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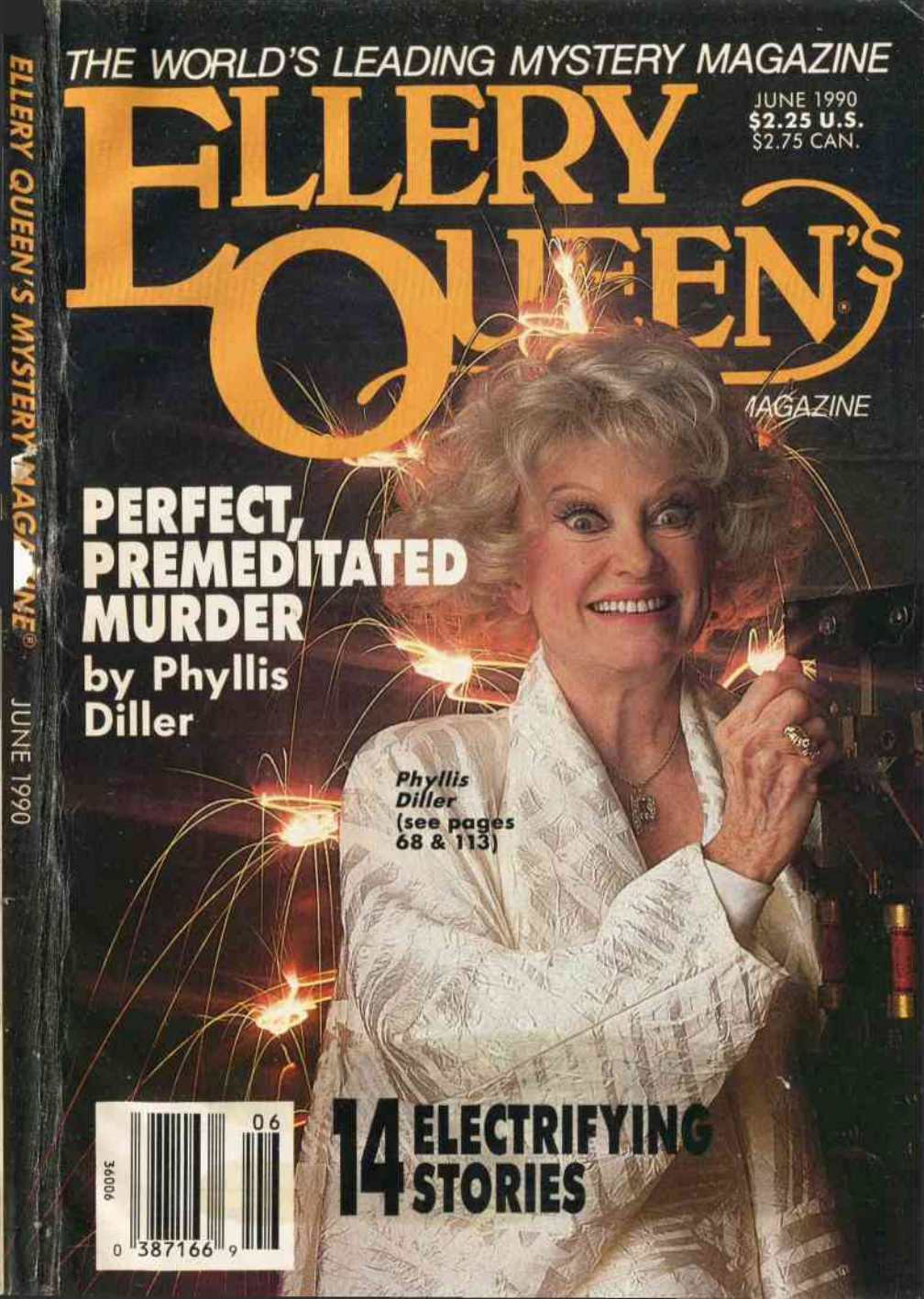

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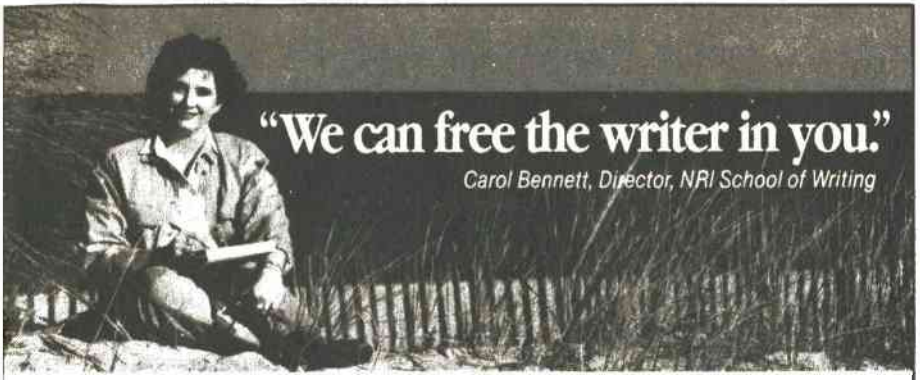

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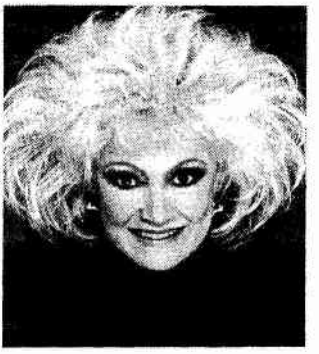

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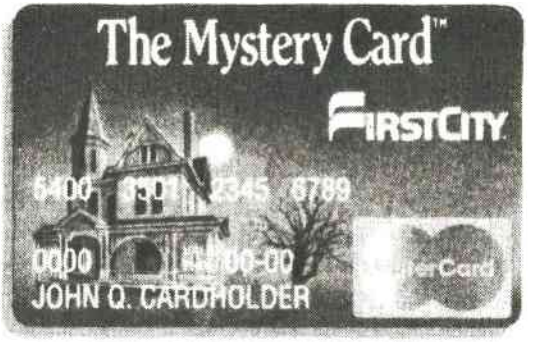

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EDWARD D. HOCH

Gloria had expected Nick to be in Atlantic City for three or four days and had taken the opportunity to visit an elderly aunt in Boston. He didn't enjoy the prospect of returning to an empty house, so he phoned Boston to tell her he'd decided on a side trip to Philadelphia. "It didn't seem too healthy staying in Atlantic City and I wasn't ready to go home quite yet," he explained.

She was disappointed. "We were counting on that money."

"Something else will turn up," he told her. "It always does . . ."

THE THEFT OF THE MANNEQUIN'S WIG

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Before he'd been in Philadelphia a single afternoon, Nick Velvet knew that someone was trying to kill him. He'd heard the ricochet of the bullet that struck the sidewalk as he crossed an expressway bridge near his hotel and had dropped immediately behind the parapet, trying to gauge the direction of the shot. The bullet hitting the sidewalk meant that the shooter was above him, in one of the buildings lining the expressway. Since no second shot followed, and the bridge parapet protected him in only one direction, he deduced the shot hadn't come from either of the taller insurance-company buildings to the south but from his own four-story hotel to the north. Since he'd heard no crack of a rifle or other firearm, he could be pretty certain a silencer had been used.

Nick crouched there for a time, attracting a questioning stare from a woman walking her dog, before he straightened up and followed her quickly off the bridge, staying close enough so that the

sniper wouldn't risk a second shot. His hotel was in the fashionable Society Hill section of Philadelphia, not far from Independence Park with its historic Liberty Bell Pavilion and Independence Hall. He'd chosen it for a few days' relaxation following a discouraging day in nearby Atlantic City, where his client was seized by the police before he could pay Nick for an assignment. That was one drawback to his line of business. The people he dealt with were often unsavory.

Gloria had expected him to be away for three or four days and had taken the opportunity to visit an elderly aunt in Boston. He didn't enjoy the prospect of returning to an empty house, so he'd phoned Boston to tell her he'd decided on a side trip to Philadelphia. "It didn't seem too healthy staying in Atlantic City and I wasn't ready to go back home quite yet."

She was disappointed. "We were counting on that money."

"Something else will turn up," he told her. "It always does."

Nick was a professional thief, and though he agreed to steal only valueless items, the law still considered him a criminal to be apprehended and imprisoned. After more than two decades of practicing his trade, he realized it had been foolish to register at the hotel under his own name. Even though he was on vacation, no one was likely to believe it. The man with the silenced gun in the upstairs room hadn't believed it, for whatever reason.

Nick went to the front desk to inquire about messages, waiting patiently while a dark-haired young woman explained that the airline had lost her luggage. "Rita O'Rourke in room 455," she told the clerk. "Please call me the minute it arrives!"

"Certainly, Miss O'Rourke."

Nick smiled at the harried clerk. "Any messages for Velvet, room 472?"

"Nothing here, sir."

He hadn't really expected any, but there was a reason for the attempt on his life. Someone knew more than he did, and he had a feeling a message of some sort would arrive before long.

The hotel lobby had the appearance of a large courtyard, with tables and chairs scattered among trees that grew beneath an overhead skylight. All four floors of the sprawling hotel overlooked the lobby, creating a pleasant, spacious atrium. Nick sat at one of the tables and ordered a beer from the waitress. As she was returning with it, there was a flurry of activity in the lobby as a large delegation of newcomers arrived.

"What's going on?" he asked the waitress.

"A South American President and his wife are staying here. Those are his bodyguards."

"What brings him to Philadelphia?"

"He probably wants to pose by the Liberty Bell like everyone else." She set down his beer and went on to the next table.

There were so many bodyguards Nick couldn't catch a glimpse of the dignitaries, but as they entered one of the large elevators the dark-haired woman he'd seen at the front desk walked by, looking for a table.

"Miss O'Rourke, has your luggage turned up yet?"

She took off her sunglasses and squinted at Nick, trying to decide if she knew him. "No," she replied. "It looks like I'll be wearing this dress for the whole weekend."

He couldn't help noticing that it was a fetching dress in glowing fall colors, in keeping with the season. She was older than he'd guessed at first glance, probably in her mid-thirties. "Would you care to join me for a drink?" he invited. "My name is Velvet."

"No, thanks. I'm supposed to meet a friend here."

Nick watched as she continued her search, circling the lobby once before disappearing among the trees. When he turned back to his beer, he was startled to find a middle-aged man seated across the table from him.

"Who—?"

"Pardon me, Mr. Velvet, I didn't mean to surprise you. My name is Vincent Gleason. I have a business matter to discuss with you."

Nick took in the double-breasted suit, the conservative necktie, and the expensive Rolex watch. He decided Vincent Gleason looked like money. Perhaps he was about to discover the reason for the attempt on his life. "I'm not here to work," Nick protested mildly. "Just taking a few days' rest."

"This is something that came up suddenly. You're quite well known, you know—and I'm prepared to pay your usual fee."

"What's the assignment?"

"I want you to steal the wig off a mannequin in the window of Stewart's, a women's shop a few blocks from here."

"No value?"

"No value. I just want it."

"How do I know which one?"

"If you have time, I'll walk you past there now and point it out."

"From across the street, if possible," Nick suggested, remembering

that someone could be watching him. "Just let me finish my beer."

Vincent Gleason didn't impress Nick as the usual type of client. He looked more like a Wall Street lawyer or a Washington lobbyist, and Nick was curious as to his motive for the theft. But then he was always curious at the beginning. He'd learned over the years to do the job without too many questions. Sometimes the answer became obvious along the way.

They left the hotel and walked up Second Street toward the downtown area. It was late afternoon and a warm breeze had come up, blowing clusters of dead leaves in gentle eddies along the sidewalk in front of them.

"Do you do much of this sort of thing?" Nick asked him. "Unless you have some sort of bizarre fetish, I trust you don't arrange to have mannequins' wigs stolen very often."

Gleason smiled. "No, this is the first time." They passed Stewart's on the other side of the street and he said, "Second one from the left."

Nick glanced over, without appearing to do so, at a slim mannequin modeling a heavy wool turtleneck sweater and a green-plaid skirt. Her wig was platinum blonde, rolled under at shoulder length in a page-boy style one rarely saw these days. "How soon?" he asked.

"As soon as you can. Before tomorrow morning."

"I can do that."

They paused at the corner while Gleason handed him an envelope of cash as his advance. Then the two men parted, with Gleason heading back toward the hotel.

It was obvious to Nick that the theft must be carried out after dark, when the store was closed. To enter it now, with clerks and customers on the premises, would be inviting trouble. He was getting too old for a chase down the street pursued by store detectives.

There were two ways to reach the wig in question. One method, simply hurling a rock through the plate-glass window and leaping in to snatch it off the mannequin's head, he quickly discarded. All of the windows had alarm wires, and a patrol car might well respond before he could be in the window and out again. That left the narrow inside door at one side of the window display through which the window dressers entered to change the costumes. There would be

no reason for an alarm on that door. All he had to figure out was a way to be inside the store after closing time.

Shortly before the six o'clock closing, Nick made a quick circuit of Stewart's main floor. Although it specialized in fashionable women's wear for younger career types, he noticed a display near the back of the store that included a male mannequin dressed in a blue blazer and grey slacks, with a fashionably attired female mannequin on each arm. He thought of substituting himself for the debonair mannequin but decided it was too risky. He lingered near the display until six, then slipped into one of the fitting rooms, standing on the bench so his feet wouldn't show beneath the door.

Ten minutes after six by his watch, most of the lights went off, but he knew some daylight still remained outside. He settled down into a reclining position on the bench, listening for the right moment to go into action. At seven o'clock he heard a woman wearing high heels cross the main floor to the back door and leave, locking the door behind her. After that, there was silence.

Nick waited another fifteen minutes and then made his move. He moved cautiously out of the fitting room into the main floor, then to the front of the store. It took him only a moment to feel behind some draperies for the door to the window display. He slipped off his shoes, hoping he'd look like a window dresser if anyone happened to glance in. Stepping up into the window, he saw only a couple of teenage boys walking by, taking no notice.

The mannequin's wig came away easily, leaving her bare-headed. If he'd expected a message or paper to be hidden inside, he was disappointed. It was nothing but a wig. He stepped back out of the window and found himself staring into the muzzle of a small pistol held firmly in the right hand of a determined-looking redheaded woman. "Suppose you walk ahead of me to my office," she said. "No tricks or I'll shoot."

"You'd shoot me for stealing this wig?" Nick asked with his best smile.

"Damn right I would! This is my store, or at least I manage it."

"I don't believe we've been introduced."

"My name's Brenda Voss. Thank heaven I decided to stay late and catch up on my paperwork."

In her office, Nick sat opposite her in the chair she indicated. "I'm Nick Velvet," he said.

"I've heard that name."

"I steal objects of no value."

She tossed the wig on the desk, sat down behind it, and reached for the telephone. "Well, this old wig certainly qualifies for that."

"Who do you think would want to steal it?" he asked quickly, trying to delay her call to the police.

"I have no idea." Her face was calm, and Nick decided she was quite pretty beneath the fluffy red hair.

"Suppose I buy it from you for a hundred dollars."

Brenda Voss took her hand away from the telephone. "What kind of thief are you, offering to buy the loot?"

"I'm a businessman. I look for ways of making a profit. And I wish you'd stop pointing that gun at me."

That brought a quick smile. She put the pistol down on her desk.

"Do we have a deal, then? One hundred dollars for the wig? I have the cash in my pocket."

She thought about it, but finally shook her head. "I guess maybe I should call the police after all, unless you want to tell me who hired you."

"I couldn't do that."

She shrugged. "No deal, then."

Nick's hand shot out and grabbed the wig from the desk. "All right. I'll be on my way!"

The store's alarm sounded as he went out the back door.

Back at the hotel, he hid the wig away in the false bottom of his suitcase. Then he dialed the number Vincent Gleason had given him along with the advance payment. When Gleason answered, he said, "I have the merchandise."

"So soon?"

"I got lucky. Do you want it tonight?"

"I can't get there before morning. There are too many security people at the hotel right now."

"Some Latin American President is staying here," Nick told him. "The morning will be fine with me."

"It'll be early. I'll ring your room about seven."

"I'll be here."

Nick hung up and glanced at the bedside clock. It was ten minutes to nine. He decided to go down to the lobby for a snack before bedtime.

The bank of elevators was by the fourth-floor balcony overlooking the lobby. While he waited, Nick glanced down at the evening crowd and saw a dark-haired Latin type with a black moustache cross the

area, scanning the faces of the guests. He was obviously a security guard, but Nick wondered if he was a hotel detective or part of the entourage of the visiting President. He was so intent on the man that he didn't realize someone had approached him from behind.

"Start walking," a husky male voice said in his ear. "This is a gun you feel in your ribs."

Nick's first thought was the police, but the man hadn't identified himself as a cop. Then he remembered the near miss of the bullet earlier in the day. Whoever this was, he had little choice but to go along. "Aren't you making a mistake?" he said.

The unseen man shoved him forward. "*You* made the mistake, Velvet, when you came to Philadelphia."

They walked around the balcony to the opposite side, past a row of bracketed flower pots that trailed ivy over the railing. "Where are we going?" Nick asked.

"In here. No tricks, now."

Someone had been watching for them through the peephole in the door with the numerals 407 on it and it swung open. The room proved to be part of a large suite at the corner of the hotel, with a table and chairs as well as sofas and a small bar area. The second man was in his shirtsleeves, wearing a shoulder holster under his left arm. Nick decided they were police or security men of some sort. Criminals weren't quite so blatant in showing their weapons.

"What is this?" he asked. "Am I under arrest?"

"Sit down," the man who'd intercepted him by the elevators said. He was tall and a good ten years younger than Nick, with the sort of blandly handsome features Nick remembered from G-man movies in his youth. Nick sat down at the table and the two men sat down opposite him.

"What's this all about?" Nick asked him again.

"I'm Rodgers and this is Myerson. Washington has quite a file on you, Velvet."

"Would you mind showing me some identification?"

The two men exchanged glances. "We work under contract with a top government security agency. That's all you need to know."

Nick smiled slightly. "CIA activity is illegal within the United States, you know."

"No one mentioned CIA," Myerson said.

Nick got up and walked to the window, gazing out at the expressway bridge he'd been crossing when he'd been shot at earlier. Though the hotel windows were of the modern, sealed design, there was one

small section that could be opened for fresh air. "That's a long shot with a pistol," he observed. "No wonder you missed."

"We didn't shoot at you," Myerson said.

"Oh, I think you did. You seem to know all about it."

The one named Rodgers came over and stood beside Nick. "No one was trying to kill you, Velvet. That was just a warning to get away from here. I'm sorry it wasn't made clear enough."

"What's going on here that's got Washington so stirred up?"

"Just routine precautions."

"It's routine to try frightening people with gunshots?"

"I'm sorry," Rodgers said. "I should have realized you needed a more direct approach. Come on, Myerson. We're going to give Mr. Velvet a personal escort to the railroad station. He can be back in New York in two hours."

"I have my car," Nick told him.

"Then we'll take you right down to it, and even check out for you. Whatever you're up to, it's the last thing we need here."

They each grabbed an arm and hustled him toward the door. Then, as Myerson yanked open the door, Nick found salvation waiting just outside. The dark-haired Rita O'Rourke was passing on her way to the elevator. "Rita!" he called out. "Good to see you again!"

The two men relaxed their grip and he broke free, hurrying to her side.

"Oh—Mr. Velvet, isn't it?"

"That's right." Nick placed his arm lightly around her shoulder in a show of intimacy and smiled back at the two men in the doorway.

"Who were those men?" Rita asked when they reached the elevator. He noticed that, as she'd predicted, she was still wearing the same dress.

"They work for a Washington pressure group."

"Lobbyists, you mean?"

"You might say they were trying to convince me of their viewpoint. Anyway, I'm glad you happened along."

They rode down to the lobby together and she smilingly excused herself and headed for the desk, no doubt to inquire again about her luggage. Nick settled into the lobby restaurant, where he ordered a sandwich and a beer. When he returned to his fourth-floor room an hour later, there was no sign of Rodgers or Myerson. He double-locked the door and propped a chair against the doorknob before undressing and getting into his pajamas.

He telephoned Gloria in Boston to let her know a job had turned up and he would be driving home tomorrow.

"That's good, Nicky," she said. "Did you get paid?"

"A retainer. I'll get the rest in the morning."

"Have a good night's sleep so you're rested for the drive."

"I'm turning in as soon as I hang up," he assured her.

He was in bed, half asleep, when he began to worry about the stolen wig in the compartment of his suitcase. He got up to check on it, but it was still there.

Nick was awakened by a knocking at his door promptly at seven o'clock. He peered out the peephole and saw Vincent Gleason standing there.

"I thought you were going to call first," Nick said, opening the door.

"I realized they might have a tap on your phone—I didn't want to take the chance."

Nick thought about it and tried to remember how much he'd told Gloria when he called her. "I've got it right here." He opened the suitcase and handed over the wig.

Gleason held it up for a careful examination. "Yes," he said finally. "That's the one." He reached into his breast pocket. "And here's the rest of your money. That makes twenty-five thousand, counting yesterday's retainer."

Nick shook hands with him. "It was a pleasure to do business with you, Mr. Gleason." He opened the door, checked the hallway cautiously, and let him out. He considered returning to bed, but he was anxious to be on the road before Rodgers and Myerson got any more ideas. He phoned room service instead, ordering a breakfast that would last him until he got home. Then he dressed and started packing.

The waiter arrived in twenty minutes with a tray. "Your breakfast, sir. And here's the morning paper."

"Thanks." Nick signed the bill and tipped him, carefully locking the door after him. He pulled up a chair and lifted the lid on his bacon and eggs. Satisfied, he drank the orange juice first and unfolded the newspaper.

LATIN PRESIDENT VISITS CITY, a two-column headline ran on the left side of the front page beside a picture of him with his wife. As Nick started to read, there was a knock at the door.

Nick went and looked out the peephole but could see nothing. It

seemed to be blocked. Carefully, he started opening the door. "Back up!" a harsh voice told him. It was Brenda Voss, holding the same small pistol pointed at his stomach. "I've come for my wig."

"Come in," Nick said, though she was already over the threshold and swinging the door shut behind her.

"Thanks."

"How did you find me?"

"It wasn't hard. You registered under your own name. And you told me who you are. You're not very bright, Mr. Velvet."

"So it seems. But you could have sent the police."

"I decided to deal with you myself. I don't like being made a fool of."

"I didn't intend to make a fool of you."

"Give me the wig and I'll consider the score settled."

"I'm sorry, it's already been delivered to my client."

"Who was that?"

"A man named Gleason." He could see by her blank expression that the name meant nothing to her. "You're really taking this too personally. I think my client simply wanted that particular wig after seeing it in the window."

"I'm sure he could have purchased a new wig for a lot less than he paid you to steal it."

"Yes," Nick admitted, "but—" he remembered the newspaper that had come with breakfast "—perhaps there wasn't time." He reached for the paper. "Take a look at this picture on the front page. It's a photo of the visiting South American President and his wife. Her hair style and color are the same as the wig I took from you."

"Of course—that's why I put it in the window this week. She's as well known for that hair style as Eva Peron was for hers a generation ago. Are you trying to tell me she had that wig stolen?"

"No." Nick's eyes skimmed the newspaper article. "They're leaving for Washington this morning."

"What does that have to do with the wig?"

"It might have a lot to do with it. Look, Brenda, put down that gun before you hurt someone."

"No, not this time."

He had no more time to waste. His hand came up, hurling the newspaper at her. Before she could pull the trigger, he was on her, wresting the weapon from her grasp. "You really don't want to shoot me over this, Brenda. Stay here—there might be trouble."

"Where are you going?" she cried, but Nick was already halfway out the door.

He ran toward the elevators, then through to the balcony overlooking the lobby atrium. Myerson was standing by the railing, watching the scene below. Nick kept out of his line of vision, noting that there were security men positioned on each floor. Down below, a circle of men moved through the lobby toward the door. He saw a bobbing blonde head hurrying to catch up with them. He lifted Brenda Voss's gun but was afraid to use it—he didn't want to kill the President's wife if his theory was wrong.

"Up there!" a man shouted from the floor below. He'd been spotted with the gun in his hand.

The blonde woman stopped almost directly beneath him. The circle of bodyguards parted for her and the departing President turned in her direction. Nick lifted one of the flower pots from its railing bracket and threw it, then dropped quickly to the carpet as the man on the third floor fired at him.

There was a second shot from the lobby and then screaming, and Myerson was on top of him, pinning him down.

"It was Rita O'Rourke," Nick told Gloria the following day when he was finally released and allowed to return home. "She and my client Gleason were an assassination team attempting to kill the visiting President. Washington thinks they were hired by the drug cartel."

"You could have been killed," Gloria said.

"I nearly was."

"When did you know the O'Rourke woman was involved?"

"I had a pretty good idea when I saw the picture of the President's wife in the newspaper. It was more than a coincidence that her blonde hairstyle looked like the wig I'd been hired to steal. Someone wanted to impersonate her, and for the kind of money they were willing to pay me I knew there was an important reason. The woman didn't have to look a great deal like the wife—she only had to be the right size. With the wig on, she could confuse the bodyguards just long enough to get close to the President."

"But she couldn't expect to escape alive!"

"Apparently the plan was that Gleason would set off a smoke bomb in the lobby at the instant she approached the President. She'd

have a fair chance of escaping in the confusion, and if she didn't she was prepared to die."

"But it might have been any woman. How did you know she was the one?"

"With a carefully laid plan like this one, the hit team would hardly have arrived in Philadelphia without the material they needed. Certainly the woman would have brought the wig with her, since it was the most important part of the plan. Then why, at the last minute, did Gleason have to hire me to steal an identical wig from a mannequin in a store window? It could only have been because something had happened to the original wig. It had been in Rita O'Rourke's luggage when the airline lost it. When they spotted an identical wig on that mannequin, they couldn't risk trying to steal it themselves. If either one was caught, the assassination plot was doomed. Then Gleason happened to recognize me at the hotel and hired me to do the job."

"Why did the police let you go, Nicky?" Gloria asked. "And the men from Washington?"

"The flower pot I threw managed to hit Rita's arm and deflect her shot. The guards grabbed her, and Gleason was caught a few minutes later trying to flee the hotel. So I was something of a hero. Add to this the fact that Rodgers and Myerson took a shot at me earlier to scare me away—something they'd rather forget about. The police considered locking me up for stealing the wig, but Brenda Voss refused to press charges."

"Why wouldn't she press charges, when she came after you with a gun?"

Nick shrugged. "Maybe with all that happened she decided I'd done her a favor taking the gun away from her."

"I'm glad you're home," Gloria said.

"So am I."

"Nicky?"

"Yes?"

"Next time you check into a hotel alone or introduce yourself to a stranger, promise me you'll give another name."

"Q"

One of our rare ghost stories—and we are in love with it—by Thomas Wilson, whose work has appeared in Anteus *and the anthology,* American Fiction . . .

COMPANY

by THOMAS WILSON

There were no cold spots. No sudden damp unwelcome drafts. Not a single sofa spinning gyroscopically or hooded sheet on the move. Every hound on the estate did bay from time to time—but at the moon. And if a fleshless hand or voice pressed itself forward from thin air, no one noticed. And yet—and yet everyone at Seven Gates that summer had the unaccountable feeling of being not quite alone, of company about in some very new way. There was this sense of being joined quietly in the night, as of another entering your swimming space after it's too dark to see—no voice, no sounds, just a gentle rising and then the feeling of someone down there in the water with you.

The feeling grew.

Was Seven Gates haunted or not? In their hearts, the older domestics felt it was so. Clearly their late master was unwilling to forfeit the bonds of matrimony (having been an unusually resourceful and devoted spouse) and so had found a way to keep his hand in. But the widow Sturtevant would have scoffed at this. In the daylight, Hannah Sturtevant knew that the "disturbances" were the work of some rogue in her employ and it was simply a matter of time before he was run to ground. At night her convictions did roam a little, but only in her dreams did Mr. Sturtevant come home. And to the younger staff, a "phantom" was all part of working for a wealthy heiress not quite right in the head (but who paid so very well).

In the fall came the traces, the signs without a trail to follow: the appliance, the armchair, and all the other things still warm to the touch that no one had approached. An overcoat would feel odd—and

the scarf, instead of in its customary pocket, would be found drawn up a sleeve. Fires, all carefully tended, burned in the library at odd hours and shutters were latched against a storm before anyone could get to them. Rooms frequented mainly for cleaning looked lived in. Oh, they were straightened, but Mrs. Sturtevant found touches here and there—a depression in a cushion, an angle to the drapes—that were not her own. And there was the feel of a man to her part of the house now: at hand yet distant somehow, muted and cooler than she remembered, but *there* (where nary a trace had been since the funeral).

Between Thanksgiving and Christmas, the more ambitious help tried to spy the phantom by whirling about at random. The young ones were certain by now it was Mrs. Sturtevant herself. There was much peering over the shoulder, much sly work with mirrors and window panes and binoculars inside the house. The older ones took to prayer.

With the New Year came surprise visits and head counts, then accusations flying back and forth between mistress and staff. But every denial proved true. Cause and effect at Seven Gates seemed to be pulling apart.

In February, Mrs. Sturtevant had the house dusted for fingerprints.

One set was found *everywhere*, in astonishing places. But no match could be made with anyone then living at Seven Gates. Unfortunately, the late Mr. Sturtevant had never been fingerprinted. This was all the Old World staff needed to confirm their ghost. But the newer recruits noted that Mrs. Sturtevant had declined to have her own checked. (Of *course*, they thought, how else could she protect her secret self!) Hannah Sturtevant concluded that the prints were indeed her husband's—made while he *lived*—the rogue had simply worn gloves. This divided house, and its presence, continued as before.

Almost.

In March, Bennett, the prep cook, thinking most anything would be covered by the commotion of such a house, decided to take advantage. Setting his alarm for the middle of the night, he began to steal.

First he took a tall cut-glass decanter from the bar, worth over a thousand. Sliding it inside a kneesock, Bennett then lowered it down into one of the old fishing boots in the mudroom. The next day

he went about his duties, waiting and watching. He was right in thinking himself safe. When the theft was discovered, everyone decided that their particular phantom had "turned." The younger staff agreed that Mrs. Sturtevant's problem had taken an awkward direction. One Old World couple gave their notice. The rest felt the decanter was, after all, Mr. Sturtevant's—he could still do what he liked with it. A few old-timers even took comfort: perhaps, in some sense, you *could* take it with you.

Three days later, Bennett passed the decanter to his cousin Tedro, a cab driver in town, to take to Boston and pawn. But Tedro located a fence instead and the three went into business. During the next week a coin collection and three rare books disappeared from the library. A taxi picked them up.

Mrs. Sturtevant had a long talk with her security chief. Soon after, armed men in uniform controlled the beach and landed perimeter of the estate; there were new dogs and great spotlights, each with a slow, prison-wall sweep. After dark, Seven Gates now had the look of those great houses seized as command posts in occupied France.

Keeping within the house, Bennett was bold. Orphaned at an early age, he had become, despite his rough-and-tumble background and swarthy looks, a wistful, dreaming man fond of ladies' scrapbooks. On kitchen break, he would amble back from the servants' quarters with his pockets full of torn photos and scented paper (later partaking, in his limited way, of courtship and of family life). Bedrooms had never been invaded before. A harsh new current of the unseen was felt to swing through Seven Gates, and no confidence was placed in the locks going up on every private door. (Wouldn't Mrs. Sturtevant have the master key?)

In private, Bennett took to nodding and rubbing his hands together. No one had given him a thought since the fingerprinting. His mind stayed jubilant and clear, for it never once occurred to him that, all this time, he had been anything but alone.

Then late one very stormy Thursday night, Bennett sauntered down the long corridor toward the library. He felt good, grown used to his disrupted sleep schedule. He felt dangerous, too. For Bennett had taken a prep knife from the kitchen and eased it down through his belt. His boning knife, with a long thin blade. For company.

Rumor had it that silent alarms for the house were coming in very soon, plus a man on duty through the night in every wing. I've got to make a killing over the weekend, Bennett thought. He knew just

what he wanted. He moved freely, for the storm covered every sound. French doors to a terrace ran along at his side, and spikes and spines of lightning lit the long hall this way and that until the passage ahead seemed to be breaking up and dancing off to some other dimension. Hard rain and the press of wind on the tall glass panes followed him along, too. Outside, there was continual thunder from above, as if some leaden horror on its way down was meeting with terrible opposition. What a night, he thought, and the downstairs is all *mine*. Bennett lifted his chin and howled like a knowing wolf.

He wanted the silver candelabra on the library mantel, the one standing in front of the portrait of Hannah's grandfather, Tobias. There were always three candles in it. If the mistress of the house couldn't sleep, this was what she always carried with her room to room. Just my ticket, Bennett thought. If they see it from the outside in this weather, they'll take me for her ladyship. He was learning fast about the price of things and Bennett knew the workmanship on this piece was good—he gave Mrs. Sturtevant credit for value in all her loose objects.

When he came to the doorway, the library was dark. Then lightning showed the room like an instant in a cinematic murder scene, then again, and the rain in the wind coming at the windows on the far side gave Bennett the impression that heavy surf was somehow running up from the shore and breaking against the house. I can forget about security tonight, he said to himself.

Now he crossed the dark room slowly, trying to make things out or remember where they were from the lightning. At the mantel, he lit the three candles with a kitchen match. The flaring light so close to his eyes was startling and Bennett wondered if one candle might not do. There was the strong, biting smell of sulphur and the sound of battering rain at the wall of windows. No—he would stick to his plan.

A plate of glass protected the portrait of Tobias Sturtevant and as Bennett reached for the candelabra he saw movement there. In the reflection, the figure of a tall man came to the doorway behind him. Then a voice said quietly, "You've come to the library once too often, Joseph Bennett."

Out went the candles. The storm seemed to draw far away. Bennett heard footsteps cross the stone of the hallway to the carpet and then a soft padding sound making straight for him. He stiffened. He hated to be caught—but since he was, he would make some fool pay. He prayed it was one of the meddling butlers. Nothing in close quarters

frightened him—in the military and in the streets, Bennett had fought and never met his match. The boning knife was out in his hand.

Instantly a blow came across his wrist and the knife flew to the side, to where light from the hallway was on the floor. Whoever he is, Bennett thought, he can see better than I can. He took hold of the man in the dark and discovered he was tall—tall like the Sturtevants, or the height of the head butler, Samuel. If you're Samuel, he thought, I'll break you like a wishbone. But instead he found himself being bent back over slowly as if he had accepted a great weight lowering down to crush him.

Already there was something very unfamiliar about this fight.

He tried a wrestler's trick by cutting off resistance and turning. They both went down heavily. Together they rolled underneath something, banging it sharply, and, coming out again, Bennett was on top. His thumbs found a throat, a windpipe, and pressed in. Below him the man was oddly silent and calm. No hand rose up to stop the choking. It was strange and unnerving; it gave Bennett the impression that he had hold of the body but the man wasn't quite in there. (A year later, he could remember his knees clearly on the chest and his fingers clearly in the throat and his opponent clearly still free.) I'll make you afraid, Bennett thought. His eyes were nearly used to the dark—in a moment or two he could make out a face.

Then he felt the man's head turn in his hands and the body underneath shift a little to the side in an unhurried way. They had struggled and fallen over toward the knife. Bennett could see a hand at the edge of the light reaching out to it and picking it up by the blade. Then the knife was up in the air, turning over once so the handle came down in the hand. Cool as ice. Now it was headed toward him and there was nothing he could do—the knifehand seemed unconnected to the body under him. Bennett put up a forearm to block a stabbing blow, but instead the blade arced obliquely and went to his choking arm, cutting right across the muscle. Bennett tried to keep his grip but his fingers wouldn't stay closed. His free hand went to the wound, cupping over the blood as if it were a hot fountain running to waste.

Then, gently, he was hoisted and rolled over on his side. The blood pressed up warmly through his fingers. Bennett felt faint and powerless and cut off from all that had served him so well up to this moment. He couldn't even remember what it was that had served him. The desire to move was gone. For the first time in his life, he

lost his bearings—he felt them drift off out of reach as if he were suddenly, impossibly, drunk on something poisoned.

All this (and the terrible shadow leaning over him) was new. Altogether new. It felt as though everything familiar to him when he had entered the library was no longer in place outside: the people of Seven Gates were all absent somehow, the double doors a few feet behind him no longer led to the rest of the house, somewhere the faces on his stolen photos were fading, and the life that had been his to resume in the morning was gone for good. Bennett never thought of himself as a thief—no, he was more the adventurer, the lone discoverer, but this thing did not belong to the territory he was exploring. He raised his voice to be heard beyond the room and cried out for help.

Some time later he woke and found himself still on the library floor. He was weak from shock and there was a vague, troubling memory of a fight. Bennett picked up his head. Astonishingly, he was alone. Looking like a black shawl on the carpet, his blood was soaking in around him. He sat up. His arm was bandaged and in a sling. Where was security? Where were the police?

Except for the rain, it was nearly quiet and still. The storm seemed almost domesticated now, with thunder no louder than someone shifting furniture in a distant room. He might still get clear of this. In such a house, what *couldn't* happen? You might be found out, caught, held captive, and still go free. Bennett now dismissed the fight. He was sure the memory of the blank-faced man would be gone just as soon as his mind cleared.

Daylight was still hours away. It seemed as if no time had been lost. And there was some sort of strange condition upon the house—like a spell, Bennett decided, like a miraculous fog that would surely lift or burn off in the daylight. He might escape, now, inside it, before everything came round to normal again. He thought a little further—it might just favor a man in touch with it—sure, a man like me. This was not over yet.

As he hurried down the long hallway, with the great, silent house around him, Bennett had a growing sense of something familiar. Not long ago, he had come across an old tale of time travel that had made a great impression on him. He had read it twice over, slowly. Everything on the planet had stopped—clocks, trains, birds in flight—while the hero moved freely about. There was nothing in all the world to stop the time traveler—as long as time stayed still.

Moving through the empty dining room and kitchen, and then up the empty back stairs, Bennett gave no thought to his arm. Time and pain seemed no closer than the rain on the roof.

But as he opened the door to his room, he noticed that all his lights were off but one: a bedside lamp which had been moved over to the top of his bureau. Glowing next to it, as if from its own light, was the sapphire paperweight he had passed to Tedro not four days before. Bennett could remember handing it over the front seat of the cab and hearing his cousin let out a whistle. He crossed the room. Under the bright jewel was a sheet of paper with writing on it.

> "I, Joseph Bennett, in league with my cousin Tedro Smalls, am guilty of stealing the books, silver, glassware, coins, paperweight, and all the personal items taken over the last three weeks. Only the two of us and Leon Burns of Lenox, Mass. were involved.
>
> Signed————"

There was a pen beside the paper. Bennett picked it up. But after he had unscrewed the cap (awkwardly, with one hand), he paused. *Hell*, he thought, why should I—who's to make me? He set down the pen. Instantly the door slammed behind him and the key turned in the lock. He whirled around. The door was shut and no key was visible. Locked in from the outside! Bennett's arm began to throb. He picked up the pen and signed. Then he heard a quiet voice beyond the room say, "Now slide it under the door."

In the morning they found his bedroom still locked, but Joseph Bennett was not inside. His fixed, thermal-pane window on the second floor was smashed outward and the prep cook and all his clothes were gone. The sapphire paperweight lay on his bureau. Tedro Smalls did not report to work that day.

Mrs. Sturtevant found an envelope in the early mail without stamp, postmark, or return address. And every missing snapshot and love letter was discovered in the morning back in its proper place.

That night, at table in the servants' quarters, Samuel, as head of staff, attempted to toast their silent benefactor. But he faltered, not knowing quite how to put it all into words.

"Q"

a distinguished reprint by

ALAN BENNETT

In 1987, a series of six monologues, all written by British playwright Alan Bennett (who many of you will also recognize as one of the four great stars of Beyond the Fringe, *the others being Jonathan Miller, Dudley Moore, and Peter Cook), appeared on BBC Television under the title* Talking Heads. *The series was later carried, at least partially, on some PBS stations here and published by BBC Books. We recommend the collection to you not only for the brilliance of the monologues but also for Mr. Bennett's wonderful Introduction, in which he says:*

"To watch a monologue on the screen is closer to reading a short story than watching a play. Admittedly it is a stripped-down version of a short story, the style of its telling necessarily austere. 'Said' or 'says' is generally all that is required to introduce reported speech, because whereas the novelist or short-story writer has a battery of expressions to choose from ('exclaimed,' 'retorted,' 'groaned,' 'lisped'), in live narration such terms seem literary and self-conscious. Adverbs too ('she remarked tersely') seem to over-egg the pudding or else acquire undue weight in the mouth of a supposedly artless narrator."

In the meantime, you have the opportunity to read the following monologue from Talking Heads. *Actress Patricia Routledge played Irene Ruddock in the first, BBC production. There will undoubtedly be many more actresses relishing the delicious role down through the years . . .*

"Q"

A LADY OF LETTERS

by ALAN BENNETT

Miss Ruddock is an ordinary middle-aged woman. The room in which we see her is simply furnished and there is a bay window. It is afternoon.

I can't say the service was up to scratch. It smacked of the conveyor-belt. In fact, I wrote to the crematorium. I said I thought the hallmark of a ceremony of that nature was reverence, whereas the word that kept coming into my mind was brisk. Moreover, I added, grief-stricken people do not expect to emerge from the Chapel of Rest to find grown men skulking in the rhododendrons with tab-ends in their mouths. If the hearse drivers must smoke, then facilities should be provided. I'd heard good reports of this crematorium, but I hoped that they would agree with me that on this occasion it had let itself down.

Of course, if I'd happened to be heartbroken I'd have felt much worse. I didn't let on to the crematorium because I thought it might get them off the hook, but I actually didn't know her all that well. I used to see her getting on the 37 and we'd pass the time of day. She lost her mother round about the time I lost mine, she had a niece in Australia and I have the one cousin in Canada, then she went in for gas-fired central heating just a few weeks before I did, so one way and another we covered a lot of the same ground. I'd spent years thinking she was called Hammersley, which was way off the mark because her name turns out to be Pringle.

There was a picture of her in the *Evening Post* (she'd been a big voluntary worker) with details of the funeral on the Wednesday afternoon, which is the one time I'm dangling my feet a bit, so I thought I'd get out my little maroon coat and put in an appearance. At least it's an outing. And I was glad I'd gone, but, as I say, the ceremony was a bit lackluster and topped off by these young fellers smoking, so I thought the least I could do was write.

Anyway, I had a charming letter back from the director of oper-

ations, a Mr. Widdop. He said he was most grateful I'd drawn this matter to his attention and, while he was aware the practice sometimes went on, if he personally caught anybody smoking he would jump on the culprits with both feet. He knew I would appreciate that discipline within the chapel precincts presented special problems, as it wasn't always convenient to tear a strip off somebody when there were griefstricken people knocking about. What he personally preferred to do was to keep a low profile, then come down on the offenders like a ton of bricks once the coast was clear. With regard to my remarks about facilities, they had no plans to provide a smoking area in the Chapel of Rest in the foreseeable future as I must understand that space was at a premium and top of their list of priorities at the present moment was the provision of a temporary temple for the use of racial minorities. However, he would bear my remarks in mind, and if I were to come across any similar infringements in the future I was not to hesitate to get in touch.

I wrote him a little letter back thanking him for his prompt and courteous reply and saying that though I hoped not to be making any further visits to the crematorium in the near future (joke), I took his point. I also dropped a line to the relatives, care of the undertakers, saying that I was an acquaintance of Miss Pringle, had been present at the ceremony, and had taken the liberty of entering into correspondence with the crematorium over the unfortunate lapse. I enclosed a copy of Mr. Widdop's reply, but they didn't write back, which I can understand because the one thing death always entails is a mass of correspondence. When Mother died, I had fifty-three letters. Besides, they may not have even seen them smoking, they were probably blinded with grief.

I see we've got a new couple moved in opposite. Don't look very promising. The kiddy looks filthy.

Go to black.

Come up on Miss Ruddock in the same setting. Morning.

A card from the opticians this morning saying that their records indicate that it's two years since they supplied me with spectacles and that by now they would almost certainly be in need of verification and suggesting I call at my earliest convenience. I thought that was nice, so I took my trusty Platignum and dashed off an answer forthwith.

I said I thought it was very considerate of them to have kept me in mind, and while I was quite satisfied with my spectacles at the

present moment I was grateful to them for drawing the matter to my attention and in the event of my noticing any deterioration I would in due course get in touch with them. *(She picks up her pen.)* It's stood me in good stead has this pen. Mother bought it me the last she was able to get over to Harrogate. It's been a real friend.

She glances in the direction of the window.

Angie her name is. I heard him shout of her as I went by en route for the Post Office. He was laid out underneath his car wanting a spanner and she came out, transistor in one hand, kiddy in the other. Thin little thing, bruise on its arm.

I thought, Well, you've got a car, you've got a transistor, it's about time you invested in some curtains. She can't be more than twenty and by the look of her she's expecting another.

I passed the place where there was the broken step I wrote to the council was a danger to the public. Little ramp there now, access for the disabled. Whenever I pass I think, Well, that's thanks to you, Irene. My monument, that ramp. Only some dog had gone and done its business right in the middle of it. I'm sure there's more of that than there used to be. I had a little Awayday to London last year and it was dog dirt everywhere. I spotted some on the pavement right outside Buckingham Palace. I wrote to the Queen about it. Had a charming letter back from a lady in waiting saying that Her Majesty appreciated my interest and that my letter had been passed on to the appropriate authority. The upshot eventually is I get a long letter from the chief cleansing officer to Westminster City Council apologizing profusely and enclosing a rundown to their Highways and Maintenance Budget.

That's been my experience, generally—people are only too grateful to have these things pointed out. The keynote is participation. Of course, I wrote back to thank him and then blow me if I didn't get another letter thanking me for mine. So I wrote back saying I hadn't been expecting another letter and there was no need to have written again and was this an appropriate use of public resources? They didn't even bother to reply. Typical.

Pause.

I'm just waiting for the paper coming. Not that there's much in it. The correspondence I initiated on the length of the Archbishop of Canterbury's hair seems to have gone off the boil. Till I wrote up to Live Letters nobody'd actually spotted it. Various people took up the cudgels until there was an impassioned letter from the Rural

Dean of Halifax, who has a beard, and that seems to have put the tin hat on it.

Getting dark.

The couple opposite just having their tea. No cloth on. They must have put the kiddy to bed. When I put the milk bottle out, I heard it crying.

Go to black.

Come up on Miss Ruddock sitting in an easy chair reading the newspaper. Afternoon.

Prison, they have it easy. Television, table tennis, art. It's just a holiday camp, do you wonder there's crime? And people say, "Well, what can you do?" Well, you can get on to your MP for a start. I do, regularly. Got a reply to one letter this morning. I'd written drawing his attention to a hitherto unnoticed factor in the rise in crime, namely the number of policemen these days who wear glasses. What chance would they have against a determined assailant? He noted my comments and promised to make them known in the proper quarter. He's Labour, but it's always very good notepaper and beautifully typed.

When I'd dusted round and done my jobs, I had a walk on to the end and bought a little packet of pork sausage and some Basildon Bond. Big black hair in the sausage. So I wrote off to the makers, enclosing the hair. Stuck it under a bit of cellotape. Little arrow: "This is the hair." I emphasized that I didn't want a substitute packet as it was plainly manufactured under unhygienic conditions, so would they send me a refund of the purchase price plus the cost of postage? I don't want inundating with sausage.

I keep wondering about the kiddy opposite. Haven't seen it for a week or two. And they're out all the time. Every single night they go off, and the kiddy doesn't go. And nobody comes in to sit. It can't be more than five.

Where do they get the money to go out, that's what I'd like to know? Because he's not working. Spends all day tinkering with that car. There wants to be a bit less of the car and a bit more of the kiddy. It never plays out and they want fresh air, do kiddies, it's a well known fact. You don't hear it crying now, nothing. And I've never seen a cloth on. Teapot stuck there. Milk bottle. It'll surprise me if they're married. He has a tattoo, anyway.

Go to black.

Come up on Miss Ruddock sitting on a dining chair in the window. Dusk.

My mother knew everybody in this street. She could reel off the occupants of every single house. Everybody could, once upon a time. Now they come and they go. That's why these tragedies happen. Nobody watching. If they knew they were being watched, they might behave. I'd talk to next door's about it only there hasn't been any contact since the business over the dustbins. And this other side's Asians, so they won't know what's normal and what isn't. Though I've a feeling he's been educated and their kiddies are always beautifully turned out. I just wish they'd do something about their privet.

I thought I'd go and have a word with the doctor, drop a hint there somehow. There used to be just one doctor. Now they've all amalgamated, so it's a bit of a lucky dip. Young fellow. I said I was getting upset, like I did before. "Before what?" he said. I said, "It's in my notes." So he read them and then said, "You've been getting a bit upset, like you did before. I'll give you something to take." So I told him about the kiddy, and he said, "Well, these tablets will help you to take a more balanced view." I gave them three or four days and they didn't seem to me to make much difference, so I went along again.

Different doctor this time. Same rigmarole. I said I didn't want any more tablets, I just wanted the name of the firm manufacturing the ones I'd already had, because I think they ought to be told if their product isn't doing the trick. The doctor said it would be easier if he gave me some new tablets and anyway I couldn't write, the firm was Swiss. I said, "What difference does that make, everybody speaks English now." He said, "We don't want to get into that, do we?" and writes me another prescription. I shan't bother with it. In fact, I put it down the toilet. I don't know who you write to about doctors.

After I'd had my tea, I sat in the front room in the dark watching the house. He's messing about with the car, one of those little vests on they have now without sleeves. Radio going hammer and tongs. No kiddy still. I don't even know their name.

Go to black.

Come up on Miss Ruddock in her hat and coat against a bare background.

Thinking about it afterwards, I realized it must have been the doctor that alerted the vicar. Came round, anyway. Not the old vicar.

I'd have known him. This was a young fellow in a collar and tie, could have been anybody. I didn't take the chain off. I said, "How do I know you're the vicar, have you any identification?" He shoves a little cross round the door. I said, "What's this?" He said, "A cross." I said, "A cross doesn't mean anything. Youths wear crosses nowadays. Hooligans. They wear crosses in their ears." He said, "Not like this. This is a real cross. A working cross. It's the tool of my trade." I was still a bit dubious, then I saw he had cycle clips on, so I let him in.

He chats for a bit, this and that, no mention of God for long enough. They keep Him up their sleeve for as long as they can, vicars, they know it puts people off. Went through a long rigmarole about love. How love comes in different forms—loving friends, loving the countryside, loving music. People would be surprised to learn, he said (and I thought, Here we go), people would be surprised to learn that they loved God all the time and just didn't know it. I cut him short. I said, "If you've come round here to talk about God, you're barking up the wrong tree. I'm an atheist." He was a bit stumped, I could see. They don't expect you to be an atheist when you're a Miss. Vicars, they think if you're a single person they're on a good wicket. He said, "Well, Miss Ruddock, I shall call again. I shall look on you as a challenge."

He hadn't been gone long when there's another knock, only this time it's a policeman, with a woman policeman in tow. Ask if they can come in and have a word. I said, "What for?" He said, "You know what for." I said, "I don't," but I let them in. Takes his helmet off, only young and says he'll come straight to the point: was it me who'd been writing these letters? I said, "What letters? I don't write letters." He said, "Not like you, love." I said, "Don't love me. You'd better give me your name and number. I intend to write to your superintendent."

It turns out it's to do with the couple opposite. I said, "Well, why are you asking me?" He said, "We're asking you because who was it wrote to the chemist saying his wife was a prostitute? We're asking you because who was it gave the lollipop man a nervous breakdown?" I said, "Well, he was interfering with those children." He said, "The court bound you over to keep the peace. This is a serious matter." I said, "It is a serious matter. I can't keep the peace when there's cruelty and neglect going on under my nose. I shouldn't keep the peace when there's a child suffering. It's not my duty to keep the peace then, is it?"

So then madam takes over, the understanding approach. She said didn't I appreciate this was a caring young couple? I said if they were a caring young couple, why did you never see the kiddy? If they were a caring young couple, why did they go gadding off every night, leaving the kiddy alone in the house? She said because the kiddy wasn't alone in the house. The kiddy wasn't in the house. The kiddy was in hospital in Bradford, that's where they were going every night. And that's where the kiddy died, last Friday. I said, "What of? Neglect?" She said, "No. Leukemia."

Pause.

He said, "You'd better get your hat and coat on."

Go to black.

Come up on Miss Ruddock back at home. Day.

I've got two social workers come, one white, one black. Maureen I'm supposed to call the white one, shocking fingernails, ginger hair, and last week a hole in her tights as big as a 50p piece. She looks more in need of social work than I do. Puts it all down to men. "We all know about men, don't we, Irene?" I never said she could call me Irene. I haven't been Irene since Mother died. But they all call me Irene—her, the police, everybody. They think they're being nice, only it's just a nice way of being nasty. The other one's Asian, Mrs. Rabindi, little red spot on her forehead, all that. Sits, talks. She's right enough. Said I'd be useful in India. You can earn a living writing letters there, apparently, as they're all illiterate. Something daubed on her door last week. She says it's what you get to expect if you're Asian. I said, "Well, there's all sorts gets chucked over my wall." We sit and talk, only she's a bit of a boring woman. I tell her I loved my mother and she says how she loved her mother. I tell her I'm frightened to walk the streets and she tells me how she's been attacked herself. Well, it doesn't get you any further. It's all "me, too." Social work, I think it's just chiming in.

I'm on what's called a suspended sentence. It means you have to toe the line. If I write any more letters, I get sent to prison. The magistrate said I was more to be pitied than anything else. I said, "Excuse me, could I interject?" He said, "No. Your best plan would be to keep mum." Big fellow, navy-blue suit, poppy in his buttonhole. Looked a bit of a drinker.

Maureen says I should listen to local radio. Join these phone-in things. Chat to the disc jockey and choose a record. She says they're very effective in alleviating loneliness and a sense of being isolated

in the community. I said, "Yes, and they're even more effective in bumping up the phone bill."

Maureen's trying to get me on reading. I suppose to get me off writing. She says books would widen my horizon. Fetches me novels, but they don't ring true. I mean, when somebody in a novel says something like "I've never been in an air crash," you know this means that five minutes later they will be. Say trains never crash and one does. In stories, saying it brings it on. So if you get the heroine saying, "I don't suppose I shall ever be happy," then you can bank on it there's happiness just around the corner. That's the rule in novels. Whereas in life you can say you're never going to be happy and you never are happy, and saying it doesn't make a ha'porth of difference. That's the real rule. Sometimes I catch myself thinking it'll be better the second time around.

Pause.

But this is it. This has been my go.

Pause.

New policeman now. Walks the streets, the way they used to. Part of the new policy. Community policing. Smiles. Passes the time of day. Keeping an eye on things.

Certainly keeps an eye on Number 56. In there an hour at a stretch. Timed it the other day, and when eventually he comes out she's at the door in just a little shorty housecoat thing.

He's in there now.

Pause.

He wants reporting.

Go to black.

Come up on Miss Ruddock against a plain institutional background. She is in a tracksuit, speaks very quickly and is radiant.

I ought to be writing up my diary. Mrs. Proctor's got us all on keeping diaries as part of Literary Appreciation. The other girls can't think what to put in theirs, me I can't think what to leave out. Trouble is, I never have time to write it up, I'm three days behind as it is.

I'm that busy. In a morning it's Occupation and I've opted for bookbinding and dressmaking. In dressmaking, Mrs. Dunlop's chucked me in at the deep end and I'm running up a little cocktail dress. I said, "I never had cocktails." She said, "Well, now you've got the dress you can." That's what it's geared to, this place—new

horizons. It's in shantung with a little shawl collar. Lucille's making me a chunky necklace for it in Handicrafts.

I share a room with Bridget, who's from Glasgow. She's been a prostitute on and off and did away with her kiddy accidentally, when she was drunk and upset. Bonny little face, you'd never think it. Her mother was blind but made beautiful pastry and brought up a family of nine in three rooms. You don't know you're born, I think. I'm friends with practically everyone, though, besides Bridget. I'm up and down this corridor—more often than not, I'm still on my rounds when the bell goes.

They laugh at me, I know, but it's all in good part. Lucille says, "You're funny you, Irene. You don't mind being in prison." I said, "Prison!" I said, "Lucille, this is the first taste of freedom I've had in years."

Of course I'm lucky. The others miss the sex. Men, men, men. They talk about nothing else.

Mind you, that's not quite the closed book it used to be. Bridget's taken me through the procedure step by step, and whereas previous to this if I'd ever found myself in bed with a man I should have been like a fish out of water, now, as Bridget says, at least I know the rudiments. Of course I can't ever see it coming to that at my age, but still it's nice to have another string to your bow. They've got me smoking now and again as well. I mean, I shan't ever be a full-time smoker, I'm not that type and I don't want to be, but it means that if I'm ever in a social situation when I'm called on to smoke, like when they're toasting the Queen, I shan't be put off my stroke. But you see, that's the whole philosophy of this place: acquiring skills.

I sailed through the secretarial course—Miss Macaulay says I'm their first Grade I. I can type like the wind. Miss Macaulay says we mustn't let the grass grow under our feet and if she goes down on her knees in Admin they might—repeat might—let me have a go on their word processor. Then the plan is: Stage One, I go on day release for a bit, followed by Stage Two, a spell in a resettlement hostel where I'll be reintegrated into the community. Then finally Stage Three, a little job in an office somewhere. I said to Miss Macaulay, "Will it matter my having been in prison?" She said, "Irene, with your qualifications it wouldn't matter if you'd been in the SS."

But the stuff some of them come out with! You have to smile. They have words for things I didn't know there were words for, and in fact I swear myself on occasion now, though only when the need arises. The other evening I'm sat with Shirley during Association.

Shirley's very obese, I think it's glandular, and we're trying to put together a letter to her boy friend. Well, she says it's her boy friend, only I had to start the letter three times because first go off she says his name's Kenneth, then she says it's Mark, and finally she settles on Stephen. She stammers, does Shirley, and I think she just wanted a name she could say. I don't believe she has a boy friend at all, just wants to be in the swim. She shouldn't actually be in here, in fact, she's not all there, but there's nowhere else to put her apparently, she sets fire to places.

Anyway, we're sitting in her room concocting this letter to her pretend boy friend when Black Geraldine waltzes in and drapes herself across the bed and starts chipping in, saying was this boy friend blond, did he have curly hair, and then nasty personal-type questions she should know better than to ask Shirley. And Shirley's getting confused and stammering and Geraldine's laughing, so finally I threw caution to the winds and told Geraldine to f—— up.

She screams with laughing and goes running down the corridor saying, "Do you know what Irene said, do you know what Irene said?" When she'd gone, Shirley said, "You shouldn't have said that." I said, "I know, but sometimes it's necessary." She said, "No, Irene. I don't mean you shouldn't have said it. Only you got it wrong. It's not f—— up." I said, "What is it?" She said, "It's f—— off." She's good-hearted.

Pause.

Sometimes Bridget will wake up in the middle of the night shouting, dreaming about the kiddy she killed, and I go over and sit by the bed and hold her hand till she's gone off again. There's my little clock ticking and I can hear the wind in the poplar trees by the playing field and maybe it's raining and I'm sitting there. And I'm so *happy*.

Fade out.

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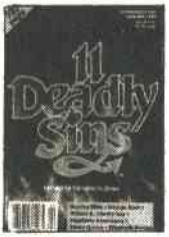

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In his wanderings, Jacen had avoided wherever possible the noise and confusion of cities—the sanctuaries they provided for the indigent traveler reminded him too painfully of the drab, seedy, antiseptic atmosphere of Rosebriar. He much preferred the small towns where, if they were big enough, he could usually find a library. No temporary refuge, he had discovered, could equal the advantages of a library. Their lavatories were invariably spotless, there was always a drinking fountain and lots of chairs, and no questions asked. You could spend hours undisturbed in these small-town libraries, which were more often than not presided over by a sweet woman to whom a stranger was a welcome diversion, not an object of distrust . . .

HIDDEN FIRES

by DONALD OLSON

He was dreaming he was back at Rosebriar, weeding an endless row of cabbages with a hoe chained to his wrist, when a gentle hand on his broad shoulder startled him awake. Or *was* he back at Rosebriar? For surely the smiling face, round and pinkly freckled, was Miss Wilbur's, even the same forget-me-not eyes. The dream evaporated, but the resemblance remained.

"Sorry to disturb you," she whispered, even though they were alone in the reading room, "but we'll be closing in ten minutes." Her soft voice and warm manner implied no rebuke.

"Makes me sleepy, reading," he murmured.

She eyed the makeshift knapsack at his elbow. "I don't recall as I've seen you in our library before. You all passin' through?" It was an observation, politely inquiring without being nosy, as if she

sensed intuitively the need to put him at ease. And wasn't that, too, just like Miss Wilbur?

He nodded with downcast eyes, and when she asked if he had far to go he replied vaguely, "I guess, maybe. I got no particular destiny in mind."

If the misuse of the word and a glimpse at the book he'd fallen asleep over—a children's story with more pictures than words—posed a question in her mind, her smile concealed it. Certainly his manly good looks betrayed no sign of instability, unless perhaps that look of childlike innocence might appear to the discerning eye as somewhat at odds with his roughcast features and shaggy, silver-flecked hair.

Just then a plump, perspiring woman clutching a folder bustled toward them. "Doralee, honey, am I too late to make copies of my church bulletins? I swear, such a day it's been—I don't know if I'm comin' or goin' or already been there."

"No trouble at all, Miss Plumley. I'll help you."

Jacen waited until they had disappeared into the office behind the circulation counter before picking up his knapsack and wandering into the stacks as if to return his book before leaving. At the far end of the stacks, where a circular stairwell opened into the basement, he paused and glanced back before ducking down it. Earlier, unobserved, he'd explored the basement of the century-old library with no conscious thought of what he had in mind, but once down there among the shelves of books and old filing cabinets a glimpse into the adjoining furnace room planted the idea in his head.

Between a monstrous old cast-iron furnace and an overflowing coal bin lay a wide strip of worn-out carpeting. Now, with no further deliberation, he fashioned a rude bedroll from the carpeting and, using his knapsack as a pillow, curled up and went back to sleep.

In his wanderings, he'd avoided wherever possible the noise and confusion of cities—the sanctuaries they provided for the indigent traveler reminded him too painfully of the drab, seedy, antiseptic atmosphere of Rosebriar. He much preferred the small towns where, if they were big enough, he could usually find a library. No temporary refuge, he had discovered, could equal the advantages of a library. Their lavatories were invariably spotless, there was always a drinking fountain and lots of chairs, and no questions asked. You could spend hours undisturbed in these small-town libraries, which were more often than not presided over by a sweet woman to whom a stranger was a welcome diversion, not an object of distrust. Dor-

alee, who bore an almost spooky resemblance to the hapless Miss Wilbur, impressed Jacen, despite her youth, with that same air of motherly benevolence.

Even after discovering the hiding place in the furnace room, into which no one was likely to venture during this hot southern summer, he expected to spend no more than one night in Hayfield, for he could never escape the fear that Jonas Leopold must be close on his trail, intent on dragging the young escapee back to Rosebriar. Perhaps he would have slipped away and hit the road before dawn had he not happened to waken in the middle of the night, as he did with increasing frequency now that his bloodstream no longer retained any of the tranquilizing potions the wisemen of Rosebriar used to quell the insurgent emotions, turning prisoner patients into patient prisoners. Whatever awakened him couldn't have been any noise louder than the furtive scrabbling of a mouse. It was more likely the gnawing of the beast of hunger reminding him of the hours he'd gone without food. He rubbed his eyes and fumbled in his knapsack for the dimestore penlight so essential to nocturnal foraging in dumpsters behind doughnut shops and fast-food restaurants.

He soon discovered to his delight that the copy machine wasn't the only modern appurtenance in Doralee's cluttered office. On a shelf beneath *Books in Print* stood a coffeemaker, a countertop refrigerator, even a microwave. In a cupboard he found an assortment of pretzels, nacho chips, Oreo cookies, and Ritz crackers—in the refrigerator cheese, yogurt, and salami.

He ate sparingly, washing down with coffee a nibble of this, a nibble of that—careful afterward to remove all trace of his pillaging. And before the town of Hayfield awoke, he slipped cautiously out of the library and off into the melon-sweet, dew-laden air of the countryside, where he remained until late morning.

"Well, hello again," Doralee greeted him as he hovered uncertainly between the circulation counter and the door to the reading room, as if expecting her to challenge his right of entry. "Still here, then, are you?"

Jacen ventured a bashful smile. "It's nice here. Quiet and peaceful." With awkward haste, he held out to her the bunch of wildflowers he'd concealed behind his back.

She responded without the faintest sign of confusion or blushing dismay. "Oh, aren't they pretty? How sweet of you. I love wildflowers. I'll put them on my desk in the office. If you're all plannin' to

be around for a while, maybe you'd like to take out a visitor's card. There's no fee."

"Yes, please."

Jacen watched her as she inserted a card in the typewriter at her side. Even her hair, pale reddish gold, was like Miss Wilbur's. He wished he dared lean across the counter and touch it as he'd once touched Miss Wilbur's in the gazebo beside the pond at Rosebriar—merely to brush away a leaf, an innocent gesture to which Miss Wilbur had responded so unexpectedly, even alarmingly, as if she'd wilfully misconstrued the gesture, catching his hand and pressing it to her burning cheek.

Poor lonely Miss Wilbur, where was she now? For that innocent gesture in the gazebo had led them inevitably into a tangled emotional web which had come brutally and decisively unraveled when another attendant had discovered what was going on and informed the Administrator. Jonas Leopold had sacked Miss Wilbur and punished Jacen by curtailing his privileges and extending his hours in the hated cabbage field, from which he'd escaped one day at sunset and headed south with some vague idea of looking for Miss Wilbur, who'd once mentioned having a family in Tennessee.

When Doralee asked his name, it rolled easily off his tongue. "Jacen—J-a-c-e-n—Southey." Which was half true—the Southey he'd borrowed from the spine of a poetry book in a library in El Dorado, Arkansas. But when she asked his address, he had to repress a smile, amused by how she might react if he were to tell her it was the Hayfield Memorial Library.

"Rosebriar," he said, as if it were the name of a town. "Kansas." Another half truth.

"Rosebriar, Kansas." Doralee's sweet drawl made it sound like Eden among the wheatfields.

Jacen pocketed the card, knowing he would cherish it, not only as a memento of Doralee but because cards of identity were something he hadn't possessed in recent memory. Moreover, he saw it as a title to the cubbyhole deep within this picturesque old building shaded by two ancient magnolia trees and guarded by a statue of General Stonewall Jackson. So different from Rosebriar, where the roses were bricks and the briars barbed wire and nobody gave a hoot if he lived or died as long as he remained quiescent.

So began a brief interlude of serenity in young Jacen's troubled life—days spent in the reading room, nights in the coal cellar, the hours between dawn and midday roaming the fields and woods,

avoiding human contact, constantly alert for the appearance of Jonas Leopold.

He had been living in the library with no one the wiser for almost a week, when one night he awoke from his nap and was padding barefoot up the corkscrew staircase and the sound of a woman's laughter halted him. At first he thought he must have imagined it or that he was hallucinating, but then it rose again eerily out of the darkness.

Cat-footed, he crept along the aisle between the stacks until he was close enough to make out narrow bands of light framing the slightly ajar door to the office. In a tension of fear and curiosity, he moved to within inches of the door, behind which mysterious rustling noises and wordless moans betrayed the presence of more than one intruder.

Presently a man's voice spoke softly, with a teasing sexiness: "Now y'all believe I really missed you, sugar?"

"Mmmmm—maybe." The woman's voice trailed off in a breathless sigh. "But don't go gettin' the notion you can sweet-talk me out of what I said when I called you from Nashville. I meant what I said, Clint. So help me, I won't spend another winter in Hayfield."

"I told you, sugar, didn't I? I got it all worked out. Come this Friday I'm a free man."

"Instant divorce? That's somethin' new I ain't heard about."

"You know what I'm talkin' about."

"That was just wishful thinkin'."

"Like hell it was. Library's open till nine on Friday. She'll be waitin' here for me to pick her up and go for pizza like always. Only when I get here, poor li'l Doralee'll be dead. There'll be evidence somebody attacked her an' killed her and yours truly discovered the body."

Jacen heard the words clearly, yet their initial impact was blunted by disbelief. Then he heard the woman say, "They'd suspect you."

"I'll have me an airtight alibi, sugar. You."

"You *crazy,* Clint? You know we can't be seen together."

"That's why it'll work. 'Cause we never *have* been seen together—not even in the back seat of a car, thanks to my bright idea of makin' a copy of Doralee's library key so's we could meet here."

"If it's a choice, give me the back seat of a car. Listen, Clint honey, can't we just run off together? Can't we—"

"Use your head, Sue Ann. Without that insurance payoff and the

money Doralee got from her granddaddy we'd be scratchin' for bus fare. We wouldn't even have a car. This way you'll have time to find us a real nice place in Nashville while I play the grievin' husband."

"Gee, I don't know, honey—"

"Sugar, I gotta count on you to make this work—an' if you go an' get cold feet on me, I just might have to put in a call to Memphis. You know what that'll mean. Now, listen—here's all you gotta do—"

Jacen waited to hear no more. The blood thundering in his head, he retreated to his dusty cocoon of carpeting and tried to shut his mind to what he'd heard. Prudence urged him to make tracks as soon as the coast was clear, put as many miles between himself and Hayfield as he could before dawn. He even tried to convince himself the voices in the darkness had been no more real than the sing-song voices the wisemen of Rosebriar had stabbed into silence with their gleaming needles. But what if these *were* real—and why pretend he couldn't tell the difference? If he were to run away without a word to anybody, Doralee would end up dead right here in the library and her sweet face would haunt his dreams as relentlessly as the demon face of Jonas Leopold.

Yet how could he say anything without the danger of exposing himself to as gruesome a fate? To be returned to Rosebriar, condemned to that endless twilight world of nonexistence, would be as bad as being put to death. And even if he did tell, would anyone believe his story? Would even Doralee believe it? He wasn't blind to the look that came over people's faces when he talked to them for more than a few minutes—the fading smiles, the uneasy shifting of the eyes, the nervous withdrawals. It was as if his months at Rosebriar had left a visible stigma.

The answer to his dilemma appeared so simple he wondered why it had taken him a whole day to think of it. A phonecall to the police and Doralee would be saved with no risk to himself. An anonymous tip, timed just right, and Clint would be caught in the act.

On Thursday night, Jacen swiped some change from the plastic bowl beside the copy machine in the office and on Friday he remained in the woods and didn't go near the library. At dusk he walked into town and along Main Street to the bus station. There he sat on a bench by the Coke machine outside, where through the window he could see the clock on the wall inside. From what he'd overheard, he could safely assume Doralee's husband wouldn't show up at the

library until after it had closed at nine o'clock and he could be sure to find her alone.

Jacen leaned back and stared up at the darkening sky until the stars caught fire and burned as brightly as the lights along Main Street. He thought of what Miss Wilbur had said to him that first time in the gazebo: "We've all got hidden fires burning deep down inside of us just waiting till something happens to make them flare up and consume us if we're not strong enough to bear the heat—just like those weak little stars up there sooner or later consume themselves."

Across the street, the Crossroads Bar came to life. Jukebox music pulsated behind the constantly revolving door while the rest of the town lay silent. A few minutes before nine, Jacen got up and entered the bus station, slipped into the phone booth, and dialed the number he'd memorized.

A man answered. "Hello."

"Police?" He wished he'd had enough change to buy a Coke—his throat was so dry it hurt.

"Ain't nobody here right now."

"There's going to be a murder. You've got to stop it!"

Instant suspicion. "Skeeter? That you, Skeeter? You pullin' my leg?"

"It's no joke! It's going to happen!"

"Who the hell is this?"

"Never mind, just listen to me—"

"This here's Ollie. I'm just cleanin' up and answerin' the phone. Chief's outa town and the deputy got called out to check on a prowler at the 7-Eleven."

The big hand of the clock was a minute short of the hour. Jacen began to panic. "Call him! Tell him to get over to the—"

"Who in tarnation *is* this, man? Gimme a name."

"It doesn't *matter* who I am—just call the deputy!"

"Buddy, I ain't gettin' my butt chewed out less'n I know who the hell I'm talkin' to."

The fool! Jacen hung up in a frenzy of indecision, then rushed outside and looked wildly up and down the empty street. The library was four blocks away behind the park. The 7-Eleven wasn't much farther in the opposite direction; he'd passed it on his way into town. He set off at a run.

Less than a quarter mile from the end of Main Street, at a major

intersection beyond a stretch of undeveloped marshland, the 7-Eleven was an oasis of light in the surrounding darkness. Two cars were parked outside, one a police cruiser.

The pretty blonde clerk behind the counter handed a bag to a customer and glanced at Jacen.

"The deputy!" he cried. "Where is he?"

She looked warily into his eyes. "Deputy?"

"His car's outside. They said he was checking on a prowler. Where *is* he?"

Perhaps something in the wildness of his gaze alarmed her. "Yeah, I called him. He's out back there in the swamp somewheres lookin' for the creep. What's wrong?"

The customer, a harried-looking woman clutching a little boy by the arm, cast a furtive look at Jacen and gave the kid's arm a rude tug. "Come along, your daddy's frettin' for his beer. G'night, Sue Ann."

Sue Ann!

Jacen looked hard into the woman's guarded brown eyes. "That deputy—what's his name?"

By now visibly unnerved, the woman edged toward the cash register, her eyes locked on Jacen's. "His *name?* His name's Gordon. So what?"

"Gordon?" Then he was wrong, this couldn't be *the* Sue Ann. And yet the voice—

"Clint Gordon," she added. "What d'you all want him for, anyhow?"

For all his problems of temperament, Jacen was no idiot. He was not stupid. A building didn't have to fall on him. The alibi! The perfect alibi! *Deputy* Clint Gordon. Doralee's husband. How easy to fake a prowler call. The police cruiser parked outside for anyone to see. The pretense of looking for a prowler in the swamp. How easy to change out of his uniform, sneak into town, to the library—

Without another word, Jacen flew out the door and raced back down the highway, his mind seared by the vision of Doralee dead, strangled or shot, battered and bloody. No cars passed him.

Main Street, except for a trio of bikers outside the Crossroads, was deserted. Jacen reached the park and leaned against a tree to catch his breath. The library loomed before him, as silent as the statue of General Stonewall Jackson and in total, ominous darkness. Why were there no lights?

Jacen ran up the steps and tried the door. It was locked. He beat

furiously on the solid oak panels and cried out Doralee's name. The building kept its stony silence until finally, exhausted and confused, he sat down on the steps, buried his head in his hands, and wept.

His heart turned over when he saw a strange woman behind the circulation counter checking out a stack of books for the plump woman he'd heard Doralee call Miss Plumley. Jacen broke into their conversation with uncharacteristic rudeness:

"Where is she? Where's Doralee?"

Miss Plumley looked somewhat taken aback. The woman behind the counter smiled sadly. "Doralee's not here today, young man. Her husband, you know."

"Her husband?"

The woman's eyes gleamed with the opportunity of enlightening the uninformed. "You all haven't heard? Deputy Gordon's gone missin'."

"Half the town's out searchin' for him in the swamp," Miss Plumley chimed in. "Poor boy either got himself lost in that awful bog or was done in by a prowler he was lookin' to catch. He went into the swamp after him an' never did come out all night long."

"Poor Doralee's under a doctor's care."

Miss Plumley looked dubious. "Well, maybe she is, but she's not at home. I saw her myself when I stopped for coffee not a half hour ago at the bus depot. She was there sayin' goodbye to Sue Ann Frawley."

"Sue *Ann?* You don't mean to tell me Sue Ann's left town? I know all she talked about was gettin' to Nashville—but *today?"*

The other woman shrugged. "What more could *she* do? 'Course she felt just awful, bein' as how she's the one called poor Clinton out to the 7-Eleven to look for that prowler."

The librarian clucked her tongue. "Where'd that flighty piece get the money to move to Nashville, tell me that."

"Maybe Doralee gave it to her. I saw her hand Sue Ann an envelope right there in the bus depot."

"I wasn't aware Doralee and Sue Ann were that close. They're hardly the same type."

Jacen might have been invisible. Miss Plumley said: "Between you and me, Agatha, I never did believe that was a marriage made in heaven. Doralee and Clint, I mean. He never paid her a speck of notice till she come into that money from her granddaddy. 'Course

she was mad about him ever since high school—big handsome brute. Just the sort to turn a bookish girl like Doralee's head."

Jacen moved away from them into the stacks, lingering there until he felt safe in making for the staircase and slipping down to the basement. None of what he'd heard made any sense to him. All he wanted to do now was retrieve his knapsack and get as far away from Hayfield as he could before noon.

On his knees in the cryptlike darkness of the furnace room, fumbling for his knapsack behind the carpeting, he flinched at the touch of something hard and gritty. Gingerly nudging it aside, he groped for his penlight. Its narrow beam picked out several briquettes of coal that had somehow become dislodged from the bin and tumbled out onto his bedroll.

He flashed the light across the bin. A smothered cry broke from his lips as in that blink of an instant before the penlight fell from his hand a vision of the cabbage field at Rosebriar shot across his brain. For in the murky light, that's what it looked like, with its features grotesquely flattened behind the stocking mask: one of those purple heads of cabbage half buried in black soil.

Even when he was miles away from Hayfield, the puzzle of what must have happened remained unclear in his mind. Too many pieces were missing. Why and at what point had Sue Ann decided to betray her lover and warn his victim? Why had Doralee not simply fled from the library before he arrived? How had she managed to turn the tables on him? What hidden fires had blazed behind the sweet face that so uncannily resembled Miss Wilbur's? And what, he wondered, would she do with the body when winter came and it was time to light the furnace? An answer to that question came to mind, but Jacen preferred not to think about it.

As for his library card, perhaps it was one of those paranoid fears that haunted him and would haunt him always that moved him to tear it into shreds and scatter the pieces from a bridge over the Tennessee River.

"Q"

Asked about herself, Amanda began with the rambling details with which many people respond to the official question, but Lieutenant Hamada was an excellent listener . . .

THE DAY OF THE FIRE GODDESS

by DOUGLAS G. SHEA

Hamada was hot, he was hungry, and his feet hurt. Still, it was some respite to find himself standing here in the old city, in this small but dignified urban oasis at the foot of the Manoa Valley, with its flowering shade trees, plumeria, African tulip, and poinciana. For the present, downtown Honolulu with its sophisticated bazaars and highrises seemed as remote as tomorrow. He glanced at his watch—3:37 of a long afternoon.

Again he rang the doorbell. Somewhere in the interior of the trim bungalow there was a whisper of sound elusive as the tinkle of windchimes.

The door opened and at a glance Hamada took in the opener. She was obviously of Japanese descent, like himself, tall even by Caucasian standards, high-cheekboned, and lean to the point of lankiness. About eighty, perhaps. She wore her greying hair in a roll at the forehead. A film devotee who knew Amanda Yamashita said that she resembled Katharine Hepburn as that actress might appear in an oriental role.

Hamada himself was standing scrutiny as her bright brown eyes regarded him speculatively. "Sorry," said Amanda Yamashita, "I was taking a pie from the oven. What might I do for you?"

Hamada introduced himself and amplified his words by proffering a blue-lettered business card which explained in fuller detail that he was Lieutenant Henry Hamada, Criminal Investigation Division, Honolulu Police Department. "I have a sum of money which may be yours," he said. "May I come in?"

Amanda started visibly but held the door open wide. "Certainly. Please do."

The sitting room was furnished with comfortably upholstered rattan chairs and sofa, but Hamada's attention was drawn to an intricately carved teakwood table topped by a lamp with an inlaid glass shade. Heirlooms, he decided.

Asked about herself, Amanda began with the rambling details with which many people respond to the official question, but Lieutenant Hamada was an excellent listener.

Her husband had been for many years Hiram Bingham Professor of Comparative Religion at the University of Hawaii, she said. But she had been widowed for twenty years. In 1956 her husband and she had adopted their five-year-old grandson after the boy's parents had been killed in a traffic accident on Kapiolani Boulevard.

"At first I felt like the biblical Sarah being blessed with a son in her old age," she smiled. "But Toshi soon cured me of thinking along those lines. Do you have children, Lieutenant Hamada?"

"No," said Hamada. "I'm a forty-one-year-old bachelor."

She appeared about to make a rejoinder to this, but evidently changed her mind. "I'll never forget the day Toshi came home with a black eye and a kitten. 'What happened to you?' I said. 'Horace,' he answered. 'I bet he won't try hurting any more kitties.'

"Well, looking back, it seems that I had barely time to sit down and put my feet up before Toshi was in college. He was an excellent student and soon joined the ROTC program. He graduated with honors.

"In the meantime, Doctor Yamashita had died. How proud he would have been to sit with Mitzi and me at graduation and watch Toshi march down the aisle with his classmates, and later as Mitzi pinned Toshi's lieutenant's bars on him. They planned to marry in a year, after Mitzi herself had finished college. But it was not to be."

Amanda fought down the bitterness that rose in her throat. "To this day, no one in authority speaks of what happened in Vietnam as a war. They speak of its long, horrible history as a series of measures and countermeasures. Well, Toshi served in Vietnam as the pilot of a search-and-rescue helicopter. In nineteen seventy-two, his copter was shot down near Dien Bien Phu and he was interned in a prisoner-of-war camp. The International Red Cross later verified that he died there. It took seventeen years to have his body repatriated. Eight months ago, he was buried in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific on Punchbowl.

"So much for dreams—and for those who dream them. Do you know haiku, Lieutenant Hamada? There is one by the poet Shiki

which reads: 'Backward I gaze; one whom I had chanced to meet—is lost in haze.' That is how it is with us now, Mitzi and me. Is this emptiness all that Shiki has to leave us with?"

"I don't know," said Hamada softly. "What little I know of haiku is that it often yields a deeper insight at a second look. Perhaps Shiki means for us to understand that haze is only a curtain of nature, and a temporary one at that."

"Do you believe that?"

"You believe it. Don't you?"

"Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief," whispered Amanda.

The somber mood passed. "I owe you an apology, Lieutenant Hamada. What possible interest could my views on Vietnam or my memories of my grandson have for you?"

He sat facing her, his big hands on his knees, his homely face and awkward frame in sharp contrast to the sensitivity of his words. "You are mistaken, Mrs. Yamashita. Not only do these bits and pieces round out the picture, speaking of them brings healing to the spirit. Now tell me more about Mitzi."

"Mitzi never married," Amanda said. "She graduated from college, took her master's degree, and became a teacher on Maui. Eight months ago, she flew in to attend the service for Toshi when he was laid to rest on Punchbowl. We rented a car at the airport and Mitzi drove us to the cemetery.

"I sat watching the closed aluminum casket on its burial straps and thinking of the little boy who had come home that day with a black eye and a bedraggled kitten. Reverend Torsen took his text from the Twenty-third Psalm, the part about lying down in green pastures. Then Mitzi nudged me and said, 'Look, Mandy, the rainbow!' We sat facing the Koolau Mountains in the distance, but we had both forgotten that you see a daily rainbow from Punchbowl in sunny weather—something to do with moisture-laden air coming down from the mountains.

"Anyway, the service was soon over. The Reverend Torsen left and we followed after a while, leaving two groundskeepers who had been watching at a distance to close Toshi's grave.

"I took a final look at the gravestones lying flat in the grass—thousands of them, reaching in every direction like stepping-stones. Well, I remember thinking, they are stepping-stones in a way, hopefully leading to a future without war.

"Mitzi spent the night with me and returned to Maui the next day."

Amanda looked at her visitor incisively. "Have you ever been to the National Memorial Cemetery, Lieutenant Hamada?"

"Yes," replied Hamada laconically. "On official business."

"Oh, you should visit it at your leisure. It's—" she groped for an adjective "—overwhelming."

What impressed her most, she told him, were the cemetery's size—one hundred and fifteen acres, she had been told—and the view from the overlook, looking down on Honolulu five hundred feet below. The view was especially impressive in late afternoon. Whether it was due to some trick of height or atmosphere she couldn't say, but everything in sight—the State House, the sea, Diamond Head—was tinted with the oddest metallic-gold sheen you could imagine. It was almost as if some old Hawaiian god had had the city bronzed for a keepsake.

Hamada interposed, "You have been going to the cemetery regularly since Toshi was laid to rest there?"

"Yes. I have a standing arrangement with Tom Kaneshiro of the Punahou Cab Company. He picks me up every Wednesday at three-thirty and takes me there. I take flowers from my garden for Toshi's flower container, spend some time with him, and then walk home. Sometimes I stop and go to the chapel there."

"Isn't the chapel behind the memorial tower?"

"Yes, it is."

"And the tower is reached by a number of staircases at the end of the central mall."

"Yes, seven staircases—some seventy steps in all, I suppose. Oh, I see what's bothering you. You're wondering how a woman my age can climb all those steps and then walk a mile and a half to her home afterward."

"The question did occur to me."

Amanda smiled. "Would it help if I tell you that as Amanda Murata I was a distance runner for Japan in the nineteen twenty-eight Women's Olympics?"

Hamada smiled back. "It helps. This is Thursday. So you went to the cemetery yesterday."

"I did."

"But yesterday was different."

Amanda nodded. "But I have to go back four days—to Sunday—to explain. On Sunday, I had returned from church, had lunch, finished the dishes, and settled down with the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* when my phone rang. It was a man's voice. He said I might call him

Victor—he preferred not to give his real name. He had been with Toshi in the prisoner-of-war camp. Mutual suffering had brought them close together. Then when Toshi realized he was going to die, he had entrusted Victor with a letter addressed to his dear *obaa-san* in the hope that Victor might survive captivity and live to deliver it.

"I was thunderstruck. My mind was spinning. For one thing, Toshi had never called me his dear *obaa-san,* even when he was a little boy—he always spoke English to me. And what about Mitzi—had Toshi forgotten her? Of course, anyone in great distress can often act in unexpected ways. But what about Victor—where had he been for the more than seventeen years since Toshi's death?

"Victor explained that he had been liberated by American troops some four months after Toshi's death, but he had immediately been taken to Tripler Army Medical Center for treatment for severe neurasthenia. Hypnotic sessions followed, in which all recollection of his days as a prisoner of war were erased from his mind. He knew he was a Vietnam veteran, but there was a gap in his power of recall that he likened to the eye's blind spot.

"Then came the day when he happened to read a news item about Toshi's interment in the National Memorial Cemetery on Punchbowl. Suddenly the torturing memories were back and he remembered the letter. Where was it? He finally found it in the folds of an old Army blanket beneath his bed. He wanted desperately to escape from all reminders of the past. An idea began to take shape—he would leave Hawaii forever, go to the mainland, settle in the Midwest, forget Tripler and all the other indignities conjured up by that letter. But it would take at least a thousand dollars more than he had to do that. Then why not sell the letter?

" 'Bring me the letter,' I told him. 'I'll give you a thousand dollars for it.' But he wanted no such meeting—no possibility of reminiscing, no agonizing questions about Vietnam, no nostalgic tears. Enough was enough. He was having a hard enough time hanging onto his sanity as it was."

In the end, a deal was struck. On her next visit to Punchbowl, she would leave a thousand dollars—it had to be fifty twenties in denomination—in Toshi's flower container. Then she was to go to the chapel. The letter would be on the seat of the last pew on the right.

"Ah," said Hamada. "Did you put flowers in the container with the money?"

"Of course. White jasmine from my garden—for Toshi."

"Ah," said Hamada.

"Tom had to pick me up a little early so I could stop at the bank," Amanda continued. "I followed the arrangement I had made with Victor exactly, putting the money into the flower container at exactly four o'clock and then going to the chapel. But there was no letter. I searched every pew, and even the space behind the grille in front of the altar. Could someone else have taken the letter? I have never found anyone else in the chapel when I have been there. I knew it was useless to go back for the money—Victor would have picked it up at once. No question about it. I had been had."

"Tsk," said Hamada softly.

Amanda looked at him sharply. "I just sat there and thought and thought. When I was a little girl in Japan, my grandfather used to tell me about Bushido, the ancient code that stresses honor above all things. And what had I done? I had brought dishonor to my grandfather and to my ancestors. I had defiled Toshi's grave—and for nothing."

"I think not, Mrs. Yamashita," Hamada said gently. "I have been told you are a Methodist. If so, you know the parable of the widow's mite. You made a considerable financial sacrifice to keep Toshi's memory green. I think your grandfather would have been very proud of you for that."

"Oh, do you think so?" said Amanda with unfeigned artlessness. Then: "Well, I must have sat there for hours just staring at the lovely colored cabochons set in the windows before I fell asleep. When I came to, it was dark. I groped my way out of the chapel onto the upper court of the memorial and looked down on the staircase pitching downward like white-water cascades in the moonlight. Then I found myself on my way homeward on the mall.

"I remember picturing a crusty old colonel standing by his gravestone and booming, 'Bat-tal-yun!' while sergeants and corporals echoed his command all up and down the line: 'Company!' —'Platoon!'—'Company!'—'Platoon!'

" 'At ease, boys, at ease,' I said. 'Go back to sleep.'

"I got home about eight o'clock and brewed myself a pot of tea. Then I wept—and went to bed."

Hamada was sympathetic. "You must have had a terrible night."

She nodded. "I did. But I felt better after I had a cold shower this morning."

Hamada reached for and unzippered an underarm portfolio that had lain on the floor at his side. "Then this should make you feel

even better. It's your money, returned to you in the very envelope in which you left it at the cemetery. Will you kindly count it and then read and sign the receipt?"

Amanda seemed momentarily startled. Had she forgotten his remark about having money that was possibly hers? Curiosity signaled her recovery. "What makes you think it's mine?"

"You told me," Hamada said. "When you said you put white jasmine in the flower container along with the money. You know, florists say that white jasmine has one of the most penetrating and persistent of all floral fragrances. This money fairly screams that it belongs to you."

Amanda's eyes moistened. "Arigato, Hamada-san."

"You are very welcome," said Hamada.

"Lieutenant Hamada, would you like a slice of shoofly pie and a glass of milk?"

Hamada demurred, mentally reviewing department regulations about accepting gratuities. Was shoofly pie a gratuity? "What *is* shoofly pie?" he asked her.

"I bake it from an old Amish recipe given me by Doctor Yamashita's cousin, who lives near Lancaster, Pennsylvania." And Hamada watched as a taboret, linen napkin, milk, fork, and a brown wedge on a fine Imari plate were set before him.

"Well?" demanded Amanda.

Hamada put down his fork. "Does Duncan Hines know about you?"

"Who is Duncan Hines?"

Gradually the lighthearted moment dissolved into embarrassed silence. Hamada became aware that Amanda was eyeing him searchingly, waiting for him to answer some of the questions in her mind. How had he gained possession of the money? How did he know of her involvement? And what about Victor?

He began: "This morning, shortly after seven, I received a phonecall from Daniel Kalahele, assistant superintendent of the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific on Punchbowl. The body of a man had been discovered near the administration building just inside the cemetery entrance. I got there in minutes, and the Medical Examiner shortly afterward.

"I judged the dead man to be about thirty-five. Fingerprints subsequently proved him to be Brad Randolph, the man you knew as Victor."

"Poor man," murmured Amanda.

"Poor man?" echoed Hamada. "You might not have said 'poor man' if you'd seen him as we found him, wearing Gucci shoes, a Patek Philippe wristwatch, and your thousand dollars tucked in his shirt pocket.

"Randolph was a scam artist of the first water. Because of the fertile imagination he brought to his frauds, we long ago took to referring to him as Hans Christian Andersen. He had another distinction, too. He had type AB blood. Only five percent of the population have type AB blood. Incidentally, the closest he ever got to Vietnam was if he happened to walk past a wall map somewhere.

"The body lay face up, with a deep laceration on the forehead that looked like an exaggerated crease. The Medical Examiner's estimate was that death had occurred at least twelve hours earlier. When the mobile lab arrived, the technician used tweezers to pull the currency envelope from Randolph's pocket and I caught a whiff of fragrance as she carried it to the van."

"Toshi's flowers," said Amanda.

Hamada nodded. "Shortly the Medical Examiner had the body ready to take to the morgue. Meanwhile, Daniel Kalahele was beckoning. I walked with him to his office, and there he gave me the name and place of employment of a tour-bus driver who had stopped at the office on his way out of the cemetery yesterday. He told Kalahele he had seen a man trip over a white dog in the upper part of the cemetery, lie there a moment, then get up and walk away. The man didn't seem to have been hurt, but the driver thought he should report it anyway."

Hamada had found Adam McCarthy at the bus headquarters on Kalakaua Avenue and learned that at about four o'clock yesterday he had parked by Ernie Pyle's grave in the cemetery and the tourists had gathered around the grave to hear tell of the World War II correspondent's tragic death on Ie-jima just four months before Japan's surrender in 1945. The tourists then began to take pictures and stroll around while he leaned against the side of the bus, waiting. As he did, he noticed the distant figure of a man wearing what looked to be an aloha shirt with blue flowers bending down as if to tie a shoelace. Then a white dog came out of nowhere and began to dart around the man.

"It occurred to the driver that the fire goddess Pele, whose old stamping ground this was, often appears as a white dog, and as he watched he saw the man topple. 'You could almost feel the thud as his head struck a gravestone,' he told me. He hurried forward to

help, but before he had covered a hundred feet the man was up and ambling away—and the white dog was nowhere to be seen."

When Hamada returned to the cemetery, he found that the mobile lab had left and he called headquarters to get a rundown. The technician said that overnight dampness had ruined all fingerprints on the envelope and there were fifty twenties inside, but no standout prints on any of them. The envelope was an ordinary currency envelope bearing an imprint of the Bank of Hawaii. A call to the bank by Hamada indicated that there were seventy branch offices throughout the Islands. He decided he would try another tack.

Obtaining an informational booklet from Daniel Kalahele, he turned to a scale drawing of the cemetery and drew a straight line from Ernie Pyle's grave to the overlook where the driver had seen the man and the dog.

It took no time to find Toshi's gravestone, marked by a reddish-brown stain on one edge. On his car radio, Hamada resummoned the mobile lab, then turned his attention to the flower container with white flowers bearing a familiar scent. It was the only flower container within his entire visual radius and the presence of fresh flowers confirmed his conviction: Toshi had someone who lived nearby—survivors of the others lived far away.

"When the lab technician arrived and I watched as he pressed moistened filter paper to the stain, my eyes wandered to the overlook—and it dawned on me. That was where Brad Randolph had stationed himself, watching his victim through the binoculars he carried. The flower container was an ingenious drop. But was its choice merely a convenience, or was the victim someone close to Toshi? Again the flowers gave me the answer.

"Leaving a request with the technician to clean Toshi's gravestone thoroughly before leaving, I made my way back to Daniel Kalahele's office. In the files there, I found your name and address as Toshi's only survivor of record. I checked out the Bank of Hawaii in Kalahele's yellow pages and ran down the list of branch offices until I found the one closest to your address. That seemed to be the University Branch, so I phoned and asked if you had been in recently. The answer was yes, and I told them I would be there within the hour and would like to speak with the teller who had served you.

"Before I left the cemetery, the lab technician stopped at the office on his way out to report that the stain on Toshi's gravestone was type AB blood, the same as Brad Randolph's. Fingerprints on the

flower container, if there ever were any, were completely weathered off."

At the University Branch office of the bank, Hamada found teller Mary Milgrim waiting for him. She had known Amanda for many years, she said—in fact, Mandy had been her Sunday-school teacher. Yesterday afternoon at about two-thirty Mandy had arrived at Mary's window and had seemed rather overwrought. She was dressed completely in white, and from this Mary assumed she was on her way to the cemetery.

"When you withdrew a thousand dollars from your savings account and asked for it to be paid in twenties, Mary grew suspicious. 'But what could I do?' she told me. 'Mandy Yamashita is a very proud and self-reliant woman. If I had as much as opened my mouth, she would have had my hide. But believe me, I didn't get much sleep last night.' "

"That makes two of us," commented Amanda. She smiled in reminiscence. "Dear Mary."

"She was very relieved when I told her I believed we had recovered your money," said Hamada.

Leaving the bank office, he had phoned headquarters, found that the autopsy results were ready, and gone directly to the Medical Examiner's office in Iwilei Road.

Brad Randolph had died from intercranial hemorrhaging, the Medical Examiner had explained. A peculiarity of this type of injury was that the subject can perform perfectly normal activities for an extended period of time, but finally—bingo! sudden death.

Back at headquarters, Hamada taped and filed his report, picked up the currency envelope with its contents, and had a clerk make out a receipt to be signed by Amanda Yamashita.

"As I drove here, I remembered an experience Daniel Kalahele told me about that I had not included in my report. The assistant superintendent is a pure-blooded Hawaiian, one of only about four hundred left in the Islands. He said he had worked late in his office on the previous night. When he left at seven forty-five, it was quite dark, but a moon approaching full was high in the east. He felt exhilarated and decided to take a turn around the cemetery in his Jeep. He drove with his lights out, for the roadway was perfectly visible.

"In his mind's eye, he looked down on Punchbowl's slightly oval shape, so like that of an ancient Hawaiian temple. The monkeypod trees shaded the crater's rim like huge pushcart umbrellas. Round-

ing the turn in front of the memorial, he looked up at the thirty-foot female figure high on the facade. In frozen silence she brooded over the gravestones. Childless, she has thousands of children, he thought to himself, and all of them boys. Well, most of them, anyway. Looking back, he waved. 'Goodnight, Mrs. Chips!' "

Amanda smiled her appreciation and Hamada continued.

"He passed the dark rampart of the overlook. Here the sky was lighter, lit by the lights of Honolulu far below. When he returned to his starting point, he saw a flicker of white in the shrubbery and, remembering the white dog, he got out of the Jeep and walked over. A deep growl came from the shrubbery.

"Like a man in a dream, words puffed up like smoke in his brain: 'Don't take another step!' He stopped and the growl subsided into a plaintive whimpering that seemed almost an attempt to achieve human speech. Then, as he turned back, he saw you, dressed all in white by the Jeep. 'Mother, you startled me!' he said. 'Did you miss your bus? Come, I'll take you home.'

"He got you into the Jeep, he said, but you never spoke a word. Then, on the darkest and loneliest stretch of Puowaina Drive you made a sign that you wanted to get out of the Jeep and he stopped. Did you decide that you wanted to walk home, after all?"

Amanda was eyeing Hamada queerly. "I never met your Daniel Kalahele. When I passed his office, I saw him working at his desk. I must have been home by the time you speak of."

Hamada's mind was racing. He heard Amanda resume:

"There is a haiku which may have something to say about Daniel Kalahele's experience. But I'll have to give it to you in Japanese, because no translator has ever done a satisfactory job of putting it into English. Listen carefully, Lieutenant Hamada: 'Hana chirite ko-no-ma-no tera to narinikeri.' "

Hamada closed his eyes. She spoke Japanese with a sense of form and substance that made his own ability to speak his ancestral tongue seem awkward. She made the four two-letter words sound hyphenated, giving the impression of the gradual but uninterrupted transformation that the poem spoke of.

"It is by Buson," he said. "The one about the cherry tree. It is perhaps the most beautiful haiku ever written.

"Buson begins by showing us the lovely spectacle of a cherry tree in full bloom. But as we look on, the blossoms gradually begin to fall until at last we see a faraway ancient temple through the bare branches. But, Buson chides us, weren't the cherry blossoms a kind

of temple to begin with? And if this is so, is there a connection between what was once and what is here and now? Are they only different aspects of the same thing?

"Punchbowl has always been considered a sacred place. The kings of ancient Hawaii are buried there. During World War II the crater was heavily fortified. Had Pearl Harbor and Honolulu fallen, Punchbowl would have been the last bit of native soil defended. I wonder: does the devotion of many generations create a kind of psychic force that can protect a place against desecration?"

"Magnificent!" breathed Amanda, her eyes shining. "Oh, but Buson would have been proud of you!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Hamada self-consciously. He stood. "Well, I must go."

Amanda followed him to the porch. In the west, a last strange streak of ocher was giving way to a canopy of pink above. The dinner crowd would be gathering at La Ronde. He would have to hurry if he wanted a table.

"Lieutenant Hamada," called Amanda, "I bake shoofly pies quite often. If I call you the next time I bake one, will you come? And don't say you don't know."

Hamada grinned. "I will come." He waved his big hand. "Sayonara, Yamashita-san."

Author's Note: In the dawn of the world, the Polynesian fire goddess Pele came to the Hawaiian Islands and made her home in a volcano on Oahu. Eons passed, and the fires of Pele's volcano died. So the goddess moved to the main island. There, in Kilauea's sulfurous steam and fitful flames, she is said to live to this day. But old-timers say that sometimes she visits Oahu, two of her favorite guises being that of a white dog or an old woman in white, hitchhiking by moonlight at the side of a lonely road. The volcano on Oahu has long been extinct. In time, because of the shape of its crater, it became known as Punchbowl, a landmark of Honolulu. Later, beautifully landscaped and appointed, the site became the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, honored resting place of American war dead.

a *NEW* short story by

J. W. WHITEHEAD

An evocative boyhood memory of two Saturdays in November 1968 and then a day in January 1969 that would change the boy's life forever—from a young writer whose stories in EQMM are earning him an estimable following . . .

THE RIGHT THING

by J. W. WHITEHEAD

When I turned nine years old, I remember it was a sunless autumn day, a Saturday, early November. People were talking politics, though I don't remember what they were saying. I think that was the year Nixon won for the first time.

My father gave me a football. That was his birthday present to me. The thing was bigger than my head, and hard as stone. He showed me the laces and told me how to hold the ball so only my last two fingers were on the laces. "The secret to good spirals," he explained—and I listened, intent on any secret of my father's. I knew so little about my father's secrets—sinister and otherwise—until it was too late.

But my hands—at that age my hands were like doughy little starfish, fresh from the sea. I was always blowing on them to dry the palms.

That afternoon, after the aunts and uncles had gone home, my father pulled on a sweatshirt, got me into a jacket, and took me over to the park near our house. He had the football with him. When we got there, I tried to stay beside him, but he told me to stand still while he walked on ahead.

He stepped off ten strides, turned, and fired the ball to me. I caught it with those soft hands and thought my job was done. But then he

dared me to throw a spiral over his head, high enough so that he couldn't reach it.

That was when I first remember seeing Joey Francona—a name that might ring a bell with college-football fans, though we're going back a ways. You may have read the "Where Are They Now?" article in *Sports Illustrated* a while back, reporting that Joey was a roadie for the Grateful Dead now. I met Joey when he was still trying to figure out if there was life after football, when he was just a scared kid trying to do the right thing.

We'd been there in the park for about an hour, my father and I, and my throws were all well within my father's reach. But with about fifteen minutes of light still hanging in the air and the wind at my back, I coiled like a javelin thrower and threw a Fran Tarkenton spiral high in the air and released on the dead run, which fluttered just over my father's outstretched hand.

"Okay!" my father said. "Okay, I mistimed my jump. Do it again and we'll go home."

And then he turned and saw Joey Francona standing beneath a tree whose leaves had turned orange and brown. I saw him, too, though to me he was just a good-looking man in a long leather coat and slender brown boots. His hair was dark and long, and he had thick sideburns. I thought he looked a little like Joe Namath. Well off, confident. He looked like *someone,* and he was watching us. It made me self-conscious.

"Dad," I said, "I'm cold. Let's go home now."

"It was a fluke. Prove to me and to yourself that it wasn't a fluke." By now he had his back turned to the man and wouldn't look at him. For a moment, he almost seemed perturbed. His words barely reached my ears before the wind snatched them away again. The cold was increasing, the winter storms pushing at its back, and I felt the strength of it at my own back like a summons to a task.

In that moment when my father appeared rattled, just before he became the most monumental figure in my life once again, I felt capable. I could sense the onrushing linemen, the straining offensive wall in front of me, the astounding openness of the receiver.

"To the great ones like Unitas and Tarkenton," my father called to me, "open receivers always seem to be by themselves in fields the size of this park! Now throw it!"

But my first step forward caught in a chewed-up bog of mud, my second foot slid out from under me, and I launched a quail that he intercepted, running toward me for the touchdown.

I had myself off the ground by the time he reached me, but I let him pass without touching him. "Did Alan Page get through the offensive wall?" he said, to be kind.

"Alan Page, Carl Eller, and Jim Marshall at *least,*" I said.

"What was Jim Marshall famous for?" he asked. We'd been over this before, in a book he sometimes read to me called *Strange But True Football Stories*. We began the windy walk home. Dead leaves crackled their applause.

"Jim Marshall once recovered a fumble and ran the wrong way with it into his own end zone."

"Against who?"

"The Forty-Niners."

"And what happened?"

"They tackled him for a two-point safety."

"You don't have to say 'two-point safety.' There's only one kind of safety. It's like saying 'six-point touchdown.' There's no need."

"There's two-point and one-point conversions."

"That's right."

"I know what else Jim Marshall did."

"What?"

"He was snowmobiling with friends and he almost froze to death and one of his friends *did* freeze to death. Because there was no food, they almost ate their friend, and they burned all of Jim Marshall's money to keep warm."

"Where did you hear that?"

"In *Sport* magazine, at the barber's."

"Don't believe everything you read," he said.

"But *Sport*—"

"*Sport* wants to make a buck, just like everybody else. Nobody's beyond telling a story."

I felt sorry that there was no one my father could trust, and that made me remember the man beneath the tree. I looked behind us, but the sidewalks were empty of all but a thousand swirling leaves.

My father tapped the ball out from underneath my arm, wrapped it between his two thick forearms like Jim Taylor, and said, "Race you home." And won again.

The next Saturday afternoon, my father wanted me to go over to the park again. It was earlier in the day. The sun was out and the winds were calm. Except for the dead trees, it felt like spring. My mother had the windows open in the house, to air out the rooms, she said.

When we reached the top of the steps leading into the park, I saw a distant figure leaning against a distant tree. I soon recognized that it was the same man who had watched us the week before. My father looked across the park at him. I couldn't read anything in my father's face.

"Stand here," he said.

He took ten steps, turned, and threw me the ball. I caught it. My arm wasn't much, but those soft hands could cushion a ball. I began to wrestle my short fingers around the ball to attempt a spiral, but my father said, "Wait here."

He turned and walked out toward the man under the tree. He had his hands in his pockets, and I remember thinking that was a strange way for my father to walk. I know now it was a message, a sign of his preparedness. He usually walked like walking was good for you, with a beautiful, big stride and his arms swinging gracefully. Now he was walking like his feet hurt.

The man pushed off from the tree and came out from under the low-dipping branches to meet my father. He was shorter than my father, and thinner, and younger. From that distance, he could almost have been another of my father's sons, though my father wasn't really that old, and the other man wasn't really that young.

My father kept his hands in his pockets while they talked, but the other man moved his left hand as if it was the only way he had of communicating. His right hand stayed still at his side. He wore a waist-length tan-leather jacket and dark slacks. He had on the same slender pair of boots he'd worn the week before. There was a colorful kerchief tied at his neck. I could somehow tell he was upset.

The man motioned toward me a couple of times, but my father shook his head. I decided it was wrong to watch them and began throwing the ball as high in the air as I could and catching it. I did this for a few minutes, until I heard my father calling for me.

They were still by the tree. I came running up, not taking my eyes off the other man. He became better-looking the closer I got, though I could see even at nine years old that there was something wild about him.

"Why are you doing this?" he said to my father. "Isn't this between you and me?"

My father ignored him. "Here's somebody who wants to meet you," he told me. "This is Joey Francona. Joey was the star quarterback for State a couple of years back."

"The year we won it all," said Francona, though he didn't sound happy about it.

"Joey was MVP of the championship game, weren't you, Joey?"

"I guess I was," Francona said. "Which came as a shock to some people who thought I might just turn out to be the goat. Who were kind of *counting* on it, I guess. You never can tell, can you?"

"Say hello," my father said to me.

"How do you do, Mr. Francona?" I said.

"Dig the kid," said Francona. "A little grown-up."

"Lay off," said my father in a voice that didn't sound all that familiar. "You could ask him for lessons."

"Right," he said. "Maybe next week."

"There is no next week, Joey," said my father. "This is it."

Francona ignored him and turned to me. "Nice to meet you, Ace. Your dad and I aren't quite finished, but I'll try to be quick so you two can play."

"Maybe you'd like to throw my boy a pass," my father said, though it confused me since he didn't sound at all friendly.

Francona turned on him quickly. "Maybe you'd like to take your—" He looked at me and grinned. "Your dad's kidding with me. I think he must remember when I got hurt."

"I guess I remember reading about it," said my father.

"I guess maybe you do," said Francona.

"It was your arm, right?"

"A nasty injury for a right-handed quarterback."

My father turned to me. "Joey was drafted by Chicago, who really could have used him. But they took one look at that arm and wouldn't even offer him a contract. Joey tells me their therapy program hasn't really helped and so they've cut him loose. Now I guess he's back and looking for work. Too bad. You only get one chance to work for me."

"Who wants to *work* for you?"

"Then why did you come back?"

"Later," he said, and looked at me.

"What happened to your arm, Mr. Francona?" I said.

"Broken."

"Didn't they put it in a cast?"

"It wasn't that kind of break, kid. What happened was that they—"

"I seem to remember," said my father, "that there was some nerve and muscle damage, right, Joey? No need for the gory details."

"Pretty good memory. Your old man's pretty sharp."

"Listen," my father said to me, "Joey and I might be here a while. I think he's got something to pitch to me, even though he won't admit it. Why don't you run over to the Unity-Frankford store and get us each a soda?" He handed me a ten-dollar bill. "Get yourself some football cards, too. Here, I'll take the ball."

"Thanks, Dad. What kind of soda?"

"Any kind. And be careful at the lights. Don't rush."

By the time I got back, my father was by himself, sitting on a bench and spinning the football into the air a few feet over his head. He looked very sad, and we went home without opening the sodas. "I want you to forget about today," he said. He went directly into his study when we got home and shut the door. He spent a good deal of time on the telephone that evening—his private line.

I didn't see Joey Francona again until after the New Year, though we often came to the park to throw the football and I always looked for him. My father was very, very busy during football season, but we always made it to the park. I think maybe I wasn't the only one looking for Joey.

There was no particular reason why I should look for him. None of the kids at school had heard of Joey Francona, even when I said he'd been drafted by the Bears. They were too young for names they didn't see on football cards every day. I suppose it was just the way he made my father sound. I guess that was what made me keep looking for him.

Then one day there he was. It was just after a heavy snowfall in late January, one that got school cancelled and swept the sky clean. The sun was hot and the air very cold, a perfect day for sledding, the skin of the snow crusted neatly with ice.

I saw Joey Francona sitting on a bench at the top of the biggest hill in the park. He'd grown a thick black beard and moustache, and wore a baseball cap that said *Bears*. His hair was very long. It covered his ears, his neck, his shoulders, and it didn't look especially clean. He wore a beaten-up old winter coat, and instead of those slender boots he wore a pair of tennis shoes on his feet. I remember thinking that his feet must have been very cold.

When he saw me dragging my sled up the hill, he got up and came over to wait for me to reach the top.

"Hi, kid," he said. "Remember me?"

"Hello, Mr. Francona."

"How's your old man?"

"He's fine."

"Well, that's good news, isn't it? But then, your old man's the type that lives forever." He looked at my sled. "How fast does that thing go?" he said.

"It's all right, I guess."

"Hey, your dad wouldn't give you anything but the best, right? Let's see how it does."

"You mean, you want to try it?"

"No," he said, "I mean I want to see you do it."

I walked out beyond the lip of the hill about thirty paces, turned around, and got my feet set. Then I took off toward the lip and felt the wind bruising my forehead, turning it into one giant ache. My feet crunched through the powder.

The launch was among the best I can remember, and I landed on my stomach about five yards downhill. I caught a slippery patch and the sled skidded forward ahead of the wind. I closed my eyes, put my head down, and cut the hill. It was by far my best run, and when the sled came to a stop I could see Joey Francona far away at the top of the hill, leaning against a tree as if he hadn't even watched.

When I got to the top he said, "Speed. Is that all you care about? You might as well have had your eyes closed. Where's the skill? Better yet, where's the *thrill?*"

I didn't know what to say to him.

"Did you ever try the side of the hill?" he said.

The side of the hill was twice as steep, and stocked with great trees and stumps and roots. When a good, banked snow hit the park, the obstacles became like land mines. Worst of all, the hill emptied on that side onto the street. The older teenage boys in the neighborhood came up to the hill at night after a snow, got drunk, and showed off for the girls by sledding down through the darkness. Almost every year a kid was killed, either by hitting a tree or being hit by a car.

"My father told me I'm not allowed," I said.

"Hey, that's the right thing to say. Your father's got a way with the rules, doesn't he? But he never did too well giving them to me. Let me try your sled."

He took it with his left hand before I could say anything, and I trailed along behind him. He produced a scarf and tied it to the rudder of the sled.

"You have to do this sitting up to get the full effect. Once you get

going, it doesn't cut down much more on wind current to be on your stomach, anyway."

He bent over the sled and pushed it for five yards, then effortlessly fell on it with his knees as it went over the lip. He had the scarf up in his left hand like carriage reins and he rode in and out of sight through the trees, scrambling deftly through them as if they were encroaching defensive linemen, kicking up sprays of crystal until he rolled off the sled at the curb far below to avoid hitting the street. It was a beautiful run.

He slowly came back up the hill, pulling the sled with his good hand, his right arm down at his side. His beard was full of glistening particles of sweat and spit when he reached the top. "My beard's frozen, man," he said, and, taking it in his left hand, he squeezed it. I heard it crack in his fist like a piece of brittle bark.

"Your turn," he said.

"I can't," I told him. "I'm not good enough."

"Then ride with me, Ace," he said. "Sit down and we won't even take a running start."

"Why?" I said.

"Why what?"

"Why do you want me to do it?"

"Don't you want to?"

"Sure."

"Then that's why I want you to. Simple as that."

"What is it you want from my dad?"

"Not much," he said. "There isn't much that dude could give me. You're all right, kid. There's just a thing or two I got to say to him. But I don't have to say it this minute. So get on."

When I finally headed for home late that afternoon, I was tired and happy and sore. Joey had gone up and down the steep hill with me at least a dozen times, and each time was better than the one before as he learned the best and most crucial paths. By the end I would have trusted him to ride with me anywhere.

He said he didn't have anywhere to go, so he'd meet me back here after dinner. "Leave your sled," he said. "You can tell your folks you left it over here with me and they'll have to let you come and get it. The sky's clear and we got us a full moon. Plenty of light."

My father was already home when I got there. He was reading the sports page in his favorite chair by the fire, sipping some mulled wine and smoking a cigar. My mother was in a corner of the room,

painstakingly lifting each dainty knickknack from its shelf on the wall and lightly dusting it.

She said, "Hi, honey. Have a good time sledding?"

"Great," I said. "I'm going back over after dinner, okay?"

"Okay," she said.

Then I said, "Dad, what happened between you and Joey Francona?"

My mother replaced the knickknack she was dusting and looked at my father. He quietly put down the newspaper and set the goblet on a table. He sat looking at me, chewing on the nub of the cigar.

"What did you say?" he said.

"You know."

"Don't play games with me, you stupid kid," he said, in that unfamiliar voice. "I asked you a question."

"Don't talk to him that way, you ape," said my mother to my father.

"What did I do?" I said.

"You were going to tell *us* that," he said.

"I just wanted to know about Joey Francona," I said. "Like why do you hate him? That's all. Okay?"

"No, it's not okay," said my father. "Did you see him today?"

I thought about not answering, but the sound of my father's voice persuaded me otherwise. It seems likely that Joey had anticipated our entire conversation, and what would come of it.

"Yes, sir," I said.

"And you're telling me he's going to be there again after dinner, waiting for you?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Don't lie to me. You dope. You stupid little dope. Can't you tell poison when you see it?" He headed out of the room. "That's it," he said. "Screw me out of the money is one thing. Screw with my family is another."

"Anthony," said my mother, and went after him. I went, too.

The study door was closed and I could hear my father talking on the telephone. I heard him say Joey Francona's name.

"What's going to happen now, Mom?" I said.

She looked sick. "Nothing's going to happen, honey," she said. "Nothing at all. Just forget about Joey Francona. He cost your father plenty." And she was right.

I waited until things were quieter, and then I put on my boots and

coat and gloves and hat and slipped out the cellar door. The park at twilight was blue where the shadows hit and red where the sunset still reached. The sky was a pale-grey, almost white. Joey Francona had been wrong. It was clouding over, and it felt almost too cold to snow.

At the top of the hill there were only a few kids, their faces blue with twilight and cold. I couldn't see Joey Francona. At first I couldn't even see my sled.

Then I saw it, tugged up into some bushes above a small slope that overlooked the steep hill. I pulled it out of the brambles and found that his scarf was still knotted to the rudder. Beneath the knot was a folded piece of paper. It said, *I did the right thing back then with the game and I did the right thing again with the kid. Maybe you and your people could maybe learn to do the right thing.*

I didn't know what it meant, but I knew enough to know I should be ashamed of my father, and that Joey was long gone.

A voice floated up from below. "Okay, Joey, get your hands off the kid's sled! I told you what was going to happen if you tried this crap! Come on out, keep your hands where we can see them, and we'll try to make this thing quick!"

The voice was talking to me.

I turned and through the maze of trees I saw my father and a band of men. In their hands they held guns. My father was holding a gun and it was pointed at me. I recognized that the voice had been my father's.

He saw it was me and turned quickly away into the shadows as if he'd been shot. In fact, they all turned away, and after a moment or two in the stillness in the snow it was like they had never been there at all. I think maybe that was what I was supposed to think. It was like my mother telling me to forget about Joey Francona. After a while, I guess it got to the point where you could believe anything you had to.

My father wasn't home when I came in a while later, my feet aching from standing there in the frozen slush at the top of the hill. I could feel I was coming down with something, and I didn't really care. I got into bed without saying anything to anyone, and when my mother looked in on me a few moments later I pretended I was already asleep.

The next morning I looked in the driveway and his car was there, and when I went downstairs he was at the breakfast table, putting

away some pancakes. He looked at me, not like he was going to say anything but like he was ready for me if I said anything. But I was his son and I didn't have anything to say. Pretty soon things were back to normal between us, but we never went back to the park to throw the football like we did that one fall, and I never saw Joey Francona again.

ON OUR COVER

Phyllis Diller, recognized as the leading female stand-up comic in the world, was born Phyllis Driver in Lima, Ohio, on July 17, 1917. She studied at Sherwood Music Conservatory in Chicago for three years and continued her music studies at Bluffton College, Ohio, where she met her first husband, Sherwood Diller. She was a working housewife and mother of five when, urged by her husband, she prepared an act and was booked into San Francisco's famous Purple Onion for two weeks—and was held over for eighty-nine!

Although films and television have been important to her, she maintains her preference for live performance. She has drawn capacity crowds to every major hotel in Las Vegas and Atlantic City and virtually every major supper club in the U.S. and abroad. The highlight of her stage career (so far) was her portrayal of Dolly Gallagher Levi in the Broadway production of *Hello, Dolly*. From 1972 to 1982, she appeared as a piano soloist with symphony orchestras across the U.S. and Canada. She describes her comedy as "tragedy revisited." There is seemingly no particular order to her zaniness, but whether she is telling about the attempts of medical science to make her more attractive or her sex life with her mythical husband Fang she is always funny.

Among the many major honors she has received are honorary doctorates from National Christian University and Kent State, the Golden Apple from the Hollywood Women's Press Club as most cooperative actress, and the USO Liberty Bell Award "for demonstrating concern for the welfare and morale of our armed forces." She has her own star on Hollywood Boulevard and is former honorary mayor of Brentwood. The newest addition to her home there is a studio where she paints in acrylics and water colors. All of which hardly begins to describe the achievements of this woman of great creativity, courage, and commitment.

a *NEW* short story by

SUSAN MOODY

"Why crime?" Martin's next-door neighbor asked him.

"Why not?" He grinned at her with conscious charm. He smiled in exactly the same way from the back of his book jackets.

She shrugged. "Crime writers have such a hard time establishing any literary credibility. It's taken people like Ruth Rendell and John le Carré years to be seen as good writers rather than as writers of good crime fiction."

"True." He rubbed his face thoughtfully. "I wonder if it would make you a better crime writer if you had personal knowledge of what it's like to commit a crime."

This is Susan Moody's first short crime fiction in EQMM. She is the author of the Penny Wanawake mystery series, published here by Fawcett, and she is currently chairman of the British Crime Writers' Association . . .

POISONED TONGUES

by SUSAN MOODY

Martin Fensome was already a household name when he bought the cottage next door to mine. With two successful novels behind him and his third being touted as one of the hottest literary properties of the year, he was, at thirty-two, well on the way to becoming the kind of major crime writer that I, ten years older and only two books further on, could never hope to be.

Not that I particularly envied him. Fame often seems to me to have been achieved at the expense of compassion. Martin, particularly, appeared to have trouble accommodating the weaknesses of others, despite his apparent understanding of the often pathetic

characters who peopled his pages. Perhaps I gave him too much credit—it is possible that the understanding I thought I glimpsed was, in fact, merely a prop to illustrate more clearly his invariable theme of an eye for an eye. Nor did he make any attempt to hide his steely determination to succeed in his chosen field by whatever means he had at his command. It is a trait that many writers lack. Those who possess it usually try to hide it since it often gives rise to a sneering hostility among their peers.

"Why crime?" I asked him once.

"Why not?" He grinned at me with conscious charm. He smiled in exactly the same way from the back of his book jackets.

I shrugged. "Crime writers have such a hard time establishing any literary credibility. It's taken people like Ruth Rendell and John le Carré years to be seen as good writers rather than as writers of good crime fiction."

"True." He rubbed his face thoughtfully. "I wonder if it would make you a better crime writer if you had personal knowledge of what it's like to commit a crime."

"Wouldn't it be bound to, provided you had the ability to start with? You'd be writing out of real knowledge, real feeling, then."

"Ability doesn't have much to do with it. Look at you, for instance. Let's face it, your books are infinitely better-written and -crafted than mine are. Yet—"

"I'm not particularly well known, you mean?"

"Yes." He sat by my fire, his face darkly sardonic. "You can't be naive enough to think that we writers achieve status on merit alone."

"Actually, I rather think I am," I said.

He laughed. "You've got to put yourself about more. Make contacts, get yourself talked about. Show them who you are."

"Difficult, when I'm not awfully sure of that myself."

Nor was I awfully sure who Martin was. Yet in spite of our different personalities, we became friends of a sort. I had thought I had him pinned down, dissected, and filed away, the separate pieces of him ready to be brought out and used to give veracity to a fictional character next time I needed them. It was Nathalie Benson who made me realize I might have been wrong in my assessment of him.

Nathalie was the daughter of the couple who lived in Lantern House on the edge of the village. He was something big in banking; she was American. Nathalie had been sent to her mother's old college—Vassar, if I remember rightly—after finishing her education

in England, and consequently did not meet Martin for a good eighteen months after his arrival among us.

She was a striking girl, tall and willowy, with one of those pale, pretty faces that are usually referred to as pre-Raphaelite, and a quantity of reddish-fair hair. She was working for BBC Radio and had plenty of the kind of transatlantic polish that appeals to men like Martin.

I confess I hadn't believed him capable of falling so passionately in love. But fall he did. So much so that he, the intolerant dissector of the flaws in others, was blind to those in her. Had I realized how total his commitment to Nathalie was to become, I might even have tried to warn him. Or maybe I would not have done; once set on their paths, I have found that people seldom alter their course, however explicit the danger signs.

And what, after all, was there for me to warn him of? The time she overdosed on sleeping pills in her first year at college? She always maintained it was not a suicide attempt, merely the result of stress and fatigue. Or the time she crashed her father's car into a tree in broad daylight on a straight piece of road? Another accident, she claimed, something to do with hitting the wrong pedal with her foot. It was established by the police that she had not been drinking, and the fact that she had just been thrown over by her boy friend wasn't mentioned. At least, not officially, though the village gossips—particularly Maggie Underwood, Jean Wallace, and Laura Pettifer—made sure the rest of us knew.

Anyway, trying to talk to Martin of neurosis would have been pointless. "What kind of neurosis?" he would have quite rightly asked. "What do you mean?"

And of course I meant little beyond my awareness in Nathalie of something faintly unstable, a recognition that the roots of her personality were too shallowly planted. Nothing I could have put my finger on, pointed to, and said: "Here, Martin, is the danger that could cause you pain in the future."

The whole village was invited to the wedding. The only absentees were Maggie Underwood and the Wallaces. Kenneth and Jean Wallace pretended to be desolated at missing the big occasion, though we all knew that they had only arranged their holiday in Rhodes after the invitations had been sent out. And Maggie discovered that she had to be in London that day, something to do with sorting out the General's memoirs. None of us mentioned, even to each other,

that Jean had crossed swords with Martin more than once over the way he parked his car on the village green, and that Maggie had been rudely rebuffed by him when she called about the Conservative Fete. I confess I was surprised to see Laura Pettifer there, in view of the fact that Martin had once called her an interfering old bat to her face. She came with Tim, her much-doted-on son, who was in his first year as a trainee-accountant and destined, so Laura said, to be a high-flyer in the City.

The occasion passed off smoothly, despite the faint curl of the groom's mouth as he greeted the local guests and the somewhat overly dramatic way the bride sobbed her way into the car taking them to the airport, as though she was never going to return. They were flying off to Japan for three weeks. I had no doubt that some of the trip would figure in Martin's next tax return as an allowable expense.

Laura Pettifer made a point of crossing the road the following day to ask me if I'd noticed the way Martin had been pawing the bridesmaids, but I said sharply that she must have been imagining it, managing to imply that she had perhaps imbibed rather more champagne than she should have. That annoyed her and she departed with huffy shoulders.

Naturally, I didn't call next door without an invitation once the newlyweds returned from their honeymoon. I saw little of Martin over the next few months—Nathalie didn't care for me much, nor I for her. In between the bouts of working at my next book, I began to realize just how much I missed Martin's acerbic conversation and outrageous cynicism, but respect for a writer's working hours kept me away, despite the fact that Nathalie changed jobs and began to travel up to London every day and even stayed overnight from time to time.

Then he invited me to dinner. "You've got to meet this friend of mine," he said. "He's in television. Could do you a bit of good."

Guy Henderson looked as if he had done a lot of people a bit of good in his time, most of them women. He also looked as if the good he'd done had mainly been for his own benefit. But perhaps I just don't go for that brand of looks: big body, beard, hungry blue eyes set in one of those enthusiastic red faces under a lot of springing blondish hair.

It seemed fairly obvious that Nathalie, on the other hand, did.

However much I reminded myself that she and Guy Henderson were in the same line of business and would naturally have a lot in common, their rapport seemed both instantaneous and exaggerated. He was down here doing a program for one of those literary slots the BBC like to put out from time to time—*Bookends,* or something like that, I believe it was called. It was to follow a typical working month in the life of one of our leading young novelists, Martin Fensome.

Henderson seemed totally uninterested when Martin introduced me as a fellow writer. Over the next few months, so he assured the table, though his eyes were on Nathalie, we would be seeing a lot of him. Naturally, I did not say that I would be fairly content to see nothing of him at all.

It wasn't very long after this that the rumors started. I think I first heard it from Jean Wallace at one of the monthly parish-council meetings.

"Saw them together in London at L'Escargot," she said over a cup of instant coffee, "sitting awfully close together." She smiled in the coyly innocent way that was her specialty, and none of us even thought to wonder what she herself was doing in so up-market a restaurant.

Laura Pettifer was next. "His car," she said, "was parked in a layby when I was picking Tim up from his grandparents."

"And they were both inside?" I asked.

"Well, I couldn't actually see them," she admitted. "But Tim thought he saw Nathalie's scarf draped over the back of the passenger seat. And why else would Guy's car be there?"

"Why else?" What did she mean? I'm often stunned by the vicious priggishness that is stirred by the thought of other people's sexuality, especially in the supposedly virtuous. I pointed out that Guy Henderson was here to make a film and he could well have been looking for a specific location. I waxed quite lyrical over the Young British Novelist striding across the fields seeking inspiration from Nature, followed by the BBC cameras, but they were unconvinced.

Then Maggie Underwood had a go. Maggie came to the village a determined spinster some twenty-five years ago, and has remained determined ever since—partly, I think, from want of opportunity to be otherwise, but also because a husband would have detracted from her own importance as the undoubted leader of local society. Her position in the village was unassailable: she was the daughter of General Underwood, who had been something high-powered in In-

dia, and she occupied herself chiefly with editing his memoirs and drinking tea with those of her neighbors she considered well bred enough to handle her bone-china teacups.

"They were holding hands," she said in her thin, well bred voice. "I saw them." She allowed a faint smear of distaste to crease her carefully powdered face.

"Where?" asked Laura greedily.

Maggie put down the disposable plastic cup which is all the Vicar sees fit to provide us with at our meetings. "On, my dear, the train!"

"A bit indiscreet, isn't it?" said Jean. "I mean, you never know who'll be coming down from London."

"But that's not all," Maggie declared. "I saw them coming out of the Station Hotel first."

"They were probably having a drink before the train," I said.

"Hand in hand?"

"They're in show business," I said. "People like that are always much more demonstrative than the rest of us."

What I said cut absolutely no ice with them. They were convinced that Nathalie and Guy were having a full-fledged affair.

Naturally, when Nathalie announced a few months later that she was expecting a baby in the summer, there were a lot of significant looks around the village.

"Oh, yes?" sneered Laura Pettifer in the village shop. "I wonder who the father is."

"Poor Martin," was Jean Wallace's contribution, along with a sorrowful shake of her head.

And Maggie Underwood, who had literary pretensions, thanks to the General's memoirs, made some remark about cuckolds that I'm glad to say I didn't quite catch.

Who told Nathalie? Difficult to say. By the time she was beginning to show, the whole village knew of the theory that the child-to-be's father was not Martin but Guy. Suffice it to say that somehow she found out.

I should really have warned Martin, I suppose, but he was so proud of his wife and longing so intensely for the baby that I found myself quite incapable of saying anything to him that would spoil his delight in either.

Then I woke up one night to discover my bedroom full of flashing blue lights. Looking out, I saw an ambulance outside Martin's gate, and men carrying a stretcher into the house.

I put on a dressing-gown and went next door. Martin was distraught. "It's Nathalie," he said.

"A miscarriage?"

"No." He watched as the ambulance men backed down the steep cottage stairway with a stretcher. "She tried to hang herself."

"What?"

"Yes. From the beam in the bedroom. Luckily, the rope broke. She must have hit the floor f-frightfully hard. There was b-blood everywhere."

His chin wobbled painfully. Martin, the cynic, the wit, the analyzer of other people's tragedies, was having trouble with his own.

We didn't see Nathalie again. Martin returned to the cottage, pale and sorrowful, keeping indoors for the most part and then leaving suddenly in his car at two or three in the morning to, I suspect, walk through the fields until dawn. Many weeks later, he knocked at my door and told me, over several whiskies, that Nathalie had not only lost their baby but been told by the doctors that she could never have another. In the aftermath of her depression and grief, she had decided to leave him.

"But I love her so much," he said. "How could this all have happened? Why did she try to kill herself? What had I done?"

"You mean she didn't tell you?"

"She did keep saying she had never been unfaithful to me. But it hadn't occurred to me for a minute that she had."

Someone had to explain, and there was no one but me to do it. "Martin." I put my hand on his shoulder. "People in the village were saying that you weren't the father of the baby."

He stared at me and I saw on his face the look I hadn't seen since he first met Nathalie—the ruthless look of someone determined to get somewhere, whatever the cost.

"Guy?" he said.

I nodded.

"They've been friends for years," he said tiredly. "It was Nathalie who persuaded him to make the program about me. I don't suppose the gossips around here can understand that a man and a woman can be friends without wanting to sleep together."

"Perhaps not."

"I don't suppose those old bitches give a damn about the fact that they've ruined two lives," he said savagely. "It *was* the Pettifer woman, wasn't it?"

"Uh—"

"And that old phony, Maggie Underwood?"

"Phony?"

"Of course she is. Stands out a mile off. Was she in on it?"

I gave a small nod, as though hoping that its size would somehow fail to underline the enormity of what had happened.

"I thought so," Martin said. "And no doubt Jean Wallace was in on it, too. Nathalie told me she and Guy had bumped into her once in some restaurant."

What I didn't understand was why Nathalie herself should have cared so much what the village thought about her. After all, she could have moved away. There was enough money for her and Martin to have lived anywhere. Perhaps it was the underlying neuroticism of her character that led her to make such an overly dramatic gesture. Or perhaps it was—I have often wondered since—guilt.

I thought Martin might move away, but he stayed. He even began to take part in village affairs, something he had always surlily avoided before. I noticed that Tim Pettifer was a frequent caller and was glad. I myself was preoccupied both with writing my next book and handling the publicity attendant on the latest, since my publishers had finally decided to give me something of a push. It seemed to me, in the moments that I could spare to think about Martin, that he could do with a friend, even if it was someone so much younger. And as the only child of a possessive mother, Tim himself might benefit from a dose of the Fensome cynicism.

Soon, the village settled down again into its safely dull routines. Christmas would soon be on us, with all that meant of carol services, church decorations, parties, and present-buying.

I wasn't aware for some time that anything was wrong. Then, in the first week of December, I realized that I hadn't received my invitation to the Wallace's party. Ordinarily, I would simply have assumed that they had decided not to give it this year, even though the Wallace party was as eternal a fixture in the village year as the parish picnic or the Conservative Fete. But only a couple of months before, Jean herself had told me that they had decided to have a caterer this year.

I am naturally diffident. No invitation did not mean no party, merely that I myself had been excluded from it. Perhaps it was my determination not to feel hurt that made me more conscious of the

Wallaces than usual. I noticed that Ken's car was hardly ever at home these days. I noticed how often the house was unlit at night, as though no one was in. I even noticed that Jean was hardly ever seen.

It was Martin who enlightened me. "What?" he said. "You, of all people, haven't heard?"

"Heard what?"

"That Ken Wallace wants a divorce."

It is difficult to explain the shock this news gave me. The Wallaces were so much part of the village that in a sense they almost *were* the village. If they were to part, then surely the village itself could no longer hold together but must inevitably be rent asunder. "But they can't split up," I said.

"Why on earth not?" He laughed his harsh laugh. "They're no different from anyone else."

There was no point in saying that in fact they were, that the two of them—solid, bourgeois, comfortable—represented a kind of English goodness that was lacking in most people and must therefore be cherished at all costs. "I can't believe it," I said.

"You'd better. The house is up for sale, I understand."

"You mean they're both leaving here?"

"They'll have to. The way I heard it, there are money problems. They'll both have to live at a considerably lower level apart than they managed together. Jean's been looking at flats in Larton, so I understand."

"Larton? But that's a dreadful place."

"I suppose it's all she can afford."

"But why is Ken doing this? Is there another woman?"

"As far as I know, it's Jean. She's been having an affair with someone."

I stared at him stupidly. *"Jean!"*

"That's what I was told. They were seen in London, apparently."

"Who by?"

He shrugged. "I can't remember. Perhaps it was the man she was having dinner with when she spotted Nathalie with Guy."

Jean, of course, denied it. I visited her in Larton, a horrid little industrial suburb. The flat was uncomfortable and cold—even the furniture and possessions she brought with her failed to make it anything but unpleasant. She spent most of my visit weeping, her broad frame jammed into the corner of a couch from their old house

that was far too big for the poky little room. "As if I would have an affair," she sobbed. "I love Kenneth, why would I want to? Besides—" and she looked away from me out of the window where factory chimneys dominated the grubby back-gardens "—I don't even like—" Her voice trailed away.

"Like what?"

"You know—sex."

There was little I could say to this. The thought of Ken and Jean in bed together was unsettling enough: to envisage them coupling was a little more than I wanted to contemplate. "Does Ken know?"

"Well—" She looked uncomfortable.

"Does he seriously believe you were having an affair?" I tried to keep my own incredulity out of my voice.

"Apparently he does. And he says that even if I wasn't, the damage has been done—a man in his position can't afford to have rumors going round about his wife. Better to divorce, he says, than be a laughingstock."

I could imagine him saying that. Ken didn't have much sense of humor and wouldn't relish innuendo about his wife. But I still couldn't understand where the rumor began in the first place.

"Somebody saw me," Jean said when I asked. "In L'Escargot. And Ken refuses to believe that I was there alone, although I was."

"Doing what?"

"Just eating. That's all. Just eating."

She saw my bewilderment. "It was after all those years of cooking for others," she said hurriedly. "Fish fingers and hotdogs for the children, and Ken wanting roasts with two veg. And now he's gone all health-conscious—wheat-germ and raw carrots all the time. I wanted to eat something delicious I hadn't cooked myself. I wanted to have it served to me for a change, that's all."

As I was leaving, she clutched my arm. "It's all happened so quickly," she said. Her face was swollen, fatter than it had been, un-madeup. She looked ugly. Worse than that, she looked frightened. "One minute I was happy, now—" she looked back along the mean passage to the mean little sitting room "—I don't think I ever will be again."

"Of course you will. You mustn't talk like that."

"No." She shook her head.

"You'll see."

"No," she said again. She opened the front door, a horrid affair of

fluted glass and plywood. "Thank you for coming. I haven't seen either Laura or Maggie since—"

The idea of Maggie Underwood sipping tea in that nasty little flat, her long leather gloves spread on her knee, was too ludicrous to contemplate. But I would have expected Laura to be kinder.

But Laura had troubles of her own. As though the Wallace divorce was the beginning of a larger rupture, a further crack in the fabric of our peaceful lives, Tim Pettifer suddenly decided to throw up accountancy and head for India or Israel or somewhere.

He came and lounged restlessly in front of my fire, telling me about it. "I mean, it's all so pointless," he said, "so meaningless. I mean, I slog away for three years and then do another three or four years' further training, and there I am, a boring accountant or economist or banker or something for the rest of my life."

"I thought that's what you wanted to be."

"Yeah, well—" he said. He stood up and kicked at a log protruding from the fire. "I did, once. But I don't know. I'm older now—I don't want to shut all the doors before I've even been through them, do I?"

I'd heard Martin once express a similar opinion. "Have you discussed this with Martin?"

"Sort of." He lifted his shoulders in the uncouth way the young do. "Like he says, what's life all about when you get down to it? Sitting at a desk, earning a *salary?*" The sneer he gave this last word was magnificent.

"Do you have any alternatives in mind?"

"Yeah, well, I want to see a bit of the world first, don't I? Live a bit—get away from my mother, apart from anything else."

"That's rather cruel, Tim."

"It's like Martin says, she's been smothering me all my life," he burst out. "I want to live my own way, not hers. And when I get back, I don't want to settle down into some kind of stultifying job just so I can keep her in luxury in her old age."

"What a terrible thing to say."

"Yeah, well," he said ungraciously, "I happen to think it's true."

"But she's scraped and scrimped so you would be properly educated and have all the opportunities you could need."

"I never asked for them," he said, not meeting my eye. "Anyway, I want to make my own opportunities. Or not. As the case may be."

Poor Laura. With Tim gone, her ebullience seemed to vanish. Her hair didn't turn white overnight, but six months later it was so much greyer than it had been and her figure so stooped that seeing her in the distance, crossing the village green, I took her for a moment to be an old woman, a stranger.

But it was the revelation about Maggie Underwood which concerned us all by then. It appeared that the General's memoirs did not exist, that Maggie's trips to London to visit the editor at his publishing house were in fact a figment of her imagination.

Worse was to follow: it turned out that the General himself was a fictional character in the slim volume that—so it transpired—was Maggie's life. Far from being the daughter of a high-ranking military officer, she had been born in some back street in Bolton, the illegitimate daughter of a midwife who had later married a supply clerk at the nearby Army depot. As Martin said, taking a glass of whisky with me one evening shortly after we heard, it was not so much the lie that was astonishing as the fact that she bothered to tell it.

"Why should we care?" he said. "There's nothing wrong with being illegitimate, let alone in having a midwife for a mother." He laughed hurtfully. "Though I, too, might have been tempted to keep quiet about Bolton."

"Poor Maggie," I said. "This will destroy her."

"Serve her right, if you ask me. All that snobby nonsense about taking tea with her and the endless crap about the General. No wonder the village is laughing its head off."

"Is it such a sin to embroider a little?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. His jaw was hard. "If it hurts other people."

"Maggie's little fictions can't have hurt anyone at all."

"Perhaps not the ones about her father," he said viciously.

It was not more than three days later that Maggie Underwood drank the contents of a plastic bottle of bleach purchased from the village shop. I've spent hours since, especially on sleepless nights, trying not to imagine how painful a death it must have been for her, lying there on the kitchen floor while the soft tissues inside her disintegrated.

Shortly after that, a For Sale sign appeared on the cottage next door. A young couple expecting their first baby bought it. They seemed nice enough from what I could see, and excited about living

in a house once owned by a major British novelist. For that, thanks partly to Guy Henderson's television program, was what Martin had become.

When the pantechnicon had carted away his furniture to the large flat in Kensington he had bought from the proceeds of the film rights of his most recent book, I went down my own garden path and up his. He was sitting on one of the window seats, waiting for the new owners to arrive so that he could hand over the key.

"I would have come to say goodbye," he said.

"I know."

"In spite of everything, I'm sorry to be leaving."

"Well," I said, and I hoped my own sense of loss and destruction did not show too much, though the novelist's eye is an acute and penetrating one. "It's no longer the village you came to, is it?"

The expression on his face sharpened as he looked at me. "I suppose it's not."

I wondered if he was really able to assess the damage done, or saw it merely as a kind of wild justice. "It will be interesting to see whether it makes you a better writer," I said.

"How do you mean?"

"Now that you can write out of personal experience of what it's like to commit a crime," I said.

Before he could answer, I turned round and walked through his gate and back through mine and up the path to my front door. I stepped inside and closed it behind me.

THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

With all the new mystery writers fighting for attention in the current bull market, there are some longtime practitioners still producing in a quiet way without ever receiving major recognition. Miriam Borgenicht, for example, published her first mystery novel in 1949 and has produced steadily if not prolifically (a total of sixteen books) in the forty years since. She never created a series character to be associated with her name, and the major reference books in the field usually treat her slightingly (Barzun and Taylor's *A Catalogue of Crime* and the first edition of *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers)* or not at all *(Encyclopedia of Mystery and Detection).* Only Pronzini and Muller's *1001 Midnights* offers an assessment that is favorable on balance. Her latest book is the first I have read, and I have to confess its excellence surprised me.

**** Miriam Borgenicht: *Undue Influence,* St. Martin's, $15.95. New York trial lawyer Lydia Ness doesn't want to appear for the defense in a rape/murder prosecution, but new boss Ben Lyttle convinces her she must—after all, hardware salesman Jerry Eldstrom may not be guilty. The unconventional puzzle is nicely handled, with at least three highly visible and credible clues to the solution, but it's the characterization, the prose, and the suspenseful variation on the children-in-jeopardy situation that give this novel special distinction.

**** Nancy Pickard: *Bum Steer,* Pocket Books, $16.95. Jenny Cain finds to her surprise that an eccentric (and dying) Texas cattleman wants to leave the Port Frederick (Massachusetts) Civic Foundation a Kansas cattle ranch. Justifiably wondering why, Jenny travels west for an introduction to the operation of the ranch, from charismatic cowboy Quentin Harlan, and to Cat Benet's widespread and contentious family. There's plenty of humor, a fairly clued puzzle, and even some will-she-or-won't-she romantic interest. Pickard is an outstanding writer, whose first professionally published fiction appeared in EQMM's Department of First Stories in 1981.

**** John Mortimer: *Rumpole and the Age of Miracles,* Penguin, $4.95. In the seventh volume of his adventures, poetry-quoting barrister Horace Rumpole is as entertaining as ever, ably defending his clients on a wide variety of charges: libel, insider trading, adultery, attempted murder, gunrunning, and (only once) murder. The seven adventures include one short-short ("Rumpole and the Chambers Party") that presumably does not have a television equivalent. It will be reprinted in an upcoming issue of EQMM.

*** Sarah Caudwell: *The Sirens Sang of Murder,* Delacorte, $16.95.

The third novel by a much admired author of super-literate comic mysteries will remind you at times of Mortimer (the atmosphere of barristers in Chambers), as well as such British humorists as Edmund Crispin (the self-conscious references to detective fiction) and, most of all, P. G. Wodehouse (especially in the funny telex messages from young Cambridge grad Michael Cantrip). Along with the rich, arch, and witty style which will delight some and drive away others (put me in the former camp) there's a storehouse of fascinating information about British tax avoidance and a serviceable puzzle plot. A continuing mystery of this series is the narrator, detective fiction's most androgynous sleuth, Hilary Tamar. Even Caudwell claims not to know Hilary's gender. (I believe a close reading shows Hilary is a man—clues appear on pages 140 and 148 of the book.)

*** Richard Martin Stern: *Missing Man,* Pocket Books, $3.95. Half-Apache New Mexico cop Johnny Ortiz, who appeared in three hardcover novels in the early 1970s, is now making a welcome comeback in paperback original. Since the expert tracker Ortiz in many ways resembles Arthur W. Upfield's Australian half-caste sleuth Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte, it seems no coincidence that the victim in the case is given the surname Upfield.

*** Robert J. Ray: *Merry Christmas, Murdock,* Delacorte, $16.95. Fans of tough, sexy, physical, and sneaky-sentimental private-eye fiction are bound to enjoy Vietnam vet Matt Murdock, who appears here in his fourth case, investigating a hit-run incident outside an ornate Newport Beach shopping mall that has left the runaway daughter of a female Texas state senator in a coma. Ray, closest in style and approach to John D. MacDonald, offers nothing particularly original, but he clears the familiar jumps with the expertise of a practiced professional.

*** Wayne D. Dundee: *The Skintight Shroud,* St. Martin's, $16.95. Rockford, Illinois' Joe Hannibal is another traditional private eye, somewhat less smooth and more interesting than Murdock. His second book-length case offers a detailed inside look (and a surprisingly sympathetic one) at an unusual mystery background: the world of porno filmmaking. (Both Murdock and Hannibal illustrate one difference between contemporary private eyes and those of past decades: after going through the usual physical torment, they spend a realistic amount of time popping pain pills.)

** Thomas T. Noguchi, M.D., and Arthur Lyons: *Physical Evidence,* Putnam, $19.95. In a somewhat better than average example of the "celebrity" mystery novel, former Los Angeles coroner Noguchi combines his forensic expertise with Lyons' storytelling skill to present a second case for Dr. Eric Parker, coroner turned specialist private eye. The main mystery centers around a cryonics organization known as Freeze Time, one of whose elderly subjects may have been frozen prematurely. The technical details are the main attraction.

Serious fans of the distinctively American shamus should know about a new reference book by a British writer, John Conquest's *Trouble Is Their Business: Private Eyes in Fiction, Film and Television, 1927–1988* (Garland, price unknown), the most thorough and readable guide yet to the hard-boiled subgenre. Completely comprehensive coverage of the fictional private eye is probably an impossibility, but the wide-ranging Conquest comes remarkably close.

Back in October, this column recommended some audiotapes of the Miss Marple stories read by the latest (and best) portrayer of Marple, Joan Hickson. Now the same company, Listen for Pleasure, is offering several tapes of short stories about Agatha Christie's other great detective, Hercule Poirot, read by the current TV Poirot, David Suchet. *The Jewel Robbery at the Grand Metropolitan* includes that story and four others from the 1925 volume, *Poirot Investiages.* These very Doyle-influenced early tales have never struck me as being in a class with Christie's novels of the same period, but Suchet's readings get the most out of them, maximizing the humor of the relationship between the conceited Poirot and the incredibly dense Watson character, Captain Arthur Hastings.

Suchet's vocal characterizations are equally effective in the longer third-person stories that present a complexity more comparable to the full-length Christie works. *Triangle at Rhodes* includes the title story and "The Incredible Theft" from the 1937 collection *Murder in the Mews* (U.S. title: *Dead Man's Mirror).* For price and ordering information, write or call Durkin Hayes Publishing Ltd., 3312 Mainway, Burlington, Ontario L7M 1A7, 1-800-263-5244, or 1 Columbia Drive, Niagara Falls, NY 14305, 1-800-962-5200.

a *NEW* short story by

HENRY SLESAR

Phil had done his homework, so he knew Wortman had an estranged wife living in a trailer park in Abilene. There was also a four-year-old daughter he hadn't seen since the night her croupy cough and endless bawling had caused him to slam out the door and hitchhike his way to Fort Worth, where, according to the police, he had taken the notion of sexually assaulting and murdering his first housewife.

Henry Slesar's latest short fiction, characterized by the style and substance that have secured his reputation in this complex and demanding genre . . .

HANGED FOR A SHEEP

by HENRY SLESAR

They would call him Boze here.

It was Phil Boswell's first thought when the elevator shivered to a halt on the third floor of the County Criminal Courts Building. Nothing had changed in the past nine years. There was still the same smell of sweat and stale air. There was still no way of telling grain from grime on the marble floor. There was still the same crackle and hum, almost below the threshold of audibility, like the murmur of high-tension wires. Everything was just as it was when he had been a ferrety kid new to the District Attorney's office, so why wouldn't his nickname be the same?

He was disappointed when the first person he met called him "sir," looking at his grey Armani suit and taking him for an attorney—right about that, of course, but Phil hadn't handled a criminal case in the last eight of his years in private practice. He gave the preppy young man an avuncular grin and asked if Donny Donahue still did his

dirty work out of the same corner office. Yes, he was told, Donny was there, but in a different corner. He pointed east, toward the area of the building they had once called Siberia.

It still deserved the name. Donny's star had obviously dimmed. He had sounded like his old self on the phone, but Phil had done some arithmetic in the taxi and figured that his old boss must be past sixty now—not a good age for bad politicians like Donny. But, hell, he didn't look all that different, and he bounced out of his swivel chair and gave Phil a crushing bear hug. And sure enough, he said: "Hey, *Boze!*"

Donny had a face full of parentheses, lines carved mostly by pure merriment. But the lines became question marks when he heard the favor Phil had come to ask.

"Why? What for?" he said. "This guy is looneytunes, Boze. Why do you want to see him?"

"I'm interested in the case," Phil answered. "That's all it is. I prosecuted a serial killer my second year on the job, remember?"

"Rat droppings," Donny growled. "Myron Wechsler did the 'prosecuting.' All you did was the coolie labor."

"But I still spent five months on the case, putting the package together, and it made me curious about this guy, Wortman." It sounded lame even as he spoke the words, so Phil shifted gears and said: "Come on, Donny, you always told me I had markers with you. Did I ever call one in before?"

"No," he admitted. "But I never thought you'd need anything, not from this office. What are you getting from those uptown clients these days? I read a million for your new divorce case, or is it palimony?"

"It's divorce," Phil said. "And, believe me, I'm earning every nickel. You think matrimonial law is a piece of cake, try spending six months with a hysterical, bloodthirsty woman."

"Maybe that's why you never married," Donny grunted. "Seeing so much of these Bitches from Hell." His eyes narrowed. "Hey, is that what this is all about? You trying to get back into criminal law?"

For a moment, Phil was tempted to smile mysteriously and let Donny keep his assumption. Donny had seen it often enough, lawyers looking for showcase clients, willing to defend the undefendable, so headline-hungry that they'd get into bed with an axe murderer or rapist or even a housewife strangler like Carl Wortman. Only so far, nobody had tried. So far, Wortman's icy-calm confessions had

paled the resolve of even the hardiest of the publicity-minded attorneys in town.

"No," Phil said, "I haven't touched a criminal case in years, and I sure wouldn't start with the Wortman case if I wanted back in. This is a kind of—journalistic interest. I've been putting some things on paper, you know the itch you get. Nizer, F. Lee Bailey—I don't know if I'll ever finish the damned book, probably burn it before I reach chapter two, but it's something I want to try."

Maybe Donny believed him, maybe he just decided not to press for more explanations. Whatever it was, he said he would do what he could, and Phil knew it would be enough. Donny would make the right calls and Phil would get admitted to the county detention center where Carl Wortman was still busily engaged in police interrogations, trying to delay his trial and inevitable sentencing as long as he could, maybe even enjoying the spotlight, no matter how white and hot it shone in his bright, intelligent, maniac eyes.

Three days later, Phil faced those eyes across a scarred wooden table in a room that reeked of old cigarettes and a few other odors he didn't care to identify. Oddly, the aroma exuded by the prisoner was one of clean soap and shaving lotion. Wortman's blue-cotton prison clothes were freshly laundered, his long straight hair damp from a recent shower, his expression amiable, even eager. It didn't matter that he was uninformed of Phil Boswell's purpose. He had been grilled by dozens of strangers since his arrest; by now he was a professional grillee.

Phil introduced himself with a business card, one that didn't mention his specialty. Wortman made a lucky guess. With a wide, crinkly smile he said: "I know who sent you here. It was Charlene, am I right?"

Phil had done his homework, so he knew who Charlene was. Wortman had an estranged wife living in a trailer park in Abilene. There was also a four-year-old daughter he hadn't seen since the night her croupy cough and endless bawling had caused him to slam out the door and hitchhike his way to Fort Worth, where, according to the police, he had taken the notion of sexually assaulting and murdering his first housewife. Phil had read some glib theories about how Wortman had redirected his rage against his wife, and maybe his mother if not his teddy bear, but he intended to ignore Carl Wortman's psyche and concentrate on his mission.

"I don't know your wife," Phil said. "I'm not here on her behalf.

If anything, I'm here because of your little girl. I'm afraid I don't remember her name." He did, but Phil had a little test in mind.

"Her name is Rachel," Wortman said. "Same name as my grandmother." If there was any alteration in the luminescence of his eyes, Phil couldn't detect it.

"You left when she was only ten months old. Have you thought about her in all this time? Visited her maybe?"

Wortman surprised him by nodding affirmatively. Then he asked Phil for a cigarette, but Phil didn't smoke. A guard came out of the shadows and handed Wortman one, lighting it for him. The service was good here.

"I was passing through Abilene," Wortman said. "I went to the trailer park, but I didn't see Charlene there. Hell, I didn't even *want* to see her. Somebody told me she was working in a coffee shop and Rachel was in a day-care center. I went to the place. The kids were outside, in a yard all fenced in with chicken wire. I picked her out right away. Rachel. More like me than Charlene. Me in a little red dress."

He grinned and stubbed out the cigarette, only half smoked. Phil saw the hole in the back of his hand and Wortman explained it almost with pride. "She did that. Woman named Cleo. Stabbed me with a pair of scissors, had me pinned down on her coffee table." He chuckled softly, as if in fond remembrance. Phil hadn't heard this gruesome detail, but the case name was familiar. Cleo Barnes, housewife, mother of two. She had been Wortman's fourth or fifth victim. He couldn't remember which, and wasn't sure that Wortman could, either.

"When the police caught you," Phil said, "in Abilene, last April—were you trying to see your little girl again?"

Wortman shrugged.

"Do you care about Rachel? Do you care what happens to her, how she grows up, whether she goes to school, has enough to eat?"

Some of Wortman's affability was waning now that the subject was no longer himself, and Phil hurried up his argument. "What I mean is, there's a lot more to you than the things you did wrong, the things you couldn't help doing, am I right? No matter what they say, you've got feelings. You would never have gone to that day-care center if your little girl didn't mean something to you."

"Well, hell, yes. That's the truth of it," Wortman said. Then he grinned. "Hey, you sure you're a lawyer, not a preacher? They snuck

in one of those on me and I told him to go save the sinners. Me, I'm just 'disturbed.' "

He dropped a wink and leaned back.

"I'm not a preacher," Phil said softly. "And I'm not a social worker, either. Although you might say I represent a charitable organization interested in the welfare of kids like your daughter Rachel. Because, let's face it, Carl, she's the child of a victim, just like the kids of Cleo Barnes."

Wortman was getting restless. Words like "welfare" struck discordant notes with him. But the name Rachel seemed to create a blip in the black intensity of his eyes, so Phil said it a few more times. *Rachel* is going to need help, he said. *Rachel* is going to need money—her own money, not his wife's.

"Damn right," Wortman said, his lips thinning. "Charlene won't do a thing for that kid, I know her only too well."

"Then here's what we're offering," Phil said. "This is how we would like to help Rachel."

Before he went on, he glanced at the guard in the shadowy corner of the interrogation room. His arms were folded, straining all the threads in his uniform. His back was curved into the recess of the wall. His eyes were closed and his lips parted; if the acoustics had been better, Phil was sure he would hear the faint whistle of his shallow breath. He was a man dozing on his feet, and Phil's last concern was gone.

"This is the offer," he said again. "A trust fund for Rachel. A nice tight trust fund in the Bank of Abilene, so tight that her mother can't touch a single nickel of it. It'll be payable to Rachel Wortman in escalating installments from the age of, say, fifteen, eighteen, twenty-one. Enough to take care of her through school, even college if she wants it."

"How much?" Wortman said, the blip more pronounced. "How much will this fund be worth?"

"One hundred thousand dollars," Phil said carefully. "One hundred big ones, Carl. How many kids have that kind of start in life? How many fathers can offer them a start like that?"

"Why?" Wortman asked, a reasonable suspicion in his voice. "Why would you do all that for her? Don't give me that 'charity' stuff, that's all cow flop. I know charities."

"I'm sure you do. I can tell when a man's been around, Carl. So I'll give you the bottom line. Just tell me one thing. Have you ever heard the expression 'hanged for a sheep' . . ."

Barry didn't answer the door after three long indentations of the buzzer, and Phil thought he might have decided to disobey his instructions and leave the apartment. Barry brought the explanation for his delay with him when he opened the door. Two explanations. One was the terrycloth robe he was wrapping around his body. The other was the faint fragrance of good Scotch whisky. Phil recognized his own robe and his own whisky, but he didn't complain. A man with Barry's problems, sweating out the last three hours in what must have been agonizing suspense, was entitled to a hot bath and a cold drink.

"I've been going crazy," he said. "I kept looking at my watch every five minutes. I took it into the tub with me and dropped it twice. Now I'll find out how true that waterproof claim is. Do you want a drink? Don't ask for the Glenlivet, this is the last of it."

"Sit down," Phil said. "I've got things to tell you."

"Good things, for God's sake. Make it something I want to hear, Boze."

He was Boze here, too. He had known Barry Lewin for a dozen years, worked across the same cluttered desk with him at the D.A.'s office until Barry had switched to defense work, had copped a nice light plea for a Wall Street criminal and ended up in his law department two years later, making nice money, marrying the prettiest girl they both knew, moving into a nice country house. The house was out of bounds now, haunted by the press, so Phil had offered his own city apartment as a hideout.

Phil checked his phone messages first. There were four shrill calls, all from his divorce client. There were two messages from his secretary. A robot voice told him that he just might be the winner of a sweepstakes. He switched off the machine and looked at Barry, huddled in a wing chair, his naked feet and hands like a sixteen-year-old's, his face like an old man's. Twelve years ago he had been the office pretty boy, with a mop of gold ringlets. Girls were always dropping by. Now there were only scribbles of hair atop a high wrinkled forehead. Phil said: "I didn't want to tell you what I was doing until I knew it was feasible. I'm still not sure it's going to work. I've got hopes, but hopes don't always keep people out of the slammer." He paused. "Which is where I was this morning."

"Where?" Barry said.

"I went to the detention center to see a man named Carl Wortman. Maybe you don't know the name, but you know the case. The Housewife Strangler? Did he kill six, did he kill ten? Are there twenty

victims still unidentified? Stay tuned. Bulletins on the hour. Film at eleven."

He went to see if Barry had told the truth about the Glenlivet. He had. Phil poured himself some vodka on ice and then sat down wearily, never touching the glass again.

"I made Wortman an offer," he said. "I told him that I'd guarantee his daughter a trust fund worth a hundred thousand dollars. All he had to do was agree with the old proverb that you might as well hang for a sheep as a lamb. Now see if that giant Wall Street brain of yours can figure out the rest."

Barry only needed five seconds. His tightened features began to inflate, his jaw slackened, his blue eyes rounded.

"Tracey," he said. "You asked him to take the blame—for what happened to Tracey."

"I got the idea three weeks ago when Joey Lopez leaked the story to me about Wortman being caught in Texas. I had to check it out first—the logistics, I mean. What Wortman's itinerary was, whether he could have been in the vicinity around the time Tracey was killed. Joey told me that the guy was hazy about his travels, that he hopped buses when he saw them, that he just let the wind blow him in every direction. All he cared about was his next date with some lonely housewife. He liked to kill them in the kitchen, did you know that? He dragged them all into the kitchen and murdered them over the sink. That was the only thing that didn't fit about Tracey, but I don't think it's crucial."

"My God," Barry whispered. "Can this really work, Boze?"

"It might," Phil said. "It just might. I told him some things he had to know. About your house, your neighborhood, about Tracey. Wortman's smart, believe it or not. A smart maniac. Had two years at Abilene Christian, studied engineering, dropped out when he got married. He knew what I was talking about. He remembered the little things I told him. About your unfinished garage, your bay windows, the Navajo rugs Tracey collected. I told him what Tracey looked like, the turquoise-and-silver necklace she always wore. The necklace that strangled her."

He looked up to see if Barry winced, but Barry's rapt expression hadn't changed.

"He said he'd do it? He said he'd confess to Tracey's murder?"

"I told him it wouldn't matter to him, but it would matter to his little girl. When she found out how well he'd provided for her. I told

him she'd grow up thinking her old man was one hell of a guy no matter what other people said."

"When will we know?" Barry asked. "When will we find out? They're breathing down my neck, Boze. There's a homicide cop named Riggs who knew me in the old days. He'd like nothing better than to nail my ass to the electric chair."

"We won't know until Wortman decides to let us know. Until we read it in the papers or hear it on the Six O'Clock News."

He saw Barry look at his watch again. It was five-thirty.

There was nothing on the television news that night, at six or eleven, and nothing in the midnight edition of the newspaper. There was nothing more about Wortman until the following evening, when the *Post* headlined a story on page three that said: THREE MORE VICTIMS CITED BY HOUSEWIFE SLAYER. The first was the wife of an insurance broker who had broken her neck in what had been mistaken for a household accident, slipping on the terrazzo tiles of her kitchen. The second was a woman in Boise, Idaho, who seemed an unlikely victim of sexual assault, being stout and sixty-eight. The third was described as thin, pretty, dark-eyed like an Indian, with Indian rugs all over the house. He'd broken her neck, too. She had been wearing a necklace he described perfectly; it was the kind of jewelry he used to see for sale around Santa Fe and Albuquerque and places like that. He even recalled that he had killed her in the living room, that she had struggled so much he could neither rape her or strangle her over the kitchen sink. The *Post* didn't hesitate to jump to the right conclusion. This third victim was local. She was Tracey Jean Lewin of 200 Roylston Road, Allenville.

Barry returned to Royalston Road the next morning, but Phil telephoned before coming out that evening, assuming that he might be having visitors. He was right. Riggs himself had been there to question Barry about Carl Wortman. Barry gleefully reported that Riggs had been deferential, even remorseful. The press had called, too, of course, but Barry had taken Boze's advice and invoked his "no comment" privilege. The relief in Barry's voice made him sound ten years younger.

Phil showed up at ten that night. Barry looked bleary-eyed, but at peace. He wasn't drunk, as Phil thought he might be, just pleasantly muddled by alcohol. The television set was on, a situation comedy giving itself lots of laughs. Phil found the sound obscene in this room, but he said nothing about it.

"I still can't believe it," Barry said. "That it's over, that it's really over. For two months—it's almost three, isn't it?—all I could think about was being in a courtroom, being the defendant this time. Me, the defendant! It was a nightmare, Boze. I used to have dreams like that when I was in criminal law, me sitting there and someone else defending. And it would have happened just that way if it wasn't for you."

For a moment Phil thought he was going to be on the receiving end of a sloppy embrace, but he slid away from the threatened lunge and went to the dry bar. There was no Glenlivet, but there was a bottle of medium-priced Scotch, one-third empty. He filled a glass and dropped in a couple of ice cubes. He was still watching them swim in the amber liquid when he said:

"Now keep your promise and tell me the truth. All of it, right from the beginning."

He didn't turn, even when Barry remained silent. Then he heard the click of a remote button on the TV set. The laughter died, and Barry said, "What I told you right off was the truth, Boze. I didn't mean to kill Tracey. As God is my witness, it was the last thing in my mind that night."

"Afternoon," Phil said. "It happened in the afternoon, didn't it?"

"Yes. That's right. It was a Wednesday afternoon. I was in my office. It was about two-thirty. I'd just had lunch with Nat Seely, the Senior V.P. Heavy hitter, Nat. Three Gibsons for lunch, and I kept up with him, he gets insulted if you don't. I was shot for the afternoon—not that I cared. Half the time I had nothing to do anyway. That was bad for me, because it gave me too much time to think. And all I thought about was Tracey. All I ever thought about in those days was Tracey. And the goddamn white roses."

"White roses?" Phil repeated.

"You remember Donny Donahue's office, right? When Tracey was his secretary? There were flowers on his desk every morning. Tracey brought those flowers—paid for them herself. I know, everybody thought she was a tough little cookie, always trying to be one of the guys, but she was like a hard piece of candy with a soft center. Maybe that was the problem. Maybe I never stopped thinking of Tracey as, you know, strong, self-reliant. I thought she could take anything. If I didn't come home some nights, if I went out of town a lot, Tracey would understand, you know what I mean? I couldn't picture her as a 'neglected housewife,' one of those weepy, complaining women. Even after she lost the baby, she didn't mope around as

if her life was over. Yes, we had a few fights then, because she wanted to adopt and I hated the idea, you never know what you'll get out of the goddamn gene pool. Oh—about the roses."

He picked up his abandoned drink.

"The way I found out about Donny's office and the flowers, I was going to work one morning when I saw Tracey coming out of a florist's. I asked her how she got a hardnose like Donny to spend money on flowers, and she broke down and told me the truth. She asked me not to tell anyone at the office, and I said I wouldn't. It gave us a secret together. We had a date a couple of nights later, and it was terrific. I was crazy about her. The next day I sent her a dozen red roses, and when I asked her if she liked them she said next time make them white."

"Did you?" Phil asked.

"No," Barry said. "The truth is, I never sent Tracey flowers again. I don't know why. I just didn't think about it. I mean, three weeks after we started dating, we decided to get married. Then I had that job offer in Chicago and there was all the fuss about relocating. Then came the Loomis case, and my new job, and the baby business, and all the other things—"

Phil was still studying the ice cubes.

"Maybe nobody ever realizes when a marriage starts going sour," Barry said. "Not until it's too late to do anything about it. Only don't ask me what I could have done, Boze. I was still crazy about Tracey, I never stopped being crazy about her. If I thought a bunch of flowers would have changed things for us, I would have sent them by the truckload."

Barry sat down for the first time, clutching his glass with both hands. "I don't know when I first got the idea that there was somebody else. It was before I noticed the rose, I'm sure of that much. The white rose in a skinny vase next to Tracey's bed. There was nothing unusual about Tracey having flowers around."

He seemed to be waiting for Phil to ask a question, but Phil didn't.

"One day," Barry said, "I was at the airport about to catch a plane for a meeting in L.A. when I realized I had left all the papers I needed in my study. I could have called Tracey, asked her to messenger them out to me, but something made me decide to go back home. Without calling first. I can't explain how I felt. There was something perverse about it. I was actually hoping I'd find somebody with Tracey. I was so sick of my doubts that I wanted them to be certainties. And I wasn't disappointed."

"You saw the man?"

"No," Barry said. "I saw the roses.

"Tracey wasn't home when I arrived. She was subbing at the local high school—she did that sometimes. She had brought in the mail before she left. There were letters, junk mail, bills. And the white roses. Half a dozen of them, wrapped in white paper. You could just make out the florist's logo printed in light grey. It was Reiner Brothers. Our local florist is called Evergreen. There was no address label, no card, so I knew they had to have been hand-delivered.

"When I got back from L.A. the next day, the white roses were in a little vase on the coffee table. I even asked a casual question about them. I said I didn't know roses were still in season. I asked her did Evergreen get them from a hothouse or something? She said yes—yes, they did. The way she answered, the way she looked away from me, Boze, that told me everything. Everything I needed to know, everything I didn't want to know.

"In the next couple of days, the roses withered and died and Tracey threw them out. The next day, I went to Reiner Brothers in the city and bought half a dozen white roses. I took an early train home, and when I handed them to Tracey her face went as white as the flowers. I said, 'What's the matter? You once told me to bring you white roses. Or am I the wrong delivery boy?' I thought she was going to faint, but she did something worse. She stood tall and straight, she put that look on her face she used to wear around the office when things weren't going right—you remember that look, Boze, her eyes like black marbles, death-ray eyes we used to call them. And she said, 'You're right, Barry. It's too late for a delivery, and you're the wrong boy. The right one isn't a boy at all. He's a *man*.'

"I hit her, Boze. I hit her just once, I swear it was only once. But I hit her hard. I hadn't used my fist like that since I got into a schoolyard fight when I was fifteen. At first it felt good, it was satisfying—all the anger that was building up in me went into that fist, Boze. But I knew it was too hard when my hand started to hurt, when I saw Tracey on the floor, her head twisted at that funny angle. I don't know if she hit something on her way down, the corner of the coffee table maybe. I tried to pick her up by her shoulders, and maybe that was another mistake. I could hear the bones in her neck grinding against each other. It was horrible.

"I ran out of the house. I was too scared to stay there. I drove back to the train station without even thinking about the plan that was already formulating in my mind. To wait for the train to arrive, my

usual train. To act as if I'd just gotten off the train, to say hello to people I knew, neighbors. To walk to the parking lot with them as if I hadn't been home at all.

"That's what I did, Boze, but you know what happened. The cops always suspect the husband first—why wouldn't they? Riggs even asked around about the train, about the possibility that I had done exactly what I did do. It was just going to be a matter of time, Boze, you and I know that. Until you did what you did. Until you did this thing for me, this great thing. I never knew what a friend you were, Boze. Now tell me what I can do for you."

Phil took the first swallow of his drink, a sizable one. Then he put it down and said: "You can write me a check. Two checks, as a matter of fact. One for a hundred thousand, the other for five hundred. The first one will be for the little girl's trust fund. The second is my fee."

"That's not enough. Not nearly enough!"

"It'll cover my expenses."

"Why are you doing this, Boze? Why? It's not your responsibility—"

"Isn't it?"

Barry wrote the checks and Phil left the house a few minutes later. Then he went home, mulling over ways to create the anonymous trust for Rachel Wortman. In the morning, he stopped off at Reiner Brothers and picked up a half dozen white roses for his visit to Tracey's grave.

Bonnie Hildebrand is a former high-school English teacher who has spent several years teaching writing courses. And although she has written advertising and newsletter copy, semi-dramatic presentations, an article published in The Orlando Sentinel, *and an essay for a recent issue of* Focus *(the magazine of the Orlando Science Center), "The Joke" is her first published fiction—a story that leads us to wonder, not for the first time, why such horrors as the joke that is at the heart of it are called practical . . .*

THE JOKE

by BONNIE HILDEBRAND

It couldn't have been murder. At least not the story *I* heard. I mean, shouldn't there be *intent* for there to be a murder? There was no intent. Or was there?

I remember Nigel Barrington-Smythe when he lived with my grandparents. He was old by that time, but very distinguished-looking—ramrod straight, slim, a full head of wavy, silver hair. His face didn't wear the years well, however: deep craggy lines crossed around his eyes and mouth; his forehead seemed to wear a perpetual frown. His grey-blue eyes were like ice—but that was because of cataracts, my grandmother told me.

A quiet man, he was not given to casual conversation or to entertaining. When we came to visit, he would observe from a distance and after dinner he would usually excuse himself and go to his room. When he did talk, it was usually only to answer questions, with answers which were brief and given in a clipped, crisp English accent.

I never knew how my grandparents had come to meet Major Nigel, as we children used to call him. Indeed, he was something of a mystery to us all. About the only thing I had heard from Mother was that Major Nigel had once been an officer in the British Army,

stationed in India. In the Fifties, he resigned his commission and came over here to live. For as long as I can remember, he had lived with my grandparents in their sprawling piece of Victorian gingerbread in the center of town. (That's when it meant something to live in the center of town. Today the house is some kind of halfway house or something.)

When my grandmother died twenty years ago, Major Nigel stayed on and continued to live with my grandfather. Everyone accepted him as a fixture within the family, but as he aged I grew more and more curious about him. Was he ever married? Did he have any children? I asked my grandfather these and other questions, but he just told me it was none of my concern and I wasn't to go around poking my nose into other people's lives. He must have said something to Mother, because she also told me to mind my own business. Their attitude, of course, served to whet my curiosity even more.

Things didn't fare well with Major Nigel, however, and as the years passed he retreated more and more into a world of his own creation until finally, no longer in touch with the reality of our world, he was taken away, screaming and howling, to a mental institution where he soon died.

My grandfather was, as could be expected, quite upset by the violence with which the Major had come to die. One day while I was visiting him alone, he quite unexpectedly revealed something of the Major's history—and the terrible secret that he had carried through his life.

As a young Army officer in India, Major Nigel had been married to the daughter of a fellow officer in the same regiment. She had spent most of her life in England before, as a young woman, she returned to live with her parents in India. She was, the Major had told my grandfather, very beautiful and had a talent for singing and they lived quite happily in a small cottage near the edge of the forest. The only weakness his wife seems to have had was an aversion to Indian wildlife, especially the reptilian kind—and especially snakes. On one occasion she had shuddered and violently thrown a book she had been looking at to the floor because there was a picture of a king cobra in the frontispiece.

How she must have longed to return to England where she had been educated! As it happened, Major Nigel was due to return to England and would have—except for the event that was to change his life.

One day, while walking down the middle of a jungle road, the

Major came face to face with a large black cobra. The hooded head of the serpent swayed menacingly in an upright position, ready to strike. Major Nigel hesitated for a moment before reaching a decision. The proximity of the snake and its venom would make running suicidal, but in his hand he held the means of his own survival—if only he could use it properly.

The device he held had been given to him by a native and he carried it with him whenever he walked through the forest, though he never thought he would actually need to use it. It was quite ingenious, actually: a wire noose connected to a stick, at the end of which was a lever that, when pulled, tightened the wire noose. Although he had been casually instructed, he had never before used the device. There wasn't much time to think. The cobra would either attack or retreat, and from the look of things it was more likely the snake would stand its ground.

Very slowly and carefully, Nigel placed the wire noose over the upraised head of the serpent. One sudden move and the snake would strike. Hardly daring to breathe, he let the noose descend a little, then a little more. Bit by bit, he took hold of the lever in the fearful hope that it would work. With his hand on the lever, he suddenly jerked it with all his strength.

It worked. After a brief struggle, the cobra lay limp in the dirt road, the noose still tight around its neck. Nigel knew not to go near the head—he had heard tales of men meeting their death by being bitten by the last reflex of a dead snake's jaws. But what to do with it? His first thought was to leave it on the road for the forest scavengers to devour. But then he remembered there was a demand for snakeskin—there would be a market for an undamaged cobra about seven feet in length. He lifted the carcass, still in the noose, and clumsily carried it home.

When he arrived, he heard his wife singing at the back of the cottage. An idea suddenly struck him, and he laughed at the thought. Although he usually wasn't given to practical jokes, he realized this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Opening the door quietly, he dragged his trophy inside and laid it on the mahogany table near the door. Then he went back to greet his wife. After the usual pleasantries, he asked her to fetch his pipe—not the briar, the meerschaum—it was probably on the mahogany table.

He stayed behind as she walked through to the front of the cottage to get the pipe. As he expected, he heard her piercing scream. He

had to laugh as he imagined her reaction on seeing the dead snake. Then he heard a thud. Then silence. He went to investigate.

I have often tried to imagine the horror that surged through him as he beheld the terrible scene in the front room. There on the table lay the snake just as he had left it, dead. On the floor, with a look of abject terror engraved on her face, was his wife, also dead.

He couldn't have known. Yet as the awful truth began to focus on his brain, he came to the sickening realization of what he had done. Slowly, and very carefully, he backed his way to the kitchen at the rear of the cottage.

His stare never left the large hooded serpent swaying over his dead wife's body. The Major hadn't counted on the dead snake's mate following him home.

DETECTIVERSE

THE MERRY WIDOW

by AILSA B. DEWING

She marries often and, with glee,
Stuffs her husbands' bods inside'er.
But, for her, it's *nolle prosequi*
Because she is a spider.

a distinguished reprint by

DANIEL MENAKER

Davey put through a call to Jim back in New Jersey. "Well, I'm here," he said. "The plant is just up the street, and I've got a terrific view of it and the loading bays and the railway spur that runs through the yard. Do you think I should—"

"Are you in the motel right now?" Jim said.

"Yes. I just got—"

"Don't talk there, don't talk there. I should have told you. Find a phone booth."

"You mean someone might—"

"Find a phone booth and call me back collect."

Daniel Menaker was born in New York, where he now lives with his wife and two children. In 1984, his "The Old Left," one of the stories in the anthology from which "I Spy" is taken, was awarded the O. Henry Prize. He is an editor at The New Yorker . . .

I SPY

by DANIEL MENAKER

In the Thirties and Forties, my father belonged to the Communist Party. They sent him to Mexico, to keep an eye on Trotsky in exile. As he tells it, he got to be friends with one of Trotsky's bodyguards, and liked him so much that when he got back to New York he deliberately falsified his report. My father also knew Russian agents and Americans working for Russia, but he says he had no part in the espionage. My father likes to talk about how much more active he was as a radical than his brother, my Uncle Sol, who nowadays makes a much bigger thing of his politics than my father

does. My mother says she went along with my father's revolutionary aspirations because she was so in love with him. They both had regular and unlikely jobs—she as a proofreader for the *Wall Street Journal* and he as an institutional-insurance salesman. My mother once told me that in 1946 she was crossing a busy intersection with a friend of my father's who was supposedly some sort of salesman, and he said to her, "You know, Emily, if a car were to hit me or something like that, for your own good you must keep on walking and pretend to have no idea who I am."

In those days, when I was in grade school and we lived in the Village, on Barrow Street, different pairs of extremely neat men wearing striped suits and well blocked hats would show up at our apartment. In the living room, behind two tall sliding doors that rumbled like thunder in their tracks and met in the middle of the floor with what seemed to a child like dreadful finality, the men would have long talks with my father. "They are from the government, Davey," my mother would say. "They need your father to help them." I could hear the strain in her voice as clearly as I could see it in the smiles of the two neat men.

Once, one of the men stayed behind when his pal left. He was immensely tall—six-four, as it turned out—and I was sure he was going to get me behind those sliding doors and kill me. Instead, he took off his coat, revealing a shoulder holster with a huge blue-black gun nestled in it. He draped his coat over the piano, unbuckled the holster, and held the gun in front of my astonished eyes, saying, as if from the top of a mountain, "What do you think of that?" He then sat down and had a cup of coffee with my parents.

This was Jim McCray. A year after Jim stayed behind and bowled me over with the sight of that monstrous pistol, my mother told me that he, and not my Uncle Sol, would be my guardian if anything ever happened to her and my father. I was hazy about what that meant, but hearing it made me feel happy and safe. That Jim became a close friend of my family's was an odd turn of events but not entirely surprising. During the conversation behind closed doors, my father and Jim discovered that they had both been born in Perth Amboy in the same year and for nearly a decade had lived only a few blocks apart. Anyway, my father has always been able to strike up friendships in the most unlikely situations.

Jim helped to keep my father and my Uncle Sol out of trouble with the F.B.I. and HUAC in the early Fifties, and when he left the Bureau to become head of corporate security for Worldwide Products

he stayed close to us. He's retired now. He and his wife live near my parents, up in Rockland County, in Nyack, and they see one another all the time. As for me, I live on Riverside Drive with my wife, Elizabeth. After a couple of years of teaching English in prep school, a year as a reporter for a now extinct West Side weekly newspaper, and five years of covering City Hall for *The Times*, I got tired of all the petty politics and skulduggery and took a job as a professor at Columbia Journalism School, which is what I do now. Classes were over a few days ago. Elizabeth and I will spend a lot of time up at our rented summer place, in Rhinebeck, and I may try a free-lance piece or two for *The Times Magazine*, but I have no regular work to do for the first time since the summer I was twenty-one and went to see Jim McCray about a job.

It was in 1963. Just as I was about to finish my senior year at Haverford and go to work as a copyboy for the Rockland County *Journal-News*, the job fell through. I hadn't been home in Nyack for more than a week, looking desultorily for work, when Jim called me up and asked me to come down to Worldwide Products headquarters, in Englewood Cliffs, to talk something over with him. "It would be better not to discuss this on the phone," he said, and my first thought was that it might have something to do with my father.

The Worldwide Products Company building was set back from Route 9-W like a fort. It was modern, low-slung, and rambling, and all you could see of it from the road was a flash of reflected sunlight from one of the smoked-glass windows or a glimpse of white marble. Jim's office jutted out from the back of the building, and the trees that crowded around his three big pearl-grey windows made me feel as if I were in some kind of natural stockade. Jim himself looked the same then, at fifty-five, as he does now—iron-grey hair, a white moustache, eyes as blue as poker chips.

His voice was high and sweet but dignified. If you asked him to show you the scar from a bullet wound on his right arm, which he got in a car chase that saw the end of some famous Depression Era criminal's wild career in 1942, he'd roll up his sleeve and say, "Oh, that. That's nothing—just a stray shot. The amazing thing was that some pal of the fugitive had called him the night before and told him we'd found out where he was hiding, but he thought that this fella, who was a notorious drinker and practical joker, was pulling his leg."

When I asked Jim if there was some trouble about my father, he

said, "Oh, no, don't worry, don't worry—this has nothing to do with your dad."

We sat down on opposite sides of his mesa-sized glass desk. "That's all over and done with," Jim said. "He never knew very much, anyway, to tell you the truth. No sense in their picking on him. But I do hope you won't mention anything to him about my little proposition. I know how he feels about big corporations and their shenanigans."

"Okay," I said, with a pang of an unfamiliar kind of guilt.

"I'd like you to go out to the Midwest and do a little informal spying for us," Jim said.

"Spying?"

"Nothing illegal, nothing illegal—don't worry about that. The Murchison Company has a big new plant out in East St. Louis, Illinois, and we're afraid they may be making a new type of instant iced tea in it. Our product-development people are pretty worried, because we're working on the same thing and we want to be first on the market. I'll pay you two hundred and fifty dollars plus expenses to go out there for a week and snoop around a little—find out if they're working on this stuff, how far along they are, and so forth. It's illegal to go onto the factory's property for espionage purposes, but just about anything else is fair game. What do you think?"

"It sounds like fun," I said, thinking how strange it was that grown men and women were going home at night and sitting at the kitchen table with a half empty bottle of liquor in front of them, worrying about a race between two brands of instant iced tea.

"I don't think this will be fun," Jim said. "But I thought it might interest you, since you want to be a reporter. Now, are you sure that doing this sort of work won't bother you?"

"Bother me?"

"Well, you're a sensitive young fella, and—"

"I'd like to give it a try," I said.

"That's the ticket, Davey me boy." Jim opened a desk drawer, took out an envelope, and handed it to me. "Count it," he said. There were ten fifty-dollar bills. "Now let me tell you more about what's involved."

"What will you be doing in St. Louis, Mr. Leonard?" asked the pretty girl sitting next to me on the plane after we had introduced ourselves. She was going home to St. Louis from nursing school in the East, and she spoke with a Southern drawl. I had never known

that Missourians could have a drawl. I had also never flown before, and I had never been west of the Poconos.

"Well, I'm in law school at Penn, and I've got a job as a clerk for a judge in St. Louis," I said.

"Really?" she said. "My father's a lawyer. Which judge will you be working for?"

"Justice—um, Blarney."

"I don't believe I've ever heard that name," she said.

"He's new. He's one of those Irishmen, but he looks like me. A real coincidence. He's older than I am. Of course. But he's got wavy brown hair, about six feet tall, too skinny. Ha ha."

"How interesting," she said. "And where will you be living?"

"In the southern part of the city. You know, South St. Louis. I forget the name of the street. I'm supposed to call this person when I get off the plane." There was a long pause. "He has diabetes—the judge, I mean. Listen, maybe you can tell me what diabetes actually is."

At the St. Louis airport I rented a car. I got lost in the city for a while, but I finally found the bridge over the Mississippi to Granite City and East St. Louis. There I got lost once again and found myself driving past gigantic factories with tall blank walls like cliff faces: East City Steel Company, United Starch & Refining Company, American Lead, Hubell Metals, Slattery Tar & Chemical, Wesco Steel Barrel, Illinois Fire Brick, East Shore Slag. Rows and rows of three-story attached houses and listing, flaking, asbestos-sided cottages in time-dimmed shades of blue, yellow, green, and red. It was an amazing and disillusioning thing for me to travel through the heart of the kind of place I'd only caught a glimpse or a whiff of from the Garden State Parkway and the New Jersey Turnpike.

The Murchison plant occupied two blocks on the north side of Jefferson Street. Directly opposite it was a bar and a bunch of dilapidated wooden bungalows. East of the bungalows sat a brick parochial school a block long, whose playground, behind a high chain-link fence, consisted of a broad patch of dirt fringed by tufts of crabgrass. Then another block of bungalows, and then the motel that I stayed in. It was a yellow-stucco barrackslike building, and its name was as blunt as everything else about East St. Louis seemed to be: Bob's Motel.

I checked in at three o'clock, just in time to watch a long stream of children pass the window of my room. The boys all wore white

shirts, green jackets, and green shorts, and the girls had on green skirts and white blouses. "Why do you wanna—" "Saw the biggest—" "Three doubles and a homer—" "Mary Ellen said she—" "Got sick, and he's a dumb—" "Sock him as hard as—" Their voices rang out and then died away, leaving the street hot, empty, and silent except for the thin sound of some country music drifting along like an old dog's leash trailing in the dust.

I put through a call to Jim. "Well, I'm here," I said. "The plant is just up the street, and I've got a terrific view of it and the loading bays and the railway spur that runs through the yard. Do you think I should—"

"Are you in the motel right now?" Jim said.

"Yes, I just got—"

"Don't talk there, don't talk there. I should have told you. Find a phone booth."

"You mean someone might—"

"Find a phone booth and call me back collect."

I went outside and walked farther east, and in looking down the street for a public telephone I caught sight of the children far ahead, dancing in the sun like leaves.

"The fella at the desk might be a little bored and listen in," Jim said when I called him back. "You've got to think about these things, me lad."

"Right," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Well, what's the trouble?"

"Nothing. I just thought you might like to know that I arrived safe and sound. Renting the car was a snap, and everything went fine." Then, though I didn't want to, I added, "This is some depressing place."

"You'll get used to it, you'll get used to it. You don't have to call again unless there's some emergency."

Parts of the new Murchison plant were already in operation, but its construction hadn't been completed. The factory consisted of three tan blocklike buildings of different sizes grouped around a concrete tower. West of the tower another block was going up, its dull-red girders poking into the air like blasted, limbless saplings. On top of the tower sat a big black wedge-shaped structure, and out of that wedge, for four or five hours every day, came the whitest of white steam, accompanied by a great rushing, hissing sound. The top of the tower was lit up at night, and when the steam was vented after

dark it looked luminescent, almost ethereal, as if the spirit of whatever was being made down below had been discarded and sent heavenward.

Sometimes the plant worked on one eight-hour shift per day, sometimes two, and sometimes three, and sometimes it was on what appeared to be half shifts. The blue-coverall-clad workmen advanced on the building and receded from it like small waves lapping at a titanic sandcastle. During the daytime, trucks of all kinds pulled up to the loading docks and later pulled away again; less often, trains hauling three or four freight cars would crawl slowly up or down the railway spur that ran east of the plant and seemed to end somewhere behind it. In a notebook I drew pictures of the plant and kept a record of the shifts, the venting times and durations, and the names on the sides of the trucks—Columbia Containerizing, Plastiseal, Glassco, White Star Sugar, Midwest Pneumatic.

I walked up and down the street again and again so that I could see the trucks' license plates and check how tight security was at the gate, which I couldn't see from the motel, and I stared at the factory from my windows for hours on end. The staring had no practical purpose; it was as if I were enchanted. At night, I used my alarm clock to wake me every hour so that I could record whether and when operations shut down. Those semi-conscious interludes were ghostly, almost hallucinatory, especially when the plant was running and those great clouds of steam were issuing from it.

"He knows what you're up to," said a voice from the barstool on my right. It was five o'clock on Tuesday, and I was in the Cardinal Bar and Grill across from the factory—about twenty workers from the day shift had come in for a beer.

"I'm sorry, were you talking to me?" I said, trying to keep the alarm out of my voice. The man sitting to my right was short and cherubic, with red cheeks and a tonsurelike fringe of grey hair. He had on a blue plant uniform and he was drinking a Coke.

"He knows everything you think and everything you do," the man said.

"Who does?"

"Why, God does, son. He knoweth every time you tell a lie, and He remembereth it, too. Do you walk with Him?"

"Well, I guess I'm not all that religious," I said, and tried to swivel back around and face the bar.

The cherub pushed me gently on the shoulder. "But God loveth you," he said.

"Why don't you leave this poor boy alone?" said a huge, sallow man who was resting his belly against the bar just beyond where the cherub was sitting. "Don't pay any attention to Hallie here, son. His wife left him four years ago and he got religion instead of getting around, which is what any sane man would do—ain't that right, Jimmy?" He reached out and fondled the chest of another man in blue who was walking by.

"Whatever you say, Grady," the man said as he walked on.

"Give this boy a drink," Grady said to the bartender. "What are you drinking, son—beer or beer?"

"I guess I'll have a beer," I said.

"That would be about right. I didn't catch your name."

"It's Dave."

"Grady."

"I know."

"Too big a target to miss, huh?"

The beers came. Hallie, muttering something about sin, got up and walked away and Grady sat down. "I know you don't work over at the plant," he said.

"No, that's right. I'm sort of visiting. I'm not from around here."

"I could tell that from the way you talk. If there's something in the way of sightseeing in this town, I don't know about it."

"I'm not sightseeing," I said. "I'm trying to get to see my girl friend."

"The women," Grady said.

"She's not the trouble—her father is."

"I can mind my own business."

"Oh, that's okay," I said. "See, we went to school together in Pennsylvania. We were going to get married this summer, but her father stepped in."

"School?"

"Well, college. Her father's a vice-president at United Starch and they live just out of town, in Ladue. I'm trying to get to see her."

"You seem all right to me, though you might be a bit on the skinny side."

"It's because I'm Jewish," I said.

"Well, hell, Dave, that don't make no difference."

"To him it does."

"I could see it if you was of the Negro persuasion."

"You know, if I have to stay around here, I'm going to run out of money," I said. "Do you think the factory could use anyone part time for a few weeks?"

"They got a personnel office. You don't have to tell no one it's just for a while."

"I know it's the Murchison Company, but I don't even know what they're making."

"Just go on up to the gate and ask for the personnel office."

"Well, maybe I will," I said. "Let me buy you back that beer."

"Hey, Grady, you want to try a game or two?" called a man standing next to the bowling machine by the door.

"Get yourself a partner," Grady yelled back. "That's my cousin Andy, Dave. You can tell from his waistline. Can you use that machine?"

"I'm pretty good at it," I said. "Though it depends on the machine."

"We'll pin his ears back for him."

Grady had to lift his belly over the edge of the board before he could slide the puck down the alley, and he had a way of reaching over the foul line which caused a lot of good-natured complaints. "House rules," he would say. He and the men we played against grumbled about someone named Johnson at the plant—I guessed he was their foreman—but it was mostly wives and baseball and cars. And racism—of a kind at once so casual and so virulent that at the time I couldn't believe that these men, who otherwise seemed decent, had their whole heart in what they were saying. Grady eventually left, and I got a hamburger and some French fries from the grill in the back and sat at the bar for another hour, but I didn't learn a thing.

Sta-Fast Labels, Missouri license plates. Red Diamond Hauling, Ohio. Occidental Office Supplies, Indiana. Little Rock Ink & Die, Arkansas. Two trains a day, marked either "Soo Line" or "Illinois Central." Two shifts Tuesday, one Wednesday, two and a half Thursday. Falling asleep in the chair in front of the window in my motel room, dreaming of drowning under a waterfall, awakening at three-thirty in the morning to find the steam pouring from the top of the plant as if the whole thing were an upside-down rocket boring into the earth.

"She called me when her father was at work and said maybe we could meet somewhere this weekend."

"Let me buy you a beer."

"You and Grady work at the same job over there?"

"Andy here swears he'll never be married."

"I'd love to beat you, Grady, but my wife will have my hair if I don't get home."

Shouts from the children in the dusty playground at recess, the drone of recitation floating out the school's windows and down the street, borne by a hot, oppressive breeze.

On Thursday evening, at the bar, I asked Grady's cousin what the plant was making and he said, "How come you're so interested?"

"Well, I figured that if I'm going to ask for a job over there, I'd like to know what I'd be doing."

"This kind of job's just a job," he said. "It don't matter what you're doing. If you need the money, why don't you do something about it instead of sitting here jawing? You don't want no job here."

I had already begun to get the feeling that some of the other men had become suspicious about me, so I left as quickly and inconspicuously as I could.

On Friday, as I was walking past the school at recess, one of the teachers on the playground beckoned me over to the fence. "Sonny, I don't know why you would want to walk along here all the time," she said. "But you had better just stay away from these children."

That night, at seven, I locked the door to my room and walked down to the public phone and called Jim at home.

"Listen, I've had about as much of this as I can handle," I said.

"Is anyone onto you? Are they asking questions?" He sounded less concerned than excited, like a child in the midst of anticipation.

"A little," I said. "But it's not that. The whole thing makes me uneasy."

"Well, it's just two more days. I sure would like to know whether that plant operates on Sunday. Just lie low, keep your eye on the place. See if you can get into some conversations."

"But I've been doing all that," I said. "You certainly were right about one thing—it isn't fun."

"It just takes patience. That's the key. We really would like to know what's going on out there. Hang on. See if you can get into some conversations. And come in to see me on Monday when you get back."

At the motel, a man was leaning against the door to my room. He

was swarthy and wiry, and was dressed in a sweat-stained blue shirt and khakis.

"Are you the guy who's supposed to be looking for work?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm out here trying to see my girl friend," I said. "My money's just about to—"

"Andy Thaxton told me about you. My name's Johnston. What's yours?"

"Dave. David."

"You're as phony as a snake's leg," he said, crossing his arms. "What do you want out here?"

"I told you—just a job. My girl friend's old man—"

"Girl friend my ass. Why don't you clear out of here before you get yourself into some real trouble? You're just about old enough to wear a jock, ain't you? How come they sent a kid like you?"

"It's the truth. Andy, Grady know—"

"If you was just a little older, I'd call the cops."

"I haven't broken any laws," I said.

He pushed himself off the door and cuffed the side of my head so hard that tears came to my eyes. "Don't talk laws to me, boy. Just clear on out."

As I watched Johnston walk away, I had the most peculiar impulse to follow him. I wanted to apologize to him, to explain things to him, to have him put his arm around my shoulders and invite me home for a beer. I wanted to work at the factory, to put on those blue coveralls every morning, to live in that place, so that I would be able to look twice at strangers. I wanted to go over to the Cardinal at quitting time and complain about the niggers down in Selma. I wanted to consider with envy the rich men who lived in the fancy suburbs of St. Louis.

My father has always known that I once did some work for Jim. That much I told him. Over the years, he's asked me from time to time exactly what the job was. When I wouldn't tell him, he would laugh as if we were partners in some hilarious crime, as if my not telling him told him something else about me—something he approved of. He's getting old now, though, and yesterday, when I was driving him up to Nyack after picking him up at the dentist's on Seventy-second Street, we got stuck in a traffic jam on West End Avenue and, looking for something to talk about, I finally spilled the beans. What harm could it do now—and, anyway, we've been

telling each other a lot of secrets lately. I guess we both know that the time for secrets is growing shorter.

When I finished the story, he said, "I guessed it was something like that. Was the information you got of any use to Jim?"

"I don't know," I said. "I typed it all up and gave it to him on that Monday. He said it was a good job and that they might be able to get some kind of pattern from my notes. He also said that the men not talking and the stuff with Johnston probably meant something secret was going on. But I think he was disappointed. He couldn't blame me for leaving right away, but I could tell that he was hoping I'd get the goods on that plant. I thought he was more disappointed about *my* not getting the goods than about not getting the goods, if you know what I mean."

"Ouch," my father said. "That bastard really did a job yanking my tooth out. The Novocain's beginning to wear off."

"I wasn't really cut out for that kind of work," I said. "The ironic thing is that Worldwide did get their tea on the market first but it wasn't as good as the Murchison stuff."

"I know," my father said. "I use the Murchison myself. But don't tell Jim." Just then the traffic cleared a little, and we drove on. We hit a red light at 100th Street and stopped right beside the Strathmore, an old hotel that has just been renovated.

"My God, look at the Strathmore," my father said. "What a coincidence! That's where all the spies lived."

"Russian or American?" I said.

"A lot of times you couldn't tell. Everybody was spying on everybody. Sometimes it got to be very funny. And, you know, that's where I first laid eyes on Jim McCray. I was visiting someone in the hotel, and when I came out I caught sight of this tall fellow standing across the street, leaning against a car. He was trying to look nonchalant, but he was so obviously an F.B.I. man it was ridiculous. He tailed me into the subway, but I lost him at Columbus Circle. It was an old trick. A few weeks later he came calling on us at Barrow Street."

"I never knew that," I said.

"It's a fact. Those days seem romantic to me now, but at the time it was boring and silly. And a lot more dangerous than I realized. I guess I wasn't very good at it, either."

"But if they were all spies, why did they all live together in the same hotel?" I asked as the light turned green.

"They were lonely," my father said.

a *NEW* short-short by

PHYLLIS DILLER

The only time your editor has been fortunate enough to be in a live Phyllis Diller audience was at the 1980 Milliken Breakfast Show at the Waldorf-Astoria—an exuberant, fast-paced variety show also starring Ray Bolger, John Raitt, Eddie Lawrence, Gregory Hines, Elaine Stritch, Donald O'Connor, Bert Parks, and Elke Sommer. Ms. Diller was so mercilessly funny, she left the audience panting for breath. Her "Perfect, Premeditated Murder" is calculated to leave you breathless as well . . .

PERFECT, PREMEDITATED MURDER

by PHYLLIS DILLER

"What you need is a good drink."

"I've *been* drinking. Seth, you saw Cara's reaction. She didn't even answer when I asked her to marry me. No 'Drop dead,' nothing."

"She may not be ready for marriage."

"Is that really what you think it is? —Can you hear them all downstairs? They're having a great time."

"Darryl, that's what a party is for—to have a good time. What are you looking for in Dad's desk?"

"He must have the key in here somewhere. For a banker, he sure keeps his desk messy."

"Which key are you looking for?"

"Don't sound so ominous. I think this is it."

"It looks like the key to his file cabinet."

"That's what I want. —She was laughing at me, Seth, when she

walked away. She thought my marriage proposal was some kind of joke."

"Cara isn't too swift, Darryl. What's so interesting about Dad's files?"

"I couldn't care less about his files. But that's where he keeps it, I know that."

"What?"

"Ah. This!"

"His gun?"

"Great—it's loaded."

"Darryl, what are you going to do with a gun?"

"I'm going to shoot Dad."

"Stop talking crazy."

"He deserves it. He ruined us."

"He didn't do anything. Put the gun away. I'll drag you out of here if you don't stop acting crazy."

"Seth, you hate him as much as I do—admit it!"

"Not enough to kill him, Darryl! He doesn't have it easy, either, you know. Come on, put the gun back."

"He has it easy compared to us. Look, you don't have to be part of it. I'm doing this on my own. I'm going to walk down into that party, march up to Dad, and blow his head off. Surprise, Pop!"

"Darryl, cool it. I've had enough of this."

"I told you—you're no part of this."

"Oh, sure."

"What makes it great is that there are thirty people in that room. Every one of them will see me pull the trigger and it'll still be a perfect murder. The police won't be able to do a thing to me. I'll even confess it was murder and they can't touch me."

"Darryl, I can't understand how Siamese twins can be so different."

"Don't worry about it. Just come on downstairs with me. You're about to see a perfect murder."

1989 was a year of dramatic loss to the mystery genre—with the deaths of Daphne duMaurier, Hugh Pentecost—and of Georges Simenon, who died in his sleep at the age of 86 at his home in Lausanne, Switzerland. He wrote 84 Inspector Maigret adventures and 136 other novels plus 1,000 articles and short stories under his own name—as well as 200 novellas under seventeen pseudonyms early in his career. (In those days, he submitted a few stories to Colette, then fiction editor of Le Matin. *She found them "too literary.") He also wrote more than a score of journals, reflections, and reminiscences, including a bestselling autobiography,* Intimate Memoirs.

Of his fiction, Thornton Wilder once wrote: "The gift of narration is the rarest of all gifts in the Twentieth Century. Georges Simenon has that to the tips of his fingers." His fiction was made into numerous television dramas and movies, including The Man on the Eiffel Tower *with Charles Laughton (1950),* Inspector Maigret *with Jean Gabin (1958),* Le Chat (The Cat) *with Gabin and Simone Signoret (1972), and* La Veuve Couderc (The Widow Couderc) *with Signoret and Alain Delon (1973).*

Simenon was not only a compulsive writer—secluding himself for days while the words poured out of him, afterward feeling emotionally and physically drained, but soon needing to plunge into more writing—but for many years he was a tireless philanderer and something of a nomad. He lived in more than thirty residences during his life (including the two years he cruised Europe's canals on his boat, the Ostrogoth) *because, he told an interviewer, again and again he would get a feeling of emptiness, look at his surroundings, ask himself, "Why am I here?" and move on. In the Forties and Fifties, he spent ten years in the States, living for a time in Connecticut, Florida, California, and Arizona. But as he grew older he became more content to stay in the Lausanne area.*

Georges Simenon married and divorced twice and is survived by his second wife and two sons. He left instructions that his ashes be placed under an old cedar on his property near the ashes of his daughter who died in 1978.

In her own memoir, Nostalgia Isn't What It Used To Be, *Si-*

mone Signoret said of Simenon: "He's not one of those authors who scream that they've been betrayed. The [film] adaptations are rarely betrayals. They're arrangements that end up serving Simenon's world. Because there's a definite Simenon world and it doesn't evaporate."

"Inspector Maigret Thinks" is a perfect example of Simenon's ability to draw you quickly and firmly into his world. The story was first published in the U.S. in the June 1967 issue of EQMM. In his introductory blurb, Frederic Dannay wrote: "The story of two hangings on the Seine, against the interesting background of weirs and locks, barges and tugs, with Chief Inspector Maigret called into the case when all the other investigators have failed—Maigret as surly as the Seine itself, Maigret puffing constantly on his pipe, Maigret perplexed and irritable and finally coming round to 'thinking bargee'—to thinking the way barge people do . . ."

INSPECTOR MAIGRET THINKS

by GEORGES SIMENON

The lock-keeper at Coudray was a thin sad-looking chap, dressed in corduroys, with a drooping moustache and a suspicious eye—a type one often meets among bailiffs.

He made no distinction between Maigret and the fifty people—detectives from Corbeil, officials from the public prosecutor's office, and reporters—to whom, for the last two days, he had been telling his story; and while he did so he kept watching, up and down river, the greenish-blue surface of the Seine.

It was November. It was cold, and a white sky—garishly white—was reflected in the water.

"I had got up at six in the morning to look after my wife," he said, and Maigret thought to himself how it was always these decent sad-looking men who have sick wives to take care of.

"Even as I was lighting the fire, it seemed to me that I heard

First published by EQMM in 1967. Reprinted with permission of the author's estate.

something. But it was later, while I was upstairs preparing the poultice, that I finally realized that someone was shouting. I went downstairs again. From the lock itself I made out a dark shape against the weir.

" 'What is it?' I shouted. A hoarse voice replied with 'Help!'

" 'What are you doing there?' I asked him.

"He went on shouting, 'Help! Help!' So I got out my dinghy to go over. I saw it was the *Astrolabe*. As it was getting brighter, I was finally able to make out old Claessens on the deck. I'd swear he was still drunk, and knew no more than I did what the barge was doing on the weir. The dog was loose, even though I had asked him to keep it tied up. That's all—that's all I know."

What mattered for him was that a barge should have come and run aground on his weir, at the risk, if the current had been stronger, of smashing it. The fact that the only thing found on board—other than the drunken old stableman and a big sheepdog—was two hanging corpses, a man and a woman—that didn't concern him at all.

The *Astrolabe*, afloat again, was still there, about a hundred and fifty meters off, guarded by a policeman who kept himself warm by marching up and down on the towpath. She was an old motorless barge—an *écurie*, or stable, as they call the boats that ply mainly on the canals and keep their horses on board. Passing cyclists looked round at this greyish hull that all the newspapers had been full of for the last two days.

As usual when everyone else had failed to uncover anything new, Chief Inspector Maigret was called in. Everyone concerned had been engaged on the inquiry, and the witnesses had already been interrogated fifty times, first by the police, then by the Corbeil detectives, the magistrates, and the reporters.

"You'll find Emile Gradut did it," everybody kept telling him.

And Maigret, who had just questioned Gradut for two hours, had come back to the scene of the crime and stood there, hands in the pockets of his thick overcoat, looking surly, smoking his pipe in little short puffs, staring at the sullen landscape as if he wanted to buy a plot there.

The interest lay not in the Coudray lock where the barge had been stranded, but at the other end of the reach, eight kilometers upstream at the Citanguette lock.

The same setting as down here, in short. The villages of Morsang and Seineport were on the opposite bank some distance away so that

one saw only the quiet water fringed with trees and, here and there, the hollow of a disused sandpit.

But at Citanguette there was a bistro. The barges went to any lengths to lie there overnight. A real waterman's inn where they sold bread, tinned food, sausage, ropes, and oats for the horses.

It was there that Maigret really conducted his investigation, without seeming to, having a drink now and then, sitting by the stove, going for little strolls outside while the owner—a woman so fair she might almost have been an albino—watched him with respect tinged with irony.

This is what was known about the Wednesday evening.

Just as it was beginning to get dark, the *Eaglet,* a small tug from the upper Seine, had brought her six barges like chicks up to the Citanguette lock. At that time a fine rain was falling. When the boats had been moored, the men as usual had gathered at the bistro for a drink while the lock-keeper was putting away his gear.

The *Astrolabe* appeared at the bend only half an hour later when darkness had already fallen. Old Arthur Aerts, the skipper, was at the helm, while on the path Claessens walked ahead of his horses, his whip on his shoulder.

Then the *Astrolabe* moored at the end of the line and Claessens had taken his horses aboard. At the time nobody was paying any attention to them.

It was after seven o'clock, and everybody had already finished eating, when Aerts and Claessens entered the bistro and sat down beside the stove. The skipper of the *Eaglet* was holding forth and the two had no need to say anything. The flaxen-headed innkeeper, a baby in her arms, served them four or five cheap brandies without paying much attention.

This, Maigret now understood, was the way of things here. They all knew one another, more or less. One entered with a casual greeting. One went and sat down without saying anything. Sometimes a woman came in, but it was to do her shopping for the next day, after which she would say to her husband, busy drinking, "Don't be too late coming back."

It had been that way with Aerts's wife, Emma, who had bought bread, eggs, a rabbit.

And from this moment onward every detail became of the utmost importance, every piece of evidence was tremendously valuable. So

Maigret was insistent. "You're sure that when he left, about ten o'clock, Arthur Aerts was drunk?"

"Blind drunk, as usual," the patronne answered. "He was a Belgian, after all. A good chap, really, who sat quietly in his corner and drank until he had only just enough strength to get back on board."

"And Claessens, the stableman?"

"It took more than that to make him drunk. He stayed about another quarter of an hour, then he left, after coming back to look for his whip, which he had forgotten."

So far everything was going well. It was easy to picture the bank of the Seine at night below the lock, the tug at the head, the six lighters behind her, then the Aerts barge—on each boat a stable lantern and, falling over it all, a fine steady drizzle.

About half past nine, Emma arrived back on board with her shopping. At ten, Aerts got back in his turn—blind drunk, as the woman in the bistro had said. And at a quarter past ten the stableman finally made for the *Astrolabe*.

"I was only waiting for him to go to close up, for the watermen go to bed early, and there was no one else left."

So much for what was tangible and reliable.

From then on, there was not a scrap of exact information. At six in the morning, the skipper of the tug was amazed that the *Astrolabe* was no longer to be seen behind his lighters, and a few moments later he noticed that the mooring lines had been cut.

Just then the Coudray lock-keeper, tending his wife, heard the shouts of the old stableman and shortly afterward found the barge grounded against his weir.

The dog on the deck was loose. The stableman, who had just been wakened by the impact, knew nothing and claimed that he had been asleep all night with the horses as usual.

But, aft in the cabin, Aerts had been found hanged, not with a rope but with the dog's chain. Then, behind a curtain that screened off the washbasin, his wife Emma was found hanged—in her case, with a sheet pulled off the bed.

And this was not all: when he was on the point of sailing, the skipper of the tug *Eaglet* called in vain for his engineer, Emile Gradut, and found he had disappeared.

"It was Gradut who did it," everyone was agreed, and that evening the newspapers had headings like:

GRADUT SEEN PROWLING NEAR SEINEPORT
MANHUNT IN THE FOREST OF ROUGEAU
AERTS SAVINGS STILL MISSING

All the statements confirmed that old Aerts had a nest egg, and everyone even agreed on the amount—one hundred thousand francs. Why? It was quite a story—or, rather, it was very simple. Aerts, who was sixty and had two grownup sons, married, had taken Emma as his second wife—and Emma, from Strasbourg, was only forty.

Now things weren't going at all well with them. At every lock, Emma complained about the meanness of the old man, who barely gave her enough to eat on.

"I don't even know where he keeps his money," she used to say. "He wants it to go to his sons if he should die. And *I* have to kill myself looking after him, steering the boat, to say nothing of—" She would go into cynical detail, to Aerts's face if need be, while Aerts stubbornly confined himself to shaking his head.

Only after she had gone he would murmur, "She only married me for my hundred thousand francs. But she'll be diddled."

Or Emma would say, "As if his sons needed it to live."

In fact, the elder, Joseph, was skipper of a tug in Antwerp, and Theodore, assisted by his father, had bought a fine motor launch, the *Marie-France,* which had just been reached on its way to Maastricht in Holland.

"But I'll find them, his hundred thousand francs—" She would tell you this without thinking, even if she had known you for only five minutes; she would give you the most intimate details about her old husband and would then conclude cynically, "All the same, he doesn't imagine it was for love that a young woman like me—"

And she was deceiving him. The evidence was indisputable. Even the skipper of the *Eaglet* knew all about it.

"I am only telling you what I know. But without a doubt, during the fortnight we were lying idle at Alfortville, and while the *Astrolabe* was loading, Emile Gradut often used to go and see her, even in broad daylight."

So?

Emile Gradut, who was twenty-three, was a rat, that was clear. Actually, he had been arrested twenty-four hours later, starving in the forest of Rougeau less than five kilometers from Citanguette.

"I haven't done anything!" he screamed at the policemen as he tried to ward off the blows.

An unhealthy little lecher, repellent, whom Maigret questioned

for two hours in his office and who had repeated obstinately, "I haven't done anything."

"Then why did you clear off?"

"That's my business!"

As for the examining magistrate, who was sure that Gradut had hidden the money in the forest, he had the place combed again—without result.

There was something infinitely dreary about all this, like the river which reflected the same sky from morning to night, like the string of boats that announced their presence with hooters—one blast for each barge under tow—and which were endlessly edging their way in and out of the lock. Then, while the women on the deck, busying themselves with the kids, kept an eye on the barges, the men went up to the bistro, had a quick drink, and came back with heavy tread.

All crystal clear, one of his colleagues had said to Maigret. And yet Maigret, surly as the Seine itself, as a canal in the rain, had come back to his lock and couldn't tear himself away again.

It's always the same thing: when an affair appears to be clear, nobody thinks of going deeper into the details. For everyone it was Gradut who had done it, and he looked so much the type who might that this in itself was taken as evidence.

Notwithstanding, there were now the results of two post-mortems, which produced some strange conclusions. Thus, for Arthur Aerts, Dr. Paul said, "Slight contusion under chin. From the degree of rigor mortis and the contents of the stomach can state that death by strangulation took place between ten and ten-thirty."

Now, Aerts had come back on board at ten. According to the blonde patronne, Claessens had followed him a quarter of an hour later, and Claessens had stated that he had gone straight to bed.

Was the light on in the Aertses' cabin?

"I don't know."

Was the dog loose?

The poor old man had thought for a long time, only to end with a helpless gesture. No, he didn't know—he hadn't noticed. Could he possibly have foreseen that his doings on that particular evening would become of prime importance after the event? He was half-seas-over. He was sleeping fully dressed on the straw, in the pungent odor of the horses.

"Didn't hear anything? Anything at all?"

He didn't know, he couldn't have known! He was asleep, and when he woke up he found himself in midstream, up against the weir.

There was another piece of evidence, but could it be relied on? It was by Madame Couturier, the wife of the skipper of *Eaglet*. The chief inspector at Corbeil had questioned her as well as the others before letting the convoy proceed on its way toward the Loing Canal. Maigret had the transcript in his pocket.

Question: You heard nothing during the night?

Answer: I wouldn't like to swear that.

Q: Tell me what you heard.

A: It's so hazy. At one time I woke up and I looked at the time on the alarm clock. It was a quarter to eleven. It seemed to me that someone was talking near the boat.

Q: You didn't recognize the voices?

A: No. But I thought it was Gradut having a rendezvous with Emma. I must have gone back to sleep straight away.

Could one rely on this? And even if it were true, what did it prove?

Below the dam, a tug, its six barges, and the *Astrolabe* had been moored for the night, and—

The report on Aerts was clear: he had died by strangulation between ten and ten-thirty. But the story grew complicated with the second of Dr. Paul's reports, the one that referred to Emma.

"The right cheekbone bore traces of bruising caused either by a blunt instrument or by a violent blow from a fist. As to the time of death—caused by hanging—it must have been about one A.M."

And here was Maigret, sinking deeper and deeper into the slow, heavy way of life of Citanguette, as if it was only there that he could think. A motor launch flying Belgian colors made him think of Aerts's son, who must by now have arrived in Paris.

The Belgian colors made him think, too, of the gin. For on the table in the cabin, a gin bottle had been found, more than half empty. The cabin itself had been ransacked from top to bottom: even the mattress had been ripped open, and the stuffing was spread all round.

All this, of course, in a search for the savings. Those who had been first on the scene were saying, "It's all very simple. Emile Gradut killed Aerts and Emma. Then he got drunk and hunted for the money, and now he's got it hidden in the forest."

But there was one difficulty: Dr. Paul's post-mortem on Emma revealed that *she* had drunk all the gin.

Well, so what? Then it was Emma who drank the gin, and not Gradut.

Perfectly clear, was the answer. Gradut, having killed Aerts, got his wife drunk so as to have the upper hand more easily—for you remember she was a strong woman.

If you believed that story, Gradut and his mistress had both stayed aboard from ten or half past, when Arthur Aerts died, until midnight or one in the morning, when Emma died.

It was possible, of course. Anything was possible. But Maigret wanted—it was hard to put into words—he wanted to come round to "thinking bargee"—that's to say, to thinking as the barge folk did.

He had been quite as hard as the others on Gradut. For two hours he had kept grilling him. To begin with, he had used the same old velvet-glove line, as they call it at Headquarters. "Now, listen to me, my boy, you're mixed up in this, that's obvious. But, frankly, I don't believe you killed them both."

"I didn't do anything!"

"All right, you didn't kill them. But own up, you pushed the old man round a bit. It was his own fault, after all—he disturbed you, so in self-defense you—"

"I didn't do anything!"

"As for Emma, of course you wouldn't have touched her, seeing she was your mistress."

"You're wasting your time—I didn't do anything!"

Then Maigret got tougher, even threatening. "Ah, so that's the way it is. Well, we'll see once you're on the boat with the corpses."

But Gradut had not flinched at the prospect of a reconstruction of the crime. "Whenever you like. I didn't do anything."

"Wait till they find the money you've got stowed away."

At that Emile Gradut had smiled, and it was such a pitying, superior smile.

That evening there were only two boats lying at Citanguette, a motor launch and an *écurie*. Below, at the weir, a policeman stood sentry on the deck of the *Astrolabe*. He was very surprised when Maigret climbed aboard, saying, "I haven't time to go back to Paris. I'll sleep here."

You could hear the soft lapping of the water against the hull; then the policeman, who was afraid of falling asleep, started marching up and down the deck. He, poor man, soon began to wonder if Maigret

had gone mad, for he was making as much noise down there all by himself as if the horses had been let loose in the hold.

"Tell me, young man—" It was Maigret emerging from the hatchway. "You couldn't find me a pickax?"

Find a pickax, at ten at night, in a place like this? However, the policeman woke the lock-keeper with the mournful look. And the lock-keeper had a pickax that he used in his garden.

"What's that Inspector of yours going to do with it?"

"I haven't the faintest."

As for Maigret, he went back to the cabin with his pickax and for the next hour the policeman heard muffled blows.

"Look, young man—"

It was Maigret again, sweating and puffing, who stuck his head through the hatch. "Go and make a phone call for me. I want the examining magistrate to come over first thing tomorrow morning, and he is to have Emile Gradut brought along."

Never had the lock-keeper looked so lugubrious as when he piloted the magistrate toward the barge, while Gradut followed between two policemen. "No, I swear to you, I don't know anything—"

There was Maigret, fast asleep on Aerts's bed. He didn't even make any excuse; he gave the impression of not noticing the magistrate's amazement at the state of the cabin. The floor had, in fact, been torn up. Under this floor there was a layer of cement, but this had been shattered by great blows from a pickax—it was complete chaos.

"Come in, sir. I went to bed very late, and I haven't yet had time to tidy myself up." Maigret lit his pipe. Somewhere he had found some bottles of beer and he poured himself a glass.

"Come in, Gradut. And now—"

"Yes," the magistrate said, "and now—?"

"It's very simple," Maigret said, sucking at his pipe. "I'm going to explain what happened the other night. You see, there's one thing that struck me from the start: old Aerts was hanged with a chain and his wife was hanged with a sheet."

"I don't see—"

"You will. Look through all the police records and I swear you won't find one case—not one single one—of a man who hanged himself using a wire or a chain. It's strange, perhaps, but it's true. Suicides tend to be soft, more or less, and the idea of the links biting into their necks and pinching the skin—"

"So Arthur Aerts was murdered?"

"That's my conclusion, yes. Especially as the bruise on his chin seems to prove that the chain—which was thrown over his head from behind while he was drunk—first struck his face."

"I don't see—"

"Wait! Next you should note that his wife, for her part, was found hanged with a twisted sheet from the bed. Not even a rope, though on board a boat there are plenty of them. No—a sheet from the bed, which is about the nicest way of hanging oneself, if I may put it like that."

"Which means what?"

"That she hanged herself. Obviously she did, because to give herself courage she had to swallow half a liter of gin—she who never drank at all. Remember the doctor's report."

"I remember."

"So, one murder and one suicide—the murder committed at about a quarter past ten, the suicide at midnight or one o'clock in the morning. From then on, everything begins to get simple."

The magistrate was looking at him with some distrust, Emile Gradut with ironic curiosity.

"For a long time now," Maigret continued, "Emma, who didn't get what she wanted by her marriage to old Aerts, and who was in love with Emile Gradut, had been haunted by one idea: to get hold of the old man's savings and go off with her lover.

"Suddenly she has the chance. Aerts comes home in a very drunken state. Gradut is only a few steps away, aboard the tug. She has seen, on going to make her purchases at the bistro, that her husband is already well on the way to being drunk. So she unchains the dog and waits with the chain all ready to slip round the old man's neck."

"But—" the magistrate objected.

"All in good time. Let me finish. Now Aerts is dead. Emma, drunk with triumph, runs to get Gradut, and here don't forget that the tug skipper's wife hears voices at a quarter to eleven. Is that right, Gradut?"

"That's right!"

"The two of them come back on board to look for the savings, search everywhere, even in the mattress, and don't find the hundred thousand francs. Is *that* right, Gradut?"

"That's right!"

"Time passes, and Gradut grows impatient. I bet he even starts wondering if he hasn't been hoaxed, wondering if the hundred thou-

sand francs really exists. Emma swears it does. But what's the use of that, if it isn't discovered? They start searching again. Gradut has had enough. He knows he will be accused—he wants to be off. Emma wants to go with him."

"Excuse me, but—" the magistrate murmured.

"Later! As I was saying, she wants to be off with him, and, as he has no wish to be encumbered with a woman who hasn't even any money, he gets out of it by punching her on the jaw. Then, once he's on shore, he cuts the mooring ropes of the barge. Is that right, Gradut?"

This time Gradut was slow to reply.

"That's almost all there is," Maigret concluded. "If they had discovered the money, they would have gone off together, or they would have tried to make the old man's death look like suicide. As they didn't find it, Gradut, scared out of his wits, roams around the countryside trying to hide.

"As for Emma, she comes to to find the boat drifting on the current and the corpse swinging beside her. No hope left. Not even a chance of getting away. Claessens would have to be wakened to pole the boat along. Everything's gone wrong. And she, in turn, decides to kill herself. Only she hasn't enough courage, so she takes a drink, chooses a soft sheet from the bed—"

"Is that right, Gradut?" the magistrate asked, watching the wretch.

"Since the Inspector says so."

"But wait a moment," the magistrate retorted. "What is there to prove that he didn't find the savings, and that just to keep the money—?"

At that, Maigret merely stretched out a foot and pushed away some pieces of cement, revealing a neat hiding place containing Belgian and French gold coins. "Now you understand?"

"Almost," the magistrate murmured, without conviction.

And Maigret, refilling his pipe, grumbled, "One ought to have known in the first place that the bottoms of old barges are repaired with cement. Nobody told me that."

Then, with a sudden change of tone, "The best of it is that I've counted it, and it does in fact amount to one hundred thousand francs. Queer kind of couple, don't you think?"

a *NEW* short story by

RUTH RENDELL

"I wonder that you chose to go on a Caribbean cruise, though," Cyril said as Mrs. Trevor showed him around the tank room prior to taking her first holiday since starting the Marine Museum. "Won't it be rather a case of coals to Newcastle?"

"What very unfortunate and hackneyed analogies you do pick on, Cyril," said Mrs. Trevor sharply. "You always have. What do you know about cruises, anyway?"

A meek and timid man, or one who had that reputation, Cyril only smiled. He could have said something about the days of his employment on a cruise ship but he didn't, though as he watched a crab's sideways progress among darting, jewel-bright chimaera he remembered the flying fish which had pursued the ship, and his friend who supervised the ladies' cloakroom next door with her collection of newts she called salamanders.

Ruth Rendell wrote "The Fish-Sitter" as the final chapter for an anthology of connected stories, Consequences, *published in England by Pandora and authored by a number of writers. Reading it as a short fiction on its own, you will encounter characters who are not introduced in a manner usual in a short story (since they appear earlier in the book), but this didn't interfere with our enjoyment of the story. On the contrary, it added to the sense of strangeness of the bizarre locale—and the sense of dislocation one feels in any new place, learning about its established inhabitants from an outsider's point of view . . .*

"Q"

THE FISH-SITTER

by RUTH RENDELL

Next door to the Empress Court Disco Roller Rink in Seoul Road, Southend, was the Southeast Essex branch of Daleth Foods and next to that the Aquarium. It was a parade of interesting and even exotic emporia such as are often found in the hinterland of seaside resorts. Goods were sold, services offered, and entertainment provided. For instance, in a flatlet above Magda's Sports Equipment, Ruth Church the clairvoyante, lately known as Ruta Yglesias, told fortunes and at the photographer's, last in the parade, little girls might dress up in tutus with ribbon laces cross-gartered to their knees and dream as they posed that they were Veronica Spencer dancing *Giselle*.

The Aquarium's real name was Malvina's Marine Museum, a grand title for what was quite a modest affair. On a sunny afternoon, when the beaches were crowded and the Ruler, ever-measuring, assessed the candy-floss queue at one thousand, three hundred meters long, Mrs. Trevor was showing her fish-sitter around the tank room.

It was lit, even on a day like this—for each tank had its own light as well as its own aeration pump. These were necessarily at floor-level, set to illuminate the green, ever-moving, ever-bubbling water below, and sending up into the tank room a glaucous, rather misty glow. In the room below, visitors to the Aquarium could be seen only occasionally and then dimly through glass and water as they moved, mostly in silence, between the Sarcopterygii, the Selachii, and the Decapoda. Some paused to read the printed and illustrated labels attached to the wall by each tank. Others pressed their faces against the cool glass and the marine creatures swam close to inspect them.

"Do you know, Cyril, this will be the first holiday I've had since I started this place?" Mrs. Trevor was saying. "Well, come to that, the first since I stopped working for you-know-who."

Cyril knew very well who, and was no more anxious to speak the name of the famous romantic novelist than was her erstwhile home

help. This attitude, on both their parts, brought him a pang of guilt, for would he have ever known Mrs. Trevor but for Louise Mitchell? This job, this temporary roof over his head, would certainly not have come about without her. Gazing down at the decapod among the weeds and branched coral below, he subtly changed the subject.

"I wonder that you chose to go on a Caribbean cruise, though. Won't it be rather a case of coals to Newcastle?"

"What very unfortunate and hackneyed analogies you do pick on, Cyril," said Mrs. Trevor sharply. "You always have. What do you know about cruises, anyway?"

A meek and timid man, or one who had that reputation, Cyril only smiled. He could have said something about the days of his employment on a cruise ship but he didn't, though as he watched the crab's sideways progress among darting, jewel-bright chimaera he remembered the flying fish which had pursued the ship, and his friend who supervised the ladies' cloakroom next door with her collection of newts she called salamanders. He also recalled the food on the *Calypso Queen,* the leavings of which had come his way and hers.

"The green-carapaced crab," he said dreamily, "whose meat is sweet to eat."

"None of that, please. Part of my pleasure in running this place is in knowing these innocent creatures are safe from the fisherman's net and the treacherous lobster pot. You don't eat fish, do you, Cyril?"

"Not this sort, at any rate," said Cyril, his eyes now on some variety of many-tentacled octopus or squid. "Why does nothing live in the biggest tank?"

"I'm hoping to acquire a shark," said Mrs. Trevor. "Possibly even Carcharhinus milberti. Now you know what you have to do, don't you, Cyril? You close at five and then you come up here and feed the innocent creatures. Specific feeding instructions are all in the book. You turn off the lights but *not* the aeration and in certain cases cover the tanks with their lids. Is that understood?"

Cyril said it was, and what about cleaning out the tanks? Some, he had noticed, were much overgrown with green algae which had even covered the back of the stone crab.

"Carlos will come in and do that. It's a specialist job. You're the kind of person who would use Persil Automatic."

He knew she was angry with him for what he had said about crabmeat and not for the first time castigated himself for his tactless ways. They went downstairs and Mrs. Trevor resumed her seat be-

hind the ticket window so that Shana from the rink could get back to her duties. Cyril, in the cozy sitting room at the rear of the Aquarium, found his instruction book, *The Care of Cold-Blooded Aquatic Vertebra and Crustaceae,* on a shelf between *Story and Structure* and Louise's novel, *Open Windows.* But he didn't read it. He looked unseeing at the pages.

As usual in one of his reveries, he trudged across familiar ground. Biggs was not such a bad name. It was an improvement on Smalls, for instance, with its connotations of underclothes. And several saints had been called Cyril. He had looked them up in encyclopedias. There were Saint Cyril of Jerusalem and Saint Cyril of Alexandria, both Doctors of the Church. There was that Saint Cyril who was responsible for christianizing the Danubian Slavs and invented the Cyrillic writing system. It is not everyone who can boast of sharing his name with an alphabet.

Was it his name which had doomed him to obscurity and, worse, to mockery? People laughed when they heard he was an insurance-claims inspector, as if someone with that name could hardly be anything else. But his venture at changing his name and adopting another profession had met with disaster. "Maxwell Lawrie" sounded distinguished. For a time his books featuring Vladimir Klein, international espionage agent, had brought him success and promised fame. But Glasnost had put an end to all hope there, for who cares for spies when there is nothing and no one left to spy on?

You cannot get back into insurance when you have been absent from it for so long, but Cyril hadn't even tried. Before he came back to Southend and Malvina's Marine Museum, he had been living on alms given him by the Espionage Authors' Benevolent Association in a hotel room in Madagascar Road, NW2, paid for by Brent Council. There he had often sat and wondered what might be the destiny of one called Cyril Biggs. Surely there must be more than to be the prototype of the dull little man in the novel, the one with thinning hair and the ugly wife, the one with shoes always dull with the dust of mean streets. He sensed sometimes that he had never had his full potential realized, though he did not know what that potential might be.

Malvina Trevor left for Southampton as soon as the Aquarium closed. She had dressed herself in a grey-green suit with a ruff around the neck. Once her taxi had disappeared round the corner

of Seoul Road, Cyril went up to the tank room and carefully scattered fish food into the tanks. He switched off the lights, but not the aeration and heating plant, and where instructed closed the lids. It was a complex routine which, once learned, became simple. Day after day it was repeated. From ten till five, Cyril sat at the ticket window. At five-thirty he fed the fish and closed up the tank room. On two days a week Shana came in to relieve him and several times Ruta Yglesias asked him in to supper.

Louise Mitchell was there on one occasion, for the sisters had always been close, and their mother with them. On another, Ruta had invited some people called Ann and Roger, whose surname Cyril no more learned than he did the christian name of another guest, Mrs. Greenaway. But it was quite a party and, to his surprise, Cyril enjoyed himself. He was not really gloomy by nature, only shy and lacking confidence. Before Malvina returned, and she would be back in less than a week, Cyril made up his mind to return Ruta's hospitality.

Giving dinner parties was not something he was accustomed to. For days, he agonized over what he should give Ruta, Mrs. Church, and Mavis Ormitage to eat. With Shana ensconced behind the ticket window, he roved the front at Southend, eyeing the fish stalls, and in equal doubt and confusion paced between the freezers in the Presto supermarket. Food was expensive, or that kind was. The price of crabs and lobsters horrified him. He informed the stone crab in the Aquarium of the amount asked for its fellows when "dressed" and offered for sale on the stalls. The crab's reply was to scamper sideways across its weedy coralline floor.

I wonder if it's really green-carapaced, thought Cyril, or if its back is the reddy-pink color of those I saw this afternoon. It's hard to tell because of the algae which covers it.

The main course was to be pasta, the kind the Italians call *alle vongole* because it has scallops mixed up in it. Cyril bought the pasta at Daleth Foods, but naturally the Orthodox Jews who ran it would have nothing to do with seafood. The scallops came from his favorite stall on the front—it was the cheapest—where he also bought a large dressed crab. He mixed its sweet meat with Hellmann's mayonnaise to make it go further and everyone pronounced it delicious. But when Mavis made a remark about its being rather strange to eat shellfish with "all that lot swimming about in there," he felt un-

comfortable. Had he been wrong to choose this menu? Had he made himself look a fool?

"Does that mean zoo keepers must be vegetarians, then, Mavis?" asked Mrs. Church.

Mavis giggled. "You know what I mean. If you had supper with a zoo keeper, you wouldn't imagine you were eating lion chops, but here—well, you know what I mean."

They all did, and Cyril couldn't help noticing that Ruta left a great many of her *vongole* on the side of her plate. What had induced him to make a lime mousse in a fish shape for pudding? It must have been seeing the copper mould in the window of the shop at the end of the parade where Mr. Cybele sold antique scoops. Mr. Cybele had lent him the fish mould and there was no doubt the pale-green shape looked pretty. But unfortunately no one wanted to eat it after what Mavis Ormitage had said.

Cyril felt that his party had been a failure. That, of course, was nothing new. Most of his ventures, large and small, were failures. But the arrival in the morning of Carlos with his tank-cleaning equipment distracted his mind from unhappy reminiscing. Cyril hung a notice on the Aquarium front door announcing that it would be closed till after lunch. He inspected the tanks before reopening. The improvement in their appearance was quite wonderful. Everything sparkled, fresh and gleaming. Every aquatic vertebra looked rejuvenated—except the stone crab, whose carapace was still overgrown with dense green fur.

Its appearance troubled him. When he went about his feeding routine, he put one finger into the water, touched the shell, and found he could easily scrape some of the crust of algae off with his fingernail. Carlos had cleaned the biggest tank in the middle of the room as well, and Cyril, closing the lid on the crab, wondered when the new shark would arrive. Before Malvina's return or after? She was coming back in two days' time. Ruta and Mrs. Church were driving to Southampton in Mrs. Church's new Audi to fetch her.

Cyril slept badly that night. He saw himself as a social misfit. He wondered about his future, which seemed to have no existence beyond Malvina's return. A great crowd came to the Aquarium in the morning and entrance had to be restricted. Visitors had heard about the cleaning operation and for the first time Cyril saw a queue at the front door. When the last visitor had left at five, he paced up and down the sitting room, uncertain what to do, torn by conflicting

demands. Then, impulsively, he rushed upstairs. He lifted the large, algae-coated decapod out of its tank, took it to the bathroom, and washed it under the running tap. It was the work of a moment. The crab's carapace was indeed green, a pure, soft emerald-green with a curious design like an ideograph in a dark purplish shade on its back.

Tenderly, Cyril restored it to its home. The crab scuttled through its woodland of weed across its coral floor, attended by a little shoal of fish colored like jewels. If Malvina inquired, he decided, he would tell her it had somehow happened during Carlos's operations. But surely she would be delighted? Cyril suddenly found himself hyperanxious to please Malvina, to confront her with perfection, to have attained, so to speak, supererogatory heights of achievement. Merely to have done the appointed job was not enough.

He spent most of Saturday night sweeping and vacuum-cleaning the Aquarium, the tank room, and the rest of the house, and on Sunday morning wrote in his best lettering a label for the biggest tank: Carcharhinus milberti, the Sandbar Shark—which he followed by a careful description of its habitat and habits.

Mrs. Trevor came back at seven in the evening, dressed exactly as she had been when she left. She entered the Aquarium alone and trembling with anger. Cyril had expected Ruta and Mrs. Church to be with her, but evidently they had thought it wisest to make themselves scarce. Malvina gave each tank a rapid penetrating glance, the stone crab a longer look. She went upstairs and Cyril followed. So far she had not uttered a word and Cyril had received no reply to his inquiries as to her health and enjoyment of her trip.

In the tank room, she stood looking down at the stone crab, turned to face Cyril, and said in shrill tones, "How dare you?"

Putting the blame on Carlos forgotten, Cyril stammered that the crab was not harmed, indeed seemed happier for the cleansing operation.

"Don't give me that. Don't even think of trying it. I know what you've done. Ruta and her mother told me all about the seafood extravaganza you served up to them—and the ingredients used. This particular decapod, I have no doubt, was purchased or stolen from the tank of one of the fish restaurants on the front. Monterroso's most probably."

"It isn't true, Malvina. They're lying. I wouldn't do that."

"I'm not a fool, you know. It isn't even the same variety. Look at

the color! You're too ignorant to know that there are no less than forty-five hundred species of crab, aren't you? You thought when you slaughtered that innocent creature to make mayonnaise that one crab was very like another. Well, I shall expose you. I shall publish the whole story in the *Southend Times*. Needless to say, I shan't pay you. And I shall not take you on as my permanent assistant, as was in my mind."

Cyril did not think. He did not hesitate. He gave her a shove and she fell into the biggest tank with a scream and a loud splash. If he saw her floundering there, he might soften, he thought, for he had never been hard-hearted, so he put the lid on and went downstairs and out to the beach. In all his life he had never felt so happy, so free and so fulfilled. As he walked along the mudflats with the sea breezes in his hair, he understood his destiny and the meaning of his name.

He was not a novelist's character, no figment of fiction, but one to inspire literature in his own right. One day books would be written about him, his past, his history, his obscurity, his striving for an identity, and his name: Cyril Biggs, the Marine Museum Murderer. Newspapers would give him headlines and television a favored position on the Six O'Clock News. At Madame Tussaud's, in the Chamber of Horrors, he would be placed by a water tank while his victim floated within. He had found his vocation.

That night Cyril slept better than he had done for years. It was Shana's day to sit at the receipt of custom. Such news travels fast and, looking out of an upstairs window, Cyril was not surprised to see a queue winding its way from the front door the length of the parade. Presently he crept down to the tank room.

He didn't lift the lid from the biggest tank but edged discreetly along the wall and peered into the stone crab's home, peered through sparkling, ever-bubbling jade-colored water and gleaming, spotless glass to the crowds beneath. There, pressed closely around the biggest tank, were Louise Mitchell, Ruta Yglesias, Fenella, Mrs. Church, and Mrs. Greenaway, Henry Bennett with the Ruler and his painted queen, the three Jewish grocers, Veronica Spencer and her husband Tim, Margaret Cavendish, Jane, several Italian boys in T-shirts, and a host of others not recognizable to Cyril. Some were reading the label he had made for the Sandbar Shark but those who could get close had their faces pressed against the glass, contemplating what was within.

They were polite, middle-class people, and as each had seen her or his fill there was a stepping back and a parting to allow those behind to look. In one of these reshuffles, the tank was briefly revealed to Cyril's view and he saw floating inside it, flippers gently pulsating with the movement of the water, a vast grey-green shape with a frill about its neck like the ruff of a salamander.

DETECTIVERSE

GARDEN PEST

by ELIZABETH SHIPLEY

A careless thug rented his nest
To a gardening sort of a guest—
She found several heads
In the soft flower beds
And, beneath the rose bushes, the rest.

a *NEW* Black Widowers story by

ISAAC ASIMOV

"I've been in music all my life," Arnold Kriss told the Widowers. "Child prodigy and all that. I can't remember anything but concerts and moving that bow back and forth. Don't get me wrong. I love music. It's my life. It's just that every once in a while I get tired. Not of music, but of musicians."

The fifth collection of Black Widowers stories, Puzzles of the Black Widowers, *was published in January by Doubleday/ Foundation. "Police at the Door" will be a standout in the sixth collection, we predict, its solution both unpredictable and especially appealing . . .*

POLICE AT THE DOOR

by ISAAC ASIMOV

The monthly banquets of the Black Widowers were never models of quiet and serenity, but on this occasion things were unusually noisy. Where, usually, one or another of the members was in a testy mood and made his views known with remarkable vigor, this was one of those rare times when all the Black Widowers were remarkably vehement. It seemed next to impossible for any one of them to complete a sentence or for any listener to determine who was saying what.

"I tell you that when we have a pipsqueak dope-runner like Noriega—"

"Pipsqueak? Why worry about pipsqueaks? What about the situation in South Africa, where we seem remarkably adjusted to—"

"Never mind South Africa. Panama is in our back yard—"

"You make it sound like Pennsylvania. It's a good—"

"I'm talking about the Panama Canal—"

"The less we talk about how we got it in the first place, the better—"

"Look, all of you are missing the point. The drug problem is a matter of demand. The supply—"

"What are the farmers supposed to grow? Coca plants are the only crop—"

"It's good old free enterprise, good capitalist doctrine—"

"Since when have you been such a yodeler on the mountaintops for free enterprise?"

Arnold Kriss, the guest on this occasion, listened gravely, his eyes traveling from one speaker to another. He had a round and chubby face that made him look younger than he was, and curly brown hair that showed no signs of thinning. The well-cared-for fingers of his right hand drummed softly on the tabletop, making way briefly to allow that best of all waiters, Henry, to place the chocolate mousse before him.

Kriss turned to Mario Gonzalo, host for the occasion, who, mindful of his hostly dignity, had contributed very little to the hot discussion. Kriss said, "How long has this club existed, Mario?"

"It was founded during World War Two. Before my time, of course."

Kriss said, in a tone of deep envy, "You fellows must love each other."

Gonzalo turned his attention to Kriss with a look of wonder. "Are you kidding, Arnie?"

"Kidding? Not at all."

"Where do you get this love shtick? We're yelling at each other like crazy."

"But that's what I mean. No one's bothering to be polite. Everyone's saying what he wants to say without regard for anyone's feelings. You can't help but get the idea that there's complete trust among all of you. Everyone knows that nothing he'll say will in any way disrupt a friendship. That's *love*. Come on, Mario, is there anyone here who wouldn't lend you money if you needed it, or put himself out to help if you were in trouble?"

Gonzalo thought about it a moment, his eyes traveling from one squabbler to another. Then he said, "I guess you're right, Arnie. I can count on every one of them, but each one would be so sarcastic at my expense if I came to him with a sob-story that I think I'd try out a handful of strangers first."

"You would not. You'd go to them like a shot." Kriss turned his attention to the chocolate mousse.

As the members were drinking their coffee almost immediately afterward (or, in the case of Kriss, herb tea), Gonzalo rattled his water glass with his spoon.

"Gentlemen of the Black Widowers," he said, "you've all met my guest, Arnold Kriss, and you all know he's a cellist with the Philharmonic, probably the best cellist it has had in at least thirty years—"

"What is this?" interrupted Thomas Trumbull indignantly, the lines on his tanned forehead turning it into a washboard. "Are you doing the grilling yourself?"

"What I'm doing," said Gonzalo, "is eliminating some of the things there's no point in talking about."

Geoffrey Avalon, hunching his thick eyebrows low, interrupted in his turn to say, "I don't think you should do any eliminating, Mario. I have some questions I'd like to ask about the internal workings of the Philharmonic."

"Maybe we'll get to that," said Gonzalo, "but I'm the host and I'm using host's privilege to turn the discussion in the direction I think proper. Arnie Kriss, as I was about to say, is a celebrity—"

At this, Kriss twisted uncomfortably in his seat and said, "Not really, Mario. I don't have the kind of following the Beatles had, or, in fact, that any third-rate rock star would have."

"Among people like *us* you're a celebrity," said Gonzalo, "and that's all we care about. So we'll take all that as given. Now it's customary for the host to appoint a griller, but I never heard that a host can't appoint himself as griller—"

There was at once a tumult, and Emmanuel Rubin raised an indignant voice, "It's never been done!"

"Just because something's never been done doesn't mean it can't be done, Manny. I'm host tonight and I've got the right to run this banquet as I wish. And I wish to be the griller. I have some questions to ask of Arnie—"

"How can you be an objective griller?" demanded Rubin. "You're a personal friend of the grillee."

"So what? I still want to ask the questions. Host's privilege."

James Drake peered through the smoke of his cigarette and said, "Let's give Mario his way. When he's asked his questions, we can ask sensible ones."

"I second those sentiments," said Roger Halsted in his soft voice. "Go ahead, Mario. Shoot."

"All right, I will." Gonzalo sat back in his chair and straightened his somewhat garish tie. "Arnie," he said, "you're a celebrity among people who have taste. You've been profiled in *The New Yorker* and you've played at a command performance at the White House. You've got it made. So what's the matter? Don't you have any friends?"

Kriss straightened in his chair and looked indignant. "Of course I have friends. What do you think? What kind of question is that?"

"It's a Mario question," muttered Rubin in a low voice.

"Well, yes," said Gonzalo, "one would think you have friends. I'm a friend of yours—at least I like to think so. But then why do you envy us?"

"Envy you?"

"During dinner, while we were all screaming our heads off, you said to me that we must all love each other, and there was envy in your voice, as though you had no friends who loved you in the same way."

"Love?" Halsted's glance went around the table. "I wouldn't call it love."

"But Arnie did," said Gonzalo. "He said we had the complete freedom to yell at each other and curse each other without fearing anyone would resent it, and that that was love. So I want to know what's behind that, Arnie."

"Nothing," said Kriss, his voice rising in pitch.

"Don't give me that, Arnie. I told you the conditions of the dinner and you agreed to them. We can ask you any questions within the bounds of good taste and human decency and you've got to give a complete and truthful answer. Everything you say will be held completely confidential by us—that includes Henry, who is also a member of the Black Widowers."

Kriss said uneasily, "Well—"

Trumbull growled, "Go ahead, Mr. Kriss. If you have something on your mind, you might as well spill it. You'll probably feel better."

Kriss nodded. "All right. Maybe I will. I'm not sure how to put it, though. I've been in music all my life. Child prodigy and all that. I can't remember anything but concerts and moving that bow back and forth. Don't get me wrong. I love music. It's my life. It's just that every once in a while I get tired. Not of music, but of musicians. —I wouldn't want that repeated, by the way."

"It won't be," said Gonzalo, "I promised you that. Why are you tired of musicians?"

"Almost all the time all I have around me are musicians—that's only natural, even inevitable—but their talk gets monotonous. They've got their special insecurities and jealousies. After a while, none of them has anything to say that I haven't heard a thousand times before. I suppose it's that way in any profession that's deep enough to consume a person.

"Now, you Black Widowers are all what we might call professional men." His eye went from one to another. "Mario's an artist, and if I remember my introductions correctly Mr. Avalon is a patent lawyer, Mr. Trumbull is a code expert, Mr. Halsted is a mathematics teacher, Mr. Drake is a chemist, and Mr. Rubin is a mystery writer. No two alike. And that's good, because if you were all chemists, or all lawyers, or all writers, I have a notion you'd get tired of each other a lot faster."

Halsted said, "You know, Mr. Kriss, you can seek out friends who are not musicians."

"I do," said Kriss energetically. "I do my best to get away from them. It's why I value my friendship with Mario here. And about a year ago, I found something else, too. By sheer circumstance, I met a group of men who play poker regularly and I accepted an invitation to join them. There are five of us now, and we meet every Tuesday night for the game. It circulates among our apartments. Every five weeks or so the game is at mine, and the whole thing is an incredibly welcome relief. Sometimes there's an additional player or two, and sometimes one of us is missing, but there are five regulars—including," he added with satisfaction, "me."

"What kind of people are they?" asked Avalon. "Not musicians, of course."

"Absolutely not. In fact—" Kriss hesitated. "Actually, they're working people. Salt of the earth and all that, but no pretensions to intellectual activity at all. We just play poker and talk about football and drink beer and tell funny stories. In a way, I don't fit in perfectly, and I don't play the best poker in the world—I lose more often than I win—but I can afford the losses and they accept me. They know I'm a musician, but I never talk about it. They may think I blow a pennywhistle. For a few hours each week I'm a man and not a musician. It's wonderful."

"In that case," said Gonzalo fiercely, "why do you envy us?"

"Because something happened."

"Aha," said Gonzalo. "What happened?"

Kriss said, "Something peculiar that just messed up everything."

"That's not informational. You'll have to tell us what it was that messed up everything."

"All right, but it's complicated. I'll have to start by talking about my wife."

"If you wish to do so," said Avalon, "please do. We'll leave it to your good judgment to keep matters within the bounds of good taste."

"There's nothing remotely involving bad taste that's involved," said Kriss. "My wife—Grace—and I married in middle life. I was fifty-three, she was forty-seven. She's my second wife, I'm her first husband. She has no children and mine are grown up. We live together, just the two of us, in perfect harmony. We've stayed in love and we simply do not quarrel."

Trumbull said, "I find that hard to believe, Mr. Kriss. I've never come across any couple that didn't quarrel on occasion, and that certainly includes myself and Mrs. Trumbull."

"It depends on how you define 'quarrel.' Grace and I are both articulate people and we each have strong views. Sometimes those views compete and we have no hesitation in letting each other know that. As you Black Widowers do at your meetings, we yell at each other sometimes. We wouldn't be human, or in love with each other for that matter, if we didn't.

"But when I say we don't quarrel, I mean that our disagreements are always kept within the bounds of decency and fair play. We don't call each other names, we don't throw things, we never use our muscles. And when we do disagree, we make up again before bedtime—as an invariable rule. I'm explaining this so you'll understand how shocking the thing that happened was."

Drake said, "Wait. If your wife didn't marry until she was forty-seven, it's safe to assume that she was living on some inherited competence or on some adequately paying job or profession. Is *she* a musician, by any chance?"

Kriss grinned self-consciously. "Yes, she is, in a manner of speaking. She's a piano teacher—but not a concert pianist, you understand."

"A social difference?" asked Rubin drily.

"Yes, in a way. Still, it makes for marital harmony if we keep each other on an even level. Having lived with her maiden name, after all, for forty-seven years, she has kept on using it with my thorough approval. We put both names on the door when we mar-

ried—G. Barron and A. Kriss—her name on top because she has students coming to the door all the time."

Rubin said, "Does it bother her that you are much more famous as a musician than she is?"

"I don't think so. She refers to it now and then, perhaps with just a touch of grimness, but you can be sure that *I* know better than to be too aware of it, or to refer to it."

"So what happened?" asked Gonzalo.

"Well, about a month ago we were watching television quietly—and separately. We have two sets in two different rooms and can each watch without being disturbed by the other because we have a sizable apartment and a well built one. She was in her office, with the door closed, watching *Star Trek,* a program she's very fond of. I was in the living room watching a *Kate and Allie* rerun. I was about ten minutes into the program, so it must have been 7:40 P.M. when the doorbell rang. That's always unsettling, because no one is supposed to get up to the apartment without the concierge downstairs ringing us. Of course, it might be a neighbor or one of the building employees.

"I knew it would be hopeless to expect Grace to answer the door while she was watching *Star Trek,* so I heaved myself out of my chair, went to the door, and, like a true New Yorker, refused to open the door without asking who was there.

"There was no answer, so I opened the peephole and looked out—and, I tell you, I got a grade-A shock, because the hall was full of policemen as far as the eye could see. I opened the door at once and there were five of them—four policemen and a policewoman.

"I looked at them blankly and said, 'What's going on, officers?'

"The policeman in the lead said, in a kind of brusque, official voice, 'We have information that there's a marital fight going on here.'

"Well, I'm sure there are people who are capable of putting on a convincing display of astonishment when they're not, in actual fact, astonished, but I'm not one of them. I was simply astonished at the idea of being involved in a marital fight of a kind that needed police attention, and my astonishment must have impressed the police as genuine.

" 'A marital fight?' I said, stunned. 'Here? In this building?'

" 'In this building,' said the policeman.

" 'Then you have the wrong apartment,' I told him.

" 'No, sir,' he said. 'We were given the apartment number and

your name.' And of course my name was right on the door staring at him, so to speak.

"My look of incredulity must have made the policeman feel impelled to justify his intrusion into our life. 'Our information is,' he said, 'that you had a knife at the throat of your wife.'

"Words absolutely failed me at the thought of such a thing between Grace and myself. No wonder there were five of them. They were expecting a maddened killer, with a knife dripping blood.

"Suddenly I thought of the two television sets that were on. However, we both ran the volume low to avoid troubling the other: my own set was a murmur and I couldn't hear Grace's at all through her closed door. And neither program had been violent. I checked that with Grace later.

"But by then it had dawned on me that I had better produce a wife in one piece. Grace hadn't come out to see what was going on at the door, so I called for her.

" 'Grace!' I shouted. She must have been reluctant to interrupt her watching. I had to call twice more—the second time in considerable agitation, for it seemed to me the police might begin to think I was bluffing and that I had a wife on the other side of a closed door who was either unconscious or dead.

"But finally she came out, clearly in fine shape and good health. 'What's the matter?' she asked, and then she saw the policemen, and asked it again with more urgency.

"I said, 'Someone reported that you and I were having a fight and that I was killing you.'

"It was her turn to be astonished, and the blank surprise on her face was all the policemen needed to see the report was wrong. They turned away and the man in charge said, 'Okay, but we had to investigate the matter, you understand?'

" 'Of course,' I said. 'You had no choice—and I thank you for trying to protect my wife.'

"And they left."

There was a silence, and then Avalon said, "Well, Mr. Kriss, it was an unsettling experience, I'm sure, but there were no later consequences, were there?"

"Not of any definite kind, Mr. Avalon."

Halsted said, "Are you referring to indirect consequences, Mr. Kriss? I imagine it must have created a stir among the apartment staff to have so many police charging up to your apartment. It must

have spread among all the neighbors and required embarrassing explanations."

"I certainly offered none," said Kriss stiffly, "and no one said anything directly to me about it. The story may have spread about a marital fight, but there isn't a person in the building who could possibly believe that I had been abusing Grace. We're well known as the Darby and Joan of the apartment house. No, that's not what bothers me."

Gonzalo said, "We're still trying to get to it. What *does* bother you, Arnie?"

Kriss said, "It's the question of who informed the police, of course. Someone called the police emergency number, reported a fight between us with a knife, and gave them the apartment building, the apartment number, and my name. It couldn't be a casual troublemaker. It had to be someone who knew me."

Trumbull said, "Maybe so, but you know a great many people who know your name and address. One of them must have had a few drinks and then got what he thought was the very funny idea of sending the police to your door. There's no way of telling who it might have been."

"You're quite wrong," said Kriss angrily. "As I told you, almost all the people I know are musicians, and none of them would do it. It's not that they're models of virtue, but they don't have that kind of mind, any more than I have. Once they've stopped thinking about music, musicians are a spent force.

"Look, this is the sort of thing a musician thinks is funny: one of them will regale another by saying, 'Isaac Stern was wrapping his violin about one of Paganini's show-off pieces and made certain he hit every note—he left no tone unSterned.' Here's another: Two aspiring violinists had finally achieved their goal and were playing a duet at Carnegie Hall. Naturally, there was a good deal of nervousness, and one of them lost his place in the sheet music. He improvised desperately while trying unsuccessfully to locate the bar he was playing, and finally whispered out of the corner of his mouth to the other, 'Where *are* we?' And the other whispered, 'Carnegie Hall.' *That's* what musicians think is funny—not one of them would ever think that sending the police to my apartment on a false alarm would be funny."

Avalon said gravely, "It's my experience that people can't be categorized that easily. Still, it might be one of your fans—though I

should think they wouldn't know your exact address, or that, even if they did, they wouldn't be so disrespectful as to try such a trick."

"I should hope not," said Kriss. "Anyway, I'll tell you who I think it is. I suspect it's one of my poker buddies—maybe all of them." And the lines of his face sank into depression.

"Why do you think that?" asked Gonzalo.

"No real reason, Mario, but they all know exactly where I live. They've been to my apartment often enough. And I told you I don't exactly fit in. For all my trying, they may still feel enough of something different about me to make them pull that trick on me. It makes me feel bad. Very bad. I enjoyed those sessions and now I can't."

"Have you stopped playing poker?"

"Oh, no. We still play, but the pleasure's gone. I keep looking from one to another, wondering which one of them did it. I don't know how much longer I can keep it up. It's spoiled everything."

Drake said, "Have you tried to face them with it? Maybe one or more will confess and you can have a good laugh over it. If you can take the joke like a sport, then they may really accept you. You would have passed a rite of passage, I suppose."

"But it's not my kind of rite of passage," said Kriss impatiently. "And I did face them with it, though not as a group. I thought that if only one of them had done it, he wouldn't like to admit it in front of the others. I took the opportunity of speaking to each one of them separately and mentioning what had happened in as jovial a manner as I could manage. Each one of the four told me it was a dirty trick and didn't show any signs of thinking it was funny. One of them must be lying, I suppose. At least one of them."

"But I take it you get along well with them," said Halsted. "You've been playing with them for some considerable time and I assume they've never made a move to get you out of the game."

"Never," said Kriss.

"So did anything happen recently that would have made one or more of them annoyed with you? Did you arouse their envy in some way?"

"Not on purpose. Of course, my apartment is somewhat better than theirs are, but not that much so."

Gonzalo said, "You didn't boast about how much you get for a concert appearance or anything like that, did you?"

Kriss looked revolted. "Of course not. You know me better than that."

Avalon said, "Well, let's use our brains. The particular practical joke that was played upon you, Mr. Kriss, put you in the position of being a wife-abuser. Is one of your poker-playing friends a wife-abuser?"

"Not to my knowledge. Of course—"

"Yes?"

"Steve is having trouble with his wife. Not physical, as far as I know. He's been running around, I gather, and his wife caught him at it, so things are antagonistic between them."

"I'm not a psychologist," said Avalon, "but isn't it possible he'd like to beat up his wife and rather than actually do it he worked up a fantasy that you beat up yours."

"Why me?" asked Kriss.

"Perhaps he was annoyed by your calm and pleasant married life. You might have boasted about that, Mr. Kriss."

"I certainly did not—but, of course, when they come to my apartment I can't very well stop Grace from being pleasant and good-humored about the whole thing."

"Well, there you are," said Avalon. "Steve might have some dim idea of getting even. After all, these are not great intellects you're dealing with, Mr. Kriss."

"They're decent men," said Kriss. "I wouldn't like to think Steve would do it for any such silly reason. The suggestion is not proof, you know."

"No, it isn't," admitted Avalon, "but we're not going to get proof unless one of them confesses."

"I wouldn't demand proof," said Kriss. "I'm not going to be reporting anyone to the police. All I want is to be satisfied in my mind who it was, and why."

Rubin said, "Just a thought. Are any of the four actually given to practical jokes? If any of them is given to pulling dumb stunts like this, they'd do it as a way of life. They wouldn't need reasons."

Kriss was thoughtful. "I can't recall that any of them ever told stories about practical jokes he'd played. Joe once palmed all four aces and let us play a game without them. Naturally, each one of us thought one of the others had the aces and when Joe started bidding we thought *he* might have them. He was able to take the pot with a nothing hand. As soon as it was over, he admitted what he'd done, we all gave him what-for, and he never tried anything like that again."

"Maybe not," said Rubin, "but it shows a bent of mind, you know."

Kriss shook his head. "That's not at all convincing."

"Look here," said Drake. "The point is that policemen were involved in this and it strikes me that not many people would try a practical joke that makes policemen as well as some innocent civilian the victims. You, Mr. Kriss, don't see the humor in it, and neither, I'm sure, did the police. If they found out who made the false report, they'd have good motivation for making life miserable for him."

"What are you driving at, Jim?" asked Avalon.

"It just seems to me that whoever did it must be sufficiently familiar with the police to be willing to take a chance. Did one of your poker mates ever have a run-in with the police to your knowledge, Mr. Kriss? Would he be trying to get at the police rather than at you?"

"Nothing like that was ever hinted at," said Kriss. Then, thoughtfully, "Ernie has a cousin, I think, who's a policeman. He mentioned that once or twice, it seems to me."

Trumbull said, "A relative in the police force would make it less likely that a person would play games with the police, if you ask me."

"Unless," said Drake, "Ernie doesn't like his cousin."

"I don't think that's at all meaningful, either," said Kriss.

A silence fell around the table, and then Gonzalo said, "Listen, Arnie, is there anyone at the poker table that you don't particularly like?"

"No," said Kriss. "They're all nice guys. Or I always thought they were till the police appeared at the door."

"Then let me put it another way, Arnie. Even if you like all four, isn't there one you like the least?"

"Well," said Kriss cautiously, "there's Ken. There's nothing wrong with him, really, but he's got a hoarse voice that grates on my ear. My musical sense, I suppose. I just find myself wincing a little sometimes when he talks. What difference could that make?"

"Because I have a theory," said Gonzalo, "that dislike usually works both ways. You don't usually dislike someone who likes you and vice versa. Like and dislike make themselves felt in subtle ways even when you're not aware of it. If you wince at Ken, he's bound to wince at you, and maybe his dislike drove him to the deed."

"I don't believe it," said Kriss.

Avalon offered, "Well, we've managed to show that each one of the four has something about him that makes it possible he's the one who phoned the police. Steve has trouble with his wife and may

be jealous of your marital bliss. Joe has a tendency to engage in practical jokes and may have done it to indulge in his caprice. Ernie has a cousin who is a policeman and may have done it either because he is hostile to policemen or unafraid of them. And Ken may have done it out of a vague dislike of you. The trouble is that not one of the four motivations is anywhere near convincing."

Kriss nodded. "That's it. So it ends up where it began. I can't trust anybody at the game and my one non-musical recreation is probably gone. Is it any wonder I envy you six your stable get-togethers?"

"Not us six," said Gonzalo, "it's us seven. And nobody has asked Henry yet. —Can you make anything of this, Henry?"

Henry, from his post at the sideboard, smiled paternally. "I'm not at all sure I can shed any light on the situation, but I do have some questions to ask, if Mr. Kriss will permit me."

"Go ahead, Henry," said Kriss resignedly. "Everyone else has been at me."

Henry said, "Did the police know who you are, Mr. Kriss?"

"You mean that I'm a well known cellist? I'm sure they didn't. When Mario says I'm a celebrity, he's exaggerating, you know."

"Did they address you by name, or refer to your playing?"

"Not at all."

"Your name on the door must have meant nothing to them, then."

"That's right. I'm sure of that."

Henry said, "And your wife still uses her maiden name on the door?"

"Yes."

"When the police came, they said the incident had been clearly localized by address, apartment number, and name. Did they address you by name? Or did you announce your name?"

"They didn't use my name and I didn't announce it. My name is right there on the door. They saw it."

"But they saw two names, Mr. Kriss, G. Barron on top and A. Kriss on the bottom. Which name had been reported to the police?"

"Why, my name, of —" Kriss stopped cold.

"Exactly, sir. You have *assumed* it was your name that had been reported, but you don't know. No name was actually mentioned, either by the police or by you or, I suppose, by your wife. So it may have been your wife's name that was reported, not yours. Isn't that right?"

"Oh, my God," said Kriss blankly.

"What difference would it make, Henry?" asked Gonzalo.

Henry said, "There doesn't seem to be any clear candidate for the role of having played this practical joke on Mr. Kriss. Might there be one who would have played it on Mrs. Kriss?"

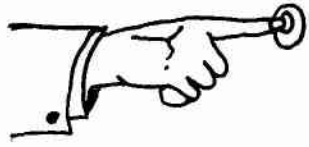
Kriss groaned. "Of course—there is. There's someone who has been harassing Grace for years, since long before I married her. He phones her frequently, he sends her letters—he won't leave her alone."

"Why?" asked Gonzalo.

Kriss shrugged. "He was a fellow student of hers once. Harmless enough, but somehow he never grew up, I imagine. He seems to have been in love with her back then. I suppose he's never found anyone else and she's his fantasy. He's always been quite harmless, so I didn't think of him in this connection. But, of course, it must be he. He knows Grace is married and resents it and fantasizes her husband might be cruel to her, I suppose. —How is it it never occurred to me it might be *her* name that had been reported?"

"It is my feeling," said Avalon, "that however seriously a male may intellectually accept the concept of his wife's equality, his feeling, viscerally, is that she is merely an appendage."

Kriss seemed too abashed to answer, but Henry said softly, "At least, Mr. Kriss, you can go back to your poker game in full enjoyment."



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INDEX TO VOLUME NINETY-FIVE—JANUARY–JUNE 1990

(Continued on page 157)

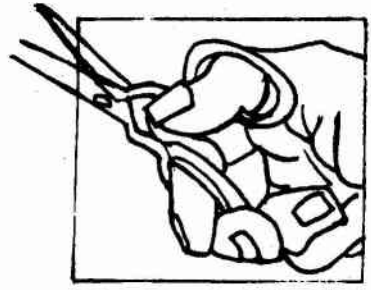
INDEX TO VOLUME NINETY-FIVE—JANUARY–JUNE 1990

(Continued from page 156)

(Continued on page 158)

INDEX TO VOLUME NINETY-FIVE—JANUARY–JUNE 1990

(Continued from page 157)



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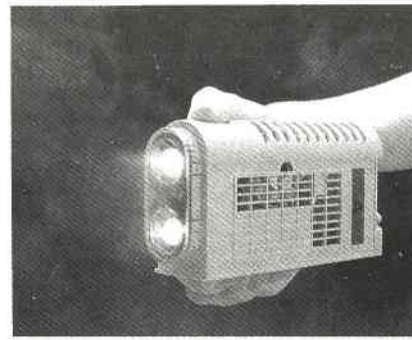

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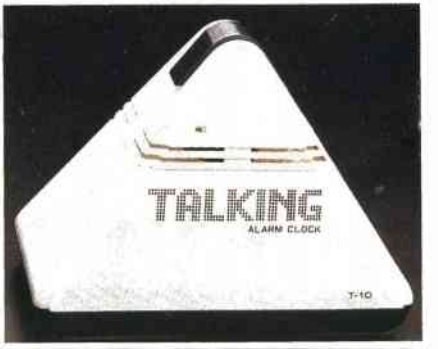

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