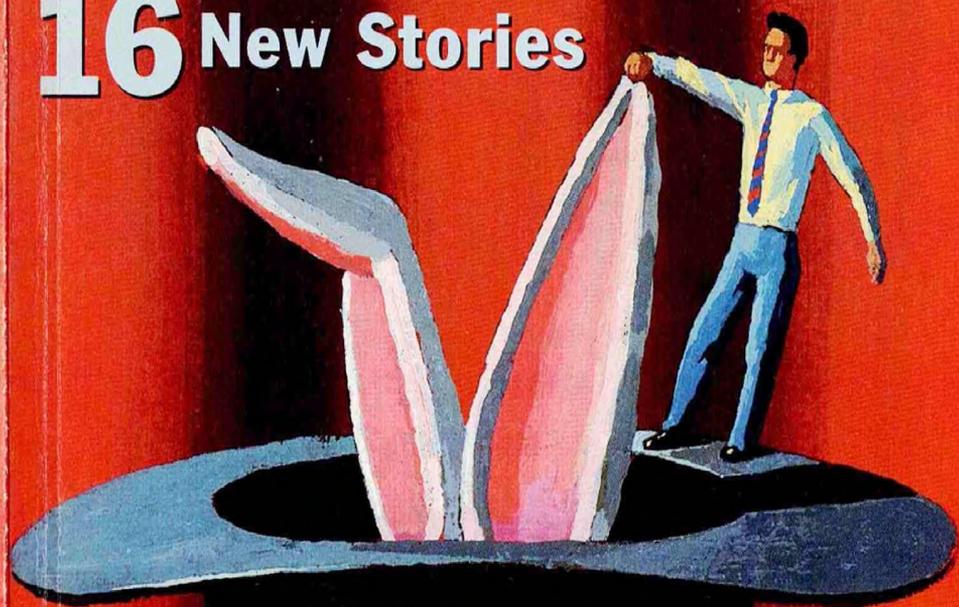


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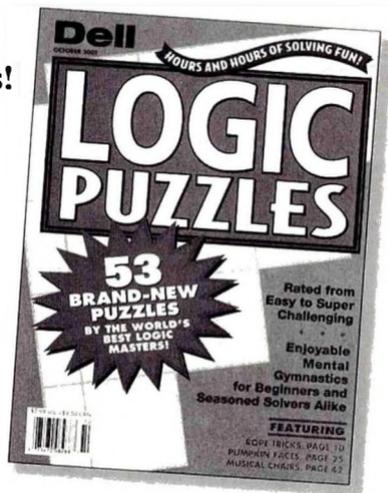
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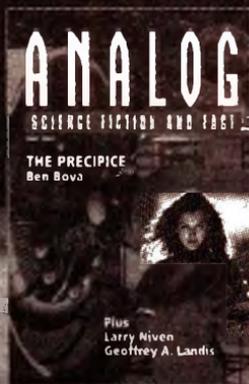
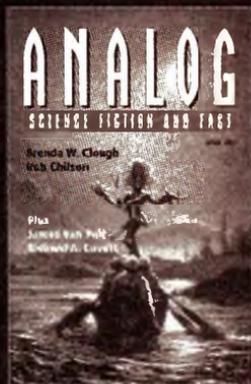
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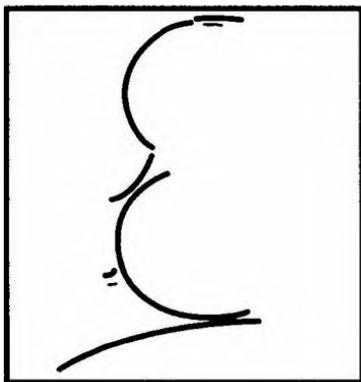


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FROM THE PUBLISHER

Dear Reader,

I am very sorry to have to tell you that Cathleen Jordan, longstanding editor of Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, died on January 31, 2002, after a short illness.

Cathleen celebrated her twentieth anniversary as editor of AHMM in 2001. Just weeks before her death, she received word that she would be the recipient of the Ellery Queen Award, established in 1983 to honor outstanding people in the mystery publishing industry. Cathleen leaves us a considerable legacy in the many talented writers she nurtured at AHMM, but she wasn't only a great editor, she was a wonderful person, and we miss her very much.

Cathleen was fiercely dedicated to AHMM, and it would have been most important to her that it continue on in good hands after her passing. I believe she would have been pleased with her successor. Linda Landrigan, AHMM's new editor, is a former Associate Editor for the magazine who spent five years under Cathleen's tutelage. Linda has also worked as a freelance writer and book reviewer, and she is active in the Women's National Book Association. Like Cathleen, Linda has a great breadth of knowledge of the mystery field. She is also a lifelong reader of AHMM, and I know that her love of the magazine will guide her in maintaining the high-quality fiction that you've come to expect.

*Sincerely,
Peter Kanter
Publisher*

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EDITOR'S NOTES

Remembering Cathleen Jordan

by William B. Crenshaw

This is Cathleen's space. In every issue of *Hitchcock* for two decades, she used this column to share something with you. She'd tell you about the issue's stories; she'd list the latest awards; in the January issue, she'd even send you a wry Season's Greetings card. But what she loved was to present new writers to you. "We are glad to introduce a new writer," she'd say, or, "Now we are delighted to bring you," or, "Welcome to," and in this limited space she'd give a face to the name.

I wish she were here to introduce her latest find, but, sadly, she's not. So I'd like to return a favor and tell you about Cathleen Jordan from the viewpoint of one of those new writers.

As an editor, Cathleen respected her readers, her writers, and the writing craft. After she accepted my first story, I taped the letter above my desk and dared think of myself as a "writer"—sometimes. Cathleen helped me think that way more often. When I came gawking to New York for the first time eighteen years ago, I knew the magazine would be busy with Edgar week and famous writers dropping by, but I hoped at least to meet Cathleen and thank her. She not only took

time to meet me but to introduce me to the editors of the other magazines at Davis Publications and to sit me down for a long and relaxed conversation. Each year that I went back, I saw new writers getting that same respect and attention.

The *Hitchcock* office was a wonderful place to visit. Cathleen was charming and funny and generous, and we'd talk about the problems of writing and editing short stories, discussions often joined by her terrific editorial assistants. Cathleen would prod and probe, asking for another story with recurring characters or bugging me to do a novel. What Cathleen gave me and other writers was support, encouragement, and respect for writing.

While the Edgar Awards dinners are important and enjoyable, Cathleen preferred things less formal and more intimate. On the day after the Edgars, she'd take a group out to dinner to honor a new writer who had won the Robert L. Fish award or a writer whose *Hitchcock* story was nominated for an Edgar. For writers, new or old, it was extraordinary—Cathleen and husband Nick, an editorial assistant, two or three other writers and

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spouses, a long evening of wonderful food and wonderful conversation.

In her columns, Cathleen gave you details about a writer's likes and dislikes, pets and hobbies, to help round out the portrait. Cathleen liked tight writing. She loved her cats. She loved New York. She knew where good little restaurants and book shops were tucked. Her apartment was crammed with books. She asked for reading recommendations and offered her own. She liked to hear stories told, stories about the oddities of our hometowns, and she liked to tell stories herself—Texas stories and New York stories and South Dakota and Italy and family and cat

stories. The stories, given and received, were acts of sharing.

Cathleen was open, witty, smart, generous, sophisticated, unpretentious, thoughtful, comfortable, determined—as one of her assistants said, she was someone you wanted to spend the rest of your life getting to know.

We all miss her. I started that novel a month before she died. I had counted on talking to her about it in progress. But when it's finished, I'll know I wouldn't have written it without her influence. A lot of writers owe her more than we can repay, and all of us—publisher, staff, writers, and readers—are incredibly fortunate to have known her.



Each spring the Mystery Writers of America hosts a banquet at which the winners of its prestigious Edgar Allan Poe Awards are announced. As William Crenshaw so fondly recalls in the preceding editorial, the banquet and the special events surrounding it are a highlight of the mystery-publishing year, a time when authors meet their editors and revel in the company of other authors. This year's banquet took place on May second at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in New York. The ceremonies included the posthumous presentation of the Ellery Queen Award to AHMM editor Cathleen Jordan. Established in 1982, the Ellery Queen Award recognizes writing teams

and outstanding people in the mystery publishing industry. Cathleen Jordan shared the honor with EQMM editor Janet Hutchings. Another special award, the Raven, was given to *Los Angeles Times* critic Charles Champlin and to Anthony Mason and Douglas Smith of CBS Sunday Morning's "Fine Print." The Raven is intended to recognize "outstanding achievement in the mystery field outside the realm of creative writing."

Listed below are the 2001 nominees for the Edgar Allan Poe Award in each of twelve categories, with the winners in boldface. The Robert L. Fish Award for

(continued on page 237)

The Scrivener's Tale

Adam of Cranefield

edited, with notes and
modernization,

by William B. Crenshaw

Prologue: Editor's note—*The story of the great good fortune by which the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century Cranefield Manuscripts came into my hands being so well known, I will not repeat it here. Suffice it to say that my excitement has only increased with the time and effort spent with the all-too-often-elusive hand of Adam of Cranefield.*

Adam, if I may be allowed the liberty—I feel that I know him well enough to call him “Adam”—is not a chronicler with an eye to posterity or political ingratiation, as is Froissart, nor does he observe so meticulously (and tediously!) as do the Paxtons. His writing is fragmentary and elliptical, highly subjective and at times shamelessly roguish, exhibiting a curious mixture (one hesitates to say “blend”) of Northern and Midland fourteenth century dialects and sensibilities—crude and cultured, savage and sensitive by turns. But he possesses a keen intellect and a visceral interest in being (or sometimes in simply staying) alive, taking delight in almost everything, especially the fol-

lies of mankind, his own included.

The role of the translator—or, more modestly, the modernizer—requires apology without ceasing, so here I make mine. In this modernization, I hope to make Adam of Cranefield accessible to the twenty-first century General Reader while remaining true to his voice. I sought to keep my own interpolations to a minimum, but I have been required by my editor to eliminate all footnotes!

Under this restriction I am forced to take liberties with the text that are at best presumptuous, in order to clarify material best explained by (and rightly belonging in) footnotes, endnotes, annotations, appendices, and other scholarly apparatus. For example, rather than offering explanatory notes on fourteenth century slang, I have been forced to substitute roughly equivalent modern slang in its place, and while such substitution does in some sense capture for the modern reader the flavor of the original, one cannot help lament what is inevitably lost in translation. (One must also draw a line somewhere. I

have refused, for instance, to render the phrase *mea culpa* as "my bad.")

In any case, I hope that Adam's stories will be as enjoyable and gratifying to the reader as they are to the modernizer, but I must close with one final word of caution: Adam is a man of his time and can be candid in his description and colorful in his opinion. While I intend to be circumspect and sensitive, I will not bowdlerize his story—a reporter must, as Chaucer says, "reherce as ny he can / Everich a word, if it be in his charge / . . . Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrew." Judge nothing that I say, Gentle Reader, as of evil intent; I must rehearse his tale whole, for better or worse, or else falsify some of my material.

And therefore, whoever desires not to hear such things should "turne over the leef and chese another tale."

—WBC, New York, Santa Fe,
Due West, 2001

Here beginneth the Tale of Adam, the Scrivener . . .

He has been too long at his books again.

He nods as he reads, his candle smokes and dances, untrimmed. We should be in a tavern raising our cups to Dame Fortune or in chapel on our knees thanking God, one, or both. Not only did we survive the revolt, but good King Henry IV, newly crowned, has not only confirmed the rights and privileges granted by King Richard, he has doubled the annuity to eighty pounds. Eighty pounds! And do we

celebrate? Nay. I sit and write, he sits and reads. Always his books, even more of late. They alone have remained constant in this unsyker world.

He will not be fit to share a sop with on the morrow unless he takes his sleep soon, and in a better bed than this inn provides. But if I nudge him awake so he can better sleep, he will deny his napping and snarl at me for breaking his thoughts, and call for a new candle despite the expense, and stay hunched at his books until his back aches, and tomorrow's road will be one long harangue at me and my blotted and miscopied transcribing. That, or he will avoid talk by trying again to read as he rides, lost in a book spread and balanced on his saddle's bow.

He was reading thus when first I saw him fourteen years ago in 1385, the eighth year of King Richard's reign and the fourth year after the Rising. I was leg-stocked outside the foregate of Haresbury as though accused of purse cutting rather than murder. The dignity of the gaol, dark and damp though it was, was denied me for the pleasure and amusement of the town—curses hurled by the good burgesses and dirt clods hurled by their children. Not my first time in stocks, but the first where the entire town seemed to joy in my torture. Of evenings, drunkards whom the gatekeeper let slip out used me for their pisspot. I cursed them all to Hell with the mightiest of oaths, and cursed the priests, too, and why not—I would be hanged long before the justice of the peace made

his way to this Godforsaken stain of a town and asked me whether I had done this murder or no.

The justice was my only hope, for the town wanted me dead. Someone had to pay for the murder of their leading citizen, and I was a stranger and at hand. I would serve.

So I watched the road like a hawk a hare, hoping to spot the justice and his retinue before the town's patience wore out.

On the third day, as I sat with ankles chafing and back afire, hope fading with every passing traveler, a well-aimed clod caught the back of my head and spread a cloud of dust glittering around my face, and I fell to cursing the whelps who laughed in the shadow of the wall.

"Mind your bloody language," growled Tallguard from the shade.

Well, so long as I was going to die anyway, I decided to die avenged. I would feign sleep so as to snatch one of the little town vermin if he edged too close and have, at least, the satisfaction of breaking a bone or two. I could hang only once. A town this size wouldn't have a hangman skilled enough to let me down before I died so to revive me and prolong the torture.

I made a grab at one of the whelps about noon, caught him by his ragged cote and drew him toward me snarling as he wailed for help. The cloth gave way and the brat ran screaming into town, and I was left with a handful of rag and a sound pummeling by the whelp's father a short while later. A sound kicking, I should say, for his boot cracked a rib or two before the

guards wandered over to put a stop to his vengeance.

"He would have eat my son," the father protested.

"No more than a mouthful, John, no more than a taste," Tallguard said. "No harm done your boy, so let's do no more here. The justice might not approve of a maimed prisoner. And we wouldn't want to piss off a representative of the Crown, would we, William?"

"Oh, no," said Fatguard. "The Crown knows best, now, don't it?"

John took their meaning and kicked me one last time before thumping away.

"Now, look you," said Tallguard, blotting out the sun, "mind you don't bring no more trouble down here. I might not be so quick to lend a hand next time."

"You call that quick?" I said. "My grandmother moves quicker, and she's dead."

Tallguard straightened and looked across me to Fatguard. He looked back at me and raised the butt of his pike from the dirt. "That where he kicked you?" he asked, and gave me a pop to the ribs.

"Aye," said Fatguard as I writhed around, trying to find my breath. "I believe that's right where he kicked him."

Later my breath came back, but I stayed where I was, curled on my side with my legs twisted into the stocks.

I lay while the sun faded behind gathering clouds and a fine drizzle settled the dust of the road. I lay with my back to the gate and my eyes closed, pretending I was dead so I would be left in peace. But as

the drizzle turned to earnest rain, I heard a horse draw up and the creak of saddle leather. I opened an eye, hoping for the justice and his retinue.

"Not yet hanged?" came the voice. Not the justice, but Sir Eustace de Witte, my accuser, leaning his long face down at me. "There was a time when you would be three days dead by now. Not today. Not in this milky age."

As if in affirmation, a bellyful of thunder rolled around us. Sir Eustace straightened in his saddle and smiled that God agreed with him. I opened my mouth to answer but he wheeled and spurred and I got a mouthful of dirt for my pains.

Lightning cracked a big tree by the river and thunder called open the sluice gates of the sky. I lay in the flood. I raised my fist to the heavens. "Do thou thy worst," I shouted, "and I thee defy." I hoped someone in this rat-bait town would hear and be shocked to soul's marrow by the blasphemer calling down the lightning. I looked around. No one, not even a guard, was so stupid as to be out in these torrents. No one had heard me, except maybe God.

It stopped raining, and the sun came out, and the air got thick and steamy, and mud began caking and drying in my hair, on my skin, in my clothes. I was hot and cold at once, shivering afire. A mud ball nearly took off my ear. I was too tired even to curse.

A lone rider pulled up before the stocks and stared as if to make a study of me. He looked plump and prosperous—a grocer, an accoun-

tant—with a forked beard and mud-splashed boots, a palfrey overburdened with bags and bundles, with reins in one hand and a small leather-bound book open in the other. His gaze at me was long and at once curious and amused, and it fretted me to be thus at length considered.

I raised my chin. "And have you ridden all this way to piss upon me, too?"

His horse stirred at my voice. "Are you a privy, then?" Forkbeard the Grocer said, smiling a maddening little smile. "I took you for a man."

I felt the rage rise within me. "I am a man, you fat rabbit! Loose my ankles and I'll show you a man!"

He smiled and flicked his reins, turning his horse toward the gate. I scraped a fist of mud into a ball and threw for his head. I hit the rump of his mount.

Up his horse reared and forward shot like a bolt, and Forkbeard was all arms and legs and belly as he rolled out of the saddle and bounced to the drying mud, his book fluttering through the air like a bird stunned.

The guards hurried over to help him to his feet, and the whelps laughed, as did I. I had made things worse for myself, but by Jesu I had shown that I was not just going to roll over and die. I lay back, proud of my spirit.

I was wakened by the butt of a pike prodding my rib cage.

"Up, you," Tallguard growled, urging again with his pike.

I stirred. I was unstocked! My legs were free! For one flashing moment I saw myself running on

those legs away from Haresbury, out of Kent altogether, into the great forest, or running west to Wales or north to Scotland, outrunning the horses and the hue and cry at my heels.

Then I tried to stand and couldn't.

"Maybe we should just leave him here," said Fatguard with hope in his voice.

Tallguard bent for my right arm. "You heard the justice. He wants him jailed."

"The justice?" I said. Had he come while I slept? Hope blossomed in my breast like a rose in the desert.

They hooked their elbows under my arms and dragged me to my feet. "Can you walk or not?" said Tallguard, trying to jerk me into balance.

"Mind how you handle me," I said.

He released me and I crumpled to the mud.

"This is the king's justice, not your local constable," I said as Tallguard reached to drag me to my feet again. "He won't sanction this treatment."

Tallguard straightened and smiled. "Oh, I don't think he'll mind."

"Oh, no? Well, call him out here then and let him see me."

"Well, William, what do you think? Should we call His Worship the justice out so he can get a look at this ragbag?"

"Well," said Fatguard, scrunching up his brows, "I don't know."

"Oh, I think we should. I think we should tell His Worship that the prisoner in our charge summons

His Worship, nay, demands that His Worship attend him."

This was not the response I had expected.

"There is no justice here, is there?" I said. "I didn't see him ride by."

"Not see him," Tallguard said. "Goddess bones, man, you unhorsed him. Well thrown."

The rose withered and turned to dust and blew away on hot winds. The plump little fork-bearded grocer tumbling off his mount? Justice of the peace? I was a dead man.

Tallguard reached for me. "What kind of justice is that?" I yelled crabbing backwards away from his grasp.

"Oh, just shut up," he said, and gave me a great clout to the head that spun me into blackness.

I awoke dead in Hell with the devil himself peeling my eyeballs. I tried to fight him off.

"Here, now," the Devil said.

"He's alive," said one of his Demons.

Alive! Worse than dead, then. I had been carried living, body and soul, straight into Hell. I never thought my sins so great nor heavenly justice so unmixed with mercy.

"Sit on him, William, afore he hurts somebody."

The Demon William did then sit upon my chest, and I could not breathe. I could feel my piked ribs grating. I fought to remove him but Demons are not lightly moved and I had little strength. A ball of fire flew at my naked eyes.

"Here, you, listen now," said

Flame. "We needs to show His Worship that you're not dead, understand? We needs to show that we didn't kill you." Flame sounded very much like Tallguard—cruel humor, I thought, to use on a man just damned.

Flame moved and I could see faces floating and glowing in the pitch of Hell. They drifted aside for His Worship's face, Satan's face, with its plump cheeks and forked beard and eyes like sparking flint that burned into my soul. I stopped struggling. I knew it was no use.

His Worship's face floated away. "See that he comes to no further harm," He said to His Minions. "Bring him to Me after prime. Wash him up a bit first. He smells."

Flame and the faces floated away.

I slipped back into blackness, surprised that Satan was so fastidious and that he kept time by canonical hours.

The next morning Tallguard dragged me out into the rain and told me to stand until the stink washed off. He stood sheltered in a doorway, leaning on his pike, rainwater dripping from the ends of his long mustache. I understood then that I had spent the night in the gaol again, although that did not mean that I had not been taken to Hell too, or that I wasn't dreaming now.

The iciness of the rain convinced me that this was either no dream, or that Hell could be frost as well as fire. It didn't matter which. Haresbury was just the last sorry stop in a long downward trail I

had been on for what seemed half my life. It was no surprise to me that I would end my life here for something I had not done, or for unhorsing the wrong man with a mudball. I had so often escaped punishment for things I had done that I supposed it was justice, somehow—God setting things to right again. Or maybe just fickle Fortune spinning her wheel, enjoying my little tragedy. It didn't matter. I didn't care.

Fatguard arrived. "Is he clean yet?"

"Clean enough for killing," Tallguard answered.

So this was it, then. Straight to my death on a sodden morning. If I wasn't in Hell now, I soon would be.

They dragged me across the mud of the market square to the doorway of what passed for a town hall, where they let me drip for a while. Every shiver ignited my broken ribs or my bruised head. I had never been so cold, not even in the dead of winter.

A servant appeared in the doorway. "The justice will see you now."

I tried to stand straight as the guards pushed me back into my nightmare.

Three men were breaking fast at a trestle table backed to a fireplace so great that it seemed another portal into Hell and the men seemed sitting in a fiery antechamber, visiting God's earth, looking for souls, finding mine.

And indeed, the one in the middle was His Lordship Satan, the Devil himself, from the night before. Forkbeard, the unhorsed jus-

tice. He looked me up and down as if I were a pisspot indeed.

I felt my will draining to the dregs of my broached tun. I was for it now, trussed and plucked and ready.

He waved a crust of bread my way. "This is the man, Constable?"

Unless . . .

"Yes, milord," said Tallguard.

"Master Coroner?"

"Yes, milord" said the man to Forkbeard's right.

Unless . . .

"Milord Mayor?"

"This is the man," said the man to Forkbeard's left.

Unless he might not recognize me washed clean. I kept my face bent as if in shame and humility.

Forkbeard dipped his crust into his wine and took a contemplative bite. His wine was steaming. My stomach snarled. I was shivering still. My ribs ached.

"You, Adam of Cranesfield, stand accused," said Forkbeard . . .

"Cranefield, milord," I said before I knew I had opened my mouth. I could not believe I'd said it, nor could anyone else. They all stared, frozen in position. "That is, milord, Adam of Cranefield, not *Cranesfield*. Milord. Begging your pardon."

The justice dabbed his lip and leaned back over the document from which he was reading. "You, Adam of Cranefield . . ." he paused and raised his eyebrows at me.

"Yes, milord," I said, looking at my muddied feet. "Thank you, milord."

" . . . stand accused of the murder of Sir Stanyarde Fisher, lately made knight by His Majesty King

Richard the Second." He paused and dipped another bit of bread. "I have a question to put to you."

"I did not kill this man, milord."

Forkbeard leaned back. "A con-jurer? To know the question before it is asked?"

Tallguard pushed me from behind. I staggered a step or two closer to the table.

"May I have leave to ask my question now?" Forkbeard said.

"Your pardon, milord," I muttered, face low.

He leaned toward me. "The question I have to put to you is this—have you eaten of late?"

I must have been struck dumb, for Tallguard shoved me again. "Answer his lordship, dog."

"No, milord."

Forkbeard ripped a fist of bread from the loaf, dipped it in his steaming beaker, held it toward me.

A drop of wine fell from bread to table. It fell, it seemed, slowly, as if suspended from the finger of an angel. It caught the fire's flickering as it fell, it glowed and sparked like a ruby, a carbuncle, a pearl of blood.

It was at that moment that I found I wanted to live. Not the best of motives, perhaps—desire for another mouthful of decent wine, for dry clothes and good bread and a bed with no fleas, for warm sun and warm women, for cheeses and grapes and venison hissing on the spit.

"Well?" said Forkbeard. "Do you want it?"

"Yes, milord. Thank you, milord."

I tried not to look like a dog indeed as I ate it, but it seemed to leap whole into my mouth. Hippocras!

Good wastel bread sopped in hippocras! Jesu be praised! A kind justice. I had some hope to live after all. He did not recognize me.

"Did you aim yestere'en at me or at my mound?"

The bread congealed in my mouth. I could not chew or swallow or spit it out. I began to choke, and the men at table recoiled as if I would vomit, and Tallguard spun me away from them. And in truth my head swam, and I swayed on my feet, and then it seemed that I was steady and the room was swaying, then that the room was the belly of a tossing ship and I was on my way again to France, pitching across the channel, smelling of sea salt and rusting mail and horse dung.

I fell to my knees and vomited.

Benches at table grated across the floor. "Get him out of here, constable!"

And then I was hunched in the mud and rain, heaving whatever remained in the depths of my body, which by then was mostly noise. Fatguard stood with his back turned, trying not to vomit himself. My fit passed finally, and I lay down in the mud and tried to sleep.

"You. Adam. Up." Tallguard. I could not have risen even had I wanted, and what I wanted was to stay right where I was. He could kick as much as he pleased.

But he didn't kick. He squatted beside me and shook my shoulder. "Adam," he said more gently now. "See here," he said, "they're blaming me if you die. So you can't die on me."

"Who's blaming you?" said Fatguard. "Sure, not the mayor?"

"It's that high and mighty justice, isn't it?" Tallguard answered in a quiet voice he supposed I couldn't hear. "He's what's causing all the trouble. He says we haven't kept him well and he holds us responsible." He got his hands under my shoulders and strained. "Up we go, Adam. Give us a hand, William."

They propped me between them. "There's a good lad. Feeling better?"

I tried to nod. I did prefer this Tallguard to the old.

"That's good, that's very good. If you won't die, I'll bring you a nice bit of soup made by my wife's own hands, eh?"

The thought of soup sent the world spinning again.

"But if you die," Tallguard said as I fell to my knees, "I'll make sure you regret it."

At that moment, dying was the last thing I would have regretted.

They spent a fair bit of time getting me presentable. I tried to sleep through most of it. But at last I found myself entering town hall clean of the worst of the dirt and in dry clothes. The Hellmouth fire had long since burned to glowing coals and sunlight lanced through a few high windows. Instead of food, spread on the board were my meager possessions. Behind them stood coroner, mayor, and Forkbeard, the justice of the peace.

"These are yours?" Forkbeard said.

A ragged cloak and hood, faded blue long before I stole them; a scrip with bits of leather for mending boots, needle and thread, some candle ends, a crust of bread, a flint and

steel, three bowstrings; a quiver with five arrows, headed and fletched; a short dagger; a long Welsh dagger; my longbow.

I pointed to the Welsh dagger. "All but that, my lord. I took that from the dead knight."

"You see?" said the mayor. "He admits to thievery. Let him be hanged."

"Indeed, Master Justice," said the coroner, "he might as well hang for theft as for murder."

"Why are we so anxious," said Forkbeard as if seriously asking, "to see a man hanged before we have heard his story?"

"Really, Master Justice," the mayor said, "a vagrant, a stranger is caught stealing from the man he has just killed. What story can he tell?"

"And who knows what mischief he was up to," the coroner said. "For all we know he is one of Wat Tyler's men come to start another Rising. Or maybe he is . . ."

"It was good that you sent for me," said Forkbeard in a surprisingly strong voice, "and I thank you, Master Coroner, for doing so. You may be right. There may be more here than it appears. Be assured, if after this inquiry I agree that this man should be bound over for trial, so shall he be. And then if convicted, you will be free to hang him as often and as high as you please. But you'll forgive me, sirs, if I proceed slowly. I am but new at the task and have not yet learned the shortcuts."

I saw hope once again. This was not some hack made justice as patronage, not somebody's nephew or

father-in-law or lender of money given the job to bumble his way through Kent and line his pockets in the process.

Forkbeard lifted my bow and turned it in a shaft of light. "This is a fine bow. Indeed, I have rarely seen its like." He looked at me. "Stolen."

"No, milord. A gift."

"Such a bow. The giver must have thought much of you."

I was absurdly pleased.

"Are you a good archer?"

"I have, milord, the benefit of the giver's training but neither his hand nor eye."

"Nor speech, I wager," Forkbeard said.

I had grown careless. With Tallguard I had sounded like Tallguard; good, it aroused no suspicion, but in talking to Forkbeard I had slipped into Forkbeard's manner of speech. I hadn't made that mistake with mayor nor coroner. Too late to dissemble now. "No, milord. He was somewhat . . ."

"God's death!" blasted a voice behind me. "Longbows and spech? You are right, Master Justice. You know no shortcuts. You know only the long ways. If you must complete some legal nicety here, get on with it and do not waste the time of good men with such trifling."

The voice had risen out of his chair on the far wall and strode majestically toward Forkbeard, who looked more like a grocer than ever as Sir Eustace de Witte leaned over the board at him. "Are we ready now to hear his story?"

Here it was, then. Sir Eustace, the knight of the manor, on one

side, the crown's justice on the other. My fate lay between them.

"Yes," said Forkbeard, "certainly. Your pardon, Sir Eustace."

My hopes fell. Forkbeard could stand toe-to-toe with the local burgesses, but not with a knight, not with the local gentry. He would bow to whatever Sir Eustace wanted. And Sir Eustace wanted me dead.

All but the justice had heard my story; all had called me already a liar, an atheist, a French spy, Welsh spy, Scottish spy, Irish spy, and a member of a Free Company, and while there was less truth in what they said than they feared, there was more than they believed. I did not tell them that I was wayfaring in their fair county on my way to the coast to wrangle passage to France and, in fact, join with a Free Company, preferably Hawkwood's White Company, not that I fancied being a free lance or a brigand, depending on your point of view, but I didn't fancy being much of anything at that stage of my life. I had no property, no land, since my father had given my inheritance and himself—and me—to God. I had no wife or children, no friends worth seeing, no ties to any one, place, purpose, or thing. I had only the possessions spread before the justice. And while I was not unlearned and had some abilities, I knew too much of the church to be priest, friar, or monk; cared too little for politics to seek my fortune in the royal bureaucracy; and had seen too much of righteous war to fight for any kind again. At least Hawkwood

did not delude himself about why he took up arms. It was perhaps that terrible honesty that appealed to me.

I told them none of that, of course. What I told them was that I was traveling through Kent seeking employment.

What kind, they wanted to know. Are you skilled?

I have a strong back and a willing spirit, I said.

They laughed.

"Your story, so please you," the justice said.

I told him that as I took the road to Haresbury through the forest near, a glint of metal in the distance caught my eye, and I saw a horse, saddled, grazing on young leaves at a bend ahead. His reins hung loose, nor did I see a tether. I guessed he had thrown his rider, who might be injured nearby.

I came slowly to the horse so not to scare him off, and he let me approach. I took the reins and stroked his neck. Truly it was a fine saddle I saw, inlaid with silver and curiously worked, the saddle of a noble. But I saw no one.

I called, but heard no answer. I called again and thought I heard a moan down the road. I tethered the horse, tried to find who had moaned, but the road was empty. I called again and heard the moan off in the brush to my left.

I found him a dozen yards off the road, lying on his belly. He was indeed a noble in fine clothes, but they were red with his blood—a hard fall he had taken, I thought, or he had been pitched into a tree. I knelt beside him and rolled him

gently towards me. His face told me he was but dead. I tried to rouse him, but he had only breath for one last moan. I laid him back to earth, wiped the blood from my hands in the dirt, closed his eyes with finger and thumb.

"And said a prayer, I suppose," Sir Eustace said.

"Aye, milord," said I, "I started a prayer for his soul but then I stopped for I saw that the gash on his head was cleanly made. The wound was not ragged, not the wound of a fall. I raised his bloody shirt and found a clean wound in his belly, a thrusting sword wound, and knew that he had been killed by no accident, and knew too that his attacker could not be far. The dead man had that long knife at his side. I drew it slowly as I knelt and hid it in a fold of my cloak before rising, hoping to pass unharmed by those who had ambushed him, robbers, most like, who my approach had interrupted and who lurked close by. Poverty walks the forest without fear, it is said, but I was afraid. I was minded to cut straight through the trees but fearful I might stumble into the murderers, so I made the road and started down it."

And here I had to address Sir Useless. "And there before me was a man, a nobleman, on horseback, Your Lordship, Sir Knight. And seeing my bloody shirt, Your Worship ordered me to halt, and not knowing Your Worship were a knight, Sir Knight, and fearing for my life, I crashed into the woods where Your Lordship chased me on horseback and brought me down with

the flat of Your Worship's blade to the back of my head, many thanks to Your Worship for not using the edge."

"As I should have done," Sir Eustace said, "and saved us all this trouble. For you see, Master Justice, after he was down I found the Welsh knife that I knew belonged to my friend and fellow knight, Sir Stanyarde Fisher. And had this rogue been conscious when I found it, he would be dead now."

The justice turned to the mayor. "You said, Sir Mayor, that you examined this man yourself?"

"After I received the constable's report, I had this man repeat his tale before myself and the coroner."

"And is this the story he told you then?"

"Aye, in essence and details."

"Master Coroner," Forkbeard the justice said, "did you find the wounds as he described them?"

"I did, milord, and two wounds on the back—one thrusting, one slashing. He was attacked from behind."

The justice tapped his chin. "As he fled?" He phrased it as a question, but no one responded. He turned to me. "And you say you unsheathed the long knife for protection."

"Aye, milord, I was in fear . . ."

He waved his hand. "I ask whether or no you unsheathed the knife." A trick question? A snare I was to spring?

"Well?" the justice said.

"Aye, milord. I did unsheathe it. He wore it here, on his right side."

"And where was his sword?"

"On his left side, milord."

"You saw it?"

"Aye, milord."

"In its scabbard?"

"Aye, milord. When I turned him, I . . ."

He turned before I finished. "Sir Eustace? You found it so?"

"I did."

The justice turned his gaze to the coals. "I wonder he did not defend himself."

His back was to the townsmen. I saw them exchange glances.

"If he did not defend himself," the justice continued, "it is like that he was wounded in the back as he fled, and that the wounds to face and torso came after he was unhorsed. Or perhaps," and here he began acting out the movements, a dumb show, "the slash to the face first, he flees, is wounded and unhorsed, and then dies from the belly thrust. What say you? Was Sir Stanyarde like to flee a fight?"

There was a long moment of silence.

The mayor said, "Sir Stanyarde was . . ."

The coroner said, "He was a most free and noble . . ."

Sir Eustace overrode them both. "He was a courtier knight. The only red his sword knew was rust."

"But he rode armed like a fighting man," said the justice. "Did he wear a knight's spurs?"

"Aye," said Sir Eustace with bitterness, "and great golden things they were."

"He loaned the Crown a great sum," said the mayor.

"And by that received his knighthood," said the justice.

"And he is distant kin to Simon Burley and knows Robert de Vere," said Sir Eustace.

"Ah," said the justice, and let it go at that. Even I knew the names of two of King Richard's upstart favorites, unpopular with the old nobility. Best not to talk about the king's chamber, especially before strangers. "So, then to recount—Sir Stanyarde had not had the benefit of experience in battle or tourney, and so when confronted by a wayfarer armed with unstrung bow and short dagger, he wheels his horse and flees and is pursued by the wayfarer, who outruns the horse and with his dagger inflicts grievous wounds on the head and body of Sir Stanyarde."

There was silence again. Oh, most noble justice, thought I. Oh, Prince of Justices.

"It was never said he acted alone," said Sir Eustace.

"He had accomplices," said the mayor.

"He was caught only because he was unmounted," Sir Eustace said. "The others fled when they noted my approach."

"You heard their horses, then?" the justice asked.

"Outlaws do not gallop into a forest thick with trees. They undoubtedly slinked away while I pursued this their spy, whom they abandoned. Indeed, I would say that this one was key to their ambush, that he distracted Sir Stanyarde on the road by feigning injury or illness, and when Sir Stanyarde reined up, he was set upon by the rest of the gang."

"Aye, that is very like," said the mayor. "He used the same trick on John Butcher's boy and nearly killed him."

"I did no such . . ."

"Or perhaps," said Sir Eustace, "he unhorsed Sir Stanyarde with a well-aimed stone. He has some skill there, I believe. And perhaps having unhorsed Sir Stanyarde, he himself mounts and rides Sir Stanyarde down on his own horse."

The justice frowned. "That he can unhorse a mounted man I can well attest," he said. "However, Sir Stanyarde's sword was sheathed when you found him, Sir Eustace. Did you find another sword naked?"

"You do not mean to let this villain go?" Sir Eustace said.

"If no sword, were there then signs of a gang?" said the justice to all three. "Hoofprints in and out of the forest? Horse dung to mark where the gang waited in ambush? Was nothing taken by this gang except this weapon? If mounted men slew this knight, how is it that you saw only this man?"

"Do you say I lie?" Useless growled.

"I say only, Sir Eustace," said the justice quietly, "that I cannot bind this man over for trial. He could not himself have done . . ."

"By Jesu, this is wrong. When my father and my grandfather before him kept the peace here, no felon would be coddled so. This man did foully kill a man made knight by that boy king, who is still our king, and you are the king's justice charged with keeping the king's peace. You must fulfill your duties. You cannot release him."

The justice studied Sir Useless as he had studied me, taking his measure, gauging his response. When he spoke, it was again qui-

etly. "We have no proof that he killed Sir . . ."

"If not this man, then who?"

Not even I could answer that question.

The justice sighed. "Sir Eustace, he must be released."

"I say thee nay."

The challenge was direct now, crown versus town, but here town wore a sword and crown wore only a short dagger and a long knife, and the thin cloak authority—a new justice, a still-new king, a new knight dead.

"Sir Eustace," the justice said, starting to sound more patronizing than patient, "there is nothing here for me to present to a jury. There were no witnesses, and . . ."

"There are clouds of witnesses, by God," said Sir Eustace, "and I invoke their aid." He turned to face me. "Thou are the murderer," he said, "and that I will prove on my body."

I almost laughed, so absurd it was. Even the justice seemed flummoxed.

"Your pardon, Sir Eustace," he said. "Are you saying . . ."

"I am invoking a trial by combat to settle this issue, as is my right." Sir Eustace turned to me. "You may, of course, engage a champion to fight in your stead, but if you indeed are innocent, you will put your body at hazard. God has a stroke in every battle. And if God is with you, who can be against you?"

I looked to the justice and did not like the puzzled frown I saw. "Milord Justice," I said, pleading.

He turned to me, the glint gone from his eyes, the strength from his chin.

"Milord," said I.

"Guards," said Forkbeard the Grocer. "Take him back."

Fittingly, the sun dimmed and the rain began again as we left the hall for the gaol. The square was crowded with people who had hurried out between storms, many gathering around two carts that had locked their wheels and the carters who were waving their arms and yelling at each other ankle-deep in mud.

"Saints," Tallguard muttered. "Be that old Ned?"

One carter took a mighty swing at the other and missed and fell facedown in the mud. The crowd laughed. The rain fell harder.

"Aye," Fatguard said, "And that's Tom Grinder drunk again."

"Drunk still, you mean. I best break this up before the knives come out. Watch this one." He handed Fatguard his pike and stalked across the square yelling for peace; Tom Grinder aimed a kick at old Ned and went down himself.

Fatguard laughed. "Two such popinjays you never saw. Ned fights to prove he's still a man and Tom to prove he's become one."

Tallguard reached the combatants and hauled Tom out of the mud and yelled, while behind him old Ned struggled to hands and knees, and Tom shoved Tallguard back across the old man and into the mud himself. The crowd cheered.

"Damnation," said Fatguard.

It came down to hitting Fatguard or facing the lance of Sir Eustace de Witte. I had nothing

against Fatguard, not really, so I did not strike with the manacles but with my fists bunched together, and even that wasn't much of a blow. I hit him just behind the right ear and he dropped like a sack of barley, stunned, into the mud. I spun and ran out of the square down a narrow alley toward the town wall. I thought to follow the wall to the gate and just walk out, hunched against the rain to hide my chains.

But as I reached the wall I heard Fatguard's outraged voice raising the hue and cry and Tallguard shouting for the gates to be barred. So at the wall, I turned left, away from the gate, heading deeper into town, hoping to find a sally port or to scramble up a low point in the wall and jump to freedom. But I came to stables built hard against the wall and the narrow way twisted back toward town and crooked and split so that I lost my bearings.

I stopped at a junction of tight lanes.

I knew I was for it now. I could hear the hue and cry running up the muddy alleys, baying like hounds almost on the board, and eager to have at me with cudgel or kitchen knife, sword or pike. Then, beneath that fury, I heard the sound of a bell tolling and across weedy thatch in the drizzle I could just make out a grey corner of the squat tower of the parish church.

I ran down the lane that seemed to lead more or less in the right direction.

I stumbled into the square, the church on my right. Down the

square to my left a cry went up as I was spotted. I ran for the church, through the mud and up the stone steps. I yanked open the church door, and there stood the justice, his sword leveled at my throat.

I thought I was but dead.

I look over at him now as he sits, more frail than he should be, fighting sleep beside his smoking candle, and I marvel at what has come to pass since we stood before that church, the point of his sword pricking the soft triangle of flesh above my breastbone, the guards and Sir Eustace closing in, followed by a crowd fresh from the carters' fight, eager for more. I looked down into his face, into his grey eyes as he looked up his blade into mine, waiting for what was coming, as still as the figures carved above the church door who poised, as did we, on the edge of some event, in the moment of a revelation, at the fork of uncertain choices.

Then I felt the sword point case a hair and I jerked my head to the side and snapped my manacles up and the chain knocked the blade aside, and before the justice could recover I charged into him with lowered head and shoulder and knocked him down. Then I was in the church running for the altar, yelling for the priest, claiming sanctuary.

I was cowering behind the altar when Sir Eustace burst in, waving his sword. The justice tried to interpose himself between us, but he gave ground until the priest finally scurried in, and Sir Eustace, caught between the threats of crown and cross, stopped shoving.

"Do you call this justice?" Sir Eustace demanded.

The priest said something about God's mercy and God's justice. The justice said nothing I could hear.

As he left, Sir Eustace pointed his sword at me and warned that he would show what real justice was if I poked so much as my great toe beyond the church door.

Taking no chances, I slept that night clutching the altar. The priest woke me before Mass and kindly accompanied me to his garderobe then returned me to the altar. Mass, he told me later, when he brought me some stale wine and a hunk of barley bread, was exceptionally well attended that morning, and he thanked me for bringing so many back to God. I had met few priests with a sense of humor. I tried not to like this one.

I spent some time leaning against the altar contemplating my position. It was, I came to see, better than I had any right to hope. I had forty days of sanctuary before I would be forced out by the justice or Sir Useless. But any time before that point I need only take my oath of abjuration, make my way to the nearest port, and sail away from England forever—which was in sooth my purpose before stumbling across the dead knight. Fortune, bitch goddess, was smiling on me once more. It were best to act while her brief favors were mine. I would forswear my country as soon as that fool of a justice made an appearance.

Which he did late that day, after vespers, with better fare than I had

tasted in some time. He set between us on a bench a flagon of that brilliant wine, a loaf of fine wastel bread, a pair of cheeses, and a bowl of thick rabbit stew. He let me bolt and swill for a time before tearing off bread for himself and asking, "Why do you claim sanctuary for a crime you did not commit?"

I chewed a moment, trying to gauge his meaning. Then I rubbed the scratch at the base of my throat. "Why do you draw your sword on innocent men?"

He laughed. "You are no vagabond."

"And you no grocer, my lord."

"Vintner," he said. "My father imported wines. I'm in the business still."

I raised my cup to him, and drained it.

"You understand that this is not the outcome I intended," he said, refilling my cup. "I thought to laugh you out of trouble by showing how absurd their accusations were. At any rate, I hope to have you safely on your way soon enough. Though I'm not sure how to stop this challenge from playing itself out."

"My lord, you are not serious, surely. I mean, my lord, trial by combat? Is it still done?"

"More often than you think, apparently. But we have other ways, I think, to extricate you from this." Then for a moment he stared at me. "You have your letters, then?" he said at last.

It was pointless to deny it. "I can read."

"And write."

"And write, aye."

"How is your Latin?"

So the wind was in that door. He next would ask if I could read the requisite verses. I smiled. "I will not claim benefit of clergy."

He frowned. "You could walk free from this church today."

"I could trade king's justice for canon's justice, you mean. I thank you, my lord, but I will not put my fate into the hands of mother church."

"She is like to be more reasonable than this crowd."

"So you would think, had you never had such dealings with them."

"You have had such dealings, then. And you would rather fight Sir Eustace?"

"Neither choice likes me, and it's a stupid hare that has only one hole. I thank you for trying to aid me, but, by your leave, my Lord Justice, it is you who owes thanks to me, for I have solved your problem, and mine own."

He waited for me to go on.

"To wit: a man has been murdered; you have caught a likely malefactor; you know him to be innocent, but he has claimed sanctuary, thereby, as you so implied, confirming suspicions of his guilt. So you can release an apparently guilty man in a town that wants him hanged, or you can hang an apparently guilty man you know to be innocent. Hardly justice."

"Hardly so."

"But, if the innocent malefactor will take his oath of abjuration and sail away, he takes all the ambiguities of justice with him, and you will be left with, apparently, a crime

solved, a criminal exiled, and satisfaction for town and crown. A success, my lord. A feather in your new cap. But indeed you need not thank me more—these cheeses are thanks enough.”

“You would forswear England?”

“It was my intent to leave before I happened upon that unfortunate knight. At least now I won’t have to seek passage, since it will be provided.”

“You think it better in France?”

“France is nothing to me. I go to France because that’s where Hawkwood is.”

His eyes narrowed. “You want to join a band of pillagers?”

“Pillagers, soldiers,” I said with heat. “Hawkwood doesn’t cloak his looting and murder in Jesu’s robes and claim divine justice.”

He leaned forward. “You’ve been to France. You’ve seen war.”

He surprised me by seeing that. “I was my father’s squire,” I said, though I was more groom than squire at age twelve.

“A knight’s son. How came you to this end?”

He wanted me to tell him about my father, the land-poor knight whom I could never please, about his serjeant, the archer, who had cut down the French aristocracy at Poitiers and Crécy and who taught me how to use the longbow and why to respect it. He wanted to know who my mother was and how she fought my father and took lovers, so the cook said, to spite him. He wanted to know how my father sacrificed us for his faith after his vision, taking the cowl and giving all that he had to mother church,

including me. He wanted to hear of how earnestly I took to my training, straining to out-Augustine Augustine. He wanted to know how I failed. This and more I could have told him.

“My father had a vision,” I said, “and here I am.”

He came from a different direction. “Whom did your father serve in France?”

I raised my eyes to him. “We were with Edward, the Black Prince. Among other places, at Limoges.”

His eyes widened and he sat up. “Were you, by God?”

So he knew Limoges.

“And you enjoyed Limoges so much that you want to join Hawkwood? The son of a knight, trained with lance and sword and, apparently, with bow. Without at least these skills what *condotierri* would have you? And yet, young and strong and not unskilled, you will not face an old knight who wrongly accuses you? Do you not believe that God has a stroke in every battle?”

I snorted. “If He did, why would we need the law? We could throw dice for justice, and God would give the match to the righteous.”

He stood. “You’re neither fool nor child, but you sound young. My advice to you is to work with me in untying this knot. Think on it. I’ll return. I do not think you will rejoice in forswearing England for Hawkwood.”

I called to him down the aisle. “At least Hawkwood is honest about what he does.”

The justice turned at the church door. “So it’s honesty you prize. If

you do leave England, then don't stop in France. Hawkwood is in Italy. Florence, I hear. Perhaps Rome, if he is alive still. His band of pillagers has not been called the White Company for some years. They hired themselves out to the pope. They call themselves the Holy Company. Honestly, I assume."

Behind him he shut the church door, which echoed for a time like distant thunder.

I am not one who puts much stock in dreams or visions, not like my father the knight, but that night I dreamt again of Limoges, of mother and babe skewered on one spear, of a headless corpse running three spouting steps, of a lad the age of my younger brother then, sitting on the ground staring at his guts spilling into the dirt from his open belly. I dreamt of Hawkwood and his men, tonsured and sword-girt, on snow-white horses, in snow-white tunics with blood-red crosses. I dreamt I rode to join them and they cut me to pieces, at which point, in the dead of night, I woke with a cry.

The Holy Company.

I knew I would not go to France.

I hated the justice then for throwing my plans into confusion. The idea of France had driven me down the length of England, and now I was afraid that neither France nor Italy held any more promise for me than did the local law. So that particular rabbit hole sealed itself closed.

But I'd be damned for a dunce to stay and fight a mad knight in single combat. I decided it were best to

make my way out of town. The moon was down, the guard likely sleeping. I wrapped the last of the cheeses in my shirt and eased into the churchyard. Let them look for me in Wales.

I was caught, of course, caught, beaten, and dragged to the gaol in irons.

"We caught him trying to escape, my lord," said Tallguard with pride when the justice arrived.

"You are mistaken, constable. He was on his way to see me. He is under my warrant and free of sanctuary. He has agreed to meet Sir Eustace in trial by battle. Haven't you, Adam of Cranefield?"

I raised my head and squinted from my one unswollen eye. "Aye, good my lord. That's just what I've been trying to tell them."

On the third day after, when I was somewhat mended, the justice took me to see Sir Eustace. He rode, I walked, Tallguard riding armed behind.

"To what end, my lord, do we call upon Sir Useless?"

The justice said nothing.

"Perhaps we go buy him off?"

The justice reined up slowly and looked down at me. He turned to Tallguard. "Draw you off a way, Master Constable. I must needs speak to the prisoner alone."

Tallguard hesitated.

"Stay armed, stay alert," said the justice, "but stand by to that oak. If he attacks me, you may ride him down and slay him."

Tallguard rode off. The justice turned back to me and said we would visit Sir Eustace to discom-

fit him. He believed that Sir Eustace had spoken in haste and anger when he made his accusation and his challenge and that he might welcome a satisfactory way out. He also thought that it was easier for Sir Eustace to blame for the murder a wandering stranger, a peasant, than it would be to blame the son of a knight who had been in service to the Black Prince. "It will complicate Sir Eustace's understanding of what he has done and will make his position less tenable. And so I hope to lead him to withdraw not only the challenge but the charges."

It seemed to me to be an over-subtle play, but then my chess tended to the slash-and-burn school.

"Anything you can do to ingratiate yourself," he added, "will benefit your cause."

"Would it not have been more expedient simply to encourage me to France?"

The justice made a show of considering this. "Yes," he said finally. He turned and called the constable, and we were on our way again.

In the lawn below Sir Eustace's manor we saw a score of workers, carpenters and groundsmen and smiths, overhauling a practice tilt-yard. They were even constructing a short length of viewing stands.

The justice grunted. "This may be more difficult than I thought."

Sir Eustace received us discourteously until the justice said he had some news which he knew Sir Eustace would be glad of. "Young Adam here is no peasant. He is the son of a knight, and he himself was his father's squire in France. With

Prince Edward, God rest his soul. At Limoges."

Sir Eustace lost his tongue. Finally he asked my father's name. "Sir Ralph Medlar, Sir Eustace. We were of a small holding in York, near to Middleham."

"I knew your father not, I fear," Sir Eustace said. "But then the company was large. You were with Edward, you say, and at Limoges?"

"Aye, milord. And after, and before."

"As was I," he said. "Sir, you are welcome."

He then called for his servants to take me away, to draw me a bath, to dress my wounds, and to find me proper and clean attire. I caught the justice's eye as they led me away. He had expected something like this.

I took my time in the bath, remembering France. It was possible I had seen Sir Eustace there, but I could not swear to it, and all my memories, and all my nightmares, were those of a skinny boy desperate for a glory he never found, swept up by events he didn't understand.

The justice, though—he was moving events somehow, or people if not events. He played a slow and curious game, and while I wished him well, I felt as much a pawn here as I was across the channel. It liked me not.

The clothes the servants brought were simple and plain, but I had not had a tunic of so fine a weave in more than ten years. I liked the feel of it.

Below, the table was spread with food and drink, a feast. Sir Eustace

bade me to take my nourishment "from this poor fare." I tried not to pile my food too high, nor gulp the ale.

Sir Eustace was as warm now as he had been cold before. He was full of praise for Prince Edward and thought his untimely death the worst catastrophe to befall England in his lifetime, the Pest included. He had been with the prince from the first, a young knight at Crécy, then at Poitiers, "where the French elite broke like waves on the solid stone of the English army and the king of France himself was captured and brought to England in triumph. We were a different kingdom, then," he said, his fist clenching, "and Prince Edward was the sum and substance of it all. Chivalry and nobility incarnate. One only had to look at him astride his war-horse in his black armor to understand what English knighthood was."

I too remembered Prince Edward, but supine on his litter, swollen and splenetic before Limoges, pale and green after those long months of siege when disease was as bad in our ranks as in the city; Edward, felled by some disorder, croaking orders to put the people to the sword and the city to the torch, turning aside pleas and counsel for mercy. Limoges had not surrendered soon enough. Limoges had made him waste time at its gates. Limoges had to pay.

"Limoges was his last victory," Sir Eustace said. "Werc he but king now . . ."

Limoges had broken my family and my future. I held my peace,

eating slowly and listening to his war stories, more tales of Poitiers, his days of glory. I had heard tales of Poitiers before from my father, who sounded much like Sir Eustace, and from my bowmaster, my father's sergeant-at-arms, who told me even when he put the short bow in my hands at six, that the long-bow had brought down the French at Crécy and Poitiers, and that he would sooner face an armed knight in an archer's leather cap and jerkin with a stout longbow in his hand than to ride the greatest destrier in the finest armor with the sharpest lance and the stoutest shield. "Armor's done for," he would tell me, "and them that wears it will be the last to see it."

After the meal, as Sir Eustace led us through his manor, the justice was circling Sir Eustace's defenses, probing for a way to get him to withdraw the charges, or at least to back away from trial by combat.

"I will have to put the case to the king, Sir Eustace, since it involves not only you, a respected knight of the realm, but another who is noble-born. And all I shall be able to offer is that you challenged Adam of Cranefield because you believed that justice might go astray since we have no witnesses to the actual event. You felt that by putting yourself at hazard, you would be insuring that right prevailed and justice was served."

Sir Eustace cleared his throat. "Indeed," he said slowly, "you put the case well, save that you say this is 'all' you have to offer. Surely this is enough."

"So it would have been earlier, I believe, Sir Eustace. But now that we know Adam to be noble-born, a squire, the son of a knight who fought with your great captain, his protestation of innocence, I'm sure you would agree, carries more weight and must be more considered. And since preparations seem stirring to mount a mighty blow against the Scots, I fear that neither the king nor my Lord Buckingham will be inclined to sanction a judicial trial when the basis is so tenuous and the possible loss of one or two good men is so grave."

Sir Eustace was silent, rubbing his chin. "What you say does make some sense, Master Justice. I am inclined to agree that judicial battle is not so clear a course as once it was, and though I do give more weight to the word of a noble, I did catch him with red hands."

"True, Sir Eustace. But had you reached Sir Stanyarde before Adam, I have no doubt that he would have come upon you with red hands as you tried to help your fellow knight."

"Yes," Sir Useless said slowly. "Yes. He would have."

"Indeed, I believe the king would be grateful if you would withdraw your challenge in this case."

At this Sir Eustace stopped and turned. "You pretend to know the king, do you?"

The justice nodded humbly. "I have been so fortunate to know the king since his birth. I have provided some small services to his grandfather, his mother, and to His Majesty."

I stared at the justice not know-

ing whether to believe him or not. Edward III, Joan of Kent, and Richard II? Was this a feint? Or was there a blade moving in under the shield?

Sir Eustace was asking himself the same questions.

"Well, sirs," he said finally, "if it would please His Majesty, I would be willing, though reluctant, to withdraw my challenge and let the king's justice take its course."

Well played, Justice, I thought.

"Excellent," said the justice. "My sincerest thanks, Sir Eustace. I am sure His Majesty will be most grateful. Indeed, to ease your understandable and worthy reluctance, I am certain that Adam would again offer surety of his innocence."

Before Sir Eustace could respond, the justice turned to me. "Adam, son of Sir Ralph Medlar of Cranefield, I put it to you, on your oath as a squire noble-born, did you bring harm or injury by any means to Sir Stanyarde Fisher?"

"I swear to you, my Lord Justice, and to you, Sir Eustace, by my name and birth, and on my father, who served your great captain Prince Edward, God rest him, that I did no injury or harm whatsoever, by any means, to Sir Stanyarde Fisher, God rest him, too."

"There," said the justice. "And it strikes me, Sir Eustace, that given the new circumstances and this new oath, the king's justice might be better served if you could see fit to withdraw your charges altogether. I do fear that, with so little evidence, the charges will not stand in court."

"I thank you for that oath," said Sir Eustace to me, "but whether I believe you or no is no matter. I cannot withdraw what I saw. Whether it stands or falls in court is not my concern."

"Sir Eustace," began the justice, but Sir Eustace cut him off.

"I am bound, Master Justice. I have my duties as a knight and as a subject of His Majesty. From this I shall not be moved."

"Then," said the justice, turning to me, "he must have the law."

Damnation to you all, is what I thought. I wasn't sure what web of legal niceties, local politics, courtly intrigue, chivalric pomposity, and ignorance, arrogance, and fear had thus snared me, but it galled me to my core; it held me tight as did the stocks, no, tighter, and more dead-ly. The stocks held me fast with honest wood, and when Tallguard hammered my ribs with the butt of his pike, I knew who had done it and why, and how to avoid another blow in future. But here, but this . . .

"We shall then take our leave," said the justice, "and leave our thanks, Sir Eustace." He took my elbow.

Enough!

I snatched my elbow free.

"Hold!" I said. Both men stood as statues. "Sir Eustace, will you not withdraw your charge against me?"

His face burned. "Hold thy tongue, thou varlet! Thou speakest to thy better."

"Then I defy thee," I said, "and I thee deny, and thy charges, and I will prove on thy body and on mine own that thou art a liar and a mis-

creant, and may God grant the right."

"I wish you had not done that," said the justice.

"So, it would have been more expedient for me to let my betters take me where they would?"

He grimaced. "Neither of us seems attached to the expedient. We may live to regret that."

"A long life to us both, then. And my thanks, my lord, for standing between me and the wrath of Sir Useless."

For indeed, when I challenged him, the old knight came at me grasping for a blade and would have torn my throat with his teeth had not the justice placed me behind him. To Sir Useless's outrage that I dare challenge him, the justice pointed out that I was the accused, was noble-born, and was trained in arms. Where was the objection? I refrained from noting to Sir Useless that he, a few days ago, was willing to challenge a peasant.

I did say, "What choice have I, Sir Eustace, if you will not withdraw your charges? I assure you that you are mistaken in those charges, but I know too that you believe them, as do others. And yet I know my innocence, and so I ask you this: On which court should I depend to reveal the truth, the court of man or the court of God?"

Sir Useless had no rejoinder.

"Good," said the justice, seizing the moment, "we are agreed. Before we further in this pace, I still must needs go to London to seek approval from the court. That

granted, we shall attend the details in this matter. Are we agreed?"

We were, and we left Useless stiff and sputtering.

I told the justice that I did not know the king's leave was needed in such a dispute.

"In this case, I had rather ask permission than forgiveness. Richard does not like surprises."

"But he will give his leave, will he not?"

"Since there are no witnesses, the case is doubtful, and therefore appropriate. The combatants are noble-born. It will be allowed. King Richard could require the trial be moved to court, where he would officiate, but other matters are now more pressing. Tomorrow I'll be off, but first I must dispose somehow of you."

I managed to dispose of myself, though exactly in the way that he intended.

In order to Defend the Right, I needed four things—arms, practice, food, and rest. For the arms, the justice got the keys to the town armory and dismissed Tallguard, thanking him for his service already performed that day.

"You're not like to find fine armor or weaponry," said the justice, raising the lantern as he led the way into the dimness, "but it will be serviceable. Count on Sir Eustace to shine in imported stuff." He moved ahead, poking at a helmet, rubbing the rust on a sword between finger and thumb, and I followed thinking "third time pays all." I had tried to escape twice, had failed twice, and here Dame Fortuna had once more spun her wheel

and smiled. Fighting Sir Eustace was better than facing a jury of locals who missed Sir Moneybags, but leaving Haresbury was still best of all. I slipped a dagger into my belt at my back. I slid a dirk into my boot.

"Here," said the justice, handing me a breastplate. "See how this likes you." I shrugged my arms through the shoulder straps and cinched it tight. It liked me well. It was time. I would not hurt the justice, for all that he had been kinder than I deserved, but I had at least to disable him long enough for me to get away.

He led on, the lantern lifted before him. I wrapped my fingers about the hilt of a sword long and solid.

To this day I do not know what happened. What I know is that I was suddenly on my back on the dirt floor, my sword arm pinned underfoot, the tip of a sword at my throat and its hilt in the hand of the justice, who leaned over me, all his plump grocer weight ready to pin my neck to the earth.

"These are dangerous times," he said in a voice as cold as ever I heard. "Do not make me choose between justice and my own future. I have survived the Pest, the French wars, intrigue at court; I have been a soldier, a diplomat, a royal spy; I knew the Black Prince; I know John Hawkwood; and I am friend to John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, King of Castile, uncle to the king, and leading magnate in all of England. If you run and I wish to find you, where think you to hide? If you threaten my future, how long to live?"

Later I realized that he knew I would try to escape, that he encouraged it by dismissing Tallguard and by keeping his back to me, playing the grocer. How he knew just when and how to strike, I know not.

"Constable," he called, and Tallguard was there instantly. "He has a blade or two more about him, I think."

The sword point did not move as Tallguard knelt down and found my dagger and my dirk. "Anything else?" he growled.

"No, I swear."

He leaned across me and took the sword from my hand.

The justice removed his foot from my wrist and took a step back, sword ready. "Constable, I am to London tomorrow, and this man will be in your keeping. How you keep him I leave to your discretion, save only that no harm may come to him unless he tries again to escape. You may deal with that as you will, and you may keep what watch you deem appropriate. Keep him chained to the wall if need be. Let him out to piss and to practice, unshackle a hand when he eats. I rely on your good judgment."

"Aye, milord," said Tallguard, a smile glinting in his eye. "Thank you, milord."

"You. On your feet."

I stood with what small dignity I could muster.

"I want your oath," the justice said, "that you will not try to escape again."

I did not know what to say. "My lord," I managed, "you would accept my oath?"

"It is your oath, is it not? Will you give it?"

"Aye, my lord."

"Then do so."

I swore that I would not try to escape again.

"Now take this man's hand and affirm that oath."

I extended my hand. Slowly Tallguard took it. "I swear to you, Constable, I will not try to escape your custody again."

He did not look convinced. I could not blame him.

"Good," said the justice. "Now let us get these arms to the gaol."

Thus it came that I sat in a cell with armor, sword, and buckler around me, a prisoner armed to the teeth.

The morning that the justice left, Tallguard stood for a time watching me arrange and handle my equipage, which, in what light fought through the narrow windows, looked considerably worse than it had in lantern light, but in truth, I was not concerned. I did not intend to depend on these arms.

"So," said Tallguard finally. "So. You will fight Sir Eustace in judicial combat."

I took this as a question and explained once more that I had no choice, the town had judged me guilty, and I could understand since I was found with the dead man's blood and blade, but I was, truly, innocent of this misdeed.

"Well, then," he said after my speech, "innocent or no, you won't last long without you practice someplace."

He put me on my oath again, but he had Fatguard stand with a

cocked crossbow just in case, and we set up a practice yard behind the gaol. In true daylight the arms looked bad indeed.

"These'll do for practice," said Tallguard. "They're not like to hurt us, anyway."

So we spent the next little while wanging away at each other with sword and buckler. They both grew heavy quickly.

The ringing swords and thumping shields attracted the curious from the square, many of whom wandered off when they realized that we were not going to let blood on purpose.

I did not see him come in, but one of the curious was Sir Eustace. I turned to retrieve the sword that Tallguard had knocked from my grip and there he was, leaning his long face down from his horse as always, studying me, and likely feeling much at ease about the upcoming duel, given what he had seen of my practice. I gave him a respectful nod and bent for my sword. When I stood, he had turned his palfrey back to the square.

I grew to respect Tallguard that morning. I was winded early, and sweat-drenched, while he seemed only flushed with exercise. Mercifully, he called a break midmorning before I collapsed completely. I thanked him for his help. It seemed to surprise him.

My cell seemed wonderfully cool. I slept.

Tallguard roused me about noon. "Visitor," he said, and said no more, but stepped aside for Sir Eustace's steward. Sir Eustace, the steward said, would be pleased if I would al-

low him to offer the use of his practice yard for my training. I would be welcomed to choose my equipage from his personal armory and to avail myself of his sergeant-at-arms from the French campaigns, who was something of a sword-master.

The steward stood still, apparently awaiting my reply.

I looked to Tallguard. "Is he serious?"

"Sir Eustace is a hard man, if Steward Aldergast will pardon me saying," he said, "quick to anger, a fell foe and deadly, but a fair man withal, and good as his word."

"So, then—you would take the offer?"

"Aye, I would. And it would be old Hildeberd that would train you. None better."

Astonished though I was, I thanked the steward and asked when I should begin. He said midmorning on the morrow.

And so it was that midmorning next I was in the practice yard of Sir Eustace de Witte, down by the stables, being looked up and down by a thin whip of a man with a close grey beard and one eye half-closed from a battle scar, so that he was forever winking at me.

"Take up that longsword," he said, pointing, "and let's see your guards."

It had been more than ten years since I stopped regular sword work, but the positions came back quickly, almost as quickly as my breath failed, for I was, in truth, still healing and my ribs did ache.

Old Hildeberd shook his head at

me as I leaned on my sword and tried to breathe. "He's been living soft," he said to Tallguard. I had no voice to protest or defend myself.

"Again," barked Hildeberd, and I stood ready for him to call the guarding positions. "Ox. Plow. Fool. Roof."

We worked until noon and Tallguard took me back to gaol, where I collapsed gratefully on my thin pallet and snored the day gone until vespers.

"Get your stuff," Tallguard said when he nudged me awake, "and come with me. We're changing your habitation." I expected something worse than the gaol, but he led me to the Coney's Tail, the best inn in town, where Steward Aldergast waited for us with thin lips. He said that Sir Eustace felt that I needed a decent place to sleep, and to sleep undisturbed, and he had therefore procured a small room for me that I need not share with other guests. I was also to partake of the inn's fare so long as it was satisfactory. It had all been paid for.

Fortune was being far too good. I knew not to trust her.

"Steward Aldergast," I said, "your pardon, but I am overwhelmed by Sir Eustace's generosity. If I may ask, sir, why is it that he is doing this for me?"

"His Worship is not in the habit of confiding such thoughts to me," the steward said with faintly disguised disdain, "but if you want my opinion, I would say that he wants you well-fed, well-rested, and well-practiced so that you may claim no excuses for your losing."

That was reasoning I could understand.

So my practice continued, and most was deeply familiar—lancing the quintain, hacking the pell, drilling positions of guard and attack, wearing thick padding and thwacking away with blunt swords which Hildeberd said "won't cut your arm off but will damn sure break your arm's bones." Two sessions a day, midforenoon, midafternoon, and a bone-weary night at the inn, too tired to enjoy the pleasures of the common room or my notoriety, custom at the Coney's Tail having increased because I boarded there.

But those training sessions were not important to me, though they were improving my wind and strength and skill. It was the early morning sessions I cared for, when a reluctant Tallguard accompanied me at first light to the town butts and I strung my bow to get my arm and my eye back. I had no intention of meeting Useless lance to lance or blade to blade. God's stroke in this battle would be my longbow and a cloth-yard arrow.

"A fine bow," said Tallguard one morning. "Might I give it a pull?"

I handed him the bow. He inspected it, hefted it for weight and balance, tested its strength. "Aye," he said, notching an arrow, drawing his bead, loosing cleanly, hitting the bull a full fifty yards away. "A fine bow."

"A fine bowman," I said, and I offered to stand him an ale that evening, "providing I can stay awake."

We became friendlier. He was impressed, I believe, that the son of a

knight would deign to use a long-bow. I did not tell him my intention. I said instead that the practice strengthened my arms and steadied my eye and my nerve.

"It does that," he said. "I get into a rhythm-like, sometimes, and the butt is as big as a barn, and I couldn't miss if I tried."

After that he brought his own bow every morning and we made a contest of it, and at night I'd stand him an ale or a bite, and once he even took me to his home for that nice bit of soup made by his wife's own hands that he promised me in the mud what seemed like years before.

A week went by and we began to expect the justice. I kept up the practice, early at the butts, later at the manor. A town councilman or two complained that Tallguard was spending too much time watching me. "I've got my orders," he told them. "Until the justice tells me otherways, it is my bounden duty to keep this prisoner under my eye."

"Prisoner?" one of them spluttered, looking at me. "A finer fed and better dressed murderer, at greater liberty, I did never see."

Tallguard shook his head and held up his hand. "Speak to the justice, sirs, that's all I can tell ye."

By ourselves, I told him he could manacle my wrists if it would make things easier for him.

"They'll only complain that you've got no leg irons," Tallguard said. "My job would be fine save for the politicos."

The second week stretched toward its end. The soreness was leaving my muscles at last, and I

wrapped my ribs tight before practice, archery or otherwise, and that did take strain off them. I was adequate with the long sword, nearly so with sword and buckler. The quintain still stung me half the time and my legs didn't seem long enough to clamp the destrier that Sir Eustace provided, truly a fine beast and a strong, almost as good as the one Sir Eustace himself would ride. I could not fault the way I was being treated, or, to be honest, the way Sir Eustace was treating me, if I overlooked that he wanted me hanged or dead by his own hand. He often watched the practice, at first from a distance, day by day easing closer until he now and again gave me advice, which Hildeberd tolerated. Once Sir Eustace even took the sword from Hildeberd and we took a few passes at each other, Sir Eustace shouting, "Elbow in, elbow in," then, "Good" when he returned Hildeberd's sword. "Excellent progress." He left, and Hildeberd and I stared at each other, but in silence.

Why did he treat me so? I thought at first he wanted to wear me down or injure me in practice and make his victory easier, or even have me accidentally killed in heat of swordplay. But I received no harm. Then what the steward said made sense, that he wanted to make sure that his victory was not tainted by fighting an untrained opponent. Then I heard that he lost two sons and two wives in childbirth, and had no more of marriage or sons, but why would a man train his son and try to kill him? In truth, I had a better chance now to best

him than I ever had, and that chance improved every day. I could not fathom it.

I wondered how my father and he would have fared. Sir Eustace was wealthier and more powerful and more learned and more sure of himself. His was a prosperous and well-run manor, from the look of it, and I wondered if my father would have heeded his vision if his days had not been so hardscrabble and if the life he renounced had been that of Sir Eustace. We might be on our manor still, vision or no.

But never would he have fought a judicial duel on a question so slender as this. He would, instead, have admitted to doubt—doubting his eyes, his conclusions, things being, as they always were, so foggy. Not that things are less foggy now, all these years from Haresbury and Cranefield and trial by battle and even the Duke of Buckingham—the fog is everywhere, but I am better at guessing the shapes and I make a fair way feelingly, sometimes.

But in those days, waiting for the justice and trying to understand what was happening and how I had ended in a Kentish town being trained for combat by a man who wanted me dead, the fog seemed solid, so thick it was, and thick not only with the mystery of Sir Eustace. Where was the justice? Lost? Ambushed in the forest by the killers of Sir Moneybags?

Sir Eustace had asked, If not him, who? The question began to plague me. That I might die for a deed not mine no longer seemed justice for my other sins coming

home late to roost, nor the fickleness of Fortune. It was not just a deed not mine; it was someone else's deed. I leaned over my ale one evening so I could lower my voice to Tallguard. "Listen," I said, "about, you know, Sir Stanyarde and all—who do you think did it, really?"

His eyes narrowed and his forehead creased as he leaned towards me. "Why," he said slowly, as if confused, "I thought it was you."

I was fairly sure he spoke in jest.

When the justice finally did return, having found the king at Eltham, he said, rather than at Winchester, as he had thought, he was accompanied by—or, I should say, he was accompanying—Thomas of Woodstock, Earl of Gloucester, Duke of Buckingham, youngest son of Edward III, brother to the Black Prince, uncle to Richard II, and, more importantly for our small drama, the realm's expert on trial by battle, come to oversee in the stead of the king.

Sir Eustace was almost boyish in his joy. That Buckingham himself should come to officiate at Sir Eustace's judicial duel—at least that's how I imagined Sir Eustace considered it, his duel, his performance. But as Useless walked us around his grounds, I overheard Buckingham say something aside to the justice about being much relieved to be away from the fen and stench of court.

To me all that Buckingham had to say was that there would likely be a royal muster soon to raise an army against the Scots, and that if I survived my tête-à-tête with Sir

Eustace, I should come to London posthaste. But he asked me, too, if my father were still in the monastery near York, and since I had told no one where he was, I guessed that the justice and Buckingham had been doing a bit of research on my story. I told him I didn't know where my father was, which was a lie.

The trial was set Sunday next, three days hence, and rumor made its speedy way through Haresbury and likely beyond. Sir Eustace spent what time he was not fawning over the Duke in supervision of the final preparations, having posts erected to hold a canopy over the royal guest, having stones removed, mounds smoothed, depressions filled, turf laid over bare spots, and making the workers miserable. They were pleased when, on the Friday before the trial, Buckingham expressed an interest in local hunting and Sir Eustace got a party up and led them on a merry chase until nightfall.

Practice stopped, so I had leisure time I had not enjoyed since I was stocked. While Useless now considered me a member of the nobility, most townfolk still thought of me as one of them, even though they would have torn me limb by limb from sanctuary. Wherever Tallguard and I went, which was mostly to inns to rate various ales, people had something to say, everything from, "God be with ye," from the cute little tapster at the Coney's Tail to, "I hope he cuts your head off, ya bloody bastard," from John Butcher, the father still angry

about his son. Others offered advice or aid.

"I was in the wars with him," said one. "He comes on strong but wears down fast. Let him spend himself. Outlast him."

"I was in France with him," said another. "He's a slow start, so best you hit early, hard and fast."

"He knows an old witch in the hills," said an attractive matron with a likerous eye, "who'll put a curse on ye. Wear ye this to turn the curse back on her what cast it." She handed me a smelly garland to wear under my helm. I thanked her kindly.

"You'll be needing someone to help you arm," said Tallguard over the last ale of the evening. "I'd be pleased were it me."

"So would I, Walt," for that was his name, "and I thank you for it." We raised our cups to one another and drained them dry.

The next day, the last day before trial, was crammed with certain formalities which I need not go into here, so I will not waste good ink on how we appeared before Buckingham to hear the general rules of judicial combat detailed for us, nor how we were given leave to question and modify some of the rules for our particular trial, nor how we made agreement regarding weapons, in which our forward was that any weapon chosen would be acceptable so long as it were not enchanted or blessed or cursed or had any taint of the supernatural about it. Nor will I describe how we were not to have about us any charm, talisman, precious stone, token, image, icon, scroll, scrap of paper or

parchment, or other item of magic or blessing, nor object on which magic or blessing could be inscribed or made somehow to sit, nor that our weapons, persons, mounts, or gear were to be free of all potions, poultices, or poisons designed to give advantage to ourselves or disadvantage to our adversary; nor shall I describe the special Mass we later attended and special confessions we made, nor how we took our oaths on our positions before Buckingham, justice, and priest, nor how we arranged for our equipage to be stored and guarded in our pavilions until the morrow, nor the sparse Lenten fare prepared for supper, nor the ritual bath and cleansing we each had, nor the simple woolen shift we each dressed in, nor how it was suggested that we might spend the night with the plight of our souls in mind, nor how Sir Eustace offered me the use of his chapel, where he himself would spend the night in prayer and contemplation, nor how I thanked him but declined in favor of the church I knew so well from my time in sanctuary. No, all of this I now pass over and go straight to the event.

I took a pallet to the church and laid it out behind the altar so as not to distract those who came late to pray nor to attract those who would come at any time to gawk. It was not the plight of my soul I was as concerned with as making sure my body got the sleep it needed, and the church would likely give me more quiet that night than would the inn, and staying in the church also seemed a more satisfactory choice with the townfolk.

As I lay behind that altar hearing all the sounds a quiet church makes in the night, I saw in my mind's eye a—I will not say "vision"—a picture of Sir Eustace stretched facedown on the stone floor of his chapel before the altar, arms extended on his imaginary cross, praying feverishly as the cold ate through his thin wool and into his bones. This I saw each time I closed my eyes. I finally decided that I, perhaps, should offer up a prayer myself, for luck, at least.

In the morning, I rode with Tallguard to Sir Eustace's for Mass, confession, a formal dressing, and breaking fast. Then to our individual pavilions for arming, Hildeberd with Sir Eustace, Tallguard with me.

And now I had to reveal to Tallguard what I was certain he already knew. In the pavilion I turned from the gleaming polished steel of the knight's armor to the bundle wrapped beside it—the simple leather and unpolished steel of a mounted archer, and my bow and a quiver of arrows.

I looked at Tallguard. "I knew not how to tell you of this. If you object and cannot stay, I understand."

"It is no matter," he said. "I always thought this were your plan. Not up to me, in any case. It's you two have to fight. I figure God will sort you out right."

If that were meant to comfort, it didn't.

I carried also a short archer's sword at my side, and foot-long dirk with a triangular cross-sectioned blade. It could punch through armor in a pinch, but if it ever came to

that, I'd be already dead. Before he would let me leave the pavilion, Tallguard went over every inch of me.

"You're as ready as you'll be," he said.

Tallguard did not object to my choice of weapons, but at the next formality, when we were called in arms before Buckingham to state our names, make our claims, and take our oaths, there were indeed objections—not the stir in the crowd as I rode along the stands toward Buckingham and the justice, not from Sir Eustace nor the justice, nor the Duke, but from old Hildeberd, ranting from Useless's pavilion. "You bleeding frog-loving son of a mongrel bitch!" carried his voice above the flapping pennants and rustling canopy. "You whore-son whey-faced girly-man! You stinking excuse for a . . ."

"Silence that man," Buckingham thundered, and the next words were faint through a muffling hand, then words stopped.

Buckingham looked to Useless. "Sir Eustace?"

Soothly, I have to say that Sir Eustace did look splendid sitting tall in his shining armor, his helmet crooked under one arm, his other hand holding reins of green and gold leather studded with colored gems and stones. It was almost enough to make a person a believer in what Sir Eustace believed in.

"I apologize to you for my man, Your Grace, and to you, Master Justice, and to you, Squire Adam."

"Well said," Buckingham said, "and gracious. Now, Sir Eustace, have you objection to your adversary's arms?"

Sir Eustace did not look at me. "Nay, Your Grace. So they be not enchanted, they are in keeping with our accord."

"Then we shall proceed."

And more formalities, which in truth I don't remember, my belly felt so empty and my limbs so light and shaky. All I wanted at that moment was for everything to be done, whichever way it might fall.

At last we were sent to our ends of the field. I dismounted with my bow and quiver. I shook my arrows out and stuck them beside me into the turf. As I strung my bow I could see Sir Eustace, now helmeted, take his shield and lance from Hildeberd. I tested my bowstring, notched an arrow.

"Shouldn't you be up a bit?" Tallguard said, and I realized that had I been riding, Sir Eustace and I would have fought before the judges, but I had dismounted near my pavilion, and the battle, if battle there was, would take place here.

"Too late," said Tallguard as Sir Eustace put his horse into a walk.

And no matter, I hoped, for I did not intend to fight at all. I would drop Sir Eustace from his mount at thirty yards, at least, only wounded, I hoped, but wounded or dead, dropped in the dirt too far to skewer me with lance, cleave me with sword, or crush me with mace or hoof.

I was amazed at how slowly his horse moved.

Tallguard led my horse behind the pavilion.

The trick was not to release the arrow too soon—

Still the horse moved slowly, so it seemed me.

—Nor too late. Too soon and the arrow flies wide—

Faster now, but far still.

—Too late and even if it strikes true, a thousand pounds of horse and man could hurtle over you. Timing is—

Faster now.

—everything. I raise my bow—

Hurling now, hurtling slow.

I draw the arrow to my—

Still so far away.

—ear, I hold my pull—

Hurling still, why doesn't he—
hold my pull—

—come faster? How far is he, he's—

My arm is shaking, he's—

taking too long.

—taking too long and I can't hold the pull and—

I loose the arrow—

and it flies straight

and true and—

penetrates at thirty yards—

his shield!

A cry from the crowd and he's coming still, he's galloping right at me and those hooves, that lance —

I turn and run toward the pavilion, out of his path, but he shifts and turns his lance sidewise and scythes me down at the legs as he passes, and I'm on the ground seeing sky. Then I'm on my knees and Sir Eustace is turning his horse over and over my arrows, snapping them like straws, so I throw my bow from me and draw my short sword and he spurs his horse toward me and this time I run right in the path of the lance, and the hooves thunder down at me, down

at me, and I hurl myself left right in front of the hooves crashing and the lance swings to follow but is blocked by the horse and then he's past me and I'm on my feet again.

He reins in hard and turns his mount in a vicious spin and is at me again, hurling the lance aside and charging down, meaning to crush me with horse or mace, and I make myself stand, stand, and then I run at the horse screaming and waving my sword, and Sir Eustace pulls up and I grab the reins and the horse rears and lifts me off the ground and a hoof glances my ribs like a mountain and I'm back on the ground, the reins still in my left hand and with my sword arm I somehow backslash and then blood and blood and the great rush of breath from the horse's severed throat, and the horse's head smashes mine and we're both going down in gouts of blood spouting, and Sir Eustace is going down and we all crash to earth in the blood, and the horse voids in its dying thrashes and everything is pain and smells, blood smell and piss and dung and horse sweat and man sweat and churned earth and ears ringing, stunned.

I hear Sir Eustace yelling. "That was unknighly done!" His leg was pinned beneath the horse. "That was unknighly done!"

My sword is gone. I pull the dirk from my belt and crawl to Sir Eustace. "Yield!" I say.

"You are a peasant after all!"

"Yield!"

"I will not yield! I'll free myself and strike you down!"

I reversed my grip and pom-

meled his helmet hard twice, thrice. He fell back. "Yield!"

He said nothing. I sat on him and put my face to his visor. I could see his eyes open. I slid the point of the dirk into the visor. "Yield, damn you, or I'll punch your eye through the back of your skull!"

"I will not yield!"

Flies were already at the blood and dung.

I raised myself to my knees and looked to the stands. "My Lord Justice?"

They were all standing. I saw the justice lean toward Buckingham. Then turned toward me. "Does he yield?" the justice called.

I leaned back over Sir Eustace. "Yield!"

"You will have to kill me!"

I raised again. "My lords."

"He must yield," the justice yelled, "or die."

I leaned toward the visor. "Yield, Sir Eustace, please, yield."

Silence.

I raised myself over the dirk. I didn't have the strength to drive it home. I'd have to drop my body weight upon it. I was dizzy. I raised myself up.

But I couldn't bring myself to drop my weight onto the dirk.

"Kill me!" Sir Eustace snarled. "Kill me, damn you! You must kill me!"

And then I knew. If not me, who?

I leaned into his visor. "It was you killed him! You!"

"Aye!" he said. "It was!"

I was in a fury, a sudden flame of anger. "May God damn you body and soul to Hell," I yelled, raising my dirk high over his helm, "and

may He give me the strength to send you there!"

"Hold thy hand!" Buckingham shouted.

My dirk hovered.

"By God, sir, *hold!*"

The blade fell from my hand and I rolled off Sir Eustace onto the ground and tried to breathe.

I heard voices, many voices, but above them all, that of the justice. "Constable!" he ordered. "Arrest that man!"

It wasn't until the guards hauled me to my feet that I understood he meant me.

So there I was, after a night in the gaol, stocked outside the foregate of Haresbury again, only this time arm-and-head stocked to keep my hands away from stones and mud balls, and this time not for murder but for assault—once on that little Demon whose father thought I would eat him, and three times for assault on the justice himself. And I thought that leg-stocking was bad on my back.

I stayed there all of Monday. Tall-guard kept me well-watered and released me every couple of hours to stretch my muscles and unlock my joints, which I suspect he was not supposed to do. I spent Monday night again in gaol and Tuesday I was stocked again.

In the late forenoon, who should dismount before me but the justice, on his way back to wherever it was he came from. I twisted my head to better see him. "How long will I be stocked?"

"Until Sir Eustace asks for your forgiveness," he said.

"Till Doomsday, then."

"Within an hour, I should think. Before noon, in any case. He begins his penance today. A pilgrimage to Rome."

A pilgrimage to Rome? He had falsely accused me of murder, yet I was the one in the stocks and he was on his way to Rome? I began to shake my stocks in my anger, trying to make them fly to pieces. All I did was chafe my wrists and neck and make my head hurt. The justice waited until my fit had passed.

"He will walk, and he will be barefoot."

I twisted toward him. "From here to Rome?"

"And he is endowing the local convent and monastery and buying weekly Masses at both for Sir Stanyarde in perpetuity."

The story was familiar. "And when he returns, he will take the cowl."

The justice smiled. "Yes. Mind you, our local priest does not have the spine to impose such a penance, so Eustace will make his confession to the archbishop in Canterbury and have his penance confirmed. But all of this is self-imposed, and his first duty will be to kneel here before you and beg your forgiveness."

"So, I will be released if I forgive him."

"No," the justice said. "You'll be released whether you forgive him or no."

"I make no promises."

"That is almost always wise." He moved to his horse.

"He wanted me to kill him," I said.

The justice did not answer until he was mounted. "He sought absolution in judicial duel and failed. He sought absolution in death, but you denied him. This is what is left."

"You knew he was guilty, then."

"I came to suspect it. It seemed best to let the play play out."

"And who would forgive you had he killed me?"

"I believed you to be a survivor."

"You might have been wrong."

"There is always that possibility."

He turned his horse and started away.

"I make no promises," I shouted after him. He did not show that he heard.

We have talked about Sir Eustace across the years, wondered what goaded his anger so on that forest path—perhaps some last inanity from Stanyarde, or the cut of his fine courtier clothes, or the great golden spurs he won in the counting house instead of honest steel ones gained afield. Sir Eustace surely saw him as a man raised from the dust by politics and money, no noble born, no knight, and finally he did what a knight does best, what a knight has to do—he drew his sword, and he used it. And in doing he lost the honor central to his knighthood.

I understand more now than I did then the need some have for an ideal, a vision, an illusion even, a need as desperate as a drowning man's need for a tossed rope or a bit of wood to buoy him. An image of a prince in black armor astride his horse, the enemy falling like grain.

A vision of a child of Limoges carrying her head, talking, in her bloody hands.

When the justice was out of sight, Walt the tall guard appeared beside me.

"Thank God," I said. "My neck is killing me."

"Sorry, Adam, not yet. I have three more orders from the justice. Last it is that I'm to let you go, and before that I'm to give you a letter. Both after Sir Eustace leaves. First I'm supposed to tell you this." He straightened as if he were giving a speech. "When you think of Edward at Limoges, think too of Edward at Calais."

Edward at Calais. Edward III, not his son Edward, the Black Prince. Another long siege, another furious besieger, another order to put the populace to the sword. But Queen Philippa fell to her knees, begging that the people be spared, and Edward, moved to pity, said he would spare Calais if seven leading burghers would come to him, halters about their necks, to give their lives for the others. And they came. And Edward spared them, too.

And then Sir Eustace was kneeling before me, barefoot in his white penitential gown, shrunken and fiery-eyed like my father, and I see now a drowning man grasping holy orders as he had his chivalry, trading one illusion for another.

Tallguard released me after Sir Eustace had risen and started toward Rome and Canterbury, followed at a distance by his steward and a few other servants, his spiritual retainers, as I thought of

them. "You're free to go now, Adam," Walt said.

Aye, I thought. *But go where?*

"Oh," said Walt, "here's the letter."

I broke the seal and found an answer to that question:

I find myself in need of a scrivener. You, I believe, find yourself in need of a position since, unless I'm mistaken, you have reconsidered your Hawkwood ambitions and are not inclined to accept Buckingham's invitation to fight the Scots. I need someone to ride the justice circuit with me, to record evidence and proceedings, and to help me gather information. I also write poetry a bit, and have need of a reliable scrivener with me for copying, since I'll likely be leaving London for a time. If you are so inclined, meet me in London a week hence. I have rooms above Aldgate. Ask for Geoffrey Chaucer, Esquire.

The justice was right. I had no desire to seek Hawkwood or to fight the Scots, so I set out later that day on the same road as Sir Eustace, but mine forked toward London before I caught him. And in a London tavern, three nights later, the justice asked what I had said to Sir Eustace on that last day. I told him that I said both the best and the worst thing that both of us could hear.

I told him that I could hear Eustace coming before I could twist enough to see him as he shuffled toward me murmuring his mea culpa. Then he knelt before me, the sun on pink scalp beneath thin white hair, tears streaking dust already on his face, hands clasped toward me, and me nothing but a

pair of hands and a head sticking out of the stocks. A fine sight we must have made.

"Adam of Cranefield," he said with his eyes down, "I kneel before you contrite and repentant for the wrongs I have done you. For these my misdoings I am heartily sorry, and I beg your pardon for my offenses against you." His hands trembled.

"Sir Eustace," I said, and I waited until he raised his eyes to mine. "I will forgive you on one condition."

I thought I could see his face tighten.

"Anything. What would you have me do?"

"I would have you forgive me my offenses against you."

"So," I said to Chaucer the justice, "I gave him the burden of having to forgive, and I shouldered the burden of having to accept forgiveness."

Chaucer smiled and topped off my ale. "Well said, Adam," he said. "And gracious."

The Cat and Mouse Caper

Cynthia Lawrence

You'd have to convince me that cats have special powers. I'd rather believe in luck or coincidence. And yet I might have been robbed, even killed—without knowing why—if it hadn't been for a cat, a drag queen, and a bag of donuts. To begin with, there was Benita, my cat, and her love of sparkling things.

We'd moved just the week before, Benita and I, into this crumbling East Village brownstone, a Civil War relic. Generation after generation of immigrants began new lives in these cramped rooms. Followed by Bohemians and Beats, the persistently poor, or, like me, temporary escapees from middle-class life.

Well, I hadn't exactly escaped. I'd left home in haste, forced at last to pay attention to Harry's infidelities. I did miss our chic, renovated brownstone in Brooklyn Heights: inlaid parquet floors, stained glass windows, lovingly assembled furnishings. But all I took was one suitcase, Benita in her carrier, and a need to get away from family and friends. My upper lip was so stiff I could hardly talk, so I sent a picture postcard of the Statue of Liberty to my mother, telling her I was fine, but don't trust Harry, and I'll call soon. Then I found this furnished studio, cashing in a couple of old U.S. Treasury Savings Bonds that had been birthday gifts from Aunt Louise. They paid enough to cover rent, security, and a pet damage deposit.

Although, from the scabrous paint and blotchy plaster, I'd guess the apartment hadn't been decorated since Edna St. Vincent Millay came to the Village to burn a few candles at both ends.

Which leads me to the damage inflicted on the building by years of absentee landlords and heedless tenants. I like to think that the holes in the baseboards and walls of my studio were made by tame little city mice, who'd be easily intimidated by Benita. But some holes were big enough to be passageways for The Rat That Ate Manhattan. I tried not to dwell on this.

Some previous desperate tenant had plugged up many of these openings with steel wool. Obviously, rat teeth were stronger than steel. At least one barrier was so shredded, my curious cat could see into the hole.

The jewels were in one of these holes, a large opening under the pipe that led from the kitchen sink into the wall. Imagine the scene: I'm sitting at the kitchen table, reconciling my checkbook and worried, really

worried, about how low the balance has dipped. I hear a scratchy sound, look down, and there's Benita, using her paw to push around what seems to be a diamond tennis bracelet. This was not a Wal-Mart special. Each diamond was faceted, sending out fiery sparks as my precious kitty played.

"Benita," I gasped, "where did you find that?"

Eyes like green agates stared into mine, and I could tell she had no intention of sharing her new toy with her mistress.

"Listen, kitty," I said in my most reasonable tone, "fresh chicken livers for dinner if you cooperate."

She yawned and, holding down the diamond links with one tan-and-white paw, began to wash her whiskers with the other.

I hadn't a clue as to where Benita had found the bracelet, so all I could do was pretend to ignore her, and wait.

A couple of hours later, after she'd played and napped (one eye open and still clutching the bracelet), as I faked a snooze at the kitchen table, she made her move. Benita trotted over to the sink, crouched underneath, and swiftly stuck a paw into the hole under the pipe. She scrambled and scratched and then (be still my heart!) pulled out a long slim gold chain, about nineteen inches in length, studded with small diamonds. Just the thing for my basic black.

What next? A tiara? The Hope Diamond? I watched Benita drag the chain across the floor and pile it next to the tennis bracelet. Curiosity wasn't killing this cat. This cat was making a killing.

I made my move. Although my pet companion glared, I grabbed a long-handled wooden spoon, lay down flat under the kitchen sink, and poked into the hole. A rustle of paper, and I felt a bulky shape. With great care, I pulled it towards me until I could see a torn, grease-spotted white paper bag, with something glittery spilling from it. I maneuvered the wooden spoon behind the bag and pulled it forward. Out it came, tearing further as the paper caught on the steel wool guarding the hole. A small fortune in gems tumbled onto the kitchen floor before my astonished eyes. The bag, I now saw, was printed with the name **DELECTABLE HOT DONUTS**. No way this hot cache could be bought, complete with a cup of coffee, for under a buck.

There were twenty pieces of real jewelry in that bag, not counting Benita's treasures. I sat on the floor, legs crossed, and ran my hands through a tangle of necklaces and bracelets that gleamed with gold and platinum, diamonds and rubies; one ring was set with an emerald about the size of a Reese's peanut butter cup. It was all I could do to keep from cackling, like a grizzled old prospector driven mad by sun and heat. Treasure! Mine, all mine!

After a few minutes of gloating, sanity returned.

I'd noticed, among the items that fell from the bag, a slip of white paper: the receipt from the donut shop. Six assorted donuts purchased on

October 11, 1998. So the jewels had been stashed about three years ago. Why hadn't the owners come back?

They were dead.

They'd forgotten where they'd hid their treasure.

They'd joined the Amish and didn't wear jewelry.

They were in jail.

It seemed to me that the last was a real possibility. In fact, I had a dim memory of a jewel heist that had made headlines about three years ago. But I couldn't ignore the other thought: that the previous tenant was some dotty old recluse who'd lived and died without letting her family know that their inheritance was in the wall.

Both scenarios needed to be checked out. Quickly, I showered and dressed in jeans and a black sweatshirt. My hand shook slightly as I applied lipstick in front of the bathroom mirror and, although my face was pale, excitement had put spots of color on my cheeks. For the first time since I'd left Harry a week ago, I could look at myself without cringing. Although my short dark hair seemed to have picked up a few more strands of gray, I'd lost the dazed look of a deceived wife.

Stumbling onto a fortune certainly helped. Now, I knew the jewels weren't really mine, but I'd been feeling so deprived. The pangs of loss had begun the moment the tickets to Tahiti had arrived in the mail at our home office. Harry keeps a P.O. box for his industrial film company, but the mail that needs timely attention comes to the house. Ten years ago, when we were first married, Harry had appointed me general manager of his firm. Since then, I'd been his ready right hand when he was away scouting locations or filming.

For the past few months, he'd been staying away all night—sometimes two or three nights in a row—supposedly in Pennsylvania planning the sequel to his award-winning documentary, "Coal: Dead as the Dinosaurs?" I'd had my doubts: Was he really incommunicado in Pittsburgh? Was our marriage going the way of the dinosaurs?

Personalized Travel should have sent the tickets to the P.O. box, but someone had slipped up. That morning, I stared at the two plane tickets for next month, complete with an itinerary listing a Tahiti hotel and sightseeing for Mr. and Mrs. Harry F. McDermott.

Buff, blue-eyed Harry, with the golden-boy tan and a film director's ego. He'd told me he'd be in Mexico's Sonoran desert next month, incommunicado (again!), doing the advance work for a new film on borax mining. Not a trip for Mr. and Mrs., he'd said.

At that moment, I felt as if I'd been stung by a Sonoran scorpion. I'd snatched up the airline tickets, packed my suitcase with a few clothes and a couple of mementos, phoned around until I found a hotel in lower Manhattan that would accept Benita, took a taxi, and left. Next day, I rented my East Village studio.

Although, of course, Benita is just a cat with no special powers, I could

accept that her find was a good omen. After a week of sleeping late, surviving on black coffee and Chinese takeout, and drifting aimlessly around the tiny apartment, the treasure gave me a new sense of purpose.

My first step was checking out the previous tenant. I'd become friendly with my upstairs neighbor. She was a six-foot-tall drag queen who sang at a local club under her stage name of Glinda the Goody. She'd told me that she'd lived in her apartment for the past two years.

I couldn't bring myself to return the jewels to the mouse hole, so I put them, donut bag and all, into a brown paper bag. Benita hissed when I took away her bracelet and chain but, hey, we all suffer losses in this life.

Luckily, I like large handbags; the bag of jewels fit easily at the bottom. I hefted the purse handles onto my shoulder, ran up the stairs, and knocked on Glinda's door.

She was six feet of Scarlett, the Southern belle, today: long black curls, bouffant pink dress, and pink picture hat. Her face lit with pleasure when she saw me.

"C'mon in, honey," she drawled. "I'm just tryin' out this costume for my new act. D'you think pink does it for me?"

"Can't stay now, Glinda. I just need to ask you a question."

"Ask away."

"The tenant before me," I said breathlessly. "Did she die while she lived in that apartment?"

"What a morbid idea. No, sweet child, her son bought a condo in Fort Lauderdale and moved her down there. She sent me a lovely postcard with palm trees."

"Thanks so much," I said. "Talk to you later. And, yes, pink is definitely you."

It wasn't quite eleven A.M. when I left my apartment. Although I'd been too excited to eat breakfast, suddenly I was starved. Across the street was a coffee house that had a neighborhood clientele, and I headed for it.

At that off-hour, only one table was taken: a young couple in the sweats-and-jeans uniform, sipping double lattes. They idly looked me over, and I resisted the panicky urge to clutch my handbag.

After gulping down a cappuccino and a ham-and-cheese croissant, I took a bus uptown to the 42nd Street public library. What I wanted were the newspapers for October, 1998. These older periodicals were in Room 100, on microfilm. I squinted over the small print, scrolling until the story popped up. It had made front-page headlines on October 5: a smash-and-grab at a famous Fifth Avenue jewelry store. Done quickly by two culprits wearing ski masks. They'd shot a security guard, who survived; escaped before police could respond to the silent alarm.

There was a follow-up article on, yes, October 12. A man had attempted to pawn a diamond-and-platinum brooch at a shop on Tenth

Avenue. The pawnbroker had alerted the police, who found the man getting into a rented van driven by his female accomplice.

According to the newspaper, the couple claimed to have found the brooch in a gutter on Third Avenue, they couldn't remember where. They'd come from Chicago a week earlier and could give the police no local address. They were just visiting, they said, and had been sleeping in the van.

A picture accompanied the article: the couple, each handcuffed, being escorted into the police station. His face was half turned away, but she was frowning into the camera. He had cropped dark hair and flashed a tiny hoop in the ear I could see; her hair was long, straight, and almost the white of platinum. They were both young, lithe and attractive. They were also familiar. I stared at the faces in the photo. Where had I seen them? It was recently, I knew.

Oh, God! Bonnie and Clyde were the latte drinkers in the coffee house across from my apartment.

Did they know who I was? Not yet. They'd had a clear look at the old brownstone from the café window, and were probably still sizing up its occupants. We were six tenants in all, on three floors. With the possible exception of Glinda, who could be seen watering pots of geraniums on her windowsill, there was no way to identify who was in which apartment. And who was at home during the day. The mailbox was no clue: just discreetly lettered last names.

Even so, it was only a matter of time before they'd ring the doorbell of Apartment 2B and, hearing no answer, jimmy the unsubstantial lock and enter. Were they still packing guns?

It would have been prudent for me to simply walk away. After all, I had the jewels in my purse; I could afford new underwear. But what about Benita? I couldn't abandon her.

The couple, obviously, had never returned to the apartment after they were arrested. The bag of jewelry had stayed in its hiding place, gleaming unseen like the treasures in King Tut's tomb, until they could return.

What had happened to them in the years since their arrest? I hastily skimmed through the microfilm and finally found a few lines in a November newspaper. The robbery and assault charges had been dropped (no witness identification), and the case was still open. But they'd been charged with possession of stolen property: pawning the brooch. They'd become old news fast. No follow-up story that I could find. I could guess that they'd served time. Now they were back on the streets, ready to fence their loot and retire young.

Leaving the library, I was suddenly ravenous again (women and stress and food, it's the old story). I passed a Delectable Hot Donuts shop and, to celebrate my good fortune and possible demise, had a maple cruller, a raspberry jelly donut, and coffee. Two donut holes with sprin-

kles and a second cup of coffee later, I had a plan. I folded the empty donut bag, tucked it into my purse, and left in search of a pay phone. The first call was to the jewelry store on Fifth Avenue; the second was to Harry.

I didn't really want to talk to Harry, just his voice mail, and I was in luck. He'd be in mid-Manhattan today, picking out music tapes for a soundtrack, but he was conscientious about checking his messages every few hours.

"Harry," I said, subdued, a catch in my voice, "by now you've discovered that I have your tickets to Tahiti. I'm sorry that our marriage hasn't worked out; I don't know what I've done wrong, but obviously I've disappointed you.

"Harry, I don't want to be bitter, so you can have your tickets back, for you and your new friend. Oh, because I was so angry when I left, I took your Film Society award. Remember that awards dinner? How excited we both were when you won. In all good conscience, I can't keep that award, so it's on my kitchen table along with the tickets.

"Pick them up today, Harry. I'll tell my neighbor in Apartment 3B to buzz you in. The door to the apartment is unlocked, and I'm not coming back. I'll be in touch once I'm resettled. Let's just remember what we once had, and be glad."

I left him the address and apartment number. There were genuine tears in my eyes as I hung up the phone. I could almost talk myself into regrets. But this was no time for sentiment. My focus was to retrieve Benita, and escape without getting shot.

I hailed a taxi back to the Village. It was taking a chance, but I'd decided to walk boldly up the front stairs and into the building. Bonnie and Clyde (real names, Jennie and Homer, according to the newspapers) would still be watching from the café, but they'd seen me once and hadn't been suspicious. The problem would be getting out of my apartment with a suitcase and cat carrier.

Luckily, Glinda had introduced herself the day I moved in and shown me the laundry room, really a narrow passageway on the roof.

She'd been dressed that day in a blond wig, Dietrich-style pinstriped black suit, and a black fedora.

"It was probably built durink Prohibition," she informed me in a husky German accent, playing her unofficial role as historian and greeter for our building and its twin next door.

Both sets of tenants used the single washer and dryer. Access was from the third floor of either building, climbing a fire escape ladder that led to the roof (balancing laundry as best you could). Once on the roof, it was possible to cross to the other building through the passageway, and descend through their ladder.

I imagine the structure violated every NYC building code. But how handy for bootleggers escaping from the cops across the roof, gaining a

few more minutes to confound their pursuers. The twin building ended at the corner, with an aromatherapy boutique on the first floor. The shop had a side entrance, handy for deliveries and for customers who didn't want to be observed leaving. (Gin buyers in the twenties, pot smokers in the sixties, according to my guide.) I had a way out.

Benita had been perched on a windowsill, keeping track of the watchers in the café. How many hours had they been at it, Benita, Jenny, and Homer, each dreaming of lovely, lost sparkling things?

Myself, I stayed away from the windows, taking my suitcase from the closet and hurriedly packing. I crept up on Benita, grabbed her before she could leap away, and gently pushed her into the carrier. To my surprise, she didn't fuss; she simply sat alertly, eyes opened wide, following my movements.

I left Harry's tickets on the kitchen table, as promised. On top, neatly packed, was his achievement award, an engraved crystal obelisk. A look around the studio; it had been my safe haven for a week, but now it was time to move on.

The purse handles went on my shoulder. One hand held my suitcase, the other, Benita in her carrier. I struggled up the stairs to Glinda's apartment.

She was home; through the door I could hear her pretty good imitation of Billie Holiday singing "Lover Man." A knock on her door and she drew me inside.

"You look like a frightened child," she said, eyeing my suitcase and carrier. "Why are you moving out?"

Today she was wearing a cream colored silk blouse, taupe gabardine slacks, a scarf tying her real brown hair into a ponytail. Six feet of classic chic. I told her everything that had happened since that morning: Benita and the diamond bracelet, the ex-cons in the café, Harry and the tickets to Tahiti.

"Well, let's get you out of here," said Glinda briskly. "I never really believed you could depend on the kindness of strangers."

She hoisted Benita's carrier in one hand, my suitcase in the other. Silently, we climbed the fire escape to the roof, went through the passageway, and descended the ladder in the other building. Down from the third floor to the hall entrance of the aromatherapy shop on the street floor.

"I'll leave you here," said Glinda the Goody, not even breathing hard as she put down my suitcase. "We'd be too conspicuous going into the store together. I'm so much taller than you," she said with a gentle smile. "Just walk through the shop to the street entrance on the other side."

Glinda was still holding Benita in her carrier. For a week, these two had offered me unconditional solace and support. Friends, I thought. They make up for a whole horrid mess of disappointments. I kissed Glin-

da on her closely shaven cheek, took Benita, and slipped into the shop and out the side door.

A taxi took us back to the downtown hotel where they accepted pets. I checked in, left Benita with a can of Chicken in Gravy and a bowl of water, and hailed another taxi for my appointment uptown. The jewels felt heavier than ever at the bottom of my purse. God, I'd be glad to get rid of them!

I called Glinda from the hotel that night and got an eyewitness account of what she'd seen from her window. The story was in the newspapers next morning. There was some confusion about who struck first and why. What was fact was that an unknown man and woman had dashed from a café and tried to grab a donut bag from Harry F. McDermott, award-winning industrial filmmaker.

There'd been a struggle, and McDermott had hit the man over the head with the paper bag, which contained a small crystal sculpture in the shape of an obelisk. The crystal shattered and the bag ripped open. When the couple saw the broken pieces they turned and ran. McDermott could give no explanation for the attack.

I clipped the story and tucked it into my wallet. Since Harry had been identified in the article, there was a good chance that Jenny and Homer would track him down, still thinking he'd made off with their jewels. How frightening for Harry.

Not that I cared. The reward money from the jeweler's insurance company had covered the down payment on an airy condo in Santa Barbara. Spanish tile and only two blocks from the Pacific. I have a great job scouting locations along the California coast for a movie production company.

I'm going back to Manhattan for a visit, to make peace with my mother and catch the opening night of Glinda's new act.

There are no mice to speak of in Santa Barbara, but I bought Benita a rhinestone necklace of her very own, and she isn't bored with it yet. Do you think she knows the difference between rhinestones and diamonds? I have a sneaking suspicion that she does but, as she naps with the necklace on my kitchen's sun-warmed tiles, she's decided that glitter is glitter and, all things considered, that's good enough.

The Cruise

Jas. R. Petrin

I am not surprised when I emerge from the kitchen nook at the Westbrook Hotel and find Tommy Hightops waiting for me in the lobby, which is a grand name for that small room where there is a tiny front desk, a cigarette machine, a pay phone, and not much else. There he stands glancing fiercely about, and when he spots me, he legs it right for me.

"It's about your friend," he snaps, "Narvel Moist."

Now, I object to Narvel Moist being described as my friend, which he most certainly never was, the guy being shoved onto me by Hightops as a sort of job in the first place.

"We've got to talk," says Hightops, steering me into the bar.

And there follows a similar scene to that which occurred about a week and a half ago . . .

At that time I am at the bar playing whisky poker with Diesel Williams, giving him my personal philosophy about life and pretty much beating the pants off him, when Hightops appears at my elbow with an invitation for me from his boss.

For those who don't know it, Hightops is a sort of lieutenant to La-La Lloyd Laduc, who is pretty much an absolute force on these streets, and therefore an individ-

ual whose invitations cannot be ignored.

Hightops explains that La-La has bought himself a ship, and that I am to be included among the guests on the first sailing.

Though I discover it isn't really a ship, but more of a floating tavern, one of those long, lit-up vessels that ply the Red River, where you can have dinner and a dance, sip a cocktail or two, and watch the old mansions slide by on the treed banks.

Its first cruise is to be a celebration of the new venture, and La-La has asked practically his entire West End crowd along. Not that I count myself among these. He has a particular reason for asking me.

"There is a joe," explains Hightops, driving Diesel Williams away with a glare, "whom the boss wants you to keep an eye on."

"Why me?"

"Because La-La has noticed that you are good at keeping an eye on people."

I'm not sure if I should feel flattered or something else.

"This joe," Hightops continues, "is called Narvel Moist. He works for the federal government. He has spent days going over the books of the Lalapaloosa Club, the Llama Club, and every other business effort which he thinks La-La may have an interest in."

"For what reason?"

"He is an auditor."

Meaning, of course, a tax inspector.

"And what can I do about it?"

"About the audit, nothing. But you can stick close to him and see that nobody—accidentally or otherwise—tips him to further avenues of investigation." Hightops gives his shoulders an irritated hitch. "He found out about the boat somehow, which is embarrassing, since we never mentioned it. La-La has to say that it slipped his mind, after which he must invite the guy along on the cruise. This means some babysitting is required, what with the characters on board who might let slip some embarrassing comment."

"Such as?"

"Such as anything that could broaden the scope of his inquiries."

"And if he does run into such a character?"

"You will intervene, change the subject, steer him away."

So there is my job description.

"You understand," explains Hightops, "that La-La has nothing to hide. It is only that, should this guy find something, he is bound to wonder where the mazuma came from and will look to see if the proper taxes were paid. Which of course they were."

"Of course."

"It's just an annoyance that he would pry into that."

"Understood."

Hightops searches my face for a moment as if to measure how deep that understanding is, and then, apparently satisfied, moves to the door. "For this La-La gives you free

run of the ship and all the food you can eat. But no liquor. You must keep your mind clear. I'm to tell you there will be a little something coming your way afterwards if things turn out well."

"And if they don't?"

"Then there will be a little something else coming your way."

On this sinister note Hightops shoves the door open, leaving me barely time to holler after him: "How will I know this man?"

"He is a ratfaced little homunculus," replies Hightops with obvious distaste, "officious, dull, with a thin goatee and a bad suit."

Which is how it starts.

Although Hightops has not requested it, I make inquiries about this tax man. Know your enemy, and all that, though he is more La-La's enemy than mine. But in my experience, when you deal with La-La, you can never be too well prepared.

I call up Theo de Voge, who goes back with me so far that we can't remember the day we met. He has contacts clear across the country from a lifetime of selling bar supplies, and he promises to find out all he can about Narvel Moist. I then return to my game with Diesel Williams—losing badly now, as I cannot concentrate.

After an hour or so, Theo calls.

There is no one in town by that name, he tells me, but there is a character of similar description known to the denizens of Ottawa-Hull.

"He's a good-time Charlie, this individual, well known along the

strip. He is unmarried and lives alone. They call him Belly-Laugh Narvel, or Deep Pockets Narvel, and even Mister Tips on account of he's so generous to the cabbies and waitresses. His number-one interest is playing the horses."

"Are you telling me he's not a sad-sack?"

"Not at all."

This sounds nothing like my guy.

"Are you sure it's the same man? My guy is a gloomy Gus."

Theo clears his throat. "Listen to me. This Narvel Moist has a federal job. He is a little guy who wears a chin-sweeper, which is how you described him. And how many Narvel Moists can there be in the world?"

He's got me there. I am trying to imagine two Narvel Moists, and so caught up am I in this speculation that Diesel Williams takes me for another fiver.

I reach the dock early so as to be present from the first moment Narvel Moist arrives—I haven't forgotten La-La's threat. The *Lady La-La* is a fine-looking craft, long and sleek and close to the water, and after boarding her, I stand peering down from the rail as the passengers roll up in dribs and drabs.

They are some crew.

Mave Inglis, Ape Arms Getz, Fifty-two Wilbur, Honeyboy Watson—and that's for starters. There are the Papadopoulos brothers, alert and silent, and Mao Chao on his motorbike, Mao being employed at Donny Rumano's hotels, the Brookside and the Westbrook, but said to be earning his serious money doing

mysterious chores for La-La Lloyd. And Charley Athens arrives, and many others.

Charley joins me at the rail giving me a shoulder clap that practically lifts me over the side, saying, "I guess we are in La-La's good books, as I never think to see the day when I would receive a free cruise from him, free food and drink and I don't yet know what else." He lets out a boisterous ha-ha and, seeing my hands empty, adds, "Can I get you a beer?"

Generous with the free provisions.

It is interesting to see all these characters in one spot, so interesting that I almost do not notice a small guy skulking up the gangway wearing a wispy goatee, a dark frown, and a gray suit that looks as if he shoves it under his bed at night for lack of a clothes hanger.

Hightops was right. He is a most uninspiring individual. He looks as if his liver has been yanked out, trampled on, and shoved back into him upside down. He picks his feet up and sets them down like two small tombstones he is freighting around.

Belly-Laugh Narvel?

I sidle over to him.

"Nice evening."

He barely looks up.

"Is it?"

"Fine night for a cruise."

"I don't like cruises. It'll be dull, all that floating around."

A delightful sailing companion.

"I hope we don't sink," he adds with a distrustful glance at the painted ironwork.

"Well, this is not a lake," I remind

him, "so if we go down, we can swim to shore."

"I don't know how to swim. And it's getting cold."

He pulls his lapels together.

"We can go below."

"It'll be smoky down there."

I have known this guy five minutes, and already I want to hold his head under water.

But he's right. It is smoky below. There is scarcely one individual in the place who doesn't smoke like a hot clutch, and what with the crowding and the low ceiling, it is like a Bogart movie before the shots ring out.

It's a nautical-looking room, what can be seen of it through the haze, with mahogany trim and brass lanterns and a rug that is all ships and sailboats. At the bar Moist orders scotch—a straight shot which he gulps down immediately and a couple of doubles as a carry-out. For myself it's ginger ale, which is a drink I don't care for but one that can pass for a number of things.

"Secondhand smoke," complains Narvel, waving his hand before him as we find a seat, "it can kill you," and he lets out a wheeze as if he is already dying.

"I hear you like to play the horses," I remark conversationally.

I mean it as an innocent comment, but Narvel Moist takes it hard, bracing himself suddenly as if a cool breeze has just shot down his neck.

"How do you know that?"

"A little bird told me."

It is clear that I have upset him, for he gulps his whisky like a thirsty camel driver. Thankfully I

am saved from having to make further small talk with this bird—if saved is the right expression—by the arrival of Banjo-Eyes Bunce and Dino "The Dinosaur" Ackerman, two oldtimers with more years between them than a history lesson, and who hate each other so intensely they can't let a day go by without insulting each other. They've got Bill Entwhistle with them as a referee.

"We nearly missed the boat," complains Bill, "on account of these two artifacts swinging haymakers at each other in the parking lot. I had to deal with them most severely. I believe I've managed to convince them to conduct themselves like clergymen for the next few hours."

"I'll be a clergyman," growls Banjo-Eyes, his thick spectacles flashing nastily, "from the Middle Ages, and break that granddad's bones."

"And I'll do something to him," snaps The Dinosaur, "with hot poker and rusty fire tongs."

"Can it," says Bill, "we're moving."

And so we are, the boat edging out into the river with a scurry of crewmen and a rumble of diesels.

"I'm Entwhistle," says Bill, extending his hand across the table at Narvel.

"Moist," says Moist, with a limp clasp.

"You look like a rat," observes Banjo-Eyes Bunce.

As Moist sits there wondering what, if anything, he should make of this unprovoked attack, the overhead speakers crackle and the voice of Hightops issues forth.

"Thank you, one and all, for attending the maiden voyage of the *M. S. Lady La-La . . .*"

"What's the *M. S.* mean?" asks Bill.

"Knowing *La-La*, it means 'my ship,'" grumps The Dinosaur.

"I had a son-in-law who looked like you," Banjo-Eyes continues, still studying Narvel. "He got killed in a cellar."

"I am sorry to hear that," replies Narvel Moist, his wary expression conveying clearly that he isn't sorry one bit.

"How did it happen?" I put this in to keep the conversation rolling.

Banjo-Eyes gives it some thought. He pops his upper plate out of his mouth, inspects it as if the blame might be laid there, then deftly pops it back in. "It just happened. My point is he also looked like a rat."

"If rats were being killed it's a wonder you survived," The Dinosaur tells him, and Bill shoves in quick with, "Now, now, boys!"

Hightops is winding up his oration: ". . . so settle back and enjoy and be sure to tell your friends and relatives what a great time you had here tonight."

I am not sure it is wise to encourage the friends and relatives of this crowd, but who am I to say?

Several musicians have mounted the bandstand, and they suddenly break into a fanfare, introducing the entertainment, an Elvis impersonator. This is a chunky, satchel-shaped guy who looks as much like Elvis as One Lung Kroeker, but makes up for it with a four-inch pompadour and more sequins than

the Shrine circus. Without hesitation he launches "Heartbreak Hotel" at us in an eerie, penetrating voice.

"I never heard an Elvis impersonator sound like Hank Snow before," remarks Bill Entwistle, blinking his baggy eyes.

"I think he sounds like Rosemary Clooney," says Banjo-Eyes.

"His voice is a little thin."

"But *he* isn't," snarls The Dinosaur. "On his worst day Elvis never weighed that much."

With a start I suddenly realize that Narvel is no longer with us. Then I spot him making his way back from the bar with two more scotches clasped in his hands. If the guy continues to drink like this, I will have a very easy time of it. He'll be in no condition to understand a word that is said to him.

"I'm going on deck," says Narvel. "I hate it here."

"But you said you were cold."

"I'm warmer now."

I can believe it, the way he's guzzling the scotch.

On deck he slumps against the rail, setting one of his drinks down on it and trapping the other in his clammy fingers. He stares straight down between his wrists at the turbid water sluicing by.

"Your friend isn't very polite."

"You mean Banjo-Eyes? He isn't my friend. He isn't anyone's friend, so far as I am aware."

"He called me a rat."

"No, he said you looked like one."

"A man can't help what he looks like."

I feel I should suggest that this isn't entirely true. He can cut his

hair one way or another, gain weight or lose it, or wear a wispy, ratty looking beard and store his suit under his bed. A man does have options. Below decks, Elvis is belting out "Blue Suede Shoes" to hoots of derision.

"Do you know what life is like?" Narvel asks. "It is like musical chairs. When the music is playing, it's all fun and games. Then it stops, and you find that you're the odd man out."

He looks as if he is going to follow Elvis into the water.

He says, "You live your whole life, and when you're gone, no one cares."

"If you don't mind my saying so, you seem fairly depressed," I observe.

"Well maybe I have a good reason." He hesitates, then adds as if it is a thing he does not confide to just anyone, "I never married. I live alone. It isn't easy being a tax inspector."

"Is that what you are?" I am playing dumb. "Well then, I can see your problem. People are probably afraid to cosy up to you. They probably believe you will be auditing them before the day is out."

He nods sadly.

"And then there is the great burden of forever seeing the worst side of people. You must be something of an expert by now on all of the ways individuals can put the old scameroo on the tax department."

He glances suspiciously at me. "I need another drink."

Drawing my attention to the fact that both his glasses are miraculously empty.

At that moment a hand grips my shoulder. It's Jimmy Quicks with a message from the commodore. And who is the commodore when he's at home, I want to know, and he informs me it is La-La Lloyd, who has issued an edict that on board this vessel he is to be addressed by that title and no other. "I'm to stay and mind your chum," Jimmy adds under his breath.

"I need another drink," Narvel tells him.

The wheelhouse is a smallish compartment. La-La and Hightops are wedged into it with the captain, a stiff, worried-looking guy in gold braid who is staring gravely up the river as if it has been mined.

"What do you mean there's a snake loose on the boat?" La-La is demanding, his eyes like hard wedges of ice. "On *my* boat? How did it happen?"

"It's a snake," explains Hightops, "belonging to that dancer we hired, Taloola what's-her-name. She says it is a part of her act."

"I have enough snakes on board already!"

"This one is a python."

La-La emits a dry, creaking sound.

"A python? Are you serious? They swallow *cows*, for crying out loud! I want it found right away before we start disappearing one by one!"

"We're working on it, boss."

"Commodore! Call me commodore!"

"Right, chief."

And Hightops legs it from the room swiftly before anything more can be said on the subject.

"A snake on my boat," La-La rat-

bles, "that swallows cows if you can believe it." He suddenly detects my presence. "And what do *you* want?"

"You sent for me." To jog his memory, I add, "I'm watching the tax inspector."

"Oh yes. That little nerd person!" His voice is filled with malevolence. "I suppose he's grilling you about me—what kind of business I do, what interests I own, how much money I have salted away."

"Not so far. He just drinks and complains a lot."

"What about?"

"He doesn't like boats, for one thing. He tells me he can't swim."

"You don't say so." La-La's eyes narrow as some little cog rolls over. "Well, let him keep on complaining. Give him more to complain about if you have to. That's the first good news I've had since we left the dock. Pour another bottle into him and find out how his investigation is going. It would be nice if I could sleep like an innocent man to-night."

As if this could be possible.

I rejoin Narvel Moist to find a brouhaha breaking out. An unruly group led by Moe Fitz, Stoplight Jones, Teeth Loepke, and Ape Arms Getz, has laid hands on the unfortunate Elvis, bearing him on their shoulders up the companionway and onto the deck. A crowd of enthusiasts swarms after them: Boy Michael, Yelp Lauder, Too Kool De-Veaux, and numerous others.

"Elvis is now leaving the building," someone shouts.

"Elvis is now entering the water," someone else adds.

There is the old one, two, three—

toss! And Elvis, sequins glittering, a look of baffled terror on his face, clears the stern rail in a graceful arc and hits the water like an elephant seal.

I steer Narvel away, seeking more tranquil surroundings, saying lightly, as if it's a question I ask of everyone, "So how is the investigation going?"

He rolls a nervous eye at me.

"How did you know about that?"

I point out that, being connected with La-La, there is no reason why I shouldn't know about it, and after musing over my reply, he seems to accept it as reasonable logic.

"The investigation is winding up."

"And do you expect a favorable conclusion?"

We have reached the stern and he sits down on a capstan, or some such nautical item. For a little man he is amazing; in spite of the scotch he's ingested, he seems none the worse for it.

"No," he replies, "I do not."

Hard news. It won't help La-La sleep.

"What—ah—is the problem?"

The din of the merrymakers is less strident here, a muffled chant demanding the exotic dancer. Somewhere below us the diesels rumble.

Narvel holds his drink up to his face, peering into it.

"The problem will become evident when the file is sent on to Enforcement."

"It hasn't got there yet?"

"No."

"When will this happen?"

"In a day or two."

"With what result, do you think?"

Perhaps I've pushed too hard. But it's a critical point. I look past him at the river as if I have only a passing interest in his answer. It is a pleasant sight, the setting sun turning the muddy water the color of Lamb's amber rum.

"There will likely be jail time."

I wince.

"Ah, how much exactly?" This is surely something La-La will want to know.

"Oh, quite a lot, I suppose. The high end."

"The high end?"

"Way up there. Years and years. Now if you don't mind, I don't wish to discuss this further."

Spotting Jimmy Quicks lurking in the shadows, I give him the nod and beat it for the wheelhouse.

La-La and Hightops are having another exchange.

"That was Elvis, that splash," Hightops is explaining. "The passengers threw him overboard."

"Did they now?"

"Yes, sir."

"And did they enjoy it?"

"Apparently so."

"That's fine, then. He is an entertainer, isn't he? Now what about the snake?"

"We're still looking, chief. Taloola what's-her-name won't perform without it. She says it is a part of her costume."

La-La shudders. Then, suddenly spotting me, his eyes light up. "Good news, I hope?"

"Not exactly."

The light goes out.

I relate to him as clearly as possible everything Narvel Moist has

told me. He hears me out, staring hard at the river. He is not hollering or getting excited, but only grappling with some inner thought. I have an impression that under his dome a machinelike intellect is noiselessly turning.

"In a day or two, huh?"

"That's what he told me."

"The high end?"

"That's what he said."

He stands there thinking for another minute and then addresses me in a most polite tone of voice: "Please wait outside a moment. There is a private matter I must discuss. Captain, I'd like you to join him. You can let Hightops handle the boat."

So Hightops takes the helm, and while he and La-La have a personal confab, the captain and I cool our heels outside the door.

"Nice evening," I venture.

"Is it?"

I might as well be speaking to Narvel Moist.

We are not there two minutes before Hightops bursts from the wheelhouse and heads aft on the double, his ankle-high, snow-white gym shoes going *chirp-chirp* along the deck. The captain, a look of terror on his chiseled face, lunges for the wheel to deftly guide us between two towering concrete bridge abutments. Minutes later Hightops returns with Jimmy Quicks, informing La-La in a flat, dull voice, "It seems that Narvel Moist is no longer with us."

I am startled to hear this—more startled than La-La.

La-La tilts his head to one side. He raises his eyebrows. He does

not seem perturbed at the news. He steps from the wheelhouse and shuts the door as if to keep the captain from being distracted.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"He's disappeared. He is not on the boat."

Now, I don't know why I take the news so hard, as I don't care at all for Narvel Moist, but I feel at that moment as if I have let him down in some way.

"Well," says La-La to Jimmy Quicks in that confident manner of his, "you were watching him. What can you tell us?"

"I dunno, chief. It seems like a mystery."

La-La has a crocodile grin.

"Elaborate!"

"Well, boss, the last time I see the joe he is there at the rail sipping a double scotch and not looking too pumped. In fact he is looking like a flat tire. When Hightops appears and starts talking to him, I think it's okay for me to wander off for a minute to bum a cigarette. I am only gone a minute or two, but when I return, the guy is not standing there any more."

"You don't say."

"I ask Hightops where the joe is, and he says I'm the one who has to answer that because I'm the one who is supposed to be watching him."

"And where were *you*?" La-La asks Hightops.

"I wandered off also to bum a cigarette."

At this point I feel we ought to be turning the *Lady La-La* around and searching the river. But my advice is not sought.

"So he is gone and nobody knows why. Good. What do we *think* happened to him? Jimmy?"

"What I am thinking," speculates Jimmy, "is that maybe the snake got him."

La-La frowns in concentration, nodding his head.

"Yes, that sounds plausible. In fact it sounds quite likely . . ."

Seeing how this is developing, I cannot restrain myself.

"No, I don't think that is possible."

"You don't?" La-La is looking at me as if I have just questioned the law of gravity.

"No, sir, I don't. Apart from other reasons, even the largest snake would take quite some time—an hour maybe—to devour a meal like Narvel."

Irritated, La-La turns to Hightops. "What about that?"

Hightops scratches his head.

"Well, how about this? The snake didn't eat him, but it scared him. It scared him so much he jumped clear over the rail."

I have to shake my head. "That guy couldn't have jumped over the rail if it was lying flat on the deck. Anybody who knew him would know that."

La-La is getting really peeved now. There is a sheen on his polished brow. He jerks the wheelhouse door open, steps inside, and snarls back at Hightops.

"You figure out the details, then. You are the one who will have to answer to the authorities. Also, it's why I pay you the big bucks!"

And he slams the door on us.

Hightops is staring at the door

with a dumb, hurt look on his face when it springs open again and La-La's head pokes out:

"And I want it noted that I was here with the captain when this entire event took place."

Hightops indicates we are to say no more about it. He lets it be known that this is the official line. After a day or two, when the police come looking for Narvel Moist, who is reported missing by the hotel he is staying at, nobody on board the boat that night can remember anything about him. It's as if he was somewhere else that entire evening.

Theo calls. "I heard about your pal." He too speaks as if Narvel was my friend. "Too bad about him going missing like that."

"Did you learn anything more about him?"

"Yes, in fact I did. It turns out he was a real operator. A tax inspector with a great scam going. He had an arrangement whereby individuals made advance payments on their back taxes."

"Advance payments?"

"To him personally."

This is surprising.

"They actually did that?"

"Oh yes. They were more than happy to."

"But that's extortion."

"I don't know about that. What I do know is they were told that this would guarantee them a favorable recommendation. And people went for it. Your friend did well with this. He had a positive run. But at some point his department learned of it and began to investigate."

Something clicks gently into place.

If Narvel himself was being investigated, perhaps he thought, when I was questioning him, that I was asking into his own difficulties. He must have been entirely focused on them, which explained his negative attitude, his long face. And then there was the La-La factor. You might squeeze money from an errant businessman, but you would not jack one dime out of La-La. With La-La, Narvel Moist was out of his depth.

The next few days are a little stressed, what with the police stepping here and there and asking all sorts of questions. There is a certain tension building. It seems that sooner or later someone must break down and say something.

Then suddenly the cops are gone.

They vanish as if they have rushed to some crime scene far away. No more questioning, no more bully-ragging, no more "*Sir, tell me, please . . .*"

It is while the silence is still settling that Hightops appears at the Westbrook and drags me into a corner.

"The pressure is off," he tells me, as if I have not noticed. "I want you to put that word around."

I play dumb, not wishing to break his bubble.

"Concerning . . ."

"Your friend Narvel." Hightops is clearly having a difficult time suppressing his satisfaction.

"It seems the authorities have obtained a note which they somehow missed the first time, with a

dribble of something—maybe tears—across it.”

Or maybe scotch.

“A note from Narvel? What does it say?”

“Something to the tune of ‘Good-bye, cruel world—’”

“Now, listen—”

“I am only giving you the thrust of it. It says he cannot live with himself any longer, that he is sorry he cannot repay the money, which he meant to do when his horse came in, which unfortunately did not occur.”

It is a good thing I don’t play dumb this time, for Hightops knows that I have consulted Theo. He says so.

Embarrassed, I say, “Then his intentions were good.”

“Apparently so. But he jumped anyway.”

“Jumped?”

“Off the boat.”

“You’re sure he jumped, are you?”

“He must have.” Hightops’ eyes never leave my face, so alert is he to some prevarication. “His body washed up a couple of miles farther down the river.”

I close my eyes for a moment. Poor Narvel.

“Who found this note?”

“As a matter of fact, I did. And in the interests of good citizenship I made sure the police got hold of it right away.”

I’m thinking, so here is a guy who is the last person on earth to see Narvel Moist alive. He is also the guy who finds the man’s tear-stained suicide note. And he is the

guy whom La-La has said will have to provide all of the answers. He stands by the cigarette machine, his bright white gym shoes glowing eerily in the black light, reminding me of how those same shoes went chirping very purposefully over the deck that night.

“Here,” he says, handing me an envelope.

I squeeze it. It’s comfortably thick.

He says, “It is nothing, really, only that little something I mentioned previously.”

And with the business between us completed, he suddenly affects a smile and a breezy manner, remarking, “Well. Things worked out fine after all. But then, of course, with La-La they usually do.”

I can’t argue with that.

So I’m playing whisky poker with Diesel Williams, and pretty much beating the pants off him, and at the same time I’m relating to him the entire story, so far as I know it, about La-La and Narvel Moist. Especially Narvel.

“Life is like musical chairs,” I tell him. “One day the music stops and you’re the odd man out . . .”

“Turn that top card,” Diesel says.

“He was a lonely guy, I think . . .”

“Are you going to play or what?”

“Do you live alone?” I ask.

“Not on Fridays and Saturdays.”

“It must be a tough thing to live alone. To be really alone. You live your whole life, and when you’re gone, no one cares . . .”

“What I want to know,” says Diesel, “is what happened to the snake.”

Ante Bellum

E. B. Ruark

JANUARY, 1863
Captain Albert Benton D'Ossché stepped out of Mrs. Brownstein's establishment on lower Cary Street near the Richmond Gas Works and began walking toward the capitol. The laughter of the women quickly faded from his mind as a cold blast of January air rolled down the James. D'Ossché flipped the fur collar on his cape up to protect the back of his neck and pulled his slouch hat down harder on his head.

He walked with his head down, looking neither to the left nor to the right. He didn't like the way the gaslights competed with the full moon, and he didn't like the way the eerie orange glare penetrated only partially into the shadows, leaving a knife-edge break between the light and the dark.

D'Ossché worked his way up to Main Street, then turned right. The street climbing toward the Trinity Church was deserted. The cold, the hour, and the provost marshal's men had combined to strictly enforce the curfew. But D'Ossché wasn't worried. He had paid the provost marshal a heavy bribe in gold for the passport in his pocket.

As he neared the Exchange Bank, D'Ossché heard a subtle cough coming from the deep shadows of a particularly dark doorway. He stopped and let his right hand

rest on the flap of his holster, confident that his cape had hidden the move. A one-legged man wearing a tattered and filthy butternut gray uniform and low-brimmed slouch hat from which all insignias had been removed hobbled into the light. He supported himself on two crudely made crutches. "Have you got a match?" he asked in a weak and gravelly voice.

D'Ossché looked at the man's deplorable condition. How many men had he seen blown apart, first at Malvern Hill, then at the railroad cut outside of Manassas Junction or up in Maryland at Sharpsburg? There but for the grace of God, Albert thought, the rawness of his own wound still fresh in his mind. D'Ossché took his hand off the holster and reached into the cartridge box next to it. He had taken the wooden block out of the box and converted it into a miniature haversack. In it he carried a small daguerreotype of his wife, some coins, a folding knife, and a horn matchsafe. He removed the cylindrical container and extended it toward the battered soldier.

"Would you mind," the soldier asked, rocking unsteadily on his wooden supports. The long brim of the man's battered hat covered the upper portion of his face, but D'Ossché could see his mouth and the short stub of an old cigar.

D'Ossché struck a match against the wood of the doorway and cupped the flaring stick in the palm of his hands. He extended the light toward the wounded stranger. The man leaned forward, his hat covering D'Ossché's hands. Soon the eddy wind carried the acrid smell of old cigar up toward D'Ossché's face and he turned his head slightly to avoid the smoke. The wounded soldier straightened, and in the sulfurous glow of the matchlight, D'Ossché thought he recognized the man's eyes.

"Do I know you?" D'Ossché asked.

"Yes, you do," the man answered, leaning forward again to blow the match out. Only this time, when he straightened, he shoved a long bowie knife deep into D'Ossché's diaphragm and into the lower chambers of his heart.

Albert D'Ossché looked down at the hand and knife handle wedged to his chest. He opened his mouth to object but couldn't make himself speak. He raised his arms in protest, but only managed to weakly grasp his assailant's wrist. The one-legged man stabbed him twice more, and Albert D'Ossché's hands dropped to his side and his knees began to buckle. As his assailant helped him drop into a sitting position in the darkened doorway, Albert Benton D'Ossché looked into his killer's eyes, recognized them, and understood why he was dying.

2.

ONE MONTH LATER

It had not been a particularly good day. My horse, O'Malley, took

offense at being quartered at the Confederate Government Stables, despite the fact that my servant, Jeremiah, and his mule were with him. His mood at being cooped up with over 100 government mounts extended to the mule, who took it out on me by lashing a kick in my direction. The kick glanced off my bad leg, forcing me to limp more than usual. Then, to add the mint to my julep, the provost marshal's men did not want to release ten of Hood's Texans despite my protestations that they would be marching for Petersburg before the next sunrise. I was of half a mind to let the Texans get their own back when a courier caught up with me with orders to report immediately to General Longstreet at Secretary of War Seddon's office. It was the kind of order that impresses many, including provost marshal flunkies. The Texans were released.

Outside, Richmond was all abustle. Hood and Pickett's divisions were encamped on the south side of the James awaiting orders. The Texans were playing havoc with the provost marshal's curfew; General Pickett was distracted by his latest femme fatal, the beautiful Miss Sally, and Lieutenant General James Longstreet was closely closeted with the secretary of war.

The Federal IX Corps was on the move. Our spies and the northern papers had them heading for either Charleston, South Carolina; Wilmington, North Carolina; or southeastern Virginia. With the Federals already in possession of Suffolk and New Bern, any new troops in that theater would dan-

gerously threaten our vital supply lines from the south. By detaching General Longstreet and much of the First Corps, General Lee hoped to counter the Federal move.

I hobbled over to the secretary of war's office as quickly as my bad leg and the mud would allow. It had snowed and rained recently, turning the clay of Richmond's streets into molasses-like quagmires. By the time I reached my destination, I was mud-spattered and wished that Jeremiah were with me to give me a quick once over before entering. However . . . duty is duty, and as a battle-hardened veteran, what should I care for a little mud?

Fortunately, I was not the only one bespattered. The entire anteroom to Seddon's office was filled with all manner of businessmen, influence peddlers, lobbyists, dubious hangers-on, and an assortment of staff officers. Paradoxically, amid all the hubbub, seated in a corner as if she had the whole world to herself, was a plain-looking young woman with a big nose. She was dressed in widow's black and accompanied by an old Negro woman. The old mammy rested a thin, gnarled hand gently on the young woman's shoulder.

When called, I presented my orders to the secretary's aide and was immediately shown into the inner sanctum. And what a sanctum it was. The gaunt and emaciated secretary of war was seated behind his desk while the heavily bearded and imposing Senator Wigfall paced the room. Not far from them, Lieutenant General James Longstreet hovered in the alcove by the

window nervously smoking a long black cigar. I always dreaded when "Old Pete" played politics, especially where Senator Wigfall was concerned. Wigfall was a powerful member of the Military Affairs Committee and for the past year, a devout enemy of President Davis's war policies. I could but wonder what kind of plot these three men were hatching and what part they wanted me to play in it.

"Captain Wallace, am I glad to see you." General Longstreet tossed his half-smoked cigar into a brass cuspidor and strode toward me. He took me firmly by the shoulders in a powerful clasp and looked deeply into my eyes. "There is a woman who wants to see me . . ."

Senator Wigfall burst out laughing. Lieutenant General James Longstreet ("Old Pete"), General Robert E. Lee's war horse—a massive, magnificently bearded, barrel-chested man from South Carolina who could command 40,000 men like so many chess pieces—was so painfully shy around women other than his wife that it was, indeed, laughable.

"You want me to talk to a woman for you?" I asked with incredulity.

"It's worse than that," Secretary of War Seddon interrupted. "She has been pestering us, me, unbearably since her husband was killed. And since I could do nothing for her, she has begun to petition General Longstreet for redress." Secretary Seddon was not a pleasant man to look at. He had long straggly hair more gray than black, sunken eyes, and skin the color of

many of the corpses I had seen on the battlefield.

"Why should she petition General Longstreet?" I asked.

"Her husband was a captain in the Hampton Legion and served under me prior to my election," Senator Wigfall explained. The pugnacious senator had been a nominal brigadier in the legion that fought under General Longstreet. An ardent duelist who had killed his man and been wounded in return, he had also been one of the regular carousers at the general's mess during the winter after the Battle of First Manassas.

"She wouldn't happen to be the young woman in black sitting by your aide's desk?" I asked Secretary Seddon.

"You saw her, then?" the General asked.

"Merely noticed how out of place she looked," I commented.

"Perhaps you would be so good as to handle this young woman's problem?" the General asked.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," I said.

"Her husband was murdered several weeks ago, practically on our doorstep," Seddon explained. "Probably an attempted robbery gone awry."

"I thought since you handled that 'other matter' so efficiently, you might so put your talents to this one, too," General Longstreet said.

"If you so order, sir."

"Gentlemen, excuse us for a moment," General Longstreet said, steering me to the coatroom that abutted the secretary of war's office. Once inside, having closed the door,

he turned to me. "Captain Wallace, my back is against the wall. The secretary has called in a favor, and you are it. They have just handed me an impossible task. I am being obliged to serve three masters, President Davis, Secretary of War Seddon, and General Lee. They have saddled me with three concurrent, incompatible, and conflicting assignments, and it will be a miracle if I can succeed at any of them. I need you to handle this matter in order to curry favor with the secretary. It's as simple as that."

"What would you like me to do?" I asked.

"Find out who killed that young woman's husband and why."

"And my orders?"

"You will have *carte blanche* from me and Secretary Seddon, and if you need any other assistance, Senator Wigfall will also be at your disposal."

"And when I've finished?"

"When you are finished, you will get your backside on that thoroughbred animal of yours and report to my headquarters wherever they may be as quickly as possible."

3.

Mrs. Albert D'Ossché was younger than I expected, late teens, with raven black hair swept back in a severe bun. She had thick but well-defined eyebrows, a large nose, and black, expressive, Indianlike eyes. Despite the nose, she carried herself like a true patrician, a young woman definitely to the manner born, one of our many southern belles turned widow.

"I think my husband was in some

kind of trouble." She sighed delicately. Secretary Seddon had given us the use of a small antechamber to one of his aide's offices. It was a very tiny room with three chairs and an equally small writing desk. Mrs. D'Ossché stood staring out the window at the leafless branches of a Linden tree, slowly wringing a white handkerchief in her black-gloved fingers.

"Why do you think so?" I asked, looking for a chair to lean against. Despite my leg, it would have been improper for me to seat myself while she was still standing. Even her mammy stood unobtrusively in the background, almost blending into the mural that covered the wall opposite the window.

Mrs. D'Ossché turned to me and gave me a sad little smile. "Since my husband left to fight in the war, the running of certain aspects of Mayfield, our plantation, has devolved to me. For the past three years it has been my *raison d'être*, and I have kept an exact accounting of our domestic finances. It is not surprising that certain irregularities have come to my attention."

"Such as?"

"Discrepancies. Nothing inordinately complex. But regular shortfalls for the same large amount converted to gold quarterly."

"Had you discussed this with your husband?" I asked with all delicacy.

"I discreetly mentioned it to him during his recent convalescence, and he assured me that it was nothing to worry about."

"And you believed him?"

"Why not? My husband did not

drink except at social occasions and then only moderately, and he abhorred gaming in any form. My husband was also ten years my senior, and he assured me that his wild oats were completely sown."

"So what does that leave you?" I asked.

"Blackmail, Captain Wallace, blackmail." She twisted the handkerchief so tight I could see the tension in her forearms through the material of her sleeves.

"Without appearing indelicate, Mrs. D'Ossché, is there any reason for blackmail?" I asked.

"Not to my knowledge. But what else could it be? As I said, my husband was considerably older than I. We were married just before the war began. We have no children. And to be perfectly frank, I would not have noticed the discrepancy had it not been for Effie."

"Effie?"

"My personal servant." She signaled toward the old Negro with an almost imperceptible tilt of her head.

I nodded.

She proceeded: "She came to me to stop our overseer from dividing up one of our fieldhand families. When our overseer told me that he was just following my husband's express orders, that's when I checked the plantation records and discovered that my husband had been selling off property on a regular basis and not entering it into the household accounts."

"When was the last time you saw your husband?" I asked.

"Just after the new year. His wound was healed and he left to re-

port back to his regiment. However, just before he left, he sold another one of our fieldhands for gold. When he was killed, he had close to one thousand, six hundred dollars deposited in the Exchange Bank." Mrs. D'Ossché unwound the handkerchief and wiped her eyes. She was crying silently.

When she composed herself, I asked her how I could keep in contact with her. She said she was not going back to Mayfield, and what with the gold on hand, she had decided to take a house in the city.

"The hotel room is so painfully small," she explained. "There is only space enough for a bed, a washstand and a glass cover. Why, I am forced to hang my best dresses on wooden pegs behind the door, can you imagine?"

After the deprivations I had seen our gallant boys endure, dresses on wooden pegs seemed too trivial to matter. But I chose not to comment and nodded understandingly and wondered how Mrs. D'Ossché would bear up under the conditions brought about by the Union blockade. When our interview was finished, I walked Mrs. D'Ossché out of the building. Before we parted, she handed me a small Daguerreotype of her husband. It showed a heavily bearded man with a broken nose and light, piercing eyes. She had a carriage waiting for her. I took a long look at the magnificent matched pair of horses and wondered just how long it would be before the provost marshal's men impounded them and sent them north to the Rappahannock to

pull some of Porter Alexander's cannon?

4.

It was midnight. Captain Peter Kingery stood by the stove in the Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac depot waiting for the train that would take him back up to the Army of Northern Virginia. He warmed his hands over the hot metal, then rubbed them together briskly. The depot was full of soldiers, all of them wounded, going nowhere, just lingering and trying to stay warm. The provost marshal's men had just come through looking for some of Hood's Texans. The soldiers had broken up another "confectionery" shop. Kingery smiled. There were many "confectioneries" dotting the streets of Richmond. They were seedy, dingy storefronts where the landlords kept a few indigestible horse-cakes on display in the window as a blind for the barroom in the back. Kingery did not begrudge the Texans their wildness. On the line, he liked those long-haired, wild, and screaming good old boys from the Deep South. They knew how to fight, and they deserved whatever happiness they could grab.

Captain Kingery was on an errand for his quartermaster, although he was stretching the limit and intent of those orders by being in Richmond. Everything he had been detached to obtain was cached at Hanover Junction, halfway between Richmond and Fredericksburg; however, it had been imperative that he see his old schoolmate. But D'Ossché had never shown up.

Captain Kingery had stopped by Mrs. Brownstein's, but even they hadn't seen him since January, and Albert had left him no new messages. It was as if Albert had just dropped off the face of the earth.

Captain Kingery stepped out of the depot and walked across Broad Street toward the new Richmond Theatre to study the impressive row of classical pilasters that rose from the theatre's second floor high into the night sky. Only recently reopened, the new theater had already been the scene of an unusual military action. General J. E. B. Stuart himself had ridden into town and stopped the show to arrest several of his troopers who had slipped out of camp to attend the new play. Kingery could imagine the excited flutter of the women as the dirty booted, plumed cavalry commander strode up and down the aisle with his saber rattling at his side ordering his men out of their seats.

Kingery was nervous. Inside the depot he was too hot; outside he was too cold. He inhaled deeply. The night air burned his lungs with the continued promise of winter. Kingery scratched at the palm of his left hand. Tucked into his gauntlet was Albert's last message from Mayfield telling him to look for him at Mrs. Brownstein's. Kingery began to reach for it when he noticed a one-legged man hobbling toward him in the shadows.

"Cold night," the one-legged man said softly as they passed.

Captain Kingery stopped. The shadows were too deep for him to see the other clearly. But he could

tell the wounded soldier was pretty much in tatters. "If you're cold, there's a nice fire at the depot," he said.

"Thank you, Captain," the one-legged man answered.

"Where did you get yours?" Captain Kingery asked.

"A place called Murphy's Landing," the other said. "Ever hear of it?"

Captain Kingery clenched his left hand into a fist, crushing D'Ossché's note. "I didn't realize there had been any fighting down that way."

"There hasn't," the one-legged man said. "I just wanted you to remember."

Captain Kingery looked at the one-legged soldier in shocked disbelief. Suddenly the man was standing on two good legs and thrusting a long bowie knife at him. Kingery parried the blade with his arm and received a deep cut for his quick thinking. However, rather than back away, he lunged for his assailant, realizing that he stood a better chance grappling with him than in a one-sided knife fight. The two of them bounced off the side of the building and then fell off the sidewalk and into the alley.

Kingery could have called for help, but he didn't. He knew who the man was, and it was a private matter. Kingery punched at the man's head with his good arm and tried to keep the other's knife hand pinned down with his wounded arm. The other grunted as Kingery connected with a few short and powerful blows to the head. But he had only one arm with which to

fight, and the other had two, and eventually the fight began to go the other's way.

Kingery was feeling lightheaded. The cut on his arm was very deep. Through the searing pain he could tell that he was losing blood rapidly. He knew he had to break away or die. However, try as he might, he could not get the upper hand. Cut three more times and stabbed deeply in his right side, he felt his legs buckling beneath him. The fight, and life, were rapidly draining out of him.

However, instead of finishing him off, his assailant stopped fighting and backed away. Kingery slumped onto the cold, wet ground and watched as the other man walked out of the alley. Kingery watched the man pick up the homemade crutches and return. Kingery studied the ragged shadow as it leaned against the opposite wall and tucked its leg back into the strap that held its calf up against the back of its thigh. The shadow hovered there like the Angel of Death. It was the last thing Captain Peter Kingery ever saw.

5.

After my meeting with Mrs. D'Ossché, I arranged to board with the Widow Douglas, where I had recuperated from my wound after the Battle of Bull Run.* It only cost me a ham and a sack of potatoes, which I obtained from General Longstreet's aide-de-camp, Capt. Fairfax, whom I was fortunate enough to run into as he was

changing trains for Petersburg.

The next morning, Jeremiah had O'Malley saddled and ready for me by ten o'clock, as I had a very unpleasant call to make. On the southwest corner of Broad and 10th Streets, practically in the shadow of George Washington's statue, stood a two-story frame building. It was the headquarters of the provost marshal of Richmond, Brigadier General John H. Winder.

General Winder was a man with a fiery temper and dangerous manner whose "detectives" inspired fear and disgust. They were refugees from the slums of Baltimore, every bit the pluguglies that had made Baltimore a mob city. In '61 and '62 those detectives pretty much had free reign commandeering private carriages, horses, and all kinds of personal property, including the clothing of the dead and dying at the hospitals around the city. Winder's men were so brazen that they finally were brought to heel and the general was forced to "fire" them, though most of them continued to practice their trade, this time without the protection of the provost marshal's office.

Assistant Provost Marshal Captain Oscarson was the best of a bad lot and had managed to keep his position despite the others falling out. Perhaps it was the fact that he was a bona fide hero and had lost an eye at Malvern Hill. When I went down to Broad and 10th, he was the man I wanted to see. Fortunately, he was in. He was sitting behind his desk drinking

*In the South, the Battle of Bull Run refers to a skirmish at Blackburn Ford the day before the Battle of First Manassas.

and looking as if he had been in winter quarters up in Fredericksburg.

"You're beginning to look like a real soldier," I said walking up to his desk.

"Go to hell," he answered. "Want a drink? You'll like this." He held a jug toward me.

I took it from him and tipped it up with my elbow and took a quick taste. It was smooth, real sippin' whisky. I took a longer drink.

"Where did you get this stuff?" I asked.

"Someone forgot to pay a bribe. It was supposed to go to Sutler Cashmyer for resale, but I impounded it."

"Living dangerously, aren't you?"

"Who isn't, nowadays? So what brings one of General Longstreet's men to see me? Can't be lookin' to free some more rowdies from the First Corps, can you?"

"I need some information on a killing that happened last January. An officer named D'Ossché."

"Da-shay? Spell it." I did and when I did, I saw Oscarson's one good eye react. He sat back, then leaned forward and pushed the jug in my direction. "Take a swig and look as if this is just a friendly visit," he said under his breath.

I did as I was told.

"Last night, an officer named Peter Kingery was killed in the alley over by the Richmond Theatre . . ."

I pushed the jug toward him and he took a quick sip.

" . . . He'd been in a knife fight. Never called out for help. The night watchmen think that if he had,

someone could have come to his rescue."

"So what does this have to do with D'Ossché?" I asked.

"There was a note from a Mr. D'Ossché hidden in his gauntlet."

"How did you find out about it so quickly?" I asked.

"An officer is killed. It's more the provost marshal's jurisdiction than it is the police's. That's where I've been all night, lookin' over the murder scene."

"See anything interesting?" I asked.

"From the looks of the ground, I'd say it was a two-man fight. I didn't see where this Captain Kingery had a knife. He could have pulled his service revolver, but he didn't. He also didn't call out. Leads me to think it was somethin' personal."

"No witnesses?"

"I'm not sure about that. There were signs of a one-legged man on crutches. He either saw the fight or was scared out of the alley when the fight started. Either way, no one has come forward. Now, what have you got for me?"

I took another drink. Although it was far too early in the morning, this was, after all, the provost marshal's headquarters. Then I told Oscarson about my meeting with Mrs. D'Ossché.

"She thinks her husband was being blackmailed," I said.

"Well, somethin' was goin' on," Captain Oscarson said.

"What if your boss is involved?" I asked.

"It wouldn't surprise me."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well, is he?"

"How the hell should I know? You don't think that I'm goin' to look into it, do you?"

"What if I find out he is?"

"That's your problem, not mine. Only . . ."

"Yes?"

"Let me know, so I can distance myself. I really don't want to end up in Castles Goodwin or Thunder for the next twenty years, if you know what I mean." Captain Oscarson winked and pushed the jug in my direction.

6.

Mrs. D'Ossché found a suite of rooms in a house up on Shockoe Hill, which was pretty quick work considering the overcrowding in the city and the smallpox epidemic that had closed many of the city's homes to all comers. I wondered how she had accomplished this feat so quickly . . . that is, I wondered right up to the time her servant opened the front door and I smelled all the food. In Richmond, because of the blockade, food was more valuable than money.

"She brought her own food?" I asked.

"My mistress is very particular 'bout what she eats," Effie said in that deep slave accent that almost passes for a language in itself.

I asked to see Mrs. D'Ossché and was shown into a neatly decorated parlor off the front hall. She kept me waiting for a few minutes, but I didn't mind because she also sent Effie back with a cup of mulled cider for me. After the second sip, I

began to wonder how long I could drag this inquiry out?

"Captain Wallace, how wonderful of you to come back so quickly. After the distressing silence from Secretary Seddon, I am impressed by your quick action. My compliments to General Longstreet. What news do you have for me?" She was again dressed in black, however her costume showed none of the delicate patching that was becoming so prevalent on many of Richmond's women. She took a seat in a ladder-back chair near the round table by the front window and waved for me to sit on the sofa facing her.

"That depends," I said.

"Depends on what?" she asked.

"It depends on how well your husband knew a Captain Peter Kingery."

"Peter? What does Peter have to do with this?"

"Then you know a Captain Kingery?"

"Know him . . . he stood up for my husband at our wedding and has been a frequent and beloved guest at Mayfair."

"Then it is, indeed, my sad duty to inform you that Captain Kingery was murdered last night here in Richmond in very much the same circumstances as your husband."

Mrs. D'Ossché turned white as the blood drained from her face, but she did not faint. She crumpled forward on the table with her head resting on her arms. Effie appeared as if from nowhere and took her by the shoulders.

"I knew there was something wrong," Mrs. D'Ossché whispered over and over again to her servant.

"Yessim, yessim," Effie said, gently stroking the back of her mistress's head.

"Mrs. D'Ossché," I said, leaning forward in my seat, "how long had your husband known Captain Kingery?"

"They went to school together in Charleston. All of them did."

"All of them?"

"Yes. Peter Kingery, my husband, Phillip Midgley, and James Kaplan. In fact, James performed our wedding service and Peter and Phillip stood up for Albert." She sat back up and wiped her eyes with a small white handkerchief.

"Do you know how I can get in touch with either Midgley or Kaplan?" I asked.

"Well, James is the minister of the Third Methodist Church in Charleston. It shouldn't be too hard to track him down. As for Phillip, I don't know where he is. Like my husband, I am sure that he has answered the call to arms."

"Mrs. D'Ossché, the fact that there was a close relationship between your husband and Captain Kingery suggests that they may have been killed for the same reason . . . either something that happened here in Richmond or something that happened before the war. Are you sure you want me to pursue this matter any further? What I find out may be embarrassing to all concerned."

Mrs. D'Ossché sat up straight in the chair and reached out for Effie's hand. Effie gave it to her and stepped in close to her mistress's side. "I am not concerned about my husband's honor," Mrs. D'Ossché

said. "I am more concerned with his good name."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," I said.

"Captain Wallace, my husband is dead. For some time now, he has been paying someone a considerable amount of money. Whatever the reason, I do not want it to haunt his memory. I want to find out why, and to make sure that Mayfair will not be placed in jeopardy, if you get my meaning. I want to be sure that those payments will stop."

"I'll let you know what I find out," I said. I stood up and bowed. "Thank you for the cider."

7.

Four days later, I was in Charleston, South Carolina, thanks to Senator Wigfall. I am continually amazed how quickly things get done when you know the right people. Charleston, where the Federals first lowered their flag on the battlements of Fort Sumter, was also the department headquarters of General P. G. T. Beauregard, the commander who opened fire on Fort Sumter and later defeated the Yankees at the First Manassas. During the bombardment of Fort Sumter, General Beauregard sent a three-man commission to demand Major Anderson's surrender. One of the men on that commission was the future Senator Wigfall. Ergo: Senator Wigfall needs a favor, he asks General Beauregard; General Beauregard responds, and I am sent south with all due speed.

On the way, I managed to stop off at General Longstreet's headquarters in Petersburg to report on my

progress. The general was not very talkative. He was suffering from a severe sore throat; however, he did ask me to extend his compliments to General Beauregard.

After reaching Charleston and paying my respects to the general and delivering General Longstreet's and Senator Wigfall's messages, I went in search of the Reverend James Kaplan. He was not a difficult man to find. He was in his rectory preparing his Sunday message. He was a slender man with a narrow mustache and sad brown eyes. He had a face made old from worry, and he was more than distressed when I told him of the deaths of D'Ossché and Kingery.

"So it has finally come to that," he said, sitting back in his chair and raising his hands to cover his face.

"Then your friends died for a reason," I said, commenting on his reaction.

"I am afraid so, Captain," he said with a deep sigh of resignation. "It is a sordid story, one of which I am not proud and one that I had hoped Albert and Peter were going to settle."

"Obviously their efforts failed," I said.

"It appears so," the reverend agreed. "And since it appears that retribution is to be my lot, you might as well know the whole horror of it."

I sat back.

He continued: "When the four of us were in college together, we ruined a young woman. It happened in a small place called Murphy's Landing. We were coming back from some plantation party

and were out drinking and acting with all the irresponsibility of youth when we came upon an illegal meeting of several slave women. They were learning how to read and write. They were being taught by a light-skinned young woman named Sabrah Johnson.

"We thought she was an octoroon, a house domestic teaching the others what she had learned at her mistress's side. Since it was an illegal meeting, and since we assumed that she was a slave, we did not see the harm in taking our pleasure. She claimed that she was white, but that did not stop us from tearing off her clothes and taking carnal knowledge of her. Oh God, she had the most haunting eyes. I still see them in my nightmares.

"Later, to our dismay, we learned that she was, indeed, white—the daughter of one of the local plantation owners. She frequently disobeyed the law and taught the local darkies to read. She used to dress in slave's clothes so as not to attract attention. As a result of our attack, she became with child and killed herself rather than face the shame of her ruination."

"You were never brought up on charges?" I asked.

"Miss Johnson was too ashamed to appear in court, and the other witnesses were Negroes and they were not allowed to testify against a white man."

"And the blackmail?" I asked.

"That started about three years ago. Her younger brother, now old enough to extract revenge, wanted us to pay for what we had done. So he asked for gold or else he threat-

ened to expose our crime and ruin us the way we had ruined his sister."

"Why did he wait so long?" I asked.

"When we raped his sister . . . yes, rape. Why not call it what it really was? When we raped his sister, he was but a child. Now he must be in his early twenties."

"Why not just call you out one at a time?"

"The Code Duello? He said that it would be too easy, too quick. He wanted revenge, not justice."

"Well, now that you know, you will be able to defend yourself," I said.

"No, Captain Wallace. It was for that sin that I joined the ministry. If God wishes me to die for it, I will. Whatever my fate, I will not avoid it. Thank you for coming."

8.

Something was wrong. The Reverend Mr. Kaplan's story did not sit right with me . . . not that he was lying. No. I firmly believed he told me the truth as to what he and his three friends had done . . . the truth as far as he saw it. It was their victim's brother's reaction that bothered me. It was all wrong. When my best friend thought I had insulted his sister, he challenged me to a duel. It's what you do. It's what's expected of a Southern Gentleman. That I accidentally killed him was the cross I had to bear. But blackmail? No. It would have been totally out of character. But if not for the young Mr. Johnson, then who? It was obvious that I needed to make a trip out to Murphy's Landing.

General Beauregard and his staff were most accommodating. They provided me with the proper paperwork and a horse. A short train/riverboat ride later, I was deposited at my destination. From the landing, it was only a short ride to the Johnson plantation.

The plantation house was set back amid a forest of old, wide oak trees heavy with moss. You could hear birds singing and darkies in the fields chanting. The air smelled sweet, and you could almost forget that there was a war on. Upon my arrival I presented my calling card and was shown into a large parlor in which several women of varying ages were sitting in a circle knitting socks for the soldiers at the front. At the head of the circle was a distinguished-looking elderly woman in her late forties. She was dressed in a simple costume made of homespun with an elaborately crocheted shawl. But the most striking thing about her were her eyes. They were large, wide-set and very doelike. When I entered the room, the ladies stopped knitting and all stared at me. The woman with the distinctive eyes was holding my calling card.

"Captain Wallace," she said in a smooth, deep voice. "It is always a pleasure to meet one of my son's acquaintances. Did you know him well?"

"Has something happened to him?" I asked.

"Don't you know?"

"I'm afraid there has been a misunderstanding," I said. "I came here hoping to speak with your son."

"Then I fear you are almost three years too late," Mrs. Johnson said.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am?"

"My son died shortly after he enlisted. He contracted measles during the muster and did not survive the crisis. Which begs the question, Captain Wallace . . . why do you want to see him?"

There was no way I was going to tell her the truth. I did not want her to realize how much of her family history I knew. "Madame, it appears that someone is perpetrating a cruel joke in your son's name and I have been sent to look into the matter."

Mrs. Johnson turned ashen and called for her smelling salts. When she regained her composure, she asked me to explain. I lied again and told her that it had to do with the selling of stolen goods to the army.

"I cannot believe that anyone could be so cruel as to use a dead boy's name to make an illegal profit," she said.

"I am afraid war often brings out the worst in people," I answered. "Who knew you son had passed on?"

"Practically everyone in the county," she answered. "He's buried out by the big oak next to the garden. It was quite the most moving of ceremonies."

"As is only fitting," I commented. Mrs. Johnson bowed delicately in her chair. "Was anyone with him during his final days?"

"Why, yes. Pompey went with him to the muster and stayed with him right through to the end. He was the one who brought him home."

"Might I speak with him?"

"Why, of course. He should be in the fields right now. I will send for him. If you care to wait in the small parlor, I will have someone serve you some refreshments."

Men were starving on the front lines. General Lee had sent his troops scavenging in the woods to find greens to prevent scurvy, and here at Murphy's Landing my refreshments could have kept a brigade alive for a month. I ate with only a modicum of guilt.

Pompey was a handsome young black man with wide shoulders, good teeth, and an attitude that was sure to unleash an overseer's whip. He had undoubtedly been raised as a house servant, most likely as young Johnson's whipping boy and valet. The way he was pouting, he was obviously unhappy at being demoted to fieldhand. I asked to speak to him alone.

"How long were you with the young Mr. Johnson?" I asked.

"Froms de time I wuz but a bid-dy baby," he said in the fieldhand dialect.

"You were raised as a house servant," I said. "You can probably speak better than I can. So quit putting on the dog."

"Did you come here to buy me to dig ditches for the army?" he asked.

"No."

"Then why?"

"Did you like your young master?"

"Suppose."

"Would you be upset if someone were using his name to commit a crime?"

"Suppose it would depend on the crime."

"What did you think of your master's sister?"

"She taught me to read and write."

That was one hell of a confession. If anyone else heard it, he would have immediately been sold south.

"Do you know what happened to her?"

"She was raped by some white men and she killed herself."

"Did that bother you?"

"There are a lot of slaves on this plantation that don't have that luxury," he said.

"What if I told you someone was making money off of her death," I said.

"Then that would be a crime," the young black man answered.

I took a chance and told him what I knew. He stood there staring at the wall above my head listening to every word but pretending not to hear a thing.

"There was a nurse who helped take care of the dying. He was just po' white trash. But he listened to the young master when he was delirious and learned the whole story. His name was Ellison. Said he lived on the Nolo-chucky. He shouldn't be too hard to find. Just look for some po' white trash what's come into some money."

"Thank you," I said.

"Miss Sabrah, she was real good to us. She took care of us. Even helped some from other plantations get north. It might be real nice of you to pay your respects out by the big oak tree near the garden," Pompey said as he walked out of the room.

I thanked Mrs. Johnson, then

left. But before I departed, I took Pompey up on his suggestion and walked out to the garden. Under the oak tree, there were three graves. One headstone read: TO MY DARLING DAUGHTER / SABRAH JOHNSON 1838-1855. The second stone read: IN DEVOTED MEMORY TO A YOUNG SOLDIER / BRUCE JOHNSON 1842-1861. The third stone just read: BARKLEY JOHNSON. There was no sentiment nor date. But there were flowers.

As I was standing there, a slave came out to the garden with a hoe and started moving dirt around listlessly. "Is Barkley the father?" I asked.

"No, sah. Mr. Johnson is with his regiment in Vicksburg."

"Then who is Barkley?"

"It's a name no one on this plantation is allowed to speak."

"Then where do the flowers come from?" I asked.

"That's the amazin' part. They always appear by magic," he answered.

9.

It took me about two weeks to track down Mr. Ellison. He was living in a cabin northeast of Chattanooga. However, "living" was not the operative word. He had been dead for quite some time. He hadn't died pretty. Someone had tied him to a chair and worked him over with a knife. At least, that was my supposition based on the way his flesh had fallen away from his bones, almost as if portions of him had been flayed and the flesh left hanging. But that meant he had been dead long before either D'Oss-

ché or Kingery. At this point, I wasn't sure just where my investigation was leading. I headed back to Richmond to report my findings to Mrs. D'Ossché. On the way through Petersburg I also reported to General Longstreet, who seemed to take great glee in my sleuthing. It was as if it gave him a respite from the cares of command.

While I had been traipsing around, the Federal cavalry had made a reconnaissance in force across the Rappahannock, and General Lee had ordered Hood's division north just in case this was the beginning of a new offensive under General Hooker. It wasn't. Hood never even had a chance to detrain before he was ordered south again. However, many of his men took advantage of the change of trains in Richmond to let off a little steam, to the chagrin of the provost marshal and his men. General Longstreet was talking about an offensive against Suffolk in hopes of provoking an error on the Federals' part. His plan was to launch it sometime in the first week of April, weather depending. He offered the strong suggestion that I wrap up my investigation before the offensive began. I told him I would.

10.

The last man I needed to see was Phillip Midgely. Once again, General Beauregard's staff came through for me. Midgley was a Captain with a South Carolina regiment that had been ordered up to support the Army of Northern Virginia. He had been in Fredericks-

burg all this time. I found him playing cards in a hell-hole nicknamed The Devil's Half Acre, where the soldiers ran chuck-a-luck boards despite their officers' attempts to close the place down. Midgley wasn't winning. I figured that I would wait to talk to him after he lost his stake. By then he would be in a really foul mood and more apt to say something useful.

On my way out I bumped into a one-legged man. I said, "Excuse me." He grunted, looked at me, nodded, and hobbled on. I walked down the street to a point where I could see both the front and the back doors and waited. The one-legged man came out the front and began walking in my direction, turning around now and again to assess his distance from the gaming hall. As he passed me I said, "This is the best spot to watch for Midgley. You can see both the front and the back from here."

"I beg your pardon?" The man's right hand slipped from his crutch and disappeared under his tattered cape.

"I'd advise keeping your hand off that knife, Mr. Johnson." I made a small motion with my wrist so that he could see the barrel of my service revolver pointing at his stomach from beneath my cloak. "It's cocked," I said.

"How did you know it was me?" he asked.

"Your eyes," I explained. "Looking at you is like looking at your mother. I suppose your sister also had those eyes. The Reverend Mr. Kaplan said that they haunt his dreams."

"They should haunt his dreams after what they did. How did you know I would be here?"

"The dead Mr. Ellison and the flowers on your grave."

"How do you make the segue between those two items?"

"From your headstone I deduced that you were still alive. It had no date, no words of love. Your brother and sister were dead, therefore the flowers must have come from someone not of your family. Since your mother has banned your name, the flowers must have come from the slaves. Now, why would slaves put flowers on a white man's grave?"

"You tell me."

"Your sister was raped while teaching Negroes to read and write. Pompey hinted that she was part of the Underground Railroad. You are *persona non grata* in your own home, yet you are respected, if not loved, by your servants, which leads me to believe that you, too, are an abolitionist, which is also why you cannot challenge your sister's tormentors to a duel. They would not consider you a gentleman and therefore would not be honor-bound to meet with you. And so you are using this war to settle a personal matter. As far as Mr. Ellison is concerned, I'm taking a wild guess that you learned that someone was extorting money in your brother's

name and that you spoke with Pompey. That you would be here only stands to reason. The Reverend Mr. Kaplan is not going anywhere. You have already killed D'Ossché and Kingery. To be avenged, you would have to kill Midgley before the Yankees did it for you."

"What do you intend to do with me now?"

"Nothing. Your vendetta against your sister's rapists is yours and yours alone. I was asked to make sure that the extortion stopped and you have taken care of that matter for me. My involvement is over."

"Then you don't intend to stop me?"

"No."

"Then why are you here?"

"I just want to be sure that your revenge extends only to the men who ruined your sister and not to their families."

"And if I give you my word?"

"I'll holster this pistol and leave."

"You would believe me?"

"Yes."

Barkley Johnson's hand re-emerged from beneath his tattered cape and he hobbled over next to me and turned toward the gaming hall. "You say this is the best spot to watch both doors?"

"Good luck, Mr. Johnson," I said as I walked away.

Minor League

Steve Hockensmith

There are three detective agencies listed in the River City, Indiana, phone book. Two of them have ads with pictures and slogans and big logos. One of them is just a line of text: "Erie Investigations, 1451 Hart Road," and then the phone number.

Larry Erie's friend Bass thought that was a big mistake.

"It pays to advertise," Bass said. "No one's gonna hire you to find their car keys when all you've got's that dinky little line there."

Erie just shrugged. He wasn't so sure about this private detective thing, anyway. He was a retired cop living alone. Wasn't he a bit old to be playing Sam Spade?

He framed his detective's license and hung it in the living room—a room he almost never went in anymore—and tried to forget it.

So when Frank Ault rolled up Erie's driveway in his silver 1990 Cadillac, Erie assumed he was an insurance salesman. Or lost.

Erie's cats told him Ault was coming. Erie didn't get many visitors. When he did, Mae and Goldie would jump up on the couch near the bay window at the front of the house to watch what was going on in the driveway. Erie walked over to the window, and he and the cats watched Ault. The man sat in his car for a moment, the engine running. He looked confused. He

glanced at a piece of paper in his hand, then looked back up at the house. Finally, he shut off the engine and got out of the car. He was a tall man, fortyish, thin and balding. He wore gray slacks and a white short-sleeved shirt with pin-stripes and a wide blue tie.

Erie stepped out of the house, careful to shoo the cats away from the door with one foot. "Can I help you?" he asked.

Ault still looked confused. He glanced at the piece of paper again, then looked back up at Erie, who stood there watching him in his sweatpants and wrinkled, ketchup-freckled shirt.

"This is 1451 Hart Road?"

"That's right."

Ault turned and looked at the street. "Is there another Hart Road around River City?"

"No."

Ault looked at Erie's house. He seemed baffled by what he saw.

"Why don't you tell me what you're looking for and maybe I can help you find it."

The man's eyes snapped back to Erie. He looked stricken. "No, that's okay, thanks. I'm just . . . I'm looking for a business." He was backing up as he spoke, starting to turn and go back to his car.

Erie wondered what kind of business this nervous-looking man could be searching for. A porn shop?

And then it hit him.

Oh, my Lord. I have a client.

"You wouldn't be looking for Erie Investigations, would you?"

The man stopped. He looked at Erie for a moment, mouth half open, obviously calculating some noncommittal answer.

"What makes you ask that?" he finally replied.

"I'm Erie. If you want to come inside, we can discuss whatever it is that brings you out here today."

Ault looked both relieved and skeptical. "Okay," he said.

Erie opened the door for him.

"Be careful," he said. "Don't let the cats out."

"I'm Frank Ault," the man said. The pause after his words told Erie that he was supposed to recognize the name. He didn't. The pause continued.

Ault shifted his weight on the living room couch. Mae the cat sat on the arm at the opposite end of the couch, watching him. It seemed to make Ault nervous.

"I'm one of the co-owners of the River City Brewers."

"Oh, really?"

Erie went to see River City's baseball team play at least four or five times each summer. It was an independent team, part of a small league called the Pioneer Association. The players were mostly twenty-something wannabes and kids fresh out of high school, almost none of whom would ever make it to a real farm team, let alone the Major Leagues. But it was enough for a town like River City.

The team was owned by a couple

of lawyers and an orthodontist. Erie pegged Ault for the mouth man.

"So then it's Dr. Ault, right?"

Ault smiled. It was a half-hearted smile, but his teeth were straight and white.

"Yes," he said. "The team's just a sideline—something my partners and I do out of sheer love of the game."

Erie nodded. "So what's the problem?"

Ault's wan smile crumbled. "We've had a theft. A major one. If word gets out, we've got a public relations nightmare on our hands. We're going to look like fools. The Brewers aren't exactly making money hand over fist, and a blow like this could . . ."

"Dr. Ault," Erie cut in, "maybe you'd better just begin at the beginning."

They were words he'd said so many times before in offices and interrogation rooms and victims' homes. It felt very strange to say them in his own house, sitting in a rocking chair, a cat curled up in his lap. What had he gotten himself into?

Ault leaned forward on the couch. "You have to understand something, Mr. Erie," he said, his voice low, as if he feared that the cat sitting nearby was eavesdropping. "My partners and I expect discretion. That's why we want to hire a private investigator to look into this. It's very important that we avoid publicity."

Erie nodded. "I understand, Dr. Ault," he said. But it felt wrong. If this involved a felony, it was a mat-

ter for the police. He shouldn't go playing cops and robbers without a real badge . . . should he?

Ault leaned back on the couch, looking a little more relaxed. "Good," he said. "Do you go to many Brewers games?"

Erie assumed that this, somehow, was the beginning of the story. People have to tell their own stories in their own way. So he just said, "Sure."

"So you've seen the River City Wall of Fame?"

Ault saw the blank look on Erie's face.

"At Lloyd Field?"

That didn't help.

"By the main concession stand?"

Still nothing.

"Between the men's room and the women's room?"

Now Erie got it. The Brewers played their home games in an old baseball stadium built in the 1940s, back when River City had a farm team for the Cincinnati Reds. Inside, not far from one of the entrances, there were eight or nine autographed pictures up on the wall and a glass case no longer than your standard dining room table. The pictures were of local sports heroes. The case contained mementos from their careers: a basketball used in the state high school championships in 1963, a football helmet worn by an All-American running back, stuff like that. Erie didn't know that this little shrine had a name. He suspected that no one else did either, other than the team's owners.

"Sure, I know what you mean," he said, thinking, Is that what this

is all about? Somebody stole some forgotten quarterback's old jock strap? After spending the last two decades of his career investigating violent crimes, he was accustomed to cases with a little more weight.

"Well, the Wall of Fame has never been all it could be," Ault continued, "because we've never had anything from Stormy Weathers."

Erie knew the name. "The old Negro Leagues player," he said.

Ault smiled. It was a bigger, truer grin this time. Clearly, the man was in love with baseball.

"That's right," he said. "The greatest ballplayer River City ever produced. I've always felt it was a shameful oversight, and I've been working to correct it. And finally, I did. A few days ago, Stormy Weathers' daughter sent me the bat he used in the 1946 Negro Leagues World Series. He hit six home runs with it in that series alone. It's a piece of baseball history."

"And now it's been stolen," Erie said.

Ault nodded sadly. "That's right. It didn't even spend one full night in the Wall of Fame vault."

Erie assumed "the vault" was the glass case between the men's and women's restrooms. "This happened last night?" he asked.

"Yes."

Goldie the cat looked up at Erie and meowed. You aren't petting me, she was telling him. What gives?

Erie stroked the overweight tabby's broad back. She began to purr.

"Tell me the specifics," he said to Ault.

"Well, Federal Express dropped the bat off at my office around two.

I left there a little after six and took the bat over to Lloyd Field. There wasn't a game yesterday, so the place was empty except for two of our players: Del Johnson and Lee Holt."

"The players can get into the stadium whenever they want?"

"No, they don't have keys. Johnson and Holt stayed behind after that afternoon's practice."

"Is that normal?"

"Yes. Just about every night, you'll find a few players staying late to practice. We've always trusted our boys like that."

"And maybe you shouldn't."

Ault let out a sad sigh. "No, maybe we shouldn't. But you've got to understand something about the Brewers. We're not just minor league. We're minor minor league. We can barely afford to pay our players \$75 a week. Most of them don't even have their own apartments; they live with host families in the community. One of the small perks we can give them is the chance to play in a real baseball stadium. And for these boys, that's worth an awful lot, because most of them know they'll never get that chance again after this summer."

"How about the players who were there last night—Johnson and Holt? Tell me about them."

"Johnson's got real talent. He's a pitcher. Got a mean slider—at least for our league. I wouldn't be surprised to see him get snatched up by a farm team by August. Holt's got hustle, but I don't think we'll be seeing him on any bubblegum cards. This is his fourth summer with us. That's about as many sum-

mers as we get out of anyone before they get a real job and move on with their lives."

"So what were Johnson and Holt doing when you saw them? Working on Johnson's pitching?"

Ault nodded.

"And you put the bat in the 'vault' and left?"

"That's right. With a little plaque I've had ready for weeks."

"And this morning?"

"The vault had been smashed open and the bat was gone."

Goldie meowed at Erie demandingly. He'd stopped petting her again.

"Quiet, you. I'm working here," he told her. He looked up at Ault, suddenly embarrassed. "I don't always talk to my cats," he said. But he did. That's why it was so embarrassing.

Ault gave him a noncommittal "Umm-hmm." Obviously, he wasn't a cat person.

"So who knew about the bat?" Erie asked abruptly, his voice a little too loud. Goldie hopped off his lap and trotted away to the kitchen to look for new developments in her food dish.

"Lots of people. Me, my partners, our publicist, a writer over at the *Courier-Press*." Ault stared down at his feet, looking miserable. "He was going to do a story about us—about me and the bat. I don't know what I'm going to tell him now."

"What about the players?"

Ault looked back up at Erie, his gaze hazy, still focused on headlines he'd never see. "The players?"

"Did they know about the bat?"

"Oh. Yes, I guess so. There was

never any kind of formal announcement, but word gets around.”

“Right.”

Erie looked over Ault’s shoulder for a moment, considering what to do. He’d had his private investigator’s license for months now, but he hadn’t really been a P.I. He hadn’t done anything. And he wasn’t sure that he wanted to start.

“What do you think?” Ault asked him.

Erie bought himself another few seconds of thought with a protracted “Welllll.” Then he made up his mind. Sort of. He’d leave it up to his client.

“I would advise you to go to the police. If you want the bat back, that’s your best bet,” he said. “But if you’re still intent on avoiding publicity, I’ll look into the matter for you. I can’t promise that I’ll recover the bat, but I can promise you a discreet, professional investigation.”

“How much do you charge?” Ault asked. To Erie’s surprise, the man didn’t hesitate for even a moment.

Erie pondered the question. He didn’t have rates. He’d never had a client before, so why should he need them?

“One hundred dollars a day,” he said, picking the figure out of thin air. “Plus expenses,” he added, simply because that seemed to be what someone was supposed to say in this situation.

“That seems reasonable,” Ault said.

“Good.”

I guess I’m really a private detective now, Erie thought to himself. So what next?

Ault was staring at him, seemingly asking himself the same question.

Erie decided that a private detective would start exactly where one employed by the city would start.

“Has the crime scene been tampered with?” he asked.

Ault blinked. The phrase “crime scene” seemed to bother him. “Tampered with?”

“Cleaned up.”

“Yes. Well, some of it. Maybe. I don’t know.”

“I’d like to see it. Please make sure it’s not disturbed any further before I look at it.”

“Of course.”

“I also need more information on Johnson and Holt—their full names, place and date of birth, that sort of thing.”

“Are they . . . suspects?” Ault’s voice trembled as he said the word “suspects.” Erie was glad the man didn’t have to say words like “police” or “robbery.” He’d probably have a stroke.

“I just want to be thorough.”

“I see. Well, I guess I can call you back with that later.”

“Fine. I’d like to talk to them, too. Can you arrange something? For later today, maybe? When I come over to the stadium?”

“Sure. We’ve got a home game tonight. Why don’t you come to Lloyd Field a few hours early? I’ll let you know an exact time.”

“That’ll work.”

“O.K., then.” Ault reached into his back pants pocket and pulled out a small black book. It was a checkbook. “I assume you’d like a retainer up-front?”

"Yes," Erie said. The customer is always right. "I usually ask for three days' wages in advance."

"Three hundred dollars then." Ault pulled a pen from his shirt pocket and wrote out the check, the checkbook balanced on one knee. Mae the cat, mesmerized by the back-and-forth motion of the pen, hopped off her perch and crept towards Ault, ready to pounce. Erie moved to the couch, scooped the cat up, and tossed her to the floor.

Ault tore the check from the checkbook and handed it to Erie, who stared at it for a moment as if it were some mysterious artifact from a long-vanished civilization. Then the two men shook hands awkwardly and said their goodbyes as Erie walked Ault to the door. Mae hopped onto the windowsill to watch Ault climb into his Cadillac and roll backwards down the steep driveway to Hart Road.

"So, what do you think, buddy?" Erie asked her. "Am I crazy or just senile?"

The little black cat didn't reply.

Ault called back an hour later with the information. Delmonte Octavio Johnson was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, on July 3, 1981. Mark Lee Holt was born in Lafayette, Indiana, on November 14, 1977. Erie should show up at the ballpark at 4 P.M.

Erie thanked his client, hung up, and called his friend Bass.

"A client? You mean, you've got a case? Well, yeeeha!" Bass whooped when he heard the news. "So what are we talkin' about here? Murder?

Blackmail? Some kinda sex scandal?"

"No, nothing like that. Someone just wants me to make a few inquiries."

"A few inquiries? What does that mean? You're gonna be asking old ladies how the weather's treatin' 'em today?"

"I can't talk about it, Bass. It's confidential."

"Confidential? So confidential you can't even tell me?"

"Yes, that confidential."

"Well, be that way then, James Bond."

Bass had a habit of taking offense at things and then instantly forgiving them — which he did once again.

"I tell you what I'm gonna do," he said, suddenly sounding amused. "One a' these days, I'm gonna convince you to hire me on as your assistant. I'll follow you around and help you out on cases. Then you won't have to worry about being confidential, cuz I'll be working with you. I'll be like your Dr. Watkins."

"Dr. who?"

"You know— the tubby fella with the mustache. British. In those movies."

"Oh, right." Erie didn't feel like getting into a debate about old movie characters. He didn't want to waste his client's time. "So, Bass, what's Andrew up to today?"

Bass was a widower, like Erie. While Erie had filled his empty house with cats, Bass had filled his with a teenager. Andrew was a neighborhood kid Bass had informally adopted. He'd lived across

the street from Bass until he'd endured a few too many slaps and put-downs from his alcoholic dad. He'd been living in Bass's basement for about a month.

"Oh, he's downstairs doin' what he always does — playin' with his computer and listenin' to that head-banger music. I've been tryin' to find him a summer job somewhere. I saw a Help Wanted sign over at the Hardee's on 41, but when I . . ."

"I've got some work for him."

"Well, that's just great. I'll go and . . . hold on there. Does this have anything to do with your case?"

Erie stifled a sigh. "Yes, it does."

"So you can't tell me about it, but you can tell Andrew?"

"I'm not going to tell him any more than he needs to know. But he can help me out."

"Well, I'll go tell him you want to talk to him, then. I guess playing messenger boy's all this old man's good for."

There was a thud as Bass put the phone down on something. Erie could hear him stomp away, grumbling. A minute later, Andrew came on the line.

"Hey, Larry. What's going on?"

Erie filled the kid in, editing as much as he could. He didn't mention the Brewers and he didn't mention the bat. But he gave him the information on Johnson and Holt and told him he was interested in any recent activity involving rare sports collectibles with a River City connection.

"Yeah, sure, I can check on all that. Do you want credit reports on these guys or just public records?"

Erie wasn't sure if Andrew was

joking or not. The kid was a wiz with computers.

"Whatever's legal, Andrew," he said. "Will ten dollars an hour be enough?"

"I'm getting paid for this? Bonus. I was gonna do it just for the fun of it. Yeah, ten bucks an hour is great."

"Good. I'll be by to pick everything up at three-thirty."

"No prob. It'll be ready."

Erie heard a muffled voice on the line, and Andrew said, "Hold on, Larry. Bass wants to say something to you."

Erie steeled himself. He heard the phone being passed from hand to hand.

"Hey, Larry," Bass said. "Are you sure you don't need a bodyguard on this case? In case you run into some rough stuff? You know I'm pretty handy with my fists."

Erie laughed. "I tell you what, Bass. If there's any 'rough stuff,' you'll be the first person I call."

"Well, okay then," Bass said, sounding almost pleased. "That's all I needed to hear."

The greater River City metro area has more baseball card shops than detective agencies—five in all. Erie spent the rest of the afternoon driving around to each of them, making small talk with the men behind the counters about this, that, the Brewers, Stormy Weathers. There wasn't much scuttlebutt about this year's Brewers lineup. Just the usual crop of kids and dreamers. And no, no one had seen any Stormy Weathers collectibles recently. Negro Leagues stuff was pretty rare. "Not much interest in

that around here," one bearded, overweight man had told Erie. Erie knew what he was saying.

Andrew had a more productive afternoon sitting in Bass's basement. When Erie showed up, the teenager had a small pile of printouts for him.

"This is everything I could find about those baseball guys," he reported, handing the papers over to Erie on the front step of Bass's house. "I cruised around eBay and some of the sports auction sites, but I didn't find any Stormy Weathers stuff posted."

Erie tried to look confused. "Baseball guys? Stormy Weathers? Who said anything about baseball guys or Stormy Weathers?"

"The kid ain't dumb, Larry!" Bass shouted from somewhere on the other side of the screen door.

"I know that!" Erie called back. "Now stop eavesdropping!"

Bass didn't answer, but Erie could hear him grumbling something to himself.

Erie started flipping through the pile of papers. The first few were printouts from a newspaper's website.

"High School Hero Headed to Big Leagues?" was the headline on one story. It was a recent article from the *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*. It was about Del Johnson.

Erie kept flipping and came across a sheet of paper overflowing with tiny print. He had to squint to make out what was on the page. He looked back up at Andrew.

"Is this what I think it is?"

Andrew nodded, obviously proud.

It was Del Johnson's high school transcript.

"I don't want to know how you got this."

"That's okay. I wouldn't tell you if you did."

The kid flashed him a wise-ass smile. Erie went back to flipping through the sheets of paper. It was mostly more *Journal Gazette* articles that mentioned Johnson. RED-SKINS EYE REGIONAL PENNANT, RED-SKIN PITCHING OVERPOWERS INDY CHAMPS, stuff like that.

"You're getting close to the Mark Lee Holt section now," Andrew said.

After a few more flips, Erie saw what he meant. The stories changed. He wasn't looking at sports page features anymore. Now the articles were no more than forty or fifty words long. They had headlines like AREA YOUTH CHARGED WITH THEFT and LAFAYETTE MAN ARRESTED FOR BREAKING AND ENTERING. The name Mark Lee Holt popped up in all of them. When Erie came across a page filled with small type, it wasn't Holt's school transcript. It was his arrest record.

"Johnson looks like just another jock to me. But this other dude—he's my kind of guy," Andrew said.

Erie looked up at the grinning kid. He'd had his own run-ins with the law.

"I thought Bass and I were reforming you," Erie said to him.

Andrew nodded. "Oh, sure, you are. Crime does not pay. I've learned that." He held out his hand. "Now I think we agreed to ten dol-

lars an hour, so you owe me thirty bucks.”

Half an hour later, Erie pulled into the parking lot in front of Lloyd Field. The lot was almost deserted. It wasn't the kind of place where you could watch players pull up in their SUVs and Lamborghinis. You were more likely to see them getting off buses or being dropped off by middle-aged women in minivans and station wagons. Weeds sprouted from cracks in the pavement.

Erie spotted Ault's silver Caddy in a reserved space. It was the fanciest car in sight.

Erie walked over to the main entrance, a bank of turnstiles under a brick archway. A chain-link fence on rollers was pushed to one side of the archway, unused. It wasn't exactly Fort Knox. No one was around to officially let him in, so Erie just slid over one of the turnstiles.

The only light inside streamed in through the entrance and down the ramps that led up to the seats. But there was just enough for Erie to see by.

The Wall of Fame was less than twenty yards away. It looked as unremarkable as ever in the half-dark, except for the jagged hole in the glass case beneath the pictures. Erie moved towards it, hoping to hear the sound of glass crunching under his feet. No such luck. The concrete floor around the Wall of Fame had been swept clean. Erie bent down and peered inside the case. Something shimmered inside.

The lights came on with a loud

clack, bathing everything in a sickly yellow fluorescent glow. Footsteps echoed off the walls, and a voice said, “Can I help you?”

“It's me, Dr. Ault. Larry Erie.”

“Oh. I didn't recognize you in the dark,” Ault said as he moved closer. “You changed your clothes.” There was something about the way he said it that made it seem that he didn't like the idea much.

Erie had put on a suit and tie before coming over to the stadium. “I'm working now, Dr. Ault,” he explained. “You caught me in my puttering-around-the-house clothes.”

Ault attempted a polite smile. He didn't quite pull it off.

“So,” Erie said, turning to “the vault.” “The scene of the crime.”

Ault nodded stiffly. “Yes.”

Erie crouched down again and looked inside the case. There were various mementos inside—a football helmet, a catcher's mitt, a basketball—each with a little bronze plaque explaining the item's significance. The space next to one plaque was empty. “Bat used by River City baseball great James ‘Stormy’ Weathers, Negro Leagues World Series, 1946,” the plaque said. Shards of glass were spread evenly over the faux velvet lining all around it.

“The inside of the case hasn't been touched?”

“No. But we're going to have to board it up before the game tonight. And I'm taking the plaque out, of course.”

Erie was disappointed with himself. It hadn't occurred to him to bring a camera. There were no evidence techs to snap shots of the

shattered case for the files. Erie resolved to buy a Polaroid camera, then instantly reconsidered. He didn't know if he'd ever have another case, so why bother?

"How does the display case open?" he asked.

Ault stepped over and pointed to a small, circular lock mechanism built into the wood paneling on the left-hand corner of the case. "I'm the only one with a key. The Wall of Fame is my responsibility," he said.

Erie examined the lock for a moment, then pulled his keys out of his pocket. Attached to his keychain was a small Swiss army knife. He flipped out the smallest blade—little more than a sliver of metal—and gingerly worked it into the lock.

"What are you doing?"

"Just . . ."

Click. The broken glass panel swung out on a hinge.

" . . . experimenting."

Erie pocketed his knife and pushed the glass panel back into place.

"So are Johnson and Holt here yet? I'd like to talk to them," he said as he stood up.

"They're out on the field practicing with the rest of the team. This way."

Ault led him up the nearest ramp into the sunshine. Down below them, about twenty blue-and-gray uniformed men were stretching, sprinting, taking batting practice, throwing balls around. The sights and sounds of it brought a smile to Erie's face. Maybe it was only minor league baseball in a run-down old stadium in southern Indiana, but it

was still baseball. He'd never been much of an athlete, but he could understand why young men would want to put off a real job, a real life, for just one more summer of this.

Ault pointed out a wiry black player pitching in a bullpen near right field. "There's Johnson," he said. He pointed to another player who was leaning against the brick wall near one of the dugouts, waiting for his turn in front of a pitching machine that was hurling balls over home plate. "That's Holt. Which one do you want to talk to first?"

With a loud crack, the player at the plate sent a long fly ball deep into left field. It didn't quite make it to the warning track before dropping into the left fielder's glove, but the batter got a few cheers from his teammates just the same.

Erie couldn't help but wonder how he'd do in front of the pitching machine. He'd played baseball in high school and softball in a church league until his bad back retired him from team sports altogether. But there was a part of his soul that was still itching to grab a bat and try to send one over the fence. What red-blooded American male wouldn't get that feeling watching the pitching machine in action?

The pitching machine. It was little more than a spinning rubber wheel with a box on top to hold the balls. It didn't look very heavy at all. One man could easily move it into position and load it.

"You know, Dr. Ault, I think I've got a new angle on this case," Erie said. He kept his eyes on the players. Lee Holt was stepping into the

batter's box. "Johnson doesn't make any sense as a suspect. He's got a future—or at least a chance for a future. Would he risk throwing that away by stealing something out of his own home field?"

"So you think it's Holt?"

Holt fouled off the first pitch and sent the second bouncing down the third-base line.

"Well, like you say, he's not bubblegum card material. And he's no stranger to petty larceny. But that's part of the problem."

"What do you mean?"

Holt finally got a solid hit, a line drive that shot through the infield between second and first.

"I mean, he knows how to pick a lock. If I could open that case in ten seconds, he could do it in three. So why pull a smash-and-grab?"

"You think it's someone else then? Someone who broke in at night? It can be done. We've known that for a long time. Every other weekend we've got kids running loose in here trying to find where we keep the beer. And now they've . . ."

"But . . ."

Ault was chattering so loud and so fast he didn't even hear Erie the first time.

"But," Erie said again. This time Ault stopped.

"There's something else," Erie went on. "The shattered glass in the trophy case is spread fairly evenly around the plaque for the bat. That suggests something very strange."

Erie waited for Ault's "And what would that be?" but it didn't come. So he pressed on anyway.

"You would expect to see some kind of pattern to the glass—an outline around the spot where the bat was mounted. But there's nothing like that. Which means maybe the bat wasn't in the case when the glass was broken. Maybe it was never there at all."

Erie waited again for a prompt from Ault. A "What are you saying?" or perhaps a "You're crazy." What he got, instead, was a quiet, "I didn't steal it."

"I'm not saying you did."

"I broke it," Ault continued.

Erie nodded out at the pitcher's mound.

"With that. After Holt and Johnson left for the night."

"Yes. I just wanted to feel what it would be like to get one hit with Stormy Weathers' bat in my hand. Just one hit."

"And that's all it took."

"Yes, damn it. I hit one measly little blooper, barely out of the infield, and it split right in two."

Erie finally turned to face his client. A bitter, sad grimace twisted Ault's long, lean face. He still couldn't believe the cosmic injustice that had been done to him. Just one hit, that's all he'd wanted. Just one moment of glory.

Erie didn't judge the man. He just felt horribly embarrassed.

"Where is it now?"

"Hidden in my garage. I couldn't admit what happened to my partners or Stormy's daughter. It's . . . I . . . I feel so humiliated."

Erie started to say something, then stopped himself. He started again, then stopped.

"This is . . . awkward, Dr. Ault," he

finally got out. "I've never been in a situation like this before. You're my client. I'm working for you. I can't tell you what to do here. But I guess I can give you a little advice. Admit what happened now, before this goes any further. I think you know that's the right thing to do."

Ault nodded quickly, then slapped a hand up over his eyes and turned away. He was crying.

Erie left without asking his final question: "Why did you hire me?"

He knew the answer. Ault was trying to hide his mistake. He had to play out the theft scenario all the way. But he couldn't go to the police. That would be too dangerous. So he'd convinced his partners to hire a private investigator—to avoid bad publicity, of course.

And who do you turn to if you've got a mystery you don't really want solved? Just flip open the yellow pages and find the cheapest, slop-

piest nickel-and-dime detective agency in town.

How about one that won't even pony up the money for a real ad? One run by an old man and his cats out of a house in the suburbs? Perfect.

The only job Erie was good for was one he was supposed to botch. Except he'd botched botching it. That was some consolation.

Driving home, Erie tried to push these thoughts out of his head by turning on the radio.

"... count is three and one. Gonzalez winds up annnnnd blows one right by LaRue.

"That was a beautiful pitch. Right across the knees. We should be watching that one drop into the Ohio.

"Three and two is the count now."

It was a Reds game. The big leagues.

Erie turned the radio off.

At the End of the Path

Eve Fisher

When I heard you were coming I was in two minds about talking to you. You've got to understand, I've had people out here asking questions for what, sixty years now? You can't kill your dad when you're only twelve years old and not have some people come by from time to time asking why. And here I am in prison, well, I'm a sitting duck. You can always find me to home, you betcha.

And the questions, they're all pretty much the same: Why'd you do it? Was your pa a violent man? Did the loneliness get to you, out there on the prairie? You ever kill small animals? How about your ma, what was she like? Yeah, I've been asked them all, and I've answered them every way you can think of. But I'm not answering any more questions, I can tell you that right now. What I'm going to do is tell you as best I can what happened and, well, you can do with it what you will. I don't care.

Now you know what the record says. My parents were both killed at their claim shanty. My father was found sprawled across the table, shot to death with a double-barreled shotgun right in the chest. My mother—well, she was lying out in the yard. Only footsteps around were theirs, and mine. They tracked me down and found me two miles away at Dark Hollow, curled up and sleeping at the edge of the pine trees. First thing I said when they woke me up was, "I shot him."

The trial didn't take long. Only reason they didn't hang me was 'cause I was twelve. Instead, they gave me life without parole, and here I am. And that was fine with me, believe it or not. But then, I never figured life would last so long.

Don't worry, I ain't gonna start blubbering about how hard it's been. The way I see it, most things are hard, but all you got to do is just last through it, because most things end. I've only known a couple of things that didn't, and none of them are here. They're outside.

You know, that's the only thing that's ever really bothered me: I've never been outside since. I mean *outside*. With no walls or fences or buildings, nothing but you and the land and the sky. That's what I miss.

I loved it out there. We had a half-section in the middle of miles of grassy hills. Lord, I loved those hills. Tall grass as high as my belly. In high summer it would bleach out, and the wind would move the grass around until it looked like the earth was this huge tawny animal and God was stroking its fur with His fingers.

I'd go running out in the morning and play all day long. Didn't have any chores back then, other than to fetch water and pick up chips for the

fire. There were still buffalo chips on the hills. Buffalo dead and gone for God knows how long, and there were still chips, that's how many buffalo there had been. I tried to think of what they must have been like, before they killed them all, but I couldn't do it. I never did have much of an imagination.

But what I liked best was the silence. No such thing nowadays. Not like that. The wind blew, the grass whispered, the birds called, I breathed, my heart beat, but hanging thick, running deep, and welling up was a silence that none of it could touch. It was what held the land and sky together.

I remember it clear, real clear. You get up to my age, you don't keep track of much of anything else but your childhood. That comes back clear as a bell. And I haven't had all that much else to remember. I was born in the claim shanty my father built the first year he got there. My earliest recollection is him standing in the doorway, looking out. The door faced east and the sun was rising strong, but the place was so small and my father was so big, he blocked out the light and it had to shine around him. I can still see him like it was yesterday, dark as pitch, outlined with beams of light.

He was a dark man. Wasn't easy to know. Wasn't easy to love. I loved him, but he was my father, and children'll love anything that raises them. You don't think that's true, talk to some of the boys around here. You'd be surprised what they love. It's the liking that's hard to earn. My mother was easier, but she had her dark sides, too. Like the one that would stare out at the hills every morning, waiting, and when you called her name she wouldn't answer back. And when you touched her, she jumped. Then at night she'd tell ghost stories and scare the crap out of you. She'd laugh when you flinched, and tell you more.

They fought all the time. Words, fists, pots, knives, anything. Worse was when they quit fighting and there was dead silence. That was the worst of all. That silence I was talking about, out on the hills, that was a living thing. Things grew out of it. But in our house, when the talk and shouts and crashes stopped, it was like another piece of them had died, and it wasn't coming back again. I used to wonder how many silences it would take before they both just vanished.

Me, I'd take off, every chance I got. Out of the house. Up on the hills. Day was no problem, but at night they'd try to stop me. I'd say I had to visit the outhouse. Then I'd take off, go far enough away so that the light in the window was just a dot in the dark. There was one place I'd always go, this outcrop of rock. From there, you could see the house on the one side, with that warm dot of light, and on the other the hills stretching out forever. Sooner or later, Dad would come out the door and call out, "Johnny! Get back in here right now! It's bedtime!" That meant they were done for the night, and I'd have to go back. If I didn't, he'd track me down. I've always been real easy to track down.

One night, my mother came out.

“Johnny!” she called. And I shivered worse than in a blizzard wind. “Johnny!” she called again. She couldn’t see me, but I could see her. The light from the fire was blazing behind her. “Johnny!” She staggered out into the yard, and her head was all wrong. “Johnny!”

The next thing I knew I was running like wild Indians were behind me, straight over the hills, my feet hammering into the ground, the tall grass cutting at my legs.

“Johnny!”

I couldn’t stop running. I wanted to throw up, but I couldn’t stop running. I wanted to do something else, cry maybe, I don’t know, but I couldn’t stop running. And then the earth dropped out from under me, and I was skidding on the grass, and over stones, and down a steep hill, and all around me were trees, and in I went.

I crouched like a dog in those pine needles, sore and gasping. It was quiet and dark and I could hear my heart pounding. Way up the wind was blowing, but down where I was it was still. And there was the silence back. Like a warm, soft blanket. After a long while I curled up under it and slept.

It was the voices that woke me up.

“He would drown in sleep if he but could.” A woman’s voice, strange and slow. “How did he come here?”

And a voice, more like a rumble of thunder than a man’s: “He ran. From what he could not bear.”

And behind my eyelids, I saw my mother, a wrong shadow outlined in burning light, staggering in the yard. I shuddered as the woman said:

“Is she . . . all right?”

“I do not know. Do you want me to find out?”

“Yes.”

I opened my eyes. It was just at dawn, the light slanting through the long row of tree trunks. Outlined with long, bright, dusty beams of light was a huge dark figure that would’ve made even my father look bright. I clamped my eyes tight shut. When I opened them again, there she was.

After a stretch of silence, she asked, “Are you all right?” She was young, with long black hair that hung to her knees and a face like carved pine. “Are you all right?” she asked again. I nodded. Her eyes, bird dark, bird clear, bird bright, looked me up one side and down the other. She nodded, turned around, and started walking away. Then she stopped and called to me over her shoulder, “Come.” I just stared at her. “You must be hungry. Come.”

I got up and ran after her.

She fed me berries and parched corn, groundnuts and honey in the comb. I was starving, and gobbled it down. The same gourd that was my plate she rinsed out in the small dark pond and filled with water for my

thirst. The whole time she hadn't said a word, and I was too busy eating to say anything myself but, "Thank you, ma'am."

Now I was used to eating quiet, because children should be seen and not heard, and I've spoke about the silence in my house already. But this was a third kind of quiet. It was in *her*: Her tongue was still, her hands were still, her body was still, and her face was still. Only her eyes were alive, and I started to think that any minute she might take off her face, like a mask, and I wasn't any too sure what would be under it. I'm still not sure. All I can say is it spooked me, spooked me bad. Once I finished my gourdful, I reckoned I'd better sprout some talk.

"My name's Johnny Olson," I said. "What's yours?" She didn't say anything. "You're an Indian, aren't you?" She still didn't say anything, so I hurried on. "My folks are settlers. We've got a claim . . ." I realized I didn't exactly know where the claim was and skipped it. "We come from out East. My dad and my mom—" I stopped again, a cold sweat breaking all over me. I saw Mom again, staggering in the yard, with her head . . .

She cupped her hands around my head. "Hush," she said. "All is safe. Rest." And I was warm and safe and sleepy. I lay down on the soft moss by the pond and looked up at her sitting beside me, and at the long stretch of tall firs rowed behind her.

"Those trees sure are nice," I said.

"I planted them," she began, and everything she said I saw as clear as I see you. I saw her brown hands cupped around them when they were like ferns, just broken from the cone. "It was a growing spring, that year," she said, and I saw plum and chokecherry, waterleaf and crowfoot, primrose and meadow rose breathing out light and color. "They were in a dark place. Too dark." I watched her move the seedlings, one by one, until she had two long rows of small green crosses. I blinked, and those dots of green became the great firs above our heads; I blinked again, and they were seedlings. "Dark that Rides laughed that I made a path of them." I watched the seedlings grow tall and strong and straight. The path grew between them, bedded deep in soft brown needles. I saw her walk the path, the red owl fly it, the deer stand in it, and through it ran streams of sunlight flowing out onto grass so green I could almost smell the sweet of it. It would be warm in summer, safe in winter, sheltered always. "And at the end of it, Dark that Rides." Her voice was very happy, but I shuddered. That dark figure I had seen so briefly, that living nightmare, was for her a love and protection as sweet as honey, as absolute as death. She passed her hand over my hair. "Sleep," she said, and stood up.

"You're not going away, are you?"

Her dark eyes blinked once, slowly. "There is no place here where I am not." I closed my eyes.

Here's where I can't be certain if it's what I heard or what I dreamed, but either way, it's true. That dark thing came back, and she called to him.

“Dark that Rides!”

“Crow Woman. Here.” From behind her, he put something into her hands; when they opened, out came yet another voice, singing:

“Sing heigh-ho, the derry-oh,
Sing heigh-ho, and the wind and the rain.
Sing heigh-ho, the wind it does blow,
Sing heigh-ho, the wind and the rain.
Sing heigh-ho, the rain is so cold,
Sing heigh-ho, the wind and the rain.
Sing heigh-ho—”

Crow Woman closed her hands, and the voice stopped. “Whose song is it?” she asked.

“Not mine.”

“The woman’s?”

“I am not sure. It was there waiting to be heard, and so I brought it. But I am not sure it came from her.”

In my head I saw a fire burning. The flames were running a river of warmth up the air, the sparks dancing on the dark night. The smoky smell setting off the crisp air. “She was never the same,” a voice was saying. An old woman’s voice. “They found her sitting there, rocking like a child, singing the same thing over and over again . . .” And the moccasins stamping dust.

“Has she lost her mind?” Crow Woman asked.

Dark that Rides spoke: “I am not sure of what her mind was like before.” A dread was gathering in me like a storm, and I could feel my whole body shaking. “The boy must go back.”

“If he goes back . . .” Crow Woman whispered.

“He is not a plant to be moved, even at your will,” Dark that Rides whispered. “He cannot be made into a path. He must follow the path already made.”

“If he goes back . . .” she said again. And I saw it, in the distance, leaping up the way a fire leaps into the dark.

“You saved me!” she cried.

“He could save her.”

The woman, staggering in the firelight. The darkness behind. My mother. Above us the wind ripped the leaves loose from the trees and sent them torn into the night.

When I woke up, I was at the edge of the trees. Crow Woman was standing by me. The wind sent up her hair like a black cape around her, and behind that Dark that Rides rode darker still.

“You must go. Now.” She was looking out, across the rolling hills, and I knew she was looking toward the cabin. “They need you.”

And then I was blubbering like a baby, with fear and anger and hurt and rage in me coming out in a long pour that was half beg, half threat, and all crazy. She listened—I think—and then she said, in the same voice, “You must go.” Suddenly she bent down, and that carved face was inches from mine. “You have a choice, but not to stay.” Those eyes, blazing through that wooden face. I shrank away from them, into the grass. Dark that Rides was safe, compared to her eyes. “Remember that. You have a choice.” The eyes died down. “And this will be the dream of a frightened boy, torn like a dog by the night.” She made a slight gesture. “You cannot stay asleep forever. Wake up.”

And I did. I don’t know how, I don’t know when, all I know is I was walking across the fields, yawning and hungry and scared, but wide awake and walking home.

My mother was lying in the yard. My father was in the kitchen. There was a lot of blood, most of it dry. They were both still breathing. Our nearest neighbor was a good five miles away, but I could get there and back with some help and they’d be fine, or at least get over it. All I had to do was hurry.

I was thirsty.

I’d just dipped some water when I heard the sound. I turned around, and my father was up, moving towards me. I never want to see such a sight again. I dropped the dipper and the water spilled everywhere as I picked up the gun.

I never want to hear such a scream again.

She was right, you know. I had a choice. I could have run, but I didn’t. I stopped for water. When he rose up, I had another choice. I could have run again, but I didn’t. I shot him. It took him awhile to die, and I stood there and watched. By then my mother was dead, too.

Where do you go when you dream? I heard him ask her that once: the dark one, I mean, not my father. Dark that Rides, he asked Crow Woman. Took me a long time to learn who they were, but I managed. Dark that Rides, who saved Crow Woman’s life one autumn day, one, two hundred years ago or more. And ever since she’s been with him in Dark Hollow. Yep. People laugh at me for believing old Indian tales. But she’s still there. I know it. I’ve seen her. I’ve talked to her. She’s there. And so is he.

Where do you go when you dream? I don’t know where she goes, but I go over the plains and the prairie and straight to Dark Hollow. For sixty years I’ve stood outside in my dreams and looked in through those tall pines. That day, when I finally did run—and I ran, all right, ran straight back to her—she wouldn’t let me in. The trees—her trees—sewed themselves together and kept me out, but I could see her, flickering like a light down that path she’d made, and Dark that Rides billowing around her like a shawl in the wind.

I couldn’t get in then, but of late I have. I’ve been able to walk inside,

down the row of trees. One of these nights I'm going to make it all the way to the pond, and when I do I'm going to curl up in the moss and go to sleep. And when I wake up, I'll be there. Truly there. And she'll be there, with that face like carved pine and those blazing eyes, Dark that Rides behind her. I'm hoping that this time she'll let me stay. I'll know if she takes off the mask.

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Hulton Archives

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

The winning entry for the February Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 239.

Tradesman's Exit

John H. Dirckx

A fly settled on Glen Laszlo's chili and began to explore it with the air of a connoisseur. Laszlo took a swipe at the fly with a paper napkin but missed and splashed chili over the plastic tablecloth. "You left the screen door open again, Kyle," he grumbled, repeating a well-worn formula.

"It sticks," drawled his brother-in-law into his beer. "Don't make much difference if it's open or shut, with the screen half busted out of it."

Maxene Laszlo, who had her brother's rusty hair and bulky frame, shifted in her chair and fixed her husband with a resentful scowl. "We wouldn't need a screen door if you'd get the air conditioner fixed."

"Don't start that again, Maxene. You saw the estimate. Business isn't that good right now."

"When was your business ever good?" asked Kyle Givens.

"At least I earn what I spend," retorted Laszlo.

"That's easy for you to say. As far as I'm concerned, I just live for the day when I see the last of you."

"Hey, Kyle, you can get out of my place any time you like."

"If he goes," said Maxene, "I go."

Her husband looked up in genuine bewilderment mixed with hurt. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I like to eat once in a while." (Laszlo smothered a sar-

castic retort.) "It means Kyle's disability check is buying us more groceries than what the shop is."

"Right now, maybe. But business is bound to get better. I've got some new leads, and things are going to pick up."

"That's what you said when you bought all those eight-track players and tapes," said Maxene. "And when you got online and started cruising here and hacking there. How about hacking a little steak into the freezer?"

Maxene Laszlo and her brother then proceeded to carry on an animated conversation as if Laszlo weren't sitting right across the kitchen table from them. The gist of the script had been established months, even years, before. The theme was Laszlo's failure to get rich despite his ambitious ideas and vaunted skill as a computer whiz, and the bottom line was that he would be worth more to Maxene dead than alive—provided his life insurance premiums were paid up.

Instead of reassuring them on that point, Laszlo left his meal unfinished and stamped out of the house, slamming the screen door behind him. Above them the ceiling fan droned on, and from time to time another fly appeared on the scene.

At seven fifty the next morning,

Patrolman Fritz Dollinger responded to a call from the dispatcher to check on an alleged dead body in an alley in the Smallwood district.

When he arrived in the alley, a crowd had already assembled. The morning was damp and cool for July, but the joggers and idlers were abroad. Dollinger parked in the middle of the alley to block any through traffic and hauled his massive form out of the cruiser.

A blonde with a nondescript dog on a leash came forward. "I'm the one that called," she said. "It's over there. My dog found it."

The body—for there certainly was one—lay in and partly under a mound of rubbish between two large steel trash receptacles enameled green. Dollinger cleared plastic wrapping materials and kitchen garbage away from the face. A white male in his forties, casually dressed, the skin cold and lead-colored, the limbs growing stiff.

"Anybody know him?" The crowd was only too pleased to move in closer for an inspection of the dead man, but nobody recognized him.

Dollinger fished in the pockets of the soiled gray flannel slacks for a wallet but found only a ring of keys and an empty glasses case. The case, however, bore an identification tag. "Glen Laszlo," he announced. "Four forty-five Winthrop." The alley they were in ran parallel to the nine hundred block of Winthrop. "Mean anything to anybody?"

It didn't. Then Dollinger noticed the blood on his fingers, and saw where it had come from—a gaping

rent in the dead man's shirt, between ribs and belt buckle. He went straight to the trunk of his cruiser and scrubbed with chlorine bleach before calling headquarters. Then he put on a pair of rubber gloves and went back to search for the weapon.

When Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn arrived at headquarters that morning, his immediate superior, Lieutenant Savage, met him in the corridor outside his office.

"Dollinger's got a citizen down, in an alley out in Smallwood," said Savage. "Knifed in the gut sometime last night. No wallet, no weapon. Kestrel's on his way there. Want to check it out?"

"Any I.D. at all?"

"They got a name and address off his glasses case. If it *is* his. They haven't checked on next of kin yet. You'd better get on that first."

Before leaving headquarters, Auburn consulted the city map on the wall in the dispatchers' room. It took a quarter of an hour for him to get to the middle-class residential district called Smallwood.

By the time he reached the scene, the alley had been cordoned off at both ends of the block with yellow plastic tape. He parked on a side street behind the police evidence van. The group of onlookers had swelled considerably, and a peanut gallery of teenage boys had gathered on the roof of a garage across the alley.

The area around the body was a scene of concerted activity. Dollinger was rooting in widening circles among weeds and rubbish, still

searching for the weapon. The coroner's investigator, Nick Stamaty, looking dapper and self-possessed in gold-rimmed glasses and a light blue lounge suit, was going over the body on the ground, while Sergeant Kestrel, the evidence technician from headquarters, was methodically removing things from one of the trash containers and laying them in precisely even rows on the ground.

All three were wearing rubber gloves.

Auburn touched base with Dollinger first. The lady with the dog, who lived at the end of the block, had gone home to get ready for work. Auburn read over the statement Dollinger had obtained from her.

Stamaty and Kestrel had already taken photographs of the body and the scene. Now they were working around each other with the elaborate politeness of two martial arts opponents just waiting for the signal to tear each other apart.

On top of Stamaty's field kit lay a plastic bag containing a wet red pulpy mass. "What's this?" said Auburn.

"Three smashed cherries, with pits, from his left-hand pants pocket."

"Anything else on him?"

"Just a ring of keys, some small change, and this." He showed Auburn the empty brown plastic spectacle case with the name and address inside the flap.

Auburn squatted to examine the dead man's face. The features were even, somewhat angular, not very imposing. The hair was the color of

a worn-out doormat, pretty sparse on top. "Where are his glasses?"

"No glasses here within a radius of about ten yards," said Stamaty. "Probably just wore them for reading. He's about that age. He wouldn't need them for a walk down the alley."

"Then why'd he have the empty case in his pocket? And you'd think he would have had a wallet on him, too. Looks like robbery, doesn't it?"

"Yes and no." Stamaty had been a beat cop for years in another city before joining the coroner's office. "There's not much blood here. He may have been killed somewhere else and dumped here during the night. As stiff as he is, I'd bet he died before it got dark last night. This seems like a pretty public spot for a knifing."

"Anybody been in touch with the family yet?" asked Auburn, knowing the answer perfectly well.

"I'll come with you," volunteered Stamaty, who dealt with grieving survivors day in and day out.

Auburn's knock at the Laszlo residence was answered by a stout redhead.

"Is Mr. Laszlo in?"

"He's not home," she said. A man, bigger and redder than she was, hovered behind her in the entry hall. He was chewing gum with relish and abandon, and it looked as if the effort was consuming about a third of his available brain power.

"Glen didn't come home last night," the man told Auburn. "Try his shop, six blocks north on Richmond. Glen's Electronic Salvage."

"Are you Mrs. Laszlo?" Auburn asked the woman.

"Yes, I'm Maxene."

"We may have some bad news for you. Could we come in?"

"What kind of bad news?" she asked, with a catch in her throat. She stepped aside and led Auburn and Stamaty into the living room.

"A man was found in the alley about four blocks north of here this morning. He had these in his pocket."

"Those are Glen's keys," said the man, "and that's his glasses case. Where is he?"

"He's still at the scene. Are you a family member, sir?"

"I'm Maxene's brother."

"Would it be possible for one of you to come with us and see if you can identify him?"

"You mean he's—he's—"

"Yes, ma'am, he's dead. I'm sorry."

He was glad Stamaty was along, even though he was doing all the talking himself.

"Well, what *happened* to him?" She wailed like a siren, but Auburn saw no tears.

"We think he was attacked and robbed. Would he have had a lot of money on him, or anything valuable?"

"Not Glen," said the man. "He can't even pay the rent. I'll come with you."

"We're both coming. Lock the kitchen door, Kyle."

Auburn had driven to the Laszlo house to spare the survivors the ordeal of walking the quarter mile. Stamaty rode in front. When they got to the scene, Mrs. Laszlo broke down. "You go, Kyle, and see if it's him. I can't get out in front of all those people."

The crowd certainly hadn't thinned, though the onlookers were keeping at a respectful distance. Dollinger and Kestrel suspended operations as Auburn and Stamaty approached with Kyle. The body was now covered with a blue plastic sheet. Stamaty, officially in charge of the remains, uncovered the face.

Kyle took one look and turned away, signaling with a nod his recognition of Laszlo to the woman waiting in the car. She covered her face and sank back in her seat.

"No doubt in your mind?" asked Stamaty. "This is definitely Mr. Glen Laszlo?"

"Yes, it's Glen all right."

Auburn took out a three-by-five-inch file card and a pen. "Your name, sir?"

"Kyle Givens." Auburn printed the name on the card. In his head he filed the round, freckled, unhealthy face, the cracked combat boots, and the fingernails gnawed down to the quick.

"And your address?"

"Right where you found me. I live with my sister."

"Where do you work, Mr. Givens?"

"I'm total and permanent."

"You're which, sir?"

"Service Connected Disability." The way he said it, Auburn could hear the capital letters. "I picked up this parasite in the Gulf War."

They had moved back toward the car. Mrs. Laszlo was sobbing violently, her large, shapeless body sloshing around in her large, shapeless sundress like the water in a waterbed.

"I'm sorry," Auburn told her again, with perfect truthfulness. He would rather have been at the dentist's. "I'll take you both back home."

Stamaty talked briefly with Mrs. Laszlo and gave her his card. He stayed at the scene while Auburn drove them home.

"I know this has been a terrible shock," he said as they drew up before the house, "and that you need some time by yourselves, but I wonder if I could just get some basic information from you both right now?" They went back into the house. "When was the last time you saw Mr. Laszlo alive?" Auburn asked them.

They looked at each other for a long moment before Maxene Laszlo replied, "Right after dinner last night. Glen went to the shop—"

"What time would that have been?"

"About a quarter to seven. The sports was on."

"He walked?"

"No, he took the truck."

"Did he go to the shop every night?"

"Pretty often."

Auburn looked at Givens. "You said electronic salvage, I think?"

"Right. Worn-out stereos and obsolete computers. Not exactly a gold mine."

"Was it unusual for him to stay there all night?"

"Not all that unusual," said Mrs. Laszlo, who was growing more composed since taking a pill from a bottle in her purse. "He'd get to working on some project or some computer program and fall asleep right in his chair."

"Did he mention any particular plans when he left last night?"

They agreed that he hadn't.

"Were you in touch with him by phone after he left?"

"No."

"Were you both here all evening?"

"Yes, sir, we were," said Mrs. Laszlo. "Kyle and I were sitting right here watching television till way after midnight." She paused in painful reflection. "How did—how —"

"How was he killed? Stabbed, ma'am. Probably died instantly." He waited for her to digest that. "He didn't have a wallet on him, or any cash except some small change. We're assuming he was robbed."

"What I don't understand," said Givens, "is what he was doing there in the alley in the first place."

"It might not have happened there," said Auburn. "Had he had any trouble with anybody lately—any arguments, threats?"

Not that they knew of.

"Are there any other family members or friends, or neighbors, he might have talked to last night after he left here?"

"No family members. Neighbors—you'd have to ask around."

"One other thing. We didn't find his glasses. Would he have been wearing them last night, do you think?"

"He would if he was working on something at the shop."

"Is there anybody at the shop now?"

"No. Glen ran the business by himself."

When Auburn got back to the alley, the plastic tape was gone. He

found Kestrel washing his hands at the elegant lavatory in the rear compartment of the evidence van.

"Find anything at all?"

"Seven brands of beer bottle, five brands of wine bottle, four brands of whisky bottle." Kestrel rattled off the statistics in his usual humorless fashion, and Auburn had no doubt the figures were strictly correct. "No weapon, no wallet, no glasses. Also no usable tire tracks or foot marks."

An ancient, low-slung hearse that looked like something rented for a Halloween party pulled into the alley, and two attendants removed the body with all the finesse and dispatch of circus clowns. Before the crowd dissipated, Auburn asked if anybody had heard anything unusual the previous evening or night. He got no response.

Dollinger had had instructions from headquarters to stay with Auburn and help him interview the neighbors. Auburn gave him the east side of the alley and he took the west side.

Nobody that Auburn talked to admitted knowing Laszlo. After an hour he touched base with Dollinger, who also had nothing. "Why don't you hit those stores and that bar in the next block, Fritz?" suggested Auburn. "I'll go up to Laszlo's store on Richmond and nose around there. His brother-in-law says this key'll get me in."

Glen's Electronic Salvage—"Buy, Sell, Trade"—occupied a deep, narrow storeroom in the middle of the block. Auburn had a description of Laszlo's truck and spotted it parked on the street in front of the store.

He found it locked and left it that way. The store was also locked.

A jumble of electronic equipment showed through the grime of a plate glass window, and when Auburn got inside he found the confusion was more real than apparent. Kyle Givens had said the business was no gold mine; probably it had been operating in the red. In any event, Laszlo seemed to have been getting the short end of most of his trades.

The heat and humidity in the store were stifling, and turning on the two antique oscillating fans didn't help much. Dust and disorder reigned everywhere. The merchandise looked as if it had been arranged on the shelves and the floor with a bulldozer. Stereos, boom boxes, cordless phones, VCR's, camcorders, videocassettes, fax machines, speaker systems, and computer components lay in hopeless chaos, with cables—coiled and straight, thick and thin, black and gray and white—snaking wildly around and among them.

In the glass-enclosed office at the back, catalogues, invoices, schematic diagrams, and business correspondence were filed in bursting cardboard cartons, on what Auburn's mother used to call the biblical system: *Seek and ye shall find*. Neither here nor in Laszlo's workshop, which looked like Dr. Frankenstein's lab after the monster snapped its straps, did Auburn find a pair of glasses.

In spite of the mess, Auburn was pretty sure nothing had been disturbed since Laszlo had last been in the shop. The door to the alley was

securely bolted, and the safe in the office was intact, even though it could probably have been popped with a Boy Scout can opener. Auburn didn't need a can opener because he had the key.

Although by law the property of a victim of violent death was under the control of the coroner, Auburn knew he could make a discreet investigation here without risking any trouble. The safe contained less than a hundred dollars in cash, a couple of personal checks payable to Laszlo, a vendor's license and some other legal documents, and a roll of large-format computer paper. This consisted of several fan-folded sheets from which the perforated strips along each side had been removed. Although densely covered with numerals, it bore not a single word of identification or explanation.

Auburn had arrived at a fair degree of computer literacy as an occupational necessity. He recognized this printout, which Laszlo had considered important enough to keep in the safe, as a distinct oddity, and took it with him when he left the store. After locking it in the trunk of his car, he decided to have a look at Laszlo's truck after all.

It was an unmarked black panel truck, old and getting red around the edges. The cab was littered with papers, pop cans, plastic bags, pencils, and miscellaneous hand tools. The cargo compartment was empty except for about two shovelfuls of heterogeneous dirt and odd scraps of wire, rubber, and metal. There was no sign of a pair of reading glasses.

The sun was high and hot. Traffic was picking up as the noon hour approached. Auburn set out on foot to retrace the route Laszlo might have followed, supposing he'd walked from his store to the spot in the alley where his body was found. He turned west off Richmond onto Wise, and after the first block he fell in with a gang of five adolescent boys, footloose and vociferous in their enjoyment of summer freedom. One of them was prancing along with his chin in the air, awkwardly balancing a pair of glasses on his nose that obviously didn't belong there.

The situation called for caution and diplomacy. If Auburn tackled it wrong, the boys would disperse and he'd never see the glasses again.

"Son. Hey, son. Those are my glasses. I'll give you five dollars for them."

His remark was met with dead silence and cagey stares, but at least nobody ran.

Auburn moved closer to the kid with the glasses. "Those sure are mine. Where'd you find them?"

The kid took the glasses off and examined them, apparently thinking over what five dollars would buy. "Behind Shalimar," he said, twitching a loose-jointed hand in the direction of a grocery two blocks further west on Beloit.

"Show me exactly where you found them and I'll make it ten dollars."

The glasses had been lying in a weed patch adjoining the parking lot of the supermarket, in the same alley where the body was found, and the same block, but about two

hundred feet south. Auburn went over the scene carefully and found no traces of blood among the trampled chickweed and chicory. Into a mental street map he inserted an imaginary thumbtack at the point where the glasses had been found, which he tentatively assumed was where Laszlo had been attacked.

Only then did it occur to him that he didn't positively know these were Laszlo's glasses. By now, the imitation leather spectacle case that Dollinger had found on the body had probably been minced and dissolved in acid by Kestrel at the forensic lab. But Auburn remembered the budget optical firm whose logo had been stamped on the case, and he had passed one of their outlets repeatedly in the past two hours. In five minutes a technician there was able to confirm that the glasses had been sold to Glen Laszlo two years earlier.

The route map evolving in Auburn's head gave some indication of Laszlo's movements the night before. If he'd decided for some reason to walk home from the shop, he wouldn't have passed within three blocks of Shalimar Market. Was he on his way somewhere else when he became the random victim of a robber with a knife, or did he have a rendezvous in the alley with his killer?

Alert for any departure from the commonplace, Auburn walked slowly along that stretch of alley, past malodorous garbage cans and through patches of fallen mulberries and rotting crabapples. Two blocks south of the market he noticed a remodeling contractor's pan-

el truck pulled up on the concrete apron outside a garage. "EMERGENCY SERVICE," said the sign on the truck. "SMOKE AND FIRE DAMAGE OUR SPECIALTY."

This was the same alley that ran behind Laszlo's, but the house, like Shalimar Market, faced on Beloit rather than on Winthrop. He followed the brick-paved walk past the garage and toward the back of the house. This proved to be a sizable red brick with an antique sign in wrought brass next to the kitchen door that read "Tradesmen's Entrance." Auburn peered in through the open kitchen door. A cheerful Amazon in an orange coverall was whistling like a steam calliope while making measurements with a spring tape.

"Excuse me?"

The woman stopped whistling and came to the door. "Were you looking for Mrs. Trolian?"

"I'm not sure who I'm looking for," said Auburn. He showed identification. "Somebody have a fire?"

"Last night. No big deal, just a grease fire, but it scorched some floor tiles, and there's smoke damage to the wallpaper and some of the cabinets."

"Hey, you really do give emergency service, don't you, if the fire was just last night?"

"I'm only giving them an estimate this morning. But we try. Were you checking up on the fire, or ..." She seemed impatient to get on with her work.

"Not exactly. Just doing a routine investigation here in the neighborhood, but I thought there might be a connection."

"Connection with what?"

Auburn took out a file card. "Can I get your name?"

"Janibeth Tischler. Mrs. Trolian's right there in the other room, if you want to ask her about the fire. I mean . . . she was here when it happened, and I wasn't."

Taking that remark as a sort of invitation, Auburn ventured to step inside the kitchen. Most of the cupboards had been emptied, and he could see china and packages of food stacked on the floor of an adjacent room, probably the dining room. An acrid smell of smoke hung in the air.

A youngish woman with sharp features and short dark hair came in through another doorway.

"I thought I heard a man in here." As she moved on into the kitchen, he noticed that the spacious pantry behind her had been converted into an office. On the floor under the computer stand was a big box of computer paper, and on the counter was a bowl of ripe cherries.

Even as the wheels began turning in Auburn's head, he realized there had been a note of inquiry in her voice. He showed identification.

Immediately she became evasive and hostile. "It was only a little grease fire," she said. "I didn't call the Fire Department. I haven't even called the insurance company yet. Was I supposed to report it to the police?"

"No, ma'am. I'm just in the neighborhood asking some routine questions. Your name, please?"

"Crystal Trolian."

The remodeling contractor had

resumed her work, but obviously wasn't missing a syllable.

"About what time did your fire occur?"

"I don't know—eight, eight thirty. I put the kettle on to make some tea, but I accidentally turned on the wrong burner. By the time I smelled the smoke from the other room, a pan full of grease from dinner had caught fire. I put the fire out with baking soda, but the smoke was marking the walls and the cupboard doors. I tried to carry the pan out the door, but it was hot and I spilled some of the grease there by the dishwasher."

"Were you here alone at the time?"

"Yes. I thought you said you weren't interested in the fire."

"I was just wondering if you were home all evening, and if you might have heard anything unusual happening in the neighborhood—especially out in the alley."

"Unusual? You mean noises, a wreck?"

"Anything unusual."

"No. All I heard was a two hour lecture from my husband after he got home last night."

Auburn glanced at the bowl of cherries again. "Does the name Glen Laszlo mean anything to you? He lives a couple streets south on Winthrop, but his house backs on the same alley as yours."

"I've never heard the name."

Auburn moved toward the door. "You're lucky the fire didn't damage your computer," he remarked off-handedly.

"Well, I guess," she sighed, suddenly more human. "I've got five

years of business records on that hard disk."

"Oh, really? What kind of business?" He had one foot on the doorstep.

"Herbal cosmetics. Strictly mail-order. But we ship worldwide. You married? Got a gal?"

"Not at the moment. You must do a good volume of business." He nodded at the box of computer paper.

"Oh, that's not from this computer. That's stuff my husband brings home from work. I use it as packing material around bottles for mailing."

"So what's it going to cost me?" boomed a voice from the back yard. "An arm or a leg?"

"Mike, I keep telling you the insurance will pay for it!"

Mike Trolian came up the back walk and stood at the foot of the kitchen steps, squinting in the sun at Auburn. He was a big man with a pager, a ring of keys, and an attitude. If Auburn had any idea of deflating him by showing his badge, it didn't work.

"You going to put her in jail or just fine her a couple of hundred bucks?"

"I'm not here about the fire," said Auburn. "Just investigating an incident here in the neighborhood last night."

"They have another holdup at the carry-out?"

"A man was found dead in the alley a couple of blocks from here. I thought somebody here might have heard something last night."

"What time last night? I work third shift."

"We don't know what time it hap-

pened." With his steel-toed safety shoes planted about eighteen inches apart, Trolian was rocking from side to side in a steady, frantic rhythm that was making Auburn seasick. "Where do you work, Mr. Trolian?"

"Quintilian Corporation."

"That's a big place. What do you do over there?"

"I'm a millwright."

"You're a which, sir?"

"Maintenance mechanic. Tighten the loose bolts, grease the squeaks type of thing."

When Auburn got back to the place where Laszlo's body had been found, everything was normal again, except that Kestrel had left that end of the alley cleaner than it had been in several decades. Hot, thirsty, and getting hungry, Auburn walked back to his car and called Dollinger's cruiser on his radio.

They met for lunch at one of the establishments where Dollinger had already made inquiries about Laszlo and drawn a blank. It was a typical neighborhood slow-food diner, patronized mostly by regulars. They sat at a table in the front window where they couldn't be overheard.

"Nobody I talked to on this block knew Laszlo by name, except the guys at The Elbow Joint," said Dollinger. "That's the bar up on the far corner. They said Laszlo wasn't in there last night but his brother-in-law was."

"Who—Givens?"

"Sure. Said he sat there playing cards and bumming drinks for a couple hours."

"That's not Givens' story. Or his sister's. You get anything else?"

"No. You?"

"I'm not sure." Auburn had worked with Dollinger off and on for years and respected the uniformed man's acumen and judgment. "I've got a hunch I know where Laszlo was killed."

He told him about the scorches on the kitchen floor, which could have been made to conceal blood stains. He also told about the computer paper he'd found in Laszlo's safe and the identical-looking paper that Trolian brought home from work for his wife to wrap herbal cosmetics in. And the cherries.

"Why cherries?"

"What?"

"Why would he have some of their cherries in his pocket?"

"I don't know. Maybe he swiped them before things turned ugly and they killed him."

"They didn't kill him for stealing cherries. It sounds pretty iffy to me, sergeant. I mean, cherries are in season right now. There could be a bowl of them in the Laszlos' kitchen, too."

"I know. I didn't get past their living room. But then there's the computer printouts I found in Laszlo's safe. The numbers aren't in columns—they're just printed solid across the sheets. And that's exactly the kind of printouts I saw at the Trolians'. I'll have to get Rifkin to look at the stuff I've got and see what he thinks it is."

"What's our next move?"

"There's probably not much more we can do until we get background checks and see if there could be any

kind of a link between Laszlo and the Trolians. We'd better find out what cars these people own. If the Trolians moved Laszlo's body a couple blocks down the alley, they didn't use a wheelbarrow. And if Givens was at the bar last night around the time Laszlo was killed, that leaves Maxene Laszlo without an alibi."

After lunch Auburn went back to headquarters, and Dollinger resumed his regular patrol duties for the balance of the shift.

Lieutenant Savage had a preliminary report on the examination of Laszlo's body. Death had apparently been due to massive internal hemorrhage caused by a single stab wound to the upper abdomen with a long, sharp knife, possibly a butcher knife or kitchen knife, possibly a bayonet or other weapon.

There was also a severe head injury, which suggested that Laszlo had been knocked unconscious before being fatally stabbed. The time of death had been tentatively placed between nine P.M. and midnight. The autopsy was still in progress. Laboratory tests for drugs, alcohol, and toxic substances would take a day or two. The cherries found in Laszlo's pocket would also be tested.

Auburn reported on the progress of his investigation. "I think we ought to get a warrant," he concluded. "Get our hands on that computer paper in the Trolians' pantry, and have Kestrel look over their kitchen knives and check out the place for trace evidence that Laszlo was killed there."

"Cy, there's computer paper everywhere. This trash can is half full of it. The world is gradually sinking in a sea of it, and you think because you found—"

"Don't forget the cherries."

"Why cherries?"

Auburn took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "I don't know. The dead guy had cherries in his pocket. No wallet, just three cherries. There's a big bowl of them in the Trolians' kitchen. Maybe when Laszlo saw they were going to waste him, he stuck the cherries in his pocket as a clue to who did it."

For a while, Savage just looked at him. "Do three cherries mean something in some kind of international code? Or do you figure he thought we could trace those particular cherries to that particular kitchen?"

Auburn shrugged helplessly.

"Cy, there's a big bowl of cherries in *my* kitchen. Find me a more substantial link than cherries between Trolian and Laszlo and you'll get your warrant. Didn't you tell me the wife's alibi for the time Laszlo was killed got shot down by a bartender?"

"So Dollinger says. I'll be checking on that further today."

"I would hope so. Like Captain Morsch used to say, butchery begins at home."

Auburn found Reuben Rifkin, Public Safety's resident computer geek, in his office in Administration. Rifkin was probably twenty-eight but looked like a high school sophomore. He spent half his time trying to recover computer files that had been lost through the in-

experience or negligence of police officers and clerical staff, and the other half designing programs and safeguards to prevent further glitches.

Auburn handed him the roll of printouts, which he had marked with his name and the date, time, and place of discovery. "What can you tell me about this?" he asked.

"Looks like some kind of calculation." Rifkin unrolled and then unfolded the paper on his worktable. "This goes on and on. Looks like a *big* calculation."

"Calculation of what? Could it just be some kind of business records?"

"There's no way, sir. This isn't a spreadsheet, just solid numbers."

"I noticed that."

Rifkin ran his eyes over the rows of numbers. "At a guess, I'd say it's a quotient. Something divided by something else and carried out to the zillionth decimal place. Only the decimal point and the whole first page, showing what was divided by what, are missing."

"Is there any way you can figure out what it means, or why a guy would keep it in a safe?"

"I can try." Rifkin looked at his watch. "Not any more today, but I'll see if I can make anything out of it by the end of the week."

Routine business, including entering a record of the current investigation in his own personal computer, occupied Auburn for the next hour or so. About the time he was thinking of going home, he got the background checks he'd requested on the principals in the Laszlo investigation.

Their slates were all clean as far as the police were concerned, but Laszlo had been in bad shape financially. He was behind in his rent at both home and store, and there were a couple of liens against his business. His wife was currently laid off from a job as receptionist at a beauty parlor.

Givens had worked as a body shop mechanic and bus driver before his reserve unit was sent to the Persian Gulf for Operation Desert Storm. He hadn't worked since. He had been granted a medical discharge from military service with total and permanent disability status. He had a currently valid chauffeur's license but no vehicle was registered in his name. Mike Trolian had been in the same job for fourteen years. He had a decent work record, and had never come to the attention of the police. His wife's herbal cosmetics business was apparently legitimate.

By the time Auburn had sifted through this information, even Savage had gone home for the day. He decided to sleep on the case, wait for the autopsy report, and hope that any trace evidence at the Trolians' wasn't obliterated before he'd persuaded Savage to get a warrant and send in an evidence technician.

When he got to headquarters next morning he found a preliminary autopsy report, faxed by Stamaty from the coroner's office in the courthouse across the street, showing that death was due to hemorrhage from a tear in the abdominal aorta. The knife thrust had been delivered with both skill

and force. The weapon must have had a blade at least nineteen centimeters long. (Auburn looked hard at his left pinky finger, whose nail was exactly one centimeter wide.) The dead man's stomach contained, among other things, undigested cherries. Toxicology reports weren't yet available.

The state Bureau of Motor Vehicles maintained a bank of digitized driver's license photographs, of which color enlargements were available to law enforcement agencies worldwide. Before nine o'clock, Auburn was on the street with five-by-eight mug shots of the Laszlos, the Trolians, and Kyle Givens.

The Laszlos' next-door neighbor was a retired widower who shook hands with Auburn, offered him a glass of homemade wine, and seemed incapable of answering questions about his neighbors without interjecting generous extracts from his own life history. He wasn't particularly fond of the Laszlos and their boarder. Their habits of berating one another at the top of their lungs and slamming the screen door day and night were enough to brand them as riffraff in his eyes.

None of the Laszlos' neighbors recognized photos of the Trolians, and none of the Trolians' neighbors knew Laszlo, his wife, or his brother-in-law. He revisited the business block Dollinger had gone over yesterday and found that several people knew one or more of the people in the pictures, some even by name, but nobody remembered ever seeing Trolian or his wife with any of the others.

Clerks at the nearest branch post office recognized both Mike and Crystal Trolian as people who often mailed parcels, sometimes five or ten at a time. He talked to the postmaster, who told him parcels couldn't be traced unless they were insured, registered, or certified, and even then the information was privileged and couldn't be released without a court order.

The Elbow Joint, the bar where Givens was supposed to have been on the night Laszlo was killed, wouldn't open until noon. Auburn used the time to stop in at a few selected businesses in the area—a shoe repair shop, a storefront pizzeria, a card and gift shop in whose back room something violent but amusing was going on.

At a branch library he struck gold. "That's Mr. Laszlo," said the librarian at the circulation desk when he showed her the dead man's picture. "The computer man. He comes in all the time to look up things in computer manuals."

She recognized Trolian's picture, too. "I don't know his name. I think he's a writer or a teacher. Or maybe a griddler."

"A which, ma'am?"

"One of these crossword puzzle fanatics—they go for the big prizes in the national tournaments. The reason I say that is that I often see him looking up things in the unabridged dictionary there on the stand. He usually takes it over to a table to work."

She didn't remember ever seeing Laszlo and Trolian together.

At The Elbow Joint the bartender was busy racking glasses

and arranging bottles for the noon-hour trade. He knew both Laszlo and Givens by name. He also knew Laszlo was dead. He had seen the brothers-in-law together, but not often and not recently.

"Yesterday morning," said Auburn, "you told a police officer that Kyle Givens was in here the night before last, Tuesday night. Do you stand by that?"

"Yes, sir." The bartender had a head like a bowling ball and eyes like a snake's. "Kyle set right over there for two, twonahalf hours on Tuesday night, just like he does every night. And he walked out of here at ten o'clock, just like he does every night. I don't tell no lies for nobody."

"Why do you say that?" asked Auburn, naive as a kindergarten teacher. "Has somebody been asking you to tell lies?"

"Not as I remember." He stared unblinkingly at Auburn as he said this, but then Auburn seemed to remember that snakes are incapable of blinking.

After lunch he visited the Laszlos'. When Maxene answered his ring, she was wearing sunglasses, presumably to hide the fact that she'd been crying. Or maybe that she hadn't been. She was also wearing engagement and wedding rings that she hadn't been wearing the day before.

"I'd like to get just a little more information from you if I could," Auburn began.

"Do they have any idea who killed Glen yet?" she asked.

"No, ma'am, but we're working on it. I think you told me that on

the night your husband was killed you and your brother were here at home all evening.”

“Well, most of it. Kyle goes up to the bar on the corner most every night for an hour or two. It’s hard on him, sitting around the house all day and not being able to work. I never like to go up there with him cause the men talk so rough.”

“So you were home all that evening, and for part of the time you were here by yourself?”

“That’s right.”

A strident creaking of the back stairs heralded the approach of Givens, who looked as if he’d just gotten out of bed five minutes before. He admitted having been at The Elbow Joint while his brother-in-law was being done in. He was vague about the time he’d left there, and they were both vague about the time he’d got back home. He agreed they’d watched the eleven o’clock news together but said he’d slept through most of the movie they’d watched afterwards.

“Mind if I look around here?”

It was just a once-over for orientation purposes, Auburn told himself, not a search. If he found anything incriminating, he wouldn’t dare touch it, knowing as he did that no court would find he had probable cause for search and seizure.

No cherries were in evidence in the kitchen. There was a good deal of clutter in some parts of the house, as if somebody had just moved in or just moved out. In a sense, somebody had. A suit, a shirt, and a tie were laid out on the bed in the master bedroom, waiting for

the undertaker to pick them up. He saw no military trophies in Givens’ room. Had they used bayonets in Operation Desert Storm?

Out in back there was nothing left of the garage but its concrete floor—a common enough circumstance in Smallwood. Maxene’s car was up on blocks with both front wheels off, and by all indications it had been in that state for weeks.

A little before ten that night, Auburn parked up the street from The Elbow Joint, in a spot from which he could see both front and side doors. He wasn’t sure Kyle Givens was inside but he didn’t care to show himself to find out. At ten P.M., almost to the minute, Givens emerged from the side door and vanished into the dark alley behind the bar—the same alley in which, two blocks away, Laszlo had been found murdered.

Mindful of that nineteen centimeter knife blade, Auburn followed on foot at a discreet distance. Visibility was poor in the alley, but there was just enough illumination from the adjacent houses for him to follow Givens’ movements. Almost immediately the man he was tailing stopped at a van in a parking lot, unlocked it, and climbed in. Auburn scrambled back to his car and managed to be in the right place to follow Givens when, a minute or two later, the van pulled into the street.

Givens made straight for the interstate and, once on it, shot along the fast lane like a maniac. Auburn called in the number on the van’s license plate, and before Givens took

the Heron Township exit he knew it was registered to PhotoPhast-Plus, a film developing service.

Givens parked the van next to a freestanding PhotoPhast booth at Heron Mall, dark and deserted at this hour. While Auburn watched from the road, Givens unlocked the booth, deposited a square metal case inside, and removed an identical one to the van. The whole operation took less than three minutes. Then he was off again like a shot and back on the interstate.

Auburn had the dispatcher get him the addresses of all the other PhotoPhast booths listed in the Yellow Pages. Thus he was able, without getting close enough to arouse Givens's notice, to observe that he visited the ones in Wilmot, Dwight, Stillwell, and Scotchburg, one after the other. It was about a quarter to one in the morning when Givens parked the van exactly where he'd found it and walked up the alley in the direction of the Laszlo's house.

Still keeping his distance, Auburn watched him slip in the back way and heard the crash of the screen door. In ten minutes the house was dark.

Givens' driving a route for PhotoPhastPlus tonight didn't prove he hadn't stabbed his brother-in-law two nights before, but it probably explained why both he and his sister had been so fuzzy about his alibi for the time of the murder.

Auburn wasn't working for the feds, and he might have been disposed to forget the fact that Givens was gainfully employed while drawing total and permanent dis-

ability payments from the Veterans Administration if the next day hadn't been payday. But when he glanced over the Leave and Earnings Statement that came with his check and saw how much federal tax had been deducted, he reached for the phone.

Later in the morning he went back to Laszlo's store, turned on both fans, opened the alley door, and set out to find some evidence of a connection between the dead man and the Trolians. It took him two hours to dig up a receipt for forty dollars signed by Michael J. Trolian, in payment for an older model computer and some computer games.

He ran it back to headquarters, but found that Savage was in a meeting. There was an e-mail message on his PC from Reuben Rifkin. He found the computer expert in an expansive mood.

"What you've got here, I think," said Rifkin, "is the quotient that you get when you divide seven hundred thirty-one by six hundred four. The first part of it—the numeral *one* and the first couple hundred digits to the right of the decimal point—is missing. From what's left, I punched in several strings of fifty digits each, and my program identified most of them as part of the decimal form of seven thirty-one over six oh-four. But not all of them. Every now and then the figures go wrong for a while."

"You mean they've been rounded off?"

Rifkin looked at him askance. "The only round number is zero," he said, as if he were reciting one of

the Ten Commandments. "No, every page or so, the figures are completely wrong for a couple of lines. Then they get back on track again."

"Computer glitch?"

Rifkin winced like a man whose deepest convictions have been harshly ridiculed. "I'd say it's more likely a cipher. The basic or background pattern is the quotient, which any computer could grind out to as many decimal points as you want. Where the numbers vary from the proper sequence, that's your cipher text. What it means I can't tell you. You'd need a cryptographer to analyze it for you. They've got some pretty fancy software nowadays to speed up the process. Unless it's some kind of book cipher."

"Such as?"

"Such as references to chapters and verses in the Bible, or pages and lines in some other book, like Shakespeare."

"How about an unabridged dictionary?"

By four o'clock he and Kestrel, the evidence technician, were at the Trolians'. They parked in the alley and rang at the kitchen door. While they waited for a response, Kestrel evinced a particular interest in the "Tradesmen's Entrance" sign.

"Antique," remarked Auburn. "Brass."

"Also politically incorrect," remarked Kestrel with deadpan earnestness.

"It's the police again," said Crystal Trolian. She cast an inquisitive eye at Kestrel's field kit.

"Is your husband home?" asked Auburn.

"He's playing golf at Sweetwater."

"Ma'am, we have a warrant to search your house for evidence in a criminal investigation." He showed her the document.

Her chin shot out and she turned feisty. "What's going on here? You conned me, mister. You said you weren't investigating the fire."

"Yesterday I wasn't."

"I have to be out of here by a quarter to six. I have choir practice on Thursdays."

"We'll try to be quick. Have the repair people started work yet?"

"No, because we're waiting for the insurance company to okay the estimate. And if you throw a monkey wrench into that—"

He and Kestrel were still standing outside on the porch steps. "Why would we do that?"

"Well, what are you looking for, for heaven's sake?"

"We'll know when we find it," said Auburn, taking firm hold of the doorknob.

They were as polite as she was rude, but they were very thorough. Most of the kitchen paraphernalia was still stacked and strewn about the dining room floor. Not a knife on the premises escaped their scrutiny.

While Kestrel was down on his hands and knees taking swabbings of the scorched floor tiles, Auburn had an inspiration and went out to his car to call headquarters.

They ransacked the pantry cupboards with meticulous care, learning far more than they wanted to

know about the retail trade in herbal cosmetics. There were stock bottles and empty bottles, printed labels, pamphlets, wrapping material—including lots of used computer paper. Kestrel tucked samples of that away in his case, along with several cherries, and wrote out a receipt.

Except for the disorder created by the fire, it was a neatly organized and shipshape residence, childless and cheerless. There was a digital piano in one of the bedrooms.

"What are you *looking* for?" she asked for the tenth time. "What do you think you can prove, taking all these samples? It was just an accident."

"What was just an accident, ma'am?"

"I told you yesterday." She was within an inch of losing control. "A pan of grease caught fire. It could happen to anybody."

Something in her tone started Auburn thinking along entirely new lines. What had first led him to suspect that the fire had been set deliberately to cover evidence of a murder was that there wasn't any damage to the structure of the house, only to the interior decor. Wallpaper, cabinet fronts, floor tile.

"How much was the estimate you sent in to the insurance company?" he asked.

"About eighty-eight hundred dollars," she said.

"To fix the damage here?"

"They couldn't match any of this stuff. That floor tile is twenty years old. They're going to have to gut the kitchen and do it all over."

"In your choice of colors, styles—" "Look, what's the point of having insurance if—"

"You set that fire on purpose, didn't you? Just to get some free remodeling?"

"Prove it."

"I don't think I'll have to prove it. I think you're going to admit it, because otherwise you'll probably be arrested as an accessory to murder."

Her stupefaction was obviously genuine. "What are you talking about?"

"Sergeant Kestrel and I are investigating a homicide. We're looking for evidence that a man was killed in this kitchen the night before last."

"You said he was killed a couple of blocks from here."

"I said he was found dead a couple of blocks from here."

Mike Trolian came in by the front door, stowing a golf bag noisily in the hall before appearing in the kitchen.

"Mike, you won't believe this," she said. "They've got a search warrant."

"Let me see it." Auburn did. Kestrel, who dreaded hostile confrontations, suddenly became deeply absorbed in his specimen containers. "What's this all about?"

"Oh, Mike, it's just a mistake. But listen, we've got to talk. About the fire. It wasn't an accident."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. I faked that fire because you wouldn't let me remodel the kitchen."

He didn't say half of what he wanted to, but at that he babbled

and swore until he was out of breath. Then he started in on Auburn and Kestrel.

"Mike," she said, "they've got the idea that we had something to do with that man who was killed up the alley two nights ago."

"What's this 'we'? I wasn't even home two nights ago."

"Where were you?" asked Auburn.

"Swimming at the club. I've been working midnight to noon the past few weeks, and I like to chill down out at Sweetwater before I go in to work. Did you ever walk into a factory at midnight in July? It's just one big pizza oven."

"Are there witnesses who could prove you were at the country club that night?"

"I don't know. Probably. Why would you think we had anything to do with some guy getting killed that we don't even know?"

"You did know him, Mr. Trolian. You sold him an old computer in April. We've got the receipt you gave him for the money."

Trolian was so obviously taken aback that Auburn decided to press on in hopes of getting him to break down on the spot. If he didn't break down first himself. His heart started racing and his mouth was so dry he could hardly recite the Miranda warning. "I don't need a lawyer," stormed Trolian. "So I sold this guy some old computer junk. I didn't even remember his name. Why would I kill him?"

"Because you left something interesting on the hard disk of that computer, and he found it and tried to blackmail you with it."

"Oh yeah? What'd he find?"

"A cipher message. He'd seen you studying the big dictionary on the stand at the library, and that gave him the clue to crack your cipher."

Trolian sat down.

"Mike, what's all this about?" Crystal Trolian stood in the breakfast nook, dazed and somber.

"We'd like to take a look in your golf bag," said Auburn quietly. "And we need to check both of your cars." Kestrel took the hint and went about his business.

"Wait a minute," said Trolian. "Just wait a minute here. What's this about a cipher?"

"You were sending secret messages on wadded up computer printouts that were used as wrapping paper in packages of cosmetics. Probably on Thursday nights, when Mrs. Trolian was at choir practice, you made up and sent a few packages she never knew anything about."

"Mike?"

Mike had nothing to say.

"Laszlo must have come around the night before last—"

"He was never in this house," said Crystal. "That I'll swear. Not that night, anyway."

Auburn ignored her and kept on at Trolian. "Maybe you arranged to meet him out in the alley. You knew what was coming, and you took along a weapon. You decked him behind Shalimar's Market. At least that's where the glasses fell out of his shirt pocket. You dragged or carried him through the alley to the other end of the block to get him farther away from here. Then you stabbed him to death. And

grabbed his wallet to make it look like a robbery.”

Trolian sat mute, gray and sweating.

Kestrel found nothing in the golf bag or the cars. When the phone rang in the pantry, Auburn didn't give either of the Trolians a chance to answer it.

“This is Auburn . . . You did? How long's the blade? Eight inches?” He looked at his left pinky finger. “I'd say that's about nineteen centimeters, wouldn't you? Give or take a furlong?”

He put down the phone. Trolian knew what he was going to say before he said it.

“We found the hunting knife, Mr. Trolian. In your locker at Sweetwater Country Club. You didn't scrub it hard enough. There are still traces of blood on it—Laszlo's blood.” That last part was pure fiction, of the sort Auburn was apt to concoct when he was drunk with triumph.

By the next day, when he was putting together his final report, the triumph seemed a bit hollow. More than one colleague had told him he was far too introspective and self-critical to be a cop.

It was true that Mike Trolian had finally confessed to murdering Laszlo, but Auburn's determination to pursue his investigation at the Trolians' had been based on some pretty shaky reasons.

Quintilian Corporation was a manufacturing firm whose vast and diversified output included products molded and extruded in neoprene, vinyl, polyurethane, and

polypropylene. Details of manufacturing processes—temperature and pressure cycles, primers, antioxidants, curing agents—were closely guarded secrets. For more than ten years, Mike Trolian had been leaking those secrets in cipher messages to “clients” in Canada, Mexico, and Europe.

But although the used computer paper in the Trolians' pantry was indeed camouflage for the cipher messages, such paper was, as Savage had pointed out, ubiquitous and of little evidential value. And the fire in the Trolians' kitchen hadn't been set to conceal the traces of Laszlo's murder, but to wangle a free redecorating job.

On the other hand, he told himself, spotting those cherries and drawing the appropriate conclusions had been Sherlockian observation and deduction at their best. Mike Trolian hadn't yet implicated his wife in the slaying of Laszlo, and she maintained Laszlo had never been in her kitchen, but the fact remained that the cherries had been Auburn's only valid clue tying the Trolians to Laszlo.

On the day after Laszlo's funeral, Auburn visited the family to report on the progress of his investigation. Givens wasn't anywhere in sight. Maxene Laszlo had put away her rings again, or maybe she'd pawned them to buy a set of tires for the car. When he told her about Trolian's motive for murdering her husband, he toned down the blackmail angle, without quite portraying Laszlo as a martyr to the cause of righteousness.

"Kyle and I heard on the radio this morning that somebody had been arrested," she said. "Up till then we were afraid maybe Glen had killed himself."

This was a new slant, of no conceivable relevance to the outcome of the case, but intriguing nonetheless. "Why did you think that?"

"Well, Glen got depressed a lot. The shop wasn't making any money. And then Kyle used to pick on him all the time about different things. When he left here the other night, he was pretty down. He didn't even finish his dinner. Just stuck some cherries in his pocket and walked out."

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What Goes Around

John L. French

Gypsy's Caravan is one of the better theme parks on the East Coast. It won't scare the Mouse or the people with the Flags, but it's large enough so that the average visitor needs two days to see and do everything. During the peak season both the park and attached motel are usually full.

I do security work for the park. Not the uniformed guard type of security, or the kind where I make sure that the employees—sorry, park associates—don't tap the tills of the souvenir shoppes. (Yes, it's really spelled that way on all the stores.) Neither do I walk the grounds at night making sure no one sneaks or stays over. I'm more the kind of security you don't see, that is, if I do my job right.

I'm the troubleshooter. When something goes wrong that might attract unwanted attention—say from the police, or worse, the press—I'm called in to take care of it. If all goes well, then no one outside the park hears about it. If it's the kind of occurrence that can't be contained, then I'm at least expected to control the situation long enough for the press agents to spin things in the right direction.

Actually, the police are not that big a problem. Winslow's a small town, and Gypsy's the only major industry. The mayor, the chief of police, the town council—they know

who pays their salaries. And if they ever forget, Hamilton Winslow is usually right at their elbow to remind them.

Hamilton Winslow owns the park, and most of the town. William Winslow founded the town before the Revolution and in many respects, the effects of that war have yet to take hold here. Free speech, representative government, equal rights for all—not in Winslow. There is the principle of one man, one vote. Hamilton's the man, and he has the vote. Everyone else goes along. Those who don't like it are free to leave, and are frequently helped to do so by the local police.

Hamilton was the one who hired me. I was on the good end of twenty years with the Baltimore Police Department, waiting for the right job to come up before turning in my papers. Hamilton was attending a theme park owners' conference at the Baltimore Convention Center. While there, he engaged the services of a professional "escort" for the evening. When he woke up in the morning, she was gone and so was his wallet.

I answered the larceny call. To his credit, he told me the truth about what had happened, rather than give me the old "I guess I forgot to lock the door" story. After that he told me who he was and about owning Gypsy's. We agreed that to

avoid embarrassment to him or the park, we'd say he had probably lost his wallet shortly after leaving the convention center, and had not discovered it lost until he had returned to the hotel—alone.

As I was writing the lost property report, Hamilton asked me how long I had been on the force. One thing led to another, and I left with a job offer. A month later I was the newest park associate of Gypsy's Caravan. As I said before, my job at Gypsy's is to quietly deal with situations that might lead to unfavorable mention in the press—and a dead body at the Sly Fox Motel almost always qualifies as one of those situations.

I was in the armory making sure that the newest shipment of blank cartridges used in the Wild West Show were indeed all blanks when my pager went off. The message, "911-Fox," told me to finish my inventory later. Grabbing my equipment bag, I took the Cannonball Express to the main gate, then the Safari Shuttle to the motel. When I got there, the manager led me up to room 324. He opened the door, waved me in, left me to do my job.

The body was that of a white male, probably in his late forties. He was in the double bed nearest the window, under the covers. I pulled back the sheet and saw that he was wearing only boxer shorts. The rest of his clothing was on the other bed, no doubt thrown there as he undressed for the night. There were no signs of trauma on the body, and nothing to indicate that any struggle had taken place in the room.

So far it was obvious. Whoever this was had gone to sleep last night with every intention of waking up today. Sometime during the night something inside him gave out and ruined his plans.

I didn't stop being a cop when I left the BPD. And just because my new job's interest is to protect those of Gypsy's doesn't mean that I take it any less seriously. So I set about doing those things that must be done whenever a dead body is found.

Not for the same reasons, of course. The police investigate dead bodies in case they're homicides. I do a full investigation to show that the park was in no way responsible for the death. And of course, if the investigation shows that we might be responsible, we know before anyone else and can take steps to mitigate that responsibility.

Before doing any searching, I got out my digital camera and took photographs of the room and the deceased. Digital photography is perfect for what I do. Digital means that I don't have to trust any dark-room people not to tell what they see when they develop the photographs. Digital means that I can print the pictures I need when I need them. And digital means that if things in the photograph need to be "adjusted" to fit alternate versions of what happened, it can be easily done.

After taking my pictures, I got brush and powder out of my bag and dusted the obvious surfaces. Hallway doorknob, bathroom sink and toilet, the bottles in the trashcans. Someone may have been with

the deceased when he passed over, and I may need to know who it was.

Just in case someone had been with my new friend, I stripped off his shorts and threw them on the other bed with the rest of his clothing. I'd run a UV light over them later to see if there were any stains that suggested he had entertained a guest. As I took off the boxers, I noticed that lividity had already set in. The body was loose so rigor had come and gone. He must have turned in early last night. He'd been dead for awhile.

I called Winslow General Hospital and told them I had a special patient at the motel. That would clue the dispatcher into sending an unmarked van. If we timed it right, we'd be able to remove the body without any of the other guests knowing anything was wrong.

I knew from past experience that the hospital van wouldn't arrive for at least twenty minutes. While I waited, I finished my search. The room gave up nothing besides what you'd expect a man traveling alone to bring with him. A wallet from the pants on the bed told me that the deceased was Hector Young, that he was forty-five, and that he lived in Richmond, Virginia. Tucked away in his wallet was a season's pass to the park. Hector, I thought, why'd you have to come to Gypsy's to die when there are so many nice parks in your state?

Before I left, I'd check with the desk to make sure that Hector Young had rented this room, and that the guy on the bed was the Hector Young who had checked in. I made sure to take a photo of his

face to show around downstairs. (Another nice feature of digital—the view screen on the back lets you display the photo you just took. And if you don't like it, or if it's the least bit embarrassing to the cause, well, that's what "delete" is for.)

Everything went smoothly. Hector was picked up and sent to the hospital with no one else the wiser. And Hector was Hector—the desk clerk recognized the picture. When I asked if she was sure, she told me that few people check in alone, that it's either couples or families with kids. Someone checking in by himself, him you remember.

That last bothered me. Why did Hector check in by himself? If the pictures in his wallet were to be believed, he had a wife and two kids. Why didn't he bring them? A convention? We have them all the time, but Hector had none of the usual junk that you pick up at those things—no goodie bag, no brochures, no HI, I'M HECTOR name tag. Besides, the Sly Fox is strictly for the tourists. The convention center has its own hotel and he would have been staying there.

There was something else bothering me, too. I wasn't sure just what it was, but my cop instinct told me that something was off in that room. There was something there that shouldn't have been, or else something that should have been there (besides the wife and kids) was missing.

Back in my office I downloaded the pictures from my camera to my PC. I reviewed them one by one, zooming in and out, looking for that something out of place. Nothing in

the bedroom or bathroom. I turned to the shots of the body. And there I found it.

I spent two years in the crime lab before becoming a sworn officer. Even after that, I saw my share of dead bodies. So I really shouldn't have missed it in the first place.

When a body dies, the heart stops pumping blood. Since it's no longer in motion, the blood, like all liquids, seeks its lowest level and pools in the parts of the body closest to the ground. The pooling of blood after death is called lividity.

When Hector died in his bed, the blood in his body should have collected on his buttocks, back and legs. Instead, only his buttocks and feet bore the redness of lividity. Had he been found in his chair, that would make sense. So it was more than likely that he had died somewhere other than his room. I was going to have to visit Doc Harris sooner than I thought.

Martin Harris is the chief pathologist at Winslow General. Actually, he is the only pathologist, but he says the title looks good on his resume. Like all good morgues, his is located in the basement of the hospital. I had called to tell him that I was coming, so he was expecting me.

"He died sitting up," the doc said by way of greeting. Then he bent back over whoever he was doing.

"That much I know." I tossed the bag containing his clothing on a spare gurney.

"Anything on them?"

I shook my head. "Nothing I could find." Martin stripped off his gloves and pointed towards his office.

"So what did he die of?"

"Heart failure."

This is what Martin tells me every time I've come to him about a death. It's what he tells everyone. It was almost funny the first time, now it's just a ritual I have to go through to get the information I need.

"And what caused his heart to stop?"

"Stroke." That was odd. A heart attack maybe, but Hector hadn't looked like any stroke victim I had seen. "At least that's what's going on the autopsy report," he added. Now it made sense.

Like me, the other park associates, every appointed position in town, and most of the other ones, Martin owes his job to the good will of Hamilton Winslow. Anyone making the park, the town, or the man himself look bad will soon be looking for other work. As I understand it, Martin Harris came to Winslow after a not too distinguished career in forensic pathology. In fact, I once heard it said that he only became a pathologist because his patients couldn't sue. Still, toward the end of his career he made one mistake too many and was allowed to retire quietly. His reputation preceding him, he couldn't get work as an expert witness. Winslow General hired him in spite of this reputation, or maybe because of it. This is the only job Martin could get. He's not the type to lose it over something stupid like the truth.

At this point I could do one of two things. I could say okay and ask him to send over a copy of his report when it was finished. The

family would be notified, arrangements would be made to send Hector back to Richmond, and all would be right with the world, at least with my little part of it.

But as I said, I didn't stop being a cop just because I retired. And truths left unspoken have a way of coming back around on you. So I did the other thing.

"And what caused the stroke?" I knew I wasn't going to like the answer.

"This." Doc Harris reached into a drawer and took out a small white envelope. He threw it on the desk-top. Whatever was inside made a dull thunk when it hit the surface. A thunk I knew well from my time on the force.

"What caliber?" I asked, not having to look.

Martin shrugged. "Who knows, who cares? It's not like anyone's going to see it, or that it even existed." He looked at me as if I was going to challenge him. I answered his shrug with one of my own. Idly, I picked up the envelope and shook out what was inside.

I weighed it in my hand. It was small, a .22 or .25, depending on whether it was all there. It was in good enough shape that a ballistics match might be made. But this bullet would never be put under a microscope, not for the murder of Hector Young. Hector had died of stroke, and like it or not, that was the way it was going to be.

I handed the bullet back to Martin. "Where was the hole? I didn't see it."

"Almost smack dab in the top of his head, just ten to fifteen degrees

off-center to the rear. Easy enough to disguise so that it looks like part of the autopsy."

Not so easy, really, but only if someone's looking for it. I thanked Martin and went on my way.

You might be wondering why a theme park would cover up murder. It's the message it sends. We sell illusions, the illusion that things are different here, that real life stops at the front gate, that while you're our guest, you're in a safe, fairy tale world where nothing goes wrong. There is no crime at our parks; people can't die, and certainly can't be murdered. A park that admits to reality will soon find its guests paying someone else for their illusions.

It was too late for the truth, anyway. Whoever had moved Hector to his room made sure of that. PARK OFFICIALS COVER UP MURDER made bigger headlines than DEATH AT GYPSY'S CARAVAN. And since it was my job to keep the park off the front pages, I had to work around the truth.

Back in my office, I went over all the things I didn't know. Who had killed Hector, and why? Where was he killed, and how did he wind up back in his room?

I thought about the first two questions. The who wasn't that important. He was getting a free ride on this one. The why worried me somewhat. If Hector's death had been personal, if someone had wanted him and him alone dead, then no problem. But if his death had been random, that meant that there might someone out there who had decided to start targeting park

guests. Not wanting to think in that direction, I decided that I'd worry about that when the next "stroke" victim came along.

I called the Richmond police department to ask their help in notifying Hector's next of kin and then walked from my office over to Central Command. Maybe they could tell me how Hector had gotten back into his room.

People have died in the park before. Not that we'd admit it. We have an established procedure for dealing with the situation. Whenever there is a person in distress, a medical team is dispatched. When they arrive, even if the patient is DOA, they treat him as if he were still alive. An ambulance is called and the patient is rushed to Winslow General. It is there that he is declared dead, not at the park. By order of Hamilton Winslow, no one dies at Gypsy's.

At Central Command, Harry Jones had the board. From the board the man on duty could watch any of twenty monitors showing different views of the park. The views changed every three minutes, just long enough for someone watching the screens to view them all once before they shifted to other parts of the park. If the security man on duty sees something worth checking out, he can then freeze that camera, maintaining the view long enough to determine if any action is needed.

Cameras cover the entire park, with the exception of inside the restrooms. Hamilton wanted to put them in there as well, worried about what illicit activities might

take place in the stalls. I managed to convince him that the bad publicity that could result from the discovery of cameras in the ladies' room far outweighed whatever mischief might occur there.

Monitor duty is rotated among the regular security staff. It is a break from park duty and most people look forward to it. Harry had been on duty all week, and would have been watching the board yesterday when Hector passed away.

"No, nothing unusual happened, Mr. Webster," he told me. Harry's not the brightest bulb in the chandelier, but he does an adequate job when given the right instructions. That goes for most of the security staff. They're hired more for their looks, muscle, and ability to follow orders than anything else. And Hamilton is against hiring anyone with a police background for regular security work. "No offense, Jake," he told me once, "but ex-cops are nothing but trouble. Their first instinct is to confront the situation and arrest someone, not make the matter go away. And they don't usually like bosses, any bosses. Give me a hungry college kid who can't find a job any day."

The instructions for handling the "special" sick cases aren't written down, but they are explained to everyone. So are the consequences of not following that or any other procedure. Screw up and it's "Well, goodbye. Here's a week's pay and a pass to the park. Don't use it anytime soon." Given that, it's unlikely anyone used his own initiative to move a body.

Still, I checked the log that has to

be filled out whenever any Security action is taken. No entries beyond the usual—a few would-be troublemakers were ejected, there were several sick cases, but these were the more typical motion sickness, heat strokes, and too-much-junk-food upset stomachs seen every day. I looked up at the board and not for the first time wished for a digital system that would save every image captured to a hard drive. “Too expensive,” I’m told every time I bring it up. Today it would’ve paid for itself if I could’ve found just one picture of Hector.

I left Central Command and went back to think in my own chair. Except for his season’s pass, there was no indication that Hector had died in the park. I tried to get comfortable with the idea that he had died outside my jurisdiction, maybe somewhere in Winslow proper, shortly after leaving the park. The more I thought about it the better I liked it, keeping my fingers crossed that my random shooter was just an idle worry. In any case, I had done all I could do. I decided it was time to get back to doing what I was doing before the 911 call came in.

And that was checking the ammunition for the Wild West Show. Real guns are used in the show (Hamilton insists), so I’ve made it my job to make sure that only blanks are fired in them. And that despite how it appears on stage, no actor ever fires a gun directly at another performer. That kind of accident we don’t need.

A sudden, terrible thought hit me. Guns, possible live ammo, and

a dead man with a bullet hole in his head. I had a vision of Hector in the park, sitting on a bench, just resting, watching the crowd go by. Then a stray bullet from the show sails over the crowd and takes him out of the game for good. It’s happened before, in Baltimore. Two years before I retired, a shot fired in celebration of the New Year traveled over the rooftops and killed a man two blocks away.

In a rush for the armory, I was off my chair and into the hallway when I remembered two things. The first was that I had already checked the ammo being used in this week’s shows. All of it blank. The second was that the guns in the show were big, .44 revolvers, and not capable of firing the bullet that had killed Hector. I slowed down and walked to the armory.

Weapons inventory, checking and counting the ammo and comparing it against new orders and known stores helped pass the time, but it really didn’t get my mind off Hector. The how and why of Hector’s death kept nagging at me. I put myself in the shooter’s place. Where could I stand to be able to shoot a sitting man in the head? I mentally reviewed the layout of the park looking for the right combination of accessible high spots and benches, and then thought of something else that put the shooting out of the park.

One of the things the security team is trained to recognize is the sound of gunfire. Anyone who has really heard a gun go off, and TV and the movies don’t count, knows that it sounds nothing like a car

backfire. It has a distinctive pop. Security is trained to run toward that pop if they ever hear it. Not to confront the shooter, but to get as many guests out of the way as possible. Once the guests are clear, the few guards qualified to carry weapons would be called in to deal with the gunman.

No one reported any gunfire yesterday. And the security coverage is such that every part of the park is at least within earshot of one guard or the other. That made me feel better, until I remembered where I was standing. Maybe everybody heard the gunfire, and just didn't pay it any attention.

Stepping outside the armory, I walked down the Main Street of Dodge City like a gunfighter of old. I looked south, then north, and then I knew where Hector had been sitting when the bullet took his life. I went back to the office to find out who had killed him.

The phone on my desk was beeping and blinking, telling me that there was a message waiting. I pressed play. A woman's voice told me to call Detective Haywood of the Richmond PD about Hector. I dialed the number she gave me. The same voice answered the phone.

"Juliet Haywood."

"Detective Haywood, Jake Webster here, from Gypsy's Caravan. You called about Hector Young."

"Yes, Mr. Webster. I talked to Mrs. Young. Your dead man was a used-car salesman, owned a few car lots actually, and according to his wife, he was supposed to be in Maryland on a buying trip."

"Supposed to be, huh?" Well, now I knew why Hector was here alone, and what the probable motive for his death was. "Did Mrs. Young have a reason for Hector's taking a long detour?"

"No, and I don't think it's occurred to her yet why he did."

"Let's hope it stays a mystery to her." She made a sound of agreement and I went on. "If you would, call and tell her that the funeral home can pick up her husband's body at Winslow General. I'll make sure that the death certificate and all other papers will be ready."

"Sure thing. Anything else I can do for you?"

"Detective Haywood, you've been more than helpful. If everyone in the BPD had been like you, I'd still be working there."

Once she heard that I'd been on the force, we started talking shop. By the time she decided she'd better get back to work, we were Jake and Juliet to each other. I told her to make sure to look me up if she ever came out this way and promised to drop a few park passes in the mail for her.

After hanging up, I turned to the computer and looked up work schedules and personnel records. It didn't take me long to put a "who" with the "where" and "why" of Hector's death. Tomorrow I'd be going to visit the Big Wheel.

If you think I mean Hamilton Winslow, you're wrong. The Big Wheel is Gypsy's Ferris wheel. It's at the back of the park, right near Dodge City and the stage of the Wild West Show. There might be other places in the Caravan where

you can get shot in the head while sitting down, but near the Ferris wheel no one would pay much attention to the shot that killed you.

Gus Rodgers has been with Gypsy's since it opened. He started by sweeping up, worked concessions, then spent some time inside the character suits. After getting tired of being poked and prodded by the kiddies, he switched to working the rides. He's been working the Big Wheel since they built it five years ago. He's grown old working for the park, and some of the first kids he's put on rides are now bringing their children to the park. I suppose he's near retirement.

Gus got married a few years ago. His wife is younger than he is, much younger. In fact, she's just about Hector's age. From the changes made in Gus's personnel jacket and insurance forms, I noted that his new wife used to live in Richmond.

It was early morning when I got to the wheel. Gypsy's wouldn't open for a few hours yet. Safety inspectors were about, making sure all the rides were in proper working order. Morning cleaning and maintenance crews were taking care of whatever the night shift had missed.

Pulling what little rank I had, I rode the Big Wheel during the regular test runs. If anyone wondered why I stayed on for several rides or why I kept switching cars, nobody asked.

Gus's shift didn't start until late afternoon. I came back then. The line to ride the wheel was moderate—about a twenty minute wait. Gus

saw me approaching, relief man in tow. After his relief took over, Gus joined me on a nearby bench.

In a park this size, with everyone hurrying from one attraction to another, trying to get the most out of their admission price, no one pays too much attention to what's going on around them. Oh, they'd notice a clown or a juggler, but not two guys just sitting on a bench talking. We had more privacy there than we would in my office. Still, we kept our voices low.

"Tell me about it, Gus."

"About what, Jake?" From his tone and the look on his face, I knew my guess about the wheel had been right.

"The guy on the wheel yesterday, the one who got on but didn't get off—you know, the dead guy."

"How did you figure it?" Gus asked. I didn't answer. I had my own questions.

"How's the wife, Gus? Does she know about Hector?"

"If she does, she hasn't said anything." He gave a sour laugh. "Not that she would, not to me. She doesn't know I know."

"Tell me about those two—Hector and your wife." The nice thing about not being official is that pesky little things like Miranda warnings don't apply. If I had had a badge, I would have had to warn Gus about talking to me long before this, and to offer him a lawyer would no doubt make sure he kept his mouth shut. As it was, we were just two guys talking. And for whatever reason, Gus was willing to talk. I was willing to let him.

"They were friends from way

back when they were in high school. I think they met again when she went home for a visit. After that, she went home on visits a lot more. He started coming to the park."

"How'd you find out about them?"

"Does that matter, Jake? I found out, I took care of it. And there's nothing you can do about it."

So that's why Gus was so willing to talk. He had been around long enough to know how things were run, to what extent Hamilton Winslow would go to avoid bad publicity. Well, maybe so, but that didn't mean he knew Hamilton, and he sure as hell didn't know me.

"By now, Jake," Gus went on, "I'm betting that however the doctors say Young died it wasn't from no bullet in the head. He's probably all packed up for his last trip to Richmond, with papers saying that his death was natural."

"Well, Gus, I'm not saying you're wrong. I'm just trying to get all the loose ends tied up, just to make sure that there's none to trip over later." I looked at him to make sure that he thought he understood. Then we watched the wheel go around a few turns.

"So who helped you, Gus?"

He was too quick to answer. "Nobody!"

In barnyard terms I told him what I thought of that; then I added, "Gus, to kill someone on a Ferris wheel takes luck, timing, a good aim and cooperation. I rode the wheel this morning. Rode it until I figured out the angle needed for a good shot. With all the struts and supports, the only clear, unobstruct-

ed view is from one car to another seven cars away. And that matches the entry angle of Hector's wound."

I gave Gus time to think about this, then went on. "You don't show any type of firearms training—never with the cops, never in the army. And for the shooter to be sure that his target would be in the right car, he had to have the cooperation of the ride operator—and that's you. So tell me, Gus, how much did you pay Harry Jones to kill Hector for you?"

Gus's face dropped. Bull's-eye! It had been a wild shot, but it struck home.

"You asked Harry to help because he was on the board this week. Anyone else ran the risk of the camera catching him in the act. Harry, however, could have left his post just long enough to kill Hector, and be back before his absence was noticed. And Harry is one of the few here who's qualified with firearms. Now, tell me everything, Gus, or so help me you'll be wearing a bandanna and beating a tambourine in the big parade ten times a day."

Gus didn't reply right away. "After I figured it all out," he finally said, "after I knew who it was, I'd see him on the wheel every two weeks or so. I don't know why he rode it. Maybe he got his kicks watching me at work, knowing that he'd soon be with my wife. Maybe he didn't know who I was, and just liked riding Ferris wheels. I don't know. And I don't know if I'd have done what I did if I hadn't seen him regular. It was like he was rubbing it in. So, yes, I planned the whole

thing out. Got the idea when I noticed that he was always coming around during the Western show. So I asked around to see who needed money, and who was likely to do what to get it. I came up with Harry Jones. Told him I'd pay him two thousand dollars, and it would be money well spent. After that we waited until I was sure Young would be coming. And never mind how I knew, just say my wife's not as subtle as she thinks she is. When I was sure, I passed the word to Jones. He had to call in some favors, but he made sure that he was on the board this week. After that, well, it happened how you figured it."

Gus's story rang true. I saw last night that Harry had switched work assignments to get on the Board this week. Whoever he owed a favor to was not going to collect.

There was one final question. "What did you do, Gus, after Harry pulled the trigger? Let a dead man ride all day until closing then take him back to the Sly Fox?"

"Nope," Gus shook his head. "He only rode until the end of my shift and Harry's. Harry got a cart and we made like he was sick. Then we took him back to the motel, stripped him, and put him to bed."

"Okay, Gus, that's it. Get back to work." I stood up.

"That's it? Get back to work?"

I shrugged. "Like you said, Gus, what can we do? We call you on this, we put ourselves in a bad light." I gave him my best smile. "Just don't expect a raise anytime soon."

"You going to talk to Jones?"

"I might mention it to him, just to remind him that killing guests is against company policy."

Just for fun I did say something to Harry. He wasn't nearly as polite as Gus was.

"And what you going to do about it, old man?" Old man? I may have retired from one job, but I was no where near Social Security. If Harry didn't pay for the murder, he'd surely pay for that crack. "Send me away, you're coming with me. Last time I checked, covering up murder was still against the law." And he was right, in most places, but this was Winslow.

"Just wanted you to know that I knew." And I left it at that, for a while.

After dealing with Harry and Gus, I finally went to see Gypsy's other big wheel. I gave Hamilton the who, why, where, and how of the murder. I also told him that Gus and Harry thought that we couldn't do anything about it.

"Jones I can understand," Hamilton said in a calm voice. "He's only been here, what, a season?"

"Two, he worked admissions security last year."

Hamilton went on. "It's Rodgers I can't figure. He's been around since forever. He should know better."

Hamilton was still shaking his head when I suggested calling in the police—ours, the county's, the state troopers, anybody—just to keep those two from getting away with murder. Even with offering up Doc Harris as a sacrifice he didn't like it. I didn't think he would.

"So what's your next idea, Jake?"

I told him. This one he liked.

"Sounds good," he said. "Running the Big Wheel all these years, Gus should know that what goes around comes around. Let's do it."

The next day, I again pulled Gus off the wheel.

"You're fired, Gus," I told him. "No retirement, no pension, not even a park pass." I held out an envelope. "Here's your week's pay. Spend it wisely, you'll need every penny."

Gus turned white, then red. "You can't do this, I'll, I'll . . ."

"What, Gus, turn yourself in, confess to murder just to make us look bad? Go ahead. Even if anyone believes you, we were just going on information provided by Dr. Harris. And he's been wrong before. One more time's not going to matter. Part of his job description is potential scapegoat. At worst, the park is embarrassed and the doc gets fired, except that he's got a pension. You, you'll go to jail for the rest of your life." I held out the envelope again. "Take this and go, Gus, or you'll go without it." I nodded to the two security guards standing close by, neither of whom was Harry Jones. I had other plans for him. Gus took the envelope and left.

Before firing Gus, I'd paid a visit to his wife. I told her just enough to let her know that Gus had had something to do with her lover's death. I made sure that she understood that a future with Gus was no future at all. I explained the value

of silence and the long term benefits of accepting a position with Gypsy's Caravan. She was not a stupid woman.

Gus got home to find the locks changed. He later found that not only had his wife cleaned out their joint accounts, but the house was now in her name alone. All he had left was a check that no one in town would cash.

Hamilton had put the word out on Gus. No one knew why, and no one asked questions. He couldn't get a job, a room, even a kind word. The next day he was taken in for vagrancy and given a bus ticket out of town. He left, a sad, broken man with little money and no future.

Harry was just as easily dealt with. About the same time I was firing Gus, officers driving a Winslow PD police car reported that someone had taken a shot at them. A bullet was recovered nearby, a .22 or .25, depending on whether it was all there. Acting on a tip, police searched Harry's apartment. There they found a small caliber pistol. Ballistics tests showed that it matched the recovered bullet. Harry was charged with, tried for, and convicted of attempted murder.

Was any of it right? It wasn't right for Gus and Harry to have killed Hector. And you're probably thinking that it wasn't right for me to have covered up his death. Maybe not, but I managed to do my job and still get a sort of justice for Hector Young. I'll settle for that.

The Black Damp

Terry Black

It's called Bone Hollow, it's the deepest mine in the Panther Valley, gave up thirty million tons of high-grade coal and sent nineteen souls to meet Saint Peter before they shut her down in '76—and I don't know who's the bigger fool, son, you for wanting to go down there or me for taking you.

Watch your step, now. No one's ridden in this old cage for damn near twenty-five years, and it might be a tad rusty. You want to be extra-special careful because this here shaft goes plumb-bob down about thirteen hundred and twenty feet, that's a quarter mile, son, deeper down than the Empire State Building is high. Once, out of curiosity, I paced off one-quarter mile from the front door of my house, got clear to Grover's Five-and-Dime on Oak Street and I wasn't even through yet. That's how far we'll be from the sunshine.

Here goes now, so hang on tight. Oh, sorry, I should have warned you how fast this thing is. They used to say you could fall down the shaft and the guys in the elevator would wonder what's keeping you. You want to keep your hands inside the bars, son, I'd hate for you to lose that nice wedding ring.

What's that? Oh, don't worry about the power cutting out, I had Chuck Burns check out that diesel generator up in the head house and Chuck, he says it's sound as a dollar and give back change. I was you, I'd be more worried about bad air or one of those roof timbers giving way or maybe a pocket of gas going up if there's some kind of a spark. You're not a smoker, son, are you?

Yeah, that's right, it is getting hotter, we pick up maybe four or five degrees every hundred feet or so. I make us about halfway down, so if you do the arithmetic, you'll see it's a good time to lose that fancy suit coat of yours. Nice fabric, what'd you pay for that?

Anyhow, I was saying what can happen in these old mines. Something I might mention, it's called the "black damp," you get all groggy and sick and you can't say why, turns out it's all that built-up carbon monoxide from those big jackhammers. You get the damp, son, you'd best make tracks or you'll be paying a visit to Parson's Funeral Home. 'Course, the first thing happens with bad air is you get stupid and start making wrong choices. That happened to a buddy of mine, Jack Sizemore, we found him at the bottom of the Jonas Vein with his drill still going in his hands.

But that's not what you're looking to write about, is it? You go back to

that snotrag of a newspaper with a story about hard rock miners sucking up diesel exhaust, they're going to toss you out on your well-tailored backside. We both know what you really want.

Whoops! Pardon the jolt, son, here we are. Let me open up this old cage and give you the two-buck tour. Hope this halogen wide-beam holds out, be awfully lonely way down here in the pitch dark . . . or maybe it wouldn't be. What do you think, son, are those stories true?

This here, then, this is the main gallery. Watch you don't trip on those tracks, that's where the ore cars come in; we used to haul 'em up and ship out the coal to the Number 9 Breaker over in Lansford. You see those chutes going up at an angle, all lined with corrugated steel? What you do, you get under that coal and drill upwards at a pitch of twenty-seven degrees, no more and no less, and when you hit that vein you drill some holes and put in dynamite and you blow that coal right down the chute. Then you line it with sheet steel and do it all over again. 'Course, you need to plug that chute when the car gets full, though you can't hardly tell sometimes because there's so much dust.

That's the worst of it, that damn dust.

Maybe you've noticed how I keep coughing into this handkerchief? That's from breathing in forty years of Pennsylvania coal dust; it's like little razor blades down there in your lungs. Every miner gets the Black Lung sooner or later; you can pack up and quit the mines, but you've still got it and there's no cure. "Anthro-silicosis," that's what Doc Stanton calls it, a ten-dollar word for how it hurts to breathe a little more each year till finally it's not worth it and then you die.

That's what you boys should be writing about, you ask me, not this business about Old Clawfoot and those unsolved killings. But I don't guess your readers would buy the *Sunday Herald* to read about some wheezing old rockmen, now would they?

Well, I better get to it, then. Make sure your recording machine's turned on, son, because this is going to be about the damndest story you ever heard.

I'm going to say it was the fall of '72, because Nixon was still president and they'd just stopped drafting for Vietnam, though I was a little old for it even back then. I had this buddy Chewie Barnswallow, that was his actual name, I'd known him a couple of years but it wasn't till that spring that he first started talking about Shaft Thirteen. That's the deepest-down hole in Bone Hollow, as far as our drills ever dug, and there at the bottom is the Lazarus Vein, not a hundred feet from where we're standing. Watch your head there, son.

So Chewie, he's been drilling on Lazarus all last week, and he says he's got a funny feeling whenever he's down there. I asked him funny how, and he hemmed and he hawed and then Old Chewie, he said something I'll never forget.

He said, "Roy, I don't think we're alone down here."

But when I asked what he meant by that, Old Chewie he just dummed up and wouldn't say another word. Chewie was like that, see, he was college educated but he came back to work in the mines anyway, even though nobody did that. You ask me, I think he couldn't hold down one of those office jobs because anyone he tried to work for would think he was half nuts, and I'm not sure they'd be wrong.

Well, I didn't pay him more than half a mind, but Chewie had this way of circling round the subject and coming up the other side, he was kind of sneaky like that. So later we're down at Jonas taking a break, and I'm feeding dry bread to the rats because as long as there's rats around you know the air's good to breathe. And Chewie, he asks if I know where coal comes from.

Damn stupid question, you ask me. You don't need any snooty college to tell you it's all that prehistoric muck smashed flat under tons of rock over an awful lot of years. Well, Chewie, he's nodding, he goes yeah, that's right, it's called a "geo-syncline." It's a sunken deep-water swamp that rots and gets buried and then kind of ferments into a big old coal seam like this one.

So I ask him what's the point, and he says, don't you see? This was alive, all of it, this was a great big undersea forest, you've got ferns big as department store windows with roots like fingers stretched deep down into the bog, all rich and full of life. And it's like we're trespassing down here, Roy, like we're ripping up a thing of beauty with these big jackhammers. And I'm thinking, no wonder you couldn't get a better job, you damn fool, but I just grunted and kept my mouth shut.

And that's when we found the dinosaur.

Mitch Bingham spotted it first, he's trying to pry out a piece of granite with his pickaxe and all of a sudden he goes, Hey guys, this looks like a bone or something. So we take a look and it's a bone, all right, a petrified bone, so heavy you can't hardly lift it. And Chewie, he's all excited, says it's a valuable fossil and we can't none of us touch it, we need a paleontologist flown in from Philadelphia.

Well, management was none too pleased about that, but Chewie, he knew just who to call and who to beg and who to threaten, and pretty soon this team of specialists shows up from LaSalle University to check out whatever it was we found. But they don't use jackhammers, they've got little tiny picks and little brass hammers and there's even a feather-duster to keep from damaging the specimen; that's how they said it, "damaging the specimen."

Six weeks they're down there, six whole weeks; we could load ninety cars of anthracite in the time it took to dig out those old bones. And Chewie, he's no help, he says there's a mine in Belgium where they dug out thirty-one iguanodon skeletons, that's a plant-eater stands sixteen feet tall; think how long that must have took to dig up. But our boy,

there's just one of him, and he wasn't a plant-eater. He was a nasty little fella called "Deinonychus."

You probably know more about him than me, I'll bet, because you're the one doing the story. All I know is, he was a dozen feet from head to tail, a hunter-killer, very fast, close cousin of some of those creatures you probably saw in *Jurassic Park*. Well, Chewie heard the name and he just about went nuts. That's from the Greek, he says, it means "terrible claw," because he's got this big old claw in his foot, probably used it to gut whoever and whatever he caught himself for dinnertime. I don't know who was first to call our boy Old Clawfoot, but Chewie got hold of it and the name stuck.

After that, he was insufferable.

"What if there's others down here?" he'd say, pointing his safety lamp up into those dark rocks. "What if Old Clawfoot's got a thousand relatives in this old mine, like flies in amber just out of reach, and here we come all tramping and poking around—what if they don't like it, Roy?" It sounds silly, doesn't it, but Chewie had this way of making even the stupidest thing sound frightening, especially down there under a quarter mile of granite with that helmet beam bouncing around throwing shadows and Chewie half-hysterical, maybe more than half. "What are we going to do?" he'd say, his eyes all big and shiny like marbles. "We're stuck down here, there's nowhere to go."

And I'd say calm down, Chewie, use your head, you're scared of dinosaur ghosts? It's the dumbest thing I ever heard. And finally he'd go okay, yeah, what was I thinking, but you could tell it was still there in the back of his mind.

Probably he would have got over it, though, if Mike Chisholm hadn't turned up dead two weeks later.

Oh, so you heard about that? Well, I hate to bust your bubble, son, but there's not much mystery about what killed Old Mike. You try holding that big jackhammer up steady against sheetrock granite, with your muscles pounding and the sweat running into your shoes, it's about the toughest thing a man can do. That rock shifts a little and takes you off-guard, suddenly you've got a wild drill that'll tear through flesh and bone just as easy as anthracite coal. I don't think poor Mike ever knew what hit him.

Well, the Carbon County medical examiner had the same idea, and they ended up calling it an accidental death. And there's this sort of churchyard hush over the mine for a few days afterward, nobody's in a hurry to get back to work but that's our job, son, what else we going to do? So pretty soon it's "shame about Mike" and "good man, Mike was," but there's coal down there still needs to be dug out, and pretty soon it's business as usual.

Except for Chewie, he's like a stark raving nutball.

"Did you see the body?" he asked me, kind of half-whispering even

though everyone could hear him just fine. We're in the wash shanty, trying to scrub some of that dirt and dust and sweat off, and Chewie, he figured I was his best audience, which gives you some idea how the others felt. So I ask, what do you mean, not because I really wanted to know but just to get it over with. And Chewie, he says the second thing I'll never forget.

He says, "That was a claw mark, Roy, running down Mike's chest."

Now I know there's no claw mark, it was just that haywire drill, but damned if Chewie hasn't got me wondering about ghosts and dinosaurs and other things about as crazy as he is. Course, I could always go home to my wife Lucille—she's five years buried this month, got the cancer and wouldn't see a doctor, Lucille; she was real hard-nosed about things like that—and she wasn't a fan of Chewie Barnswallow. Said I should rid myself of that raving loon and be done with it. So I said look, Lucille, we both know Chewie's got a sprocket loose but I'm worried about him, I think he might do something. And damned if I wasn't right.

All it took was something to set him off. And it came sooner than I figured.

See, we've got a winze, that's a tunnel goes up at a slant, it runs between Shaft Ten and the south face of the Lucas Vein. And two of the boys are down there, Sam Peck and Arty Morris, they're not five minutes out of the cage and there's this big old grumble, felt it clean through my boots, and Max, he's the fire boss, he goes oh dear God, and that's when I knew there was a cave-in. I wanted to run down there but of course that's not smart, you want to take your time and be extra careful or they'll be pulling you out of there, too.

Well, by the time we got Sam and Arty clear there wasn't much need for a doctor. I remember Sam had mud up his nose, I can see that yet, and Arty, he had a timber come down, stove in his skull. And now everyone's kind of spooky and nervous, two men down so soon after Mike Chisholm, it's bad luck and no mistake. And who do you think picks that moment to stir up the pot even worse?

"This wasn't an accident," Chewie says.

And he's looking at this big roof timber, right where it cracked, there's a scrape running down the side and Chewie says that's why it gave out. "Only one thing could have done that," he says, and I'm thinking he's really gone off the path this time and I can see I'm not alone. See, none of us wanted to hear about Old Clawfoot right then, least of all me, but Chewie wouldn't let go of it. "He did this, that's what happened, we dug too deep and tore up his resting hole and now he's going to hunt us down like animals in these filthy old dead-end caves. You think you're safe down here, we're like a herd he's stalking. I'll bet he's already picked out the next one to follow in Mike and Sam and Arty's tracks—"

Somebody slugged him. No surprise, he was practically begging for it. I tried to get in and break it up, but next thing I know Chewie's knocked

off his feet and all those boys are cursing and spitting on him and kicking him with their hard-soled boots. I just barely got him out of there, all banged-up and swollen and bleeding from the mouth, and I said he was a damn fool to start raving right then but Chewie wasn't even listening.

"He's down here, Roy," was all he said.

And I knew this would be Chewie's last day in Bone Hollow, he was going to quit this job for once and all if I had to drag him out of there myself. I left him with the foreman and went back to finish out my shift, and I tried not to think what would happen if we had another accident with the men so scared and mad over what Chewie had been telling them.

Well, nothing happened for the next four hours, and I went up thinking it was all over, we could maybe get Chewie hired on as a bank teller at First Federal, I'd heard they were hiring, and then he'd be someone else's problem. I'm halfway out of there, thinking Chewie might even like sitting at that little window with no prehistoric monsters anywhere close, and then I saw something just about made my heart seize.

You see, there's a pegboard by the elevator. Every man has a little piece of brass stamped LEHIGH NAVIGATION COAL COMPANY with a number inscribed at the top. That's your check number, you turn it over when you leave the mine and that's how they know everyone's out. Well, Chewie's number was 57, he used to say it was because he liked Heinz ketchup with the "57 Varieties" written on the bottle. And I'm looking at that pegboard and I happen to see that number 57's turned the wrong way, and I realize Chewie's still down there!

So I got right back in the elevator, I remember Mitch, he laughed and said, "Hey, Roy, you're going the wrong way," and I'm heading for the bottom of Shaft Thirteen just as fast as that old cage could carry me. You remember how quick it was getting us down here, well, I swear it took forever that time, with me just standing there wondering what Chewie thought he was doing, and remembering that look on his face.

I get to the bottom and it's dark as pitch, all the lights are turned out except for my helmet, and there's the smell of old sweat and fresh dug-up coal. But it's not quiet, like you'd expect —there's this chatter coming from not far off, it's the sound of a drill going.

And I'm running towards it, yelling, "Chewie! What's going on?" But it's hard to go too fast because the ceiling's low-hung and you can't see your feet, just that bobbing patch of light up ahead. I took a header a couple of times, skinned my knee up good but I didn't even notice that until later. So then I turn a corner and there's Chewie, took me a minute just to figure out what he's doing.

Then I got it, and wished I hadn't.

You know those wildcat operators, they go into a mine that's been shut down and try to dig out whatever coal got missed last time? Well, there's

something they do, it's like dumb times three, they go up to one of those stone pillars holding the roof up and they try to dig out the coal from it. "Robbing the pillar," that's called, it's the worst kind of mining there is, because if you take out too much, you'll be wearing the roof for a hat.

And that's what Chewie was doing.

"You stand back, Roy," he says, jamming his drill bit into the side of a stone column, I swear it's half cut through already, though it's hard to tell with all that dust flying around in our helmet beams. And I go Chewie, what the hell's this, you looking to die down here? And he says it's the only way to stop Old Clawfoot, says he's going to bring this whole place down so that murdering nightmare can go back to hell where he belongs.

And there's this crack from one of the roof timbers splitting, and dirt starts to rain from the ceiling, there's maybe a couple of seconds before the whole thing gives way. And a voice in my head is saying, Leave him, he wants to die that's fine but you don't have to join him. I just about turned tail but something held me back, maybe it was the time I twisted an ankle and Chewie drug me two miles out of the woods, or maybe it was the time Chewie lent me a hundred and nine dollars for Lucille's new birthday dress, or maybe you just don't leave a buddy behind in this damn stinking hole if you can possibly help it, I don't know, but I swear I was going back for him.

Only I never made it.

Because I saw something just then, even through all the dust in the light of my helmet. You're going to say I was seeing things or maybe the damp hit me and I just wasn't getting enough air, but I swear there were two eyes red as hot coals coming out of the dark at Chewie, and a big misshapen head zippered with teeth, and two scaly paws with claws like steak knives. And Chewie, he saw it, too, he screamed and screamed but he never stopped drilling.

Well, I stopped right in my tracks, thinking, It's not there, I'm seeing it but it's not there, and that's when that timber gave way and a column of rock and earth one-quarter mile high came down right smack on both of them, with a BOOM! like to bust my eardrums. And I'm scrambling out of there, thought I wasn't going to make it but by the grace of God and good fortune that rockpile missed me, left me gasping and half-smothered in dirt and dust but somehow still alive.

Later on, a couple of the boys, Mitch and I forget who else, they came down after me and hauled me up topside, got Doc Stanton to look at me and cleaned up the worst of my scrapes. And the Doc, he said I was lucky to make it out of there, by rights I should have been sharing my final rest with poor old Chewie.

I never told them what I saw. I never even told Lucille, like she would have believed it anyway. I figured it was a story that didn't need telling,

since it was all over and done with anyhow. They shut down Shaft Thirteen, no one dug one cupful out of Lazarus from that day forward, and though they worked Bone Hollow for another three years and change, you could tell it was a losing enterprise. "Economic factors," they said, this country was built on coal but now people wanted cleaner fuels, like petroleum and natural gas, and coal just wasn't profitable anymore. That's why they closed Bone Hollow.

Me, I know better.

We're a superstitious bunch, we rockmen are, and when word got around what Chewie had been saying and what became of him, it was hard to get good men down here. Lots of work stoppages, absenteeism, unplanned shutdowns. When they finally boarded up this place in '76, I'm thinking they were well rid of it.

What's that, son? No, it's a fair question, you're right to wonder why a fella like me would come back down here after what I saw. By way of an answer, I want you to listen real close and tell me if you don't hear what I do: that little crunch off in the distance, like a big scaly footstep on loose bits of gravel? There, listen again, it's coming closer. I knew Old Clawfoot wouldn't disappoint us.

No, son, it's no joke, you're in a deep earth mine with a crazy old fool and one lone flashlight and an elevator that might or might not get you back out again. Sec, I lied about what Chuck said, that old cage could give out at any time. We were lucky to make it down here.

Well, that's a fair question, too, I might as well tell you. See, I saw Doc Stanton again this morning, my Black Lung, it's worse than he thought, I've got six months to go, tops, and I'm thinking maybe it's time to join up with my Lucille and Old Chewie again, though that could be a problem because they may have gone to different places, if you know what I mean. Figured I'd let Saint Pete sort it out, after Old Clawfoot's done his job.

I was you, son, I'd bolt like a rabbit for that elevator and pray it's got enough juice to carry you topside. Don't wait for me, because I'm not coming, I'm going to take this old pickaxe and stand my ground and see if I can't give a good account of myself, even now after all these years. If you make it out, son, you tell those Sunday supplement readers how Roy James wasn't scared of this old mine or anything in it, least of all a murdering pile of bones and teeth and claws.

Come on, old buddy, I'm waiting for you.

The Swimmers' Club

D. A. McGuire

She gave us our seats by moving through the room, tapping the back of each molded plastic chair, and saying our last names. Totally random, she insisted, mixing up the entire class without reference to sex, alphabetization, or any other reasonable criteria. Groups of three, she said, but as there were twenty-three in the class, the last two names called made up a final pairing of two.

"Might be another added to the class," Mrs. Hillman, Intro to World History, said to me in passing. "She'll be with you two . . ." She gave a swift glance to the other student assigned to sit with me. "If we get her. Have a seat."

So we did, me without comment and my new "partner" muttering, "Great. Look who I get to sit with."

I could have said the same or worse, but I kept my mouth shut.

And kept it shut as all around us other groups of kids sorted out in this aimless, pointless manner talked to one another or turned around to find a friend, make a comment, shuffle book bags and notebooks, or otherwise get comfortable in the world's worst designed furniture: student desks. Usually the desks were arranged in rows of five to six across the front, five to six going back in strictly parallel lines.

Except this was Mrs. Hillman's class, and everyone knew that Mrs. Hillman lived by another set of rules and a different and more radical set of expectations. No rows in her class. No seating plans with students lined up A to Z. In her room the desks bumped each other head-to-head, with a third desk bisecting the first two. And when I took the desk against the far wall, I just knew my new partner, as yet unnamed to me, would take the one opposite, thus leaving a forward-facing desk part way between us.

And so, slumping back, tossing her raggedy backpack on the floor, a green-haired, black-eyed, scowling girl faced me. Dressed all in black, too: black sweater too hot for the first day of school, black jeans, black platform heels which she had teetered across the room upon. She was chewing gum, had too much eye makeup on, as well as too much nail polish: black nail polish on thin, short fingers which she immediately started to drum across the graffiti-marked desktop. She wasn't very big, and possibly not very bad-looking, but any natural appeal she might have had was covered up with too much makeup, too many layers of dark clothing, and just too much attitude. I turned away from her as far as I could, folded my arms over

my chest, and waited to see what this teacher had planned.

I attend Manamesset Bay Regional High School, part of a school district which brings together kids from three different towns: Manamesset, my hometown, which sits on the east side of Manamesset Bay; Northport, a slightly larger community just north of the Manamesset Canal Bridge; and Quinicut, a smaller town directly south of us. All three are Cape Cod towns, of course, with populations which swell in summer, then shrink back down after Labor Day. None of the three communities are as rich as Westfleet or Hyannis, or as big as Sandwich and Falmouth, so we don't have our own high schools. After finishing grade nine in the local junior high, kids from all three towns move on to the regional high school, there to share the resources, more varied courses and extra-curricular activities that only a large facility can offer. I say all this only to explain why I didn't know this odd, green-haired, black-eyed girl, who was still glowering at me like I was her worst enemy. She must have been a Northport or Quinicut girl, and even though we'd only met (and it hadn't been *me* who put us together), I could tell she was less than enthralled to hear that:

“. . . you'll be working together on in-class projects and activities.” Mrs. Hillman, at the front of the room, was expounding on her class philosophy. “Every six weeks there'll be a new seating arrangement. It's my belief that students get too comfortable sitting with

those they've known since grade school. That's why I've mixed you up. I intend that this class will mimic the adult world, and believe me, in *that* world you'll be thrown together with people from all different backgrounds and points of view, which means people you might not like very much. But as an adult you have to learn to accept other people well enough to get a job done. So don't even think of asking to change your group. The answer will be no.”

At that, the green-haired girl sighed and scowled at me. I just looked back at her and shrugged. This wasn't my fault.

“And for those who might think they'd like to transfer out, let me remind you that Intro to World History is a required course for all sophomores. Both Mr. Rockingham's and Mrs. Firullo's classes are full. If we get any new transfers to the school, they come into this class. Now, I'm going to read the roll. Please say 'Here' when I call your name.”

She had a comment to that, Miss Green-hair, under her breath: “This sucks.”

I said nothing, and when Mrs. Hillman called, “Emma Presley,” Green-hair called out in a totally bored fashion, “Here,” then glared at me some more.

But when my name, next to last, “Herbert Sawyer,” was called, Emma Green-hair muttered, “Herbert?” just as I said, “Here.”

“So what kind of a name is Herbert, anyhow?” she smirked. There were about twenty minutes left to

class. We were finishing up a summer reading quiz, which Emma was snorting and sighing all the way through. Mrs. Hillman, apparently oblivious to us, was writing avidly on the board. Evidently my new history partner was determined to seize on any fault she could find in me. I guess my name was good enough.

"It's my name," I answered. I didn't even look up; I was writing out the answer to an essay question.

"Yeah," she sneered, "but *who* names their kid *Herbert*?" She was determined to milk this for all it was worth. It was as though she was trying to goad me, and wanted to make me say or do something she could really sink her teeth into.

"The same kind of people who name their kid Emma, I guess," I answered.

"Hey, Emma's a good name. You ever hear of the British actress, Emma something; you know who I mean, she was married to someone famous, and was in a movie with that guy who was in *American Graffiti*. You know, the famous one."

"John Travolta?"

"You stupid jerk," she said back. Mrs. Hillman turned from the board and frowned at the class. As soon as her back was turned again, Emma Green-hair said: "Emma Thompson, and she was never married to John Travolta."

"Who said she was?" I replied. I put my pen down with a slam and Mrs. Hillman turned around again. This was going to be a long six weeks.

"You're smart, aren't you?" Emma asked. Mrs. Hillman had moved

to a group of kids near the back of the room; one of them had a hand raised.

But Emma's question kind of took me by surprise. I glanced at the clock; at least another fifteen minutes. All around us restless kids were writing, sighing, stretching, shifting in their uncomfortable plastic chairs. I knew a few of them, but none were really friends. I guessed the best I could hope for was that Emma wasn't in any of my other classes.

"Who says I'm smart?" I said.

"You just look smart." Her eyes flashed up and down me. "You dress smart."

Now, I was wearing khakis, new ones, but an old shirt, plain white, nothing fancy. And black sneakers. I'm not flamboyant; I don't stand out. I'm a completely ordinary-looking, average-sized, fifteen-year-old American kid, about five foot, seven inches, with reddish-brown hair, and an average build. Not big, not small; not ugly, not a male model. I run but don't work out excessively and besides, I had an accident last summer so the last six weeks I'd been pretty lethargic, nursing a broken right arm, and a left one with a hairline fracture. To be blunt, I was kind of out of shape. Hanging around the house and letting my mother wait on me had put a few pounds on and I was anxious to work it off, was even thinking of going out for soccer. So for this ghoulish-looking girl to say I "looked smart," well, it just didn't figure.

"I'm not smart." I reached down to grab the history book I'd tucked

on the metal shelf under my seat. As I did—big mistake—I winced.

“Hey . . .” Instantly the attitude in her voice was gone. She almost sounded concerned: “You okay?”

“I’m fine.” Now my turn to be cool. I turned around in the seat as Mrs. Hillman announced where to bring the finished quizzes, then she gave us a reading assignment. I didn’t talk to Emma for the rest of the class.

After school I took a walk along the canal, watched a luxury liner, then a flat-bottomed barge make their way through. A few tourists were still about, cameras hanging around their necks. The license plates in the parking lot read Ontario, New Brunswick, New York, and Maine. The wind was cool and brisk off the canal, and as I stood and watched, the elevated train bridge cranked its way to the bottom. I found a concrete bench, parked myself on it, and started in on a reading assignment.

Not that I didn’t want to go home, though home had been a less than peaceful place lately. My mother’s love life, rocky the last four years, was smooth sailing at last. Still, she and I seemed to argue over everything and anything. I didn’t seem to do anything right. Forgot to take out the trash. Forgot to pay the paper boy. Forgot to walk Mrs. Miller’s smelly dachshund, as promised. Maybe since my mother was going on forty, she was menopausal or something.

So I stretched out my legs, tried to get into *Moby-Dick*, and lost it a few short words after, “Call me Ish-

mael.” I’d force it down later; I wasn’t one to shirk an assignment, no matter how disinterested I was, just that the sinking sun in the west, brushing the trees out on Smiley’s Island was vastly more appealing . . .

Kind of. For it had been out there on the island where I’d had a little accident: broken one arm, hurt the other. I shoved the book back into my backpack and wished I’d stopped on the way for burgers, a sandwich, anything. My only option seemed to be to go home, face my uncertainly moody mother, and hope that Jake had stopped in. Only around Jake Valari did she ever seem to be in anything close to a good mood.

Jake Valari, a detective on Manamasset’s rather small police force, was my mother’s latest love interest, though theirs had been an on-again, off-again relationship from the start. Truth was, my mother was miserable without Jake, but sometimes not much happier when they were together. “Don’t want to be a cop’s wife,” she’d told me one night after supper, then she’d burst into tears and dropped a casserole dish—macaroni and cheese and all—into the sink, breaking it.

Okay, I’ll tell the truth here, or what I know about it. Fact is, my mother’s distress didn’t arise only from her up-and-down relationship with the only guy in recent history who treated her with any respect. It also came from me. I had a penchant, is the best way I can put it, for getting in and out of sticky situations. So for my mother’s sake I was determined to have a perfect-

ly normal, perfectly ordinary sophomore year. I was going to do my homework, get good grades, help around the house, be polite and attentive to my mother, and generally keep out of trouble.

No more girls. Girls were always bad news. Three girlfriends in a mere two years and nothing but trouble from any of them. So maybe it was a good idea I had to work with Miss Emma Green-hair; no way I'd ever get involved with something like that. Yes, for sure, my life was going to be school, sports, work. To bed early, up in the morning early as well, and if I had any spare time, well then, I'd . . .

Go to church, maybe. Join a church soccer league. Play basketball later in the year when my arms were fully healed. Keep my nose clean, in other words, and if anything unusual or strange was going down anywhere in my immediate vicinity, look the other way. Yeah, that's right, turn around and walk.

Such are the well-intentioned promises we always make to ourselves.

I'd heard about the fires; everyone in town had. It came up the next day during those few minutes at the start of every class when everyone's pulling assignments out of book bags—or just looking for them. It seems that someone was building bonfires on Black Oak Island, one of the outer bay islands that fringed the edge of Manamesset Bay. It was a good-sized island, with a decent stand of trees on it and an old crumbling dock, but no

houses or other buildings on it; it was privately owned. The theory going around school was that the fires were being set to discourage the seals, which had taken up temporary residence on a few of the outer, smaller islands. Apparently some of the local fishermen weren't too thrilled by "competition" for the dwindling fishing stocks, and with even more government fishing restrictions being suggested, it was felt that if the seals were forced to go elsewhere, so much the better for the fishermen who were struggling to stay in business. That's what they reasoned, even though the seals were few in number, and probably would eventually return north from where they'd come.

But I didn't get involved too much in the conversation. I kept to myself, sharing a table at lunch with my two closest friends, Covey and Remy, whose chief interests revolve around girls, rock music, and more girls. So as they chattered away about some good-looking senior girl who might—or might not—have given Covey a come-on stare during gym class (I voted for not), I worked on my geometry homework, then tried to squeeze in five more minutes of *Moby-Dick*. I was still getting hung up on: "Call me . . ."

"Hey, there's no room anywhere else."

A familiar voice; I looked up, startled to see Miss Green-hair standing there with a tray in her hands. Immediately both Covey and Remy were sliding over, making room between them. So she had green hair; so she was dressed completely in

black again; so she was wearing black lipstick and had even inked her thick eyebrows with black liner. She was alive, she was breathing, and she was a girl. But she was ignoring the two of them. She was talking to me. She slid into the bench opposite me, banging her tray down heavily.

"Don't think I looked for you," she said with an exaggerated sigh. "This is the only place left." She looked past me with a rather bored expression on her face. "You might be smart, but you're not the most popular kid in this school, are you?"

"Guess not," was all I could think to say as my two friends snickered—one on either side of her.

"Suppose you all heard about the seals out in the bay," she said, sinking a fork into an unappetizing mix of macaroni, dried-up beef the color of chimney soot, and wrinkled-looking green peppers: chef's special, American chop suey. I'd opted for a creamsicle and a bag of chips. "I think they should just go out and shoot them all."

At this, Remy and Covey giggled. I could almost read their minds: This was some girl!

"Hey look," I said, shutting the novel on my hand, "I don't think killing the seals is the right answer. They're probably just temporary visitors; it's rare to see any this far south and—"

She cut me off: "I mean the jerks who're setting the fires, you idiot. Boy, you aren't as smart as I thought." She looked over at my friends. "Him and me, history partners. Lucky me, right?"

I wasn't interested in this, in her,

or even in my two friends, who were leaning forward, arms folded on the table in the manner of all adolescents eager to make a connection—of any kind—with the opposite sex.

"I got to go," I said, standing up, balancing books, lunch, a half-eaten creamsicle.

"Before you go," she said, stopping me and grabbing a paper from her backpack. She slapped the paper on top of my books. "SOS. If you're interested, or if you're the kind who cares. After school. Room 118." Then she sat herself back down and turned to my friends.

SOS. Save Our Seals. Sponsored by the Environmental Club. But I had better things to do so I crumpled the leaflet into a ball and made a perfect drop—from about twelve feet—into the science room trash bin.

Then, after school, and because I thought I should (and not because I wanted to avoid my mother and her changing day-to-day moodiness), I biked on over to an old friend's house to check up on him. Mr. Elmer Hornton had had an accident about a year ago, one from which he was still recovering. He'd been through a long hospital stay, then rehab, and was finally able to return home with a little in-house health care. In a word, he was doing better, and since I hadn't dropped in for a few days, I figured it was time.

Only problem was, he had company, so just as soon as I'd knocked on the door (and before I figured out that the gray sedan in the driveway didn't belong to a health-care work-

er), a woman answered it. Now, I don't like to bother Mr. Hornton if he's got company. He may be over seventy, as stubborn as an old mule, and a lifelong bachelor, but I wasn't one to intrude on anyone's personal life, excepting my mother's, of course. Still, this woman was no man's idea of a dream date, be he seventeen—or seventy-seven.

She was tall and dark, with brooding eyes and white hair plastered over a long, bony forehead. She'd never been attractive, not a day in her life. Dressed in a plain, drab, black suit, she stared down at me and said:

"You're him, aren't you? Herbert Sawyer. Just who I was looking for." And then, before I could recover from that, she added, "I think I have a job for you."

"So you want me . . ." I looked over at a cheerful Elmer Hornton, sitting there at his kitchen table, cribbage board between him and Miss Etta Bailey, to whom I'd just been introduced. I looked back at the woman, who hadn't missed a trick, or point, as she soundly beat Elmer, now three games in a row, "to go out to Black Oak Island and check things out?"

"I have heard," she said, gathering up the cards in a pair of bony, gnarled hands to shuffle them. "That you are both perspicacious . . . and discreet." She eyed me from under heavy, grayish-white bangs. "Not to mention resourceful. It's a paying job, young man; I will give you five dollars an hour for your time and your trouble. They're setting fires on Black

Oak, a property that has been in my family for over five generations. There is a good stand of forest still on the island, mainly oak, of course, and I should hate to lose it." Her sharp, dark eyes fell on Elmer, who was being pretty close-mouthed throughout this whole conversation. "So yes, check it out. Look around. Lord knows, I've had the fire department out there, and the police, and so many state and local officials your head would spin to hear about it. The fires have all been put out, by the tides for the most part, but everyone I talk to claims the matter comes under someone else's authority. Truth is, no one seems to know whose jurisdiction the island falls under. No one even knows what town the island is in. My deed says Manamesset, but the town officials say it's in Quinicut."

I looked over at Elmer helplessly. "But I'm not a detective, I'm just a kid."

She sat back, eyed me with one bony finger poised against her lips. "Perhaps what I am asking for is an impartial point of view. I need someone to tell *me* what they see. A person can take all the photographs they want, or movies, whatever, and still not get a totally accurate impression of a place, or what's going on in a place. I need, I guess, to hire not just you, Herbert, but your instincts. Someone is setting fires on my island; I need to know why."

I looked at Elmer, who was just sitting there and grinning for all the world like a Cheshire cat. May-

be he saw this as an easy way for me to make a few bucks; maybe he just wanted to get her off his back.

"To keep the seals away?" I said.

"There haven't been seals on Black Oak in over a hundred years," she argued back forcefully.

"You just want me to go out, take a look around and . . . report back? That's it?" I still wasn't sure of what I was being asked to do.

"Yes. That's it."

As I was leaving, Mr. Hornton took me aside and said: "Think of it as a favor for me, Herbie, even though I know that ups the ante between you and me. I owe you, boy, and don't think I don't know that." He laid his hand heavily on my shoulder.

"Owe me? What for?" I shot back. "Just because I take out your trash, and shoveled your drive all last winter, and checked on your house, and brought you your mail, and watered your plants, and put in your vegetable garden, and . . ."

His fingers squeezed hard, trembling a little as they did. "You think I don't know what you've done? I wouldn't be here now if you, your mother, and Jake hadn't come to the hospital every day. Damn it boy, you three are the only family I have." Then his eyes teared up a little, which I hated to see because it embarrassed him more than me, so as he wiped them and turned to watch Miss Bailey back out of his driveway, I said:

"I got nothing better to do anyhow. Tomorrow's Saturday. I'll go

out early, before high tide, see what I can find."

Problem is, not everything works out so simple as it either looks or sounds. It was still early September, still nice, mild weather, so I figured I'd take my boat out—a nice little wooden runabout I'd been given as a thank-you for a favor I'd done this summer—early enough in the morning to get things done, which would leave me the rest of the day to do what I wanted. Yeah, a quick zip to the island and back wouldn't take more than a couple of hours. Figuring another hour or so to walk around the island and look things over, I'd be back by lunch.

Not that I had any idea what I could "report back" to Miss Bailey that a detective or arson expert couldn't. It almost seemed to me that maybe Mr. Hornton was getting senile or something, and had built me up to be something I wasn't in Miss Bailey's eyes. He had suffered some brain damage from his accident a year ago, so maybe his perspective on things had changed. Maybe he forgot I was just an ordinary kid who occasionally had the bad luck to get caught up in things that were far from ordinary.

Anyway, when I got to the river where I keep my boat moored, I found I had a problem. The engine wouldn't turn over. So there I was, had a paying job to do, which I'd said I'd do, but no way to do it. Mr. Hornton had a boat, true, but it had been dry-docked since his accident. The only other person I knew who

had a boat—and who was probably also up at seven in the morning—was my friend Covey.

“If you want me to do this,” Covey had announced, one donut in hand and half of another one stuffed in his mouth, “you got to cut me in, fifty-fifty, and she comes, too.”

Covey lived fairly close to the river; it had been five minutes to jaunt over there and find him home—and entertaining a new friend.

“Look, Covey, this is serious,” I insisted, trying to ignore the presence of his new friend, who believe it or not, was Miss Emma Green-hair. I had tried to conceal my shock, disgust, and dismay at finding her with Covey; I was doing a poor job at all three. I turned back to Covey. “This woman has entrusted me with a real important job. You can’t just have anyone tag along with us.”

Of course, that just made Green-hair fume and sputter; her comments to me were pretty bad, and unprintable here. Covey, on the other hand, was his usual complacent self. “No Emma, no Covey. No Covey, no boat.” Then he smashed the second donut into his face.

“What an amazing coincidence,” Emma told me snidely. “We were going out there, too, as representatives of SOS, to see what’s going on.” Never in my life had I wanted to push a girl off a boat so much. I ignored her, went up to the wheel, and stood near Covey.

“What the hell are you doing with her?” I asked him. “What, you met her like, three days ago?”

“She likes me,” Covey said, his entire face one huge, almost moronic smile, and then as though I hadn’t heard him right, he said again, “She likes me.” And she’s a girl and that’s about all it takes, I guess.

Well, it was Covey’s boat, a small but trim bayliner, thirty foot in length, and Covey’s call, so I took a seat on the bench out on the aft deck, spread my arms out, and just sat there while Covey took us out to Black Oak. I wasn’t happy; I wasn’t even remotely pleased that Emma Green-hair had not only: one, hooked up with my best friend, but two: was with us on our way to Black Oak. This should have been a guy thing—a totally, one hundred percent, just me alone or me and Covey, guy thing. I didn’t like the way she looked at me, her painted lips curled up in a sneer, or the way she . . .

Well, the way she even rode in the boat, because as Covey let it rip and boosted the little craft up to 10 knots, then 15, then 20—which was really pushing it out here—Emma sidled right up against him, her hands on his waist. Between the roar of the engine and the slap-slap of the hull against the water, I couldn’t hear a word they were saying to one another, and was glad of it, too. They were laughing and talking, and occasionally Miss Green-hair would sneak a look back at me over her shoulder and just grin. She was upsetting me; she knew it, and she loved it.

And I hated it, especially when she shoved her hands down inside Covey’s pockets and leaned against

him, her head on his back. He was taking the boat so hard now, and so fast, that every few seconds a spray of water would come in from the port side. She was pretending to scream and hate it. But I knew . . .

I knew that the only real reason she was hugged up against Covey so tightly was to upset me by being hugged up against Covey so tightly. Not that I cared. Why should I care? She in her tight black sweater and black windbreaker and black shorts and black sneakers, and . . .

Her green hair, which when the wind whipped back through it, looked brown underneath, no blonde. Maybe it was the light. Maybe it was a golden-brown. Anyhow, that didn't matter; she was doing all this just to tick me off. Not Covey, though, poor sap; he was innocent as a lamb in all this and had absolutely no idea that Emma Green-hair Presley was doing all this just to . . .

Yes, like I said: just to tick me off. And it was working.

"You're just jealous, aren't you, Sawyer?" she had the nerve to ask as we walked toward a pile of blackened driftwood, dead branches, and old wooden planks that were probably torn from the dilapidated dock we'd just tied up to.

"Jealous—of what?" I asked. I hadn't seen anything that I could possibly report back to Miss Bailey. A fire was a fire, and these had been extinguished by, of all things, the encroaching tides. Someone had placed them—at low tide, just below the high-tide mark. They were probably just what they

seemed to be: fires placed along the beach to deter the seals—if there were indeed any seals—from coming up on shore and deciding to add the outer bay islands to their range. We'd already walked past two piles of debris and now were approaching a third. Covey had run out ahead of us.

"Your best friend has a girlfriend, and you don't," she said to me sarcastically.

"You? You just met him, what, two days ago?"

"True love knows no time limit," she replied, snickering and sucking on a lollipop she'd pulled out of the backpack swung over her shoulder.

She was such a . . . well, I can't say the word here, but I suppose it takes little imagination to figure what I wanted to say. Then, just when I figured she couldn't irritate me more, she did:

"You've probably never even had a girlfriend, right?"

I stopped, right there in the sand, with the water licking my sneakers; we had arrived on the incoming tide. "I've had three."

"Three?" she jeered. "Who you kidding, Sawyer?"

"The first was moved by her father to a private school, out of state, because of me. The second is living in a foster home somewhere on the Cape, where I don't know, and I'm not allowed to know. And that's partly because of me. And the third . . ."

She was just staring at me, the wind whipping up her green hair, her mouth hanging open, lollipop stuck in it.

"Well, she tried to kill me." I shoved my hands into my pockets and then headed up to where Covey had stopped. For some reason—and Covey can be real dramatic when he wants to be—he was shouting and waving his hands over his head. I guess he'd found something interesting.

So here I am, supposedly doing some investigative or scouting work, a paid job, and I'm standing there without a camera, a cell phone, or even a stupid notebook to jot things down in. I made a pretty lousy detective and I decided then and there—as I looked down at what Covey had found—to refuse any money Mrs. Bailey tried to give me. Still, even I was shocked, and surprised, and a little disgusted as Emma hurried to join me and looked down at the body lying in the pile of ashes.

"Oh, my God," she muttered, then looked up the beach toward the thin line of oaks Covey had rushed off to. We could both hear retching in the woods. "Is that . . . it can't be? Is it?"

Give her credit; she had a pretty strong stomach.

"Yeah, it is. Covey's sick, but he'll be okay. This is his first dead body."

"His first . . ." She looked at me, and for a moment I thought she was going to go gray, too, and start heaving up on me. I would imagine it wouldn't be a very pretty sight. Besides, I had to get her and him out of here, contact the police, make sure we didn't touch anything . . .

So yeah, I knew what we were

supposed to do; I also knew what I wanted to do.

"I wasn't talking about Covey, you stupid jerk," she said; she stepped back and away as a small cloud of black flies rose from the body, "I was talking about . . . that's a body, isn't it? A man?" Then her whole face contorted as she took another step back. "What do you mean it's his . . . first body? Like it isn't *yours*?"

What did I say to her, that bad as this was, this wasn't my first, or my second? That wasn't important now. What was, was that this man looked like he had died a real mean death. He was burned up pretty bad, skin a charcoal gray color—that is, what was left of it. His face was clenched in a tight grimace, teeth pulled back against blackened lips, but that was probably just due to muscles shrinking from the heat. His arms and wrists were pulled tight, too, his fists curled into tight knots like he wanted to take a poke at someone. Pugilistic stance, I think I heard Jake call it.

He was dressed in jeans that, maybe because they had been wet when someone had tried to burn him up, were pretty much intact. His jersey, though, a plain knit item, probably polyester, had half-melted, half-burned to his upper torso. He also had what looked like a tie around his neck, which made no sense; the guy was dressed casually. In fact, the way the tie was knotted was sort of weird; it was mostly burned away except for a few threads, and where it was loosely tied around his neck, it made kind of a large bow. About

four inches of one end, the thinner end, was intact. There was a little bit of rockweed lying on him, a bit of charred driftwood, a few small planks of wood. I looked at Emma.

"Well, no, I mean . . ." I quickly lied; she was too upset. "Saw a dead dog once, by the side of the road and . . ."

"This is a human being, you jerk!" She came at me, hitting me on the arm. "Oh, my God, and . . ." She looked at me, then she looked at the corpse, then at me again. "Herbie, I think I know him. Oh, my God, yes. Yes, it's Mr. Davies. I'm pretty sure of it. Mr. Davies?" She looked at me; she looked at him. I looked up as a pair of crows went screaming by. "He taught at my old junior high."

"How do you know it's him?"

"That stupid paisley tie. He wore a paisley tie *every* day. He must have had a hundred different paisley ties. I'm not kidding; he was obsessed with paisley. He even had a couple of paisley suit jackets and his car, the interior was . . ." She took a deep breath and stepped back like she was going to be sick. "He was my seventh and eighth grade teacher, social studies. Oh, my God."

"Yeah, look, we've got to get Covey, and . . . call the police. Why don't you go get him, and I'll . . . Damn, wish I had a cell phone or something, or a camera."

"Camera?" She was even more appalled.

"Yeah, because by the time I get the police out here, well, the tide's almost in and . . ." I pointed out to where the water was slowly creep-

ing up the beach toward the pile. High tide was 8:37 AM. It was just after eight now.

Without a word she swung her backpack to the sand and, opening it, pulled out a small, cheap, disposable camera and a black cell phone. She handed both to me. "There's . . . maybe three or four shots left. But you're sick, you know that."

"This guy's going to be covered by water in less than an hour. It's for the police."

She swung the backpack up on her shoulder and tromped off in the direction of the woods. "You're just sick."

"Thought I was sick," I said as she joined me on the cedar log up above the tidal rack. The cops had just finished talking to her; they'd done me a few minutes earlier.

"You are. I don't like you at all. This whole thing is just . . . sick." She turned to glare at me, then stared down at the small group hovering around the body of her old social studies teacher. "And what did he mean when he said, 'You again?' That guy in the green cap?" She pointed out the county medical examiner, now standing in ankle-deep water and scratching his head.

"I . . . came across another dead person a while back. It's not important." I still had her cell phone, had used it to call the Manamesset Police Department, my house, Covey's house, and Jake Valari. I had also called my mother, told her not to expect me for lunch.

"Not important? What, are you

just unlucky?" she asked. Her face was kind of screwed up like she was looking at the most disgusting thing she'd ever seen, and it wasn't Mr. Davies.

"What do you know about him?" I asked. "Mr. Davies, I mean."

"He was my teacher," she said, newly appalled by me. "I have no idea what he's doing out here—dead." And then, "Why did you want to take those pictures? Thought you were going to give them to the police." She looked at me closely.

As it turned out, the police got here far quicker than I thought they would, a whole boatload of them, both from Manamesset and Quinicut, and the harbor police, and a Coast Guard cruiser, too, which was anchored about forty yards out in the peaceful waters of Manamesset Bay. I guess a dead body lying on a beach on a bonfire has a whole strange, morbid allure of its own.

"They got here pretty fast," I told her. "They won't need these." I tapped my jacket pocket, which is where I had stowed her camera before the police arrived.

"My camera."

"My photographs. I'll develop them and give you yours; the rest are mine."

"I can tell them now you took pictures."

"If you do, you'll never get your camera or your pictures back," I warned her. "What's on the film, anyhow? You and Covey getting all lovey-dovey?"

"Poor Covey." She looked off in the direction of the little dock, or

what remained of it, a few tipped pilings, some boards which just managed to hold themselves together. Covey's uncle and father had just come up to get him, and taken off after we convinced them that the police would "need us" in case a statement had to be made.

Truth is, I'd told Emma to take off, too, but when she'd insisted on staying—and the police hadn't much cared whether she did or not—I didn't put up a protest. I'd been through this before; after giving the police my name and general details—like what we were doing out here—I'd been asked to hang around. This meant several hours of waiting until someone was sufficiently interested to question me some more, the innocent bystander who had found the body. So the fact that she was willing to stay, well, I almost liked her company. Either that, or I liked the fact that she hadn't acted like the typical teenage girl by overreacting in response to finding a corpse. In fact, once she got over her disgust—which was mainly aimed at me—she almost seemed interested in what was happening.

"Why's he all twisted up like that—I mean, his body. He looks like . . . like he was fighting, or I mean, his hands."

"Happens when a body burns sometimes. The muscles shrink in the heat, makes him look like a boxer. What was he like, Emma? Did people like him, not like him? Did he have enemies?"

"I liked him," she said in a sort of distracted way. "I think I did. I used to file papers for him after school."

"File papers?"

"Yeah, you know what I mean?" She eyed me strangely; evidently I wasn't adequately clued in. "Mr. Davies was a nice guy and all, but he didn't teach much. You know, he talked a lot. About sports, about his team—he was assistant coach of the county swim team. I mean, we could get him off on a tangent and he'd forget all about teaching history, or geography; I had him for both subjects." She gave an offhanded shrug. "We all thought it was funny back then. He was so easy. Gave A's like nothing, because we mostly did nothing. Then when we had to take those stupid state tests, whoa, I *knew* nothing. Anyhow, I filed for him, which means I was maybe . . . a pet of his, kind of, but he had a lot of them. I corrected papers, is what I'm trying to say, the few he gave. He was one of those teachers that talks and talks and talks, but he doesn't *do* much. He had kids do his correcting and stuff. My whole second term grade in eighth grade was based on a single project I did on the Panama Canal. I don't think he even read it; just looked at my poster and gave me an A."

"So kids liked him."

"Yeah, because he talked sports, or about the Swimmers' Club. His two passions, I guess."

"Swimmers' Club."

"Yeah, a group of teachers, mostly, that got together and hung out. They went to every swim meet and . . . well, on Fridays, they went out after school and got drunk together. Not that he told us that, but we knew; we heard. Our parents

talked. They didn't like him, I don't think, not unless your kid was a swimmer, then boy, Mr. Davies could do no wrong."

"Mostly teachers? In the Swimmers' Club."

"Yeah, and some kids, but not junior high kids, at least I don't . . ." She bit her lip and hung her head, green hair swinging in her face. "Older kids, like ones he knew from before. High school, or college, or student teachers. Most people really liked him, I guess."

"Someone didn't like him," I commented, nodding down to the beach where a police officer was now looking up at us. Apparently someone had remembered we were still here, patiently waiting.

But if I'd thought we were important enough for someone to want more from us, then I was wrong. In fact, when the man lumbered up to talk to us, all he said was: "Nothing more you kids can do here. Harbor patrol will take you home."

Going home wasn't easy. I'd been through this before and I promised myself—I swore—I wouldn't bring any of this home. This was not my affair, and despite the fact I'd been asked to check out the fires, that is all I had been asked to do. If the police came with questions, okay, I'd answer them. I did call Miss Bailey, gave her my report, meager as it was; of course, I left out the part about Mr. Davies. Still, when she thanked me and offered to send me a check in the mail, I told her to forget it. As for the rest, well, Emma had told the police who she thought

the body was and that was that. Let the police sort everything out.

And that's exactly what I told a somber Jake as he and I sat at my kitchen table later that evening. My mother was out on the front porch doing needlepoint and watching a documentary on the Discovery Channel. About seals, I think, or maybe it was sea lions.

"It's the only way to look at it," Jake agreed; surprisingly, he had no lecture for me that night, nothing about minding my own business and staying out of the police's way, and so on, and so on. We had just finished a wonderful late supper of steamers and stuffed quahogs, grilled corn-on-the-cob and Jake's special peach cobbler. It had been a treat to have him with us and even my mother—despite the news of the day—had seemed calm, relaxed, and very happy.

"I mean, she knows . . ." I said, dropping my voice; I glanced across the living room in the direction of the porch, "that it's happened, that I . . . but I swear, Jake, I don't even care why this guy was out there, or how he got out there, or what happened to him. I don't."

"Found a tie around his neck, part of it was unburned, big knot in the back."

"God-awful paisley," I said, trying to be offhanded about it. "Probably he was strangled, then burned."

Jake just nodded, took a sip of coffee.

"And there was stuff on him, some driftwood, seaweed, some planking from the dock. It probably washed over him with the tide,

which was around eight fifteen last night. But the body stayed put, pretty much; a couple more ins and outs of the tide and he'd be gone, maybe. Maybe someone thought, burn him up, wash him out to sea, but why not just weigh him down, drop him somewhere in the bay? Confusing."

"I'll say."

"Look, because I'm interested doesn't mean I'm going to be involved. I'm normal, curious; I can't help that. She's got to know that, Jake, at some point, she's got to understand. I'm going to think about it, and try to figure it out, and follow it in the paper, but I am not going to . . . do anything else." I sighed heavily; I'd eaten too much. I glanced at Jake's huge, rotund belly, then at the peach cobbler, and decided against a third helping.

"A couple of things you need to know about your mother." Jake leaned across the small, narrow wooden table toward me. "She loves you. She's proud of you. She's also scared for you. You're not a bad kid, not a daredevil, risk-taker, none of that, but you are . . . what's the word? When it comes to a puzzle, or a crime, tireless? No, you are—and it's a big word—*indefatigable*. You might not get involved in this and I don't want you to, but I can't control what you're tossing and turning around in your head. She's afraid—because you can't turn it off. She told me the other night that what she feared most is that you'd become a cop."

"Like you?" I wanted to laugh.

"A nice safe job is what she wants

for you. She lost your father; she doesn't want to lose you."

I started to rise; this whole conversation was bugging me. "I'll try not to get leukemia."

He lunged out an arm, grabbed hold of me. "That's a rotten thing to say, even to me."

"I got to read *Moby-Dick*," I told him, and then: "I'm sorry."

"Miss McGifford," Emma muttered under her breath.

"What?" I was not in a good mood. Monday morning, and we were getting ready to do a stupid bonding activity in history class, so we "would learn to know each other better." I mean, what makes teachers think we want to get to know each other better? Just give us our work and let us go to it! We're talking about fifteen- and sixteen-year-old kids, for crying out loud!

Plus, two other incidents already had me on edge. When I got to Period One/Homeroom class this morning, one of the kids who'd heard about my discovery—I mean, who hadn't? Our names, Covey's, Emma's, and mine, had been in all the local and big-city papers; only the local cable news station had had the decency to call us "three local teenagers"—had called out to me: "Hey, Sawyer, what the heck are you? You trip over bodies everywhere you go. What are you, the 'Death Kid,' or something?"

Of course, the teacher tried to quash that, but she was cut off by morning announcements over the intercom: "During today's moment of silence, let's all think about Mr.

David Davies, who passed away this weekend. When announcements are over, anyone who needs to see or speak to a counselor has permission to report to Guidance."

Well, there were Quinicut kids in that class, which was Spanish. A little explanation is needed here: I take third-year Spanish, having completed two years in my old junior high; but some kids start Spanish in Grade Nine, or even Grade Ten. This means we have a handful of juniors and seniors in the class, and one of the seniors was a big kid named Jim Reid. When that announcement was read, Jim gave a kind of snort, and put his head down onto his arms on the desk. No one bothered him; no one said anything, but when the announcements were finally over and a few kids, I guess from Quinicut, rose to leave the room to go to Guidance, Jim didn't move. One of the kids stopped to speak to him: "Hey, Jim, you coming?"

"What for?" he'd snapped, rearing up. "You think I care the jerk is dead?"

Now *that* the Spanish teacher did quash. "Mr. Reid! I can't believe you just said that!"

Jim muttered an apology, dropped his head back to his arms, and that's pretty much how he'd stayed the remainder of the class.

Yeah, so I had two things on my mind when Emma spoke to me.

"Miss McGifford, seventh grade science; she was in the Swimmers' Club, too. Probably not important, but I was trying to remember. Mr. Davies talked about it a lot when I was in seventh grade, but then not

so much in eighth grade, and I don't know about ninth."

"What are you getting at?" I muttered as an assignment was handed to us. "And who cares?"

"Listen . . ." She had the nerve to move up against me; who did she think I was, Covey? "There were five or six of them. *Were*. When I was a seventh grader, two of them died in a car crash. Do you remember? Two teachers who drove off a bridge?"

I did remember: "Coming back from a swim . . . meet. They were drunk."

"Yeah, and then in eighth grade, another died, a phys. ed teacher who had retired; I forget his name. He'd taken some sleeping pills, I think, with a lot of vodka. I remember Mr. Davies remarking that there were only a few left in his old club. Then he never talked about it much anymore."

"Yeah, well, if there's anything to it, the police will dig it up."

"Why would they? How would they know? I mean, if there is anything to it? It wasn't a formal thing, Sawyer, just a bunch of teachers hanging out, drinking, carousing, I guess. There was a picture of them in my yearbook, Grade 7, a candid someone took at a meet." She looked me up and down very carefully; she didn't look so black, nor so grim today. She still had too much dour, dark makeup on, but she was wearing normal blue jeans and an ordinary white sweatshirt. "You want to come over and . . . look at it?"

"You two all right?" Mrs. Hillman asked us suddenly and abruptly. "I

mean, I know what happened on Saturday. It must have been awful. Do you need to leave the room, or . . ." She put her hand down on the bonding sheet we were supposed to complete. Already kids were circulating around the room finding someone who "loved chocolate ice cream" or who could "do a handstand."

"Yes," Emma said quickly. "I need to . . . just step outside for a minute, if you don't mind, Mrs. Hillman."

"Go right ahead, dear," the teacher said. "Herbie?"

"Yeah, me too, I guess," I said.

"I've asked around," Emma said, leaning against a locker there in the hall, hands behind her. "I know that you . . . you've helped the cops, sometimes. You have a reputation."

"Small reputation," I corrected her. "Or I'm just damn unlucky. Listen, Emma, I'm sorry he's dead, but I can't do a thing about it. The cops are more than competent, and . . ." I shook my head because I saw the signs; she was too eager to play Miss Junior Detective—with me.

"Okay, but it's weird, you got to admit it. There were six of them, now there's only two, I think. I mean teachers; the kids came and went, but . . . he *was* upset when the last one died, two years ago. I remember he made us watch videos all week. I mean, Mr. Davies was a lazy teacher, but he talked everyday; we did do . . . some stuff. He wasn't a video teacher, is what I'm saying, because then the stage belonged to someone else. He wanted it all for himself."

I just looked at her then, won-

dering how it was that a black-lipped, green-haired girl could be so astute.

"At least, tell the cops. I could, but what would I say? They wouldn't listen to me. I'm a kid, a girl, a nobody. You, they might listen to. I just think they should check out the Swimmers' Club, is all. I don't know the name of the other member, but Miss McGifford was one, definitely. I'll show you my year-book; I'll bring it to school tomorrow."

"No," I told her. I was thinking, too much; this was not good. "No, I'll come over today, if it's okay." Just a pause; Covey wasn't going to like this, not to mention Jake or my mother. But who said any of them had to know? "Where do you live?"

Someone had left the newspaper lying open on the kitchen table. She went over to it, put her hand on the short, concise article which detailed: Local Teacher Found Dead on Black Oak Island. There wasn't much to it, though; the police weren't releasing very much information. Truth is, they probably didn't have much. All the paper, a big-city Boston issue, did say was that Mr. Davies had been "one of the best-liked and most popular teachers at Quinicut Junior High, where he taught history, geography, and until last year, was assistant coach of Manamesset County's All-American Junior League Swim Team." The article also went on to say that, "Dave Davies was unmarried, leaving only a few distant cousins," but that, according to the principal of Quinicut, "his presence and exu-

berant spirit will be sorely missed from these halls . . ." The details about his death were very sparse, though they did mention where he was found and that a search was now "underway to find who had set the fires," which in my mind was an altogether different issue. Seals and fishermen? Now, they didn't jive with a burned man strangled by his own tie. The paper also went on to say that the "Quinicut and Manamesset Police Departments were working in conjunction with state authorities" to bring the guilty parties to justice.

"My stepfather says I could make some money if I sold what I saw, you know, to a local paper or something."

I looked at her, paper in my hand. "You going to do that?"

"What do I say? How shriveled up he was? How I recognized him by his tie?"

I looked around the small, spare, white kitchen. Emma lived in one of four apartments which had been made by dividing up an old Cape farmhouse. It had been about an hour's bike ride from my house, and easy to find; I knew the area.

"Besides, he . . . doesn't know we have photographs. We do have photos? I mean, if someone saw them when they were being developed, they'd turn the photos into the cops, right?"

"All done by machine, Emma." I reached into my jacket pocket, pulled out the wad of photos, and tossed them on the table.

"They're there?" She dove on them, and rifling through fifteen photos of Covey eating donuts, Cov-

ey drinking soda, Covey acting like a clown, she found the three I'd taken of the dead Mr. Davies. "My God." She slipped down into a kitchen chair. "Okay, okay, so if the others . . . they were killed . . . they died and they were accidents, this . . ." She dropped the three photos, fanning them out on the table atop the newspaper. "This was no accident. Herbie, he was murdered."

I leaned forward on the table, said: "Emma, there are a hundred reasons Mr. Davies might have been killed: a fight, an argument, a debt owed; he was involved in drugs or something else illegal; he was fooling around with somebody's wife. They're going to question the people he worked with; his friends, his enemies . . ."

"But the kids? Will they question . . . the kids?"

She looked so pale sitting there, and strangely enough, so frightened.

"Yeah, sure, the kids on the swim team, you mean?"

"No, the other kids."

"What other kids, Emma? You don't mean his students?"

"No, the ones who came and saw him after school, or that he drove home, or . . ." She shook her head rather pathetically.

"Emma, did Mr. Davies . . ." I realized then how intimidating my pose might have been, so I quickly slid out a chair and sat next to her at the table. "Hey, you know more about this guy than you want to say. Did he . . ." I glanced at, then quickly turned over, the photos on the table, "ever proposition you, Emma? You know, come on to you,

or your friends, or . . ."

"You know, we . . . we ignore a lot of what we see if it makes us uncomfortable, and if the person is . . . well, a Mr. Davies. Popular and smart and friendly."

"Emma . . ." I moved closer to her, but not so close that she'd misinterpret my intentions.

"Em. My friends call me Em."

"I can't do that."

"Because you're not my friend?" She looked suddenly like she was going to cry.

"No, because that's what my mother's boyfriend calls my mother. Her name is Emily."

She smiled; it quickly faded. "No, I never saw anything bad, and he never did or said anything to me. It's not that." She settled back with a sigh. "I could be so off base with this, so wrong. But there were times when I was sitting at his desk and kids would come in and they'd look at me, the kids, that is, as if they wanted me out of there. Then Mr. Davies would laugh and I remember one day him saying 'It's all right,' and took them into this back room he had, where he kept maps and globes and stuff like that. It had a window in it; nothing happened—I would have seen. But I never heard what they talked about. I used to wonder about that." She shrugged.

"Kids," I murmured, then not knowing why I said it, added, "Girl kids—or . . ."

She cut me right off: "Boys. They were always boys."

She showed me the yearbook after that, which was nothing really

special, a ragged, soft-cover publication about fifty pages long. In the back was a section with candid photos, and among them was a shot of six adults sitting in the bleachers of what looked like a pool. There was a wavy effect to it, as though light reflecting off of water had cast a blur against their faces. Strangely enough, I did recognize Mr. Davies, even though I'd only seen him once, and that one time, dead. Emma pointed out the two who had died in the crash, two young male teachers, she said, though she never knew them, both taught ninth grade. She also pointed out the phys. ed teacher who may or may not have taken his own life with a mixture of alcohol and sleeping pills. Then Miss McGifford, a teacher about thirty, with long straight hair and an ordinary, almost stern-looking face. She looked out of place in the bunch, as though possibly she was the only one there not having a good time. The sixth person was another woman, sitting behind Mr. Davies but forward, with her arms looped around his neck.

"I know now why I forgot her. She taught only one year, photography." She frowned. "She opened a small photography studio; it's in the center of town. I don't remember why she left; I can't remember everything. This is three years ago!"

"I remember everything from three years ago."

"Well, aren't we special, Herbert Sawyer." She gave an exaggerated sigh and flipped to the front of the yearbook, searching for something. "There, that's all of them and four

are dead and two alive, the two women. Here . . ." She turned the book to me and sighed again. It was a group photo of about forty teachers, the entire staff, I guess, of Quinicut Junior High in 1997. "She's right there. Miss Iverson."

I didn't know what I was going to do yet. I had a little bit of information that didn't amount to much, plus three photos which now lay spread across the words, "Call me Ishmael." I was wondering if I could go rent *Moby Dick* at Blockbuster and how true to the novel it really was. Supposedly, being in Honors English, I should be well into the tenth chapter by now. Instead, I was staring down at the figure of a man who, though he hadn't met his fate at the hands (or tail) of a white whale, had found it by the sea.

"Is everything okay?" That was my mother, cautiously peering in my open door.

"Yeah." Funny thing, she hadn't asked about this at all, even though she knew and I'd heard her and Jake talking about it over late-night coffee and David Letterman. I was so determined to stay out of it, except that one thing Emma had said really stuck with me:

She was right: the cops wouldn't question the kids, not like . . . well, not like another kid could. They'd clam up tight if they knew anything about why someone would want to kill a nice, popular, easygoing guy like Mr. David Davies. Question his colleagues, sure, and his principal, and all his friends, the girl he was dating—if there was one—but who was going to ask the

kids what they knew, and I bet they knew something."

"*Moby-Dick*," I said to my mother, holding up the novel.

"Tough book," she commented. "But worth it if you can get through it." Then, "Jake is here. He wants to talk to you."

"So do you want to know, or wait until it comes out in the papers?"

I think he was enjoying tormenting me, but the truth was, it was either Jake or Herman Melville; I opted for Jake. We went outside to talk; the redwood picnic table was still set up under the trees and it was another late summer, blissfully mild evening. We could hear my mother through the kitchen windows, emptying the dishwasher, cleaning up from supper.

"I told you I'm keeping out of it."

"And that's good," Jake agreed; he shifted his weight around so he could fit at the table. He set a mug of steaming coffee down and loosened his collar. He really needed to lose a few pounds. "Nice breeze; keeps the mosquitoes down."

I folded my arms together on the table, stared straight at him, said: "Okay, what do you have? What have they got?"

"All I ever wanted was your insight, Herbie; I never wanted you involved in anything." It was a predictable message, one he had to give me, and then: "Dave Davies was five-seven, 165 pounds, thirty-five years old, and in great shape. Ran, swam, played pickup basketball with friends and kids after school. Also liked to golf and play

tennis. Was pretty good at everything he did. His passion was swimming, though, and he was, as you know, assistant coach of the county team. Kids liked him; parents liked him. No known enemies, lots of friends. Despite all that, he dropped his coaching position a year ago, and we can't seem to find out why. The local school boards requested it, sent a petition to the county asking that he be relieved for a period of three years. We're trying to get the records opened, see what's what. The local talk is that he was getting a little verbally abusive to the kids, on edge a lot, a win-win guy who stomped all over his swimmers when they lost. Feeling was, he needed some time off, and that may be all there is to it. As for his job record, clean as a whistle. Guy had perfect attendance three years straight. Everyone liked him: coworkers, department chair, principal, parents. No complaints.

"As for how he died, he was strangled with his own tie, which in itself is strange, and I'll get back to that. Seems that on Friday afternoon, after school, he went out with some friends, a group of four men he works with. They went for drinks at a local bar. Each arrived alone; each left in their own separate cars. One of them was able to pinpoint the time they left exactly, as he checked his watch; apparently this guy had a date at seven o'clock. According to him, they all left the bar at a quarter past six.

"Okay, now Dave Davies was a fairly formal dresser for a teacher, favored corduroy blazers and paisley ties. A photograph of the intact

portion of the tie found around his neck was shown to a group of teachers. There's general agreement that he wore that tie to school on Friday. Yet he was casually dressed—jeans and a jersey—when he was found. One of his friends explained that, said Dave always changed his clothes before going out after school, usually in school. His car—with a neatly folded blazer, shirt, and dress pants in it—was found at North Pier Parking Lot. We can find no one who saw him out there, or might know what he was doing out there. Obviously he got from North Pier to Black Oak Island by boat. We don't know who he was with—or why.

“Back to the tie. It was found around his neck, kind of loosely draped, from the looks of it. Only a small portion of it remained around the neck itself. He was too burned to find signs of abrasion, though his trachea did show some compression. But this is the funny thing: There was a knot in the tie, a big one, like a bow, but not a tie knot. You could have slid the whole thing up and over his head, do you follow? We don't think that was the knot that someone used to strangle him. We found, or rather the state did, some nautical experts—some sailor boys—who are studying the knot. But anyhow, Davies is strangled up on the beach above the tidal rack. Signs of a struggle were found there, at the edge of the woods. Then his body is dragged to the bonfire, dumped, and set on fire. Using ordinary lighter fluid, traces of which were found on his jeans. He didn't burn completely; you saw

that. His jeans must have been wet. He was also submerged at least once; that particular fire was right on the high-tide line. Time of death is estimated to be between five and seven on Friday night. Seeing we know where he was at 6:15, and it takes twenty minutes to get to North Pier, then another thirty to get out to Black Oak, he probably was killed closer to seven or seven thirty. Sunset was at 7:07, so a fire burning that far away, that time of day, might go unnoticed for a while, or until it's very dark. Most of those fires everyone is complaining about were started late at night, which makes them more noticeable on the mainland. No one has come forward claiming responsibility for any of those fires, though we're still asking around.”

“So a guy is strangled, dumped in a pile of debris, and lit on fire.”

“High tide Friday night was around eight fifteen; put whatever fire was left out.”

“Enemies?”

“None that we can determine. No motives, either. Had a teacher's union and a school insurance policy; some cousin in North Dakota is the beneficiary.”

“The cousin still in North Dakota?”

Jake gave a nod and went on: “Davies was a strong guy, also did a little weightlifting. Someone bigger and stronger than him did it, or took him by surprise. He'd had a few drinks; they found alcohol in his body, God knows how. Plus his friends, and the bartender, all attest that he'd had several, and maybe shouldn't have been driving.”

"Did he say . . . to his friends that night that he had a date, or was meeting someone?"

Jake just shook his head. "No. The guy did date, off and on, but no serious or steady girlfriend, or for that matter, boyfriend. Oh, one more thing, a second tie was found up in the woods, paisley, and a blanket. Looks like the blanket from his car, old plaid thing. They're doing fiber analysis on it. The tie, also his. Couple of teachers agreed, it was Davies' tie."

"Another tie in the woods?"

"That's what I said." Jake sighed, took a breath, then, "The guy was clean and straight. We found one incident of driving under the influence; had some kids in the car with him so the cop brought him in, read him his rights. Parents had given him permission to drive the kids; it was a county sponsored event. No one could find any particular reason to make a big stink about it, so once he agreed not to drive kids home from meets, the charges were dropped."

"The guy liked to swim, and drink, and talk," I said, half to myself, half to Jake.

"That's about it."

"No, Jake, he liked one other thing. He liked kids."

Jake muttered an expletive, pulled away from me, mug cradled in both his hands. "Okay, this is the rest: a search of his house found nothing out of line. There were two computers, but so far nothing you wouldn't expect to find in a teacher's computer. Lots of . . . hey, I don't know all the terms, bookmarks? Yeah, mostly to sports sites, histo-

ry sites, pretty innocuous stuff, all of it. A few required passwords and we've got some expert working on that, but it doesn't look like Davies was into anything shady or illegal." Jake leaned back over the table and stared straight at me. His bright blue eyes squeezed half-shut. "Still, have you heard . . . anything?"

"Heard? I've had four days of school, Jake; I'm not from Quinicut. I've heard zilch. You asking me to go . . ." I tried not to smile, "undercover?"

"Hell, no!" he roared, pulling away from me. "You know, I wouldn't be telling you any of this if it weren't going to make the papers tomorrow—well, most of it. Still, if you hear anything—don't go looking, just go listening—then you come right to me, you hear?"

"I'm all ears, Jake."

I got to admit it wasn't easy; good thing I'm pretty obscure. Average height, average clothes, average . . . well, not average reputation. I wasn't in Jim Reid's gym class, but I managed to get into the locker room on a pretty handy school invention—the bathroom pass. And since there were a good fifty or sixty kids in the locker room, and it was still the beginning of the school year, pretty much no one noticed that I was out of place. I just walked around a lot and any teacher who asked me whose class I was in—I just said the other phys. ed teacher's name. No one knew me yet, and the few kids who said something to me I just nodded to and gave the standard greeting, "Hey."

Then, as everyone started leaving for the gym, I found him, looking pretty much like he did yesterday: glum, sitting on a bench, arms folded on his knees, head resting on his arms. "Hey, Jim," a couple of kids said to him, but he shrugged them off, said: "I'll be there." Then he noticed me, right after which he also noticed the locker room was pretty much empty. "What do you want?" he snarled.

"I want to know about Mr. Davies."

He stood up so fast, moved so fast toward me, I thought for a moment he was going to take a swing at me. I figured great, that ought to do my arm some good.

"Mr. Davies, he was the man, you know?" he shouted at me.

"Yeah, noticed you were all choked up yesterday about him."

"Hey, you're that kid, aren't you? You found him. They call you 'Death Kid.' That's pretty funny."

"It keeps me laughing. Listen, Davies had a reputation for being Mr. Perfect, Mr. Likable, but I don't think everyone liked him. I don't think you did. Can you tell me why?"

"I got asked by the cops, you know, lots of questions." He turned around and shut the locker behind him, then he turned on me again, very fast, very scary. He was a big guy, and if he suddenly decided he didn't like me, well, this locker room was totally empty now, except for him and me. "But like I'd tell them anything. What do they think I am, some kind of jerk? I'm riding on a swimmer's scholarship; I gotta keep my nose clean. It's the only way I'm

going to college. You think I'm going to screw that up?"

"Course not," I said. "And I'm sorry I bothered you."

"Things happen in a school, you know, and if you're smart, you keep your mouth shut."

I had already turned away; I didn't turn back, but I stopped.

"Even the teachers; they know things and they don't do a thing about it," he went on. "Maybe they think, hey, they look at me and figure, he can take care of himself, right? You think it's easy being six-four and having people think that? You know, size isn't everything, at least most of the time."

Then I turned around, said: "What'd he do, Jim?"

He was so close to saying it, damn, he was so close, but he was so scared, too. And I knew, looking at him, that I didn't want to give him to Jake, or any other detective, or the state police, or the D.A.'s office, or anybody else. I wanted him to tell me, but he couldn't. All he could say was this:

"You go see Janet Iverson, Bay-side Photography, over in Quinicut. Tell her . . . tell her Dave Davies sent you. That's all I got to say to you, buddy, that's all."

I know we discussed *Moby-Dick*, but I don't know most of what was said. I know there was a vocabulary assignment, some grammar and some other stuff, but I don't remember much about that, either. I was thinking about what I should do, and I knew what I was supposed to do, but I didn't do it.

No, instead of notifying Jake

right away that Jim Reid knew something, something that scared him to death, I went to the library after school; then I made my one mistake: I told Emma. She didn't take it any better than my mother would have.

"Are you crazy? Are you nuts?" she nearly screamed at me from behind the stacks. "You said to me that the cops were more than competent, and that's a direct quote! You also have a cop as a friend; I know, Covey told me. Listen, you can't . . . you're insane! If Big Jim Reid told you . . ." She did look a bit upset, I'll give her that, and briefly I wondered if it was because of me, or if she'd have acted this way with anyone else. She looked away, face flushed; there were some kids at a table close by and she dropped her voice. "I know Jim; everyone who went to Quinicut knows Jim. Big kid, superstar athlete: football, track, on both the dive and swim teams. Come on, Sawyer, tell your cop friend what Jim said to you. You can't do this."

"Hey, I just asked for Miss McGifford's room number. If you can't tell me, I'll ask when I get there." I started to walk away.

"Damn you, Sawyer," she muttered at my back. "Room 216, second floor."

Quinicut was an hour's ride on my bike, an old brick building near the center of town. School security was like it was in most schools: nonexistent. I walked right in, found the stairs to the second floor, walked into her room. Only problem, she wasn't there, but there was

a student sitting at her desk, a small, pretty, intent girl, with blonde hair and a sunny disposition.

"Are you looking for Miss McGifford?" she asked me buoyantly. Apparently she was pasting labels on a tall stack of cardboard folders. "She's not here right now, but she'll be back. There's a teachers' meeting downstairs, in the gym? They're arranging for coverage for tomorrow, because of Mr. Davies' funeral? You know, they'll cover each other's classes so some of them can go to it?" She frowned slightly, but then, becoming buoyant again, said: "You don't go to this school, do you?"

"No." I was wondering if everything she said was a question.

"Well, I'm hoping she covers my science class, because she's not going and I really like her. She's my favorite teacher, and it would be great to have her again. I was in her science class last year." She seemed to want to emphasize that carefully.

"You were."

"Yes, and I'm doing folders for her right now, you know, for the seventh graders this year?"

I supposed I could have come back, but apparently I didn't seem too threatening to this girl, so I walked over and pretended to be interested in the room: it was your average science room, posters everywhere, periodic table on the back wall, full-size human skeleton hanging from a rod near the front board, microscopes, the works.

"Did I say I'm in eighth grade?" she asked. "So, if you want me to

tell her you were here, or whatever, I can. Miss McGifford calls me her unpaid secretary."

I looked back at her, thinking about, heck, so many things, some of which scared me. For one, the fact that some kids sometimes get into rather complicated relationships with their teachers, relationships that parents, even close friends, sometimes never know about. Most are utterly harmless, even helpful in the long run. What kid couldn't use another caring, concerned, and compassionate adult in their lives? Then I thought about Jim Reid.

"Just answer me a question, would you? You say she was your teacher last year?"

"Yes. She's wonderful. We did stuff all the time."

"Did she . . ." I folded my arms, leaned against the large wooden desk this pretty, perky girl was sitting at. She was too anxious to be nice to me, too eager to please. That was scary, too. ". . . ever mention to you, or to your class, anything about the . . . Swimmers' Club?"

"Swimmers' Club?" she frowned in an exaggerated sort of way, shook her head. "Miss McGifford sails, she doesn't swim."

"Sails?"

"Yes, see?" She picked up a cube off the desk, handed it to me. It was one of those cheap plastic things you can buy in any stationery store, the kind of cube you put photos in. I turned it: several shots of a nice-looking sailboat, probably a twenty-footer, a few others of what probably had to be Miss McGifford, including one with her arm around

a young man. On a whim, I said to the girl:

"Who's this?"

"Oh, that's not her boyfriend, I bet you think that. Everybody does. That's her brother, Joey. He drowned." Instantly her face posed sadness, as if it were expected of her. And then, a huge smile, meant for me: "So, can I tell her you were here?"

"Where does she keep her boat?"

I handed her back the cube, and as she went to take it, I pulled back with a little tug. On cue, she blushed, said, "Up at North Pier, I think."

"Thanks." I let the cube go.

I fanned the three photos out in front of me: Mr. Dave Davies, dead, scorched, barely recognizable except for his paisley tie where it hadn't burned, at the loose knot in back. I didn't need a sailor, a "knot expert," to tell me it was just a regular bow knot, something any grade school kid can do.

But what I needed was a plan, because it was as though I was following a long line myself, and though I couldn't see to what it was hitched, I had to follow that line, unknitting it along the way. I hadn't expected to find who had killed Mr. Davies, or even why, and I still hadn't, but what I had found was even bigger, and more important than finding one "likable" man's murderer.

Twenty minutes ago I'd made three calls, the first to Jake. I asked him to meet me here, if he could, a small diner off the Manamasset Rotary where we often went for a late-

night snack, an early breakfast, whatever. I also asked him to bring me something.

Then I'd called my mother, explained where I was, with whom, and quite calmly convinced her how innocent it all was. My story was I'd gone over to a friend's, then hit the library, and was eating dinner with Jake at the diner on the Manamesset Rotary. She accepted it all very calmly.

Then I called Emma.

"First, I want you to know something . . ." I started in; we were in the booth farthest back, which was a snug fit for Jake, but he made it. He placed a manila envelope between us on the table. "I never would have done any of this if I hadn't talked to Jim Reid; he's a senior at school and he's real scared. After him, I had to. You got to know that, Jake."

He wanted to talk, to interrupt; I shot right over his words:

"And now you got to let me finish, to say everything I need to say, then you can . . . heck, Jake, I'll be going to school in Alaska when this all gets out. What I know, what I found, it's going to blow Quinicut Junior High—no, all of Quinicut—sky high. And my school, too, and this whole area. When people know that I . . ." I felt like I was going to choke—on a scorpion. I couldn't swallow and Jake motioned for a waitress, quickly ordered us a couple of cokes. And until they came, he was quiet.

Then, after the waitress disappeared, I slowly turned over the photos, one at a time.

"I took these with Emma Presley's disposable camera. She's the only one who knows . . . what I'm going to tell you. Covey doesn't know. No one else knows. Jim Reid, he's a senior, he sent me there, but he doesn't know I went. You see, Jake, I don't know who killed Dave Davies, and I don't even know the motive for sure, though I do have a few guesses, and even a few new suspects for you to question. What I've got to tell you . . . it's bigger than Dave Davies.

"I do know this, and probably you guys have figured out how he died, right?" I pointed out the knot in the picture—a thick knot that must have got wet and was preserved largely intact. "I mean, Mr. Davies didn't think he was going to be strangled with this tie, that's because it was tied around his eyes." I looked up at Jake. He made a sound and looked off across the diner, shaking his head. "It was a blindfold, wasn't it? The other tie, the one in the woods, that probably was around his wrists." I shook my head; did he think this was easy? None of it was. "He was out there right at sunset, Jake, and playing a little game with someone, a game he was . . . willing to play. But the game went sour, and whoever he was with—male, female, young, old, whoever—came up behind him and slipped that tie down and around his neck, and strangled him with it, by twisting it. That part of the tie is mostly gone. Anyhow, it had to be someone who was pretty strong, or quick, or both."

"Yeah, that . . . scenario has come

up as a possibility," he agreed softly.

"But when I tell you the rest, hey, it's too bad he's dead, but . . ." How did I do this? Jake's known me since I was twelve; he's dated my mother seriously, off and on, for almost four years. "Is that the print-out?"

He shoved the manila envelope at me. Inside were several pages detailing the Web sites which Dave Davies had bookmarked in his computer. Lots of sites with "swim," and "water" and "aqua" in their titles; lots of sites about golf and tennis. Professional sites; personal sites; general information sites. Even a few that probably had something to do with the subject he taught, social studies. But I found what I was looking for and pointed it out to him. Someone had placed a red check mark next to it.

"That one needs a password," Jake said. "We've got some experts working on it. Looks like an ordinary site, from outward appearances. There's a Web master; they've contacted him, or her, sent an e-mail."

"I know who the Web master is, Jake, and the password, too." I sank back against the hard, cold vinyl seat. "Let me tell you about it . . ."

After I left Quinicut Junior High, I headed for the main street, found Bayside Photography on a little side road. It was a business operating out of a small, white-with-red-trim Cape Cod cottage, with a new addition, a studio, tacked on the side. It was fairly pretty, kind of picturesque in a rural, run-down

sort of way. The front room had been converted over into a small waiting room, which was empty. It was going on five, closing time.

Still, I hadn't expected things to move as fast, and as completely as they did. Janet Iverson was a fading blonde, nearly forty, with a hard-seamed face which had seen too many summers in the sun. She almost looked past me at first, saying, "Didn't you read the sign, kid; we close at five." Then she turned to me and before I could speak, said: "Too young for senior pictures, aren't you? You looking for something special? Something to prop up on the TV set for Mom?" She was smoking a cigarette and paused to exhale; somehow I knew I had to do it fast, then and there, no pauses:

"Mr. Davies sent me over."

So here was another twist in the line I'd been following since talking to Jim Reid; here was the last member of the Swimmers' Club, and she I got to see, to talk to, meet up close. Because that hard, seamed face changed then, loosened, and the tiny pinprick eyes lit up and she smiled—a yellow-toothed grin.

"Even dead, he keeps sending them," she half-laughed. "What a guy. You do know he's dead?" Another puff of the cigarette as she waltzed around me, looking me up and down as she did. When she got between me and the door, she spun around and locked the door. Then, with a quick glance both ways out the window, she said, "How'd you get here? Bike? Smart boy, behind the hedge." She pulled the shade down.

"Yeah, I heard . . . some kid found him," I said with total disinterest.

"But life goes on, right? Life is for the living." She turned her attention back to me. "The deal is this, I have to check you out, you know that, and that'll take me a week, maybe a little longer. Then, if they say you're okay, and I don't see why you won't be . . ." Her smile turned into a leer, "you get forty percent, take it or leave it. I do all the bookkeeping so you've got to trust me. Understand?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Studio's in back; I'll need a few photos, nothing fancy. And your name."

"Fine, whatever."

"And?" Jake demanded; good thing there was a sturdy metal table between the two of us. "And?"

"And she took some pictures of me." I sighed, sat back even farther. "Just with my shirt off, nothing else. Look, Jake, you need to send someone else in there, someone who looks real young, someone . . ."

"I know what I need to do." He looked like he wanted to kill me.

"You got to do it quick, too, before she realizes I gave her a fake name. She's going to ask around, the school—both schools—and find out if I'm okay . . . to use. She must have contacts, teachers, other adults, I don't know. I suppose they look for kids who . . . have one parent, or come from foster homes, or need a scholarship to get into college." We were both silent for a moment; I guess it took a while to all sink in. "And when it all comes

out," I said, "I'm dead. But I have to do this, and, hey, I didn't want to read *Moby-Dick* anyway."

"Just when I think you can't surprise me . . ."

I cut him off: "Damn it, Jake, there's a group of teachers who feed her kids; one of them was Dave Davies. You look around, you're going to find, somewhere, a huge bank account in his name. And . . . that's all I got. Oh, and this, that's their website." I looked down at the printout he'd made for me. "The Swimmers' Club. It's a porn site, and I think, I'd guess, that Dave Davies was the webmaster, so you're not going to get any reply from him. But it does seem, if I were you, I'd try 'paisley' as a password."

I got up then, figuring if I left now he'd be less apt to kill me. There were still a lot of diners up near the front of the restaurant.

"Do you know what you did?" Jake asked.

"I also got a few names for you, possible . . . suspects in the murder. But I think when you open this up, you're going to find a lot of them yourself, suspects, that is. Kids now grown up, and their parents, and their older brothers, and maybe a teacher who just got sick of it all." I shrugged. "I didn't mean to do this, Jake. You knew I didn't want to. I fell into it, please believe me, I did."

Then he said something which totally surprised me: "Who have you told?"

"You. Emma. That's it."

"This senior, this Reid kid?"

I shook my head. "You send in

undercover right away, Jim won't know it was me."

"What name did you give this woman so she could check you out?"

"Jake Valari."

"Now I know why you had—and lost—three girlfriends," she said, standing over me, book in hand. She took a swipe at me with it but all I did was shield my head. "You're dangerous, Sawyer. You're a jerk, and you're dangerous."

I was lying on the old wicker couch on my front porch, looking up at her as she threatened to hit me again with her copy of *Moby-Dick*. "You think you can keep all this quiet, Emma?"

"One week I've known you—one stinking week." She backed away from me, looked around the porch with a tight, grim, almost frightened look on her face. Her hair didn't look so green today; maybe she was slowly washing it out, and her face was not quite so made-up, though her eyes were still very dark, very intense. "You know, I

thought you asked me over here today because . . . well, I didn't think it was because you needed to tell me to be quiet about what you did. Because I would have, been quiet, without even being asked. Maybe you don't know me well enough, yet, to know that."

I relaxed back on the sofa, said: "Maybe not."

She sank down on the floor, book in her lap, then turned so her head was near where my arm was resting. "I'm thinking of . . . dying my hair pink." She tipped her head up, but couldn't see me. "What do you think?"

"I think if you really want to, go ahead."

She turned around then, and folding her arms on the edge of the couch, looked at me. "You think? I should hit you with this book and break your arm all over again. What are you *really* thinking, Sawyer?"

I dropped my hand on her shoulder. "I'm thinking I'm going to have a hard time telling my best friend . . . that I want his girlfriend."

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the September issue.

When rumors persisted that the king of Zazuzu had purchased huge quantities of munitions and was in the market for mercenaries, the bordering countries of Xalmo and Yoland became alarmed. Each country planned to send three agents into Zazuzu disguised as tourists. The timing seemed propitious, inasmuch as the king was inviting all visitors to his realm to a gala formal reception.

As it happened, only two agents were loyal to each of the threatened nations; the fifth was a double agent, receiving pay from both Xalmo and Yoland. These secret operators had the code names Auk, Bluebird, Canary, Duck, and Eagle, and traveled under the covers of artist, banker, chef, dentist, and engineer. Each was instructed by the chief of intelligence in his country to communicate truthfully with his fellow agents, but to lie in *all matters* to strangers. The double agent, playing a dangerous game, lied to everyone.

However, the chief of intelligence in Xalmo suspected that one agent in his employ was a traitor, so without their knowledge he planted a tiny transmitter in the collar button of each in order to monitor their conversations at the upcoming affair in Zazuzu. To be certain of the identity of each speaker, the transmitters were set at three different frequencies.

Similarly, the chief of intelligence in Yoland also distrusted his operators, and secretly installed a miniature transmitter set at a particular frequency in the shirt stud of each of his agents. In Xalmo and in Yoland, each chief sat back to anxiously await developments.

At the king of Zazuzu's reception, intrigue was everywhere as pairs of individuals met here and there to converse discreetly and cautiously in low tones.

(1) At 21:05 that evening, the Auk met Mr. Krich and said quietly, "Mr. Gerdo, the engineer you met earlier, is from Yoland, not from Xalmo as he claims."

(2) Five minutes later in another corner of the great palace ballroom, the Bluebird remarked to Mr. Gerdo, "Mr. Havik over there is a chef."

(3) At 21:15 the Canary said to Mr. Idatz, "I am Mr. Jurdy. Please excuse the facial bandages—I had a rather nasty auto accident. Have you been introduced to the king yet?"

(4) At 21:18 the Auk mentioned to Mr. Jurdy, "My name is Krich. Mr. Gerdo, across the room and speaking to our host, is from Xalmo."

(5) At 21:20 the Bluebird said in a low voice to Mr. Havik, "Mr. Gerdo isn't the engineer who is the agent known as the Canary."

(6) At 21:25 the Canary spoke privately to the banker. "The chef is the Auk; it's the dentist who is Mr. Havik."

(7) At 21:35 the Auk confided to Mr. Havik, "Earlier this evening I spoke to Mr. Jurdy, a very interesting man. Despite what others may say, he is a noted banker."

(8) At 21:48 the Duck remarked to the chef, "The banker is from Yoland. The artist is here tonight."

At 22:00 that night, one of the chiefs of intelligence made a hurried telephone call to the head of Passport Control in his country. As he hung up, he muttered, "Now I know positively who the traitor is. He has a big surprise awaiting him upon arrival back at our Customs."

Who was the double agent? Which chief of intelligence exposed him? How? And what could that mysterious phone call have been about?

(Hint: Each chief of intelligence knows, of course, the identity of the speaker when he is one of his agents. If he also hears a simultaneous transmission of the same words, he knows that another of his agents is being addressed and that the speaker is presumably telling the truth. If, however, the other frequencies remain silent, then the speaker is presumably lying to some stranger.)

See page 183 for the solution to the June puzzle.

Stalkers

Stuart R. Ball

George McCall wasn't going to die on my watch. I whispered in his ear: "Go right. Right at the corner." He paused when he reached the corner, deciding. "Right. Right," I whispered. He looked to the right, and I reached out to the neon sign in the window of the restaurant down the street and made it flicker just a little. He saw it in his peripheral vision and made up his mind. He went right.

I looked back down the street in time to see the car that Alvarez had sent. It careened around a corner and raced across the crosswalk, right where McCall would have been if he had gone left instead of right. The driver saw me, and we locked eyes for a moment, triumph staring down angry defeat. I had seen the driver before, one of the flunkies who worked for Alvarez. But he had missed this time. I won. We won.

McCall walked down the street toward the restaurant, the Hunan Sun. I watched carefully as he crossed the street, but no danger was imminent this time. He sat down, ordering Kung Po chicken from the lunch menu. From McCall's file I knew that he ate here about once a week and always ordered the same thing. I spoke into my lapel and checked in while he sipped his soup. "Any other actions pending on McCall?" I asked after I had filled them in on the car incident.

"None that we have uncovered," said the tinny voice in my ear. "But be careful. They have to make their move by eleven o'clock tonight."

"Why eleven?" I asked for the third time. Like the other two times, I received no reply.

On a hunch, I strolled into the kitchen. There were only three restaurants along this street that McCall patronized. Suppose they had "arranged" something at all three? Just in case the car missed? I browsed the spices, looking for poisons, but I didn't really expect to find any. They don't like mass killings except for really important targets—it's a technique that can only be believable so often. I didn't see any of their agents. Perhaps one of the humans? I mentally reviewed the file on McCall, matching faces against the known data on this restaurant. No, all the workers in the kitchen had been here for some time.

I went back into the dining room, where the regulars were starting to file in, just in time to see an enemy agent come in. She walked through the wall, which meant she wasn't carrying anything solid. She nodded in my direction, and I hurried to McCall's side. The agent

went around to the potted plant beside the door. She looked around to be sure nobody was watching and then reached behind the brass planter. She withdrew her hand, holding it up so I could see the pill she was holding. Of course. They had hidden the poisoned pill there earlier, probably at the same time they planned the hit-and-run.

The agent strode purposefully toward the table. She was probably planning to drop the poison into McCall's soup, or maybe his iced tea. Of course, as soon as she let go of it, it would become visible to McCall, so it had to be something that would dissolve quickly. I stood between her and McCall's table.

"You aren't going any closer with that," I said.

She stopped in front of me. "McCall's going down," she said. She swung at my head with one fist, and I almost missed her tossing the pill over my shoulder with the other. Ignoring the stars that exploded in my head when her fist connected, I made a grab and caught the pill before it dropped into McCall's soup. He was signaling the waiter for another glass of tea and didn't see the momentary appearance of the pill as it flew through the air. Two other diners glanced our way as if they'd seen motion at the edge of their vision. Which they had, of course.

I pocketed the pill and twisted to face the agent, but she was already walking away. She turned before she reached the wall. "We'll get him, you know," she said.

"I've never lost one yet," I called after her. "Not in two hundred years."

I hovered around McCall's table, making occasional dashes into the kitchen to be sure no strangers had entered, until his plate was set in front of him. I took a breather while he ate, watchful but feeling temporarily safe.

This assignment had started out pretty much like any other. I was handed a folder with his biography and habits, the places he frequented, things like that. Each of his close friends, coworkers, and family members warranted a single page with a picture and biography. Anyone peripherally connected to him, like the cooks in the kitchen, had pictures and one-line descriptions. I knew that McCall, age thirty-five, was a buyer for an electrical equipment manufacturer. He liked golf and detested sad movies, and his twice-weekly basketball games had given him knee problems that he hadn't noticed yet. I knew that he had a sister in New Mexico, that his mother was taking medication for high cholesterol, and that his married boss was having an affair. It was standard stuff, which I memorized quickly, but something was missing. I looked up at my supervisor. "Where's the rest of it?" I had asked.

"What do you mean?" he said. "That's all there is."

“You know, the part that tells me why McCall has to be kept alive. Or why they want him dead.”

He steeped his fingers. “That’s all there is,” he had repeated.

McCall opened his fortune cookie. The fortune read “You will receive help from an unexpected source.” Who writes these things, anyway? McCall nibbled at the cookie, and I wondered why he was a target. Maybe he was going get in his car and have a head-on collision that would kill the enemy’s next would-be world dictator. It had happened before, where we saved someone just so they could be killed later in the right place and at the right time. We weren’t always successful, which is why Hitler had lived past the age of twenty-five. I remember that one. I shook my head. It wasn’t normal for the field agent to be unaware of why his charge was important. Not unheard of, just not normal.

McCall finished eating and got up to leave. He opened the door, and I slipped out ahead of him, since I couldn’t just pass through a closed door while I had the poison pill in my pocket. I looked quickly around for enemy agents but saw none. As McCall walked back to his office, I crumbled the pill between my fingers, leaving a trail of fine dust that was blown away by the light breeze. It would be so much easier if we could use the same tactics that the enemy used. It was frustrating sometimes, not to be able to co-opt some human and bend their will to the need of the moment. “No interference with the free will of humans.” It was the one rule we all had to obey. We can arrange circumstances, we can whisper subconscious suggestions, but we aren’t allowed to take control of a human mind or body.

The enemy, of course, ignored all such restrictions. That plane crash last year that was never satisfactorily explained was one of theirs. They killed the researcher who was on the verge of a cure for leukemia. Our agent was held by two of theirs and had to watch helplessly while one of the enemy took control of the pilot’s body and flew the plane straight into the ground. Why have that capability and not be allowed to use it? I shook my head. It only made me angry to consider our limitations. Self-imposed limitations that made no sense . . . Better to not think about it.

McCall made it back to his desk without incident, and I perched on the edge, finally able to relax for a while. He was fairly safe in the office, and he didn’t seem to be an important enough target for them to crash a plane for or anything like that. I wished I knew what exactly McCall was going to do tomorrow or next month or next year. It would give me some idea of how far they would go to get him.

It was a slow afternoon, and McCall made some telephone calls and wrote a couple of memos. Around three thirty someone called him, and I got very interested.

“George? This is Trisha,” said the caller.

George had dated Trisha off and on for the last few months. She was the account manager for one of his suppliers, and he had met her through normal business interactions. George hesitated, probably not sure if the call were business or personal. “Hi, Trish,” he answered. “How are you?”

“Have you seen *Paranormal?*”

“I don’t even know what it is,” George said. “I mean I know what the word means, but I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“*Paranormal*. The play at the Glass House, that dinner theater they renovated. Downtown.”

“Oh. Sure. I read something about that.” I knew that he’d seen it in yesterday’s paper, although he probably wouldn’t recall the specific reference.

“My boss was going to go, but he had something come up and he gave me his tickets. Want to go? Tonight?”

George thought about it momentarily. “Sure. That’ll be fun. Do you want to meet me there?”

“Parking is pretty bad downtown, so we should take one car. Pick me up? Around six?”

“Sure.” It sounded like fun for George, but it was big news to me. He was supposed to spend tonight watching TV, as far as we knew.

George checked his watch as he hung up, and I called in. “We’ve got a change of plan,” I said.

“I know, I know,” came the reply. “We’re checking on it.”

“Don’t take too long,” I said. “I need to know what’s going on here.”

George went to the restroom, and I followed to be sure he wasn’t going to have a fatal “accident” on a wet floor or anything like that. The receiver in my ear beeped while George was washing his hands.

“What’s the story?” I asked.

“Okay. Trish got the tickets from her boss. Looks like they got to his mother with some kind of virus. She’s nearly eighty, so he had to take her to the hospital. They made sure he was tied up on the telephone until everyone but Trish was out of the office. Probably suggested that he give Trish the tickets; otherwise he’d likely have forgotten he even had them.”

“I don’t like it,” I said.

“Just follow McCall. We’ll try to get some backup downtown. Don’t let him sit under anything heavy.”

“Sure, sure.” Like I haven’t done this a time or two.

McCall finished out the afternoon, probably thinking about his date with Trish because he didn’t work very hard. He left about five minutes early to beat the rush. He went straight home. My receiver beeped while he was changing clothes.

“Here’s the deal,” my control said. “We’ve got an agent at Trish’s

house. Looks clean. We're checking out the area around the theater but haven't found anything yet. We'll have someone in the bar in case they try something with McCall's drink."

"How about putting somebody in the kitchen?" I asked.

"Sorry. We can only spare one. You'll have to cover the kitchen yourself."

I sighed. "Okay. I don't like it, though. They didn't give an old lady the flu for nothing." There was always a problem with low-priority targets. They had to be protected, but there were never enough of us to go around. I supposed I should be grateful for any help at all. Sometimes the enemy gets the jump on us—they identify somebody important before we do, before we can assign sufficient coverage. However we do it, though, there always seem to be too many people for us to take care of. Fortunately for us, the other side has the same problem. They can't just take humanity over—there aren't nearly enough of them. And if too many weird, supernatural things happened, humans would catch on. The last thing the other side wants is for humanity to start exercising power they don't even know they have.

McCall drove to Trish's house while I fidgeted nervously in the back seat. I cringed as an eighteen-wheeler pulled up behind us, but the driver stopped with plenty of clearance. I watched carefully at every intersection, looking for oncoming cars, but none appeared. I hate protecting a human who is driving a car. There are just so many things you can't control. All the enemy has to do is suggest that a driver keep his or her car in another driver's blind spot. Enough miles like that, and a lane change is bound to happen. And humans are so susceptible to suggestion when they're driving.

George picked up Trish without incident and drove downtown. The Glass House is one of those old downtown buildings that has been renovated as part of a renewal project. It's surrounded by older buildings that haven't been touched, some of them abandoned.

The theater was crowded, and I spent quite a bit of time going back and forth between the kitchen and McCall's table. Trish went to the restroom after they ate, but I stayed with McCall. That's just the sort of opportunity they look for, leading you away with something you think is significant while something you overlooked sneaks up on whoever you're protecting.

Trish moved her chair closer to George's and took his hand under the table as the lights went down. George's heart rate went up but not enough to be dangerous. The play wasn't bad, although Trish giggled at a few places that were supposed to be serious. It ended right on time, and George suggested that they wait until the crowd thinned before leaving. Trish seemed to like that idea, and they made small talk while I tried to check out everybody that passed within arm's length of George.

I saw a bulge under one guy's jacket, but when I checked it, it turned out to be a cell phone.

George and Trish trailed the crowd, among the last to leave the building. Trish slipped her arm through George's and clasped his arm with her other hand. When they got outside, a light rain had started falling, and George said he'd bring the car around. It was past ten thirty, and I was starting to think the enemy might have given up on this one.

George walked quickly down the sidewalk and rounded the building, and I realized that this particular parking lot was nearly empty. He had parked at the far end, and there wasn't another person in sight. My senses went on high alert as he strode toward his car.

I finally saw them, around the corner of an abandoned building. Three youths, probably eighteen years old. "Run!" I shouted to George, and he paused and looked around like someone who has heard a noise while strolling through a cemetery. He shrugged. Crazy, he said to himself, shaking his head. The three thugs came around the corner of the building as George opened the car door.

"Gimme your car keys and your wallet," one of them said.

George looked up, surprise changing to horror as he saw the gun in the kid's hand. "No problem," he stammered. He tossed the keys, and they fell short by a foot.

"Run! Run!" I shouted, but George wasn't listening to his subconscious any more. He reached around for his wallet.

"Want to watch me do this one?" the kid with the gun asked the others.

"Do it," said one. The light in his eyes was evil, and I knew that this was how they were going to take George out. The kid with the gun pointed it at him, and I pushed his arm, just a little, as he pulled the trigger. The bullet *zipped* past George's ear, and he broke into a terrified run. He ran the wrong way, unfortunately, not back toward the lighted street but into the abandoned building that bordered the parking lot. The plywood that once covered a side door had been pulled away long ago by junkies or vagrants, and he went straight into the heart of the building. I followed. I could hear the three hoodlums arguing about whether to beat it or go after George. I could feel one of the enemy in the building, and I knew what they would decide.

They came through the same doorway that George had used as he ran down a flight of rickety stairs. He ducked into a side room, an old closet, and leaned up against the wall, panting. The place smelled of urine and damp newspapers. I watched the stairs to see if the three muggers would follow. I wondered what kind of flak I'd take for the gun incident. I mean, it was dark, and the kid probably wasn't a very good shot. How could anyone know that he wouldn't have missed anyway? It would probably be okay—I'd gotten away with things like that before.

The kids had apparently split up, and one of them started down the

stairs. George caught his breath when he heard footsteps on the stairs; he knew he was trapped. I frantically looked for a solution and found a loose step. Not quite within the rules, but I'd bent one already. I pushed the step up just a little, and it came away as the kid stepped on it. He flew headlong down the stairs and hit his head on the concrete floor. His gun skittered across the floor and came to rest outside the doorway of George's hiding place.

"Buck? That you?" one of the others shouted. I could hear footsteps. "Buck?" The voice was closer the second time. George peeked around the corner and looked at the mugger on the floor. The kid was alive, but he wasn't going anywhere for a while. George looked down at the gun. Keeping his eyes on the stairway, he knelt and felt around until he had the gun awkwardly in his hand. He took a deep, shaky breath and started slowly up the stairs, the gun wavering so much that he'd never be able to hit anything with it. I had a moment of panic when he reached the missing step, but he stepped over it and continued on up. I'd be in real trouble if George died because I broke the rules to save him.

George reached the top of the stairs and looked toward the door he'd entered the building through. He started toward it, but then he heard footsteps coming from that direction. He ran the other way, making enough noise to guarantee they would know where he was. He ran into a larger room and ducked around the door. He inched along the wall, moving away from the door as the footsteps came closer. One of the kids came into the room with his gun in front of him. George pointed his gun at the kid, who sensed or heard the motion and spun around to face him. They were standing there in a nervous, shaking standoff when I realized that someone else was in the room. An enemy. I looked around. "Alvarez," I hissed.

He stepped out of the shadows. "That's right," he replied calmly.

My mind raced. How important *was* McCall, anyway? To get Alvarez himself here? I reached toward the kid facing McCall. No, he hadn't been taken over by an enemy agent. It was just Alvarez and me and two humans.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

"Sometimes you have to do things yourself," he said. He walked over to the kid, whose eyes were as wide as McCall's. Alvarez looked at me and whispered into the kid's ear. The kid visibly calmed. I stepped to McCall's side. Alvarez or no Alvarez, I still had a mission to carry out.

"Calm down," I said. "You can win this." McCall didn't quit shaking. He was at a mental disadvantage here—he didn't live with violence all the time.

The kid steadied his gun. It was going down, and McCall didn't even realize it. "Shoot! Shoot!" I shouted at him. He would probably miss, but it might scare the kid off.

Alvarez smiled confidently at me. "Looks like you might finally lose

one," he said. He turned to speak to the kid again, whose finger tightened on the trigger.

I grabbed the gun in McCall's hand and pulled the trigger. Quick, quicker than lightning, quicker than any human reflex. I aimed the gun at the kid's heart. McCall jumped as the gun roared, the concussion from the .357 deafening inside the concrete walls. George stared in amazement at the gun in his hand as his intended killer collapsed to the floor.

I sneered at Alvarez. "I win," I said. "You lose." I could hear the third mugger, elsewhere in the building, running for the exit.

Alvarez was smiling. Why? He had just lost a big one.

"Actually," he replied, "I believe I win."

"How?" I asked. "McCall is still alive. It's almost eleven o'clock. You don't have anything left to try before then."

He let go an evil chuckle. "McCall wasn't the target. You were."

"Me? You can't kill me."

"I didn't want to kill you. I wanted to turn you. Now you're on our side."

"I am not!" I said fiercely. "I stopped you. I carried out my mission. Just like I always do."

"You committed murder to do it. That makes you one of us. The end justifies the means, as the saying goes."

"That doesn't make me one of you."

"Of course it does. You used the same methods we do. In fact, you've killed one more person on this assignment than I have. How do you suppose this will affect McCall's life?"

"McCall will be fine," I shouted. "And that kid was one of yours! A killer."

He gestured to the body on the floor. "First, he was one of them. And you killed him."

"No! I'll never be one of you. Never."

"You already are. Oh, it will take a while for you to actually switch sides. But the issue isn't in doubt. I've been watching you, and I know how constricting you find those silly rules you have to follow. I know how you bend the rules when you think nobody's looking. It's been getting a little easier every time you do it, right?"

I said nothing.

Alvarez nodded. "That's the way it always is. You break the rules just a little at first, then more often and in bigger ways. You're ready to come over, you just needed a little push. And after today, they won't really trust you any more. You'll be an outcast. Eventually you'll come around. You've been *their* best. Now you'll be *my* best. You know where to find me when it's time." He turned to go.

"You're wrong!" I shouted. "I'll never turn."

He didn't turn around. "Welcome to the team," he said.

Ukulele and the World's Pain

James Sallis

Sure, I killed the son of a bitch. I mean, what right did he think he had, bursting out in laughter like that when I took Miss Shelley out of her case? I'm a professional, too. I was getting scale just like him. I've paid my union dues and a lot more dues besides.

It was a good date. Sonny Martin had made a name for himself in country music, and now he was doing what he'd been talking about for years, he was cutting a jazz album. I'd played on a couple of Martin sessions before. He liked the freshness of the sound, I guess. And he knew that jazz was my first love, too. One time during a session break, I remember, I think this was on his album *Longneck Love*, we started goofing around on "Don't Get Around Much Anymore," just the two of us, and before we knew, everybody else had picked his instrument back up and was playing along.

Playing music's not about making sounds, you know, it's about listening. Everything unfolds out of the first note, that first attack.

Sonny always reminded me a lot of the great George Barnes, just this plain, balding, fat guy with a Barcalounger and two or three cheap suits at home doing his job, only his job happened to be, instead of working as an auto mechanic or Sears salesman, recording country

hits. Or in this case, playing great jazz and backup. You half-expected a cigar stump to be sticking out of his mouth there above the Gibson.

By contrast, the guy who thought Miss Shelley was so funny was a real Bubba type with stringy hair, glasses that kept sliding down his nose and getting pushed back up, and white shoes with plastic buckles most of the gold paint had come off of. He played a fair guitar, but you know what? That's not enough. Besides him, there was a drummer who looked vaguely familiar and couldn't have been more than nineteen, the great, loose Morty Epstein on bass, and a pianist who gave us the impression of spending more time in concert halls than with the likes of us.

We slammed around on a twelve-bar shuffle just to start the thing running and get acquainted, and that went well, with the guitar sliding in these little pulls, bends, and stumbling, broken runs way up high—Sonny's guitar was so solid Bubba could float. But towards the end he left off that and, staying high, started strumming on just two or three strings, looking over at me.

Sonny called "Sweet Georgia Brown" and we worked it through a time or two by ear, kind of clanging and clunking along, then Sonny had the guitar player scribble out

some quick charts. I got mine and we started running it, and a line or two in, looking ahead, I can see it's wrong. So I just played right on past it, grinning at the guitar player the whole time. As we started winding down, Sonny nodded me in for a solo. I took a chorus and it was pretty hot and he signalled for another and that one was steaming, and then we all took off again. I looked over and the piano man's staring at me, shaking his head, fingers going on about their business there below. Looks like he just ate a cat.

Next we worked up a head version of a slow, ballady blues, then put some time in on jamming "Take the A Train" and "Lulu's Back in Town." Again Bubba threw some charts together and again mine was wrong—wildly wrong this time. He did everything but hop keys on me. I don't know, maybe his mother was frightened by some Hawaiian when he was in there in the womb growing that greasy hair and trying on those white shoes.

That's where Miss Shelley and her kin came from—you all know that. But you probably don't know much more. That it emerged around 1877, most likely as a derivative of a four-string folk guitar, the *machada* or *machete*, introduced to the islands by the Portuguese. Or how it hitched a ride back to the U.S. with returning sailors and soldiers. Martin started selling them in 1916; Gibson, Regal, Vega, Harmony, and Kay all offered standard to premium models alongside their guitars, banjos, and mandolins. National manufactured

resonator ukes. Briefly, banjo ukuleles came into favor. Other variations include the somewhat larger taropatch, an eight-string uke of paired strings, and the tiple, whose two outer courses of steel strings are doubled, with an additional third string added to the two inner courses and tuned an octave lower. Mario Maccaferri, the man who designed the great Django Reinhardt's guitar, after losing half a million or so with plastic guitars no one would buy, recouped with sale of some nine million plastic ukes. And the players! The ever-amazing Roy Smeck. Cliff Edwards, known as Ukulele Ike. Or Lyle Ritz. Trained on violin, he was a top studio bass player in the 60s and 70s and turned out three astonishing albums of straight-ahead jazz ukulele.

We worked through what we had again, then broke for lunch. Morty and I grabbed hot dogs at the taco stand by the park across the street and sat on a bench catching up. The fountain was clogged with food wrappers, leaves, and cigarette butts, as usual. Kids in swings were shoved screaming towards the sky. Old men sat on benches tossing stale bread at pigeons. Morty's son had just started college all the way up in Iowa, he told me, studying physical chemistry, whatever that was. Better be looking for more gigs, I said. He shook his head. Don't I know it, he said. Don't I know it. I told Morty I had a quick errand that couldn't wait, I'd see him inside.

Well, we got back from lunch break, as you know, everybody but

the guitar player, and after we wait a while and drink up a pot of coffee Sonny says: Anybody see Walt out there? But none of us know him, of course, and who'd want to look at that greasy hair while he was eating?

So we—Sonny, I should say—finally called the session off, shut it down. And I do regret that. Some fine music was this close to being cut.

Can I tell you one more thing before we go?

There's this story about Eric Dol-

phy. He's called in to overdub on a session. Brings all his instruments along. He listens to the tape and what he does is, he adds this single note, on bass clarinet, right at the end. That's it. He collects sale for the session, puts his horn back in the case, and goes home. But what he did there, what that one note was, was Dolphy finding his holy moment, you know? That's what we're all looking for, what we go on looking for, that single holy moment, all our lives.

SOLUTION TO THE JUNE "UNSOLVED":

The author with inside information on the robbery is Flora Davis.

ROYALTY	AUTHOR	HUSBAND	HOME
\$150	Flora Davis	Mike	Prince George
\$250	Heidi Arbor	Levi	Regina
\$325	Jenny Cruze	Oscar	Sudbury
\$425	Greta Engel	Ned	Quebec
\$500	Ida Baker	Karl	Toronto

A Very Special Group

William T. Lowe

“**W**e’ll bottle up the orchard where he’s hiding and go in and get him,” the DEA agent said. “It may take a couple of days, but we’ll get him.”

“No,” I said.

The agent was surprised. “Look, I know it’s a mighty big place, but we’ve got the manpower. The state police will help, the Border Patrol, the sheriff . . .”

“No,” I said again.

The agent, Bliss Adler was his name, appeared on my porch one sultry September afternoon. He was all ready to start a big man-hunt for a drug dealer but his chief, Ted Mulholland, had told him to check with me first. I was a deputy in this county of northern New York before I retired, and Ted and I worked more than a few drug cases together.

Adler wanted me to agree with his plan. “Look, Mr. Sessions, this man hiding in the orchard isn’t your ordinary pusher. He’s a courier for a big narcotics network overseas. Why can’t we go in and shake the place down until we find him?”

I leaned forward and spoke as earnestly as I could. “Because this is harvest time. The apples are ripe now and need to be picked now.” I paused to be sure he was listening. “A whole year’s work is riding on about three short weeks. Every

minute and every pair of hands counts.

“There are over two hundred Jamaicans over there right now working twelve hours a day to get those McIntosh apples in. You can’t go charging in there with a detail of men and stop the work to look for this man.”

Adler was frowning. “Did you say Jamaicans?”

“Yes. They come up every year. The growers in Essex and Clinton counties couldn’t harvest their crops without them.”

Alder’s frown deepened. “What’s the problem?” I asked him.

“This suspect we’re after. He’s a black man from Colombia.”

It was my turn to frown. This was a complication. A foreign black man hiding among two hundred other foreign black men.

“Have you got a picture of this Colombian?” I asked.

“No, but we’ll get one,” he answered. Another complication, I told myself.

“How did this man get here?”

Bliss took a deep breath. “Here’s what happened: We’ve known that a top level meeting between two narcotics distributors was going to take place sometime soon, in or around Plattsburgh. Yesterday the Border Patrol got a tip that an illegal alien had sneaked across the border at Champlain and was

holed up in one of the motels outside Keeseville, waiting to meet another dealer.

"Our office planned a joint effort with the Patrol and staked out the place, waiting for the second subject. Our man—we now know his name is Navad Sabella—must have seen something that made him suspicious.

"He had a car and he took off down Route 22 toward Peru. A couple of agents followed him. We had a state police car cruising just this side of Peru; we radioed them that the alien was headed their way.

"Anyway, Sabella saw he was being boxed in. He was passing the north side of the orchard; he ditched the car and took off into the trees. The agents following him got a quick look at him before he disappeared. They say he was dressed in sports clothes, a bit under six feet, maybe one seventy. No weapons visible.

"Maybe he knew about the Jamaicans being there, or maybe he saw some of them at work. Maybe he thought he could use them as a shield." Adler stopped and looked at me. "Mr. Sessions, is it possible for him to stay hidden out there in the orchards?"

I had been thinking about that. "Call me Hank. Yes, it's possible," I answered. "He's black. He can steal food from the dining room, steal clothes from one of the dormitories. There's a thousand acres to keep out of sight in. He might get lucky."

Bliss stood up and began pacing. He was in his mid forties, running to overweight, with a crewcut that didn't make him look a bit young-

er. A city man, uncomfortable out of sight of sidewalks and streetlights.

"Captain Mulholland says this Colombian is a key player and it's important to nail him quick. He wasn't happy when he heard he got away from us."

"What makes this man so important?"

Bliss sat down again. "When he took off from the motel he dropped a small bag. There was five thousand in cash—his walking-around money—and twelve pounds of a new narcotic called Khat."

He stopped and looked at me. I nodded. "I've heard of it," I said. "Originally from Africa, isn't it?"

"Right. It's grown on bushes, not cooked up in a lab. Khat is popular as hell in parts of Europe, a big favorite with young people."

There had to be more to the story. "Is this the first time the DEA has seen Khat?"

Bliss shook his head. "The agency has intercepted shipments from Europe at Dulles Airport in Washington and Kennedy in New York. Now we think distributors want to bring it down from Canada." He paused a minute. "It would be another step-up drug, like ecstasy."

All we need, I thought. Kids always try something new, get hooked, then step up to the hard stuff like heroin or crack.

"Anyway," Bliss went on, "our man must have contacts in Albany or Syracuse or New York. We think he'll phone somebody to come and pick him up. He may have a cell phone on him or find a pay phone. All he has to do is stay out of sight and wait."

He looked at me. "You think maybe we can get our hands on him first, Hank?"

The sun was going down behind the ridge across the fields and there was the faintest hint of a breeze.

"Maybe," I said. I stood up and put on my hat. "Let's go talk to Foster Burroughs."

We took my car. Bliss offered to follow me in his but I wanted to show him how extensive the Burroughs orchards are. Of the twenty or so apple orchards around here it's one of the largest. As a teenager I worked for the Burroughs a summer or two.

I bypassed the little town of Fountain and turned north on Dry Bridge Road. We went around Arnold Hill with its Civil War iron mines. I pointed out the ancient Quaker cemetery, said to be the oldest in the state.

Then, outside Keeseville, we began driving through the Burroughs orchards, section after section of mature trees and young trees, orderly rows stretching to the horizon in every direction. The center of the operation is two huge warehouses, each of which could swallow a couple of basketball courts. The apples are brought here for processing. They are kept in storage rooms where temperature and humidity are precisely controlled. Then they are sorted, graded, and packaged.

The aroma of ripe apples was heavy in the air. At the edge of the parking lot were rows of mature trees. Bliss had never seen apple trees close up. He was surprised they were no more than ten or

twelve feet tall, with thick, wide-spread branches.

"They're pruned to grow that way," I told him, "makes it easier to reach the fruit at picking time."

I had used the car phone to say we were coming, hoping to see Foster Burroughs, president of the corporation. I knew his office was on the second floor at the rear of one of the buildings. I led the way inside. On a balcony, I stopped to let Bliss see the activity on the floor below. A dozen conveyor belts carried apples through electronic sensors that sorted the fruit for size and color and grade. Some two dozen women handled the packaging in colorful boxes.

The office is small, furnished with only the bare necessities. There's a desk, a telephone, a few chairs. The sales department and a staff of accountants are in town, with all the computers and hardware they need. Out here nothing interferes with the business of growing McIntosh apples.

On one wall was a large map of the area with the company's holdings outlined, something over twelve hundred acres. A tiny square towards the center marked the original Burroughs orchard, eight acres painstakingly cleared by hand.

In 1836, the first Mr. Burroughs harvested the initial crop of juicy red apples. That same year on the army base outside Plattsburgh a stone barracks was built to replace log huts. Later, that same building was to house a young lieutenant named Ulysses S. Grant after he graduated from West Point.

Foster was waiting for us. At over sixty he is energetic, deeply tanned, given to quick, hurried movements. He knows me and knows I wouldn't ask to see him at this time of year if it weren't important.

Bliss told him about the alien. Foster didn't like the idea of a drug dealer on his property. Strangers in the groves were a constant problem, especially now when the apples were ripe. People would ignore the No Trespassing signs and blithely help themselves. Their attitude was, "Nobody will miss a few apples." But the notion of a drug dealer wandering around loose was not to be tolerated.

"This man, this fugitive, you have a picture of him?" he asked Bliss.

"No, sir. One is being sent from Washington."

"Is he considered dangerous?"

"No, sir. He's not known to be violent."

Bliss tried to be reassuring, but put his foot in his mouth. "We can get all the manpower we need, sir," he said, "the state police, the Border Patrol, the sheriff . . ."

Foster was shaking his head. "No! I won't have it!" He turned to me. "Hank, will you explain that we simply cannot interrupt the work . . ."

"I will, Foster." I waited a moment until he seemed to relax a bit. "The thing is," I began, "this man is in the international drug business. He has a record with the DEA. We don't know who else knows about his being here . . ."

Bliss chimed in. "The Border Pa-

trol may tell Immigration. Or somebody on a newspaper may . . ."

"All right, all right!" Foster waved his hand. "You both understand that the Jamaicans are on the orchards here by specific federal authority. Any publicity could be severely damaging."

He stood up. "Hank, you know my situation here. Can you give me some time on this thing?" I nodded. "Good." He turned to Bliss. "Mr. Adler, we'll do what we can to help you."

Foster shook hands with us and was gone. Bliss looked at me and smiled. "We're on first base. What's next?"

"Next we talk to a friend of mine."

"The man we're going out here to find is Edwardo Martin," I told Bliss. We were walking down a trail between rows of mature trees loaded with fruit. "I met him eighteen years ago when he first came up here to work and I loaned him my bicycle."

"Eighteen years?"

"Yes. Some of the men have been coming up from Jamaica for twenty years. Look, Bliss, these men are not your ordinary migrant workers. They're recruited on the island by agents of the orchard owners. They're fingerprinted, checked for criminal records. They're given physicals, even tested for AIDS. They're flown to Florida, then bused up here.

"The men are welcome in town. The stores stock items they like. They go to church. At the end of the season, they put on a program of island music.

"They work very hard but they're well treated, well cared for. The new men take lessons in how to pick apples . . ."

Bliss gave me the skeptical look of a city man who thinks he's being fed a tall tale by a country person.

"Yes," I said, "there is a correct way." I held up my hand, fingers holding an invisible apple. "You don't twist. You don't pull. You lift gently, got it?"

Bliss nodded slowly. "I'll take your word for it."

The afternoon sun was warm on my back as we walked along. Usually, the sight of shiny red apples against a royal blue sky takes my breath away, but today the beauty was lost on me. I was hoping the intruder was long gone by now, that he was miles away. I could see trouble ahead if he was still here.

Even for a Jamaican, Edwardo was a big man, over six feet tall, close to two hundred pounds. Black skin, skimpy brown hair, heavy features. He was dressed in the unofficial uniform of a long-sleeved shirt, work pants, rubber boots.

Edwardo and his team worked quietly, efficiently. The apples were placed in buckets attached to long canvas sleeves. When filled, the sleeves were emptied into wooden crates for transport.

I introduced Bliss as my friend and then I said, "Edwardo, there may be a strange man, a black man, in the orchard without Mr. Burroughs' permission."

He nodded. "Is possible. This afternoon I see one man I do not know. I call to him but he goes behind row."

"Could he have been from another team?"

"No, he not wearing boots like all of us. I think maybe he kitchen worker or from delivery truck."

I told Edwardo to keep his eyes open and to tell Mr. Burroughs or call me if the man was seen again. "We want to take him away," I explained. Edwardo had my home phone number. When we turned to leave, Edwardo smiled and shook hands. To Bliss he said, "Pleasant day, sir."

Bliss was in a hurry to get back to the office. "Our man is here all right," he said. "I've got some calls to make. By the way, what was that you said earlier about lending Edwardo a bicycle?"

I explained it as we walked back to headquarters. Actually, it was a simple gesture. These men work hard, but on their days off they like to go shopping for their families back home; gifts for the wives, toys for the children, small appliances for the house. It's a long walk to the stores in Peru, much longer to the shopping centers in Plattsburgh. The men can hitchhike, and the townspeople are glad to give them a lift, but the loan of a bicycle is mighty welcome.

Foster's office would be Bliss's command post. An agent from the Border Patrol and an investigator from the state police arrived, offering to help. Mulholland's office passed on some details. The alien Sabella was forty-two, spoke English fairly well, a natty dresser, above average intelligence. A photo had been located and would be

faxed to a machine in town and delivered by hand later tonight. Obviously, any manhunt would have to wait until it was on hand.

Bliss and the other men were at the desk, manning their phones. They were positive the Colombian was somewhere in the orchards, waiting for someone to come and pick him up.

"It figures, Hank." Bliss was keyed up; sweat glistened on his broad face. "Where's he going to go? He's got little or no money, he doesn't know this area, it would be too risky to steal a car. He's staying out of sight, but he's here."

Bliss wanted to capture the man as soon as possible. He was thinking of armed men in riot gear sweeping through the trees, loudspeakers blaring, maybe even a helicopter overhead. Nailing an international drug figure might even put a letter of commendation in his file.

In time and money, his plan would be as damaging to the Burroughs Orchards as a late-summer hailstorm. I tried to talk him back down to earth. "Bliss, I know these Jamaicans. I know how they talk, how they act. Beside them this Colombian will stand out like a Holstein at a horse show . . ."

"Make your point, Hank," he said impatiently.

"Let me get some people I know. We'll stake out the kitchens, the dormitories. Strictly low-key. We won't interfere with the work. We'll spot him pretty quick if he's still here . . ."

He was shaking his head. I got steamed. "Look, Bliss, this isn't

Lucky Luciano you're after. He's just another pusher with a new drug to sell. You'll have another chance . . ."

The phone rang. Bliss answered it and then handed it to me. Ted Mulholland was on the line.

"How does it look up there, Hank?"

"Not good, Ted. This is harvest time; the apples have to be picked now. It will take a hell of a lot of manpower to comb these orchards, and cost too much downtime from the work. Besides, the guy may be long gone by tomorrow."

"I know, Hank, but we've got to give it a shot. This is not your ordinary mule. He's got names and details of a syndicate we want to nail."

I know Ted, and when he says something is important you can take it to the bank. "Maybe you and Bliss will get lucky," Ted went on. "I'll hold the Immigration boys off as long as I can. They don't like the idea of an alien wandering around loose up there, especially if the press gets hold of it . . ."

The state police investigator talking on his cell phone was making "Hang up" signs at me.

"Call you later, Ted," I said, and put down the phone.

"There's been a break-in at a store about a mile down the road," the officer said, "and the suspect is a black man!"

That brought instant silence in the room. "Go on," I said.

"It's Carter's seed and feed store. A local man was coming home from work; he passed the store, saw a light on, knew the store is always closed after five. He slowed down

and stopped and when he did he saw a man run away from the side of the building.

"He went to a phone and called the owner, and the owner called us." He paused. "He's sure the man he saw was black."

Bliss turned to me. "I guess our man is making a run for it." He looked disappointed.

"Yeah, maybe we just got lucky." I said, thinking of Foster and the apple harvest. "Let's go check out the store."

Outside, the sun was gone but there was plenty of daylight left and the air was noticeably cooler. The Jamaicans would work another three hours before going to dinner. Their own cooks would serve up soup, pork or chicken and rice, and the ever-present green tea.

We arrived at Carter's store in about ten minutes. A big frame building, painted barn red, the store supplies feeds to nearby dairy farms and horse stables. There's also a line of seeds and fertilizer.

A state trooper I know named Benson Stewart was on the scene. "John Carter is inside," he told us. "Not too upset by what happened; he's been broken into before a time or two." Ben led the way inside.

A long counter held a rack of books on horsemanship and big containers of dog treats. The walls were lined with pictures of local 4-H Club members and prize-winning horses and cattle. Toward the rear were displays of very attractive riding apparel. There were a few beautiful saddles, both English and Western.

To me, John Carter always

looked like a tonsorial mistake. He is a young man but completely bald. He wears a handlebar mustache at least eight inches from waxed tip to waxed tip.

He stood behind the counter near his cash register. The cash drawer was open; he had been told not to touch it until a fingerprint technician had gone over it.

"How much is missing, Mr. Carter?" asked Ben.

"Just twenty bucks and change." Carter looked at Bliss and me. "I always leave a twenty in the box," he explained. "Give the guy something for his trouble. Otherwise he might get mad and trash the place."

"Makes sense," I told him.

"The bastard must be traveling light," Carter said and pointed at one of the saddles. "That there's a four hundred dollar saddle. He could have taken it and sold it for fifty, easy."

Bliss pointed at the phone on the wall behind the counter. "Could be our man broke in just to use the phone." To Ben he asked, "Can you find out if any calls were made from here after five o'clock?"

Ben frowned. "Can do, but it'll take time."

"Let's do it," Bliss said. "Maybe my office can help." He walked toward a door in the rear of the room. "What's back here?"

"Stockroom," Carter told him. He opened the door and turned on the lights.

It was a big room with a floor of rough planking and bare walls. We walked in between stacks of fifty-pound bags of various feeds and cases of canned pet food. To our

right, double doors would open onto the loading dock. A two-wheeled hand truck stood in a corner.

"This is funny," Carter exclaimed. He pointed to a couple of hooks on an upright beam. "I always keep some old clothes here," he told us, "to wear when I'm putting up stock or unloading a delivery. An old army shirt, blue jeans. They're gone."

I looked at Bliss; I could tell what he was thinking. Our alien is about the same size as John Carter.

"I'll take a look outside," I offered.

"Already did, Hank," Ben said. "Driveway and parking space all gravel. Couldn't find any tracks."

"I'll look anyway. Could use some fresh air." I left by the front door and walked around the building. I knew by now the state police and other agencies had been alerted to watch for a black man wearing old clothes. Last seen west of Peru on Route 22. Precious little to go on.

Bliss thought the alien did the break-in and robbery. I wasn't so sure; there was one more card to play. I went back inside and buttoned Ben.

"I've seen work crews clearing brush along Route 9 the last day or so," I said. Work crew consisted of inmates from nearby prisons detailed to do outside work, under guard, of course. "Ben, ask your dispatcher if any place reported an escapee."

"I checked on that just before you got here, Hank," Ben said. "No dice. Neither Dannemora or Adirondack or Lyon Mountain is missing a prisoner. Good idea, though."

That convinced Bliss he was

right, that the alien had eluded him. "I think we're done here," he said. "Officer Stewart, can you locate the man who saw this?"

"No sweat. He lives here in Peru. We told him to stay home."

Bliss nodded. "Could you have someone bring him to the orchard so we can talk with him?"

The witness was glad to repeat his story to Bliss and me and the other officers. He had a good look at the man running away.

"What was this man wearing?" Bliss asked.

"Ordinary work clothes."

"And you're sure he was a black man?"

"Positive."

"Our man," Bliss told us, "he's on the move."

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe not."

I could tell Bliss was disappointed, but he kept it to himself. He told the other officers that the Colombian must have come out of the orchard, walked down the highway, happened on the store, broke in, used the phone, took the money and the old clothes. The car stopping outside alarmed him; he ran out the back and disappeared.

I tried to shoot holes in that scenario. "We know that Sabella is a con man, a snappy dresser; Washington gave us that. If he wanted a change of clothes, why did he take those old things of Carter's? Why not some of those nice new clothes out front? Some were his size and he would look a lot better."

"Maybe he wanted to be inconspicuous."

"You don't know this area. The

fastest way to get picked up is to look like a bum.”

“He doesn’t know that. And the main idea was to use the phone.”

“There’s phones here at the orchard, outside the dining rooms.”

“Maybe he didn’t want to be seen.” To end the argument, Bliss turned away and picked up his phone.

“I think he’s still here,” I said, but nobody was listening.

Someone brought in containers of stew and coffee from one of the kitchens, and two cots had been set up against one wall. We would wait for news of the fugitive. The long twilight had faded into dark night when the phone rang for me.

It was Ben Stewart. “We just got this report, Hank. You know Thornhill, that boot camp facility for first offenders over past Bloomingdale? One of their young gentlemen walked away two days ago. Got away clean.”

He paused. “Now get this, Hank. They caught the guy an hour ago, and he admitted he did the break-in at Carter’s store. You’re back in business, Hank. . . .”

“Thanks, Ben, thanks.”

Right away I told Bliss that for all we knew his alien was still in the orchard. Bliss was energized. I sat there and listened to him go over his plans again.

At first light a force of men would be assembled and confine the Jamaicans to their dormitories. The kitchen would be cordoned off but meal preparation would be allowed to continue. Troop cars would be stationed along the main service

roads. Men with loudspeakers would patrol the orchard, calling on the alien to surrender.

When he got to the part that called for trained dogs to be on standby in case they were needed for tracking, I gave up and went home.

A new moon floated above the horizon, a bright shining crescent, what the poet called “a chin of gold.” I drove slowly, trying to think calmly.

Bliss Adler would never be on my Christmas card list, but we did have one thing in common. We both wanted to see the alien drug dealer caught and out of circulation. And I wanted a message sent back to his syndicate in Haiti or South America or wherever that this part of New York would be a bad place to peddle Khat or any of the other poisons.

I knew the pusher’s spiel by heart. “Look, kid, no needles, no HIV. Safe, and everybody says it’s the world’s best high. Cheap, too . . .”

Possessing with intent to sell is a felony. I’ve arrested more than a few pushers around schools and on the streets, sometimes handing them a contusion or two to mark the end of their careers in narcotics.

At home I took something to eat out of the freezer and put it in the microwave. I was opening a can of dog food for Skipper when the phone rang. I was sure it would be Bliss, but it wasn’t.

“This is Daniel,” the lilting voice of a Jamaican native said, “Edwar-do’s friend. He say you please come

to Cortland house and bring your Mr. Adler. He has something for you to see."

"Be right there," I answered. I shut off the oven, turned off the light, and got back in my car.

I was lucky I didn't get a ticket driving back to the orchard. I used the car phone to tell Bliss to meet me at the entrance, and by himself.

Daniel was waiting for us at the gate. Foster had kindly given Bliss the use of a jeep, and Daniel directed me down trails between dark rows of trees. Bliss sat in silence, keeping his comments to himself.

The dormitories in the Burroughs orchards are permanent cinder block buildings, and are named for different varieties of apples, Cortland, Empire, Spartan, and so on.

They have large sleeping areas with single beds for the men, separate lockers, bathrooms, a game room. Daniel escorted us through a rec room where some men were playing dominoes and back to the shower room.

Edwardo stepped over to greet us. He pointed to a corner where a black man sat in a straight chair. The man was not bound, but surrounded by large men who had persuaded him to sit quietly and not try to leave.

"This mon is not one of us," Edwardo said. "We see him take food from the dining room. He try to tell us he is from Department of Health down on island, come to see if we are all well and comfortable."

When we approached, the man looked up hopefully. He saw we were strangers and looked down again, a discouraged expression on his face. He was about forty, dressed in expensive-looking casual clothes.

Bliss took my arm. "That's him," he whispered. "We got his picture a few minutes ago."

Edwardo went on. "The mon has no name paper like we do. And he not from 'Maica; he not know who is governor now in Kingston."

Edwardo looked at Bliss and me, a small grin on his broad face. "Maybe you like to take him with you?"

"Yes, Edwardo," I answered. "Yes, we would."

"We would," Bliss said, "and thank you."

Thirty minutes later the alien had been brought back to the warehouse, transferred to a state police car, and taken to the Clinton County jail. Phone calls had been made to various offices, including Ted Mulholland's. Foster was pleased; the work would not be interrupted and the weather was holding good. His heart was set on surpassing last year's record of four hundred thousand bushels.

Bliss looked at me and grinned. "You're right, Hank, those Jamaicans are something special."

"Yes, they are." That was the opening I was waiting for. "Bliss, would your expense account cover a couple of new bicycles for Edwardo's team?"

"Sure thing, partner. I already thought of that."

What the Chairman Says

Craig V. Eister

“Who do you think we should get rid of?”

Richter sits on the opposite side of the table and stares me down with his deep, penetrating eyes. The curtains are open, but a menacing thunderstorm surrounds the city and turns the board room slightly sinister.

“Pardon me, sir?” I ask hesitantly.

I am already nervous about my meeting with the chairman, having spent days poring over budget numbers and project plans. I am just a manager for the firm, and can only speculate wildly about the secret dealings that go on at executive level. Just how far will they go to make this company successful?

“It’s simple, Jensen,” Richter says, leaning back in his enormous leather chair. “We posted a loss for the first quarter and projections aren’t good. We’ve got to cut costs around here. I want your candid opinion on who the dead weight is.”

He leans forward and begins tapping his open palm on the solidly built oak table. The sound reverberates throughout the room and echoes in my head.

Taking a deep breath, I decide to go for broke.

“Well, sir, I think we need to focus on successfully completing key initiatives to drive forward our profit.

I don’t think we should touch the worker base. They are our key to that profit. So perhaps we ought to target the overhead.”

I hold my breath.

“I’ve thought about that myself,” Richter replies. “What about you?”

The rain begins to tap on the windows as I squirm. Is the room getting warmer? How do I get myself out of this?

You started down the road. Keep going.

“Well, I believe I am vital to drive our Internet business forward, sir. I was thinking more of the VP level,” I say.

Richter begins tapping his fingertips together. “Go on,” he commands.

“My boss, Martine Miller, for example. The Internet project could continue successfully in a matrix reporting relationship.”

It is perhaps bold and stupid. But after a year of inane management, nonexistent support, and ridiculous requests, Martine has pushed me to the edge. The stifling room, impending storm, and aura of inside deal-making urge me on. I feel the need to be powerful. To be mighty. To be wicked.

Richter swivels his chair and crosses his legs casually, staring out the window.

“I see what you mean, Jensen.”

Does he? Nail it home.

"I have no desire to sabotage anyone, sir," I lie. "But as the chairman of the company, I'm sure you appreciate solid input on what is really going on."

Richter turns back to face me. "You know, Jensen, I've considered Martine for a while now. I've always thought she was a cross between a simpering kiss ass and a vengeful bitch."

Daydreaming isn't going to get me anywhere. In front of me, my desk is covered with reports that I need in order to prepare for my meeting with Chairman Richter tomorrow. I have only barely begun my presentation.

Bob Richter founded Earth Bang! two years ago, as an on-line supplier of environmentally friendly products. Our website is operational, but it is my job to drive the technology forward. With business waning, Richter called meetings with several of the firm's managers to understand their goals and, more important, their budgets.

Quite simply, I have to demonstrate my worth tomorrow.

I start to look at the budget line by line when an abrupt rap on the door startles me. Before I can respond, Martine Miller enters my office, closes the door behind her, and plants herself in front of me with her arms crossed.

"We've got a problem," she blurts out in an annoyed tone.

"Oh?" I say innocently. Whatever this problem is, I know it will soon be mine. I don't have time to deal with any crap, especially since I am under such a tight deadline with

this presentation to Richter. But I cannot be aggressive. After all, she will be speaking with Richter tomorrow as well. Just what might she be plotting to say about me?

"Who is Blake Adams?" she asks, crossing her legs. I glance at the spike heel on her shoe and imagine her driving it through my chest, or kicking me backwards through the glass.

"He's one of my employees," I reply cautiously. "He's working on the architectural design of the customer database."

I feel nervous. Hadn't Jack, a friend of mine in H.R., asked me the same question last week?

"How long has he been here?"

"About two months," I say.

Another sharp knock hits the door, and I jump. I open it, and Bill Marsh, director of technical staffing in Human Resources, enters.

"Ah, Martine, you are already here. Good," Bill says.

Bill sits next to Martine, and I return to my seat filled with fear.

"Blake Adams works for you, Chad, does he not?" Bill asks.

"Yes he does," I reply.

"Well, we've got to get rid of him."

"What?" I ask incredulously.

"We've gotten several reference checks back indicating that he falsified his application in at least three places. It clearly states in our policies that any falsification is grounds for dismissal."

Bill is all business and I stare in fascination at what is unfolding before me.

"I thought reference checks were done before the hire," Martine snaps.

"Well, we got some of them back early," Bill says, turning toward Martine. "Early references looked fine and there was such a rush to get this position filled that we moved forward. But upon further investigation we noticed some suspicious entries on the form and looked into it. As it turns out, it's lucky that we did."

So that's what Jack had been doing. He was checking into Blake Adams.

"Didn't you check this guy out?" Martine demands of me.

"I interviewed him. Technically he was great," I reply. "I had no idea that there was a problem in his past."

"Damn it," Martine says, running her hands through her hair.

"We need to terminate him and walk him out of the building. I'll do it, and Martine, you should be there as a backup. Chad, I think it's best that you stay clear. It is my experience that employees tend to get hostile toward their direct supervisors in situations like this. Let's get this over with."

Bill and Martine stand up and make their way for the door. Martine pauses.

"This really screws things up for tomorrow. You'd better do some quick thinking to explain to Richter how we're going to avoid being delayed by this. And it better be good."

With my elbows on the desk and head in my hands, I close my eyes and begin to rub my temples.

"I understand what you're saying about Martine," Richter continues. "But what about your managerial

capabilities? Especially with this Blake Adams fiasco."

The rain is coming down in sheets now. Framed in the window, Richter looks like an ominous judge passing sentence on me in the middle of a tempest. I have to get myself out of this mess!

"He falsified his application, Mr. Richter," I say calmly.

"But weren't you the one who pushed to hire him so soon? Why didn't we wait till all the checks were completed?"

I breathe deeply. Don't get defensive.

"Because this project is in real jeopardy," I say. "Our website is behind the times and I'm convinced it's a major source of our lagging business."

Richter stares back at me sternly. "And this Adams guy is our sole savior? I find that hard to believe."

"It's a difficult skill set. We had to find someone who was knowledgeable about database design, Internet and web technology, and who also knew how to interface this with everything else, like our financial systems. A resource like that is hard to find, and he had the perfect credentials. If we waited too long, I was afraid we'd lose him and jeopardize the project further."

Richter looks more and more annoyed. He stands and moves over to a small side table where a pitcher of water rests. I look at it longingly, but Richter pours himself a glass and continues with his questioning.

"So you're telling me that a critical technical project is in such a tenuous situation? I can't believe this is our only option."

Here we go. The heart of the matter.

"Sir, I proposed to Martine that our best shot at quick, thorough, and successful implementation was using a third-party vendor. I got a couple of proposals from Myriad Technology and Daniel Blank Productions, and they were willing to significantly reduce their charges in exchange for some advertising on our site. But Martine was dead set on an in-house development. To me, it was a huge risk."

Richter sits down and folds his arms across his chest.

"So what do we do now?" he asks thoughtfully.

What do we do now?

The thought of facing Richter tomorrow is making me more and more tense. I have to refocus and plan. But after several hours and no word from either Bill Marsh or Martine on the Blake Adams encounter, I can no longer stand the silence. I pick up the phone and dial.

"Human Resources, this is Jack."

"Jack, hi, it's Chad Jensen. Listen, have you heard anything about the Blake Adams situation?"

"Hi, Chad," Jack responds. "Well, I haven't heard too much, buddy. Except that Adams was pissed off and pitched a fit."

"Damn." I say, knowing that this would be the case anyway.

"Bill Marsh told me to take care of the usual, like cutting off e-mail access and security access. I think Martine wants to see you."

"This day is turning into a real nightmare."

"Good luck, my friend. If I hear anything, I'll let you know," Jack says.

"Thanks, Jack."

Hanging up, I know I have to face the inevitable and head for Martine's office. She will no doubt be in a foul mood. This is going to give her the perfect excuse to cast me in a bad light in front of Richter, and I wonder just how determined Martine will be to make this my fault. She is in her office eating a salad when I poke my head in.

"Got a sec?" I ask tentatively.

Martine glares at me, and motions me into the office. I close the door behind me as she carefully wipes her lips with a paper napkin.

"He claims that there was no deliberate falsification, but he felt rushed when he filled out the form and simply made some mistakes," she says.

"Well, so it is all just a misunderstanding," I say calmly, trying to assess the situation.

"Whether it was or not, there are definite inconsistencies. More than one. H.R. policy stands. We had to let him go."

I rub my eyes. "But if it was a simple mistake . . ."

"The bigger problem," she interrupts, "is that he said you are the one who rushed him and said that he didn't need to worry about the details. There may be a lawsuit."

"That's not true at all!" I exclaim. "I left him in my office in perfect peace and quiet and told him to take his time."

Martine pushes the salad away so that she can rest her arms on the desk. "I can't believe you didn't see

the problems in that application, Chad."

Taking a deep breath, I know I have to go through things step by step. "I didn't look at the application, Martine. I was interviewing him off of his resume. I think we all leave the applications for H.R. to deal with."

"It gets better," Martine snaps at me. She never acknowledges any response you might have to her accusations, but simply plunges into the next line of attack. "He claims you wanted this to happen."

"What?"

"He says it was your goal all along to sabotage this project so that you could outsource it. He claims you have a side deal with Daniel Blank Productions to get a hefty commission when they sign a deal with Earth Bang! In fact, he said there were papers on your desk that indicated recent communications with them."

I am dumbfounded. Is this really happening?

"We made the decision several months ago to develop this in-house, Chad. I hope you are committed to that effort," Martine states, her voice becoming dangerously low.

"I hope you don't believe that..." I begin indignantly, but she cuts me off.

"I think you'd better spend a lot of time today getting ready for your talk with Richter. Adams is furious and plans to send Richter an e-mail later today telling his theory on the situation. I'm not sure what I'm going to be able to do to save you."

Riding the elevator down, I walk

into the lobby. I must look like a total wreck. I wonder if the security guard will think I look sick and ask me if I need a doctor. Or maybe I look guilty and he will get suspicious. But no, he simply smiles at me, and I nod back.

I walk quickly outside to get some fresh air. It is turning cooler, so there are few people on the jogging trail that surrounds the building. I begin walking the track to collect my thoughts.

"It's quite obvious, isn't it, Jensen?" Richter says calmly, holding a fresh cup of coffee and walking slowly around the table. I attempt to remain calm, although I want to bury my face in my hands.

"Sir?"

"Jensen, you don't play the idiot well. In order to outsmart the ruthless, you have to think one step ahead."

One step ahead.

It is becoming impossible to control the tension. Sweat breaks out on my forehead. "I am afraid you've completely lost me."

"I ask you who we should get rid of around here. So, you make a calculated risk to put the finger on your boss. I see the light and she gets the boot."

It is what I want to hear him say, and yet it isn't.

The rain continues to hit the window with force and I feel thoroughly dehydrated. I stand up.

"Where are you going Jensen? We've just begun."

"Just needed some water, sir."

"Here you go," Richter says, handing me a bottle from the side bar.

Accepting it, I reluctantly sit down again. My throat begins constricting. I take gulps of water.

"The Daniel Blank people came to you. Offered a few kickbacks to get the account. But you knew there was no way that Martine would let that fly. You had to get her out of the way. But you knew that simply a bad word from you wasn't going to do it. You needed some bad moves. Some dirt."

"Sir, wait a minute . . ."

"So poor Blake Adams came into the picture. He was your out. You make sure that he fills out an application in your office. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if you doctored the application yourself. You go through your friend Jack at H.R. to make sure that he gets hired before the application is checked out. Then, when the time is right, you and Jack expose the application irregularities and get him booted. Sure, you come under some question for letting this happen. But ultimately, it brings to light the troubles with Martine's decision to keep the project in-house.

"Sir, this isn't at all what happened," I say, standing up desperately.

"Jensen, Jensen," Richter says, approaching me and putting a hand on my shoulder. "Chad. Isn't it time we talk frankly?"

My imagination is making me crazy.

I return to my office and shut the door. Just get some thoughts on paper. Anything. Then refine them later. I need to at least start or I will have nothing to present to Richter.

I open up my word processor and begin to type. Several hours pass before I realize that I have not made it past the first page. Papers are scattered all over my desk, along with empty candy wrappers, Diet Coke cans, and half-filled potato chip bags. I rub my eyes, which are hurting from the computer screen glare.

I need a fresh venue. A clear head.

With purpose, I stand and pack up my materials. I am shocked when I look outside and see that it is dark. Damn, almost 8 P.M.! How am I ever going to finish?

It takes several minutes for the elevator to arrive. That is odd, especially this late at night. My computer and briefcase begin hurting my shoulder and I have to set them down on the ride down.

Emerging from the elevator, I sign the log book.

The guard is not at his station. That is even more odd.

I walk slowly and cautiously down the length of the lobby, toward the parking garage, glancing behind me several times. By the time I reached the far doors, the guard is still not at his post.

Stepping into the garage, I pause. The lights are on, and everything looks normal. I see my car at the far end, in the same spot where I have parked it for years.

Slowly, I begin walking toward it.

Blake is angry, and I am certainly the logical choice for his anger. It would not be very hard for him to have waited for me here in the garage. After all, a terminated em-

ployee was escorted out of the building. But no one made sure that person got in their car and drove away, did they?

And what about Martine? This whole incident would be damaging to her. She would surely be out to get me.

I quicken my step a bit, realizing that I have only gotten about a quarter of the way to my car. My computer feels like a ton on my shoulder.

The garage is quiet, way too quiet for my taste. I cannot seem to walk fast enough, even though my breathing is becoming labored. There are a few cars scattered in the garage, all of them dark. Could someone be waiting in one of them? Waiting to jump out and attack me? Waiting to start a car suddenly and run me down?

Waiting to ambush me?

I am nearly at my car when I hear a noise and nearly scream. It sounds like a car door slamming. Maybe a car on another level? Maybe a car backfiring somewhere outside of the garage?

Maybe him. Or her.

I sprint the rest of the way. My hand shakes violently as I get into the car and lock myself in, checking the backseat for intruders.

I bury my face in my hand and begin crying.

"Mr. Richter, let me tell you that the story you just told was indeed that, a story," I stammer. "I in no way had any . . ."

Richter holds his hand up.

"I know, I know, Jensen," he says, indicating a seat. We both sit down

again. "Frankly, I'm slightly disappointed that you don't see the whole picture. Remember what I said: You have to think one step ahead of the ruthless."

Once again, I do not know where this is going.

"Didn't you consider that Blake Adams may not be the victim in all of this?"

"How so?"

"A second ago, I argued that you could have been in cahoots with the Daniel Blank people to get a kickback. What if, instead, Adams was getting a kickback to keep the project in-house?"

Richter senses my confusion and continues.

"Think about it. Adams was way too quick to suggest this whole plot that you might have with the Daniel Blank people. Why? Because his whole point was to cast an ugly light on the external consultant idea. He discredits it and the project stays internal."

"But in discrediting it, he loses his job," I point out.

"Sure, but he is guaranteed part of the profits from the internal development."

"By who?"

"Martine, of course."

I stare at him in amazement.

"It's obvious, Jensen. Martine and Adams formed an alliance to keep the project in-house. This plot was a simple way to cast a negative light on the consultants. And don't think that Martine isn't planning on coming in here and telling me how negative you are, and that you should be eliminated."

I cannot believe the genius of it

all. "And Martine had Bill Marsh from H.R. there right away to make sure that Blake was given the boot."

"Now you're catching on, my boy. After all, it was Marsh that marched in your office and demanded that he be fired."

"But why go through all this?" I ask. "She's the boss. She'd already decided the project would remain internal."

"Ah, yes," Richter replies. "But the project is in trouble. She is thinking one step ahead. She knows that I am going to demand some changes. So she concocts this little plot to cast a negative light on the external idea. She then suggests we get rid of you. Then, later on, when the internal project is completed, she gets all the glory."

Richter sits back and studies me. I slowly shake my head. "I don't know what to say, sir. I didn't see any of that coming. I guess I don't have what it takes to be a high-powered executive."

"Oh, I don't know about that, Jensen. You've got promise. The important thing is to figure out what you want to do about it now."

My apartment is located on the third floor of the complex, and all the lights on my side are dark. I wonder if a fuse box has blown, but notice the porch light glowing on my patio. I hadn't even been out there lately, had I?

Gripping my laptop and holding my other hand in a fist, I proceed quickly up the stairs. My hands shake slightly as I put the key into the lock, push the door open, and

immediately flick on the living room lights, prepared to scream.

I exhale deeply. My apartment looks just as I left it. It has not been ransacked, and no evil messages are painted in blood on my walls.

Get a grip, Chad. I dead-bolt the door behind me and move automatically to the answering machine.

The message light blinks three times.

I press the playback.

Three hang-ups.

Telemarketers, I reason. Those damn telemarketers are always disturbing you.

I plug in my computer and bring up my presentation. It is still a mess. How in the world am I going to finish this? I am thoroughly exhausted, and my nerves have passed their breaking point.

I start some coffee brewing and turn on the radio to jar my senses back to life.

Stay awake. Stay awake. Stay awake!

I would not be in this terrible position if it were not for my vivid imagination. Always trying to think of worst-case scenarios.

Always trying to think one step ahead.

Martine charges into the board room as I contemplate what Richter has said.

"Ah, Martine, how nice of you to join us," Richter says. "I was having the most interesting discussion with Jensen."

"I just bet you have," Martine says with a snarl. "I'm sure he's been filling your head with lies, Mr.

Richter. Chad Jensen has been trying to stab me in the back for months!"

"Is that so?" Richter comments as I listen in fascination.

"Despite my mandate to complete internal development of our web product, Jensen has spent the past several months trying to sabotage the project. Blake Adams has been in collaboration with Jensen this whole time. Chad brought him in here long enough to learn the technology. Then they arrange this phony scheme to get him fired. Adams further sabotages the Internet design so that Jensen can come in here and tell you what dire straits we are in."

"And are we in dire straits?" Richter asks.

"Unfortunately, yes. I think we have no choice but to get an external vendor to pick up this project."

Richter glances at me, as if he begins to suspect me anew. He turns toward Martine and pays close attention.

I stare at Martine, my eyes boring a hole through her.

"But that was the beauty of his plan," Martine smiles triumphantly at me. "Blake makes sure to suggest an alliance with Daniel Blank Productions."

"Why in the world would he do that?" Richter asks. "That information would make me definitely not want to choose them."

"Exactly!" Martine says triumphantly. "Because all along, Chad has had a pact with the other vendor, Myriad Technology. It's the perfect plan. Not only does he

discredit the internal development idea, he casts a suspicious light on one of the two vendor choices. Mr. Richter, Chad Jensen wants you to think that you have no other choice. He wants you to pick Myriad Technology."

They both stare at me.

"Sir" I laugh nervously. "This is ridiculous."

"Jensen, perhaps I haven't given you enough credit," Richter says.

"Mr. Richter, you can't believe . . ."

Richter interrupts, "Luckily Martine has been smart enough to think one step . . ."

Oh no! It is 7:30 A.M!

I wake up with my head laying in a pool of drool on the kitchen table, next to my laptop and a half finished cup of coffee. The radio is still playing.

My meeting with Richter is in half an hour!

Like a madman, I throw off my clothes and run into the shower.

No, no, no! This cannot be happening! I will be late to the office. Richter will call Martine. She will have plenty of time to fill his head with lies. I will be sunk!

I make it to the car, determined to tie my tie and shave on the way to work. Please don't let me get into an accident.

What am I going to do? What am I going to say?

The security guard has the same pleasant smile as I rush past him in a frenzy. I open my laptop in the elevator and pull up the part of the presentation I have. The doors open and I make a mad dash to the board room.

It is 7:59.

I have made it on time. Calm down. Stay steady.

The door to the board room is open, and I stare inside in horror.

Richter and Martine are having coffee.

They see me, and stand.

"Ah, here you are, Jensen," Richter says. "Come in, come in. Have a seat."

I sit down at the table, nervously.

"Put the laptop away, Jensen. We've gotten everything squared away. I have to take a call with our key investors, but here it is in a nutshell. We're going to outsource the Internet development, and we are going with Daniel Blank Productions. Martine will be in charge of the project, but you will manage the vendor relationship. Any questions?"

They both look at me. Are they waiting for me to flinch? To react in surprise? To betray my thoughts?

"Fine, sir. I will get right on it," I reply calmly.

"Good," Richter says with finality, stands up, and walks out.

Martine smiles.

Of course, they believe they have outfoxed me.

But really, it was quite simple. I left Daniel Blank material all over my office as Blake Adams filled in his application. I changed the application before I turned it in, then forced Jack to have him hired early. Blake gets fired and he squeals.

The Daniel Blank people didn't think it would work. They thought that the plan would discredit the idea of using a vendor, and Richter would end up keeping the project in-house. Or, Richter would end up thinking Daniel Blank Productions had a tarnished name because of Blake, and would end up going with Myriad Technology. So, of course, I negotiated an even bigger payback for myself.

But in the end, I knew there wouldn't be any risk.

Martine and Richter would desperately try to stay one step ahead. They would outsmart themselves.

"Well," Martine says standing up. "I guess we'd better get to work."

"Yes," I reply. "Let's do what the chairman says."

Lighthouse Rock

Raymond Steiber

Gerald "Doc" Milligan—Doc because he'd been a volunteer ambulance driver in World War I—was in the bootleg hootch business. No other way to put it.

It was the early days of Prohibition, and down in Chicago the Italian gangs hadn't yet machine-gunned the Irish gangs out of business. Not that it mattered to Doc—he didn't deal with either of them. And besides, he had a more discriminating clientele than they did, the kind who liked their booze straight and unwatered. Nor did he ever get down to Chicago. His bailiwick was Lake Superior and the shores of upper Wisconsin.

Doc had a twenty-five foot boat with a souped-up engine. He belonged to that breed of Americans who, like Rickenbacker and Barney Oldfield, could take an engine apart and make it run faster and better than it ever had before—for a while anyway, till they blew it apart by abusing it. Then they'd grin and start all over again. Jules Verne once wrote that Americans were engineers by birthright, and that was Doc all right. He had motor oil in his veins and a grease monkey's heart.

He ran good Canadian whisky in from Ontario in its original bottles. He'd put into a cove near Thunder Bay, load his boat to the

gunwales, then take off south, dodging revenue boats and the Coast Guard. He'd painted his boat a dark gray and made his runs on starless nights, which was precisely when a storm could whip up and Lake Superior was most dangerous. Then he'd creep through the Apostle Islands to the Wisconsin shore where a couple of Indians off the reservation just south of there would be waiting for him. The Indians would have the reservation hearse with them, and in the back of it would be some empty coffins. Into the coffins would go the booze, and the Indians, now dressed in a sober black, would take off for Milwaukee where a middleman would sell it to the country club set there and in Chicago.

The Indians were Methodists and teetotalers, but they didn't much mind if a bunch of palefaces drank themselves into oblivion—particularly if they were paying for it. In a way, they sort of looked on it as revenge for Wounded Knee.

On this particular night, Doc had just finished unloading a cargo of hootch and had moved his boat back to its home base near Bayfield. Feeling pretty good, too, since he had a fresh wad of greenbacks in his pocket. He was just tying up when the woman appeared. She walked right down to the end of

the dock and began climbing down the ladder into his boat.

"Are you Doc Milligan?" she asked.

Doc didn't answer because his jaw was hanging open. He'd never really gotten used to short skirts. The first time he'd seen one was when he went on leave to Paris in 1916. He was sort of shocked by them, to tell the truth, but he couldn't take his eyes off them, either. It was as if for the first time he'd realized that women had legs.

This woman had legs, all right. Long white ones that seemed to go all the way up to her armpits. She wore one of those close-fitting helmetlike hats, and her bobbed, dark brown hair showed at the edges of it.

"Well, are you Doc Milligan or not?"

Doc nodded dumbly. The truth was that he was a little bit awkward with women—but then what would you expect of a man whose mother had destined him for the priesthood? But he'd got out of that, all right, and what a close call it had been!

"I'm Peggy Noone," she said as she dropped the last few inches. "I hear you know Lake Superior like the back of your hand."

He knew it, all right. He had to know it to dodge the Coast Guard.

"I'm trying to get to a place called Lighthouse Rock."

He finally found his voice. "There's nothing there but an abandoned lighthouse."

"That doesn't bother me," she said.

She had a strong face for a

woman, but it was softened by large eyes and a complexion that could've been featured in a beauty soap ad. The people at Pears or Procter and Gamble would've loved her.

"Well, can you take me? I'll pay, of course."

His first impulse was to refuse. He was a hootch runner, goddamit, he didn't run a taxi service. But then he thought about sailing into the sunrise with this woman beside him, and his heart did a little flip-flop.

Like a lot of shy men—even shy men who sometimes got shot at by the Coast Guard—he was a romantic, and Peggy Noone's big eyes had him in a kind of pre-Nuclear Age meltdown.

So he said: "What time would you want to leave?"

And she said: "How about right now?"

What Doc didn't know and what Peggy Noone didn't know was that there were a couple of men up in the weeds listening to them and that their voices carried fitfully over the water.

Fast Frankie Muldoon said: "What was that they said?"

"Something about Lighthouse Rock," Bottle Cap Brown replied.

Fast Frankie snapped his fingers. "That's where he's got his stash, I bet."

It would be indelicate to say why Fast Frankie was called that. As for Jimmy "Bottle Cap" Brown, he was reputed to be able to remove the cap from a beer bottle with his front teeth. They had been sent north by their Chicago boss, Paddy

Boylan, and their Franklin motorcar was parked nearby. Paddy had heard about Doc's enterprise, and he wanted to elbow in on it. "Them stiffs at the country clubs got plenty of moolah to blow," he'd told them, "and why shouldn't we grab some of it?"

"Look," Fast Frankie said, "he's gassing up his boat. I bet he's going to that rock he talked about."

"Yeah, and that's probably his moll he's got with him."

Fast Frankie was skinny and redheaded while Bottle Cap was built along the lines of a truck.

The former said: "We'll hire a boat and follow him out there and then we'll know where he stores his booze. Then later we can lean on him like Paddy wants. And because he won't have no secrets from us, we'll have the upper hand."

"Yeah," Bottle Cap said.

Bottle Cap was good at saying yeah. It was probably the main reason why he'd spent ten years, on and off, in state penitentiaries—and he wasn't yet thirty.

Fast Frankie, on the other hand, was good at coming up with hare-brained ideas. But without knowing it, he'd actually come up with a pretty good one this time. Because it wasn't booze he'd find at Lighthouse Rock, it was a gentleman named Stanley Noviski.

"Listen," Peggy Noone said as they left the shore behind, "I guess I'd better tell you what I do. I'm a reporter with the *News*."

"The *Milwaukee News*? The *Minneapolis News*? The East Dogtown News?"

"The *Chicago News*—the best damned paper in the Midwest. We're the ones who blew the lid off the Black Sox scandal."

She talked tough as nails, but she looked like sweet heaven to him. In fact, he could barely take his eyes off her long enough to steer the boat.

"I guess you're wondering why I want to go to Lighthouse Rock. And why I waited all night for you to show up at your dock."

Actually, he hadn't thought about it at all. That was because he hadn't yet got past those long legs of hers. That's what comes of living in an age when nobody's yet defined sexism.

"There's a big story waiting out there," Peggy said, "and this lady's going to latch on to it."

They cleared the Apostle Islands, and here came the sun popping out of the water ahead of them—as if Lake Superior were an ocean instead of the biggest lake in North America.

"Wow—that's really something."

It was, too—and Doc felt like he was seeing it for the first time.

"What were you doing out all night? Fishing or something?"

Doc fessed up to her. "I'm a whiskey runner."

"No—are you really?"

"I bring top grade stuff down from Canada and sell it downstate."

"But that's really wild. Wait—you don't have any on board right now, do you?"

"There's a couple of bottles in that locker over there."

And then she had to drag one out and open it, and pretty soon they

were passing it back and forth, drinking straight out of the neck. Doc thought: This is a hell of an adventure I'm having. Drinking good Canadian whisky with a pretty girl as we run on into the sunrise. It sure beats anything I would've experienced as a priest.

Stanley Noviski peered through the glassless windows of the lighthouse as if he were afraid someone might be watching him, then got the account books out of their satchel again. Not to open them and study them, but just to make sure they hadn't walked off somewhere.

Stanley was a round little man with a potato nose and not much of a chin. He had weepy, doelike eyes and didn't look at all like the type who'd do anything dangerous. But a few weeks before he'd taken the risk of his life. He'd run off with Da Mare's account books—and these were the real ones. They showed just who in the city of Chicago was grafting what, and how that graft was being distributed. They were dynamite.

Da Mare—the mayor, to say it the way somebody not from Chicago would—had trusted Noviski implicitly. And why shouldn't he? Stanley was a pale little bookkeeper who'd lived all his life with his mother and had a safe job with the city. Who would have thought that he had dreams in his head and that he'd try to realize them by stealing the books?

Stanley put the account books back in the satchel and thought about the woman who was coming

out to meet him—this Peggy Noone. Peggy had exaggerated somewhat when she'd told Doc that she was a reporter. Actually, she was a sob sister, a female who wrote an agony column, advice to the lovelorn and that sort of thing. But she had ambitions, and big-time reporting was one of them.

She'll make me a big offer from the *News*, Stanley thought. Hoped. Prayed.

She was the only newspaperwoman he knew about, and that was why he'd written the letter to her. He and his mother—while she was still alive. God rest her soul—had avidly read her column. It was exciting for Stanley to realize that there was romance out there—even if it was other people's romance and pretty imperfect. When he finally cashed in on the books, he intended to hie himself off to Capri and find some of his own. He'd heard that the island was cheap and sunny and beautiful and just the place for a fellow with his predilections. Foggy nights, hidden in the lighthouse, he longed for it.

As for this particular island, he'd read about it in a magazine article about old lighthouses, and it had struck him as the perfect hideout. That was why he'd paid an Apostle Islands boatman to take him out here. Da Mare's henchmen would figure that he'd holed up in a rooming house somewhere. They'd never believe that a person like him would take himself off to a deserted pile of rocks and cook his meals over a fire of driftwood.

Fooled them, he thought. Just the same, he kept glancing fearfully

out the windows and hiding and re-hiding the satchel with the account books.

Da Mare, after all, was nobody to be trifled with.

It took Fast Frankie and Bottle Cap some time to find somebody who'd take them out to Lighthouse Rock, and then it was an old guy named Dewhurst who had a boat so small they could barely cram themselves into it. Even worse, it cost Fast Frankie a quick fifty to induce him—a fact he didn't like at all.

Bottle Cap brought a violin case on board, and Dewhurst stared at it in surprise.

"He keeps his typewriter in there," Fast Frankie informed him with a grin.

Typewriter? That made even less sense than a violin.

What Dewhurst didn't know was that typewriter was gangsterese for Tommy gun, and that in several encounters with rival Italian gangs Bottle Cap had proved himself an expert with it.

They pulled away from the dock, leaving a creamy wake behind them.

Dewhurst leaned in Bottle Cap's direction.

"Are you a writer or something?"

"Hell," Bottle Cap said, "I don't even read too good."

It was nine A.M. when Lighthouse Rock hove into view. It was in an area of dangerous shoals, and the government had built an island of rocks on one of them and raised a lighthouse on it. The lighthouse

was supposed to warn away shipping, but so little came that way that in the end the Feds decided to close it down.

There had once been a dock on the east end of the island, but a storm had blown it away. But a couple of pilings remained, and that was where Doc decided to tie up. Over the years debris had piled up at the northwest corner of the island, and now there was a narrow peninsula there where a stand of vagrant pines had taken root.

Good place for a campsite, Doc thought. If you didn't mind getting your feet wet when a storm blew up.

"How do we get ashore?" Peggy asked.

Doc showed her how—which was to remove his pants and wade in hip deep. She did the same with her skirt after making him turn his back on her. It took all his Irish backbone not to sneak a peek, but he didn't try to curb his imagination.

Dressed again, they proceeded toward the lighthouse. It was a woebegone place with no windows and the outside walls streaked with bird dung.

"Smell that?" Doc asked.

"Smell what?"

"Old smoke."

They stopped before the entrance to the lighthouse.

"What are we supposed to be looking for?" Doc asked.

For an answer, Peggy stuck her head in the doorway and yelled: "Stanley!" The name echoed up and down the interior of the building and a couple of birds took off.

Doc, feeling all the hootch he'd drunk, decided to join the game.

"Livingstone!"

"You nut," Peggy muttered.

"Well, whether it's Stanley or Livingstone, they don't seem to be home today."

"Let's look around the island."

They tramped off toward the stand of pines and skirted the western side of it.

"I just hope this hasn't been a wild-goose chase," Peggy said.

"Nope. Look there."

Footprints in the mud along the shore and drag marks behind them.

"What was he dragging?"

Doc pointed at the debris at the tip of the island. Thanks to all the logging in Wisconsin and Minnesota, a lot of driftwood found its way here, and, in fact, the entire peninsula was built on a base of it.

"Firewood," Doc said.

"Let's go back to the lighthouse. I bet he's in there but just didn't answer."

"Who is this galoot?"

"He's Stanley Noviski—although I'm not supposed to know his last name. Da Mare—" she pronounced it the same way every other Chicagoan did—"is turning over every rock in the city looking for him. He walked off with an armful of books that show where all the graft is going."

"He must have a bunch of them then. In Chicago, even the garbage collectors are on the graft."

"Quiet—that's supposed to be a secret."

They were approaching the lighthouse again. All at once a pale face

showed itself at one of the upper windows.

"Don't come any closer! I've got a gun!"

"Wait a minute," Doc said. "That's a stick."

"It just looks like a stick! Stay where you are!"

"Stanley—I'm Peggy Noone."

"You were supposed to come alone!"

"How was I supposed to get here? Swim?"

"If you're Peggy Noone, tell me what you wrote to Mr. Lonelyhearts in your column."

"Stanley, I get a dozen letters a day from people who sign themselves Lonelyhearts."

"That's the answer I wanted! You are Peggy Noone!"

He disappeared from the window.

"This guy's a looney," Doc said.

"Maybe so, but he's a looney who's going to make a star reporter out of me."

Noviski appeared at the entrance of the lighthouse. He looked around as if he expected someone to jump him. Peggy and Doc walked up to him.

"I can't be too cautious," he said.

"What're you afraid of?" Doc asked. "The seagulls?"

"I'm afraid of Da Mare." And the way he said it, Doc almost expected a drumroll afterwards.

To their surprise, Noviski offered them coffee. He'd made a circle of stones in one corner of the lighthouse and there was a pile of driftwood in it. The broken windows up near where the light had been provided a natural draft for the smoke.

He got a fire going and put a big metal pot on it.

"What do we do for coffee cups?" Doc asked.

"Oops. I never thought about that. I only have one."

"Never mind," Peggy said. "Let's get down to business."

"I want ten thousand dollars for the books." Peggy swallowed hard. "And five thousand dollars more for the exclusive rights to my story."

"Stanley, there are movie stars who don't get that."

"The *News*'ll just have to pay or I'll go to the *Tribune*. Just think of the circulation advantage that'll give them."

Even civilians seemed to know about circulation wars these days.

"I'll have to take one of the books back with me—so my editor can see it. Otherwise you won't get five cents."

Noviski hemmed and hawed, but finally he agreed to it.

"All right, but you've got to act as my go-between. I won't trust anybody else. And I want some up-front money."

Peggy paled at that. She didn't have twenty dollars on her. And as for the *News*, she hadn't yet told them what she was up to.

Fortunately, Doc spotted her predicament and took out a fat roll and peeled off two hundred dollars.

"That do?"

Noviski licked his lips. He probably hadn't seen more than fifty dollars in his life. "One more," he said.

Doc peeled off another hundred, and he seemed happy.

Then he began telling them

about the books and what he knew about Da Mare's operation, and Peggy took out a notebook and began writing furiously. They got so engrossed in Noviski's story that they didn't hear the motor of the approaching boat. The thick walls of the lighthouse had something to do with that, and the noises the birds were making up where the light had been.

Then the motor dropped to a purr, and they missed the only chance of an advance warning they were likely to have.

Fast Frankie spotted Doc's boat tied up to the piling and had Dewhurst take them around to the end of the peninsula. Then they rolled up their pant legs and waded ashore, Bottle Cap carrying his violin case over his head in case he stepped into a hole.

"You want me to wait around?" Dewhurst called.

"Naw. Go on back. We'll use that other boat."

The Tommy gun made sure of that. It was their ticket to a free ride.

They laid up at the edge of the pines and put their shoes back on. Then they shook out their pant legs, which had got soaked in spite of the rollup. Dewhurst let the current sweep him away from the island.

"Now let's see what's at that lighthouse," Fast Frankie said.

"What if this Milligan guy decides to fight us?"

"Then we take him down a couple of pegs. Besides, who's going to argue with your typewriter?"

They pushed through the sparse stand of trees. Then they spotted Peggy and Doc and Noviski standing outside the lighthouse. At last one of them had heard the boat motor, and they were watching Dewhurst's craft recede in the distance.

Fast Frankie did a double take.

"I know that little guy—I seen him at City Hall a couple of times. It's Noviski. He's the guy Da Mare's looking for. He's offering three G's for him, and that's no malarkey."

"Three grand? We could use that money, Frankie."

"You bet we could—and here the bastard's dropped right in our lap."

"What do we do about Milligan?"

"We make it a double header. Two for the price of one. Take care of Paddy Boylan's business and Da Mare's at the same time."

They stepped out of the pines, and just then Noviski spotted them.

"Cripes!" he yelled.

The other two turned and saw them, too.

"Let's show them who's boss," Fast Frankie said, unholstering his .38.

Bottle Cap got the Tommy gun out of the violin case.

Doc saw it and grabbed Peggy by the hand and whisked her around the side of the lighthouse. Noviski just stood there, frozen. His constant nightmare had come true. Da Mare's henchmen had found him.

Bottle Cap braced the Tommy gun against his hip. Noviski came alive then and darted toward the entrance of the lighthouse. Bottle

Cap let loose with a burst of fire, and the classic rat-a-tat-tat typewriter sound of the Tommy gun echoed across the island.

Noviski jerked once and fell inside the lighthouse.

"Jeez, Bottle Cap, I can't remember whether Da Mare wanted him dead or alive."

"It better a' been dead, because that's the way I just cooked him. Now let's go roust out them other two."

Doc and Peggy got down on their stomachs behind one of the boulders down from the lighthouse. By craning their heads to one side, they could keep track of the two men.

"Horse hockey," Doc said. "The way they're coming, we won't have time to get to the boat."

"Who are they?"

"Beats me, but they sure aren't friendly."

"They must work for Da Mare."

"That's the last time he gets my vote—not that I'm eligible in Chicago."

"Doc, people who've been dead twenty years are eligible in Chicago, and plenty of them vote every election day. How do you think Da Mare stays in power?"

"I bet he'd get elected anyway. I mean, think how stupid people are."

"All this political philosophy's a real thrill, Doc, but how do we get out of this mess?"

"We pray for a sudden fog."

"Besides that."

"Damned if I know."

The two hoodlums had come

around the lighthouse now. They paused in the sunlight.

"Come out, you two," the red-headed one shouted. "We got the firepower and you ain't got a chance."

"Sure, we'll come out," Peggy muttered. "I always wanted to have more holes in me than a noodle strainer. Look, Doc, don't you have a gun or something?"

"Never touch the damned things."

"But you've got to have a gun. You're a whisky runner. What do you do when you run into a Coast Guard cutter?"

"Run for shallow water where they can't follow me. You think I want to get in a fight with those guys? They'd blow me out of the water. Besides, what if I had a gun and managed to shoot some eighteen-year-old deck hand? How do you think I'd feel about that?"

"Doc, you can't be a whisky runner and a pacifist, too."

"Well, I can halfway try."

The redhead yelled again. "Quit jawing, you two, and come out into the open. We see where you are."

"What'll you do if we come out?" Doc shouted.

"We'll talk to you real polite."

"Like you talked to Stanley Noviski?" Peggy yelled.

"Noviski was a separate business. Now we got to deal with you two. Where's your whisky stash, Milligan?"

"Don't have one."

"Don't give us that crap. It's in the lighthouse, ain't it?"

"Yeah, but it's twelve feet down and you'll have to dig for it with a pick and shovel."

Fast Frankie began to lose his temper. "Come out of there, Milligan. You're digging yourself a grave and we'll shove you right into it."

"Since you put it that way, go—" And here Doc described an act so complicated and disgusting that it had even Fast Frankie blushing.

Peggy said: "That's pretty good, Doc. I never heard that one before."

"A Frenchman taught me that when I was an ambulance driver in the Great War. He'd just got shot in the gluteus maximus. I'm freely translating, of course."

"You speak French?"

"Only the vulgar stuff. And how to ask how much something costs. But then I never know what the reply means."

"You two better come out," Fast Frankie yodeled. "Cause ten more seconds and we're coming in."

"Yeah," Bottle Cap echoed.

"You bunch of murderers!" Peggy yelled.

"They'll take that as a compliment," Doc said.

The two hoodlums began edging toward their boulder, their weapons gleaming in the sun.

"What are we going to do, Doc?"

"Well, if we surrender they'll kill us. And if we don't surrender, they'll kill us. So I guess it's time to use something else a Frenchman once taught me."

"What's that?"

"How to throw a hand grenade when you're prone behind a rock and still get some oomph on it."

"You got a hand grenade? And you never told me?"

"Next best thing, Peggy."

He shimmied sideways and

grabbed a fist-sized rock. Then he shot a look around the edge of the boulder and executed a roll, bringing his arm up and over and letting fly.

The rock arced high in the air, then came zooming down and bounced off the redhead's leg.

"Hey!" he yelled.

But Doc was already letting fly with another rock.

This one caught Bottle Cap high in the chest and sent him sprawling on his rear end. He was up again almost immediately and waving the Tommy gun.

"You rats! I'm gonna drill you so full of holes you won't hold water any more!"

He started jogging forward, and Doc threw another rock. This one missed him and he let loose with the Tommy gun. Chips flew from the boulder, and Peggy scrooched down in the fetal position, covering her head with her arms. But Doc just kept on throwing rocks. One thing, there was a plentiful supply of them.

One of them caught Bottle Cap in the shoulder and turned him half-way around. But it didn't stop him and he kept right on coming with the Tommy gun, stumbling now and then on the rough ground but not stopping for anything. And now Fast Frankie opened up with the .38.

"Stop it, Doc! You're just making them mad!"

But then Doc got lucky and conked the redhead on the noggin with a miniature boulder. He went down like a ballerina doing the dying swan.

"You blankety-blanks! You *hurt* my partner! Now you're really gonna pay!"

Bottle Cap rushed forward, firing from the hip. Bullets spattered everywhere and Doc had to stay buttoned down behind the boulder while Peggy tried to make a hole for herself. Then a wonderful thing happened. Bottle Cap's Tommy gun jammed. He cursed and came to a halt and tried to unjam it, and Doc rose to his full height and surveyed the situation.

Bottle Cap cast a wild eye at him and went on with his efforts.

Doc just smiled at him.

Then he let loose with his best fastball, and it conked Bottle Cap right out of business. And the way it slammed into his teeth, he'd never open a bottle with them again.

Doc bent down and nudged Peggy.

"Game's over. Home team beat the visitors two-ought."

She raised her head and essayed a cautious look.

"Doc—you whipped those guys!"

"Wasn't nothing, Peggy. Let's go see what they did to poor Noviski."

Not much, it turned out. One of the rounds from the Tommy gun had grazed his head and put him out for a while. But now he'd come to and was mad as hell.

"Let me at those guys! Fire a Tommy gun at me, will they? That's outrageous!"

"They're all tied up with their belts and neckties," Doc informed him, "and better left alone."

"What did you do? Get the drop on them?"

"He got all kinds of drops on

them," Peggy said. "Now, where are those account books?"

They left Noviski to guard the hoodlums with the now unjammed Tommy gun while they headed for Wisconsin to get the police. And from the look on Noviski's face, those two had better not try anything. Not that they were in any condition to.

Afterwards, Doc and Peggy would just disappear, and Noviski would give a false name and do the same, meeting up with them in Bayfield. That meant Frankie and Bottle Cap would probably be released, but they were a dead issue

anyway. And when the *News* came out with its story, they'd be even deader still.

Doc took pity on Peggy and nudged his boat close enough that she could step aboard dryshod. She made a hash of it anyway, and he had to quick grab her in his arms. And once he'd done that, he somehow didn't want to release her again.

"You gonna let me go anytime soon?"

"Uh-uh."

"Not that I'm wanting you to, Doc."

Then she slid her arms around his neck, and it went on from there.

The Lyre's Song

Marianne Wilski Strong

It has been twenty-eight years since that night Aspasia walked into my house, but I shall never forget that moment when I looked up from the scroll I was reading and saw her solemn face in the light of the resin torch her servant carried. Of course, I was already in love with her. But then half of Athens was, too. The other half despised her, already believing what that fool Aristophanes would later write: that she had once run a brothel. Perhaps she had. But if so, she was enterprising and intelligent enough to have done it with class and to have made a fortune doing it.

When Aspasia appeared in my doorway I leapt up from my stool, partly out of respect, partly out of shock that she had come through the dark and muddy streets of Athens at that late hour to seek me out. Even with her servant Tysander along to protect her and carry a torch to light the way, it had taken boldness and courage to come. But Aspasia never lacked either.

I knew that she must have been driven to come to me by some event that meant danger to her or to her lover Pericles, though I half hoped that the stories of her promiscuity as a high-class hetaera were true and that she'd come to bestow her sexual favors on me. Much as I bore and still do bear great love, respect, and friendship for Athens' greatest archon, Pericles, I would have embraced Aspasia's offer and Aspasia herself without hesitation. She was that beautiful and that enchanting. I hoped, at least, for some mild flirtation.

But Aspasia, being Aspasia, knew that the moment called for immediate and straightforward truth. "Kleides," she said, motioning to Tysander to wait outside and stepping farther inside the doorway and into the light of my oil lamp, "I need your help. Melissia has been murdered."

Even as my mind rebelled at such a deed committed in my Athens, my heart swelled with sorrow for the loss of so lovely a singer, whose voice had lifted many a symposium to a level fit for the gods. "Murdered?" I said. "That lovely voice stilled?" Then my sophist's mind clicked in. "On what evidence do you claim murder?"

"She has been found dead. Strangled. Her neck is mottled with the marks of the murderer's fingers."

I pulled my good chair of fiber cords and pillows from against the wall and set it in the center of the room for Aspasia. "Found where and when," I asked, "and by whom?"

"In the outer part of the Kerimakus district, an hour ago. By a young

man who had gone to the cemetery to lay a wreath at his brother's stele."

I frowned. The outer Kerimakus was Athens' cemetery and red light district. "And you, Aspasia," I asked, "how did you come to find out where and when he found her?"

"He knew Melissia. And he knew that she was to be at Pericles' symposium this evening to sing. I had arranged it."

"She never showed up?"

"No. I sent one of my servants to her uncle's house to inquire after her. I thought that perhaps she'd become ill."

"And what did the uncle say?"

"Menides said that she had left for the symposium. But she never arrived." Aspasia bowed her head. Two dark curls brushed her shoulders, an elegant Ionian hairdo for which she was both envied and criticized by Athenian women who followed the current fashion of simpler upswept hair.

I could see that she was deeply saddened by Melissia's death, though, as always, she kept a tight rein on her emotions. She shed no tears. Only the intake of her breath told me how close she had come to crying. I gave her a few moments.

"She was not accompanied by a slave, as is usual, on her way to your house?"

Aspasia looked up. "According to Menides, she insisted on going alone."

I thought about that. Only lower-class women, water-bearers, food-sellers, and cheap flute girls walked the streets of Athens alone. At one time, before Aspasia had rescued her, Melissia had been a lower-class flute girl plying her trade in the port of Piraeus to survive, her intelligence and lovely songs unappreciated. "Had she maintained the habit of going out alone?"

"She was not afraid to defy Athens' rigid rules for women. She often walked into the hills with her lyre to practice her songs in the woods, as Orpheus did." Aspasia spoke with pride, not censure. She herself never hesitated to defy the rules of Athens for women, though she did so discreetly, so as not to give more ammunition to Pericles' aristocratic political enemies. She would do nothing to harm the democracy Pericles had so carefully nourished.

"So she likely did set out alone?"

Aspasia shook her head slowly. "I can't think that she would have. She was to perform at our home. Whenever she came to our home, even in the day to visit with me, she came with a servant. Yet tonight, if Menides is to be believed, she did set out alone."

"Something out of a usual pattern then," I mused, as much to myself as to Aspasia.

The oil lamp dimmed and I got up to pour olive oil into another lamp.

Aspasia remained still, but she kept her eyes on me and I could see that she was waiting to tell me something of significance.

"Something else?" I said, when I sat down again.

"Yes. Melissa's hair. It had been ripped from her head."

I stared at Aspasia, partly because she lowered her hemation from her shoulders so gracefully, letting the blue cloak drop to her waist to reveal the white linen chiton beneath, and partly because I could not imagine why anyone would have ripped out Melissa's gloriously shiny dark brown hair. "Ripped out?" I said finally.

"According to the man who found her. Her head . . ." Aspasia paused and drew another deep breath. "Her head was bloodied."

A number of thoughts ran through my brain. A crime of passion. An angry lover. Another hetaera, jealous of her rival's success. Perhaps even an animal attack. But I knew of no animal who would rip the hair rather than the flesh. Our superstitious folk would have suggested a goddess jealous of Melissa's hair, just as Apollo and Artemis, the divine children of Leto, had destroyed the children of Niobe, who had boasted she had more children than Leto. It is only a myth, of course, but the folk believe it to be true. I am a sophist. I come to no conclusions until I examine what evidence there is to be seen.

"Where is the body now?" I asked.

"Still at Kerimakus. I sent a slave to stand guard over it. Will you go?"

"Of course," I said.

Pulling her hemation back over her shoulders, Aspasia rose. "And when you are finished, bring the body to me. I will see to it that it is properly tended. And come to me yourself. I will want to know what you have found."

I nodded. "And Menides? Who will tell him?"

"I will send for him."

Aspasia walked to the door and summoned Tysander from the upper part of the street to which he had retreated. She turned back to me. "Kleides," she said, "find who killed Melissa. I will give you what help you need."

I knew that she meant she would give me not only what drachmae I required for my inquiries, bribes being an effective way to obtain information, but also whatever information she had about Melissa and her acquaintances.

"I will come to you first thing in the morning."

"No," she said. "I will do no sleeping tonight. Come when you are finished with your examination. My servant Cleon is waiting outside with Tysander. Cleon will guide you to Melissa."

I nodded, taking no offense at Aspasia's having assumed that I would go.

She stepped out into the light of the torch Tysander held high. I followed and Cleon, stepping out from a dark doorway, nodded to me. He

had a length of white linen over his arm. I did not need to ask what it was for. I watched Aspasia disappear into the night, the pleats of her white linen chiton flowing gracefully against her slim ankles.

I turned to Cleon and started out on my grim task.

Her body lay atop one of Attica's rocky outcroppings at the edge of the Kerimakus district, about twenty feet off a narrow path that took travelers through the Sacred Gate of the city walls and up the Panathenaea Way to the district where Pericles and Aspasia lived. I sent the slave guarding the body back to the path to detain any stragglers who might appear on the scene.

I knelt down at Melissa's side while Cleon held a torch up high. I heard Cleon groan as the light of the torch fell on Melissa's head. At least, I thought it was Cleon who groaned. It may have been me, or both of us.

I had seen dead bodies before. Numerous times. I had even seen mutilated bodies: a child torn apart by wild dogs; a Helot from Sparta savagely beaten by his master; a drunken young sailor whose body was broken by his fall from the cliffs of Thera.

But I had never before felt the wrenching of my gut that I felt when I looked at Melissa. Perhaps what was so disturbing was that once ivory colored face, so perfect for love and for song, now purplish red and surrounded by clumps of blood that had oozed from the skull where the hair had been ripped from her head. Above me, the torch wavered, and I glanced up, as much to relieve my eyes from the sight of Melissa's face as to ready myself to catch the torch should Cleon drop it. In the torch light, Cleon's face was pale and his chin trembled. Mine may have as well.

I steeled myself, and turning back to Melissa, reminded myself of how young Hippocrates and his father might have behaved: controlled, observant, checking to see what had killed the girl. I could see the strangulation marks on her neck: deep purple bruises and contusions. I knew that the dark red color of her face came from the congested blood that could not flow through the vessels of her neck.

I picked up her head, ignoring Cleon's intake of breath, and turned it to the left. Between the bloody clumps of what hair remained were patches of bald scalp, some where the skin had bled, some where it had not. Whoever had murdered Melissa had continued to yank out her hair even after she had ceased to breathe. I tried not to think of the anger or passion that had driven her murderer. It was too early to concern myself with motive. I had not yet looked around enough for what physical evidence might be found.

I lowered Melissa's head and lifted one of her hands. The hand, as I expected, was bruised and scratched. Melissa had put up a fight against whoever had attacked her.

I motioned to Cleon to bring the torch a little closer. He reluctantly did

so. I had no desire to violate Melissa's dignity any more than had already been done, but I had to know for sure. I lifted the hem of her chiton. There were, as far as I could tell, no signs of rape. I hadn't expected there to be. A rapist had no reason to pull her hair from her head. It occurred to me then to look about for tufts of hair. I took the torch from Cleon, who seemed relieved to step back from the body.

I saw immediately a few tufts scattered about the ground. Coming as close to the edge of rocky outcropping as I dared in the flickering light of the torch, I walked around the body. As I had expected, there were no tufts of hair on that side of the body. The murderer had attacked from the left, the more level side of the path, and fled the scene of the murder in the same direction. I walked back to the level side of the path, picking up a few tufts of hair as I went. It was then that I noticed something strange. Here and there, bits of a white substance clung to the hair. In addition to the tufts, I found strands of hair, as if whoever had murdered Melissa had stood there and ripped the clumps of hair apart. I could not fathom why.

I was standing in thought when Cleon called. "Kleides," he said. "Look."

I turned and threw the light of the torch on him, half expecting to see some apparition of Medusa descending on us. I pulled my sophist's mind back in order.

Cleon had something white in his hand. As I approached him I saw that it was a square of material: white, pure white. I took it from Cleon, examined it, and lifted two strands of long black hair from it. "Melissia's headdress," I murmured. But something about the scarf bothered me. I couldn't quite determine what.

"Where did you find it?"

Cleon pointed to the ground behind him. "I stepped on it. Here."

The scarf had lain about twelve foot-lengths from the body. The murderer, perhaps, had torn the scarf from Melissa's head and thrown it.

I folded the scarf and tied it up in the hem of my tunic.

Then I walked in semicircles, increasing the length of the radius from the body, but found only a few more tufts and strands of hair scattered here and there. Finally, I felt that I had gathered what scant evidence there was to be gathered. I would have to find Melissa's murderer in the ebb and flow of people and emotions in which she had lived her last few months. There, I would need Aspasia's help.

"Cleon," I said, "let us wrap the body in the linen Aspasia gave you."

We walked back to where Melissa lay and knelt by her. Cleon propped the torch between two rocks, opened the white linen, and held it out to me. I left it untouched for a moment while I took a last look at Melissa's face, not as a sophist hired to discover what in her life had led to her murder, but as a man who appreciated beauty and song.

Light broke over the three of us there, and I looked up at the bright

moon which had appeared from behind a cloud. Some distance away, its yellow light shone golden on the Acropolis, where Iktinos and Kallikrates were at work on Pericles' new project: a great temple to Athena. Great Athena, I said to myself, goddess of wisdom and justice, help me find the monster who did this. Then I took a breath and, slipping my arms under her shoulders, lifted Melissa so that Cleon might begin to wrap her.

He brought the linen toward the upper part of her body.

"Stop," I said. "Put the linen down and hold her."

Cleon looked at me as if the moon goddess Selene had struck me mad. No doubt he believed, as many of our citizens still do, that Selene's appearance in the sky marked a time of increased physical passion, sometimes strange and violent, but nevertheless he obeyed me.

I reached down, picked up what I had seen, rose, and took it over to the torch. There I turned it about in my hand. It was a piece of broken pottery: a shard of varying black shades. There was nothing unusual about finding a shard near the cemetery; that is where we throw the shards we use to write down our jury verdicts and to write down the name of someone we wish to ostracize, sending him into exile for ten years if six thousand of us so vote. I wondered if there might be some significance to this shard's lying beneath Melissa's body. I examined it again and could just make out a scratch on the edge of the shard, a scratch that might have been part of two letters. Perhaps, the lower strokes of epsilon and sigma. I tied the shard into another part of my tunic and started back toward Cleon, who was still holding Melissa.

Just as I got to the body, I heard a burst of laughter. It was dulled and far enough away not to startle me. Undoubtedly some young ruffians out looking for mischief in the agora. But the sound of laughter somehow provoked my anger, and I swore again that I would find who had done this awful deed.

I was still thinking about that shard as we wrapped Melissa in the linen and summoned the slave to help transport her body to Aspasia. Only after our forlorn procession, myself leading the way with the torch, had marched slowly about fifty foot-lengths did it occur to me that I had not found something I should have: Melissa's lyre. I stopped and looked back to where she had lain. Clouds had covered the moon again and the site of the murder was lost in darkness. I knew that the lyre was not near the body and that in the dark Athenian night I would likely not be able to find it in the thick shrubbery off the path.

I took the shard from my tunic, turned it in my fingers a few times, then motioned the men to move forward past the steles, whose unpolished marble seemed to throw off sparks in the light of the torch I carried. I walked before them, my head bowed in thought.

We moved slowly but steadily through the dark streets of Athens,

Melissia's body swaying slightly between the two men. No one but the young men whom we had heard carousing in the agora passed us, and they were too drunk to know or care what we were doing. It was still dark when we arrived at Pericles' house. The dawn light had still not broken over the Hymettos mountains.

As we approached the house, a door opened and a servant stepped out with two large torches to give us a grim welcome. Aspasia had apparently put him on guard to watch for us.

As we stepped inside, Aspasia came forward. She walked straight up to the burden the men carried and put her hand momentarily on the white linen. Then, without a word, she gestured to Cleon and the other man to follow the servant into another room, nodded to me, then turned to ascend a flight of stairs to the women's quarters, obviously expecting me to follow. Neither she nor Pericles adhered to the ban on a man entering a woman's quarters without her husband's permission.

I followed her into a large room hung with tapestries woven with delicate bird and flower designs. Ionian, no doubt. Too delicate and fanciful for our somber Athenian weavers. In one corner stood a table and on it a statue of Artemis, the huntress, bow and arrow at her side, an interesting contrast to the delicate birds on the tapestries. How like Aspasia to relish such complexity.

She motioned me to a chair and I sat, allowing myself for a moment to savor the luxury of a chair with a back. Aspasia went to the table and poured out wine into a cup, mixing it expertly with the right amount of water. She poured one for herself as well.

"You'll need this after your task," she said, handing the cup to me.

She sat opposite me and waited while I refreshed myself. I admired her patience.

She gave me two minutes, then spoke. "Tell me what you found and what you think."

"She was strangled," I said, lowering my cup from my lips, "and indeed, her hair was ripped from her skull. The young man's report was correct."

She nodded. "He is not given to lying to me. Did you find anything?"

"Yes," I said. I reached down, lifted the hem of my tunic, and untied the shard. "This," I said, handing it to her. "Melissia was lying on it."

She looked at the shard and then at me. "But pottery shards are not uncommon on the streets and paths of Athens. Do you believe this shard has something to do with Melissia's death?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Maybe not. But it was there."

She handed the shard back to me. "Anything else?"

"Yes." I handed her Melissia's headdress. "Do you know if this is Melissia's?"

She examined it. "It is not her usual headdress. She always wore a headdress with blue stars. The stars were a kind of signature for her."

I nodded. "That's it," I said. "I knew something was wrong about the scarf."

Aspasia held the scarf up. "Something else is wrong. It is large, too large. I don't think it is a headdress. What made you think it was?"

"I found strands of her hair in it."

Aspasia looked at the scarf again. "Why would she wear such a scarf? Was she hiding her face? And if so, from whom?"

I shook my head. "I don't know."

Aspasia handed the scarf back to me. "Anything else?"

"Yes. I could not find her lyre."

Aspasia cocked her head sharply and narrowed her eyes. The oil sputtered in one of the lamps. She ignored it. There were plenty of candles to give light. "Melissia would have had her lyre with her," she said, tilting her head in thought. "The murderer took it . . ." She paused. ". . . or someone came along after she died and took it. O, it is still lying somewhere near where she died. I suppose that in the dark, you could not . . ."

"I will go back as soon as the dawn breaks."

She nodded. "Take Cleon with you."

"I will. But for now, I need to know as much as possible about Melissia."

Aspasia rose and poured out more wine and water for me. The candlelight bathed her bare arms in soft light. Once more, I envied Pericles. He'd been unmercifully criticized for divorcing his wife, the mother of his two sons, and taking up with Aspasia. The conservative aristocrats had blackened his name and Aspasia's. Not that it mattered to the populace. They prospered under Pericles. For my part, I understood perfectly why Pericles wanted Aspasia, a partner both beautiful and intelligent.

She settled back into her chair. "Do you know Menides, Melissia's uncle?"

I shrugged. "A proud aristocrat," I said, "protective of his inherited wealth, organizing the conservative votes in the Assembly, and, in the agora, stingy with his money and dull with his conversation."

Aspasia smiled. "An apt description. He saw everything he'd inherited, both from his parents and from his brother, Melissia's father, as existing for his personal use, including Melissia."

"You are saying what?"

"He took Melissia as his own hetaera when she was twelve. When she was sixteen, Melissia gathered the courage to leave his home. She went to Piraeus where the sailors found her most appealing."

I shuddered a bit. "Must have been an awful life for her."

Aspasia lifted a hand. "Probably no worse than with her uncle. And business is good in the port, especially for one so young and beautiful. Melissia saved her money, bought herself a silk chiton, and caught the eye of a wealthy merchant, as she knew she would. He paid enough for

her to buy a lyre and to take lessons. That's when I discovered her and brought her to our symposia. With her talent, she had no further need to go to Piraeus. She is . . ." Aspasia lowered her head, then raised it, ". . . was, a true daughter of Sappho."

I nodded. I had heard Melissia sing her poetry at symposia. "Yes," I said. "She bore comparison even to so great a poetess."

Aspasia sighed. "Athens will not appreciate its loss, Melissia being a woman. But what you must know is that Melissia went back to live in her uncle's house a month ago. She did not tell me why, though I asked once."

"She would not have gone for money," I said. "With your sponsorship, she had no need for more money. She was also well paid by her lovers, I assume."

"As a beautiful hetaera should be," Aspasia said.

"Do you know who her lovers were?"

Aspasia nodded. "You've met most of them at the symposia here at one time or another. Recently, she consorted mainly with two men. Thyestes gave her gold jewelry, though I believe she put up with his drunkenness more for the use of his father's library than for the jewelry. Alcaon does not have as much money, but Melissia appreciated his fine youthful body and his love for her. But she did chafe under his jealousy. Still, Kleides, I cannot see any of these men as murderers. But I suppose Socrates would insist that I subject my impressions to a reasoned definition of the qualities of a murderer."

"And I would agree with him."

"One more person you should know about: Phrync, a flute girl, quite lovely and a talented flutist. She is employed by a man named Aphorus, as Melissia once was. Phrync has played here now and again, but neither Pericles nor I have hired her recently. She was once a friend of Melissia's, but she became jealous of Melissia's success, both with the lyre and with Alcaon." Aspasia paused. "I cannot see her strangling Melissia, but I needn't tell you that she should not be dismissed as a murderer simply because she is a woman."

"No," I said, fully aware that Aspasia herself could hate as passionately as she could love. I told her I would make my inquiries in the agora about our possible suspects, always remembering that Melissia might have been the victim of some madman with a vendetta against hetaerae.

"Go then," Aspasia said, "and I will tend Melissia myself for her burial tomorrow."

It was very like Aspasia to do that. Most people would have left the task to a professional burial man. But Aspasia, when she offered her friendship, offered it with all her courage.

"Find her lyre, Kleides," she told me as I left. "And if you do, bring it to me in time for her funeral procession tomorrow." She bowed her head. When she lifted it, her dark eyes glinted in thought. "One thing more

you should know: I believe now that Melissia knew she was in danger of some sort."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Two weeks ago," Aspasia continued, "she told me that she would want her lyre played at her funeral. She told me that, should she die, Lais, one of her students, would know what song to sing. I thought at the time that she was simply melancholy, as we all are now and then. Now . . ." She lifted her hands and dropped them. "She feared someone. Perhaps that's why she returned to Menides' house. Kleides, find the lyre."

With Cleon's help I found it, lodged between two rocks where it had fallen. One of its strings had torn loose and the tortoiseshell base had suffered scratches, like its mistress. I took it home with me, hid it among my scrolls until I could get it to Aspasia, and set out to talk to Phryne, the easiest of my suspects to find.

As usual, the marketplace was already jammed by eight o'clock. I bought myself a piece of bread for breakfast, was tempted by a fishmonger's catch that didn't look half rotted, picked up a bit of honey from a beekeeper, and made my way to the professional entertainers' corner of the agora. A young man was performing some acrobatics, his short tunic flying as he tumbled and leapt from hands to feet, up and down. I made my way to the tent of Aphorus, a man known for the quality of his flute girls and dancers. He summoned Phryne for me.

She was pretty enough, with full lips and wide-set, though smallish, eyes. She wore a thin chiton, perfumed with olive oil and crushed violets, that clung nicely to her full breasts. Two golden looped earrings hung from her ears, drawing attention to her finely pointed chin. I told her about Melissia's death. She seemed neither unduly upset nor unduly pleased. She was well trained in keeping her emotions, whatever they were, to herself.

She shrugged her shoulders when I asked if Melissia had had any particular enemies. "Probably," she said. "Some of her lovers were upset when she went back to her uncle. Not that it should have been a surprise. Proved my point."

"Which was?" I asked.

"That Melissia was no high and mighty hetaera." Phryne's eyes followed a handsome youth with good arm and leg muscles. I could see from the corner of my eye that her boss Aphorus was keeping his eyes on her. She was probably a highly prized employee and more. "In fact," Phryne said, bringing her eyes back to me, "Melissia must have been a bit of a slut. Had to be to go back to her uncle." She shook herself, letting her gold earrings jangle. "Something unsavory about him."

"What?" I asked.

"Can't say. There just was." She was losing interest. Her eyes scanned the agora crowd, looking for someone.

"Which of her lovers were upset?"

She looked back at me sharply. "Thyestes," she said finally. "Though that doesn't mean he killed Melissia. Thyestes and Menides are friends. They are both part of the same drinking group. And they are both part of the aristocratic religious group that claims descent from Theseus. Theseus, indeed," she sneered.

"Do you know where I could find Thyestes?"

"Likely in the wineshop by the potters' quarters."

"Were other lovers also jealous?"

She said nothing.

I decided to appeal to her better side, if she had one. I told her about Melissia's hair.

"Alcaon?" I prompted.

She looked up at me searchingly. "You're one of our thinkers, aren't you. Trying to figure out how everything works, not even believing Zeus causes storms."

"I try to think about things before I decide what's what."

"Well, then," she said, "Alcaon knew Menides, too. They didn't like each other. But that doesn't mean anything," she added quickly.

"Perhaps not," I said.

She claimed not to know where I might find Alcaon. I pulled out the shard and asked if she'd ever seen Melissia with it.

She looked at it and shrugged again. "I don't know. Why would I remember a shard anyway? There's thousands of them around Athens." She had much the same reaction to the headdress.

"Will you go to the funeral procession?" I asked.

She looked at me with big questioning eyes. "Do you think I should?"

"It would be a good thing to do."

She nodded. "It wouldn't be just for Melissia, you know," she said, looking at me squarely. She touched her hair again. "Maybe it would be for me, too. For all of us."

I knew she meant for all the women of Athens, and I knew that she would go. Phryne had some character after all.

I bid her goodbye and walked just far enough away, edging toward a sandalmaker's stall, but keeping close enough to hear her tell another flute girl that she was going to find Alcaon. Phryne was a woman who wasted no time.

Unable to find Thyestes at the wineshop, I headed next to the villa of Melissia's uncle, walking outside the city walls toward Piraeus. On the way out of the agora, I saw some Scythian slave police hauling off a man in a dirty tunic yelling that he hadn't really added ground stone to his barley to take it over the official weight, that his prices were honest. Judging by their rough handling, the Scythians didn't think so.

On the road to Menides' villa I passed a potter who tried to sell me

one of the pots he carried in a large basket on his donkey's side. He had only two pots left and they looked ill done, in a splotchy black that anyone would have recognized as the mark of a careless or talentless potter.

"I've sold a good many pots lately," he remarked when he saw my distaste for his inferior goods. He looked at my slightly shabby tunic. "I just thought you looked as if you could use one of these."

I tripped him as he started to walk away and he challenged me to a fistfight, but I had other things than scurrilous potters on my mind.

Menides owned a luxurious villa, with a finely laid red key design on the mosaic floor in the andron where a slave led me to wait for his master. As I waited I noticed telltale signs of the passing of the heyday of Menides' aristocratic family: a few cracks in the plaster walls and a buckling in part of the mosaic floor. It looked to have been recently patched.

Menides, however, looked aristocratic and prosperous enough in his white tunic, arranged carefully to drape over one shoulder. His beard was nicely trimmed and his eyes intelligent. But I saw what Phryne meant. There was something of the wild boar about him; maybe his slightly flattened nose, or maybe the way he moved his head from side to side as if preparing to charge. He expressed sorrow over Melissia's death and informed me that he was satisfied with Aspasia handling the funeral procession.

I asked him why Melissia had returned to his villa.

His head shifted to the left. "For exactly the reason anyone observant might have realized. Money, or lack of it. She had expensive tastes."

"She could have gone to live with any one of her lovers."

He smiled, a very thin smile. "Melissia was not known for steadiness. She tired easily of her lovers."

Hetaerae often did, but I didn't know if this were true or not of Melissia, so I said nothing. I pulled out the shard. "I found this by her body. Have you ever seen it?"

His head shifted to the right. He took the shard from my hand and examined it, turning it over several times. Then he threw it back into my open palm. "Thousands of those things all over Athens. How can you possibly tell it had anything to do with her?"

"I can't." I put the shard back in the leather pouch I was carrying and pulled out the headdress. "Was Melissia wearing this when she left your house yesterday?"

He lifted his hands, palms up. "I didn't take particular notice of what she wore."

"I understand that she left alone."

"Yes," he said. He glanced over his shoulder at nothing in particular. "I believe that she did leave alone. She had little use for following the rules a woman should follow."

I knew this to be true, so I said nothing. I'd already seen and heard enough to set my mind off on a possible solution to the murder.

I took my leave of Menides, but stopped outside to ask a kitchen slave girl if a potter had recently sold his wares here. She looked blank until I offered two obols. The potter, she told me, had indeed come to the house, several times.

I set off toward the city again, fairly certain of my theory of the murder, but I still wanted to interview Alcaon and Thyestes. So I headed again for the wineshop.

I found Thyestes there this time, laying out a good deal of drachmae for two amphorae of Chian wine. Melissa and Chian wine. Thyestes had expensive tastes. I wondered how he afforded them. He had inherited wealth, but he was known to have squandered a fair amount of it.

He seemed shocked to hear of Melissa's death. "Great Zeus," he sputtered. "When did she die?"

I told him how I'd found her last night, omitting a few details just in case I needed to use them later.

He walked away from the wineshop toward a patch of weeds, and sat down heavily on a rock. "I can't believe it," he muttered, his eyes bright with tears.

I noticed that one eye looked bluish, as if it were in recovery from a fist having hit it.

"I told her," he mumbled, "I told her."

"Told her what?"

"Nothing." His lips quivered, but whether from drink or sorrow I could not tell.

"Told her what?" I repeated. "You'd best tell me to avoid suspicion, Thyestes."

"I, I . . ." He stopped. "Just that she shouldn't have gone back to Menides. That's all."

"You think Menides might have killed her?"

"No. No. Why would he? But . . ." He dropped his head. "I just think she shouldn't have returned. No need."

A woman selling some goats' cheese that looked a bit green around the edges approached. I shooed her away and then drew the shard from my pouch. "Recognize this?"

Thyestes barely glanced at my hand. He fumbled with the wine amphorae, his hands shaking. "No."

"Sure?" I asked. "Take a look."

"I don't recognize it." He stood up. "I have to go now."

"Know any of the potters here?" I asked, gesturing toward the potters' sheds.

"No," he said. He started to walk away, then stopped and turned to me. "I'm sorry. I'm very sorry about Melissa. I'm sorry."

"Aspasia is conducting her funeral this afternoon. Will you go?"

He hesitated. "I can't. Not feeling well." He turned and hastened out of the agora.

I was pretty sure then that my theory was right. So far, only Phryne had given me the right reaction to the shard. Not that Thyestes hadn't told the truth. In fact, he could not possibly have recognized this particular shard. He'd hardly looked at it. I had one more person to ask.

I collected Melissia's lyre and set out for the funeral procession that was to proceed from Pericles' house to Kerimakus Cemetery.

When I arrived at the house, I found the mourners gathered round the bier. I was about to join them when Tysander came over and summoned me inside.

Aspasia was waiting. She wore a black chiton edged with gold and a veil that made her large dark eyes larger and darker. Her hair was pulled back and held up with a simple black band. She was breathtaking, but she gave me no time to study her beauty.

"Do you have the lyre?" she asked.

I handed it to her. She motioned to Tysander, gave him the lyre, and instructed him to take it outside to the young girl in dark blue.

"She is Lais," Aspasia told me. "She is to play the lyre and sing Melissia's poem at the gravesite."

I nodded. I did not have to be told that Melissia's funeral would not be standard. Aspasia would have no qualms about ignoring traditions she disliked. She had hired no professional mourners to wail and tear their hair. Melissia's funeral would be conducted with dignity and beauty.

We went out to initiate the procession. It was not large. Aspasia walked behind Melissia's bier and behind her came Menides, his head moving from side to side, his face wooden. Eight or nine of Melissia's friends and fellow music students walked behind Menides. In the center of them the young Lais, strumming the lyre softly, sang a song in a sweet youthful voice. Behind the friends, Alcaon walked with his head bowed. Thyestes had not come. I took the liberty of moving about in the procession, now near Menides, now near Alcaon, watching faces. I could see nothing but despair in that of Alcaon and nothing at all in that of Menides.

"Alcaon," I said, stepping beside him.

He turned his head slightly toward me.

I opened my fist to show him the shard. "Do you recognize this?"

He looked at it, then looked up at me as if he intended to strangle me. "This is a funeral. Why are you bothering me with this?"

"It might have something to do with Melissia's death."

He looked at the shard again. "What could that have to do with her death?"

"Do you recognize it?"

He frowned down at the shard. "Is there something peculiar about it?"

"Maybe," I said.

He looked again and shook his head. "It looks like an ordinary shard."

I put the shard away, satisfied. "Do you know why Melissia returned to her uncle's villa?"

He balled one hand into a fist and rubbed it into the palm of the other hand. "She was frightened about something."

"What?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. She wouldn't tell me. But it had something to do with that wine swiller, may he drown in the sea like a dog."

"Thyestes?" I asked.

"He said something to her or did something, that filthy cistern. Whatever he did or said, she didn't seem to trust anybody anymore."

"Did you fight with him?"

He rubbed his fist harder. "Not yet."

I dropped back, thinking. Thyestes had seemed sincere when he'd said he warned Melissia about returning to her uncle's place. But he had also told her something that compelled her to return to her uncle. I was pretty sure I knew what.

I dropped back further, near Phryne, who brought up the rear. Her eyes flicked from the bier ahead to Alcaon. Sorrow, anger, and love played across her face.

I left the funeral early, seeking Thyestes again. He was nowhere to be found. I wasn't entirely surprised. I returned then to Aspasia.

She was still in her mourning clothes, waiting impatiently for me. When I entered her room she put aside a scroll. I noted that it was Sappho's poetry.

"Tell me what you know," she said, motioning me to a chair. Thoughtful as always, she had put some goat cheese, olives, and bread on a tripod by my chair, along with a cup of wine. "Tell me what you know," she repeated, "then eat and drink."

I got to the point. "One of Menides' slave girls was hungry enough for a bribe to tell me that Menides had a good deal of cheap pottery brought into the house. I had thought as much." I told Aspasia about the pottery dealer I had seen leaving Menides' farm. "He was carrying pottery like this," I said, pulling out from my pouch the shard I had found beneath Melissia's head. "When Phryne and Alcaon looked at it, neither could imagine how they could recognize one shard among thousands in Athens. Menides denied recognizing it, but his interest in examining it in detail told me he had something to do with it. And I knew Thyestes had something to do with it when he denied recognizing it without looking at it. I suspect he gladly participated in the plot. He'd do it for money. Besides, he belongs to the same aristocratic cult group as Menides, and he hangs around near the potters in the agora. Menides would have found that useful."

Aspasia took the shard, examined it, and looked up at me sharply. "You suspect that there are many such shards?"

I knew that her quick mind had understood the danger. "Yes, probably several thousand, particularly if other members of Menides' aristocratic cult are involved in preparing sham shards. They'll bribe someone to load the shards into the ostracism urns at the meeting of the Assembly."

"Enough shards," she said, "with the disgruntled three or so thousand who always vote to exile Pericles and to damage and even to destroy the democracy he has nurtured so painstakingly, to make up the needed six thousand votes."

I nodded. "Note the strokes. From epsilon and sigma."

Aspasia looked again at the shard and nodded. "I see. And Melissia knew?"

"I think she had smuggled out some shards from her uncle's house. Woven in her hair. And covered with the white scarf."

"But how did Melissia know about the shards?"

"Thyestes, I believe. An impassioned lover, drunk to boot. I suspect he was bragging about his role in the plot. If I'm right, then when he sobered up, he realized that he'd put Melissia in danger because she intended to return to her uncle's place to find the evidence of the plot against Pericles. He tried to stop her from going to her uncle's place. I suspect that when he couldn't stop her, he betrayed her and told Menides about her."

Aspasia shook her head slowly, her dark eyes lowered. "Why did she risk her life? Why didn't she just tell me?"

"She was a hetaera, and one who had worked the port, about to accuse her uncle and his aristocratic group of treason. Even Pericles couldn't have acted on just her word. Accusations without proof against an aristocrat would have ruined her for good."

"So she died trying to bring the proof to me, her hair ripped out with the hidden shards."

I nodded again. "I believe so. That's why I found bits of white clay in her hair, and why there were loose strands lying about. The murderer pulled the clumps of hair apart to get at the shards."

"Why didn't she take along a servant to protect her?" Aspasia asked, sorrow etching her voice.

I remembered how easily I had bribed the kitchen slave girl at Menides' villa. "Bring a servant of Menides? Could she have trusted any of them? How could she be sure they were not in on the plot? Besides," I said, remembering Alcaon's anger, "at that point she trusted no one."

We sat silently for a while, the torches lighting the golden edges of Aspasia's black veil and the ivory inlay on the sides of her chair.

When she looked up I could see the anger in her eyes. "We must se-

cure the proof to discredit the cult group involved and to protect Pericles," she said. "Melissia must not have died for nothing."

"The problem," I said, "is where to look. That knowledge died with Melissia."

Aspasia sat back in her chair, her head down.

"Maybe . . ." I said, stopping when she held up a hand.

"Perhaps," she said, "the knowledge did not die with Melissia." She rose, walked over to a chest, opened it, and returned with a piece of papyrus. "This," she said, handing me the papyrus, "is the song Melissia wanted sung at her funeral."

I rose, took the papyrus closer to a torch and read:

*My clear lyre sings the brilliance of Athens' great son,
And the brilliance of the shining star at his side.
For they have given crowns to the poets;
They have given voice to the people.*

*By them I have known golden love and beauty;
My heart has sung its songs.
May the lurking scorpions
Locked in the dark earth
Beneath the rust-red key
Never darken their golden light
Or silence my sun-bright songs.*

When I finished I looked at Aspasia.

"Does it tell you anything?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "Melissia's told us where to look. Should we alert Pericles?" I asked.

"No," she said, "Melissia was right. We must have the proof first." She motioned me to sit again. "I have a plan, but you must feel free not to agree to it."

I nodded, though I knew I would agree to whatever she wanted.

She told me her plan and, of course, I agreed even though I thought that it was not foolproof. It depended on Aspasia's power to fascinate, about which I had no doubt, but deliberately keeping occupied a man already tensed with conspiracy and murder was tricky business. But we ironed out the details, and once Aspasia had set the plan in motion, I set out to do my part. I had no suspicion of Aspasia's real plan.

I used my bribe money to get back into Menides' house. It took me little time to pull up the buckled part of the mosaic floor with its rust-red key design. Kneeling, I began to collect out of the hole beneath the floor pouches of the shards with Pericles' name scratched in them. Suddenly

I was jerked back and choked with the force of an arm that had locked round my neck. I saw the knife pointed at my heart.

“Cur,” Menides cursed. “How did you know where they were?”

I gasped and croaked, wondering, even in my fear, how he expected me to answer with my throat so constricted.

“How?” he shouted in my ear. “Has that cur Thyestes been talking again?”

I croaked again, and he released my throat a bit, but kept the knife angled straight at my heart. I croaked some more, giving myself time to think. Something had gone wrong with the plan. Aspasia had not been able to keep Menides delayed as long as we had agreed. The point of the knife dug through my tunic and into my flesh.

“How?” Menides growled.

“A song,” I muttered, the sound barely coming from my throat.

“Fool,” Menides growled. “No matter, swine,” he spit into my ear. “I’ll rid myself of you just as I rid myself of that damned little tart. For your information, sophist, she didn’t quite leave my house alone. I had her watched carefully and followed her when she made her move with the shards.” He laughed. “Athens will soon be rid of that damned Pericles, too. By the time he returns from exile, the mob he caters to will be put back in their place.”

He raised the knife.

I, a sophist who does not believe in the gods, said a prayer to Hermes to guide me safely to the underworld.

“Or perhaps, Menides,” Aspasia’s voice rang out, “the people you call the mob will vote in court to condemn you.”

Menides swung round to face Aspasia and the three Scythian police and the two witnesses she had brought with her. I grabbed the knife from Menides’ hand. He hardly reacted. He just dropped both arms to his sides. He was smart enough to know when he was defeated. The Scythians carted him off.

I rubbed my throat.

Aspasia came over to me. “Thyestes has already confessed to the Scythian police I sent after him. They found him on the road to Piraeus. He was fleeing Athens, afraid of Menides’ wrath. Apparently he’d already suffered from it. He’s admitted that he told Melissia about the plot.”

I nodded, still rubbing my throat and remembering Thyestes’ injured eye.

Aspasia laid a hand on my arm. My throat ceased to burn, but my heart heated up. “Forgive me, Kleides,” she said. “I curtailed my delay of Menides. I knew that neither Thyestes nor I, nor you, would necessarily be believed, even with the shards. Menides has many friends. We had to have incontrovertible proof from his own house and from his own mouth, and before witnesses. We followed him closely, but I deeply regret having to put you to any risk at all.”

I didn't care about the risk, only that she hadn't trusted me with the whole plan. But the regret in her dark eyes lay so deep that I forgave her immediately. How could I do otherwise? She had saved our beloved Athens.

As I sit here now, almost thirty years later, wondering if or when Sparta will defeat us, I fear that democracy, which Pericles brought to such greatness, democracy which Melissia died to save, may be wiped from the face of the earth and disappear with the glory of our city.

BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



Roy Johansen's protagonist Joe Bailey is dubbed the "Spirit Basher" by his fellow Atlanta cops. In **Beyond Belief** (Bantam, \$5.99), Joe is called to investigate the fatal impaling of a university parapsychology professor on a sculpture mounted on his own wall. Why does this scene call for the department's ace debunker of fake spiritualists and mediums? Because the deadly artwork hangs some eight feet off the floor. Could the local press be correct when they name as the culprit a very young boy whom the dead man was touting as a gifted psychokinetic? Bailey thinks not, but proving so will be more dangerous than one would suspect. Johansen's engaging cop adds a new twist to the police procedural genre, and while Bailey is a certified skeptic, readers interested in psychic phenomena will enjoy the ride, especially the budding relationship between the detective and a woman who sincerely believes herself to be psychic.

Carol Goodman's **The Lake of Dead Languages** (Ballantine, \$23.95) beckons readers into the quiet, cloistered, claustrophobic world of the Heart Lake School for Girls in the Adirondacks, a setting as carefully drawn as is the portrait of the book's narrator and protagonist, Jane Hudson. From the opening pages, we sense the school's potential for menace, although Jane herself clearly hopes that by returning to teach Latin here, where she was once a student, she will be able to recover her balance from her recent divorce and begin a new life with her young daughter. So much has changed, Jane reasons, in the twenty years that have passed since the tragedy that robbed her of her two best friends. The very character of the school has undergone revision. What was once an elite and prestigious academy is now a last resort for girls who have proven troublesome at other institutions. Yet something here has perhaps not changed enough; Jane begins to receive messages from her past. Goodman has written a dark, engaging novel, with several surprising twists at the end.

Every family has its back story—and its secrets. Will Klein's family

had them aired by the media eleven years earlier when Will's ex-girlfriend, a college coed and neighbor named Julie Miller, was found dead in her family's home, the victim of a brutal rape and stabbing. The prime suspect immediately became the young man who disappeared that same evening, Will's older, beloved brother Ken. Harlan Coben's **Gone for Good** (Delacorte, \$23.95) opens with a surprising deathbed revelation by Will's mother: his brother Ken, so long a popular subject for the media and true-crime wrap-up shows, is alive. Will has always loyally defended Ken, refusing to believe that he murdered Julie, secretly suspecting that Ken was also killed that night, his body taken elsewhere and never found. But a photograph discovered in his late mother's room proves otherwise. All too soon Will is going to lose the second love of his life, and find himself in the middle of a deadly game that twisted into murder that long ago summer night and has been suspended—until now. The game has resumed, and Will appears to be everyone's pawn. Coben grabs the reader by the throat from the opening scene and continues to surprise up to the very final pages.

Sarah Strohmeier's heroine in **Bubbles Unbound** (Signet, \$6.99) is a small-town Pennsylvania girl, a skillful beautician (although she prefers the term "stylist"), a single mom, and a wannabe journalist with an uncanny nose for news. She can stack a tight sweater and miniskirt with the best of them, and she bears up under the sobriquet of Bubbles Yablonsky with remarkable aplomb. Most of these assets—and I'm including the Mutt-and-Jeff team of her vertically-challenged mother and oversized friend—will serve Bubbles well when she begins her investigation into the case of the long-dead high school cheerleader and the missing drunken heiress. What this wacky debut novel lacks in credibility it makes up for in Bubbles' guffaw-producing antics.

Mo Hayder, author of the acclaimed *Birdman*, brings back her beleaguered D.I. Jack Caffery in a big, suspenseful book titled **The Treatment** (Doubleday, \$23.95). The book opens with a frantic search for a nine-year-old boy who has been abducted from his home. The parents, suffering from dehydration and abuse, report having been bound and left for the past three days. Still, Caffery is certain that the eyewitness report of a man seen running into the nearby park mere hours earlier is the lead that he must follow. Not surprisingly, this disappearance brings back all of Jack's own memories and fuels his personal obsession with the now old man who lives across the tracks from Jack's boyhood home. Jack has no doubt that this is the man who took his brother Ewan when they were boys. With one conviction for child sexual abuse, Jack's neighbor had been a suspect but was cleared by cronies. Hayder spares no punches here; the forensic detail and accounts of psychotic behavior and perversion are all too graphic. Even tougher, perhaps, is the emotional strain she puts on her characters, especially Jack and his lover, and the shocking twist she has devised to account for young

Ewan's disappearance so long ago. This book's impossible to set down, but it is definitely not for the faint of heart.

Leslie O'Kane's canine therapist, Allie Babcock, can generally point directly to the source of a neurotic dog's behavior: his neurotic owner. But in **Give the Dog a Bone** (Fawcett, \$6.99), it may be difficult to re-train owner Ken Culberson to treat his rambunctious golden retriever Maggie as a trained pet. Ken believes Maggie to be channeling the spirit of his late ex-wife. By novel's end, Allie has had to contend with her boyfriend's dog phobia, several unearthed human bones, a police grilling, a hostile vet, two nosy mobile home residents, a surprising will codicil—oh, and murder. All of this, however, Allie manages with more grace and efficiency than she exhibits with the miscreant Maggie. If you were hoping for some dog training tips, you'll either have to wait for the next Allie mystery or go back and search through an earlier case.

Steve Hamilton's fourth Alex McKnight mystery, **North of Nowhere** (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$23.95), treats readers to summertime in Paradise, Alex's home and stomping grounds on Michigan's Upper Peninsula. For residents of a place that sees so much ice and snow in a year, the brief summer is a time of enchantment, a season to truly savor. Alex, however, has been gloomily keeping to himself, which is reason enough for his buddy Jackie to demand that Alex join his weekly poker game at the showcase home of a local mover and shaker. Alex doesn't warm to the guy, nor does he appreciate the man's big plans to develop Alex's heretofore isolated section of lakefront. The worst part of the evening, however, is when three armed and masked men rush in and rob the owner's safe. Hamilton's hero is easy to be with, his friends and haunts are unusual enough to be exotic, and he's no slouch when it comes to reasoning his way through a pretty tricky patch of plots. I'd recommend this guy to anyone who enjoys P.I. novels.

I've been a fan of Earl W. Emerson's Thomas Black private eye novels for years. In **Vertical Burn** (Ballantine, \$24.95), Emerson introduces fans both old and new to Seattle firefighter John Finney. Finney is both son and brother of firemen, a man decorated for bravery and respected for his abilities. But on a June night when a call comes in about a warehouse fire on Leary Way, Finney's life will take a dramatic turn downward. His losses will prove almost too much to bear, and his obsession to discover the truth of the Leary Way fire will threaten everything he holds dear. Emerson brings twenty-four years of experience as a firefighter with the Seattle Fire Department to this novel, and it shows in every behind-the-scene detail. Loyalty, greed, conspiracy, and jealousy are the themes that fuel Emerson's fire here. The result is a hot new book with an engaging main character, an incendiary plot, a sizzling romance, and several explosive action sequences. Warm up with this one until the beaches open.

(continued from page 7)

Best First Mystery Short Story is also presented yearly at the Edgar banquet. This year it went to Ted Hertel, Jr., for his story "My Bonnie Lies," published in the Mammoth Book of Legal Thrillers.

BEST NOVEL

Silent Joe by T. Jefferson Parker (Hyperion)

The Judgement by D. W. Buffa (Warner)

Tell No One by Harlan Coben (Delacorte)

Money, Money, Money by Ed McBain (Simon & Schuster)

Reflecting the Sky by S. J. Rozan (St. Martin's Minotaur)

BEST FIRST NOVEL BY AN AMERICAN AUTHOR

Line of Vision by David Ellis (Putnam)

Open Season by C. J. Box (Putnam)

Red Hook by Gabriel Cohen (Thomas Dunne/St. Martin's Minotaur)

Gun Monkeys by Victor Gischler (Uglytown)

The Jasmine Trade by Denise Hamilton (Scribner)

BEST PAPERBACK ORIGINAL

Adios Muchachos by Daniel Chavarria (Akashic)

Hell's Kitchen by Jefferey Deaver writing as William Jeffries (Pocket)

The Mother Tongue by Teri Holbrook (Bantam)

Dead of Winter by P. J. Parrish (Pinnacle)

Straw Men by Martin J. Smith (Jove)

BEST FACT CRIME

Son of a Grifter by Kent Walker with Mark Schone (William Morrow)

Leavenworth Train: A Fugitive's Search for Justice in the Vanishing West by Joe Jackson (Carroll & Graff)

The Wrong Man: The Final Verdict on the Dr. Sam Sheppard Murder Case by James Neff (Random House)

Dark Dreams: Sexual Violence, Homicide, and the Criminal Mind by Roy Hazelwood and Stephen G. Michaud (St. Martin's)

Base Instincts: What Makes Killers Kill? by Jonathan H. Pincus, M.D. (Norton)

BEST CRITICAL/BIOGRAPHICAL WORK

Edgar Allan Poe: A to Z by Dawn B. Sova (Facts On File/Checkmark)

The History of Mystery by Max Allan Collins (Collectors)

Dashiell Hammett: A Daughter Remembers by Jo Hammett (Carol & Graff/Otto Penzler)

My Name's Friday by Michael J. Hayde (Cumberland House)

Selected Letters of Dashiell Hammett: 1921-1960 Edited by Richard Layman with Julie M. Rivett (Counterpoint)

Who Was That Lady? by Jeffrey Marks (Delphi)

BEST SHORT STORY

"Double-Crossing Delancey" by S. J. Rozan (Private Eye Writers of America, Mystery Street, Penguin Putnam/Signet)

"The Abbey Ghosts" by Jan Burke
(AHMM, Jan.)

"The Horrible, Senseless Murders
of Two Elderly Women" by
Michael Collins (Fedora)

"If the Glove Fits" by Michael Z.
Lewin (EQMM, Sept./Oct.)

"Virgo in Sapphires" by Margaret
Maron (EQMM, Dec.)

BEST YOUNG ADULT

The Boy in the Burning House
by Tim Wynne-Jones (Farar,
Straus and Giroux/Melanie
Kroupa)

Dark Secrets: Don't Tell by Eliza-
beth Chandler (Pocket/Archway)

Death on Sacred Ground by
Harriet K. Feder (Lerner)

Shades of Simon Gray by Joyce
McDonald (Delacorte)

Witch Hill by Marcus Sedgwick
(Delacorte)

BEST JUVENILE

***Dangling* by Lillian Eige**
(Simon & Schuster/Atheneum)

Ghost Soldier by Elaine Marie
Alphin (Henry Holt)

The Ghost Sitter by Peni R. Griffin
(Penguin Putnam/Dutton)

Following Fake Man by Barbara
Ware Holmes (Alfred A. Knopf)

Bug Muldoon by Paul Shipton
(Penguin Putnam/Viking)

BEST TELEVISION EPISODE

***The Sopranos: "The Pine
Barrens"* by Terence Winter,
story by Tim Van Patten and
Terence Winter**

Nero Wolfe: "Prisoner's Base, Part 2"
by Lee Goldberg and William
Rabkin

Law & Order: SVU: "Countdown"
by Lisa Marie Petersen and
Dawn DeNoon

The Practice: "Killing Time" by
Jonathan Shapiro, Lukas Reiter,
Peter Blake, and David E.
Kelley

NYPD Blue: "Johnny Got His Gold"
by Nicholas Wootton, story by
Stephen Bochco, Bill Clark, and
Nicholas Wootton

BEST TV FEATURE/MINISERIES

***The Sins* by William Ivory**
(BBC America)

Things Behind the Sun by Alison
Anders and Kurt Voss (Showtime)

The Killing Yard by Benita Garvin
(Showtime)

Final Jeopardy by Adam Greenman
(from the novel by Linda
Fairstein; Sanitsky Company)

Steve Martini's The Judge by
Christopher Lofton (from the
novel by Steve Martini;
Jaffe/Braunstein Films)

BEST MYSTERY MOTION PICTURE

***Memento* by Christopher
Nolan (Newmarket Films)**

The Man Who Wasn't There by
Ethan Coen and Joel Coen
(USA Films)

Gosford Park by Julian Fellowes
(USA Films)

Mulholland Drive by David Lynch
(Universal Focus)

Series 7: The Contenders by Daniel
Minahan (USA Films)

SPECIAL EDGAR: Blake Edwards

This Year's Grand Master was
Robert B. Parker.

THE STORY THAT WON

The February Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Andrew McAllister of Frederickton, New Brunswick, Canada. Honorable mentions go to Richard Ricketts of Largo, Florida; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; Ed Ridgley of Phenix City, Alabama; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Kate Karp of Long Beach, California; Frances Lowe of



Orlando, Florida; Martha Bland of Midland, Texas; Benjamin H. Foreman of Harbor Oaks, Florida; Daniel LeBoeuf of Lake Orion, Michigan; Doc Finch of Zion, Illinois; Regina M. Sestak of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Nicole Sheldon-Desjardins of Minneapolis, Minnesota; and W. B. Borrebach of Newtown Square, Pennsylvania.

Hulton Archives

OVER THE EDGE by Andrew McAllister

Milo Jackson took one more halting backwards step down Lincoln's nose. His crash course in mountain climbing had not prepared him for the terror of hanging from a rope near the top of Mount Rushmore.

But Milo was nothing if not persistent. For years he had pestered his grandfather with questions about the Des Moines Brinks robbery of 1947, the crime for which LeRoy Jackson had spent the better part of his adult life in prison.

"Tell me about the money, Grandpa," Milo would say, knowing full well it had never been recovered. "What happened to the money?"

On his bad days LeRoy would just stare vacantly, his toothless mouth working constantly as he ignored the world around him. When he was more coherent, however, the old man would tap his nose and mumble: "Abe Lincoln nose."

The words were mushy around the edges but Milo heard them enough times to make sense of them, especially since he knew his grandfather had spent six years as part of the crew that built the Mount Rushmore memorial.

So it was that Milo found himself dangling beneath a giant pair of granite nostrils, shining his flashlight expectantly upwards.

Of course he found nothing. LeRoy had hidden the money in a hollow neon sign that hung outside an Italian restaurant known affectionately by Des Moines residents in days gone by as The Schnozz. Which was why the old man kept telling Milo: "A blinkin' nose."

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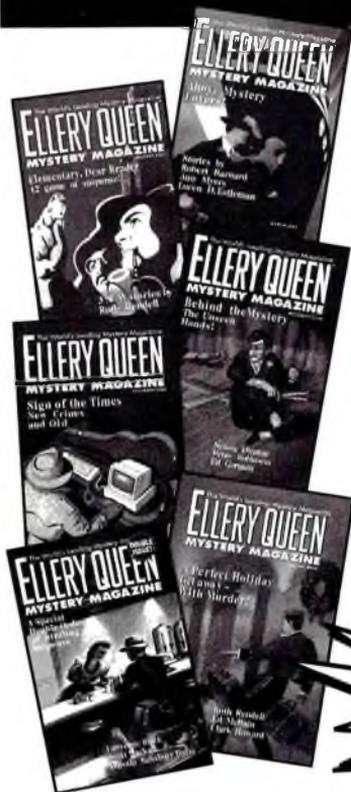
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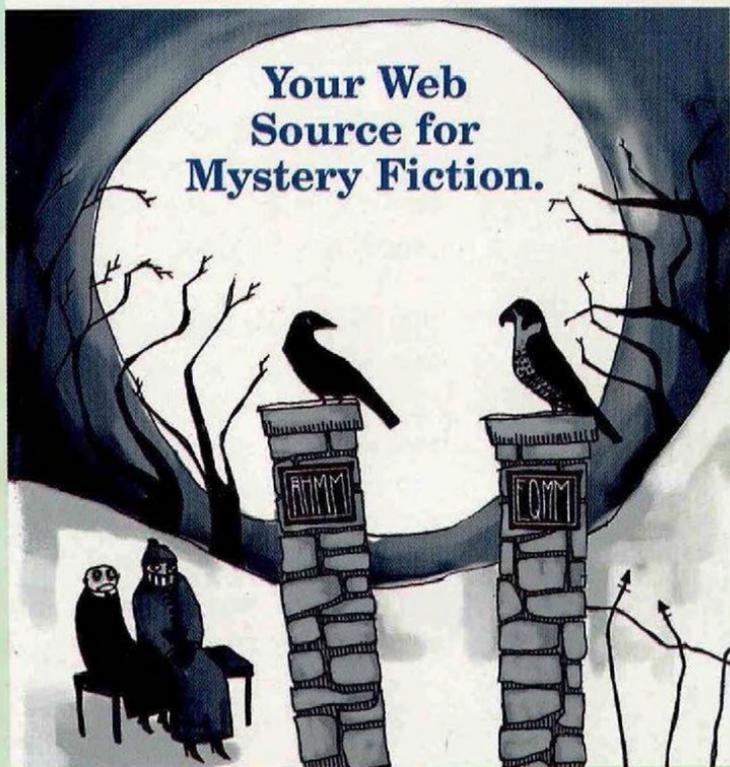


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