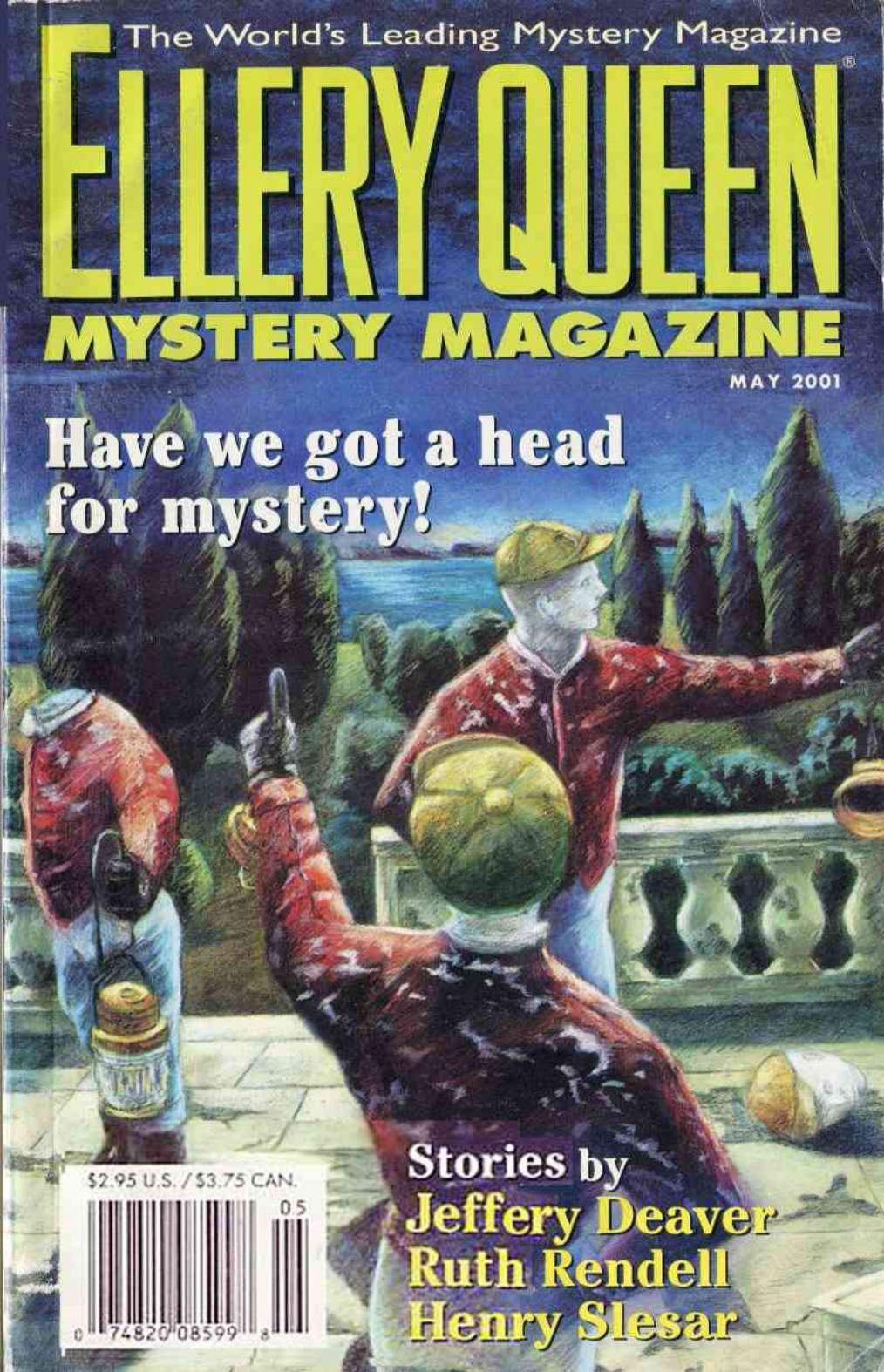
The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN MYSTERY MAGAZINE

MAY 2001

Have we got a head for mystery!



Stories by
Jeffery Deaver
Ruth Rendell
Henry Slesar

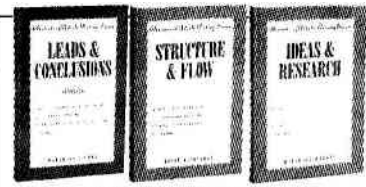
$2.95 U.S. / $3.75 CAN.
05
0 74820 08599 8

Discover the Secrets of Fiction Writing that Sells!

#10661-7 $29.99 pb

#10529-6 $19.99 hc

#10366-3 $17.99 hc



#43449-8 $47.97 hcs *Counts as 1 selection.*

#48041-8 $18.99 hc

#10371-3 $19.99 hc

#10464-6 $22.99 hc

#10483-6 $17.99 hc

#10498-4 $16.99 pb

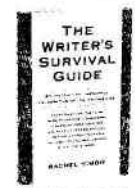
#10567-6 $17.99 hc

#10602-1 $18.99 hc

#10618-7 $18.99 pb

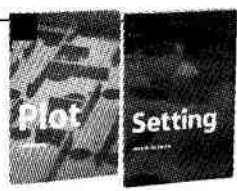
#10628-6 $18.99 hc

#10630-2 $16.99 pb



#48025-1 $18.99 hc

#48030-1 $17.99 hc



#43396-1 $24.00 pbs *Counts as 1 selection.*

#10631-0 $18.99 hc

#48043-4 $18.99 hc

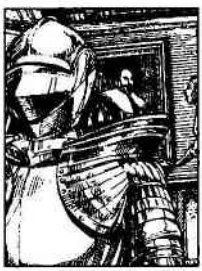
AS A CLUB MEMBER, YOU'LL ENJOY:

- **DISCOUNTS FROM 15-65%** on every book you buy!
- **FREE SHIPPING AND HANDLING** on prepaid orders (after this joining offer)!
- **SATISFACTION GUARANTEED 100%!**

HOW THE CLUB WORKS

You'll receive the *BULLETIN* every four weeks (fourteen times a year) featuring the Main Selection and 100 or more of the newest and best books for writers. If you want the Main Selection, do nothing. We will send it to you automatically. If you want a different book or want nothing that month, just indicate your choice on the easy-to-use Selection Card and mail it to us. You'll always have at least 10 days to decide and return your Selection Card. However, if late mail delivery ever causes you to receive a book you don't want, you may return it at Club expense. As a new member, you are under no obligation to buy any more books—you're just trying out the Club for 9 months. After that, you may cancel at any time. Every time you buy a book from the *BULLETIN*, your membership will be renewed for 6 months from the purchase date.

CONTENTS



Country-house crime
Page 28

D.A. in court
Page 58

Cover Illustration by
Tinam Valk

Dell Magazines
475 Park Avenue South
New York, NY
10016

Note: indicia on
page 143

MYSTERY VALUE PACK

5 magazines for just $5.95!

Give yourself **chills** with our value pack of 5 best-loved issues of **Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine!**

You'll enjoy dozens of captivating tales from world-renowned masters of suspense and talented new writers alike — all for just $5.95 plus shipping. **You save 60% off the regular price.**

It's easy to order. Just fill out the coupon below and mail it to us with your payment. **Your satisfaction is fully guaranteed!**

PENNY MARKETING

Dept. SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

☑ **YES!** Please send me my **Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine Value Pack.** I get 5 entertaining issues for just $5.95 plus $2 shipping and handling ($7.95 per pack, U.S. funds). My satisfaction is fully guaranteed! My payment of $_____ is enclosed.(AHPK05)

Name: _____
(Please print)

Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____ **ZIP:** _____

Please make checks payable to Penny Marketing. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Add $4 additional postage for delivery outside the U.S.A. Offer expires 12/31/01. 090C-NQHVL1

Art by Mark Evan Walker

THE PROFESSIONAL

by Ruth Rendell

The girls had the best of it. Dressed in models from the Designer Room, they disposed themselves in one of the windows that fronted onto the High Street, one in a hammock from House and Garden, another in an armchair from Beautiful Interiors, holding bestsellers from the book department and pretending to read them. Small crowds gathered and stared at them, as if they were caged exotic animals.

The boys had seats inside, between Men's Leisurewear and Perfumery, facing the escalators. Anyone coming down the escalators was obliged to look straight at them. They sat surrounded by the materials of their craft, ten pairs of brushes each, thirty different kinds of polishes and creams and sprays, innumerable soft cloths, all of different colours, all used just the once, then discarded. Customers had comfortable leather chairs to sit in and padded leather footrests for their feet. A big notice said: *Let our professionals clean your shoes to an unrivalled high standard. £2.50.*

It was a lot harder work than what the girls did. Nigel resented the girls, lounging about doing bugger all, getting to wear the sort

of kit they'd never afford in their wildest dreams. But Ross pointed out to him that the boys would do better out of it in the long run. After all, it was a load of rubbish Karen and Fiona thinking this was the first step to a modelling career. As if it was Paris (or even London), as if they were on the catwalk instead of in a department-store window in a city that had one of the highest rates of unemployment in the country.

Besides, he and Nigel were trained. They'd both had two weeks intensive training. When he had been at his pitch at the foot of the escalator a week, Ross's parents came in to see how he was getting on. Ross hadn't much liked that, it was embarrassing, especially as his father thought he could get his shoes cleaned for free. But his mother understood.

"Professional," she said, nudging his father, "you see that? That's what it says, 'our professionals.' You always wanted him to get some real training and now he's got it. For a profession."

The W. S. Marsh Partnership got a subsidy for taking them on. Sixty pounds a week per head, someone had told him. And a lot of praise and a framed certificate from the Chamber of Commerce for their "distinguished contribution to alleviating youth unemployment." The certificate hung up on the wall at the entrance to Men's Leisurewear, which Ross privately thought rather too close for comfort. Still, it was a job, and a job for which he was trained. He was twenty and it was the first employment he'd had since he left school four years before.

At school, when he was young and didn't know any better, he was ambitious. He thought he could be an airline pilot or something in the media.

"Yeah, or a brain surgeon," said Nigel.

But of course it turned out that any one of those was as unlikely as the others. His aims were lower now, but at least he could have aims. The job with the W. S. Marsh Partnership had made that possible. He'd set his sights on the footwear trade. Manager of a shoe shop. How to get there he didn't know because he didn't know how managers of shoe shops got started, but still he thought

"Patricia Highsmith is often cited as the mother of the psychological suspense novel. But for my money, Ruth Rendell's influence has been far greater," said writer Val McDermid in a recent essay. "Highsmith's novels are quintessentially European, whereas Ruth Rendell has created a subgenre that speaks more resonantly to Brits and Americans." Ms. Rendell's influence on the psychological suspense short story has also been enormous. We'll have more of her tales for you later this year. †

he had set his foot onto the lowest rung of the ladder. While he cleaned shoes he imagined himself fitting on shoes, or better still, calling to an assistant to serve this customer or that. In these daydreams of his, the assistant was always Karen, obliged to do his bidding, no longer favouring him with disdainful glances as he walked by her window on his way to lunch. Karen, though, not Fiona. Fiona sometimes lifted her head and smiled.

The customers—Nigel called them "punters"—mostly treated him as if he didn't exist. Once they'd paid, that is, and said what they wanted done. But no, that wasn't quite right. Not as if he didn't exist, more as if he was a machine. They sat down, put their feet on the footrest, and nodded at him. They kept their shoes on. Women always took their shoes off, passed him the shoes, and left their slender and delicate stockinged feet dangling. They talked to him, mostly about shoes, but they talked. The women were nicer than the men.

"Yeah, well, you know what they're after, don't you?" said Nigel.

It was a good idea, but Ross didn't think it was true. If he had asked any of those pretty women who showed off their legs in front of him what they were doing that evening or did they fancy a movie, he'd have expected to get his face smacked. Or be reported. Be reported and probably sacked. The floor manager disliked them anyway. He was known to disapprove of anything that seemed designed to waylay or entrap customers. No assistants stood about in Perfumery spraying passing customers with scent. Mr. Costello wouldn't allow it. He even discouraged assistants from asking customers if they might help them. He believed in the total freedom of everyone who entered W. S. Marsh's doors. Short of shoplifting, that is.

Every morning, when Ross and Nigel took up their position facing the escalators ten minutes before the store opened at nine, Mr. Costello arrived to move them back against the wall, to try and reduce their allotted space, and to examine both of them closely, checking that they were properly dressed, that their hair was short enough and their hands clean. Mr. Costello himself was a model of elegance, six feet tall, slender, strongly resembling Linford Christie, if you could imagine Linford Christie dressed in a black suit, ice-white shirt, and satin tie. When he spoke, he usually extended one long—preternaturally long—well-manicured sepia forefinger in either Nigel's direction or Ross's and wagged it as if beating time to music.

"You do not speak to the customers until they speak to you. You do not say 'Hi,' you do not say 'Cheers.'" Here the unsmiling glance was turned on Nigel and the finger wagged. "'Cheers' is no substitute for 'Thank you.' You do not attract attention to yourselves. Above all, you do not catch customers' eyes or seem to be trying to

attract their attention. Customers of the W. S. Marsh Partnership must be free to pay *untrammelled* visits to this store."

Mr. Costello had a degree in business studies and "untrammelled" was one of his favourite words. Neither Ross nor Nigel knew what it meant. But they both understood that Mr. Costello would prefer them not to be there. He would have liked an excuse to be rid of them. Once or twice he had been heard to say that no one paid an employer to take him on when he was twenty, he had been obliged to take an evening job to make ends meet at college. Any little thing would be an excuse, Ross sometimes thought, any stepping out of line in the presence of a customer.

But they had few customers. After those early days when he and Nigel had been a novelty, business ceased to boom. Having your shoes cleaned at W. S. Marsh was expensive. Out in the High Street you could get it done for a pound, and guests in the hotels could use the electric shoe polisher for nothing. Mostly it was the regulars who came to them, businessmen from the big office blocks, women who had nothing to do but go shopping and had time on their hands. This worried Ross, especially as in Mr. Costello's opinion, sixty pounds a week or no sixty pounds, no commercial concern was going to keep them on in idleness.

"It's not as if you are an ornament to the place," he said with an unpleasant smile.

And they were often idle. After the half-dozen who came first thing in the morning would come a lull until, one by one and infrequently, the women appeared. It was typical of the women to stand and look at them, to consider, maybe discuss the matter with a companion, smile at them, and pass on into Perfumery. Ross sat on his stool, gazing up the escalator. If you did what Nigel did and stared at the customers at ground level, if you happened to eye the girls' legs, you got a reprimand. Mr. Costello walked round the ground floor all day, passing the foot of the escalators once an hour, observing everything with his Black and Decker drill eyes. When there was nothing to do, Ross watched the people going up the escalator on the right-hand side and coming down the escalator on the left. And he watched them with his face fixed into a polite expression, careful to catch no eyes.

Karen and Fiona seldom came to get their shoes cleaned. After all, they only wore their own shoes to come in and go home in. But sometimes, on wet days, at lunchtime, one or the other of them would present herself to Ross to have a pair of damp or muddy loafers polished. They didn't like the way Nigel looked at them and both preferred Ross.

Karen didn't open her mouth while he cleaned her suede boots. Her eyes roved round the store as if she was expecting to see someone she knew. Fiona talked, but still he couldn't believe his

luck when, extending a slim foot and handing him a green leather brogue, she asked him if he'd like to go for a drink on the way home. He nodded, he couldn't speak, but looked deep into her large turquoise eyes. Then she went, her shoes sparkling, turning once to flash him a smile. Nigel pretended he hadn't heard, but a flush turned his face a mottled red. Ross, his heart thudding, gazed away to where he always gazed, the ascending and descending escalators.

He was getting somewhere. He was trained, a professional. It could only lead onwards and to better things. Fiona, of the kingfisher eyes and the cobweb-fine feet, was going to have a drink with him. He gazed upwards, dreaming, seeing his future as the escalator that ceaselessly and endlessly climbed. Then he saw something else.

At the top of the escalator stood a woman. She was holding on to the rail and looking back over one shoulder towards the man who came up behind her. Ross recognised the man; he had once or twice cleaned his shoes and actually been talked to and smiled at and thanked. And once he had seen him outside, giving a passing glance at Fiona and Karen's window. He was about forty but the woman was older, a thin, frail woman in a very short skirt that showed most of her long bony legs. She had bright hair, the colour of the yellow hammock Fiona reclined in. As she turned her head to look down the escalator as she stepped onto it, Ross saw the man put out one hand and give her a hard push in the middle of her back.

Everything happened very fast. She fell with a loud, protracted scream. She fell forward, just like someone diving into deep water, but it wasn't water, it was moving metal, and halfway down, as her head caught against one of the steps, she rolled over in a perfect somersault. All the time she was screaming.

The man behind her was shouting as he ran down. People at the top of the escalator shrank back from it as the man went down alone. Ross and Nigel had sprung to their feet. The screaming had fetched assistants and customers running from Perfumery and Men's Leisurewear but it had stopped. It had split the air as an earthquake splits rock, but now it had stopped and for a moment there was utter silence.

In that moment Ross saw her, lying spread at the foot of the escalator. A funny thought came to him, that he'd never seen anyone look so relaxed. Then he understood she looked relaxed because she was dead. He made a sound, a kind of whimper. He could no longer see her, she was surrounded by people, but he could see the man who had pushed her, he was so tall, he towered above everyone, even above Mr. Costello.

Nigel said, "Did you see her shoes? Five-inch heels, at least five-inch. She must have caught her heel."

"She didn't catch her heel," Ross said.

A doctor had appeared. There was always a doctor out shopping, which was the reason the National Health Service was in such a mess, Ross's mother said. The main doors burst open and an ambulance crew came running in. Mr. Costello cleared a path among the onlookers to let them through and then he tried to get people back to work or shopping or whatever they'd been doing. But before he had got very far a voice came over the public-address system telling customers the south escalators would be out of service for the day and Perfumery and Men's Leisurewear closed.

"What d'you mean, she didn't catch her heel?" said Nigel.

Ross ought to have said then. This was his first chance to tell. He nearly did. He nearly told Nigel what he'd seen. But then he got separated from Nigel by the ambulance men carrying the woman out on a stretcher, pushing Nigel to one side and him to the other, the tall man walking behind them, his face white, his head bowed. Mr. Costello came up to them.

"I suppose you thought you could skive off for the rest of the day," he said. "Sorry to disappoint you. We're making you a new pitch upstairs in Ladies' Shoes."

This was his second chance. Mr. Costello stood there while they packed their materials into the cases. Nigel carried the notice board that said *Let our professionals clean your shoes to an unrivalled high standard. £2.50.* The escalators had stopped running, so they followed Mr. Costello to the lifts and Ross pressed the button and they waited. Now was the time to tell Mr. Costello what he had seen. He should tell Mr. Costello, and through Mr. Costello the top management, and through them, or maybe before they were brought into it, the police.

"I saw the man that was with her push her down the escalator."

He didn't say it. The lift came and took them up to the second floor. The departmental manager, a woman, showed them their new pitch and they laid out their things. No one had their shoes cleaned, but a girl Nigel knew who worked in the stockroom came over and told them that the woman who fell down the escalator was a Mrs. Russell, the tall man with her was her husband, and they had a big house up on The Mount, which was the best part where all the nobs lived. They were good customers of the Marsh Partnership, they were often in the store, Mrs. Russell had an account there and a Marsh Partnership Customer Card. Ross went off for his lunch and when he returned Nigel went off for his, coming back to add more details that he had picked up in the cafe-

teria. Mr. and Mrs. Russell had only been married a year; they were devoted to each other.

"Mr. Russell is devastated," said Nigel. "They're keeping him under sedation."

When the departmental manager came along to see how they were getting on, Ross knew that this was his third chance and perhaps his last. She told them everything would be back to normal next day, they'd be back at the foot of the escalator between Perfumery and Men's Leisurewear, and now he should tell her what he had seen. But he didn't, and he wouldn't. He knew that now because he saw very clearly what would happen if he told.

He would attract attention to himself. In fact, it was hard to think of any way to attract *more* attention to himself. He would have to describe what he had seen, identify Mr. Russell—a customer, a good customer!—say he had seen Mr. Russell put his hand in the middle of his wife's back and push her down the escalator. He alone had seen it. Not Nigel, not the other customers, but he alone. They wouldn't believe him, he'd get the sack. He had had this job just six weeks and he would get the sack.

So he wouldn't tell. At least, he wouldn't tell Mr. Costello. There was only one person he really wanted to tell and that was Fiona, but when they met and had their drink and talked and had another drink and she said she'd see him again the next night, he didn't say anything about Mr. Russell. He didn't want to spoil things, have her think he was a nut or maybe a liar. Once he was at home he thought about telling his mother. Not his father, his father would just get on to the police, but his mother, who sometimes had glimmerings of understanding. But she had gone to bed and next morning he wasn't in the mood for talking about it.

Something strange had happened in the night. He was no longer quite sure of his facts. He had begun to doubt. Had he really seen that rich and powerful man, that tall middle-aged man, one of the few men who had ever talked to him while he had his shoes cleaned, had he really seen that man push his wife down the escalator? Was it reasonable? Was it *possible?* What motive could he have had? He was rich, he had only recently married, he was known for being devoted to his wife.

Ross tried to recreate the sight in his mind, to rewind the film, so to speak, and run it through once more. To stop it at that point and freeze the frame. With his eyes closed, he attempted it. He could get Mrs. Russell to the top of the escalator, he could turn her head round to look back at her approaching husband, he could turn her head once more towards the escalator, but then came a moment of darkness, of a blank screen, as had happened once or twice to their TV set when there was a power cut. His power cut lasted only ten seconds, but when the electricity came on again it

was to show Mrs. Russell plunging forward and to transmit the terrible sound of her scream. The bit where Mr. Russell had put his hand on her back and pushed her had vanished.

They were back that morning at the foot of the escalator. Things were normal, as if it had never happened. Ross could hardly believe his ears when Mr. Costello came by and said he wanted to congratulate them, him and Nigel, for keeping their heads the day before, behaving politely, not attracting unnecessary attention to themselves. Nigel blushed at that, but Ross smiled with pleasure and thanked Mr. Costello.

Business picked up wonderfully from that day onwards. One memorable Wednesday afternoon there was actually a queue of customers waiting to have their shoes cleaned. The accident had been in all the papers and someone had got a photograph. Just as there is always a doctor on hand, so is there always someone with a camera. People wanted to have their shoes cleaned by the two professionals who had seen Mrs. Russell fall down the stairs, who had been there when it was all happening.

Fall down the stairs, not get pushed down. The more Ross heard the term "fall down" the more "pushed down" faded from his consciousness. He hadn't seen anything, of course he hadn't, it had been a dream, a fantasy, a craving for excitement. He was very polite to the customers, he called them sir and madam with every breath, but he never talked about the accident beyond saying how unfortunate it was and what a tragedy. When they asked him directly, he always said, "I'm afraid I wasn't looking, madam, I was attending to a customer."

Mr. Costello overheard approvingly. Three months later, when there was a vacancy in Men's Shoes, he offered Ross the job. By that time, Ross and Fiona were going steady, she had given up all ideas of modelling for hairdresser training, and they had moved together into a studio flatlet. Karen had disappeared. Fiona had never known her well, she was a deep one, never talked about her personal life, and now she was gone and the window where they had both sat and pretended to read bestsellers from the book department had been given over to Armani for Men.

While in Men's Shoes, Ross managed to get into a day-release scheme and took a business-studies course at the metropolitan college. His mother was disappointed because he wasn't a professional anymore, but everyone else saw all this as a great step forward. And so it was, for two weeks before he and Fiona got engaged, he was taken on as assistant manager at a shop in the precinct called The Great Boot Sale at twice the salary he was getting from the Marsh Partnership.

In all that time he had heard very little of Mr. Russell beyond that he had let the house on The Mount and moved away. It was

his mother who told Ross he was back and having his house done up before moving into it with his new wife.

"It's a funny thing," she said, "but I've noticed it time and time again. A man who's been married to a woman a lot older than him will always marry a woman a lot younger than him the second time round. Now why is that?"

No one knew. Ross thought very little of it. He had long ago convinced himself that the whole escalator incident had been in his imagination, a kind of daydream, probably the result of the kind of videos he had been watching. And when he encountered Mr. Russell in the High Street he wasn't surprised the man didn't recognise him. After all, it was a year ago.

But to see Karen walk past with her nose in the air did surprise him. She tucked her hand into Mr. Russell's arm—the hand with the diamond ring on it and the wedding ring—and turned him round to look where she was looking, into the jeweller's window. Ross looked at their reflections in the glass and shivered. ●

A-Wol

by Katherine H. Brooks

Natalie opened the door to his knocking,
Noticed that Frank had a jug in his hand,
Stepped to the side at the sight of him rocking,
Peevishly wondered just where he would land.
Natalie flinched as he sluggishly stumbled
Straight through the doorway and into the hall,
Gazed at the plaster and sighed as it crumbled,
Watched as his head broke a panel of wall.

Natalie, eyeing the mess he'd created,
Vaguely disgruntled, and more than annoyed,
Sorry, by then, that she'd worried and waited,
Shoved him disgustedly into the void.
Natalie drew on the skills she had mastered.
Nothing's impossible under the sun,
And all through the evening she papered and plastered,
Till early next morning her project was done.

Natalie, eager for coffee and cruller,
Fled to the kitchen and wearily flopped,
Delighted to find that the morning was duller,
Now that his pitiful tapping had stopped.
Natalie, proud of the fruits of her labor,
Summoned up reasons for wandering men,
And later explained to her curious neighbor
That Frank was undoubtedly plastered again.

THE HOUSEBREAKERS

by Henry Slesar

City cops scarf down hamburgers and sugar donuts. Police Chief Phil Hayes ate duck confit and drank Chardonnay, and I couldn't stop thinking about what it cost to feed him. Phil is my brother-in-law and a bachelor. My wife Georgia had him over to dinner every Friday night, and while he ate his way through my paycheck they exchanged gossip about Fairdell, the town where we live and where Phil deals with crime waves like kids riding bikes on the sidewalk and somebody playing a radio too loud.

Fairdell is in New Jersey, and it's a bedroom community where the cheapest house costs a million five. That would be our place, an elm-shaded colonial that shrank into insignificance when the elms blighted and had to be removed, leaving the house small and naked and an embarrassment to our neighbors. They were all rich. I work as a broker, but these guys owned the brokerages.

I earned good money, but it wouldn't stick to my hands. Fairdell wasn't cheap. You had to keep the house painted, the lawn manicured, a luxury car in your garage. There were country-club dues, green fees, charity solicitations. I could have done without the high-priced car, the club, the golf, and charity begins at home, but Georgia wanted us to "belong." Georgia chased after the Fairdell matrons until she began to look like them. That was the start of the trouble. Although I guess the real beginning was the Fairdell Burglar.

❖ ❖ ❖

Henry Slesar has written several hundred short stories, but they are only a part of his varied fictional output. He has also written dozens of television, radio, and screen plays, a number of novels, and mystery puzzles such as the Janus Mystery Jigsaw puzzles and *EQMM*'s The Final Paragraph. He has accomplished all this while also working as a writer, creative director, and agency owner in the advertising industry. †

We got the details from Phil. There had been five housebreakings, and Phil was elated by the emergence of a genuine crime situation.

The first burglary was at the Anderson house, while the family was skiing in Klosters. They had an elaborate alarm system, but the burglar bypassed it easily, with a skill that marked him as a professional. Nor was he greedy, Phil said. He took some antique silver. He slit two of the best canvases out of their frames. He took only a tenth of the jewelry, and Mrs. Anderson described them as her best pieces.

At the second robbery, the burglar proved even more of a connoisseur. The only object he stole from the Finchley house was a Russian icon. Its insured worth was a quarter of a million dollars.

"Yes," Phil said, "I thought it might be insurance fraud, that maybe the first robbery was just to set it up. But hey, Warren Finchley? He gave two million to the Community Chest last year. He needs money like Iceland needs ice."

Then there were the next housebreakings. You would have thought the residents of Fairdell would be on their guard, that they would double their security, but the burglar let things cool down for two weeks and then broke into two more Fairdell homes on the same night, cleaned out the good jewelry, opened a safe stuffed with negotiable securities, cut a small Picasso out of its frame, and left no souvenirs but plenty of chagrin.

The fifth robbery was the most daring of them all. The Rossmores were home, sleeping peacefully in one of their six bedrooms. They hadn't heard a thing. Just woke up to find all the drawers opened, all the valuables gone. No critical selection this time, but with the victims only a snore away, one couldn't fault the burglar for not being picky.

That seemed to be the end of the cycle. Three weeks went by without any more burglaries. Or any arrests. When I mentioned the fact to Phil, he said:

"Oh, don't worry. We've got some pretty good leads."

His smile was almost a smirk. But it was the expression on Georgia's face that got my attention. Her mouth was turned down like a sad circus clown's. She said:

"Haven't you noticed something about these burglaries? All the houses were on either Carver Road or Pinchpenny Lane. You could walk to them in five minutes from our house."

"Are you implying that I'm the burglar?" I said pleasantly. "I sure could use the money."

"No, Corky," Georgia said. (My nickname.) "You don't have that much taste. And obviously we don't have the kind of house worth burglarizing."

This made her brother laugh. "You're offended," he said. "I'll tell that to the burglar when we catch him."

"And you really think you will?" I said.

"We're checking out some records with the FBI. Stay tuned, kids. You might see me on the Six O'Clock News."

The next day I had to work late at the office. Only kidding. Nobody worked late at Gribbin & Katz. Harry Gribbin always said he made his best deals on the golf course. Katz left at four to see his therapist. Everybody else was out of there at five. Some repaired to the nearest bar. A few even went home. I went to see Bunny Hellstrom.

Here's the truth. I didn't really want to see Bunny. I'd been paying the rent on her tiny house at the edge of town for the last three months, but it was no longer a playpen. Somehow, when our affair got past the motel phase, when I became responsible for a second domicile, with plumbing repairs, another lawn to mow, pizza dinners, and dirty dishes, I lost interest in Bunny. She stopped trying to be attractive. She greeted me in shabby housedresses, usually with a litany of complaints about the hot water, the sticky windows, the broken knobs on the closet doors. Mostly, she complained about her job at the diner. Her complaints carried an implicit query. How long did she have to stay in that greasepit? When was "something" going to happen?

Bunny seemed to remember promises I never made. She assumed my marriage was over. She was ecstatic when she saw a photograph of Georgia in the local newspaper, taken at a charity ball, at an angle that made her look fat. Georgia had seen it, too, and put herself on a liquid diet that almost landed her in Fairdell Hospital. But she lost the matronly look. The truth is, she was prettier than ever.

So why did I go to see Bunny? Same reason I had for the last few weeks. I wanted out. I was tired of supporting a second household. I was tired of Bunny and her one-note conversations. I wanted a divorce from my mistress, if either of those words are applicable.

But, as usual, I had a hard time finding an opening. Bunny had a lot to tell me. She had a controversy with MasterCard over a bill. Her dentist wanted to cap her lower teeth. Her dirty rotten ex-husband was demanding the return of her car (it was registered in his name). The drink I was drinking started to burn in my chest like a trickle of acid.

Bunny must have sensed my mood. She wasn't stupid. She softened up, slipped her arms around me, brushed my eyelashes with her lips. She murmured something so low that I had to ask her to repeat it.

"I've got something to show you," she said. "Something really special."

She went into the bedroom. When she emerged, she was holding something glitzy. I recognized the watch I had given her almost a year ago. That was when the romance was red-hot, when a six-thousand-dollar watch from Cartier didn't seem like an extravagance. She sat beside me on the sofa and handed it to me. For a moment, I thought she was going to say something sensible, like "Sell it and pay some of these bills." No way. What she said was:

"Turn it over. Look at the back."

I turned it over. It had been inscribed, recently. The inscription read: *"To Bunny from her Hunny, Corky."*

She was giggling at my expression. She thought I was dumbfounded with pleasure. She was wrong, of course. I was sickened by the sheer stupidity.

"Why did you do this?" I said. "For God's sake, why didn't you just call the newspaper and take out an ad?"

She gave me one of her patented pouts. "What are you afraid of? That somebody will see what it says?"

"There are not many 'Bunnys' in this town. And no other 'Corkys' that I know of."

"Fine!" she exploded. "I wish somebody *would* see it! I'd like to send it to your fat wife so she could see what time it is! Time she gave you that divorce you asked her for—"

"What divorce? I never said I wanted a divorce!"

Her mouth opened like a dying fish. "You told me your marriage was a mistake! That you wished you'd met me first!"

Okay, maybe I said it. Words to that effect. A year ago. That was then, but this was now. I didn't tell her that, but it must have been written on my face. She jumped up like the cushion had caught fire.

"I've got something else to show you!" Bunny said. "Something I wasn't going to send her—not yet! Not until it was absolutely necessary!"

She went to a battered old writing desk, fought with a stuck drawer, and then came out with a sheet of blue-lined paper. She thrust it at me, and my stomach churned like a washer-dryer even before I saw the salutation.

"Dear Mrs. Corcoran," it said. *"You don't know me, but I know you better than you think . . ."*

I did the instinctive thing. I tore it up.

"Go ahead," she said smugly. "Those are just my notes. You want to see the letter, watch your mailbox. No," Bunny added shrewdly, "I'd better deliver it personally. When do you think is a good time, Corky?"

"Never!" I said, my voice choked.

"Boy, is that the wrong answer," Bunny said. "Now I know I'd better not wait anymore. This week—Thursday. My day off. Is that a dumb day to be off, or what? I never do anything anyway. Just hang around and watch TV. You like soap operas, Corky?" Her voice was actually sardonic. It was a new mood for Bunny. "I'll show you a soap opera, baby. You and your wife both."

This was where I lost it. I grabbed her arm and pulled her back to the sofa. She wasn't scared. She was laughing. I was the one who was scared, because I couldn't stop myself from doing what I did. She had a tiny throat. I could practically enclose it with one hand, but one wasn't enough for my uncontrollable fury. I didn't mean to kill her. Oh, hell, of course I did. I wanted her out of my life and I had no other way but this one. Rage and all, I was already imagining the consequences of my act, thinking ahead to what I would have to do to ensure that I would never be connected to it.

When she was lying there, half on the sofa, half on the floor, red-faced and dead-white at the same time, I went to look for the letter, assuming it really existed.

It did. It was in the top drawer of her bedroom bureau. Bunny had a surprisingly good handwriting, but her grammar was hopeless.

I opened all the rest of the drawers and messed them around. I was thinking "burglar," of course, which was pretty ironic. Nobody would credit the fastidious Fairdell Burglar with Bunny's bad ending, but I had to give the police something in the way of theory. Would it work? I'd find out next Friday night. Georgia was preparing coq au vin.

I took the letter with me, and the newly-inscribed watch. As far as I knew, there was nothing else in the place that said "Corky." The house was too isolated to have nosy neighbors. My car was never parked less than three or four blocks away. I'd been cautious and conservative, just the way I was at picking stocks. It usually meant elderly clients and few triumphs in the market. Now it meant safety, and no more Bunny.

I destroyed the letter at our office shredder. I kept the watch, of course. Six thousand dollars was six thousand dollars, and inscriptions could always be erased. When I got home, earlier than usual, I suggested a movie Georgia wanted to see. She was thrilled. While she jumped into the shower, I put the watch into my "junk" drawer, the one she never touched, filled with old eyeglasses, cufflinks I never wore, small boxes full of buttons, Canadian dimes, useless keys, and now, a dead woman's watch.

On Friday, Phil Hayes ate his coq au vin with a bottle of Merlot, and Georgia asked him about the Fairdell Burglar.

"We're still waiting for the FBI report. We think he's right under our nose. Meanwhile," he said happily, "we've got a murder."

Georgia gave a little yelp of pleasure.

"It's a woman named Bunny Hellstrom," Phil said. "A waitress at the Lamplighter Cafe. It looks like a robbery," he said, making me feel good. "Or maybe not," he added, sending a shiver between my shoulder blades. "It might be her ex-husband—a big, mean guy. According to a letter we found, they were having a dispute about a car."

"Have you questioned him?" Georgia asked.

"We have to find him first, and that won't be easy."

"Have some more wine," I said, feeling good again.

Now the bad news.

On Tuesday night, when Georgia was at a Fairdell Woman's Club meeting and I was working late (for real this time), the Fairdell Burglar struck our modest little million-five house.

Georgia was the first to discover it. She got home half an hour before I did, and noticed that a small lamp in the living room was no longer lit. We always left a lamp burning and a radio playing, on the half-baked theory that burglars would be fooled into thinking the house was occupied. The Fairdell Burglar knew better. He had turned off the lamp, preferring to work in the dark, but left the radio on, probably to keep himself entertained while he robbed us blind.

I'll give Georgia credit; she didn't go into hysterics. When I got home, twenty minutes after her discovery, she had already called Brother Phil and was roaming the house trying to find what was missing. It wasn't easy. We didn't keep an inventory. Phil told us that burglary victims often don't realize all they've lost until days or even weeks after the event.

"My jewelry box is empty," she told Phil, blinking back tears. "Every last piece! He must have just dumped it all into a bag or something. So much for your discriminating thief!"

Phil frowned. "He must have known where you both were, and how long his window of opportunity would be open."

" 'Window of opportunity,' " I said bitterly. "Is that what you call it these days?"

"I told you, Corky, this guy is sharp as a tack. He must have been watching your movements. Probably knew about the Woman's Club meeting and how long they usually lasted. Knew you were at the office burning the midnight oil . . ."

"How could he know these things?"

"Because . . ." Phil hesitated, and then decided to leak some information for the sake of his sister's Friday dinners. "Because we're sure he's a local resident. Somebody you see often. You've probably bought him a drink, talked about things happening in town—"

Georgia gasped. "Then you know who it is! You do!"

"We don't have enough proof. But we'll get him, I promise. And that means you'll get your jewelry back."

Some of the strain went out of her face.

Phil wanted one of us to come down to the station house and file a formal complaint. Georgia quickly volunteered. I think she was enjoying herself.

Me, I went straight to the bedroom and fell on the bed. Didn't even take my shoes off. This had been some week.

I was drifting towards sleep when a sudden thought forced me into a sitting position. I looked at my bureau and wondered: Were the drawers all tightly shut? Were a few of them projecting, as if they had been opened recently?

I bounded out of bed and went to check. Nothing seemed to be missing. What would even a hurried burglar want with socks, handkerchiefs, jockey shorts, and pajamas?

Then I opened the junk drawer.

The familiar rattle wasn't there.

The drawer was empty.

Empty.

No eyeglasses with broken earpieces, no ugly cufflinks, no buttons, safety pins, Canadian dimes, keys without locks. And no six-thousand-dollar Cartier watch, inscribed to the murdered Bunny Hellstrom from her devoted Hunny and murderer, Corky Corcoran.

If I knew how to faint, I would have done so. Oblivion would have been a relief. Instead I slammed the drawer shut and tried to think.

Maybe, despite Phil's optimism, they'd never catch the thief.

Maybe he'd sell all his loot to some fence who'd disappear to Mexico or South America.

Or maybe . . . But I couldn't think of any more positive outcomes. All I could envision was a pile of retrieved objects at the police station, being identified and tagged for return to the burglar's victims.

"To Bunny from her Hunny . . ."

I was hot. I was clammy. I tore off my clothes, dropping them on the floor on my way to the shower. I stood under it for a good ten minutes until I began to shiver. I didn't feel much better, but at least my brain was working again.

Phil was surprised when I called the next day and asked him to lunch. I never saw Phil on any other day but Friday. But I dropped the name of a fine restaurant, and he said yes.

I took him to the Box Tree, and he correctly assumed that I wanted to talk about the robbery. He assured me that everything was being done, that I should do my best to keep Georgia calm.

"Georgia's plenty calm," I said. "Georgia is having a good time gabbing with all the rich ladies who were also robbed. The one that's not calm is me, Phil. You see, all those rich people were insured."

His eyebrow went up, a particularly bushy eyebrow.

"Georgia said you were insured, too. She told us that at the police station."

"We had a theft policy once," I said. "I thought it was pointless, since we didn't have many valuables . . . The truth is, I started skipping the premium payments . . ."

Phil was looking grim. "That was a dumb thing to do, Corky."

"But it won't matter if we get our stuff back, will it? You said you were almost sure you knew who the burglar was. . . . Was that just talk, Phil? Just something to make us think you're a real big-time detective like those guys on TV?"

I could see he was getting annoyed. Not annoyed enough to stop eating his steak, though.

"I can't tell you the guy's name, Corky, that wouldn't be right. At least not until we get that FBI file."

"I swear I'll keep it confidential, Phil. You can trust me. I'm your sister's husband, for Pete's sake! I just need a little reassurance. . . . Please!"

It must have been a hell of a good steak. He lowered his fork and his voice at the same time.

"Do you know Frank Birdwell?"

It took me a moment.

"Birdwell. The name's familiar. . . . Wait a sec! He's the golf pro at the country club!"

"That's right. And if our information checks out, he's been a golf pro in three or four other towns like Fairdell. Never works more than a season, moves on to make a score somewhere else. . . . And I don't mean a golf score."

"Wow," I said, looking impressed. "That was really smart of you, Phil, to figure that out."

"Save the congratulations for when I prove it. And don't breathe a word of this, not even to Georgia. Do we understand each other?"

I nodded my head solemnly, and wondered how soon I could buy Frank Birdwell's lunch.

It took only three days. I dropped a hint to Harry Gribbin that I wouldn't mind doing a little business on the golf course. Harry had always thought I hated the game, and he was delighted, especially because he needed a fourth for an upcoming match with our number-one client. I suggested that maybe I could use a little help overcoming a wicked slice, and he told me to take the day off to work with the pro.

I'd seen Birdwell around the club, a slick-looking guy, white-

haired but not much older than me. Always tanned. Always trim. Short, but with a tall man's posture. The women loved him.

I picked a day when the club was likely to be empty. I spent an hour on the first tee letting him teach me to overcome some bad habits. Even though I didn't make much progress, I suggested lunch. The dining room was almost vacant, and I chose the quietest table. I knew Birdwell would appreciate that, especially after he heard my preliminary statement.

"What do you think of these burglaries?"

He had a full wine glass in his hand and it trembled just enough to make the Sauterne slosh.

"Don't know much about it," he said, dabbing at his light gray pants with a napkin. "But I heard that your house was the last one he robbed."

"That's right. Kind of surprised me. I mean, the guy has great taste. Why bother with our little dump?" I smiled, trying to put him at his ease.

"Well, you never know," Birdwell said.

"You're right about that. As a matter of fact, the son of a gun took something that had real value. More than he realized."

That got his interest. "What was that?"

"It was a ladies' watch, from Cartier. Called a Panther watch, don't ask me why. Not worth a fortune, a few thou maybe, but what the heck. This guy swiped stuff in the five-, six-figure range. Why does he need a watch like that?"

He lowered the menu slowly. "I wouldn't know," he said, looking like he wanted to know.

"And there was an inscription on the back. That'll make it tough to get rid of, too traceable. . . ."

"But what did you mean by 'real value'?"

"Sentimental," I said. "The watch meant something to me. I'd give just about anything to have it back. I even thought about taking out an ad in the local paper, offering a reward for its return. No questions asked, that kind of thing . . ."

"For how much?"

My heart was thumping. He was hooked.

"I don't know. Ten, twenty thousand. Think that would be enough?"

"Not for a guy like that," he said. "Besides, he'd be taking a risk, wouldn't he? Isn't your wife's brother a cop?"

"Yeah, that's true. The burglar might think I'm trying to trap him. But I swear I'm not. Honest. I just want my watch back!"

"You might have to go higher," he said. "As high as, say, a hundred thousand?"

"Out of the question. I've got a retirement fund, but the most I could draw would be fifty."

"Well, I wish you luck." He grinned. "I'll look for your ad in the paper. What will it say?"

"I won't use any names. I'd say something like—'If the gentleman now possessing a ladies' Cartier watch inscribed with the name 'Hunny'—" I spelled the misspelling for him. "You know, that kind of thing."

"With a meeting place, I suppose?"

"Someplace right outside town, like the Eiger Tavern. You know the Eiger? Off Route Seventeen?"

"I've passed it."

"It's all dark and cozy," I said. "I'd suggest meeting him there, oh, let's say Thursday night, around seven. I'd have the money, he'd have the watch, everything would be cool."

"Well," Birdwell grinned, "I wish you luck. Also with that slice of yours. If you don't get it fixed, you'll be spending a lot of time in the rough."

I was in the rough right now. I hoped he didn't see the sweat circles under my arms.

I got to the Eiger at seven. The money was in my pocket, in cash. There was nobody in the place except the bartender, a burly man with a ponytail, watching a basketball game. He didn't bother asking me what I wanted. I sat in a booth and started reading the newspaper I had brought with me. Of course, there had been no ad. There hadn't been any promises, either. But I waited and watched the door, and sure enough, ten minutes after the hour Frank Birdwell walked in.

If life could be scored like a movie, I would have heard violins. After a week of terrified expectations, I suddenly felt liberated. The fact that I would also be liberated of fifty thousand dollars didn't trouble me much. You don't need a retirement fund in prison.

Birdwell didn't look like a golf pro tonight. His white hair was uncombed, his topcoat too big for him. His posture was stooped. He had the look of a homeless man, and I realized he didn't want to risk recognition any more than I did.

He slid into the seat opposite and without any preamble produced a small bulging white envelope. I grabbed for it, but he pulled it back.

"Not so fast," he said.

I looked at the bartender, who was still hypnotized by the running figures on screen. Then I produced my own envelope, a ten-by-thirteen Manila crammed with five-hundred-dollar bills, the highest denomination I could manage. He made a swift mental count and shoved the white envelope towards me. I peeked at the

Cartier watch inside, the Panther watch that meant so much more to me than it ever did to poor Bunny.

In the next moment, Birdwell was gone. The sound of the tavern door finally got the bartender's attention. He came to my booth and I told him to give me a double blast of scotch. I'd earned it.

When he was out of sight, I slipped the watch out of the envelope. I turned it over and looked at the smooth gold surface.

For a moment, I thought our clever Fairdell Burglar had taken the precaution of having the inscription removed. Someone had done a remarkable job. Maybe the entire casing had been replaced. Maybe. Maybe.

I started to panic. Or maybe, I thought, it wasn't the same watch. Maybe Bunny's incriminating timepiece was still in Frank Birdwell's possession. But why? Why would he bother to deceive me? Why would he spend six thousand on a new watch when the old one was available? Was it some kind of blackmail scheme? Did he realize its connection to the unsolved murder of Bunny Hellstrom?

When the drink finally arrived, I took about fifteen seconds downing it, threw a ten on the table, and raced out of the Eiger Tavern like the devil was after me. In a way, he was.

Of course, Birdwell's car was gone. I would have to wait until morning to confront him. But even as I got behind the wheel of my own car, something told me that the Fairdell Country Club's pro wouldn't be around tomorrow, that he would be gone, golf bag and baggage.

I was right. Birdwell must have realized how I knew he was the Fairdell Burglar. He knew Phil Hayes had been my source, which meant that the Fairdell cops were on his heels. He must have needed ready cash to make his escape, even if his suitcase was loaded with loot.

It was Phil who broke the news to us the next night. Georgia had outdone herself in the kitchen, with a cassoulet that usually had her brother in ecstasy. That night, he was too despondent to enjoy it. He sat there glumly, hardly aware of what he was eating. Georgia was heartbroken. It had taken her two days to prepare the meal.

"It's all my fault," Phil moaned. "I shouldn't have waited for the FBI. I should have hauled him in and made him crack. . . ."

"Don't let it get to you," Georgia said. "Please, Phil!"

"I promised you'd have your jewelry back! But now he'll sell every last piece and you'll never see them again, not even if somebody else catches him. . . ."

Georgia was chewing her lip, which was more than her brother was doing to the cassoulet.

"Phil," she said, "I don't know if I should tell you this . . ."

"That's what hurts the most," Phil said, not hearing her. "That

somebody else is going to make this collar, after all our hard work . . ."

"Phil! I really have to talk to you," Georgia said.

"What's there to say? I dragged my feet on this one, there's no excuse. . . ."

That's when Georgia stood up. She put her fork down on her plate so hard it rang like a bell.

"I have my jewelry, Phil. I have every last piece."

"What?"

"There wasn't any robbery. The Fairdell Burglar never got into this house. Why would he? Why would anyone want to rob people who have nothing?"

Now she was looking at me. Did she notice how pale I became?

"Georgia," Phil said. "Would you mind explaining?"

"I'll do better than that. I'll show you."

She left the room. Phil and I looked at each other. I said nothing. He said nothing.

Two minutes later, she was back. She was carrying a pillowcase that was bulging like Santa's sack. She walked to the end of the table and turned the bag upside down. A bright cascade of objects spilled onto the tablecloth.

"I burglarized the house," my wife said defiantly. "I was sick about that man ignoring us, *spurning* us! As if we weren't worth his time! As if we just couldn't meet his precious standards! That's what all those women at the club were thinking, the ones he robbed! They were proud of their damned burglar, Phil! Proud that he thought their houses were worth housebreaking!"

She was weeping now, but Phil didn't notice. He was too busy pawing through the conglomeration of jewelry and silverware and bric-a-brac, and the odd assortment of old eyeglasses, button boxes, Canadian coins and useless keys, and, of course, the Cartier Panther watch, with the inscription that read: *To Bunny from her Hunny, Corky.* ●

by Jon L. Breen

Now that everyone agrees we've entered the twenty-first century (in the year 2000, the matter was in dispute) it's a good time for a roundup of recent examples of one of this department's favorite mystery subcategories. The twentieth-century historical is in some ways the most challenging type, since anachronisms are both more easily spotted by and more annoying to readers closer to the period. Though the novels below generally avoid obvious miscues, one of the passengers on a 1907 Atlantic crossing says his wife "has a thing" about silver and a 1940s character tells a private eye the Black Dahlia wore "those black stockings with the seams up the calf" at a time when all women's stockings had seams. Such rare lapses are easy to forgive in writers who choose to look back at my favorite century.

**** Laura Wilson: *Little Death,* Bantam, $5.99. This extraordinary first novel, originally published in Britain in 1999, traces the lives of a brother, sister, and servant from the early-century death of a five-year-old younger brother, through a celebrated 1928 murder trial of the sister for the murder of her husband, to a presumed double-murder-suicide in 1955. In a whodunit where the only detective is the reader, each of the three narrators has a distinctive and believable voice, and a sense of the changing times enriches the mystery. Wilson is a genuine find for readers who have enjoyed the novels of Peter Dickinson, Thomas H. Cook, and Ruth Rendell (as Barbara Vine).

**** Howard Engel: *Murder in Montparnasse,* Overlook, $23.95 hardcover; $14.95 trade paper. In 1925, a serial killer of artists' models known as Jack de Paris stalks the city, but is one of the murders ascribed to him a more personal crime involving members of the expatriate literary community? In

an expertly crafted novel that captures the time and place beautifully, thinly disguised versions of the Hemingways, Fitzgeralds, and Ford Madox Fords are among the characters encountered by young Canadian narrator Michael Ward. Much as I admire the Benny Cooperman series, this novel first published in Canada in 1992 may represent Engel's finest crime-fiction hour.

*** Ed Gorman: *Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?,* Carroll & Graf, $22.95. In 1959, Black River Falls, Iowa, becomes the focus of Cold War ideological struggle when a left-leaning local resident is murdered. Lawyer and private eye Sam McCain's third case has some characteristics typical of Gorman: the beautifully captured scenes and moods of mid-century middle America; the infusion of grim reality into a seemingly lighthearted narrative; and an impatience with the conventions of traditional suspense fiction, demonstrated by ironic genre references and a touch of parody in an unconventional pair of dueling spies. The pop-music title is, as usual, a perfect fit. (Gorman's very best evocation of fifties Iowa may be the title novella in the 1996 collection *Moonchasers and Other Stories,* now in trade paperback [Forge, $14.95].)

*** Andrew Bergman: *Tender is LeVine,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. In 1950 New York, a violinist for the NBC Symphony believes Maestro Arturo Toscanini has been replaced by an impostor. Wisecracking private eye Jack LeVine, who hasn't lost a step since his last appearance in *Hollywood and LeVine* (1975), wins this department's Comeback of the Year award. Even admirers of Bergman's work as film writer and director may regret he stayed away from print detective fiction so long. LeVine's funny, self-mocking narrative voice is reminiscent of the P.I. Nicolas Cage played in Bergman's fine 1992 comedy *Honeymoon in Vegas.*

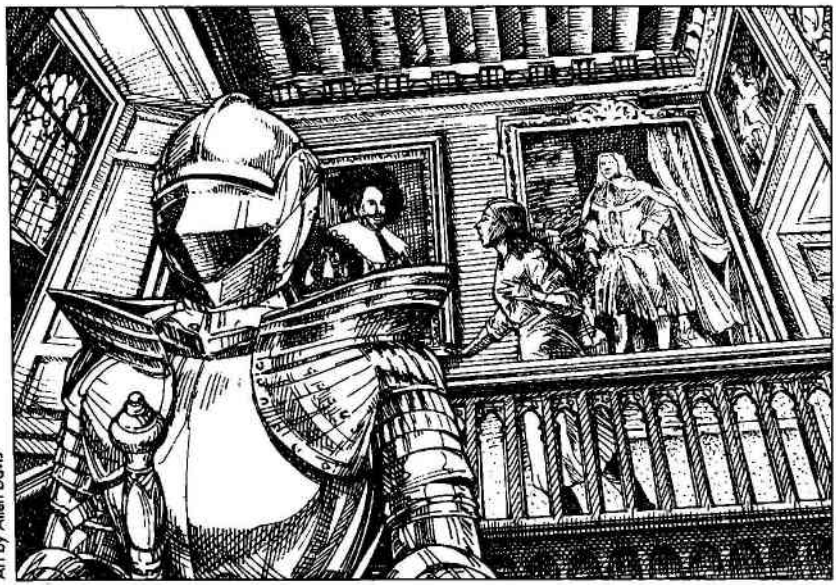
*** Max Allan Collins: *Angel in Black,* New American Library, hardcover, price unknown. Chicago private eye Nate Heller looks into the 1947 murder of Elizabeth Short, a Hollywood hopeful known in true-crime lore as the Black Dahlia. The case has been fictionalized by several earlier writers, notably James Ellroy, but Collins's treatment is both original and distinctive, his theory of the case a wild one but as plausible as any. Among the celebrity characters recurring from earlier Heller novels are Orson Welles, Mickey Cohen, Barney Ross, and Eliot Ness. As always, the fact-vs.-fiction postscript is a model of its kind. (An interview with Collins in the extraordinary British periodical *Crime Time: The Journal of Crime Fiction* reveals there may eventually be a Heller novel about the assassination of John F. Kennedy.)

*** Conrad Allen: *Murder on*

the Mauretania, St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. On the great ship's 1907 maiden voyage, Cunard Line detectives George Porter Dillman and Genevieve Masefield make their second appearance, following a shakedown cruise in *Murder on the Lusitania* (1999). This most enjoyable shipboard whodunit draws its characters from all classes of passengers and, for the most part, displays a sound sense of period. It's nice for a change to read about an early-century luxury liner you know isn't going to sink at the end.

** Sam McCarver: *The Case of the 2nd Séance,* Signet, $5.99. The third case for Professor John Darnell involves the 1916 kidnapping of Lloyd George's teenage daughter during a séance at 10 Downing Street attended by Conan Doyle. Is there a connection with the German peace overtures the British Prime Minister is considering to end the carnage of World War I? McCarver continues to be strong on historical detail and action writing, less so on dialogue. Though paranormal investigator Darnell seeks rational solutions for seemingly supernatural events, the treatment of spiritualism here is intriguingly ambivalent. (The previous Darnell case, *The Case of Compartment 7* [Signet, $5.99], concerning the appearance of a bloody apparition on a 1914 Orient Express journey, is his best to date. Among the passengers: Anna Held, Mata Hari, and Agatha Miller, later to achieve fame with a different surname.)

Stories from a couple of original anthologies fit our recent-history theme. Lawrence Block leads off the Adams Round Table's *Murder Among Friends* (Berkley, $21.95) with a good Nixon-era case for Matt Scudder, in his days as a married alcoholic cop. In *The Shamus Game* (Signet, $6.50), a Private Eye Writers of America collection edited by Robert J. Randisi, Terence Faherty's mid-century Hollywood sleuth Scott Elliott solves an admirably tricky puzzle in "Nobody's Ring"; Max Allan Collins's Nate Heller, visiting off-season Miami Beach in 1941, is asked by Frank Nitti to get a nightclub comic to tone down his blue material in "Screwball"; and the private-eye dreams of Gary Phillips's Ivan Monk drift about in time in the parody "The Sleeping Detective," while demonstrating the depth of the author's knowledge and reverence of mystery-fiction history. The rest of the book is a P.I.-lover's dream come true including (among others) new stories about Parnell Hall's Stanley Hastings, Bill Pronzini's Nameless, John Lutz's Nudger, and recent PWA Lifetime Achievement Award-winner Edward D. Hoch's Al Darlan in the typically clever "It Could Get Worse," which reads like a period piece save for one amusing detail that sets it firmly in the present.



Art by Allen Davis

THE SCARING BELL

by Edward D. Hoch

Helen Millet knew it was still dark even before she opened her eyes. She'd always told her brother she had especially thin eyelids, able to distinguish light and dark with ease. Now, awakening in his guest room in the middle of a moonlit night, she wondered what had roused her. She listened intently but heard no sound within the house nor any animal without, not even the cry of a screech owl. But she remembered that that was an American bird from back home, and she was at her brother's estate in England.

Then she heard it, the faint but insistent ringing of a bell. It was not the full-bodied sound one associated with bells at night, not the mournful tolling of a floating buoy in the harbor nor the occasional cowbell sounding across a darkened field. It was more like a little hand-held bell rung to summon a servant, but the sound seemed to be coming from outside the house, through her partly opened window that faced the old chapel a mere twenty feet away.

Helen slid out from under the covers and went to the window, pulling open the drapes just enough to see outside. There was a

full moon bathing the chapel and its little graveyard in an unearthly glow, and it took her only an instant to locate the source of the bell. One of the stained-glass windows of the chapel had a louvered opening at the bottom for air circulation, and a white bony hand was thrust out, shaking a small silver bell. The very sight of it sent a shiver down her spine and she ran from the room, seeking her brother.

She pounded on the thick wooden door to their bedroom until Larry opened it. His pajamas were rumpled and his eyes barely open. "What in God's name is it, Helen? This is the middle of the night!"

Simon Ark was the protagonist of Edward D. Hoch's first published short story (1955), yet he has appeared in tales for *EQMM* less than a dozen times over the years. Mr. Hoch employs this unusual character infrequently, though he says, "Of all my characters, Ark is probably closest to the mood of John Dickson Carr's stories, and I think this is especially true of this story, whose elements hark back to the Golden Age, even though it's set in the present."

"There's someone in the chapel. I saw a hand, ringing a bell."

He seemed to blanch at the words. "That's impossible. The chapel is locked and I have the only key. If someone broke in, the alarm would have sounded."

"Come see for yourself."

By now Cynthia was also awake and she followed them across the hall to Helen's room. "What is it? What's happened?"

"She says there's someone in the chapel," Larry told her.

"That's impossible! It's locked up tight."

They peered out the window of Helen's bedroom, but now there was nothing but the moonlight playing on the partly opened stained-glass window. There was no hand, no bell.

"I saw it, I tell you! And I heard it, too! The bell awakened me."

"The scaring bell," Cynthia murmured.

"What?"

"I'd better get the chapel key," Larry decided.

"Do you know where it is?" his wife asked.

"It should be in my desk." He got his slippers and robe and went downstairs to find it. Helen paused long enough to put on shoes for the dewy grass and then followed her sister-in-law.

"That old place hasn't been opened in years," Cynthia told her. "If it didn't have so much history connected with it we'd have it torn down."

Larry unlocked his desk and produced the big brass key, pausing to turn off the chapel alarm and pick up a flashlight. He led

the way out of the house with the women following. At the big oak chapel door he had trouble with the lock. "Damned thing is rusted shut. We won't find anyone in here."

The door squeaked loudly as it finally yielded to the pressure of his shoulder. "Are there any lights?" Helen asked, catching a faint odor she couldn't identify.

"Just candles. I'll use my flash—" But as soon as it went on she heard Cynthia's scream.

There was a trail of blood from the partly open window to the altar, upon which sprawled the body of a man, as if in sacrifice to some ancient god.

That was the story Helen Millet told Simon Ark and me four days later in a London hotel room. Though I was retired from my position as editor of Neptune Books, I still performed occasional services for them. When he learned I was flying to England to visit a best-selling author of children's books, Simon decided to come along. An inquisitive reporter for one of the London tabloids heard about the visit and headlined his report: *Famed Spook-Hunter Visits Here.*

"I am neither famed nor a spook-hunter," Simon hastened to inform Helen Millet after agreeing to a brief visit in our hotel suite. She was a somber young American woman, probably in her early thirties, who'd come to England for two months between jobs to visit her brother and his wife. On this early October day she was wearing tailored slacks, with a gray tweed jacket covering a red blouse.

"But this article says you once claimed to be nearly two thousand years old," she insisted.

"British tabloids have a way of shading the truth," Simon answered noncommittally. "Now tell me about your brother, and the murder at his chapel." I knew it was this latter fact that had piqued Simon's interest when she phoned our hotel.

Helen Millet began to speak, her voice low and guarded, as if she feared being overheard. "He and Cynthia met about five years ago when he was studying for his doctorate at York, and he had no idea at the time that her family was wealthy, with a small estate in Suffolk. The place was once a convent and there's a little chapel close to the main house. After Larry and Cynthia were married three years ago they wanted to tear it down to make room for a tennis court, but the chapel is over two hundred years old and the local villagers objected."

"What does your brother do for a living?"

"Well, Cynthia's family left her with money and Larry is trying to start an Internet company. He works at home but makes frequent trips to London."

"Tell me about this murder," Simon suggested. The light in our hotel room was fading as the afternoon sun dipped behind the building across the street, and I turned on the floor lamp next to his chair. It brought out the lines of his face, making him appear suddenly old. But in truth he had looked nearly that old when first we met almost forty-five years earlier.

Twisting a handkerchief she held in her hands, Helen Millet recounted the story of the ghastly hand and its ringing bell, awakening her from a sound sleep, then hurried on to their discovery of the slain man on the altar of the locked chapel. "Who was the murdered man?" Simon asked when she'd finished.

"A village handyman named Basil Sloane. He did gardening and repair work around my brother's house. They have no full-time servants, but employ cleaners once a week and cooks when they entertain."

"How did Sloane get into the chapel?"

"We have no idea. The only door was locked. When I saw your name in the paper I thought you might be able to help."

"Indeed I might," Simon told her. "How was he killed?"

"Stabbed in the chest. There were cuts on his fingers as well. One of them was quite deep."

"Does your brother know you're here?"

"Larry saw the item in the paper about you and he asked me to meet with you and urge you to come up there. He's worried the police suspect him of the crime. Cynthia doesn't know. She wouldn't approve of strangers meddling in their business. I—I didn't want to come here, but I'm doing it for Larry."

Simon Ark leaned forward, and with the light off his face the lines of age seemed to fade away. "Your story interests me. I would like to look into it further. But a visit to the estate and the chapel would be impossible without your sister-in-law's knowledge and consent."

"She doesn't have to know the real purpose of your visit. You can be researching old chapels for a book."

"Actually, that's not a bad idea for a book, Simon," I chimed in. "We could illustrate it with full-page photographs, very moody. It might make an interesting coffee-table book for next fall's season."

"Then you'll come?" she asked.

"Why is it so important to you, Miss Millet?"

"Because I love my brother, and the police think he did it."

It had been an early autumn in England that year, and the trees in Suffolk were almost bare as we traveled by train to Dunwich on the coast. Its name reminded me of an old story by H.P. Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror," though that Dunwich had been in Massachusetts. The small estate owned by Helen's brother and sister-in-

law in a nearby fishing village seemed not the least bit sinister when we reached it, after being picked up at the station by Larry Millet. He proved to be an engaging chap, more British than American, and he carried our bags to his car. If he was the subject of a police investigation, he showed no sign of it.

"Mr. Ark is writing a book on old English chapels," Helen told her brother. "I told him he had to see yours."

"Is that true?" Larry asked us, undecided whether to go along with the story.

"True enough," I confirmed. "Neptune Books published his volume on witchcraft about ten years ago. It's time for another one."

Our host chuckled. "You won't find any witches at The Nunnery, or any nuns either, for that matter. Most of the bedrooms are closed and empty. We just maintain the rooms we need for ourselves, plus a couple of guest rooms." He turned serious for a moment. "But I do appreciate your coming up here with Helen. I hope you can help us."

The Nunnery proved to be a three-story Tudor-style house behind a fieldstone wall with a gate flanked by stone griffins. It hardly seemed an appropriate entrance for a one-time convent, but for all I knew a later owner might have added the griffins. Larry Millet drove up to the front door and his pale, dark-haired wife came out to meet us. Cynthia Millet was an attractive woman in her early thirties, yet there was about her an off-putting quality. Even while greeting us at the door she seemed to be questioning our presence there. Perhaps it was natural, considering the circumstances.

The interior of the house seemed dark and brooding, in desperate need of bright colors. There was even the traditional suit of armor off in one corner of the main floor, its gauntlets crossed on the hilt of a sword. "You say you're working on a book, Mr. Ark?" Cynthia addressed him, ignoring me after the brief introductions. "About old English chapels?"

"That's correct. I understand you have a fine example of one here."

"The nuns used it some two hundred years ago. I'm afraid we haven't kept it up as we should. The main house was built in the mid-1700s. The chapel was an afterthought, built around 1795 when an order of Anglican nuns took over the place."

"I'd like to see it nonetheless."

"Very well. Larry tells me you'll be spending the night with us."

"Just one night," I assured her. "We must return to London tomorrow."

She showed us to a second-floor guest room, next to the one occupied by Helen Millet. The upstairs, like the main floor, was a somber affair with dark wood paneling and just a few touches of

color provided by autumn flowers from the garden. Once in our room we saw that the chapel was indeed only about twenty feet away. Helen pointed toward the window where she'd heard and seen the ringing bell.

"They've got enough land around," I observed. "Why would they build their chapel so close to the house?"

Simon didn't answer. He seemed to be peering intently at the window in question, partly obscured by bushes. "I'd like to visit the chapel while it's still daylight," he said.

Cynthia Millet frowned. "I'm afraid it's not looking its best right now. A man was killed there earlier this week. The police had the chapel sealed until this morning and we haven't had an opportunity to clean up in there. I have a photograph we took two years ago, though."

She hurried from the bedroom and returned after a moment carrying an eight-by-ten framed photo of the chapel's interior. It showed a view down the center aisle, with about ten pews on each side facing a small altar. A barely visible cross stood at its center, flanked by wide candles on either side. There was wood paneling on the walls, and behind the altar was a large stained-glass window depicting St. George slaying the dragon. "It's Saint George's Chapel," Larry Millet explained. "Dragon legends were fashionable in this part of England."

Simon Ark smiled slightly. "Who was the man that was killed?"

"He did gardening and odd jobs for us. His name was Sloane."

"How did he get into your chapel?"

"That's what we don't know," Millet's wife told us. "It's been locked since shortly after our marriage."

"I'd still like to see it," Simon told them.

"I'll take you over," Larry said, glancing at Helen. "We won't be long, Cynthia."

She stayed behind while the rest of us followed him downstairs. He picked up a rusty old key and led the way out the back door of the house. Simon headed at once toward the window where Helen had seen the hand ringing the bell.

"There's something carved in the stone here," he told us. "I thought I saw it from upstairs."

"Yes," Larry Millet agreed, pushing away the bushes so we could see it better. "No one knows quite what it means."

"*Pray Silence for the Scaring Bell,*" Simon read, tracing his wrinkled fingers along the weathered letters.

"What in heaven's name is the scaring bell?" I asked. Peering in through the slight opening beneath the stained glass, I had a side view of the altar opposite us.

Larry shrugged. "Perhaps the chapel once had a reputation for being haunted."

"It was certainly haunted the night I heard the bell," Helen said.

"Is there a back door to the chapel?" Simon asked.

He shook his head. "There's just the one entrance."

"What about this open louver?"

"It was always closed. The dying man must have opened it."

"He rang the bell trying to attract attention," I suggested.

"But how did he get in there in the first place?" Helen Millet wondered.

Her brother had no answer. "Sloane was in the house a great deal, doing odd jobs for me. But the key to the chapel door is kept in a locked drawer, and the chapel itself has an alarm system that was turned on at the time."

"Was a copy found on him?"

"No," Millet answered. "A key that big and old couldn't be copied by a modern key-cutting machine. The police think I'm the only one who could have killed him, after turning off the alarm and opening the door for him. But I was asleep with Cynthia the whole time." We'd walked around to the front door and waited while he struggled with the lock. Finally it squeaked open and we entered the chapel. It was as we'd seen in the picture, except that the altar was a mess, covered with dried blood and an overturned cross. Helen stood back, as if afraid to approach too closely. "I suppose we can start cleaning up now that the police are finished," Millet said, picking up the overturned cross and returning it to the center of the altar. "There's blood on this cross, too, and on one of the candles."

"Thieves may have been attracted by the gold," I suggested.

Simon wasn't so certain. "The price of gold is low right now. And the cross and candlesticks weren't taken. Was there a chalice too?" He was peering closely at the bloodstained gold cross, running his fingers over some protrusions in the metal.

"No. So far as I can tell, there's nothing missing," Larry Millet told us.

Simon turned his attention to the trail of blood. "See, these drops seem to go in both directions, but there are more coming back from the window. You can tell by the direction of the drops. He was wounded near the altar but lived long enough to stagger to the window for help. The exertion may have been too much for him and the bleeding increased. He staggered back to the altar and died."

"But where's the bell?" Helen asked. "The police didn't mention taking anything away, except for a bloodstained handkerchief and a small pocketknife."

She was right. The bell was nowhere to be found. We were puzzled by it until Simon Ark spoke. "An interesting but relatively simple problem in deduction. Did the killer take it? No, because if

he were still here he wouldn't have allowed his victim to open the louvers and ring for help in the first place. Once Sloane was at the window ringing that bell, why did he stop? Why did he give up and stagger back to the altar to die?"

"Why?" I asked. It was not the first time I'd played Simon's straight man.

"Because he dropped the bell. It must have fallen from his weakened fingers, into those bushes outside the window."

"We'd better look," Millet said.

We found it after a few minutes' searching, not on the ground where the police might have seen it, but rather caught in the thick branches of the bush beneath the window. There was still a trace of dried blood on it, and Helen recognized the sound of its ringing at once. "It still sends a chill through me. Shall we tell Superintendent Jennings that we've found it?"

Her brother considered that. "I don't know what good it would do. If there's any trace of fingerprints I'm sure they belong to poor Sloane."

"The bell was kept on the altar?"

"I believe so. I haven't been here in a couple of years."

Simon suggested it be placed carefully in a plastic bag in the event it was needed as evidence. As we headed back to the house I was wondering if Larry and his wife were planning dinner for us, but Helen quickly solved that problem. "There's a nice little hotel in the village where we can get something to eat. I at least owe you a meal for coming up here with me."

The place was called the Blue Boy Hotel, with a statue of Gainsborough out front. "He actually lived in Sudbury," Helen explained, "which is some distance from here but in the area."

"Tell me something," Simon said when we were seated at the table. "Are the winters harsh around here?"

"They are, from what Larry tells me. They get at least a few inches of snow several times, and lots of rain. They're lucky if they have five days a month without rain in the winter. Of course being on the coast like this doesn't help." Her expression suddenly clouded. "Uh-oh! Superintendent Jennings is at the bar and he's spotted me. He's coming over."

Jennings was a beefy, red-faced man whom I suspected spent a good deal of time in pubs. "Miss Millet, isn't it?" he asked as he approached our table.

"Yes, Superintendent. How is your investigation going?"

"Mind if I pull up a chair and join you?"

She had no choice but to agree. Introducing Simon and me, she moved her chair a bit to make room for him. "My brother is home cleaning up the chapel."

"I should have given you the name of a cleaning service in

Grimsby," the superintendent said. "They're very good with crime scenes."

"Do you have any leads as to the killer's identity?" Simon asked.

Jennings frowned at him. "Are you a solicitor or a private inquiry agent, by any chance?"

"Neither one, only a searcher after truth."

"Basil Sloane had some shady friends. We're investigating them. We're also looking into other possibilities."

"You suspect my brother, don't you?" Helen asked.

Superintendent Jennings sighed and leaned forward so as not to be overheard. "Sloane was killed in a locked chapel to which your brother possessed the only known key. Naturally we have to look into that possibility. He might have caught the man trying to steal the gold cross or candlesticks and killed him."

"Then why wouldn't he report that to the police?"

"He could have faced a manslaughter charge. He might have felt it was better to say nothing."

"There is another possible explanation that does not involve Larry Millet," Simon Ark said.

The superintendent's eyes narrowed. "You're the spook hunter, aren't you? Read about you in the London papers. I'll be happy to hear your explanation."

"Gladly. Sloane might have picked the lock somehow."

"We've considered it, but the chapel did have an alarm in working order," he replied. "We're checking Sloane's friends. There's a fellow named Joe Bingham, an ex-convict, who's sometimes seen in pubs with Sloane. He's been missing from his usual haunts this week."

"Was the murder weapon recovered?"

Jennings shook his head. "There was a bloodstained handkerchief with the victim's initials on it, and a bloodstained pocketknife much too small to have done the deed. He had nothing else in his possession except a pack of cigarettes, a lighter, and a small amount of money."

"He may have wounded his attacker," Simon suggested. "Did you test the blood on the pocketknife?"

"And on the handkerchief, and on the window. It was all Sloane's blood."

"Mr. Ark will be able to find this Bingham if you can't," Helen said. It was not a remark likely to put the superintendent on our side.

"Fine," Jennings responded, getting to his feet. "You just let me know when that happens."

"You don't think he can do it?"

"Sure, maybe he can even find Sloane's ghost and ask him who did it."

"You probably shouldn't have egged him on," I suggested to Helen after the superintendent had gone.

"People like that think they know everything. That's why there are so many criminals running around loose."

"We need to know where Sloane hung out, if we're to get a line on this Bingham," I decided.

"You might ask the barman here," Simon suggested.

I took his advice and went up to the end of the bar where a red-haired Irishman was smoothing the foam off two pints of draft. "I'm looking for a fellow named Bingham, a friend of Basil Sloane, the man who got himself killed a few days ago."

"Don't know him," the barman said simply.

"Did Sloane come in here?"

"Not lately. He owed too many people money. Including me."

"Where'd he hang out?"

"Probably the Blue Boar down the street."

I told Simon and Helen what I'd learned and suggested I go down there after dinner. "You two can wait here. I might find out more if I'm alone." They didn't argue.

The Blue Boar was a typical village pub, noisy and smoky, lacking the genteel demeanor of the hotel up the street. The barman referred me to one of the customers, a chum of Bingham's, who told me the man had been off on a fishing boat for a few days. "You one of Jennings's men?"

"No, I'm a visiting American. I'm not with the police."

He was a short man wearing glasses and a tweed cap. "Joe gets nervous when the law comes around. He thinks they want to send him back to prison."

"Where can I find him? It's important."

The short man hesitated and I slipped him a five-pound note. That seemed to convince him I wasn't a cop. "He's working on a fishing boat, that's the truth. He left right after his buddy Basil got killed. Told me he'd probably be back tonight sometime."

"Where's the dock?"

"Near the Marine Supply. Look for a fishing boat named the *Tiger Lily.*"

I went back to the hotel and told Simon and Helen about it. "This is the best lead we have. I think I should go down to the dock and wait."

Helen was uncertain. "If he fled because he killed Sloane, he may try to kill you, too."

"If he killed Sloane, he won't be coming back on that boat," I reasoned, and was pleased to see Simon nod in agreement.

"You wait, we all wait," Helen decided. "We only have the one car."

I didn't like that, but there was no arguing with her logic. After

dinner we drove down to the docks and they waited in the car while I went in search of a fishing boat named the *Tiger Lily.* At the Marine Supply Shop I learned it had already docked and the crew was busy unloading their catch. I walked out on the pier and quickly located Joe Bingham. He was a bearded, muscular man who looked as if he'd be at home on the North Sea.

"I wanted to ask you about Basil Sloane," I said. "I'm an old friend from America. I was shocked to learn of his death."

"Yeah. He died." He continued pulling on a rope, lifting a cargo net full of fish from the hold of the boat while two other crew members helped.

"I'm just trying to get to the bottom of this. What would he have been doing out in that chapel in the middle of the night?"

"He did odd jobs around the place." The net full of fish swung out onto the dock and Joe Bingham seemed to snicker at the memory of his friend. "And some not so odd," he added, half under his breath.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, Cynthia Millet is a handsome young woman."

"Are you suggesting she and Sloane were having an affair?"

"Sure, he used to brag about it. Why else do you think her husband would have killed him?"

Back in the car with Simon and Helen Millet, I told them what I'd learned. Helen listened, unbelieving. "I can't imagine Cynthia with that man. It's all a lie to give Larry a motive for the murder."

"Think back over the weeks you've been here," Simon suggested. "Did your sister-in-law show any evidence of particular friendship with Sloane? Or tension with your brother?"

"No," she said at once, but then seemed to hesitate. "There was one odd thing. When I moved into that guest room for my visit I found some of Cynthia's nightgowns and body lotion in the drawers. There was even a book." She blushed at the memory. "*Lady Chatterley's Lover.* I saw those things and wondered if she slept in there occasionally, but it's not the sort of thing I could ask her. The next day she'd removed them."

"Bingham might have killed him during an aborted robbery," I suggested. "That would explain why he shipped out on the fishing boat so quickly."

"Perhaps," Simon acknowledged.

"But what were they trying to steal and how did they get in?" Helen asked. "No one could have fit through that opening in the stained-glass window."

Simon sighed in resignation. "Perhaps we should return to The Nunnery and conduct a more thorough search."

"For what?" I asked.

Even in the car's darkened interior I could make out the smile

on his lips. "In the best tradition of an old English mansion, we shall search for a secret passage."

Larry Millet stared at us as if we were insane. "A secret passage, in this day and age? Did this fellow Bingham say there was one?"

"No," Simon Ark replied. "But the house was not built in this day and age. It was built in the eighteenth century and even the chapel is over two hundred years old."

"The chapel was built when the place became a nunnery. Why would the nuns want a secret passage?"

"It wouldn't have been a secret to them. It would have been to protect them from rain and snow on their way to morning prayers. I understand the weather here can be quite unpleasant."

Larry waved a hand at the main-floor hallway. "Look for yourself. Do you see any place for a secret passage?"

"It would be underground, of course. The entrance should be in your basement, in the wall nearest the chapel."

"What gave you this crazy idea?"

"I suppose the fact that the chapel was built so close to the nunnery, only twenty feet away. For some reason they wanted the two buildings separate, but accessible to the nuns without their having to go outside."

"Come on!" Helen's brother said, leading the way. "If there's a tunnel down here you'll have to show me where."

We went past the suit of armor and followed him down the steps to the hard dirt floor of the basement. The place was dimly lit by a single bulb and seemed little more than a storage area for great old furniture long out of date. "You must have a fortune in antiques here," Helen speculated. "Why don't you sell some of them?"

"They belong to Cynthia, not me."

Simon quickly oriented himself. "If there is an underground passage it must come up near the altar, behind the wood paneling." His quick eyes darted toward a little alcove partially blocked by a tall chiffonier. "What's this?"

Larry went to investigate. "I've never been back here. There's a sheet of plywood—"

"What's going on down here?" Cynthia asked from the top of the stairs. "Are you entertaining our house guests in the basement, Larry?"

"Mr. Ark thinks there's an underground passage to the chapel."

"I never heard of one," she said, starting down the stairs.

But now Larry had pulled aside the sheet of plywood, revealing a heavy wooden door. It was unlocked and opened easily on well-oiled hinges. "We've found it!" he called up to his wife. "Bring the flashlight, will you?"

She reappeared in a moment and handed it to her husband. Larry was first into the darkened passageway, shining the light at the floor and walls. It was a narrow tunnel, less than three feet wide, its sides of rough stone and its floor of packed earth. His light immediately came to rest on a damp spot several feet wide where water had seeped in from outside. The earth had softened here, and there was a single clear indentation of a man's footprint headed toward the chapel.

We pressed on until we came to a flight of wooden steps. At the top Larry shined his light on another door, lifted the latch, and pushed. As Simon had surmised, a section of wood paneling swung open and we found ourselves facing the chapel's altar. "This is the way the nuns came," he said, "whenever the weather was bad."

Larry turned to his wife. "You never knew about this?"

"I don't remember my parents ever mentioning it. They probably didn't want me playing here, and then of course I was away at school and working up in York much of the time."

Moonlight was streaming through the stained-glass windows but we still needed Larry's flashlight to see much of anything. The chapel was as we'd left it, and with the wall panel closed there was no hint of the entrance to the underground passage. "One entrance," Simon said. "That made me suspicious from the beginning. Even two hundred years ago no building larger than a cabin would have been built with only one entrance."

"But if Sloane came in this way and the killer came in this way, they both had to come from our house," Cynthia said. "The killer had to return to our house."

"Exactly," Simon told her. "Except that it couldn't have happened that way."

"Why not?" I asked.

Simon took the flashlight from Larry Millet and directed its beam at the altar. "Look at this gold cross. Notice the little projections in the metal. Isn't it true, Mrs. Millet, that this cross was studded with gems held in place by these prongs?"

"Why . . . Yes, I think I remember that now."

"Your photograph wasn't sharp enough to show such detail, but it seems likely that Basil Sloane discovered the tunnel during his work at The Nunnery and explored the chapel on his own. He came here the other night to steal the jewels from the cross. The price of gold might be down, but not of precious stones. I believe he was using his pocketknife to pry the gems free when he cut himself severely on the hand. That accounted for the blood on the knife and the cross."

"And his accomplice killed him for the stones?" Larry asked.

"I don't think so." Simon shifted the flashlight beam to the wide candles that stood on either side of the cross. "Remember the blood

on this one candle? If Sloane cut his hands while prying the gems free from the cross, why would there be blood on the candle?" He turned to me. "Do you have a pocketknife, my friend?"

I handed him the Swiss Army knife I'd carried for years and he passed me the flashlight to hold. Then he went to work digging at the wax in the top of the candle. "I believe, Miss Millet, that you mentioned in your story a faint odor when the three of you entered through the chapel door. Might it have been the odor of burning candles?"

"It could have been," she replied, trying to remember.

"Ah!" He reached into the top of the candle and produced a blood-red ruby. "I'm sure there are more here."

"How did it get inside the candle?" Larry wanted to know.

"Sloane dropped the gems into the melted wax at the candle top and then blew out the flames. The wax hardened and hid them. Convinced that his hand wound was serious, he had to summon help and didn't want the gems found on him."

"How did you know the candles were lit?" Larry asked. "Just from what my sister said?"

"They had to be lit. How else could Sloane have seen to pry off the gems? No flashlight was found, and there's no electricity in here. There was a full moon to provide some illumination through the windows, but not enough for that kind of close work. He used his lighter to light the candles, of course, and that's where he hid the stones after he cut himself."

"Then you've solved it," Cynthia Millet said.

"Hardly. If Sloane had an accomplice and the accomplice was still here at the time, he wouldn't have needed to hide the stones or ring the bell for help. He was alone, and if he was alone, who stabbed him in the chest? The chapel door was locked and the killer couldn't have left by the tunnel."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Remember that imprint of a male shoe we saw coming in? There was none going out, though the area of damp dirt was several feet wide and unavoidable. Sloane was by himself in this chapel when he died."

"The scaring bell," Cynthia said softly and seemed to shiver. "I've seen those words carved beneath the window all my life and never quite knew what they meant."

Simon walked over to the bloodstained window nearest the altar and peered out. The chest-high louvered window was still open—enough for the dying man to have reached an arm out.

"Perhaps I should have explained that earlier," Simon told her. "It was nothing more than a simple typographical error on the part of some long-forgotten stone mason. He meant to carve

Sacring Bell. The inscription should have read *Pray Silence for the Sacring Bell."*

"But that makes no sense at all!" Helen protested.

"It does. *Sacre* is an obsolete verb meaning *to consecrate.* The sacring bell was rung in churches to call attention to the most solemn parts of the Mass. In medieval times a hand bell was often rung out a side window near the altar to alert those outside the church. More often it is called the Sanctus bell today. Until recently it was still rung at solemn moments during the Roman Catholic Mass."

Larry Millet shook his head. "That still doesn't tell us what happened here."

"No, it doesn't," Simon admitted.

In the morning, things were no better. Simon and I planned to catch a midafternoon train back to London and there seemed little we could do before that. Over a country breakfast prepared by Cynthia, he promised to phone Superintendent Jennings and tell him about the passageway, the footprint, and what little else we knew.

"Crime detection is quite a scientific art these days," he told them while Helen took a second helping of bacon. "If Jennings can locate the murder weapon there are any number of tests that can be run. Even if the weapon has been wiped clean there are sure to be minute traces of blood remaining on the blade. Tests can identify it as Sloane's blood. And no matter how careful the killer is, there are often traces of fingerprints somewhere on the weapon."

"But first they have to find it," Larry said. "And if they find the knife it'll probably be in the killer's possession. You said the superintendent mentioned that this fellow Bingham was an ex-convict. He would seem to be the likely suspect, especially since he disappeared for a few days after the killing."

"But how did he get in there and out again?" his wife asked. If she had been having an affair with Sloane, she seemed to have accepted the fact of his death without visible emotion.

"I suppose it has something to do with the so-called secret passage," Larry said, glancing at Simon. "Anyway, Cynthia, I think you and I had better get at the job of mopping up that blood. Unless you'd rather hire cleaners for it."

"I'll help, too," Helen offered. "I should do something to earn my keep here."

Her brother and Cynthia gathered up mops and pails. Larry said, "We might as well use the passageway now that we know about it." Helen went in search of more cleaning rags.

Simon and I headed for our room, but at the top of the stairs he placed a hand on my shoulder. "Step into the shadows, my friend."

"What . . . ?"

"Hush!"

It was only a moment before Helen Millet reappeared, carrying a pail and some rags. But she did not immediately head for the basement stairs. Instead she paused at the suit of armor and dropped to her knees before it.

"Quickly now!" Simon commanded as we hurried back down to the main floor.

Helen whirled, seeing us, and threw the pail. Then I was on her before she could pull the sword free from its gauntlets.

"You left out an important part of your story, Miss Millet," Simon told her while I pinned her arms to her sides. "You neglected to tell us that before waking your brother and his wife you came downstairs to that chapel window and killed Basil Sloane with this sword."

What followed was sheer hysteria. It took her brother nearly a half-hour to calm her, and then only with the help of a tranquilizer that put her into a deep, troubled sleep. "We'll have to call Superintendent Jennings," he said finally. "It's not a secret we can keep to ourselves." He went to the telephone and dialed the number.

"I believe she's ready to suffer the consequences of her action," Simon told them.

"But why? Why did she do it?"

"She did it for you, to save your marriage." Simon glanced at Cynthia. "Pardon me if I speak frankly, Mrs. Millet. This needs to be said. Helen came here for a two months' visit and from the very first day she knew you were being unfaithful to your husband with Basil Sloane, the gardener. She found the nightclothes in the guest room, along with a copy of *Lady Chatterley's Lover.* The lover was a gamekeeper in that book, not a gardener, but I'm sure Sloane saw the resemblance. I suspect he may even have inscribed the book to you as a gift. In any event, Helen knew. She knew you were betraying her brother with the gardener. It was easy enough to do in that guest bedroom, since Larry was often in London for the day."

Larry merely stared at his wife through all of this. If he'd had his suspicions before, the cold facts were still hard for him to accept. Cynthia, for her part, must have run out of lies and pretense. She sat there, stonefaced, as Simon's words washed over her.

"Of course, Sloane found the underground passage to the chapel and decided to steal the gems from the gold cross. Removing the cross itself would have been too obvious, and it could be traced if he tried to sell it. But the missing gems could have gone unnoticed for years. Unfortunately for him, he cut his fingers prying the

stones loose from the cross, including a bad cut on one hand. He couldn't stop the bleeding and tried to summon help."

"With that little bell?" Larry asked. "Why didn't he just start yelling?"

"Because he didn't want to be discovered as a thief. He rang the bell hoping to awaken Cynthia in her bed. In his moment of panic he'd forgotten that Helen was occupying the guest-room bed and Cynthia was back sleeping with you. Helen heard the bell and saw the hand that held it. In an act of bravery she went downstairs alone to see who it was. She saw the sword with the suit of armor and took it for self-defense. And there behind that chest-high louvered window she saw the man who was ruining her brother's marriage. His hands were already bleeding. She plunged the sword through the opening and into his chest. That's when he dropped the bell. She pulled the sword free and hurried back into the house, wiping it off as best she could before returning it to the suit of armor. Penetrating Sloane's chest only several inches, the wound was identical to that of a knife."

"You knew," Cynthia said, speaking at last. "All that talk at breakfast about the police being able to find the smallest bloodstains and fingerprints was only to unnerve her, to bring her back to the sword for a more thorough cleaning."

Simon nodded. "I had to be certain of my suspicions. The direction and location of the bloodstains seemed to indicate that further bleeding started at the window rather than the altar. You two were in bed together at the time and if Sloane had some accomplice like Bingham waiting outside it's doubtful the man would have had a knife long enough to reach through that window and inflict the fatal wound. I considered Helen having gone out to investigate on her own, especially since she mentioned putting on shoes later when the three of you went out, to protect her feet from the dew. How did she know about the dew if she hadn't been out yet? It was a clear moonlit night, remember, with no rain. She'd admitted finding your nightclothes and book in the guest room, and if she knew about Sloane that might have given her a motive to kill him. When I thought of the sword, I provided an opportunity for her to betray herself and she did."

"But she came to you for help," Cynthia said.

"Only because her brother asked her to. She would have done anything for him, even commit murder."

The doorbell rang, and we knew it would be Superintendent Jennings. ●

Into the Kingdom of Memory

by Batya Swift Yasgur

Those who do not understand the past are condemned to repeat it.

The letter, crushed and balled, burned my hand like a coal. I was still clutching it as the cab pulled up to the motel.

"You okay, lady? You're shaking like a leaf. Seizure?" His face was worried as he fingered his cell phone. "I can call nine-one-one—"

I was having a seizure, yes. A seizure of memory. A paroxysm of pain.

"I—I'm okay." His concern arranged itself into a "Hey, I tried" expression as he drove away. Leaving me to wobble on knees of rubber to the check-in desk. Local friends would have welcomed me into their homes had they known I was coming, but the motel was the only place for me. This was a solo flight. Or a solo plunge.

Riverview. I was back in Riverview.

Batya Swift Yasgur, formerly a literary agent, currently makes her living as a freelance medical writer. Despite the demands of that career, she has managed to continue producing new books for a young-adult mystery series she began several years ago, and occasionally turns out a mystery short story. Ms. Yasgur debuted in *EQMM* in 1994 and won that year's Robert L. Fish Award for best story by a new writer.

I had left town before the trial ended. Didn't stay for the verdict, didn't care what the neighbors would say. Hillary could stand by Bill, smiling her artificial support into the camera for the benefit of the voting public. Not me, thanks. I gave my testimony never looking at Carl. Then fled to the first city where a branch of my publishing company would hire me. San Francisco.

Where I lived in a brick-walled bubble of silence, the roar of pain and memory kept at bay by altered routine, altered scenery, and

ruthless self-discipline. Get up. Go to work. Make conversation with colleagues. Work late. Take Sominex. Get up. Go to work—

Don't think. Don't feel. Don't remember.

Back now in Riverview I didn't have a choice. I was in the heart of the kingdom—the dictatorship—of memory.

The lawyer's letter that had summoned me back was filled with legalese. It told of statutes and precedents invoked, appeals turned down. The letter begged me to participate in the effort to acquit Carl of murder. Did I know anything that might cast new light on the case? It closed with a jargon-free paragraph. "I believe that your husband is innocent, but I cannot prove it. I understand that you are angry, but I am asking you to look beyond your own hurt because a man's life is at stake." Then, shockingly, a handwritten P.S. with a heart that beat. "You cannot keep running away. If you do not understand what happened, how can you understand yourself? And if you do not understand yourself, how can you expect to heal? You knew him better than anyone else. Only you can unlock this door. Do it for yourself, if not for him." A thick folder, now stowed in my suitcase, was enclosed.

After many Sominex-deprived, anguished nights of pacing my small apartment, I decided that the lawyer was right. Comprehension was less terrifying than incomprehension. I had to come back. Not for Carl, he could sizzle in the chair for all I cared. But for me.

That first night back in Riverview, my insides heaving, I wandered through streets paved with the blood of memory. Echoes of broken promises mocked me from every corner. Here was where we first kissed, right here, behind the post office, the mail trucks coming and going and never noticing us. Here was the library, where we once spent fifteen minutes in the oversized-book section kissing frantically. And making jokes about something else that had become "oversized." The church, St. Anne's, where two tremulous just-marrieds clutched hands and giggled under rice rain. The bakery where I used to buy his favorite poppy-seed rolls on Sundays. The supermarket where he and I, with dewy-eyed newlywed earnestness, discussed the relative virtues of Skippy over Jif, and whether broccoli belongs in a vegetable soup. The park where he whispered what he had never told anyone else—that he wanted to be like Dr. Doolittle, who had been his childhood hero. That he thought he had actually discovered how to bark so that a dog would listen, that he felt more loved by animals than by people (except for me, of course), that he didn't want an accounting career but a career relieving the pain of animals. The park where I confided once-ridiculed hopes of writing novels and getting them published. Body to body, soul to soul, bonded in love.

And here—here was the house we once shared. (Now rented to strangers.) Where lips met, hands searched, bodies prayed and shuddered, danced and sang. (Lying lips and hands, it turned out. Lips and hands that were dancing with similar steps over the body of someone else.)

You knew him better than anyone else, said the lawyer.

No I didn't. I only thought I did.

Back at the motel:

Stomach centrifuging, hands shaking, sleet prickling up and down my spine, I forced myself to read the pages the lawyer had sent me.

The facts were stark. My husband had been sleeping with one Rhea Sandler (age 32, homemaker). He had met her when she brought the family beagle to the veterinary clinic for a checkup. Rhea was married to Grant Sandler (age 34, owner of the Sandler clothing line). Two children—Michelle, age 6, and Grant Junior, age 4.

(Flashback: It is dinnertime and the phone is ringing. Carl. Working late at the clinic, the fourth night in a row. He tells me how lucky he is to have a wife who supports his dreams of veterinary school. Those nights were scarcely spent fondling Mrs. Smith's ailing poodle, or petting Mr. Jones's asthmatic parrot.)

Then, one night, Grant came home from a meeting (a dozen or more people confirmed that he really was at that meeting) to find his wife dead in her bed, the children sleeping peacefully in theirs. On the night table was a glass of orange juice. Later analysis of the juice showed that it was laced with ketamine—a chemical used to anesthetize animals. Toxic levels of the same substance were found in Rhea's blood. Carl's fingerprints were on the glass.

Carl had been at the Sandler house that night. (He was supposed to be at the library, studying for his entrance exams to veterinary school. In the "oversized" section, no doubt, I thought bitterly.) He had driven away at nine o'clock. The coroner set the time of death at shortly after ten.

Perfect timing.

But Carl denied killing her. Yes, he had been involved with Rhea. Yes, he had been there that night. But no, he hadn't killed her. His theory was that she had killed herself because she was distraught that he hadn't left me yet. She had promised to leave Grant once Carl made the break, but Carl had to go first. To give her courage. Carl admitted that he never had any intention of ending his marriage. Rhea was "just a fling." He theorized that she had figured this out and taken her own life.

The police dismissed Carl's theory. First of all, where would she have gotten ketamine? And how would she know about its chemi-

cal effects on animals and humans? He was the one who worked in an animal clinic, after all. His fingerprints dotted the lethal glass, no one else's. With suicide ruled out, Carl had been arrested a few days later. Motive and means—the evidence was damning. His lawyer came to see me then, a dark-haired man with powerful but kindly eyes. "Give me information," he had pleaded. "Anything you think might help me build a case for his innocence."

"I don't want to build a case for his innocence, because I don't believe he's innocent," I had replied. "A man who can murder a relationship, who can murder trust—a man like that can murder another human being."

"So you won't help me?"

I stood up to show the lawyer the door. "I'm going to tell the truth in court, if I'm called. That he lied to me. And that I was at my writing workshop the night of the murder. There is nothing more to say."

And what else could anyone say? The evidence seemed incontrovertible. The lawyer was grasping at straws.

I could not bring myself to read anything else in the file. Action. I had to take action. Had to get away from the confining torment of the motel room with its leering folder of papers. I had to start somewhere, to find out something. Perhaps Grant Sandler, fellow victim. Aggrieved husband, now aggrieved widower. The next morning I would go to see him.

Grant Sandler's office was in the garment district of Manhattan, where I walked past racks of plastic-covered clothes, wheeled along the streets to showrooms with mannequin-models. I rode up the elevator with clipboarded buyers from department stores who murmured about fall fashions.

The secretary, whose tight sweater showed everything but the color, looked indignant when I explained my mission. "How dare you disturb this poor man's little bit of peace? What happened almost destroyed him, but now he's beginning to get over it, even date a bit—"

(Dating so soon?)

"*I* haven't started to get over it," I said pointedly. "And I need to talk to him."

She sighed and reached for a phone. "It's the wife of Rhea's killer. She wants to talk to you."

(I was shocked by the rage that surged in my belly at hearing Carl so casually called a killer. And by the secretary's suddenly crooning voice.)

She gestured. "Go on in."

A distinguished Grant Sandler, tweed-suited, salt-and-pepper-

haired, and patrician-nosed, stood to greet me. Strikingly handsome. Sympathy rolled unctuously from his outstretched hand as he motioned to a chair.

There was a long, awkward pause. Then I blurted out, "Carl's not a killer!"

Red flame consumed his cellophane sympathy. "You came here to tell me that?"

I gulped. "I'm sorry about your wife. What happened was horrible. But I don't believe Carl did it."

Flame gave way to ice. "He lied to you. And cheated on you. What makes you think he wouldn't—"

"Your wife cheated, too—"

"How dare you!" he suddenly roared. "What do you know? Rhea was happy with her life. She loved being Mrs. Sandler. She loved her children. But she was too trusting. She had always been too trusting. I rescued her from the last scum and you'd think she'd be satisfied, but no. Her silly, naive head was turned by *your husband,* who seduced her. Obviously, he didn't get enough—" he looked at me insidiously—"at home. Rhea would never have taken her own life."

Too trusting. The secretary's crooning voice. He'd just started dating again. I was sure he had never stopped dating. That he hadn't let a little thing like marriage to a trusting wife stand in the way of dating a luscious secretary.

"So when did she stop trusting you?"

Now he was on his feet, advancing toward me, purple coils of vein bulging from crimson temples. I felt no fear, only a strange admixture of revulsion and exultation. He was revealing himself in ways that he had obviously never done to the police. I pressed ahead.

"She adored you, right? She worshiped you. She trusted you. Then somehow she found out you weren't being faithful."

"Get out!" He wrenched the phone off its receiver. "I'm calling security—"

I fled before he finished dialing.

So had Grant done it? Here was a man of rages. A controlling man, accustomed to having his own way. To being adored and worshiped. (*She loved being Mrs. Sandler . . .*) And then the timid, adoring wife found out she was being betrayed by her dashing hero-husband. Enter a new hero. Carl.

Had Grant found out about Carl? That would provide quite a motive.

Motive, but no means. Lab analysis showed that the ketamine had been added to the orange juice less than two hours before her death. Grant had not been home that night to administer the evil

potion. Also, Grant had no access to veterinary medicines. And Carl's fingerprints were on the glass.

For all his nastiness and menacing control, Grant could not have been the killer.

I spent the rest of the day alone in the motel room. Pacing like one of Carl's caged dogs. And chasing my tail.

Around and around the circle of agony, my teeth sinking deeper into my tail. Untrustworthy men. Trusting women. Animal sedatives that kill human beings—

Animal sedatives that kill human beings.

Whoever killed her had access to that sedative. If not Carl, then someone else.

The Riverview Animal Clinic would be tomorrow's foray into darkness.

The clinic waiting room was almost empty. A white-haired woman, dumpy in her housedress, was holding a mangy cat. Two gum-chewing teenagers sat cradling a collie who kept licking its paw.

Carl's dream had been to minister to the skinny cat, the dog's paw.

"Can I help you?" a blond, white-coated receptionist asked.

"I—well—I'm Carl's wife."

The red that suffused her face contrasted so remarkably with the white of her coat, I was reminded of Snow White's apple. Her voice sounded faint, wavering. "Y-yes?"

I gaped at her reaction, her discomfort—once again, I had that eerie feeling of familiarity, of *knowing.* I took a chance. No time for niceties. No time to let her rearrange herself into a studied pose.

"You and Carl were—" (watching her face, watching the nervous play of her wedding-ringed hand on her pencil, the widening of her eyes, I pushed further, surer than ever)—"you were sleeping with my husband."

She opened her mouth as if to speak, but no sound came out. Her face, now as pale as her clinic coat, was frozen in open-mouthed position. "The police didn't figure it out. How—" She was barely audible.

"You'd better tell me everything."

"I don't know everything. I don't know anything." Her eyes were darting about, panicked, a trapped-animal look on her face.

"Tell me what you do know."

"All I know is this. Rhea came by the clinic that day to say hello to Carl. She didn't have an appointment, he wasn't expecting her. She saw us—right there." She pointed to a closet filled with medical supplies. "The door was open, and we were, you know—"

I finished her sentence in flat tones. "Necking."

"Yes. She didn't say anything. I knew Carl was involved with her, so I was really upset. I hoped she didn't see us. I quickly ran to the ladies' room. Carl zoomed into an examining room."

"So she was alone in the waiting room for a while?"

The receptionist gulped and shook her head. "Not alone. Old Mr. Jackson was coming right through the front door for a refill of vitamins for Rex. I eventually came out of the bathroom, and she was there, on that couch." She gestured to where the teenagers were sitting. "Looking as put-together as you please. I was incredibly relieved. I was sure she hadn't seen us after all."

She was talking as if Rhea were the wife to whom Carl owed fidelity.

"But the next day I heard she was dead. It was too weird to be a coincidence."

"So do you think Carl did it?"

"Probably. But I didn't say anything to the police because then it would have gotten out about my—you know—my own relationship with Carl. And that would ruin my life."

She stammered, trying to explain how I had caught her off guard (as I had obviously caught the veneered Grant), but I wasn't interested in her anymore. What she had told me made Carl look even worse. There was only one tiny thread of possibility left.

"This Mr. Jackson. The guy with the doggie vitamins. Do you have his phone number?"

She opened a filing cabinet. "You won't tell my husband?" she pleaded. But I was already partway out the door.

Jack Jackson, ancient and gnarled, lived with his daughter in a modest house at the edge of town. The daughter was at work, but Mr. Jackson was home. Sitting loyally at his side and presenting his ears to be scratched was Rex. Every now and then, his tail thumped the floor.

"Always liked young Carl." His voice, thin and reedy, was hard to hear. I leaned forward. "Rex took to him, too. I don't believe that boy would hurt a fly."

(Maybe not a fly. But, then again, a wife—)

"You were at the clinic a few hours before the murder. In fact, you were there at the same time as Rhea. Do you remember seeing her in the waiting room?"

"Saw a lady go into the back area behind the desk. Didn't think much of it. Just figured maybe she was looking for the rest room. She went into the closet, you know, where they keep the vitamins. Fiddled in there a bit. I heard bottles clinking and paper rustling. Then she took out a bottle and put it in her bag."

"And you didn't think that was strange?"

He shrugged. "Figured it was none of my business to butt in."

Rummaging through the supply closet. Pocketing something. Rhea must have found ketamine and stowed it away. But how did she know what ketamine was? This was scarcely the sort of information laypeople had.

The answer lay someplace in the clinic.

A buxom, gray-haired woman was sitting behind the desk, a ferret nestled in the crook of her neck. She wore a pin that identified her as Clarissa Peters, DVM. She explained that the receptionist had gone home early. (Home to hubby, poor dear.)

When I told her who I was, she broke in, babbling, "How terrible for you. Men are such *animals*, you know?" She shook her head and the ferret rubbed against her cheek. "So how can I help?"

"I'm trying to figure out whether Rhea ever had any contact with ketamine—before it killed her, that is. Maybe her dog once had an operation?"

"I'll check our files." She got up, the ferret still snuggled in place, and lumbered over to a tall filing cabinet. "Let me see." She thumbed through folders. "Yes. Three years ago. Dr. Singer removed a suspicious growth from the dog's flank. You're in luck, because he's on call today. Wesley!" she called down the hall.

An examination-room door opened and a thin man—looking like a ferret himself—darted out. "I'm in the middle of a cauterization. Is this urgent?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, Dr. Singer, but I really need to know. When Rhea Sandler brought in her dog for surgery, did you use ketamine to sedate the dog?"

"Well, of course." He sounded impatient.

"And did you explain anything to her about what ketamine is?"

He frowned. "She was unusually nervous. She kept asking questions. Wouldn't shut up, in fact. I told her that the dog would feel no pain because we were using ketamine. I spelled it out for her, k-e-t-a-m-i-n-e, when she asked me to. I explained that a large quantity could hurt or even kill her dog, but a small quantity would dull pain and induce a deep sleep. She was so frightened, it was like talking to a child."

Poor Rhea. Poor, foolish, trusting Rhea.

Not so foolish, Rhea. And not so naive, either.

It took smarts to plan her next move. To kill herself but frame her betrayer. Her hero and redeemer, who had dashed her trust in a careless fling with the receptionist. Rhea, whose stunning, fast-forward growing up catapulted her beyond adulthood and into death.

Now back to the hotel. To read the unbearable remainder of the folder. A packet of love letters Carl had written Rhea.

My icy hands could barely hold the paper. "My darling Rhea . . ."

How different his letters to her were from his letters to me. Last year, when the company sent me for a two-week training seminar in Colorado, his e-mails had been filled with things that had touched him at work. The elderly woman whose cat he'd put to sleep, and who had cried that she'd lost her best friend. The little boy who blamed himself because his dog had been hit by a car. Carl had closed his letters telling me how much Canine (our private nickname for his private part) missed my Bovine I and Bovine II (more private nicknames). And how much he loved me.

His letters to Rhea were filled with fluff. How beautiful she was. How sexy. Generic love letters to a generic woman. There was nothing personal or intimate. And no banter.

Wandering around the park (that very park where we had once exchanged secrets, kisses, and dreams), the slurred echoes reverberating through red corridors of memory, I took another look at Carl.

Remembered that when we first met he had been involved with a woman named Jane. I had been flattered rather than disturbed when he started seeing me even before he had broken up with her. Remembered the comment he once made: "Men spend childhood hiding from their mothers, and adulthood hiding from their wives." Remembered his eyes that hopped and ogled as we walked along city streets, especially in summertime, when nubile shoulders and legs glittered in the sunlight. His shrug over the sordid revelations about Bill Clinton: "Men are like that." Flirtation with the bridesmaids at our engagement party.

Remembered that he steadfastly refused to talk about his family or have anything to do with them. I didn't know if his parents were alive or dead. It was as if he had no parents, as if he had been a doorstep-basket baby.

And shook my fist at the mirror of unadorned truth. Why had I not questioned his values? His loyalty? His long hours at work? All the things about him I didn't know and he refused to talk about?

And knew why. Because he had made my heart sing and my body fly. Because no eyes had ever looked at me the way his did. No ears had ever *heard* me the way his did. Because no one had ever confided his dreams to me before. Or called forth my own. Because I had never laughed so much, played so much, given so much, received so much.

Because I loved him.

Carl's lawyer eyed me critically. "You've lost a lot of weight."

"I don't have much appetite these days." (I had lost over twenty pounds since the murder. Every time I thought of Carl entwined with another woman, I lost my dinner.)

"Do you have information for me?"

I nodded and outlined my conclusions, beginning with Grant's lack of composure. "The dead woman—she was a sort of starry-eyed baby. Men took advantage of her. In fact, Grant rescued her from the last creep. She was happy until she realized that he was sleeping around."

"Go on."

"She met Carl at the clinic. Carl was also—" My voice broke and suddenly I was crying. Bawling and pounding at the lawyer's couch. Rage and grief exploded as I sobbed and spewed the end of innocence. Of trust. The death of the man who wasn't. The death of the woman who was.

The lawyer's face was anxious. "Would you like to come back another time?"

I shook my head, still convulsing. "Carl—he cheated on her, too. She came by the clinic to say hello. She saw him—" my voice broke, but this time I managed to steady it—"kissing the receptionist in the supply closet." I told him about Mr. Jackson and Dr. Singer. "That new betrayal must have pushed her over the edge. She stole ketamine from the supply closet. Got Carl to pour her a glass of juice and bring it up to her—" I could not get the word "bedroom" past the lump in my throat. "It was probably the first time in her life she rescued herself from anything."

He sat silent, obviously sifting through the new information I had given him, and the conclusion I had reached. He stood up. "I'd better tell Carl."

"No. I want to be the one to tell him."

He frowned. "Are you going to be okay? You can barely mention his name without—"

"This is something I have to do."

A dingy visitor's room. A stern officer standing by. An emaciated man with haunted eyes shaking before me. A husband (still). My husband.

A now-babbling husband. About Daddy, who had run off with another woman, never to be seen again. Mommy, in and out of mental hospitals, who had beaten him every time he so much as talked to a girl. About twelve-step programs, counseling, getting help for his sexual "problem," healing his "dysfunctional inner child." Then suddenly he stopped. Tentatively, like a child touching the delicate down on a new puppy's ear, he said, "You've done what the police couldn't do. How did you manage that?"

It came to me in a blue flash of pain. "No one could stand in that woman's shoes the way I could. Not a day has gone by since I found out about your affair that I haven't wanted to kill myself.

And get back at you. The only difference between me and her is that I didn't."

"Well, you got to the bottom of it. You found out the truth."

My laugh echoed from stone floors and steel bars. "You're a fine person to talk about truth."

"I love you." He started to cry. "Can you understand this? I gave Rhea—I gave all of them—my body. But I gave you my soul."

I did understand. For the first time, I understood.

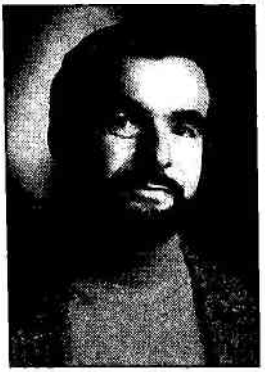
The sun is pouring its molten light on gray marble and green grass. A breeze wafts droplets of morning dew through the cemetery. They glint and wink, then fade, as I find my way to the grave of Rhea Sandler.

I kneel, my arms around the marble, my lips against it. Lean on its ungiving surface, shiny and cold. A soul etched in the impersonality of alphabet. "Here lies . . . In memoriam . . ." I rest my head on its comforting hardness, its solidity.

Hugging the marble, I feel it come alive. It breathes, shudders, and rises to greet me, undulating and liquid in its heat. As I embrace it, I tremble against the glare of truth, the light of knowledge, consuming, searing, blinding, engulfing. From the dead to the dead. From the dead to the living. From the living to the alive.

My resurrection and my life. ●

"MY NAME IS PAUL--AS IN 'ROB PETER TO PAY PAUL.'"



Doug Allyn

2000 Readers Award

Donald Olson

All of the authors of stories finishing in the top ten spots for the 2000 *EQMM* Readers Award are published novelists, but it is striking that most of them are not *primarily* novelists. The novel so dominates the current literary marketplace that most writers are forced to devote the lion's share of their time to it, at the expense of the short story. Those who give priority to the short story are a minority, even among *EQMM*'s contributors, but this year they've taken home the gold, silver, and bronze—and most of the remaining places listed below.

A returning champion, Doug Allyn takes first place for "The Death Row Pet Show" (4/00) and second place for "The Christmas Mitzvah" (12/00). Though his first fiction was published as recently as 1985, Doug has already earned lasting distinction as a short-story writer; he is a winner of the short-story Edgar and the recipient of five additional Edgar Allan Poe Award nominations for Best Short Story (a number equalled only by the great Stanley Ellin).

Author of more than a half-dozen novels over the past decade, Doug Allyn has been even more prolific with short stories, turning out thirty-four of them for *EQMM* alone, and many others for *AHMM* and short-story anthologies. He has won four previous *EQMM* Readers Awards.

Doug Allyn's winning story for 2000, a Dr. David Westbrook tale, is part of a series started in *EQMM* at short-story length in 1995. The first novel in the series, *The Cremation of Rachel Hayes*, is now complete—it and the novel *Welcome to Wolf Country* (Five Star Press) are expected to be published this year.

Both "The Death Row Pet Show" and Doug Allyn's stand-alone tale "The Christmas Mitzvah" are superb examples of good storytelling. Congratulations, Doug! from *EQMM* and *EQMM* readers.

Photo Credits from left to right: Peter Papadopolous and Bruce Porterfield

Third place for 2000 goes to one of the short story's finest and most dedicated practitioners. Donald Olson's story sales to *EQMM* are nearing the 100 mark, and he has an equal number of story credits with *AHMM* and other publications. During the seventies and early eighties, novels by the Jamestown, New York author were regularly appearing in print, but in recent years he has concentrated almost entirely on the form he prefers, the short story, often creating tales whose mood and tone, clever twists, and genteel settings are reminiscent of the Golden Age of mystery fiction.

By one of the oddest coincidences imaginable, this author with a talent for crime writing was born into a family with a relative—an uncle—named Holmes. This Holmes resided in a house on Baker Street (in Jamestown, not London, alas!), and handed that house on to his mystery-writing nephew in the 1970s. It is from Baker Street (though in a different house, now, from the one Uncle Holmes owned) that Donald Olson despatches his wonderful packages of short stories to his agent, bound ultimately for *EQMM*. They arrive six or seven at a time, almost all of them small gems of twist-in-the-tail suspense. "Don't Go Upstairs" (8/00) is one of the most fiendishly beguiling of them all. Don is an author whose contributions to our genre richly deserve recognition. We salute him on the occasion of this excellent finish for the 2000 Readers Award!

Other finalists for the 2000 *EQMM* Readers Award include three short-story Edgar winners, multiple *EQMM* Readers Award winner Clark Howard, past Readers Award winner Kristine Kathryn Rusch, and the most prolific and highly acclaimed of all contemporary writers of classical mystery short stories, this year's MWA Grandmaster, Edward D. Hoch. All in all, it's been a great year for those who give pride of place to the mystery short story.

OTHER FINALISTS IN THE COMPETITION

Fourth . . . . . "The Hunters" by J. F. Freedman
Fifth . . . . . "The Problem of the Potting Shed" by Edward D. Hoch
Sixth . . . . . "The Spirit Birds" by Clark Howard
Seventh . . . . "The Theft of the Parrot's Feather" by Edward D. Hoch
Eighth . . . . . (tied) "The Sword of Colonel Ledyard" by Edward D. Hoch
"Spinning" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch
"Whatever It Takes" by Benjamin M. Schutz
Ninth. . . . . "Under Suspicion" by Clark Howard
Tenth. . . . . "I Think I Will Not Hang Myself Today" by Bill Pronzini

Art by Laurie Harden

LESSER-INCLUDED OFFENSE

by Jeffery Deaver

"You're gonna lose this one."

"Am I now?" asked Danny Tribow, rocking back in his desk chair and studying the man who'd just spoken.

Fifteen years older and forty pounds heavier than Tribow, Raymond Hartman nodded slowly and added, "On all counts. Simple as that."

The man next to Hartman touched his client's arm to restrain him.

"He doesn't mind a little sparring," Hartman said to his lawyer. "He can take it. Anyway, I'm just telling it like it is." Hartman unbuttoned his navy suit jacket, blue and rich as an ocean at night.

The truth was that Tribow didn't mind one bit. The man could say whatever he wanted. Tribow wasn't going to prosecute the case against Hartman any *more* vigorously because of the man's

arrogance than he would've pursued it less so had he been tearful and contrite.

On the other hand, the thirty-five-year-old career prosecutor wasn't going to get walked on, either. He fixed his eye on Hartman and said in a soft voice, "It's been my experience that what looks pretty clear to one person may turn out to be the opposite. I'm pretty convinced the jury's going to see the facts my way. Which means *you're* going to lose."

Hartman shrugged and looked at his gold Rolex watch. He couldn't've cared less about the time, Tribow suspected. He was simply delivering an aside: *This one piece of jewelry of mine equals your annual salary.*

"Anyone familiar with the writing of this master of the twist and turn has doubtless been anticipating the arrival of this thriller," said England's *West Lancashire Gazette* of Jeffery Deaver's new novel *Speaking in Tongues* (S&S, 12/2000). And anyone familiar with the two-time *EQMM* Readers Award winner's short fiction equally anticipates each new short story. Mr. Deaver has delivered another stunner here. †

Danny Tribow wore a Casio and the only message a glance at that timepiece would deliver is that this meeting had been a waste of a good half-hour.

In addition to the defendant, his lawyer, and Tribow, two other people sat in the office, as small and shabby as one would expect for a district attorney's. On Tribow's left was his law clerk, Chuck Wu, a handsome man in his twenties who was a meticulous—some said compulsive—worker. He now leaned forward, typing notes and observations about this meeting into the battered laptop computer he was inseparable from. This was a habit that drove most defendants nuts, but it had no apparent effect on Ray Hartman.

The other one of the fivesome was Adele Viamonte, the assistant D.A. who'd been assigned to Tribow in the Violent Felonies division for the past year. She was almost ten years older than Tribow but had picked up her interest in law later in life after a successful first career: raising twin boys, now teenagers.

Viamonte's mind and tongue were as sharp as her confidence was solid. She now looked over Hartman's tanned skin, taut belly, silvery hair, the broad shoulders and thick neck. She then turned to his lawyer and asked, "So can we conclude that this meeting with Mr. Hartman and his ego is over with?"

Hartman gave a faint embarrassed laugh, as if a student had said something awkward in class, a put-down of Viamonte motivated solely, guessed Tribow, by the fact that she was a woman.

The defense lawyer repeated what he'd been saying all along. "My client isn't interested in a plea-bargain that involves jail time."

Tribow echoed his own litany. "But that's all we're offering."

"Then he wants to go to trial. He's confident he'll be found innocent."

Tribow didn't know how *that* was going to happen. Ray Hartman had shot a man in the back of the head one Sunday afternoon last March. There was circumstantial evidence—ballistics, gunpowder residue on the hand. There were witnesses who placed him at the scene, looking for the victim. There were reports of earlier threats by Hartman and statements of intent to cause the victim harm. There was a motive. While Danny Tribow was always guarded about the outcomes of the cases he prosecuted, this was as solid a case as he'd ever had.

And so he tried one last time. "If you accept manslaughter, I'll recommend ten years."

"No way," Hartman responded, laughing at the absurdity of the suggestion. "You didn't hear my shyster here. No jail time. I'll pay a fine. I'll pay a *big* goddamn fine. I'll do community service. But no jail time."

Daniel Tribow was a slight man, unflappable and soft-spoken. He would have looked right at home in a bow tie and suspenders, though he'd never wear anything that affected and self-conscious. "Sir," he said now, speaking directly to Hartman, "you understand I'm going to prosecute you for premeditated murder. In this state that's a special-circumstances crime—meaning I can seek the death penalty."

"What I understand is that I don't see much point in continuing this little get-together. I've got a lunch date waiting, and if you ask me, you boys and girls better bone up on your law—you sure as hell need to if you think you're getting me convicted."

"If that's what you want, sir." Tribow stood. He shook the lawyer's hand though not the suspect's. Adele Viamonte glanced at both lawyer and client as if they were clerks who'd short-changed her and remained seated, apparently struggling to keep from saying what she really felt.

When they were gone, Tribow sat back in his chair. He spun to look out the window at the rolling countryside of suburbia, bright green with early summer colors. Tribow played absently with the only sculpture in his office: a baby's mobile of Winnie-the-Pooh characters, stuck to his chipped credenza top with a suction cup. It was his son's—well, *had* been, when the boy, now ten, was an infant. When Danny Junior had lost interest in the mobile, his father didn't have the heart to throw it away and brought it here to the office. His wife thought this was one of those silly things he did sometimes, like his infamous practical jokes or dressing up in costumes for his son's parties. Tribow didn't tell her that he

wanted the toy here for one reason only: to remind him of his family on those long weeks preparing for and prosecuting cases when it seemed that the only family he had were judges, jurors, detectives, and his colleagues.

He now mused, "I offer him ten years against a possible special-circumstances murder and he says he'll take his chances. I don't get it."

Viamonte shook her head. "Nope. Doesn't add up. He'd be out in seven. If he loses on special circumstances—and that's likely—he's going to get the needle."

"How 'bout the answer?" a man's voice asked from the doorway.

"Sure." Tribow spun around in the chair and nodded Richard Moyer, a senior county detective, into the room. "Only what's the question?"

He nodded greetings to Viamonte and Wu, sat down in a chair, and yawned excessively.

"Bored with us already?" Wu asked wryly.

"Tired. Too many bad guys out there. Anyway, I overheard what you were saying—about Hartman. I know why he won't take the plea."

"Why's that?"

"He can't go into Stafford."

The main state prison in the county, through which had passed a number of graduates of the Daniel Tribow school of criminal prosecution.

"Who wants to go to prison?" Viamonte asked.

"No, no, I mean he *can't.* They're already sharpening spoon handles and grinding down glass shivs, waiting for him."

Moyer continued, explaining that two of the O.C.—organized crime—bosses that Hartman had snitched on were in Stafford now. "Word's out that Hartman wouldn't last a week inside."

So *that* was why he'd killed the victim in this case, Jose Valdez. The poor man had been the sole witness against Hartman in an extortion case. If Hartman had been convicted of that, he'd have gone to Stafford for at least six months—or, apparently, until he was murdered by fellow prisoners. That explained Valdez's cold-blooded killing.

But Hartman's reception in prison wasn't Tribow's problem. The prosecutor believed he had a simple task in life: to keep his county safe. This attitude was considerably different from that of many other prosecutors, who religiously wanted to "get" the bad guys. Many took it personally that criminals committed offenses and went after them vindictively, full of rage. But to Danny Tribow prosecuting wasn't about being a gunslinger; it was simply making sure his community could feel safe and secure. He was far more involved in the community than a typical D.A. He'd worked

with congressmen and the courts, for instance, to support laws that made it easier to get restraining orders against abusive spouses and that established mandatory felony sentences for three-strikes offenders, anyone carrying a gun near a school, and drivers whose drinking resulted in someone's death.

Getting Ray Hartman off the streets was nothing more than yet another brick in the castle wall of law and order, to which Tribow was so devoted.

This particular man's conviction, however, was a very important brick. At various stages in his life Hartman had been through court-ordered therapy and though he'd always escaped with a diagnosis of sanity, the doctors had observed that he was very close to being a sociopath, someone for whom human life meant very little.

This was certainly reflected in his M.O. He was a bully and a petty thug who sold protection to and extorted money from recent immigrants who ran small businesses. Hartman would intimidate or murder anyone who threatened to testify against him—such as unfortunate father and husband Jose Valdez. No one was safe from him—not innocent families and children, and not—as Detective Moyer had reminded them—policemen.

"Hartman's got money in Europe," Tribow said to the cop. "Who's watching him to make sure he doesn't head for the hills?" The suspect had been released on a two-million-dollar bond, which he'd easily posted, and he had had his passport lifted. But Tribow remembered the killer's assured look not long before as he'd said, "You're going to lose," and wondered if Hartman conveyed a subconscious message that he was planning to jump bond.

But Detective Moyer—helping himself to the cookies that Tribow's wife often sent her husband to work with—said, "We don't have to worry. He's got babysitters like you wouldn't believe. Two, full time. He steps over the county line or into an airport and, bang, he's wearing cuffs. These oatmeal ones're my favorite. Can I get the recipe?" He yawned again.

"You don't bake," Tribow told him. "How 'bout if Connie just makes you a box?"

"That'd work too." The cop wandered back into the hallway to find some criminals to arrest—or to get some sleep—and Chuck Wu accompanied Viamonte to her office, where they'd spend the night preparing questions for voir dire—jury selection.

Tribow himself turned to the indictment and continued to plan out the trial.

He'd reviewed the facts of the Valdez killing and decided to bring Hartman up on three charges. The backbone of the case—the offense that Tribow wanted most—was first-degree murder. This was premeditated homicide and, if convicted of it, Hartman could be sentenced to death, a punishment that Tribow intended

to recommend to the court. But this was a difficult case to prove. He had to establish beyond a reasonable doubt that Hartman planned out Valdez's murder ahead of time, went looking for him, and killed him under circumstances that showed no heat of passion or emotional turmoil.

But there were several other charges included in the indictment, too: murder two and manslaughter. These were backups—what were called "lesser-included offenses." They were easier to prove than murder one. If the jury decided, for instance, that Hartman hadn't planned the murder ahead of time but decided impulsively to kill Valdez, they could still convict for second-degree murder. He could go to prison for life without parole for this type of murder but he couldn't be sentenced to death.

Finally Tribow included the manslaughter charge as a last-ditch backup. He'd have to prove only that Hartman killed Valdez either under conditions of extreme recklessness or in the heat of passion. This would be the easiest of the crimes to prove, and on these facts the jury would undoubtedly convict. The sentence wouldn't be as severe as for murder, but Tribow recalled what Rich Moyer had just told him—any sentence that got Hartman in jail would be tantamount to a death sentence.

That weekend the three prosecutors prepared questions to ask the jury and over the course of the next week they battled Hartman's impressive legal team during the voir dire process, which selects the jurors to sit on the panel. Finally, on Friday, the jury was empaneled and Tribow, Wu, and Viamonte returned to the office to spend the weekend coaching witnesses and preparing evidence and exhibits.

Every time he got tired, every time he wanted to stop and return home to play with Danny Jr. or just sit and have a cup of coffee with his wife, he pictured Jose Valdez's wife and thought that she'd never spend *any* time with her husband again. And when he thought *that* he pictured Ray Hartman's arrogant eyes.

You're going to lose this one. . . .

Then Danny Tribow would stop daydreaming and return to his preparation for the case.

When he'd been in law school, Tribow had hoped for the chance to prosecute cases in a Gothic courthouse filled with portraits of stern old judges and dark wood paneling and the scent of somber justice.

Where he plied his trade, however, was a brightly lit, low-ceilinged county courtroom filled with blond wood and beige drapes and ugly green linoleum. It looked like a high-school classroom.

On the morning of trial, nine A. M. sharp, he sat down at the counsel table, flanked by Adele Viamonte—in her darkest suit, whitest blouse, and most assertive visage—and Chuck Wu, who

was manning his battered laptop. Hundreds of papers and exhibits and law books surrounded them.

Across the aisle, Ray Hartman sat at the other table. He was surrounded by three high-ticket partners in the law firm he'd hired, two associates, and *four* laptops.

The uneven teams didn't bother Tribow one bit, however. He believed he was put on earth to bring people who did illegal things to justice. They'd always be richer than you and have better resources. That was how the game worked and Tribow, like every successful prosecutor throughout history, accepted it. Only weak or incompetent D.A.s whined about the unfairness of the system.

He noticed Ray Hartman staring at him, mouthing something. The D.A. couldn't tell what it was.

Viamonte translated. "He said, 'You're going to lose.'"

Tribow gave a brief laugh.

He looked behind him. The room was filled. He saw a number of police officers he knew, in attendance probably out of respect for the young officer Hartman had allegedly ordered killed several years ago. In the front row, in her dress uniform, was patrolwoman Margaret Palmer, who'd been the officer's partner and had been with him when he'd been shot in the back. Sitting beside her was Carmen Valdez, the widow of the victim. Tribow nodded to both women, who returned his gaze with what was clearly a silent request that he bring this terrible man to justice.

I'll do my best, he answered, also silently.

Then the clerk entered and called out, "Oyez, oyez, this court is now in session. All those with business before this court come forward and be heard." As he always did, Tribow felt a chill at these words, as if they were an incantation that shut out reality and ushered everyone here into the solemn and mysterious world of the criminal courtroom.

A few preliminaries were disposed of and the bearded judge nodded for Tribow to start.

The prosecutor rose and gave his opening statement, which was very short; Danny Tribow believed that the divining rod that most effectively pointed toward justice in a criminal case wasn't rhetoric but the truth as revealed by the facts that you presented to the jury.

And so for the next two days he produced witness after witness, exhibits, charts, and graphs.

I've been a professional ballistics expert for twenty-two years. . . . I conducted three tests of the bullets taken from the defendant's weapon and I can state without a doubt that the bullet that killed the victim came from the defendant's gun. . . .

I sold that weapon to the man sitting there—the defendant, Ray Hartman. . . .

I've been a police officer for seven years. I was one of the first on

the scene and I took that particular weapon off the person of the defendant Ray Hartman. . . .

We found gunshot residue on the hand of the defendant, Ray Hartman. The amount and nature of this residue is consistent with what we would've found on the hands of someone who fired a pistol about the time the victim was shot. . . .

The victim was shot once in the back of the head. . . .

Yes, I saw the defendant on the day of the shooting. He was walking down the street next to Mr. Valdez's shop and I heard him stop and ask several people where Mr. Valdez was. . . .

I saw them struggling, the defendant and Mr. Valdez. They were holding this gun between them and it started going off. I didn't see him get shot because I jumped to the ground. It went off four or five times. . . .

About a month ago I was at a bar, I was sitting next to the defendant and I heard him say he was going to "get" Mr. Valdez and that'd take care of all his problems. . . .

Yes, in my opinion the defendant Ray Hartman did have a motive to kill the victim. I'm a senior prosecutor here in this county. I was prosecuting a case against the defendant for extortion and the victim, Jose Valdez, was the only witness. With his death, I have no case. I'll now have to dismiss the charges. . . .

By introducing all this testimony, Tribow established that Hartman had a motive to kill Valdez, he'd intended to do it for some time, he went looking for the victim, armed with a gun, on the day the victim was shot, he'd behaved with reckless disregard by attacking the man with a pistol and firing shots that could have injured innocent people, and he in fact was the proximate cause of Valdez's death.

"Your honor, the prosecution rests."

He returned to the table.

"Open and shut," said Chuck Wu.

"Shhhh," whispered Adele Viamonte. "Bad luck."

Danny Tribow didn't believe in luck. But he did believe in not prematurely counting chickens. He sat back and listened to the defense begin its case.

The slickest of Hartman's lawyers—the one who'd been in Tribow's office during the ill-fated plea-bargain session—first introduced a pistol permit, which showed that Hartman was licensed to carry a weapon for his own personal safety.

No problem here, Tribow thought. He'd known about the permit.

But Hartman's lawyer had no sooner begun to question his first witness—the doorman of Hartman's building—than Tribow began to feel uneasy.

"Did you happen to see the defendant on the morning of Sunday, March thirteenth?"

"Yessir."

"Did you happen to notice if he was carrying a weapon?"

"He was."

Why was he asking this? Tribow asked himself. It'd support the *state's* case. He glanced at Viamonte, who shook her head.

"And did you notice him the day before?"

"Yessir."

Uh-oh. Tribow had an idea where this was headed.

"And did he have his gun with him then?"

"Yes, he did. He'd run into some trouble with the gangs in the inner city—he was trying to get a youth center started and the gangs didn't want it."

Youth center? Tribow and Wu exchanged sour glances. The only interest Hartman would have in a youth center was as a venue to sell drugs.

"How often did he have a gun with him?"

"Every day, sir. For the past three years I've been working there."

Nobody would notice something every day for three years. He was lying. Hartman had gotten to the doorman.

"We got a problem, boss." Wu whispered.

He meant this: If the jury believed that Hartman *always* carried the gun, that fact would undermine Tribow's assertion that he'd taken it with him only that one time—on the day of the murder—for the purpose of killing Valdez. The jury could therefore conclude that he hadn't planned the murder, which would eliminate the premeditation element of the case and, with it, the murder-one count.

But if the doorman's testimony endangered the first-degree murder case, the next witness—a man in an expensive business suit—destroyed it completely.

"Sir, you don't know the defendant, do you?"

"No. I've never had anything to do with him. Never met him."

"He's never given you anything or offered you any money or anything of value?"

"No, sir."

He's lying, Tribow thought instinctively. The witness delivered his lines like a bad actor in a dinner-theater play.

"Now you heard the prosecution witness say that Mr. Hartman was going to, quote, 'get' the victim and that would take care of all his problems."

"Yessir, I did."

"You were nearby the defendant and that witness when this conversation supposedly took place, is that right?"

"Yessir."

"Where was that?"

"Cibella's Restaurant on Washington Boulevard, sir."

"And was the real conversation the same as the witness described?"

"No, it wasn't," the witness answered the defense lawyer. "The prosecution witness, he misunderstood. See, I was sitting at the next table and I heard Mr. Hartman say, 'I'm going to get Valdez to take care of some problems I've been having in the Latino community.'"

"I see," the lawyer summarized in a slick voice. "He was going to *get* Valdez to *take care of* some problems?"

"Yessir. Then Mr. Hartman said, 'That Jose Valdez is a good man and I respect him. I'd like him to explain to the community that I'm concerned for their welfare.'"

Chuck Wu mouthed an obscenity.

The lawyer pushed his point home. "So Mr. Hartman was concerned for the welfare of the Latino community?"

"Yes, very much so. Mr. Hartman was really patient with Valdez. Even though Valdez started all those rumors, you know."

"What rumors?" the lawyer asked.

"About Mr. Hartman and Valdez's wife."

Behind him Tribow heard the man's widow inhale in shock.

"What were those rumors?"

"It was all bull—I mean, it was all nonsense. But Valdez got it into his head that Mr. Hartman'd been seeing his wife. I know he wasn't, but Valdez was convinced of it. The guy was a little, you know, nuts in the head. He thought a lot of guys were, you know, seeing his wife."

"Objection."

"Sustained."

Tribow glanced at the tearful face of Valdez's widow, who was shaking her head slowly.

The defense lawyer said to Tribow, "Your witness."

The prosecutor did his best to punch holes in the man's testimony. He thought he did a pretty good job. But much of the man's testimony had been speculation and opinion—the rumors of the affair, for instance. There was little he could do to discredit him. He returned to his chair.

Relax, Tribow told himself and set down the pen he'd been playing compulsively with. The murder-two charge was still alive and well. All they'd have to find was that Hartman had in fact killed him—as Tribow had already proven—and that he'd decided at the last minute to do so.

The defense lawyer called another witness.

He was a Latino—a grandfatherly sort of man, balding, round. A friendly face. His name was Cristos Abrego and he described himself as a good friend of the defendant's.

Tribow considered this and concluded that the jury's concerns about Abrego's potential bias were outweighed by the fact that the suspect, it seemed, had "good friends" in the minority community (a

complete lie, of course; Hartman saw minorities not as friends but only as opportunities for his extortion and loan-sharking operations).

"Now you heard the prosecution witness say that Mr. Hartman went looking for Mr. Valdez the day of the tragic shooting?"

"Tragic?" Wu whispered. "He's making it sound like an accident."

"Yessir," the witness answered the lawyer's question.

"Can you confirm that Mr. Hartman went looking for Mr. Valdez on the day of the shooting?"

"Yessir, it is true. Mr. Hartman did go looking for him."

Tribow leaned forward. Where was this going?

"Could you explain what happened and what you observed?"

"Yessir. I'd been in church with Mr. Hartman—"

"Excuse me," the lawyer said. "Church?"

"Yeah, him and me, we went to the same church. Well, he went more than me. He went at least twice a week. Sometimes three."

"Brother," an exasperated Adele Viamonte said.

Tribow counted four crucifixes hanging from the necks of the jury and not a single eyebrow among these men and women raised in irony at this gratuitous mention of the defendant's piety.

"Please go on, Mr. Abrego."

"We were walking along the street on the way from church."

Make that *two* gratuitous mentions.

"And I stopped in the Starbucks with Ray and we got some coffee and sat outside. Then he asked a couple of people if they'd seen Valdez, 'cause he hangs out in Starbucks a lot."

"Do you know why the defendant wanted to see Valdez?"

"He wanted to give him this game he bought for Valdez's kid."

"*What?*" the widow, behind Tribow, whispered in shock. "No, no, no . . ."

"A present, you know. Mr. Hartman loves kids. And he wanted to give it to Valdez for his boy."

"Why did he want to give Mr. Valdez a present?"

Abrego said, "He said he wanted to patch things up with Valdez. He felt bad the man had those crazy ideas about him and his wife. So he thought a present for the kid'd be fun."

"Keep going, sir. What happened next?"

"Then Mr. Hartman sees Valdez outside his store and he gets up from the table and goes over to him."

"And then?"

"Ray waves to Valdez and says, 'Hi,' or something like that. 'How you doing?' I don't know. Something friendly. And he starts to hand him the bag but Valdez just pushes it away and starts yelling at him."

"Do you know what they were yelling about?"

"Valdez was saying all kinds of weird stuff. Like: I know you've been seeing my wife for years. Which is crazy 'cause Valdez just

moved here last year."

"No!" the widow cried. "It's all a lie!"

The judge banged his gavel down, though it was with a lethargy that suggested his sympathies were with the woman.

Tribow sighed in disgust. Here, the defense had introduced a motive suggesting that Valdez, not Hartman, might have been the aggressor in the fight that day.

"I *know* it wasn't true," the witness said to the defense lawyer. "Mr. Hartman'd never do anything like that. He was really religious."

Three references to the archangel Raymond C. Hartman.

The lawyer then asked, "Did you see what happened next?"

"It was all kind of a blur, but I saw Valdez grab something—a pipe or piece of wood—and swing it at Mr. Hartman. He tried to back away, but there was no place for him to go—they were in this alley. Finally—it looked like he was going to get his head cracked open—Mr. Hartman pulled out his gun. He was just going to threaten him—"

"Objection. The witness couldn't know what the defendant's intentions were."

The lawyer asked the witness, "What, Mr. Abrego, was your impression of Mr. Hartman's intention?"

"It *looked* like he was just going to threaten Valdez. Valdez swung at him a few more times with the pipe, but Mr. Hartman still didn't shoot. Then Valdez grabbed his arm and they were struggling for the gun. Mr. Hartman was yelling for people to get down and shouting to Valdez, 'Let go! Let go! Somebody'll get hurt.' Then he started shouting to anybody on the street, 'Get down, get down.'"

Which was hardly the reckless behavior or heat of passion that Tribow had to show to prove the manslaughter count.

"Mr. Hartman was pretty brave. I mean, he coulda run and saved himself but he was worried about bystanders. He was like that, always worrying about other people—especially kids."

Tribow wondered who'd written the script. Hartman himself, he guessed.

"Then I ducked 'cause I thought if Valdez got the gun away he'd just start shooting and I got scared. I heard a gunshot and when I got up off the ground I saw that Valdez was dead."

"What was the defendant doing?"

"He was on his knees, trying to help Valdez. Stopping the bleeding, it looked like, calling for help. He was very shaken up."

"No further questions."

Tribow tried to puncture Abrego's testimony, too, but because it was cleverly hedged ("It was all kind of a blur." "I'm not sure." "There was this rumor.") he had nothing specific to discredit the witness on. The prosecutor planted the seeds of doubt in the minds of the jury by asking if Hartman had paid the witness any-

thing or threatened him or his family. But, of course, the man denied that had ever happened.

The defense then called a doctor, whose testimony was short and to the point.

"Doctor, the coroner's report shows the victim was shot once in the back of the head. Yet you heard the testimony of the prior witness that the two men were struggling face-to-face. How could the victim have been shot in the back of the head?"

"Very simple. A shot in the back of the head would be consistent with Mr. Valdez turning his head away from the weapon because he was gripping Mr. Hartman's hands, which held the gun. I would think it was possible that Mr. Valdez had his own finger on the trigger of the gun and, in the struggle, was exerting pressure, expecting it to go off and hit Mr. Hartman."

"So, in effect, you're saying that Mr. Valdez shot himself."

"Objection!"

"Sustained."

The lawyer said, "You're saying that it's *possible* Mr. Valdez himself pulled the trigger of the weapon, resulting in his own death?"

"That's correct."

"No further questions."

Tribow did what he had to do—had the doctor admit that the gunshot Valdez received was also consistent with Hartman coming up behind the victim and shooting him in the back of the head. He also asked the doctor how it was that the coroner didn't find any gunshot residue on Valdez's hands, which probably would have been present if he'd fired the gun himself. The doctor was uneasy for a moment as he glanced at Hartman and then said, "I would think that because Mr. Valdez wasn't holding the weapon himself, Mr. Hartman's hands got most of the residue."

The judge dismissed the witness and Tribow returned to the table with a glance at the stony face of the defendant, who was staring back at him.

You're going to lose. . . .

Well, Tribow hadn't thought that was possible a short while before, but now there was a real chance that Hartman would be proven right.

Then the defense lawyer called his final witness: Raymond Hartman himself.

His testimony gave a story identical to that of the other witnesses and supported his case: that he always carried his gun, that Valdez had this weird idea about Hartman and Valdez's wife, that he bought a present for the Valdez boy, that he wanted to enlist Valdez's help in putting money into the Latino community, that the struggle occurred just as the witness said. Though he added a coda: his giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to Valdez.

As to why the state was prosecuting him so adamantly, he suggested that testimony he'd given at earlier grand juries had "bigger implications that, you know, might reach pretty high up in the police department and government."

He continued, with a glance at the four Latino and five black jurors, "I get a lot of hassles because I want to help minority businesses. For some reason the police and the city and state—they don't like that. And here . . . I ended up accidentally hurting one of the very people I'm trying to help." He looked sorrowfully at the floor.

Adele Viamonte's sigh could be heard throughout the courtroom.

The lawyer thanked Hartman and said to Tribow, "Your witness."

"What're we going to do, boss?" Wu whispered.

Tribow glanced at the two people on his team, who'd worked so hard on this case. Then he looked behind him into the eyes of Carmen Valdez and Margaret Palmer—just two of the many people whose lives had been so terribly altered by the man sitting on the witness stand, gazing arrogantly at the prosecutors and the people in the gallery.

Tribow pulled Chuck Wu's laptop computer closer to him and scrolled through the notes that the young man had taken over the course of the trial. He read for a moment, then stood slowly and walked toward Hartman.

In his trademark polite voice he asked, "Mr. Hartman, I'm curious about one thing."

"Yessir?" the killer asked, just as polite. He'd been coached well by his attorneys, who'd undoubtedly urged him never to get flustered or angry on the stand.

"The game you got for Mr. Valdez's son."

The eyes flickered. "Yes? What about it?"

"What was it?"

"One of those little video games. A Gameboy."

"Was it expensive?"

A smile of curiosity. "Yeah, pretty expensive. But I wanted to do something nice for Jose and his kid. I felt bad because his father was pretty crazy—"

"Just answer the question," Tribow interrupted.

"It cost about fifty or sixty bucks."

"Where did you get it?"

"A toy store in the mall. I don't remember the name."

Tribow considered himself a pretty good lie detector and he could see that Hartman was making all this up. He'd probably seen an ad for Gameboys that morning. He doubted, however, that the jury could tell. To them he was simply cooperating and politely answering the prosecutor's somewhat curious questions.

"What did this video game do?"

"Objection," the lawyer called. "What's the point?"

"Your honor," Tribow said. "I'm just trying to establish a relationship between the defendant and the victim."

"Go ahead, Mr. Tribow, but I don't think we need to know what kind of box this toy came in."

"Actually, sir, I was going to ask that."

"Well, don't."

"I won't. Now, Mr. Hartman, what did this game do?"

"I don't know—you shot spaceships or something."

"Did you play with it before giving it to Mr. Valdez?"

From the corner of his eye he saw Viamonte and Wu exchange troubled glances, wondering what on earth their boss was up to.

"No," Hartman answered. For the first time on the stand he seemed testy. "I don't like games. Anyway, it was a present. I wasn't gonna open it up before I gave it to somebody."

Tribow nodded as if this were significant and continued his questioning. "Now the morning of the day Jose Valdez was shot, did you have this game with you when you left your house?"

"Yessir."

"Was it in a bag?"

He thought for a moment. "It was, yeah, but I put it in my pocket. It wasn't that big."

"So your hands would be free?"

"I guess. Probably."

"And you left your house when?"

"Ten-forty or so. Mass was at eleven."

Tribow then asked, "Which church?"

"St. Anthony's."

"And you went straight there? With the game in your pocket?"

"Yes, that's right."

"And the game was with you in the church?"

"Correct."

"But no one would have seen it because it was in your pocket."

"I guess that'd be right." Still polite, still unflustered.

"And when you left the church you walked along Maple Street to the Starbucks in the company of the earlier witness, Mr. Cristos Abrego?"

"Yes, that's right."

"And the game was still in your pocket?"

"No."

"It wasn't?"

"No. At that point I took it out and was carrying the bag."

Tribow whirled to face him and asked in a piercing voice, "Isn't it true that you *didn't* have the game with you in church?"

"No," Hartman said, blinking in surprise but keeping his voice even and low, "that's not true at all. I had the game with me all day. Until I was attacked by Valdez."

"Isn't it true that you left church, returned home, got the game, and then *drove* to Starbucks?"

"No, I wouldn't've had time to go home after church and get the game. Mass was over at noon. I got to Starbucks about ten minutes later. I told you, my house is a good twenty minutes away from the church. You can check a map. I went straight from St. Anthony's to Starbucks."

Tribow looked away from Hartman to the faces of the jury. He then glanced at the widow in the front row of the gallery, crying softly. He saw the grim face of the patrolwoman whose partner Hartman had killed. He saw the perplexed faces of his prosecution team. He saw spectators glancing at each other. Everyone was waiting for him to drop some brilliant bombshell that would pull the rug out from underneath Hartman's testimony and expose him as the liar and killer that he was.

Tribow said, "No further questions, your honor."

There was a moment of silence. The judge frowned and seemed to want to ask if the prosecutor was sure. But he settled for asking the defense lawyer, "Any more witnesses?"

"No, sir. The defense rests."

The sole reason for the jury's existence is that people lie.

If everyone told the truth, a judge could simply ask Raymond C. Hartman if he planned and carried out the murder of Jose Valdez and the man would say yes or no and that would be that.

But people don't tell the truth, of course, and so the judicial system relies on a jury to look at the eyes and mouths and hands and postures of witnesses and listen to their words and decide what's the truth and what isn't.

The jury in the case of the State v. Hartman had been out for two hours and Tribow and his assistants had holed up here, in the cafeteria in the building across from the courthouse. Nobody was saying a word. Some of this silence had to be attributed to their uneasiness—if not outright embarrassment—at Tribow's unfathomable line of questioning about the game Hartman had allegedly bought for the victim's son. They were probably thinking that even experienced prosecutors get flustered and fumble the ball from time to time and it was just as well it happened during a case like this, which was, apparently, unwinnable.

Danny Tribow's eyes were closed as he lounged back in an ugly orange fiberglass chair. He was replaying Hartman's cool demeanor and the witnesses' claims that they hadn't been threatened or bribed by Hartman. They'd all been paid off or threatened, he knew, but he had to admit they looked and sounded fairly credible to him; presumably they'd seemed that way to the jury as well. But Tribow had great respect for the jury system and for jurors on the

whole and, as they sat in the small deliberation room behind the courthouse, they might easily be concluding at this moment that Hartman had lied and coerced the witnesses into lying as well.

And that he was guilty of murder one.

But when he opened his eyes and glanced over at Adele Viamonte and Chuck Wu, their discouraged faces told him that there was a pretty good chance that justice probably was not going to get done at this trial.

"Okay," Viamonte said, "so we don't win on premeditated murder. We've still got the two lesser-includeds. And they'll *have* to convict on manslaughter."

Have to? thought Tribow. He didn't think that was a word that ever applied to a jury's decision. "I don't know," the prosecutor said.

"Miracles happen," said Wu with youthful enthusiasm.

And that was when Tribow's cell phone rang. It was the clerk with the news that the jury was returning.

"Them coming back this fast—is that good or bad?" Wu asked.

As a general rule, short deliberations meant a not-guilty verdict. And this was the shortest deliberation in Tribow's history as a prosecutor.

Tribow finished his coffee. "Let's go find out."

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict?"

"We have, Your Honor."

The foreman, a middle-aged man in a plaid shirt and dark slacks, handed a piece of paper to the bailiff, who carried it to the judge.

Tribow kept his eyes on Hartman's, but the killer was sitting back in the swivel chair with a placid expression. He cleaned a fingernail with a paper clip. If he was worried about the outcome of the trial, he didn't show it.

The judge read the slip of paper silently and glanced over at the jury.

Tribow tried to read the jurist's expression but couldn't.

"The defendant will rise."

Hartman and his lawyer stood.

The judge handed the paper to the clerk, who read: "In the case of the People versus Raymond C. Hartman, first count, murder in the first degree, the jury finds you not guilty. Second count, murder in the second degree, the jury finds you not guilty. Third count, manslaughter, the jury finds you not guilty."

Complete silence in the courtroom for a moment, broken by Hartman's whispered, "Yes!" as he raised a fist of victory in the air.

The judge, clearly disgusted at the verdict, banged his gavel down and said, "No more of that, Mr. Hartman." He added gruffly, "See the clerk for the return of your passport and bail deposit. I only hope that if you're brought up on charges again you appear in

my courtroom." Another angry slap of the gavel. "This court stands adjourned."

The courtroom broke into a hundred simultaneous conversations, all laced with disapproval and anger.

Hartman ignored all the comments and glares. He shook his lawyers' hands. Several of his confederates came up to him and gave him hugs. Tribow saw a smile pass between Hartman and his church buddy, Abrego.

Tribow formally shook Viamonte's and Wu's hands—as was his tradition when a verdict, good or bad, came down. Then he went over to Carman Valdez. She was crying softly. The D. A. hugged her. "I'm sorry," he said.

"You did your best," the woman said, and nodded at Hartman. "I guess people like that, really bad people, they don't play by the rules. And there's nothing you can do about it. Sometimes they're just going to win."

"Next time," Tribow said.

"Next time," she whispered cynically.

Tribow whispered a few words to the partner of the officer that Hartman had killed, patrolwoman Margaret Palmer.

The prosecutor then noticed Hartman walking toward the front door of the courtroom and he stepped forward quickly, intercepting him.

"Just a second, Hartman," Tribow said.

"Nice try, counselor," the larger-than-life man said, pausing, "but you should've listened to me. I told you you were going to lose."

One of his lawyers handed Hartman an envelope. He opened it and took out his passport.

"Must've cost you a lot to bribe those witnesses," Tribow said amiably.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," Hartman frowned. "That'd be a crime. As you, of all people, ought to know."

Viamonte leveled a finger at him and said, "You're going to stumble and we're going to be there when it happens."

Hartman replied calmly, "Not unless you're moving to the south of France. Which is what I'm doing next week."

"To help the minority community in St. Tropez?" Chuck Wu asked sarcastically.

Hartman offered a smile, then turned toward the door.

"Mr. Hartman," Tribow said. "One more thing."

The killer turned. "What?"

Tribow nodded to Officer Margaret Palmer. She stepped forward, paused, and gazed coldly into Hartman's eyes.

"Something you want, little lady?" the killer asked.

Palmer gripped Hartman roughly and handcuffed him.

"What the hell're you doing?"

Abrego and two of Hartman's bodyguards stepped forward, but by now a number of other police officers were next to Tribow and Patrolwoman Palmer. The thugs backed off immediately.

Hartman's lawyer pushed his way to the front of the crowd. "What's going on here?"

Palmer ignored him and said, "Raymond Hartman, you're under arrest for violation of state penal code section eighteen point three one dash B. You have the right to remain silent, you have the right to an attorney." She continued the litany of the Miranda warning.

Hartman snapped to his lawyer, "Why the hell're you letting her do this? I'm paying you—do something!"

This attitude didn't sit well with the lawyer but he said, "He's been acquitted of all charges."

"Actually, not all charges," Tribow said. "There was one lesser-included offense I didn't bring him up on. Section eighteen point three one."

"What the hell is that?" Hartman snapped.

His lawyer shook his head. "I don't know."

"You're a goddamn lawyer. What do you mean, you don't know?"

Tribow said, "It's a law that makes it a felony to have a loaded firearm within one hundred yards of a school—Sunday schools included—when there are students present." He added modestly, "I worked with the state legislature myself to get that one passed."

"Oh, no. . . ." the lawyer muttered.

Hartman frowned and said ominously, "You can't do that. It's too late. The trial's over."

The lawyer said, "He can, Ray."

"Well, he can't prove it," Hartman snapped. "Nobody saw any guns. There were no witnesses."

"As a matter of fact there *is* a witness. And he happens to be one you can't bribe or threaten."

"Who?"

"You."

Tribow walked to the computer on which Chuck Wu had transcribed much of the testimony.

He read, *"Hartman: No, I wouldn't've had time to go home after church and get the game. Mass was over at noon. I got to Starbucks about ten minutes later. I told you, my house is a good twenty minutes away from the church. You can check a map. I went straight from St. Anthony's to Starbucks."*

"What's that all about? What's with this goddamn game?"

"The game's irrelevant," Tribow explained. "What's important is that you said you didn't have time to go home between leaving the church and arriving at Starbucks. That means you *had* to have the gun with you in church. And that's right next to the Sunday school." The prosecutor summarized, "You admitted under oath that you

broke section eighteen point thirty-one. This transcript's admissible at your next trial. That means it's virtually an automatic conviction."

Hartman said, "All right, all right. Let me pay the fine and get the hell out of here. I'll do it now."

Tribow looked at Hartman's lawyer. "You want to tell him the other part of eighteen point thirty-one?"

His lawyer shook his head. "It's a do-time felony, Ray."

"What the hell's that?"

"It carries mandatory prison time. Six months."

"What?" Terror blossomed in the killer's eyes. "But I can't go to prison." He turned to his lawyer, grabbing his arm. "I *told* you that. They'll kill me there. I can't! Do something, earn your goddamn fee for a change."

But the lawyer pulled the man's hand off. "You know what, Ray? Why don't you tell your story to your new lawyer. I'm in the market for a better grade of client." The man turned and walked out through the swinging doors.

Margaret Palmer and two other officers escorted Hartman away, as he shouted his protests.

After some congratulations from the police officers and spectators, Tribow and his team returned to the prosecution table and began organizing books and papers and laptops. There was a huge amount of material to pack up; the law is nothing more or less than words.

"Hey, boss, sleight of hand," Chuck Wu said. "You got him focusing on that game and he didn't think about the gun."

"Yeah, we thought you'd gone off the deep end," Viamonte offered.

"But we weren't going to say anything," Wu said, laughing. "Hey, let's go celebrate."

Tribow declined. He hadn't spent much time at all with his wife and son and he was desperate to get home to them. He finished packing up the big litigation bags.

"Thank you," a woman's voice said. Tribow turned to see Jose Valdez's widow standing in front of him. He nodded. She seemed to be casting about for something else to say, but then she just shook the prosecutor's hand and she and an older woman walked out of the nearly empty courtroom.

Tribow watched her leave.

I guess people like that, really bad people, they don't play by the rules. And there's nothing you can do about it. Sometimes they're just going to win.

And sometimes they're not.

"Hold on a minute," Adele Viamonte said to Tribow.

He glanced at her, lifting an eyebrow.

"Think it's *your* turn to carry the big one." She pushed the largest litigation briefcase toward him. He hefted it and together the three prosecutors left the courtroom. ●

IT'S FOR YOU

by John Lawrence Reynolds

Harvey wants a cup of coffee, but Harvey doesn't dare have one because his stomach is doing the final high-kick sequence from *A Chorus Line.* This is unlike Harvey, which is something his secretary Jennifer notices as soon as she walks into his office carrying his personal mug, the one that proclaims *World's Sexiest Accountant.* It's steaming with his first coffee of the day, double cream, no sugar.

"Not today," Harvey says. He thinks he could kill for a coffee right now, then winces at the expression.

"You okay?" Jennifer asks. She puts a hand on her hip as though she is an exasperated mother and Harvey is her little boy who won't drink his milk. "Are you getting an ulcer?"

Harvey tries to smile. He raises a hand to reassure her, but the hand is shaking so much it looks like he's conducting a polka band so he lowers it to his lap, out of sight. "Just workload," he says. "Nothing to worry about."

"What do I do with this?" she asks him, still holding his coffee mug.

Harvey stares at it before answering. His wife gave him that mug, he recalls. Two years ago, for his birthday. Oh my God, what has he done? "Pour it down the sink, I guess," Harvey tells her.

Jennifer shrugs, and as she turns to go Harvey remembers something else. He is panic-stricken because he almost forgot to tell her. The most important thing he must do all day and he nearly forgot it! "I don't . . ." he begins, and the inside of his mouth feels like he is chewing sandpaper. "I don't want any calls this

Canadian John Lawrence Reynolds is the author of five published mystery novels, four of which were short-listed for Canada's prestigious Arthur Ellis Award. (Two of the books won in the Best Novel category!) Despite his success with the novel, Mr. Reynolds had never submitted a short story for publication before sending this one off to *EQMM.* We're delighted to be the magazine to debut him in the field.

morning," he tells her. "Not before noon. Nobody at all. . . ."

"Not even Duncan McNie?" Jennifer says, her eyebrows raised.

"Especially not him," Harvey says. "But," he adds, and this time he risks raising one hand to point it at her, "if a man named Basso calls—that's how he'll identify himself, he'll say he's Mr. Basso—you must put him through to me immediately, understand? Nobody else but him, right up to noon, all morning long."

Jennifer nods blankly. Three years of bringing her boss coffee every morning, of reminding him of his wife's birthday and his wedding anniversary and helping him choose a new tie twice a year, and she realizes she doesn't really know him. She pauses at the door and asks, in her smallest voice, "You sure you're okay?"

Harvey smiles and conceals his hands again. "Of course I am," he says. "Thank you, Jennifer." His smile widens. "And you look very pretty today," he adds. "I'm sorry I forgot to tell you."

She closes the door.

Harvey leans back in his chair and stares at the ceiling. He breathes deeply, closes his eyes, and feels the tears begin to flow.

"It's your wife, isn't it?"

Harvey is certain his heart is going to leap out of his chest. At the very least, he may have to change his underwear. His eyes open wide and there's Jennifer standing at the door again, grinning at him like a mad baboon. "What?" Harvey manages to say. How does she know? he wonders. *How does she know???!*

"She's leaving for that vacation today and you're going to miss her. That's why you're acting strange, right? Right?" Jennifer can barely conceal her joy at solving the puzzle.

Harvey is close to disintegration. He is convinced that his arms are about to fall to the floor followed by other appendages, and soon his torso will collapse, spilling various organs all over the carpet. But Harvey smiles and begins to laugh. The laughter feels strange, but good. "That's right," he says. "She's catching a noon flight and I'll miss her. . . ." His laughter has suddenly changed to tears. How did that happen so quickly? Now Harvey is crying and he cannot stop. "I'll miss her," he blubbers.

Jennifer rushes to his side and takes his head in her hands. "Oh, that is so sweet," she says. She sniffs, a delicate but damp one. Harvey wishes they could stay like this the rest of the day, maybe even the rest of his life, with his face pressed so firmly against Jennifer's chest he can tell she is wearing a lace brassiere beneath her blouse. But she releases him and turns away, biting her lip. "I think that is so sweet," she says again, pausing at the door to look back at him. "And I'll do exactly as you say."

Harvey relaxes again, his eyes still closed, until he hears Jennifer's voice demand: "Say, who the heck is this Mr. Basso, anyway?" and that's when Harvey loses it. Harvey brings his hands to

the side of his head, stares up at the ceiling, and screams, *"None of your damn business!"*

You should expect to meet strange people in strange places, Harvey muses when Jennifer finally leaves him alone to ponder the next three hours of his day, and perhaps the next thirty years of his life.

Certainly the Graystone Tavern had been a strange place. Strange to Harvey, anyway. It was in a neighborhood where Harvey rarely ventured, and only during daylight with his car doors locked.

Why did I go there? Harvey asks himself. Why did I talk to him? Why did I do it? How can I stop it, because now I don't want it to happen, I don't, I don't . . .

If it hadn't been for Duncan McNie . . .

McNie is Harvey's biggest client, a reclusive man who invests in devalued urban real estate and has managed to accumulate slum properties with a book value exceeding three hundred million dollars. McNie operates out of a nondescript office in a sixty-year-old twelve-story building that houses more rats than paying tenants. The firm's personnel consists of Duncan McNie, his scabrous nephew David Melvin, and two elderly women, one of whom is rumored to have been the city's last living brothel madam.

Harvey meets McNie face-to-face once a year, when he prepares the man's income-tax return and presents the financial report. But he hears from McNie often.

McNie's most recent communication was two days ago when he ordered Harvey to inspect the Graystone Tavern & Hostel, a dreary building on the city's even drearier west side. Forty years ago, the Graystone was an elite establishment featuring a bandstand crowded with live musicians playing Gershwin songs for dining and dancing. But the diners and dancers moved away to the suburbs, the musicians died of the various diseases that knock off musicians, and Gershwin's music succumbed to Elvis, the Beatles, and galloping bad taste. Eventually the Graystone became first a show club for unfunny comedians and then a strip joint, before metamorphosing into its most recent and probably final stage: a dull, dusty bar and grill featuring cheap beer, greasy food, and middle-aged hookers who rent themselves and some of the upstairs rooms by the hour.

"Give it the once-over, look at the books, and assess it as a going concern," McNie told Harvey over the telephone, in a voice that sounded like a rusty bellows.

"Doesn't David normally do that kind of thing?" Harvey asked. Harvey did not want to venture into the Graystone neighborhood.

What's more, Harvey and his wife had argued that morning for the third day in a row. Harvey would have preferred to simply work very late that evening, arriving home too late and too weary to resume the domestic dispute.

"David?" McNie hooted and wheezed at the mention of his nephew's name. "That horse's foot would be picked cleaner'n a cue ball by all the hookers they got at that place. That's why I'm sending you."

Harvey did not know if McNie's comment was an assessment of Harvey's superior moral standards or an assumption that Harvey enjoyed no carnal activity whatsoever.

The latter was at least partially true.

For several months, Harvey has remained convinced that somewhere in the world exists a stunningly beautiful woman who longs to devote her life to his happiness. He knows she awaits him, the way Columbus knew another world was waiting for him to discover it. Harvey believes he needs only the opportunity and the courage to throw away his present life and start over, free and unencumbered, to search for this woman who will help him escape his mournful, mundane existence.

In other words, Harvey is in many respects a normal middle-aged married man.

It is not within Harvey's heart to betray his wife with an affair. Nor does he seriously consider divorcing her because the action would spell the end of his carefully constructed accounting firm, since his wife holds half the assets in her name.

But it might, perhaps, be in his heart to kill her.

The idea began as nothing more than a niggling seed, a quiet and somewhat guilt-inspiring image that Harvey contemplated during moments of sadness and despair at the state of his life and marriage.

It might have remained so had Harvey refused to visit the Graystone Tavern. But disobeying the direct instructions of his largest client was unthinkable. So he had gone. After completing his inspection and fixing a market assessment in his head, Harvey made his second consecutive error when he decided to enjoy a drink or two before returning to the disharmony that had become his home.

The stool he chose at the bar wobbled like something out of a carnival ride when Harvey rested his haunches upon it. Blue fluorescent lights shone into Harvey's face from behind the bar, and his drink was served by a reedy bartender whose bronchial system rattled like a jar of ball-bearings whenever he coughed, which was frequently.

The rest of the room was dimly lit by wall sconces set above torn banquettes. A television set hanging from the ceiling like a ripe

electronic fruit carried the silent action of a professional billiards game on its screen. Three women in short dresses, spike heels, and shrunken sweaters sat in one banquette smoking and laughing among themselves. About an equal number of men were scattered among the other tables.

Harvey had never been so depressed in his life.

He finished his first drink slowly. Then he ordered a second rum and Coke.

He was finishing his second drink and steeling his courage to return home when he grew aware of someone seating herself on the stool next to him. He knew it was a female because the fluorescent light caught the glare of soft fleshy thighs through torn net stockings.

The woman leaned toward him and said, "Wanna go upstairs?"

Harvey turned to look at her. She was prettier than his wife. Probably younger, too. Harvey smiled. "No, thank you," he said, and turned back to his drink.

"It's all right," she cooed. "It's paid for."

"What's paid for?" Harvey asked.

"It," she said. "Half an hour's worth. After that it comes out of your pocket."

"You give half an hour's worth of . . ." Harvey began. "You give it away free?"

"Hey, watch it," the woman said. She seemed offended, and it occurred to Harvey that he probably could not have said anything that would have insulted her more. "I said it's paid for, I didn't say it's free."

Harvey was intrigued. "Who paid for . . . it?"

"Cutie over there." She jerked her thumb behind her. Harvey swiveled on the barstool to follow the gesture. Someone was sitting in a corner banquette behind a glass brandy snifter. "Look, if you don't want it, he doesn't get a refund," the woman was saying. "So if you want to throw it away, that's up to you. Ain't no skin off my butt."

She was still talking as Harvey slid from the stool and walked slowly toward the corner banquette where the man waited, sitting erect, both hands cupping the brandy snifter.

Harvey is pulled back from his memory of two nights ago by the sound of Jennifer's telephone ringing beyond his office door. He looks at his watch. It is only ten. His wife wouldn't have left for the airport yet. Not until ten-thirty, to arrive by eleven-thirty for her flight at noon. He pictures her driving across town, stopping on the way, as he knows she will, for magazines, candy, and cosmetics.

He lowers his head in his hands and pretends he is a rock,

except that this rock has a memory. A terrifying memory he finds difficult to believe now.

The man in the banquette waited motionless as Harvey approached him. Harvey seemed to have absorbed some of the macho atmosphere of the Graystone. Or perhaps it was vestigial courage distilled from the rum and Coke. Whatever it was, it caused Harvey to walk more erect than normal, almost strutting. He felt piqued. He told himself it was an insult for one man to buy a woman for another man. A humiliation. Harvey would not be humiliated. He had, after all, his pride.

Harvey sat down at the banquette and stared into the shadows concealing the man's face. He jerked his thumb back toward the bar. "Did you send that woman to see me?"

The man made no reply. As Harvey's eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he saw the man was wearing heavy horn-rimmed glasses.

"I don't buy my women," Harvey said, raising his voice a little. His indignation felt good. Perhaps he should try speaking this way to his wife. He gained more confidence with the other man's silence. I am intimidating him, Harvey told himself. He pulled his shoulders back a little and raised his voice. "I don't need someone else paying for my amusement, thank you very much. I am very successful at my work . . ." Harvey stopped and tilted his head. "What?" The man had spoken in a low voice.

"I said," the man almost whispered, "it was not for your amusement. It was for mine." He lifted the glass from the table, raising it into the shadows and toward his mouth.

Harvey sat back in his chair, feeling his indignation escaping like air from an untied balloon, and he wondered why he had decided to step away from the relative safety of the bar to sit across from this man, who wore an aura of danger like a tailored suit.

"Well, thank you very much." Harvey forced a smile. "But I get all the . . ." He paused. ". . . women I can handle. On my own."

"What does your wife think of that?" The man sounded amused. Harvey could make out some facial characteristics now. A shock of hair, maybe red. A hawk nose. Small eyes behind the thick glasses, and a smaller mouth that barely moved when he spoke. His voice carried a vaguely Southern accent, perhaps Georgia or the Carolinas. Southern and cultured.

Harvey glanced down at his wedding ring, then sat more erect. "We have an understanding."

"And does she get all the men she can handle?" the other man asked.

"She . . ." Harvey began. What am I *doing* here? he thought.

"Look, thank you for the offer of—whoever she is," he said, standing up. "I hope you get your money back."

"You hate her, don't you?" the man said.

Harvey looked toward the bar where the woman in the net stockings was watching him, curious. "I don't even know the poor girl," he began.

"Not her," the man said. He sounded no longer amused. "Your wife."

Harvey squinted into the gloom of the banquette. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I already know more about you than you will ever learn about me," the man said. He sounded more weary than boastful. "I could tell by observing you that you are here on business. I can tell by your car and your suit that you are moderately wealthy. And I can tell by the way you act that your life is a shambles and you do not want to go home."

"Who *are* you?" Harvey repeated, and he sat down at the banquette again.

"It can be fixed," the man said.

Harvey smiled. He had no idea what the man meant. That was a lie. Yes, I do, he admitted to himself. "I have no idea what you mean," he lied aloud.

"Yes, you do," the man said. His voice was sliding toward a broader accent. "Y'all know exactly what I mean."

Jennifer's telephone rings again. Harvey can hear it through his office door. He turns to his telephone, and when he sees that the incoming call button is lit he fears he will be sick to his stomach. He stares at the lighted button, willing it to go out, and it does.

Harvey leans back in his chair and covers his eyes. It is well past ten o'clock.

At first, Harvey thought it was mere posturing by someone who had seen too many gangster movies, someone pretending he was Edward G. Robinson or John Gotti. The man will laugh at me any minute now, Harvey believed, and tomorrow he'll boast about how he fooled this suburban fish-out-of-water, this successful accountant who arrived in his silver Mercedes (Harvey had parked his car at the curb; it was visible through the dusty glass doors of the Graystone), into believing he was a hired killer.

But instead of laughing, the man lifted his wrist and pulled back the sleeve of his neatly pressed linen sports jacket to glance at a gold watch fastened to his wrist with an alligator-skin strap. "Tomorrow you will hear of a man found shot in his garage," the man said. "No one will know why. No one will know exactly when.

No one will know by whom. And someone will be mighty pleased at his death."

"Why are you telling me this?" Harvey said. The man finished his drink as Harvey spoke. "I could . . . I could report this to the police."

The man was standing now. Harvey could see he was short and slim. His button-down shirt looked like Brooks Brothers. His silk tie was perfectly knotted.

The man was shaking his head and peeling some bills from a roll. "Don't think about it," he said, dropping money on the table. He studied Harvey from the corner of his eye and Harvey felt the temperature around him drop by several degrees, just for an instant. "Don't even think about it," the man advised Harvey. His glance shifted away and the temperature returned to normal. "But if y'all would like something fixed, bring five thousand dollars with you tomorrow."

"Why . . ." Harvey began. He swallowed, hard. It hurt a little. "Why would you make this kind of offer to me, a total stranger?" he asked.

"All my clients are total strangers," the man said. He was out of the darkest shadows now and setting a tweed cap on his head just so. "It is the only way I work." He edged his way past Harvey, touching the brim of his cap. "Y'all have a nice night," he said. Then, before turning to leave, he leaned back toward Harvey. "The left ear," he said. He walked quickly to the door and was gone.

Harvey sat down, shaking. He shook there for ten minutes before rising to leave and drive home, his mind a mental hurricane.

The next morning, while his wife shouted at him from the hall, Harvey shook again as he read a news report in the morning paper about an insurance broker found dead in his garage across town.

Shot once.

Behind the left ear.

That was yesterday morning. Now Harvey begins shaking all over again. He stands up and paces his office, then stops at a window, staring down at people in the street. He can see the street beggar who accosts Harvey every morning when Harvey enters the building, thrusting a gnarled hand at Harvey and demanding spare change.

A week ago, in a foul mood after yet another spat with his wife, Harvey had snapped, "Get a job!" They were the first words he had ever spoken to the street person, and the beggar had nodded politely and said, "Thank you very much, sir," leaving Harvey feeling both guilty and angry the rest of the day.

Now Harvey wonders what it would be like to trade places with the beggar, to exchange this terrible burden, this terrible thing he has done, for the identity of a man who has nothing, to give up all his material possessions just to enjoy peace of mind.

Harvey snaps out of it. Don't be ridiculous, he tells himself. You hired a professional, a man who is discreet and does not make mistakes, and when he succeeds you will of course feel remorse, as any husband would at the unexplained death of his wife of twenty-two years. But all will be yours, he reminds himself. The business, the house, and the five-hundred-thousand-dollar life-insurance policy on your wife, which has been in existence for over five years, long enough that there will be no suspicion cast upon you. It will all be yours.

Look on the bright side, Harvey says silently. He nods and smiles to himself. Think of the places you can go, the women you can meet, the thrill of all that freedom!

Harvey feels better, almost elated. He is still nodding and smiling when a short knock on his door is followed by Jennifer's innocent face, apologizing before introducing two men who wish to talk to Harvey, and who are from the police.

"Nice to see you again." The man was wearing a different jacket when Harvey visited the Graystone Tavern for the second time, the previous evening. This time he wore a hound's-tooth check over a cotton turtleneck. He sat in the same banquette, another glass snifter resting between his hands.

Two women were at the bar. When Harvey entered, the woman in the net stockings who had told Harvey she was already paid for the previous night leaned toward the other and whispered something, and they both collapsed in giggles.

The money rested inside Harvey's jacket pocket. It felt like a bowling ball.

"What do you need to know?" Harvey asked when he was seated.

"I need to know if you brought the money," the man said, and when Harvey began to reach inside his jacket the man raised his hand and said, "Don't."

Harvey nodded. "Look," he said rapidly, "my wife is basically a good woman . . ."

"Don't do that either," the man said.

"Tell me what to do," Harvey said. He was almost pleading.

"Have a drink." The man smiled and raised his glass. The bartender approached and Harvey ordered a brandy, neat.

"Now what?" Harvey asked while waiting for his drink to arrive.

"The weather," the man said. "Very warm for May, isn't it?"

Harvey is convinced he is about to be sick to his stomach, which is

already in motion like a sprinter rocking on his toes, waiting for the starter's pistol. Harvey closes his eyes at the thought of a pistol.

The two detectives are seated directly across from Harvey. Jennifer has served them coffee in bone china cups that Harvey's wife chose several months ago. Jennifer has returned to her desk, closing the door behind her.

The detectives introduced themselves, but Harvey has forgotten their names already. The scandal, he is thinking. All those years in jail, that will be bad enough, he thinks. But the scandal, he can't stand that.

The detectives slurp their coffee and make small talk. One is older than Harvey, with thinning gray hair and a heavy stomach. The other is in his early thirties and handsome, with blow-dried hair and an athletic physique.

Harvey is still describing the state of his business in response to the younger detective's question when the older one sets his cup aside and leans forward. He says, in a voice like a growling stomach, "Where is your wife?"

"My wife?" Harvey says aloud, his voice a near-soprano. They know, he thinks. They know. He looks at the small gold clock on his desk, the one his wife gave him for Christmas ten years ago. It is ten minutes to eleven. Now Harvey does not think he will be sick. Now he thinks he will cry. But he doesn't. He smiles instead and says, "She is on her way to the airport. To catch a flight to Tampa. She is visit—" He runs out of saliva, tries to swallow, fails to, and finishes the sentence in a voice that shakes like a leaf in the wind: "Visiting a friend. For a week."

"That's good," the man in the banquette nodded when Harvey gave him the same information the evening before. "She drives herself to the airport to be gone for a week. So that gives you a week when you don't expect to hear from her. Because you all had a tiff when she left."

"Not in the house," Harvey whispered, leaning across the banquette table and almost spilling his drink. "Don't do it in the house!"

The man had watched Harvey carefully for a moment. "Stop acting like a sow when she catches sight of the sickle," the man said. "Remember, you're the boss. I'm just the hired help. You say not in the house, it won't be in the house. It will be in the car."

"You don't look like the kind of guy to hang around a place like the Graystone," the younger detective says to Harvey. He slouches in his chair.

Harvey tells them he was there on business. On behalf of a client. They can check if they want.

"We already did," the older detective says.

"So why did you go back?" the younger detective says. "Last night?"

"For a second inspection," Harvey says. "To confirm . . . " He breathes deeply. Should he try to plea-bargain now? Does early plea-bargaining earn points that you can apply to your sentence? Like a frequent-flyer? "To confirm my opinion of the previous evening."

"You ask Charlie Savannah what he thought of the place?" the older detective sneers.

"Who?" Harvey says with genuine surprise.

The man had nodded again with satisfaction as Harvey described his wife's car and the stops she was likely to make on the way to the airport, the same exasperating stops she always made when they drove to the airport together, the two of them. "Now, you see, that's convenient," the man said, still nodding.

Harvey began to speak, but a wave of the man's hand silenced him.

"Real convenient," the man said. "Your wife's car will be left in the airport parking garage. I will drive it there myself. As it turns out, I am flying out tomorrow to another appointment." He kept nodding, agreeing with himself. "Your wife will be in the trunk." Then he smiled. "She won't make her plane."

"Do I have to know anything else?" Harvey had asked.

The man shook his head.

Harvey stood to leave, and the man raised his hand to stop him. "Now don't tell me y'all forgot the little matter of a fee." He handed Harvey a copy of the day's newspaper. "You look like a man who needs a men's room. Take this with you. As reading material. Bring it back. With your little bitty gift in between the pages."

Harvey sat down again. "How do I . . . How do I know . . . "

"If it will be done? Because I am a professional. Because I would not take this risk if I were not."

His next words chilled Harvey to the core of his being.

"Because I enjoy my work."

"You took a newspaper into the john with you, right?" The older detective is standing now, walking around Harvey's office, inspecting the artwork on Harvey's walls as though in an art gallery.

Harvey's wife chose all the pictures.

Now Harvey realizes how closely they were watching him.

"Yes." Harvey's voice sounds as if it comes from a very small furry animal.

"And you came out two minutes later and gave the newspaper back to Charlie Savannah." The older detective is still strolling around Harvey's office. The younger detective sits picking at his teeth with a thumbnail, watching Harvey.

"It was his newspaper," Harvey says. He tries to smile. "I just borrowed it."

"What's a man like you have to do with a guy like Charlie Savannah?" The younger detective looks almost amused now.

"Who?" Harvey says again.

"And what did you talk about when you gave him back the newspaper?" the older detective barks.

"What?" Harvey whispers.

Harvey returned from the men's room with the five thousand dollars set among the pages of the newspaper, which he placed carefully on the banquette table. The other man ignored it.

"Y'all take telephone calls at your office?" the man said. He was staring across the room towards the bar where the women in shrunken clothing and net stockings were seated.

Harvey said he did. When the man asked for Harvey's office telephone number, Harvey told him.

"Tomorrow a man named Basso will call you and he will sound exactly like me," the man said. "He will call any time up to noon. All the way up to noon. But not after. He will tell you the report is completed."

At the time, Harvey surprised himself with his own calmness. "So when it's done, you'll call me," he said. Harvey was getting pretty good at this.

His words seemed to anger the man. "Not me," the man snapped. It was the only emotion other than amusement he had shown so far. "Basso. And not when. If. Things can go wrong. I do not take chances and I do not make errors." With his accent, it sounded like "Are-ares."

"What if you . . . what if Basso doesn't call by noon?" Harvey had asked.

"Then it didn't happen. This time. You can count on that. So y'all meet me here again in a week. And we make other plans."

Harvey nodded and turned to leave.

"It doesn't happen tomorrow and you don't show up next week, it doesn't happen at all," the man said. "And don't expect to see your money again."

Harvey turned to look at him. The man was standing, the folded newspaper with Harvey's money inside under his arm. His eyes had returned to the women across the room. "It'll probably happen

tomorrow," the man said. "But you must appreciate my carefulness. All my clients do." Then he strode toward the women.

As Harvey left he heard the women laugh with delight as the man sat among them.

"You hired Charlie to kill your wife, right?" The older detective has planted himself in front of Harvey's desk. "We understand the two of you, you and your wife, haven't been getting along well recently."

Harvey can't believe his ears. How much do they know? he screams silently. "I don't know what you're talking about," he says. His hands are shaking like birds on a tether.

"Charlie Savannah doesn't deal with anybody unless it's business," the younger detective says. "And Charlie's business is killing people. For money."

"If . . ." Harvey begins. "If you know that, why don't you arrest him?"

For the first time, the detectives look uncomfortable. "Charlie is very careful," the older detective says, seating himself again. "And he moves around a lot. But this time we think he might have made a mistake."

"By talking to you," the younger detective says.

"I have no idea what you're . . ." Damn, Harvey's throat is dry again. "What you're talking about," he finishes.

"Your secretary says you canceled all your appointments this morning," the older detective says.

Harvey says it's true.

"So you have a lot of time to talk to us," the older detective says, pulling a notepad from his pocket, "and tell us a few things."

The telephone button for the incoming line to Harvey's office lights up.

Harvey's body wants to evacuate everything within it.

"Tell us again what you planned to do with the five thousand dollars in cash you withdrew yesterday."

It is the third time the older detective has asked this question in the past half-hour. For the third time, Harvey tells him the money was to purchase a going-away gift for his wife.

"And tell us what you did with it instead," the younger detective says for the third time. Harvey watches the light on his telephone. It goes out. Harvey closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, then looks at the clock on his desk. It is eleven-fifteen. His telephone has not rung yet. The incoming phone button lights up again.

For the third time, Harvey says he paid a gambling debt, which came up sooner than he expected. He holds his breath, his eyes on the light.

The detectives watch him in silence. Then the older detective

stands up and paces the room, inspecting the pictures on the wall again. "Let's go back to the beginning one more time," he says.

The incoming light goes out.

Harvey releases his breath. "Whatever you say," he says. He wants terribly to cry.

Harvey is feeling better than he has all morning. It is now eleven-thirty. His telephone has not rung once. Mr. Basso has not called. It did not happen.

The incoming line is lit again, and he hears Jennifer's voice beyond the door answering his telephone.

The two detectives are sprawled in the chairs facing Harvey's desk. "Tell us again what you and Charlie Savannah talked about," the younger detective says. He is no longer making notes. The older detective is cleaning his fingernails.

The incoming light is extinguished. Another call that was not from Mr. Basso.

Harvey smiles and releases his breath. "Well," he begins, "as I told you, he's a Yankees fan. . . ."

The two detectives glance at each other, the older one with his eyebrows raised. It is almost half an hour later. The younger one looks at his watch. Harvey studies his desk clock, which reads two minutes to twelve. The detectives stand up and close their notebooks.

"We'll be in touch with you," the younger detective says.

Harvey makes a tent with his hands, fingertips together, and says that will be fine. The incoming line button lights up.

"Be careful who you associate with," the older detective says. "We'll be alerting Florida police about your wife, and about Charlie Savannah," he adds.

Harvey smiles. No danger there. He never told the man in the Graystone where his wife was going. The man knows nothing about Harvey beyond his name, his address, his wife's description, and his wife's car. Nothing else.

The detectives walk slowly toward Harvey's office door. Harvey almost feels sorry for them. "Nice to meet . . ." Harvey begins to say.

Harvey's telephone rings.

Harvey cannot believe it. He looks at the phone. The detectives look at each other.

Harvey's desk clock says 11:59.

The detectives remain staring at Harvey as his telephone rings again. Harvey freezes the smile on his face.

"Aren't you going to answer your telephone?" the older detective says. Another ring.

"Probably not . . ." Harvey begins. He wants to cry. "Not important."

The damn thing rings again. Harvey would like to wrench the phone from the wall and fling it through the window and watch it fall all the way down to the street beggar. The lucky homeless hungry street beggar.

Another ring.

"Not important?" the younger detective says. "That's the first time it's rung since we got here. How do you know it's not important?"

"It'll stop ringing," Harvey says. "Soon." His eyes are wet. He did it, Harvey thinks. The man murdered my wife.

"We hear Charlie Savannah always confirms that he's done his job," the younger detective says. "By telephone."

The telephone rings twice more. The detectives appear to be amused. The older detective walks casually toward Harvey's desk. "Why don't I just answer that for you?" he asks. "Do you a little favor."

Harvey closes his eyes. His body trembles like one of those Rio carnival samba dancers he once saw in a TV show. Rio was one of the places he had considered traveling to. In search of beautiful women.

The phone rings again before the detective picks up the receiver. He is watching Harvey but Harvey can't see him because his eyes are squeezed tightly shut. "Hello," the detective says with surprising softness in his voice.

Harvey opens his eyes. The detective is extending the receiver to Harvey.

"It's for you."

Harvey wants to confess everything, beg for forgiveness, talk to his lawyer, cradle his wife, wet his pants, *anything* but accept the telephone from this man. But he takes the receiver in two hands and presses it tightly to his ear.

The detectives are watching him carefully. Watching him for the reaction of a man discovering that his wife has been murdered.

"Hello?" Harvey says. A voice speaks to him through the receiver. Harvey nods and responds. "I see. . . . Well, that's wonderful news. . . . I think we should get together as soon as possible and review the financial picture. . . . Oh, I'll get onto it right away, with pleasure. . . . No, no, not at all, not at all. . . . You have a nice day, now."

Harvey replaces the receiver and beams up at the detectives. His hands are no longer shaking. "Thank you for playing secretary," he says to the older one. Then Harvey makes a joke. "You can drop a resume off at the desk on your way out," he says. "You know, in case Jennifer looks for another position."

The detectives glance at each other and shrug. Then the older detective mutters an obscenity and they both leave.

The airline confirms that flight 873 to Tampa departed on time. Harvey replaces the receiver and swivels his chair to face the window and look down to the street below. He can still see the street beggar on the sidewalk, hand extended to passersby.

"Get a job," Harvey says aloud to the beggar and smiles again. He has been smiling since the detectives left ten minutes ago.

A knock on Harvey's office door is followed by Jennifer, wearing a concerned expression. "Are you sure you're all right?" she says to him.

Harvey assures her he has never felt better. He is looking forward to lunch. It will be the first full meal he has eaten in two days. Ah freedom, ah peace of mind.

"Because you must admit you've been acting strange all day," Jennifer says, stepping into his office.

Harvey waves her words away with his hand. "Job pressures," he says. He taps his stomach. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I'm getting an ulcer." But he laughs at the thought.

"And those two detectives," Jennifer says.

"A misunderstanding," Harvey assures her.

"And that telephone call just before noon," she says.

"What about it?"

"Well, I wondered about putting it through, because it wasn't quite noon," Jennifer says.

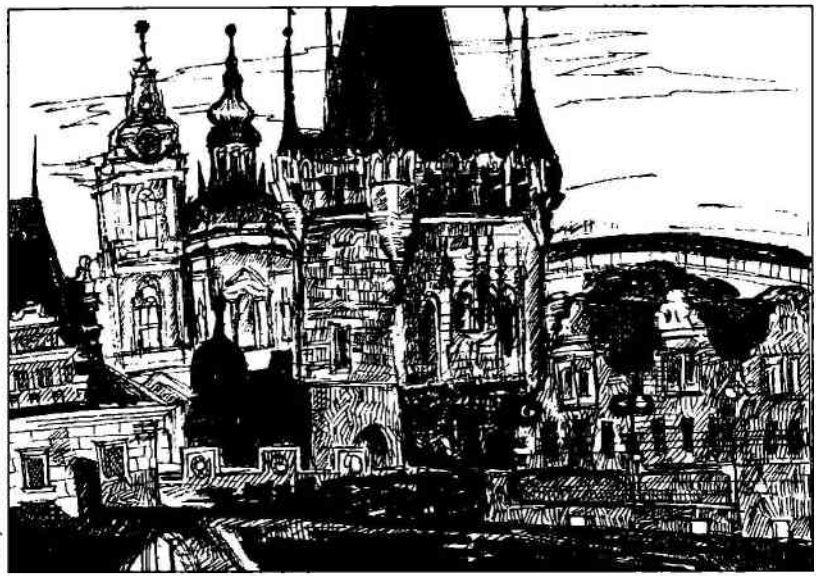
"No problem," Harvey says.

"But I could tell it was really important. And then they called back as soon as you hung up."

"Really?" Harvey says. "Why?"

"To see if you are all right. They said . . ." She folds her arms and walks closer to Harvey so she can look directly into his eyes with deep concern.

"That woman from Milwaukee, she said it wouldn't be a surprise to you because you knew it's been coming for months, there was never any hope. But she said in all the years of running a nursing home they had never heard such a strange reaction from a man who has been told that his mother has just passed away." ●



Art by June Levine

ASSIGNMENT IN PRAGUE

by Joan Richter

There were days when a look at the skyline outside her office window was like a glass of champagne. But today thick layers of fog drifted by, obscuring even the close silhouettes of the Twin Towers. Manhattan had withdrawn from her, just as her lover had. In the gray swirl of mist and cloud, Gail Jennings saw Michael's face, appearing to her as it had yesterday, from the pages of *The New York Times.*

The sun had been streaming in through the windows of her Westside apartment as she lay curled up on the sofa, leafing through the Sunday paper. Then, with a start, she saw him, his dark eyes shining, a pretty young woman at his side. A froth of white veiling framed her face and the train of her satin wedding gown lay in a swirl at her feet—Michael's new bride.

Gail winced at the memory and pressed her head against the cool glass. A knock on her open office door interrupted her trance. She turned in time to see her secretary enter the room, a white envelope in her hand stamped URGENT & CONFIDENTIAL. Gail had been expecting it, but it had slipped her mind. Not a good sign.

❖ ❖ ❖

It was an odd assignment.

"If you say no, I won't hold it against you," her boss had said the day he broached the idea. "I'd be less than honest if I didn't say I'd consider it a favor."

Ron Samuels was chairman of The Foundation for a Safe Environment, where Gail had come to work five years ago. They had met at a series of hearings on the environment in Washington. She had been a reporter then, working for a wire service, the environment her beat.

When the hearings were over, Samuels invited her to lunch and talked her into joining his foundation. "Come on as my special assistant. That will give you an overview of what we do. After that, you can choose your area." She was now the foundation's Vice President of International Affairs.

A newspaper and magazine journalist, Joan Richter began writing short stories in the early 1960s when she attended a creative writing class taught by *EQMM*'s founding editor, Frederic Dannay. Dannay published her first two stories in the September 1962 issue of *EQMM*. She spent many of the years following those first publications traveling for her work with the American Express magazines, and this new tale shows her fine sense of place. ✝

"There isn't much I can tell you about this assignment," Samuels had gone on to say. "Except that the request comes from a reputable, high-powered search firm. They don't want to be identified, so I can't tell you that. They're interested in a man who will attend the conference in Prague. I have no idea who he is or what they're looking for."

They had been seated at the small conference table in the room across from Samuels's office. Its gray walls were decorated with pleasant watercolors of seascapes and beach scenes, done by Samuels's wife. It was an unpretentious room.

"You've attended a dozen of these overseas conferences. You know the scene and the players. You're a keen observer and you've got good judgment." He smiled at her almost shyly. "I'm sure you'll be able to give them what they want."

She asked a few questions, but it was clear Samuels had told her all he knew, except for the name of the "search firm." He wouldn't budge on that. She was certain the term was a cloak, and she would have felt better knowing which one of the agencies it was, but she trusted Samuels and accepted the assignment.

He smiled his appreciation. "Good. You'll hear from them directly, by mail. The envelope will be marked URGENT & CONFIDENTIAL."

Gail thought of that conversation as she settled herself at her desk, the envelope in front of her. The meeting in Prague was just a week away, the fifth in a series of conferences held in a different city each year. Last year it had been New Delhi, before that, Rome. This year her involvement had been more intense than usual. She was one of the vice-chairs.

The extra work had been a welcome distraction. It had helped keep her sane when Michael had walked out. They had been together more than a year and had begun talking about setting a wedding date. Then, out of the blue, he told her he'd met someone else. The next day he was gone. That was four months ago.

She stared at the envelope, oddly reluctant to open it, wondering what she had gotten herself into. There was only one way to find out.

Her disappointment was immediate. All she found was a single sheet of paper, without letterhead, salutation, or signature. Two paragraphs floated on the page.

SUBJECT: Elgar Krinn, 43-year-old male, Austrian passport, first-time delegate to environment conference.

ASSIGNMENT: Observe social demeanor, professional competence, and idiosyncrasies. Make no effort to instigate or promote relationship with subject. Evaluate in context. File report within ten days. Mail to post-office box indicated.

She tossed the sheet aside.

The rules were ridiculous, the material so skeletal there were hardly enough lines to read between. She looked at it again, reading each word, looking for a missing piece, but there was nothing else there. She began lining up her questions in an effort to summarize what she knew.

What have I got? An unidentified agency is interested in a man named Elgar Krinn. She said the name out loud and decided it had a pleasant, even elegant sound. The first name was unusual, not one she'd forget if she'd heard it before. Then why did it sound familiar? She thought awhile. Nothing came to her.

Austria might be Elgar Krinn's birthplace, and it might not. Was it important? She had no way of knowing. Given the rules, unless Elgar Krinn was a talker, there was a lot she wasn't going to know.

He was five years older than she was, the same age as Michael, forty-three. She shook off the comparison. It was time to stop using Michael as her yardstick.

She began imagining what kind of man Elgar Krinn might be, and gave herself free rein, returning to a game she and her sister had played on summer nights at the cabin on Crystal Lake. She'd found it useful since. It broke up mental logjams.

There had been no TV at the lake, only a small radio which they

pulled under the covers with them, making a kind of tent. They kept the volume low, so their parents wouldn't know they were still awake. There was only one station, a late-night disk jockey who invited friends to drop by. They smothered their giggles at the twangy voices and silly stories. It was Janice who began conjuring up images and giving personalities to the voices they heard. They loved topping each other with extremes.

Gail tried it with Elgar Krinn. She decided he wore well-tailored gray suits, crisp white shirts, and elegant silk ties. He was tall and debonair. Gold cufflinks flashed at his wrists. His fingers were long. He played the piano.

She pushed back her chair with such ferocity, she might have toppled the bookcase behind her if she hadn't dug in her heels. *You're losing it! Elgar Krinn is probably bald and fat! Why the piano?*

Her flight from JFK to Prague the following Monday was overnight via Frankfurt. She had slept a few hours and felt rested when she arrived in the Czech capital at noon, eager to take advantage of her free time before the reception that evening. She hung up her evening suit, a luscious moss-green silk that Janice had given her. Her sister was taking a sabbatical from a law career and was at home with a four-year-old and a newborn. "By the time I get around to wearing this again, it'll be out of style. Besides, it's *your* color."

Gail had laughed then and smiled now. People often took them for twins. They shared their mother's honey-blond hair and gray-green eyes. They were eighteen months apart. Their brother Jimmy didn't resemble them at all. He was the image of their father, with shining brown eyes and dark curly hair.

Wenceslas Square was a short walk from her hotel and she was soon strolling in the warm spring sunshine along the wide boulevard, marveling at the vibrant mood of the city, a happy contrast to the gloom of an earlier visit when the Russians had been in power. She joined the easy flow of walkers, both residents and tourists, browsing at shop windows filled with attractive merchandise. She walked past busy cafes and coffeehouses, resisting for the time being the enticing aroma of coffee and the tempting pastries in their windows. Instead she gave in to her enchantment with the Czech glassware and stood admiring the sparkle of wine goblets, vases, pitchers, and elaborate candelabra. *SKLO* seemed to be the word for the intricately cut glass. It was on banners strung over doorways and printed on store windows. She grew closer to deciding that a vase would be the perfect souvenir to take home and at the next *SKLO* shop she went inside and tried to decide which shape and size would look best on the corner table in

her living room. They were all so beautiful it was hard to choose, but she settled on a perfect sphere and for a moment saw it filled with the yellow roses Michael often brought home. The lapse was brief. If Michael was still buying yellow roses, they weren't for her.

She chose a pair of candlesticks for Janice and was delighted when she came upon a miniature punch bowl and tiny cups for her niece. Her purchases were heavier than she expected they would be and when she left the store she decided it was time to head back to the hotel, but not without a stop at one of the coffeehouses she had passed earlier. She found one with tables outside and a seat facing the street. She ordered coffee and a slice of apple strudel sprinkled with powdered sugar.

A packet of conference material had been waiting for her at the hotel when she arrived, but she was so familiar with it all she only opened it to extract her delegate's badge so she'd not forget to wear it that evening.

The weightiest item on the agenda was the planned protest against China's decision to build a dam in the Yangtze River. The Chinese would be unmoved by the protest, but environmentalists wanted their views documented: The dam would displace millions of people and create unaccountable ecological changes for generations to come.

There were other issues the conference would address, too many perhaps. It would be a challenge to keep things moving along without having delegates feel their views had not been heard.

And then there was Elgar Krinn.

She wondered how they would meet. With three hundred delegates expected, it was possible their paths might not cross at all. And given her instructions, she could do nothing to engineer a meeting.

The odd notion that Elgar Krinn played the piano had stayed with her. It came to her again, with greater strength. Not only did she see his hands moving authoritatively over a polished keyboard, she heard the music—the pronounced beat of a march. As her foot began to keep time, the source of her fantasy came to her. It was her brother's hands she saw. It was Jimmy who was seated at the piano, his curly head bent over the keyboard, fingers flying, practicing for his high-school orchestra audition. "Pomp and Circumstance" was the selection, by Sir Edward Elgar. The Elgar she remembered was in gothic type on Jimmy's sheet music.

She smiled. The tricks the mind will play. She was both relieved and disappointed to have the puzzle solved.

When she left her hotel room that evening and turned down the long corridor toward the elevator, it was with a renewed sense of confidence. It had been a good day—the change of scene and her

successful afternoon shopping spree, seeing her reflection in the long mirror of the armoire. Janice's green silk suit with its slim floor-length skirt and fitted jacket was beautiful, and so was she. It was Janice's voice she heard.

That thought was in her mind when she noticed a man approaching from the opposite corridor. She was struck by the odd familiarity of his walk, the way his hands swung at his sides. He had the long, easy stride of a runner. Michael had run in two marathons. Of course it wasn't Michael. It couldn't be, but for an instant she wasn't sure. Then the distance between them shortened and the hallucination dissolved. The man's hair was blond, not brown. A delegate's badge swung from around his neck.

"I see that we are colleagues," he said with a smile. They arrived at the elevator at about the same time. She felt his appraising glance and approval. "I should not be surprised. There are many delegates in the hotel."

Gail laughed. "You're quite right, three hundred, at last count." His eyes were intensely blue. He bore no resemblance to Michael at all. "Gail Jennings," she said, offering him her hand. His badge was flipped over, hiding his name.

"Ah yes. I have seen your name on the correspondence this year. You are one of the vice-chairs. You have come from New York—a much longer journey than mine." He bowed. "My name is Krinn. Elgar Krinn. I had only a short distance to travel, from Vienna."

Despite her astonishment, she was sure her response sounded smooth and even. "I envy you your short trip. Did you come by train? I understand it's a short ride from Vienna to Prague." *Elgar Krinn! I don't believe it! So much for bald and fat.*

What he might have answered was interrupted by the arrival of the elevator, which drew Gail into a flurry of greetings from delegates she knew from previous years. The ride down was one of noisy camaraderie, hardly conducive to continuing her acquaintance with Elgar Krinn.

Drinks were served and waiters passed among the guests with trays of fancy hors d'oeuvres. Gail slipped from one conversation to another, but kept an eye out for Elgar Krinn, anticipating that at any moment he would seek her out, but that never happened. His height and fair hair made him easy to spot and she caught sight of him from time to time, but it was always from a distance.

When she was getting ready for bed that night she admitted how disappointed she was. It seemed almost rude that he'd not made some attempt to talk to her. But Europeans, she reminded herself, had a sense of class distinction most Americans did not have. Perhaps her position as a vice-chair was a barrier. He might feel it her place to make the overture. She thought about that for a while and decided that it made sense. It was certainly easier to

accept that than to be left with the thought she'd stirred no interest in him at all.

It took a long time for her to fall asleep. Jet lag, a full day, the anticipation of tomorrow all lined up behind her frustrating questions concerning Elgar Krinn. She lay trapped in that place where conscious thought crosses into dream, and the mind wanders down strange paths, creating intense realities that in the light of day would be quickly unmasked. She was dreaming of Michael, but his familiar face dissolved into that of Elgar Krinn.

He was coming toward her across a wide green lawn. His arms were open wide. A bouquet of white flowers was in his hand. He gave them to her and then carefully threaded her hand through the loop of his arm. He led her out of the garden, past a waterfall, down a long carpeted corridor to a pair of wide double doors. They opened at their approach onto a convention hall filled with delegates. An orchestra began to play. The delegates rose and turned to watch them march down the aisle. She was wearing a white satin wedding gown with a long train. The music was "Pomp and Circumstance."

When she woke the next morning it was with the sense of having had a bad dream, but she gave it no thought and dressed for breakfast downstairs. She was on the dais before nine-thirty, in time to see Elgar Krinn enter the room. Her elevated position made it easy to observe him without seeming to. Late in the morning when he requested the floor to propose an addition to the agenda, she listened to his slightly accented English and admired his poise. She made notes in the margin of her pad, cryptic and decipherable only to herself. His proposal was an interesting one—that countries be required to alert tourists to areas within their borders of questionable environmental safety.

As she sat studying him, the recollection of the dream swept over her, and for a terrifying moment she felt that everyone around her had been a witness to her dream. Her fingers tightened round her pen and she forced herself to stay focused. Krinn finished speaking and she turned her attention to the next item on the agenda.

The afternoon session moved according to plan, with the Chinese Yangtze dam project the last item of the day and taking less time than she had thought it might. Delegates were asked to gather outside the hotel at seven that evening for transport by bus to the National Museum for a reception. Gail glanced around, looking for Krinn, but when she saw the bright smile of Antoine Lyon beaming at her from inside the bus, she hurried on board.

"I have been saving this place for you, *mademoiselle,*" the handsome Frenchman said with his familiar flirtatious smile, stepping aside so she could slide into the seat by the window.

"How kind of you, *monsieur,*" she said, mocking his formality. They had been at a number of conferences together and enjoyed

each other's company.

"I looked for you at lunch today, but you were already taken. I apologize for coming a day late. As usual, my minister had a crisis." He shrugged. "I am used to it, but it is still a pain."

Antoine occasionally talked about leaving the government for the private sector. She asked him about that.

"I have waited this long. I want to get through next year's conference. It is in Paris, as you know," he said with ironic emphasis.

She smiled.

"Why do you have to live so far away? I will need your help. I have begun to realize it is a big job to run this conference."

"Whatever gave you that idea?" They laughed.

Lights illuminating Prague's night skyline had just come on, and they turned to look out the window.

"It is a beautiful city," he said over her shoulder. "Some say it is even more beautiful than Paris. What do you think?"

"I think that's a trick question."

"You are quite right. If you said Prague, my ego would be ruined. If you answered Paris, I would be delighted, but then I would ask why you do not come to my city more often."

She smiled at him. "How are things with you and Yvette?"

He grimaced. "She has left Paris for a job in Bangkok with the embassy. It is her way of saying it is over between us." Again he shrugged. "Should I ask you about Michael?"

"Not necessarily, but since you have . . . We're not together anymore, either. But it's more final than a geographical separation." She turned away toward the window to avoid saying any more and was surprised to see Elgar Krinn standing on the corner waiting to cross. The bus had stopped for the same light. Their glances met. Krinn raised his hand in a formal wave. The light changed and he walked on.

"Who is that?" Antoine asked.

"His name is Elgar Krinn. It's his first time at the conference."

"I knew I had not seen him before. I would have remembered. He is a handsome man. What is he like?"

"We haven't really spoken, only to say hello."

"He has the right idea—to walk. It is a beautiful night. The museum is not so far from here."

"It's a good thing the conference is only three days," Antoine said, helping himself to a slice of liver pâté. "All this rich food will make us fat. You chose well," he said with a glance at her plate. "Salmon, cucumbers, and tomatoes. Now I know your secret to staying slim. Did I tell you, you look marvelous this evening?"

She smiled. "No, but now you have."

Delegates had been taken on a brief tour of the museum's pri-

vate galleries and then ushered into a chandeliered salon for a cocktail buffet. Throughout the evening, Gail caught glimpses of Elgar Krinn, but again, only at a distance. She thought of suggesting to Antoine that they welcome the new delegate, but then decided it might give Antoine the wrong idea.

She had reason to add a few more notes to the margin of her pad the next day when Krinn rose to speak on his agenda item. During the discussion that followed, his delivery remained controlled, but a surprising darkness slid into his eyes when his challengers grew in number. The blue turned almost black. She sketched a dark eye on her pad.

On the last day of the conference some recommendations were finalized, others were left in drafts to be pursued at regional meetings during the year. Krinn's proposal was in the latter category. Adjournment came and delegates gathered for a brief farewell. No one lingered long. There were late planes to catch and early flights the next morning. Antoine took Gail's hand and kissed her on both cheeks. "Are you flying home tonight or tomorrow?"

She shook her head. "Neither. I'm staying on for a day."

"You must give Paris more time than that. What can I do to persuade you?"

She laughed. "I'm sure you'll think of something."

In her room that night she took a mini bottle of Scotch from the bar and poured it over ice. The conference had gone well, but her contact with Elgar Krinn had been nonexistent. Her report was going to be very brief.

She went over her spare notes, startled to find that she had written down "M" for Michael. It seemed unbelievable that, even for a moment, she could have thought it was Michael coming toward her. The dream was even more disturbing. The explanation was not all that complicated, she supposed—wishful thinking, part of the self-healing process that followed being jilted.

She dressed for sightseeing the next morning, slacks and a light blazer over a white T-shirt. The conference and Krinn were behind her. A guide to Prague was in her hand when she paused at the entrance to the dining room, waiting to be seated. With most of the delegates gone, the room was almost empty, so she was quick to see Elgar Krinn at a table by the window, and startled to see him rise as soon as she appeared. It was almost as if he had been waiting for her, which was confirmed when, without questioning her, the maître d' led her to his table.

"I hope you will not think me too forward. I was hoping I would see you this morning. I heard you say last night that you would be staying on in Prague." Krinn remained standing, smiling at her,

and motioned to the chair opposite him, which the maître d' had already withdrawn.

She hesitated, thrown off balance by the sudden change in him. It seemed least awkward to simply sit down.

"Do you know Prague well?" he asked, glancing at the travel guide she placed on the table.

She shook her head. "I was here only once before—a long time ago. The weather was awful and the Communists were in power."

A waiter poured Krinn more coffee and took Gail's order.

"And what about you? With Vienna so close, you must know Prague well."

"I was here, also, many years ago. The times were different then, too. It is a happy city now. Perhaps we could see Prague together."

She made no effort to hide her surprise, but if he noticed he gave no sign.

"I have only one thing I would like to do. There used to be a small shop on the hill near the castle. I should like to try to find it. It is a lovely walk in that direction, across the Charles Bridge over the Vlatava River. One is always looking up at the castle on the hill."

He had no trouble approaching her today. Why not before?

"If I can persuade you to join me, we should make a list of what you would like to see. A day is not much time. I have only to look for my shop, but you must tell me what interests you."

She glanced at the guidebook lying alongside her coffee cup. "*You* interest me," she played with saying. But was that still true? The conference was over. Her report was almost written. He'd had his chance. Curiosity ruled her answer.

"I've checked off a few things—the Old Town Square, the Jewish Cemetery, the castle, of course. I hadn't decided on a route. I just planned to walk and look."

"Then that's what we shall do—walk and look. Perhaps you will bring me luck and I will find the shop."

They started out in the direction of the old square. "It is the heart of Prague," he said. "It is where everyone goes in good times and bad."

She remembered it from her previous visit, all the glorious old buildings, crowned with steeples and spires. "Look, isn't that the clock tower over there?" She pointed to where a crowd was gathering.

He nodded and glanced at his watch. "It is almost time for the hour to strike."

They joined the crowd and as they stood waiting Gail became aware of a young couple in front of her, leaning against each other, their arms about each other's waists. She envied them.

The hour struck and eyes lifted to where a trio of tiny figures

appeared and performed their mechanical ballet. Children giggled and clapped their hands. There was an added flutter of applause when the performance was over, and the crowd gradually began to disperse.

Krinn nodded in the direction of a passageway marked by a stone arch. "We can go that way to get to the Jewish Cemetery. It is not far from here."

Even though she had read about the cemetery, she wasn't prepared for the stark emotion of the scene. There was no grass, no flowers, only weathered tombstones, fallen and collapsed against each other—skeletal symbols of the tragic lives they commemorated. An overwhelming dryness burned in her throat. Tears stung her eyes. If Michael were at her side . . . but she pushed the thought aside.

It was a relief when they approached the university and she saw crowds of students on the street. She was happy for the change in mood. Boisterous voices surrounded them and they were soon engulfed in a crowd.

"It is good they are going our way," Krinn said with a laugh, and she felt his steadying hand on her arm. "They are all crossing the Charles Bridge. We should wait to cross until after they have gone."

They stood at the chest-high wall of the bridge, looking down at the traffic on the water—tankers, tugs, barges, pleasure craft, and sightseeing boats moved in a defined channel toward the spans of other bridges beyond. Sun glimmered on the surface where the water rippled. Along the nearby bank a forest of willow trees trailed their thin branches into the water.

Krinn pointed in that direction. "If you look closely, you will see the swans." She tried to see through the camouflage of silver-green leaves and detected only shifting shadows, but soon the curtain parted and a pair of swans appeared and sailed gracefully out into the open water. Their snow-white plumage was puffed and full. They moved on, proudly on parade.

She turned to Krinn. "I've never seen real swans before. Only on stage—in *Swan Lake.*"

Behind his smile she caught a look of surprise. "The swans were always here."

When was that? she wanted to ask.

The pedestrian bridge was a busy thoroughfare, even with the students gone. Everyone stopped at souvenir stands and paused in front of impromptu art galleries, open portfolios and paintings propped against the walls. A mime and a juggler vied for an audience. She and Krinn watched them for a while and then moved on to where an old man with a beard was playing a violin. Krinn tossed a coin into his open violin case. The melody had a mournful sound.

"What is he playing, do you know?" Gail asked.

"Smetana, a Czech composer. It is a piece from his big work, *Ma Vlast—My Country.*"

"Are you a musician?"

He shook his head and laughed. "No. I am only a listener."

So I was wrong. You don't play the piano.

An odd nostalgia swept over her, a longing for home, not her Westside apartment, but the home of her childhood, the house where she had grown up. She thought of the living room and her father's big chair, with its worn footrest. She saw Jimmy at the piano, his eyes intent on the sheet music where notes leapt like flags across and between the thin black lines, the bold dark print of a composer's name—a different Elgar.

She wondered what this Elgar would say if she told him the story of Jimmy and Sir Edward Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance." Would he laugh? Would he find her imaginings endearing, as Michael might have, not all that long ago?

The strains of the violin's melody faded as they continued on, but there was more music up ahead. "Hey, Jude" was the tune, strummed by a new-generation hippie with DAKOTA stamped on his T-shirt.

She shook her head. "It's like a carnival."

"Life has come back, but it is too much. It is without discrimination. That will change, perhaps. But I don't think it will ever be as it was years ago, before our time, before the war, before the Russians—a city full of music and intellectual subtleties."

Intellectual subtleties, an interesting phrase. "Tell me more," she wanted to say.

When they reached the end of the bridge they stood with their hands shading their eyes against the sun, looking toward where the castle stood, a shimmering gold fortress on the hill.

"It's right out of a fairy tale," she said.

"It is a favorite of artists to paint the castle on the hill. It is a hard word to say for non-Czechs. *Hradcany.* The 'H' and the 'r' run together liked a soft growl. The 'c' is pronounced like 'ch.' We must go toward the *Hradcany* to look for my shop, but first we should stop for something to drink. I'm sure you are thirsty. It is very warm."

A strong sun had turned the spring day to summer. The sky was clear and without clouds. They crossed the street to a small cafe perched on a stone balcony overlooking the river, its tables shaded by yellow umbrellas. Gail asked for iced tea. Krinn ordered a beer.

"You present very well," he said.

"What do you mean?" It was her first direct question.

"You could use your looks as a tool, but I saw none of that at the conference. You relied on your expertise and your diplomatic skills to make your points, to move the agenda along. I admire that—a woman who does not play the games society still forces on your

sex." He paused, his eyes holding hers. "You have a lovely smile."

Why had he waited until now?

She thought he was about to say more, but when the silence went on for too long, she asked him about the shop he wanted to find. "Does it have a name?"

"There are many with that same name now. You will laugh when I tell you."

"What is it?" *He's playing with me. Why?*

"*SKLO.*" He spelled the word, but he needn't have.

She shook her head, but she didn't laugh. If she had, it would have been only to please him. She told him of her afternoon on Wenceslaus Square, the vase she had bought for herself, the candlesticks for her sister, and the tiny punch bowl for her niece. After that she laughed, but it was at herself. "*SKLO* is the only Czech word I know."

Eventually she glanced away, to keep from babbling on, and to be released from the steady gaze of his blue eyes.

She looked back to the part of the city where they had just been, across the long arch of the bridge, marked with its medieval statues, to a complex of chimneys and domes and towers.

How old were you when you visited this city? Or did you live here? When did you leave? Why? These and other questions were crowding behind the barrier of rules she had been given. She could argue that the assignment had ended on the final day of the conference. The regulations no longer applied. She could ask Elgar Krinn anything at all and pursue the relationship as she chose. Is that what she wanted? Where would it lead?

"Tell me about your glass shop. How will you recognize it?"

He looked off in the distance, his brows drawing together in a way that suggested he was entering a passage of memory, searching for something forgotten.

He began slowly. "The shop was on the ground floor of an old stone building. It had a tower. There was a lantern over the front door. When it was lit it was quite beautiful. The glass was blue."

She sat watching him. Was it a performance, a seduction of sorts, leading her to think she had given him the gift of recall?

"Fuel wasn't wasted on lanterns in those days. The family who lived behind the shop was poor. Everyone was then. Johan's mother rendered scraps of fat and sometimes soaked a piece of cloth to use as a wick. When it was lit, it smelled like pork roasting. We could smell it in the tower room where we used to hide when I came. It made our stomachs growl."

She tried to see past the words, to understand the story he was telling. *We smelled it in the tower room . . . where we used to hide. . . . It made our stomachs growl.*

She thought of the folder back at the hotel, the draft of her

report—spare, tidy, and complete. What am I going to do with this?

They left the crowds behind them when they started up the steep incline, a winding walk on uneven cobblestones, leading toward the castle. A family passed them on their way down, the parents steadying each other over the uneven ground. Their two young boys ran ahead, laughing, racing one another downhill. They saw no one after that.

The way curled past narrow streets and alleys lined with buildings made from blocks of stone. Some had intricately carved arches and facades, evidence of the skilled labor of an earlier time. They were empty and abandoned now, with broken windows and massive doors sagging on heavy hinges. How long before a generation of renovators appeared?

Krinn's stride suddenly lengthened and she watched him move out ahead of her, struck by the steady rhythm of his walk. She wondered if he was a runner.

At the next turn he stood waiting for her and she hurried to close the gap, but he continued on before she caught up. She paused to catch her breath. The day had grown warmer still. She found him in front of a massive stone building, the color of dark red wine. The ground-floor windows were boarded over and the heavy door was fastened with a rope of twisted wire. The bent frame of a lantern was over the doorway. Its glass was gone, except for one small fragment that had a hint of blue.

She stayed to the side, reluctant to cross into his emotional space, but not so distant that she could not follow his gaze as it traveled up the side of the building, past the first floor, up to the second, and on to the tower.

"That's where we were," he said, turning to her. "There was a way to climb up the side then. Johan's family lived on the first floor, behind the *SKLO* shop. There was no glass to sell then. His father worked in a boot factory. His mother did laundry."

He walked up to the front door and pressed the weight of his body against it, pushing hard. A few strands of the rusted wire frayed, but it took several more attempts before they all gave way. With a rough scraping sound, the door swung inward.

She followed him into a large room that would have been dark except for shafts of sunlight that spilled down from the upper floor and revealed a wide stone staircase. Cobwebs trailed from high beams and filled the shadowed corners. Empty shelves lined one wall. It was damp and cool.

He mounted the first step of the stairs and then stopped and offered her his hand. She moved toward him, but he didn't wait. At the first landing he hesitated and glanced over his shoulder, but moved on and disappeared around a turn. She continued upward, following the echo of his footsteps. Soon there was the sound of

another door forced open and a billow of light bloomed above her.

When she reached the tower she saw Krinn through the arch of the open doorway. She shielded her eyes, adjusting to the brightness after the semidark, and then stepped over the doorway's high sill. Only when she was outside did she see that the outer curve of the small porch was gone. She hugged the tower wall, staring at the blue haze that rose over the city, a far drop below.

"On summer nights we came out here. We liked to lie on our backs and look up at the stars. We asked each other if there really was a God."

She heard his words and tried to imagine the boy he must have been, the child he was remembering, but her thoughts hit a wall. She was trapped into absorbing his silhouette, stark and unreal, with nothing behind him but sky. A terrifying chill came over her. Where had her judgment gone? What was she doing here?

His movement was so slow it took her by surprise. He drew her toward him as if in a dance and spun her in the narrow curve of the tower porch, releasing her to stand with her back to where the city lay.

Terror pumped her heart.

"Johan's mother was lame and needed a stick to walk. She never came up here. His father worked hard and went to bed early. We didn't hear him coming up the stairs that night."

She was watching his eyes.

"His father found us, boys doing things together that boys are not supposed to do. He hit me first, with the back of his hand, but when he turned on Johan his fists were tight and hard. He was a big man. The blows were very hard."

His glance slid to where a rubble of stones lay loose near the tower door. "There weren't so many then, but one was enough. I hit him hard."

The heat of the sun pounded down on her head, but ice was in her veins.

"We ran away that night and hid by the river among the willows. The swans were there. Johan couldn't stop crying. He knew his father was dead. He held on to me until he fell asleep, but the next morning when I woke, he was gone. I knew he had come back here."

A light breeze swirled a pile of dry leaves near the doorway, sounding as though someone was there. Krinn turned to look. It gave her courage.

"Why are you telling me this?"

The expression on his face was calm and appraising. "When I saw you that first evening by the elevator, I thought, here is a woman I would like to know. Throughout the conference I watched you, and I was almost sure."

She shook her head. "You never spoke to me."

The change was sudden, the blue of his eyes gone black. She thought of the eye she had drawn on her pad. It was her warning of the movement to come before it began.

With her arms stretched out like a swimmer, she dove to the side of him and slid on her knees across the rough stone floor. She grabbed for the sill of the tower door.

His movement was a blur, too propelled to be reversed, sweeping past the space where she had stood and beyond to where the city lay. Perhaps she imagined it, but she thought she saw the fleeting shadow of his fall play out across the tower wall.

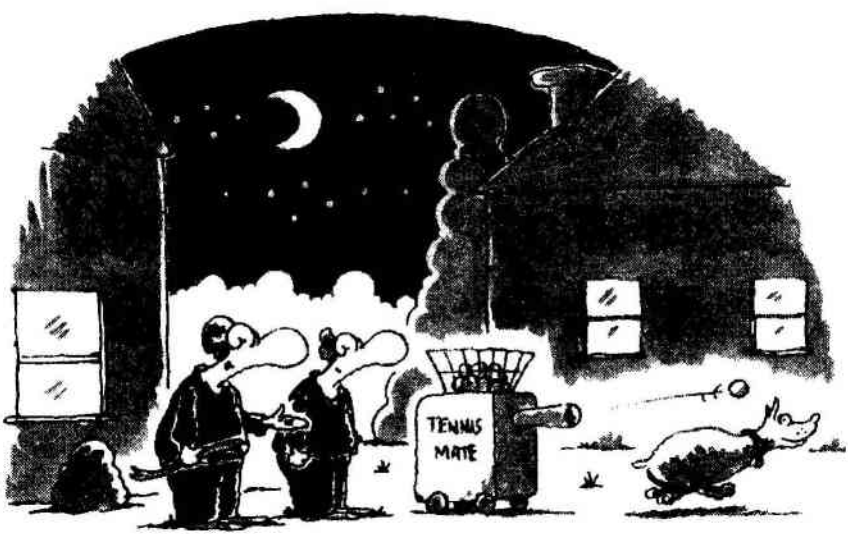
Her report was less than a page and followed the expected form. It covered the time of the conference and nothing more.

She was afraid for a while. But if anyone knew they had been together that day, no one came forward.

That didn't end it, of course.

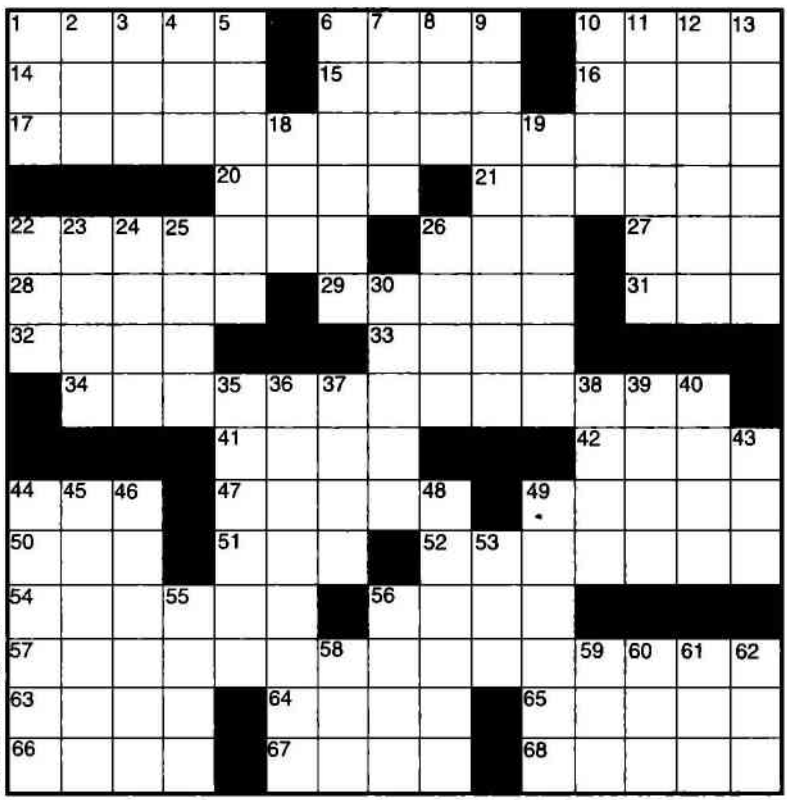
Elgar Krinn appears in her dreams now and again, and some days when she approaches a corner she imagines she sees him waiting for her. But she doesn't rush after him anymore. She knows he will be gone.

She left the foundation, but consults for them from time to time. She accepts no assignments from high-powered "search firms." She lives in Paris with Antoine. They are married and expecting their first child. ●



A.K.A. William Jefferies

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 142

ACROSS

1. Deliver
6. City north of Provo
10. After "clear" and "fin"
14. Stand
15. Manage
16. City east of Osaka
17. Lincoln Rhyme solves the mystery
20. William _____, starred in "Hopalong Cassidy" movies
21. Turkish inn
22. Home of Gini Hartzmark's attorney sleuth Kate Milholland

26. Perfect serve
27. Anglo-Saxon letter
28. Mystery-writer daughter of Mary Higgins Clark
29. *The* _____ *Suspects*
31. Draft Org.
32. North Mexican tribe
33. High, pref.
34. Author of 17 and 57 across
41. Employs
42. Jai _____
44. Perry was a member of this org.
47. Army rank, abbr.
49. Concerning
50. Female descendants of George III's enemies in the USA
51. Skill
52. Consent
54. Mysteries
56. Combining form referring to farming
57. See 34 across
63. "The Witch of the Low-_____, John Dickson Carr
64. Pay by _____, Brit. and Cont. credit transfer system
65. Spooky
66. Understands
67. North Carolina college
68. Small tube used in heart surgery

DOWN

1. Wager
2. Cheer
3. "Real" ending
4. Jap. tech firm
5. Worldwide
6. _____ go! "Bye" to a tot
7. Foray
8. Aquatic bird
9. Treat
10. Nevada Barr's Park Ranger _____ Pigeon
11. Shellfish that yield mother-of-pearl
12. Sets of beliefs
13. "Heaven's light forever shines, _____ shadows fly," Shelley
18. Often enveloped Holmes and Watson
19. Elizabeth Peters's _____ Peabody
22. Appellate judicial body, abbr.
23. Muslim pilgrimage
24. Dies _____
25. Hairdo
26. Part of New Year's Eve song
30. Well, if you _____, hesitant agreement
35. Pastoral African people
36. Alienate
37. Geometric form, abbr.
38. Lady Harriet Wimsey, nee _____
39. General Robert _____
40. Rage
43. California judge
44. Conforms
45. Peter Pan author
46. Gallery
48. Shallow pond
49. Gets up
53. Warning from Asta
55. Affirmative votes
56. Hairstyle
58. _____ Mayo, Marjorie Eccles' sleuth in Hertfordshire
59. Lease
60. "Able was I _____"
61. German one
62. Sneaky Pie Brown, e.g.

The Pursuit of the Nonexistent

by Mark SaFranko

By the time Professor Storpe and his fiancée took off from Logan International Airport, he was already playing with names. First on his mental list was the nonscientific "ochre-throated hummingbird," but he wasn't yet settled on anything. And in fact, he thought as he peered out the jet window at the robin's-egg-blue May sky, he could do with something a little more flamboyant—"The copper-throated badge" had crossed his mind—since that was precisely the kind of moniker that would stand out in his colleagues' minds. A flamboyant name attached to a novel discovery would seal his reputation forever. But he would have to set eyes on the bird first, study its shadings up close. Of course, it would be even better if he could fit his own surname in somehow, but he hadn't quite figured out how. Because as he himself once wrote in a field guide to Canadian birds, "There can be no more exquisite immortality for a man than to have a bird named after him."

And that's what Professor Storpe was after on this junket: something that would make his reputation once and for all. After trekking in his student days through the Amazon rain forests with the likes of the great O'Neill, he felt that he himself had been shortchanged somehow, a full professorship in the zoology department at Harvard notwithstanding. Because in the discipline of

Mark SaFranko is a published poet, short-story writer, and novelist, and also a playwright whose work has been produced at such New York theaters as the Samuel Beckett, the Village Gate, and the Belmont Playhouse. His first short story for *EQMM* is not strictly a mystery, but it does have a sinister quality that seems to us to suit a mystery magazine. Mr. SaFranko lives in Hoboken, New Jersey. †

modern ornithology, you either came up with the goods—the discovery of a new species—or you didn't, and as in the science of mathematics, there was no either-or, or in-between. And what had happened to Professor Storpe was that he'd been on the scene when the first sightings were recorded and the discoveries made official, but as an assistant only, and his name had not gone into the books along with the new bird. So for years now he'd been secretly pursuing the theory, developed as a result of rumors bandied about by the South American Indians and a complicated matrix of information on cross-pollination, migration routes, and food sources (as well as the notebooks bequeathed to him by a deceased colleague who claimed to have glimpsed the bird in the general locale he was targeting), that his ochre-throated hummer, a cross between two rare Peruvian species, was spending a fraction of its year—the height of spring in the northern hemisphere—in a small area of southwestern coastal Florida. When this trip was finished, and his find trapped and trumpeted to the world, they (meaning his peers and competitors) would be flocking to the region like . . . well, like voracious, migrating birds.

"You must be so excited, dear," said Gwendolyn with an enthusiastic, teenager-like shrug as they sat over their third cup of mocha java at the dining-room table in the rustic bed-and-breakfast where they'd set up headquarters for the next two weeks.

The professor leaned back in his chair and contemplatively eyed the African gray parrot that was monotonously cracking open seeds and sucking in the meat with its thick black tongue in the cage above his head.

"Excited? It's strange—I am, of course, but on the other hand I'm not, really."

"No? I'm surprised," remarked Gwendolyn, her unearthly blue eyes observing his every gesture and nuance with the calm fire of new love.

"Well, that's because I'm firmly convinced that we're going to be successful out there," the professor went on, pausing to lick a drop of cool coffee from his moustache. "You see, I've prepared for this for so long. In one sense, in my own mind at least, it's a foregone conclusion that we're going to find the ochre-throated hummingbird in this very spot sooner or later. Hopefully sooner."

"Out there" meant the littoral that stretched roughly from Marco Island, at its northernmost point, to Barnes Key, just near the Overseas Highway heading to Key West, and that distance encompassed a hefty portion of the coastal Everglades. This morning, day one, would take them out to B. B. Wing's Wildlife Refuge on the marshy atolls that ran off the tip of the Glades, a chain of tiny, connected, unsupervised islets that were hardly known and barely visible to the naked eye at their farthest extent, but still

accessible by foot from shore.

From the look of the clear, cloudless, aquamarine sky, the day promised to be spectacular. The two scientists had everything they would need for their outing: fresh water, sandwiches and boiled eggs, binoculars, sunblock, notebooks, cameras, bug repellent, bait, and traps. Within moments of parking their rented sports-utility vehicle at the side of the road, both the professor and Gwendolyn, no stranger herself to nature excursions though she was only a graduate teaching assistant when she met the professor last year, were drenched with sweat.

"God, it's hot out here," she complained, mopping her fair brow with her bandanna as they started out along the sandy trail that would lead through the first atoll out toward the Gulf of Mexico.

"Every bit as close as the rain forest," answered her lover and mentor, removing his brand new safari hat and shaking out a shower of perspiration. "But this is a different kind of heat. At least in the rain forest you have the advantage of heavy shade, sometimes for mile after mile. This brush"—he pointed at the low-lying tangles of thick shrubbery—"does nothing to mute the sun. This is the kind of heat that seems to want to kill you."

But the professor was not about to be deterred for even a moment by anything as inconsequential as an extreme of climate. He'd been dreaming about his precious, as-yet-undiscovered bird for too long to let anything so trifling as heat knock him off his course. Gwendolyn could read the determination in his stride, and in the smoky gray eyes behind the rimless glasses that had slid now to the tip of his wet nose, and it was that persistence, that supreme confidence, that made her feel she was in the presence of something unique, something approaching greatness.

"These," he announced, halting not far into the path and pointing out a cluster of tiny bluish-red tubular flowers hanging heavily from a low-slung bush, "are the perfect fodder for our bird. Very close to what grows in the Rio Shesha."

Gwendolyn nodded at this allusion to his experiences in South America. While not nearly as erudite or accomplished as the professor, she was eager to learn everything she could at the feet of a genius. It thrilled her all over again that this man was her own private master.

And at times the professor, despite his absolute absorption in the task at hand, couldn't help but notice his young companion. The mane of wavy, dirty blond hair, the long, wonderfully shaped limbs, the angelic face, all made him shake his head with the incredible realization that in his middle years he'd miraculously succeeded in inadvertently trapping a goddess. Why was it in life that when you weren't trying, things seemed to fall into your hands, and that on the reverse side of the coin herculean effort on

a given project was likely to produce the exactly opposite effect—frustration? There he was, a man stranded at the halfway point in his life-journey when his wife passed away from cancer (they'd had no children), a man lost and confused . . . when along came Gwendolyn like a ray of golden light from a distant lucky star. There were times when he fretted over how long his good luck would last. . . .

Yet Gwendolyn seemed to genuinely love him. In a fit of uncontainable exuberance at being in proximity to his bird, the bird he knew was there waiting for him, he kissed her on the mouth when they stopped the first time for a drink from their packs. The fineness of the skin on her bare legs made the thought of taking her right then and there cross his mind (because she had, since they'd met, renewed his appetite for the pleasures of sex), but on this day time was of the utmost importance, and so they quickly pushed on.

"I've got the feeling we're closing in on our baby," he chortled as they marched, single file now, through the eerily quiet swamp. Exhausted or not, he knew what he was going to do with Gwendolyn tonight in their big four-poster that overlooked the Gulf, if she was at all willing and had the energy—and with a woman in her mid twenties, that was something he'd rarely had to worry about.

On either side of the footpath the scrub had given way to an irregular succession of bogs, flat surfaces of dull, brackish water decorated with fine tendrils of green grass like combed hair on a baby's head. Here and there drifted a bright blossom like a discarded flower from a bouquet.

"Look," said Gwendolyn, stopping dead between a pair of rotted ancient bald cypress stumps. "*El lagarto,* isn't it?"

Professor Storpe, who happened to be poring over the tangles of shrubbery which grew around the waterline ahead, turned back to join his friend.

"Ah, yes, *Alligator mississippiensis,*" he murmured absently. "I wasn't paying attention . . ."

Ten, perhaps twelve feet away, its brilliant primeval eyes as still as shiny agates left on a playroom floor, the rocklike skull and broad snout of a large American alligator floated in the brownish-gray tide. It, thought Gwendolyn, was watching them.

"I didn't figure we'd see an alligator out here, though I should have known. There were no warnings posted, not that I happened to see. . . . It's a thrill, encountering one of these creatures up close in its natural habitat." She'd dropped her voice to the level of a whisper.

"The southeastern United States is one of the alligator's two true cradles in the world, the other being China's Yangtze River, where the smaller *A. Sinensis* can be found," recited the professor patiently, though he understood that as a zoologist Gwendolyn

had to be aware of that fact.

"Yes . . . but I've never been so near one of these fellows before, outside of the zoo." Involuntarily, Gwendolyn sucked in her breath. The brutal heat was making her uncomfortably lightheaded.

"Herps," pronounced the professor in an ironic tone, as if he were talking about truant schoolboys. He shook his head. "Some of these guys actually consume exotic birds as appetizers. In South America they were everywhere, underfoot. The fer-de-lance, the bushmaster, the anaconda, poisonous frogs. And the caiman, of course, the American alligator's southern cousin. The caiman is no match for these brutes in strength and cunning, but they're formidable in their own right."

As if he couldn't be bothered, the professor turned his gaze on the dense undergrowth once again, on the lookout for his trophy hummingbird. "Herps. . . . Unfortunately, wherever the jewel birds are, they can also be found, whether in Africa, or Brazil, or . . ."

Gwendolyn, who, having done her time in the field, was no shrinking violet in the wilderness, shuddered nevertheless. She'd studied herpetology. She knew how many miles per hour a hungry alligator could travel over dry land, how much flesh it needed to consume in order to fuel its massive engine. She was suddenly a little more than uneasy at the prospect of ambulating without a protective barrier between her own body and the unmoving beast.

They pushed on. Occasionally the professor froze in his tracks and whipped his field glasses to his eyes at a distant flash in the foliage across the bog, but inevitably he was disappointed when he recognized the species with ease. "Nothing—nothing but the good old ruby-throated hummer—*Archilochus colubris,*" he sighed. He was beginning to wonder if perhaps he'd made an error in his painstaking calculations, but he decided to keep his dejection to himself and stay the course. There was nothing worse a leader could do than show hesitation or incertitude. Besides, there were so many days left in the expedition to discover his treasure. And he *would* discover his treasure.

Still onward they plunged, sometimes clearing away vines with their hands to get through. The path toward the Gulf had narrowed almost imperceptibly; it was nothing more now than a strip of white sand three feet across. Tiny birds of paradise not found elsewhere on the continent darted in and out of the undergrowth at a rate of speed the naked eye could hardly follow except for the colorful blurs left in their wake.

After a few hours of the trek, the professor and Gwendolyn stopped to eat their grilled-vegetable sandwiches on a patch of green that had fortuitously sprouted on the fringe of a larger inlet.

"The perfect environment for coral snakes," sniffed the professor, though from the skyward, blind cast of his eyes Gwendolyn could

see that he was preoccupied with his quest and not really with the presence of poisonous serpents. As soon as she raised the food to her lips, she gasped.

"Jesus—look! They're *everywhere* . . . !"

The professor glanced toward the water. "Alligators, mm-hm. . . ."

Gwendolyn was strangely elated. "Ellis . . . do you think it's dangerous?"

"Dangerous? Is what dangerous?"

"Being out here alone with all these—"

"Reptiles? No, of course not. . . . I mean, yes, it might be considered dangerous, but not to worry. The creatures are just basking in the sun. I don't get the feeling they're particularly interested in us."

Gwendolyn chuckled uneasily. "Probably you're right. But you never know, Ellis. . . ."

The professor was going over his notes as Gwendolyn talked, never for a moment taking her eyes off the alligators paddling in a flotilla all around.

"I only hope—"

"Yes?" said the professor, looking up.

Gwendolyn shot to her feet.

"Do you think—do you think we ought to go back?"

The professor was cupping his hand over his brow as he stared at Gwendolyn, who was standing directly in the glare of the sun. "Go back?" He blinked. He was astounded by the question.

"Yes, do you think we ought to go back?"

"What on earth for?"

"Because I'm a little afraid. . . ." It was at that moment that Gwendolyn realized with the full force of a fist to her belly that she didn't really know her professor as well as she thought she did, that their courtship had been all too brief, their relationship not developed significantly beyond the superficial—Cambridge restaurants, bookstores and theaters, endless hours in the laboratory—and not in the arena of real life. Or the jungle.

"But we're so close!" protested the professor.

"To *what?*" demanded Gwendolyn, opening her hands.

"To our bird!"

"You mean to *your* bird!"

The professor grinned with the haughtiness of undisputed ownership. "But you're with me. Doesn't that mean something to you? The fact that you're about to share in the momentous discovery of a previously unknown specimen? That your name will likely go into the history books right alongside mine?"

"You mean as nothing but a forgotten footnote, like you've been all these years!"

Their little honeymoon had turned ugly. Gwendolyn glanced from Professor Storpe to the scores of disembodied reptilian eyes

beaming like small periscopes on the water's surface. It seemed to her that the animals were growing slightly more active since she'd spied the first of them all the way back at the outset of their jaunt, swimming now rather than floating.

"The fact is, we don't know that your bird is out here at all," she argued. "It's nothing but conjecture on your part that the bird even exists. We don't know that we're not on some crazy wild-goose chase." The joke struck her in a morbid way, and she added as an afterthought, "No pun intended."

"Science has never been anything but a wild-goose chase from the beginning, my dear," the professor pointed out, quite disappointed at this sudden defection of loyalty. He had no interest in expending energy in the critical moments of his career on an altercation. And with no one but a lowly graduate assistant, for crying out loud!

"I want to go back," insisted Gwendolyn.

"Suit yourself. But you don't know what you'll be missing."

"You come back with me, Ellis. I'm afraid. Really."

"Come on now, Gwen. You know how long I planned this. No way I'm turning back."

"But you—you can come back on your own later," she tried to persuade him, with the last vestige of calm reason she could muster.

"Uh-uh." The professor hoisted his pack onto his shoulders, dusted the sand off his khaki shorts, and turned his back on her.

"Damn it, *Professor Storpe!* You're nothing but an immature egomaniac, just like any other idiot man! Those are freaking *alligators* out there, not salamanders, in case you haven't noticed!"

The professor continued his advance west, in the direction of his fanciful holy grail. He remembered a line he'd read somewhere, in a book of French philosophy perhaps: "This is man's fate—the pursuit of the nonexistent." The difference in this case was that *his* bird existed. He was not about to be deterred from his mission, no matter what—not by heat, not by a reluctant companion, not even by a few alligators.

Just as he expected, he heard Gwendolyn's soft footfalls behind him. Maybe this blowup was just a matter of the heat getting to her. Had it not been for his extraordinary, steely resolve, it would have weakened him, too, if the truth be told. Still, this incident revealed something to him about Gwendolyn's character, something that, when his quest was fulfilled, he would have to evaluate in greater depth. Maybe his young fiancée wasn't the woman he wanted at his side through thick and thin after all. . . .

By now the sun had reached its zenith in the south Florida sky. The professor had the sense that he and Gwendolyn weren't far from the open water now, and his heart sank at the thought that all his meticulous planning might have been in vain: no sign thus far of his elusive ochre-throated hummingbird, if indeed such a creature

existed at all. At the periphery of his vision, he couldn't help but notice that the profusion of alligators in the water on either side of the path had not diminished. If anything, it was increasing, just as the physical size of the slimy creatures seemed to be growing.

A subtle sound, like a child slurping the bottom of a soft drink from a straw, caught the professor's attention. He swung around. Gwendolyn was ashen, trembling, though still dutifully tracing his footsteps. Her neck was rigid—she refused to look to either side of herself—it was as if she were walking the narrow ledge at the apex of a skyscraper and the slightest deviation could cause her to fall to her death.

"What?" she stammered, staring into his eyes. The professor was indeed looking past her right shoulder, at something on the footpath behind her.

"*What?* Say something, damn it!"

Gwendolyn's first thought was: *It's the bird. He's finally found it, and now we can get out of this ridiculous hell-hole once and for all.* But when she turned to see for herself, she realized her error at once.

An enormous gator—the provenance of that slurping noise—had slogged out of the muck and draped itself over the footpath some twenty-five feet away. Gwendolyn was too shocked, too dismayed by the stark apprehension that her only way back to the mainland was blocked, to even open her mouth and scream.

"Now don't—" the professor began before being cut off by a loud slap, leather against water, a rude sound produced by another monstrous reptile that was slithering up to join the first.

"*They're coming for us, Ellis. . . .*" said Gwendolyn, as hypnotically as if she were in a trance—as if she were a zombie, already dead.

"Just don't panic," warned the professor, wondering at that moment why he'd not thought to bring a weapon, a gun, out here, though he knew that ultimately a gun would be useless if enough of the beasts decided to scuttle up onto dry land.

Gwendolyn's shoulders quaked slightly. She was crying, sniffling like the girl her lover suddenly understood she was.

"We're never going to get out of here, Ellis," she pronounced fatalistically, just loudly enough so that he could hear, quietly enough not to rouse the attention of the circling predators.

"But we will, we will. . . ." he countered, though he felt not the slightest courage of the statement.

There was a thrashing racket at his back. He wheeled around to face the specter of a huge bull gator up on all fours, maw open, ready to attack. All means of egress were now closed to Professor Storpe and his assistant.

"Ellis!" cried Gwendolyn again.

"*Don't move,*" commanded the professor, thinking it might help. But an alligator was no venomous snake that could be tricked by

motionlessness into leaving its quarry alone. If these behemoths were hungry or out for blood, it wouldn't matter whether their prey was dead or alive, moving or stationary. He realized now that he should have heeded Gwendolyn when they came upon that first gator all that distance ago. Now it was too late. He'd made a grave mistake.

Gwendolyn was paralyzed by her panic. The professor wanted to say he was sorry for what he'd brought down on them, but to make that gesture now would be tantamount to admitting that the end was imminent, and he refused to believe that the two of them were about to be devoured alive on this godforsaken spoor.

But, like a bird immobilized by its instinct for self-preservation, Gwendolyn offered no resistance when the first animal made a leap for her. Where could she go, after all? The professor watched in horror as she screamed while her beautiful lower limbs disappeared inside the beast's gigantic mouth. He heard the bones of her legs snap, like the frail skeleton of a chicken, and at that terrible sound he bolted for a six-foot-high scrub pine that grew all twisty on the lip of the bog. He couldn't climb up very high, but the top of the short tree was a feasible enough point of vantage so that he could observe the end of Gwendolyn's short life. Howling "*Ellis, please! Please do something!*" she was dragged by the green-gray killer off the sand and into the water, where, after a mercifully brief handful of seconds, her head disappeared beneath the scum, leaving only a few bubbles as evidence that she'd ever been there.

The worst part of the tragedy was that the professor was left to contemplate his own end without benefit of a shred of hope. Who, after all, knew he was out here? He'd elected to keep his expedition a secret from everyone except Gwendolyn; no one would think to look for him until days had passed, if then.

The commotion and frenetic activity of Gwendolyn's death attracted the attention of the other reptiles in the immediate vicinity, and soon an entire herd was groping its way up to dry land in pursuit of the professor's scent—the scent of hot, pulsing blood.

For now, clinging to the peak of the flimsy tree, he was out of harm's way. Minute after excruciating minute, then hour after excruciating hour passed. . . . Occasionally he would whimper, "Gwendolyn, what did I do to you . . . ?" like a frightened, remorseful child, but he had to be careful not to cry out so loud that he'd incite the dozing gators below.

It was amazing, the range of noises, from hisses to grunts to bellows, that the beasts produced, and the terrible, rancid stink they sent into his nostrils. If there was such a thing as Hell on earth, it was there, at the base of that crooked tree.

The light of day began to fade. The professor's arms and legs, having been wrapped around the top branches of his hiding place

for so long, were stiff with fatigue and enervation. *If I weren't so goddamned tired, I might be able to survive this,* he thought. In fact, the reptiles could get to him easily, either by making a leap for him or simply climbing onto each other's backs in a stack—he'd seen alligators do that. There was nothing, not a thing in the world he could do to extricate himself. The professor began to contemplate his own death.

The night passed, each moment a horrifying eternity. The professor couldn't remember the last time he hadn't slept a wink the whole night through. Now he was exhausted beyond belief, from a combination of terror and dehydration. He assumed that it was only a matter of time before his sanity caved in and he began to hallucinate like a lost traveler in the desert. Any hope that the monsters might be gone when dawn arrived, that perhaps the whole thing had been some sort of awful waking nightmare, was crushed when the darkness finally dissipated. If anything, there were more alligators than ever. The world, all of it, was nothing but a garden full of famished alligators. . . .

With the complete ascension of the sun, the prehistoric fiends began to stir again, the urges of hunger prodding their powerful carcasses. The tail of one lumbering animal slammed lazily against the trunk of the professor's puny refuge, causing it to creak, its desiccated wood to begin to give way. On the eastern horizon, he caught the absurd vision of a pelican in flight, the leisurely flapping of its wings mocking him and his own looming execution.

Then, when his final dilemma was nothing more than a question of whether the tree or his own self would be first to yield to its fate, the professor saw the vision he'd sacrificed his life for: There, at the waterline, among the bright scarlet outgrowths of a trumpet creeper, was the stationary blur of a tiny rust-hued dynamo that paid no heed whatever to the mass of waiting death a few feet away.

"There you are!" called the professor, in hopes the bird would at least acknowledge his presence. The miniature creature seemed to pose in mid-flight, so that the professor could confirm what he'd hoped for all along, then veer at him. From nowhere came another hummer, and another, and another, until the trumpet creeper was girdled by tiny flashes of ochre-hued light, like a merry Christmas tree.

At that instant the professor's tree snapped in two and he tumbled into the sludgy, gaping muzzle of one of his tormentors. With an awful shock he felt the powerful jaws close on his hips like a gigantic vise, heard the collapsing of his own pelvic bones. He was being eaten alive, and that was an unfortunate turn of luck to say the least, because he had finally made his discovery. ●

(For John SaFranko)

DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

THE HOLLOW WOMAN

by Laura Philpot Benedict

As a winner of the West Virginia Writers Competition, Laura Philpot Benedict earned publication in a paperback anthology of the competition's top stories from 1991-1995, but the following story is her first paid professional fiction publication. Ms. Benedict lives in Roanoke, Virginia, where she works as a copywriter. She reviews books for *Grand Rapids Press* in Michigan and WVTF Public Radio in Roanoke. †

I watched as the old woman on the other side of the road pushed her mower back and forth, back and forth across the scorched August grass, the mower's yellow cord snaking over the ground like some living thing. At the end of each careful row, the old woman stood for a moment, her head tilted back as though she were balancing an invisible book on her helmet of red-dyed hair. In those brief pauses, she closed her eyes and stood perfectly still, as though she were already dead, a corpse propped up in the sunlight like some ghoulish lawn ornament, an undertaker's sight-gag.

The baby squirmed in my arms, arching his back to look up at my face. He reached for my chin and scratched, an untrimmed point on his thumbnail digging into my skin.

I grabbed his hand and squeezed it. Not hard, but hard enough for him to get the message.

"Bad baby," I said. "Don't scratch Mommy."

His eyes widened and I saw fat tears form in their corners. The guilt washed over me in a wave of heat. Guilty because I was angry that he'd taken my attention from the old woman.

He began to cry in earnest and I held him close. The rattle and hum of the mower muffled his sobs.

"There, there," I crooned. "Mommy's sorry."

He pulled away with a fierce cry, aimlessly waving his gathered fist. His eyes were closing in sleep, sleep that rarely came peace-

fully to him. He slept only in self-defense, when he no longer had the strength to keep it away.

I took the baby inside the house, holding his head against my shoulder, imagining that my closeness would keep him asleep. I laid him in his crib, pulled the single window shade down against the vibrant sunlight. When he was settled, I pulled the door to and went into the living room to sit in my chair beside the front picture window.

The old woman was still out there, walking the fifty paces or so of each sunburned row and back again. Every so often I would lose sight of her as she passed behind the wide trunk of a silver maple, but she would emerge almost immediately, the body of the mower first, then the old woman's hands gripping the mower's handle, her canvas-clad feet, and, finally, her ramrod frame, thin as a cancer victim's.

I sat at the edge of the window, my head leaning against the back of the chair, peering at the old woman through half-closed eyes, so that if she did see me she might think I was sleeping or meditating. Doing anything but watching her.

Every so often she would brush at the air around her face, which I could see was, as always, heavily made-up. But mostly she just walked behind the mower, the grass behind her always shorter and slightly less brown than the grass ahead.

I watched until my own eyes closed and I drifted off to sleep.

I was born into one of those cozy, middle-class suburbs where a new family's arrival was an event. When a house changed owners, I would stand with the other neighborhood children at the back of the moving van and watch the furniture come off. We must have imagined ourselves invisible because we were always in the way of the moving men, who cursed us and repeated, time after time, "Step aside, kids," and, "Move or you'll get hurt." And we always did step away, but only for a minute, and then we were back again, crowding each other for a look at what was coming out next.

The first time I ever saw a king-size mattress it was coming off the back of a moving truck. I remember how we all gasped at the sight of it and how Jill Parker said that it was a bed for giants and that the new people must be freaks from a circus. When I told my parents about the bed over dinner, my father raised his eyebrows and exchanged a look with my mother that told me that people with king-size beds must not belong in our neighborhood. All the same, my mother sent me over with a chocolate-pudding pie the very next day. The man who had bought the house and his pale-haired teenage daughter had come to Kentucky all the way from California, but after six months another moving truck came and the house was empty again.

When Barry and I moved into our house, there were no children gathered at the back of our moving van, no offers for the use of a telephone, no promise of a tuna casserole. Our house was only one of two on a small, dead-end street. A friend of Barry's had bought the lot and cleared it and started building the house. Nothing special: three bedrooms, one-and-a-half baths, vinyl siding, a vaulted ceiling and a brick fireplace in the living room to give it some character. But he'd lost his job and couldn't pay to finish it, and Barry made him an offer.

I didn't see the old woman until we'd been in the house a week. I was painting the mailbox, lavender paint splattered on the T-shirt of Barry's that was stretched over my huge, pregnant belly. I heard the front door of the house across the street close, firmly, and the old woman, her hair alarmingly bright against the creamy brick of her house, walked slowly toward the Buick parked in the driveway.

"Hello," I called to her. I waved. She didn't turn to look at me.

"My name's Cathy," I said. "Cathy," came my own voice back to me, echoing off the brick of her house. I wondered for a moment if she might be deaf.

I placed the paintbrush on the edge of the can. Thinking that the old woman hadn't seen me, I started across the road to her driveway, which was poured concrete and expensive, Barry had told me.

"Hi," I said again.

The old woman got into her car, started it. I stopped in the middle of our small road. A thin stream of gray exhaust came from the back of the Buick; it dissipated as the car rolled slowly backwards. The car paused at the end of the driveway, its bulbous taillights staring at me like two comic eyes. The old woman wasn't looking over her shoulder, or even moving that I could tell. I realized then that she was waiting for me to move, that I was merely an object blocking her way, some kind of nuisance to her, like an obstinate stray dog, or a bad-mannered child.

I started walking backwards, to my own driveway, thinking, pitifully, that there must be some misunderstanding between us, that she surely couldn't mean to ignore me. But as the car sped away, all I saw of the old woman was the shadow of her profile: oversized sunglasses; small, straight nose; gloved hands gripping the steering wheel through her closed-up window.

I awoke on the telephone's first ring. The shadows of the silver maples in the old woman's yard stretched into the road. The old woman had finished the mowing. Her Buick was gone from the driveway.

Barry was on the phone. "Cathy," he said. "What's wrong? You weren't sleeping, were you?"

I heard accusation in his voice. This child, his only one, wasn't

normal. He would only sleep a few hours a day, almost exclusively in the daytime, like a miniature vampire. Barry, who could lie on the bed or the couch, close his eyes, and be dreaming in thirty seconds. Barry, who needed twelve hours' sleep at a time and would spend the night in his truck to get it if the baby cried too loudly or too long. Somehow it was my fault.

"I tried to put him down early last night," I said. "I thought that maybe if it was still light outside, he would sleep."

"They want me to move on to the next one straight from here," Barry said. "Down to Trimble County." The next one. The next Taco Fiesta. Barry installed the special Mexican floor tile the restaurants used, traveled with a construction crew. He'd been working on Taco Fiestas for months.

"How long, Barry?" I said. "I'm tired of you being gone." I wanted him home, to feel his warm body next to me in our bed, even if I had to lie awake, listening, listening, listening to the baby make toneless noises from his crib while Barry slept. But another part of me, a small voice in my brain, was saying, "This is good, Cathy. This is easier, Cathy. This is for the best."

"Two weeks," Barry said. "Maybe two and a half."

We sat, quiet, the hundred miles of phone line humming between us. "Take him back to the doctor, Cathy. Find out what the hell is wrong with him."

Suddenly I hated Barry, this man who'd given me this damaged child, who'd left me here in this godforsaken house with its unfinished garage and treeless yard. This man who said he didn't know if he was ready to be married, even though we had the house, the kid, the bills. Even though he'd said that he loved me a thousand times.

"You're not here, are you, Barry?" I said. "I'll do whatever I damn well please." I slapped the phone into its cradle. I knew I would regret doing it. I always did.

The baby howled from his bedroom. Days like this when he slept for three or four hours in the afternoon were the worst. It meant maybe one or two catnaps in the night, twenty minutes, nothing more.

I lifted him from the crib. He gave me a small, hesitant smile. At six months old, he was too young to reach out. But it was enough that he was happy to see me.

"You're lucky you're so cute," I told him. "Or we'd have pitched you out with the trash a long time ago." And he was cute. He had a peachy, old-fashioned look to him, round cheeks and blue eyes. Blue eyes bright like carnival-glass Christmas ornaments with a sparkle that let you know that he would soon be up to mischief. "That boy's got the devil in him," my mother said. But she was wrong. The devil wouldn't waste any time on a darling like my baby. If the devil were to come on the earth, he would take the form

of someone with an empty heart, someone cold like the old woman.

I fed the baby his heated oatmeal and a jar of peas for dinner. I cleaned his hands and face and put him in the stroller that sat waiting on the front porch. There was something I'd been wanting to do for a long time.

The old woman's Buick was still gone. Wednesday evening. She was always dressed up the same way on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings—tiny hat, white gloves like I wore when I was five years old (I could imagine the plastic pearl buttons at their tops), carefully ironed dress, matching handbag and shoes—which told me that she must go to church. Baptists go to church on Wednesday nights, I know. Barry's parents are Baptists.

More than six months we'd lived across the street from the old woman and I didn't even know her name.

Nervous, I pushed the baby up the road some, just short of the next house nearly a half-mile away. I walked back on the old woman's side of the road and stopped at her mailbox. Going into another person's mailbox was some kind of crime. My hand shook as I pulled at the latch.

A pile of mail lay inside. I pulled it out carefully and fingered through it. Nutter was her name: Mrs. Charles Nutter; L. E. Nutter, the Nutter Family. One piece from a mail-order steak place (imagine—mail-order steak) was addressed to The Nutties at 125 Elm Grove Lane.

Nutter. Nutty. Nut Case. Nutty-as-a-fruitcake. I laughed out loud, startling the baby, who was pulling at a flowering vine that the old woman had trained around the mailbox post.

I couldn't find her first name on any of the envelopes. The Boston Shoe Company catalog, with the initials L.E. in the address, was the closest I could get to it. I tucked the shoe catalog into the stroller's pocket and slipped the rest of the mail back into the box.

Nighttime. The coffee maker shorted out when I tried to put a second potful of water into its already-filled reservoir. There was a loud *pop* and the kitchen lights flickered. Water splashed onto the counter and my feet, soaking my socks and the kitchen rug. Coffee, with a little splash of Bailey's Irish Cream, was my comfort. Now there was no coffee and no comfort. Just me and the night and the baby and the old woman.

The old woman's lights went out at twelve-fifteen. First, though, she walked through the house and secured all the window latches. I watched as her hand reached through the curtains, window after window, her fingers feeling for the lock and then disappearing. I don't know why she did it every night. I never saw her open windows except to clean them, which she did, every single one of them, every two weeks. After she'd secured the window locks, she

switched on the floodlights planted in the yard. They bathed the house in light like it was some sort of palace. Every shutter, every gutter, every nook was outlined in broad light and shadow. Except for one space on the right side of the house. That bulb had been burned out for several days, but I don't think she knew it.

Now that I had her name, I could look up her phone number in the book and call her to tell her about the burned-out light: "Hi, Mrs. Nutter. It's Cathy. . . . Sure you know me. I live across the street. . . . No, I really do. We haven't met. I'm the one with the baby. . . . Sure, I'd love to come over sometime. . . . Can I bring anything? Coffeecake, maybe? . . . You really are too nice. . . . Well, I just called to let you know that one of your floodlights is burned out. . . . Yes. Neighbors do have to watch out for each other."

The baby was calm, lying on the floor, watching the ceiling fan spinning overhead. I lay down beside him and stroked his arms and legs, his soft, soft skin. I massaged him gently with my fingertips like the baby book said and he lay almost hypnotized with the quiet whir of the fan and the touch of my hands. It was so peaceful in the house, I wondered that he could resist sleep.

I slept for one minute, maybe five. I dreamed that I lived in a one-room cabin that had no ceiling. Storm clouds sailed over in the sky above, but never rained on me. My mother came to the window and handed me pies and baskets of soap until there was no longer any room to move around. I cried for her to stop. When I awoke, the baby was staring at me, his curls ruffling lightly in the fan's breeze. He stared and I wondered what he saw in my face. I wondered if he would remember how my face looked at this moment years from now.

He began to cry.

Two A. M. The lights in the old woman's house had been out for almost two hours. The Home Shopping Channel played on the television. The baby's swing clicked back and forth beside my chair. I drank a cup of strong tea to make up for the coffee. If they'd been selling coffee makers on the television, I'd have bought one.

At three, I gave the baby a bottle and he fell asleep in the middle of it, his fists balled up under his chin. But as I lowered him into the crib, his eyes opened and he screamed as though I were doing him some harm.

When the newspaper came at five, tossed onto our porch from a rusting Datsun that was sorely in need of a new muffler, I was strapping the baby into his high chair for his next bowl of oatmeal.

I wasn't hungry. I ate a couple of spoonfuls of the baby's prunes from a jar just to taste their sweetness on my tongue.

I thought about the old woman across the road. She was probably

still in bed. Alone, like me. There had been a husband. Had there been children? Had she ever sat in a creaking rocking chair feeding a baby who looked up at her with eyes that had never held a look of fear? Maybe she was the sort that scared children. Maybe I wouldn't like her at all. She was cruel the way she never waved back at me. I always waved when I saw her. It was unfair of her not to give me a chance. Thinking about her made me angry. Maybe she was waiting for me, waiting for *me* to break, to beg for her friendship. What kind of person was she? What made a person mean like that?

The baby sat spinning the bright blue and green clown toy that was suctioned to his highchair tray. Such an angel. Truly one of God's miracles. He was innocence itself. Why would the old woman reject him, too? The bitch.

Standing at the kitchen sink, I saw several bursts of light in the window, brief, high flashes that streaked through the receding dark. *Shooting stars,* I thought. A present for me. A chance to make a wish. Then I saw more bounce off the stark white kitchen cabinets that Barry had installed by himself. I knew then that the flashes were in my head.

I heard the phone ringing in the house as I buckled the baby into his car seat. I was sure it was Barry, worried that I hadn't called him to apologize. *Let him wonder,* I thought.

As I opened the driver's door, the old woman came out of her house, pulling the front door shut, hard, so that the knocker clanked once behind her. Out the front door, in through the side door. Like she was superstitious. She also kept her house key under a flower basket next to the side door. A stupid, old-fashioned habit for someone who double-checked her locked windows each night.

Why did I choose that morning to follow her? I don't know. I'd meant just to run to the grocery to pick up some formula and diapers.

I followed her down our street and through the surrounding neighborhood. She drove with a heavier foot than I would have expected, barely slowing at curves where I had to downshift to stay on the road. Once, I let another car come between us so that she wouldn't become suspicious of seeing my Honda constantly in her rearview mirror.

We ended up at the big Baptist church in town. When I saw her put on her turn signal, I slipped into the lot of the dry cleaner next door. I had a clear view of her as she parked and got out of her car. She took off her sunglasses before she opened the front door and went inside.

I waited a good twenty minutes. I wanted to know what she was doing in the church. Was she a Sunday-school teacher preparing lessons? Maybe she was giving the preacher advice. Old women

liked to give advice. How galling, then, that she could see me every day, struggling with this angel-darling baby, and not want to rush over to help, to tell me what I should be feeding him, how often to change his diaper, how to make him sleep like other babies.

When she came out, she was carrying a Manila envelope, which she dropped onto the passenger seat of her car. The baby started fussing and I reached backward, feeling for his mouth to stick the pacifier in it. I almost wasn't able to catch up to the old woman, who had sped out of the parking lot.

She went next to a copy shop, where she walked in with the envelope and came out empty-handed.

The baby began howling and pulled at his hair.

"Go on," I said. "Go to sleep." I rubbed his foot as we drove, letting go only when I had to shift gears. It was a danger letting him sleep in the car. At home, he might sleep for two to three hours, his longest sleep of the day. My only chance to sleep. But sleep didn't matter. I needed to be close to the old woman. I needed to know what she was doing. I was hungry with the desire to know, to be there. My heart was pounding the way it had when I would wait at my apartment for Barry to pick me up for a date. It was the anticipation that something was going to happen and I wanted to be awake and alive to it.

I knew in my heart that there was something not quite right about this, that maybe the old woman might be unhappy if she knew what I was doing. But I had a right to do this, to make up for her lapse, to give her the chance to be a better person.

We drove to a shopping center across town. The roads were unfamiliar and I had to follow closely. I really wanted to stop for coffee and maybe a donut. I was getting hungry despite the nervous state of my stomach.

The old woman pulled into a space in front of a dress shop that had a small fountain out front and no clothes at all in the window. An expensive place.

I parked two rows over and shut the engine off. The baby was asleep, his mouth slightly open, the pacifier in his lap. His finger twitched.

I rummaged in the glovebox for some crackers or something but came up with only a packet of ketchup. I nipped the edge of the package with my teeth and tore off the corner, careful to put the plastic bit in the ashtray. The ketchup was warm on my tongue. I sucked at it. I was thirsty, too.

I thought about Barry. Maybe we would divorce. Perhaps I hadn't loved him as much as I thought I did. We used to spend hours, whole days together in bed. Days like dreams that had no purpose, no reason to them. Just aimless happiness. Days when we would sleep and eat and make love. But I was having trouble imagining myself having days like that again. Everything had

become difficult, complicated, new. Hard: the harsh morning light that flooded our white (blindingly, damnably white) kitchen; the unflinching bitterness of the old woman's soul; the brittle ring of the telephone; Barry's voice, cold and accusing.

The old woman came out of the store. A saleswoman carried out something on a hanger, a dress, maybe, or a suit (the old woman wore a lot of brightly colored suits, despite her garish hair) covered with an opaque plastic bag. She hung the bag in the Buick and nodded to the old woman. Then the old woman smiled.

The bitch actually smiled.

All at once, I felt that the months of waiting were over. I backed the Honda out of its space and drove right up behind the Buick, blocking the old woman in. My foot slipped off the clutch and the car shuddered to a halt. I felt my pulse beating in my ears. Now was the time! I imagined myself getting out of the car, walking up to the old woman and shouting at her, telling her what a mess she'd made of my life. How her cruelty had hurt me.

How they stared at me. Did I seem crazy to them? The saleswoman's slender face wore a look of frank curiosity. Disdain, too, I thought, for my old car. But the old woman just hid behind her sunglasses, her lips pursed. Uninterested.

I looked away and started the car and drove home as quickly as I dared.

Barry left three messages that day.

Pleading. "Cathy, pick up the phone. Talk to me, Cathy."

Angry. "I've taken about all of this shit that I'm going to take, Cathy. I'm sick of your games," he said. "Bullshit, Cathy. This is bullshit."

The third call came about midnight. He sighed into the phone, a long, drawn-out breath that sounded sad, regretful. He hung up.

We ran out of baby formula about two in the morning. I thought about Marie Antoinette and her words, "Let them eat cake." The baby was laughing at a shadow on the wall. We had plenty of grape juice.

The shooting lights that I'd been seeing showed up again and again, falling like a shower as I sat in my chair and watched the old woman's house through the night.

I filled the useless coffee carafe with water to its ten-cup mark and drank from it until the water was gone.

The old woman turned the floodlights out sometime early in the morning. But her curtains stayed drawn.

Around noon, the baby started screaming. I held him in my arms and tried to give him a bottle of grape juice, but he turned his head to the side and pushed my arm away. It wasn't me he

didn't want, I knew. It was the old woman's fault that I'd forgotten the formula. The baby's screams faded in my ears, becoming just a background, like roughly textured music.

The old woman left her house in the late afternoon. She turned her head ever so slightly to look at my house, my window, my face.

Click. Click. Click. The baby slept in his swing, the sun warming his tired little body. My angel.

The phone rang. My mother's voice on the answering machine. "Cathy. Barry called me. You've upset him terribly, Cathy. Call me," she said. "How's my baby boy?"

It was late when the old woman came home. She checked the windows and turned on the floodlights.

The phone rang about one in the morning as I opened the front door. Barry's voice on the answering machine. "Don't, Cathy," he said.

The key, of course. The key like an invitation for welcome friends. The kind of friend I would be. Would have been.

As I put my hand on the old woman's doorknob, I thought of gloves. Plastic kitchen gloves were all I had, orange rubber things that would have been clumsy and overlarge. If I'd worn gloves, it would have said something about intention, wouldn't it? I was just visiting. I wasn't intending anything.

The door felt solid against my hand. Everything about the house felt solid. Old. Settled.

I stood in the old woman's kitchen. It was dark and cool. Neat. I tiptoed quietly, as if I were in a church. I would be respectful even if the old woman didn't deserve it. I found the light switch and flipped it on.

The kitchen cabinets were knotty pine, matching the paneling on the walls. Matching, like her shoes and purses. I lifted the teakettle on the stove and found it full of water. I lit the burner beneath it. I discovered an uncut pound cake under a ceramic cover painted to look like a strawberries-and-cream layer cake. Like she'd been expecting me.

How many times had my mother sent me to a neighbor's house, my arms aching under the weight of her heaviest casserole dish, filled to the top with fragrant noodles or a chicken and rice bake? Here I'd come to the old woman's house empty-handed. I felt ashamed and mean.

I took a long, serrated bread knife from a block on the counter and green china plates and teacups and saucers from the cupboard. I put the dishes on the table and cut a piece off the pound cake.

"Charles?" The old woman spoke from down the hallway. "Charles, are you home?"

I quickly sliced another piece of pound cake, thinner this time. Less generous. Old women don't eat much. I put the cake on the

waiting second plate. Fat, honey-colored crumbs dropped from the knife. I touched my fingers to them and put them to my lips. *Heaven.*

"Charles?" The old woman sounded worried now. Definitely not the way a hostess should behave.

She stood in the doorway, looking much smaller to me than she had from a distance. She was really quite petite. Her hair was disheveled, odd. Up close, her skin was less wrinkled than I'd imagined. Perhaps she wasn't such an old woman.

"Cake?" I said. "The water will boil in a minute. Where do you keep your tea?"

She took it all in—me, the cake, the crumbs on the table. "The police," she said. "Get out or I'll call the police." But she was frozen where she stood. Her eyes looked wild, a little crazy. I was just a woman, a mother, no one to fear. It was a hell of a welcome.

I reached out for the phone hanging on the wall just a foot or so from the old woman's head. She flinched. I took the receiver in one hand and jerked on the cord, breaking it free from the phone. The plastic connector skittered across the floor. It seemed such a silly, dramatic thing for me to do that it made me laugh.

"Oh no," I said. "I think I broke your phone. I'm sorry."

"You did break my phone," the old woman said. "Now get out."

I carefully hung the phone back on its cradle. I could have left then. I probably should have. But there was the cake and the tea I hadn't yet made. I was hungry. So hungry.

"I just wanted to sit down," I said. "I'm tired. Can't you just sit with me and have some cake?"

The old woman eased her way into the kitchen, keeping her distance from me. "Have all the cake you want," she said. "Take it. Just take it."

"You don't understand," I told her. She didn't understand. And suddenly I was so profoundly tired that I was having a difficult time driving the words from my mouth. "Sit," I said. "Please." My head felt heavy.

"I wouldn't sit at a table with a piece of white trash like you in a million years," she said. She pointed at me, her arm shaking in the long, apricot sleeve of her robe. "I know you," she said. "I know who you are."

"But we haven't met," I said. "My name is Cathy." I heard my voice speaking, but it seemed to come from far away, somewhere far below me.

"You're going to get out of here," the old woman said. "And they're going to take that little bastard child of yours away from you when I tell them what you've done."

My angel. She was talking about my angel-baby. What was she saying? I couldn't see her very well. My face felt cool and wet. Rain? I looked up, but there was nothing but ceiling above me.

The shriek of the teakettle's whistle shook me from the daze into which I had drifted. The old woman lunged for the door, but I grabbed her around the waist before she could pull it open. She was light, so light, as though she were hollow. She flopped forward over my arm. A rag doll.

"Sit down!" I screamed. I pulled out a chair with one hand.

The old woman didn't resist. She slumped into the vinyl seat, her shoulders resting against its back. I slid the plate with the slice of pound cake on it into the space in front of her.

"Eat it," I said.

She was still, looking down at the floor. "I won't," she said.

"Eat the goddamn cake!" I was shouting at her.

When she made no move to take it, I picked up the piece of cake in my hand. I jerked her head back by her hair and the red hair—I saw now that it was a wig—came off in my hand. The old fraud. A bitch and a fraud.

When I pitched the wig across the room, the old woman tried to get up out of the chair, her head pitifully small now, and gray. But I was too fast and too strong for her. I pushed her back down.

The old woman began to wail. A high, mournful quaver.

"You have to eat the cake," I told her, firmly, as though she were a child. I pushed the piece of cake into her open mouth. She gagged, tried to spit it out again. When she tried to close her mouth, I pulled her jaw down. I tore more cake from the loaf, a handful, and pushed it, too, into her mouth. She struggled, turning her head from side to side. We fell to the floor, but I had the entire cake in my hand now. I fed her and fed her. I filled the empty old woman with the rich, buttery cake. Finally, she stopped struggling. She was full of sweetness.

Standing in the old woman's driveway, I could see into my own living room: the baby (my darling, sweetest angel) sleeping in his swing; the flickering glow of the television. Like looking into my own life.

Inside, I stopped in front of the gold-framed mirror that my mother had bought and made me hang by the front door. "To touch up your lipstick on the way out the door," she said. But I didn't recognize the woman I saw in the mirror. Was I this haggard witch with the deep, purplish circles beneath her eyes? When had my hair lost its color of fluid sunshine and taken on that steely tone? Why couldn't my eyes meet themselves in the mirror?

I sat down in my chair beside the front window and dialed the number of Barry's motel. "Hello," he said. "Cathy?" He sounded awake, as though he'd been waiting.

"Come home," I said. I put the phone back in its cradle, gently, quietly, so as not to wake the baby. Leaning my head against the back of my chair, I closed my eyes and fell into a hard, dreamless sleep. ●

Art by Allen Davis

TRUNK CALL

by Marilyn Todd

When a man lies on his deathbed, it is, of course, customary to send for his wife. But with Rufus Vatia, purveyor of Imperial elephants, wouldn't you just know that *three* women would turn up, each laying claim to the title? For two days now they'd been pacing his tiny apartment up on the Palatine, stiff with suspicion and hating each other's guts—yet these three women stuck like glue. Fearful lest one gained an edge on her rivals.

The sun rose. The sun set. And now it had risen again, its fiery ball casting long autumn shadows across the seven hills of Rome, its heat swirling white mists over the Tiber, enshrouding the brown sludgy waters which churned beneath the arches of the bridges. Another month and there would be frosts twinkling across the city's red-tiled roofs. Would Rufus Vatia, the ultimate practical joker, live to see them? Or would Death have the final laugh?

On the table in the corner, between a carved ivory jackal and a terra-cotta lamp, an old-fashioned cylindrical water clock relentlessly dripped away his allotted mortal span . . .

From time to time, the women took turns visiting the sick

room, returning, though, only moments later, thin-lipped and shaking their heads, but today the physician had taken the unprecedented step of banning all visitors. The only exception he'd made was for Milo, Rufus's almond-eyed steward, who continued to waft in and out with his trays on silent, padded feet.

For the very first time, everything on those trays was coming back untouched.

So the three contenders sat.

And waited.

And watched.

The clock dripped on. Occasionally, one of the women would half-rise, think better of it, then sink back into position, and Claudia, observing them from the corner of her eye as she leant against the marble flank of a rearing Spanish stallion, was reminded of a pack of hyenas waiting for the stumbling beast to finally drop. The analogy was more than apt.

"To date," says British author Marilyn Todd, "I have six novels in print featuring the beautiful but formidable Claudia Seferius, who would do anything (well almost anything) for money, and aristocratic investigator Marcus Cornelius Orbilio, who would do anything (well, almost anything) for her." The latest book in the series is *Black Salamander* (Macmillan U.K., 7/2000). The two are in tip-top form in this new story. ✝

Africa had been the dashing trapper's life, and across his walls antelope and lion, wildebeest and zebra thundered across the open plain, while flamingos dabbled in the margins of a pair of double doors painted to resemble a lake.

Except that the young wine merchant with the flashing eyes and tumbling curls had not come to admire the artistry in the hunter's crowded apartment . . .

"I could be wrong," whispered a baritone in her ear, "but I have the distinct impression you've been avoiding me."

"They do say that's the first stage of paranoia," Claudia replied, although when he followed her behind the statue, Marcus Cornelius Orbilio found himself completely alone.

"Claudia. Please." He managed to catch up with her beside a painted hippopotamus. "You've got to help me out here," he hissed under his breath.

"My pleasure." The young wine merchant smiled, keeping her gaze on a rampaging rhino. "The exit's just past the flamingos."

Orbilio contrived to have his head turned by the time his grin slipped out, and forced himself to ignore the gentle curve of her collarbone and the waves of her spicy Judaean perfume. This was a professional visit, he reminded himself sternly. The emperor, being as fond of the charismatic trapper as he was of the showpieces themselves, had despatched a representative from the

Security Police with a single, clear-cut objective: to thwart any scandal, stamp it out. Orbilio rubbed his jaw with the back of his hand and tried not to reflect that failure would unquestionably result in some far-flung posting abroad.

"Rufus Vatia is dying," he pressed, weighing up the prospect of scorching Nubian deserts versus cold, damp Pannonian plains. "My job is to establish which of those three has a genuine claim on his estate."

Claudia tilted her head at a painted giraffe. Was it her imagination, or did the poor beast have a squint? "Knowing Rufus's sense of mischief," she said, "he would have married them all."

"*Bigamy?*" Marcus felt his shoulders sag. That was all his career prospects needed! And suddenly, as he glanced across to Rufus's hard-eyed harem, his original notion of fraudulent claims seemed achingly appealing—

The hunter would be, what—forty? Forty-two? With half his year spent under hot African skies, trailing, trapping, and transporting elephants for the emperor's extravaganzas, it was obvious that that easy smile and lean, tanned body was never going to settle for a good book on a long winter's evening and a ballad or two on the lyre!

Not when our friend Rufus could coax a sweeter tune from that sultry Arabian beauty buffing her nails in that high-backed satinwood chair.

. . . Or test the voluptuous charms of the girl who now sprawled lengthways on his couch, one smoky sage-green eye keeping a permanent vigil on the water clock.

. . . And certainly not when he could melt into the soft, milky blondness of the creature who stood twisting her rings by the window!

"You really think these could be bigamous wives?"

"Actually," Claudia flashed him a wicked sideways grin, "I know it for a fact."

A fishhook clawed in Orbilio's gut, and he battled the urge to ask the question which was uppermost in his mind. Instead, he said levelly, "Then I suppose I should turn my investigations towards which of the three Rufus married first?" He put strong emphasis on the *three,* but Claudia did not seem to notice.

"I wouldn't waste my time, if I was you," she said. "The whole thing's academic." She began to edge away from her tall, dark, human shadow. (Dammit, the last thing she wanted was the Security Police sniffing around!) "You'll find our man Rufus is as fit as a flea."

"*Fit?*"

Orbilio followed so fast, she had to check that his belt buckle hadn't snagged in her gown.

"Claudia, his steward is laying cypress round the front door and weaving funeral garlands of oak!"

"Milo can run naked round the Forum for all I care," she tossed back, "but trust me on this, Rufus is *not* at death's door."

Marcus smiled indulgently. "I think you'll find you're mistaken," he said. "I've spoken to the physician and he's adamant—"

"I may have my faults, Orbilio, but being wrong isn't one of them."

The young investigator might have been able to suck in his cheeks, but he could not disguise the twinkle in his eyes. "Remind me again when and where you studied medicine, will you?" he said.

"One doesn't need to have taken the Hippocratic oath to work this one out," Claudia retorted. How many men do you know who, when they're supposed to be standing at the ferry landing about to cross the River Styx, suddenly lurch out of bed to pinch a girl's bottom? She resisted the urge to massage the bruises and said instead, "Our handsome trapper is up to something."

I just don't know what it is yet!

"Wait, wait." Marcus pinched the bridge of his nose. "Let me get this straight. You think this deathbed stuff is some kind of *prank?*"

"Oh, you can bet your fine patrician boots on that."

Except you're not the only one who can play games, Rufus, my old mucker . . .

Outside, a horse whinnied as it stumbled in a pothole, and a flock of goats not sold at market bleated their way back up the Palatine Hill, but Claudia was oblivious to both. Nor did she hear the squeals of children playing hopscotch in the street, or the foghorn voice of a pie-seller over the road. No, no. Whatever sport the wily trapper was engaged in, she could match him move for move, no doubt of that. What *really* bugged her was why he had—

The collective gasp of female breath made her spring round.

Three sets of kohl-rimmed eyes were fastened on the ruffled head of the physician, which had now appeared round the bed-chamber door. His young face was the colour of porridge.

"I'm sorry." He shrugged his thin shoulders to the assembly in general, though his gaze remained fixed on his sandals. "I—I did everything I could . . . " His blue eyes were tortured. "But—I'm really sorry—Rufus is dead."

"Impossible!" Claudia barely noticed two of the women jump out of their seats, or the other slump to the floor. She was too busy pushing past the ashen-faced medic. "No one drops dead from a simple cough and a sneeze!"

At first she'd thought it a joke. That Rufus would burst through the door, laughing. But there was no doubt the doctor was telling the truth. His face, his voice said it all.

"It was the quinsy," he murmured.

"Listen." Claudia spun round to confront him. "When I want a medical opinion, I'll go straight to the undertaker and cut out the cost of the middleman." This clot typified the reason why she never called a doctor. Mistakes they bury, and judging from this one's nervy, twitching manner, he had—incredibly—chalked up one more medical disaster. *What the hell had gone wrong?*

"A fever set in," he began, but that was as far as he got, because the bedchamber door was firmly slammed in his face.

Damn! Somehow Orbilio had preceded her into the bedroom, no doubt slipping in while she'd been trouncing that idiot physician!

However, what made Claudia's breath catch was not the sight of the aristocratic investigator lifting to peer under Rufus's eyelids. Rather, the overwhelming number of scents which were slugging it out in this simple room of woven drapes and wooden floor, of bearskin rug and the writing desk strewn with scrolls and dice and shaving implements.

Slowly, Claudia identified the conflicting odours, one by one. Dark purple heliotrope in glazed pots out on the balcony. The heady aromas of the physician's ointments, his tinctures, rubs, and infusions. There was evidence of some overzealous beeswax polish. Burnt bread. Lavender oil in the lamps. And from the street far below, over-ripe peaches and pitch.

Alone, each scent could have laid out a horse, but the winner, on points, was surely the smell of death which clung to that motionless figure. The setting sun reflected off the only hint of luxury in the room, his great silver bedframe, and the sunlight dazzled her eyes.

A perfect excuse, she thought, to turn away from the empty shell that had once been Rufus Vatia . . .

Around the walls, his adored elephants trumpeted and reared, their characters captured as clearly as the faces of their trainers. Some bore wooden castles on their backs, from which mock battles were fought in the arena. Others danced, performed tricks, while the little ones endeared themselves merely by being babies. Moving round, she saw that the scene behind the desk recorded Rufus's skill in capturing the beasts. The pits that he dug. The way he hobbled the brutes. The ships he carried them home in. Even the odd, tragic casualty, like when two elephants drowned after one boat capsized in the harbour, or when an Oriental assistant had been trampled beneath giant grey feet.

Claudia swallowed. So much death. So much unnecessary, excessive, *premature* death . . .

She stood for a moment, swaying, trying to make order from chaos. And then, while Orbilio was engrossed with his grisly inspections, slender fingers silently riffled the papers and scrolls on Rufus's desk.

Dammit, what she wanted wasn't there! Come on, come on, it's

got to be here somewhere. Where have you hidden it, Rufus? Her stomach lurched. Oh, no! *Please* don't say it's under the mattress—

Claudia swivelled her eyes towards the lean, bronzed figure stretched out on what was now his funeral bier—only her gaze never reached as far as the trapper. The instant she saw the expression on Orbilio's face, ice exploded throughout every vein.

"You were right," he rasped. "Rufus didn't die from a simple cough and a sneeze. He's been poisoned." He straightened up and spiked his fingers through his thick, dark curls. "So I think now's as good a time as any for you to tell me exactly what brings a young wine merchant to this flat."

Night had fallen. Claudia was in her own garden, where silvery trails of slug slime shone in the light of a full hunter's moon and there was not yet a chill in the air. The fountain gurgled like a contented baby, and a bullfrog croaked to the bats.

The gate hinge had been oiled far too often to creak, but she knew it had opened behind her and she felt, rather than saw, him approach. There was a faint shadow of stubble on his chin and he poured himself a goblet of wine before settling himself beside her on the white marble bench, his back tight to the trunk of the sour apple tree. He smelled of sandalwood and ambition, leather and hope. An owl hooted from the garden next door.

"See that statue?" Orbilio's voice was thick as he pointed to the nymph and her amorous satyr. "One kiss like that from you, Claudia Seferius, and I would be faithful to you forever."

"Well, thank you, Marcus. I appreciate the warning."

In the darkness, she saw him grin and the tension drained from her limbs. Slowly—very slowly—the stars tramped their way across the heavens and Claudia pulled a wrap round her shoulders.

"You were right," he said eventually. "About who killed Rufus."

Claudia watched a moth flutter round the vervain, a plant reputed to have sprung from the tears of Isis, before moving on to drink from the sweet blue blooms of borage.

"What happened when you broke the news to our winsome trio that Rufus was not the rich catch they believed they'd netted, but was actually up to his eyeballs in debt?"

The trapper was a man who worked hard and played harder, and his personal slogan of "Live now, pay later" was fine . . . providing one remembered that there *was* a second part to that motto! Unfortunately, in Rufus's case, this wasn't as often as his creditors might have wished, and indeed, had it not been for his dire financial circumstances, he and Claudia would not have been thrown together in the first place.

"Let's just say two of the women are already on their way back to Ardea," Marcus said dryly. Ardea was the town south of Rome

where Rufus stabled and trained his thumping great pachyderms, the place where he spent most of his time.

It would be a different town without him, she thought. No craggy smile, no easy laugh, no acted-out tales of his exotic adventures. Idly, she wondered whether the elephants would miss him, and had a mental picture of them shuffling in patient anticipation.

"And the third one?" she queried. "The blonde?"

He shot her a sharp, sideways glance. "I won't ask how you fathomed it out," he said, refilling both glasses with wine. "But you were right on all scores."

Claudia twirled her goblet between her hands without drinking. It was obvious from the start that Rufus Vatia had been out to make mischief. This was autumn and, fresh home from the safari he loved and facing six months in a climate he hated, he'd very quickly grown restless. So much so that when he went down with that chill in his lonely apartment he resolved to cheer himself up. Just a joke; nothing malicious; something to make the stable hands chuckle throughout the long winter.

Rufus would pretend he was dying!

And if three bigamous wives pitched against one another wasn't enough, he'd summonsed the little blonde's lover, as well—that young buck of a physician—in addition to Claudia Seferius, his . . . his . . .

Well, never mind what! The point was, so absorbed had Rufus been in his own machinations that he'd failed to notice the shadow stealing over him. The shadow of someone who was aware of his charade—*and who decided to cash in on the opportunity to settle a score. . . .*

"I must admit, I was way off target," Orbilio said, stretching. "My money was on the blonde—especially when she fainted at the announcement that Rufus was dead. After all, her father *is* an actor at the Theatre of Marcellus. I simply assumed she was putting it on. It's a classic ruse to divert suspicion."

"No, her distress was real, all right. Like me, she knew there was nothing wrong with Rufus apart from a few sniffs and snuffles, so when the poor sod was suddenly pronounced dead, it came as quite a shock to think her lover had shortened the odds."

"She thought he'd killed Rufus for the money?"

"Typical Rufus, feeding each of his wives the same line, that he was sitting on a fortune." Greedy bitches. That was the only reason they married him! "But you're in good company, Orbilio. Blondie was way off target in her suspicions, too!"

Claudia crossed one long leg over the other and leaned back.

"Blondie's boyfriend wasn't, as she imagined, looking sick and nervous out of guilt. The poor chap suspected *her* of bumping off her husband. He was genuinely mortified!"

She recalled the pitiful slump of his shoulders, the look of utter despair. *"I did everything I could,"* he'd said, and although his words had been addressed to everybody in the room, in reality it was a coded message to Blondie. Obviously, as a doctor, he'd realised at once that someone had slipped Rufus poison during his absence overnight and (this was the hard bit!) he also knew that he was powerless to do anything other than make the unfortunate trapper's end as comfortable as possible.

That's why he'd banned visitors. That's why he'd disguised the foetid smell of baneberries with burnt bread and lavender, heliotrope and polish.

Believing the little blonde had killed her husband for him, the physician had gone to great pains to cover up murder.

As someone predicted he would . . .

"When did you realise the truth?" Orbilio asked, resisting the urge to massage her neck and rubbing his own instead.

"The minute I saw the exquisite detail on Rufus's bedroom walls." Claudia sank half her wine in one go.

Every expression had been captured, every likeness reproduced with breathtaking authenticity. Especially the fresco recalling the accident where, boarding ship, an Oriental helper slips and is trampled by elephants. His injuries are truly horrific. His face twists. The scene is so vivid, you wince with him. Crowds gather round, men confer. The victim continues to thrash. Rufus steps forward. He slits the dying man's throat. When he's laid on his funeral bier, the dead man's mouth rests in a smile . . .

"The resemblance to Milo was unmistakable."

And who but the steward would be privy to Rufus's hoax? *Who better placed to avenge his young brother's death?*

"Milo claimed there had been bad blood between the two men for several months," Orbilio explained. "In his view, what Rufus did was nothing short of cold-blooded murder, and anything less accurate than the gentle euthanasia scene depicted on that fresco Milo could not imagine. His version is that his brother simply lost his footing on the gangplank and that Rufus took the opportunity to kill his enemy, making up that story afterwards about him being trampled."

"And as a slave, of course, bound to a master who, rightly or wrongly, he believed had killed his brother without conscience, Milo would be in a difficult position. The sense of injustice and grievance would grow, but to kill Rufus openly would only draw attention to himself. He had to either make it look like an accident or—"

"—Or throw suspicion onto somebody else." Orbilio chinked his goblet against Claudia's. "Exactly!"

"I expect you'll find Milo's perception has been twisted by grief," Claudia said. There were many accusations one might level against Rufus Vatia, but cold-blooded could never be one of them. "I dare-

say once you start interviewing witnesses to his brother's death—"

"Ah." Marcus wriggled uncomfortably. "Unfortunately, the case file is now closed. We'll only ever be able to guess at what happened. You see, Milo fell on his dagger just as the soldiers arrived to arrest him, and the emperor wants it left at that. Just—you know—in case there *is* any truth in the rumour."

In the darkness, Claudia smiled. "You mean he doesn't want any taint of scandal attached to his imperial pachyderms?"

"Like Caesar's wife," he grinned back, "those elephants must be above suspicion." A few moments passed, then Orbilio rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "Incidentally," he said. "You, er . . . never did tell me what you were doing at Rufus's flat."

Claudia thought of the reason that had brought her and Rufus together. Two people, both in financial dilemmas. One with a product to sell. The other with a means of transporting it. She then thought of the formal, written contract which the wily trapper had insisted on securing before he would agree to ship any of her precious vintage wines to Africa unfettered, shall we say, by the burden of imperial taxation.

The self-same contract, in fact, that she'd whisked from underneath his mattress. And which now lay as a delectable pile of white ash in the kitchen . . .

"Oh, it was purely a social visit," she purred, flicking a strand of hair from her face.

After all.

What's the point of having double standards, if you don't live up to both? ●

Solution to the Mystery Crossword

B	R	I	N	G	■	O	R	E	M	■	A	N	C	E
E	A	S	E	L	■	F	A	R	E	■	N	A	R	A
T	H	E	C	O	F	F	I	N	D	A	N	C	E	R
■	■	■	■	B	O	Y	D	■	I	M	A	R	E	T
C	H	I	C	A	G	O	■	A	C	E	■	E	D	H
C	A	R	O	L	■	U	S	U	A	L	■	S	S	S
A	D	A	I	■	■	■	A	L	T	I	■	■	■	■
■	J	E	F	F	E	R	Y	D	E	A	V	E	R	■
■	■	■	■	U	S	E	S	■	■	■	A	L	A	I
A	B	A	■	L	T	C	O	L	■	A	N	E	N	T
D	A	R	■	A	R	T	■	A	G	R	E	E	T	O
A	R	C	A	N	A	■	A	G	R	I	■	■	■	■
P	R	A	Y	I	N	G	F	O	R	S	L	E	E	P
T	I	D	E	■	G	I	R	O	■	E	E	R	I	E
S	E	E	S	■	E	L	O	N	■	S	T	E	N	T

NEXT ISSUE...

Long Run North
BY RAYMOND STEIBER

Juggernaut
BY NANCY SPRINGER

One of Us
BY KEITH MILES

A Quiet Pool
BY BARBARA OWENS

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE. Vol. 117, No. 5. Whole No. 717, May 2001. USPS 523-610, ISSN 0012-6328. Dell GST: R123054108. Published monthly except for a combined September/ October double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. 1 year subscription $33.97 in U.S.A. and possessions, $41.97 elsewhere, payable in advance and in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Call 800-333-3053 with questions about your subscription. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to Ellery Queen, P.O. Box 54052, Boulder, CO 80322-4052. Editorial Offices, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016. Executive Offices 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220.Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Montreal, Quebec. Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260649. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to Transcontinental Sub Dept.,525 Louis Pasteur, Boucherville, Quebec, J4B 8E7. For back issues, send your check for $5.00 (U.S. funds) to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Suite SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Please specify the issue you are ordering. Add $2 per copy for delivery outside the U.S.

PRINTED IN CANADA

PRINTED WITH SOY INK

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

Ellery Queen May '01

Advertise to the world's largest mystery magazine audience with our Ellery Queen/ Alfred Hitchcock combined classified section. Ad rates per issue: $4.95 per word (10 word minimum), $350 per column inch (2.25 inch maximum). Special introductory offer: Buy two issues and receive a third issue FREE. Send orders to: Dell Magazines, Classified Department, 475 Park Ave. S., 11th Floor, New York, New York 10016. Direct inquiries to: (212) 686-7188: Fax:(212) 686-7414.

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

FASCINATINGLY GRUESOME! – Murder, mystery. True Crime photo-illustrated paperbacks. Free brochures! Infoexpress, Box 12Q, Holtsville, NY 11742.

FREE CATALOG Collectible and used mystery books. Dunn and Powell Books, Dept. DP, The Hideaway, Bar Harbor, ME 04609-1714, dpbooks@acadia.net/www.dpbooks.com

FREE CATALOGS Collectible/used mysteries. Murder is Served, 5273 Bittersweet Drive, Dayton, OH 45429. (937) 438-0211.

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

FREE CATALOG Collectible/used mysteries. Twice Told Tales, 24380 Mouring Drive, Carrollton, VA 23314. (757) 238-3587.

FREE LISTS. Quality used mystery paperbacks. Collections purchased. Steve Lewis, 62 Chestnut, Newington, CT 06111.

MYSTERY ADDICTS! Free catalog! New and recycled detective fiction. Grave Matters, Box 32192-C, Cincinnati, OH 45232, www.gravematters.com

FREE AD OFFER FOR OUR MYSTERY COMBO

PLACE A CLASSIFIED AD IN OUR NEXT TWO ISSUES AND RECEIVE A THIRD AD FREE!

Your ad will reach a combined audience of 300,000 readers in our outstanding publications–**Ellery Queen and Alfred Hitchcock** mystery magazines.

Call today for a new rate card.

DELL MAGAZINES CLASSIFIED DEPARTMENT
475 Park Avenue South, 11th Floor, NY, NY 10016
Call: (212) 686-7188 • Fax: (212) 686-7414