because somebody might believe me. The only way I win is if you live and somebody tells the world what that thing is in your chest."

"I want to call someone," the judge said softly in a voice that was suddenly more calm. "Martin Flowers . . . a cardiologist at the Mayo Clinic. I want him to call your man at his office in Georgetown. If he calls me back and tells me your man has a persuasive argument, I'll do it, but I want Dr. Flowers to be there."

Jacks acquiesced. It had become more complicated than he

wanted it to be, but he didn't feel he had much choice. This was a helluva thing he was orchestrating. They were going to take this guy's pacemaker out in Annie Lois's kitchen and substitute a temporary pacemaker with Annie Lois's daughter assisting. Milton Carlyle said that pulling out a pacemaker and sliding in a new one wasn't much more difficult than sticking in an IV, but he wasn't buying it and neither was Whitworth.

If these shadow people who were stalking him got wind of this, Whitworth could be dead in a heartbeat, and he would be next.

He caught one break that was invaluable. Martin Flowers and Milton Carlyle trained together and knew each other well. Flowers did the persuading. When he finished explaining what Carlyle had described, the judge had no more doubts. Jacks would meet Flowers's plane and transport him to Annie Lois's home and hope that no one else would figure out what they were doing.

Martin Flowers flew into Reagan International on a standby flight that arrived at two A.M. Jacks was nervous. He was always nervous. Even large airports slowed down this late at night when almost no flights were scheduled to arrive. There were no throngs to get lost among. He felt naked. He was unarmed and walking through this airport with a guy who looked as if he hadn't been in an altercation since grade school. Every security guard and every maintenance worker looked like a threat. He made it to his car and sped onto the beltway with his eyes darting from mirror to mirror.

He quickly exited to the surface streets searching for the alphabets that would lead him to Webster Street. Somewhere off K Street, he made a wrong turn trying to avoid a construction site. It dawned on him too late that the orange cones blocking the road were left there intentionally to divert him.

A dark car blocked his way on the one-way street, and he slowed to a stop several yards from it.

"What's happening?" the doctor asked nervously.

"Get down on the floor," Jacks replied.

"What?"

Jacks pulled a nine millimeter from the glove compartment, and the doctor cowered on the floor without asking further questions.

The two front doors of the other car opened simultaneously just as Jacks opened his. His eyes strained to see in the darkness. The men were wearing poorly fitting jogging suits, but more disturbing, they were carrying something in their hands. He didn't have to see clearly. It could be only one thing.

Jacks raised his pistol and fired point blank into the closest

man's chest. The man twitched, took a step backward, then kept on coming. He fired two more shots with the same results. He fired at the second man who also kept coming. The back door of the car started to open, and he emptied his weapon.

"Goddamned body armor," he cursed. He leaped back into his car just as they sprayed it with automatic weapons. He dropped the car into reverse and jammed the accelerator. His car blindly careened backward. He hit something, but he didn't dare look as bullets exploded through his windshield. He sawed the steering wheel back and forth and let the car bounce off whatever was in the way. His car finally spun around in the road, and he slammed into several more parked cars as he roared away from his attackers.

The doctor was moaning and crying, but he wasn't hurt—just terrified.

Jacks jammed the brakes, and the car spun in the street again.

"What are you doing?" the doctor screamed.

"You can't run from crap like this," Jacks said, punching the trunk release.

The attacking men were fifty or sixty yards away. They were moving slowly toward him in a semicrouch and still firing.

He reached in the trunk and pulled out his baby. He closed the trunk, then climbed on top and put the baby's feet on the roof as bullets pinged off the metal. The cross hairs seemed to float down to the approaching men. He squeezed the trigger and jolted from the recoil as the closest man's head snapped backward.

"Goddamned body armor," he muttered as the cross hairs floated to the second man's head. He squeezed the trigger with the same results.

The third man had retreated to the back seat of the car. Jacks waited. He couldn't see through the windows in the darkness. He imagined that the last man was crouched down in the back. He blew out the windows and still couldn't see him. He waited several more seconds and thought about approaching the car and finishing him off. He finally decided that it wasn't worth the risk. He fired three more rounds into the car then took off for Webster Street. Funny, he thought. All of that shooting and not one damned siren.

Webster Street was deserted. Human activity had yet to begin in these darkened predawn hours. A stray feline scavenger stalked the streets unperturbed by Jacks's presence. The street was lined on both sides by cars creating the narrowest of lanes through which traffic could flow.

Jacks cruised the street twice searching for the presence of those

who would harm them. In his heart he knew it was futile. Those kinds of people knew how to cloak their presence. All he could do was make himself as formidable an adversary as possible and hope for the best.

He found a parking space too far from Annie Lois's house for his comfort. He popped the trunk again and suffered the chagrin on the doctor's face as he stuffed weapons in various places.

Once inside, Dr. Flowers shook Judge Whitworth's hand and embraced him. It was apparent their friendship extended beyond the physician-patient relationship.

One of the bedrooms had been converted into a small operating suite. Carlyle had even brought a cardiac monitor, cardioverter, and extra lighting.

Jacks excused himself. He didn't like the tedious dissection and pulling apart of flesh involved in operations. He didn't like the close-up view of blood spilling from tissue. He really didn't like the sight of blood—a strange attitude for a man who didn't hesitate to use a gun.

The doorbell rang, startling Jacks from the early clutches of fatigue-induced slumber, and he was instantly awake. A tense tremor passed through him as he gathered himself from the transient disorientation of sleep.

Thirty minutes had passed, and they were still at it in the bedroom. He viewed an innocuous-appearing man in his mid-forties through the peephole. He unholstered two of his pistols. Innocuous or not, white men didn't go around knocking on doors in black neighborhoods at five A.M. He cracked the door and showed him his guns.

"Ahhh, Mr. Jacks. I wonder if I might have a word with you."

Jacks wondered which of them was more deranged. The man spoke as if they were simply friends having a casual conversation.

"Who are you and what the hell do you want?" Jacks asked.

"I'd like to come in," the man answered. "But I'm sure you wouldn't allow that."

"Step away from the door!" Jacks ordered the man, then stepped outside.

There were at least three and perhaps as many as four or five others partially hidden in shadow in the street. He noticed for the first time that the street lights near the house were out. The man in front of him nervously manipulated his car keys as if he didn't know what to do with his hands.

"So what do we do?" Jacks asked.

The man smiled disarmingly.

"If you're doing what I think you're doing, there's something in there that I need. If you can get it for me, I'll be on my way."

"I'm surprised you haven't used it."

"An unfortunate limitation of the equipment. You have to be within six feet of the device to trigger its essential functions. I can't allow anyone else to examine it. I could destroy it from here, but you see, there's no advantage in perpetrating an obvious murder. The only political solution to this dilemma would be for the victim to die of natural causes."

"You might have to come and take it," Jacks said.

"Oh, Mr. Jacks, I don't want to fight with you. You're a dangerous man. You're just dysfunctional enough to not worry about dying. You might kill two or three of my men before we got you. I wouldn't want one of those two or three to be me. I need for this to be clean, Mr. Jacks."

They stared at each other silently, neither man giving an inch.

The man confronting Jacks continued to fidget unconsciously with his car keys. He finally pressed the red panic button on the remote.

A woman screamed upstairs, and Jacks leveled both pistols at the man's head. The men in the shadows stepped forward with weapons raised.

Carlyle threw open the door and gasped as he saw what was developing.

"We got it out, but it blew up!" he exclaimed. "Everything inside the pacemaker just melted."

"What about the judge?"

"He's okay."

"Well, Mr. Jacks, I think we're done here," the man said as he waved his men back into the shadows. "By the way, Mr. Jacks, I couldn't interest you in a job, could I? Federal pay scale, good benefits, liberal retirement policy. You might not like the structure and the discipline; still, it's a consideration and not a bad career move. We don't care about past problems, mental or otherwise. We should talk sometime."

Jacks stared at the man; he was speechless.

The pacemaker was nothing but a jumble of plastic and melted wire. There was probably nothing to be discerned from even the closest inspection by those trained to do so.

Judge Whitworth and his wife were too rattled to ever consider accepting a Supreme Court appointment even if offered. They

were unwilling to talk about the matter to authorities or anyone else, so in a sense the mission of those who wanted to thwart him had been accomplished.

Everything went back to square one. Even with two well-respected physicians talking about this, it boiled down to a political conflict between conservatives and liberals. Everybody knew that both sides were more than willing to project bizarre lies in order to further their causes. If the two next-best witnesses were a gossiping maid and a shady private detective who had lived in and out of mental wards, there was precious little credibility available.

Back in his home in Atlanta, Jacks found a strange duffle bag that he had somehow missed before in the excitement that was swirling around him. He opened it, and the dark silk spilled out on the floor.

"Damn! J. B. What the hell did you do?"

The question slipped out unconsciously, but the answer was obvious. J. B. had bailed out of that plane before the crash. The other pilot was probably already dead. No doubt J. B. had taken the federal pay scale with good benefits. Unfortunately he had also taken the early retirement that went with it.

Jacks's mission had been personal all along. It was to save his own life, and that had been done. It had begun, however, with concern over a friend, and in the course of things he had also helped someone else. That was different for him. He would have to add that to his resume. Something about that made him feel good about himself. After all, wasn't that the heart of the matter—finding a way to neutralize his plague of personal demons? Federal pay scale and good benefits be damned. ♣

CONVERSATION WITH

L. A. WILSON, JR.

Atlanta physician L. A. Wilson, Jr. first appeared in AHMM in November of 1997 with "Jazreen," which introduced Atlanta police detective Albert Lee Ivey. In that story, Ivey investigated a haunting mystery that reached back to the Jim Crow past of his own home town. Since then, the versatile Dr. Wilson has

launched a second series featuring P.I. Riley Jacks, and has written a number of stand-alone stories as well. We thought we'd take a few minutes to learn more about this multifaceted writer.

AHMM: Many mystery stories are self-contained, but your stories are distinguished by a strong sense of the past and of historical continuity. Is this a goal of yours as a writer, and if so, why do you feel it important?

LAW: I do believe that stories that are anchored with a certain degree of historical continuity tend to be a bit more intriguing than those that are limited to a contemporary level. I also believe that the most fascinating mysteries are those that we ponder for years, even decades. When the intricacies of those mysteries are finally resolved, it results in enormous satisfaction.

AHMM: The main character in this issue's story, Jacks, is an unusual P.I. because of his mental instability. What inspired you to create such a character?

LAW: Actually, I created Riley Jacks in order to avoid contaminating another character whose integrity I wanted to maintain. I wanted to develop a darker character whose demons would allow him to drift into the underbelly of society. At the same time I hoped that Jacks had enough remnants of a moral base to resolve his various conflicts in a manner in which justice would be served. Writing about characters like this is not something I find difficult. The perspective of a person, like Jacks, who is struggling against neurosis and psychosis is often very logical. It is simply not the line of logic that most of us would follow. When developing his character I tried to make sure that his perspective remained consistent. I believe that a reader can follow with some enjoyment a consistently deranged thought process, but

bizarre and disjointed thoughts and actions are a distraction and hamper the reader's understanding of the character.

AHMM: How has your own medical background helped to prepare you to write such a character?

LAW: As a physician I have often spent a considerable amount of time talking to people with severe neuroses and even psychoses, who struggle constantly against compulsions that push them toward self-destructive behaviors, not that dissimilar from Riley Jacks. Some of Riley Jacks's thoughts and dialogue are frequently taken from conversations I witnessed that involved people with various mental problems.

AHMM: What prompted you to take up writing and why did you choose the mystery genre as a vehicle for your stories?

LAW: I've always wanted to write. I used to send hand-written (in pencil) short stories to the *Saturday Evening Post* when I was a kid. We all know what happened to them since I never got a reply. I grew up in the rural South during the pre-television era. Reading books and telling stories were a prime source of entertainment, and the pursuit of writing was simply a logical extension of that.

Mysteries have always fascinated me. I grew up in a household of mystery readers. My parents had every Erle Stanley Gardner and Mickey Spillane paperback

ever published. My father took pride in turning out most of the lights and reading Edgar Allan Poe to us.

AHMM: Issues of race have been important themes in all of your stories. How do you see your characters as having been shaped by such issues?

LAW: I grew up in the rural South during the height of segregation. Of course the impact of the ongoing racial conflict helped to shape my life, and I have tried to show some of that in my characters who have also experienced racial conflict. Interestingly, the majority of the kids I grew up with have gone on to have successful lives. That's not to say they all became doctors. There have been doctors, janitors, mechanics, teachers, professors, etc. The important thing is that they all grew up, earned a decent living, raised families, sent their kids to college, and all of the other things that define success. I believe that the struggle against adversity gave many of us the strength and motivation to persevere at a higher level because we knew that anything less would have given those prone to bigotry an opportunity to obstruct us. It has been important that the characters I developed understand the struggle against racial injustice and proceed with strategies to overcome it. Some of these strategies encompass confrontation, and some involve manipulating the circumstances

to a perceived advantage. Isn't that what we do in real life?

AHMM: Your stories also exhibit a strong sense of Southern culture. What are the challenges of writing about the South today?

LAW: I am a Southerner. I have never lived outside the South and have never had any desire to live anywhere else. The South has changed over the years, yet it has remained the same in many ways. It is the singularly most fascinating place I have ever seen. Blacks and whites are like Siamese twins. They share everything but remain in eternal conflict. There must be a zillion stories to be told down here. The challenge is simply to impart truth. It is so easy to slip into distortion and exaggeration. There are so many people who welcome distortion and exaggeration because it fits their agendas. Truth in defining the Southern experience can only help the evolution of the relationships among its various cultures.

AHMM: Do you have a mystery novel in the works?

LAW: There is no novel in the works. I'm still a full time physician, and I have difficulty finding the time. I suppose you can define me as a dedicated short story writer at this point. I love the short mystery genre and get enormous pleasure from developing new plots and characters. I probably won't pursue a novel for a few years.

BAR SINISTER

EDWARD D. HOCH

Stacy Worth had never been to the Runway Club before. It had been open nearly a year, since the previous October, in a section of the city where bars and dance clubs opened and closed with a regularity that was frightening. She'd simply skipped the Runway because it was the sort of place she was sure wouldn't last. How wrong she'd been!

The Runway wasn't a club at all in the strictest sense. It was a restaurant with a gimmick. Arriving patrons entered directly into the bar itself, and from there to the dining area. The room was split in two by a runway that ran from a small bandstand and dance floor at the far end back to the bar. There were steps on either side of the runway so anyone could mount it and walk its length. "Feel like a fashion model!" the ads invited. It was an offer many of the young women, and a few of the men, couldn't resist. Loud cheers went up from the tables whenever a particularly comely lady walked back along the runway to the rest rooms, and often some stud was waiting at the bar to buy her a drink.

All this was fodder for Stacy's weekly column, "City by Night," that reviewed the latest hot spots for the younger crowd. It wasn't a proper restaurant review; Stacy concentrated more on the ambiance, music, rest rooms, and the so-called "hook-up factor." She rated the video games and TV sets if it was a sports bar, and issued a drug warning if their availability seemed obvious, though few bars like the Runway Club used security cameras to discourage drug activity. When Stacy entered a bit after eight, the crowd was, as expected, mostly under thirty—more than a few possibly under the legal drinking age of twenty-one.

Stacy herself could have passed for college age, though she'd just celebrated her twenty-seventh birthday. She'd been at the *Times-Herald* for two years, ever since earning her master's degree in journalism, but she was short and small-boned with a perpetually

youthful face and long brown hair. Perhaps that was why she missed out on the really important stories. At the university she'd dreamed of winning a Pulitzer before she was thirty. She'd never dreamed of writing a weekly report on the club scene while covering minor court cases on the crime beat.

"Is that you, Stacy?" a male voice asked as she lingered near the bar. Her heart sank, as it always did when someone recognized her on the job. The whole object of her column was to review and rate the bars and dance clubs *incognito*.

She turned and barely recognized the bartender. Walt Quentin was the only one on duty at the moment. She'd gotten to know him at Farraday's, a classy East Side club several rungs up from this one. Now with a shaved head and a gold earring, he seemed like a different person, even with WALT stitched on his shirt pocket.

"How are you, Walt? I like that bald look. Didn't know you were over here now."

"Yeah, it didn't work out at Farraday's," he answered vaguely. "I see you're still doing the column. I read it every Friday."

"My one reader!"

He chuckled. "No, the kids read you all the time. After you gave Farraday's a hook-up factor of nine the place was crowded for the next three weeks."

"You've got a pretty good crowd here without me," she said, scanning the tables and spotting only a few empty ones against the far wall.

"You should see it tomorrow. The fish fry brings them in on Fridays. That and the cheap beer."

"How much?"

"A buck for a draft, unless it's one of the local microbrews. They're two bucks."

She laid a dollar on the damp bar. "That's cheap enough."

He smiled. "You always worked best with a glass in your hand."

"I have to blend in."

As she spoke, a curvy blonde wearing tight jeans and a bare midriff mounted the runway and sauntered toward the bar, bringing cheers from the guys. She staggered just a bit, as if she'd had a few drinks. "That's Maggie, one of our regulars."

"She looks familiar," Stacy said. "Watch my beer."

She always checked out the ladies' rest rooms for her column and this seemed a good time to do it. The place was just a few steps from the bar. It was clean, with no graffiti, but she'd have been surprised to find any. There was the usual vending machine for feminine necessities and, in this case, condoms. She used one

of the stalls and was washing her hands when Maggie entered.

"Hello there," Stacy greeted her casually.

She squinted at Stacy, probably because she wasn't wearing her glasses. "Do I know you?"

"Stacy Worth from the *Times-Herald*. I interviewed you a few months back at the county jail."

The blonde's features froze. "You must be mistaken."

"I don't think so. You're Maggie Payne, aren't you?"

"Yes," she admitted. "I remember you."

"Are you out on bail, Maggie? I don't remember your case coming up for trial."

Maggie leaned against the sink, looking Stacy in the eye. "It's before the judge next week. I may change my plea to guilty and promise to make restitution, if I can get probation rather than prison time. I'm trying to make a deal."

As Stacy remembered the case, Maggie had embezzled a few thousand dollars from the insurance agency where she worked. It wasn't a big deal and probation wasn't unusual for a first offense. "Well, I'm glad you're out. Do you have another job?"

"Nothing regular. I've been temping. Finding a regular job has been tough, thanks to you."

"The arrest was a matter of public record," Stacy reminded her. "There was a story in my paper when it happened. All I did was interview you."

"All you did was ruin my life! That picture of me behind bars will follow me to my grave."

"Believe me, I don't have that many avid readers."

"I thought you were trying to help me. Instead you were only after a clever story to sell more papers."

Stacy could sense her growing agitation. There was nothing to be gained in pursuing this ladies' room argument with a half-drunk woman. "I'm sorry you feel that way," she said, and started for the door.

"Wait!" Maggie Payne made a sudden grab for her, catching Stacy's bare forearm with a sharp fingernail. Stacy shoved her away and hurried through the door.

Walt the bartender saw her coming. "Another draft?" he asked. "Your glass is about empty."

She shook her head. "I'm out of here."

At the door she encountered another familiar face just entering. "Hi, Stacy. Slumming a bit tonight?" It was Chris Ready, the *Times-Herald's* second-string sports reporter.

"Just doing my 'City by Night' column."

"Buy you a drink?"

"No, thanks. I've got what I came for." She left him at the door and hurried out to her car, fearful that Maggie Payne might come after her at any moment.

Stacy arrived at the city room early the following morning. She had to cover a trial at ten and she wanted to write up the column first while the Runway was still fresh in her mind. Glancing over the few notes she'd made, she turned on the computer and started typing. Almost at once the phone at her elbow rang.

"Worth," she answered.

It was Janet at the reception desk. "Stacy, there are a couple of detectives here to see you."

"To see me? What about?"

"They didn't say. They just want to see you."

Her mind raced through the recent court cases she'd covered. "Send them back."

Detective Contento was tall and balding. Stacy didn't really know him, but she remembered him testifying in a court case some months back. His partner, Detective Samson, was shorter and hardly lived up to his name. "Sorry to bother you at work, Miss Worth," Contento said, showing her his ID and badge. He glanced around the city room. "Is there a private place where we could talk?"

"Well—I suppose we could use the conference room. I need to know what this is about."

Contento waited until they'd entered the small conference room before he replied. "Do you know a woman named Maggie Payne?"

"I interviewed her in the county jail after her arrest on an embezzlement charge." She noticed the second detective, Samson, was taking notes.

"Did you have an encounter with her at the Runway Club last night?"

"I wouldn't describe it as an encounter. We exchanged a few words in the ladies' room. What's this all about?"

"Maggie Payne was found dead in there shortly after you left the Runway Club. We have witnesses who describe you as agitated."

"Dead!" It took a moment for the full import of his words to sink in. "How did she die?"

"It appears to have been a blow on the head. She may have fallen and hit the sink. Did you have any sort of altercation with her?"

"When she came into the ladies' room, I recognized her from

the interview I'd done. We exchanged a few words, but it was hardly an altercation."

Contento pointed to the scratch on her arm. "That looks fairly recent. Did you get it last night?"

"I—I don't remember. I might have."

"One of her fingernails was broken, as if she'd grabbed someone. The lab boys recovered a bit of skin."

Stacy felt a chill of apprehension. What was happening here? "But we didn't fight or anything! She'd had a few drinks and complained about the interview I did and the picture we ran. Even though she got off with probation she said she couldn't find another job. Said I'd ruined her life. I turned to leave and she grabbed at my arm. That's when I got the scratch."

"Did you strike her?"

"No, never."

"The bartender said you left in a hurry, and a reporter named Chris Ready passed you as he was going in. He confirmed that you seemed agitated."

"I was afraid she might follow me out and cause a scene. I never hit her. I certainly didn't knock her down."

Detective Contento sighed. "We should have the autopsy results by this afternoon. I'm going to request that you come down for a further interview and make a formal statement."

"Do I need a lawyer?"

He shrugged. "That's up to you. We're not bringing any charges at this time."

They left her then, arranging for a four o'clock appointment, and she returned to her desk. The chill she'd felt would not go away. She was a suspect in a violent death, a suspect in a murder. There was no other way to put it.

She covered the court case at ten and returned to the city room. When Chris Ready came to work at noon she wandered over to his desk. He was reaching for a pencil but put it away when she sat down. "I hear there was some excitement at the Runway Club after I left."

"Hi, Stacy. Yeah, a woman was killed. The cops questioned everyone in the place."

"Did you tell them I seemed agitated?"

"What? Maybe I mentioned seeing you. I think I did. You were in sort of a hurry."

"What happened after you went in?"

"I was there a few minutes when a girl came over to the bar and told Walt someone had collapsed in the ladies' room. He told

everyone to stay out and went in to look at her. Then he sent the girl to tell me to phone 911. The ambulance and a police car both responded. They rushed her to the hospital but she was already dead. I could see a bruise on her temple."

"She must have been at the club with someone."

He nodded. "Another young woman named Kath something. She was all in tears when the ambulance came."

"Know where I can find her?"

"I think she used to work with Maggie Payne at the insurance company. Why? What's the trouble?"

"I wish you hadn't mentioned that about me, Chris. Two detectives came here this morning to question me and I have to go in this afternoon to give them a formal statement."

"How come?"

"I was in the ladies' room with Maggie Payne, but she was alive when I left. Now I just have to convince the police of that."

"Why would they suspect you?"

"Because of what you told them. We did exchange a few words about my interview when I saw her, but that was all."

"God, Stacy, I'm sorry if I got you in trouble."

"Don't worry. It'll be all right." She hoped so, anyway.

Before she showed up at police headquarters for that four o'clock interview, she really wanted to speak with Maggie's friend Kath. She found her at the insurance office where Maggie had worked.

Kath Brinker was a slender young woman, in her mid-twenties with unnaturally blonde hair. Glasses helped hide her red-rimmed eyes. "I've been at my desk crying all morning, every time I think of Maggie," she said. "I have to take the rest of the afternoon off."

"Could I talk to you first?" Stacy asked.

"You're the reporter, the one who interviewed Maggie."

"That's right. I understand you were at the Runway Club last night when she died."

"We went there together. I was trying to cheer her up. She was having a tough time finding a new job with her probation and all."

"When I interviewed her, she was vague about why she embezzled the money."

Kath Brinker lowered her voice. "I never said this while she was alive, but I think she was into drugs. Not serious, but enough that she needed extra cash."

"If she was into drugs, it was serious. Didn't the police know?" The blonde woman shook her head. "She told me once that she

might give them some information if they dropped the charges against her."

"Was there anyone at the Runway last night she knew?"

"She knew half the people in the place. We went there once or twice a week."

"I saw her strutting up the runway."

"Sure, she liked that. She'd go to the bar or the ladies' room and wind up with some guy."

Stacy nodded. "The hook-up factor. Did you see her after she left your table?"

"I was trying to pick her out of the crowd around the bar and I saw her go into the ladies' room. I thought I saw her after that, but when I went to find her she wasn't around. Then there was the commotion when a girl found her body in the ladies' room."

"Who was that, do you know?"

She shook her head. "Walt probably does. She came running out to him after she found Maggie."

"Thanks, Kath. You've been a big help."

As she left the insurance office, Stacy checked the time. It was just after two o'clock and she knew the Runway Club opened at noon for the lunch crowd. She drove over there and parked in the side lot where she'd been the night before. Walt Quentin was nowhere to be seen. The other bartender—ROY was stitched to his shirt—said Walt wouldn't come on duty till six.

"Do you know anything about the girl who was killed here last night?" Stacy asked.

"Just what I heard. I wasn't on duty. Walt usually works alone on weeknights."

"Who found her body? You must have heard that much."

"Jennifer Ahearn. She's a luncheon waitress here. Sometimes she stays around after work."

"Luncheon? Is she here now?"

"Sure. See the brunette with the long pigtail down her back? That's Jennifer."

Stacy went down the steps to the dining area, avoiding the ramp, and intercepted Jennifer on her way to the kitchen. "Can I speak to you for a minute? I'm Stacy Worth from the *Times-Herald*."

Jennifer took a deep breath. "It's about that dead girl last night, isn't it?"

"Yes," Stacy admitted.

"I just knew her by sight. I didn't even know her name."

The waitress tried to brush past, into the kitchen, but Stacy

blocked her path for another moment. "Was she dead when you found her, Jennifer?"

"She wasn't moving. I ran out to tell Walt behind the bar."

"Do any men ever go into the ladies' room?"

"Are you kidding? It's right out by the bar. Any guy tried some funny stuff he'd be hauled out of there quick."

"So if someone killed her it had to be a woman."

"I guess so," she answered a bit dubiously. "But she could have just fallen and hit her head."

"Was there any blood?"

"I didn't see any. Look, I gotta go. I'm working."

Stacy let her pass. There seemed nothing more to be learned here. And yet—

She glanced up at the ceiling, remembering the security cameras they'd installed to discourage drug activity. There were none in the ladies' room, of course, but the tapes might still show something.

Stacy was ten minutes late for her four o'clock appointment with Detective Contento, and she could see he was not pleased.

"I was about to start looking for you," he said.

"Sorry. The traffic was heavy."

"Have a seat. I'm going to have you dictate a statement about last night and then sign it. You didn't bring a lawyer?"

"No. But I have a question for you first. Have you reviewed the tapes from the Runway's security cameras?"

"I just took a quick look," he admitted. "I have them here, but right now we're more interested in the preliminary autopsy report. It indicates the blow to the head didn't kill her. She was asphyxiated."

"How could that be?"

He shrugged. "The killer may have knocked her out and then held a hand over her nose and mouth. There are also traces of drugs in her system that are still being analyzed."

Stacy reached a decision. "I want to view those tapes from the security cameras."

"What do you expect to find there, Miss Worth?"

"Maybe proof that I had nothing to do with her death. A friend of hers told me she might have seen her after I left."

"All right, we'll have a look at the tapes. You can help me identify some of the people."

Stacy followed Detective Contento into the lieutenant's office where there was a television monitor with a VCR player. "These are the tapes from both cameras last night. One is in the dining room

and the other in the bar. Both record single images several seconds apart, like bank cameras, so the action is a bit jerky," he said.

"Let's look at the bar one first," she decided. "That probably shows the ladies' room door."

He turned on the TV and slid the cassette tape into the VCR. A black-and-white image of the bar area appeared on the screen. A timer showed the tape had started at six P.M. the previous day. "What time did you get there?" he asked.

"A bit after eight. I only stayed a half hour, maybe less. Just enough for one beer."

He advanced the tape to eight o'clock and after a few minutes Stacy saw herself come up to the bar and chat with Walt Quentin. The door to the ladies' room was at the corner of the screen, sometimes obscured by customers. After a few more minutes of jerky movement, Maggie Payne appeared in her tight jeans and bare midriff. Stacy saw a corner shot of herself entering the ladies' room, and then Maggie followed after a few moments. The time on the screen was 8:32.

"There I am coming out," she told Contento, then held her breath waiting to see if Maggie emerged. A group from the bar had edged into the picture, obscuring the door as it opened. Then, "There she is at the bar, getting another drink! Still alive!"

The detective grunted and kept on watching. "I didn't see you leave the place."

"No, but there's Chris Ready, one of our reporters. I passed him in the doorway as I was leaving. He'll tell you I was gone then."

About five minutes later Maggie moved away from the bar, heading for the ladies' room once more. "She'd had a bit too much to drink," Contento noted, watching her walk.

It was impossible to tell whether anyone else had entered the room before her, but they could see no sign of anyone entering afterward. The crowd milled about for a few minutes until finally the off-duty waitress, Jennifer Ahearn, pushed through the crowd to the door. She came out almost at once and hurried to the bar where Walt Quentin leaned forward to hear what she was saying. He came out from behind the bar and followed her back to the ladies' room. Then she came out and said something to Chris Ready, apparently telling him to call 911.

"All right," the detective agreed. "I guess you're in the clear."

"But we're no closer to knowing who killed her. If someone was in there already, or followed her in, we didn't see it."

"Maybe," was all he would say. They looked quickly through the dining room tape, seeing the dead woman seated with her friend

Kath, but nothing jumped out at them. "I'm going back to the Runway Club," he said at last. "Want to come along?"

"Sure. Why not?"

He reached for something in the bottom drawer of his desk and asked, "How good an actress are you?"

They reached the club just after six, when the Friday evening crowd was already filling the place. Contento asked Stacy to enter first. The previous night's killing seemed the main topic of conversation, and Stacy heard Maggie Payne's name mentioned several times before she even reached the bar. She was a bit surprised to see Kath Brinker drinking with a couple of guys, hardly mourning the death of her friend.

With the Friday crowd, Walt and Roy were both working behind the bar. She waited till Walt was free and asked if she could have a private word with him. "It's about Maggie Payne."

He looked puzzled but said, "Sure. We'll use the manager's office. He's not in yet."

She followed him to the back office, closing the door behind her. "Make it quick," he told her. "I have to get back to the bar."

"Walt, when I interviewed Maggie in jail last year she told me something I didn't put in my article because I had no proof. She told me you were supplying her and others with drugs."

"What? Are you crazy? I hope you didn't believe her."

"I didn't know what to think. I'd never been here. I didn't know what sort of place it was. But when you told me last night you'd left Farraday's, I wondered if it might have been something to do with drugs."

"So now you're here."

"I'm here and I see the place where Maggie was murdered, possibly because she was trying to make a deal to testify in exchange for her freedom."

"I think the police questioned you about it, didn't they, Stacy? Didn't she scratch you in the ladies' room?"

"You could only have known that if she told you. The security camera tape showed her leaving the ladies' room after my departure and returning to the bar for another drink. Or don't you remember that?"

"What are you trying to say, Stacy?"

"It seemed likely that Maggie was killed by another woman, because a man couldn't have followed her into the ladies' room without being noticed. But one man did just that. You followed her in and everyone saw you."

"She was already dead!"

"No, she was simply knocked out by the Mickey or whatever it was you put in her last drink. She stumbled in there and passed out on the floor, maybe hitting her head on the way down. Jennifer found her and hurried out to get you, as you knew she would. Your bar is the closest thing to the ladies' room, and the manager's never around anyway. You went in, told Jennifer to call 911, and smothered Maggie as you held her in your arms waiting for the police. You couldn't take a chance on her testifying against you."

"Do you expect anyone to believe that?"

"They will when you confess to it. The police are analyzing the drugs found in her body right now."

"Like hell I'll confess! Sure, I wanted her off my back. She came out to the bar and told me about her tiff with you last night. I figured if I knocked her out and she got arrested it would hurt her credibility. I didn't know for sure I'd be called in when someone found her. But it was Jennifer, one of our waitresses, so naturally she came to me. It was the perfect opportunity to finish the job and I took it."

"You killed her."

"Let's say I cured her of her drug addiction."

"I'm going to write this, Walt," Stacy told him.

"Like hell you are! You want to end up like Maggie?"

He grabbed for her then, and she managed only a quick "Help!" before he covered her nose and mouth. But it was enough. Contento and two other detectives were through the office door, wrestling him to the ground.

"You were wearing a wire!" Walt snarled at her.

"Did you think I figured it all out?" she asked him. "This man's the detective."

"On your feet," Contento ordered, snapping on the cuffs.

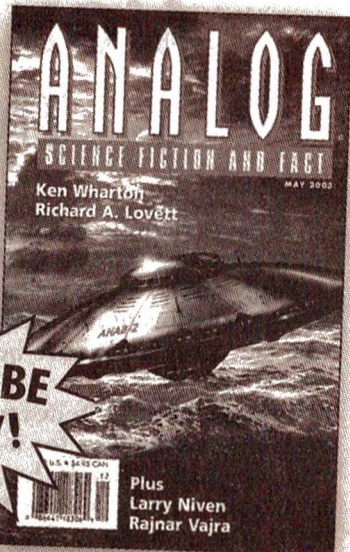
He started reading Walt Quentin his rights, and as they led him out the door Stacy just had time to ask, "Can I interview you in jail?" 🦋

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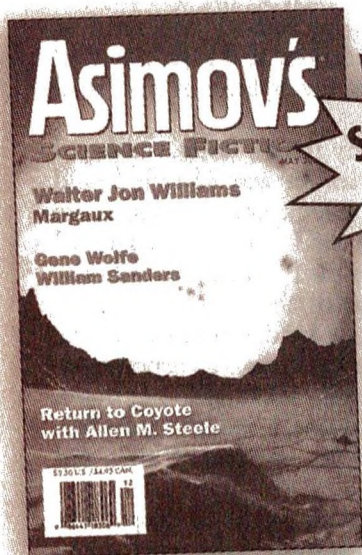
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O. HENRY

CONSCIENCE IN ART

“I never could hold my partner, Andy Tucker, down to legitimate ethics of pure swindling,” said Jeff Peters to me one day.

“Andy had too much imagination to be honest. He used to devise schemes of money-getting so fraudulent and high-financial that they wouldn’t have been allowed in the bylaws of a railroad rebate system.

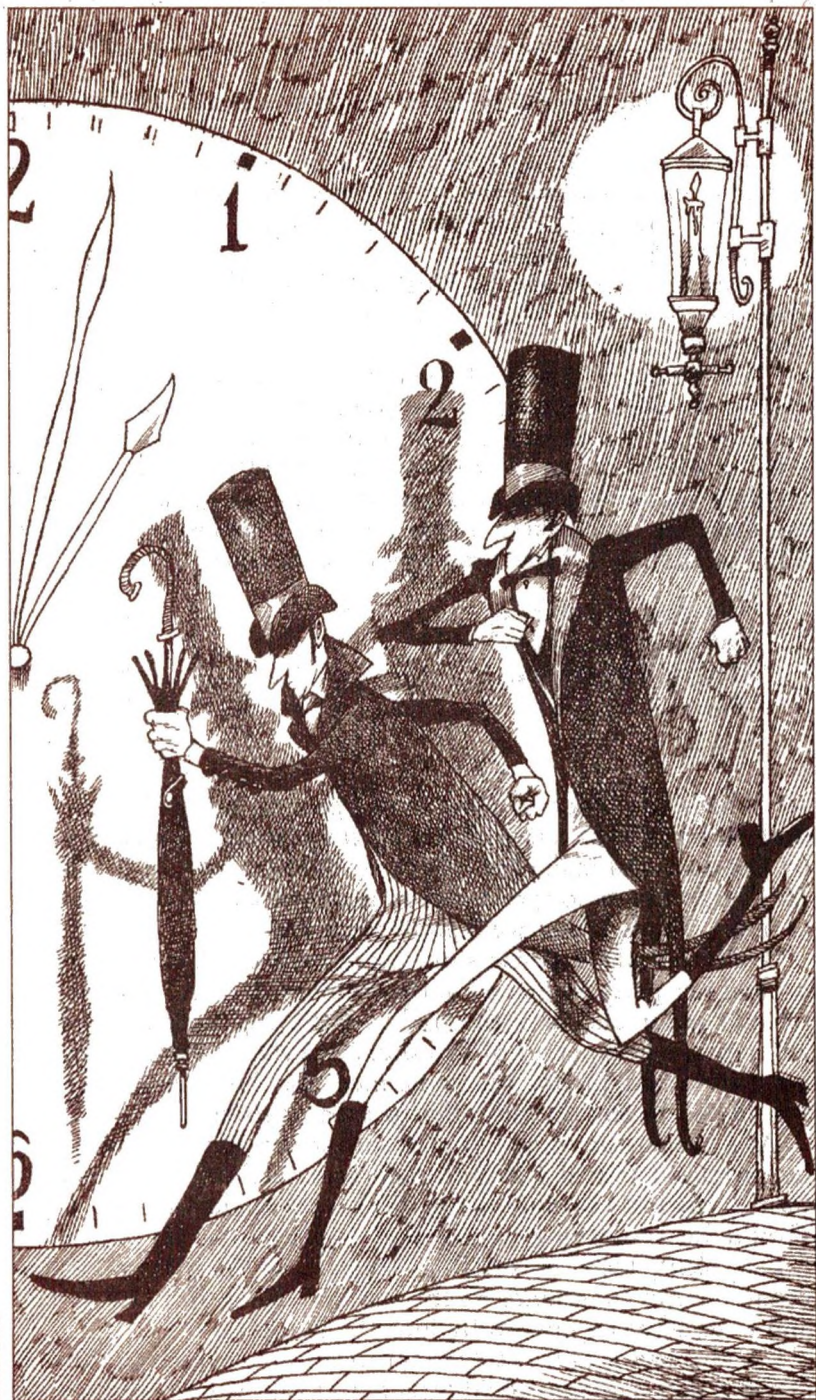
“Myself, I never believed in taking any man’s dollars unless I gave him something for it—something in the way of rolled gold jewelry, garden seeds, lumbago lotion, stock certificates, stove polish or a crack on the head to show for his money. I guess I must have had New England ancestors away back and inherited some of their stanch and rugged fear of the police.

“But Andy’s family tree was in different kind. I don’t think he could have traced his descent any further back than a corporation.

“One summer while we was in the middle West, working down the Ohio valley with a line of family albums, headache powders and roach destroyer, Andy takes one of his notions of high and actionable financiering.

“ ‘Jeff,’ says he, ‘I’ve been thinking that we ought to drop these rutabaga fanciers and give our attention to something more nourishing and prolific. If we keep on snapshooting these hinds for their egg money we’ll be classed as nature fakers. How about plunging into the fastnesses of the skyscraper country and biting some big bull caribous in the chest?’

“ ‘Well,’ says I, ‘you know my idiosyncrasies. I prefer a square, nonillegal style of business such as we are carrying on now. When I take money I want to leave some tangible object in the other fellow’s hands for him to gaze at and to distract his attention from my spoor, even if it’s only a Komical Kuss Trick Finger Ring for Squirting Perfume in a Friend’s Eye. But if you’ve got a fresh idea, Andy,’ says I, ‘let’s have a look at it. I’m not so wedded to



petty graft that I would refuse something better in the way of a subsidy.'

" 'I was thinking,' says Andy, 'of a little hunt without horn, hound or camera among the great herd of the Midas Americanus, commonly known as the Pittsburg millionaires.'

" 'In New York?' I asks.

" 'No, sir,' says Andy, 'in Pittsburg. That's their habitat. They don't like New York. They go there now and then just because it's expected of 'em.'

" 'A Pittsburg Millionaire in New York is like a fly in a cup of hot coffee—he attracts attention and comment, but he don't enjoy it. New York ridicules him for "blowing" so much money in that town of sneaks and snobs, and sneers. The truth is, he don't spend anything while he is true. I saw a memorandum of expenses for a ten days' trip to Bunkum Town made by a Pittsburg man worth \$15,000,000 once. Here's the way he set it down:

R. R. fare to and from	\$	21 00
Cab fare to and from hotel		2 00
Hotel bill \$5 per day		50 00
Tips		5,750 00
TOTAL	\$	5,823 00

" 'That's the voice of New York,' goes on Andy. 'The town's nothing but a head waiter. If you tip it too much it'll go and stand by the door and make fun of you to the hat check boy. When a Pittsburger wants to spend money and have a good time he stays at home. That's where we'll go to catch him.'

"Well, to make a dense story more condensed, me and Andy cached our paris green and antipyrine powders and albums in a friend's cellar, and took the trail to Pittsburg. Andy didn't have any especial prospectus of chicanery and violence drawn up, but he always had plenty of confidence that his immoral nature would rise to any occasion that presented itself.

"As a concession to my ideas of self-preservation and rectitude he promised that if I should take an active and incriminating part in any little business venture that we might work up, there should be something actual and cognizant to the senses of touch, sight, taste or smell to transfer to the victim for the money so my conscience might rest easy. After that I felt better and entered more cheerfully into the foul play.

" 'Andy,' says I, as we strayed through the smoke along the cinderpath they call Smithfield Street, 'had you figured out how we

are going to get acquainted with these coke kings and pig iron squeezers? Not that I would decry my own worth or system of drawing-room deportment, and work with the olive fork and pie knife,' says I, 'but isn't the entree nous into the salons of the stogie smokers going to be harder than you imagined?'

" 'If there's any handicap at all,' says Andy, 'it's our own refinement and inherent culture. Pittsburg millionaires are a fine body of plain, wholehearted, unassuming, democratic men.

" 'They are rough but uncivil in their manners, and though their ways are boisterous and unpolished, under it all they have a great deal of impoliteness and discourtesy. Nearly every one of 'em rose from obscurity,' says Andy, 'and they'll live in it till the town gets to using smoke consumers. If we act simple and unaffected and don't go too far from the saloons and keep making a noise like an import duty on steel rails we won't have any trouble in meeting some of 'em socially.'

"Well, Andy and me drifted about town three or four days getting our bearings. We got to knowing several millionaires by sight.

"One used to stop his automobile in front of our hotel and have a quart of champagne brought out to him. When the waiter opened it he'd turn it up to his mouth and drink it out of the bottle. That showed he used to be a glass-blower before he made his money.

"One evening Andy failed to come to the hotel for dinner. About 11 o'clock he came into my room.

" 'Landed one, Jeff,' says he. 'Twelve millions. Oil, rolling mills, real estate and natural gas. He's a fine man; no airs about him. Made all his money in the last five years. He's got professors posting him up now on education—arts and literature and haberdashery and such things.

" 'When I saw him he'd just won a bet of \$10,000 with a Steel Corporation man that there'd be four suicides in the Allegheny rolling mills today. So everybody in sight had to walk up and have drinks on him. He took a fancy to me and asked me to dinner with him. We went to a restaurant in Diamond Alley and sat on stools and had sparkling Moselle and clam chowder and apple fritters.

" 'Then he wanted to show me his bachelor apartment on Liberty Street. He's got ten rooms over a fish market with privilege of the bath on the next floor above. He told me it cost him \$18,000 to furnish his apartment, and I believe it.

" 'He's got \$40,000 worth of pictures in one room, and \$20,000 worth of curios and antiques in another. His name's Scudder, and

he's 45, and taking lessons on the piano and 15,000 barrels of oil a day out of his wells.'

" 'All right,' says I. 'Preliminary canter satisfactory. But, kay vooly, voo? What good is the art junk to us? And the oil?'

" 'Now, that man,' says Andy, sitting thoughtfully on the bed, 'ain't what you would call an ordinary scutt. When he was showing me his cabinet of art curios his face lighted up like the door of a coke oven. He says that if some of his big deals go through he'll make J. P. Morgan's collection of sweatshop tapestry and Augusta, Me., beadwork look like the contents of an ostrich's craw thrown on a screen by a magic lantern.

" 'And then he showed me a little carving,' went on Andy, 'that anybody could see was a wonderful thing. It was something like 2,000 years old, he said. It was a lotus flower with a woman's face in it carved out of a solid piece of ivory.

" 'Scudder looks it up in a catalogue and describes it. An Egyptian carver named Khafra made two of 'em for King Ramses II about the year B.C. The other one can't be found. The junkshops and antique bugs have rubbered all Europe for it, but it seems to be out of stock. Scudder paid \$2,000 for the one he has.'

" 'Oh, well,' says I, 'this sounds like the purling of a rill to me. I thought we came here to teach the millionaires business, instead of learning art from 'em?'

" 'Be patient,' says Andy, kindly. 'Maybe we will see a rift in the smoke ere long.'

"All the next afternoon Andy was out. I didn't see him until about noon. He came to the hotel and called me into his room across the hall. He pulled a roundish bundle about as big as a goose egg out of his pocket and unwrapped it. It was an ivory carving just as he had described the millionaire's to me.

" 'I went in an old second-hand store and pawnshop a while ago,' says Andy, 'and I see this half hidden under a lot of old daggers and truck. The pawnbroker said he'd had it several years and thinks it was soaked by some Arabs or Turks or some foreign dubs that used to live down by the river.

" 'I offered him \$2 for it, and I must have looked like I wanted it, for he said it would be taking the pumpnickel out of his children's mouths to hold any conversation that did not lead up to a price of \$335. I finally got it for \$25.

" 'Jeff,' goes on Andy, 'this is the exact counterpart of Scudder's carving. It's absolutely a dead ringer for it. He'll pay \$2,000 for it as quick as he'd tuck a napkin under his chin. And why shouldn't

it be the genuine other one, anyhow, that the old gypsy whittled out?’

“ ‘Why not, indeed?’ says I. ‘And how shall we go about compelling him to make a voluntary purchase of it?’

“ ‘Andy had his plan all ready, and I’ll tell you how we carried it out.

“ ‘I got a pair of blue spectacles, put on my black frock coat, rumpled my hair up and became Prof. Pickleman. I went to another hotel, registered, and sent a telegram to Scudder to come see me at once on important art business. The elevator dumped him on me in less than an hour. He was a foggy man with a clarion voice, smelling of Connecticut wrappers and naphtha.

“ ‘Hello, Profess!’ he shouts. ‘How’s your conduct?’

“ ‘I rumpled my hair some more and gave him a blue glass stare.

“ ‘Sir,’ says I. ‘Are you Cornelius T. Scudder? Of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania?’

“ ‘I am,’ says he. ‘Come out and have a drink.’

“ ‘I have neither the time nor the desire,’ says I, ‘for such harmful and deleterious amusements. I have come from New York,’ says I, ‘on a matter of busi—on a matter of art.

“ ‘I learned that you are the owner of an Egyptian ivory carving of the time of Ramses II, representing the head of Queen Isis in a lotus flower. There were only two of such carvings made. One has been lost for many years. I recently discovered and purchased the other in a pawn—in an obscure museum in Vienna. I wish to purchase yours. Name your price.’

“ ‘Well, the great ice jams, Profess!’ says Scudder. ‘Have you found the other one? Me sell? No. I don’t guess Cornelius Scudder needs to sell anything that he wants to keep. Have you got the carving with you, Profess?’

“ ‘I shows it to Scudder. He examines it careful all over.

“ ‘It’s the article,’ says he. ‘It’s a duplicate of mine, every line and curve of it. Tell you what I’ll do,’ he says. ‘I won’t sell, but I’ll buy. Give you \$2,500 for yours.’

“ ‘Since you won’t sell, I will,’ says I. ‘Large bills please. I’m a man of few words. I must return to New York tonight. I lecture tomorrow at the aquarium.’

“ ‘Scudder sends a check down and the hotel cashes it. He goes off with the piece of antiquity and I hurry back to Andy’s hotel, according to arrangement.

“ ‘Andy is walking up and down the room looking at his watch.

“ ‘Well?’ he says.

“ ‘Twenty-five hundred,’ says I. ‘Cash.’

" 'We've got just eleven minutes,' says Andy, 'to catch the B. & O. westbound. Grab your baggage.'

" 'What's the hurry?' says I. 'It was a square deal. And even if it was only an imitation of the original carving it'll take him some time to find it out. He seemed to be sure it was the genuine article.'

" 'It was,' says Andy. 'It was his own. When I was looking at his curios yesterday he stepped out of the room for a moment and I pocketed it. Now, will you pick up your suitcase and hurry?'

" 'Then,' says I, 'why was that story about finding another one in the pawn—'

" 'Oh,' says Andy, 'out of respect for that conscience of yours. Come on.' " 🐉

Solution to the March "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

A. Whole-wheat	G. Autograph	O. New Hampshire
B. Individual	H. Freebie	P. Emotional
C. Raided	I. Teahouse	Q. Roundabout
D. Interview	J. Earthshaking	R. Scheme
E. Swallowing	K. Ramshackle	S. Thawed
F. High school	L. Deuce	T. Outnumber
	M. Irish whiskey	U. Revenue
	N. Necklace	V. Yielded

QUOTATION

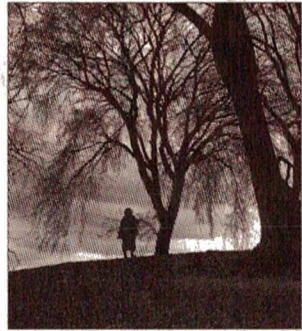
Editor—W(illiam) IRISH

Work—"AFTER-DINNER STORY"

"Surely, death was somewhere inside the house here with me. . . . I couldn't hear him. Not even a creak. A creak would have been a relief, would have placed him. This was like being shut up in the dark with . . . a gliding, coiling cobra somewhere around you."

THE STORY THAT WON

The October Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Honorable mentions go to Judith A. Vogel of Wading River, New Jersey; Dana Quarrels of New York, New York; Tolonda Ricard-Age of Corpus Christi, Texas; Larry Stephens of Lincoln, Nebraska; Leslie Pfost of Tacoma, Washington; Martha Dobson of Hawthorne, Florida; Kathryn Dean of Austin, Texas; Pamela Karavolos of Rosamond, California; and Alan Keith Parker of Huntsville, Alabama.



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DESIRE UNDER THE ELM

ROBERT KESLING

“**S**ince we’ll be a-sharin’ this tiny room here in Portsmouth gaol,” I said ter me beefy cellmate, “we mought as well git acquainted. Me name is Lucybelle Hoskins and I was Lady Wormsley’s downstairs maid—yer know, that big mansion on Kings Street. Anyhow, I fell in love with Harry Timmons. Take my advice, sister, don’t *never* fall fer a Cockney fisherman. That’s why I’m here.

“We needed money ter git married. ‘Lucybelle darlin’,’ Harry says, ‘nick the old lady’s diamond necklace tomorrer mornin’. Hi’ll be waitin’ at the elm for a quick getaway. We’ll be orff and git married!’

“Like a fool I swiped the necklace and hiked up ter that big elm tree on the hill overlookin’ the port. The weather’d turned cold—remember that ice storm last Tuesday? Sure you do. I kept stompin’ me feet whilst waitin’ fer Harry. Any minute he’ll come, I told meself. He didn’t. So there I stood, shiverin’ in me thin-soled shoes, when the coppers come and arrested me.

“And know the funny part, sister? This’ll slay you. I finally figured it out. When Harry said, ‘Hi’ll be waitin’ at the ‘elm,’ he meant the *helm* of his fishin’ boat. He’s probably still wonderin’ why I never showed . . . Now, what’s your story?”

“Forget about Harry,” growled my cellmate, flexin’ her muscles. “I’m his legal married wife. When I discovered he’s two-timin’ me agin, I beat hell outta the rotter. Harry’s in General Hospital—and *we’re penned in here together!*”

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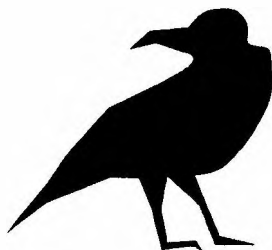
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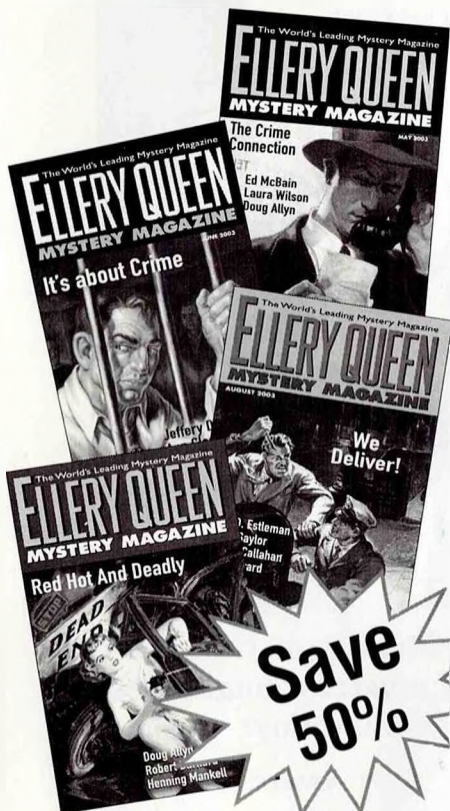
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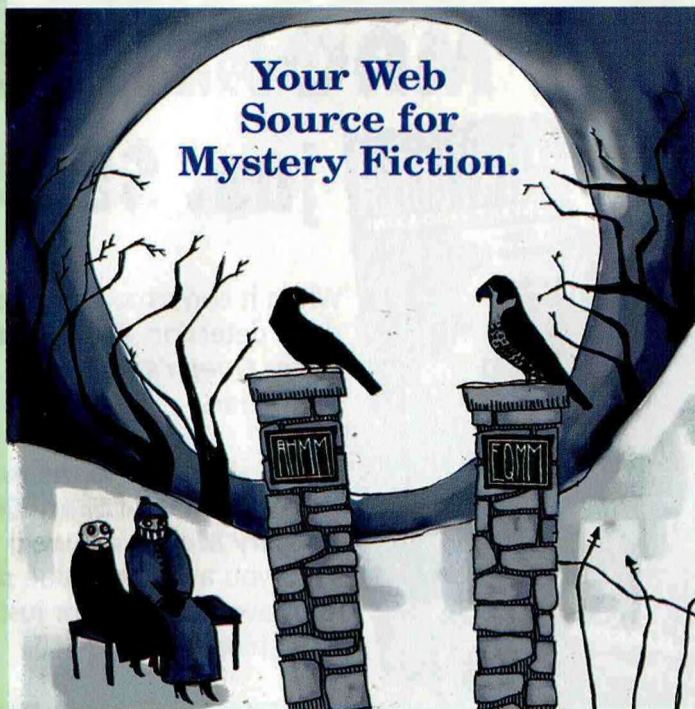
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