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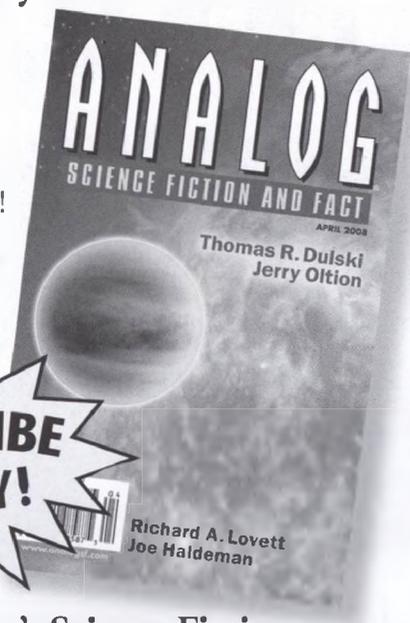
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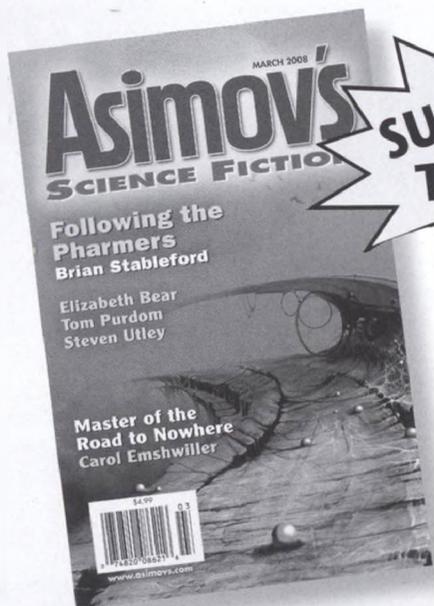
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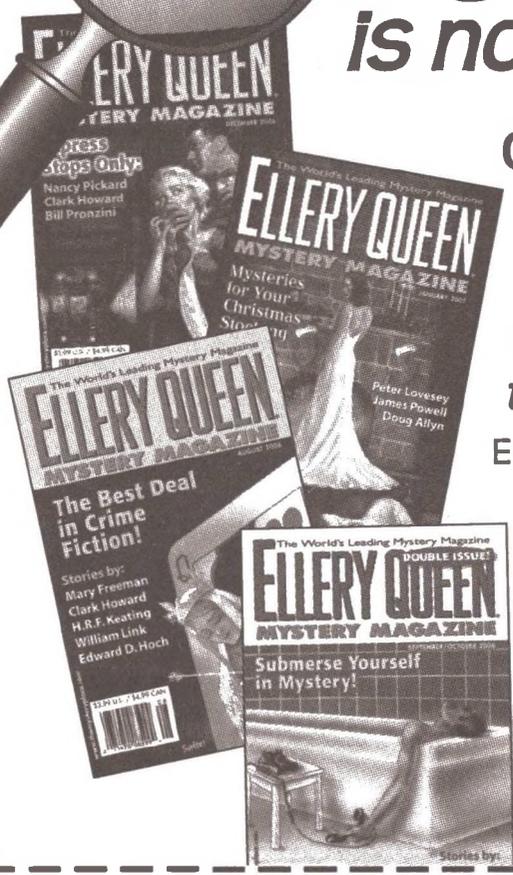
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# ALFRED MYSTERY MAGAZINE HITCHCOCK®

November 2010

*Cover by Justine Ehlers*

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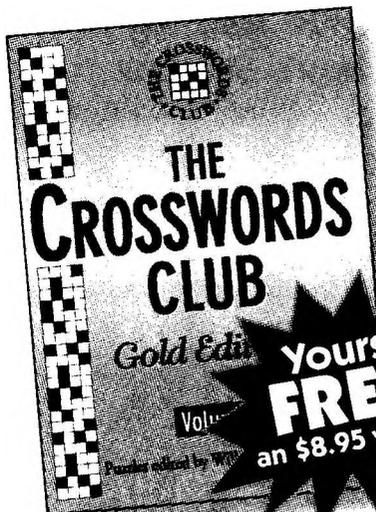
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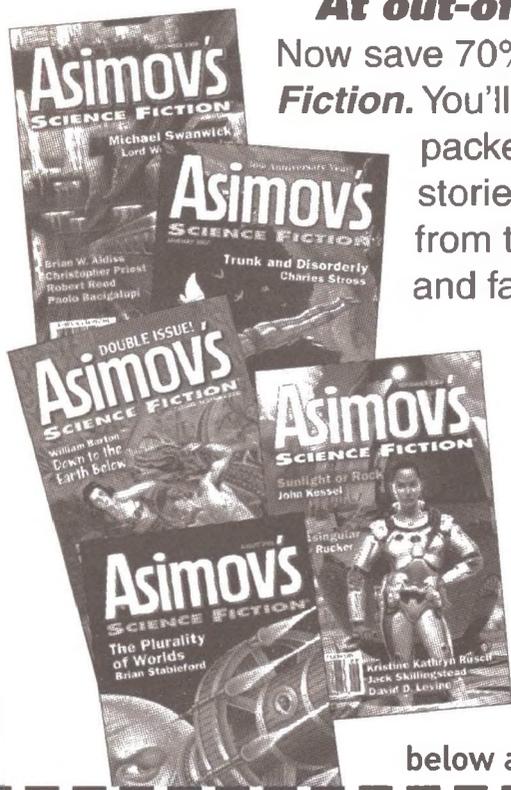
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# Crime Blotter

**Wanted:** Jim Fusilli, John H. Dirckx, and Brendan DuBois for award-worthy fiction. Fusilli's Edgar-nominated story "Digby, Attorney at Law" (May 2009) has been shortlisted for a Macavity Award, sponsored by Mystery Readers International, while Dirckx's "Real Men Die" (September 2009) and DuBois's "The High House Writer" (July/August 2009) have both been named finalists for the Barry Award, sponsored by Deadly Pleasures. Congratulations and good luck to all three!

**In custody:** this month's issue features the return of Gar Anthony Haywood's P.I. Aaron Gunner, last seen in the 1999 novel *All the Lucky Ones Are Dead*. Welcome back!

**Unlawful gathering (anticipated):** As we go to press, we are looking forward to the 2010 Bouchercon in San Francisco. Bouchercon is one of the largest conventions of mystery writers and readers, with something for everyone. See you there!

LINDA LANDRIGAN, EDITOR

---

## The Lineup

**STEVEN GORE** is the author of the thriller *Final Target* (HarperCollins). His novel *Absolute Risk* comes out in November.

**CATHRYN GRANT's** short fiction has appeared in AHMM, EQMM, and in the e-zine *Every Day Fiction*. She is at work on a novel set in Silicon Valley.

**Booked & Printed** columnist **ROBERT C. HAHN** reviews mysteries for *Publishers Weekly* and the *New York Post*.

**GAR ANTHONY HAYWOOD** is the author of eleven crime novels, including the Shamus-winning *Fear of the Dark* and his latest, *Cemetery Road* (Severn House). This is his first AHMM publication.

Translator **NATHAN HOROWITZ** is a writer and teacher living in Vienna.

**ERIC RUTTER's** story "Runaway" appeared in the September 2009 issue of AHMM.

**BILLY O'CALLAGHAN** has published two story collections, *In Too Deep* and *In Exile* (Mercier Press).

"Shell Game" is **NEIL SCHOFIELD's** 12th story for AHMM. "Somewhere Elsie" appeared the May 2009 issue of AHMM.

**ABDÓN UBIDIA** is the literary director of Editorial El Conejo in Quito, Ecuador. He is the author of *Wolves' Dream* (Latin American Literary Review Press) and *Funventions: A Book of Fantasies and Utopias*.

**JAMES LINCOLN WARREN** selected and introduced our October 2009 Mystery Classic "Space-time for Springers" by Fritz Leiber.

# THREE STRIKES

---

STEVEN GORE

“I am gonna roll the dice,” Tank McBain told Evan Gordon inside the attorney’s visiting room in the San Francisco County Jail.

“There aren’t any dice to roll.” Evan pointed at the police report lying on the metal table between them. “They’ve got two eyewitness IDs. They’ve got a partial license plate number on a truck that matches yours, and they’ve got the gun.”

Looking over at his jumpsuited client, Evan wondered why he’d bothered to argue. No way Tank would take the case to trial. Twelve years in the Public Defender’s Office had taught him that the biker-crank-dealer-blue-tattooed Tanks of the world didn’t do trials. They’d just sic their county-paid lawyers on the evidence, delay the trial to give the prosecution witnesses time to fade in body or in memory, and then on the eve of jury selection cut a deal and go do their time.

“We don’t gotta cave on the gun,” Tank said. “Go squeeze some money out of your boss, and we’ll hire our own ballistics guy.”

Evan shook his head. “The lines and grooves in the slug they pulled out of the victim—”

“Don’t call that punk a victim—”

“—were so distinct, it was like a signature.”

Tank’s face flushed. He leaned his six foot four-inch body forward and thumped the table with his knuckles. “My buddy’s sister is the real victim. After what that scumbag did to her, I’d have killed him myself if I had the chance.”

“Then who shot him?”

“I ain’t no snitch.”

“What about the gun behind the seat of your pickup?”

Tank shrugged. “Somebody must’ve tossed it back there.”

Evan flipped open the police report, ran his finger halfway down the evidence list, then spun it around and asked, “Like this box of women’s jewelry?”

Tank sat back. “That’s got nothing to do with this case, and I can’t talk about it.”

Evan smirked. “Because you’re not a snitch?”

“What good’s an alibi if you can’t use it?”



Evan's eyes narrowed. "You mean you were doing a burglary at the time of the homicide?"

Tank nodded. "A house down in San Jose."

"Any chance you left prints?"

Tank reached for Evan's pen and legal pad and sketched a floor plan.

"The jewelry was in the drawer of a dressing table between the closet and the bedroom." Tank tapped the ballpoint along the side of what looked to Evan like a narrow hallway. "The place smelled like Victoria's Secret the night before Valentine's Day. My allergies kicked in and I sneezed. About ripped my head apart. I had to take off my glove to open a box of Kleenex so I could blow my nose. I didn't want to spray no more DNA around."

Evan's fists clenched under the table. Tank would still have to do some time, but this could be the best homicide alibi that had ever come walking through the jailhouse door. But the jury's verdict would rest on a fact that Evan wasn't certain would ever be in evidence.

"How can you be sure of the time?" Evan asked.

"Easy. The guy I was with tripped the alarm when he walked into the home office. Some kind of motion detector." Tank pointed around the glass-walled interviewing room as if it were crisscrossed with sensors. "That's where we were really headed. The jewelry was just a cover for what we were after: a hundred grand the guy was supposed to launder from a check scam. I looked at my watch: 10:12 P.M. No way I could've done the, uh, victim fifteen minutes later in San Francisco."

"It's a hell of a defense," Evan said. "The most you'd do on the burglary is six years. With good time credits, you'd be out in four."

Tank shook his head. "It wasn't just a burglary. There'll be an arson charge because my partner tried to torch the place to cover up the theft."

Evan shrugged. "So you do a few more years."

"It won't be just a few." Tank held up a forefinger. "I got one strike already." He held up two more fingers. "If I get convicted on both . . ."

Evan felt air escape in a rush from the balloon of his legal imagination. "And it's three strikes."

"The most I'd get on a first-degree murder is twenty-five to life. But arson and burglary would mean I'd have to serve back-to-back twenty-fives before I got paroled. Fifty years minimum. And no credits. I'd be eighty before they opened the gate."

Evan exhaled, shaking his head. "And on a murder, you'd get a parole hearing after twenty-five."

"See, that's why I'm gonna roll the dice. Maybe I'll get lucky and I walk. The worst that happens is that I get paroled in twenty-five, thirty years. People in my family who don't get murdered live into their nineties and I'll only be sixty when I get out."

Tank leaned forward and rested his forearms on the table. "All I need you to do is to push the trial past the November election. Three Strikes is on the ballot. If it gets overturned, we can go with the alibi and I'll only have

to do time on the burglary and arson." Tank grinned and spread his hands toward Evan. "You're a smart guy, file some motions or something."

Evan thought for a moment. Maybe he could work it. "I've got a couple of trials stacked up," he said. "I'll keep kicking yours down the road until the judge gets antsy."

"Even if the ballot measure loses," Tank said, shrugging, "maybe the witnesses will decide they got better things to do than testify against a sweet guy like me."

Evan swallowed. "You're not going to . . ."

"Nah, maybe they'll just take a hike all on their own."

"How's it look?" Tank asked Evan ten months later in the same interviewing room.

"How's what look?"

"The trial."

"Judge Huffman says plead out or start trial on Monday."

"The D.A. offering anything?"

"Nope. Still twenty-five to life."

"What about a manslaughter? A flat sixteen."

"How? You only get a manslaughter if there's evidence that you killed the guy in a heat of passion or you mistakenly thought your life was in danger. He was shot in the back of the head from fifteen feet. Makes it hard to argue mistaken self-defense. And the witnesses all say you were—"

"It wasn't me."

"—lying in wait. So it wasn't heat of passion."

Tank folded his arms across his chest. His biceps were two inches thicker than when he was first booked.

"I told you to lay off the weights," Evan said. "You're going to scare the hell out of the jury. They'll want to convict you of something just to keep you off the street."

"It's not like I'm accused of strangling the guy. Anyway, I'm bored in here." Tank unfolded his arms. "What about the other thing?"

"The polls show the Three Strikes reform measure is leading by three points."

"With a margin of error of twenty-five years."

"Give or take."

Tank leaned back in his chair and thought for a moment.

"When do we have to decide if we're going with the alibi defense?" Tank asked.

"It's not only about us deciding. We have to inform the D.A. in advance."

"How far?"

"The case law says we have to tell him only when we decide, but Huffman could preclude us from using it if we don't let the D.A. know soon enough."

"Could we get a hearing?"

"I think Huffman would have to give us one," Evan said. "It's a factual

issue about how and when we decided. He'll need a record so a conviction wouldn't get thrown out on appeal."

Evan drew a calendar on his legal pad.

"The way I figure it, the D.A.'s case will take a week, until Friday afternoon. We'll have to start ours on Monday, but the election isn't until Tuesday." He jabbed his pen on Wednesday. "We need a way to kick the trial over."

Tank alerted to movement on the other side of the windows behind Evan.

"See that blond-haired dude?" Tank said.

Evan turned and picked out a tall tattooed inmate in a red jumpsuit issued by the jail to designate violent prisoners.

"He's the guy I did the burglary with. Jimmie Fagener." Tank reached into a soiled manila envelope on the metal table, then handed Evan a stack of papers. "He gave me his case file. He don't need it no more. He's on his way to the joint and has got no grounds to appeal. Just stopped here to clear a warrant." Tank pointed at the top sheet. "Look at the ID tech's report."

Evan skimmed down the evidence list. Thirty latents had been lifted. Two partials from a Kleenex box.

Tank was nodding when Evan looked up. "Now look at the interview the detectives did with Jimmie."

Evan flipped to the next page, read two paragraphs, then looked up.

"He snitched you off. He says you did the burglary. Claims he wasn't even there." Evan reached out to return the papers. "The cops already know about you."

Tank held up his hand. "Keep reading. The witnesses only saw one guy running away and they'd already matched his prints to latents in the office, so they didn't believe him when he blamed it on me."

Evan read further. The next paragraph covered the cops confronting Jimmie with his latents, then Jimmie deciding he wanted a lawyer.

Evan shook his head. "Those idiots never checked the partials from the Kleenex box."

"No reason to. They had their man."

Evan stood up and began gathering his files. "I need to get a court order to keep the sheriff from shipping him off."

"Sit down." Tank waved Evan back into his seat. "He won't testify. He's one of those snakes that'll stab you in the back behind closed doors, but he'll never testify out in the open. He'll more likely take a swing at the judge than take the oath."

**I**t was called making a bulletproof record for the inevitable appeal, and Judge Huffman strode into the courtroom like he was wearing Kevlar from head to toe.

Huffman slipped on his reading glasses as he sat down. Evan got the message: Huffman wasn't interested in hearing oral argument on Evan's

continuance motion. The written decision lay before him on the bench, fresh from his clerk's printer.

"Is there further argument?" Huffman asked, peering down at Evan like disapproving father. "Or is the matter submitted?"

Evan figured he'd save his energy for a motion he might win. "Submitted."

Huffman tilted his head toward Assistant District Attorney Chalmers Bezener and raised his eyebrows.

"Submitted, Your Honor."

Huffman began reading. "Let the record reflect that a hearing was held in chambers, outside of the presence of the district attorney, on the matter of defendant's motion for a continuance. The hearing took place in camera for two reasons. One, because it required the disclosure of certain attorney-client matters relating to defense strategy. And two, it impinged on the defendant's Fifth Amendment right not to incriminate himself." Huffman looked up from the text. "The defendant's motion is denied."

Huffman slipped off his reading glasses, then glared at Evan. "Suffice it to say, this Court, its calendar, and the People's right to swift and certain justice shall not be subject to the whims of the voters."

Bezener's head snapped toward Evan, "What the . . . ?" His chair jerked backwards as he rose to his feet. "Your Honor—"

"Mr. Bezener, I said the motion is denied. Unless you now wish to move for a continuance, I suggest you sit down."

Bezener sat.

Huffman began reading again. "The defense has also offered a motion to permit the testimony of an expert witness regarding eyewitness identification. I don't believe the jurors in this matter need to be reminded by a white coat that eyewitnesses are sometimes wrong. They are perfectly capable of discerning that life lesson for themselves. Therefore, under Evidence Code Section 352, I find that the probative value of this testimony is substantially outweighed by the probability that its admission will necessitate an undue consumption of time. The motion is denied."

Huffman signed the decision, then set it aside.

"Now, Mr. Gordon, you have indicated your intention to file two additional motions. One requesting the court to immunize a certain, unnamed witness, and one for belated permission to present an alibi defense."

Bezener leapt up again. "Your Honor, the People—"

"I know, Mr. Bezener. I'll insure that you have sufficient notice and time to prepare your rebuttal."

"Your Honor, once the trial starts, jeopardy attaches. The People don't get a second chance."

"I'll bear that in mind, Mr. Bezener."

Huffman then offered Evan a patronizing smile. "What progress have we made, Counsel?"

Evan glanced down at Tank, who merely shrugged, his unblinking eyes staring forward.

"None, Your Honor. You'll know when I know."  
"Jury selection will begin at two o'clock."

Assistant District Attorney Bezener's case lasted six days.

Eyewitnesses: unimpeachable.

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The jurors kept glancing back and forth between Evan and Tank, their narrowed eyes asking why they'd been forced to waste a week of their lives on an indefensible case. It was obvious to Evan that on the verdict forms in their minds' eyes, they'd already checked the box marked guilty.

Judge Huffman grinned at Evan as he took his seat behind the bench.

"Mr. Gordon, have you consulted with your co-counsel Mr. Gallup, Mr. Harris, Mr. Pew, and Ms. L.A. Times?"

Evan leaned toward Tank sitting next to him at the counsel table, then said in a low voice, "Time to roll the dice again. What do you want to do?"

Tank glanced at his wife sitting behind him in the first row of the gallery. She rolled over her fist and raised her right thumb.

"The polls say Three Strikes is on its way out," Tank whispered to Evan. "Let's go for it."

Evan rose. "The defense seeks permission of the court to enter an alibi defense."

Bezener stood and glared at Evan. "The People object to the late notice."

Huffman looked back and forth between them and said, "Then let's brief the matter. We'll continue the trial until tomorrow morning."

"I'd also like to brief the defense immunity motion," Evan said.

"I think that's premature," Huffman said, "as the witness hasn't yet invoked his privilege against self-incrimination."

"Your Honor," Evan began the following morning, "I've been advised that Jimmie Fagener will assert his Fifth Amendment privilege if called as a witness in this matter."

"Let's have him do it before we call in the jury," Huffman pointed at the bailiff. "Bring in the witness."

Jimmie Fagener glowered at Tank as he was led into the courtroom and into the witness box. One bailiff stood to his right to block an escape, and one to his left to block an assault on the judge.

"I take the Fifth," Fagener said.

Huffman didn't bother looking over at Fagener. "No one has asked you anything yet."

The clerk stood, but didn't approach the witness. "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?"

"Screw you. I take the Fifth."

Huffman glanced down at the clerk. "Let the record reflect that the witness answered in the affirmative."

"Your Honor," Evan said, "I think he's made his position clear. I therefore move for a compulsion order."

Fagener looked up at Huffman. "What's a compulsion order?"

"It means I give you immunity and you have to testify or get held in contempt."

"How much can I get for contempt?"

"A year."

Jimmie rolled up his jumpsuit sleeve and pointed at a "Hard Time is My Time" tattoo on the inside of his forearm. "Piece of cake."

Huffman raised an eyebrow at Evan. "You really want to go through with this?"

Tank elbowed Evan, then shook his head.

"Yes, Your Honor."

Tank elbowed him again. Evan leaned over and whispered, "We need to make a record."

Huffman didn't wait for the D.A.'s opposition. "Granted."

"Mr. Fagener," Evan began, "would you please state your full name for the record."

Jimmie glanced at Huffman. "Hit me, Judge."

"I hereby find you in contempt. One year in the San Francisco County Jail."

The clerk swung around and looked up at Huffman. "Your Honor, is that consecutive or concurrent? I mean, does he do the county time first, then go to his state prison sentence, or does he go to state prison, then come back to do the year in county jail?"

Huffman looked over at the bailiff.

"Your Honor, it's a whole lot simpler for the Sheriff's Department if it's concurrent."

"Make it concurrent."

Huffman waited until Fagener was removed from the courtroom, then smirked at Evan. "Now, wasn't that entertaining?"

Tank jabbed Evan again. "Now you've got the judge pissed off."

Evan jabbed him back. "Why don't you just let me be the lawyer? I told you, we needed to make a record."

"Does the defense need a recess?" Huffman asked.

"No, Your Honor."

"Let's take one anyway. Ten minutes. We'll bring the jury in at nine fifteen."

"Your Honor," the bailiff interjected, "the jurors have asked if they can leave early today so they'll have time to vote."

Huffman glanced back and forth between Evan and Bezener. "Hearing no objection, we'll break at four o'clock this afternoon."

"Mr. Gordon, call your first witness."

Evan rose from the counsel table. "The defense calls Dr. Albert Fredrickson."

A pale man with red eyes rose from the first row of the gallery, then pushed through the swinging wooden gate. Without waiting for directions, he walked within a few feet of the clerk and raised his right hand. He took the oath, then climbed into the witness box.

"Your Honor," Evan said, looking up at Judge Huffman, "as Dr. Fredrickson has testified many times for the prosecution over the years, may I skip the general voir dire and proceed to the specific area of fingerprint identification?"

Bezener rose. "The People will stipulate to the qualifications of Dr. Fredrickson in that area."

Judge Huffman didn't wait for Evan's response. "So stipulated."

The rest was easy. Seven questions later, Dr. Fredrickson gave Evan his first building block: "The partial latents lifted from the Kleenex box match the fingerprints of Tank McBain."

"Nothing further," Evan said, turning toward Bezener. "Your witness."

Bezener rose again. "The People have no questions for Dr. Fredrickson."

Evan next called the burglary victim who testified that it was her jewelry that had been recovered from Tank's truck and that had been sitting in evidence as unclaimed property for the last eleven months. She also testified that she'd purchased the Kleenex a week before the burglary. She remembered it because it had a little slice in the top from the grocery clerk's box cutter.

"The defense now calls San Jose Police Detective Howard McCurdy."

A middle-aged man in a crisp blue suit strode up to the witness box, took the oath, and then sat in the still-warm seat.

"Detective McCurdy, do you recall investigating a burglary that occurred in San Jose on the evening of March tenth last year?"

"Yes."

"Where did that take place?"

"At 4642 Willow Brook Drive, San Jose."

"And what time did that burglary occur?"

"It was called into SJPD dispatch by the Sentry Alarm Company at 10:14 P.M."

"Did you determine when the alarm was first received by Sentry?"

Bezener stood. "Objection, hearsay."

"Mr. Bezener," Huffman said, "do you really want to waste the jurors' valuable time calling someone from the alarm company to testify to what Detective McCurdy could tell us in two seconds?"

Bezener gasped that it was a rhetorical question and sat down.

"Overruled. You may answer."

"The alarm went off at 10:12."

"And what time was the homicide in San Francisco?"

"Ten twenty-seven."

"And what is the distance between the burglary scene in San Jose and the homicide scene in San Francisco?"

McCurdy raised his eyebrows toward Bezener, begging for an objection, but the D.A. wasn't ready to go to war over two more seconds.

"About forty miles."

"Does the defendant own a jet?"

"Objection! Your Honor, Mr. Gordon—"

"Sustained."

"Detective McCurdy, did you make any arrests in connection with the burglary at 4642 Willow Brook Drive?"

"Yes. Jimmie Fagener."

"Did you interview Jimmie Fagener?"

Bezener jumped to his feet. "Objection. Hearsay."

"You're premature, Mr. Bezener," Huffman said. "Mr. Gordon only asked whether Detective McCurdy interviewed Jimmie Fagener, not what Mr. Fagener said, if anything. Overruled. You may answer the question."

"Yes. I interviewed Jimmie Fagener."

"Did you ask him who committed the burglary?"

Bezener jumped up again. "Objection. Leading. Hearsay."

"Your leading objection is sustained." Huffman peered down at Evan like a disappointed criminal procedure professor. "Mr. Gordon, just ask Detective Huffman what questions he asked, not if he asked a particular question." Huffman redirected his disappointment toward Bezener. "And as to the hearsay objection? Sorry, Mr. Bezener, still premature articulation. Overruled."

Evan continued. "What did you ask Jimmie Fagener?"

"I asked him if he committed the burglary."

"And what did he say?"

"Objection. Hearsay."

Evan spoke before Huffman could rule. "I'd like to be heard, Your Honor."

"Why don't we discuss this outside the presence of the jury," Huffman said, signaling the bailiff, who herded the jurors through the jury room door.

"Mr. Gordon, you had something to say?"

"The statements of Jimmie Fagener to Detective McCurdy are admissible under Evidence Code Sections 1250 and 1251."

Evan glanced back at Tank, giving him an I-told-you-so wink.

"First, Your Honor, the record shows that Jimmie Fagener is unavailable as a witness. He refused to testify even after the court issued the compulsion order. And second, what Fagener said is not being offered for the truth of the matter, only as to his state of mind."

"Of course it's being offered for the truth of the matter," Bezener said, his voice rising to a whine. "The defendant's whole defense is that he was committing a burglary when the murder occurred."

"Your Honor," Evan said, "the evidence supporting his defense are his fingerprints at the scene of the crime and his possession of the stolen jewelry, not what a scumbag snitch like Fagener has to say."

"Is it wise to refer to your own witness as a scumbag snitch?" Huffman asked, smiling.

"As I said, his statement is only being offered as to his state of mind."

"But Your Honor—" Bezener paused as a clerk from his office slipped next to him and handed him a note. He looked at it and smiled, then turned toward Evan mouthing the words "Exit polls, sixty-forty, you lose," and making a thumbs-down motion.

"Mr. Bezener . . . Mr. Bezener?"

"Sorry, Your Honor."

"Did you have something further?"

"No, Your Honor."

"Overruled. I'll instruct the jury that it's coming in only as to his state of mind."

The questions in the jurors' eyes during the prosecution case transformed into adoration during the defense. And by the time of Evan's closing argument, they were nodding at every emphasis, smiling at every punch line, and all too ready to hand him what Evan feared would be a defeat in victory.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, have you ever spotted a neighbor in a department store, then realized you were mistaken; ever forgotten where you set down your car keys three minutes earlier; ever find a book on your bookshelf and had no idea how it got there or who left it? Eyewitnesses can be wrong, memories fail, guns can be planted, but fingerprints don't lie. And remember, you don't have to find that Tank McBain actually committed the burglary to find him not guilty of the homicide. It's only a question—only a question—of reasonable doubt. And the answer to that is a verdict of not guilty."

Bezener rose as Evan returned to the defense table. Even the jury could see that he was conflicted, torn between wanting a victory in trial and wanting to be the D.A. who permanently struck out Tank McBain. He limited his rebuttal to the feeble argument that maybe Jimmie Fagener planted the Kleenex box to give Tank an alibi or maybe Tank snuck in the day before the murder to fondle a few items on the dressing table. But Bezener's heart wasn't in it. Every theory needs evidence as a foundation. His was floating on air, and everybody in the courtroom knew it.

Bezener raced from the courtroom after the case was consigned to the jury. He returned when the jurors asked to examine the Kleenex box, then bolted again.

The following morning, with the jury still out, Bezener strode into the courtroom beaming like he'd paid off all ten jockeys in the fourth race at Golden Gate Fields. A copy of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and a fresh San Jose grand jury indictment for burglary and arson in one hand, and a Starbucks latte in the other. He plopped down at the counsel table, then spread out the paper.

Tank was still in the holding cell.

"Your client know yet?" Bezener asked Evan.

"He saw it on the news last night. He wants to cut a deal before the jury comes back. He'll take a second-degree. Seventeen to life."

Evan knew Bezener had no reason to plea bargain. For Tank it was lose-lose.

"What do I get out of it?" Bezener asked.

"He'll waive any appeals," Evan answered. "It'll be a done-deal sentence."

Bezener thought for a moment, then shook his head. "No can do. The voters have spoken. Three strikes and you're still out. If he wins, he's alibied himself into fifty years minimum. If he loses, he gets twenty-five to life. Who says you can't win for losing? Or was it can't lose for winning? I think this is what they call a win-win sitch-e-ay-shun."

Evan had been too depressed to watch the late news and couldn't bear to read the paper in the morning.

"What were the final numbers?" he asked Bezener.

"Sixty-four percent against changing the law. A landslide. I can't believe your client didn't see it coming."

The door to the holding pen opened. Bailiffs led Tank McBain, head down, to the counsel table. As if to announce that the pretense was over, he hadn't bothered to change from his jail jumpsuit into his civilian trial clothes. He didn't look up when the jury was seated, when the foreperson rose, when he and Evan stood, or when the verdict was read.

No defendant had ever taken victory with such an expression of defeat.

Tank sat down. He remained impassive as Huffman thanked the jury for their service and excused them, as Bezener announced the burglary and arson indictment and demanded that Tank be held without bail until he could be transported to San Jose, and as Huffman discharged him on the homicide and remanded him on the new case.

Tank again rose to his feet. "Your Honor—"

"You're represented by counsel, Mr. McBain. Perhaps you should consult with him before addressing the court, although I'm not sure it really helped you all that much last time."

Evan reddened. He started to rise, but Tank clamped a hand on his shoulder and braced him in his seat.

"Your Honor, I know the district attorney, and even my own attorney, thought I was an idiot for rolling the dice by going to trial and in expecting the voters to repeal an unfair law, one that gives a defendant more time for burglary than for murder."

Tank glanced back toward his wife, gave her a we-gave-it-our-best-shot half smile, then looked back at Huffman.

"Would I go to trial again? Probably. Life's always a gamble. Did I learn anything? Sure. Life is also a learning experience. I never went to trial before, so the whole thing was new. I learned about different motions. I learned about defenses to homicide. I learned about rules of evidence and trial procedure. I learned about hearsay objections and leading questions."

Bezener rolled his eyes like a child being reminded of something for the umpteenth time.



# RECOMMENDED TO MERCY

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ERIC RUTTER

“Private Knox, can you hear me?” Captain Patrick Ainsworth said.

The man lying on the cot didn’t respond. Patrick watched him for a moment from the doorway of the small room. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the guard standing in the corridor beside him.

Slowly Patrick stepped into the room. “How are you feeling?” he asked Private Knox.

Again Knox didn’t answer. He simply stared at the ceiling, his eyes glassy and blind. He didn’t seem to be aware of his surroundings.

Patrick considered the possibility that this was something more than neurasthenia, maybe full-blown shell shock. He set his black bag down on a stack of crates in the corner and said, “I’ve come to examine you. Is that all right?”

Knox didn’t reply. Patrick heard the footsteps of the guard moving to stand in the doorway behind him. It was the only sound in the quiet room.

Patrick took out his stethoscope. “Unbutton your shirt, would you, please?”

Knox didn’t move. Patrick knelt beside him and unbuttoned it himself, then laid his stethoscope against Knox’s chest. Knox’s pulse was slow and regular, his breathing normal. Patrick checked his scalp for head trauma but found none. His pupils looked fine, too, as did his ears—if a bomb-blast had rendered him deaf recently, there was no obvious sign of it. Not that anyone thought that was what had happened, but Patrick wouldn’t be surprised if Knox had had a near-miss lately. That was why they called it shell shock, after all.

Patrick sat back on his haunches. He said, “People are worried about you, Private. They wanted me to make sure you’re all right.” When Knox didn’t react, he asked, “Do you know where you are?”

He got no response.

“Do you understand you’ve been convicted of murder?”

Again Knox didn’t react.

Patrick sat and watched him for a while. Finally he put his stethoscope in his bag and moved to the door.

Once he was out in the corridor, he asked the guard, "Has he been eating?"

"No, sir," the guard said. "At first he did but not anymore."

"He never moves or talks to anyone?"

"No, sir."

"How did you get him to his court-martial, then?"

"He wasn't this bad then. Me and another man took him by the arms. Once we got him up, he walked between us. Sort of."

Patrick looked into the makeshift cell again. Absently, he realized the room must have been some kind of closet originally. Some of the buildings on this old farm had been bombed so badly, you couldn't tell what they used to be, but this one had obviously been the farmhouse. Now it was serving as regimental headquarters.

He thanked the guard, then turned and headed for what must have been the old master bedroom at one time. Now it was Colonel Browning's office.

He found Colonel Browning seated behind his desk, talking with Major Olmstead, the officer in command of Private Knox's rifle company. Patrick stopped just inside the doorway, waiting for the colonel to notice him. When he did, Patrick saluted.

Colonel Browning said, "Well?"

Patrick stepped forward. "Sir, Major. I've examined the prisoner. He's catatonic."

"What does that mean?" Colonel Browning said.

"He doesn't move or speak or respond to external stimuli."

"Hell, Captain, we knew that before."

"I realize that, sir. You said it came over him as soon as he was arrested?"

Major Olmstead said, "That's right. He was fine the day before he murdered Corporal Daly. By the time we brought him here, he wouldn't talk anymore. Now he just lays there."

Patrick said, "He doesn't look to be physically wounded. My preliminary diagnosis is some kind of mental illness, possibly shell shock."

Both Colonel Browning and Major Olmstead grimaced. The colonel said, "Are you sure he isn't faking it?"

"Not entirely, sir, but I doubt it."

"Hmm. Well, we're less interested in what his mental state is now and more interested in what it was four days ago, when he committed the murder. We need to know if he can be held responsible for his crime."

"I'm not sure how to determine that, sir. It's hard to determine anything with a patient who shows no signs of physical trauma but can't communicate with you. I'll have to observe him for a while. If you'll let me take him back to station—"

"Absolutely not. That man is a dangerous criminal. I won't turn him loose among the wounded."

"Well, a base hospital might be able to guard him better while he's under observation."

Colonel Browning's scowl deepened. "We're not shipping him anywhere. He committed his crime here, he was tried here, and he's going to be punished here."

"But, sir," Patrick said hesitantly, "I must confess, I'm a little confused. You want me to determine whether or not Private Knox is responsible for what he's done, but you've already convicted him of murder."

Major Olmstead said, "It's not as confusing as it sounds. If Private Knox is insane, he's still guilty of manslaughter. That's why we need to determine his mental state. If you can get his side of the story out of him while you're at it, so much the better. He didn't say a word during his court-martial."

Patrick stood there for a moment, feeling lost. It wasn't a new feeling; he'd only been in active service for two months now. There was still a lot he didn't know. For example, he didn't know the first thing about military law. He couldn't understand why Private Knox had been court-martialed in the first place, given that there were doubts about his sanity. Surely he should have been examined first to determine whether or not he was fit to stand trial.

Patrick said, "What do we know about his medical history?"

Colonel Browning said, "He was wounded once, a few months ago. Made a full recovery."

"What about past psychological problems?"

Patrick noticed how Colonel Browning's lips twisted at the word psychological. In the short time Patrick had been in the army, he'd already learned that most officers thought the fledgling science of psychology was pure bunk. That included some of the medical officers.

Major Olmstead said, "His record doesn't say anything about that."

Patrick looked at the file sitting on the desk in front of Colonel Browning. "Is that his service record?"

"Yes," Colonel Browning said. "And a record of his court-martial. Do you want to see it?"

"It might help me form an opinion."

Colonel Browning picked up the file and handed it to him. "I'll need it before the end of the week. Your opinion, that is. The file doesn't leave this building. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Dismissed."

"It's a textbook case," Patrick said. "It's shell shock. This fellow cracked."

Captain Morris sipped his tea and said, "Why do you say that?"

They were sitting in the mess tent, eating a late supper. Most of the other tables were empty at this hour. The patter of rain on the tent's roof was audible between the clink of their flatware.

Patrick said, "Knox was a model soldier before this incident. He's been

-serving a long time, enlisted back in '14. Never had any disciplinary problems according to his conduct sheet. But two weeks after he came back from being wounded, he killed someone in the trenches."

Calmly Captain Morris said, "How do we know it wasn't something personal between them?"

"The other men in the squad said that wasn't it. According to them, Private Knox killed Corporal Daly when Daly ordered them over the top. Knox refused to go, said it was suicide. Daly accused him of being a coward. Knox pointed his rifle at him and shot him dead."

Morris didn't even blink, even though that kind of conduct was simply unheard of. He just ate another forkful of corned beef.

Patrick continued. "I've studied a few cases of shell shock. It usually happens just that way. Something happens to the soldier, some specific event, that makes him lose his nerve. Sometimes it's being wounded, but other times it's a near miss from an exploding shell. It doesn't even have to harm him physically. The emotional shock is enough. I've heard of men who were temporarily buried alive when a shell collapsed a dugout on top of them, and afterwards they couldn't stand shelling anymore. Other men cracked when they got bad news from home or when they got to the front for the first time and saw how bad it is there."

"This chap was at the front for years."

"I know. That's the point. People who say shell shock isn't real say the soldiers who present it are just cowards. But Private Knox wasn't a coward. His record proves it. He was such a good soldier, he was made lance corporal of his squad. But something changed him. I say it was getting wounded a few months ago."

Morris made a vague gesture with his fork, unmoved.

Patrick frowned at him. He might have expected this. He knew Morris didn't put a lot of stock in the idea of shell shock, or psychology in general. Frankly, Morris didn't have a lot of sympathy for any of the men who came back from the front, but especially the ones who had no physical wounds. More than once Morris had advised Patrick to be more dispassionate towards his own patients. He said you couldn't have the same amount of compassion for them that you had for patients in civilian practice. Patrick had no real frame of reference; he'd been drafted just a few months after graduating from medical college. But he'd learned very quickly there was some truth in what Morris said. He'd now seen his share of malingerers, and of course you had to harden your heart when deciding which wounded soldiers to try to save and which ones to let die. But still, he hoped he never became as jaded as Morris was.

He told himself he never could. A chilly disposition was in Morris's blood—like most officers, he came from a noble family. He'd bought his commission in the time-honored tradition, whereas Patrick's had been conferred on him because of the war emergency. Every now and then Morris did something to remind him of that, not with words usually, but with a glance or an attitude that said Patrick wasn't really part of the club.

The other medical officer working with them here at the Casualty Clearing Station, Captain Reeves, was the same way only worse.

Patrick thought of how Reeves or Morris would have behaved if they'd been the one sent to examine Private Knox. The look he imagined on their faces matched the looks he'd gotten earlier today from Colonel Browning and Major Olmstead. Obviously, those two had also made up their minds about Private Knox. Troublingly, based on the record of Knox's court-martial, it looked like their prejudice had influenced his trial.

Broaching that subject, Patrick said, "I'll tell you what's odd. No one from Knox's squad testified at his court-martial. None of his fellow soldiers, I mean, only his platoon sergeant. The sergeant's the one who came along a few minutes after the murder and arrested him."

"Hmm," Morris said disinterestedly.

"Major Olmstead said they want to know Knox's side of the story. If that's true, why wouldn't they bring in a witness who actually saw the murder?"

Morris glanced up at him. He held Patrick's gaze for so long, Patrick finally said, "What?"

"Have you ever served on a Field General Court-Martial? No, you wouldn't have. Well, I can tell you, it's nothing like a civilian trial. It moves a lot quicker, for one thing. The members of the court don't brook any delay. They want to hear the facts and they want to hear them quick. If the prisoner's friend even calls a witness who presents information the court just heard from someone else, the prisoner's friend gets a dressing down."

"The prisoner's friend?"

"That's the defending officer."

"Oh, you mean the accused man's barrister."

"No, there are no barristers in a Field General Court-Martial. The prisoner's friend is usually the commander of the accused man's company or platoon."

Patrick stared. "You mean the prisoner doesn't even have someone trained in the law to defend him?"

"No."

"Not even if he's on trial for his life?"

"No."

Patrick was speechless.

Morris said, "Most of the time, no one else in the court has any legal training, either."

Patrick tried to express his disbelief, but again words failed him.

Morris saw the look on his face and scowled. "Look around you," he said. "What do you expect here? Court-martials are improvised, just like everything else. We don't have any barristers, so officers serve in their place. We don't have any courtrooms, so court-martials are held in dugouts and tents and wherever else there's room. The last one I sat on was held in one of the rooms above a café. They set up a table at the foot of the bed, threw

a blanket over it, and sat us down behind it. We didn't have a Bible, so the witnesses swore their oath on a cookbook from downstairs. The presiding officer chose it because it looked important. It had gilded type on the spine."

"Good God."

"It gets worse. The prisoner is entitled to a defending officer but sometimes the trial is held without one. And there's no appeal—of conviction or of sentence. If the prisoner says he was out of his mind when he committed the crime, he's supposed to be examined by a medical officer if he's convicted, but sometimes that doesn't even happen. You should be glad they're doing it in this case.

"This is the army," Morris concluded. "Court-martials are about enforcing discipline, not upholding the law. Every time I served on one, it was made clear to me I was expected to find the prisoner guilty and impose the maximum sentence."

"No wonder Private Knox went catatonic," Patrick said. "If he knew what sort of justice he was in for."

Morris didn't reply.

Patrick added, "Knowing he's been condemned to death can't help either."

"He hasn't been, yet."

"Yes, he has. He was found guilty at trial, and murder is a capital offense."

"But the sentence has to be confirmed."

"What does that mean?"

"It means the details of the case will be sent to each of Knox's superiors: the commander of his brigade, division, corps, and army. Each of them will say whether or not they think the sentence should be carried out. If they choose, they can recommend him to mercy and say the sentence should be commuted or suspended altogether. Their opinions will get passed up to the commander-in-chief. In the end, he's the one who decides."

So Sir Douglas Haig himself would be the one to sign Knox's death warrant, Patrick thought. There was no question in his mind that Knox's sentence would be confirmed. Unless he could prove Knox wasn't responsible for his actions.

He had three more days to make his diagnosis. He'd better get it right. From the look of things, he was the only one who cared whether Knox deserved to die.

Patrick visited Knox again the next day. He observed him for a full hour and gave him another, more thorough physical examination. He learned nothing.

On his way out of the farmhouse, he asked a clerk where Knox's platoon was stationed. The clerk checked his records.

"They're up at the front right now, sir," the young man said. "In the firing trench."

Patrick was taken aback. He turned to go, but stopped with his hand on the doorknob. "Where, exactly?"

The clerk told him. Patrick thanked him and went out.

Outside, he turned and looked towards the front. Now as always, the sound of shelling came from that direction. Lately the fighting had been lighter than it was during the first six weeks after his arrival, but a steady stream of casualties still came back from the front lines every night. By day there were none; the stretcher-bearers always waited until nightfall to collect the wounded from no-man's-land. Without the cover of darkness, the work was just too dangerous. Even at night it was risky, since the sky was lit periodically by the brilliant flashes of explosions and the slowly arcing gleams of Verey lights.

He'd never been to the trenches himself. He really should go, so he could speak with the members of Knox's squad straightaway. Besides, it would give him the clearest possible picture of the circumstances in which Knox committed his crime. But he was under no obligation to go. And his superiors might not approve of him putting himself in harm's way over something like this.

He thought about it while he made his rounds. He didn't tell anyone what he was considering, least of all Morris or Reeves. He made up his mind around mid afternoon, shortly before he ran into a stretcher-bearer named Private Welden, who was a passing acquaintance.

Patrick asked him, "When are you going back to the front?"

"In a few minutes, sir. Why?"

"I want to go with you." Welden nodded unquestioningly, but Patrick felt the need to add, "I need to get to the firing trench."

"I can get you there, sir. Meet me at the ambulance, say, in fifteen minutes?"

"Okay."

"Wear your waders, sir."

"Why?"

"You'll see."

Patrick went to get ready. He took his helmet and sidearm out of his locker and put them on. He had to borrow a pair of waders from one of the orderlies. Then, on second thought, he went back to his locker and got the gas mask he'd been issued. He studied it as he walked across camp, making sure he knew how to use it.

An ambulance took him and Welden to the reserve trench, which was the rearmost of the three parallel trenches dug into the French countryside. It was a short ride. Along the way, the sound of shelling got steadily louder.

When they arrived and Patrick stepped down into the reserve trench, he saw immediately why Welden had insisted he wear waders. The trench was knee deep in water.

Doubtfully he asked, "Is this from the rain last night?"

"Yes, sir. There's poor drainage here, and in a lot of other places. In some

spots the trenches are always full of water. The water table is so close to the surface, the trenches there filled up as soon as they were dug."

Patrick realized he should have expected this. He'd heard about water-filled trenches before, and certainly he'd seen enough cases of trench foot among the frontline troops. But somehow the reality of it still came as a surprise.

Welden began to lead him along the narrow trench. Patrick followed carefully, feeling with his feet for the duckboards laid under the filthy water. He supposed the water must be chilly, although he couldn't feel it through the waders. He imagined how much worse it would be when winter set in a couple of months from now. There would surely be a lot of cases of frostbite and hypothermia.

As he and Welden made their way towards the firing trench, whistling shells exploded overhead. Each one made Patrick drop into a crouch. The seven-foot-high trench walls were good protection against shrapnel, but he knew a direct shell-hit wasn't all he had to worry about. A shell that landed close enough would collapse the trench on top of him. He concentrated on following Welden along the mud-slippery duckboards, returning the salutes of the soldiers he passed. He caught groups of them by surprise since the trench was blocked at intervals by piles of sandbags and mounds of earth. He remembered the purpose of these traverses as soon as he saw them: they were designed to prevent the Germans from having a clear line of fire up and down the trench if they ever managed to occupy a section of it.

He and Welden came at length to an intersection. The even narrower connecting trench led them towards the front line, terminating at the middle, or support trench. The sights here were very much the same as in the reserve. He and Welden passed rows and heaps of sandbags, dark dugout doorways, and muddy soldiers bent at work or standing around, looking unperturbed until the moment Patrick arrived. Another connecting trench soon branched off. Patrick followed Welden into it, his chest tightening with fear. Next stop: the front line. He almost felt like he didn't need to see it anymore. He could already appreciate how hard it must be living in the trenches.

At last they came to the firing trench. It was the most crowded one yet. He and Welden squeezed past men smoking cigarettes, tending their rifles and looking over the parapet through boxy, handheld periscopes. Not many of them were firing at the enemy; the wooden firing step built along the trench's front wall was occupied mostly by bayonet-tipped rifles that stood propped in rows. In one place a soldier sat slumped between the rifles, his eyes closed. Patrick looked at him worriedly.

When Patrick caught another private's eye, he asked him, "Is that man all right?"

"Yes, sir. He's just asleep."

Another shell landed nearby, close enough to send clods of earth pattering down on Patrick's helmet—and the helmet of the sleeping man. The latter hardly stirred.

Patrick asked, "Where's Sergeant Finney's section?"

"Thataway, sir."

Patrick headed in the direction the soldier had pointed, taking over the lead from Welden. Part of him wanted to get back to the rear as soon as possible, but he'd resolved to get a look at no-man's-land, so he stopped when he came by another pair of soldiers and asked if he could look through their periscope. They let him.

He looked out on a wasteland. Two hundred yards of open ground separated the British and German front lines. The field was churned to mud, cratered with shell holes and littered with bodies. He couldn't help but search for signs of movement among the fallen men, not that he could do anything for them right now. But if any of the men lying in his field of view were still alive, he saw no sign of it. The only thing moving was the occasional rat nosing among the corpses. Patrick focused beyond the bodies and saw a thicket of barbed wire stretching from one end of the field to the other. Dark shapes seemed to be draped over it. Belatedly he realized those shapes were more corpses tangled in the wire.

He moved on, inquiring after Sergeant Finney.

At last one man said, "I'm Finney. What can I do for you, sir?"

Patrick said, "My name is Captain Ainsworth. I'm the medical officer assigned to examine Private Knox."

"Oh. Yes, sir."

"I'd like to speak with you about him. Is this a bad time?"

"No, sir. We aren't in the thick of it."

The whistling of another shell's descent made Patrick cringe. The explosion, when it came, was farther off than he'd expected. When he straightened up, he saw Sergeant Finney hadn't flinched at all.

Patrick said, "Is there someplace—" He almost said "safer." "—where we could talk?"

"Follow me, sir."

Sergeant Finney led him up the trench and into an empty dugout. It was big enough to accommodate maybe half a dozen men, unlike some of the others Patrick had seen that were barely big enough for one. Looking up, he saw the ceiling consisted of loose sheets of plywood under a sod roof. It looked pretty flimsy.

He turned back to Finney and asked, "Can you tell me what happened with Private Knox?"

"Well, sir, it's like I said at the court-martial. We got orders to go over the top and Private Knox refused to go. He said he wasn't going to let his men go, either. When Corporal Daly tried to get him under control, Knox shot him."

"I didn't know he tried to keep his squad from going."

"Yes, sir. I said that at the court-martial. He was yelling that none of them should have to go, on account of them having no chance."

Patrick thought back to the court-martial record. He'd noticed it didn't

include any transcripts of witness testimony, just very brief summaries. None of them had mentioned this information.

He asked, "What did Knox say, exactly?"

"Oh, you know. That they'd never get across no-man's-land in one piece, that the Germans were too well armed, that too many of our boys had died already. And that the brass hats didn't know what they were doing, that they don't know what it's really like in the trenches or how to wage a war."

"He told all this to Corporal Daly?"

"Yes, sir. And the rest of the squad. He was ranting, from what I understand. He said some of it to me when I got there, although I gather he'd calmed down a bit by then."

"So he was still talking when you got to him."

"Yes, sir. I had to talk him into surrendering his weapon. I don't mind telling you, for a while there I thought he was going to shoot me too. His squad were afraid for their lives. That's why they didn't turn their backs on him and try to go over the top without him."

"What happened then?"

"He gave me his rifle and I placed him under arrest. Then I appointed another man in his squad lance corporal and sent them over the top. Then I took Private Knox back to headquarters."

"He went willingly?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did he say anything on the way?"

"No, sir."

"Tell me this: before that day, did you ever see any sign from him that he might lose his nerve?"

"Not really, sir. He seemed a little edgy ever since he came back from hospital, but I never thought he'd go off his rocker."

Patrick nodded. Just as he'd suspected. "I'd like to talk with the men in his squad."

"They're all gone, sir."

"What do you mean?"

"That day they went over the top, they were all killed or wounded. Actually, only one of them was just wounded: Private George. He took it in the leg, I think."

"I see."

Finney's expression darkened a little. "If Knox hadn't held them up, they would've had a chance. We were supposed to attack right after our artillery had softened up the Germans, but by the time I got here and sent Knox's squad on their way, the Germans had regrouped. Those men are dead because of Knox. And I made sure he knows it."

"How?"

"I went and saw him in his cell the next day. I looked him in the face and told him about it."

"Did he react?"

"He didn't say anything."

"But did he react at all? Did he hear you?"

"Yes, sir. He heard me."

"How do you know?"

"Because I saw it in his face. He was looking me in the eye when I told him."

Patrick considered that for a moment. Then he said, "Thank you, Sergeant. That'll be all."

"Very good, sir."

Patrick started to follow him out of the dugout, but Finney paused in the doorway and said, "Do you know I volunteered to serve on Knox's firing squad?"

Patrick nodded once, mutely. It was all he could think to do.

**P**atrick discovered there was a Private George back at the Casualty Clearing Station. The man occupied one of the cots in the evacuation tent, where post-ops waited to be sent to a base hospital. From base the most serious cases would be invalided home. George was one of those; he'd lost his left leg below the knee. As Patrick skimmed his chart, he was surprised to find he was the one who'd amputated George's leg six days ago. He barely remembered it.

George seemed to be asleep when Patrick approached his cot. Patrick hated to wake him, but he knew he didn't have much time until the night's wounded started to come in. The deepening shadows in the tent said twilight was falling outside. Nurses were going around quietly lighting candles and oil lamps.

Patrick set a stool down beside George's cot and sat on it. "Private George?" he said. "Wake up, Private."

George stirred. When his eyes opened, they didn't focus right away. Patrick hoped the morphine wouldn't make him incoherent.

"How are you feeling, Private?"

"A little better." George smiled weakly. "Good enough to ship out."

"So I see."

"Back to Old Blighty."

"Good for you." Patrick chose his next words carefully. "How much do you remember about what happened?"

George's smile faded. "All of it."

"And Private Knox? Do you remember what happened with him?"

"Yes, sir."

"You were there when he lost his nerve."

"He didn't lose his nerve."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know." George paused, remembering. "I don't really know what happened to him. I've seen plenty of Tommies crack—new recruits, old-timers. It can happen to anyone if they're in the trenches long enough. And when it happens, it always happens the same way: They huddle

down, curl up into a ball, and don't move. They lay there and shake, and maybe cry, but they don't move until you pick them up and carry them back to the rear. That isn't what happened to Knockers."

"What did happen to him?"

"I don't know what to call it. He just wasn't going to take it anymore."

"Wasn't or couldn't?"

"Wasn't."

Patrick sat back a little. George might not know what to call that but Patrick was afraid he did: mutiny. That was a capital offense, too, and if anything it was worse than murder.

He asked George, "Was is it something Private Knox had planned?"

"Oh, no."

"So what happened, then?"

"Well, when Corporal Daly gave us our orders, Knockers just snapped. He said the people back at HQ were bloody daft. He said they were ordering us to commit suicide."

"Sergeant Finney says Knox holding you up is what caused the trouble."

"That's bollocks. The orders came late. By the time we were told to advance, the Germans already had time to bring up reinforcements."

Patrick's brow furrowed. "Why would the orders come late if the plan was for the advance to follow the bombardment?"

"Who knows? It's not like it was the first time. HQ doesn't know its arse from a hole in the ground. And they don't have any idea what it's like at the front. How could they? They spend all their time behind the lines! All the time I spent in the trenches, I never once saw an officer there ranked higher than captain. They all stay back in their nice, safe offices, in their chateaus, and at the first sign of trouble, they pack up their things and fall further back. Once, last spring, when the Germans were pressing us hard, we couldn't get supplies because the brass had all the trucks packed solid with their file cabinets and featherbeds."

Patrick wondered if he could believe that. It wasn't that George didn't seem lucid, it was just that his candor was so shocking. That might be an effect of the morphine, or it might be because George knew that for him the war was over.

Patrick thought back to his trip to the front lines earlier that day. The looks he'd gotten from a lot of the men took on a new character. Their faces hadn't just shown surprise, he now realized, but also respect for an officer brave enough to visit the trenches.

He asked George, "Do a lot of the men feel the way you do?"

"Yes." George darted a glance at him, showing a little self-consciousness at last. ". . . Sir. We don't talk about it with superiors."

"It's all right. You won't get in any trouble from me."

George grimaced. "What are they going to do, court-martial me? Maybe they'll invent a new Field Punishment, make me stand on one leg for hours on end."

His grimace was partly a grin. Patrick grinned back. George's recovery

must be well underway if he was developing the survivor's black sense of humor.

Patrick said, "Did you know Knox was court-martialed? And found guilty?"

"No, I didn't."

"How do you feel about that?"

George shrugged.

Patrick said, "Sergeant Finney volunteered to be on his firing squad. Would you want to, if you could?"

"Only if I could shoot him in the leg."

They looked at each other for a moment. Then they both chuckled darkly.

George said, "Hell, Captain, what do you want me to say? Corporal Daly didn't deserve to die, but then again none of us did. We had our orders, though, and that's all there is to it. We all knew our time could come any day—any minute. You stop worrying about it, eventually."

"Do you really?"

"Yes. When you're at the front, you come to understand. You realize you could be killed any minute no matter where you are, even back home. It's just that at the front, death happens more often, and it's louder and bloodier."

Patrick wondered if George knew what had happened to his squad. He wondered if he should tell him.

Instead he said, "What time of day did you go over the top?"

"It was a little after noon."

"How long after Knox killed Corporal Daly? How long did he keep you there?"

"Maybe an hour. I guess it was an hour until Sergeant Finney came along."

"But the shelling was already over by then?"

"Yes, a long time."

"So that hour . . ."

"It didn't make any difference at all."

**P**atrick went to bed tired that night, like every night. But he lay awake for a long time, thinking about Private Knox. He could see now he'd made up his mind about Knox some time ago. He'd decided he was shell shocked and therefore not responsible for his crime. What he'd been looking for was evidence to prove it.

But now he could see Knox's behavior just didn't fit the profile. Like George said, shell-shocked soldiers turned inward. They literally collapsed. They didn't attack their brothers-in-arms. Knox still might be shell shocked; it wasn't like they had a complete understanding of the disease. It was so new, it had only been given a name earlier this year. For all anyone knew, there might be more than one kind of shell shock and Knox

might be the first documented case of this variety. But Patrick wasn't sure of that and unless he was, he couldn't diagnose him that way, not in good conscience.

If only Knox hadn't been right. But his squad's orders really had been suicide.

The next day, in between rounds, Patrick decided to go see him again. When he got to Knox's cell, he saw the guard standing outside was the same one as before.

Patrick asked him, "How is he?"

"The same, sir. Didn't eat a thing all day yesterday or so far today."

"I'd like to see him."

The guard unlocked the door. Patrick stepped in. When the guard moved to stand in the doorway, Patrick told him, "It'll be fine. You can wait outside."

"Yes, sir."

The door closed and darkness swept in. The only light was what shone under the door. Patrick waited for his eyes to adjust.

When he was able to distinguish Knox's shape from the cot he lay on, he stepped closer and said, "It's me again, Private. Captain Ainsworth."

Unsurprisingly, Knox didn't stir.

Patrick said, "I talked to Sergeant Finney. And Private George. He survived the attack. I'm not sure if Sergeant Finney told you that."

Patrick could see well enough now to notice no change in Knox's expression. He just stared blindly at the ceiling, his eyes half closed.

Patrick said, "Sergeant Finney says the men in your squad died because you delayed them but I wanted you to know I don't believe that. Private George doesn't believe it either. And he doesn't seem to hold any grudge against you. I don't think he has any reason to. In fact, I think you saved his life. He got hit in the leg when he was about fifty yards away from our lines. He had to lay there all afternoon until the stretcher-bearers could get to him. By the time they brought him in, he was in very bad shape. He'd lost a lot of blood. I talked to the people who prepped him for surgery and they said if he'd laid out there another hour, he would have bled to death.

"Do you understand what I'm telling you? Your holding him up probably saved his life. There's no chance he could have avoided getting wounded altogether, given how ready the Germans were when your orders came through. Maybe he could have taken a less serious wound, but I doubt it. No one else in your squad did. He was in the right place at the right time, thanks to you."

Patrick waited for a reaction. He waited a long time. But he didn't get one.

Finally he turned and walked to the door. He heard a sigh behind him. He turned around. Knox hadn't moved but now his eyes were closed.

Patrick said, "Private Knox?"

Knox didn't move or speak. Patrick waited another minute, then turned and left.

Back at the Casualty Clearing Station, Patrick stopped at the first empty desk he found, put a sheet of Royal Army Medical Corps stationery in the typewriter and wrote his opinion:

To: Col. Wm. R. Browning, OC, 4th Bn, 228th Infantry Brigade  
From: Capt. Patrick L. Ainsworth, RMO, 16th CCS  
Re: Medical Condition of Pvt. Conrad S. Knox

Sir,

Having examined and observed Private Knox, I conclude that he was not insane at the time he committed his crime. However, his current state of catatonia strongly suggests that he possessed a latent mental defect that was exacerbated by the trauma of war. Given this, as well as his exemplary service record prior to his crime and the intense emotional strain he endured while serving at the front, I recommend in the interest of justice that his death sentence be commuted to one of imprisonment or penal servitude.

Sincerely,  
Capt. Patrick L. Ainsworth

Patrick went back to his regular duties, hopeful but not convinced he'd done everything he could for Private Knox. He didn't have much time to dwell on it. Later that same day, the Allied troops stationed on the Somme commenced a big push. He was quickly snowed under with wounded.

It took several days for any news about Knox to reach him. When it did, he learned that on the evening of that last day he visited him, Knox began to stir. He ate a little of the dinner brought to him, and the next morning the guard who arrived with his breakfast found him sitting upright. When the guard asked him how he was, Knox said, "Fine."

Major Olmstead interrogated Knox again, briefly; like everyone else, the major was very busy now that a new offensive was underway. Knox was still largely uncommunicative, but when Major Olmstead asked him if he felt any remorse for what he'd done, Knox said, "At least I saved one of them."

Sir Douglas Haig confirmed Knox's sentence the next day, despite Patrick's opinion. None of Knox's superiors recommended him to mercy. He was executed by firing squad on October 15, 1916. 🦋

# A GOOD MAN

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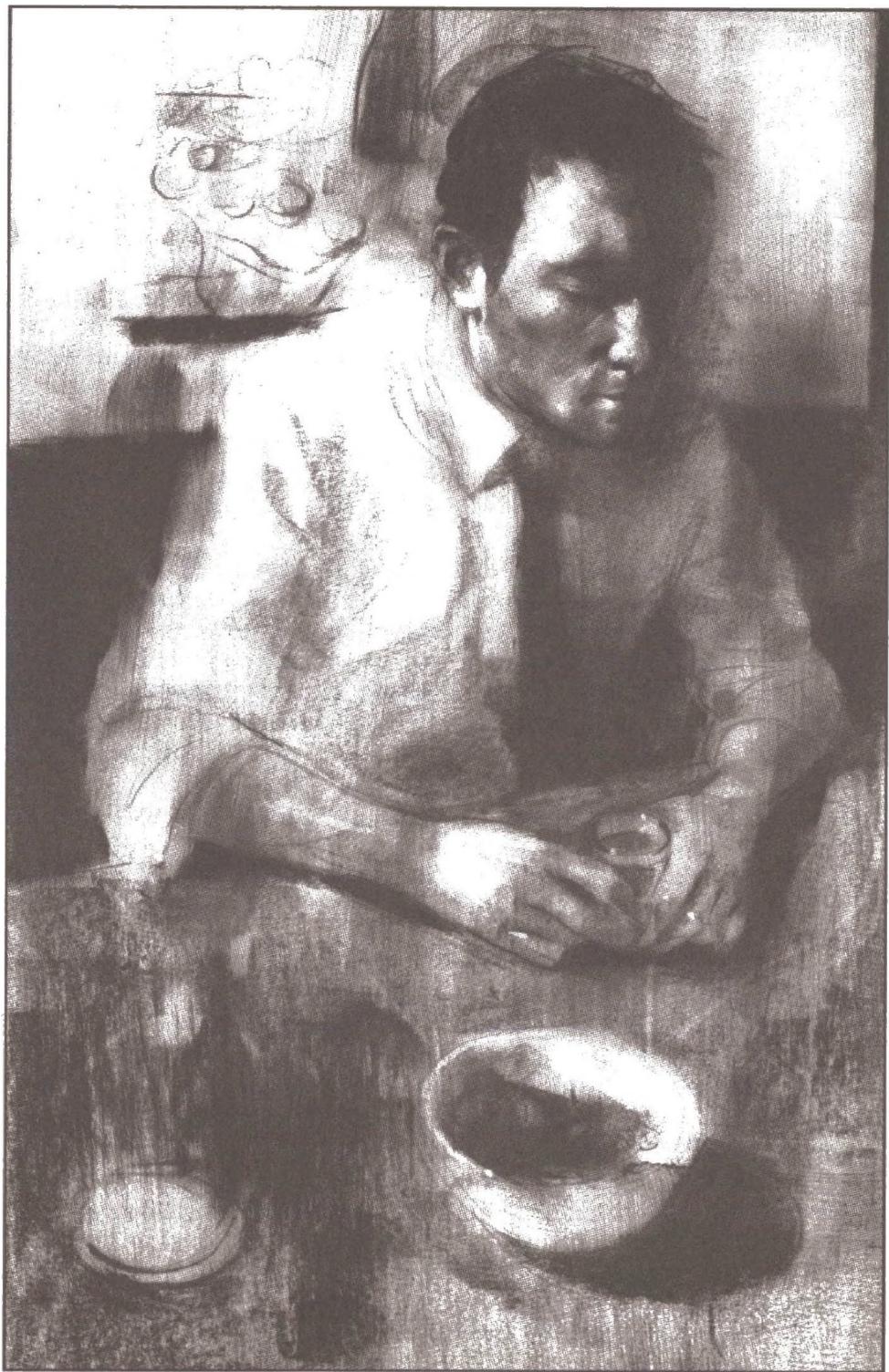
CATHRYN GRANT

**D**avid had been a good boy and he was a good man. So why was this happening to him? He'd worked hard. The result was a five-bedroom home in Silicon Valley on a street with mature California oak trees. He coached his daughter's soccer team and spent winter weekends snowboarding with both kids. In the spring, he played golf with his son. When an anniversary or a birthday rolled around, he took his wife out to dinner and bought her a fourteen-carat gold trinket. He'd never stolen anything. He'd never cheated on Lin or his taxes. He tried to stay active. Yeah, he had a bit of a gut now, but what man didn't at the age of forty-five? At least he still had a full head of hair. He was a good looking guy who still saw women slip second glances in his direction, but he never tried to get what he might out of that.

Pundits speculated on a jobless recovery, whatever that was. Financial institutions had collapsed on their greed, or were propped up with tax dollars. The business headlines were a steady stream of cost reductions: three hundred here, a thousand there, five thousand next month. Now, he was a cost reduction. He had plenty of company, but it was humiliating. Lin would look at him with her glossy chocolate eyes and he would see a mixture of fear and disgust. Mostly fear, but that other part would be there too, when she blinked, or looked away.

He didn't deserve this. What did a solid education and a twenty-year career matter? How were his ethics and his morals going to help him now? At ten o'clock in the morning he walked out of his office building for the last time. Seven years devoted to this company and all he had was a small box with his books and a dead geranium in a plastic pot. He paused next to the trash can outside the lobby and dropped the petrified plant inside. He was locked out. The thought of pulling into his driveway and walking to the front door in the middle of the morning made waves of liquid heave up the walls of his stomach. He couldn't go home, not yet.

His 1997 Porsche 911 was four spaces from the entrance to the building. It screamed midlife crisis, but he didn't care, at least it was paid for, one thing he wouldn't have to give up as he watched the rest of his life melt away. First to go would be dinners out, followed quickly by green fees. Next would be cell phones and cable TV. How much would he lose?



The house? His wife? Which would come first: a job offer or economic recovery? There was a good possibility that neither would happen this year. He opened the trunk, put his box inside, and slammed it closed.

With a little too much pressure on the gas, he raced out of the parking lot and up Avenue Road. He zipped around the tight corner of the freeway on-ramp. He needed a shot of whiskey. Where did a guy go to find whiskey when the 101 freeway was still clogged with late commuters? As he traveled southeast, the sun against the windshield disoriented him. During both legs of his regular commute, the sun was behind him. He put on his sunglasses to eliminate the glare.

One exit down, he eased the Porsche off the freeway. If he turned back and crossed the overpass, he'd be in East Palo Alto, a pocket of low-income apartments and high crime in the midst of the surrounding wealth created by Stanford University and the high-tech industry. It was a place that was sure to have bars where he could cruise in the gutter with drug dealers and the chronically unemployed. It wasn't the safest choice, not a place he should go at night, for sure, but mid morning was probably safe.

He pulled into the gravel parking lot of a place called The Wet Spot. A nice smooth drink would calm the hammering that had been beating at the back of his skull since he'd walked into the conference room and seen the fat white severance package lying on the table. The pounding battered images of Lin's face against the soft tissue of his brain, followed by the kids, then thoughts of sending out resumés, being reduced to begging his friends and former colleagues for work. Networking. You found a job through connections. Begging. He wanted a fog in his brain, he wanted to get plastered. He wanted, for once in his life, to be irresponsible, to not care about whether he was parking the Porsche in a safe neighborhood, not care that he should start networking immediately instead of drinking in a dive bar in an area of town where a senior product manager in khaki slacks and a pale blue button-down shirt didn't belong.

Inside it was as empty as he'd hoped. He hooked his sunglasses into the open neck of his shirt. At first, he couldn't see anything but the glow of the mirror behind the bar. It was five feet high and ran the entire length of the bar, the only bit of ambience in a place that featured a scuffed linoleum floor and stools that wobbled. The oak bar top had the finish rubbed off in spots. He slid onto a bar stool. A woman pushed her way through the swinging door behind the bar. A female bartender. Great. He wanted a silent, scruffy old guy, not some chick who would want to talk.

"Waddaya drinking?" She put a lime on the counter below the bar and sliced it in half. She had fat wrists and fingers, but the rest of her wasn't overly pudgy. Her hair was tugged into a tiny knot, pulling at the skin of her forehead and cheeks, which made her look as if she was experimenting with what a face lift might look like. She was short, with broad shoulders, and wore a bright green T-shirt that sagged around the neck.

"Crown Royal. A double."

She sliced the lime halves into wedges with a knife that seemed unusually sharp. She put the lime sections into a bowl and rinsed her hands and dried them. She lifted the Crown Royal bottle off the shelf below the mirror. A stream of whiskey slid like a ribbon into the glass and she pulled the bottle aside with a flick of her wrist. She placed it on a white cocktail napkin stamped with a shamrock. "Twelve bucks."

"I'll start a tab."

"I only run tabs for regulars."

He leaned to one side and pulled out his wallet. He laid his credit card on the bar. "Can you keep it open?"

"After this first charge. Gotta make sure it's good first."

He took a quick swallow from the glass. Maybe he should just slam it down and walk out. He was probably the most solvent customer she'd served all month. Of course, bartenders were supposed to be good at reading people. He wondered if she could read the desperation that crept from his gut to his throat, if there was something about the twist of his lips that made her know that by the time the next statement came, paying his bill might not be the top priority. But his credit was good today. She had no right to treat him like a drifter.

He poured half the brown liquid at the back of his throat and shuddered as it sliced its way down his esophagus. He liked the brutality of it. He liked the sudden rush of numbness and the heat and the softening of that hammer pinging against his skull. What would it be like to become a drunk? Maybe he'd never go home again, just disappear and run up bills at the bar until his credit card was canceled. It wouldn't take long to run out of easy access to cash. Then what? He picked up the glass and flung the rest of the liquid into his mouth and ordered another drink, one shot this time. There was already a buzz inside his head and a relaxing of his shoulders. The bartender's eyes were on him, cold and disapproving. Did she feel superior because she was pouring and he was drinking in the middle of the morning? He didn't know what he'd done to cause that look.

The shot went down more quickly than he'd planned and he was faced with an empty glass. His head felt fuzzy. He really should order a beer, but then, why bother? It would make him feel the urge to piss sooner and all he wanted now was to keep that full, cottony sensation behind his eyes. The disapproving look was blurring and her face looked like a lump of dough, her eyes dark spots like burned bits that had pressed against the side of the oven and picked up soot.

The door opened and a blast of sunlight hit the mirror. High heels clicked across the linoleum. He felt the heat and shifting of someone settling onto the stool next to him.

The woman reeked of jasmine perfume. He turned and tried to focus his eyes. She was blonde. The roots had grown out nearly an inch from her scalp, making the rest of her hair look filthy, as if it was stained with some kind of yellow, rotted material. Her eyelids were coated in bright blue

shadow and a darker blue line was drawn under her bottom eyelashes. Without even pretending to be subtle, she laid her hand on his thigh and pressed her fingers around the inside of his leg. He pushed her hand away. The moment her hand was gone he felt two things—he wanted another drink so he would stop thinking like the good little boy that he'd always been. And he wanted her fingers back on his leg.

He ordered another double. He laid his palms on the bar and checked to see whether his fingertips still registered the hard press of the wood. How did he go about asking for those long, delicate fingers back on his leg, trailing over his inner thigh, making him forget how useless he was, making him forget that he'd ever been good? He couldn't just raise his finger like he did when he ordered more shots.

In front of him, a white bowl had appeared, filled with peanuts. He fumbled in the bowl. He picked up too many nuts and most of them slipped out of his thick fingers. The woman's hand darted out and grabbed a few peanuts. She dropped them into a mouth that she opened like a bird's beak receiving a worm. The nuts fell perfectly inside her rounded lips, proving she wasn't drunk or high. He stuffed nuts into his own mouth, picked up his glass with salty, greasy fingers, and took a slow sip. No need to turn into a drunk during his first hour on the loose. He would take things gradually. He wanted to stay numb, not make himself so obliterated that he passed out, then woke with a clear head. And a missing wallet.

When he reached for the nuts again, the blonde pounced her fingers on top of his.

"You're a sharp-looking guy. What are you doing here before happy hour?"

"Got laid off." He took a swallow of whiskey, it scraped across his tongue like a matchstick.

"That's too bad."

She didn't sound very sorry.

"Sure is." Words erupted out of him as if he had been waiting all morning to tell someone what it felt like. "I worked seven years for that company. I'm smarter and better educated than half the losers that still have jobs. I have a great resumé."

"I bet you do, hon."

Her words should have sounded trite, like someone paid to listen, but they didn't. Somehow, her voice was warm and he felt that she really cared, that she wasn't going to push him to find a new job as fast as possible. Of course, why would she? It wasn't as if she depended on his support. Not like Lin. And the kids. It wasn't his fault. Surely Lin would see that. Or maybe it was his fault, always following the rules, always trying to do the right thing, thinking education and hard work paid off. What an idiot he'd been. He'd also thought it was important to be loyal to his wife. He never looked at other women, much less flirted, but here he was, longing for a stranger with unwashed hair and jeans that rode low over the rounded flesh of her hips when she leaned forward. Her black T-shirt, a

silver emblem announcing she was a Raiders football fan, rode up her back. The view was delightful.

Why be good if it got you nowhere? All the really smart guys got what they wanted and got out. The politicians, the financial institutions, the CEOs of the auto companies. Heck, his own CEO. How did the guy sleep with millions under his pillow when people who made a fraction of what he took home were deemed unnecessary?

Maybe he'd see where he stood with Lin. Perhaps he'd called it wrong and she'd pull him into warm and loving arms when he got home instead of letting loose a string of sharp questions, blurting out her fears accompanied by slamming cabinet doors. Why tell her to her face anyway? Just because he thought he owed her that? What about himself? What did he owe himself, for once in his life? This time, he would take the easy way out. He yanked his BlackBerry out of the holster hooked to his belt and scrolled through the list of frequently called numbers to Lin's cell number.

She answered on the first ring.

"I got hit." He spit the words into the phone.

"Hit?"

"I told you the layoffs were today. I got let go."

"Oh no."

"Worst economy in fifty years. Out the door like I was a clerical worker. However, apparently I've done 'good work.'"

"You do."

"Do what?"

"Good work."

"How the hell would you know?"

"What are you going to do?" Her voice was soft, with a breathlessness behind the words, expecting him to have the answer.

"What am I going to do?" He looked at the blonde. "I'm planning to get drunk."

"Where are you?"

"Not at the office, that's for sure."

"Why do you sound so angry?"

"Why do you think?"

"You'll find something else."

"Do you read the newspaper, Lin? Everyone is laying off, cutting costs. Maybe you'll have to get a job." He wondered where all this hostility was coming from. Even in his fuzzy-brained, blurry-eyed state, he knew he was trying to pick a fight.

"My job is raising the kids. You'll find something. Are you networking?"

He pulled the phone away from his ear as her voice grew louder. She deserved an answer, but he just didn't feel like it. Why was it all on him? Why did she have to be so dependent? Couldn't she be like this gal sitting next to him? Bravado oozed from every pore, despite the coat of liquid foundation.

"Slow down," he mumbled.

"Are you drinking? That's no solution."

"What if I am?"

"It's irresponsible."

"Yeah?"

"Come home, David."

"In awhile." He pressed the END CALL button and hooked the device to his belt. It vibrated against his hip. It wasn't as if he had to start looking for a job right this minute.

The bartender hovered across from him. "Anything to drink, Eileen?"

Eileen ordered a Bloody Mary.

Once she had the fingers of her right hand around the bottom of the glass, the fingers of her left hand found their way back onto his thigh. The thump of his heart, clogged and eager, pounded inside his head. He could sit here like this forever, feeling her sympathy wrap itself around him. From the corner of his eye, he saw the flashing red light on his phone. A missed call. Or e-mail. Nothing pressed on his conscience with any insistence, just the demand of his body, blood rushing to the surface of his skin, and a growing need to urinate.

"Excuse me." He levered himself off the stool. Once both feet were firmly planted on the floor, he straightened to a full standing position, and let go of the stool. Good. He was solid on his feet. It seemed like it took an eternity for him to make his way down the length of the bar, past the electronic game machine, through the door to the men's room, relieve himself, and stumble back across the empty room to his seat at the bar.

Eileen tipped her head back to empty the glass. The stalk of celery pressed against her cheekbone.

He climbed onto the stool. "Another Bloody Mary for Eileen."

The bartender frowned. "Are you sure?"

Eileen nodded and laid her hand on his thigh. He swallowed the last of his whiskey and set the glass on the bar. He shoved the empty glass across the counter and it toppled close to the inner edge of the bar. The bartender caught it before it slid onto the floor. She refilled it before she poured the vodka for the Bloody Mary.

"Your wife sounded like she wanted you to come home," said Eileen.

"How'd you know I was talking to my wife?"

Eileen rolled her eyes; the whites were stark against the blue circling her lashes.

"You should be a good boy and go on home. Before you drink too much."

"Maybe I'm tired of being good."

"Can't argue with that," said the bartender. She set the Bloody Mary in front of Eileen. The celery stalk was small and thin. Eileen pulled it out, licked the red stain and bit off the end.

David had the sudden sensation they were ganging up on him. The bartender's maternal grimace and thick shoulders scared him. She hovered

as if she were protecting Eileen from some vague threat, as if he were dangerous. How dare she act as if he couldn't control his liquor. Even her seeming agreement sounded as if she was warning Eileen to watch out, something bad might come from a man who was tired of being good. He wanted to see what Eileen was going to do with her hand, and he wanted to see how many Bloody Marys she'd let him buy. Most of all he wanted to see how many shots of whiskey he could handle before he crashed sideways off the stool that had started to feel a bit too small beneath his hips.

He plunged his hand into the bowl, scooped out a fistful of peanuts, and stuffed them into his mouth. Bits of peanut crumbs tumbled out, stuck to his lips, and smeared salt and oil across his chin. Eileen leaned against him. With a finger wet from the side of her sweating glass, she wiped at his chin, and then put her finger in her mouth and sucked off the salt.

"Be careful, Eileen."

David glared at the bartender. What did she mean, *be careful*? There was nothing scary about him. He was a businessman. He should be the one showing caution. If he didn't watch it, he would lose his coordination and they could take everything he had left—wallet and car. He resented the implication that he might be someone to fear, someone that would hurt her, or stiff her, if she was what he thought she was.

"She doesn't need to worry about me." His voice came out a semi growl and he knew the sound contradicted the words. He tried to soften it with a smile, but forcing his lips into a curve, pushing against the leaden feeling around his mouth, made him more angry. He didn't need to prove anything.

"I'm always careful, Renata." She turned to David. "You've had a lot to drink, hon. Why don't we go to my place. I live close by. I could make you a cup of coffee."

Even in his drunken state, he knew she wasn't inviting him over for a chat or a cup of coffee. He held his breath for a few seconds. Renata's eyes bore down on him. The alcohol softened his brain. His job, Lin . . . his kids, Allie and Josh, felt very far away, in another dimension, a life in which he knew where he belonged—at the office in the middle of the morning. It was Tuesday, he usually left work early on Tuesdays to coach Allie's soccer team.

He slid off the stool. The room tilted to the side for just a moment, then righted itself. He might be drunk, but he wasn't plastered. Where was he going once he walked out into the sunshine? Home, driving drunk on the freeway? Or to Eileen's apartment, if it was that. Her motel room, possibly.

"You stay right here. I'll make him a cup of coffee." Renata turned to the back of the bar, yanked the pot off a coffeemaker stand, and turned back to the front where she filled the discolored carafe from a faucet on the sink tucked under the bar.

"He's coming with me," said Eileen.

He wasn't sure whether he was leaving with Eileen, or headed home,

not sure if he even wanted to leave with Eileen. He was hoping fate might make the choice for him.

"That's not the kind of man you want to take home." Renata's voice was a stage whisper. "Trust me."

"What do you know?"

"I know mean drunks and I know rich white guys. Let him go."

"He's got a nice car. He looks like a decent guy."

He was definitely ready to have a bit of fun, ready to be bad, now that it looked like he might lose the opportunity to make his own choice. He couldn't go to soccer practice drunk, so why go at all? And he sure wasn't going home. He needed to sleep this off somewhere, it might as well be on an aging mattress in a room with Eileen.

"That's the kind you need to watch out for," said Renata. "It's not safe."

Now he was angry. In fact, he felt a rage boiling inside that was worse than what he felt walking out of his building, a jobless and unwanted professional, carrying his pathetic box of belongings like a kindergartener on the last day of school. Useless. How dare she imply he was dangerous. He was a soccer coach. This woman, a crummy bartender in a crap bar was telling this slut to watch out for him? For *him*? As if he might hurt her, as if he had a buried rage that would do something like rape her. Or worse, one of those monsters who would methodically slice her into pieces. Is that what she meant?

He grabbed Eileen's arm. "Don't listen to her. I'm a nice guy. Just a sad guy who got laid off today. No job. So what am I gonna do except have a few drinks?"

She stroked his arm. "That's right, hon. Booze is good for soothing the beast."

"In some men, it releases the buried beast," said Renata.

God, he wanted to smack that woman.

Eileen was off her stool. She swallowed the last of her drink, the red liquid poured between her lips, the celery leaves brushed her cheek, leaving a wet spot that he could see even in the gloomy light. The skin on her arms jiggled slightly as she shook her glass, resettling the ice at the bottom to prevent it from dropping onto her face. She was older than he'd thought. That loose skin, shaking like a thick towel in the wind, made him slightly less certain of where he was headed. Lin's arms didn't jiggle like that. Forty years old and she still looked pretty good. If it wasn't for that razor blade tongue. *Are you networking, David? How long do you think it will take?*

He was immobilized. It was a doorway into a new, unknown world. A woman who was obviously offering herself to him, even if he had to pay, which wasn't completely clear. He'd never paid before. And maybe he wouldn't have to. She was small. He was a big guy. She could demand money up front, but he could easily manipulate her out of that. She didn't look quite that savvy, looked like she was on some kind of cusp, just like him, having lived a certain life, things went wrong, and now she had to sell

herself. It wasn't quite clear if that was the deal. Maybe she thought she could get something from him. Or maybe she just wanted him. Saw a good-looking guy, younger than she was, not like the other scum that usually hung out at this place, and she wanted him. Things weren't always about money, maybe she just needed the ego boost.

"I'm telling you, Eileen. You're making a mistake."

Damn her. Who did she think she was? David's hand tightened around the glass. He lifted it as if to take a final swallow and saw it was empty. He raised his arm and hurled the glass at the mirror. It cracked and the shot glass thudded onto the shelf, rattled against some bottles, but didn't knock them over. Where was the enormous, crashing, shattering storm of glass he'd expected? A spider mark on the mirror, a minor impact. Like his life. All that effort, his good throwing arm, an arm that had thrown thousands of baseballs, felt limp and as waggly as the skin under Eileen's arm. Renata plucked a cell phone out of her pocket and pressed a single number for speed dial. She growled into the phone, "I need your help."

"Why'd you call him?" Eileen was crying, blue streaks ran down her face.

Before he could blink, Renata, pocketed the phone, reached under the bar and pulled out a knife, much bigger than the one she'd used to slice limes. David stumbled and sat down hard on the floor. He wondered what the next humiliation would be. Possibly Eileen would try to help him up, making him feel like the old man he suddenly realized he was. The ache in his tailbone raced up his spine. The floor was cold. He pushed on the palms of his hands and raised himself into an awkward crab-like position, his butt off the floor and his hands and feet supporting his torso like a bridge.

"Stay down," said Renata.

"I'll pay for the mirror."

Eileen scurried to his side and ran her fingers through his hair.

"Get away from him. Are you stupid?"

"I thought I had him under control."

"You always think that, until you get sucked in with too many free drinks."

David closed his eyes.

"Quit rubbing his head. Get control of him."

Eileen grabbed his shirt collar, and he opened his eyes. She held a gun in her opposite hand. She was still crying and it wasn't clear that her eyes were focused on him.

David grabbed the toe poking out of her sandal and twisted. She cried out and he reached up and grabbed the gun. Renata raced to the end of the bar and out onto the main floor, straight at him, the knife clenched in her fist. He lifted the gun and fired. Renata was immobile for half an instant as a dark, moist spot grew at the center of her shirt. Then she collapsed on the floor.

David scrambled to his feet. He went behind the bar and grabbed the empty shot glass he'd thrown. He and Eileen hurried out the door. The sunlight sliced into his eyes. Tears spilled over his lower eyelids. Eileen

gripped his bicep and tugged him across the parking lot. There were only two cars. A dirty white compact American car and his.

He leaned against his Porsche. This was it. Get in and drive home to face the rest of his life, jobless and humiliated, frightened of the repercussions. Or go wherever Eileen planned to take him. Blood pumped furiously through his veins, pushing as if it couldn't quite make its way where it was headed. He closed his eyes and saw a vast network of vessels and arteries on the backs of his eyelids. The ache in his tailbone had seeped into his lower back.

"You don't want me, do you."

"I do, but . . ."

"You'd better leave."

She leaned forward, nearly falling off her platform shoes, and kissed his throat.

She walked to her car, teetering slightly. She looked across the roof of the sagging car. "I don't know your name."

"David."

"Be good, David." She didn't open the car door. She looked into his eyes, not even squinting from the sunlight. Possibly thirty seconds passed before she tugged on the handle of the car. It opened with a creaking sound. She climbed inside.

David unlocked his car and lowered himself into the seat. He revved the engine, backed out of the parking spot, turned the wheel sharply, and went down the apron. The left rear wheel bounced over the curb. When he started the day, just a few hours ago, he never thought he'd be unemployed, much less running from a woman he'd shot. Now he had to hope his prints were lost among hundreds of others on the bar, in the men's room. He turned toward the freeway. The sun hit the windshield and he lowered his visor to keep it out of his eyes. He couldn't seem to find his sunglasses. At the on-ramp, he saw the traffic was light, and he threaded his way on without easing up on the gas. 🐾

# MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

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## Rustic Getaway

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, 267 Broadway, 4th Floor, New York, New York 10007-2352. Please label your entry "November Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If you would like your story returned, please include an SASE.

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The winning entry for the May Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 109.

# THE LAMB WAS SURE TO GO

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GAR ANTHONY HAYWOOD

**O**llie Brown finally got tired of chasing Jetta Brown's tail. Jetta was Ollie's wife, a fine and tart little thing who liked to wear dresses that made her teardrop body look like a shrink-wrapped party invite, and her man-mountain husband had been trying to force the idea of monogamy upon her ever since I'd known the pair, which was going on eleven years.

The night I heard the news, I was off my stool and headed for the door of the Deuce, passing Howard Gaines just as he was dropping a cold thirty on my cousin Del, winning another game of dominoes from a man who was both younger and far less inebriated than he. In an effort to blunt Del's humiliation with casual conversation, Howard mentioned offhandedly that Ollie had jumped in front of a Metro Rail train three days before on Flower and Eleventh, leaving Jetta a widow with little in the way of a body to center a funeral around.

I stopped in my tracks. "He killed himself?"

Howard's gray head bobbed up and down. "He left a note. Said he couldn't take Jetta's games no more, and he loved her too much to leave her. And we all know the fool sure as hell couldn't kill her, so . . ."

"Kill her? That man couldn't touch a hair on that woman's head, didn't matter how bad she treated him," Del said.

And that was the God's honest truth. Anyone who made a habit of drinking at the Deuce became familiar with the pair's routine eventually: Jetta sniffing every pants leg in the house until she found something stiff and willing inside, and Ollie losing his mind and temper in response, pitting his rage and giant hands against all but Jetta herself. That was the one line he could never bring himself to cross.

I shook my head at the shame of it all and sat back down at the bar.

"Hell of a thing, ain't it? Lovin' a woman that much?" Howard said. "Me, I couldn't do it. Throw myself in front of a damn train just 'cause my wife don't know how to keep her drawers on."

"Shoot, you don't know what you could do," Lilly Tennell sneered. The barkeep had ambled over to our end of the bar to regale us with the mag-

nificance of her opinion, and none of us was going to tell her it wasn't appreciated. Lilly was bigger than any two male patrons in the house combined, and she had less patience for disagreement than a black bear with its foot in a trap. "Let the right girl come along and open your nose, see if you ain't turnin' flips and doin' cartwheels at the snap of her little finger!"

The big woman snapped two of her own meaty fingers and laughed, eyes rolling up toward the ceiling.

"Hate to say it, but girlfriend's right," Del said. "I've been there myself. We all have."

"So what?" Howard asked, unconvinced. "Just 'cause a man's crazy in love don't mean he's gotta let a woman treat 'im like a damn dog. She don't wanna do you right, show you the proper respect—"

"Walk away," Del said.

"That's right. Walk the hell off. Shoot, you ain't a man if you can't do that."

Lilly chuckled, grandly amused by Howard and Del's unified front of imperial maleness, and turned—as I knew she inevitably would—in my direction. "You're awful quiet there, hotshot. What do you got to say about it?"

"Me?" I produced a casual shrug. "I guess I say it all depends upon the woman. A man feels one deep enough, there isn't anything she can do to make him leave."

"Oh." Del nodded his head with recognition, a small smile growing larger on his face. "I bet I know who you're talking about."

"Who?" Howard asked.

"A client G had once. She said this fool—"

I silenced him with a shake of my head, but Lilly caught the gesture and jumped on it like a cat pawing a mouse.

"Uh-uh. To hell with that. Finish what you was sayin'," she told Del.

"It's a private matter, Lilly," I said, "and it's not worth talking about."

"You let me an' Howard be the judges of that." The big woman behind the flaming red mouth and dirty apron slapped a fresh glass down in front of me, set a bottle of Wild Turkey alongside it, and said, "Let's hear it."

It's not a story I care much to reflect upon, let alone regale friends with, but confession is supposed to be good for the soul, so I told it.

My soul has always needed all the help it can get.

I remember that it happened during one of those extended lulls in my business that turn my every waking thought to loan sharks and debt consolidation. A stranger and I were sitting out front at the barbershop, watching Mickey Moore shave the stubble from Hobie London's jawline as we all played the dozens at the expense of Condoleezza Rice, when a sister I'd never seen before stepped through the door and sheepishly asked for me.

"I'm lookin' for Aaron Gunner?"

She was a reed-thin, middle-aged black woman who hadn't been the knockout she was dressed up to be for a long time, and like most of my would-be clients, she couldn't believe she hadn't come to the wrong address.

"That's him right there," Mickey said, pointing his scissors in my direction before I could identify myself.

"Aaron Gunner, the private investigator?" She glanced around the barber-shop as if it were an apparition that had suddenly sprung up all around her.

"My office is in the back," I said, rising to my feet. "Come on in, Ms. . . .?"

She didn't give me her name, but she followed my lead through the beaded curtain filling an open doorway that separates Mickey's workspace from mine. The sight of my office confused her even further because there's nothing more to it than a desk, two chairs, and a couch, but I took little offense. The sight of it often sets my own head reeling.

I coaxed her into a chair and took my own seat behind the desk, then asked for her name again.

"Innes. Deirdre Innes," she said.

"What can I do for you, Ms. Innes?"

"I thought you'd have a real office. This is nice, but—"

I could have told her it was the best a brother in my profession working out of his own Central Los Angeles neighborhood could do, but I exchanged that explanation for the shorter, less cynical version. "The rent's cheap, and Mickey does my head twice a month for free. How I can help you, Ms. Innes?"

She hugged her purse close to her stomach, gathering nerve, and said, "I need a bodyguard. A man I know's gonna kill me." Her eyes were starting to tear up.

"What man is this?"

"His name's Samuel Stills. I seen 'im kill a man outside a bar eight years ago, and I had to say so in court. He told me then, they ever let 'im out, I was good as dead."

"And he's out now?"

"Girl I know in Corrections says he's scheduled for release this Wednesday."

I started jotting down some notes. "This man he killed. He was a friend of yours?"

"A friend?" Innes shook her head. "He was just somebody asked me to dance that night." Her eyes lit up with anger as she added, "So Samuel followed 'im out back and shot 'im dead afterwards."

"Samuel was your boyfriend?"

"Hell no. That's what he always liked to *think* he was, but it wasn't never like that between us."

I continued my note taking, examining my prospective client more closely as I did so. She was afraid of Stills, to be sure, yet her contempt for him seemed strangely dismissive, as if he wasn't worth all the trouble she was going through to seek protection from him. The contradiction bothered me enough to make me wonder how badly I wanted her business, even as desperate as my circumstances were.

"Eight years is a long time," I said. "How do you know Stills even remembers you?"

"Because I know Samuel Stills." My questions were frustrating her now. "Look, Mr. Gunner, I went to the police, and they said they couldn't help me. They said Samuel had to threaten me over the phone or somethin' 'fore they could even bring 'im in for questionin'. So I come to you, 'cause somebody told me personal security is part of your business. Now if that ain't right—"

"It's right, sure. But—"

"All I want you to do is follow me around for a while. Keep an eye out for Samuel, and let me know if you see 'im. You can do that, can't you?"

"Yes, and I'd be happy to. But it's not going to be cheap. The kind of surveillance you're talking about involves a lot of man hours, and can get rather expensive. How much money were you thinking about spending?"

"I got two hundred dollars."

She said it with a straight face because it wasn't meant to be a joke, but I found myself wanting to laugh out loud nonetheless.

"What?" she asked, keen enough to have sensed that my mood had suddenly changed for the worse.

"I'm afraid there's nothing I can do for you, Ms. Innes. But thanks for stopping by."

"Excuse me?"

"I can't help you. I'm sorry."

"You're *sorry*? I'm tellin' you the man's gonna kill me!"

"I'm sure you're mistaken. After eight years inside, you're probably the last thing on Stills's mind. If I were you, I'd go home and forget about him, just as he's almost certainly forgotten about you."

"No! I need your help, and I ain't got nobody else I can turn to!"

I stood up to encourage her to do likewise, said, "I wish I could do more for you, but I can't. For two hundred dollars, the most I could do is roll by the crib once, maybe twice a day for a week, just to make sure you're okay."

"That ain't enough!"

She was pushing me now, and I was in no mood to be forgiving about it. "Look. You come in here talking about Stills like he's a homicidal maniac, then offer me two lousy bills to stand between him and you. I may be crazy, sister, but I'm not that crazy. Now, I can walk you to the door, or you can find your own way out, but either way, you're leaving 'cause this conversation is over."

She finally leapt to her own feet, quaking with rage, and stormed out, throwing a full-bodied epithet behind her in farewell.

As soon as she was gone, I sat down again, feeling like a prize ass, yet cheered by the almost certain knowledge that I would not be left to wallow in my self-deprecation for long.

"That was kinda cold, wasn't it?" Mickey asked, dropping in on me right on cue.

"Nobody asked you back here, old man. And I believe you've still got somebody in your chair."

He kept right on coming as if I hadn't spoken, clippers still in his hand,

said, "Lady's in trouble. Ain't her fault she ain't got a dime to get herself out of it."

"I'm all done, Mick, working for the next thing closest to free. It's bull."

"It is what it is. What you gonna do, move the business out to Brentwood?"

"There is no business. That's the problem in a nutshell."

"You run into a cold spell, that's all. We all do, don't matter what line we're in. You just gotta wait it out."

He made it sound so simple. Wait it out. Keep my shingle up in the heart of the 'hood, where few people have a dollar to spend on something other than the barest of necessities, and hope somebody one day would walk through my door and offer me something to do with my time that both paid well and would be worth talking about afterward, without any soul-crushing embarrassment.

Sure.

I fixed my eyes on my landlord until he, too, fled the room, and then I resigned myself to taking his advice and doing what I always do when I arrive at this pathetically redundant crossroads in my "career"—Nothing.

**J**olly Mokes and his late wife Grace had once been the polar opposites of Ollie and Jetta Brown. The only playing around on Jolly Grace ever did was all in her husband's head, and unlike Ollie, Jolly had no problem directing his jealous rages at the woman he loved, rather than the men he imagined she was sleeping with. A convenient excuse for his abuse was the nightmare we both had endured over a nineteen-month span in the jungles of Long Binh, as Jolly took the carnage we witnessed there harder than most, but the truth was that Jolly didn't need any excuse to be a bully; he'd been a big, insecure little boy when he arrived in Vietnam, and that was what he was when he got out.

He killed Grace two years after we came home. Her death was unintentional. He meant only to slap her around to the point of tears as usual, but ever since he beat her to death instead, he's had to live with the crime as if he'd put a gun to her head and pulled the trigger all the same. On the surface, it wouldn't appear that he deserved anybody's sympathy, and I never thought he'd get an ounce of mine. Then he came to see me at Mickey's one day after they let him out of Corcoran State Prison, begging for some kind of work, and the guilt-wracked shell of the giant I remembered demanded my pity in spite of my best efforts to withhold it. He had found God in prison, and part of the deal he had made with his Savior was to carry his wife's murder around on his back like a ton of iron chain mail, for every minute of every day he had left to live.

It's a hard penance to watch, and an even harder one to ignore.

So I found a way to give him a job, and I've been doing the same as my workload and finances allow ever since. It's no great sacrifice. I only assign him things I have no wish to do myself, and I pay him next to nothing for the privilege.

When neither my own conscience nor Mickey's needling would allow me to forget Deirdre Innes after three days of trying, I finally got the idea to let Jolly watch her back for me. It was a task tailor-made for him.

"All you have to do is watch her crib for a while, let me know if you see this boy Stills anywhere," I told him.

"And if I do?"

"You call me immediately. He sounds like a real piece of work, I don't want you trying to deal with him alone. You got that?"

Jolly said he did. But Deirdre Innes wasn't exactly grateful when I took him over to her place to introduce them.

"Uh-uh, Mr. Gunner. I want *you* to look after me, not him. I need a professional!"

"Jolly is a professional," I said.

"Has he got a gun?"

"He doesn't need a gun. What, you can't see how big this man is?"

"Samuel don't give a damn about big. If he comes over here lookin' for me, only thing gonna stop 'im from killin' me is a bullet. I told you that."

I gave her an easy choice to make: Jolly or nothing.

She took Jolly.

The next day, I finally picked up some work of my own. A well-to-do sister in the technical writing trade named Seneca Latimore was about to marry David Fields, her fiancé of ten months, and before she went down the aisle with him, she wanted me to do a thorough background check on him, just in case he'd left any embarrassing details out of the life story he'd offered her. She was a careful woman, Ms. Latimore, and it was a good thing she was because over the course of the next two weeks, I would discover that "David Fields" was only the latest of many false identities her betrothed had seen fit to invent in recent years. Fields was actually an ex-con out of Louisiana whose real surname was Spencer, and if the treatment he'd given the three women he'd married previously was any indication, the post-honeymoon plans he had for Seneca Latimore were not going to be of the happily-ever-after variety. I had seen armed bank robbers hit and run without leaving as much emotional carnage behind.

I was only two days into the task of documenting the full breadth of the David Fields iceberg when Jolly called me away.

"I seen Samuel Stills," he said.

He was calling from a ramshackle eyesore known as the Red Owl Motel, ten shoebox rooms slathered in crumbling white stucco that made the blight of Van Ness and Gage complete. He met me across the street where I parked my car and we walked back over together.

"He still here?"

"Yeah. Room 4. I followed him over from Ms. Innes's place. She was out when he came around. I figured you might wanna know where he's stayin'."

"You figured right. What'd he do over at Ms. Innes's place?"

"He didn't do anything. Just walked past the house a couple times, like he was tryin' to make up his mind 'bout goin' to the door. But he never did."

We were moving past the motel office now, no one visible behind the dust-caked screen door, and I could see Room 4 waiting for us less than fifteen yards away.

"What're we gonna do?" Jolly asked.

"I'm not sure yet. Let's just see how it goes."

"Okay. But we better watch this boy close, G. He looks like the wrong end of trouble to me."

I knocked on the door and waited as Jolly loomed behind me, both of us aware that we were taking a chance that Stills wouldn't make any assumptions about who was calling and put a few bullet holes in the door before opening it. It was the risk you always took when you dropped in on bad people unexpectedly.

But Stills just flung the door open without a word and snapped, "What you want?" No more concerned about us being a danger to him than the line of red ants snaking across the dusty motel porch at our feet.

"Samuel Stills?" I asked.

California cons don't have access to weight rooms anymore, but Stills had been doing some kind of heavy lifting while he'd been inside. Shirtless and barefoot, his arms were massive slabs of chiseled muscle and his waist was narrow and hard, abs rippling beneath his gleaming black skin like a tightly coiled serpent.

"Who the hell are you?"

"My name's Gunner, his is Mokes. We're friends of Deirdre's. May we come in?"

"No. Deirdre who?"

"Deirdre Innes. You were just by her place. She's asked us to come by and find out what you want with her. Do we really have to do this out here?"

He didn't say anything, just let a long spell go by while deciding what move to make. In the space of that moment, I came to understand why Innes was so terrified of him. Even motionless, he exuded the threat of sudden violence. Jolly was right: Stills *was* the wrong end of trouble.

"Come on in," he said at last, and stepped away from the door so we could enter.

He sat on a corner of his bed and interlocked the fingers of both hands between his legs, a grin appearing out of nowhere on his face. I scanned the room quickly for a weapon within his reach but saw nothing of the kind, a warning that he was confident enough of his chances against us without one.

"So. Deirdre sent you over here, huh?"

"That's right. She wants to be left alone," I said.

"Alone? She tol' you that?"

"Yeah. And she wanted us to tell you."

"That's bull. I love Dee."

"Apparently, that's not the impression you left her with back at your trial. Or don't you remember threatening to kill her?"

He laughed. "Now I *know* this is bull," he said.

And then he came off the bed.

He plowed into me first and the two of us together drove Jolly to the floor. The big man went down beneath us like a poleaxed buffalo and struck the back of his head on a dresser against the wall, damn near knocking the face-board off one of its drawers. From the sound the air made leaving his lungs, I could tell he wasn't going to be of much help to me for a while.

I'd brought my Ruger 9 into the room with me along with Jolly, but Stills was keeping me too busy fending off blows to find it. He had a knee in my chest as he threw punches at my face, working like hell to put my lights out before Jolly could shake the cobwebs off. One of his right hands connected solidly with the bridge of my nose and I heard bone snap, felt my nostrils cloud with warm blood. Something shrill kept ringing in my ear, and I finally realized Stills had yet to stop laughing.

I reared up and bucked him off, but somewhere in the process my Ruger slipped its holster and slid under the table behind me, well out of reach. Meanwhile, Stills was demanding my ongoing attention. He was faster and stronger than I, and the punches I threw at him kept meeting thin air. I caught him once with a good left under the right eye, but he took it like a bitch-slap from an old woman with rheumatism. All it did was stop the laughter; it didn't stop him.

Our fight had been a fair one up to now, and that was the problem with it. I was overmatched. I reached out for an equalizer and found one in the only chair in the room, an armless, straight-backed piece of old kindling no homeless person would have brought back to the shanty. I swung it in a sideways arc Stills couldn't duck and broke it across his left shoulder, legs and seat flying in all directions. He charged me in response, enraged and hurt now, and I used the chair back still in my hand to counter. My blow caught him flush on the left side of his lowered head and sent him sprawling to the floor, grasping for me in vain. He was climbing back to his feet in seconds, going for the gun under the table, but his time had run out: Jolly was back in action. The big man kicked him under the jaw with the size fourteen on his right foot and Stills went down for good, blinking at the ceiling and gasping for breath.

I retrieved my sidearm and moved in close so Stills would have no choice but to hear me clearly.

"Leave the lady be, Sammy. You scare her, and she doesn't like being scared. If my boy and I have to come back here again, it won't be to ask for the same favor with sugar on top."

Stills propped himself up on his elbows, teeth painted crimson. "Go to hell, punk! Me an' Dee got mad love for each other! Ain't nothin'—or nobody—gonna keep us apart!"

He was laughing again, spitting blood, too tickled by the weightless-

ness of my threat to contain himself.

"You know he ain't gonna listen, right?" Jolly asked me later, when we had returned to my car across the street.

"I know. That's why you're gonna forget all about Ms. Innes for now and start following him. And the first step he takes in her direction—"

"I call you. Got it. But—"

"I don't know what we'll do after that, Jolly. Guess we'll just have to cross that bridge when we come to it."

It wasn't much of an answer, but it was the only one I had to offer.

Late the next day, a man came to see me at Mickey's. I didn't know him, but I knew the type. Shaved-head white men in short-sleeved dress shirts and eyesore neckties aren't always agents of the law, but a foul mood thrown into the mix makes it all but an absolute certainty.

He flashed the badge as soon as Mickey showed him to my desk and I'd nodded at the sound of my name. "Larry Milton, Mr. Gunner. Department of Corrections. I understand you've been harassing one of my parolees."

I didn't follow fast enough to suit him.

"Samuel Stills. You and a friend went by his place yesterday and roughed him up. Maybe you'd like to tell me why."

"Sure. But first, a salient correction: Stills was the one who started the heavy horseplay, not us. My associate and I only went there to talk."

"About what?"

"My client, Deirdre Innes. She's worried Stills intends to do her harm, and hired me to make sure that he doesn't."

"Deirdre Innes?" Milton scrunched his face up in what appeared to be minor confusion. "Why would Stills want to hurt Deirdre Innes?"

"You don't know? She's the reason he *is* a parolee. It was her testimony that put him away eight years ago. What, you didn't read the man's file?"

"I *wrote* the man's file. What the hell are you talking about?"

I began to feel uneasy. "The guy Stills shot at the bar. She testified at his trial she saw it happen. Are you trying to say she didn't?"

He smirked and shook his head, as if I'd just finished telling a bad joke he'd heard a million times before. "Christ, you make-believe policemen. How stupid can you get? Innes never testified against Stills and neither did anyone else. The man made a full confession, his case never even went to trial."

My mouth inched open and something came out, but it wasn't anything either of us could understand.

I asked Milton politely to have a seat and set myself for the jarring impact of a long, humiliating fall from grace.

The downside to having a man like Jolly Mokes do your dirty work is how rarely you can reach him when you desperately need to. It's all Jolly can do to keep peanut butter on his bread, so a telephone, even one of those pay-as-you-go cellular numbers, is well beyond his reach. That means the only time I ever talk to him during a case is when he sees fit to

either call me from a pay phone or visit me in the office. Our lines of communication are entirely one sided.

I waited three hours after Larry Milton left me for Jolly to make contact, then went out to find him. I drove to the Red Owl Motel first, hoping both Jolly and Samuel Stills would be there, but neither man was in evidence. I tried to sit in the car and wait for one or the other to show up, not wanting to give in to the dread that was trying its damndest to take hold of me, but fifteen minutes was all the waiting I could do. My calls to Deirdre Innes's home were still going unanswered and my mind was working overtime inventing reasons for her absence. It was just after 7 P.M. now, and night had set its full weight down upon the city of black angels.

A single light burned in the front window of my client's little tool shack of a house on Third Avenue when I pulled up at the curb. The place was quiet, too, like a prison cell just before the bulls slam the door on you for the first time. No one answered the door when I knocked or called out Innes's name. None of this added up to anything more ominous than an empty house, but my nerves were on edge just the same.

I slid around the side of the house and knocked on the back door with the same result. Every window at the rear was dark. I tried the knob and the door came open in my hand like a well-oiled stage prop. I called Innes's name one more time, received no answer, then drew my gun and started in. Slowly.

Somebody grabbed my shoulder from behind, and I spun around on my heels, put the gun in a big man's face, and damn near pulled the trigger.

"Dammit, Jolly! Where the hell's Stills?"

"I'm sorry, G. I lost 'im. He went up in this mall and . . . There were so many people. I looked and I looked, but—"

"Forget it. Come on."

I led the way into the house. We crept down a narrow hallway past three open doors—a bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen—only to be greeted by shadows and more silence. The burning light in the living room beckoned. With Jolly's breathing booming like thunder in my ears, we finally reached the front of the house, and that was where we found them: Innes sitting motionless on the edge of a sofa, Samuel Stills laying on one side of his face at her feet, the carpet beneath his torso drenched in blood.

"Damn," Jolly said.

The gun she had used was still in Innes's left hand. Her eyes were fixed on a meaningless spot on the floor, unblinking, and it looked like they had been for a while now. I slipped the revolver from her grasp, then checked Stills's body for a pulse, just to make sure.

"Call 911," I told Jolly, before bearing down on Innes, my voice quavering with rage.

"What the hell happened?"

She didn't answer, oblivious to the question. I hunkered down to make direct eye contact and tried again, a little more forcefully.

"What the hell happened!"

This time my voice registered. Her eyes fluttered to life and refocused. Her mouth changed shape, she gave out a small moan. "Where were you?" she asked. She looked over at Jolly, who was hanging up the phone. "Where the hell was *he*?"

"Never mind that. There's a dead man on the floor and the Man's on his way over here to ask us both how he got there."

"How he got there?" Her eyes flared as white as a camera flash. "How the hell you think he got there? He broke into my crib an' I shot 'im, that's how!"

"That you shot him is obvious. What isn't is why. And don't give me any more of that crap about Stills wanting revenge for your having testified at his trial eight years ago because we both know that's a lie."

"What?"

"You heard me. I had a little talk with his parole officer today. Stills gave the cops a full confession, Deirdre, his case never even went to trial."

Now her eyes went cold again, the telltale sign of a liar being forced without warning to regroup. "So? I still had to tell the cops what I seen! What difference does it make that there wasn't no trial?"

"It doesn't make any difference. Unless Stills wasn't the one who actually pulled the trigger that night."

It was just a hunch, but that was the scenario I'd kept coming around to, ever since Larry Milton left my office. Innes tried hard not to give me anything back in the way of a response, but her silence alone was response enough.

"His P.O. says he took the rap on a charge he might've beaten if he'd only cared to try. Two brothers wrestling over a gun in a dark parking lot, only one witness there to see the gun go off. People walk in cases like that all the time. Only Stills showed no interest in walking. The only thing he seemed to have any interest in was *you*."

"You're crazy. I saw 'im—"

"He was in love with you, the poor bastard, and he wanted to protect you. When that gun went off, he wasn't the one holding it, you were. But he did the time for the crime so you wouldn't have to. Didn't he?"

"Nobody asked him to!" She leapt to her feet, suddenly teary eyed and livid. "Nobody ever asked that fool for nothin'!" She glared down at Stills's body, her contempt for him too far gone to conceal a moment longer. "But he was always hangin' around, buyin' me stuff and treatin' me special, like I was his damn woman or somethin'." She looked at me and Jolly, smiled as if we were both as great a fool as Stills. "But I wasn't never his woman! His or nobody else's, and I ain't ever gonna be!"

She started to chuckle, but it died in her throat. Jolly and I said nothing, just stared at her in awe, and a siren building in the distance became the only sound in the room.

"I was only tryin' to help 'im that night," Innes said, winding down again. "They dropped the gun and I picked it up. If I hadn't shot that man . . ."

She waited for one of us to say something, but neither of us did.

"Why the hell're you lookin' at me like that?"  
Jolly and I kept our thoughts to ourselves.

"So Stills never did mean the girl no harm?" Howard Gaines asked, putting the last of his dominoes back in their box. He and I, Del and Lilly were the only ones left standing at the Deuce.

"Until that night? No. I don't think he ever did," I said.

"Damn. Then why'd she tell you—"

"She was hopin' G would kill the fool for her," Lilly said, further demonstrating her own capacity for detection. "That's why she was always tellin' 'im how dangerous Stills was, and how only somebody with a gun could stop 'im from hurtin' her, and all that." She turned to me. "Ain't that right?"

I nodded.

"She wanted to be rid of the boy that bad?" Howard asked.

"She would have made the argument she had no choice. She eventually produced letters he'd written her from prison, expressing his undiminished love for her, and his intent to be with her again the minute he was released. It's for sure he still felt that way the day Jolly and I went to see him at his motel."

"He was whipped," Del said. "Just like Ollie. It didn't matter that she didn't want him. The man was in love."

"Or at least he was until the night he died," I said.

"How do you mean?" Howard asked.

"The story Innes told the police was that Stills broke into her place in a rage. He was furious that's she'd hired Jolly and me to scare him off, and if she hadn't put those three bullets in him, he would have done something very similar to her."

"And you all believed that?" Lilly asked.

"The district attorney did. Me?" I shrugged and slid off my stool, my enthusiasm for the tale wearing thin. "I'm not so sure."

"Come on, cuz," Del said. "Don't leave 'em hangin' like that. Tell 'em the rest of it."

"The rest of it?" Howard asked.

I looked around the empty room, caught in a trap of my own making, and said, "Stills's P.O. came to see me again a few days after he died. He said the letters Stills wrote Innes from prison didn't contain a single threat against her, and the cops never found any signs of forced entry at her crib. To him, that could only mean two things: She let Stills in herself that night and shot him in cold blood."

"And?" Howard asked.

"And she finally hit the man she was really aiming at eight years before."

I went to the Deuce's door and drove my tired ass home. 🐾

# BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

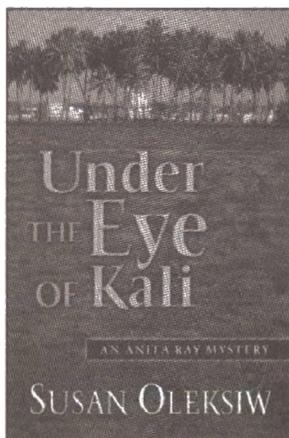
**F**or the armchair traveler, mystery novels can offer insights into the customs and cultures of foreign countries. Four recent, well-researched novels capture the sights and sounds of four Asian cultures.

Colin Cotterill takes us to Laos for a sometimes-frightening journey in the company of the delightful Dr. Siri Paiboun in *LOVE SONGS FROM A SHALLOW GRAVE* (Soho, \$25), the seventh book in a series that began in 2004 with *The Coroner's Lunch*.

On the morning of his seventy-fourth birthday, Dr. Paiboun is handcuffed to a lead pipe in a Cambodian prison. How the coroner came to be held prisoner in such a foul place unfolds throughout the book, as does his involvement in the investigation of three strange murders in Laos. Three young women, in separate locations, have been skewered by épées, or dueling swords, which are, needless to say, a rarity in Laos. In addition, each of the women studied abroad in one of the Eastern bloc countries.

Dr. Siri Paiboun and his friend and colleague Inspector Phosy operate under a wide variety of handicaps including government interference, interference by the Vietnamese (the first murder took place at a Vietnamese compound), and an almost complete lack of forensic tools.

Siri endures his imprisonment and the investigation with a terrific combination of humor and resolve. Cotterill has given Siri a strong supporting cast and exhibits a fine understanding of a country and people who have endured a long history of occupation (French, American, Chinese, Vietnamese) with real fortitude. It is always a pleasure to discover a rewarding series, and judging by this entry, readers should pick up a copy of the first book and prepare for an enjoyable journey.



**S**usan Oleksiw's five previous novels have featured Massachusetts Police Chief Joe Silva. Now with *UNDER THE EYE OF KALI* (Five Star, \$25.95) she has a new series and lead character, photographer Anita Ray, who was first introduced in an AHMM story ("A Murder Made in

India," Oct. 2003). Anita's mother is Indian; her father, Irish-American. Anita lives with her Aunt Meena in the coastal village of Kovalam near the southern tip of India, where Anita helps her aunt run the small Hotel Delite and where she also has a stall to display and sell her photography.

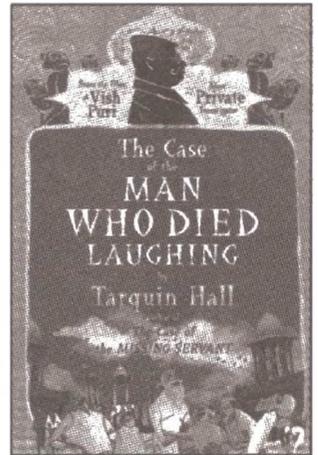
Both businesses depend entirely on the tourist trade, and Anita's ability to serve as a sort of cultural ambassador to both natives and foreigners is often useful. Visitors to Kovalam come from many countries for many reasons and with varying expectations, and many are unprepared for what they find. One visitor hopes to smuggle much needed medical supplies into Burma, another finds herself spiritually called by the goddess Kali, and yet another is bent on avenging a great wrong. But when one of the hotel guests goes missing and another has to be hospitalized with apparent food poisoning, Anita fears the events are not the result of coincidence.

Anita's determination to discover who or what is behind a fatal fall leads her into danger and takes the reader into a fascinating ancient culture that is rapidly changing with modernization. Oleksiw, who trained as a Sanskritist at the University of Pennsylvania and has a PhD in Asian studies, applies a lively intelligence and empathy to her depiction of the people of Kovalam and their visitors. Here's hoping that we will see more of Anita Ray and her Aunt Meena.

**P**unjabi detective Vish Puri, northern India's "Most Private Investigator," continues to confound and confuse his enemies in **THE CASE OF THE MAN WHO DIED LAUGHING** (Simon & Schuster, \$24) by Tarquin Hall. In his delightful second outing the hefty Delhi investigator takes on a case that might have baffled Sherlock Holmes.

While Puri handles a variety of cases, most of them easily, it is the amazing demise of Dr. Suresh Jha that takes all of Puri's ingenuity to solve. Dr. Jha, founder of the Delhi Institute for Rationalism and Education (DIRE), has made many enemies debunking both magicians and "Godmen" who claim to perform religious miracles. In particular he has earned the enmity of His Holiness Maharaj Swami, regarded by many as a living saint.

Ignoring death threats Dr. Jha attends an outdoor morning meeting of a laughter therapy group, and while other members of the group stand transfixed and unable to move, the terrifying figure of the four-armed goddess Kali appears, levitates, and thrusts her sword into Dr. Jha's chest,



killing him instantly. Puri investigates the three magicians he believes capable of creating the kind of illusion that hid the murder, even sending an undercover operative into the massive ashram run by Swami-Ji, his Abode of Eternal Love.

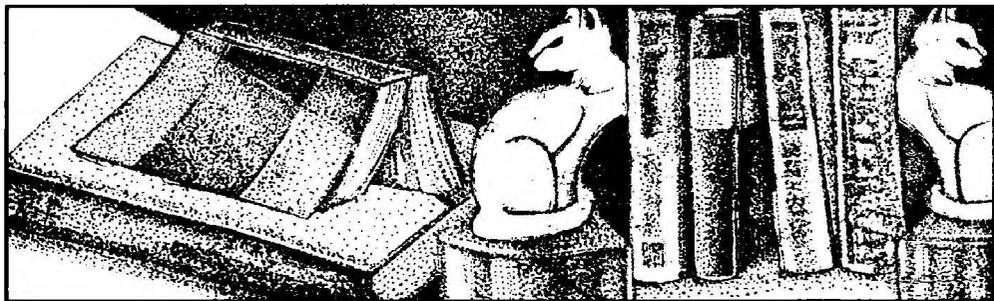
In addition to this main investigation, Hall offers plenty of other amusements including Puri's attempts to keep his doltish brother-in-law Jaideep Bagga from his latest foolish enterprise and Puri's mother's determination to solve a daring daylight robbery without having to bother her son.

Hall's emphasis is emphatically on providing amusing entertainment built around Puri's voracious appetite and his unorthodox methods but he also gives his detective a devilishly difficult case to solve and brains enough to solve it.

**I**ndian-born Rajorshi Chakraborti, who teaches creative writing at the University of Edinburgh, takes the reader on a dizzying journey that relies not on geography, though it moves from Calcutta to London to Brazil, but also on the intricate interplay between the twin stories he tells. *SHADOW PLAY* (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$24.99) may confound readers in his surreal book within a book featuring the author as a character in a novel that moves from his native India to England, Brazil, and Europe.

In segments called "The Perfect Worker," Chakraborti relates the story of Charles Robert Pereira: "a Hindu from India, born a Catholic, lived in London, moved to Brazil, speaking Portuguese with a Portuguese accent." Pereira is a killer who is co-opted into becoming an unwilling tool for unknown masters. Alternating segments labeled "The Writer of Rare Fictions" tell Chakraborti's own life story through his marriage to filmmaker Ana da Lima and the reasons for his decision to disappear from the world.

The two segments tend to merge and tangle in mind-bending fashion as Chakraborti's connection to a young journalist who is murdered results in him becoming either a suspect or the killer's next target. Endnotes offered by Chakraborti's editor, Ellery King, and clarification of certain points by Ana da Lima only serve to deepen the mystery as the author and his creation blur the definition of reality.



**J**ohn Grisham has scored one bestseller after another since the success of his second novel, *The Firm*. Now he's taking a page from the play-book of colleagues such as Carl Hiaasen, Robert B. Parker, and James Patterson and bending his talents to a younger audience.

**THEODORE BOONE: KID LAWYER** (Dutton Children's Books, \$16.99) is Grisham's first entry aimed at young readers age 8-12, and like his adult fiction it blends murder, suspense, courtroom maneuverings, and ethical quandaries in pleasing fashion.

Thirteen-year-old Theo comes by his legal leanings honestly: Both parents are lawyers, as is Uncle Ike, though he's something of a black sheep. His father, Woods Boone, is a real estate attorney, and mother, Marcella Boone, specializes in divorce cases.

Theo absorbs everything he can from his parents as well as from observing courtroom behavior whenever he gets an opportunity. Thus he is able to help or advise his Strattenburg classmates dealing with everything from an ugly divorce and custody trial to an impounded dog to a possible foreclosure. But Theo finds himself in way over his head when a classmate tells him that his cousin, an illegal immigrant, was witness to a defendant's suspicious behavior in an ongoing and sensational murder trial.

Torn between the dilemma of possibly watching a guilty man get away with murder or betraying his promise of confidentiality, Theo gets a bitter taste of adult realities. Grisham provides clear explanations of the workings of various courts and the limitations and obligations of the law and lawyers. *Theodore Boone: Kid Lawyer* sets the stage for Theo and his family to appear in additional novels.

**ALL POINTS BULLETIN:** Pegasus Books releases the newest John Ceepak mystery by Chris Grabenstein, **ROLLING THUNDER**, set on the Jersey shore. Mr. Grabenstein's 2009 young adult novel, **THE HANGING HILL** (Random House), won an Agatha Award, presented this spring at the Malice Domestic Convention in Arlington, Virginia • Molly MacRae's contentious sisters Margaret and Bitsy have appeared in seven issues of **AHMM**; they now make their novel debut in December in **LAWN ORDER** (Five Star) • Dave Zeltserman followed up the May release of his crime novel, **KILLER** (Serpent's Tail) with his supernatural thriller **THE CARETAKER OF LORNE FIELD** (August, Overlook Press).

# SHELL GAME

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NEIL SCHOFIELD

I was sitting in the office, with my feet up on the open desk drawer, the large bottom one where the whisky lived and had its being. I had a glass of J&B in front of me on the desk, but what I was doing mostly was musing by the light of the desk lamp, and considering the hard drive I had taken out of the computer. It was around half past midnight. Behind me, the rain was beating hard on the windows, and in front of me, through the glass office door, past the logo of MURRAY INVESTIGATIONS, the building was dark. Of course, the logo only said "Murray Investigations" on the outside. From in here, it said something coarse in Martian.

I was musing, and sipping the whisky, but, at the same time, I was whistling "Skylark." That's called multitasking. I'm quite proud of being able to whistle "Skylark," because it has a middle eight with some chord changes which can keep even the most experienced of whistlers—among whom I modestly count myself—awake of nights. I imagine Hoagy Carmichael finishing the tune off and saying to himself, "Okay, whistlers of the world, pick the bones out of that."

In the middle of all this musing and sipping and whistling, the door opened. Now that was odd because there was no one in the building. The landings were dark; the offices had all been empty as far as I could see when I had come up to the fourth floor. But the door opened anyway.

And in she came. Walking in through the lobby and into the office as cool as you please. Which was pretty cool. I muffled a curse at myself for having left the outer door unlocked. I muffled the curse; I don't like to offend, especially on first acquaintance.

She didn't look like someone I'd want to offend. She was around twenty, medium sized and blonde, a figure carved out of all our dreams, with a beautiful face, huge violet eyes, and a straight mouth that, while it was voluptuous enough, told you clearly that she didn't put up with no nonsense from nobody.

"Good evening," I said. Civility costs nothing, as my mother used to say. Far too often, in fact.

She stopped halfway to the desk.

"I saw your light on," she said, "and I thought I'd try the door on the off chance."



Tim Foley

"Well, it's my night for the off chance," I said. "What seems to be the problem?" I'd heard people say that, usually doctors, but then what do they know of doctors who only doctors know?

I was assuming she had a problem—what else would she have wandering around the empty floors of the Avalon Commercial Centre at midnight?

"May I sit down?" she said, with a graceful, hesitant gesture at the empty client chair in front of the desk.

I replied with an equally graceful wave that said, as clearly as I could make it: Park it, sister. I would have pushed my snap-brim fedora back on my head with a nonchalant thumb, but as luck would have it, I wasn't wearing one. Which goes to show it's better to have one and not need it, than not to have one and need it.

She sat down and crossed her legs. Those legs had been made for crossing, but being the man I am, I averted my gaze. She pulled down her skirt so, appropriately, I unaverted my gaze.

"I might need some help," she said.

"Who among us doesn't?" I said, just to keep things moving along briskly. She answered this with an irritated shake of her head that set all that blonde hair swirling. She could have been testing for a shampoo commercial.

"How did you get in?" I asked. You see what I'm doing there? Causing a diversion, in case there was something coming here I wasn't going to like. "There's a code on the main door."

"I waited until somebody came out, and then I slipped in before the door could close," she said.

Nice one, Mildred. Low-maintenance offices mean low-maintenance security. There was a two-man security round at two in the morning, but that was all.

"Okay," I said, "let's start at the start. What's your name and what's your game?" I was quite proud of that.

"Brenda," she said, "Brenda Mulvaney. But I don't really have a game. That's the real problem."

"Hmm." I said. Just like that, without even having to think about it. I surprise myself sometimes, and I'm hard to surprise, let me tell you.

"All right, Brenda," I said, "what's up?"

"I have a problem with someone who has an office in this building. I've been trying to get in touch with him for weeks. There's never any answer when I call. I've been coming and going for days. The office never seems to be open. So, I thought I'd try—"

"A midnight raid. A dawn swoop. A strike at the soft underbelly." I finished for her.

She nodded. She really was a number. There are men in this vicious old world who'd kill for a nod like that and that flash of violet eyes. But I am made of sterner stuff. That's what I get paid for. *When* I get paid.

"Okay," I said, "who is this Jasper?"

"Jasper?" she said, her brows crinkling. I was asking myself the same question: *Jasper*? Where had I dragged that up from? And I couldn't swear that my brows weren't crinkling in sympathy, although normally, I exert an iron control over my brows.

"Jackie Harris," she said.

"Class. And what sort of game is Jackie Harris running?"

"He has a modeling agency. You come along and if you're the right type, he sends you to a photographer. You get studio shots."

"And armed with these photographs, for which no doubt you had to pay, he guarantees to find you work as a model or your money back." It wasn't hard to guess the rest. "You didn't get any work, and you didn't get your money back."

She nodded miserably.

"Two hundred and fifty pounds. It may not sound like a lot, but it took me a long time to get it together."

It seemed to be my turn to nod, so I did. Now she pulled a handkerchief out of her bag, and dabbed at her eyes and nose.

"I've been ringing every day, but he's never there, there's always an answering machine."

"Of course there is. He's filtering. And when you come in person, there's no one there, right?"

"That's right."

It looked as though I were on top of the game.

"It's a scam, Brenda, a con trick. The photographs cost them a couple of pounds at most, and he never had any contacts. You never had a chance. Have you tried the photographer?"

"It's the same thing. He has a studio in some sort of converted warehouse down in Chelsea, but he never seems to be there. At least there's no answer when you ring the auto-porter at the main door."

There was a pause. Well that's all right. Pausing never hurts.

"So," I said eventually, "what can I do?"

"I saw the light on here, so I came up to ask if anyone knew anything about Mr. Harris. Then I saw that you were investigators, so I thought I'd try. I thought—perhaps—you might help me to find out something about him."

I thought about that for a bit.

"I don't have any money with me," she said, just to round things off, "but I'd be willing to pay you for an hour's work. If you would."

I didn't tell her what my hourly fee was. She didn't deserve that.

"Okay." I said. "Where does this Harris hang out?"

"He's down on the third floor," she said.

"Well," I said, getting to my feet, "let's go and have a look, shall we?"

"Now?" she said. "Right now?"

"There's no time like the present," I told her, in my best stern professional voice, "that's one of our axioms."

She got up gracefully, too, not scrambling out of her chair like some girls

do. And of course, I held the door open for her. She was that sort of girl.

We went down the staircase. There was little light, mainly coming from the emergency exit lighting. Brenda clung onto the railing and took her time on the stairs.

The Avalon was one of those places that used to be something else. I don't what it was, a power station, maybe, or a factory. Whatever it had been, it wasn't that anymore. Someone had had the bright idea of gutting it and making it into offices for small businesses. There were four floors, connected by staircases, and one small lift. There was a lot of red piping around: They seemed to have made all the handrails from a job lot of scaffolding poles and a pot of red paint. Perhaps they thought that gave the place a with-it artistic atmosphere suited to graphics and communications startups, of which the place seemed to have more than its fair share.

Down on the third floor, we walked along the landing, until Brenda halted at a door two from the end. An ordinary office door, with frosted glass on which was written in gold lettering, Harris Modeling Agency. It appeared, like most of the offices in the place, to be a simple two-room setup. I looked at the offices on either side. Identical. On the right we had The Madison Music Company. And on the other on the far side, a corner office was where Blenheim Publishing lived. Ordinary, respectable struggling companies. Each of the three offices had an auto-porter mounted on the doorframe.

We stood, Brenda and I, in front of the dark office door. She smelled good up close, did Brenda, but I averted my mind. I looked at her.

"Do you want to have a look?" I said.

"You mean . . . break in?" Her eyes were wide.

"I'm not going to break anything," I told her. "No need for gratuitous violence." And I dug out the necessary.

She stared at the little bunch of tools. "You're going to pick the lock?"

I winked at her. "Never was a lock that couldn't be broke, little lady," I said in my best raffish manner. It didn't seem to raff Brenda though. Perhaps it would have gone down better if I'd worn a hat.

The lock and I came to an agreement after thirty seconds top whack. I listened for a moment. The building was absolutely silent. There was a faint faraway buzz of traffic from the street, but that was all.

I opened the door and, gallant as ever, waved her in. There was the same small lobby, and beyond that the main office. It took me a moment to find the light switch, but there was hardly any point because once I had flicked the switch, the lights were shining on absolutely nothing. The office was completely bare. A thirty-foot expanse of nothing whatever. As bare as the surprise and shock in Brenda's eyes. Zero furniture, blank walls with the occasional square where a picture had formerly hung. And nothing else at all, except for the black night and the rain on the windows.

"Business doesn't seem to be too good," I said, just to break the silence.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" Stupid question, I know, but I felt the need to say something.

"This is really strange," she said, looking round. "No, this is the right office. That's the same carpet."

The carpet was in fact the only thing in the place, a mock Persian, well worn through in places.

Brenda looked at me.

"Do you think this means he's—"

"Done a flit?" I finished for her. "Looks pretty much like it. Except . . ."

"Except what?"

Except. I wandered down to the far end of the office. The carpet seemed oddly more worn down here. I looked keenly around me. This, like all the other offices in the place, had evidently been designed by a flexible management catering for all sizes. On each side of the room was a door. I tried the one on the right.

Brenda watched me.

"But that must lead into the office next door."

"Good thinking, Brenda," I said, as I entered into negotiations with the lock, which was a rather cursory security device, in any case. You would have been safer using Scotch tape to hold the door shut. Surprise, surprise, the office on the right was as empty as the one we had come into.

"Business does seem to be bad, and it's catching," I said. "All right, let's see just how bad it can get."

I locked the door and went across to the one on the left. It had the same rubbishy lock, which was well oiled for a door that really shouldn't open that often.

We stepped inside.

"Well, well," I said, "things appear to be looking up in the music business."

The office was well furnished. In fact, it was well over furnished. There were two desks, and a lot of office chairs stacked on top of each other. There were also two large filing cabinets. Brenda was looking around her with a puzzled frown on her pretty face.

"I don't understand," she said.

"Something up?"

"It's just that I'm sure I recognize the desk." She pointed to it. "Yes, I'm positive. It has that cigarette burn on the edge, just there."

She was right. At some time, a careless somebody had let their Silk Cut or Camel burn a nice neat black hole on the edge of the desk.

"And I recognize this chair, as well," she said, going to a chair sitting against the wall. It was upholstered in red moquette, rather worn in places. "I'm sure I sat in this chair when I came for the interview. What's going on?"

Again, I had the urge to push my hat back on my head. I was going to have to get myself a hat. This sort of repressed urge can lead to all sorts of psychological mayhem. Who were the great thumbers-back of hats?

Robert Stack, Richard Widmark. Where would they have been without the raw material? An artist has to have something to work with.

"One thing you might notice," I said, "is that all of the furniture is on castors."

"What does that mean?"

"It means it's easy to move around."

There was another matching door in the wall opposite. I performed my by-now usual miracle. To give her her due, Brenda seemed to have got used to my miracle working. This time she barely watched me. She was trying to open a filing cabinet. She appeared to have got used to office-breaking very quickly. I like people who are adaptable.

This door opened onto the fire stairwell. All right. Now we knew what we were dealing with. At least *I* did. Brenda was still hauling on the filing cabinet drawer like a Ukrainian athlete in an Olympic hammer-throwing event. Her face was red.

"This was in there too," she said, with difficulty.

"Help you?" I said, and I did.

And there we were. The top drawer was devoted to Harris Modeling, the second to Madison Music and the third to Blenheim Publishing.

After we had spent half an hour flipping through the files, we sat back and looked at each other.

"So," I said, "Harris Modeling sucks in young would-be models, takes two hundred and fifty off them, and they never hear another thing. I'll bet there's no film in that camera down in Chelsea, either. Madison Music invites young would-be composers to send their song lyrics to be set to music by our in-house music staff, or their music to have words written by our talented lyric writers. For a hefty fee. And Blenheim Publishing is doing the same for would-be novelists. Send in your manuscript with a large check and we'll find you a publisher. And no one ever hears a thing. And if you turn up, as some people must, Jackie is never in. At least he is, but it's always next door."

"You mean, he's dodging about between these three offices?"

"Dodging is the word. Life must be pretty sweaty for little Mr. Harris. I have to say, I admire his energy."

"But how can it work? I mean, what if people turn up at all three?"

"He doesn't answer any of them. Or he bolts down the fire stairs. And I imagine, to make things easier on himself, I think he must go in cycles. He does a month of interviewing models. Then he moves into Madison Music the time it takes all you girls to give it up as a bad job, and so on and so on. And if the worst comes to the worst, he's got his bolt-hole, and a discreet way in." I jerked a thumb at the door onto the stairwell.

"The rotten little—so-and-so," she said. I admired her restraint.

"It's a shell game," I said. She didn't seem to understand my analogy, and I wasn't going to explain about walnut shells and a pea. "Find the Lady," I said, "at least you know about Find the Lady?" She nodded doubtfully. "Only in this case, it's Find the Jackie."

"What can I do? I'd really like to tell this nasty little snake what I think of him."

"Well," I said, "you could complain to the management company. But that might take some time, and you never know, his brother-in-law might be the managing director."

"I could go to the police," she said.

"Yes, you could. Worst case he'd smell trouble and disappear, or best case he'd be up in court, and you can wave good-bye to your money."

"So, there's nothing to do."

"Do you know any large persons?" I asked her.

"Large?"

"Yes, large. As in big. As in well built."

She thought for a moment.

"There's my brother," she said.

"He's big?"

"He plays rugby. Tighthouse Prop," she said.

I bent my nose sideways. "Few missing teeth?" She nodded and chuckled slightly.

"And does he have some large friends?"

"The whole front row," she said simply.

I nodded. "That should do it," I said. "All right, what you do, on Monday you come round with your large persons, and you get one large person to hammer on each door. And, you station a large person on the stairwell. That should get him. And you don't leave without your money."

She was staring at the wall.

"I'd like that," she said. "I'd like that very much."

"And," I said, "just to add a bit of spice, you could take some telephone numbers from those files, get a few other would-be models to turn up and make some noise. That'll rattle him. What Jackie likes least, I imagine, is noise."

After we'd finished, I locked all the doors after us. We stood on the landing.

"I'd like to pay you something," she said, "I don't have a lot, but I could pay you for your time."

I shook my head.

"On the house," I said. "It was a pleasure to do business with you, Brenda."

She shook her head.

"I'll come up to the office on Monday. I must give you something."

"Brenda," I said, "it's really not necessary. And they might not like me doing private work."

She nodded. "All right, I understand."

We shook hands in the half light. She stood on tiptoe and kissed me gently on the cheek.

"Thank you," she said. I watched her walk down the stairs. At the bot-

tom, she turned and gave me a wave. I waved back. It was the least I could do. Or rather it was the most I could do, lacking that hat-to-thumb back.

Hat or not, I consoled myself, whatever happened, we would always have Harris.

Back in the office, I had a number of things to finish off. It was late, and I should be on my way. First, I put the whisky back in the drawer. No point in causing alarm and scandal, after all. Then I put the hard drive in my gym bag. I don't do gym, but I do do gym bags. The files went in with the hard drive. All the files, photographs, and what-have-you the client had asked for.

And that seemed to be that. I looked round the office one last time. I could still detect just the faintest trace of Brenda's perfume.

I locked the door carefully behind me this time. As I walked down the stairs, I tossed a glance at Jackie's triple setup. Weird: All these people could work from home, I thought. What is this pathological urge to have an office, a place to work? Jackie Harris, for example, had to have three. Some people just need offices.

Not me, that goes without saying. Burglars don't.

What a burglar definitely *does* need, and what I promised myself I was going to buy the next day, was a hat. 🐿

## **Solution to the October "Dying Words"**

### **WORD LIST**

- |               |                |                 |
|---------------|----------------|-----------------|
| A. Merlin     | I. Repent      | Q. Throwback    |
| B. Shelley    | J. Plants      | R. Hopscotch    |
| C. Tendril    | K. Heroine     | S. Encyclical   |
| D. Accident   | L. Azure blue  | T. Waffle       |
| E. Sphere     | M. Nutrition   | U. Official     |
| F. Ivy League | N. Sympathy    | V. Off the wall |
| G. Oriels     | O. Ivory Coast | W. Dreaded      |
| H. Original   | P. Norwegian   | X. Soft-soap    |

### **QUOTATION**

Author—M(arilyn) STASIO

Work—ORPHANS IN THE WOODS (*The New York Times*,  
December 27, 2009)

"The eccentric views of London in Christopher Fowler's playful Peculiar Crimes Unit novels will gladden the heart of anyone who appreciates an offbeat mystery. The bizarre stories typically . . . unfold like an archaeological dig . . ."

# 3 FUNVENTIONS

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ABDÓN UBIDIA

## WATCHES

When the first digital watches appeared, I hurried to buy one at Hans Maurer's store. Scarcely was it mine when I grasped the real importance of my decision. I was not surprised by the absence of little toothed wheels, winding pins, and springs. I was not surprised by the flow of current through the labyrinth of integrated circuits and quartz crystals, or by the loss of the ticktock, which for centuries was the true music of time.

I was surprised by the diminutive screen that had come to replace the watch face.

I explained it to the wizened, enigmatic, reticent Maurer:

"The marked circle makes us think of a protective, and in some way happy, concept of the world: Time goes round and round. Each end is a new beginning. There is no rupture between departures and arrivals. The past, the present, and even the future are displayed before our eyes in a circular continuity. The little hands abandon with antlike steps that which no longer is, and continue in pursuit of that which ineluctably will be. You can see your path and indicate your return. When you see the hands of a watch, you can tell yourself that the days will always repeat themselves with their mornings and nights. That cycles exist. That we will repeat ourselves in our children as our parents have repeated themselves in us. That we will endure.

"And suddenly, along comes this damned digital screen to change all that. The numbers appear and mark a punctual present. Each instant is distinct from the one that preceded it. The numbers emerge and sink into nothingness without a trace. There is no continuity, only replacement. Time seems wide open. It has lost its circular path; it lacks limits. It's barely an instantaneous present. The future is a white and frozen desert. The past fades away. It is a white abyss that opens, then dissolves behind our heels with every step we take. I don't know whether others see what I see there: an infinite solitude. Abandonment. Total vulnerability. These watches have come to teach us that we are orphans. The great round table, that joined so many things, is no more."

These three short pieces are taken from *Funventions: A Book of Fantasies and Utopias*, translated from the Spanish by Nathan Horowitz.

Hans Maurer smiles. But I insist:

"It's possible that each age invents instruments for measuring itself. It's possible that each era chooses its own methods for understanding itself, according to what suits it. The circular forms of gears and dials, and the movements of mechanical watches with their obligatory axis would, then, be neither a random occurrence nor the fruit of purely physical necessity. It would be, then, in addition to what I've said already, the end of a search for a center of order, a central meaning that arranges everything in due place around it.

"I fear, then, and I'm not ashamed to admit it, that digital watches, besides measuring time, are also measuring another continent, which I cannot comprehend well. Perhaps it is a great, white desert, empty, centerless, and meaningless."

From time to time I visit Maurer's shop in the afternoons, despite our mutual repulsion. I examine every model he shows me. My hope is fading that I will find something qualitatively different that can replace the digital watch he sold me.

Recently, Maurer played a dirty trick on me: He offered me the only watch I didn't want. Some macabre demon had invented it a short time before. Perhaps it was a sign that the end of time itself was drawing near. It was equipped with sensors for detecting the vital signs of its owner. Because of this it did have hands. But they went in reverse, counterclockwise. And they sped up as the user's death approached.

Maurer's smile opened like a black hole in his whitish face as he offered it to me.

But between the one subtler, more psychological horror that palpitated silently in my digital wristwatch, and the other, grossly physical, that he held in his outstretched hand, I could not choose.

## SILENT MUSIC

The End, one of many music halls where silent music is played, is neither large nor luxurious. Some people say it looks more like the auditorium of a provincial high school. But its public is faithful and sometimes fanatical. The sessions begin at eight P.M. and last two or three hours.

Afterwards there are fierce debates that divide the audience into enemy camps.

Each concert happens like this. The musicians take their places, the conductor walks to the podium and bows, and the audience members allow themselves to be carried away by the movements of the conductor's baton. None of the musicians has an instrument, though at the beginning, years before, they mimed playing instruments. Now they limit themselves to opening musical scores and following, with their eyes, a number of circles marked along the length of a single black line, like drops of rain on a telephone wire. The scores are untrustworthy guides because after a few minutes, the lights fade out, and the rest of the concert takes place in

darkness. In this way, each attendee knows that his or her concentration will be absolute, and it becomes possible to imagine with great clarity the sounds the orchestra has suggested.

When the concert is over, the lights are switched on, confirming to the audience members that what has ended in their minds has ended in the room as a whole.

These concerts have been denounced to the police. An investigator has alleged that the organizers belong to a sect bent on completely obliterating Western music, which they consider totalitarian and responsible for the disappearance of other music of the world—unrecorded, savage music, music of cultures that have sunk beneath the seas of time.

But none of the patrons of The End gives any credibility to the allegations, or believes that the gentle virtuosos and their languid conductor have anything to do with those extremists who are known to be responsible for, among other atrocities, the theft of the organ from St. Thomas's Cathedral, the murder of Herbert Von Karajan (boiled in linseed oil), and the detonation of a small atomic bomb in the laboratories of Deutsche Grammophon.

### CAR SECURITY

The system works in the following way. When the thief manages to get into the car—which, itself, isn't hard to do—and sits behind the steering wheel, an electronic mechanism locks the doors and windows. This action can either be silent or not.

The second step comes when the intruder tries to start the motor. At this point, a red light starts blinking on the dashboard, and a recorded voice repeats three times, at thirty-second intervals, "There is no escape." It has been demonstrated that three repetitions are enough because after trying repeatedly to start the car, the thief will then try to get out. But the doors and windows are secured.

This is when a hypodermic needle comes out of the seat and injects a special preparation that paralyzes the thief's legs and vocal cords. It has been found that in a very high percentage of cases, the thief, under the influence of the drug, believes that what he is experiencing is a nightmare. To correct this error, the recorded voice explains to him the details of what is going to happen. Then all is ready for the final step, which, unfortunately, is quite disagreeable but, without a doubt, necessary.

The seat slides to the right (to the left in British models), revealing a system of pistons and gears where the thief is completely ground up, compressed, and dissolved in a powerful, odorless acid whose composition is a secret of the manufacturer. Then the seat returns to its former position, so that when the owner gets in and turns on the car, he or she will find no trace at all of what has happened.

The manufacturer guarantees that in only one percent of the cases will the mechanism mistake the owner for a thief. ♣

# DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER



Using the definitions below, fill in as many words as you can in the WORDS column. Then transfer the letters to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram denotes the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a quotation. The initial letters of the words in the WORDS column, reading down, will spell out the author and the work quoted.

The solution to this puzzle will appear in the December issue.

## DEFINITIONS

## WORDS

A. Makes an impression

115 82 13 174 141 34 161 49 96

B. Initial aeronautical successes

145 124 21 99 11 104 53 120

C. Aim

180 166 1 51 147 153 98 88 40

D. Disparaging

139 80 184 18 29 157 110 25 133 70

E. Beach in Delaware

68 107 181 176 41 140 126 113

F. "Committed" author Gilbert

159 6 87 76 28 169 95 56 111

G. Day for rest and worship

46 155 10 144 185 91 35

H. Formal paper

156 100 14 119 38 173

I. Of Roscommon

106 17 137 130 58

J. Hall of —, gallery

150 22 158 177 116 164 66

K. Hardly antediluvian

170 54 48 24 101 73 31 132

L. Soon-to-be collegians

125 61 108 165 26 93 152

M. Acts with caution

37 149 117 86 131 59 9

N. Ingredients in macaroons: 2 wds.

36 44 136 16 154 172 83 146 15

O. Activity of one who takes backward steps

78 20 4 105 151 162 142 182 135 62

1	C	2	W	3	V	4	O	5	S		6	F	7	S	8	P	9	M		10	G	11	B	12	U	13	A	14	H						
15	N			16	N	17	I	18	D	19	V	20	O		21	B	22	J	23	V	24	K	25	D	26	L	27	R							
28	F	29	D	30	V	31	K	32	P	33	T			34	A	35	G	36	N			37	M	38	H	39	R	40	C						
41	E	42	Q	43	W	44	N	45	P	46	G			47	R	48	K	49	A	50	V	51	C	52	S			53	B	54	K				
55	T	56	F	57	P			58	I	59	M			60	Q	61	L	62	O	63	U	64	S			65	V			66	J				
67	Q	68	E	69	R	70	D	71	V			72	W	73	K			74	Q	75	V	76	F	77	R	78	O	79	W	80	D				
		81	S	82	A	83	N	84	T	85	W	86	M	87	F	88	C	89	U			90	T	91	G	92	R	93	L	94	W				
95	F	96	A					97	Q	98	C	99	B	100	H			101	K	102	T	103	U			104	B	105	O	106	I	107	E		
108	L	109	W					110	D	111	F	112	P					113	E	114	U	115	A	116	J			117	M	118	S	119	H	120	B
121	T	122	P					123	U	124	B	125	L					126	E	127	V	128	S	129	T			130	I	131	M	132	K	133	D
134	R	135	O	136	N			137	I	138	P	139	D	140	E	141	A	142	O	143	R	144	G	145	B	146	N			147	C				
148	W	149	M	150	J	151	O	152	L			153	C	154	N	155	G	156	H			157	D	158	J	159	F			160	S				
161	A	162	O	163	Q	164	J	165	L	166	C	167	P	168	V			169	F	170	K			171	U	172	N	173	H	174	A				
175	P	176	E	177	J	178	W			179	R	180	C			181	E	182	O	183	Q			184	D	185	G	186	U	187	R				

P. Al Mukalla residents

$\overline{57}$   $\overline{45}$   $\overline{138}$   $\overline{112}$   $\overline{32}$   $\overline{8}$   $\overline{175}$   $\overline{167}$   $\overline{122}$

Q. Chelicerate critters' creations

$\overline{163}$   $\overline{42}$   $\overline{74}$   $\overline{97}$   $\overline{67}$   $\overline{60}$   $\overline{183}$

R. Shortcoming

$\overline{187}$   $\overline{69}$   $\overline{39}$   $\overline{134}$   $\overline{47}$   $\overline{77}$   $\overline{179}$   $\overline{143}$   $\overline{92}$   $\overline{27}$

S. Text follow-up

$\overline{118}$   $\overline{52}$   $\overline{81}$   $\overline{5}$   $\overline{64}$   $\overline{160}$   $\overline{7}$   $\overline{128}$

T. Less elegant

$\overline{90}$   $\overline{129}$   $\overline{84}$   $\overline{33}$   $\overline{102}$   $\overline{121}$   $\overline{55}$

U. Noisy serenade

$\overline{103}$   $\overline{123}$   $\overline{186}$   $\overline{171}$   $\overline{63}$   $\overline{12}$   $\overline{89}$   $\overline{114}$

V. Economic measurements

$\overline{127}$   $\overline{50}$   $\overline{168}$   $\overline{75}$   $\overline{23}$   $\overline{65}$   $\overline{19}$   $\overline{30}$   $\overline{3}$   $\overline{71}$

W. Long halls

$\overline{85}$   $\overline{2}$   $\overline{43}$   $\overline{79}$   $\overline{94}$   $\overline{109}$   $\overline{72}$   $\overline{148}$   $\overline{178}$

# TEN THOUSAND COLD NIGHTS

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JAMES LINCOLN WARREN

**E**laine sat upright in the dimness and uttered a single choked word.  
"Uragiri!"

It was barely above a whisper, but it was enough to wake Andy Lockhart from a restless slumber. He shook the sleep from his fogged-up brain, and tentatively reached out to touch his wife. Her body was beaded with sweat, the muscles beneath her skin as taut as piano strings. He took her hand and her fingers were icy, unnaturally cold in the warm night.

"Elaine?"

She blinked slowly and relaxed, sighing, releasing what remained of the pent up breath that had partially escaped to emit only that one, strange sound.

"God, what a nightmare," she said.

"Oh," he said. A nightmare, that's all. He relaxed a little himself. "Well, it's all over now. Why don't you go back to sleep?"

"Sleep? It was so real. I was running in a dark forest on the side of a mountain. The ground was muddy and slippery. It was hard to see through the heavy mist. My breath steamed as I ran, and then—then I saw this—this face."

She shuddered. "It was horrible. Like a—like a demon, or a devil, grimacing in excruciating pain. It was flat black, like cast iron, except for the eyes. The eyes were—I don't know, they were alive, alive with malice. I raised my arms to strike . . . and that's when I woke up." She hugged herself and shuddered once.

"Hey. It was just a bad dream," he said, his weak words of comfort sounding hopelessly banal to his own ears. "It will fade in no time at all. I know. Let me get you a glass of water, and then we can get back to sleep."

He slid into his slippers and padded off to kitchen. The glass was half full when the phone rang.

Elaine heard him say, "Give me half an hour."

When he got back to the bedroom, he went straight into the bathroom and turned on the shower. He stuck his head back into the bedroom just long enough to say the unavoidable.



"That was the precinct. I've got to go."

She slumped back in the bed. Somehow she knew that it was going to be a long, long night.

The car doors thumped shut almost in unison as Lockhart and Ericson got out. Ericson was still babbling like some handsome but brainless talking head on TV as they flashed their badges, blithely regurgitating more boring crap from that correspondence course in ethics he had signed up for. They ducked under the crime scene tape and stepped on to the fresh-mown lawn, the grass wet with predawn dew.

"Look, you got me wrong, Andy," he said, "I didn't say evil doesn't exist, only that it's an *abstraction*. Like Christmas, for example. That's real, too—but it's an abstraction, see? Retailers do something like, what, forty percent of their business during the holidays? So, take away Christmas, and whammo, the economy goes in the toilet. There's your reality. Follow me? If you think about it, Christmas doesn't have an *objective* existence, not like this car, or a pair of shoes. We only *act* like Christmas is real because long ago somebody decided that December twenty-fifth was Jesus' birthday, and then sometime later, somebody else figured it was good for business for everybody to spend tons of money on toys for the kids every year, and now everybody buys into it, even the Chinese, for God's sake, and it has the force of something that actually exists. Get it?"

By that time they'd come to the front door.

The criminalists were still at work, so the two detectives were told to stand on a paper mat that had been laid down in the foyer to prevent contamination of the scene. Standing there they had a complete view of the living room.

Long streaks of blood splattered the walls and furniture, and more blood was smeared on the floor. The woman had been neatly decapitated, her trim brown body still sitting on the sofa, and her fat brother, lying on the floor, had been eviscerated with a long single slash deep across the abdomen.

"Merry Christmas," Lockhart muttered under his breath.

They passed through the doorway into the living room itself, careful not to step off the paper strip that extended into it.

"Whoa." Ericson had turned and was staring at the wall behind them. "What the hell is that?"

Someone had painted something that looked like large Chinese characters on the wall. In blood. Below the writing rested the severed head of the woman, her wide eyes staring up at them, her face a rictus of terror. The murderer had used her hair as a paintbrush.

Lockhart rushed out, looking for the toilet.

"I'd say a long knife or bayonet, maybe a sword," Dr. Guerra said, staring into the abdominal cavity. "Very sharp, and wielded with considerable force."

Lockhart swallowed hard. The morgue was too bright. It was always too bright.

"How about a katana?" Ericson asked, unfazed.

"He means a samurai sword, doc," Lockhart said, clenching his jaws and trying not to look at the corpse.

"I know what a katana is," Guerra snapped.

"I just thought, you know, what with the Chinese writing and all," Ericson said. "Maybe the killer is something of a connoisseur of Asian martial artifacts."

"'Connoisseur of Asian martial artifacts?'" Lockhart said, almost under his breath. "Whack job with a fetish for knives is more like it."

Ericson didn't react. Maybe he hadn't heard.

"From the angle of attack, I'd say a tall man. Or a very tall woman," Guerra said, pointedly ignoring Ericson. "Well over six foot."

Lockhart's cell phone chirped and he took the opportunity to turn away from the steel table. "Lockhart . . . right. Thanks." He flipped the phone shut and looked at Guerra and Ericson.

"Got to go. Maybe the idea of a katana isn't so farfetched. That writing on the wall, it's not Chinese after all. It's Japanese. A signature."

The Asian man was sitting on the chair beside Lockhart's desk. He was small, in his sixties, conservatively dressed in a loose gray suit, his red and blue regimental-stripe tie tucked into a maroon sweater vest. The professorial look was further emphasized by his rectangular steel-rimmed glasses, partially obscuring his quick eyes. As Lockhart approached, he stood and perfunctorily bowed, holding out his business card with both hands.

Lockhart took the card, held out his right hand, and they shook. He looked at the card, which was printed in Japanese on one side and in English on the other.

ODA MASATO, PH.D.  
CULTURAL ATTACHÉ, CONSULATE OF JAPAN

"Please sit, Dr. Oda." Lockhart pulled one of his own cards from the cardholder on his desk and unceremoniously handed it to Oda.

"I am very pleased to meet you, Detective," he said. "I think that you might be able to help us."

"Likewise," Lockhart replied. "I understand that you've identified the . . . the signature at the crime scene."

"Yes, very strange," Oda said. "That is, I had never expected to see such a thing ever again."

"You've seen something like this before?"

"Not for many years. I had begun to lose hope."

"Hope?" Lockhart felt his gorge starting to rise.

"You misunderstand—perhaps I expressed myself poorly. Of course such a discovery is very upsetting, and in such tragic circumstances. But it

is the first, I suppose you might say, lead, we have seen in thirty years. I am sorry; I am not explaining things well."

"Not really."

"You asked if I have seen such a thing before. The answer is yes, twice before, although never at first hand. The first time was in Japan. That was in 1956. Of course, I was only a student then, but I saw the police report many years later, when I was in graduate school. Then I came across something similar in 1983, but that was here, in America."

"Why don't you cut to the chase, Doctor?"

"Excuse me, please?"

"Get to the point. I mean, please get to the point."

"Ah, yes, of course." Oda reached into his inside coat pocket and withdrew a black and white photocopy of the name on the wall. He laid it flat on Lockhart's desk and fixed his index finger on the top ideogram.

"This is a signature, Detective, a very infamous signature."

"So I've been told. Murderers don't usually sign their work."

Oda smiled deprecatingly and tilted his head. "That depends on what you mean, Detective. But this, this is the signature of Muramasa Senzo."

At last, a name. "Is he wanted in Japan?"

Oda sat up in surprise. "Oh, no, Detective, not at all. You see, he has been dead for almost five hundred years."

Lockhart stood, clenching his fists. Oda stood with him, his palms forward in a placating gesture. "Let me explain. Let me explain, please."

"Sorry," Lockhart grunted, and returned to his seat. "So the murderer wrote the name of a man who has been dead for a very long time. Well, that's something. Maybe a profiler can make something of it."

"Yes, but it is not simply Muramasa's name—it is his *signature*. As if he had written it himself."

Lockhart stared down at the photocopy as if it could tell him something more. Of course, it didn't.

"So who exactly was this Muramasa?"

"A renowned swordsmith of the late fifteenth century. It was the golden age for great swords." Oda could see the impatience on Lockhart's face and hastily continued. "Swordsmiths are held in very high esteem in Japan, Detective, very high. They are considered artists as much as painters or poets. They imbue their work with their own spirits, just as surely as the soul of a Hokusai, or a Basho, shines in his own work. But Muramasa Senzo was different. He was not a good man. His swords were known for their thirst for blood. They are dangerous."

"What are you saying? His swords were what, cursed?" Lockhart stared incredulously at the little man across the desk.

"Ne, I don't mean to suggest—Curses are not such simple things, Detective. I believe you have an expression in English, the self-fulfilling prophesy? Many times for a curse to be effective it is only necessary that someone believe in the curse. Is that not so?"

Lockhart frowned. "What are you suggesting?"

"Perhaps some history will illustrate. You are investigating a crime. I have knowledge of two similar crimes. The earliest of these was committed in 1956, in Tokyo. The victim was a *jigoku*, a hell woman—"

"Excuse me?"

"A prostitute, who practiced her trade among the American soldiers. She was beheaded, and Muramasa's signature was written on the wall of the room where she was found, in her blood. The person most suspected of the crime was an American, Corporal Roger McClardy of Cleveland, Ohio. This McClardy collected Japanese weapons as trophies, and at some point had acquired several valuable swords, among which was one that was alleged to be a Muramasa. He was tried for the murder by court-martial, but he was acquitted, since it seemed obvious that the murderer must know how to write *kanji*, Japanese characters."

"Couldn't he have just copied the design?"

"Japanese calligraphy is also a high art, Detective," Oda replied. "The hand that had written Muramasa's name on the wall of the prostitute's room had all the appearance of being a master's. Forgery or imitation by an untrained foreigner is not credible. This was evidence that the murderer must be Japanese."

"So he was innocent."

Oda smiled and sharply inhaled. "Ah. But there was other evidence against him. He was a collector of spoils. Among other treasures, he claimed to have acquired an antique sword of inestimable worth. Investigation showed that this sword was supposedly the very blade with which Nagatake cleaved the crest of Toda Shigemasa's helm at the battle of Sekigahara in 1600. A very famous sword, indeed."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Of course. But there is more you should know about the battle. Sekigahara was the greatest battle in the history of Japan, regarded by us as you might look at Gettysburg in your own Civil War. The winner of the battle was Tokugawa Ieyasu, the first shogun, and with his victory he attained a power for his dynasty that would last almost three hundred years and isolate Japan from the world.

"Now, Nagatake was a great warrior on the side of Ieyasu, and Toda Shigemasa was a valiant vassal of Otani Yoshitsugu, the closest ally of Ieyasu's great enemy, Ishida Mitsunari. After the battle, Ieyasu asked to see Nagatake's sword—and accidentally cut himself with it, a fact beyond all comprehension when you consider that Ieyasu was born to the blade. Ieyasu then remarked that it must be a Muramasa blade, as it was well known that Muramasa swords held a particular hatred for the Tokugawa clan. And so it proved."

"All very interesting, but hardly relevant."

"But it is relevant, Detective. Because of their reputations for being antagonistic to the most powerful man Japan has ever known, Muramasa blades were highly prized by Ieyasu's enemies and were unusually valuable. As a consequence, there was a proliferation of forgeries, false swords

bearing Muramasa's signature that commanded prices far above their actual worth. Ieyasu almost certainly had Nagatake's katana destroyed—it is unbelievable that he would suffer it to exist. This means that Corporal McClardy's sword was almost certainly one of those forgeries."

"Then it couldn't bear the curse." Lockhart was tiring of the lesson. He didn't like academics to begin with, and found Oda particularly irritating.

"Precisely. But someone believing that the curse was upon the blade might be influenced to act as if the curse were real. This, by the way, was another point in Sergeant McClardy's favor at the trial, because he knew little of Japanese history and nothing of Muramasa's reputation."

"So the killer must have been Japanese."

"That is far from certain. McClardy was eventually cashiered from the Army for unrelated crimes. He returned to the United States, but he took his swords with him, even though this was highly illegal. He died in 1959 while attempting to rob a bank. The sword was not recovered. And then in 1983, a crime was committed in Chicago almost identical to the Tokyo murder—and to the murder you are now investigating. That was the incident that engaged the attention of my government."

"But McClardy was already dead. No, wait. I get it. You think that McClardy's antique katana was somehow involved, even though he wasn't around to use it."

"Oh, no, Detective. I know beyond doubt that McClardy's katana was the murder weapon. It was recovered, although the murderer was never caught."

"I think I see where you're going with this. But it's a dead end. If the sword was booked as evidence, it could hardly have been used again here."

"I am almost finished with my story, Detective. You see, I first came to the United States in 1987, specifically to take charge of this weapon, which is an artifact of historical interest and the property of the Japanese government. But when I arrived, the sword was gone. Someone had stolen it from police custody, perhaps years before."

As a lead, it was hopelessly thin, but it was all there was. Lockhart's temper again flared when Oda coolly stated the obvious.

"Find the sword, and you will find your murderer."

When Lockhart got home, he found Elaine made up and wearing a cocktail dress. At first he thought he'd forgotten about a planned night out, but the rich aromas wafting out of the kitchen told him she'd been cooking all afternoon.

"Did John tell you what time he'd get here?" Elaine asked, fussing with a strap on her right shoe.

She looked great. Lockhart was so distracted he didn't digest her question right away, and then he remembered. Elaine had invited John Ericson to dinner, taking pity on his status as a lonely bachelor.

"Sevenish," Lockhart said, covering up his lapse with the smoothness of an accomplished liar.

"What's that?"

He reached into the shopping bag he had brought into the house and pulled out a book. "This? Just some homework for a case."

She took the book from him and stiffened as she saw the cover. *Arms and Armour of Feudal Japan* by Neville Woodward.

She quickly recovered and wryly smiled. "Must be an unusual case."

"You don't know the half of it."

She put the book down on his nightstand, keeping her eyes on its glossy dustcover. It showed a samurai helmet, a *kabuto*, complete with *so-mempo*, a face mask. The wrought-iron mask depicted a hideously contorted face.

"You're all dolled up for a family dinner," he said, immediately regretting the tone of his voice. The invitation to Ericson had been couched in terms emphasizing the allure of wholesome home cooking.

She shrugged. "I didn't want to be underdressed. You know John. I'll bet he wears a suit."

She had a point. Ericson's idea of casual was vintage '80s Don Johnson: a linen suit over a colored T-shirt, complete with hair gel and five o'clock shadow and chic deodorant body spray. He would have shaved today, though. It was a workday.

His partner showed up at seven on the dot, wearing a suit as predicted, but with an open-collar dress shirt and a suede vest. Elaine had prepared chicken cacciatore and a fancy salad, with asparagus in hollandaise sauce as a side dish and tiramisu for dessert, the last having been bought at a specialty bakery. It was delicious, much better than their regular fare, but Lockhart did not enjoy the dinner at all. Elaine sparkled and Ericson displayed an unexpected talent for wit and tact, and Lockhart worked hard at not appearing sullen.

He didn't want to be there. He felt the need to talk to somebody, and he knew whom he wanted to talk to, but there was no way he could escape. Not tonight. Most likely Beth was with her husband, anyway. Their liaisons were becoming less frequent, and Lockhart wondered if maybe she was tired of keeping up the subterfuge necessitated by their circumstances. But Beth Lundstrom would have listened to him, and she certainly would not have tried his patience with any irritating demands. Especially not by making him put up with his stupid partner.

Ericson departed just after ten. Lockhart watched impassively as his partner lingered over his good-bye handshake with Elaine, the two of them joyfully grinning as if they had just won the lottery. He bet Ericson was headed for a club rather than home.

At three o'clock in the morning, Elaine violently rose with a cry of pain, clutching her forehead. Before he could reach out to her, she cried out in anger: "*Uragiri!*"

By the time she was fully awake, she didn't remember anything.

The 1983 case file detailing the second of Oda's similar murders, the one in Chicago, had been overnighted from Chicago P.D., but it con-

tained almost nothing of any value. Like Lockhart's own case, there had been two victims. The first had been a high-end escort, the second a bellhop who worked for the four-star hotel where the murders had taken place. The prime suspect had been a bent veteran vice cop, Tiger Curzon, whose career was already in tatters before he attracted the attention of Chicago Homicide. Muramasa's signature on the wall of the hotel room had been identified by a professor at the University of Chicago, who also apparently called the crime to the attention of the Japanese. The katana had been found at the scene, firmly wedged in the second victim's cranium. Curzon had committed suicide six months later, apparently during an episode of drug-amplified depression, even though he was never charged. His suicide note was an incoherent jumble of self-loathing and shed light on nothing.

The photocopy of the log from Chicago's evidence locker revealed that the last persons to legitimately examine the collected physical evidence were the bent cop's lawyer and a detective assigned to the case. At no time had either been alone. The Chicago detective's name, Walt Wieczorek, seemed familiar to Lockhart. He was sure he'd heard it before.

Ericson dropped the thick binder of the murder book on Lockhart's desk with a thud and parked himself in the chair opposite.

"I like the husband."

"What?"

"Mindy's husband. I like him for it."

"Who's Mindy?"

Ericson's brow furrowed as he directed a sharp glance at Lockhart. "Mindy Gutiérrez Alarcón. Our female victim, the one without a head. Damn, Andy, you mean you can't even remember her name?"

"Sorry. I was off somewhere else. Her husband, you say."

"That's right. He hasn't been heard of since before the crime. Chances are he hot-footed it over to Mexico, where he's got family."

"All right. So talk."

"They'd been having marital trouble. I think her brother was staying over at her house so he could protect her from Neto, that's the husband. Her sister says they were separated and Mindy had a new boyfriend, and that Neto threatened her because of it."

"Jealous rage," said Lockhart. "Fits all right. Say, she wasn't in the game, was she?"

"You mean was she a hooker?" Ericson asked, surprised. "Not a chance. Very middle class, college graduate, worked as an office manager for her father. He's a dentist. Where'd you come up with that idea?"

"It's just that the previous two were whores."

"Previous two what?"

"Never mind." Lockhart went back to reading the Chicago file, but Ericson wasn't finished.

"Just so you know. I put out a BOLO for Neto Alarcón, but I doubt he'll turn up. Like I said, probably went to Oaxaca."

"Okay." Lockhart looked down at the file. He saw the words but none of them registered. He was thinking of the sword. He didn't want to ask, especially not Ericson, but he had to. "So, do you know if this Neto was into martial arts?"

"What—oh, right, the sword angle. No, not that I've heard. Good idea, though—I'll look into it."

Lockhart said nothing and stared at Wieczorek's name. Why was it so familiar? Where had he seen it before? Ericson stood and waited until Lockhart looked up again.

"I had a great time last night," Ericson said, boyishly grinning. "Thank Elaine again for me, will you? You're one lucky cop, to have a lady like her."

"I'll do that." As Ericson turned to go back to his own desk, Lockhart stopped him. "John, does the name Wieczorek mean anything to you?"

"Can't say it does—no, wait. What was the name of that Polack captain in Central Division some years back? It was something like that."

That was it. Lockhart reached for the phone and dialed Human Resources.

Wieczorek's career had run its course before personnel records had gone digital, and the original paperwork had long since been destroyed, but his file still existed on microfiche. Lockhart found himself in the basement parked in front of a huge old microfiche reader, awkwardly scrolling through hundreds of blurry images before he found what he was looking for.

It was the same man. Had to be. Ten years on the Chicago force, then moved out here. Immediately hired as a detective in 1990, rapidly rising through the ranks to the rank of captain by dint of being tough and inflexible in the application of the law. Real old school when old school was the way to go.

There was only one ugly thing in his record, a reprimand for allowing officers under his authority to use excessive force and turning a peaceful immigration rights protest into a full-blown riot back in 2002. Lockhart remembered the incident well. Cracked heads, broken bones, and in the aftermath, the red-hot wrath of an indignant public. It had almost caused the downfall of the chief. At first, it looked like maybe Wieczorek had been singled out as a fall guy to insulate the men at the top. But then Wieczorek, unrepentant to the point of arrogance, filed an incendiary written protest, expressing his anger in the most immoderate language, essentially accusing the protesters of violating U. S. sovereignty and fomenting an alien revolution in the streets. The diatribe read like the product of an unhinged mind. The letter had been subsequently and anonymously leaked to the press, and took most of the heat off the administration. Wieczorek would have been put to pasture if he hadn't suddenly died of heart failure first.

Lockhart wondered what else the captain had brought with him from Chicago besides attitude.

On a hunch, Lockhart went back to his office and looked up Roger

McClardy's name in the national criminal database on his computer. Bank robbery was a federal crime. The Feds were way ahead of everybody else in electronically archiving their records. It should be there. And it was, as advertised. In Indianapolis, in 1959. The name of the rookie patrolman who had shot McClardy dead at the scene was there, too. Officer Clement "Tiger" Curzon, age twenty.

Lockhart leaned back in his chair, his elbows locked as he gripped the front edge of his desk.

A chain. McClardy to Curzon to Wieczorek to . . . who?

Ericson liked Neto Alarcón for the murders. But was a nexus between Wieczorek and Alarcón even conceivable? Wieczorek had made no secret of his contempt for Latinos. It didn't add up.

Didn't Ericson say that Mindy Alarcón had a new boyfriend?

Ericson had checked out Mindy's recent conquest as a matter of routine and had put him at the bottom of the list of potential suspects. He was a little peeved when Lockhart asked about him.

"Of course I looked at him," he said, "but there's nothing to tie him in. They'd only dated a couple of times and things between him and Mindy hadn't gotten very far."

"Where was he night before last?"

Ericson flipped open his notebook and examined what he'd written there.

"Daniel Dell'Isola, thirty-six. General contractor. Active in his church and local charities. Says he was at a rehearsal at the Christian Community Little Theater until about eleven. They're doing *Guys and Dolls* and he's playing Harry the Horse. I checked with the director, Bill O'Hara, and he confirms that Dell'Isola was there."

"That's no alibi. The murders weren't committed until two A.M. Harry the Horse, you say. This guy on the large side? The M.E. said our murderer was big."

"So what? Guerra based his conclusion on the angle of the cut—but take it from me, an attack with a katana can be made from almost any angle. You'd know that if you ever saw a samurai movie. And psychologically, Dell'Isola just doesn't fit."

"Reading minds now, are we?"

"Look, partner, when I talked to the guy, he was in complete shock, total denial. Kept asking me if I was sure Mindy was gone, that's the way he put it. No way he was faking it."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I know he's not any kind of brilliant actor because O'Hara said the only reason he got the part of Harry the Horse is because he's one huge dude and the role can be played with a stilted delivery. Apparently that's the very best Dell'Isola can give. O'Hara knows him pretty well, too—Dell'Isola has spent a lot of time with the group over the last five years, usually as a stagehand or an extra."

"Maybe he's a better actor than he pretends to be."

"For God's sake, Andy—Dr. Gutiérrez, Mindy's father, was there too. He's playing Big Jule. According to O'Hara, the two of them were very friendly and even hung out together when they weren't on stage. Do you think Dell'Isola's going to belt out show tunes with Papa all evening and then run off to behead Daddy's little princess?"

"Put that way, probably not, but let me have his particulars anyway."

"Help yourself." Ericson sounded like he would rather have used different word than "help" and Lockhart felt a sudden urge to wipe the smirk off his face. But Ericson wasn't smirking. Had Lockhart imagined the insult? Ericson flipped a couple of pages over in the notebook and showed Lockhart the address.

Lockhart felt a thrum of electricity pass through him when read it. He had just seen that address himself, down in the basement. It was the same West Side condo complex where Walt Wieczorek had lived.

Lockhart tried to imagine what the expression on his lieutenant's face would look like if he told him he wanted a warrant to search Dell'Isola's home, because Dell'Isola might have known Wieczorek who knew Curzon who shot McClardy who had been suspected of a murder in Japan fifty years before. It wasn't pretty. He'd be laughed out of the office.

He pulled Dr. Oda's card out of his wallet. He needed to talk to somebody, and this was beyond even Beth's capacity for sympathy.

"Come in, please, Detective. Would you mind removing your shoes?"

Oda's home was much smaller than Lockhart had expected. He had imagined that the home of a senior diplomat would be big and ostentatious, and he hadn't figured that Oda would be more comfortable in a place like the tiny apartment he had known in Tokyo.

The decoration was sparse in the extreme, even given the limited space. This was not to say, however, that it lacked personality or suggested an air of transience, as was usually the case with near-empty lodgings. Instead, there was an atmosphere of studied simplicity. On a low table against one wall there stood a lacquered wooden stand horizontally holding two swords in shiny black scabbards, one shorter than the other.

"I am glad you have come," Oda said. "My wife is home visiting our children and I am grateful for the company. Will you have some beer?"

"Sure. That's your, uh, *daisho*, right?"

Oda smiled. "Very good, Detective. You are right, *daisho*, the 'large-and-small.' The stand is called a *katana-kake*, after the katana, the long sword—the shorter sword is the *wakizashi*. It never left the side of the warrior who wielded it except in the battlefield, or when he slept. Do you see how the swords point to the right? That is so they must be lifted by the left hand, and thus difficult to draw. It shows peaceful intent."

"You didn't tell me that your family were samurai."

Oda shrugged. "It is not important. My clan were *daimyo*, feudal lords. One of my ancestors was Ieyasu's mentor. All very long ago. But these

swords are not so old. They only date from the eighteenth century. Please, come in."

Lockhart followed him as he went into the kitchen, and leaned against the doorframe, watching as the little man busily played host.

"I am very fond of beer, although I don't much care for your American brands." Oda's refrigerator was a short, two-door compact model. He squatted in front of it and pulled out two bottles of Pilsner Urquell, and then fetched two tumblers to pour them into. He carried them in each hand into the constricted dining area. The table was barely large enough for four and Oda indicated that Lockhart should sit opposite him.

They were silent for several seconds as they sipped their beers. Then both began to talk at the same time.

"No, you go ahead, Doctor." Lockhart felt vaguely ashamed for some reason.

"You did not like me very much, I think, when we first met."

Lockhart didn't know what to say to that, so he settled for the truth. "No, not much."

Oda shrugged. "I am used to that, Detective. Japanese think Americans are cold because you are rude. Americans think Japanese are cold because we are polite. But where there is a common thirst for the truth, these things are nothing but shadows. I must confess, as well, that I deliberately misled you when I did not tell you everything I knew or suspected."

Lockhart raised an eyebrow. He shouldn't have been surprised. When it came down to it, most people held something back from the cops. Or lied.

"I told you that I had seen such crimes twice before. That was so you could confirm that these crimes had actually been committed, as I'm sure you did."

"That's right."

"Then you will not be surprised to learn that there was another such crime, committed in Nagasaki in 1928. Sadly, all records of it were destroyed by the atomic bomb, but you may take my word for it."

"I don't—" But Lockhart didn't know what he was trying to say.

Oda smiled tightly. "A third-hand account exists of another such crime committed in 1901, in Nara. Finally, there was a detailed description of a murder bearing Muramasa's mark in 1873 in Kyoto. Before that, there are no records at all, only rumors—the Meiji Restoration, which opened up Japan, did not occur until 1868, and before that the shogun's secret police would have handled such matters. They were adept at keeping secrets."

"You're saying there's a long history of identical crimes going back—who knows how far. You think the katana is genuine, that it really was fabricated by the hands of Muramasa. And you believe in the curse too. You believe that this sword is the—the *thing* that killed all those people."

Oda closed his eyes and breathed deeply. When he opened them again, he began to speak with deliberate calmness.

"There is a story, a legend that tells of a challenge between Muramasa Senzo and another, even more famous swordsmith. His name was Goro

Nyudo Masamune, the most esteemed of them all. The legend assumes that Masamune was the master and Muramasa his pupil. In fact, the two could never actually have met because Masamune lived a hundred years before Muramasa, but the story is nevertheless not without merit.

"The shogun is said to have ordered each to fashion his finest sword, to prove who was the greater smith. Muramasa's sword was called *Juchi Yosamu*, the Ten Thousand Cold Nights. His master's sword was called *Yawaraka-Te*, the Tender Hands. When the swords were finished, both smiths were told to hold their swords under a waterfall.

"Everything that came over the waterfall was cut by the Ten Thousand Cold Nights: fish, leaves, even the air. The pond below was fouled with blood. The leaves adhered to Muramasa's blade, limp and brown. The sword destroyed all it touched.

"But when the Tender Hands were placed in the waterfall, the water cleared. Fish passed it by, and the leaves, when they were cut, reformed and floated like the boats of pearl divers on the pond below.

"Muramasa scoffed at his master for forging a sword that would not kill. But the shogun asked a monk, who was there as an observer, what it meant, and the monk said, 'The sword of Muramasa Senzo is sharper than the winter wind, but it craves blood and death. It cares nothing for who or what it will sever, so long as there is destruction. It might as well cut the wings of butterflies as the necks of the shogun's foes. But the blade of Masamune is the better, for it will not needlessly cleave the innocent and the undeserving.'"

Oda drank his beer. Lockhart stared at his hands, his heart pounding.

"Detective," Oda said quietly, "there are those who think that evil does not materially exist, that it has no force, that it is an intangible fantasy. I am not one of them. I think evil seizes every opportunity to corrupt men's hearts, to foster hatred, to engender harm. I feel that you believe this too."

"I thought I had some questions for you," Lockhart said at length, "but now I only have one. Does *uragiri* mean anything in Japanese?"

Oda inhaled sharply. "Where have you heard this word?"

"That's not important—but I must know what it means."

"At Sekigahara, most of Mitsunari's allies abandoned him and joined Ieyasu's side. They betrayed him, and cost him everything—the battle, his life, and even his clan. That is *uragiri*."

Lockhart felt suddenly cold. He stood.

"Thank you, Dr. Oda. I have to go now. I have work to do."

"Yes, of course. Only one more thing, Detective. Ten thousand nights—that is just over twenty-seven years. Look at the dates of the crimes. They are each ten exactly ten thousand days apart."

**L**ockhart turned it over in his mind again and again. There was no way he could claim probable cause. He would have to get Dell'Isola to invite

him in. Once inside, he'd find some pretext to look for the sword. He would create the opportunity. He must create the opportunity.

He punched the doorbell with his thumb and waited.

If Oda was right, the katana's lust for blood had been sated by Mindy's and her brother's murders for another twenty-seven years. But if Dell'Isola felt cornered, there was no telling what he might do.

"Who is it?"

"Police. I'm Detective Lockhart. I'm just following up on some questions you answered for my partner, Detective Ericson."

The door opened a crack.

Dell'Isola was even taller than Lockhart had expected. Lockhart had to look up to make eye contact.

"Badge?"

Lockhart already had it out and held it up to Dell'Isola's face.

The door opened all the way. "All right. Come on in."

Lockhart walked into the living room of the apartment. Dell'Isola waited at the door as he entered. Lockhart didn't like having Dell'Isola behind him.

"Do I smell beer on your breath?" Dell'Isola asked. "You're not drunk, are you, Officer?"

"No. I'm not. I just had one, to make this old guy comfortable."

"That's too bad."

"What?"

"Since you're not drunk, this is going to hurt a lot more."

Dell'Isola's huge right fist hit him in the kidney with the force of a pile-driver. Lockhart folded like a paper napkin.

He could barely move from where he had fallen. He tried reaching for his pistol, but Dell'Isola swatted his hand away and pulled the weapon out of the holster.

"I don't like guns," Dell'Isola said. "They are artless."

He tossed the gun on the sofa. His left hand grabbed Lockhart by the jaw, the long thick fingers pushing Lockhart's cheeks painfully into his teeth.

"Knives, though. They're like—like a sculptor's chisel. You carve away what isn't art."

Lockhart tried to free himself but Dell'Isola only laughed and slapped him until his head rang.

"Swords are even better. But you know that. You came for that."

He jerked Lockhart up off the floor and flung him down hard in an armchair.

"Sit."

Dell'Isola moved toward the bedroom and Lockhart tried to get up, but he was too slow. Dell'Isola almost casually punched him in the solar plexus and the air left Lockhart like a freeway blowout. He fell back in the chair.

Dell'Isola ducked into the bedroom and returned with a naked katana.

"Tell me, Officer. Does the man hold the sword, or does the sword hold the man?"

It was a thing of singular, sinister beauty, long and slender, gleaming like a mirror, a wavelike temper line extending down its length. It was . . . seductive.

"You wonder how I knew you were onto me. Well, here's a secret." Dell'Isola put his lips against Lockhart's right ear. "It talks to me. Tells me things. It knew you were coming before you did."

Dell'Isola stood erect and posed in front of Lockhart as if he were Conan the Barbarian. "Watch, Officer."

Dell'Isola then proceeded to execute a routine intended to show off his control of the blade. He danced around the living room like a circus bear, ridiculous but dangerous.

"Okay, show's over." Dell'Isola lifted the katana in both hands over his head and tensed.

The blow was obviously intended to cut Lockhart in half. But as he brought the sword over his head, the sword bit into the ceiling plaster, struck a beam, and imbedded itself fast.

As Dell'Isola tried to tug the weapon free, Lockhart exerted every muscle, every particle of his sapping willpower, to lurch over to the sofa and his pistol. Dell'Isola half turned, torn between trying to liberate the sword and stopping Lockhart. The slight hesitation was all Lockhart needed. His fingers closed on the pistol grip and he flipped over. He pointed the gun at Dell'Isola and emptied the magazine. Dell'Isola collapsed like an imploding derelict high-rise.

Lockhart knew he was going to pass out. The beating he had taken must have caused serious internal injuries. He could taste blood in his mouth. He pulled his cell phone out, dropped it, picked it up, and noticed he couldn't focus on the numbers. He was slipping away.

And then he heard the faint voice.

"Andy!—Andy!—"

Although he didn't remember closing them, he opened his eyes.

It was Elaine.

Consciousness did not return all at once, but in episodes. There was Elaine, sitting by his hospital bed and reading the book about Japanese weapons he'd bought. Then there was Dr. Oda, standing in the doorway talking to Elaine and a nurse. John Ericson asking him if there was anything he wanted.

Eventually, he felt good enough to talk for several minutes at a time before tiring.

"The katana was recovered by your criminalists," Oda told him, "although they had to cut through the wood in the ceiling to free it. It has been returned to the custody of the Japanese government and is now safe. I had the opportunity to examine it."

"Your suspicions were right, weren't they? It was a genuine Muramasa."

Oda shook his head. "No, I was quite wrong. Although the sword is several hundred years old, the ornamental file marks on the blade's tang could not have been made by Muramasa. The katana is a forgery after all."

"How is that possible? The curse is real enough. You convinced me of that."

"How is any of it possible?" Oda looked off into space. "Perhaps we are mistaken in thinking that objects themselves can be possessed by evil. Perhaps the curse does not come from within the sword, but from within us."

"Within us." Lockhart felt the truth of it. It made him want to cry.

Oda smiled. "I am returning to Japan, to bring the sword back. From now on, it will be locked in a museum behind shatterproof glass, where it can do no harm. It will never again fall into private hands."

"Good-bye, Doctor. And thank you. Thank you for everything."

The day they released him, Elaine was withdrawn and quiet. She helped him into the passenger's side of her car, but said very little. She pulled out into traffic and Lockhart mentally waved *sayonara* to the hospital.

"You saved my life," he said as they came to a halt at a red light.

"Yes," she said.

"Elaine . . . how was it that you were there, of all places, when I needed you most?"

She clenched her jaw and hesitated before replying. "I was following you, Andy. I convinced myself you were having an affair—don't say anything—and I wanted to find out for sure. So I followed you from work to Dr. Oda's apartment, and from there to Dell'Isola's. I was parked across the street, and was going to tail you after you came out. It was only when I heard the gun go off that I came running."

Lockhart had blushed during Elaine's confession. He touched her shoulder. "It's all right, Elaine. I guess I haven't been the husband I should be. But all that has changed."

"I read that book about the samurai you brought home," she said a little too brightly. "It was very instructive."

"Was it," he said. It was obvious that her emotional wounds were still a little raw. He could tolerate the change in subject for now.

"Yes, and I also talked a lot with that nice Dr. Oda," she said. "He told me all about what you two were doing."

"I know it sounds crazy—"

"No, it was very interesting. Oh, look, we're home."

She assisted him out of the car and supported him all the way to the front door. Once inside, she helped him park himself on the davenport and went to make coffee.

"Those bad dreams have stopped too," she called from the kitchen. "Now that I know what they were."

"What?"

She returned holding a steaming cup. "They were memories, Andy. Of the battle of Sekigahara, fought in the mountain mist, where Mori

Hidemoto and Kobayakawa Hideaki betrayed my master and became Ieyasu's slaves. But that's ancient history. I'd rather talk about now."

"Are you feeling all right?"

"You shouldn't worry about me. I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes. Of course, Dr. Oda told you the katana was a forgery."

It all felt terribly wrong. "Yes, he mentioned that."

"That's because Ieyasu had the real katana destroyed as soon as he learned it was made by Muramasa. But not the wakizashi, Andy. Samurai never carry the wakizashi into battle, you know. Ieyasu never got his hands on it."

"What are you talking about?"

She put the cup down on the coffee table and smiled enigmatically.

"Does the sword hold the man, or does the man hold the sword?"

Lockhart tried to get up but she pushed him back.

"The sword holds the man, Andy. What the sword puts in the man's hands is just another tool to be used. The false katana was handy, so it was used. The wakizashi was still there when I arrived, Andy. The real wakizashi, the one fashioned by Muramasa and imbued with his spirit. Sit down! I'm talking to you."

He didn't see where it came from, but suddenly there was a sword in her hands, shorter than the one Dell'Isola had used, but even more beautiful, more dangerous, more frightening.

"When were you going to tell me about that *jigoku* Beth Lundstrom, Andy?" Elaine drew the wakizashi's edge against Lockhart's chest. The incision was so fine it didn't even hurt at first. Then the blood began to flow.

Her face warped with rage, Elaine positioned herself to deliver another cut and growled a single word.

"Uragiri!" 🐦



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# A GAME OF CONFIDENCE

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BILLY O'CALLAGHAN

**T**he back room was small and cramped. Cigarette smoke hung in a softly churning haze a foot or so beneath the ceiling, bars protected the small fogged-glass window, and the plaster had split in a dozen different places along the walls, exposing clammy, mud-colored patches of brickwork. The lights were kept low, except over the green baize-covered table. There, light was everything.

Tonight, three of the four chairs were filled.

"I'll take three . . ."

Kimble, who owned the game, the joint, and the whole damned setup, dealt the cards. "Three from the top."

The third player, Wilson, the player with the window seat, sighed thoughtfully. "Two, I guess."

"Two." Kimble's dextrous fingers flicked the new cards into play. "And the dealer helps himself to one . . ."

All three players settled to their hands. The odd man out here was Jake Tanner. He was a stranger to this game, middle aged going on for elderly, slim set, with the blanched pallor and pinched expression of someone never very far removed from pain. He wore a pepper-colored suit that looked both cheap and worn out, but he seemed to fit well at a card table, and he moved as if he knew the form. He considered his hand, then bunched the cards together, tapped their edges into place on the table.

"So, she says to me . . . get this, she says, 'You don't know how it *feels*.' Ha! Can you believe that. And she just as close as you like to tears too. Boy, I'll tell ya. Kids these days, they think they *invented* love. The way they go on, it's like they've got the patent on it, or something. 'What?' I said. 'You think I don't know things? Ha! I know things, believe me. I know plenty.' She had the lip going too. You know, quivering. The whole works. 'Is that what you think?' I ask her. 'That I don't *know*? Well, let me tell you, missy,' I said. 'You can take this one to the bank and lock it up safe and sound. I know *plenty*.'"

Kimble rolled his eyes. "We playing, or what?"

"What?"

"I said, I came here to play cards, old man, not to listen to you run your mouth off."

"Is there a problem here?" Jake said. He moved slowly, laying his cards facedown flat before him on the table. His voice was measured, too, soft but assured, and his rheumy stare never flinched. "Because I've got money on the table just the same as you. That buys me some entitlements, I reckon."

Kimble took a breath and held it, hoping that his anger would abate. Rage and poker did not make for an easy mix. "Look, old man, all I'm saying is, you feel like making a speech, go get yourself into politics. I like a little silence when I play cards. If you don't mind."

"Hey, I don't mind at all, sport. Wouldn't want to knock you out of your stride." Jake smiled. His teeth needed work, or at least a good cleaning. "Hey, tell you what. How about we split the difference, okay? You keep all the silence you can carry over at your side of the table. But I quite like a little chitchat when I play. If you don't mind, sport."

His hand chased a wrinkle out of the emerald baize tablecloth, then settled over a stack of chips. The plastic disks lifted with his fingers and tumbled back down as a stack, over and over, making the sound of crickets at play, or the sound of rattling bones.

"Hmm, so it's down to me, huh? Well now, let's see. Yeah, I guess a little raise might be in order. This here pot's looking mighty skinny." He glanced at Wilson, then returned to meet Kimble's stare. Wilson was at the table merely to make up the numbers; Kimble was the real challenge here. "A hundred," he said, and pushed a small bunch of chips out into the middle of the table. Then he smiled again. "Now, tell me, gentlemen. Isn't that just a whole lot better?"

"A hundred? Damn." Wilson sighed again. "Too hot for me, I'm afraid. I guess I'll fold."

Jake smiled, without even looking at his beaten opponent. "As you please, young feller," he said, going for a kindly tone and almost making it. "Won't be the same without you, but I do admire a man with sense enough to know when quits is quits."

"You're full of shit, mister," muttered Kimble, but his words only widened Jake's smile.

"Hey, you got me cold, Mr. Kimble. You're absolutely right, I'm plugged to the gills with the stuff. In fact, that's the reason I chew so much gum. Bad breath is just about the bane of my existence. I've damn near worn my teeth down to stubs from all the chewing I do. But tell me, am I to take it that you're not quite so ready to make for the door?"

"You like to talk, all right. But a hundred is pretty tall words for such a little guy. Yeah, I'm in. And I'm staying in. This pot's not for sale."

"Are you sure about that, sport? Because there's plenty more where that came from, you know."

"I'm glad as hell to hear that." said Kimble, showing his own teeth now.

He glanced once more at his cards, then leaned out and pushed a loose rabble of chips into the center of the table. "Your hundred, and let's say a hundred more. Just to keep things interesting."

Jake whistled softly. "Nice, kid. Now you're talking my language. It took a while, but I knew the words would come in the end. Knew it just by looking at you. Well now, let's see . . . Your hundred and—what would you say is a fair price then? For the pot, I mean. Another hundred? Or how about we make this really interesting. Let's try five. Five hundred."

"What are you, old man?" said Kimble. He looked stunned, but Jake knew that his heart would be heaving in his chest. "Some kind of nut job? Or maybe you're on some kind of charity kick. You swapped three cards and you don't even have a pair showing. You really think I'm going to let you come in to my club and bully me out of my own game with a lousy five hundred dollars? Your five, and another five."

"That's the spirit, kid," said Jake, and his calmness now was more irritating than any other stunt he'd pulled tonight. "Don't ever let yourself be pushed around." His right hand rattled another stack of chips. "So, what was I saying before? Oh yeah, my kid, Molly. Great girl but, well, you know. 'Let me tell you something,' I told her. 'There's more to the world than you, you know. What? Seventeen years old and you think you're doing business that no one else ever done before? I adore the very *bones* of you, Molly,' I said, 'but it might surprise you to know that—'"

"It's up to you, old timer," said Kimble. "Put something on the table. Your money or your cards. You decide."

Jake smiled again, then relaxed slowly into laughter. "Get on with it, huh? Well, there is a ball game on, out on the West Coast, and I do have a little, well, shall we say professional interest in the Giants. So why not? It's still early. I might even be able to catch the final inning. Tell you what, Mr. Kimble. I guess I'll settle for calling your five. I mean, there's no point in being greedy, now, is there?"

Wilson's Honda Civic crawled through the late-night streets. The city was quiet at this hour. Dead, almost. The adrenaline of an hour ago had flushed itself out, and all that remained now was a lead-boned exhaustion. Soft jazz dripped from the stereo speakers, soprano sax flurries that probably sounded aimless to the uninitiated but which to his ears seemed perfect in every note, every pause, every wandering line.

In the passenger seat, Jake Tanner was watching the streets. Even in profile, his demeanor looked shot. Only the illusion of life clung to him. He seemed to awaken only when the heavy night shadows were set to crawling by the occasionally invading wash of a streetlight. And yet, words flowed from him with a detachment that was quite disturbing.

"They always give themselves away. No matter what they're holding, you can always count on some gesture that will tip their hand. It may be nothing more than a chewing of the lip or a flicker of eyelid, or perhaps they'll touch their nose or their ear, tap their fingers on the table. There is

always a giveaway. Now even the casual observer might spot one out of every twenty slips, maybe even one in ten, if they happen to be particularly sharp. But their biggest difficulty is always in trying to interpret what they've seen." He raised a hand, pointed through the windscreen. "Take a left at the next set of lights. You need to cross over onto Tenth." He paused and waited for Wilson to properly navigate the turn, and there was only jazz to keep the silence at bay. He shifted uncomfortably in the passenger seat, then settled again to gazing through the side window. An earlier thundershower had fixed the road and the sidewalks with an eerie glint, a sheen that emphasized all that was squalid about this part of the city. "Look," he said, "this is not magic, not really. It's simply a matter of learning all the signs, and understanding what each one means. The real trick is in knowing what to look for, without being seen to look."

Put that way, it sounded reassuring. But Wilson could not relax. There were just too many possible pitfalls, and a single mistake could prove fatal. He glanced at the older man. "But how can you be so certain? What I mean is, can—does everyone do it? Give themselves away, I mean? Supposing you were to come up against someone who knows the game, really knows it. What happens then?"

Jake shrugged. "If they really know the game then they won't be sitting down across from me. Or not for long, anyway. Not for more than a couple of hands. They'll know better and so will I. I've been doing this for more years than I can count, and I don't make mistakes. Like Walter Brennan used to say in that old TV show: 'No brag, just fact.' You remember that one? *The Guns of Will Sonnett*? Well, no matter. It's from before your time, I reckon. Pretty good show though, as I remember it. Anyway, the point is that if you aim to last in this business then you learn to make the read. Everything depends on that. Poker's not a game of chance, not if you play it right. And if you do happen to come up against a brick wall or a straight face and for whatever reason can't make the read, then you get the hell out. And fast. Otherwise it's just suicide. Only a fool tries to beat the odds."

"And this one? I mean, you are sure, aren't you? Because you have to be. There's too much on the line. You'd damn well better be."

"I've seen him play, kid. No problem."

"But what if—"

"No problem, I said. Trust me."

The Honda switched empty lanes again and drifted a few blocks farther. Wilson had his bearings now. "So," he said, at last, "how much did you take him for?"

Jake cleared his throat, fixed his gaze hard on the street just ahead and to his right. A homeless man stood bent over, peeling sodden newspaper pages off the sidewalk. In a few seconds they came abreast of the man and then they were past. Jake glanced at the wing mirror but the glass was set to the wrong angle and he saw only darkness.

"How much, I said." Wilson had a way of sounding angry without even raising his voice.

"I don't know," said Jake, feigning disinterest. "Altogether? Something like two grand and change, I guess."

"What the hell's with you, Jake? You were supposed to hit him hard, clean him out. What good is two grand?"

"Do we have to listen to this shit?"

"What?"

"This," Jake said, gesturing toward the radio with the toss of a hand. "Jazz. Can't you get nothing better on this fancy stereo system of yours, or are you just getting some kind of sick kick out of tormenting me?"

"You ignorant bastard," said Wilson. The anger was still close to the surface, but now there was a mottling of amusement too. "That's Coltrane. *My Favorite Things*."

"Figures," Jake muttered. "And, hey, if you're not happy with the way I work, you are more than welcome to just stop this car right now and go get yourself another chump to do your bidding." He let his voice purposely spin out of control, then paused and drew a gasping breath. "I told you at the beginning, we do this my way. I know what I'm at. Hell, I was pulling games when you were still just an itch in your daddy's shorts."

"Jake—"

"No. You can rant all you want, but your meanness don't amount to a hill of beans. There's nothing that the likes of you can teach me about working a racket. We do this my way, or you can just forget it."

Now Wilson was smiling. "You done?" he asked, his tone soft with menace. "Good. Now, sit back and shut up. Just remember, it's my money you're splashing around when you take a seat at that table. And you owe me, don't forget that. You owe me *big*. It's like I said before, you do this one thing for me and we're quits. You'll never hear another word from me again. But you screw this up, or if I get even a hint of a notion that you're not giving this your A-game attention, I'll personally feed you to the lions. Look at me. I said, look at me. Because I want you to take this seriously. I have never been a man fond of idle threats. Got that? If you never believed anything in your whole miserable excuse for a life, you can believe this. Screw me over and I swear to God I'll take you out to the Bronx Zoo and personally feed you to the fucking lions."

They drove on in silence for a while. Wilson knew this area now and there was no further need to rely on the older man's directions. When the lights turned red they stopped, even though theirs was the only car on the streets. Apart from the winos and the junkies, they seemed to have the city to themselves.

Jake nodded slightly along to the music, though he had to make up a beat. When the song, if that's what it was, had wound itself out, he cleared his throat again. "The two grand was just to hurt him. There was no serious cash in the house tonight. If there was, he would have been power playing, trying to frighten me off with big numbers. But when I show up tomorrow night he'll be mad as all hell. And he'll be packing cash by the bucket load. Tonight was just to rough him up a little bit, hurt his pride. I

needed him to get his mind working up a little vengeance.”

Wilson glanced across and considered the words.

“Is that how you always play?” he asked, at last. “The way you did tonight? All that talking, I mean? You hardly shut up from the moment you sat down. Or is that just part of the gag too?”

“Depends. Some guys like to talk a lot, thinking that it’ll mask any flutters. It doesn’t. Not when you know where to look. Others, like our man Kimble, prefer to concentrate. In such cases, talk rattles them hard. If I can get a player spitting bullets at me then I know he’ll be an easy mark. The talk tonight kept him off balance and gave me a chance to see what kind of stuff he had.”

“He was plenty mad, I can tell you. But even so—”

“If you are worried about the hands he won, then don’t. They were so that he wouldn’t smell a rat. If I had gone in there and cleared the table, you think I could have walked out so easily? And if I did make it out, you think they’d ever welcome me back? I dare to show my face again, I’d wake up in an alley with my knees broken. That’s if I ever woke up at all. Those hands he won were nothing pots, more or less, but it gave the game a balanced look. When it comes to cards, doubt can be a dangerous thing. The way I played it tonight, there were no problems. He was pissed that he lost, of course he was, but he didn’t feel like he was being torn apart. It’s good to stir him up a little bit, but you won’t survive if you don’t recognize where the limits lie. When a man is angry he’ll have his mind tied up on unimportant details. But there’s a difference between anger and blind rage. That’s how you get yourself shot, and that, from my perspective, is something to be avoided at all costs.”

“So you’re telling me that everything went according to plan. Is that it?”

“My plan was to study his game and to see what moves would produce mistakes. The talking angered him, and then the fact that he was losing angered him even more, but I had to be careful. Like I said, there was no point in playing hard when the money wasn’t in the house. The important thing is that I got what I wanted. Within two hands I’d sussed out his moves. Within ten, I knew him better than he probably even knew himself. Now I know what he does when the deal is friendly to him, a little thing with his eyes, a gesture so slight and seemingly insignificant that ninety-nine people out of a hundred won’t even bother to notice, and I know what he does when he’s out to try a bluff. The bluff hands are always the best ones to throw. With them the pot will never get too far out of control, so they are usually okay to give up. And they taste as sweet as the best malt liquor. Win a bluffed hand and you really feel like you’ve put a big one over on your opponent. Your confidence will be sky high. And that’s when you’re ready to be plucked.”

The Honda cut across another junction. Up ahead, a late bar was spilling yellow light out onto the street. Wilson pulled in to the curb and let the engine idle. Another tune had started up, but to Jake’s ears it seemed like the same mess as before. Same heartbeat bass line, same squawking

horn flurries. Some of the barroom light fell across the car's hood and they both stared at it for a moment, as if it meant something.

"All that talk, though," said Wilson. "Where did it all come from? I mean, have you really got a kid, or was that just another line?"

"It's a game of confidence. Don't you understand that yet, Wilson? When I was a boy, I got so that I became a wiz at monte. All the other boys would be out playing stickball or trying to steal hubcaps. I'd sit on a stoop and practice. Before age got into my bones there was no one on the planet could switch 'em like me. What you see is what you get only if I want it to be that way. Tonight I talked a lot, and I've got a hundred thousand stories."

"You mentioned a girl named Molly? Does she exist?"

Jake shrugged. "Can't for the life of me see why you'd want to know, but yeah, as it happens, she does exist. Or did. Can't really say for sure now. She was the daughter of a woman I used to know, back in Detroit. Well, that was a long time ago. A lifetime ago. Sweet girl. A real peach. Molly wasn't my kid, though for a while I was like a father to her."

"But why mention her? I mean, what was the point?"

"It was random chat, that's all, though maybe a psychiatrist would argue differently. The truth of it is, I could just as easily have talked about an old schoolteacher or an old sweetheart from my childhood. Or I could have gone chasing down some twisted figment of my imagination. The point you should take out of all this is that sometimes the people I'll mention are real and sometimes they're not. That mixture confuses everything. If no one can tell the difference between the truth and a lie then surely one is just as good as the other." He considered the bar for a few seconds. There were dozens of bars like this one across the city, nondescript and run-down, that provided easy shelters for the deeply lost. As far as Jake was concerned, it was places like this that made a city just as much as its skyscrapers and traffic jams. "I like this place," he said, and a smile cracked his mouth. "At least, I think I like it. It's a good place to sit and blow the suds off a beer, maybe swap a little chat with the bartender. As long as I've been coming here, I've never seen the place busy. Maybe that's what I like best about it. That and the fact that they show ball games."

Wilson couldn't help but laugh. "So that was true, then? That stuff about the Giants?"

"You've just proved my point, Wilson," said Jake. "Muddy the waters enough and truth can be just as good as fiction." He nodded to himself, then turned to open the car door.

Wilson lay a restraining hand on his shoulder. "I'll take the winnings, Jake."

"What?"

"The winnings. The two grand. The money you won with *my* money. Give it to me. I'll add it to the stake money for tomorrow night."

Jake cleared his throat. "Look, Wilson, can't you give me a break, just for tonight? I thought that maybe . . . that is, I guess I was sort of hoping I

could do a little bit of business. You know what I mean? And you don't have to worry. I won't be losing. It's just that I can't get into a decent game with anything less than two grand. If you could just let me hold on to it. Tomorrow night you'll get every cent back. Every single cent of it. In fact, how about this? You give me the two grand now and I guarantee you'll get three grand back. That's a promise. You have my word on it."

Wilson's face was masked by the shadows of the night, but added a dreadful sense of menace to his voice. "That's the trouble with you, Jake. I never know when you're telling me the truth or spinning me some fancy lie. No, on the whole I think it's best that I take the money. After all, these are dangerous streets. A man could very easily get mugged in a neighbourhood like this, and I'd hate to see you put in the way of danger. So, come on. Hand it over."

And just like that, the night had gone to pot. Knowing he was beaten, Jake slipped a hand inside his jacket and withdrew the wad of won cash. He held it in his fingers, feeling its small heft and thinking of all that it could have done, all that it could have bought him. Then he dropped it into Wilson's waiting hand, opened the car door and stepped out into the street.

He walked around the back of the Honda, keeping his hands out of his pockets so that he would not have to acknowledge their emptiness. He was almost to the barroom's front door when Wilson cranked the car window and called him back.

"Hey Jake," he said, "wait a minute. Look, I'm not a hard case." He fumbled at the roll of notes. "I know how it is to be on the skids. So, here."

Jake took the offered bill and glared at it, barely able to hold back his disgust. "What the hell am I supposed to do with fifty bucks?"

"Have a drink on me," said Wilson, through a terrible, mocking grin. "And make sure you have yourself a good time."

Back in the club, a night later, and it was clear around the table that playtime was over. Some three hours' worth of hands had already been dealt, and there was no toying around with stakes now. This was a no-limits game.

Kimble eased back in his chair, considered the pot and then his opponent.

"Another five hundred? Mister, you don't look to me like you can afford to lose that sort of cash."

Jake smiled his most winning smile. With his face so etched in fatigue, the effect was pathetic. "Oh, that's all right, sport," he said, softly. "I'm not planning on losing."

"Well," Kimble sighed. "It makes no difference to me, you understand. But you're already in quite a hole tonight. Bet you wish you'd stayed in some bar now and watched the Giants game. By the way, that was pretty bad luck, them going down the pan like that last night."

Across the table, Wilson lowered his own hand. "What? The Giants lost?"

A rumble of laughter shook Kimble by the shoulders. "Sure as hell did. A single run, bottom of the ninth. From what I caught on the news, it was a truly deplorable thing to see Bonds choking like that at such an important moment. I mean, who could have seen that one coming? The Angels must have made some kind of a pact, or something. These days there are turncoats everywhere. No bet is safe anymore." He shook his head ruefully. "But hey, that's the way it goes sometimes. I just thank my lucky stars that I didn't have currency riding on that one. A heart can take only so much squeezing."

Jake met the knowing smile with a snide leer of his own. "We playing, or what? Price is five to stay in. So how about you get to it, sport?"

This was too much for Kimble. He rolled back his head and laughed, loudly and with thorough delight. "Oh," he said, when he could regain his composure once more. "I'm in. I'm all the way in." His right hand worked the large pile of chips. "Your five and . . . let's see now . . . I got, what, two, three, four . . . five grand. How about we see if the pot's for sale tonight. Five thousand in good, clean note of the realm. I'd say that's a fair price." He glanced at Wilson, drawing him into the equation. "Wouldn't you agree, Wilson?"

Wilson stared at the center of the table, his eyes showing all their blood-shot whites and his mouth hanging open in the agog manner of those shell-shocked by war. "Five grand," he whispered. "Jesus. That puts me on my ass. I can't do it." The legs of his chair scraped backwards along the floor. He rose and tossed his cards facedown onto the table. "I fold," he whispered. Then, a little more loudly: "I'm out." He met Kimble's stare and then Jake's. If he was looking for reassurance then he found none. Finally, he staggered away across the room in search of something strong to drink.

Kimble watched him go. "Fold, huh? Well, that's a shame. A real damn shame. But, it's true what they say, the show must go on. So, old man. I guess it's down to you and me. So, how about it, hmm? Do you fancy an early night? They're probably still swinging in Candlestick, what with the time difference and all. The odds on a repeat of last night must be pretty high. I'm sure if you left now you could probably make the last few pitches. See whether Bonds can redeem himself or take another bust. Two in a row might prove fatal." He smiled and leaned in. "Or have you come here to play some proper cards? It's going to cost you five big ones to see my hand. You got the stomach for that, old man?"

For a long moment, nothing happened. The world seemed to have lost its spin. Jake's cards were fanned open before him, shielded from all viewpoints but his own, and yet he hardly even registered their story. He looked beat. Tiredness clung to him like a coat. His mouth was dry and it hurt to swallow. Finally, his hands squeezed the cards together and he laid them facedown on the baize.

"You know," he said, and the softness of deep reflection made feathers of the words. "I saw a terrible thing once. I mean, in my life I've seen a

whole stack of bad stuff, just the same as you or Mr. Wilson there, or anyone else, for that matter. But this one thing was truly terrible, the sort of horror that gets you right in the gut and, once you've seen it, never goes away. It happened in 'Nam, of course. Quang Tri province, October the twelfth, 1967. I was about a third of the way through my tour and even then I'd taken to counting down the days, marking them off every night on a little sweat-stained pocket calendar that my sister had sent me. You quickly learn to get along the only way you can, and that little calendar was my way of dealing with it all. I kept telling myself with every passing day that it couldn't possibly get any worse than the way it had already been, but then I'd wade into some putrid new degree of shit and I'd have to reassess the whole goddamn situation entirely from scratch. You know, Vietnam showed me a lot of things, but mostly what it showed me was that it really was possible to have a hell on earth. Wouldn't expect you boys to understand, of course, you being as young as you both are, but you can take my word on it, even if you never believe another word I say. Honest to God, there really can be such a thing as hell on earth."

"My old man was over there," muttered Kimble. "'69."

"It's a funny thing, but there are times now when I remember that calendar better than I remember my sister's face. She was a few years older than me, had married while I was still a kid and moved out to Abilene. Her husband was Texan, and a nice enough guy, but he could never swear farther than the panhandle dirt and the smell of cow shit. Well, to each their own, I guess. Anyway, getting back to what I was saying, it was a stinking hot day and we were out on the trail when we came upon a temple that looked as if it had been forgotten by time. I swear to God, it was as if the jungle had parted for us and there it was."

Across the room, Wilson slammed down his empty shot glass on the counter of the small bar. "Jesus, old man," he snarled. "Can't you just give it up? No more damn stories. You talk way the hell too much, you know that? We've all heard enough from you to last us a hundred lifetimes."

Kimble didn't look up from his cards.

"No," he said, "I want to hear this one."

"Feel free to take a walk if you don't want to listen, sport," said Jake. "You folded your hand, didn't you? I reckon that about concludes your business here for tonight. But if you decide to stay, I would appreciate it if you'd stop interrupting." He took a long, slow breath then, bracing himself against some sort of reprisal, but a few seconds passed and then he heard the sound of a bottle's neck chiming against the rim of a glass. "So," he continued, "as I was saying. Finding that temple spooked us all pretty bad. It stood there in the clearing, you know, and after the darkness of the jungle I remember that the glare of sunlight was blinding. But worst of all was the silence. Everything was perfectly still, as if all time had stopped around us. We fanned out, worried about traps or the possibility of an ambush. All we found at first were bones, bones and skulls bleached white and picked completely clean. We tried to convince ourselves first that they

were the remains of monkeys, and then, when that didn't work, that we were looking at bodies of people wiped out in a napalm blast. Napalm cooks you right down, so that was possible. Except that the trees showed no trace of scorching. Then twenty minutes or so later, we found two monks. They were way in at the back of the temple, eating lunch."

Kimble looked up, comprehension breaking like weather across his face. "What? You don't mean . . . Oh, Christ."

"They probably had no other choice. When the food runs out it's survival of the fittest, isn't it? I guess when it comes right down to it, a man will do what he has to in order to survive. When we found them they were down to two. It was difficult to tell how many there may originally have been but it was a pretty big temple. They didn't speak, not a single word, just looked at us and then went on with their business."

"What happened?"

Jake's mouth trembled. Finally, he cleared his throat. "Five grand, huh? Well, I've come this far. I guess I'll see your five . . . and I'll raise you . . . let's see now . . . How does ten sound to you?"

"Ten grand?" Kimble couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice and didn't even bother to try.

"That's right. I fell pretty hard last night on the Giants and I've got to do something to balance the books." He pushed his remaining chips out into the center of the table. "Ten thousand. Your move, sport. Ten to stay in, otherwise I'll be saying goodnight to you."

A smile broke slowly across Kimble's face. "You're bluffing." He stared hard at Jake, looking for clues. "You are. You're bluffing."

Jake shrugged. "Ten bigs to stay in, sport. Otherwise you'll never know."

"I know," said Kimble. "You're bluffing. You've got this thing you do. I've been watching you. A little pinching of your nose. You think I didn't see but I did. Maybe you don't even realize that you're doing it. Ten, huh? Well, let's see, I've got maybe three in cash. But I'm good for the rest. You can't doubt that, surely."

"I don't doubt it at all," Jake said. "But I have a rule. I only play for what's on the table. It's been my experience that promises, even those made with the very best of intentions, tend to disappear like smoke on a breeze once all the shooting's done." He rubbed his chin. A day's worth of stubble whispered against his fingers. "Still, I'm nothing if not reasonable. Maybe we can come to some arrangement. Have you got something else to bet?"

"All right. My car. It's out front. A Mercedes, two years old. Sports model." He held up the keys and tossed them forward into the pile of chips. "There's not even forty thousand on the clock. It's worth maybe fifteen grand, maybe even more. You'll be getting the deal of a lifetime, or at least you will if what you're holding happens to be any good."

Jake considered the matter. "You know, I only have your word on the value. But, as a gesture, I'll let the car cover the bet, in addition to the three grand you mentioned."

Kimble began to laugh, then seemed to think better of it. "You've got to be yanking my chain."

"Hey, I'm trying to do you a favor. It's entirely up to you. If you can't put the cash on the table then that's your problem. Or maybe you're not so confident now in your cards. Do you still think I'm trying on a bluff, that I'm sitting down here with a handful of nothing? Maybe you're having doubts about what you saw, or what you thought you saw. Maybe you're beginning to wonder now if I might have planted the gesture in order to make you think I was bluffing." He shrugged. "But like I said, sport. It's entirely up to you. There's what? Forty grand in this pot? I could walk away happily with that much right now. But I'm doing you a favor, giving you a chance. You can either take it or leave it."

Kimble thought it over. "Okay," he said, softly. "I call."

"Money first, if you don't mind. On the table. Then you can call."

Kimble rose, crossed the room and worked open a small wall safe. The cash was neatly bound in a single wad of hundreds. "That good enough?" he asked. "Or do you want to count it too?"

Jake shook his head. "That's okay, I trust you."

"So?" Kimble drew a deep breath and let it out in an unsteady flush. "What have you got?"

Jake upturned his cards and fanned them out with a practiced flash of his hand. "Full house. Aces and tens."

The air went out of Kimble like a punctured wheel. He shrunk visibly, wilted down into a slouch in his chair. "I honest to God thought you were bluffing."

Jake nodded, with some sympathy. "I know you did. What are you holding?"

"Not enough. Low straight." He pushed back his chair but didn't get up, perhaps didn't quite trust himself to do so without staggering. "Well played, old man."

"Thanks," said Jake. He thought of offering some words of consolation but didn't. There was nothing to say that would make things any better. He reached out and gathered in his winnings. Then a tall, thin black man appeared in the doorway. For an instant, Jake felt a stirring of fear, but Kimble must have seen it because he raised an assuring hand.

"This is Leonard. Hey, Lennie, cash these chips for Mr. Tanner, will you?"

Leonard stared a moment at the pile of chips, then shrugged. "Sure thing, Mr. Kimble." He gathered up the chips and disappeared, only to return a few minutes later with a small black leather satchel full of money. "It's all there," he said, though nobody had posed the question. "Forty-two thousand." He put the satchel down on the table and left.

"Well," said Jake, picking up the car keys and rattling them before slipping them into his jacket pocket. "I guess I'll be heading on home now. See how the Giants got on. I still have them down for the pennant this year, even after last night. Everyone makes mistakes once in a while, don't they?"

What matters is how well you bounce back, and how quickly. So try not to beat yourself up too badly over this, sport. You played a pretty good game tonight. It's just that I've been playing cards a long, long time."

He hesitated a moment longer, then nodded to himself and moved toward the door. He was just about to open the door when Kimble stopped him.

"One thing. Just before you go. I need to know what happened."

Jake turned. The whisper of fear was back. "What happened with what?"

"The story. What happened to the monks?"

"Oh, the monks. We shot them. Well, can't have that sort of thing, can we? It's like our lieutenant said. They were vultures, feeding on the weak. They deserved to die, he said. If the truth be told, I felt really bad about doing it, still do as a matter of fact, but I guess maybe they were better off dead. I mean, feeding off the bones of their companions is no way to live. A man ought to be able to turn his back without feeling the blade of a knife between his shoulders. Especially where his so-called friends are concerned. I guess that when trust goes, well, everything else follows pretty quickly." He smiled then, and cast an obvious and knowing glance at Wilson, one that would have been impossible for Kimble to miss. "If you're not sure what I mean, Mr. Kimble, you might consider asking your friend Wilson here. I'm quite sure he can explain."

Then, without another word, he opened the door and stepped out onto the landing. He was shaking inside, but with exhilaration now as well as fear. He started down the stairs slowly, holding onto the handrail for balance. The landing below was dark, and the open door gave on to a very dark street. In the background, he could hear the rumble of voices, and then raised voices. Outside, the chill of the night closed around him. He found the Mercedes alone at the curb side, got in and drove away quickly, before he was forced to hear anything worse. 🐦

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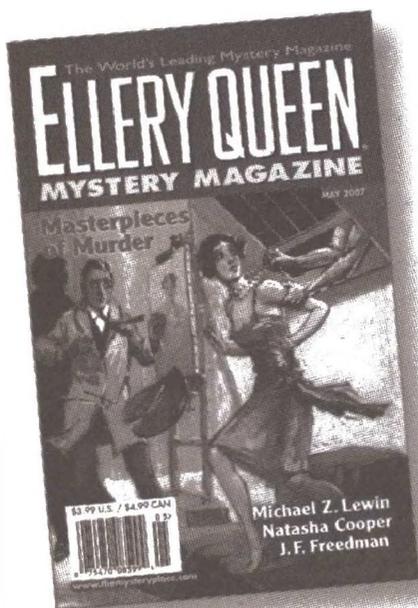
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## OOPS!!

ELIZABETH BROWN

The sirens draw closer as I practice an innocent smile. Shortly policemen pile out of the newly arrived cars. I sit serenely in a lawn chair sipping an icy lemonade and feeling as cool as a cucumber. I am half-way through laughing off the unsubstantiated accusations of a local bank robbery, when I see a policeman pick up my neighbor's son Johnny from an unnoticed corner of the yard. Johnny is holding a very nice camera and still taking pictures. This camera is the real deal; you can tell just by looking at it that it has an extensive memory. It can hold hundreds of pictures. I feel the blood in my veins turn to ice as the policeman gently takes the camera from Johnny—deftly trading him a candy bar for it.

I begin to sweat as the policeman scrolls through the pictures. He looks up at me and tells me I am under arrest.

It isn't until after I've signed my confession that the policeman allows me to view the photos that Johnny has snapped. They follow my cat around the yard as it attempts to catch butterflies, birds, and bugs. Not one picture shows me hiding banknotes in the neighbor's car (which is on blocks in the nearby yard). My cohorts are tracked down and charged as well, based on my confession and about six hundred pictures of my cat.

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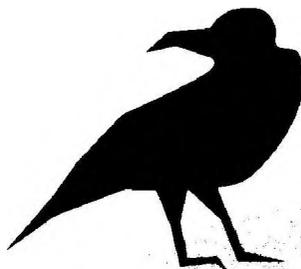
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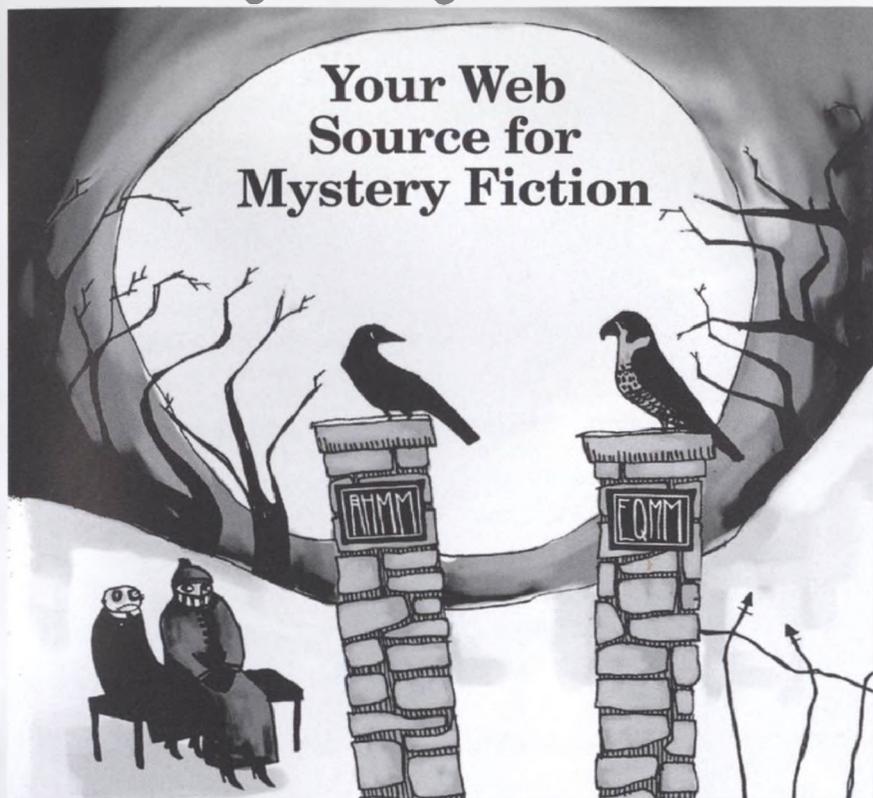
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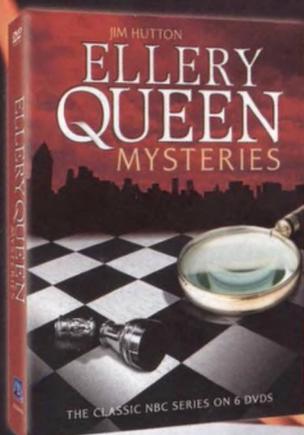
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