The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN®
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2001

60TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

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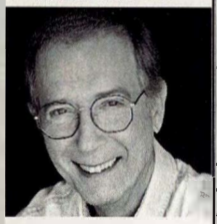

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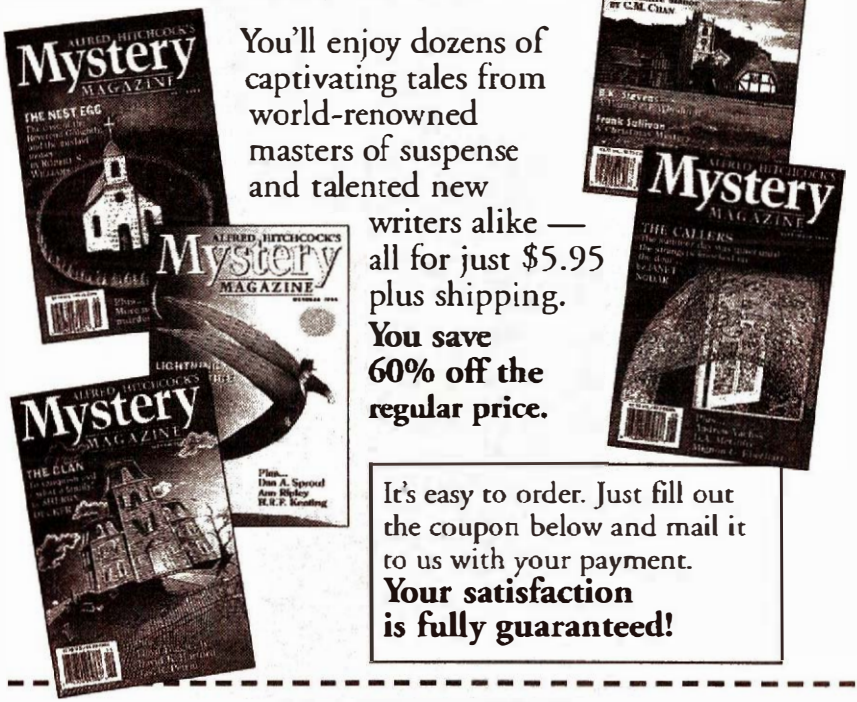

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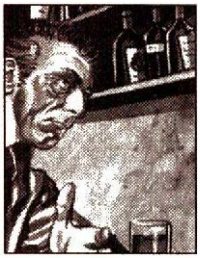

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Frederic Dannay (left) and Manfred B. Lee (right), a.k.a. Ellery Queen

A Lump of Sugar

by Ellery Queen

If not for the fact that Mounted Patrolman Wilkins was doing the dawn trick on the bridle path, where it goes by the Park Tavern, the Shakes Cooney murder would never have been solved. Ellery admits this cheerfully. He can afford to, since it was he who brought to that merry-go-round some much-needed horse sense.

A waiter with a hot date had neglected to strip one of his tables on the tavern's open terrace at closing time the night before, whereupon the question was: Who had done a carving job on Cooney's so-called heart about six A.M. the next morning? Logic said nearly eight million people, or roughly the population of New York City, the law-abiding majority of whom might well have found Shakes Cooney's continued existence a bore. But Mounted Patrolman Wilkins was there when it counted, and it was he who collared the three gentlemen who, curiously, were in the neighborhood of the deserted tavern and Cooney's corpse at that ungentlemanly hour.

Their collars were attached to very important necks, and when Inspector Richard Queen of police headquarters took over he han-

dled them, as it were, with lamb's-wool knuckles. It was not every morning that Inspector Queen was called upon in a homicide to quiz a statesman, a financial titan, and an organization politician; and the little inspector rose to the occasion.

Senator Kregg responded loftily, as to a reporter from an opposition newspaper.

Piers d'I. Millard responded remotely, as to a minority stockholder.

The Hon. Stevens responded affably, as to a precinct worker.

Lofty, remote, or affable, the three distinguished suspects in riding clothes agreed in their stories to the tittle of an iota. They had been out for an early canter on the bridle path. They had not addressed or seen any fourth person until the mounted policeman gathered them in. The life and death of Shakes Cooney were as nothing to them. Patrolman Wilkins's act in detaining them had been "totalitarian"—Senator Kregg; "ill-advised"—Financier Millard; "a sucker play"—Politician Stevens.

Delicately, Inspector Queen broached certain possibly relevant matters, viz.: In the national forest of politics, it was rumored, Senator Kregg (ex-Senator Kregg) was being measured as a great and spreading oak, of such timber as presidents are made. Financier Piers d'I. Millard was said to be the senator's architect, already working on the blueprints with his golden stylus. And small-souled political keyholers would have it that the Hon. Stevens was down on the plans as sales manager of the development. Under the circumstances, said the inspector with a cough, some irreverent persons might opine that Shakes Cooney—bookie, tout, gambler, underworld slug, and clubhouse creep, with the instincts of a jay and the ethics of a graverobber—had learned of the burial place of some body or other, the exhumation of which would so befoul the senator's vicinity as to wither his noble aspirations on the branch. It might even be surmised, suggested Inspector Queen apologetically, that Cooney's price for letting the body stay buried was so outrageous as to cause Someone to lose his head. Would the gentlemen care to comment?

The senator obliged in extended remarks, fortunately off the record, then he surged away. Prepared to totter after, Financier Millard paused long enough to ask reflectively, "And how long did you say you have been with the New York police department, Inspector Queen?"—and it sounded like the *coup de grâce* to an empire. The Hon. Stevens lingered to ooze a few lubricating drops and then he, too, was gone.

When Ellery arrived on the scene he found his father in a good, if thoughtful, temper. The hide, remarked Inspector Queen, was pretty much cut-and-dried; the question was, to whose door had Shakes been trying to nail it? Because Shakes Cooney hadn't been

a man to take murder lying down. The evidence on the Tavern terrace showed that after his assailant fled Cooney had struggled to his hands and knees, the tavern steak knife stuck in his butchered chest, and that he had gorily crawled—kept alive by sheer meanness, protested the inspector—to the table which the preoccupied waiter had forgotten to clear off the night before; that the dying man had then reached to the tabletop and groped for a certain bowl; and that from this bowl he had plucked the object which they had found in his fist, a single lump of sugar. Then, presumably with satisfaction, Shakes had expired.

"He must have been one of your readers," complained the inspector. "Because, Ellery, that's a dying message or I'm the senator's uncle. But which one was Shakes fingering?"

"Sugar," said Ellery absently. "In Cooney's dictionary sugar means—"

"Sure. But Millard isn't the only one of the three who's loaded with heavy sugar. The ex-senator's well stocked, and he recently doubled his inventory by marrying that fertilizer millionaire's daughter. And Stevens has the first grand he ever grafted. So Shakes didn't mean that kind of sugar. What's sugar mean in *your* dictionary, son?"

Ellery, who had left page 87 of his latest novel in his typewriter, picked the lint off his thoughts. Finally he said, "Get me the equestrian history of Kregg, Millard, and Stevens," and he went back home to literature.

That afternoon his father phoned from Center Street.

"What?" said Ellery, frowning over at his typewriter.

"About their horseback riding," snapped the inspector. "The senator used to ride, but he had a bad fall ten years ago and now he only punishes a saddle in the gym—the electrical kind. Moneybags hasn't been on the back of a plug since he walked out on Grandpa Millard's plowhorse in '88, in Indiana. Only reason Piers d'I. allowed himself to be jockeyed into those plush-lined jodhpurs this morning, I'm pretty sure, is so he, Kregg, and Stevens could have a nice dirty skull session in the park out of range of the newsreel cameras."

"And Stevens?"

"That bar insect?" snorted the old gentleman. "Only horse *he* knows how to ride is a dark one, with galluses. This morning's the first time Stevens ever set his suede-topped brogans into a stirrup."

"Well, well," said Ellery, sounding surprised. "Then what did Shakes mean? Sugar . . . Is one of them tied up with the sugar industry in some way? Has Kregg ever been conspicuous in sugar legislation? Is Millard a director of some sugar combine? Or maybe Stevens owns some sugar stock. Try that line, Dad."

His father said wearily, "I don't need you for that kind of fishing, my son. That's in the works."

"Then you're in," said Ellery; and without enjoyment he went back to his novel, which, like Shakes Cooney, was advancing on its hands and knees.

Two days later Inspector Queen telephoned his report. "Not one of them is tied up with sugar in any way whatsoever. Only connection Kregg, Millard, and Stevens have with the stuff is what I take it they drop into their coffee." After a moment the inspector said, "Are you there?"

"Lump of sugar," Ellery mumbled. "And Shakes evidently thought it would be clear . . ." The mumble ended in a glug.

"Yes?" said his father, brightening.

"Of course," chuckled Ellery. "Dad, get a medical report on those three. Then let me know which one of 'em has diabetes."

The inspector's uppers clacked against his lowers. "That's my baby! That's it, son! It's as good as wrapped up!"

The following day Inspector Queen phoned again.

"Whose father?" asked Ellery, running his fingers through his hair. "Oh! Yes, Dad? What is it?"

"About the case, Ellery—"

"Case? Oh, the case. Yes? Well? Which one's diabetic?"

The inspector said thoughtfully, "None."

"None! You mean—?"

"I mean."

"Hmm," said Ellery. "Hnh!"

For some time Inspector Queen heard nothing but little rumbles, pops, flutters, and other ruminative noises, until suddenly the line was cleared by a sound as definite as the electrocutioner's switch.

"You've got something?" said the inspector doubtfully.

"Yes. Yes," said Ellery, with no doubt whatever, but considerable relief. "Yes, Dad, now I know whom Shakes Cooney meant!"

"Who?" demanded the Inspector.

"We ruled out all the reasonable interpretations of sugar," said Ellery, "leaving us where we started—with a lump of sugar in Cooney's clutch as a clue to his killer. Since the fancy stuff is out, suppose we take a lump of sugar in a man's hand to mean just that: a lump of sugar in a man's hand. Why does a man carry a lump of sugar with him?"

"I give up," said the inspector promptly. "Why?"

"Why?" said Ellery. "Why, to feed it to a horse."

"Feed it to a—" The old gentleman was silent. Then he said, "So that's why you wanted to know their riding history. But Ellery, that theory fizzled. None of the three is what you'd call a horseman, so none of the three would be likely to have a lump of sugar on him."

"Absolutely correct," said Ellery. "So Shakes was indicating a

fourth suspect, only I didn't see it then. Cooney was a bookie and a gambler. You'll probably find that this fellow was over his noggin in Cooney's book, couldn't pay off, and took the impulsive way out—"

"Wait, hold it!" howled his father. "*Fourth* suspect? What fourth suspect?"

"Why, the fourth man on the bridle path that morning. And he *would* be likely to carry a lump of sugar for his horse."

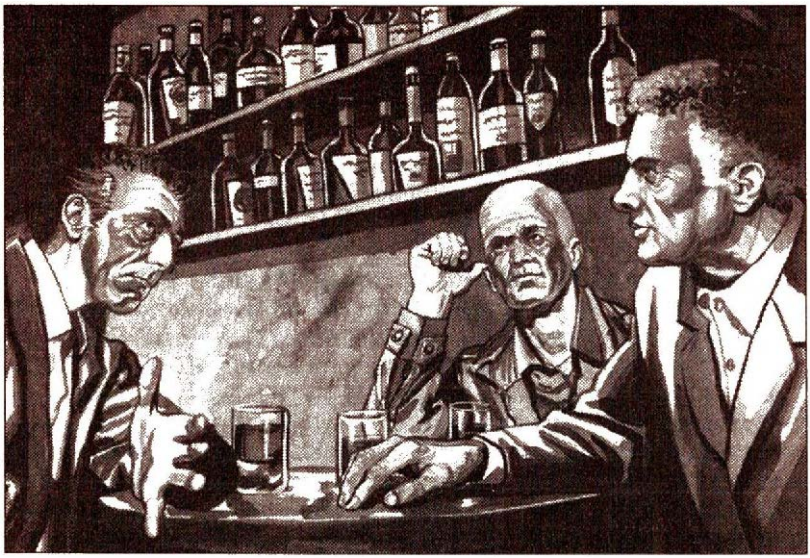
"*Mounted Patrolman Wilkins!*" ●

60 Years of the World's Leading Mystery Magazine

Stories "highly varied in type but similar in excellence." That's how Anthony Boucher described the content of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* in 1961, and the phrase nicely sums up the editorial policy we follow today. Our 60th anniversary issue contains the finest contemporary examples we could find of the classical whodunit, the psychological suspense tale, urban noir, the tale with a twist ending, the crime caper, and even a reflection on all the possible forms of crime and mystery writing (see "Some Most Unusual Culprits"). And, of course, we haven't forgotten the classics, represented by Ellery Queen's own tale "A Lump of Sugar."

Editor Queen—really the two-cousin writing team of Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee—launched *EQMM* with reprints of forgotten short gems of mystery and suspense. Over time the name Ellery Queen as applied to the magazine came to be understood to refer to Dannay alone, for he soon assumed exclusive responsibility for selecting and editing the magazine's stories. His search for material led him to assemble one of the most extensive libraries of detective fiction of its time, and he was so good at finding and reprinting stories by both famous and little-known authors of the past that he left virtually nothing for subsequent editors of the magazine to "rediscover." It is partly for that reason that *EQMM* today consists almost entirely of new stories, though the fashion of the time also guides us. Today fewer readers than we would like, and even fewer writers, are attuned to the conventions of classical detective fiction. The dying message, the pivot of the succinctly plotted "A Lump of Sugar," has practically dropped out of contemporary mystery fiction.

One of the things that set Ellery Queen apart, both as writer and as editor, was that he was able to change with the times. The post WWII Queen novels have a much more realistic cast than the early books and stories, for during that period, as Dannay said, "the structure of the detective novel [and story] was deliberately loosened." *EQMM* too changed after the war. As the pool of classic stories began to dwindle, Ellery Queen introduced more and more new writers to the magazine and to the genre, giving a start to authors such as Jack Finney and Stanley Ellin and expanding the definition of a mystery story by opening the door to virtually any tale in which a crime occurred. His successor, Eleanor Sullivan, excelled at the discovery and introduction to *EQMM* of important suspense writers such as Ruth Rendell, and provided a provocative mix of the traditional mystery and modern "mainstream" stories. As for *EQMM* today, our anniversary issue should give you a good idea of the varied fare. Enjoy!



Art by Mark Evans

The Cobalt Blues

by Clark Howard

Lewis got off the Harrison Street bus, turned up the collar of his old surplus Navy watch coat, and walked, head down against the cold March wind, to the Cook County Medical Center down the street. Chicago, he thought, was a lousy place for a guy to have to spend the last weeks and months of his life. He should have moved out to Arizona or down to Florida a long time ago, like most of the rest of the old gang he had grown up with did. At least he could be lying out in the sun while he died.

At the big, sprawling medical complex, he made his way to the Radiology Building and entered the foyer. He paused a moment to turn down his collar, catch his breath, and pull a tissue from his pocket to dry his watery eyes. On his way to the elevators, he looked up at the lobby clock and saw that it was 8:52. As usual, he began making the mental bet he made every Thursday morning. Would he be the first to arrive and sign in? The second? Or the third? There were three of them that had the nine o'clock appointment: himself, a skinny white guy named Potts, and a sullen black man named Hoxie. The radiology technician had three come in at

once because there were three phases to the treatment, and he could have a patient in each phase as the morning progressed.

Because Lewis was an obsessive gambler, his mind, without conscious direction from him, invariably broke everything he did in life down to odds for or against. So when he stepped onto one of the elevators and reached past two Hispanic orderlies to press the button for five, he started trying to decide how it would be today: Would he be first, second, or third? The rule he applied was that he had to make up his mind before the elevator door opened on five. That was the only fair way to do it. Otherwise, he might see one of the other two in the hall upstairs. Then there could be no bet. Just like if he encountered one of them in the lobby. No bet.

Over the past two decades Clark Howard has emerged as one of our genre's truly great storytellers. His large-scale crime stories have proved spellbinding to *EQMM* readers, who have five times given him the top spot in the Readers Award poll. Mr. Howard excels in a type of hardboiled adventure/suspense tale that few others are now writing, but even if he didn't have a niche virtually to himself, his style would mark him as someone singular. ✝

The elevator stopped on three and the orderlies got off. The door closed and the car started again. Since he was now alone, Lewis said aloud, "Okay, one, two, or three? What's it gonna be?"

This was important to him. This, in his mind, might tell him whether he was going to have a winning day or a losing day. To a confirmed gambler, every day was a new beginning, a fresh start, another chance to hit it big. Yesterday never mattered. A gambler that looked back on what he lost yesterday was a fool. The same as a gambler who planned what to gamble on tomorrow. Yesterday was over, tomorrow wasn't here. There was only today.

The elevator stopped on five. A split instant before the door opened, Lewis decided. Second. He would be second today.

On five, he walked down a long corridor to a door with a sign above it that read: OUTPATIENT RADIOLOGY. Taking a deep breath, as if he had a fortune bet on the moment, Lewis opened the door and entered the waiting room. In a glance he saw that Potts, the skinny white guy, was already there, slouched down in a corner chair, leafing through one of a dozen outdated magazines spread about the room. Hoxie, the sullen black man, sat in an opposite corner, looking straight ahead, not moving, as if he were in a trance.

Lewis cursed under his breath. He had lost. Disgruntled, he

signed in at the reception window and found a place to sit that was well away from either of the other two. Controlling his annoyance at this unlucky turn of events, he took off his heavy coat, pulled a racing form from one of its pockets, and began to reevaluate bets he had made earlier that morning in the day's lineup at Calexico Downs.

An hour before catching a bus to the hospital that morning, Lewis had been knocking impatiently on the door of a basement apartment on the near Northwest Side, in the neighborhood where he had grown up, once all Irish and Italian, now mostly mixed Black, Hispanic, and Asian. He had to pound on the door three times, the cold wind whipping at his ankles, before his friend Ralph opened the door.

"What the hell, you going deaf?" Lewis complained peevishly. "I'm freezing out here."

"You're lucky I'm letting you in at all," Ralph replied without rancor. He closed and triple-locked the door behind Lewis. "This ain't no Vegas casino, y'know. It's a business. We got reg'lar hours. Especially on Thursdays and Fridays, which is count days."

The two men retreated into what had once been a basement apartment but had been converted into a neighborhood betting parlor, where bets were taken not only on daily lineups from seasonal racetracks around the country, but also on baseball, football, basketball, and hockey games, as well as major boxing matches. The parlor was owned by Cicero Charley Waxman, who was nicknamed after the Chicago suburb where Al Capone had once had his headquarters. Waxman had two dozen similar locations, all of which were illegal but much more popular than the state-owned offtrack-betting sites, because the former accepted wagers on *all* sports, the latter only horse racing.

The parlor where Lewis gambled was managed by his friend Ralph, one of the gang he had grown up with, and the only one other than Lewis who was still around. Ralph had started as an errand boy for Cicero Charley while still in elementary school, and over the years had grown into gambling-parlor middle management. Even though his net income depended on the earnings of the parlor, he constantly nagged Lewis about his gambling problem.

"Why the hell don't you give it a rest for a few days, Lew?" he griped now. "Go out and buy yourself a decent overcoat instead of laying bets every day."

Lewis threw him a derisive look and did not even bother to respond to such an absurd suggestion. The day Lewis did not lay a bet would be the day when all racehorses, boxers, and football, baseball, basketball, and hockey players were dead. At a counter

next to the betting cages, Lewis spread out a Green Sheet racing form and began filling out a wagering slip.

"So how's the gallbladder treatment going?" Ralph finally asked, seeing that Lewis was ignoring his advice.

"Slow," said Lewis. "The stones are shrinking, but slow."

Lewis had not told anyone what was really the matter with him; the thought of someone feeling pity for him was nauseating. Ralph thought he was going to the hospital every Thursday morning for some kind of treatment that shrank and dissolved gallstones. That was the reason he let Lewis in early to bet on Thursdays. The parlor normally opened at ten.

Standing across the counter from each other, the two men were acutely but not uncomfortably aware of the marked differences between them. Both forty-six, Ralph now had a wife, two teenage daughters bound for finishing school, a two-story colonial home in an upscale suburb, two sedans, and a recreational utility vehicle. Lewis lived alone in a shabby little kitchenette in a tenement building in the same neighborhood in which they had grown up. He had no family, no regular job, and wore secondhand clothes from St. Malachy's Thrift Shop.

Over the years, Ralph had tried to interest Lewis in bettering himself. Just a month earlier he had talked to Cicero Charley Waxman about giving Lewis a janitorial contract for all of Waxman's gambling parlors. "It'll put you on easy street, Lew," his friend had promised. "You hire a dozen welfare mothers to do the work, see, and you pay them in cash so they don't have to declare the income. All you gotta do is supervise them. I know guys that would cut off a toe for a setup like that."

But not Lewis. He shied away from steady employment like a two-year-old resisted discipline. When he had to work—emphasize *had to,* as in riding out a losing streak—he took a temporary job as a dishwasher or a trucker's helper, or delivered advertising flyers door-to-door, whatever—as long as it was not permanent. Lewis wanted nothing in his life that was permanent. Especially now.

"Did I tell you Debbie finally got her braces off?" Ralph asked now, as Lewis continued to fill out his wagering slip. From his wallet, Ralph extracted a wallet-size photo of his eldest daughter. Lewis looked at it, seeing a girl who resembled Ralph too much to ever be pretty, but who did have, after thousands of dollars of orthodontics, a near-perfect smile.

"She's a looker," Lewis lied. "You're a lucky man, Ralph." Inside, he shuddered at the mere thought of such responsibility.

As they were standing there, another knock sounded on the outside door and Ralph went over to answer it. He admitted two men, both very large, wearing hats and overcoats, each carrying two

large suitcases. As they walked past Ralph, one of them asked, "Count room unlocked?"

"Yeah, go on in," Ralph said. "I'll be with you in a minute."

Returning to the counter, Ralph took the wager sheet, tallied it up, validated it in an automatic stamping machine, and shook his head in sad resignation as Lewis counted out sixty-five dollars and gave it to him.

As Lewis made the bets, an old, familiar thought surfaced in his mind: *Maybe today would be the beginning of a winning streak that would give him enough money to get the hell out of cold, dirty Chicago and go live where it was warm and sunny for the rest of his life.*

What was left of it.

The following Thursday, he walked from the elevator to the outpatient radiology waiting room, again betting with himself that he would be the second of the three patients to arrive. When he got to the door and was about to open it, he paused, hearing a quiet voice inside. He did not think it was either of the other two patients, because they never talked. Opening the door, he went in and saw at once that Potts, the skinny white guy, sitting alone in a corner, appeared to be talking quietly to himself. When he glanced up and saw Lewis, he stopped at once. A nut, Lewis thought, as he signed in. At that moment, Hoxie, the black man, came in, looking angry as usual, not speaking to either of them, and sat down as far away as possible.

Just as Hoxie sat down, the waiting-room door immediately opened again and two uniformed, armed men brought in a younger man, his wrists cuffed to a waist chain, wearing an orange jumpsuit stenciled on the back with large black letters: ISP. Illinois State Prison. The radiology technician met them in the waiting room and escorted them directly into the treatment room.

Lewis, Potts, and Hoxie exchanged curious looks, but none of them commented about it.

A little while later, the young man was brought back through again, and this time the three regular patients were prepared and all got a better look at him. He was pretty ordinary in appearance, his only outstanding feature being a head of thick, curly black hair that, Lewis and the others knew, he would soon lose if his radiation treatment was above the neck. Potts, when Lewis had first seen him, had healthy blond hair combed straight back. Because he was undergoing radiation treatment for a brain tumor, he was now bald as an egg. Lewis, who had cancer of the pancreas, and Hoxie, cancer of the esophagus, were both radiated below the head and had kept their hair, such as it was. As if to make up for the

hair loss, however, Potts did not have the other debilitating side effects; he experienced a temporary loss of taste, but that was mild compared to the vile nausea, vomiting, and fatigue suffered by Lewis and Hoxie.

After his original diagnosis, Lewis had gone to the medical section of the main public library and researched his illness. He concluded that he had a one-in-five chance of living five more years. When he had subsequently learned in conversations with the radiology technicians the types of cancer Potts and Hoxie were dealing with, he had, out of curiosity, returned to the library and researched their illnesses. Potts he put at eight-to-one to reach five years, Hoxie at nine-to-five.

Lurking somewhere in the back of his mind, Lewis had a vision of a huge national pool made up of cancer patients between the ages of forty and sixty. If each one put in a hundred bucks, the last patient still living would become a very wealthy person. He doubted, however, that the American Medical Association would approve such a plan. Doctors only approved of taking chances with life and death, never money.

The following Thursday, Lewis was the first patient to arrive, and the first to go in for treatment after the young convict had been treated and taken away. While he stripped to the waist, and as the radiology technician adjusted the Cobalt-60 applicator for his treatment, Lewis surreptitiously looked down at the technician's desk. As he expected, there was a new clipboard there, in addition to his and those of the other two regular patients. He was able to quickly read that the young prisoner's name was Alan Lampley, age twenty-eight, residing in the Joliet Correctional Center south of Chicago, diagnosis lymphatic leukemia. Lewis was not familiar with that particular type of cancer, so he could not put any odds on it.

"Ready, Lewis?" the technician asked, coming out of the little control room where he was protected from radiation.

"Sure thing," Lewis replied.

Lewis stretched out on the leather treatment table. He stared at the ceiling as the technician began painting a design on his upper torso with water-soluble orange dye. When he was finished, he carefully placed leather pads filled with lead all around the outside of the pattern, to deflect the radiation from those parts of the body where it was not needed. The radiation itself would come from the Cobalt-60 applicator, which the technician had adjusted following instructions from a radiologist-oncologist as to the diameter and filtration of the cobalt beam and the target distance at which Lewis was lying. That beam was generated by radioactive cobalt pellets sealed in a stainless-steel cylinder mounted behind

shields jacketed with sheet steel and carried by a mechanical arm to an open port through which it would be aimed at Lewis.

It continued to amaze Lewis that such a powerful beam could penetrate his body without pain, without heat, without any sensation at all—yet that same ray would—could—*might*—destroy a malignant cancer that was trying to destroy him. The doctor had explained it to him, of course. The radiation beam did not affect ordinary body tissue; it merely passed through it. Radiation affected only what would *absorb* it: cells, cartilage, bone—and tumors.

When the technician finished preparing Lewis, he retreated to his safe room and presently activated the Cobalt-60 applicator. Lewis closed his eyes. But instead of dozing, as he usually did, he found himself wondering what Alan Lampley had done to be sent to prison.

On the next treatment day, after Alan Lampley had been taken through the waiting room by his guards, Lewis spoke up to the others and announced, "I know what he done."

Potts and Hoxie, startled at the sound of his voice, jerked their heads around to stare at him.

"He killed a guy," Lewis said.

"Man, how do *you* know?" Hoxie challenged.

Now Lewis and Potts stared at Hoxie. Neither of them had ever heard him speak before. His voice matched his demeanor: angry; it cracked like a whip.

"I looked him up in the library," Lewis said.

"The *li*-brary?" Potts said incredulously. He had a slow, Southern drawl, lazy-like. Lewis and Hoxie looked at each other in surprise. Both of them had the same thought: *redneck*. There had been an influx of them recently, Southerners coming north looking for high-paying factory jobs. It happened every time crops failed.

"Yeah, the library," Lewis confirmed. "I got his name off the chart in the treatment room. Alan Lampley. Then I looked up his trial in the old newspapers down there at the library. He was in a couple stories four years ago. Killed a drug dealer."

Hoxie snorted derisively. "Poor little white boy junkie got carried away, huh?"

"He wasn't the junkie," Lewis said. "It was his sister. The dealer who got her hooked on crack put her on the street to hustle for him to support her habit. This kid Alan came looking for her; they were both from some little town in Indiana somewheres. When he found them in an apartment where she was living with the guy, the sister was so humiliated that she ran into the bedroom, got the dealer's gun from a drawer, and blew her brains out right in front of both of them. The dealer panicked and tried to beat it, but

Alan picked up the gun, ran after him, and shot him four times as he was getting into his car."

"Good for him, by God," Potts drawled.

"I suppose," Hoxie said, glaring at both of them, "that the dealer was a black man."

"Paper didn't say," Lewis told him. "But what difference does it make?"

"I'll *tell* you what difference it makes," Hoxie said, jabbing an accusing finger at both of them. "If he had killed a *white* dude, he wouldn't be here taking no treatments; he'd be waiting on Death Row to get the needle."

Potts grunted disdainfully, looking down at the floor, shaking his bald head. Lewis just shrugged and said, "Maybe, maybe not. Works out about the same, anyway. The kid got fourteen years for second-degree murder. Far as he's concerned, it's still a death sentence."

"Oh, yeah?" Hoxie said, his voice almost a growl. "Why's that?"

"He's got it in the lymph glands," Lewis explained. "I seen on his chart that he's getting megavolts that go three inches under the skin. That means it's prob'ly spread too far to stop. I read up on all this cancer stuff at the library. Even money he ain't got six months left."

Hoxie started to say something, reconsidered, and looked away. His fixed, dark countenance seemed to soften a little, and he blinked rapidly several times. Potts sat up straight instead of slouching. Lewis chewed on the inside of his mouth. Alan Lampley's mortality had somehow synchronized with their own.

None of them said anything further until the young prisoner's treatment was over and his guards brought him back out. Lewis and the others then looked at him with new interest; he was a person now, with a story as well as a dread disease.

When Potts rose to go in for his own treatment, he impulsively paused at the door and asked, "How long you fellers got after your treatment before you get sick?"

Lewis shrugged. "I got about three hours."

" 'Bout four for me," Hoxie said. "Why?"

"Well, I don't get real sick, you know, but I start to lose my taste after two or three hours. So what I do is, I go down Harrison Street 'bout three blocks, toward the lake there, and around the corner on Ashland Avenue is a little bar called Billy Daly's Place. I like beer, see—nice, cold, draft beer. An' I only have a little while to drink it before my taste goes. So I was just thinking, if you fellers want to mosey on down when you get done here, I'll buy you a pitcher of beer. What d'you say?"

Lewis and Hoxie exchanged looks. Lewis sensed that it was up to him to speak first; Hoxie's expression was again almost hostile.

"I wouldn't mind," Lewis said. He and Potts looked at Hoxie, who glared back at them. "Come on, man," Lewis said quietly. "We're all the same inside—especially now."

Hoxie nodded curtly. "I be there."

Billy Daly's Place was one of those Chicago neighborhood taverns that opened at eight A.M. to accommodate people who had to have one or two drinks to steady their morning shakes so they could go to work. Those who worked nearby were back in at lunchtime to steady their afternoon shakes.

When Lewis arrived, Potts was at a small table in the back, almost finished with his first pitcher of cold draft. By the time Hoxie got there, Potts was well into his second pitcher, and Lewis was working hard on his first. When the bartender put a glass and pitcher in front of Hoxie, he reached for his wallet, but Potts held up a hand and said, "Hey, no, I already paid for one pitcher apiece for you fellers. After that, you're on your own."

As men who drink together for the first time invariably do, they got around to telling each other about themselves. Potts, who had drunk the most, got around to it first.

"I come up to Chicago from a little town in Tennessee to find work. I had a good job down there in a paper mill, but some Japanese land group bought up all the property and closed down the mill. They was supposed to be going to develop some kind of industrial complex; said there'd be good jobs for ever'body. That was two years ago; they ain't developed nothin' so far. I went on unemployment for six months, then picked up odd jobs here and there for another six. But with a wife and three kids to take care of, things just kept gettin' tighter and tighter, so finally I got on the bus and come on up here. Got me a pretty decent fac'try job with Motorola. Moved into a ratty little kitchenette so I'd be able to send home enough money ever' week to take care of my family. I was riding the bus down twice a month to be with 'em for a weekend. Ever'thing seemed to be going along fine—then I started having what they call focal seizures, where my arms and legs would start shaking like I was freezing to death. Fac'try doctor sent me for a MRI scan and they found a brainstem glioma. They put me on a anticonvulsant drug and started radiation. I collect disability pay, but it ain't enough to send anything home. So me and my wife worked it out for her and the kids to go on state welfare by saying I'd abandoned my family. Now they get along pretty good—but I can't come around in case somebody was to see me there. So here I am: got no job, got no family, got no hair, and ain't got no future to speak of." He grinned crookedly. "Like the feller once said: Life's a bitch—and then you die."

"Man, ain't that the truth," Hoxie enthusiastically agreed. "A

year ago, I had it knocked, you know? Me and my old lady had just got divorced after thirty-two years of marriage. It had got down to the point where we couldn't stand being in the same room with each other. I tell you, she had turned into the meanest damned woman that ever drew breath. Never happy. Nothing pleased her. She could find things to complain about before they even *happened.* Like she'd say, 'I know what you're gonna do next Wednesday. You gonna go out with those no-good friends of yours.' Next *Wednesday* she's complaining about, and it ain't even *here* yet.

"Anyway, I finally had enough of it; I moved out and we got divorced. I took early retirement from my job at the post office, and that was when I *really* started living. I got a little place of my own, got a new TV, new stereo, new set of wheels, and—best of all—I started running around with this little fox in her second year of *college.* She had one of those father-complex things, you know; had to have an older man in her life. 'Course, everybody said I was having a mid-life crisis; tru'f is, I was having a *ball.* Only thing was, I started getting these damned sore throats all the time, and my voice would go hoarse." Hoxie smiled widely. "This young fox of mine, she say it sounded sexy. After awhile, though, it didn't *feel* sexy. When I went to the doctor about it, I found out why."

Hoxie sat back and sighed wearily. "Now the young fox is gone, the apartment's gone, the new wheels are gone, my daughter and her husband have the TV and the stereo, and I got a room in their basement where I'm welcome to stay as long as they's the beneficiaries on my life insurance." He raised his beer glass in salute. "Like you said, life *is* a bitch."

Hoxie fell silent then, and he and Potts sat looking at Lewis with expressions that said: *Okay, man, what's your story?* It took Lewis a few moments but he finally caught on. All he could really say, however, was that the only effect cancer had on his lifestyle was that he had to get his Thursday bets down early, and he'd begun to brood about dying in a cold climate.

"That's it?" Hoxie said incredulously. "Hell, you might as well not even *have* cancer."

"That's fer sure," Potts agreed. "I've knowed people with the flu had their lives more messed up than you."

"Well, excuse the hell out of me," Lewis said, annoyed. "Sorry I don't have something worse to tell you. Hope I ain't ruined your day."

Potts and Hoxie exchanged glances and then suddenly burst out laughing.

"You know what this reminds me of?" said Hoxie. "The day I tol' my daughter and son-in-law about my diagnosis. Know what my fool son-in-law said? He said it was too bad I couldn't have a

respectable disease like sickle-cell anemia. Said cancer was a white person's disease!"

"You think that's bad," Potts told him, "listen to this. I was feeling kind of down about a month ago, so I went to see this Baptist preacher, thinking maybe he could console me a little, jack up my spirits, you know. Guess what the idiot said. He told me to thank God I had a disease like cancer instead of something *impure* like AIDS. Said AIDS was the Lord's way of punishing the homosexuals of the world, but that cancer was for *decent* folks. An' he was *serious,* too!"

Lewis loosened up then and joined in the laughter, although normally he was not the laughing type. He tried never to show *any* emotion; he did not consider emotion appropriate for a gambler. But with these two men, it did not seem unfitting in any way. Despite the conspicuous differences among the three of them, along with the fact that it had taken them more than two months to even say "Good morning" in the waiting room, Lewis now began to feel at ease with them, and sensed that each one of them felt the same with him and with each other. All of a sudden, it seemed as if they had been friends for a long time.

When their laughter subsided, and before they could order more beer, Lewis began to feel sick and said he had better leave; he needed to be back in his apartment before the intense nausea hit him. Hoxie said he would leave, too, since his own nausea was imminent. Potts decided he would leave with them, saying, "No sense in drinking it if you can't taste it."

It was then that Potts suggested that they meet there again Saturday afternoon to have a few pitchers and watch the Bears game on the bar's big-screen TV. Lewis and Hoxie, to their mutual surprise, readily agreed to the plan.

On his way home on the bus, with the numbers and odds and calculations in his mind beginning to spin about from the buzz of the beer, Lewis inexplicably blocked them out and again began thinking of Alan Lampley. Lewis had thought it was bad to have to spend the last months of his life in cold and dirty Chicago, but what must it be like to have to spend them locked in a prison cell?

The three of them began to meet at the bar several times a week: Wednesday nights before their treatment; Thursday afternoons following treatment; Monday evenings to watch a preseason Bulls game. They began to talk about Alan Lampley. Casually, at first, wistfully.

"Too bad that boy can't join us for beers," Potts said at one point.

"Yeah," said Lewis. "Hell, big spenders like us, we'd even buy for the guards."

Another time, Hoxie said, out of the blue, "Damn shame, kid that young having to deal with cancer *and* prison."

"Yeah, it ain't like he killed some upright citizen," said Lewis. "All's he done was ice a drug dealer."

"It ain't right," said Hoxie.

"They call that justice?" Potts demanded.

"Don't confuse justice with the law," Lewis said sagely. "Them's two different things."

On Thursdays now, when the guards brought Alan in, the three began bobbing their chins at him, nodding, giving him a wink. Potts even stood up one day to talk to him, but one of the guards got between them and said to Alan, "Just keep moving, Lampley." To Potts, the other guard said, "Sorry, the prisoner isn't allowed to talk to anyone except medical personnel."

But they knew that Alan had recognized their overtures of friendliness, understanding, even commiseration, because he began to nod back their greetings, and even grin a little. The little signals they passed to him seemed to say: *You're not alone.*

In the bar, the three new friends, after a pitcher or two, began to daydream of helping Alan. "If I was to win me the lottery," Potts said, "you know what I'd do with part of it? I'd hire the bes' damn criminal lawyer in the city to try and get that boy paroled or something, so's he could die in some real nice place."

"Yeah," Lewis said drily, "like us."

"If *I* was to win the lottery," Hoxie said, "I wouldn't mess with no lawyers. I'd hire me three or four real tough street dudes to jump them guards and turn that boy loose. Give him enough money to skip out to South America or someplace."

"Now *that's* a good idea," Lewis allowed.

"Only thing bad about it is ain't none of us gonna win no lottery," Potts said glumly.

"Seems like," Hoxie said, "I always be reading how some group or organization or something be trying to get some worthless piece of shit off Death Row 'cause he's got a low IQ, or his mamma whipped his ass too much when he was a kid, or *something.* But don't nobody seem to be helping this boy. Leastwise, nobody we know of."

"People don't help other people 'cause they've usually got something to lose by doing it," Lewis said. "Only time people *really* go out on a limb for somebody is when they got nothin' to lose."

"You mean people like us?" Potts asked.

Neither Lewis nor Hoxie answered.

For a long time, nobody said anything. But they all knew what the others were thinking.

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They got down to it the next time they met, when Potts said, "I wish there was some way *we* could help the kid."

Without consciously realizing it, that was what Lewis had been waiting for. "We could," he said simply.

"What do you mean?" Hoxie asked. "How?"

"Get the jump on those two guards. Be easy. They ain't expecting no trouble from three sick guys like us. We could take 'em down with no problem, let the kid go, and use them shackles they got on him to chain up the guards and the radiology tech in the scan room. Before anybody knew what was happening, we could all be out of the hospital and gone."

"Yeah, but gone where?" Potts asked. "The hospital knows who we are, where we live—hell, we'd be caught before lunchtime."

"Not if we had an escape plan," Lewis said.

Hoxie frowned, but with interest. "What kind of escape plan?"

"I ain't sure," Lewis admitted. "But it'd have to be a plan where we could all get out of the country. Go to someplace where we couldn't be extradited. And where we could still get our treatments. Like Argentina."

"Lewis, good buddy, you are dreaming," Potts said. "An escape plan like that would take a whole hell of a lot of money."

"Well," Lewis said quietly. "I just happen to know where we can get our hands on a whole hell of a lot of money."

He told them about the four suitcases of cash that he saw being brought into the betting parlor run by his friend Ralph every Thursday morning. Hoxie's eyebrows went up.

"Man, are you talking about sticking up one of them parlors that's owned by Cicero Charley Waxman? If you are, that ain't too smart."

"Who's Cicero Charley Waxman?" Potts asked.

"Big-time rackets boss who runs the gambling on the North Side," Hoxie told him. "We steal from him, he'll have his hoods after us like fleas after a junkyard dog."

Potts shrugged his skinny shoulders. "So what? Look, if we busted this kid loose, we'd have the Chicago cops and the Illinois state police after us anyways. A few hoodlums wouldn't make no difference."

"He's right," Lewis said. "If our escape plan worked, we get away from everybody. If it didn't, what's the difference who catches us? We go to jail or we get killed. We're dying anyways." Lewis leaned forward with his elbows on the table and lowered his voice. "Look, I'm gonna be straight with you guys. I want those four suitcases of dough as much for myself as I do for the kid. I don't know if I'm gonna beat this cancer or not—just like you guys don't know if you'll beat yours. But if I don't beat it, I'd like to spend my last days in someplace clean and warm; maybe some little beach vil-

lage not too far from a city where there's a modern hospital where I can get my treatments—"

"You know, I got the same feeling," Hoxie admitted. "I'd like to have a way to get the hell out of my daughter's house. I don't want to die in no basement room. That little beach village sounds mighty good to me."

Lewis and Hoxie looked at Potts. The Southerner nodded slowly. "I guess I got a reason, too. I'd like to have my wife and kids with me when I go. Somebody to say goodbye to besides strangers." He blushed slightly. "No offense."

"Looks like we all understand each other," Lewis said.

They sat back and raised their beer glasses in a silent toast.

They met in Lewis's shabby little apartment the following evening and, over pizza and beer, began to make plans.

"First thing in the morning," Lewis said, "we go downtown to the federal building and get passports. Then we gotta figure some way to get a gun—"

"I can cover that," Hoxie said. "My son-in-law gots a .32-caliber Saturday-night special he keeps in a drawer nex' to his bed. It's a little gun, but he had it chromed and it looks bigger."

"Just one gun all we need?" Potts asked.

"Yeah, the other two guys can keep their hands in their pockets like they got guns, too," Lewis said. "Anyway, we'll take guns off the guys carrying the money. They're bound to be strapped."

"Okay. What else?" Hoxie asked.

"Plane tickets," said Lewis. "I checked out the airlines this morning. There's an Argentine Air flight from here to Buenos Aires at nine o'clock every night. One-way fare is eleven hundred and eighty bucks, first class."

"First class!" said Potts.

"Certainly," Lewis confirmed. "We'll be in the money; you don't think we're gonna fly coach, do you?"

"Where we gonna get the money to buy first-class tickets?"

"We don't need no money. The airline will hold the tickets at the airport until two hours before flight time; we pay for them when we check in. But we do need a little front money for a few other things."

"Like what?" Hoxie wanted to know.

"We need to rent a car. We need to rent a motel room out near the airport. And we need to buy some clothes for the kid; we can't have him running around in that orange jumpsuit. Either of you guys got a credit card?"

"Not me," Hoxie said glumly. "My daughter canceled mine. She gives me an *allowance* now, like I was some kid."

"I got a Visa card," said Potts. "I don't use it much; just for groceries and stuff when I run short of cash."

"What's the credit limit on it?"

"Five hundred."

"That ought to be enough. You got a driver's license?"

"Yeah. Tennessee license."

"That'll do. We'll rent the car at the airport the night before, and drop it off when we go to catch the flight."

"We taking the kid with us?" Potts asked. Lewis shook his head.

"Can't. He won't have no passport. We'll give him a fourth of the money and then he's on his own." Hoxie and Potts exchanged cheerless looks. Lewis shrugged. "It's the best we can do for him."

For a long moment then, the three men were silent: looking at each other, looking down at the remains of the pizza, sipping beer that was turning warm, drumming silent fingers. It was a brief time of limbo, a heavy interval in which any one of them could have hesitated just a hint, looked even a trace tentative, and maybe the whole unlikely scheme would have broken to pieces in their minds and evaporated like some juvenile plan to steal a math test the night before the exam. But none of them faltered.

"Well then," Potts drawled, "when do we do it?"

"A week from Thursday," Lewis said. "We should have everything set up by a week from Thursday. We'll do it then."

When a week from Thursday came and Lewis's friend Ralph opened the parlor door to let Lewis in to make his early bets, the parlor manager was surprised to find Lewis accompanied by two men he had never seen before. "What the hell?" he said, holding the door only partly open.

"These are a couple of guys I go to the hospital with," Lewis explained. "Just let 'em stand inside out of the cold while they wait for me, okay?"

"Damn it, Lew, I shouldn't even be letting *you* in before the place opens," Ralph complained. "Now you're taking advantage by showing up with two guys I don't even know—"

"They're *okay,*" Lewis assured him, gently shouldering his way in and gesturing for Potts and Hoxie to follow. "They'll wait by the door, you won't even know they're here, Ralph. Come on, let me get my bets down . . ."

Reluctantly, Ralph closed and locked the door behind them. Walking around the betting counter, he studied Lewis curiously. There was something different about him. Suddenly it dawned on Ralph what it was.

"Where's your racing form?" he asked. It was the first time in twenty years that he could remember seeing Lewis without a racing form either in his hand or sticking out of a pocket.

"I, uh—guess I forgot it," Lewis said. He tried to sound casual, but he knew at once that he had blown the ploy; the nervousness that he heard in his own usually sanguine voice betrayed him.

Ralph glanced at Potts and Hoxie, who were just inside the door, watching intently. His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "All right, Lewis, what's going on?" he demanded.

Lewis locked eyes with him but did not answer. Ralph wet his lips. Swallowing, he moved one hand to reach under the counter. There was a red telephone under there that was Cicero Charley Waxman's hotline. Just taking it off the hook without saying anything was enough to send a quartet of thugs from the neighborhood to check out the problem.

Before Ralph could get to the receiver, however, Lewis reached over and grabbed his arm. "Keep both hands up on the counter, Ralph," he said quietly.

Hoxie walked over and drew his son-in-law's chromed revolver. "Do what the man say," he ordered.

Ralph looked at Lewis in utter disbelief. "Are you out of your mind, Lewis?"

Before anyone could say anything else, another knock sounded at the door. Lewis quickly pulled Ralph around the counter. He jerked his head at Hoxie and the black man hurried to stand behind where the door swung open. Potts stood with him.

"Open the door, Ralph," Lewis instructed, nudging him toward it.

"You're crazy," Ralph muttered.

"Open it."

Ralph did as he was told, and immediately through the door came a pair of burly men, each carrying two suitcases. Before it could register with them what was happening, Potts slammed the door behind them and locked it, and Hoxie stepped out to face them with the revolver leveled.

"Put the bags down and stay real still!" Lewis snapped, all nervousness dissolved from his voice by adrenaline.

"Do what he says," Ralph told the men. "He's crazy. Don't make trouble."

The couriers remained still while Potts relieved each of them of an automatic pistol and fished around in their coat pockets until he found the keys to the suitcases.

"All right, get in that closet," Lewis then ordered. "You too, Ralph."

It was a small closet behind the counter, the door usually open, with shelves on which the parlor kept pads of betting slips, boxes of ballpoint pens, rolls of calculator tape, cartons of disposable coffee cups, and other supplies. There was hardly room for all three

men to squeeze in together. As Ralph followed the two couriers in, he shook his head in pity at Lewis.

"You've bought yourself a lot of trouble, Lewis, for a few thousand bucks."

"A *few* thousand, huh?" Lewis smirked.

"That's what I said, smart guy. A *few*. What, did you think you and your friends were going to get rich here today?"

"Four suitcases full of money," Lewis pointed out. "A week's take from all of Cicero Charley's parlors—"

"That's not parlor money," Ralph said evenly. "That's football-game parlay-card money from all the cigar stores and candy stores and bars. Ninety-five percent of it is minimum bets. You've got yourself four bags of mostly dollar bills, Lewis. Maybe twenty, twenty-five thousand, maximum." Ralph pointed a stiff finger at him. "But you got a million bucks' worth of grief from Cicero Charley."

A stunned look on his face, Lewis guided his friend into the closet and closed the door. Turning, he found Hoxie and Potts staring at him with sick expressions. Stepping over to Potts, he took the suitcase keys out of his hand.

"Do the door," he said to Hoxie.

The black man shoved the revolver into a coat pocket, drew a ball-peen hammer from under his belt, and from another pocket got out a handful of four-inch carpenter nails. As he proceeded to nail the closet door shut, Lewis knelt and unlocked one of the suitcases. It was filled with sheaves of cash held together by rubber bands. Checking half a dozen of them, he found that Ralph had been telling him the truth: There were occasional fives and tens mixed in the currency, but the vast majority of the bills were singles.

"We done stepped in something soft now," Hoxie said, looking down from his hammering."

"What the hell we gonna do?" Potts asked, his voice breaking as he stood there incongruously with a large automatic pistol in each hand.

"For now, we're gonna follow the plan and get out of here," Lewis said. He bobbed his chin at Hoxie. "Finish the door." To Potts, "Get the car." He himself tore all the phone wires out of the wall, including the hotline.

Moments later, Potts pulled up in a rented Buick and opened the trunk. Lewis and Hoxie carried the suitcases out one at a time and loaded them. Then they all crowded into the front seat and Potts drove off

"We got two decisions to make," Lewis said tensely. "One: Do we follow our plan to spring the kid—or do the three of us make a run for it now? Two: If we do spring him, do we give him part of the

money or just cut him loose?"

"Making a run from here ain't gonna give us much of a head start," Potts reasoned. "We started this because we were sorry for the kid. If we don't go ahead with that part of it, we'll really feel like fools. I think we ought to spring him."

"Me too," Hoxie agreed. "But I *don't* think we ought to split the dough with him. We gon' need it a lot worse'n him. I mean, Cicero Charley ain't gon' be after *him*. I say give him the clothes we bought him and a few hundred bucks. Let him take his chances."

Lewis thought it over for a few moments, then concurred. "Sounds fair to me. Head for the hospital."

They parked on the visitors' lot of the Cook County Hospital complex and unobtrusively made their way to the Radiology Building. When they got upstairs to Outpatient Radiology, they entered and signed in as usual, then took separate seats in the familiar waiting room as they always did. From past experience, Lewis had already calculated that the odds were five to four that they wouldn't have to wait more than fifteen minutes. He was right; they only had to wait eleven.

When the two prison guards walked in with Alan Lampley between them, they proceeded, as usual, directly to the treatment-room door. As they were about to enter, Lewis nodded to Potts and the lanky Southerner jumped to his feet and drew one of the guns taken from the money couriers.

"Don't shoot or I'll move!" he ordered. The guards, Alan Lampley, Lewis, and Hoxie all looked at him with mixed expressions. Potts swallowed and said, "I mean, don't *m-m-move* or I'll shoot!"

"Take it easy, mister," one of the guards said. "Nobody's moving."

Hoxie quickly stepped up behind the guards and disarmed them. "We gon' be able to open a gun shop pretty soon," he muttered.

Just then, the door to the treatment room opened and the radiology technician came out. Potts turned the gun on him. "Hand it! Put your holds up! Damn it, I mean *hold* it and put your hands up!"

The technician froze. Alan Lampley looked around incredulously. "What's going on?" he asked.

"You'll find out in a minute," Lewis told him. "All right, everybody into the treatment room. Move it!"

In the treatment room, Lewis searched the guards, found keys, and unlocked Alan Lampley's cuffs and waist chain. "Get out of that jumpsuit," he said. To the technician, he said, "Take off that lab coat and your pants. Hurry up!"

In less than five minutes, Lewis and the others had the two guards and the technician, in his underwear, handcuffed and

chained to the floor-mounted Cobalt-60 X-ray machine in the treatment room.

"You won't get away with this," one of the guards warned.

"Five to two you're right," Lewis agreed. He turned to his cohorts and their liberated prisoner. "Okay, let's go. Straight down to the fire stairs at the end of the hall."

Six minutes later, they were in the rented Buick, driving off the parking lot.

From the rear seat, where he sat with Hoxie, Alan Lampley said, "You guys are crazy. You just got yourselves in a hell of a lot of trouble."

"We thought you'd consider it a favor," Lewis said wryly. "So you wouldn't have to spend your last six months or so in prison."

"I don't have six months," Alan said. "They figure three at the most."

"Well, three, then," Potts said, glancing back over his shoulder from the driver's seat. "Wouldn't you rather be out than in?"

"Sure, I would," Alan admitted. "But not for the trouble you guys are into now. I mean, why'd you do it? You don't even know me, or anything about me--"

"Yeah, we do, son," said Hoxie. "We know why you're in jail; about your sister and that drug dealer an' all."

"Anyway," said Lewis, "we're doing it for ourselves, too. We pulled a stickup this morning to get enough dough so we could *all* live out what time we got left in a little style. On'y thing is, we didn't get as much as we figured. But we can still give you enough dough to get out of town, maybe go out to Las Vegas or L. A. or someplace and at least die a free man."

"Canada," Alan said. "I want to go to Canada."

Lewis grimaced. "What the hell for? It's cold up there. Don't you wanna go someplace warm?"

"I've got an uncle in Canada," Alan explained. "He went up there years ago to avoid the draft during the Vietnam War. He's got a little badger ranch up near Moose Jaw, that's in Saskatchewan. Raises badgers and harvests their hair like people shear sheep for their wool. They use the hair to make expensive shaving brushes. If I could get up to my uncle's ranch, I know he'd let me stay there and look after me for the time I've got left."

"Wouldn't work," Lewis said, shaking his head. "You couldn't get there without no ID of any kind: no driver's license, no passport, nothing. You'd never get in."

"I'd get in, all right," Alan promised. "I've been up there and gone on fishing trips with my uncle. There's places in the Grasslands National Park on the Montana border where you can just walk into Canada like you were crossing the street. You just get me a Grey-

hound bus ticket to Shelby, Montana. I'll take it from there."

Lewis and Potts exchanged looks, and Hoxie nodded to them in the rearview mirror.

"You got a deal, kid," Lewis said.

In the motel room they had rented, about a mile from O'Hare Airport, Alan showered and dressed in the new clothes they had bought for him while Lewis and the others opened the four stolen suitcases, dumped all the money on one of the beds, and set about counting it.

"Throw all the ones on the other bed," Lewis said. "I'll start putting them in hundred-dollar bunches with rubber bands. You guys sort the bigger bills."

"That ain't gonna be hard," Potts cracked.

While they were counting, Alan finished getting ready and came into the room. He looked distressed. "I can't do this," he said. "I can't let you guys go on with this plan. It's not fair. I'm going to get away and you guys are going to get caught and go to prison. Then in three months or so, I'm going to be dead and they're going to be bringing *you* guys in from Joliet for radiation treatments—and *you're* going to die in prison." He shook his head determinedly. "It's all wrong. Look, if I give myself up, maybe they'll go easy on you. Maybe you'll just get probation."

The three men who had freed him exchanged glances, each in his own way moved by Alan's concern.

"Look, Alan," said Lewis, "it's nice of you to feel that way about us, but the fact is, it ain't only you and us and the cops that are involved in this thing. See all this money here? We stole it from Cicero Charley Waxman, a mobster—and Cicero Charley don't grant probation. If he catches up with us, we're dead—and he'll catch up with us just as easy inside prison as out."

"Maybe easier," Hoxie amended.

Potts went over and draped an arm around Alan's shoulders. "What he's saying, old buddy, is that we're up to our necks in this thing. Ain't no way out for us now. We got to play it right to the end. It just might turn out that the only thing we get out of this is knowing we helped you get away. You take that away from us an' it could turn out that we done it all for nothing. You don't want to do that to us, do you?"

"No," Alan shook his head, "I don't."

"You best get on up to that little badger ranch then," Hoxie told him quietly. "That way we get *something* out of it."

"All right," Alan said, lowering his eyes. He looked like he might cry.

Lewis guided Alan over to one of the open suitcases, which was now neatly packed with bundles of currency. "There's three thou-

sand dollars in one-dollar bills, another fifteen hundred in fives and tens, and here"—he handed Alan a separate bundle—"is another five hundred in mixed bills to put in your pocket. Potts is going to drive you over to the Greyhound terminal near the airport. He'll go in and buy you a ticket on the first bus leaving; it's safer for him to do it, 'cause there won't be no pictures of us out yet. Then you take the ticket and get on the bus. Wherever it takes you, you can start out from there for Canada. Eight to five you'll make it."

Alan shook hands with Lewis and Hoxie, and left with Potts.

Lewis and Hoxie went back to counting dollar bills.

When Potts returned, Lewis and Hoxie were watching television.

"We made the evening news," Lewis told him.

"Made it big-time," Hoxie added. "Lead story."

"They got a picture of the kid on there, but none of us yet. We got the city cops, state police, and FBI after us. They got the feds in on it 'cause they say we're prob'ly gonna leave the state and that's something called 'Interstate Flight.' How'd the kid do?"

"Good," said Potts. "Got him on a bus to Omaha, Nebraska. He said he can make Montana easy from there, then just walk into Canada through the woods." Potts looked at one of the beds, which was piled with bundles of money. "All counted, huh?"

"All counted," Lewis confirmed. "My friend Ralph estimated it pretty close. Total take was twenty-three thousand six hundred and twelve dollars. Minus the five grand we gave the kid, leaves us with eighteen thousand six hundred twelve. That comes to sixty-two hundred and four bucks apiece."

"Damn poor wages," Hoxie muttered, "considering we got all that law *plus* Cicero Charley after us."

"Yeah, sixty-two hunnerd ain't gonna get us far," said Potts.

"We could still make Buenos Aires," Lewis pointed out. "At least we'd be out of the country, and each have five grand to last us down there."

"Count me out," Potts said. "I got my wife and three kids to think about. Only reason I went in on this was I figured to have enough money to send for them, so's they could be with me when I die. Since that ain't worked out, I'll prob'ly just send my share of the dough to them and go on the bum around the city here until I get picked up."

"Hell, you can send them my puny little share, too," said Hoxie. "I'll go on the bum with you. Anything to get out of my daughter's basement."

"There is one other thing we could do," Lewis said quietly. He was sitting with his eyebrows knitted together in a frown, looking like a cross between James Cagney and an owl. "I don't know if you guys would go for it or not."

"Well, let's hear it. I mean, we ain't never let you down yet, have we?" Potts said drily.

"Yeah, tell us all about it," Hoxie declared. "Hell, we wouldn't be where we are today if it wasn't for you, my man."

"I thought of something while we was counting all them dollar bills," Lewis explained. "It was something my friend Ralph said to me one Thursday morning when he let me into the parlor early to lay my bets. He said I was lucky he was letting me in at all—especially on Thursday. Because Thursdays and Fridays was count days. Thursdays *and Fridays.* If the chump change from parlay cards comes in on Thursdays, the serious money from track and sports betting must come in on Fridays. I picked the wrong day for us. The big bucks should be delivered in the morning."

Hoxie looked askance at him. "Lewis, are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"Next thing you know," Potts said, "you'll be wanting to hold up a bank."

"I thought about that," Lewis admitted, "but with the security and alarms and all, I figured it was nine to five we'd get caught."

"And you think we *won't* get caught if we rob the same place tomorrow that we robbed today?" Hoxie asked incredulously.

"That's exactly what I think," Lewis said. "Right now, Cicero Charley thinks he's lucky that we hit him on Thursday. Ralph's already admitted to him that he let me in on Thursdays only. Cicero Charley's got no idea I even know that Friday is a count day, too. Plus which, by now he already knows from the news what else we done, springing the kid, and he knows the law's after us. Right now, he figures we're running for our lives. He wouldn't think in a million years that we'd hit him again tomorrow."

"That friend of yours, Ralph, ain't gonna open the door again," Potts pointed out.

"He won't have to. Look, we got guns. We take down the couriers on the sidewalk, after they get out of their car. We can do this in two minutes, be in our own car, and be gone. We'll slash their tires so they can't follow."

Potts leaned forward, a look of intense interest on his thin face. "What do you think the odds are, Lewis?"

"Eight to one, our favor," Lewis said confidently.

"Hmmm," Hoxie said, "that high?"

"Absolutely."

It only took a moment for them to decide.

"I'm in," Potts said.

"Me too," Hoxie added.

Lewis smiled.

Potts telephoned out for pizza and beer, and when it was delivered, the three dying men began planning their second stickup. ●

BEAUTIFUL

by Jeffery Deaver

With his most recent hardcover novel, *The Blue Nowhere*, on the *New York Times* Bestseller List, and his most recent paperback, *The Empty Chair*, having claimed a place there in the weeks following its publication, Jeffery Deaver is enjoying enormous, and much-deserved, popularity. *The Blue Nowhere* and several other Deaver books are currently under option for film.

He'd found her already.

Oh no, she thought. Lord, no. . . .

Eyes filling with tears of despair, wracked with sudden nausea, the young woman sagged against the window frame as she stared through a crack in the blinds.

The battered Ford pickup—as gray as the turbulent Atlantic ocean a few hundred yards up the road—eased to a stop in front of her house in this pretty neighborhood of Crowell, Massachusetts, north of Boston. This was the very truck she'd come to dread, the truck that regularly careened through her dreams, sometimes with its tires on fire, sometimes shooting blood from its tailpipe, sometimes piloted by an invisible driver bent on tearing her heart from her chest.

Oh no. . . .

The engine shut off and tapped as it cooled. The dusk light was failing and the interior of the pickup was dark but she knew the occupant was staring at her. In her mind she could see his features as clearly as if he were standing ten feet away in broad August sunlight. Kari Swanson knew he'd have that faint smile of impatience on his face, that he'd be tugging an earlobe marred with two piercings long ago infected and closed up. She knew his breathing would be labored.

Her own breath coming in panicked gasps, hands trembling, Kari drew back from the window. Crawling to the front hallway, she tore open the drawer of a small table and took out the pistol. She looked outside again.

The driver didn't approach the house. He simply played his all-too-familiar game: sitting in the front seat of his old junker and staring at her.

He'd found her already. Just one week after she'd moved here! He'd followed her over two thousand miles. All the effort to cover her tracks had been futile.

The brief peace she'd enjoyed was gone.

David Dale had found her.

Kari—born Catherine Kelley Swanson—was a sensible, pleasant-mannered twenty-eight-year-old who'd been raised in the Midwest by a loving family. She was a natural-born student with a cum laude degree to her name and plans for a Ph.D. Her career until the move here—fashion modeling—had provided her with both a large investment account and a chance to work regularly in such pampering locales as Paris, Cape Town, London, Rio, Bali, and Bermuda. She drove a nice car, had always bought herself modest but comfortable houses, and had provided her parents with a plump annuity.

A seemingly enviable life . . . and yet Kari Swanson had been forever plagued by a debilitating problem.

She was completely beautiful.

She'd hit her full height—six feet—at seventeen, and her weight hadn't varied more than a pound or so off its present mark of 121. Her hair was naturally golden and her skin had a flawless translucent eggshell tone that often left makeup artists with little to do at photo shoots but dab on the currently in-vogue lipstick and eyeshadow.

People, Details, W, Rolling Stone, Paris Match, the *London Times,* and *Entertainment Weekly* had all described Kari Swanson as the "most beautiful woman in the world," or some version of that title. And virtually *every* publication in the industrialized world that even touched on fashion had run a picture of her at one time or another, most of those pictures appearing on the magazines' covers.

That her spellbinding beauty could be a liability was a lesson she learned early. Young Cathy—she didn't become "Kari" the supermodel until age twenty—longed for a normal teenhood, but her appearance kept interfering. She was drawn to the scholastic and artistic crowds in high school, but they rejected her point-blank, assuming either that she was a flighty airhead or that by applying for the literary magazine or history club or forensic society she was mocking the gawky students in those circles.

On the other hand, she was fiercely courted by the cliquish in-crowd of cheerleaders and athletes, few of whom she could stand. To her embarrassment, she was regularly elected queen of various school pageants and dances, even when she refused to compete for the titles.

The dating situation was even more impossible. Most of the nice, interesting boys froze like rabbits in front of her and didn't have the courage to ask her out, assuming they'd be rejected. The jocks

and studs relentlessly pursued her—though their motive, of course, was simply to be seen in public with the most beautiful girl in school or to bed her as a trophy lay (naturally none succeeded, but stinging rumors abounded; it seemed that the more adamant the rejection, the more the spurned boy bragged about his conquest).

Her four years at Stanford were virtually the same—modeling, schoolwork, and hours of loneliness, interrupted by rare evenings and weekends with a few friends who didn't care what she looked like (tellingly, her first lover—a man she was still friendly with—was blind).

After graduation she'd hoped that life would be different, that the spell of her beauty wouldn't be as potent with those who were older and busy making their way in the world. How wrong that was. . . . Men remained true to their dubious missions and, ignoring Kari the person, pursued her as greedily and thoughtlessly as ever. Women grew even more resentful of her than in school, as their figures changed thanks to children and food and sedentary lives.

Kari threw herself into her modeling, easily getting assignments with Ford, Elite, and the other top agencies. But her successful career created a curious irony: She was desperately lonely and yet she had no privacy. Simply because she was beautiful, complete strangers considered themselves intimate friends and constantly approached her in public or sent her long letters describing their intimate secrets, begging for advice and offering her their own opinions on what she should do with her life.

She grew to hate the simple tasks that she'd enjoyed as a child—Christmas shopping, playing softball, fishing, jogging. A trip to the grocery store was often a horror; men would speed into line behind her and flirt mercilessly. More than once she fled from the local Safeway leaving behind a full grocery cart.

But she never felt any real terror until David Dale, the man in the gray pickup truck. Kari had first noticed him in a crowd of onlookers when she was on a job for *Vogue* two years ago.

People always watched photo shoots, of course. They were fascinated with physiques they would never have, with designer clothes that cost their monthly salary, with the gorgeous faces they'd seen gazing at them from newsstands around the country. But something had seemed different about this man. Something troubling.

Not just his massive size—well over six feet tall with huge legs and heavy thighs, long, dangling arms. What had bothered her was the way he'd looked at her through his chunky out-of-fashion glasses: His expression had been one of familiarity.

As if he knew a great deal about her.

And with a chill Kari had realized that *he* was familiar to *her,* too—she'd seen him at other shoots.

Hell, she'd thought, I've got a stalker.

Then—as he'd realized she was looking at him—something even more chilling had happened. His face had broken into a faint smile of impatience. Meaning, it'd seemed to her: Well, here I am. What are you waiting for? Come talk to me.

At first David Dale would simply appear at photo shoots like the one in Pacific Grove, parking his pickup truck nearby and standing silently just outside the ring of activity. Then she began to see him hanging out around the doors of the modeling agencies that repped her. He began to write her long letters about himself: his lonely, troubled childhood, his parents' deaths, his former girlfriends (the stories sounded made-up), his current job as an environmental engineer (Kari read "janitor"), his struggle with his weight, his love of Dungeons and Dragons games, television shows he watched. He also knew a frightening amount of information about her—where she'd grown up, what she'd studied at Stanford, her likes and dislikes. He'd clearly read all of the interviews she'd ever given. He took to sending her presents, usually innocuous things like slippers, DayTimers, picture frames, pen-and-pencil sets. Occasionally he'd send her lingerie: tasteful Victoria's Secret items, in her exact size, with a gift receipt courteously enclosed. She threw everything out.

Kari generally ignored Dale but the first time he'd parked his gray pickup in front of her house in Santa Monica, she'd stormed up to it and confronted him. Tugging at his damaged ear, breathing in an asthmatic, eerie way, he ignored her rage and fixed her with an adoring gaze, muttering, "Beautiful, beautiful." Upset, she returned to her house. Dale, however, happily pulled out a thermos and began sipping coffee. He remained parked on the street until midnight—a practice that would soon become a daily ritual.

Dale would dog her on the street. He'd sit in restaurants where she was eating and occasionally have a bottle of cheap wine sent to her table. She kept her phone number unlisted and had her mail sent to her agent's office, but he still managed to get notes delivered to her. Kari was one of the few people in America without e-mail on her computer; she was sure that Dale would find her address and inundate her with messages.

She went to the police, of course, and they did what they could but it wasn't much. On the cops' first visit to Dale's ramshackle condo in a low-rent neighborhood, they found a copy of the state's anti-stalking statute sitting prominently on his coffee table. Sections were underlined; David Dale knew exactly how far he could go. Kari convinced a magistrate to issue a restraining order. Since Dale had never done anything exactly illegal, though, the order was limited to preventing him from setting foot on her property itself. Which he'd never done anyway.

The incident that finally pushed her over the edge had occurred

last month. Dale also made a practice of following the few men whom Kari had the effrontery to date. In this case it'd been a young TV producer. One day Dale had walked into the man's health club in Century City and had a brief conversation with him. The producer had broken their date that night, leaving the harsh message that he would've appreciated it if she'd told him she was engaged. He never returned Kari's calls.

That incident had warranted another visit from the police, but the cops found Dale's condo empty and the pickup gone when they arrived.

But Kari knew he'd be back. And so she'd decided it was time to end the problem once and for all. She'd never intended to be a model for more than a few years and she'd figured that this was a good time to quit. Telling only her parents and a few close friends, she instructed a real estate company to lease her house and moved to Crowell, a town she'd been to several years before on a photo shoot. She'd spent a few days there after the assignment and had fallen in love with the clean air and dramatic coastline—and with the citizens of the town, too. They were friendly but refreshingly reserved toward her; a beautiful face didn't place very high on the scale of austere New England values.

She'd left L.A. at two A.M. on a Sunday morning, taking mostly back streets, doubling back and pausing often until she was sure she'd evaded Dale. As she'd driven across the country, elated at the prospect of a new life, she'd occupied much of her time with a fantasy about Dale's committing suicide.

But now she knew that the son of a bitch was very much alive. And had somehow discovered her new address.

Tonight, huddled in the living room of her new house, she heard his pickup's engine start. It idled roughly, the exhaust bubbling from the rusty pipe—sounds she'd grown all too familiar with over the past few years. Slowly the vehicle drove away.

Crying quietly now, Kari laid her head on the carpet. She closed her eyes. Nine hours later she awoke and found herself on her side, knees drawn up, clutching the .38-caliber pistol to her chest, the same way that, as a little girl, she'd wake up every morning curled into a ball and cuddling a stuffed bear she'd named Bonnie.

Later that morning an embittered Kari Swanson was sitting in the office of Detective Brad Loesser, head of the Felonies Division of the Crowell, Massachusetts, police department.

A solid, balding man with sun-baked freckles across the bridge of his nose, Loesser listened to her story with sympathy. He shook his head, then asked, "How'd he find out you were here?"

She shrugged. "Hired a private eye, for all I know." David Dale

was exactly as resourceful as he needed to be when it came to Kari Swanson.

"Sid!" the detective shouted to a plain-clothes officer in a nearby cubicle.

The trim young man appeared. Loesser introduced Kari to Sid Harper. Loesser briefed his assistant and said, "Check this guy out and get me the records from . . ." He glanced at Kari. "What police department'd have his file?"

She said angrily, "That'd be departments, Detective. Plural. I'd start with Santa Monica, Los Angeles, and the California State Police. Then you might want to talk to Burbank, Beverly Hills, Glendale, and Orange County. I moved around a bit to get away from him."

"Brother," Loesser said, shaking his head.

Sid Harper returned a few minutes later.

"L.A.'s overnighting us their file. Santa Monica's is coming in two days. I ran the real estate records here." He glanced at a slip of paper. "David Dale bought a condo in Park View two days ago. That's about a quarter mile from Ms. Swanson's place."

" 'Bought'?" Loesser asked, surprised.

"He said it made him feel closer to me if he owned a house in the same town," Kari explained.

"We'll talk to him, Ms. Swanson. And we'll keep an eye on your house. If he does anything overt you can get a restraining order."

"That won't stop him," she muttered. "You know that."

"Our hands're pretty much tied."

She slapped her leg hard. "I've been hearing that for two years. It's time to *do* something." Kari's eyes strayed to a rack of shotguns on the wall nearby. When she looked back she found the detective was studying her closely.

Loesser sent Sid Harper back to his cubicle and then said, "Hey, got something to show you, Ms. Swanson." Loesser reached forward and lifted a picture frame off his desk and handed it to her. "The snapshot on the left there. Whatta you think?"

A picture of a grinning, freckled teenage boy was on the right. On the left side was a shot of a young woman in a graduation gown and mortarboard.

" 'S'my daughter. Elaine."

"She's pretty. You going to ask me if she's got a future in modeling?"

Loesser laughed. "No, ma'am, I wasn't. See, my girl's twenty-five, almost the same age as you. You know something—she's got her whole life ahead of her. Tons and tons of good things waiting. Husband, kids, traveling, jobs."

Kari looked up from the picture into the detective's placid face. He continued, "You got the same things to look forward to, Ms.

Swanson. I know this's been hell for you and it may be hell for a while to come. But if you go taking matters into your own hands, which I have a feeling you've been thinking about, well, that's gonna be the end of your life right there."

She shrugged off the advice and asked, "What's the law on self-defense here?"

"Why're you asking me a question like that?" Loesser asked in a whisper.

"What's the answer?"

The detective hesitated, then said, "The commonwealth's real strict about it. Outside of your own house, even on your front porch, it's practically impossible to shoot somebody who's unarmed and get away with a self-defense claim. And I'll tell you, we look right away to see if the body was dragged inside after it was shot, say, and a knife got put into the corpse's hand." The detective paused then added, "And I'm gonna have to be frank, Ms. Swanson, a jury's going to look at you and say, 'Well, of *course* men're going to be following her around. Moth to the flame. She ought to've had a thicker skin.'"

"I better go," Kari said.

Loesser studied her for a moment, then said in a heartfelt tone: "Don't go throwing your life away over some piece of trash like this crazy man."

She snapped, "I don't *have* a life. That's the problem. I thought I could get one back by moving to Crowell. That didn't work." She replaced the picture of Loesser's children on his desk.

"We all go through rough spots from time to time. God helps us through 'em."

"I don't believe in God," Kari said, rising and pulling on her raincoat. "He wouldn't do this to anybody."

"God didn't send David Dale after you," Loesser said.

"I don't mean that," she replied angrily. She lifted a splayed hand toward her face. "I mean, if He existed He wouldn't be cruel enough to make me look like this."

At eight P.M. a car door slammed outside of Kari Swanson's house.

It was Dale's pickup. She recognized the sound of the truck's door latch.

With shaking hands Kari set down her wine and shut off the TV, which she always watched with the sound muted so she'd have some warning if Dale decided to approach the house. She ran to the hallway table and pulled out her gun.

Outside of your own house, even on your front porch, it's practically impossible to shoot somebody who's unarmed and get away with a self-defense claim. . . .

Gripping the pistol, Kari peeked through the front-door curtain.

David Dale walked slowly toward her yard, clutching a huge bouquet of flowers. He knew enough not to set foot on her property and so, still standing in the street, he bowed from the waist, the way people do when meeting royalty, and set the bouquet on the grass of the parking strip, resting an envelope next to it. He arranged the flowers carefully, as if they were sitting atop his mother's grave, then stood up and admired them. Then he returned to the truck and drove into the windy night.

Barefoot, Kari walked out into the cold drizzle, seized the flowers, and tossed them into the trash. Returning to the front porch, she paused under the lantern and tore open the envelope, hoping that maybe Detective Loesser had spoken with Dale and frightened him into leaving. Maybe this was a goodbye message.

But, of course, it was not.

To my most Beautiful Lover—

This was a wonderful idea you had. I mean, moving to the East Coast. There were too many people in California vieing (or whatever . . . ha, you know I'm a bad speller! ! !) for your love and attention and it means a lot to me that you wanted them out of your life. And quitting your modeling job so I don't have to share you with the world anymore . . . . You did that ALL for me! ! ! !

I know we'll be happy here.

I love you always and forever.

David

P.S. Guess what? I FINALLY found that old *New York Scene* magazine where you modeled those leather skirts. Yes, the one I've been looking for for years! Can you believe it!!!! I was so happy! I cut you out and taped you up (so to speak, ha!!!). I have a "Kari" room in my new condo, just like the one in my old place in Glendale (which you never came to visit boo hoo!!!) but I decided to put these pictures in my bedroom. I got this nice light, it's very low like candlelight and I leave it on all night long. Now I even look forward to having bad dreams so I can wake up and see you.

Inside, she slammed the door and clicked the three deadbolts. Sinking to her knees, she sobbed in fury until she was exhausted and her chest ached. Finally she calmed down, caught her breath, and wiped her face with her sleeve.

Kari stared at the pistol for a long moment, then put it back in the drawer. She walked into the den and, sitting in a straight-back chair, stared into her wind-swept backyard. Understanding at last that the only way this nightmare would end was with David Dale's death or her own.

She turned to her desk and began rummaging through a large stack of papers.

The bar on West 42nd Street was dim and stank of Lysol.

Even though Kari was dressed down—in sweats, sunglasses, and a baseball cap—three of the four patrons and the bartender inside stared at her in astonishment, one bleary-eyed man offering her a flirty smile that revealed more gum than teeth.

The fourth customer snored sloppily at the end of the bar. Everyone except the snoozer smoked.

She ordered a model's cocktail—diet Coke—and sat at a table in the rear of the shabby place. Ten minutes later, a tall man with a massive chest and huge hands entered the bar. He squinted through the cigarette smoke and made his way to Kari's table. He nodded at her and sat, looking around with distaste at the decrepit bar. He appeared exactly as she'd remembered him from their first meeting. That had been several years ago in the Dominican Republic when she'd been on a photo assignment for *Elle* and he'd been taking a day off from a project he'd been working on in nearby Haiti. When, after a few drinks, he'd told her his line of work and wondered if she might need anyone with his particular skills, she'd laughed at the absurd thought. Still, she'd pocketed his card, which contained the phone number she'd called last night.

"Why didn't you want to meet at my place?" he asked her.

"Because of him," she said, lowering her voice, as if uttering the pronoun alone could magically summon David Dale like a demon. "He follows me everywhere. I don't think he knows I came to New York. But I can't take any chances that he'd find out about you."

"Yo," the bartender's raspy voice called, "you want something? I mean, we don't got table service."

The man turned to the bartender, who fell silent under his sharp gaze and returned to inventorying the bottles of cheap well liquor.

The man across from Kari cleared his throat. With a grave voice he said, "You told me what you wanted, but there's something I have to say. First—"

Kari held up a hand to stop him. She whispered, "You're going to tell me it's risky, you're going to tell me that it could ruin my life forever, you're going to tell me to go home and let the police deal with him."

"Yeah, that's pretty much it." He looked into her flinty eyes and when she said nothing more he asked her, "You're sure you want to handle it this way?"

Kari pulled a thick white envelope out of her purse and slid it toward him. "There's the hundred thousand dollars I promised you. That's my answer."

The man hesitated, then picked up the envelope and put it in his pocket.

Nearly a month after his meeting with Kari Swanson, Brad Loesser sat in his office and gazed absently at the rain streaming down his windows. He heard a breathless voice from his doorway.

"We got a problem, Detective," Sid Harper said.

"Which is?" Loesser spun around. Problems on a night like this . . . that was just great. And whatever it was, he bet he'd have to go outside to deal with it.

Harper said, "We got a hit on the wiretap."

After Kari Swanson had met with him last month Loesser had had several talks with David Dale, urging—virtually threatening—him to stop harassing the woman. The man had been infuriating. He'd appeared to listen reasonably to the detective but apparently hadn't paid any attention at all and, with psychotic persistence, explained how he and Kari loved each other and that it was merely a matter of time until they'd be getting married. On their last meeting, Dale had looked Loesser up and down coldly and then began cross-examining *him,* apparently convinced that he'd asked Kari out himself. That incident had so unnerved the detective that he'd convinced a commonwealth magistrate to allow a wiretap on Dale's phone.

"What happened?" Loesser now asked his assistant.

"She called him."

"Who called who?" the detective snapped.

"Kari Swanson called Dale. About a half-hour ago. She was nice as could be. Asked to see him."

"What?"

"She's gotta be setting him up," Harper offered.

Loesser shook his head in disgust. He'd been concerned about this very thing happening. From the moment when he'd seen her eyeing the department's shotguns he'd known that she was determined to end Dale's stalking one way or another. Loesser had kept a close eye on the situation, calling Kari at home frequently over the past weeks. He'd been troubled by her demeanor. She'd seemed detached, almost cheerful, even when Dale had been parked in his usual spot, right in front of her house. Loesser could only conclude that she'd finally decided to stop him and was waiting for an opportune time.

Which was, it seemed, tonight.

"Where's she going to meet him? At her house?"

"No. At the old pier off Charles Street."

Oh, hell, Loesser thought. The pier was a perfect site for a murder—there were no houses nearby and it was virtually invisible from the main roads in town. And there were stairs nearby, leading down to a small floating dock, where Kari, or someone she'd

hired, could easily take the body out to sea to dispose of it.

But she didn't know about the wiretap—and that they now had a clue as to what her plans were. If she killed Dale she'd get caught. She'd be in prison for twenty-five years.

Loesser grabbed his coat and sprinted toward the door. "Let's go."

The squad car skidded to a stop at the chain-link fence on Charles Street. Loesser leapt out. He gazed toward the pier, a hundred yards away.

Through the fog and rain the detective could vaguely make out David Dale in a raincoat, clutching a bouquet of roses, walking slowly toward Kari Swanson. The tall woman stood with her back to Dale, hands on the rotting railing, gazing out over the turbulent gray Atlantic as if she was looking for a boat.

The detective shouted for Dale to stop. The sound of the waves, though, was deafening—neither the stalker nor his prey could hear.

"Boost me up," Loesser cried to his assistant.

"You want—?"

The detective himself formed Harper's fingers into a cradle, planted his right foot firmly in the man's hands, and then vaulted over the top of the chain-link. He landed off balance and tumbled painfully onto the rocky ground.

By the time he climbed to his feet and oriented himself, Dale was only twenty feet from Kari.

"Call for backup and an ambulance," he shouted to Harper and then took off down the muddy slope to the pier, unholstering his weapon as he ran. "Don't move! Police!"

But he saw he was too late.

Kari suddenly turned and stepped toward Dale. Loesser couldn't hear a gunshot over the roaring waves or see clearly through the misty rain, but there was no doubt that David Dale had been shot. His hands flew to his chest and, dropping the flowers, he fell backwards and sprawled on the pier.

"No!" Loesser muttered hopelessly, realizing that he himself was going to be the eyewitness who put Kari Swanson in jail. Why hadn't she listened to him? But Loesser was a seasoned professional and he kept his emotions in check as he followed procedure to the letter. He lifted his gun toward the model and shouted, "On the ground, Kari! Now!"

She was startled by the cop's sudden appearance, but she immediately did as she was told and lay face forward on the wet wood.

"Hands behind your back," Loesser ordered, running to her. He quickly cuffed her hands and then turned to David Dale, who lay on the ground amid the crushed roses, writhing and howling in agony. Kari was saying something, but her face was turned away and Loesser couldn't hear her words. Besides, the detective's

attention was wholly on keeping David Dale alive so that Kari would at least avoid a murder conviction.

"Oh God, oh God," the stalker cried.

Loesser pried Dale's hands away from his chest and ripped open his shirt, looking for the entry wound.

But he couldn't find it.

"Where're you hit?" the detective shouted. "Talk to me. Talk to me!"

But the big man continued to sob and shake hysterically and didn't respond.

Sid Harper ran up, panting. He dropped to his knees beside Dale.

"Ambulance'll be here in five minutes. Where's he hit?"

The detective said, "I don't know. I can't find the wound."

The young cop, too, examined the stalker. "There's no blood."

Still, Dale kept moaning as if he were in unbearable pain. "Oh God, no. . . . No. . . ."

Finally Loesser heard Kari Swanson call out, "He's fine. I didn't shoot him."

"Get her up," the detective said to Harper as he continued to examine Dale. "I don't understand it. He—"

"Jesus Christ," Sid Harper's stunned voice whispered.

Loesser glanced at his assistant, who was staring at Kari with his mouth open.

The detective himself turned to look at her. He blinked in astonishment.

"I really didn't shoot him," Kari insisted.

Except . . . *Was* this Kari Swanson? The woman was the same height and had the same figure and hair. And the voice was the same. But in place of the extraordinary beauty that had burned itself into Loesser's memory on their first meeting was a very different face: This woman had a bumpy, unfortunate nose, thin, uneven lips, a fleshy chin, wrinkles in her forehead and around her eyes.

"Are you . . . Who are you?" Loesser stammered.

She gave a faint smile. "It's me, Kari."

"But . . . I don't understand."

She gave a contemptuous glance at Dale, still lying on the pier, and said to Loesser, "When he followed me to Crowell I finally realized what had to happen: One of us had to die . . . and I picked me."

"You?"

She nodded. "I killed the person he was obsessed with: Kari the supermodel. A few years ago, down in the Caribbean, I met a plastic surgeon. His office was in Manhattan but he also ran a free clinic in Haiti. He'd rebuild the faces of natives injured in catastrophic accidents." She laughed. "He gave me his card as a joke—saying if I ever needed a plastic surgeon give him a call. Just trying to pick me up, of course, but I liked it that he was doing vol-

unteer work and we hit it off. I kept his number. When I decided last month I had to do something about Dale, I thought about him. I figured if he could make such badly deformed people look normal, he could make a beautiful person look normal, too. I took the train down to New York and met with him. He didn't want to do the operation at first, but I donated a hundred thousand dollars to his clinic. That changed his mind."

Loesser studied her closely. She wasn't ugly. She simply looked average—like any of ten million people you'd meet on the street and not glance twice at.

Someone whose attractiveness would be found in who she was rather than what she looked like.

David Dale's terrible moaning rose up over the sound of the wind—not from physical pain but from the horror that the beauty that had consumed him for so long was now gone. "No, no, no. . . ."

Kari asked Loesser, "Can you take these things off me?" Holding up the cuffs.

Harper unhooked them.

As Kari pulled her coat tighter around her, a mad voice suddenly filled the air, rising above the sound of the ferocious waves. "How could you?" Dale cried, rising to his knees. "How could you do this to me?"

Kari crouched in front of him. "To *you?*" she raged. "What I look like, who I am, the life I lead . . . those things don't have a goddamn thing to do with you and they never did!" She gripped his head in both hands and tried to turn it toward her. "Look at me."

"No!" He struggled to keep his face averted.

"Look at me!"

Finally he did.

"Do you love me now, David?" she asked with a cold smile on her new face. "Do you?"

He scrabbled away in revulsion and began to run back toward the street. He stumbled, then picked himself up and continued to sprint away from the pier.

Kari Swanson rose and shouted after him, "Do you love me, David? Do you love me now? Do you? Do you?"

"Hey, Cath," the man said, surveying the grocery cart she was pushing.

"What?" she asked. The plastic surgery had officially laid "Kari" to rest and she was now using only variations on "Catherine" Swanson.

"I think we're missing something," Carl replied with exaggerated gravity.

"What?"

"Junk food," he answered.

"Oh, no." She too frowned in mock alarm as she examined the

cart. Then she suggested, "Nachos'd solve the problem."

"Ah. Good. Back in a minute." Carl—a man with an easy temperament and an endless supply of bulky fisherman's sweaters—ambled off down the snack-food aisle. He was a late-bloomer, a second-career lawyer who was exactly five years older and two inches taller than Cathy. He'd picked her up at the annual Crowell St. Patrick's Day festival ten days ago and they'd spent a half-dozen delightful afternoons and evenings together, doing absolutely nothing.

Was there a future between them? Cathy had no idea. They certainly enjoyed each other's company, but Carl had yet to spend the night. And he still hadn't given her the skinny on his ex-wife.

Both of which were, of course, vital benchmarks in the life of a relationship.

But there was no hurry. Catherine Swanson wasn't looking hard for a man. Her life was a comfortable mélange of teaching high school history, jogging along the rocky Massachusetts shore, working on her master's at BU, and spending time with a marvelous therapist who was helping her forget David Dale, about—and from—whom she'd heard nothing in the past six months.

She moved forward in the checkout line, trying to remember if she had charcoal for the grill. She thought—

"Say, miss, excuse me," mumbled a man's low voice behind her. She recognized his intonation immediately—the edgy, intimate sound of obsession.

Cathy spun around to see a young man in a trench coat and a stocking cap. Instantly she thought of the hundreds of strangers who had relentlessly pursued her on the street, in restaurants, and in checkout lanes just like this one. Her palms began to sweat. Her heart started pounding fiercely, jaw trembling. Her mouth opened but she couldn't speak.

But then Cathy saw that the man wasn't looking at her at all. His eyes were fixed on the magazine rack next to the cash register. He muttered, "That *Entertainment Weekly* there? Could you hand it to me?"

She passed him the magazine. Without thanking her he flipped quickly to an article inside. Cathy couldn't tell what the story was about, only that it featured three or four cheesecakey pictures of some young, brunette woman, which he stared at intently.

Cathy slowly forced herself to calm. Then, suddenly, her shaking hands rose to her mouth and she began laughing out loud. The man looked up once from the pictures of his dream girl then returned to his magazine, not the least curious about this tall, plain woman and what she found so funny. Cathy wiped the tears of laughter from her eyes, turned back to the cart, and began loading her groceries onto the belt. ●

SOME MOST UNUSUAL CULPRITS

Introduction
READER, YOU MURDERED HIM

A few years ago the French professor François Gallix was giving a talk at the Sorbonne and used a quotation from Umberto Eco's *Reflections on The Name of the Rose* (1983): *"It seems that the Parisian OULIPO group has recently constructed a matrix of all possible murder-story situations and has found that there has still to be written a book in which the murderer is the reader."*

During the discussion, a Ph.D. student, Delphine Kresge, pointed out that this had been done by Peter Lovesey, in a story entitled "Youdunnit," published in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* in 1989. Later, it emerged that in 1999 a French writer, Max Dorra, also cast the reader as the culprit, in his story "Vous permettez que je vous dise tue?" ("Thou Shalt Kill" is the nearest François Gallix could get to the untranslatable pun of the title) in *La Nouvelle Revue Française.*

At Magna International, a conference held jointly by the Sorbonne and Ball State University (Indiana) in November, 1999, Professor Gallix read a paper analyzing the two stories and also explaining the objects of the charmingly eccentric organization known as OULIPO. The Workshop for Potential Literature, OULIPO (*Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*), was founded in 1960, and one of its aims was to study the rules and constraints of story construction. A subgroup of OULIPO specialized in mystery and detective stories, and attempted to dissect all the situations and mechanisms ever used. François le Lionnais, one of the founders of OULIPO, made a list of some of the most unusual culprits employed in stories, such as the narrator (in a celebrated Agatha Christie story many *EQMM* readers will recall) or an animal (an equally familiar tale from Edgar Allan Poe). Other variations included the author (as distinct from the narrator) as culprit, and the publisher.

Le Lionnais went on to claim that he had devised a rational way of making the *reader* the culprit, and would unveil it at a future session of OULIPO, but it seemed his ingenious idea remained a secret.

In the course of his paper, Professor Gallix suggested another hypothesis—one that had not been foreseen by OULIPO—in which the author is the culprit and another author his victim. It happened that Peter Lovesey and Max Dorra were in the audience, and they sportingly took up the challenge. It seemed to us that this "challenge to the writer" was a project Ellery Queen himself would savor. Therefore, in honor of the 60th anniversary of the magazine Ellery Queen founded, we are reprinting Peter Lovesey's "Youdunnit" and Max Dorra's "Thou Shalt Kill." These are followed by the new stories in which each of the writers takes revenge on the other.

YOUDUNNIT

by Peter Lovesey

You.

Yes, you, reading this.

How would you like to be a character in this story? Take a deep breath. It's a murder mystery. If you suffer from nightmares, nervous rashes, or have a dicky heart, better turn to something less dangerous. But if you think you can take it, read on.

Now step into the story.

Someone speaks your name.

Cautiously you answer, "Yes?"

You find yourself in an office furnished simply with a desk and two chairs, the sort of room universally used for interviewing purposes. It might seem totally impersonal were it not for the glass-fronted case mounted on the wall in front of you. Inside is a large stuffed fish.

"You may sit down. This will take a little time." Although the bearded man behind the desk isn't wearing a uniform, authority is implicit in his voice and manner. He is broad-shouldered, with a thick neck. His head is bald at the crown, with a crop of grizzled hair at the sides and back as compensation. His age would be difficult to estimate, but he is obviously a long-serving officer who gives the impression that he knows everything about you and is interested only in having it confirmed. He spends a moment looking at the papers in front of him. You are not deceived by the humorous sparkle in his brown eyes. You sense that it may shortly turn into an accusing gleam. But at the beginning he doesn't threaten. He starts in a quiet, disarming monotone, his eyes on his notes.

"Have you any idea why you are here?"

"Well," you say, "I was reading this crime story—"

He looks up with more interest. "So you read crime stories?"

"Sometimes, yes."

"Do you ever get ideas from what you read?"

This sounds like a question to duck. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"It's obvious what I mean," he tells you sharply. "So-called ingenious methods of murder. Anyone who reads crime stories knows how devious they are. Writers have been concocting murder mysteries for at least a hundred and fifty years, ever since Edgar Allan Poe. What was that one of his in which an orangutan turned out to be the killer?"

" 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue'?"

"Right. I don't get much time for reading in this job, but I know the plots. Years ago in those country-house murders it was sufficient surprise for the butler to have done it. Most of them are a sight more ingenious than that, of course. There was the mad wife in the attic. There was the postman nobody noticed, who actually carried the corpse away in his sack. Did you read that one?"

"I may have done."

"Chesterton. I met him once, many years ago. I've met them all. It dates me, doesn't it? Dorothy L. Sayers. Agatha Christie. She was a fiendish plotter. Sweet lady, though. Rather shy, in fact."

Not only does it date him, you think to yourself; it takes some believing. G.K. Chesterton must have died fifty years ago, at least. Theoretically it's possible that they met, but it seems more likely that he is making it up.

"You sound like a real enthusiast," you venture, still unsure where all this is leading. Is he doing this to make you feel inferior?

"The Agatha Christie story that impressed me most," he says, "was the murder that turned out to have been committed by the narrator of the story."

"Yes, clever."

"I came across one in which the detective did it. There's no end to the twists in these stories. One of these days I fully expect to find out that the reader did it. Not so much a whodunnit as a youdunnit."

You smile nervously. "That would be stretching it."

"Oh, I don't know."

He eyes you speculatively. "You didn't answer my question just now. Do you get ideas from crime stories?"

"Not that I'm aware of," you say. "I don't know what use I could make of them."

He fingers his beard. "That remains to be discovered. Let's talk about you. Shall I lay out the essential facts? I want to ask you about a Saturday evening towards the end of last summer."

"Last summer?" Your hand finds the edge of your chair and grips it. This isn't going to be easy. Last summer was a long time ago. You have sometimes wondered how reliable a witness you would be if you were ever called to testify to something you saw the same day. But last summer . . .

"To be precise, the last Saturday in August. You were expecting a visitor, a rather special visitor, so special that you'd put a bottle of champagne on ice and . . ." He looks up and arches his eyebrows, plainly inviting you to continue.

You frown and say, "There's obviously some mistake."

He stares back. "What's your difficulty?"

"What you just said. It has nothing to do with me."

"Are you certain?"

"Absolutely."

He folds his arms. "What exactly is your difficulty? Remembering the day? It was an unusually warm, still evening. Still as the grave. Days like that deserve to be remembered. You *do* remember it?"

"The day?"

"The last Saturday in August."

"It isn't so simple. I suppose I could if something were to jog my memory."

He says with faintly sinister sarcasm, "If necessary, I can arrange that. Let's get to the bubbly, then—the champagne. More up your street than trying to remember which day it was, I dare say."

"What do you mean? I'm not in the habit—"

"I didn't say you were. But you wouldn't object to a glass of fizz on a sweltering Saturday evening in summer?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He presses on, unperturbed. "We're simply establishing the possibility of the scenario I gave you. It could have happened to anyone."

"Not to me."

"Let's put it to the test. You *have* drunk champagne at some time in your life? You don't deny that?"

You give a shrug that doesn't commit you to anything.

"Presumably you prefer it cooled?"

"Most people do."

"So if you *did* have a bottle of champagne—a good champagne, a Perrier Jouet '79, shall we say—you'd have sufficient respect to put it on ice?" He spreads his hands to show how reasonable the proposition is.

You refuse to be lured into some admission that will incriminate you. "Listen, it's becoming more and more obvious that you are talking to the wrong person. I'm not in the habit of drinking champagne on Saturday evenings."

"Pity. It would make you more cooperative. However, the point is immaterial. As it turned out, nobody drank the champagne."

A pause.

"As *what* turned out?" you ask.

He gives you a long, level look. "We're coming to that. Let's stay with the champagne a moment. You wouldn't drink it alone, would you? It isn't the sort of drink you have alone. Champagne is for lovers."

You stare at him and say, "This is getting more and more ridiculous."

"Is there someone in your life?"

"If there is, it's no concern of yours."

"Correction," he says before you have got out the words. "It *is* my concern. It assuredly is."

You press your lips together and shake your head.

He continues to probe. "Don't tell me you haven't a lover. Look, I may seem old-fashioned to you, but I know what goes on."

"Not in my life, you don't," you tell him firmly. "That's becoming clearer by the minute."

"All right, if it's the term 'lover' you object to, let's settle for friend, then. Intimate friend. Someone who makes your heart beat faster. This is a crime of passion—I'll stake my reputation on that."

"A *crime?*" Now is the moment to make a stand. "You're talking about a crime?"

"That's what I said."

"Involving someone I know?"

"Involving you."

You are silent for a moment. Then, with an effort to stay in control, you say, "If you are serious, I think I'd better ask for a solicitor."

His face creases into a pained expression. "Don't spoil it," he tells you. "We were getting on so well. Let's leave the love angle for the present. We'll go back to Saturday evening. No more beating about the bush. It was about nine. You were at home, alone. But your, em, visitor was expected any minute, so you had the champagne ready in a bucket of ice."

"All of this is rubbish."

He lifts a warning finger. "Have the goodness to hear me out, will you? You're getting the kid-glove treatment, but there are limits. You had the house to yourself because your spouse, is it?—or partner, is that more accurate?—was away for the weekend."

You sigh loudly and say nothing. Might as well let him continue. He's making a total idiot of himself.

"A romantic evening was in prospect. Soft music in the background. The Richard Clayderman album."

"I can't stand Richard Clayderman."

"Your lover can. The candles were lit. After your bath you'd put on something cool and sexy, a white silk caftan."

You roll your eyes upwards. "Me in a caftan?"

"Some kind of robe, then. We won't argue over that. Suddenly the doorbell chimed. You went to the front door and flung it open and said, 'Darling . . .' Then the smile froze on your lips, because it wasn't your lover on the doorstep. It was You Know Who, back unexpectedly from that weekend away."

"You're way off beam," you say. "This didn't happen to me. This is someone else you're talking about."

"You don't remember?"

"I haven't the faintest recollection of anything you've said. What's supposed to have happened next?"

"A blazing row. There was hell to pay with all that evidence of infidelity around you. Champagne and soft music wasn't the norm in your house. You just admitted that."

"Did I?" You feel your mouth go dry. You thought you'd admitted nothing, yet there's a disturbing logic in some of what he is saying.

"You protested your innocence vigorously. You're pretty good at that. And all the time that this row was going on, you dreaded hearing the doorbell again, because you knew this time it would be your lover. Zap! You'd be finished, the pair of you. So what did you do?"

"Don't ask me," you say acidly. "I wasn't there."

"You panicked. You snatched up the full bottle of champagne and swung it with all your strength. Crashed it into You Know Who's skull. Murder."

"Untrue."

His eyes open wider. "How can you say it's untrue if you don't remember anything?" He leans towards you again. "You dragged the body across the room and shoved it into the cupboard under the stairs."

You're sweating now. It's apparent that he's speaking of something that really happened. A murder was committed and you're in grave danger of being framed, or stitched up, or whatever the expression is. But why? What has he got against you? Is there some piece of evidence he hasn't brought up yet? So far it's all been circumstantial. They need more than that to secure a conviction, don't they?

You decide to change tack. "Listen, it's clear to me that I need some help. How can I convince you that all this absolutely did not happen? Not to me."

He leans forward and fixes you with his dark eyes. "You really know nothing about it? You'd swear to that?"

You nod and look earnest.

At last he seems willing to reconsider. "In that case," he speculates, "perhaps I got it wrong. *You* were struck with the bottle. You were concussed, so you remember nothing."

"Would that explain it?" you blurt out thankfully.

"So it appears."

"I'm innocent, then?"

He hesitates. "How's your head? Does it feel sore?"

You rub it, pressing hard with your fingers. "That part is tender, certainly."

"At the back?"

"Yes."

He starts writing in his book, speaking the words aloud. "A blow on the back of the head, causing concussion and loss of memory."

You start turning mental cartwheels. "May I go, then?"

He looks up, grinning faintly. "No, I can't allow that."

"Why not?"

"Because there *was* a corpse found in that cupboard and it wasn't yours."

"A corpse in my house? That isn't possible. Whose corpse, for heaven's sake?"

His tone alters. "Watch it. You're in no position to talk like that. You asked whose corpse it was. I told you. It was the corpse of the person I referred to as You Know Who."

"And you hold me responsible? I thought we just agreed that if I was there at all I was out cold."

He shakes his head. "You regained consciousness after a minute or two and picked up the bottle and struck the fatal blow—a much harder one. Your victim's skull was heavily impacted. There's no doubt that the bottle was the murder weapon."

"I deny it."

"I wouldn't, if I were you." He closes his book. "It's my duty to caution you now." He presses his hands together and stares at you solemnly. "Speak that which thou knowest and no more, for by thy words shalt thou be judged."

You gape at him. "That isn't the proper caution. Those aren't the words."

"They are in this place."

You stare around you at the walls, blank except for the stuffed fish above his head. "Where am I, then?"

He gives you a look with genuine pity in it. "This will come as a shock. You were found unconscious in your house. There was a box of pills beside you. That is to say, a box that had contained pills. Sleeping pills. You swallowed the lot after committing the murder. You've been in intensive care for months, in a coma."

"A coma?"

"I'm afraid you never recovered consciousness. You died in hospital twenty minutes ago."

With heavy irony you say, "Oh, yes, and I suppose you're St. Peter."

But your words are lost in a vaporous mist that swirls over you. The floor sinks away, and you find that you are almost weightless. As you drift lower you glimpse the sandaled feet of your inquisitor. You recall his strange claim to have met Chesterton and the others, all dead writers. Then a man in a red uniform takes a grip on your arm and starts to draw you firmly downwards.

Yes, youdunnit. ●

Thou Shalt Kill

by Max Dorra

translated by François Gallix

This is a detective story.

I am about to embark on something unique and incapable of being imitated. I will reveal the true nature of a human being. And this human being is you.

I am going to tell the story of a murder.

Normal, for a detective story.

The problem is that *you* are the murderer. Yes, you. And this is not just a trick to hold your attention. It's the real truth. Yours.

You frown. Improbable. You think you're safe. You tell yourself it can't be true, that you've killed no one, or of course you would know about it.

And yet it *is* true, and the only suspense—but what suspense—in this story, in which the murderer's identity—you—is unveiled from the start, is whether I can convince you. How? Through the details of my narrative; if you are honest (and you will be, as we're alone, you and I) you'll recognize things as we go along.

The key to the mystery is that you have completely forgotten the crime you have committed. You had to, or else how could you sleep at night without terrible nightmares?

This amnesia is the guarantee of your peace of mind.

Don't worry. My revelations will be gradual. You'll have all the time you need to get used to this image of yourself that right now you are denying: that of a criminal.

And, also, I'm the only one who knows. I know everything. And I won't tell anyone. Except you.

Just one question before we begin. When you read hard-boiled mysteries, or when you watch a Hitchcock movie, have you never secretly surprised yourself by identifying with the murderer? When a badly buried corpse is coming slowly to the surface, have you never felt a kind of uneasiness: the dread of being discovered?

Now, don't you feel in the pit of your stomach something that wasn't there when you started this story?

Don't worry, names won't be supplied. I will call you by a letter

of the alphabet, A, since you are the main character. Then there is B. Then C, your victim.

B's ARRIVAL IN YOUR LIFE

I don't remember precisely where you met B for the first time.

In the mountains or at the seaside, in the country, at work, or on holiday. Never mind. What matters is the mood you were in just before this meeting.

How to describe this mood?

A feeling of emptiness combined with lassitude, very familiar to you. You were not depressed, far from it, but rather bogged down, semi-anesthetized. I suppose a silkworm in its chrysalis must feel that way.

The meeting with B created a black hole in your life. From inside it, you viewed everything differently. Your problems slipped away as you devoted yourself totally to your relationship with B. Arrested time, so to speak.

It was B who took the initiative. You see, I know everything. I'll go further. You did not respond. At first you disliked B's attitude. But not entirely, it has to be said.

You met at some friend's place, or in an exhibition, a park, or at work. I don't remember.

What I do remember—and so do you if you're honest—is how sorry you felt when B took off. B's departure caused distress that still puzzles you.

Shamelessly, you tried to make contact. You wormed out a phone number from B's friends. You carefully wrote it down, perhaps on the page of a newspaper. For you, at that time, those ten digits held all the interest in the world, the passion to live and face a future whose very uncertainty had something disquieting and delicious.

When you finally came into contact again, you and B, when you really stared into each other's eyes for the first time, you burst out laughing, both of you. You knew something unbelievable, statistically improbable, had happened. Suddenly life was different.

Because of that moment you were later driven to kill C.

You don't remember?

Be patient!

What you do remember, I am certain, are the walks you took with B at the beginning. Under arcades, in parks, along country lanes, in city streets.

You talked. Every topic under the sun. Each of you felt that until then you never had anyone to talk to. You were able, with

each other's agreement, to rewrite your life history.

And between those two accounts, you discovered strange coincidences, amazing things in common. In particular . . . But why should I remind you, when you know it so well?

It won't help to say any more about this relationship with B. It was unique, new, intense. Those words will do for the moment.

The feeling that you had always known each other was probably due to the act of rewriting your lives. You were two recreated beings, mutually recreated, walking side by side. Reborn. Hence the remarkable links you forged. Hence the flaws in them. See what I'm getting at?

Let's use another image. It was a flame you and B had lit. A flame capable of destroying, of turning anyone else into ashes.

It's easy to say this now, looking back, but when it happened you were totally unaware of it. Both of you were caught up blindly in this moment in time. In this place, as in a black hole, the usual laws no longer held. As if an amazingly powerful magnetic field had been created, this space exerted an irresistible attraction on whatever came close. Human beings, objects, meteorites, but also feelings and opinions were somehow swallowed up and eliminated.

So without realizing it, you had become dangerous. This danger—it needs to be recorded now—was of importance. B saw it coming earlier than you.

Before you did, B noticed the violence in what was happening between you two. A suppressed violence, surfacing.

Your mutual understanding seemed to make you indestructible. You had, both of you, become too strong, overpowering to other poor mortals still in search of their missing halves. Miraculous twins possessing an inaccessible secret language, you could only provoke envy, hatred, and sadness.

Turned into frustrated outsiders, your friends with their noses stuck to the windowpanes contemplated a banquet from which they felt excluded.

You and B pretended to understand each other by mere hints or by using one or two words. And it was true, often. Not always, but even when it wasn't, you would compensate for the momentary misunderstanding with a laugh filled with complicity and conviction.

Days and months went by and neither you nor B felt any weariness with the relationship. On the contrary, there was something progressive in it that never ceased to surprise you. Every day it renewed you. One could say your meeting had started an unstoppable chain reaction.

Your colleagues at work did not fail to notice the happy change you had each undergone. They commented on it. You smiled and

everyone understood. It was a kind of miracle, this coming together.

And then you almost lost B. The illness came out of the blue. You had anticipated everything except that. The doctors told you B had an eighty-percent chance of recovering. That there should be a one-in-five chance of B dying distressed you so much that you couldn't concentrate on day-to-day living anymore. You kept imagining in minute detail the worst possible outcome of B's illness, as if you wanted to prepare yourself. When those thoughts took a grip, they paralyzed you completely. One hundred times, one thousand times, you lived through B's death.

When, once in a while, you stopped thinking of B, this fear remained and affected all your thoughts. Everything worried you: your looks, a small growth you discovered in your groin, relationships with friends, a minor professional episode, the smallest mechanical problem with your car.

And yet you kept up appearances. During all that time there was no moment when B suspected you were worried. When questioned, you always spoke of B's health with optimism. You were totally reassuring because you were perfectly sincere at the time.

B recovered.

Your relationship started afresh.

What I am now going to say is very specific. So far, I have kept to amiable generalities in which anyone could recognize themselves. You will no longer be able to say that.

Here it is. One day you had an inspiration. A terrific idea. I won't say in which field. You know what I'm talking about, and that's all that matters.

No one else knew of it, except B, who heard it from you, had everything explained. B encouraged you. And you needed encouragement because your idea was so new, so revolutionary, that no one else would have believed you or understood.

So how do I, the writer, know about all that? Never mind. Don't worry at this stage.

B's illness and the confidence you shared in your idea had not only reinforced your union; it was the start of a new kind of relationship. B did not totally agree with you about your idea, but the mere fact of being your only confidant was enough to introduce your partner to a very special world inhabited until then by only one individual. Yourself.

About your idea, without going into detail, I can confirm it had something to do with human relationships. You had devised an

approach that was totally new, that had never been used, described, or imagined, even in works of fiction. This will play an important role in the next part of the story, partly explaining the drama that you know.

YOU DIDN'T SEE C COMING

I now have to make this story more personal, your story. Let's say that you, A, are a man. And that B is a woman.

In fact, it has no importance at all.

I hope you appreciate that I am making efforts to accommodate you. Let's do it this way for simplicity: C will be—or rather was—a man.

Two or three more things for clarity's sake.

You, A, are four or five years younger than B, and B, at the time this happened, was six years younger than C. The three of you were working in a similar field. But, unlike you or C, B had an international reputation.

All this, as you know, is significant.

C looked rather like Dussolier, the French actor. Quite pleasant, not aggressive, but contained. Unlike Dussolier, however, he was rather . . . I am tempted to say "dull," but I know for a fact that isn't the right word.

For a long time you thought you had nothing to fear from C. His presence seemed to bind you even more closely to B. When your dear B talked to you about C, it was usually in an ironic way, almost patronising. And you would do your best to defend C by stressing his good points.

However, he was so different from both of you that you were surprised to see him so often. In his shoes, you would never have put up with it. Admit it, you always wanted the leading part, whereas C didn't mind a cameo role. It was embarrassing to hear his hearty laughter when you and B improvised a dialogue in which you gave free rein to your wild imaginations.

So you ended up as an ill-matched trio, C being the walk-on part. Or the foil. Often he was your audience. Almost indispensable as time went on.

You and B were inseparably linked. B's common ground with C was extremely limited.

C was a good hunter, a remarkable rider. You loathed hunting, and B was mystified by it. One day the three of you visited a riding school. Remember? C's horse, a mare called Autumn Folly, was nervous, and he calmed her down by talking softly into her ear. Whatever he said, it soothed her.

B watched this. And you noticed her look. There was something in her eyes you had never seen before. It was very brief. It gave

you a rather unpleasant feeling which you couldn't understand. Then you forgot it.

Things began to change, so slowly that for some time it wasn't apparent. B and C imperceptibly increased their common ground. Your own relationship with B didn't alter much. Something, however, was different. Insidiously. Treacherously, you would say now. But at the time you were quite pleased. Undoubtedly you were pleased for C, and thought he would be more at ease in your threesome.

After a while you were conscious of being young, younger than each of them. Too young for comfort.

And then the pendulum swung.

The displacement of the center of gravity.

It was sudden. Horrible.

Intolerable.

And you said nothing. You made a point of hiding what you felt. It seemed of paramount importance to suppress your true feelings. A challenge for your self-control.

There was nothing else you could do. The tie progressively woven, under your own eyes, became really strong, and suddenly you realized it was indestructible.

Nobody has written a *Kama Sutra* of pain. There is, however, such a diversity in suffering, such refinements in torture, that they deserve to be recorded.

The torment you were under was totally new to you.

It left you defenseless. Naked.

It probably explains the decision you took.

THE DECISION

At this point in the narrative, you feel somewhat relieved, admit it. So that's all there is to it, you think, a commonplace story of rivalry. This writer hasn't shaken me at all. Who hasn't felt a twinge of jealousy or resentment at some stage? I am probably going to be lectured about my capacity for hatred now. No problem.

I am absolutely certain I haven't killed anyone. No one will convince me otherwise.

But wait.

In all good faith, everyone is allowed to have forgotten something essential, don't you agree?

Not the act you are accusing me of, you say.

Just think. The things one erases from the memory are the most disturbing. How long was needed before the guilt of Bousquet and Papon, the French collaborators in World War II, was recognized? How long was it before the responsibility of the United States for so much turmoil in South America came to light? And the role of France in Africa? Let alone the most monstrous of all unsaids, the

concentration camps. When all the secret archives have been gone through, be sure that many will tremble.

When whole nations suppress and deny the truth, what hope is there for individual honesty?

The object of this little story is to refresh your memory. And what is it that motivates me? Not sadism, believe me. Only the disgust I feel for those whose conscience is at peace. White lies. Denial of the truth. For reasons of my own, I hate self-satisfied people. You in particular, after the crime you committed.

So progressively you realized the necessity to eliminate C.

His death. Remember how intensely you desired it?

You were angry that he was in good health (even sorry that he didn't smoke) and that he drove a very safe car with absolute care. If it is true that hatred is sadness prompted by an exterior cause, then quite plainly you hated C, utterly.

So your decision was logical. Healthy, I am tempted to say. He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone. I agree—but I never translated it into action.

You are deceiving yourself. I am now about to prove it.

WHAT IS A PERFECT CRIME?

A crime whose perpetrator will never be discovered.

The ingenuity of novelists has exercised itself with the perfect murder for over a century.

A murder committed in a room locked *from the inside* is the classic example. Nobody has forgotten "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," by Edgar Allan Poe, or *The Mystery of the Yellow Room,* by Gaston Leroux. I must confess however that *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd,* by Agatha Christie, fascinates me just as much. Because of the uniqueness of the murder.

I have the pleasure to inform you, dear reader, that you have beaten the field. For the first time ever, the murderer himself (you) does not know, in all good faith, that he is the author of the crime. And what's more, a premeditated crime.

So here is the more-than-perfect crime. One step up from *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd.*

In fact, C was murdered in a hermetically closed place: himself. His own being.

He committed suicide.

It was not even murder disguised as suicide. And yet it was a crime. Are you starting to see where I am leading you?

Be careful, this is not a case of the vague guilt each of us feels when a relative kills himself. That's too easy. You could excuse yourself with a shrug.

You really killed C, even if you have forgotten the facts.

Just one word before that. Every suicide is, of course, a murder.

I do not believe in the famous "death wish"—a concept invented by Freud for personal reasons. Roustang shows very clearly Freud's responsibility in the suicide of some of his pupils. Notably, he cites Honneger's tragic death and Freud's pitiless cruelty with Tausk.

In a different area, isn't the suicide of an unemployed person directly linked to the values of a society that only accepts efficiency for the profit motive, a society that reduces human beings to possessions?

Finally, would Salengro or Bérégovoy (the former French Prime Minister who committed suicide after allegations of dishonesty) have killed themselves if an intolerable representation of themselves had not been imposed on them?

And yet it was not that sort of murder in the case of C. I repeat: You deliberately murdered him.

I must now evoke the personality of someone you knew extremely well. Someone you hated because he frightened you. He is vital to the story because he fascinated you as well. You identified with him when you planned and carried out the murder.

Until then, you were not a killer.

PORTRAIT OF A KILLER

". . . with a certain dare-devil expression of countenance not altogether unprepossessing."

Edgar Allan Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"

He was of average height. Bold in looks, rather attractive. Eyes sparkling with intelligence, but cold, as well.

He was not, strictly speaking, a serial killer, but he was responsible for at least ten "neutralisations," as they put it in the jargon of the intelligence service.

His method never changed.

He called it "induced suicide."

His weapon was words. I have been using the past tense, and you know why, and under which circumstances, he became a victim of them himself.

The method, then: To eliminate a human being with words, he should be hit twice. It's the principle of the explosive bullet. It penetrates, and then explodes inside.

First, he observed, meticulously watched the man or woman targeted. Second, he brought together two critical elements. One, any childhood experiences that mentally scarred his target; the other, his insecurities in coping with modern life and his place in society. All that was left to do then was to discover the "bullet words," as

he called them. He claimed—and demonstrated time after time with murderous results—that each of us is vulnerable to specific death-dealing words. When spoken at the right moment, those words home in and hit the heart, leaving no chance. Those who survived—the few who did not commit suicide—were so severely depressed that an active life was impossible afterwards. They were reduced to a living death.

Such was the man whose method inspired you when you decided you must do away with C.

THE KILLING

"There can be no more absolute waste of time than the attempt to prove, in the present day, that man, merely by the exercise of will, can so impress his fellow as to cast him into an abnormal condition, of which the symptoms closely resemble death."

Edgar Allan Poe, "Mesmeric Revelation"

It will be hard to credit what comes next. What I am going to tell you now makes you into a monster. Because you *are* a monster, and perhaps the strangest who ever was.

Curiously, nobody knows about it. Not even you.

You are not a professional killer, but a brilliant amateur. You have a very rare gift: an amazing ability. Apart from Dupin—Poe's famous detective—you are the only person I have heard of who is able to follow someone else's chain of associations for so long without losing it.

But there is something else.

Your words are formidable. Difficult to explain.

Without using hypnosis, you can put anyone into a suggestible state. The impression of absolute certainty that comes out of you, together with a sort of poetry in your delivery, give your words an irresistible penetration.

Let us now admit that A, B, and C were painters—all three.

B—I'll say it once more—had reached international fame. One crucial day she made a portrait of C, which was exhibited at the San Francisco Art Gallery.

It was, I must point out, a "loving" portrait. B had captured on C's face something elusive. Something tragic no one else had perceived. With this portrait she made C her own child, in a way, even though he was older than she. But what was very significant, she reproduced the small birthmark, the hangnail that C had on his right cheek. An angioma, as the doctors say.

And it is here that your devilish side was roused.

C had made portraits of himself showing the birthmark, but he could not bear that it should be noticed and painted by someone else. Even by B. Particularly by B.

If love brings joy, it also removes the shame we feel in our bodies, the last links in an invisible chain that links us to childhood. Love transforms what is shameful and turns it into a secret garden.

A stain on one's skin. B thought C was cured of self-consciousness.

You had observed all this.

C's childhood had not been normal, and you were aware of this. You guessed what that birthmark represented for him.

He was distinctly ill-at-ease when his portrait went on exhibition. His blemish was now exposed for everyone to see. And it was B who had revealed it. Even so, he felt he hadn't the right to prevent it.

With misplaced confidence, C asked you for advice. You, the youngest of the three. He felt, in a way, that B had betrayed him. She *knew*.

All the strategic devices were in place. You always had a very acute sense of when to go for the bull. How to hurt. Really hurt.

At that stage, one sentence was enough to kill him.

You delivered that sentence.

A few insidious words, meditated over many times, that contained everything: C's childhood, the way B saw him, the difference in ages, in reputation. And the birthmark, that ancient flaw now irremediably made visible to all. And the exposure of what he imagined was B's duplicity.

With one sentence you locked him inside a jail from which there was only one "escape."

He was found dead in his studio. He had swallowed three tubes of Nirtaquine after slashing all his paintings.

EPILOGUE

". . . the presence of 'thou' which is when the world comes into existence."

Julio Cortazar. *Preface* to Edgar Allan Poe's *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque.*

Having committed your crime, you thought all you had to do was turn the page quietly. With complete impunity.

Nobody would ever suspect you.

Even B noticed nothing.

The perfect crime.

You were wrong.

How do you think I know all this?

I am B.

I only wrote this story so that "thou shalt be killed." ●

MURDERING MAX

by Peter Lovesey

In 1989 I wrote the first youdunnit. A small accomplishment, you may think, not to be compared with the first manned flight or walking on the moon. To me, a humble crime writer, it brought satisfaction. For in 1983, Umberto Eco, the celebrated author of *The Name of the Rose,* had observed:

"It seems that the Parisian OULIPO group has recently constructed a matrix of all possible murder-story situations and has found that there has still to be written a book in which the murderer is the reader."

Pardon my vanity. "Youdunnit" is my claim to stand in the Pantheon with the Wright brothers and Neil Armstrong.

Do you doubt the importance of the achievement?

Am I guilty of self-aggrandisement?

Reflect on this. In the long history of the crime story, no one else had succeeded in writing a youdunnit. From Edgar Allan Poe to Umberto Eco himself, no mystery writer found a way to resolve the problem. Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, John Dickson Carr, Hammett, Chandler, Simenon, brilliant and ingenious as they were, couldn't crack it.

I did, in 1989. I pulled it off. And for ten years I stood alone. No other writer matched me. I believed I would see out the century as the one writer to succeed in devising a youdunnit.

And I almost did.

In November, 1999, François Gallix, professor at the Sorbonne, in Paris, wrote to tell me he had prepared a paper on "Twists and Turns in Crime Fiction—Peter Lovesey's 'Youdunnit.'" It was to be delivered at the Sorbonne before an international audience.

I turned cartwheels of joy.

After ten years, my achievement was to get recognition from the academic establishment. You see, for some reason I don't understand, my story had not (till then) received its due acclaim. In fact, it had passed most people by.

Now, however, my reputation would soar. My life was to be transformed. I decided forthwith to go to Paris.

Ladies and gentlemen of the French Academy, meet Peter Lovesey, trailblazer, pioneer, writer of the first youdunnit.

Bravo!

Then I read the rest of the professor's letter and received a body blow. "There is a French author, Max Dorra, who also wrote a short story—'Vous permettez que je vous dise tue?'—in which the reader is the murderer."

Unthinkable.

To say that I was appalled is an understatement. With just a few weeks left, this man Dorra had ruined the twentieth century for me. My claim to be the only man in the century, in the *millennium,* to write a youdunnit was dashed.

I hated him.

The professor's letter went on to state that Dr. Dorra was invited to the lecture. In my hour of triumph, this upstart would be there to undermine me, devalue my currency, smirk behind my back. It was insufferable.

For a week, I scarcely slept. Dorra was with me day and night, deep in my psyche, irritating, immovable, the grain of sand in the oyster. I pictured him sitting in the lecture room smiling arrogantly, confident that his youdunnit was superior to mine.

Reader, you will have divined by now that I don't like competition. Once or twice I've been told I'm a monomaniac. I don't accept that at all. Why should I believe the nonsense fools say about me? But when I am attacked from behind, I fight back.

I would devise a plot even more brilliant, even more ingenious than "Youdunnit."

First, it would be necessary to find out more about Dorra. More knowledge of the man would be painful, but necessary. I have a French friend I shall call Gerard. For the purpose of this, I must disguise his identity. Gerard once translated one of my stories (not "Youdunnit") and took the trouble to call me about some ironies in the text. That's unusual in a translator, such care over detail. We became the best of friends.

I phoned Gerard and asked what he could tell me about my rival. He knew very little, but offered to find out, promising to be discreet in his enquiries. In the heart of Paris (Gerard informed me) there is a marvellous library known as the BILIPO (La Bibliotheque des Littératures Policières), a superb research facility for scholars of crime fiction. Every crime story published in France is stored there.

Gerard happened to know a Ph.D. student, Delphine Kresge, who regularly used the BILIPO and was remarkably well informed about crime writers. This young lady was brilliant at ferreting out information, and could be trusted not to speak to a soul. She was ideally placed to act for us. In a couple of hours studying the cuttings library at the BILIPO, she compiled a dossier. Gerard faxed it to me. Thanks to Delphine, I was informed about Max Dorra's literary output, career, family, education, daily routine, the papers he read, the way he voted, the glasses he wore, the blend of

coffee he preferred. More than enough.

Without going into detail, Dorra was a medical doctor living in Paris who wrote fiction as a second career. The staff at the BILIPO didn't know him personally. They hoped he might call in when he came to the Sorbonne for the lecture on November 27th. They were also hoping for a visit from me.

They would get one.

I travelled to France by Eurostar on November 25th and took a room in the Hotel des Grandes Ecoles in the rue du Cardinal Lemoine, the same street as the BILIPO. That afternoon I visited the place and announced who I was. My reputation as the writer of "Youdunnit" must have gone before me. The director of the library, Catherine Chauchard, came specially from her office to greet me. She and one of her colleagues, Michele Witta, showed me round. And I discovered that my translator friend Gerard had not exaggerated in the least. Truly, the BILIPO is a house of treasures. Thousands of books, magazines, and documents are kept in ideal conditions, the air maintained at fifty percent humidity, the temperature at a constant seventeen degrees Celsius.

Happily, this location was perfect for my plan, as I realised when I was shown upstairs, where the books by foreign writers are stored. The upper floor is not usually open to the public; you reach it by elevator, operated by a secret digital code. I watched my host tapping the numbers on the panel, and memorised the sequence.

"Would you like to see your own book?" they asked.

I was taken into a room with tall metal bookshelves with winding-handles or cranks mounted on the ends, and it was explained to me that the shelves were on tracks and could he moved aside with ease by turning the handles. Michele Witta demonstrated and three shelves slid to the left and closed against each other.

"Dangerous, if someone is between the shelves," I commented.

"Yes, we have to be careful. That's why the public aren't normally allowed up here."

"But if I wanted to study books in translation . . . ?"

"We would make an exception for you."

"I see. May I turn the handle?"

They allowed me to try the mechanism. The shelves moved the other way and made a metallic boom as they slid together. Anyone caught between them would have been trapped, squeezed, and possibly crushed.

"And nobody except the staff comes up here?"

"Only certain people we trust."

"Such as writers?"

"And some researchers."

I was shown other things, including the strongroom containing

shelf system.

That evening, I finalised my plans. I knew exactly what to do about Max Dorra. I went shopping in the rue Descartes, where there are some fine food shops.

The lecture on "Youdunnit" took place as scheduled in the Salle Louis Liard at the Sorbonne. It was an appropriate setting, a magnificent gilded room with an allegorical painting on the ceiling and portraits of the elite of French literature on the walls. I positioned myself to one side of the tiered seats and waited for Professor Gallix to begin. I knew he must be a man of exquisite taste, and I was pleased to find that he also spoke eloquently and in perfect English, his eyes sparkling in the light of the great chandelier above us.

"I was hoping," he said almost at once, "that Peter Lovesey would be present this morning."

I declared myself with a modest wave.

"Ah! Welcome." He smiled. ". . . And we also have Max Dorra with us, the writer of a second story in which the reader is the culprit."

In the centre of the room a slim man in glasses gave a nod and then swung around to stare at me, as if challenging me to do something about it.

I glared back, and then turned to listen to the lecture. I didn't give him a second glance. I didn't allow anything to spoil my enjoyment of the occasion.

It was, I have to say, a brilliant, witty, and authoritative lecture touching on many obscure manipulations of the genre. The OULIPO, I learned, was a group of intellectuals dedicated to the study of crime literature and its potential manifestations. They had analysed every permutation of sleuth, victim, and murderer from Edgar Allan Poe onwards. It was gratifying to have it confirmed that my story was truly original, a first of its kind. Dorra's was mentioned, but not, I felt, in the same glowing terms.

By a curious quirk of fate, Professor Gallix concluded his lecture with a speculation. "Perhaps we may look forward to a story which is yet another innovation, one in which the author himself is the murderer and the victim is another author who has written a similar story."

The hairs rose on the back of my neck. I said nothing.

At the end, I demonstrated that I was a decent Englishman and a good sportsman by crossing the room to shake hands with the man masquerading as my equal. Just as I expected, he professed not to have read my story. "Has it gone out of print?" he said offensively and in quite a carrying voice.

"You can read it in the BILIPO," I informed him. "They have it upstairs, with the other books by distinguished foreign authors."

"I shall go there at once," he announced. "Where is this place?"

I offered to show him. Together, we walked the short distance to the rue du Cardinal Lemoine. Little was said until we reached the BILIPO. We went in together.

I returned to England the same evening, quietly satisfied.

A full week passed, and I was beginning to wonder when I would hear from France. At last came a fax message from Professor Gallix:

"I am not sure if you have heard that there is some concern here about your fellow author, Max Dorra. He has not been seen since the day of my lecture. There are fears for his safety and the police are investigating. Some people say he left the Sorbonne in your company, and it is possible that French detectives may wish to interview you. I thought in courtesy I should let you know. Perhaps you can throw some light on the matter."

Of course I threw no light on the matter. I was interviewed next day by a British detective who said he was making inquiries on behalf of Interpol. I signed a short statement confirming that I had escorted Dorra to the BILIPO where he proposed to read my story.

I was not troubled again.

In Paris, however, strange things were happening. The staff on the upper floor at the BILIPO became conscious of an unpleasant smell invading their refined atmosphere of constant temperature and humidity. The odour seemed to come from the area of the sliding shelves where the foreign books were stored. They moved one of the shelves and noticed some fragments of glass and wire that turned out to be a pair of broken spectacles. Alarmed at what they might find behind the next shelf, they called the police.

It was necessarily a slow process. The forensic team had to recover all the bits of broken glass and test all the shelving for DNA traces and fingerprints before rolling aside the next stack to see what lay behind. They fully expected to find a corpse.

When, eventually, they had all their "evidence" and moved the stack of shelves aside, they found only a plastic bag containing an overripe Roquefort cheese.

"You're the victim of a hoax," the senior detective told Catherine Chauchard, the BILIPO director, as if the police themselves had not been fooled at all.

"This Dr. Dorra," said another of the police team. "Is he a practical joker?"

"I couldn't tell you. We only saw him once. He's a writer."

"Was he wearing glasses?"

"Yes."

"What kind of thing does he write?"

"Crime stories."

"Devious, ingenious, tricky?"

"All of those."

"Ha." This discovery seemed to have a discouraging effect on the police. They started losing interest in Max Dorra. From that point on, they listed him as a missing person, but they scaled down the investigation into his disappearance.

Late the following year, I had a phone call from Professor Gallix:

"I thought you'd be interested in a new development in the Max Dorra disappearance."

My stomach gave a lurch, but I made sure my voice was steady. "What's happened?"

"He's still missing."

Thank God for that, I thought.

"But they published a picture of him in one of those magazines that list missing persons. When I saw it, I was thrown into confusion. The picture isn't anything like the man who came to my lecture."

"I expect they got the captions mixed."

"No. I checked with his publisher. I can only conclude that the man you and I met—the man claiming to be Dorra—was an impostor."

"How extraordinary."

"Why anyone should wish to pose as a writer and attend a rather esoteric lecture is a mystery."

"It defies explanation," I said convincingly.

"It makes me wonder if something happened to Dorra before the lecture took place."

He was getting too close to the truth for my peace of mind. "I shouldn't think so."

I didn't enlighten the professor. I didn't tell him I had arranged to meet Max Dorra the evening before the lecture, and that his body now lay deep in the Seine, weighted down with scaffolding bolts. Nor did I tell him that my translator-friend Gerard had been only too willing to play the part of Dorra. Pity the poor translators. They are starved of the attention they deserve. Gerard had savoured the admiring glances of the BILIPO staff when he arrived with the cheese and took the elevator to the upper floor and planted it there with the spectacles. Knowing the secret combination, he left without drawing attention to himself, a nonentity once more.

"I doubt if we'll ever know the truth," said the professor.

"If there were no mysteries, you and I would be out of a job," I said.

"One other thing," he added, "and quite unconnected with this. Did you give any consideration to my suggestion?"

"What was that?"

"The story in which one author kills another."

"Impossible," I said. "It will never be written." ●

Two Little Indians

by Max Dorra

translated by François Gallix

Wednesday morning on a crisp November day. The Sorbonne. Kafkaesque corridors. Lecture rooms unchanged from the days of Jules Verne. That dusty, derided, magnificent, marvellous Sorbonne.

I find the Louis Liard amphitheater where the colloquium is to be held, a place looking like a small part of Cambridge that has infiltrated a French university. The people from the English department are starting to arrive, and so are the guests from England and the United States, notably from Ball State University, Indiana.

I don't know anyone. All the proceedings are to be in English, and mine is only average. I feel nervous. Here everyone has at least a Ph.D. and most of them teach in universities.

François Gallix, the director of the research center, has written to me about my short story in which the reader is the culprit. An "Oulipian-like constraint," which is precisely the theme of his paper in the colloquium. But we have never met.

Ah, here's a guy with a moustache like a Brit's. You could swear he has a pipe between his teeth, and yet he hasn't. He seems friendly, with a sense of humor. It can only be Professor Gallix. I say in a well-rehearsed way, "Doctor Livingstone, I presume?" We both laugh.

Now I'm looking for my victim, that is, my intended victim: the British author who had the same idea for a story, the man I mean to eliminate by some method yet to be decided.

"I have not seen Peter Lovesey arrive," François Gallix says.

The amphitheater is almost full. There's only one seat left, beside a blond girl—the Hitchcock-heroine type, a profiterole in reverse: icy distinction on the outside, Stromboli inside. I sit, and immediately we start up a conversation. She has a Ph.D. in English, like everyone else. Her accent is perfect. Is she bilingual? "Oh, no, and I only got a 4 out of 20 on my exam because of my accent!" She teaches at the University of Aix, and her paper this afternoon will be on "Edgar Allan Poe and the Maelstrom." I tell her about my short story. "What is it called?" she asks.

"'Thou Shalt Kill.'"

"Of course," she answers immediately.

I really don't know why, but suddenly I feel much better. Great title.

The first paper is read. Nothing. I can't understand a thing. A few snatches, no more. And yet I did six years of English in school and I wasn't the worst pupil. I am getting more and more worried. If there is a discussion I really must think of a set phrase in English that will get me off the hook with a clever answer. I scribble a few words on a scrap of paper and hand it to my pretty neighbor: "How do you say in English: *'Je ne parlerai qu'en presence de mon avocat'*?"

She smiles, thinks for a few seconds, then writes down the answer and passes it back: *"I'll only speak in the presence of my lawyer."* A fine and precise hand. In difficult situations, I've always been saved by a girl. But my fears, which had quietened down for a time, are coming back. ". . . *in the presence of my lawyer.*" The word "lawyer." Where does the stress go? I was always told this was important in English. Well, I can't really disturb her again. She is listening very attentively to the chap with the microphone.

Suddenly I hear three words in French: *"mise en abyme"*—the story within the story, as in Potocki's *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse.* How to get out of one story by entering another. That interests me. I feel there may be something important here. Each time another person looks at us, for instance, we are reinvented. Unknown to us, a new story is conceived in their brain. I think of the way Baudelaire looked at Poe.

Ah! Now François Gallix's paper. He is speaking about Peter Lovesey's short story "Youdunnit." Then the discussion starts. I participate, as planned, by saying the sentence I have mentally repeated fifty times. Peter Lovesey (he is in the audience after all), when questioned by François Gallix, answers with humor, it seems, as everyone laughs. I can't understand his comment. I also laugh, but after a short delay.

At that moment, the blonde next to me tells me casually that a fortnight ago she killed her grandmother by being overgenerous with drops of Digitalin. She adds, "But you know all those who dabble in the crime story have a similar story to tell." She looks me straight in the eye. "Don't you?"

Then she goes back to her note-taking.

Suddenly she clasps her hands to her breast and screams.

Something terrible is happening. It feels like an earthquake.

I must have lost consciousness for a few seconds. I am crawling through rubble.

Of the Sorbonne there is nothing left. A crater and a few smoking ruins.

Later, I will learn that the explosion was so violent that the windows of every cafe on the square were shattered. My favorite bookshop was not spared.

About ten meters from where I am lying, to my right, a man slowly emerges from the debris: Peter Lovesey. We are alone now. Two serial killers, two accomplices meeting at the scene of their crime. And finally they feel rather drawn to each other. To my amazement, Peter holds tightly in his right hand a bottle of Jouet '79 champagne, miraculously intact. We smile at each other. To insert others into an invented story, that *is* the perfect murder. Literature. *Mise en abyme.* The phrase is sufficiently eloquent. By making a story out of it, we have pushed everyone else into the abyss.

Now I must confess one of my shortcomings. I've been like this since early childhood. I must always be ahead of the game.

I have prepared my defense in case I go to court.

I will brief my lawyer. I can already picture the elegant young lady (obviously blond) standing up. "Objection, my Lord. My client has an irrefutable alibi. At the time of the crime he was in another story."

We'll then exchange a knowing smile that no one else will notice.

Peter Lovesey will be found guilty.

*He*dunnit. ●

EDITOR'S NOTE: Don't be fooled by Peter Lovesey's depiction of himself in "Murdering Max"; he is the most generous of authors, the first to credit others and to underplay his own achievements—which, incidentally, far surpass whatever distinction may attach to the devising of the first "youdunnit." Mr. Lovesey was dubbed the "modern master of the historical mystery," by critic William L. DeAndrea, on the merits of the two literate, witty, and brilliantly plotted series of Victorian novels to which he devoted most of his early years as a writer. The skillful construction characteristic of the historicals is also evident in his more recent series, set in modern-day Bath. As *EQMM* readers know, Peter Lovesey is also a short-story writer *par excellence.* The many awards and honors he has received for his fiction include a Gold and a Silver Dagger from the British Crime Writers Association, and, last year, the Cartier Diamond Dagger, that organization's Lifetime Achievement Award.

Of Max Dorra we know considerably less: only that he is a medical doctor, a writer of literary articles, and the author of at least two published novels. And, of course, that he showed himself to be most worthy of the clever professor's challenge. Perhaps Professor Gallix will treat us to another Dorra translation soon. Bravo to them both!

Art by Darryl Elliott

The Mondo Whammy

by David Handler

"I'm sorry, sir—you can't come in here."

He was a massive young cop with red hair and a freckly jack-o'-lantern face. His winter blues strained against his shoulders as he stood there stubbornly guarding the door to my building, his arms folded in front of his chest.

"But I live here," I protested. "Here" was a four-story townhouse of red brick on West Tenth Street, just off of Sixth Avenue. It was a quiet, tree-lined Greenwich Village street, especially on a chilly Sunday evening in January. Or it usually was. Right now a pair of NYPD blue-and-whites were parked out front, along with an EMS van and two crime-scene vans. Neighbors from up and down the block were milling around, wondering what was up. The cab that had brought me here slowly pulled away through the hubbub. "I'm in apartment Four-A."

"Your name, sir?"

I told him. He nodded and buzzed my apartment. Someone up there answered. He told this someone that I was here, then turned back to me, his face impassive.

"A detective will be right down, Mr. Samuels."

"Why is there a detective in my apartment? What's this all about?"

His name was Flett. He was a squarely built man in his forties with thick gray hair and eyes that were warm and moist like a stray spaniel that wanted to lick your hand. His camel's-hair topcoat was unbuttoned. Under it he wore a gray flannel suit, blue button-down shirt, and striped tie. If I had seen him on the street I would have taken him for an investment banker with a seat on the exchange and a wife and 2.8 kids snugly at home in Darien.

David Handler, winner of an Edgar Allan Poe Award and an American Mystery Award for his Stewart Hoag novels, draws upon his years battling in the TV sitcom writing trenches for "The Mondo Whammy." He launches a new mystery series this fall with *The Cold Blue Blood* (St. Martin's), which introduces the highly mismatched duo of chubby New York film critic Mitch Berger and alluring state trooper Desiree Mitry.

"So you're Mr. Samuels," he said, his eyes falling on my weekend bag and bookbag. "Just getting back from a trip?"

"I was in the country for a few days. I have a farmhouse a few miles outside of New Paltz. Look, what's this all about?"

"Please come with me."

I went with him, pausing in the vestibule to unlock my mailbox and get the bills and catalogs that had accumulated. As we started up the stairs, I could hear the floorboard creak behind the door to my landlord's apartment. Mr. Popper's favorite pastime was squinting through his peephole at his tenants coming and going. He and his wife shared the bottom two floors. The third floor was divided into two studio apartments. One was rented to an architect, a Japanese woman who lived and worked there. The other belonged to a fashion designer who spent part of the year in Paris. The top floor had been mine since I came east. I had a book-lined living room with a fireplace, a bedroom, and a small study.

"Were you alone up in New Paltz, Mr. Samuels?"

"Yes, I was. I drove up there Wednesday evening. Just got back. I keep my car at a garage near Chelsea Studios, since I usually leave from there."

"What kind of work is it you do?"

I explained to him that I wrote and produced *Make Me Perfect*. He knew the show. It had been the number-one-rated sitcom in America for three straight seasons. Our Emmy-award-winning star, Sarah Banks, played a single, successful Park Avenue plastic surgeon whose job was to turn the rich and famous into perfect

people even though she herself was anything but.

"We were on hiatus last week," I told him as we climbed. "I was getting some personal writing done. I'm working on a play." A play for Sarah, as it happened. I still clung to the quaintly romantic notion that people would pay good money to see good live theater. Just as I still believed, at age thirty-four, that my true destiny was to become my generation's Neil Simon.

"That Sarah Banks is really something," Flett said admiringly. "Me, I'd put her right up there with Mary Tyler Moore. Funny *and* beautiful."

She was also warm and passionate and had been the great love of my life for the past three months. Unfortunately, she was still technically married to her abusive, womanizing louse of a husband, Pierre. They were good and separated before Sarah and I ever got involved. But she hadn't filed the divorce papers yet and she was still a big celebrity with a squeaky-clean image. So we could not go out together in public. That was becoming a problem for me. Either we were going to be a couple or we were not. I had no doubts. But I still wasn't sure about how Sarah felt. So I had gone away to write. That's what writers do when we can't figure things out.

"Hey, did you ever write for *Seinfeld?*" he asked me.

"If it hadn't been for me, Kramer would never have gone swimming in the East River." I was on staff for two seasons—me and my writing and producing partner, Naomi. We had also worked on *Cheers, Frasier,* and *The Simpsons.* I was Marty Samuels. She was Naomi Lewis. We called ourselves Martin and Lewis. We'd been writing together ever since we were twelve-year-old misfits growing up together in Beverly Hills. When the chance came up to create and run a show for Sarah in New York we grabbed it. Southern California no longer felt like home. Just one big roiling, toxic shopping mall. "I'm sorry, but you still haven't told me what's going on."

"The reason we're here, Mr. Samuels, is we got a nine-one-one call earlier this evening saying that there was an emergency here in your apartment."

"No, no, that's impossible. No one was here. I live alone."

"Your landlord let our men in," he continued, puffing as we reached the fourth-floor landing. "Your door was locked. There was no sign of forced entry."

Now my living room was crowded with technicians wearing latex gloves. They were dusting countertops and doorknobs for prints, gathering stray hairs from the carpet, pawing through my desk drawers, cupboards, closets.

"Please follow me, sir," Flett said as I stood there, bewildered.

There were more people in my bedroom. One of them was in the process of taking photographs of something on the bed.

That something was a dead woman in a see-through teddy.

She was young and blond and very attractive. Or she had been. She wasn't anymore. Whoever strangled her had used a pair of black pantyhose. She had put up a fight. Her fingernails were torn and bloodied. So was her throat.

"W-Who the hell is this?" I stammered hoarsely.

"You don't know her?" Flett asked me doubtfully. "I want you to be really sure about this, Mr. Samuels. Take a good, long look."

I forced myself to take a closer look. She had brown eyes and good high cheekbones, a model's cheekbones. She was a tall girl, very slender and shapely, with long, fine legs. She did seem slightly familiar, like someone I might have sat across the aisle from in a restaurant recently, but I didn't know her. And I sure didn't know what she was doing in my bed, mostly naked.

I shook my head slowly and said, "What's her name?"

"Carla Pettit, according to her driver's license. She's an actress. Got a SAG card." He peered at me, stroking his chin with a blunt thumb. "You're sticking to the story that she means nothing to you?"

"It's not a story, Detective. It's the truth."

"Come with me," he ordered, leading me back through the hive of technicians into my study.

I used an old paint-splattered trestle table as my desk. It was heaped with stacks of manuscripts and notepads. Someone had rearranged those piles so as to clear one corner of the table, where a professionally shot eight-by-ten black-and-white portrait of Carla Pettit was displayed in a silver frame. She looked provocative and extremely desirable.

"I—I've never seen this picture before," I said, staring at it dumbly.

That wasn't all. A woman's clothes were hanging in my hall closet. Clothes that I'd never seen before. And there were things in the bathroom. Cosmetics, hair brushes. Valium that I didn't take. Tampons that I for damned sure didn't use.

I backed slowly out of the bathroom, reeling. I felt as if I'd wandered into someone else's home, someone else's life. "W-What's going on here?" I croaked. We were back in my bedroom, where more ladies' things were piled in one of the dresser drawers. "I have no idea who this woman was. This is totally insane!"

The photographer interjected, "Sir, look at me, please."

And when I did he took *my* picture. "What's that for?" I demanded.

"Strictly routine," Flett answered. "Mr. Samuels, your landlord's seen this woman before in the building on numerous occasions."

The man's voice was much chillier now. "Furthermore, she had a key to this apartment in her purse."

I had walked right into a nightmare. My face suddenly felt very flushed. And the walls were closing in on me. Part of me, the part that spent those long days and nights at the laugh factory, wanted to believe that all of these people were actors and this was just some kind of an elaborate prank. But this was no prank. The body was real. The nightmare was real.

Flett was glowering at me now with flinty disapproval. "Look, Mr. Samuels, why don't you just tell me what happened. We work together on this thing, it will make the situation a lot easier all the way around."

"You actually think I did this, don't you?"

"I don't think at this point," he answered wearily. "I ask questions. You seem like a nice enough guy. Bright, successful, clean arrest record. But it's still your apartment, so I still have to start with you."

"I have no idea what she was doing here."

"Well, she wasn't having sex," he confided. "Medical examiner's preliminary findings are that she was killed before she and her killer got around to it, which is too bad—we could go to town with a DNA sample. No, I'm afraid we'll have to do this one the old-fashioned way—with our minds. . . . Who else has a key to this place?"

"Well, there's the woman who cleans for me . . ." I gave him Maria's address up in Washington Heights. She was the cousin of one of our wardrobe women. "There's my production assistant, Kenny Sapperstein."

"Why does he have a key to your home?"

"He runs personal errands for me sometimes. Part of the job description."

"Uh-hunh. How long have you known him?"

"A few months. He also warms up our audiences on tape day. Does a bit of stand-up, some corny magic tricks." Kenny had come to us by way of the *Harvard Lampoon*. He was ambitious but manageable. I was grooming him to join our writing staff.

"Where does he live?"

"Forest Hills, I think. With his brother, who's an intern at one of the hospitals." I paused, searching my memory. "And I do keep a spare key in my office desk at the studio."

"How secure is your office?"

"Not very."

"Anyone else have one?"

Sarah. But I didn't want her involved. Not if I could help it. Besides, there was no way she would have had anything to do with this. My thoughts did, however, fall on that husband of hers.

If you were to look up the word *eurotrash* in the dictionary, you would see Pierre Devereaux's picture. He was pretentious, arrogant, and worthless, a philanderer and a mean drinker. He'd given Sarah a nasty black eye last season when she tried to talk to him about his drinking, forcing us to rewrite that week's show at the last minute. His office was right next door to mine—he certainly could have lifted my spare key. Maybe he was purposely trying to ruin me for taking up with Sarah. It made sense. But how on earth could I raise him as a suspect to Detective Flett without bringing her into it, too?

I didn't know. I needed to go somewhere and think. "How long has she been dead, Detective?"

"Since this morning."

"Yet you didn't get the nine-one-one call until tonight. Why is that?"

"No idea. And don't ask me who the caller was. I can't tell you."

"But that's not fair. I have a right to know."

He raised an eyebrow at me curiously. "I don't disagree. But we aren't authorized to release that information without a court order. Tell me, when does your cleaning lady usually come?"

"Saturday mornings."

"Do you go up to New Paltz every weekend?"

"Pretty much."

"Then I suppose it's *possible* Carla's been using this apartment without you ever knowing it. That could play, provided she tidied up after herself. And if you did find anything out of place, you'd attribute it to your cleaning woman, right?"

"I've often smelled perfume when I came in the door on Sunday nights. I always figured it was Maria's, but . . ." I swallowed. "I smell it now—on her."

"Anyone see you up in New Paltz? Neighbors?"

"No, it's extremely remote. I did buy groceries in town on Thursday."

"So no one's seen you since then?"

"I went there to work, like I told you."

"How about phone calls? Did you make any phone calls?"

Every night before I went to bed. There would be a record of that. "Yes, I called Sarah Banks." When he gazed curiously at me I added, "I'm writing my play for her."

"We'll need to look around up there in the morning."

"That's fine."

"We have your permission?" he asked pointedly.

"Absolutely. I have nothing to hide." I gave him the address, and directions. "Key's under the mat. There's no security system. Nothing to steal."

"Okay, I guess we're done here," he said, leading me back out to

the living room. He paused, looking me up and down. "I never met a professional comedy writer before. I keep expecting you to say something funny."

"To be honest, I can't come up with a joke to suit this particular situation. Well, all right, how about this—do I need a lawyer?"

"What you need is a place to stay," he advised. "This apartment's going to be sealed for a couple of days. Got someone you can crash with?"

I crashed with my partner, who was in another room reading a bedtime story to Paul's four-year-old son, Sam, when I barged in, bags in tow.

Paul parked me in front of some of his lentil soup. Paul Kaminsky was an excellent cook. Excellent at everything. Tall, handsome, calm, generous, kind—just the sort of sane, grounded individual every lunatic comedy writer ought to be paired off with. He was even a psychiatrist. The Stepford Boyfriend, Naomi and I called him. Paul's wife had run off with a jazz musician and left him with young Sam. He, Sam, and Naomi now shared a vast, airy four-thousand-square-foot loft on the top floor of an old masonry warehouse on Staples Street in Tribeca, complete with gourmet kitchen, sauna, and drop-dead view of the Hudson.

I lived like Bob Cratchit in comparison to Naomi, maybe because I'd grown up south of Wilshire Boulevard in a two-bedroom apartment with my mother, Rose, a widow who raised me by herself on a school librarian's salary. Naomi grew up in a hilltop mansion that was just a spit take away from Pickfair. Spending money was very important to her. I guess it was her way of proving to her late father, and herself, that she'd made it.

Naomi still had some unresolved conflicts with Saul Lewis, who'd been the creative power behind *F Troop, The Munsters,* and a number of other hit shows. Also a major bully. When a teenaged Naomi worked up the nerve to inform Saul that she wanted to follow in his footsteps, Saul made her perform ten minutes of her best material in front of a jury of eight of his sitcom peers, all of them gruff, sour schtickticians who wouldn't crack a smile if you threatened to pull out their toenails with pliers. She had been severely traumatized by the experience, and had never stopped despising her father, even after the funeral—which she refused to attend. Eventually, Naomi went to see a shrink about her anger—Paul, as a matter of fact. He sent her to another therapist after the two of them became romantically involved.

"Are you okay, Marty?" Paul asked me, his brow furrowing with concern.

I puffed out my cheeks. "I can think of a lot of words to describe how I am. Okay is not one of them. Someone has purposely set out

to destroy me, Paul. My life has been totally overturned. It's truly amazing. One minute you think that you have everything under control. The next minute, wham-zoom, it's gone."

He put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed it. "Please don't try to fight this alone. If you need to talk, call me anytime, day or night. I mean that."

Paul was very understanding. And, seemingly, not threatened by Naomi being so close to another man. Paul accepted it, and me.

After all, she and I had been like brother and sister since we were kids, both of us outsiders in the status-conscious Beverly Hills junior high school we found ourselves stuck in. Neither of us had a brother or sister of our own. Or a single real friend. Naomi was clumsy and overweight, with a sharp tongue and a wicked, fearless wit. The popular girls called her Hippo. I possessed an Adam's apple the size of a casaba melon and a voice that could, and did, leap tall octaves in a single bound. My palms were never dry. Ever. I was also plagued by frequent, blinding migraine headaches that required me to lie down in the nurse's office for hours with the blinds drawn and a damp washcloth over my eyes.

Mostly, I had spent my childhood alone, reading *Mad* magazine, listening to old Stan Freberg records, and watching reruns of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. In Naomi I finally found a kindred soul. We could read each other's minds, finish each other's sentences, make each other laugh. When we hooked up together, we were complete. Often, we would sit up until dawn in her dad's screening room watching tapes of old sitcoms. Inevitably, we began to write together.

She came barreling in now from Sam's room in a sweatshirt and sweatpants, big-boned and blustering, her hair tied back in a ponytail. Clearly, she'd just been to Kelly's Gym in Soho, where she worked out three times a week with the same drill sergeant of a trainer I had. Naomi had gotten a lot more toned and polished through the years. She was by no means a beauty, but she was comfortable in her own skin. "Hey, Junior," she called out to me.

She'd always called me Junior. She was the realist and I was the dreamer, and this made her the designated grownup of the team. Naomi was a great shmoozer and pitch artist. She wined and dined the network suits. Worked the corridors at the studios. Kept her ear to the ground and the money people away from me, for which I was eternally grateful. I was the script wonk, the master mechanic who was good at the day-in, day-out grind of breaking down stories and churning out pages. It was a division of labor that worked perfectly for both of us.

Paul went off to finish reading Sam his story. Naomi grabbed us a couple of beers and flopped down across the table from me, her face darkening.

The police called me," she said in a low, grim voice. "They asked me what I knew about you and this Carla Pettit."

"I didn't know her, Nayo. I never saw her before."

She took a long drink of her beer and said, "Yes, you did."

I gaped at her in shock. "What do you mean?"

"She had a scene in the elevator show—the one last season when Sarah got trapped in the building after work with that guy who'd just gotten fired and couldn't stop crying. We taped it back in March, remember?"

"I remember the episode, but who . . . ?"

"She was the other woman in the elevator. The one who nudged Sarah and said, 'Don't knock it—a complete mental meltdown makes for a nice break in the day.' That was Carla Pettit. She was a brunette then."

"My God, you're right. . . . How on earth did you remember her?"

"Because I cast her, that's how. Her agent was a pain in the butt who kept holding out for guest-star pay. I must have talked to him on the phone eight times." Naomi ran a hand across her face, swallowing uneasily. "I told the police. I guess I panicked, you know? My life passed before my eyes faster than Joe Piscopo's film career. I'm really sorry, Junior."

"Nayo, there's absolutely no reason to be sorry," I assured her.

Although I was already wondering whether Flett had leapt to the conclusion that I was lying when I told him I didn't know Carla. Despite the fact that I was innocent, I was starting to think like a guilty person. Trust me, it doesn't take long. Guilt, fear, paranoia—it's inside all of us, bubbling away.

My partner peered across the table at me. "We've been through the wars together. And one thing we've always been is brutally honest with each other. . . ."

I nodded. "It's us against them. Always."

"So just clue me in and I'll go to the mat for you. I'll go *through* the mat. But I've got to know what the story is. Were you involved with this woman?"

"There's only one woman in my life, and it's Sarah." I reached for my beer, turning the whole thing over in my mind. "I keep thinking about Pierre. He hits on every actress who comes through the door. Maybe he made a copy of my key. Maybe he's been meeting Carla there while I was up in New Paltz."

"Why would he do that? He has his own place now."

"To keep her under wraps. Something to do with the divorce proceedings."

"Sarah's filed for the divorce?" Naomi raised her eyebrows at me. She did not totally approve of the two of us. She worried that I was in over my head.

"Not yet, but it's the only thing that makes any sense to me."

"Well, if it *was* Pierre, then you've got nothing to worry about. There's absolutely no way he's bright enough to pull this off. The police are bound to nail him. Count on it." Naomi smiled at me reassuringly. "Now let's talk about something important—how goes the play?"

I was tentatively calling it *Rose of Boyle Heights*. Boyle Heights was the working-class Jewish neighborhood in South-Central L.A. where my mom had been raised. It was about a struggling single mother who's trying to raise a precocious son in a wealthy neighborhood. Not even remotely autobiographical. "I won't know how it is until you read it and tell me."

"Any time you're ready. I think it's great that you're doing this."

"Do you?" I'd wondered if she resented my doing it on my own.

"Absolutely. Somebody's got to rescue the American theater. It may as well be someone with talent. And if it can't be someone with talent, it may as well be you." Now she drained her beer and climbed to her feet. "Ready to go to bed?"

"I'm sorry, Nayo," I replied gravely. "I just don't feel that way about you."

She gave me one of her bear hugs. "That's it—don't lose your sense of humor."

"My God, you've finally admitted that I have one."

"You want to know what I think?"

"Desperately."

"I think this is all just a crazy misunderstanding. And that we'll get it straightened out in the morning. And that we'll all live happily ever after."

"Nayo, you've been watching too much television. Bad television. You've been watching our show again, haven't you?"

She had made up the double bed in the guest bedroom, which was furnished with Mission oak antiques. I dug my shaving kit out of my weekend bag and undressed and showered in the adjoining guest bathroom. After I brushed my teeth I discovered I was out of dental floss. I found some in the medicine chest, where Paul kept an entire pharmacy of drug samples stashed away. Packet upon packet of sleeping pills, stomach-acid pills, Prozac, tranks, decongestants. But I didn't need any of those things.

I needed to burrow under the covers with my cell phone and call Sarah. So what if it was past midnight? I had to talk to her.

Only she wasn't home. It was her phone machine that answered. *Why wasn't she home? Where in the hell was she?*

I left her a calm, collected message. Then I shut off the light and lay there in the darkness, unable to shut off my mind. I kept thinking the same thing over and over again: Somebody was pulling a killer gag on me. A real live genuine mondo whammy. But who? And why? If there was one thing I understood, it was

how to build a gag. Every gag must have a punch line. So what was the damned punch line?

I lay there, wondering. And as I tumbled slowly toward sleep I was visited by a nightmare that hadn't called on me since I was a very small boy: I became overwhelmingly certain that an invisible monster, *someone,* was purposely shaking my bed so as to keep me awake. I immediately flicked on the light, my heart pounding. When I was little, I would call for my mother. She'd come in and sit on the bed to keep it from shaking. But my mother was three thousand miles away now. And there was no monster in that room with me. I knew that. I was an adult, damn it. But that didn't make a bit of difference.

The fear was real.

Someone was tapping at the door. Naomi had seen my light. She padded in barefoot in her red flannel nightshirt and shut the door softly, an index finger held conspiratorially to her lips. Then she sat on the edge of the bed and lit a cigarette, dragging hungrily on it. "Paul will kill me if he catches me," she whispered.

"He'll smell it on you when you get back into bed, won't he?"

"I'll tell him you were the one who was smoking."

"Since when did you start again?"

"Since right now," she confessed. "I'm scared, Junior."

"Then you can imagine how I feel."

"Want one?" she asked, offering me her crumpled pack.

"Hell yes. I thought you'd never ask."

We both smoked like chimneys when we were fledgling staff writers. We both quit at the same time, four years ago. I lit one, dragging on it gratefully, while she climbed in under the covers. Her feet were like two blocks of frozen hamburger.

She let out a contented purr. "Wanna fool around, good lookin'?"

Not that there had ever been a romance between us. She was forever attracted to guys who looked like the young Robert Redford. I looked a lot more like the young Jerry Stiller.

"We *are* fooling around," I replied. "We're in bed together smoking cigarettes. I'm in my underwear. What else is there?"

"God, you are so innocent."

"Tell Flett that, will you?"

"Who he?"

"The cop who was in my apartment. You didn't talk to him?"

"No, someone else. Is he cute?"

"I don't mean to be critical, but do your feet *ever* warm up?"

"What a wuss," she fumed, edging them a bit farther away. "Hey, do you remember Terry Sand?"

"Terry Sand . . . Sure, he used to pitch for the Giants. A crafty left-hander. Did you ever notice how right-handers are never called crafty? Only left-handers?"

"You're doing Jerry Seinfeld again. Stop it. *She* was in Mr. Brockbank's French class with us. Always made fun of me in gym class because I was such a mammoth klutz."

"So what about her?"

"I had a dream about her last night. I was eating a scrumptious dinner at Babbo with Paul and she was sitting at the next table—laughing at me." She let out a long, mournful sigh. "I've been dreaming about junior high a lot lately. Do you think I'm having a midlife crisis?"

"I do. Get help right away."

She let out a snort. "I don't even know why I bother talking to you."

"Because I'm the only one who'll listen to you."

"God, I'm wired. You don't have a joint on you, do you?"

"Yeah, right. That's just what I need right . . ." A brand new spasm of fear shot through me. I sat right up, my heart racing. "Sarah left some up at the farmhouse a few weeks ago. She likes to smoke a little to unwind."

"So?"

"So they're going to search the place in the morning."

"They can't. Not without a warrant."

"I gave them permission."

"Why would you do that?"

"Why *wouldn't* I? I'm not a criminal. What am I going to do?"

"They're investigating a murder. They won't care about a couple of joints."

"But Sarah's gardening clothes are up there, too."

"So say they belong to someone else."

"Like who—*Carla Pettit?!*"

"Shh, you'll wake up the boys," Naomi cautioned. "No, me. Tell them I go up there to write with you all the time."

"It'll never work. She's petite. You're economy sized."

"Screw you, too."

"I have to go up there and remove all traces of her." I reached for my watch on the nightstand. It was 12:30. If I floored it, I could get there before three, be back not much later than five. I got out of bed and hurriedly started dressing.

"Marty, Dan Quayle said it best: A mind is a terrible thing to lose."

"She's our franchise player, Nayo. She can't get caught up in this."

"Stop and think, will you? You can't remove every trace of her. She's left behind fingerprints, hairs. Besides, people have *seen* her up there, haven't they? Just come clean about it. They're *going* to find out about you two."

"Not if I can help it."

"Junior, you're behaving like a putz. And you know who's going to end up getting hurt from all of this, don't you? *You.*"

"It's a relationship. You can't be in one without getting hurt."

"That's not a good line."

"You're right," I admitted. "I'll come up with a better one."

"Want me to come with you?"

"No."

"Good. I have much better things to do than tromp around in a foot of snow in the middle of the night. Can I sleep in your bed?"

"Go right ahead. But I'm taking the cigarettes." I began putting my shoes on. "Okay, I have a better line . . . I love her."

"Sincere, direct, and on the money," Naomi said approvingly. "But deep down inside you still know zero about women."

"Such as?"

"Hasn't it occurred to you that Sarah wants to be a Broadway star more than anything in the whole wide world?"

"Sure. So what?"

"She's never done a play in her life, that's what. Do you think anyone besides you is going to hand her the keys to an original, custom-built star vehicle? You're her *ticket.*"

"Sarah's not that scheming."

"She's an actress!"

"I'd better get going. Let's feel free to not continue this conversation some other time."

"Fine," she huffed. "Go. See if I care. . . . But for God's sake, be careful."

Even at this hour, there was traffic. It began to thin a little by the time I reached Yonkers. I took the Tappan Zee Bridge over the Hudson, hooked up with the New York State Thruway, and pushed my Jeep to 85. I was the only car on the road now. There was no one ahead of me or behind me, only darkness.

Again, I tried calling Sarah on my cell phone. Again, I got her phone machine. This time I didn't leave a message. *Where in the hell was she?*

I made it to the New Paltz exit just after 2:30. A police car was prowling the quaint, narrow main drag. Otherwise, the little college town was asleep. I'd stumbled on the place when I was invited up by the drama department to teach a workshop on comedy writing. I immediately fell in love with the area, which was a stone's throw from Woodstock. There were working dairy farms and apple orchards. Lots of idealistic young artists and writers. It was the perfect place for me to get away from the Marty Samuels who wrote television scripts all day in a room with Naomi Lewis. I kept getting the feeling that there was more within me. Up there, I felt free to dig deep in search of it. And not worry about how to turn it

into twenty-two minutes of slick, rhythmic ensemble comedy with sweetened laughter and a feel-good mood that would work for a national prime-time audience.

It only had to work for me.

It was pitch black out, with no moon overhead. On the outskirts of town, a bridge crossed a frozen stream and then there was nothing but pastures covered with virgin white snow that shimmered in the Jeep's high beams. New Paltz was part of the upstate New York snow belt. It had come down heavily on Sunday morning, a wet snow that froze hard and crunchy. The city got nothing. My place was at the end of a dirt road. I had thirteen acres of apple trees and cleared pasture, a dilapidated two-bedroom 1920s farmhouse, a sagging barn with a see-through roof. I got it cheap because the New Yorkers who were looking for a weekend getaway home thought it needed more bedrooms, a new kitchen, new baths, new everything. Me, I furnished it with tag-sale finds and moved right in.

One of the few things I'd done was install an electric eye so that when I pulled up outside it activated the floodlights on the porch. Otherwise I'd have to fumble around in the dark to unlock the front door. The lights stayed on for five minutes and then automatically shut off.

It still felt warm inside from earlier in the day, when I'd had the furnace cranked up high. I went straight up the narrow, creaking wooden stairs to my bedroom, flicked on a light, and opened the closet.

Someone had already been there. Sarah's jeans and work shirts and rubber boots were gone. In their place I discovered flashy, sequined tops, narrow skirts with slits, open-toed shoes with stiletto heels. A whole closet full of the daring, eye-catching things a sexy young woman might wear. I had never seen any of this clothing before. I had no idea how it got there. None. I flung open the dresser drawers. In place of Sarah's chunky wool sweaters I found slinky lingerie—the kind Carla Pettit was wearing when someone strangled her in my bed.

Suddenly, I realized the floodlights out front had flicked back on. That did happen from time to time. The deer came around in the night and triggered the electric eye. But I wasn't thinking that right now. I was thinking it was Carla Pettit's killer. The sick, evil bastard who was trying to destroy me.

There was a working fireplace in the bedroom. I reached for the wrought-iron poker, gripping it tightly. My heart pounding, I started slowly down the stairs with it, cursing the creaky boards. Now I was in the front hall. And now I heard a sound in the living room and whirled and . . .

"Looking for these, Mr. Samuels?" Flett was seated comfortably

in my one good easy chair, clutching a batch of snapshots. He had a calm smile on his creased face. "You were picked up the second you left your friend's loft."

I tried moving my mouth. Briefly, nothing came out. "But you weren't tailing me. No one was."

"Didn't have to tail you, Mr. Samuels. I already knew where you were going. A patrol car was cruising the main drag in town, waiting for you." That was the police car I'd seen. "I was parked down the road a piece, waiting for his call. Want to drop your weapon, please?"

I was still gripping the poker—so tightly my knuckles were white. I set it down gently on the floor. "But how did you . . . ?"

"I told you we wouldn't be searching the place until the morning. That was not a casual remark, Mr. Samuels. I wanted to give you an opportunity to show your hand. And you did."

I slumped into a chair at the dining table. Naomi's cigarettes were in the pocket of my goose-down jacket. I lit one and considered getting myself a stiff brandy. I sure needed one. But I just sat there, smoking.

Flett just sat there watching me from his chair. He had to be the most relaxed man I'd ever met. "Was Carla Pettit up here this weekend with you?"

"She was never here."

"Just her stuff, hunh?"

"I don't know whose stuff that is up there."

"And I suppose you didn't take these pictures either. . . ." He got up and began laying them out on the table before me, using a pocket-sized pair of tweezers to handle them. They were Polaroid shots of Carla Pettit. Nude shots, the kind you'd find in a porn magazine. All of them had been taken in my apartment. I recognized the furnishings.

"I didn't take these," I insisted. "I swear. Where did you find them?"

"Nightstand drawer upstairs in your bedroom," he replied. "Along with some credit-card receipts belonging to the victim. Do you own a Polaroid?"

"A Polaroid? No, I've never . . ." But I did know someone who owned one, I realized. "God, I don't *understand* this! I was just here eight hours ago." And this had all been planted since I left. What a fool I'd been. Here I was, thinking I'd make things better by coming up here. All I'd done was help Carla Pettit's killer construct an even more perfect frame. "Believe me, I know how this looks. . . ."

"Not so good, Mr. Samuels. I have to be honest with you."

"But I am an innocent man."

"If that's the case, then what are you doing up here at three in the morning?"

I shook my head, staying silent.

"Okay, you're riding back to town with me," Flett said brusquely.

"Am I under arrest?"

"If and when I formally arrest you, you'll be the first to know. But we *will* be searching your Jeep for physical evidence. House and grounds, too."

I was about to assure him that they wouldn't find any such evidence, but I couldn't be sure of that. I couldn't be sure of anything anymore.

His car was a dark blue Crown Victoria sedan. He drove, I rode shotgun. I didn't know if it was normal procedure or not for me to ride up front. I didn't know anything about regular procedure. We rode through the darkness in silence for a long while, the heater slowly taking the chill off of the car's interior as we made our way back through the village toward the thruway.

"Mind if I smoke?"

"Go ahead. I don't remember seeing any ashtrays in your apartment."

"That's because I quit." I lit one, dragging on it deeply, and cracked my window to release the smoke.

Flett nodded sympathetically. "That's how it happens. Something stressful comes up and right away you're back on them. If life were free of stress, we would have no trouble coping with our vices. Did you touch Carla's body?"

"Excuse me?"

"When you killed her, I mean. I'm asking because we test the skin for fingerprints. There are several procedures—Kromekoting, Magna-brush, iodine fumes. . . . If your prints are there, we'll find them."

We drove on in tight silence for a while, Flett holding the steering wheel loosely in his big, square hands. After he'd made it up onto the thruway and settled in at a correct 65 he said, "She appeared on your show last season."

"That's true, she did."

"So now you *do* admit knowing her?"

"I remember her now. I didn't when I first saw her there on my bed."

He shook his head at me. "That's where you and me are different, Mr. Samuels. If I met a woman who looked like that, I'd never forget her."

"I work with a lot of actresses during the course of a season. Actresses are beautiful just as basketball players are tall and politicians are full of bull. It's simply the way they're made."

"You sleep with a lot of them?"

"No, I don't," I answered sharply.

Flett narrowed his eyes. "Okay, let's say everything you've told me about your connection to this, no matter how unlikely it sounds, is true . . ."

"You don't believe me, do you? You think I killed her."

"Mr. Samuels, it *is* the most plausible explanation."

"Except for one thing—that's not what happened."

"Give me a reason to believe you. One good reason."

"I'd love to, but how?"

"You clammed up when I asked you why you drove all the way up here tonight. You'd better give it up, Mr. Samuels." Now his voice gained a harder edge. "Because if you don't I'll have to take you in when we reach the city."

I sat there gazing through the windshield at the strip of road ahead of us. I had to hand it to him—he was good at his job. Reassuring one minute, ruthless the next. And now he had me right where he wanted me. "Okay," I finally said. "I'm romantically involved with Sarah Banks."

"Well, well. Lucky fellow, aren't you?"

"I used to think so. Now I'm not sure."

"Afraid of what she'll do when she finds out you were two-timing her?"

"Damn it, there's nothing to find out!"

"So why the secretiveness?"

"I don't want to get her mixed up in a tabloid circus, that's why. She's our star. Fifty-four people rely on her for their daily bread. And there are still plenty of folks around who look dimly upon a married woman sleeping with another man, even though it's none of their damned business. Just imagine the amount of sleazy coverage this would generate. I came up here for her stuff. I was trying to keep her clear of your investigation. Because she *is* clear, and that's the truth."

"So where is this stuff of hers?"

"Gone. Whoever planted Carla's stuff took it."

He chewed on this for a moment. "You're saying that someone went up to your house after you left, cleared out every trace of Sarah Banks, and substituted Carla Pettit's things?"

"And those pictures. The pornographic pictures."

"Which you didn't shoot."

"Correct. That's exactly what I'm saying."

"Which would mean somebody's going to one helluva lot of trouble to make you the fall guy."

"That's for sure."

Flett paused, running a blunt hand over his face. "You're talking about something that just doesn't happen in real life, Mr. Samuels. Not in my experience. Most people—people who kill people—they're

driven to it by rage or madness. And then do you know what they do? They panic. And then they run. What they don't do is go around rearranging the physical evidence so as to point it at someone else. They aren't capable of that kind of orderly, methodical behavior. And even if they *were,* we'd still have the million-dollar question . . ."

"Which is . . . ?"

"Why would anyone want to do that to *you?"*

"Detective Flett, I have no idea why." I looked over at him apprehensively. "Are you still going to arrest me?"

He stuck out his lower lip, weighing his reply. "Not right now. You're doing me more good right where you are. Besides, if you had wanted to run, you already would have. No, I'm just going to keep tabs on you."

I started breathing again, in and out. "I asked you something before that I'd better ask you again—do I need a lawyer?"

His only answer was a cold and ominous silence. A silence that meant yes.

When a beautiful young actress gets murdered in a television producer's apartment, it goes right to page one of the New York tabloids and stays there. A dozen TV news crews, newspaper reporters, and photographers were staked out in front of the Chelsea Studios, clamoring for me, when we arrived at the Piers for work in the morning. Ordinarily, we at *Make Me Perfect* courted publicity. But no one wants the kind of attention I was drawing the morning after Carla Pettit's body was found. I had nothing to say to these people who were shouting out my name. I was just glad that I had Naomi along to steamroll a path to the door for me, her elbows flying and a low growl coming from her throat.

There was always a buzz of anticipation in our production offices on Monday morning. This was when we rolled out that week's new episode. The sets had been built. The performers were on hand. The network suits were en route. At ten o'clock there would be a table reading of the script to see how it played aloud. We'd take the network's notes. And then we'd roll up our sleeves—the writers punching up the scenes that hadn't played, the actors getting the show up on its feet out on the studio floor. Monday was always hectic and it was always exciting, because the episode absolutely had to be ready to tape come Friday afternoon. No excuses. This was television.

Of course, on this Monday there was a special buzz. Our production assistants gaped at me as Naomi and I passed through the reception area. Our writers and actors were huddled in little pockets over by the coffee and bagels, whispering. When they saw me, they got terribly quiet, their eyes widening.

I felt like a criminal. I didn't like it one bit.

The first person I reached out to was Kenny Sapperstein. Kenny

was slightly built, with bright blue eyes, a mop of frizzy red hair, and a motor that was perpetually on. For some strange reason, I was fond of him.

"Kenny, you may be hearing from a police detective this morning."

"I already did," he blurted out. Kenny's words tended to tumble out fast. "Detective Flett was just here. He questioned me. He even took my picture. A couple of his men were poking around in your office."

Again I felt a cold chill of terror. "Did they take anything with them?"

"I don't think so, no."

"Look, I'm sorry I had to involve you. But when he asked me who had a key to my apartment, your name came up."

"But I wasn't anywhere near your place this weekend," Kenny insisted.

"Do you remember Carla from the show?" Naomi asked him.

"Oh, sure." Kenny nodded his head eagerly, like one of those bobble-headed dolls people put in the back window of their car. "She was a total hottie. But she never took her nose out of the air around me. Didn't so much as thank me for bringing her coffee, that stuck-up..." Kenny broke off, not wanting to bad-mouth the dead. "I was at my mom's in Great Neck yesterday. That's what I told Flett. Sunday is always brisket. The only thing that ever changes is the side dish. Sometimes it's roasted potatoes, sometimes it's boiled potatoes."

"Then there's no need to worry, Kenny," I said.

"Everything will be fine," Naomi agreed, nodding.

My next stop was Pierre's office. Naomi wanted to come, too. She was afraid I'd do something crazy like tear his head off of his neck with my bare hands. I assured her I'd be fine—as would Pierre's head, neck, and other body parts.

Mr. Sarah Banks was seated behind his antique tulip-poplar desk with a cup of coffee and the newspapers. He wore a wine-colored cashmere cardigan, his usual two-day growth of beard, and his even more usual condescending air.

When we first started the show, he'd been known simply as Sarah's French Boyfriend. She asked us to put him to work taking our publicity stills, since he actually called himself a fashion photographer. We complied. Mostly, we made fun of his accent. It stopped being funny once they got married and he became our executive producer at a salary of $30,000 per episode, which he got for doing absolutely nothing except chasing after women. And even though he and Sarah were *kaputnik,* we still couldn't fire him because he had a contract for the season that the network wasn't willing to eat.

"Such nice publicity for our show, Martin," he said loftily, looking down his long, narrow nose at me. "So classy."

I ignored his jab. "Talk to me about Carla Pettit, Pierre."

"I know of no such person. Other than what I have read."

"That's not good enough."

He bristled. "You're saying that I am a liar?"

"I'm saying that I'm sliding down a slippery slope here. For all I know, I may end up taking the whole show down with me. I have to know what the hell's going on. Where were you yesterday, Pierre?"

"This particular information is none of your damned business."

"No, it *is* my business. I need the truth and I need it right now!"

He sat back in his chair, sipping his coffee. "You know, Martin, I do not care what you need. You are not the police. You are not my employer. And you most certainly are not my friend. You obviously have no respect for me. Which is fine. The feeling is mutual. But I did not kill this girl. I have someone who can vouch for me. I have already told the policeman all of this."

"If I find out that you're involved . . ."

"You'll do what?" Pierre demanded indignantly. "What else is left, eh? You've already done the worst thing one man can do to another."

"You did that to yourself. Sarah had already thrown you out."

"You're lucky I haven't destroyed you, Martin," he shot back. "I have wanted to. But when I do, I will do it like a man—to your face." He reached for his coffee cup, his hand shaking with anger. "Now kindly get out of my office."

I went to my own office and found Sarah huddled in there all by herself on my sofa, her eyes red and swollen from crying. She was a slender little whippet of a woman with raven-colored hair and porcelain skin. Her eyes were an arresting deep blue, her lips full, her cheekbones high. She ran into my arms, hugging me tightly. She looked frail but was surprisingly strong. We held on to each other, saying nothing, the weight of the world pressing down on our shoulders.

It was strange, us standing there that way, surrounded by my collection of humor memorabilia—the display case full of chattering teeth and plastic vomit, my gorilla suit, my classic Spiro Agnew mask, my prized autographed eight-by-ten glossy of Larry Storch.

"Are you okay?" she finally asked, her voice trembling.

I nodded. "I tried calling you last night. You were out."

"Yes," she said, coloring. "Tell me you don't know anything about this."

Sarah grew up in Toronto and had a slight Canadian accent that came out when she said words like "about," which sounded more like "aboot." As a young performer, she catapulted from Second City onto *Saturday Night Live,* where she caught hold with her awesome Kathie Lee Gifford impersonation. An up-and-down film career followed until she found her niche in our sitcom.

"Sarah, I don't know what Carla Pettit was doing in my bed. Or

what her things were doing in my farmhouse. Somebody removed yours and substituted hers. You do believe me, don't you?"

Sarah stared deeply into my eyes. "Yes, I do. It's just that I've always had impeccably bad taste in men. I thought you were going to be the exception."

"I am the exception. Really, I am." I sat down at my desk and slid open the top drawer. The spare key to my apartment was still in there. Then again, Pierre could simply have borrowed it, made a copy, and returned it. Sure, that must be it.

I was about to shut the drawer when I noticed something else in there. Something that wasn't mine. It was a pair of disposable white latex gloves.

They were all stretched out and rumpled. Someone had worn them. And someone had put them there in my desk. And I knew why—these were the gloves Carla's killer wore when he murdered her. I had no doubt about this. It was just another link in the chain that was getting tighter and tighter around my throat. Flett must have searched my desk. Why hadn't he removed them as evidence? Had he purposely left them there to see what I'd do? *Or* had Carla's killer put them in there *after* Flett searched my office. If so, why?

I stared down at them, my chest tightening. Damn it, I *wasn't* guilty. I *hadn't* killed her. So why was I thinking like a guilty man?

It was at this moment that a new theory began to creep its way into my consciousness. Only this one was so horrifying to contemplate that I didn't even dare to articulate it to myself.

"Is there something wrong?" Sarah asked, watching me curiously.

"No, no," I said hurriedly, slamming the drawer shut. "Nothing's wrong."

"I could forgive you just about anything, you know. I do that. I forgive."

"There's nothing to forgive, Sarah. Except I did have to tell Flett about us. I tried to keep you out of it, but he left me no choice."

"I'm a big girl, Marty. That's really not a problem." She curled up on my sofa with her legs under her and stared down at her hands. "I had to tell him some things, too. . . . I knew Carla Pettit pretty well."

My eyes widened with surprise. "You did?"

She nodded. "We roomed together when I first moved to New York."

"What was she like?"

"Let's put it this way—you knew she wanted to make it."

"We all do, don't we?"

"Yes, but she didn't care how. She'd hop into bed with anyone—animal, vegetable, or mineral—who could do her even the slightest bit of good."

"What else did Flett ask you?"

"Where I was last night."

"And where were you, Sarah?"

She dug her teeth into her soft, kissable lower lip. "I could have asked you that same question, and I haven't, so why don't we just leave it alone."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means . . ." Sarah broke off, wringing her hands helplessly. "Oh, Marty, I really don't want to have this conversation right now."

"*What* conversation?"

"Well, maybe it *is* time to clear the air. . . . Look, you *are* seeing someone else, aren't you?"

I gaped at her, genuinely startled. "Why on earth would you say that?"

Sarah shrugged her shoulders. "I've sensed it for a while. The way you hold a part of yourself back. You *never* want to spend the night at my place."

"Only because I work on the show late at night before I go to sleep. It's the only chance I have to write during the week without interruption. What did you think I've been doing—cruisin' the bars for babes?"

"I've been fairly certain that you were involved with another woman," she said haltingly. "So when this happened, it did occur to me that maybe . . ."

"That it was Carla? Sarah, there's no one but you. You must believe me." I got up and crossed the room toward her, taking her hands in mine. Hers were cold and clammy. "Why haven't you told me where you were last night?"

Sarah's face immediately tightened. "Look, I'm not a very good liar . . ."

"So just tell me the truth."

"The *truth?*" Sarah did a drop-dead Jack Nicholson. "You can't *handle* the truth!"

I didn't crack a smile. Her take on Jack in *A Few Good Men* didn't strike me as too funny right now. It seemed more like an evasive maneuver. "You're not being straight with me, Sarah."

"Maybe it's for your own good."

"Have you ever noticed when someone tells you it's for your own good that it never is?"

"You're doing Jerry Seinfeld. Stop it."

"Sarah, you're either in a relationship with me or you're not."

She perched tensely on the edge of the sofa. Her eyes were open very wide and her nose was twitching. She reminded me exactly of a cat during a thunderstorm. "Okay, you win. But you won't like it. . . . Pierre and I are trying to work things out. I was with Pierre, okay?"

She was right. I didn't like it at all. That whole time I'd been shlepping up to New Paltz in the night, putting my own ass in a sling, she

and Pierre had been together. What's more, this meant Pierre was actually in the clear. *She* was his alibi. "One more stupid question that's none of my business," I said, shaken. "You two slept together?"

"Yes," she answered quietly. "I still have feelings for him. He *is* my husband. I—I didn't say anything about it because I was trying to spare you."

"I'm not a child."

"Yes, you are," she insisted. "All of us in this business are. We're a bunch of little kids sitting on the bedroom floor with our crayons and our coloring books. We have no idea how to deal with real life. I sure don't. . . . I know that he's bad for me. But I can't ignore how I feel about him. And I still feel like the failure of our marriage is *my* failure." She leveled her gaze at me, her eyes shimmering. "You're someone I care about deeply and don't want to hurt."

I wasn't buying it. I was too upset. "You just wanted to keep me happy, that's all," I blustered at her. "You've been playing around with me so I'd keep cranking out a good show for you every week. Man, you must really care about your career. That's commitment. That's—"

"Marty, that's not true! I've loved every minute we've had together."

"Or is it my play?" I demanded, my thoughts turning to what Naomi had said. "Is that it? You want to star in my play?"

Sarah immediately turned icy on me. "That's an awful thing to say."

"It's what I'm thinking."

Kenny tapped at my door now and stuck his head in to tell me that the network suits had phoned and were running late. I thanked him. He retreated, closing the door.

Sarah remained where she was. "Can't we just put *us* on hold for a little while until things sort themselves out? Can't we leave it that way?"

"What way, Sarah? That I'm the mutton stew bubbling away on your back burner while you try to decide whether to serve Pierre to your guests or not?"

"It's not like that."

"Then what *is* it like? Tell me, please. I'd really like to know."

She fell silent. "I honestly don't know the answer to that, Marty."

"Well, maybe I do," I said. "Let's restore some perspective here: I'm an executive producer of your show and Pierre is your husband. And, because of the unfortunate fact that he's a lying scumbag who sleeps around on you, the two of us got involved, which was really terrific but also a really bad idea and now it's over."

"But I don't want to end it," she said mournfully.

"Well, I do. And as far as I'm concerned, it's over . . . Jaaane Kean . . . !" I roared, waving my arm in the air. My own impression

of The Great One when he came out from behind the curtain to thank his stars. "Sheeeeila McCrae . . . ! Art CAAAAARNEY . . . ! GOOD NIGHT EVERYBODY!"

"Well, that's just *fine*." Sarah marched angrily over to the door and stopped, her hand gripping the knob tightly. "I'm just going to ask you one more question and then I am out of your life: Who the hell do you think you're fooling?"

And then she stormed out of my office in tears.

Who *did* I think I was fooling? Her? Evidently not. Myself? Not a chance. I was hoping Pierre would never so much as pass go—that, alibi or not, he would go directly to jail for killing Carla Pettit. And that Sarah and I would end up back together in each other's arms. I was in love with this woman. She was smart, talented, beautiful, fabulous. There was no way I wanted to let her go. Hell, no.

Who was I fooling? Nobody. And Sarah knew it as well as I did.

I shut off my overhead light and sat there alone in the darkness with my pain until Naomi joined me.

"What are you doing in here?" she demanded. "What's that noise I hear?"

"Just me weeping uncontrollably."

"Come here, you doofus."

I obeyed and she threw her arms around me and gave me one of her Mother Bear hugs. I hugged her back for dear life. And told her what had happened.

"I'm not going to say I told you so, Junior."

"No, go right ahead," I said. "You're entitled. You warned me about her."

"Will you be okay working on the show with that scrawny little bitch?"

"Please don't call her that, Nayo."

"I was out of line," she apologized. "Let me rephrase that: Will you be okay working with that anorexic little slut?"

"Much better." I flicked the light back on, smiling at her. "Sure, I will. It'll be awkward for a while, but we're all professionals. Hell, by next season it'll be forgotten. She'll be pregnant with Pierre's child. And I'll have fallen madly in love with someone new. . . . Unfortunately, his name will be Bubba and he and I will be sharing a cell together in Sing Sing."

"*That* was a good line. What about your play?"

"I still have to write it. My mother deserves that much. But there will be a lot less joy attached to it. None, in fact."

"Just as long as you don't let it dry up and blow away. You can't let Sarah do that to you. It's too important."

"I won't," I promised, glancing at my watch. "I'd better call Jack now."

"Want me to stay here with you?"

"Thanks, I'll be okay."

After she left I reached for my phone and hit the speed-dial button for our agent's house in L.A., which was button No. 2. It rang. And it rang. There didn't seem to be anyone home. Which was odd, since it was barely seven in the morning out there. Finally, on the sixth ring, his machine picked up. After a brief rustling noise, I heard the following recorded message:

"Hi, this is Carla. . . . I'm not home right now, like, duhhh. . . . So please leave a message at the sound of the . . ."

Gasping, I hurled the receiver away as if it were a live rat. Someone had redone my speed-dial buttons. Deleted Jack's number and input Carla Pettit's to make it look like I called her all the time. Did Flett know this? Had he checked my telephone? I didn't know. All I knew was that I felt exactly like I did when that monster was shoving my bed around in the night. Except I wasn't asleep. This nightmare was real.

Shaking, I dialed Jack manually. He was home, expecting my call. Jack Dietz was the head of the TV department of one of the big agencies. Out there they called him The Choirboy Assassin because he looked so much like Ralph Reed, the former head of the Christian Coalition. But Jack was as bloodthirsty as a piranha. He handled a dozen or so show runners like we were. He also happened to be a lawyer. Just not the kind of lawyer I needed right now.

"I'm already on the case, Marty," he assured me, his voice as confident and upbeat as always. "I've been spitballing names with our New York office. The best criminal defense lawyers in town. You should be getting a call from one very soon. In the meantime, you have nothing to hide, right?"

"I have nothing to hide, Jacko."

"Then you have zero reason to worry. Be accommodating. Be helpful. Be cool. Granted, things may look a little bleak right now, but you're a law-abiding citizen. They don't go after people like you."

"That's what I always thought," I said glumly.

After I rang off with Jack, I reached out to my mother in L.A. She would be upset if she saw the morning headlines before she heard from me.

"Why didn't I hear from you last night?" Rose of Boyle Heights immediately wanted to know. She sounded fretful. She sounded awful.

"I didn't want to upset you, Mother."

"I'm not upset. I'm concerned. Tell me, what is going on?"

"I seem to have made an enemy. Someone who is trying to ruin me."

"Don't let them do it to you," she commanded me fiercely. They grew up tough in her old neighborhood. You didn't make it out by being soft.

"I'm innocent, Mother. *You* believe me, don't you?"

"You know I do," she replied. "When no one else believes you, I will. When everyone else has given up on you, I won't. You're my boy."

"Has anyone told you that you're starting to sound a little like Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath?*" I said teasingly. "Come to think of it, you even dress an awful lot like Jane Darwell."

"Always with the jokes, mister." Her stock rejoinder to my ribbing.

I smiled. Already, I felt better. I guess that was why I'd needed to talk to her. Not to reassure her, but to reassure myself. "Thank you, Mother."

"For what?"

"For being there. I love you."

"I love you, too, sweetheart. And no matter what happens, I always will."

Kenny tapped on my door again to tell me that the network suits had arrived. But before I could make it out of my office to greet them, Detective Flett came barging in with more questions.

Flett was wearing a navy blue suit today, and the same calm, unperturbed expression on his face. "Quite some office," he observed, gazing around at my humor memorabilia.

"But you've already been in here, haven't you?" I said warily, my mind on those gloves in my desk drawer. "You've already searched it."

He didn't say anything in response. Just watched me piercingly as I sat there behind my desk.

"Look, Detective, I'm needed in the conference room. We have a show to do. So unless this is terribly urgent—"

"Oh, it is, Mr. Samuels," he said, taking a seat in the chair facing my desk.

I glanced at my phone, wondering if he'd been tracing the calls placed to Carla's number today. Did he already know that I'd reached her machine from this very phone? "How can I help you?" I asked him, struggling to sound calm.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news. There were more nude Polaroids of Miss Pettit. They've been leaked—they're all over the Internet already."

"Who would want to do something like that?"

"It wasn't me. That's not how I run an investigation."

"I suppose you think *I* did it. Why would I?"

"I don't know what to make of human behavior anymore, Mr. Samuels. I used to understand it, or I thought I did. Not anymore. I've seen way too much of it. I do have some preliminary lab results," he informed me. "The skin cells under the victim's nails were her own—from tearing at her own throat. We found no one else's skin. No fingerprints on her, either. . . . What did you do, use latex gloves?"

He knew. He knew about the gloves in the drawer.

"I already told you—I didn't do it."

"That's right, you did," he said easily, removing a notepad from the inside pocket of his jacket. He thumbed through it, shoving his lower lip in and out. "We've learned a bit more about Carla Pettit's personal life since last night. She lived in a one-bedroom garden apartment on East Eighty-Seventh Street. Had a cat. Otherwise, she lived alone. Her sister out in Park Slope says Carla told her she was involved with someone new. Someone she met on a television show she'd worked on." Flett paused, glancing up at me. "*Your* show, Mr. Samuels."

I swallowed, that chain feeling even tighter around my throat. "Who . . . ?"

"Unfortunately, Carla didn't tell her his name," Flett replied. "The only thing she did say was that he was on the kinky side. Liked to wear her lingerie, have her get rough with him."

Pierre. It had to be Pierre. But *how,* if he was with Sarah last night?

Flett continued thumbing through his notepad. "Carla Pettit was what's known in the trade as arm candy. The kind who's seen around town with ballplayers, rock stars, real-estate tycoons. Millionaires, one and all. Her sister said she wanted to latch on to one of them. She was terrified of ending up alone and broke. She was a looker, but she was also thirty-two years old."

"The window of opportunity slams shut pretty fast for those women," I concurred.

"You make out pretty well for yourself, am I right?"

"I'm very well paid. But I'm no millionaire."

"Not yet," he countered. "But you will be soon, won't you?"

I hesitated. Rose always taught me that what you have in the bank is nobody's business but your own. "After next season," I answered carefully, "assuming there *is* a next season—and you never, ever know in this business—we'll be able to sell *Make Me Perfect* into syndication. Since I own a share of the adjusted gross profits, I do stand to come into a considerable nest egg."

"We're talking several million dollars, am I right?"

"I'd be very fortunate if that happened. But that *is* why people go into TV—to make money." And if I invested it wisely I'd never have to worry about it again. Or do TV. Just write what I wanted to write. That was becoming my new definition of success. Freedom. Not that I'd mentioned this to Naomi. It would not be something she'd want to hear.

Flett leafed through his notepad some more. "We showed your photo around at the market up in New Paltz. Cashier there said she might have seen you. But she couldn't be sure what day you were there. We also questioned your landlord again. Mr. Popper

claims he saw you in the building earlier in the weekend—on Saturday evening."

"No, that's not possible. I wasn't there."

Flett stared across the desk at me. "It's what he said, Mr. Samuels."

"Then he's mistaken. It wasn't me. I didn't come back until Sunday night. My mail hadn't even been picked up. You saw that."

"So you didn't pick up your mail. What does that mean? Not a thing."

"Well, then what about the attendants at my parking garage?"

"They support your story," he acknowledged grudgingly. "They say you checked your Jeep out on Wednesday evening. And back in on Sunday."

"Because that's what happened."

"Maybe so," he admitted. "But who's to say you didn't drive back to New York on Saturday, park in another lot, and then return to New Paltz after you murdered Carla? Or maybe you left your car at the Poughkeepsie station and took the Hudson line into Grand Central. We're canvassing this, Mr. Samuels. Showing your picture to toll takers, train conductors, ticket-window workers, garage attendants. And if that's how it went down, we'll find out."

"That's *not* how it went down."

"Your cleaning lady, Maria Ordonez, says the victim's photo had been displayed on your desk for quite a while. And her clothing and so forth were there, too."

"It isn't true!" Someone had gotten to Maria. Someone had paid her to say that. "Did she ever see the two of us together?"

"No," he conceded. "She said she'd never met the victim."

"That's because I didn't *know* her, damn it!"

"Nonetheless, a neighbor across the street from your building backs up your landlord. He, too, saw the victim coming and going from your building a lot. How do you explain that?"

"I can't explain it," I said helplessly.

Flett stuffed his notepad back in his jacket pocket and folded his big hands in his lap, sighing. "Mr. Samuels, I'm having a real serious problem with that."

"You sound as if you'd like to arrest me."

"I would like to close this case out. That's how I always feel. And right now, everything that smells bad is sticking to you. You're starting to stink, Mr. Samuels. You know, I really can't figure you out. You're sincere, smart, got everything going for you. You just don't seem the type to be such a good liar. But if you did kill her, and I think you did, then you are just about the greatest liar I've ever come across. You've been playing with my mind, haven't you?"

"No, Detective, I haven't."

"Sure you have." He got up out of his chair and peered inside the

display case at the red and white button that qualified me as a charter member of the Soupy Sales Society. "A guilty man doesn't give me permission to search his country house *knowing* what I'm going to find up there. Not unless *that's* your play—that I'll figure you couldn't possibly be so dumb, therefore you must be innocent. Only an innocent man would be naive enough to think we wouldn't be watching him last night. A guilty man would *know* we were. No way he'd hop in his car and drive straight up there. True, I did mention I wouldn't be checking the house until the morning. But how could you count on that? And why did you leave all of Carla's stuff lying around up there? Only a moron would do that. Which you are not. Therefore . . ."

My phone rang now, cutting in on him.

I answered it. "Mr. Samuels, my name is Jeffrey Flax," a voice blustered in my ear. "I'm an attorney. Your agent, Jack Dietz, has reached out to me on your behalf to represent you in this Carla Pettit matter."

"I am really glad to hear from you," I said, relieved.

"Detective Flett is there in your office at this very minute, am I right?"

"Yes, he is," I said, glancing up at him. He squared his jaw at me, his right knee shaking. "Detective, will you please excuse me for a moment?"

"I'll be right outside," he warned me, closing the door behind him.

"Okay, I don't want you saying another word to him," Flax ordered me. "Not unless I'm there. I've been reviewing the case that he's putting together against you. And, quite frankly, you are either guilty or insane. Which is it?"

"Neither," I responded, put off by his blunt manner. "I'm innocent."

"So be it. We'll plead not guilty."

"You think they're going to file charges against me?"

"Are you a baseball fan?"

"Sure . . ."

"It will take a bases-loaded, grand-slam home run with two outs in the bottom of the ninth inning for you not to be indicted for murder in the first degree."

I sat back in my chair, stunned. This news shouldn't have come as a total surprise, but I felt as if Flax had just sucker-punched the wind right out of me.

Naomi came in the door just then to tell me that everyone was waiting for me and the suits were getting antsy. I motioned for her to sit, and asked Flax to go on.

"I can tell you a little about Detective Flett," he continued. "He's a solid point A to point B thinker, the kind I hate to face on the witness stand. He's steady and he's building his case block by

block. All he needs is one of Carla's hairs in your Jeep and you are gone. Frankly, you'd be much better off copping a plea."

"I'm innocent."

"You keep saying that like it's a line of defense."

"I always thought it was."

"Well, you were wrong. Wake up and smell the coffee, my friend. You are about to go to jail for twenty, maybe thirty years. That's real. That's happening. From here on in you are guilty until proven innocent. Understand?"

"Perfectly."

"Good. Now when can we meet face to face?"

"The sooner the better. I'm in the middle of production, but any time you can get here is fine with me. About this nine-one-one call—they won't tell me who placed it. Not unless I get a court order. I'd very much like to know who it was. It seems to me it could be significant."

"I'll get right on it," Flax promised. "Don't despair, Mr. Samuels. You are not going to jail for a crime you didn't commit, no matter how bad it looks."

"I can't tell you how glad I am to hear that," I said, hanging up the phone. To Naomi I said, "Is Flett still waiting outside my door?"

She nodded grimly. "Does he really think you did it?"

"Nayo, *I'm* starting to think I did it." I got up and began pacing around the office in a profound state of agitation. "What am I going to do?"

"You're going to cope, Junior. *We're* going to cope." Naomi forced a smile onto her face. "Paul's worried about you."

"I'm worried about me, too."

"He said—"

"I can call him anytime, day or night. I know. Thank you both. I'm fine." I reached for my cigarettes. "Want to sneak a smoke?"

"Smoke detector," she cautioned, pointing up to the device over the door.

"Can't we disarm it or something?"

"No, it'll go off and the fire department will come and we'll get yelled at."

"You used to be more fun."

"You used to have more hair."

"That was not a good line."

"It was so. You're just getting touchy about your male-pattern baldness."

I sat back down in my chair and gazed at her long and hard. There were only two people on the face of the earth I was absolutely, positively sure I could count on. One was Rose of Boyle Heights. The other was Naomi Lewis.

Until now, that is. Because it was starting to happen again. That

horrible realization was inching its way back. The one I hadn't wanted to face before. But I had to now. I had no choice.

I continued to stare at her across the desk, the words sticking in my throat. Once I actually said them aloud my whole life would change. I breathed in and out, my chest heavy, my mouth dry. And then I said them. I said, "Naomi, how did you know it snowed in New Paltz on Sunday morning?"

She shook her head at me, bewildered. "What?"

"Before I left to go up there last night, you said, 'I have much better things to do than tromp around in a foot of snow.' It didn't snow here in town. How did you know it snowed up there?"

Naomi shrugged her shoulders. "Because you told me."

"No, I didn't."

"Junior, it *always* snows up there. Why are we even talking about this? The network is—"

"When I showed up at your place you looked as if you'd just been to the gym. You had your sweats on, seemed pretty bushed . . ."

"Only because I was."

"That would be easy enough to check, you know. I could call up Kelly's and find out whether or not you signed in."

She peered across the desk at me steadily, her eyes holding mine. "Where else would I have been?"

"In New Paltz," I replied quietly. "Planting Carla Pettit's things in my house."

Naomi lowered her eyes and was silent for a long moment. "I can't even begin to imagine what you're going through right now," she said, choosing her words carefully. "So I'm not going to take any of this personally. You're just venting. And I'm just the one who's here."

"Talk to me, Nayo," I said insistently. "Tell me why you did this."

She turned incredulous. "My God, you're totally serious. Next you'll be saying Paul did it."

"Well, he was an unwitting accomplice. He does own a Polaroid. And he provided the Valium that you planted in the bathroom of my apartment. It was one of those sample packs that drug manufacturers give out to doctors. I found some just like it in the guest bathroom of your loft. You should have been more careful."

She wasn't saying anything now, just staring at me coldly.

"You built a killer gag, Nayo. A mondo whammy. Everyone fell for it, including me. But I'm on to the gag now. I'm on to you."

"What about Kenny?" she spoke up suddenly. "His brother is an intern, so he can score all the Valium he wants. And Kenny was hot for Carla—he told us so. *And* he has your key."

"All true. But Kenny also has an alibi for last night. So does Pierre. Damn it, Nayo, we *have* to stick together. It's us against them, just like you said last night. But I have to know why you did this to me. Tell me why."

She said nothing for the longest time. "What do you want to know?" she finally answered in a low, husky voice.

"For starters, about you and Carla."

"I—I don't know how to describe that," she began, tears forming in her eyes. "Except to say that I loved her. There was something so lascivious about her, so outright carnal, that I just had to have her. I—I couldn't stop myself."

"I didn't know that you . . ."

"That I was a switch hitter?" she said mockingly. "God, you *are* such an innocent. The day Carla came in to read for us I knew that if I didn't have her I'd go insane. Maybe I *did* go insane. I borrowed the key from your desk and made a copy. And I took to meeting her at your place every weekend when you were up in New Paltz. I told Paul it was impossible for me to work at home with little Sam underfoot." Naomi sat back in her chair, gazing up at the ceiling. "You want to know who she reminded me of?—Terry Sand."

"That girl from junior high school?"

"Carla was just like her—the kind who wouldn't even talk to me when we were kids. I wanted her to know what that felt like. I wanted *her* to want *me*. And she *did,* damn it. . . ." Naomi let out a pained groan. "And then she didn't anymore. She was sleeping with Pierre, too, you know. Hell, it meant nothing to her. *I* meant nothing. A-And suddenly it was all slipping away. Her, you—"

"Me?" I shook my head at her, totally befuddled. "What about me?"

"When you finished your play you were going to dump me and take Sarah with you," Naomi answered matter-of-factly. "I couldn't let that happen."

I came around the desk and knelt before her. "That was *never* going to happen, Nayo." Or was it? I *had* been thinking about packing it in after we sold *Make Me Perfect* into syndication. Had she picked up on that and panicked? Was I to blame for this? "I'd never, ever walk away from you," I said slowly. "But even if I did, how on earth would this have helped?"

Briefly, she didn't seem to hear me. "I'd never make it on my own," she said woodenly. "My career would go right down the tubes. I'd lose everything."

"No, you wouldn't! You have a wonderful career, a wonderful man in Paul. Little Sam loves you. How could you do this to them?"

"I was doing it *for* them, don't you see?"

Maybe I was beginning to. Maybe her father had hammered Naomi's psyche more deeply than I'd realized. And maybe her anger toward him hadn't died when they buried Saul—she simply transferred it over to me, the closest living thing she had to a brother. She was trying to punish Saul by punishing me.

Detective Flett was knocking on my door now. "Mr. Samuels, are you still on the phone in there?"

"One more minute, please!" I called out to him.

He muttered something in response, but he didn't come in.

"Look, I'd better call that lawyer," I said to her quickly. "He sounds like he knows what he's doing. Put yourself in Flax's hands, okay?"

She didn't respond. She was lost in her own private anguish, the tears beginning to stream down her face.

I reached for the phone.

"No, wait!" she cried, stopping me. "There's something I have to do first."

"Okay, that's not a problem. What is it?"

"I want to go see him. My father. I want to go see my father."

"Nayo, he's dead," I pointed out gently.

"I *know* that, Junior. And I didn't go to his funeral. I never said goodbye. I need to, because everything that's wrong with me, I owe it all to him. I have to pay homage to him one last time. I have to go home."

"Then you'll turn yourself in?"

"I swear it," she vowed, "I'll confess everything."

"But he's buried three thousand miles away."

"Help me, Junior," Naomi begged. "Come to L.A. with me."

"They think I'm the killer. If I take off with you now I'll zoom straight to the top of the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list. They'll shoot me down like a dog."

"Come with me," she repeated.

"But I can't, Nayo. I just can't."

"I need you," she said pleadingly. *"Please?"*

So here it was. She was putting our partnership, our friendship, our *everything* to the ultimate test.

"What if we call Paul?" I offered, grasping for a lifeline. "Why don't you go talk to him? He can make a lot of sense."

She shook her head. "I can't talk to him about this. Only *you.* Come with me, Junior. I'll never make it all the way out there without you."

"Okay then. We'll go together. But answer me this—Flett's right outside that door. How can we possibly get out of here?"

"I know how we can." Swiftly, she positioned her chair on top of my desk, stood on it, and pushed one of the ceiling panels up and over to one side, exposing the darkness up above. "The super told me about this," she whispered. "This was a warehouse before they converted it to studio space. They put all of the pipes and duct work up there, then dropped the ceiling down to hide it. There's a catwalk for the workmen when they need to service anything." Gripping the iron railing of the catwalk with both hands, Naomi hoisted herself up, up, up by her arms, straining, until she was able to hook a leg around the railing. Finally, with a push from me, she pulled herself up and over onto the catwalk.

Now it was my turn. She held a hand down for me in case I needed it, but I didn't. After all, I'd been going to the gym, too.

Naomi pressed a finger to her lips to warn me that silence was vital from here on. I was well aware of this. We started crawling along the catwalk on our hands and knees, Naomi in the lead, me following close behind. From somewhere nearby, I could hear the skittering of mice. Otherwise, it was eerily quiet up there.

It grew darker as we inched our way farther from the opening in the ceiling. It was stuffy, and smelled of damp pipes and mouse droppings. And there was almost no headroom. I kept banging mine on the air-conditioning ducts that were directly above us. The catwalk was made of cast iron. Hard on the knees, but this was no time to think about comfort. Only escape. One knee in front of the other. Left knee, right knee. I hadn't scuttled any distance this way since I was a small child, but the movements were totally instinctive. Left knee, right knee . . .

Until suddenly all hell broke loose. Flett had gone back into my office and discovered we were gone. I heard yelling and heavy footsteps, men running. Naomi and I kept right on scuttling, silent except for the rapid, shallow gasps of breath coming from each of us.

Policemen were up on the catwalk with us now. I felt it shudder and shake from their weight as they tried to catch up with us, groaning and cursing at each other. Flashlight beams waved wildly over our heads.

Now the catwalk ended at a wall and made a sharp right turn. Naomi kicked out a ceiling panel directly below us, flooding us with light. We were over an uncarpeted stairwell—the building's fire stairs just outside our suite of offices. It was a ten-foot drop down. But it meant freedom. Or at least a shot at it.

Except that the light from the stairwell had exposed us. They could see us now. I heard them call out to us.

Naomi grabbed hold of the railing and dropped down, hanging by her hands, her legs swinging wildly in midair as she let go and landed on the hard cement floor below with a smack. She was motionless for a moment, stunned, but she shook it off and held her arms out to me, nodding encouragingly.

A shot rang out, the roar of it deafening in that enclosed crawl space. A bullet chunked into the wall directly over my head just as I dropped down, trying desperately to balance my legs under me as I fell. I came down heavily. Briefly, I saw stars. But there was no time to waste.

We flew down the three flights of stairs to the ground floor. We came out the back way, where the loading platform was. Trucks delivered the flats and furniture for our sets here. Right now, there was no activity. Only the driveway and the street beyond. We vaulted off of the platform and kept on running. And now we were

sprinting across the parking lot and out into Eleventh Avenue and there was a taxi with its light on and Naomi flagged it down and we jumped in, our chests heaving, the sweat pouring from us.

"Where to?" our driver wanted to know.

La Guardia and JFK were completely out of the question. They'd be looking for us there. Newark as well. Likewise Grand Central, Penn Station, and the Port Authority bus terminal.

Naomi gave him the address of the parking garage on Hudson and Jay where she and Paul kept their car. We fell silent as our taxi rocketed downtown. I was thinking about Rose and how I ought to let her know I'd be coming to town. I didn't know what Naomi was thinking about. I couldn't imagine.

The garage attendant on duty got the car out for us. It was a black Volvo 850 station wagon, a sedate family car with a safety seat for Sam in back and a turbo-charged engine under its hood. It was gassed and ready to go. We took off, Naomi behind the wheel with her foot to the floor.

"How much cash have you got on you?" she barked at me.

"Three hundred, at least," I said, fishing my money clip out of my trousers. "I just went to the bank yesterday. Plus I have my credit cards on me."

"Credit cards are out," she said. "They can find us if we use them. We'd better stop at an ATM right away and get as much cash as we can."

With a screech, she pulled over at a Citibank branch on Chambers Street. I withdrew the maximum the machine would give me—$1,000—while she idled at the curb. Then I jumped back in and she got on the West Side Highway and floored it, heading uptown. The traffic was heavy, but it was moving.

"If we drive all the way out there it'll take us at least three days," she said, maneuvering her way skillfully around the slower traffic and trucks and the potholes large enough to hold a beluga whale. "Plus it won't take them long to figure out we have this car. Within a couple of hours every tollbooth collector in the tri-state area will have our license number and description. There might even be roadblocks."

"So what do you suggest? That we steal a car?"

She shook her head. "Hartford. We'll drive straight there and catch the first flight out. It's a sleepy little regional airport. No way they'll have someone watching for us there."

"But can we catch a flight to L.A. out of Hartford?"

"We don't want one," she said. "In fact, we'll be much better off if we don't fly into L.A. at all. It's our hometown, Junior. They'll be looking for us there. Better we should end up somewhere like San Francisco or Phoenix. We can drive the rest of the way. And if we pay cash, they won't be able to trace us."

"Sure they will. You have to show your driver's license to get on the plane, remember? That means you have to use your real name."

"True, but the timing's still in our favor. It'll take them awhile to work their way through every passenger manifest on every airline at every airport in the region. By the time they figure out what plane we're on we'll already *be* there."

We were zooming alongside the Upper West Side now. On our right the lights in the luxury apartment buildings on Riverside Drive twinkled warmly in the gray winter light, the people inside secure and safe. God, I wished I was one of them. On our left was the cold black water of the Hudson, and beyond it the apartment towers on the Jersey Palisades.

I turned up the heater, shivering. In our haste, we had left our coats behind. My eyes fell on the car phone. "It's too bad we can't call Paul," I said. "Let him know where we are."

"Forget about Paul," Naomi said with sudden vehemence.

I glanced across the seat at her, surprised by her tone. "He doesn't know anything about this at all?"

"Not a thing. Although he *did* always say that he wanted me to act on my impulses instead of suppressing them. So he'll probably consider this to be a major breakthrough." She let out a harsh, brittle laugh. "We're on our own now, Junior. There's nobody else."

"There never has been, Nayo."

We took the Saw Mill River Parkway all the way up to the Bedford hunt country, where it hooked up with 684. Naomi's eyes stayed glued on the road. She was maintaining a steady 85 and there were ice patches now that we were farther north. We could not afford to spin out.

I flicked on the radio and switched over to an all-news AM station, 1010 WINS, which was broadcasting that law enforcement officials were mounting an all-out manhunt for me. I was wanted for the murder of Carla Pettit. That made it official. I no longer felt like a criminal. I *was* a criminal. I punched the power button off and sat there brooding in angry silence. How could she get me into this? How would I ever be able to put the pieces of my life back together again?

"Okay, Junior. If we were living in a movie right now, which one would it be?"

One of our old games. I glanced over at her, amazed by how nonchalant she was acting. "It has to be *The Fugitive,*" I answered.

"I was thinking more of *Thelma and Louis.* Get it? *Louis* instead of *Louise.*" She said it again, pitching it harder. "We're *Thelma and Louis.*"

"Nayo, that may be the single worst line you've uttered in the twenty-two years that I've known you."

"Hey, if I can't be bad in front of you, who *can* I be bad in front of?" One of our time-tested comebacks. Only now it took on a new

significance, and Naomi knew it. "I guess I shouldn't have gone there," she said softly.

"No, I really wish you would. I wish you'd talk to me about it."

Instead, we fell into strained silence. Something new for us. At Brewster we picked up 84, heading east. We crossed over into Connecticut at Danbury, the late morning traffic growing heavier now.

"Okay, what do you want to know?" she finally asked, her voice heavy.

"The why part. I just don't get it."

"Only because you refuse to believe it—if you left me I'd be nowhere. Dead. I'd flat-out cease to exist. You're the one who has all of the talent, don't you see that?"

"Nayo, that is so not true. *I'm* the one who would be lost without *you*. I'm a basket case when I'm around network people. I can't pitch. I can't shmooze."

"Get outta here. That's the easy part."

"For *you*. If it were up to me I'd just sit and write all day and no one would ever see a single word of it."

"You could do it, Junior," she argued. "You just choose not to. But I can't choose to be talented. You either are or you aren't. No, you'd be fine on your own. I just hope you never have to find that out for yourself. It'll be such a shock to you to realize how you've been carrying me all these years."

I let out a cry of exasperation. "Let's just drop this whole discussion, okay? Because not only are you wrong but you're completely missing the point—I was never going to leave the show. I was never going to take Sarah away. That was all in your own head, you big doofus."

She considered this in sullen silence. "You must hate me for this."

"No, I could never hate you. I just think you got yourself messed up. And you should have talked to me. I don't know why you didn't."

"You're right about that. I should have. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "We can fix this. We'll visit Saul. You'll do what you've got to do. And then we'll turn ourselves in to the LAPD. Since we're both white, the chances are fifty-fifty they won't shoot us on sight."

"They're going to send me away to prison, Junior."

"Me, too. For helping you escape."

"But you'll get out soon enough. I may never get out."

"Sure you will. Until you do, I'll come visit you every week. We'll write a prison sitcom together. A real groundbreaker—it'll be like that HBO show *Oz,* only with laughs."

"Honest laughs," she insisted. "No sweetening."

"Just think how much great material we'll collect. The life stories we'll hear."

"Can't wait," she said bitterly.

"You know what? I almost feel like I did when we were first starting out together and we had nothing but each other. We're right back where we started, Nayo. It's you and me against the world." I glanced over at her, smiling. Her eyes were on the road, her jaw stuck out in stubborn defiance. I knew that face as well as I knew my own. I knew *her*. Or so I'd thought. Because I didn't know her at all. You can never really know another person. You can only think you do. "What's it like? Killing someone, I mean."

Her mouth tightened. "Believe me, you don't want to know."

We encountered heavy truck traffic when we hit Waterbury, the old brass-mill town. It was noon by the time we made it to Hartford. Bradley Airport was located a few miles north of the city in the vast, flat tobacco fields of Windsor. I'd flown in there once when La Guardia was fogged in. I-91 took us there.

We ditched the car in short-term parking and hurried inside the main terminal, our eyes anxiously scanning the TV monitors. Delta had the next flight out—to Dallas at 12:30. It was presently 12:27. We dashed for the ticket counter.

"Is it too late to get on the Dallas flight?" Naomi gasped as I started pulling money out of my pockets.

"Boy, you believe in cutting it close, don't you?" The ticket agent was a plump young woman with a pebbly complexion. She began tapping away at her computer terminal. "We can *just* get you on. They're running a few minutes late because they had to de-ice the wings. Is Dallas your final destination or do you want me to go ahead and book you on the connecting flight to Las Vegas?"

What I wanted to do was kiss her.

We passed right on through the metal detector at the security checkpoint without a hitch. No one who was on duty gave us so much as a second look. A really big part of me was expecting to find a phalanx of large policemen waiting there at the departure gate with their guns drawn. But no, there was only a bored ticket agent. Naomi had called it right.

The flight was almost full. We sank into our seats, sighing with relief as the plane slowly eased its way out onto the runway. We would arrive in Vegas just after two o'clock, local time. For now we were speeding down the runway, soaring up through the clouds and into the frozen blue beyond. We were on our way west, toward a future that was perilous and terrifying.

And offered no hope whatsoever of a happy ending.

It was Naomi's idea to stuff Mel Mencher in the trunk of his Cadillac.

By the time we landed at McCarran International in Las Vegas we had weighed our options and found them to be severely limited. We did not want to risk a shuttle flight to Los Angeles. And renting

a car was out, too. You need to flash a credit card to do that.

Naomi had worked out a plan. We followed a stout, sixtyish businessman who had been on our flight. First to the baggage-claim carousel, where he retrieved two large suitcases, then outside to the long-term parking area. Coming from New York, the searing desert heat was a real shock. It was as if we'd landed on another planet. Our stout businessman put down his suitcases as soon as he got out there and lit a cigar. Then he waddled on, puffing on it contentedly. We followed him, our footsteps resounding sharply on the pavement behind him. He was not the least bit concerned about our presence. He assumed we were retrieving our own car. Besides, we were not in the least bit threatening looking.

No one else was anywhere near us when he slowed up in front of a big white Cadillac with Nevada license plates. He flicked the automatic door-lock button on his key chain, opened his trunk, and hoisted his bags inside.

"Have a good one," he said pleasantly as we passed on by.

"Same to you," Naomi said. Then she approached him, fumbling for a cigarette. "I wonder if I could bother you for a match."

"Sure thing," he said, reaching into his pocket for his lighter.

As he did, Naomi seized the back of his head and bashed his face down against the roof of his car, once, twice, three times. She did it with such ferocity that I could not believe what I was seeing. I didn't even know this woman.

"Stop it, Nayo!" I cried as blood spurted from his nose. "You'll kill him!"

She released him. As he sagged to the pavement, glassy-eyed, she snatched his keys from him. I assumed we'd leave him there, but Naomi was taking no chances by this point. And that meant neither was I. I was her accomplice now, whether I wanted to be or not. Together, we muscled him into the Cadillac's big trunk. She stripped off his shirt and used it to bind his wrists together behind his back. His wallet she pocketed. His hankerchief she stuffed in his mouth. Then she yanked down his pants and used them to tie his ankles together. Satisfied, she slammed the trunk shut and we jumped in, Naomi behind the wheel.

Now I wasn't just guilty of aiding and abetting a felon in her interstate flight, I was a party to assault, kidnapping, and grand theft auto. It's truly amazing how fast things can go bad once they start.

The Cadillac was an old person's car with burgundy velour upholstery and a strong smell of Old Spice and cigar smoke.

"Damn," Naomi cursed as she pawed her way frantically through its glove compartment. "We need his ticket stub to get out of here. Wait, I know . . ." She riffled through his wallet now. Mel Mencher had five hundred or so in cash, tons of credit cards. And, most significantly, the precious ticket stub that would allow us to

get out of the parking lot without causing a fuss.

She started the engine and backed us out of the space, easing the big white car toward the exit. "Do you really want to know what it's like?"

"I said I did, didn't I?"

"I wasn't sure you really wanted to know."

"I did," I insisted. "I do."

"The answer is, it's easy. A whole lot easier than you'd imagine."

"I couldn't do it."

"Sure you could," she said, smiling at me knowingly. "Believe me."

"Not a chance. I'm not made that way."

"We all are, Junior. When push comes to shove, no one really cares if another human being lives or dies."

"But you said you *loved* Carla. Doesn't that make any difference?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? But that's just a myth, like the tooth fairy."

We paid seventeen dollars of Mel's hard-earned money to the attendant at the ticket window, then cruised out of the airport into the blinding sunlight. The Cadillac was powerful and smooth, with good air conditioning. The tank was half full. We got onto the big highway to Los Angeles, Interstate 15, and soon put the billboards in our rearview mirror. Within a half-hour the traffic had thinned and the desert solitude beyond the ribbon of highway was utter and complete.

I worked the radio until I found a local all-news station. An all-out manhunt was underway for Carla Pettit's killer. According to police, the focus was on New Paltz, New York, a bucolic upstate enclave where authorities said that the chief suspect, Martin Bernard Samuels, owned a country estate.

"'Country estate,' my aunt fanny," Naomi sniffed, as we crossed over the state line into California. "It's a shack."

"But mine own. Do you think we've actually outsmarted Flett?"

"You make that sound like it would be a hard thing."

"He struck me as pretty crafty."

"That's a problem you have, Junior. You are easily intimidated by petty authority figures. That's why you can't pitch."

"So that's it," I reflected. "I always wondered."

"Well, now you know."

"How come *you're* not?"

"Because of how we were brought up," Naomi replied. "Your mother, a nice person, taught you to respect people. My father, a prick, taught me that they're all idiots. And guess what, he was right."

"If he was so right, then what are we doing driving across the desert in a stolen car?"

"Get outta here," she growled.

"Can't. You're stuck with me, *Thelma.*"

It was about a hundred miles across the Mohave Desert to Barstow, where we stopped at a Chevron station to fill the Caddy's gas tank, paying at the pump courtesy of Mel's Chevron card. I needed to use the men's room so I went inside, the brain-fried counter clerk paying me no mind. My face in the bathroom mirror seemed psychedelic purple under the harsh fluorescent lights. As I splashed some water on my face I was seized by an overwhelming sense of unease. I could have sworn someone was standing right there behind me at the sink, ready to put me in handcuffs and drag me away.

But there was no one else there in the men's room with me. The only sound came from a dripping faucet.

I got through to my mother now. I had promised her I would always let her know when I was coming to town. And with Rose, a promise was a promise.

"I'm in Barstow, mother," I announced.

"What are you doing *there?*" she demanded, making it sound as if I was in some far-off foreign country, one that was not especially friendly.

"Couldn't get a direct flight out. Just coming into town for a quickie. One meeting. I'll be leaving as soon as it's over."

"What time can we get together?"

"I—I don't think I can come see you this time, Mother."

Her initial response was stony silence. "Why not?"

"It's a little complicated . . ."

"What's going on, Marty? You sound funny."

"Funny ha-ha or funny weird?"

"Always with the jokes, mister," she fumed.

"Look, it's a personal matter," I explained. "But it's going to be okay."

"Sweetheart, you're not making any sense. And you sound so frightened. Is this about that actress who was murdered?"

"It's not true, Mother."

"*What* isn't?"

"That stuff about me on the news. You believe me, don't you?"

"Of course I do, but—"

"Mother, I have to go now."

"Wait, sweetheart—"

"I love you. Goodbye . . ."

Mel was either unconscious or asleep. We did not hear a sound coming out of the trunk. We thought about dumping him somewhere nearby, but decided against it. If he were found soon he would call the police on us. And if he were not found soon he could die of exposure in the scalding sun. He was actually better off right where he was. And so were we.

We continued on. Soon we began to climb, the highway's grade growing steeper as it sliced its way between the towering San Gabriel and San Bernadino ranges at the Cajon Pass. Over in the right lane, the big trucks began to groan as they inched their heavy loads up the steep climb. There was a mile-high lookout at the summit of Cajon Mountain. On our left was Sugarpine, on our right Mount Baldy, which was capped by snow. On those rare, precious days when it was clear, brisk, and utterly smog-free, you could see the snow cap on top of Mount Baldy all the way from Beverly Hills.

Now we were making the twisting, turning, roller-coaster Grapevine Canyon descent, our ears popping, the trucks downshifting mightily next to us as we came tumbling down into the flatlands at Ontario. We picked up the San Bernardino Freeway there, heading west through Claremont and Covina, where once there had been scented orange groves and now there was nothing but tract homes and strip malls and factories and everything that was gaseous and ugly and dying or dead all over the land where Naomi and I had grown up.

It was rush hour by the time we had made it downtown in the bumper-to-bumper traffic, the Civic Center shrouded in smog. My eyes were gritty, my mouth chalky, my chin stubbly. It was currently 77 degrees, according to KNX radio. The Lakers were scheduled to beat up on the Dallas Mavericks that evening. And Mel was awake, thudding around in the trunk and moaning.

No one in the neighboring cars could hear the ruckus he was making as we sat there in the standstill traffic. They were inside of their individual air-conditioned cocoons, talking on their cell phones and listening to their music. They were wrapped up in their own problems, their own lives, their own white noise.

Home. We were home.

Hillside Memorial, where Saul Lewis was buried, was a very popular final resting place among show biz people. Al Jolson was interred there, along with numerous other luminaries from yesteryear. It was located in Fox Hills on Centinela, just off of Sepulveda. It was dusk by the time we got there, but happily the big wrought-iron front gate was still open. Gardeners were hosing down the sidewalk in front of the funeral chapels.

There was an information building just inside the gate where visitors could get help locating a loved one. The driveway continued on beyond it, curving its way gently up the manicured green hills toward a cluster of two-story white mausoleums that housed the raised family crypts. In the approaching darkness, Hillside resembled a small college campus. It wasn't until you squinted that you noticed all of the gravestones dotting those lush green hills.

"Do you need to find out where Saul is buried?"

"Not necessary," Naomi said tightly as she eased the big white Caddy slowly up the hill.

She pulled up outside the front door to one of the mausoleums and parked and we got out, stretching and groaning from our long confinement in the car. It was sticky and warm outside, and the air smelled like rotting peaches.

In the trunk, Mel was quiet again. Part of me wondered whether we had just delivered him to his own final resting place. Most of me didn't want to know.

We went inside. It was a lot like being in a library—except instead of these aisles being filled with books, they were stacked from floor to ceiling with caskets. Row upon row of dead people, piled one atop the other. Plaques marked their names and vital dates. Bud vases were attached to the plaques. Some held plastic flowers that were furry with dust and cobwebs and neglect. The air was very still, and it was quieter than quiet. Our footsteps rang out so loudly on the marble floor that we sounded like an advancing army of Huns.

There was a wide staircase up to the second floor. At the top of the stairs Naomi turned right, murmuring, "Okay, this is it down here, third from the end. Yeah, this is it. . . ."

"What are you going to say to him, Nayo?"

"Don't you worry about that," she replied. "I know exactly what I have to say. I've been waiting to say it for a long time." When we reached the third aisle from the end she stopped, staring down the row at one of the caskets with wide-eyed fright. "It's the fourth row in, second from the bottom. That's the one."

I started toward it. She stayed right where she was.

"I did it for you, Junior," she said to me suddenly. "You should be a great playwright, not some schlock sitcom writer. You *should* take Sarah to Broadway, and the hell with me and our stupid show. That's why I did it. I did it for you."

I shook my head. "Nayo, what on earth are you talking about?"

"That's how come I didn't kill *her.*" Naomi's voice was starting to sound more far away, as if she were talking to me across a growing distance. "If I had really wanted to destroy you, I would have killed Sarah. I didn't. You needed her for your play. I did it for you, Junior. All of it."

"Now wait just a minute," I said angrily. "I didn't ask you to do any of that. I *wouldn't.*"

"I know. That's why I didn't tell you what I was doing. You would have tried to stop me. And . . . I—I have to go now, Junior," she stammered.

"Go? What do you mean, go?"

"I mean, I can't stay here."

"We just got here! You haven't even seen him yet."

"No, no, I have to go away," she cried, her voice quaking. Tears began to stream down her face. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Nayo, what are you doing?" I demanded, bewildered. "You just dragged me all the way out here because you said you *had* to say goodbye to Saul. Now's your chance. Here he is!"

But it was no use. She was backing away from me, shaking her head from side to side like a stubborn little girl who absolutely refused to take her bad-tasting medicine. "Don't hate me, Junior!" she pleaded. "Please don't hate me!"

"C'mon, I don't *hate* you. But—?"

"It *has* to happen," she insisted. "You *know* it's for your own good."

"*What* is?"

Now Naomi whirled and ran, sprinting down the corridor toward the stairs.

"Nayo, where are you going?" I shouted after her. "Nayo, wait . . . !"

I started to chase after her but I felt myself being held back. A strange, powerful force was keeping me anchored where I was. I could not explain this force. Or overcome it. I only knew that it was much stronger than I was. Slowly, it began to draw me toward the casket Naomi had pointed to.

I moved closer to it, bending over so I could get a better look at the plaque. That was when I let out a scream of pure anguish. *No, no, no* . . . It couldn't be . . . *No, no, no* . . . But it was . . .

Rose Helen Samuels
1930-1999
Beloved mother of Martin
"Always with the jokes, mister . . ."

Suddenly, an excruciating pain stabbed me directly between my eyes. This pain was worse than any migraine I could remember. It brought me to my knees, clutching at my head with both of my hands, groaning. It felt as if someone were driving a metal spike directly into my skull. Razor sharp splinters of bone were breaking off and piercing their way deep into my brain, deeper and deeper . . .

This was no migraine. It was the pain of the truth all coming back at once. It was the broken shards of memory slicing at my exposed nerves. Faces began to appear before my eyes, a dazzling, hyperkinetic kaleidoscope of faces. Snapshots punctuated by flashes of blinding, white-hot light.

It was my mother who was gone, not Saul Lewis. It was Rose of Boyle Heights. I'd buried her two years ago. And I'd been blocking it out. Refusing to deal with it. Hiding. That's why Naomi brought me here. . . . "It's for your own good . . ." Because I had to let go of Rose and I *wasn't* letting go. I was still dependent on her, still reaching out to her. For counsel, for inspiration, for love. Only it was her memory I was contacting. It wasn't her.

Because Rose was gone.

And now so was Naomi, my best and oldest friend. The big, awkward girl who had been by my side since I was twelve years old and so lonely and geeky that I thought I'd never make it. We'd learned to write together. We'd learned to succeed together. Always, she'd held my hand as we tiptoed our way across minefield after minefield to the very pinnacle of the television business. Always, she was there for me. But now she was gone. I would never see Naomi Lewis again. Never. I knew this with total certainty. Naomi was history.

And she'd left me holding the bag all by myself.

I was so overwhelmingly all alone that I felt as if I might pass out. The mausoleum corridors began spinning around me. Maybe it was the shock. Or maybe it was just exhaustion. I didn't know. All I knew was that the marble floor was suddenly rushing toward me and my face was smacking hard into it.

I lay there like that for I don't know how long, wondering who I was. Wondering how I was ever going to survive. Wondering if I even wanted to.

Until I became dimly aware that I was starting to hear footsteps. They were far away at first. Gradually, they drew closer. And then two people were standing over me. I gazed up at them dumbly, blinking. One of them was Paul Kaminsky, Naomi's Stepford boyfriend. The other was Detective Flett, who was pointing his semiautomatic right at me.

Paul helped me up to a sitting position. "Are you okay, Marty?" he asked, one of his arms draped protectively around my shoulders. He spoke very loudly and distinctly, as if he were talking to an idiot child. "Can I get you a drink of water?"

Flett holstered his weapon and stood there watching me. He looked tired and rumpled. I could only imagine what I must have looked like.

"H-How did you know I'd be here?" I said hoarsely.

"We caught the noon flight from JFK," Flett replied gruffly. "Been waiting here for you all afternoon. Dr. Kaminsky filled in a lot of the blanks for me. But I still can't say I totally understand you, Mr. Samuels. From the get-go this has never been a typical case."

My cheek was beginning to throb, and my eye twitched. "Is that right?"

Paul sat there next to me on the floor, his brow furrowing with concern.

Flett pulled a microcassette recorder out of his jacket pocket and hit the play button. There was a crackling noise, followed by a frantic voice: *"I'm calling from Thirty-one West Tenth Street, apartment Four-A. Come quick! There's a dead woman here. She's been murdered. Do you hear me? Murdered!"*

It was *my* voice. I was the one who had made the 911 call. *Me.*

I looked at Flett, mystified. "Why didn't you play that for me before?"

He flicked it off. "I wanted to make sure it hadn't been pieced together by someone else from phone messages and so forth. They can lift a word here, a phrase there. From my point of view, there was still a chance it was a fake."

"It's not a fake, is it?" I asked him softly.

"No, Mr. Samuels, it's not," Flett answered. "But you were *so* insistent that you were being framed. And I kept thinking that you just weren't *behaving* like a guilty man. I've never encountered a case like this before in my entire career. That's your voice, Mr. Samuels. There's no doubt about it. *You* made the nine-one-one call. We traced it to a pay phone."

"Near the garage where I keep my car?"

"Yes," he said, glancing curiously at Paul.

"That makes sense," I said, nodding.

"No, it *doesn't* make sense," Flett shot back at me. "You murdered Carla Pettit in your apartment on Sunday morning. You took the train up to New Paltz with her clothing and those nude photos. Then you drove back that evening and reported the crime before you came home to find us there. Why did you call us? That's the part I can't figure out."

I stared at my mother's crypt for a long moment. "That's the part you'll have trouble believing, Detective Flett."

"Try me," he ordered.

"Okay, I will," I agreed reluctantly. "It . . . It wasn't me."

"*Who* wasn't you, Marty?" Paul asked gently.

"The killer," I replied. "I'm not the one who killed Carla."

"You still deny you committed the crime?" Flett demanded. "Even though that's your voice?"

"I do."

"Well, then, who killed her?"

"Naomi did. She's the one you want. Naomi Lewis. She's your killer."

"I see . . ." Flett glanced over at Paul, then back at me, his eyes narrowing intently. "And just exactly who the hell is Naomi Lewis?"

"She's my writing partner," I replied. "Or I guess I should say ex-partner, since we seem to have split up."

Flett cleared his throat. "Mr. Samuels," he said slowly. "You have no partner. You work alone."

"No, I don't," I insisted. "Naomi and I have been together since we were kids. Martin and Lewis, we called ourselves. We were incredibly close. We did everything together. In fact, we even shared the same body."

Flett drew his breath in, stunned. So did Paul.

Because there was only me. ●

RNSOM

by john Biguenet

He sked me which finger i wnted him to hck off with the knife, the big one he mde lunch for us with just couple of hours before, the one tht wouldn't fit in the mustrd bottle. i think he thought he ws being kind, you know, giving me the choice.

i ws crying, but not just becuse i ws frightened. i didn't know which to tell him. The thumbs, i knew you needed them for everything. Tht's wht set us off from nture in the beginning, fter ll, opposble thumbs. But i ws frid he'd cut them ll off if i didn't sy something uick, so i sid the pinkie. Tke the pinkie.

Fine, he sys.

no, wit minute.

Wht do you men, wit minute/ he sys. C'mon, mke up your mind.

mybe there's better one to pick, i ws thinking. mybe i ought to think this through.

not the ring finger. Then i could never get mrried, i thought. you know, i ws only eleven. Wht did i know bout wht relly went on between people/

Scred stupid like i ws, i held up my hnds in front of my fce. The middle fingers looked too big to wste. nd the pointers, well, i knew they were good for more thn just picking your nose.

Tht nrrowed it down to the ring finger on my right hnd nd both my pinkies. if i were lefty, it would hve been the ring finger-who uses it for nything nywy-but since i needed the whole right hnd just to throw bsebll, there relly wsn't ny uestion.

it worried me, though. Even bck then, i knew i ws going to be writer. i hdn't told nybody yet, but i ws sure. i'd even tught myself

John Biguenet's first piece for *EQMM* is one of the most unusual stories of the year. Mr. Biguenet is the winner of an O. Henry Award for a story recently published in *Esquire* and a recipient of citations from *Best American Short Stories 1998* and *Best American Short Stories 1999,* in each case for work that appeared in *Granta.* In January of this year, Harper Collins brought out a collection of his stories entitled *The Torturer's Apprentice.* f

to type. But no pinkie, no shift key. So no cpitls for hlf the lphbet, none of tht stuff bove 6 to 0, nd none of those letters the little finger hndles by itself, either. not if you touch-type, which i still do.

mke up your mind or i'll mke it up for you, the guy sys.

ok, i cn get by without ll tht, i told myself.

The pinkie, i sy, sure this time, the left-hnd pinkie.

i ws relly scred, so he gve me shot of his vodk nd tied my hnd to the tble like he'd done this before nd gve me nother shot. Then he sid look the other wy. i didn't feel it when it hppened, just herd the snp, like guitr string popping.

Fther gve in fter my little finger showed up in the envelope. The guy got his money, nd he left me on the subwy for the cops to find. i guess you could sy it ws hppy ending. how mny kids go home from something like tht/

But, let me tell you, it's held me bck ever since-in my writing, i men. Sure, i tried one of those fke fingers in the beginning, but they don't sty on when it's the little finger. There's nothing to wedge it in. With ll those dmn strps nd buckles, too, it clls ttention to itself. Everybody's got their eye on you ll the time. So i decided no wy, no fke finger for me. nd i thought bout inventing new system of typing-you know, without the left pinkie. But then i thought, wit minute, i'm writer. i'm supposed to express who i m, me, the guy with nine fingers.

nywy, you'd think writer wouldn't need his pinkie much. it's like everything else, though. The little things, tht's wht kills you. The little things you'd think you'd never notice going without. ●

Lady Killer

by Cornelia Snider Yarrington

He was a lady killer, drop-dead handsome, so they said.
He wooed four wealthy widows and charmed them into bed.
Each thought he was to die for, when each became his bride,
And sure enough when wills were signed, each of the widows died.
His eye was caught by widow five, so moneyed and so sad
That he never thought to ask how many husbands *she* had had.
A whirlwind courtship followed; you could say he lost his head,
For they found it on the railroad track soon after he had wed.

Art by Allen Davis

THE VACANCY

by Kate Ellis

"Could you scare the life out of someone? Wanted: reliable person for unusual duties. Flexible hours to suit right applicant."

Darren stood in the street near the cathedral staring at the small advertisement in the local newspaper. Was he reliable? He supposed that he could be, given the right incentives. Could he scare the life out of someone? There was that time he'd robbed that newsagent's shop brandishing a replica gun: The old man had looked scared all right.

But who would want to scare the life out of someone in the first place? Darren's mind ran through all the possibilities and concluded that it was only those with something to hide who used fear as a weapon. But then did such people—armed robbers, drug dealers, and such like—advertise vacancies in the local paper? Darren inhaled the smoke from his diminishing cigarette and threw the glowing stub to the ground.

He leaned against the wall of a half-timbered gift shop which, according to a plaque above the door, had been built in fourteen eighty-seven. The town was full of history; quaint shops and

houses in magpie black and white. Not that this made much difference to Darren: In the nineteen years that he had lived in the rundown council house on the town's furthest edge, he had never noticed, let alone appreciated, the beauties of the ancient centre. To the tourists who flocked there from Europe, the USA, and Japan—from all over the world—it was an unspoilt example of a smallish English medieval cathedral city; a must for every visitor and coach tour. To Darren, however, it was just a boring little town with plenty of old buildings . . . but very little excitement.

Liverpool native Kate Ellis studied drama before winning a playwriting competition that gave her her start as a writer. She is the author of a series of detective novels, set in southwest England, that forges connections between modern-day crimes and historical events. Ms. Ellis's latest novel to see print in the U.S. is *The Armada Boy* (St. Martin's Press).

Darren opened the newspaper again at the advertisements page, just to make sure he hadn't misread or misunderstood. But there it was: "Could you scare the life out of someone?" He took the mobile phone he had bought from a man in a pub out of his inside pocket and dialled the number given in the advert, waiting with held breath for an answer. The call was answered after a few long seconds by a man who sounded as nervous as Darren felt. After a brief conversation, the arrangements were made: Darren was to meet a Mr. Melchet, the curator, at three-thirty.

But it was the place of that meeting which intrigued Darren. The castle: that formidable stone fortress which vied with the lofty cathedral for domination of the town. Darren had never been inside the castle: He had seen it from the outside; walked past it kicking beer cans with his mates or stared at its massive walls—which someone had once told him were ten feet thick—from the top deck of one of the town's infrequent buses. But he had never been inside: Only kids and tourists went inside.

The advert had stressed the word "reliable," so Darren didn't want to be late for his appointment. As the bus service ran to its own moody and unfathomable timetable, he decided to walk to the castle, timing his journey. The spring day was pleasantly warm and as he made his way through the crowds of sightseers in the narrow streets, he went over the job details in his mind.

The advert had said "unusual duties" . . . and scaring the life out of someone could certainly be classed as unusual; hardly part of the average worker's job description. Darren assumed that the work, whatever it was, would probably be on the wrong side of the law. But that didn't bother him . . . not really.

At twenty past three, Darren arrived at the castle gate. He crossed the modern wooden walkway which had replaced the rotted drawbridge, and passed beneath the towering gatehouse. He was to go to the curator's office and wait.

He began to search for the office, weaving his way through the gaggles of tourists who were recording the scene for posterity with tiny and expensive cameras. Some brightly dressed women glanced at him suspiciously and tightened their grip on their purses. The fear and wariness in their eyes gave Darren a warm glow of satisfaction as he plunged his hands into the pockets of his black leather jacket and swaggered across the castle's great courtyard.

In the end the curator's office was easy to find: a wooden door on the far side of the courtyard bore the words "Curator" and "Private" in tall gothic script. He stood outside for a few moments, then he pushed at the door, which opened slowly with a hair-raising creak.

The office was empty. Darren stepped inside, closing the door behind him, and looked around. The bookshelves which lined the rough stone walls sagged beneath the weight of files and heavy reference books, and a large desk stood in the centre of the room, laden with books and papers. Darren stood staring at the unfamiliar scene for a while before sitting himself in the swivel chair behind the desk. If the curator—whoever he was—was going to be late, he might as well wait in comfort. He swung the chair from side to side; then he pirouetted it round, enjoying the ride.

After a while Darren became fed up with the game, bored with the small thrill of taking unseen liberties with his prospective employer's belongings. He looked at his watch. The curator was five minutes late and Darren wondered whether to stay or to cut his losses and go. There were always other jobs . . . legal or illegal.

He looked at the desk, wondering if Mr. Melchet had left him a message hidden amongst the clutter, an apology that he wasn't able to make it. There was a horseshoe of chaotic paperwork around the desk's edges, but the centre was clear apart from one envelope lying there: a large brown envelope. Darren stared at it for a few moments: It would surely do no harm to have a quick look inside. It had no name on it so, for all he knew, it might be for him anyway. The advert had mentioned unusual duties, so this might be some kind of initiative test.

He picked up the envelope. It was unsealed, so if it wasn't for him he could put the contents back and nobody would be any the wiser. He folded the flap back carefully and held it so that the contents fluttered down onto the desk. A photocopied letter lay there, typed and official-looking. It said "Confidential" on the top. Darren read it.

"Dear Mr. Melchet," it began. "This is to confirm that the policy insuring your wife's life came into force on the first of this month, but in view of her existing heart condition, the premiums will be

adjusted upwards accordingly." Darren read on, but the rest of the letter seemed to be written in incomprehensible jargon. There was another sheet of paper with a figure written on it: £500. And a photograph of a woman, blond, fragile, and middle-aged, which had an address scrawled on the back in pencil.

Darren stared at the papers lying there on the dark wood of the desktop. The words "scare the life out of someone" came back to him and he put his hand to his forehead and closed his eyes. His head was starting to ache in the dimly lit office, but he stared at the photograph, etching the image of the woman's face on his brain. The photo, the address, the copy of the life-insurance policy mentioning the woman's heart condition . . . and the sheet of paper with £500 written tantalisingly across it. It could only mean one thing.

Melchet hadn't turned up. He hadn't wanted to put his request into words that could be used against him later. He had laid the trail but he was keeping out of it; playing the innocent. But Darren knew what he wanted all right; knew what the "unusual duties" entailed. And £500 for a few moments' work was a tempting prospect.

He grabbed the envelope and tucked it inside his leather jacket.

When the telephone on the desk began to ring, it made Darren jump. He stared at it. One ring . . . two . . . three . . . four. Then he picked it up.

"Is that Darren Goodenough?"

Darren grunted a "Yeah" and waited, his heart beating fast.

"This is Ian Melchet. I'm so sorry you've been kept waiting. I've been held up in a meeting about the ghost tours. If you want to hold on, I'll be with you in ten minutes, then I can tell you what I need you to do."

There was an awkward silence. Then Darren spoke quietly. "I know what to do. I've worked it out for myself."

"Really? How enterprising of you. I can see you'll be the right man for the job."

"Just one thing. . . . When do I get the money?"

"When the job's done, of course." Melchet sounded rather surprised. "How soon can you start?"

"Right away," said Darren warily. This was moving faster than he had expected.

Darren took the photograph out of the envelope and stared at the woman's face. If he did it right away, there'd be no time to think about it. It would all be over soon.

Ian Melchet put the phone down and turned round. The two other people with him—a smartly dressed young man and a plump middle-aged woman with mouse-brown hair—looked at him expectantly.

"You remember I told you earlier that I was interviewing a young man called Darren Goodenough for one of the ghost-tour

jobs? Well, he's waiting in my office now and I must say he seems very keen. I haven't seen him yet, but I'm hoping he'll make a passable grey monk . . . or even the mad Earl himself. And he says he can start right away so that's no problem."

The woman smiled at him. "These ghost tours are just what we need to bring in more visitors."

"I hope you're right, Margaret," snapped the young man. "We certainly need some fresh attractions round here, the budget deficit being what it is."

Ian Melchet looked at him anxiously. "Do you think the advert was okay? 'Could you scare the life out of someone?' I thought it would catch people's attention. What do you think, Andrew? Was it all right?"

"I think it was fine: a good way of combating the heritage industry's stuffy image." Andrew smiled, showing a row of perfect teeth. "When I had the idea for these ghost tours—"

"I thought the tours were Ian's idea," Margaret said sharply.

Ian Melchet's face reddened as he studied his pencil.

"I think you'll find the initial idea was mine," Andrew said with relaxed confidence. "But Ian's made a contribution on the planning front, of course."

The pencil snapped in half in Ian's hands. He stood up. "I'd better go. Mustn't keep our prospective ghost waiting any longer."

"How's your wife, by the way, Ian?" asked Margaret.

Melchet smiled at Margaret gratefully. Then he glanced at Andrew and saw the sneer on his handsome young face. "She's much better now, thank you, Margaret. They say that if she doesn't have too much excitement she'll be fine and then when she's had the operation she'll be as right as rain."

"Good," said Margaret with a ghost of a smile. Andrew had turned away to retrieve some papers from his briefcase.

Ian said his goodbyes and walked across the courtyard, weaving his way through the meandering visitors. Darren Goodenough was waiting in his office. He did hope Darren would look the part; gaunt and cadaverous. But he was the only applicant for the vacancy so far, so whatever he looked like, he'd have to do.

But when Ian Melchet reached his office he found it empty. Darren Goodenough, like any self-respecting ghost, had disappeared into thin air.

An hour later a call came through to Ian Melchet's extension. His wife had been taken to the General Hospital. His heart pounded as he pushed away the file he'd been studying. He had been on edge ever since the disappearance of his prospective ghost, but now the call he had been half expecting, half dreading had come. He threw on his jacket and ran from the office, slamming the

heavy door behind him. Margaret was crossing the courtyard and he almost collided with her.

"Ian, what's the matter? How did you get on with Darren?"

"Darren?"

"The applicant for the vacancy."

"Oh, him? He didn't bother waiting."

"That's a shame. I thought he'd be very good in the job."

"You know him?"

"Er . . . yes. I met him when I was working for the probation service. He was one of my young criminals . . . but he's a very bright lad. Quick on the uptake."

"You should have said . . . not that I'd be prejudiced against him because of his background or anything," he added, trying to sound convincing.

"I thought that Darren deserved a chance and—"

"Look, Margaret. I haven't time to talk now. I'm on my way to the hospital. It's my wife."

"Nothing serious, I hope."

"They never tell you much over the phone. I'm going down there now."

"Hope everything's okay," said Margaret as their eyes met.

She began to play nervously with the beads around her neck as she watched him disappear into the shadow of the gatehouse.

When Ian Melchet arrived at the hospital he was surprised to see a uniformed policeman standing by his wife's bed. There were two other men there, one young and one middle-aged, who both wore the wary and weary expressions of plain-clothes police officers who had seen it all before.

Elizabeth Melchet lay in the centre of the group, holding court from her neatly made hospital bed. Her fair skin was unnaturally pale and her lips had a slight blue tinge. She lay back on her plump pillows, her fair hair spread out like a halo.

The officers looked Ian up and down with some suspicion, but when he introduced himself their faces became a touch more sympathetic. "There'll have to be an investigation, of course, sir," the older one said solemnly.

"What do you mean? What's happened? How's my wife?"

"I'm fine, Ian. Don't fuss," Elizabeth said weakly from her pillows.

"There was an incident, sir . . . at your home. An intruder tried to attack your wife. Don't worry, he didn't assault her. In fact, it seems like he just wanted to frighten her. Anyway, he was in the bedroom and he tried to make his escape through the window."

"Have you any idea who the intruder was?" Ian asked nervously.

"Oh, we know who it was, all right, sir. He was an old friend of ours, so to speak. His name was Darren Goodenough. He had some

papers on him when he was found . . . your wife's photograph with her name and address and some insurance details. Can you throw any light on how he came by them?"

Ian swallowed hard and shook his head. His heart began to thump inside his ribs. He hoped the policemen couldn't hear it. "Have you talked to him? Did he say where he got these papers?" he asked as casually as he could.

"He climbed out of your bedroom window to make his escape from that nice little wrought-iron balcony you, er . . . had. It collapsed and he was impaled on the railings below. Very nasty."

"Will he be all right?"

"Oh no, sir," said the younger policeman with a glint in his eye. "He's dead."

It was two weeks later when the ghost tours began officially. And the adverts promised that visitors were guaranteed a sighting of at least one of the castle's four ghosts.

On the first night, Margaret waited for the appointed participants to turn up in the cold stone chamber that had once been the castle's guard room. The costumes were laid out ready—the grey monk, the mad Earl, the white lady, and the headless cavalier—and the tour was fully booked. Ghosts brought in the crowds.

She picked up the telephone receiver and punched out half of Ian Melchet's extension number. But then she stopped. Ian was at home with his wife, looking after her while she convalesced after her heart bypass operation. The doctors said she'd now be able to live a normal life . . . which wasn't what Margaret had intended.

She had taken her chance when Ian had told her that Darren Goodenough was being interviewed for the ghost-tour vacancy. She knew Darren: She knew how his mind worked. The advert's suggestion that someone needed the life scared out of them, combined with Elizabeth's details left for him to find on Ian's desk and the tantalising mention of a sum of money, would have been enough to set Darren off on the right trail. It was hit-and-miss, but if it had worked nobody could have proved anything against them. Elizabeth would have been dead and Ian would have been free and that was what Margaret had longed for ever since she had met him. And she was certain that Ian felt the same about her . . . although he had never put his feelings into words. In all her years of single isolation, Ian was the only man who'd been sympathetic; always kind and considerate. Margaret loved him and it was only his wife, sickly clinging Elizabeth, who had stood in her way.

But Darren had died. At first Margaret had tried her best to feel sorry . . . but Darren was a difficult man to mourn. Then she had tried to forget about him, to put the whole incident behind her. But each night since his death she had lain awake, and when she

had managed to drift into sleep the nightmares came: Darren's bleeding hands reached out to her as she lay there in a cold sweat of terror and his dead eyes stared into hers . . . accusing.

Now Margaret's head swam and her eyes ached. She slumped down onto the seat by her desk, exhausted, wondering how she was going to get through the next few hours.

The door creaked open. Margaret rubbed her eyes quickly and sat upright when she heard a familiar voice.

"Is everything ready? The punters will start arriving soon." Andrew looked eager as he calculated the profit each visitor would bring in.

"Yes, it's all ready. It's a shame Ian can't be here."

"We're doing very nicely without him," said Andrew with a smirk. "I've been thinking, and I reckon that what we really need in the heritage industry is young people with new ideas. Have you ever considered early retirement, Margaret?"

Darren leapt, unbidden, into Margaret's mind. Andrew, with his cold ambition and contempt for his colleagues, needed a lesson in humility, and if Darren had still been alive . . .

But Margaret tried to crush these wild thoughts springing up in her weary mind. She could only suppress her anger, hide it inside while it gnawed away at her spirit, leaving her bitter and tired. She stood in the doorway and watched as Andrew marched away confidently down the shadowy stone passage.

She must forget Andrew's words. She must try to concentrate on her work. She was expecting her "ghosts" to arrive any minute. There had been four suitable applicants: a lad on a youth training scheme, two unemployed actors, and a university student.

When she heard a faint rustling noise in the passage, she thought that it must be one of her new protégés arriving early. But then the sound was behind her, inside the guard room. She turned and caught the tantalising dull sheen of black leather in the chamber's shadowy corner. Taking a deep breath, she walked towards it slowly. But it moved, changed shape, faded, and then reformed.

"Darren," she whispered, half fascinated, half terrified. Darren's face was there, grinning down at her, watching her with malicious, knowing eyes. Then he moved a little in the shadows and she saw his chest, torn and bloody. "Darren," she gasped again, reaching out to touch the apparition. But when the loud knock came on the door he had gone, melted into the air to join the other castle ghosts.

The knocking came again, louder, and Margaret swung round to see a skinny young man with red hair and acne standing nervously on the threshold. "Am I too early?" he said shyly. "I'm, er . . . one of the ghosts."

Margaret stared at him for a few seconds before collapsing on the floor. ●

Art by Ron Chironna

TELL ME YOU FORGIVE ME?

by Joyce Carol Oates

1.

The Elms ElderCare Center, Yewville, NY. October 16, 2000.

To my Dear Daughter Mary Lynda who I hope will forgive me. I am writting this because it has been 40 yrs. ago this day, I saw by the calendar, that I sent you down into that place of horror & ugliness. I did not mean to injure you, Darling. I could not foresee. I was an ignorant & blind woman then, a drinker. I know you are well now & recovered for yrs. but I am writting to ask for your forgiveness?

Darling, I know you are smiling & shaking your head as you do. When your Mother worries too much. I know you're saying there is nothing to forgive, Mother!

Maybe that is not so, Darling.

Tho' I am fearful of explaining. & maybe cant find the words to explain, what was so clear 40 yrs. ago & had to be done.

Its strange for me to write this, & to know that when you read it, these words one by one that take me so long to write, I will be "gone." I am asking Billy (the big Jamaican girl with "cornrow" hair) to abide by my wishes & save this letter for you & I believe she will, Billy is one of the few to be trusted here.

If you wanted to speak to me after reading this, tho', you could not. This seems wrong.

You have forgiven me for that terrible time, Mary Lynda, I suppose. You have never blamed me as another daughter might.

No one ever accused me, I think. Not to my face?

(Except your father of course. & all the Donaldsons. I'm sorry, Mary Lynda, you bear that name yourself, I know! But you are more your Mother's daughter than his, everybody has always said how "Mary Lynda" takes after "Elsie." Our eyes & hair & our way of speaking.)

(I think of your father sometimes. Its strange, I did injury to "Dr. Donaldson" also, yet it never worried me. I thought—He is a man, he can take care of himself. I'm not proud that when I was young if I ceased loving a man, or caring for a woman friend, I seemed almost to "forget" them overnight. I'm not proud of this, Darling, but its your Mother's way.)

So many times this past year, since I have been moved to this wing of the Center, tho' its only across the lawn from the other place—I wanted to take your hand, Darling, and tell you the truth in my heart. Not what you have forgiven me for but something more. Something nobody has guessed at, all these years! But I did not, for I feared you would not love me then. That was why I was so quiet sometimes, after the chemo especially. When I was sick, & so tired. Yet to be forgiven, I must confess to you. So I am writting in this way. A coward's way I know, after I am "gone."

There are things you say in quiet you cant say face to face. I am not going to live much longer, and so it is time.

Last year I think it was April, when the Eagle House was razed, & you came to visit & were "not yourself"—upset & crying—I wanted to tell you then, Darling. & explain about Hiram Jones. (Is

Over the years another lesser-known byline has periodically appeared on the work of Joyce Carol Oates. The novel *The Barrens* (Otto Penzler Books, June) is attributed to Joyce Carol Oates writing as Rosamond Smith, the first explicit linking of Ms. Oates's once-secret suspense-writing pseudonym with her own, more-famous literary name—a name recently associated with TV through the miniseries *Blonde*, based on the Oates novel of that title. ✝

that a name you remember?) But I saw you needed comfort from your Mother, not "truth." Not just then.

After 40 yrs.! I have not been downtown to see South Main Street since coming to this place. Since my surgery etc. That part of old Yewville was meant to be "renewed"—but the state money gave out, I heard. So there's vacant lots & weeds between buildings, rubble & dust. The Lafayette Hotel & Midland Trust & the library & post office are still there, but the Eagle House is gone, & the rest of that block.

So I try to picture it in my head. Its only 3 miles from here, but I will never see it, I think.

I know its a childish way to think, he is buried beneath rubble. & his bones are in that debris.

"The Elms" is a good place for me, I think. I'm grateful to you, Darling, for helping me to live here. God knows where I would be living with just Medicare & Social Security! I don't complain like the other "oldsters." Tho' I am only 72, the youngest in this cottage. The oldest is that poor thing Mrs. N. you've seen, blind & with no teeth, "deaf & can't hear" etc. Lately they haven't brought Mrs. N. into the sun room even, which is a pity for her, but a relief to us. She is 99 yrs. old & everybody is hoping she will live to 100—except Mrs. N., she has no idea how old she is or even her name. There are 3 or 4 of us who are "progressing" (as the doctors call it, but this means the disease not us!) & those of us who are "just plain old." I am out of my time element here, because I am still young (in my mind) but the body has worn out, I know Darling its sad for you to see me, your Mother who used to be "beautiful" & vain of it.

Now I am vain of you, Darling. My "M.D." daughter I can boast of to these other old women, the ones who are my friends.

I love the pretty straw hat you brought for me to cover my head, & the bluebird scarf.

Are dead people "lonely" I wonder?

I have been writting—writing?—this damn letter for a week & it gets harder. Like trying to see into the darkness when you are in the light. The future when I will be "gone" is strange to me tho' I know its coming. When some other sick woman will have my room here & my bed.

You'd be surprised, we dont talk much of God here. You'd think so, but no. Its hard to believe in a "universe" inside these walls & lasting beyond a few days' time. Do I have a fear of God's judgement for my sins, somebody might ask. No Darling, I do not. Remember your Grandaddy Kenelly who laughed when "God" was spoken of. It was all just b.s. invented to keep weak people in line, Daddy believed .

Hell, God better believe in me. I'm a man, he'd say.

By that Daddy meant that "man" is more important than "God"

because it was "man" who invented God, not the other way around.

Only just I wish I had more courage.

Daddy has been dead a long time but to me he's more real than the people in this place. I talk to him & hear his voice in my head. Since 1959! Thank God, Daddy never lived to be an old man here in "The Elms." Imagine your Grandaddy 100 yrs. old, deaf & blind & not knowing his own name or where the hell he is. He was only 55 when he died—thats young. How Time plays tricks on us. My handsome Daddy always older than me, now he'd be younger. When he died, I mean. I dont think of these things if I can.

Billy says I should not pass away with secrets in my heart. So I am trying, Darling.

Is "Hiram Jones" a name you remember, Darling? Maybe I have asked you this already.

However you were told your Grandaddy died, its best to think it was an accident like a roll of the dice. Nothing more.

Wish I could undo the bad thing that happened to you, Darling.

You were only 10 yrs. old. I cant think why I would send you into that terrible place like I did, to see where that terrible man had got to. I was drinking in those days & missing my father & that caused me to forget my duties as a Mother.

Now its a later time. You are a M.D. like "Dr. Donaldson" & so you know about my case, more than I would know myself. Tho' "oncology" is not your field. (I hate that word, its ugly!) But this is why I am not afraid of dying: when I had my surgery & my mind went out, it was OUT. Like a light bulb switched OFF. When I had you, Darling, I was very young & ignorant & believed I was healthy & went into labor not guessing what it would be, 18 hrs. of it, but afterward I "forgot" as they say but I knew what true pain was & would not wish to relive it. But this, when you're OUT, is different. The 3 times I was operated on, each time it was like "Elsie Kenelly" ceased to exist.

So if you're dead and theres no pain you cease to exist. If theres no pain theres nothing to fear.

Darling, I am a coward I guess. Too fearful of telling you what I have wished to, to beg your forgiveness. I'm sorry.

But in this envelope I am leaving a surprise for you. These ivory dice, remember? From your Grandaddy you didn't know too well. These dice he'd keep in his pocket & take out & roll "to see what they have to tell me"—he'd say. They were Daddy's Good Luck Dice he'd got in Okinowa—Okinawa?—that island in the Pacific where the U.S. soldiers were waiting to be shipped to Japan to fight & a lot of them would have died (Daddy always said) except the war ended with the A-bomb. So Daddy said these were Good Luck Dice for him. He'd toss away his medals but not these. At the Eagle House he'd roll his friends for drinks. 7 times out of 10 he'd

win, I swear. The other men didnt know how the hell Willie Kenelly did it but the dice werent fixed, as you will see. Yet Daddy would snap his fingers & sometimes it seemed the dice would obey him, who knows why.

After my mother died we had some happy years, your Grandaddy & me. Maybe Daddy had a drinking problem but thats not the only thing in life, believe me.

Theres something about dice being tossed, if they're classy dice, it makes my backbone shiver even now. As soon as the dice fly out of your hand. & its an important bet, & everybody watching. I hope you will put away these dice for safekeeping, Mary Lynda. They're pure ivory which is why they've changed color. Daddy & I would roll them for fun, & one night he pressed them in my hand (in June 1959, I will always remember) & I knew this must be a sign of something but could not have guessed that Daddy would be dead in 5 weeks.

& Bud Beechum would be dead in about a year.

& Hiram Jones (maybe this is a name you dont remember) would be dead in a few years.

Well! Its too late now, Darling. For any of this, I guess. Even for feeling sorry. Like your Grandaddy said theres nothing to do with dice except "toss 'em."

Your loving Mother "Elsie Kenelly"

2.

Yewville, NY. April 11, 1999.

A fire. It looked like a fire: not flames but smoke.

Clouds of pale dust-colored smoke drifting skyward in erratic surges, like expelled breaths. In the downtown area of Yewville, just across the river, it looked like.

She was driving to visit her mother in the nursing home. She'd delayed the visit for weeks. Poor Elsie: who'd once been a beautiful, vain woman, with that wavy shoulder-length dark-blond hair, now she was a chemo patient, the hair gone, and what sprouted from her scalp was fuzzy gray like down or mold you had an instinct to wipe off with a damp cloth.

Mary Lynda, no: I don't mind.

I'm lucky to be alive, see?

Mary Lynda, the daughter, wasn't so sure. She was a doctor, and she knew what was in store for her mother, and she wasn't so sure.

She'd had a driver's license for more than thirty years but the fact was, which she could never have explained to anyone: in all those years she'd never once driven in downtown Yewville. She'd managed to avoid South Main Street—the "historic" district—on the western bank of the Yewville River. Not that it was a phobia, it was a conscious choice. (Or maybe, yes, it was a phobia. And it

soothed her vanity to tell herself it was a conscious choice.) There were circuitous routes to bring her to other parts of Yewville and its suburbs without any need to navigate the blocks closest to the river; though, from childhood, with the vividness of impressions formed in childhood, she could instantly recall the look of South Main Street: the grandiose Lafayette Hotel with its sandstone facade and many gleaming windows; Franklin Brothers, once Yewville's premiere department store, with its brass flagpole and fluttering American flag; the old stone City Hall, for decades the downtown branch of the Yewville Public Library; Mohawk Smoke Shop, King's Cafe, Ella's Ladies' Apparel, Midland Trust, Yewville Savings & Loan with its luminous clock tower; the Old Eagle House Tavern, gray stone, cavelike inside, with its faded sign in the shape of a bald eagle in flight, wings outspread, talons ready to grip prey.... She hadn't seen this sign in forty years but could see it now, swift as a headache. She could hear the sign creaking in the wind.

Old Eagle House Tavern est. 1819.

For some reason, she was going to drive through the downtown today. The "historic" district. Why not? She was curious about the smoke, and what South Main Street looked like after so many years. She'd been there last in 1960. Now, it was 1999. The bridge over the river had been totally changed, of course. Now four lanes, reasonably modern. Her car's tires hummed on the wire-mesh surface. There didn't seem to be any fire, though. No fire trucks or sirens. Main Street traffic was being diverted into a single slow-moving lane overseen by burly men shouting through megaphones. CONSTRUCTION AHEAD. DEMOLITION WARNING. She smelled a powdery-gritty dust, her eyes smarted. Damn: jackhammers. She hated jackhammers. Her heartbeat began to quicken in panic, such loud noises upset her. What was she trying to prove, driving here, when there was no one to prove it to, no witness? She vowed she wasn't going to mention this to Elsie.

I'm not that girl. She was someone else.

The girl had been ten at the time. When she'd gone down into the cellar of the Eagle House that smelled of beer, mildew, dirt. The stink of urine from the men's room. She'd been sent by Momma to see where the proprietor Bud Beechum "had got to."

Now, she was forty-nine years old. She hadn't lived in Yewville for decades. She'd graduated, valedictorian of her high school class, in 1968. She'd gone to college in Rochester and medical school in New York City. She was "Dr. Donaldson"—she had a general practice in Montclair, New Jersey. She was fully an adult, it was ridiculous that Yewville should reduce her to trembling like a child.

In her life away from Yewville, "Mary Lynda" was a name she rarely heard. Among friends and colleagues she was simply "Mary." An old-fashioned name, a name so classic it was almost

impersonal, like a title. She liked the formality of "Dr. Donaldson" though it was her (deceased) father's name, too. Both her parents had called her "Mary Lynda" while she was growing up. Never had she had the courage to tell them how much she hated it.

Mary Lynda! Born in 1950, you could guess by the name. Sweet and simpering in gingham, like June Allyson. Crinkly crinoline skirts and pin-curls, weirdly dark lipstick. Don't hurt me, please just love me, I am so good.

Mary Donaldson visited her mother in Yewville two or three times a year. They spoke often on the phone. Or fairly often. Until just recently Elsie had lived by herself but she'd had a run of bad luck in her mid sixties, health problems, financial problems, so she'd allowed Mary to persuade her to move into The Elms Retirement Village, which was a condominium complex for senior citizens in a semirural suburb of Yewville; when Elsie's health began to deteriorate, she moved into a nursing home on the premises. ("Next move," Elsie quipped, "is out the door, feet first." Mary winced, pretending not to hear.) When Elsie had been younger and in better health, Mary bought her a plane ticket once or twice a year so that she could come visit her in Montclair; they went to matinees and museums in New York; they were judged to be "more like sisters than mother and daughter," as Mary's friends liked to say, as if this remark might be flattering to Mary. Of course it wasn't true: Mary looked nothing like Elsie, who was an intensely feminine woman with a full, shapely body carried upright as a candle, dark blond hair that bobbed enticingly, flirty eyes, and a throaty voice. ("Don't be deceived by Mother's 'personality,'" Mary said. "Mother is a dominatrix." Her friends laughed, no one believed her for an instant.) Well into her mid sixties Elsie could pass for a youthful fifty. Though she'd been a heavy smoker and drinker, her skin was relatively unlined. She'd had only two husbands—Mary's father was the first—but numerous lovers who'd treated her, on the whole, as Elsie said, not too badly. But now, at last, life was catching up with her. Her girlfriends from childhood were white-haired, wrinkled grandmothers, the boys elderly-shrunken, or dead. In her late sixties things began to go wrong with Elsie. She had varicose-vein surgery on her legs. She had surgery to remove ovarian cysts. Arthritis in her lower spine, bronchitis that lasted for weeks in the cold damply windy climate of upstate New York. For much of her adult life she'd been a drinker, joined Alcoholics Anonymous in her early thirties, and quit smoking at about the same time. ("I must have thought I'd live forever," Elsie said ruefully. "Now look!") In fact, Mary was in awe that her mother, who'd taken such indifferent care of herself, who'd avoided doctors for decades, was in such relatively good health for a woman of her generation, and had managed even to

keep her bright "upbeat" temperament. *Not a dominatrix, a seductress. Her power is more insidious.*

Driving with maddening slowness on Main Street, Mary thought of these things. And of the past, coiled snaky and waiting (for her? that wasn't likely) beyond the facades of these old, now shabby buildings. The Lafayette Hotel; the ugly discount store that had once been classy Franklin Brothers; the old City Hall which hadn't changed much, at least on the outside; the Mohawk Smoke Shop, still in business, though with a sign in its window ADULT X-RATED VIDEOS; the old Yewville Savings & Loan with the clock tower that had always seemed gigantic, a proud glowing clock face to be seen for miles, though in fact, as Mary now saw, to her surprise, the granite tower was no higher than the second floor of the bank building.

But where was Ella's, and where was King's Cafe, and where was . . . the Eagle House Tavern?

Mary stared, confused. Half the block was being razed. Only the shells of some buildings remained. Stone, and brick. Rubble in heaps. Like an earthquake. A bombing. She was tasting dust, swallowing dust; she steeled herself against the noise of jackhammers, that made her heartbeat race as if with amphetamine. There came a wrecking ball swinging in air like a deranged pendulum, and at once a wall of weatherworn stone collapsed in an explosion of dust.

Go look for him, honey. I'll wait out here.

Mommy, why? I don't want to.

Because I'm asking you, Mary Lynda.

I don't want to, Mommy. I'm afraid . . .

Go on, I said! Damn you! Just see where that bastard has got to.

Mommy's face was bright and hard and her mouth twisted in that way Mary Lynda knew. Her mother had been drinking, it was like fire inside her that could leap out at you, and burn.

Mommy wanted to know where Bud Beechum was, exactly. For he wasn't in the tavern when they came inside. When Mommy pushed Mary Lynda inside. Bud Beechum owned the Eagle House. He'd been a friend of Grandaddy Kenelly when Grandaddy was alive and he was a friend of Mary Lynda's mother, too. Somehow, the families were friendly. Beechums, Kenellys. Bud Beechum's wife was Elsie's cousin. They'd all been "wild" together in high school. Just to remember those times, they'd start laughing, shaking their heads. The child Mary Lynda was uneasy around Beechum. He had a way of looking at you, smirking and rubbing at his teeth with the tip of his tongue.

Mary Lynda was uneasy around most adult men, except her father and the Donaldsons: They were "different" kinds of people. They were soft-spoken, "nice." When Elsie divorced Timothy Don-

aldson, she was given custody of Mary Lynda and so Mary Lynda saw her father only on weekends.

Bud Beechum had been dead now for almost forty years. Yet you could imagine his big, chunky bones in the cellar of that old building. His broken-in skull the size of a bucket amid the rubble and suffocating dust.

Mommy, no. Mommy, don't make me.

Mary Lynda, do as you're told.

Mommy's voice was scared, too. And Mommy's fingers gripping Mary Lynda's narrow shoulders, pushing her forward.

It was now that Mary did the unexpected thing: As soon as she was safely past the traffic congestion on South Main, she turned left on a street called Post, and drove back toward the river, and, with an air of adventure, a sense of recklessness, parked in the lot, now mostly deserted and weedy, behind the old Franklin Brothers store.

Dr. Donaldson, why? This is crazy.

She wasn't a woman of impulse, usually. She was a woman who guarded her actions as she guarded her emotions. Not for Mary Donaldson the dice-tossing habits of her charming old drunk of a grandfather Kenelly.

And so it was strange that in her good Italian shoes, in her taupe linen pants suit (Ann Taylor), her hair stylishly scissor-cut, she was parking in downtown Yewville, and hurrying to join a small crowd of people gathered to stare at the destruction of a few old, ugly buildings. Coughing from the dust, and maybe there was asbestos in that dust. Yet she was compelled by curiosity, like the others, most of whom were elderly, retired men, with here and there some woman shoppers, some teenagers and children. (Thank God, no one who seemed to recognize Mary Lynda Donaldson.)

His bones in that rubble. Ashes.

Toxic to inhale!

Of course this was ridiculous. Bud Beechum had been properly buried. Forty years ago.

The Eagle House was being razed, spectacularly. The very earth shook as the wrecking ball struck. "Wow! Fan-tas-tic." A teenaged boy with spiky hair spoke approvingly. His girl snuggled against him, wriggling her taut little bottom as if the demolition of the Eagle House had a private, salacious meaning. Mary saw that the girl was hardly more than fourteen, her brown hair streaked in maroon and green, one nostril and one eyebrow pierced. She was pale, wanly pretty, though looking like a pincushion. Very thin. One of her tiny breasts, the size and color of an oyster, was virtually exposed, her tank top hung so slack on her skinny torso. She wore faded jeans, and in this place of litter and broken glass was barefoot.

That afternoon, Elsie had picked up Mary Lynda from school. She'd driven here. She'd parked her car, the yellow Chevy, in this lot,

though closer to the rear of the Eagle House. *Why are we here, Mommy?* Mary Lynda asked. *Because that bastard owes me. He owed your Grandaddy, he's got to pay.* Mary Lynda knew the symptoms: Her mother's eyes were dilated, her hair hung lank in her face. When she hiccupped, Mary Lynda could smell her sweetish-sour breath.

"What's happening here?" Mary asked in the bright, friendly voice of a visitor to Yewville who'd just wandered over from the Lafayette Hotel. The boy with the spiky hair said, with an air of civic pride, "They're tearing these old dumps down. They're gonna build something new." His girl said, smirking, "About time, huh?" Mary had to press her fingers against her ears, the jackhammer was so loud. Such noises enter the soul, and may do permanent damage. She saw that beyond the adjacent lot was an unpaved alley that led toward the river. This was the lot in which her mother had parked that day. Debris was piled on both sides of the alley, some of it Styrofoam of the white-glaring hue of exposed bone. Mary was smiling, or trying to smile, but something was wrong with her mouth. "Ma'am? You okay?" The teenagers were suddenly alert, responsible. You could guess they had mothers for whom they were sometimes concerned. They helped Mary sit down—for suddenly Mary's knees were weak, her strength was gone like water rapidly draining away—on a twisted guardrail. Amid the deafening jackhammer that made her bones vibrate she sat dazed, confused, breathing through her mouth. Her legs were clumsily spread, thank God for the trousers. She was wiping her nose with her fingers. Was she crying? Saying earnestly, "A man was found dead in that building, a long time ago. A little girl found him. Now I can tell her the cellar is gone."

3.

Rochester, NY 1968–Barnegat, NJ 1974.

For years she would see a male figure, not fallen but "resting"—prone on the floor, for instance, inside a room she was passing; in the blurry corner of her eye she saw this figure, but had no sense that the figure meant death. Because when she looked, there was no figure, of course. One night, in Rochester, working late in the university library, she was swiftly passing a dim-lit lounge and though it had been eight years since she'd seen Beechum's body in that cellar, and rarely thought of it, now suddenly she was seeing it again, in terrifying detail, more clearly than she'd seen the body at the time. *He's here. How'd he come to be here?* Always a logical young woman, even in her panic she reasoned that if Bud Beechum's body was actually here in the University of Rochester library, so long as there was no linkage between the body and Mary Lynda Donaldson, a pre-med student, she was blameless, and could not be blamed.

Her instinct was to stop dead in her tracks and stare into the room, yet since she knew (she knew perfectly well) that no one was lying there on the carpet, she averted her eyes and flew past.

No. Don't look. Nothing!

She believed it was an act of simple discipline, fighting off madness. As an adult you took responsibility for your life, you were no-nonsense. High grades at the university, always high grades. She was pre-med after all. Ignore the politics of the era. Assassinations, the Vietnam War, the despairing effort of her generation to "bring the war home." For always in history there have been wars, and destruction, and people dying to no purpose, if not here then elsewhere, if not elsewhere then (possibly) here, count your blessings, Mary Lynda, her mother often consoled her; or maybe it was a mother's simple command, and it made sense. (Elsie had joined AA, Elsie hadn't had a drink stronger than sweet apple cider in years, laughing *Can you believe it?*) So private madness seemed to Mary Lynda the worst nonsense. Stupid and self-hurtful as "dropping acid," or laughing like a hyena (that belly laugh of Bud Beechum's, how she'd hated it) at someone's funeral, or tearing off your clothes and running in the street when you didn't even look good, small breasts and soft hips and tummy, naked. Fighting off madness seemed to Mary Lynda like beating out a fire with a heavy blanket or canvas—"Something anybody could do if they tried."

It was her opinion that both Kennedys could have prevented being assassinated if they'd been more prudent in their behavior. Martin Luther King, too. But she kept this opinion to herself.

One of the men she'd loved, and would live with intermittently for several years in her late twenties, she'd seen lying in the sun in khaki shorts, bare-chested, amid sand and scrub grass at the Jersey shore. She was an intern at Columbia Presbyterian and lived a life far from Yewville and from her mother. Seeing the boy sleeping in the sun, sprawled on the sand, she stared, like one under a spell. She went to him, knelt over him, stroked his hair. The boy was in fact a young man, her age; with long pale lashes and long lank hair women called moon-colored. At Mary's touch he opened his eyes that were sleepy but sharpened immediately when he saw who she was: another man's girl. And when he realized what Mary was doing in her trancelike state, where her hand crept, he came fully awake and pulled her down on top of him, his hands gripping her head. His kisses were hard, hungry. Mary shut her eyes that hurt from the sun, she would see what came of this.

4.
Yewville, NY. 1960–1963.

Those years of Elsie chiding, frightened. *Mary Lynda, talk to me! This is just some sort of game you're playing, isn't it!*

At first they believed her inability to speak might have something to do with her breathing patterns. She breathed rapidly, and usually through her mouth. This precipitated hyperventilation. (Elsie learned to enunciate this carefully: "Hy-per-ven-ti-lation.")

Mary felt dizzy, her eyes "sparked." Her throat shut up tight. If she managed to choke out words they were only a sound, a shuddering stammer like drowning. "Is your daughter a little deaf-mute girl?" a woman dared ask Elsie at the clinic.

For approximately ten months after October 16, 1960 she was mute. And what relief when finally she wasn't expected to speak. They let you alone if you don't talk, they seem to think you're deaf, too. Except for some of the kids teasing her at school it was a time of peace. She'd never been very afraid of children, even of the loud-yelling older boys, only just adults frightened her. Their size, their sudden voices. The mystery of their moods, and their motives. The grip of their fingers on your shoulders even in love. *Mary Lynda, I love you, honey! Say something. I know you can talk if you want to.*

But mostly this was a time of peace. No one would question her words as the police had questioned her, for she had no words. Because she'd ceased speaking, she was surrounded by quiet. Like inside a glass bubble. She carried it with her everywhere, inviolable.

In school where she was *Mary Lynda Donaldson* she occupied her own space. Her teacher Miss Doehler with the watery eyes was very kind to her, always Mary Lynda's desk was just in front of Miss Doehler's desk in fifth and sixth grades. She was *the little girl who'd found the dead man. The dead man!* The man who'd owned the Eagle House Tavern by the river. With the soaring eagle sign that creaked in the wind. When Bud Beechum was killed, his picture was printed in the Yewville paper: the first time in Bud's life, people said. Poor bastard, he'd have liked the attention.

Tavern Owner, 35, Killed in Robbery.

Strange that, in Bud Beechum's picture, he was young-looking, without his whiskers, and smiling. Like he had no idea what would happen to him.

Strange that, when Mary Lynda's throat shut up the way it did, she felt safe. Like somebody was hugging her so tight she couldn't move. Sometimes in the night her throat came open, like ice melting, and then she began to groan, and whimper like a baby, and call "Momma! Mom-ma!" in her sleep. If Elsie was home, and if Elsie heard, she might come staggering into Mary Lynda's room, groggy and scolding. "Oh Mary Lynda, what? What is it *now?*" If Elsie wasn't home, or wasn't wakened, Mary Lynda woke herself up, and tried to sleep sitting up, which was a safe way, generally. Not to put your head down on a pillow. Not to be so unprotected. She stared at the walls of her room (which was a small room, hardly more than a closet) to keep them from closing in.

Always in one of the walls there was a door. As long as the door was shut, she was safe. But the door might open. It might be pushed open. It might glide open. On the other side of the door there might be steep steps leading down, and she had no choice but to approach these steps, for something was pressing her forward, like a hand against her back. A gentle hand, but it could turn hard. A hard firm adult hand on her back. And she would see her own hand switching on a light, and she would see suddenly down into the cellar into the dark. That was her mistake.

5.

Yewville, NY. October 1960–March 1965.

The boy was a Negro, as blacks were then called, with an I.Q. of 84. This was not "severe retardation" (it would be argued by prosecutors), this was not a case of "not knowing right from wrong." Though the boy was seventeen, he'd dropped out of school in fifth grade and could not read, still less write, except to shakily sign his name to a confession later to be recanted, with a protestation of his court-appointed attorney of "extreme police coercion." The case would receive the most publicity any murder case had ever received in Eden County. In some quarters it was believed to be a "race murder"—the boy, Hiram Jones, had brutally killed and robbed Bud Beechum because Beechum was a white man. In other quarters, the case was believed to be a "race issue"—Hiram Jones was being prosecuted because he was a Negro. Because his I.Q. was 84. Because he lived in that part of Yewville known as Lowertown, a place of makeshift wood-frame shanties with tin roofs. Because the testimony of his family that Hiram had been home at the probable time of the murder was dismissed as lies. Because when he'd been arrested by police he had in his possession Bud Beechum's wallet, containing twenty-eight dollars; he was wearing Bud Beechum's favorite leather belt with the silver medallion buckle; Bud Beechum's shoes were hidden in a shed behind the Jones's house. These items, Hiram claimed he'd found while fishing on the riverbank, less than a mile from the Eagle House. Yet when police came into Lowertown to arrest him, having been tipped off by a (Negro) informant, Hiram Jones had "acted guilty" by trying to run. He'd made things worse by "resisting arrest." Police had had to overpower him, and he'd been hurt and hospitalized, his nose and eye sockets broken, ribs cracked, windpipe crushed from someone's boot. He would speak in a hoarse, cracked whisper like wind rattling newspaper for the remainder of his life.

Always Hiram Jones would deny he'd killed the white man. He would not remember the white man's name, or how exactly he'd been charged with killing him, but he would deny it. He would deny he'd ever been in the Eagle House. No Negroes in Yewville

patronized the Eagle House. He would be tried as an adult and found guilty of second-degree murder and robbery, he would be incarcerated while his case was appealed to the state supreme court where a new trial would be ordered, but by this time Hiram Jones was diagnosed as "mentally deficient"—"unable to participate in his own trial"—so he was transferred to a state mental hospital in Port Oriskany where, in March 1965, he would die after a severe beating by fellow inmates.

6.

The Eagle House Tavern, Yewville, NY. October 16, 1960.

At the bottom of the wooden steps there was a man lying on his side. Like he was floating in the dark. Like he was sleeping, and floating. His arms sprawled. Maybe it was a joke, or a trick? Bud Beechum was always joking. *Hey, I'm kidding, kid,* Bud Beechum would say, in reproach. *Where's your sense of humor?* If he saw you were frightened of him, he'd press in closer. He smelled of beer, and cigarette smoke, and his own body. His stomach rode his big-buckled belt like a pumpkin. He had hot moist smiling eyes and the skin beside those eyes crinkled. He'd been in the Korean War. He boasted of things he'd done there with his "bayonet." He refused to serve Negroes in the Eagle House because, as he said, he owed it to his white customers who didn't want to drink out of glasses that Negroes drank out of, or use the men's room if a Negro had used it. His wife was Momma's cousin Joanie who smelled of talcum. Once at the Beechums' in the old hay barn where kids were leaping into hay and screaming like crazy, bare arms and legs, Bud Beechum laughed at Mary Lynda for being so shy and fearful—"Not like your Momma who's *hot*." Because Mary Lynda didn't want to run and jump with the others into the hay loft. Bud Beechum teased her pretending to grab at her between the legs with his big thumb and forefinger. *Uh-oh! Watch out, the crab's gonna getcha!* It was just a joke though. Bud Beechum's face was flushed and happy-seeming. So maybe now, lying at the foot of the steps, in this nasty-smelling place with the bare light bulb that hurt her eyes, maybe this was a joke, too. Bud Beechum's head that was big as a bucket twisted to one side like he was trying to look over his shoulder. Something glistened on his head, was it blood?

Mary Lynda was fearful of blood. She began to breathe in a quick light funny way like the breath couldn't get past her mouth. Was Mr. Beechum breathing? Or holding his breath? His mouth was gaping in surprise and something glistened there, too. There was a smell—Mary Lynda's nostrils pinched—like he'd soiled his pants. A grown man! Mary Lynda wanted to run away, but could not move. Nor had she any words to utter. Never had she spoken

to Momma's man friend Bud Beechum except shyly in response to a teasing query and that only sidelong, out of the corner of her mouth, eyes averted. You could not. You did not. She stood paralyzed, unable to breathe. She could not have said why she was in this place. Or where exactly this place was. A dungeon? Like in a movie? A cave? It made her think of bats: She was terrified of bats, that got into little girls' hair.

Of the Yewville taverns where Momma went when she was feeling lonely her favorite was the Eagle House because that had been Grandaddy Kenelly's favorite, too. There, Mary Lynda was allowed to play the jukebox. Nickel after nickel. Sometimes men at the bar gave her nickels. Like they bought drinks for Momma. Bud Beechum, too—"This one's on the house." Mary Lynda drank sugary Cokes until her tummy bloated and she had to pee so bad it hurt. If Momma stayed late she slept in one of the sticky black vinyl booths. All the men liked Momma, you could tell. Momma so pretty with her long wavy dark-blond hair and her way of dancing alone, turning and lifting her arms like a woman in a dream.

Mary Lynda had overheard her parents quarreling. Her father's voice, and her mother's voice rising to a scream. *Because you bore the shit out of me, that's why.*

Such words, Mary Lynda wasn't allowed to hear.

Why was this afternoon special? Mary Lynda didn't know. Momma had come to pick her up at school which wasn't Momma's custom. Saying she didn't have to take the damned school bus. They'd come here, and parked in the next-door lot. It would turn out—it would say so in the newspaper—that the front door of the Eagle House was locked, only the back door was open. There were no customers in the bar because it was early: not yet four o'clock. Momma talked excitedly explaining (to Mary Lynda?) that she was in no mood to see Bud Beechum's face. "Just tell him I'm out here, and waiting." Momma repeated this several times. It wasn't clear why Momma didn't want to see Bud Beechum's face yet wanted Mary Lynda to find him, to ask him to come outside so that Momma could talk to him. For wouldn't she have to see his face, then? But this was Momma's way when she'd been drinking. One minute she'd grab Mary Lynda's head and kiss her wetly on the mouth calling her "my beautiful baby daughter," the next minute she'd be scolding. Only fragments of the afternoon of October 16, 1960 would be clear in Mary Lynda's memory. For possibly much of it had been dreamt, or would be dreamt. Her throat began to shut up tight as soon as she'd entered the barroom looking for Bud Beechum who was always behind the bar except now he wasn't. She'd have to look back in the kitchen, Momma said. She wanted to leave but Momma said no. *See where that bastard has got to. I know he's here somewhere.* Mary Lynda saw Bud Beechum,

and the thought came to her, *He's dead.* She giggled, and pressed her knuckles against her mouth. The day before, Momma had kept her home from school with an "ear infection"—a "fever." When you have a fever, Momma said, you might become "delirious." You might have wild, bad dreams when you weren't even asleep and you couldn't trust what you saw, or thought you saw. So she'd called Mary Lynda's school and made her excuse. Yet, yesterday, it had seemed to Mary Lynda that Momma kept her home because she was nervous about something. She was edgy, and distracted. When the telephone rang, she wouldn't answer it. She wouldn't let Mary Lynda answer it. After a while, she left the receiver off the hook. She made sure every blind in the house was drawn, and lights were out in most of the rooms except upstairs. When Mary Lynda asked what was wrong, Momma told her to hush.

Already, yesterday was a long time ago.

Mary Lynda was crouched at the top of the steps staring down to where Bud Beechum was lying. Looking like he was asleep. *No: He's dead.* Still, Bud Beechum was tricky, he might wake up at any moment. Maybe it was a trick he was playing on Momma, too. You couldn't trust him. Mary Lynda stood there on the steps so long, not able to move, not able to breathe, at last Momma came to see where she was.

Soft as a whisper coming up behind Mary Lynda.

"Honey? Is something wrong?"

7.

The Eagle House Tavern, Yewville, NY. October 16, 1960.

He told her to come to the Eagle House at noon, he wanted to see her. He'd leave the rear door unlocked. He was pissed as hell at her not answering the phone, almost he'd come over there and broken down the door and the hell with her little girl or any other witness. So she came by. She saw she had no choice. She parked the Chevy on Front Street, by the Lafayette Hotel. A dead-end street. She wasn't seen walking to the Eagle House through the alley. She wore a raincoat and a scarf tied tight around her head and she walked swiftly, in a way unusual for Elsie Kenelly. She entered by the rear door. At this time of day no one was around. There was a raw, egg-white look to the day. High clouds were spitting rain cold enough to be ice. The clouds would be blown away, and the sky would open into patches of bright blue, by the time she left. The Eagle House wasn't open for lunch; it opened, most days, around four P.M. and it closed at two A.M. Beechum was waiting for her just inside. "About time, Elsie." He was angry, but relieved. She'd come as he had commanded: The woman had done his bidding. He grabbed at her. She pushed him off, laughing nervously. She'd washed her hair and put on crimson lipstick. Per-

fume that made her nostrils pinch. She'd brought a steak knife, one of that set her mother-in-law Maudie Donaldson had given them, in her handbag but she knew she wasn't brave enough to use a knife. She was terrified of blood, and of the possibility of Bud Beechum wrenching the knife out of her fingers. He was strong, and for a man of his size he was quick. She knew he was quick. And he was shrewd. She would have to say the right things to him, to placate him. Because he was pissed from last night, she knew that. She told him that Mary Lynda had been sick, an ear infection. She told him she was sorry. He squeezed her breasts, always there was something mean in this man's touch. And when he kissed her, there was meanness in his kiss. His beery breath, his ridiculous thrusting tongue like an eel. His teeth that needed brushing. The wire-whiskers she'd come to hate though at one time (had she been crazy?) she'd thought they were sexy, and Bud Beechum was "sexy—sort of." She'd always been curious about this guy married to her cousin Joanie, even back in high school it was said all the Beechum men were built like horses which was fine if you liked horses. Drunk, she'd thought just maybe she might. But only part-drunk, and stone-cold sober, she'd had other thoughts.

Mary Lynda was at school. She'd be at school until three-fifteen.

"Look. I got kids, too. You think I don't have my own kids?"

Now he was blaming her for—what? Mary Lynda? The bastard.

There was the doorway to the cellar. Like a dream doorway. *Pass through to an adventure! But you must be brave.* She laughed, and wrenched her mouth free of his. She was breathing quickly as if she'd been running. She lifted her heavy dark-blond hair in both her hands and let it sift through her fingers as it fell, in that way he liked. She could see in his eyes, dilated with desire, he liked. He led her urgently toward the cellar steps, where a bare light bulb was screwed into a ceiling fixture filmy with cobweb. It was both too bright here and smudged-seeming. It smelled of piss from the men's room in the back hall, and of damp dark earth. All the cellars in these old "historic" buildings were earthen. Things died in these cellars and rotted away. Beechum was talking excitedly, laughing, that warning edge to his voice. He was sexually charged up like a battery. But he didn't like tricky women, he wanted her to know that. He'd hinted at things about her old man she wouldn't want generally known in Yewville. She'd got that, right? He was leading her down the steps, ahead of her, to this place they'd gone before, this was the third time in fact, she was disgusted and ashamed and she pushed him, suddenly pushed him hard, and he lost his balance and fell forward. Elsie's fingers with the painted nails, which were strong fingers, you'd better believe they were strong, at the small of the man's fattish back, and he fell.

He fell hard. He fell onto the wooden steps limp and lumpy as a

sack of potatoes, sliding down. Horrible to watch, and fascinating, the big man's body helpless, thumping against the steps that swayed dangerously with his weight. Beechum was six feet three, weighed two hundred twenty pounds at least. Yet now, falling, he was helpless as a giant baby. He lay on the earthen floor, stunned. A groan of utter astonishment escaped his throat. If Beechum wasn't seriously hurt, if he got hold of Elsie now, he'd kill her. He'd beat her to death with his fists. She'd seen a pipe amid a pile of debris. Beechum was writhing, groaning, possibly the bastard had injured his back in the fall, maybe his spine or his neck was broken, maybe the bastard was dying but Elsie hadn't faith this could be so easy. Almost, she was willing—she was wanting—to work a little harder. Her father Willie Kenelly had killed men in Okinawa, gunfire and bayonet, he hadn't boasted of it, he'd said it was Goddamned dirty work, it was hard work, killing was hard work, nothing to be proud of but not ashamed either. That had been his job, and they'd given him medals for it, but in his own mind he'd just done his job. *Do it right, girl, or not at all. Don't screw up.*

She knew. She'd known, making up her mind to drive over here.

Afterward, she wrapped the pipe in newspaper. It was bloody, and there were hairs on it. But nothing had splattered onto her. She would bathe anyway. For the second time that day. She wiped the dead man's mouth roughly, thoroughly, removing all traces of crimson lipstick. She took his wallet, stuffed with small bills. She unbuckled his belt and removed it. She unlaced his shoes. She was feverish yet calm. Whispering aloud, "Now. I want this. These. One, two. The shoe. Three, four. Shut the door. *Don't screw up.*" In a paper bag she carried Beechum's things to her car parked on Front Street beside the Lafayette Hotel. This had been an ideal place to park: a side street above the river, a dead end used mainly by delivery trucks. No one had seen her, and no one would see her. It wasn't yet one P.M. The sky was clearing rapidly. Each morning, as winter neared, the sky was thick with clouds like broken concrete but the wind from Lake Ontario usually dislodged them by midday, patches of bright blue glared like neon. Elsie drove north along the River Road humming the theme from *Moulin Rouge.* It had snagged in her brain and would recur throughout her life, reminding her of this day, this hour. She surprised herself, so calm. *You're doing good, girl. That's my girl.* Why she would behave so strangely within a few hours, bringing her daughter Mary Lynda to the death scene as if to ascertain yes, yes the man was dead, yes it had really happened, yes she could not possibly be to blame if her own daughter was the one to discover the corpse, she would not know. She would not wish to think. *That's right, girl. Never look back.*

She drove the Chevy bump-bump-bumping along a sandy access

road to the river, where fishermen parked, but today there were no fishermen. Scrub willow grew thick on the riverbank here, no one would see her. She was a doctor's wife, not a woman you'd suspect of murder. She threw the bloodied pipe out into the river, about twenty feet from shore. It sank immediately, never would it be recovered. Beechum's fat, frayed pigskin wallet Elsie hadn't glanced into, not wanting the bastard's money, the leather belt he'd been so proud of, like the oversized silver buckle was meant to be his cock, and his shoes, his size-twelve smelly brown fake-leather shoes, these items of Bud Beechum's she left on the riverbank for someone unknown to find.

"Like Hallowe'en," she said. "Trick or treat, in reverse."

8.

Yewville, NY. 1959–1960.

She was just so lonely, couldn't help herself. Missing him.

Crying till she was sick. Lost so much weight her clothes hung loose on her. Even her bras. And her eyes bruised, bloodshot.

At first, her husband was sympathetic. In his arms she lay stiff in the terror of a death she'd never somehow believed could happen. *Can't believe it. I can't believe he's gone. I wake up, and it's like it never happened.*

Couldn't help herself, she began dropping by the Eagle House though he wasn't there. Because, each time she entered, pushing through the rear door which was the door by which he'd entered, she told herself *It might not have happened yet.* She told herself maybe he was there, at the bar. Waiting.

The other men, his friends, were there. Most were older than Willie Kenelly had been. Yet they were there, they were living, still. Glancing around at her when she entered the barroom, the only woman. And Bud Beechum behind the bar, staring at her. Elsie Kenelly, Willie Kenelly's girl, who'd married the doctor.

God, they'd loved Willie Kenelly: Nobody like him.

Except: He'd left without saying goodbye.

Short of breath, sometimes. The heel of his big calloused hand against his chest. And that faraway look in his eyes. She'd asked her father what was wrong, and he hadn't heard her. She asked again, and he turned his gaze upon her, close up, those faded blue eyes, and laughed at her. *What's wrong with what? The world? Plenty.*

Except he'd given Elsie, one evening at the bar of the Eagle House, those worn ivory dice he liked to play with, he'd brought back from Okinawa. His Good Luck Dice he called them.

"Don't lose 'em, honey."

That had been a clear sign, hadn't it? That he was saying goodbye. But Elsie hadn't caught on.

No one would speak of how Willie Kenelly died. One of the

papers, not the Yewville paper, printed he'd "stepped or fallen" off the girder of a bridge being repaired upriver at Tintern Falls; there was water in his lungs, yet he'd died of "cardiac arrest." In any case Willie Kenelly's death was ruled "accidental." But Elsie knew better, her father wasn't a man to do anything by accident.

In the Eagle House that summer, she drank. Few women came alone into Yewville taverns, and never any woman who was a doctor's wife and lived in one of the handsome brick houses on Church Street. Yet Elsie was Willie Kenelly's daughter long before she'd become Dr. Donaldson's wife. She'd gone to Yewville High School, everyone knew her in the neighborhood. Bud Beechum leaned his high, hard belly against the edge of the bar, talking with her. Listening sympathetically. Beechum, greasy thinning dark hair worn like he was still in high school, sideburns like Presley's and something of Presley's sullen expression. And those eyes, deep-socketed, black and moist and intense. Elsie had always thought Bud Beechum was an attractive guy, in his way. By Yewville standards. She remembered him in his dress-up G.I. uniform. He'd been lean then. He'd had good posture then. He'd been fox-faced, sexy. They'd kissed, once. A long time ago in somebody's backyard. A beer party. A picnic. When?

Bud Beechum had liked her father. He'd "really admired" Willie Kenelly, he said. Elsie's father was a guy "totally lacking in bullshit," he said. Elsie's father had been in World War II, as it was called, and Beechum in the Korean War. They had that in common: a hatred of the army, of officers, of anybody telling them what to do. And Willie Kenelly hadn't had a son. When Beechum wiped at his eyes with his fist, Elsie felt her heart pierced.

It was hard for men to speak of loss. Of grief. Of what scared them. Better not to try, it always came out clumsy, crude.

But Elsie could tell Beechum, and her father's friends, that he'd been her best friend, not just her father. He'd loved her without wanting anything from her and without judging her. That had always been his way. Maybe she hadn't deserved it but it was so. She'd seen his body at the funeral director's, and she'd seen his coffin lowered into the ground, and she saw his death reflected in others' eyes as in the draining of color during a solar eclipse, yet still it wasn't real to her. So she found herself drifting to the places he'd gone, especially in the late afternoon as fall and winter came on, as the sun turned the western sky hazy, rust-red, reflected in somber ripples on the Yewville River. Never would Elsie drive to Tintern Falls, never would she cross over that bridge. Never again in her lifetime. And this time, the melancholy time, dusk: Never would she not think of him, waiting at the Eagle House for her. She should have been home with Mary Lynda, her daughter. She should have been preparing supper for her husband. She should

have been a wife and a mother, not a daughter any longer.

This was the dangerous time.

Possibly Dr. Donaldson wasn't so sympathetic with his wife's grief as people thought, when they were alone. Between him and the older man there'd been rivalry. Donaldson disapproved of Kenelly's business practices. Kenelly had owned a lumberyard in Yewville, but it hadn't been very prosperous. He gave customers credit and rarely collected. The tarpaper roofs of his sheds leaked, his lumber warped and rotted. When customers came to buy single planks, a handful of spikes, he'd say, airily, "Oh hell, just take 'em." His son-in-law Tim Donaldson was a very different kind of man and after Willie Kenelly's death Elsie began to hate him. Her husband! His teeth-brushing, his bathroom noises, his sighs, his chewing, his frowns, his querying of Mary Lynda: "Did you and Mommy go out in the car today? Did you go shopping? Where?" Tim Donaldson never spoke meanly. Always, Dr. Donaldson spoke pleasantly. As he did at his office with his nurse-assistant, and with his patients, the majority of whom were women. His sand-colored hair was trimmed neatly every two weeks and he was a dignified, intelligent man yet after Willie Kenelly's death his jealousy of the old man quickened. Worse, Kenelly had left several thousand dollars to Elsie and Mary Lynda, without so much as mentioning him in the will. And he'd married Elsie, who hadn't been a virgin! Who'd had a certain reputation in Yewville, as a girl. He'd thought the old man would be grateful to him for that, at least.

One night when he touched Elsie in their bedroom, she shrank from him with a look of undisguised dislike. She began crying, not in grief but in anger. *Leave me alone, you disgust me. I don't love you, I love him.*

Next day, in the dusk of an early autumn, Elsie dropped by the Eagle House for just a single drink. She would stay only a few minutes. But Bud Beechum was alone there, waiting. Seeing her face as she entered the barroom, her eyes snatching at the place where her father should have been. "Elsie! Hey." Beechum spoke almost gently. Elsie saw his eyes on her, she saw how he wanted her.

That first time, she'd been drunk. Beechum shut up the Eagle House early. Running his hands over her, greedy and excited and a little scared. Murmuring, "Oh baby, baby." Like he couldn't believe his good luck. Like he was fearful he'd explode, too soon. He led Elsie down into the cellar. A bare light bulb shone in her eyes, screwed into a ceiling fixture amid cobwebs. There was a smell here of stale beer, a stink of cigarettes. She was sexually aroused as she hadn't been in months. What a strange, dirty thing to do; what a wicked thing to do, instead of preparing supper for a hard-working, hungry husband and a sweet little daughter. Elsie and

Bud Beechum laughed like kids, and pulled at each other's clothing. This was high-school behavior, this was teen rock music, oh God how they'd been missing it, these years of being adults.

Somehow it hadn't taken with either of them, adulthood.

Next afternoon, repentant, disgusted with herself, Elsie returned to the Eagle House determined it would be only for a single beer, only so she'd feel less lonely, and she'd take the opportunity to explain to Bud Beechum why yesterday had been a mistake, a terrible mistake, and she hoped he wouldn't think poorly of her . . . but this time, too, somehow it happened that Bud Beechum led Elsie down the unsteady wooden steps into the cellar, to the filthy sofa she recognized as a castoff from her cousin Joanie's living room. "Bud, no. I can't, Bud. I . . ." Elsie heard her voice, plausible and alarmed, and yet there she was in Beechum's rough embrace, and closing her arms about him another time. *It's just I'm so lonely.*

So it happened that, when Elsie changed her mind about seeing Beechum again, Beechum laughed at her, and said, "Elsie. C'mon. I was there. I remember how it was." He knew and she knew, he'd felt her clutching at him, her helpless thrashing and yearning, he'd seen her tears; and so when she stayed away from the Eagle House naturally he began to telephone her at home, "Hey Elsie, c'mon. Don't play hard to get. This is me, Bud. *I know you.*" When she hung up the receiver he began to drive past the handsome brick house on Church Street. Elsie shouldn't have been surprised, she knew who Beechum was, yet somehow she couldn't believe it: what was happening, spinning out of her control. *I made a mistake, I guess. Oh Daddy.*

When she drove to the grocery store, with Mary Lynda, and she glanced up to see Beechum's car in her rearview mirror, she knew—she'd made a serious mistake.

One evening Elsie stopped her car at the Sunoco station. And Beechum stopped his. And they talked together at the edge of the pavement, Elsie brushing wind-whipped hair out of her eyes, Beechum hunching close in a zip-up jacket, bareheaded. Elsie was talking quickly now. There was a smile she had, a smile girls cultivated for such circumstances, desperate, not quite begging, and Elsie smiled this smile, and told Beechum she'd changed her mind about "seeing him," the mistake had been hers. "See? I'd been drinking. I was drunk." Beechum stared at Elsie, not hearing. She understood that the man was sexually aroused, even now. Her breathy words meant nothing to him, only his arousal had meaning, concentrated in his groin but suffused through his tense, quivering body. She saw it in his eyes, angry and triumphant. For the first time she realized that Bud Beechum, her cousin Joanie's tavern-owner husband, might be dangerous. Like Willie Kenelly, he'd

killed men in combat. He'd had the power to kill in his hands, and that power had been sweet. Hoping to placate him, to soften the expression on his flushed, sullen face, Elsie said, almost shyly, "Bud, I just feel wrong, doing this to Joanie. If—" "Screw 'Joanie,'" Beechum said savagely. "This has got nothing to do with 'Joanie.'" Beechum's lips twisted, pronouncing his wife's name. Elsie was shocked at the hatred in his voice. For Joanie? She tried to move away, but Beechum caught her by the arm. His fingers were powerful as hooks. "Your father told me some things, baby," Beechum said suggestively. His breath was warm and beery. "What things?" Elsie asked uneasily. "Things you wouldn't want known," Beechum said, smirking, as if Elsie and her deceased father were co-conspirators in some shame. Elsie asked, "About—what? What?" Beechum said, "How your old man felt about—things. Like, wanting to step in front of a train, or off a bridge. This time he told me—" Elsie lost control and slapped Beechum. The bastard's smug fat face! She was too upset even to scream and when Beechum tried to grab her she wrenched free of him, and ran back to her car. Driving away she trembled with rage, and panic at what was happening to her. *Maligning the dead! Beechum would pay.*

9.

Yewville, NY. July 12, 1959.

The call came late at night: two-twenty A.M. Naturally you'd think it was one of Dr. Donaldson's patients.

Through a haze of sleep, resentfully Elsie heard her husband's calm condescending voice. He loved such late-night calls, obviously; if he didn't, he could leave the damned phone off the hook. (The Donaldsons were sleeping, at this time, in the same bed, of course. Technically, at that time, in the summer of 1959, they were still man-and-wife, with all that applies of marital intimacy and obligation.) Then Donaldson's voice sharpened in surprise. "When? *How?*" Elsie was fully awake in an instant. This was something personal, urgent. And yet there was a thrill to her husband's voice, a quavering she knew meant triumph of a kind, vindication. And when Donaldson put the palm of his hand over the receiver, and said gently, as if he were speaking not to his wife but to his nine-year-old daughter, "Elsie, I'm afraid there's bad news. Your father—in Tintern Falls—" Already Elsie was out of bed, and backing away from him, clumsy as a frightened cow in her aqua nylon nightgown with the lacy straps and bodice, shaking her head. *I already knew. Nothing could hurt me, after this.*

10.

Yewville, NY. March 29, 1957.

This call, Elsie had been expecting.

"Honey? Your mother has—" (there was a moment's pause, delicate as her father's fingers touching her wrist in that way he had, as if to steady her, or caution her, or simply to alert her that something crucial was being communicated) "—passed away."

Elsie surprised herself, beginning to cry. The tears, the childish sobs, burst from her.

Elsie's father disliked women crying, on principle. But he didn't interrupt Elsie. He let her cry for a while, then told her he was at the hospital if she wanted to come by.

Elsie tasted panic. No, no! She didn't want to see her mother's dead, wasted body, her skin the color of yellowed ivory, any more than she'd wanted to see her mother while the woman was alive, and disapproving of her. "Daddy, I can't. I just can't. I'll come by the house, later."

"Suit yourself, Elsie." Her father laughed, she could imagine him rubbing at his nose, a brisk upward gesture with his right forefinger that signaled the end of a conversation he felt had gone on long enough.

11.

Yewville, NY. 1946–1957.

Elsie and her mother hadn't gotten along. It happened in Yewville sometimes, a girl and her mother, living too close, recoiled from each other, hurt and unforgiving.

Elsie's mother hadn't approved of her. Even her marriage to Dr. Donaldson's son Timothy (as Tim was known at that time in Yewville). Mrs. Kenelly had been furious and disgusted with her youngest daughter since she'd caught Elsie, aged seventeen, with her boyfriend Duane Cadmon, in Elsie's attic bedroom, the two of them squirming partly undressed in each other's arms, French-kissing on Elsie's rumpled bed beneath the eaves. Never would Mrs. Kenelly forgive her for such behavior: being cheap, "easy," soiling her reputation, bringing "disgrace" into the Kenelly household. Elsie, who'd had reason to think her mother would be gone from the house for hours, lay pretzel-sprawled in Duane's grip, in a thrumming erotic haze like drowning, and her eyes sprang open in horror to see, past Duane's flushed face, her pinch-faced mother staring at her with ice-pick eyes. In that instant, Mrs. Kenelly slammed the door, hard enough to make Duane wince. Later, they would have it out. Mrs. Kenelly and Elsie. (Where was Willie Kenelly at such times? Nowhere near. Keeping his distance. He never intervened in such female matters.) Elsie's mother spoke bitterly and sarcastically to her, or refused to speak to her at all, even to look at her, as if the sight of Elsie disgusted her; Elsie slammed around the house, sullen, trembling with rage. "How'd anybody get born, Momma, for Christ's sake," Elsie said, her voice

rising dangerously so the neighbors might hear, "you act like people don't do things like Duane and I were doing, well God *damn,* Momma, here's news for you: People *do.*"

You didn't talk to your mother like this in Yewville in those days. If you did, you were trailer trash. But here was Elsie Kenelly screaming at her mother. And Mrs. Kenelly screaming back calling Elsie "tramp," "slut," telling her "no decent boy" would respect her, or marry her.

Elsie brooded for weeks, months. Years.

Even after Elsie was married to Tim Donaldson, who'd gone away to medical school in Albany, and was eight years older than Elsie; even after she'd married, not just some high school boyfriend, or a guy from the neighborhood, but a "family physician" with a good income who brought her to live with him on Church Street, still Mrs. Kenelly withheld her approval, as she withheld her love. For that was a mother's sole power: to withhold love. And Elsie recoiled with yet more resentment.

Goddamn, Momma! I married a man of a higher class than you did so maybe you're jealous. My husband's a doctor not a lumberyard owner, see?

She didn't love Timothy Donaldson. But she took pride in being Dr. Donaldson's wife.

After Mary Lynda was born, and Elsie's mother had a beautiful baby granddaughter she wished to see, and to hold, and to fuss over, then Elsie realized her power: to exclude her mother from as much of her life as she could. (Of course, Elsie's father was always welcome in the Church Street house. Invited to "drop by" after work. Anytime!) Though in public when it couldn't be avoided, Elsie and her mother hugged stiffly, and managed to kiss each other's cheek. In Mrs. Kenelly's presence Elsie was lightheaded, giddy. She laughed loudly. She drank too much. *Momma I hate you. Momma why don't you die.*

12.

Wolf's Head Lake, NY. Summer 1946.

Those evenings at the lake. Where Yewville families went for picnics in the summer. Some of the men fished but not Willie Kenelly who thought fishing was boring—"Almost as bad as the army. Almost as bad as life." He laughed his deep belly laugh that made anybody who listened laugh with him.

Elsie was proud of her dad who'd returned home from the War with burn scars and medals to show for his bravery though he dismissed it all as bullshit and rarely spoke of it with anyone except other veterans. And at such times the men spoke in a way that excluded others. They were profane, obscene. They shouted with laughter. Summer nights, they liked most just to sit drinking beer

and ale on the deck of the Lakeside Tavern. Often they played cards (poker, euchre) or craps. These could get to be rowdy, raucous times. The sun set late in summer and so, toward dusk, when the sky was bleeding out into night, red-streaked, bruised-looking clouds, serrated and rough-seeming as a cat's tongue, and the surface of the lake had grown calm except for erratic, nervelike shivers and an occasional leap of a fish, the men would have been drinking for hours, ignoring their wives' pleas to come eat supper. "Daddy, can I?" There was Elsie Kenelly on the deck at her father's elbow teasing him for sips of ale from his glass, or a puff of his cigarette, or asking could she play his hand at cards, just once. Could she take his turn at craps, just once. Elsie in her new white two-piece swimsuit with the halter top, ponytailed dark-blond hair and long tanned legs, nails painted frost-pink to match her lipstick: Elsie was sixteen that summer, and very pretty lounging boldly on the deck against the railing by the men's table, liking the attention her dad gave her, and the other men, which meant more to her than the attention she got from boys her own age. Elsie regarded her good-looking father with pride: how muscled his bare shoulders and his bare, heavy torso, covered in a pelt of hairs, mysteriously tattooed and scarred. She was his girl for life. She blushed and squealed with laughter if he teased her. She bit her lip and came close to crying if he spoke harshly to her. Always it was a risk, hanging by her father, you couldn't predict when Willie Kenelly might speak sarcastically, or suddenly lose patience. He'd come back from the War with an air of speechless rage like a permanent twitch or tic somewhere in his body you couldn't detect, though you knew it was there. You felt it, if you touched him. Yet you had to touch him.

"Sure, honey: Toss 'em."

Willie Kenelly spoke negligently, handing his daughter the ivory dice, as if fate were nothing more than the crudest, meanest chance requiring no human skill. Always she would remember those ivory dice! As the men's eyes move onto her young eager body in the white swimsuit, taking in her snub-nosed profile, the graceful fall of her ponytail partway down her back, Elsie is laughing self-consciously, her heart swelling with happiness, and the excitement of the moment as the dice are released from her hand to tumble, roll, come to rest on the sticky tabletop and there's that anxious moment before you dare look to see what, as your Dad says, the dice have to tell you. ●

Art by Mark Evan Walker

If the Glove Fits

by Michael Z. Lewin

I tried to get out of it. I did. For instance, I said, "Look, there's no way—not under any circumstances—I would vote to send someone to the gas chamber. You could show me a video of a guy taking an axe to a dozen five-year-old nuns and then he feeds the bits into a wood-chipper, and I still couldn't put up my hand to put him down."

Something of an exaggeration, but being a juror was *not* what I wanted at that point in time and when you have a clear objective, you take whatever steps you have to, right? "It's a matter of principle," I told the selection clerk. "I just couldn't do it. Sorry." I spread my hands, doing my best to make it look like it was out of my control.

"They ain't asking for the death penalty on this one," the clerk said, "so you'll be okay."

"But it's a first-degree murder trial."

"That don't mean that they gotta ask for the chamber, and they ain't doing it." He looked at his clipboard. "And you'll get a choice of second-degree or manslaughter-one on this one, too."

"Look," I began again.

"Look yourself, pal. You already put your civic duty off twice with the deferrals, right?"

"Yes, but that's not—"

"Two is all you get. You run out on it this time and they'll prosecute you—jail cell, mug shot, fingerprints, DNA, the whole shooting match. Is that what you want?"

"Well, no."

"Unless you got a baby on the tit, which I don't see, or mental derangement *with* a doctor's note, you're in there today."

I shook my head in disbelief.

"Your only chance—and don't tell 'em I said so—your only chance is to go into the selection room and give the defendant a big 'Hiya Jack, long time no see!'"

Michael Z. Lewin's work travels well. An American living and writing in the U.K., Mr. Lewin has always enjoyed strong sales in England, but recently he's also developed a following in Japan. Japanese TV is currently dramatizing the 1988 Lewin novel *And Baby Will Fall* (William Morrow/U.S.), and the author has sold several stories and novels to Japanese publishers. Mr. Lewin's new story for us is as American as apple pie.

"It's Charles, isn't it?" I said. "I have read about the case in the papers. Charles Allen Hall, something like that? Not that I've ever met the man." Which was true, I hadn't.

"Hey, there's been so much publicity on this one, just saying you read about it ain't going to be enough to get you sent home, in my opinion," the clerk said. "But you can try the 'I read about it in the papers' route if you want, pal."

When it was my turn to be questioned by the district attorney, I told him about reading the papers about the case.

He looked me in the eye and put his hand on his hip. "This is the kind of case and the kind of community where it would be hard not to have prior information, Mr. Albertson. The question is, have you in any way come to judgment about the guilt or innocence of the defendant, based on your reading?"

"On my reading?"

"Or any other media source, of course."

"A judgment about the guilt or innocence? No," I said. Which was nothing more than the truth.

And then the D.A. sat down and said, "No objections to this juror, Your Honor." I never got another chance to talk my way out. I shouldn't have been surprised, I guess. Word is that prosecutors like thirty-something white guys who wear ties.

The defense guy didn't bother getting up from his chair. "Mr. Albertson, do you know what circumstantial evidence is?"

"Well, I think so. It's when what you see—or hear, or whatever—implies what happened instead of being a fingerprint, or somebody who saw you do it, or it was your blood or whatever."

"Mmmm," he said in a way that sounded like he was impressed with my answer. He looked at the papers on the table in front of him. "And you're a . . . What is it you do for a living, Mr. Albertson?"

"I'm a photographer."

"What do you photograph?"

"I photograph children. In a mall. I'm one of *those* guys." It crossed my mind to add that a photograph was an example of evidence that wasn't circumstantial. But I hesitated because one of life's lessons is "Don't answer what you're not asked." Although another is "He who hesitates is lost."

"And do you like your work?"

But the district attorney butted in before I could answer.

"Your Honor, I think my esteemed colleague is going on a wild-goose chase here."

The judge, a woman, good looker for her age, said, "What is your point here, Mr. Mockton?"

Mockton, the defense guy, said, "I'm trying to establish Mr. Albertson's attitude to circumstantial evidence, Your Honor."

"By asking him if he likes his work?" she said, and the tone was pure put-down.

But I thought I saw what Mockton had been getting at. If I like pictures, then maybe I don't trust circumstantial evidence.

From what I'd read, the prosecution case against this Charles Allen Hall was *all* circumstantial, which was hardly surprising, especially considering that Westgate & Davies didn't even have closed-circuit TV—what a cheap company!—which meant there was no video of Nat Byrd being bashed to death. And there were no witnesses either, at least none I'd read about.

I was formulating what I would say about whether I liked my work when Mockton surprised me by changing the question. He asked, "Do you have previous acquaintance with the defendant, Charles Allen Hall? Or the deceased, Nathaniel Byrd?"

The D.A. jumped to his feet to interrupt. "I object to my esteemed colleague referring to Nathaniel Byrd merely as 'the deceased,' Your Honor. By any accounting of the facts in this case, Mr. Byrd is unquestionably the *victim* here."

"Save it for the trial, Mr. Valentine," the judge said, and her tone was sharp—whew! She was cute, but I'd hate to pass her strawberry jam for her breakfast toast if what she asked for was raspberry.

"Yes, Your Honor," Valentine said, and he sat down.

Mockton for the defense said, "To repeat my question, Mr.

Albertson, do you have previous personal acquaintance with the defendant, Charles Allen Hall? Or the late Nathaniel Byrd? Or with anyone else related to this case, insofar as you know, through your reading or any other source?"

Well, I wasn't going to answer yes to that, was I? "No."

"The defense has no objection to this juror, either," Mockton said then.

How do I let myself get pinned into situations where there's no reasonable way out? Man! Story of my life.

However, by the time they'd picked the rest of the jury and we were all sworn in, I'd come to terms with the fact that I was going to have to serve on this jury and do my level best to see justice done. We have a great country and the jury system is at the heart of it, despite all the rigamarole. As I said to Juror 6—I was Juror 5—when we were having lunch before the tipoff, "It all sounded kind of like a wedding, didn't it?"

"How do you mean?" she said. Nice-looking girl. Year or two older than me, maybe.

"When the judge said, 'Do any of you know of any reason why you would not be able to come to a fair and just judgment in this trial based solely on the evidence presented?'"

"You've got that down pat," 6 said with a smile, and it was really nice. It transformed her face into a friend's. "Are you a lawyer or something?"

"No, a photographer."

"Oh right, I remember. Kids, in a mall."

"And I do like it," I said, smiling back. "Even though I never got a chance to say so."

"You got kids of your own?" she asked, which I took to be asking if I was single.

"Me? No. I'd never do that without getting married. You?"

She shook her head. "No way. At least not without Mr. Right there to change some diapers. And when I look out the window I don't see anybody who even resembles Mr. Right."

"Have you checked the door?"

"The . . . ? Oh, I get it," 6 said. "Windows, doors."

"It's just that I always think—it's like one of life's lessons—if you're not finding what you want in one place, then maybe you should try looking someplace else."

She raised her eyebrows, like she was saying, *And does that mean I ought to be looking in the jury box?* What she said out loud was, "So tell me, how did you mean it was like a wedding?"

"Like when the priest or whatever says, 'Is there anyone here who—'"

"Oh, I get it. 'Is there anyone with a just cause or impediment . . .'

Yeah, I see what you mean now." The smile again.

I've always been a sucker for a nice smile. That's one of the first things that attracted me to my Annie.

In the afternoon, the facts of the case were laid out straightforwardly, if a touch ponderously, by the D.A., Mr. Valentine, in his opening statement.

The *victim,* Nathaniel Byrd, was the night watchman at a building that included the offices of Westgate & Davies, an accountancy practice with nine employees. Or rather, ten employees, until the day of the murder or, possibly, manslaughter.

Charles Allen Hall had been fired by Dan Westgate on the afternoon of the killing, for a series of increasingly serious errors, and because he'd failed to pull himself together after repeated warnings. When told of his dismissal he had banged his fist on Westgate's desk. He'd told him he would regret what he was doing. He had kicked the water cooler. And he had smashed a potted plant by hurling it to the floor.

We would undoubtedly be told by the defense, Valentine said, that Hall had been under what would be called "stress" because of problems at home. But surely no domestic upset could justify or excuse what he had done that night, beginning with a return to the offices of Westgate & Davies in order to "wreak havoc."

But, Valentine said, while Hall was trashing the very office area he'd worked in, the true *victim* of these events—night watchman Nathaniel Byrd—had interrupted him. With a fury augmented by alcohol, Charles Allen Hall had bludgeoned the unfortunate Byrd to death with a blunt instrument as yet to be recovered.

We, the jury, would be shown police photographs of the *victim* and his horrifying injuries. We would hear evidence that the *victim's* blood was on many items belonging to Charles Allen Hall, including a heavy stapler. We would also hear how the defendant had at first provided no alibi when questioned by police, and how he had then offered an alibi that was in many ways demonstrably unsatisfactory. We would also hear from police witnesses that there were no signs of forced entry to Westgate & Davies, a telling detail because it strongly implied the use of a key to enter not only the building but the specific offices of Westgate & Davies, keys which the defendant still had in his possession when he was arrested. And further, we would be shown that the defendant had a documented history of violence.

At that point the defense guy, Mockton, objected and we were sent out to the deliberation room while the lawyers talked their problems over with the judge.

When we were settled at the big table, I said to 6, "I think if that Valentine guy says the word 'victim' in that pious way one more

time I'm going to puke."

But it was an old guy across the table—Juror 11, I think, another suit and tie, like me, but sixty, easy—who said, "We're not supposed to talk about the case."

"I wasn't talking about the case," I said. "I was talking about puking."

6 laughed, but a couple of old biddies next to 11—the same generation as him and they looked like they'd have brought their knitting if it was allowed—one of them clucked, and the other tsked and said I should show more respect.

Well, I wasn't going to be put on the defensive. I said to 11 and the biddies, "If I was to say that maybe the prosecutor was making a big emotional deal about the victim because he knew his case was weak, then *that* would be something I shouldn't do. But if I say I am having waves of nausea, then that's about me and not about the case, so it's okay."

As I was talking I saw that everyone at the table was looking at me, except for a young black guy who never seemed to look at anybody or make a sound. So I looked up and down the table. "I hope you all have that straight now." Which I thought was making pretty good use of the opportunity. Nobody said anything back at me, and then we got called back into the courtroom.

Once there, the judge said that the reason we had been sent out was so that she and the lawyers could discuss Mr. Valentine's assertion that the defendant had a history of violence. The reason Mr. Mockton had objected, she said, was that he feared Mr. Valentine would try to leave an impression in our minds that the defendant was violent without offering any evidence to back the assertion up. And to do that was wrong. If Mr. Valentine brought an alleged history up, it would be up to him to prove it, and Mr. Mockton promised that he would dispute vigorously that there was any such history. Meanwhile, she was instructing us all to ignore entirely Mr. Valentine's misplaced reference. So I made a note on my pad to do just that.

Then Valentine began again. Almost at once he said *victim* in that special way, and I nearly laughed, and I knew I couldn't look at 6 or any of the other jurors, so instead I concentrated on Charles Allen Hall's face.

The guy had hardly moved during the whole thing so far. He sat there, staring at the table in front of him, only there were no papers or anything there. He looked pale, though for all I knew that was the way he usually looked, because I'd never seen the guy before that day except for pictures in the papers. But to tell the truth, he didn't look like a violent man to me. I wrote a note on my pad saying, "Look at Hall. He looks more shocked than guilty—the way I'd look if I was being tried for something I didn't do. What do

you think?" and I pushed it in front of 6. But then I saw that the court official who had led us in and out of the deliberation room was frowning our way. 6 saw it, too, and she put her hand on top of my pad and didn't look down.

When Mockton got up to talk about the defense case, the main thing he said was that Charles Allen Hall had not killed Nathaniel Byrd and nobody could prove that he did.

It was true that Hall had been fired that afternoon. And, also true, he was upset about it. He had worked for Westgate & Davies for more than four years, most of that time without complaint. But in this last half-year he'd had a terrible run of bad luck. First his mother had died, and then his wife had left him, and he had also endured a number of other difficulties in his private life of which we would hear more later. Ideally, Mockton said, he would have been able to separate his domestic life from his professional life, but Charles Allen Hall was not the first—and would not be the last—who couldn't keep the different parts of his life comfortably compartmentalized.

However, on the night he was fired Hall had not, repeat *not,* returned to the offices of Westgate & Davies. And he had most certainly *not* been involved in any way whatever with the killing. Charlie Hall commiserated, deeply, with Nathaniel Byrd's widow and with all his other grieving relatives. But what had happened was, simply, nothing to do with him.

When Charlie Hall left Westgate & Davies that afternoon, he had gone to a bar. Not an ideal response to his misfortune, but an understandable one. Then—reprehensibly, one admits—he had driven around the town despite his inebriated state. His route was an aimless one and covered a long period of time, and neither Charlie Hall nor the police could reconstruct it. But one thing Hall did remember was that late in the night he had parked on a bridge, and he had contemplated jumping off and drowning himself.

But, however unconstructive his drinking, aimless driving, and suicidal thoughts might have been, however much they reflected the accumulation of problems in his life and, perhaps, his own contribution to them, Charles Allen Hall had *not* returned to the office, he had *not* killed Nathaniel Byrd or anyone else—not even himself. And he must certainly *not* be convicted.

It was *not* the job of the defense, Mockton said, to prove who had killed Nathaniel Byrd. And it was *not* the job of the defense to prove that Charlie Hall was innocent, although by the end we might well decide the defense had done that anyway.

The only job the defense needed to do was to underline the weakness of the so-called evidence—all of it circumstantial—that the prosecution would parade before the court.

Was there a witness to the killing? There was not. Was there a murder weapon for us to see that could be tied to Charlie Hall? There was not. Was there even a witness to place the defendant's car outside Westgate & Davies at the critical time? There was not. Indeed, was there any single piece of direct evidence to link Charles Allen Hall with the crime? There was *not*.

About that time, 6 pushed a slip of paper to me. "Is he going to tie himself in 'nots'?" But I didn't think it was very funny. In my opinion Mockton was doing pretty well. Even so, I smiled at 6 and she smiled back—that lovely smile—and it felt like we were in school and passing notes and would maybe go to the prom.

When I turned my attention back to Mockton, he was saying that the only reason he could see as to why the D.A. was pursuing this prosecution at all was that it was an election year and Mr. Valentine wanted to keep his name on the front pages.

Not surprisingly, Valentine got all heated at that point. For a moment I thought they'd be sending us to the deliberation room again, and I was trying to work out how best to use that time—cement things with 6, or apologize to 11 and the biddies, or introduce myself to some of the others.

But we never retired again. Mr. Mockton withdrew his remark about a political motivation to the case, the judge told us to forget it, and the trial moved on.

Mr. Valentine started his apolitical prosecution with a parade of policemen. The first, the guy in charge of the investigation, Proctor, went through uncontroversial details like how the police had been called to the scene at Westgate & Davies early in the morning and what they'd found there, like the battered body and the wrecked office. "But not," Valentine stressed, "signs of a forced entry?" What he was getting at was it looked like the perpetrator had entered with a key, and even though it sounded like speculation to me, Mockton didn't object.

Valentine gave Proctor a rest and called a forensic guy who said how the physical damage done to both Byrd and the office was consistent with the use of a baseball bat.

And there was other stuff but, frankly, my mind wandered. Mostly I was thinking of Annie and of how happy we would be once this was over and I got off the bad luck of being on jury duty and we could be together and get on with our lives. I also replayed some of our happier times past, with full X-rated imagery.

It's not that I didn't pay any attention to the case at all, but what was being covered was not what was at issue. After the last cop—a woman policeman, and not pretty at all, though some are—it was the dead man's boss, and he talked about what a reliable employee Nathaniel Byrd had been and what his duties at West-

gate & Davies were. All pretty standard stuff.

But then Valentine surprised me, because he put Byrd's widow on the stand. I mean, the guy was dead, right? And he was killed at work. So what the *hell* does the widow have to do with it? Why drag her in?

About the time she was saying she was Bernice Joanne Regina Byrd—a mouthful for anyone, even someone without as beautiful a mouth as hers—6 tapped my elbow and slipped me a note which said, "Are you all right?"

I frowned, and crossed her question out, and wrote, "Sure," and if we'd been talking I would have asked her why she asked, but I left it at that and turned back to the widow.

She was a sad sight in the black dress, but gorgeous at the same time, with her sleek brown hair and smooth, pink skin. I would have bet my last dollar that every man in the courtroom was thinking the kind of X-rated stuff I had been thinking about before—at least every man who was a man, if you know what I mean. But I was trying to work out why Valentine had called her.

What he asked was about her husband, and his medical history, because Nathaniel Byrd wasn't always a night watchman. When they met—before he came down with the manic-depression—he was one of those number-crunching guys who seem to be inheriting the earth. But then when he did get his manic-depression, he turned out to be one of the few who the L-dopa doesn't work all the way for. The medication fixed the uppy-downy part, but it left him so he couldn't do the numbers like he used to. He had good insurance from the company he'd been crunching for, but life for him and his wife was nothing like what it used to be. And eventually Byrd did the night-watchman work to supplement their income, as well as to make him feel that he was bread-winning.

I finally realized what Valentine was up to when he said, "So despite all these problems at home, Mrs. Byrd, your husband performed his job reliably?"

And she nodded and said, "Very reliably. It was a matter of great pride to him."

What Valentine was doing, apart from underlining the *Byrd-the-victim* thing again, was making the point that Charles Allen Hall wasn't the only guy in the world with problems in his domestic life.

When it was Mockton's turn I saw—at least it seemed to me that I saw—that he thought about asking her all kinds of questions, like was the marriage happy and how did you cope when he wasn't the guy you married. But that might have strengthened Valentine's point, so instead what Mockton said was, "Mrs. Byrd, please accept sincere condolences for your loss from those of us on this side of the courtroom."

"Thank you," she said. It was only quiet, but it was dignified, which we all heard.

Then Mockton said, "No questions for this witness, Your Honor."

After that, Valentine really got to work on his case. He had Westgate of Westgate & Davies testify about Hall's reaction to being fired. There was a lot of stuff about how Hall had shouted and banged the desk. "And did he threaten you?" Valentine asked.

"Yes," Westgate said. "He said I was going to regret what I was doing."

"Were you frightened by this?"

"Yes," Westgate said. "This was a guy who was seriously out of control."

"Objection, Your Honor," Mockton said, and the judge went a few rounds with both the lawyers.

Me, the impression it left about Hall was that he didn't like being fired. So?

Valentine also had Westgate say that the bulk of destruction in the office had been to Hall's desk, Hall's computer, and to a filing cabinet which contained the files of clients Hall had worked for. And Westgate said that the only way into the office was with a key.

In his turn, Mockton asked if any other employee's records had been damaged, and Westgate said yes. How many other employees' papers were affected? To which Westgate could only say that it was several. And while it was still clear that most of the damage was to Hall's stuff, the impression after Mockton got through was a lot different from the one Valentine left. Mockton also asked how many keys to the office there were, and Westgate said every employee had keys so he—or she—could come in to work nights and weekends.

Then Proctor, the policeman in charge of the investigation, was called back, and he said that it was the Hall-centered focus of the destruction that had made them think of questioning Hall in the first place, especially when they heard he'd been fired that day.

Proctor said that when they got to Hall's apartment he was asleep, dirty, and unshaved. They asked him about his movements the previous night but he'd claimed not to remember anything, only after a while he'd come up with the went-to-a-bar, drove-around, stopped-on-a-bridge story.

As well, in Hall's apartment they'd found a metal softball bat that fit the injuries to Byrd and which also fit a lot of the dents in equipment around the office. Moreover, Proctor said, the forensic people had found Nat Byrd's blood on several items in the office belonging to Hall, and they'd found hairs and flecks of skin belonging to Hall on the dead man's clothing. Valentine said he'd be calling the forensic people back to confirm that.

When it was Mockton's turn he asked Proctor if the search of Hall's apartment, or car, or garage, had turned up any blood-stained clothing. Proctor agreed that it hadn't.

"But there would have been a lot of blood spattered from Mr. Byrd's wounds, wouldn't there?"

"Yes," Proctor said.

"Some of which *must* have gotten on the killer and his weapon."

"In all likelihood, yes."

"So Hall would have had either to dispose of all the clothes he wore, or clean them extremely thoroughly, if he was to leave no trace of the blood on them?"

"Yes."

"But isn't the dirty, disorganized state you found Hall in more consistent with the actions of a man who came home and just fell into bed? Isn't it inconsistent with the actions of a man who had to either throw away every scrap of the clothing he was wearing—including his shoes—or wash them thoroughly?"

Proctor said, "He might have thrown away his clothing and changed into dirty clothes. That could explain it, too."

"And what about the bat you found? Did it have traces of blood on it?"

"Well, no. But a metal bat is a lot easier to clean than clothes."

"So you're suggesting that Mr. Hall threw away his clothes, including his shoes and probably his underwear in case a stain had come through. But he kept his bat, and cleaned it thoroughly. Then he changed into dirty clothes, and went into a deep sleep. Is that what you're suggesting?"

"I'm not suggesting anything," Proctor said. "That's for you lawyer guys. But it could have happened that way. Or it could be that Hall used another bat entirely and dumped it with the clothes. The fact that he had one bat makes it more likely that he had two."

"Thank you, Mr. Proctor. No more questions about bats or clothes just now." And it was obvious that Mockton had scored good points.

"Instead," he said, "let's turn to the blood, hairs, and flecks of skin . . ." and he went on to say that blood spattered on things belonging to other people, too, and that hairs and skin cells are only to be expected where a guy has worked for more than four years and that they could easily have gotten on Byrd that way.

The cop agreed it was possible, but it felt to me like Mockton did less well with this one.

Then Mockton asked Proctor if he himself had ever gotten drunk, or known anyone who had, and wasn't Hall's condition and response when the police found him entirely consistent with someone who'd drunk himself stupid and had a very bad hangover.

Eventually Proctor said it was.

"Finally," Mockton said, "after the decision was made to interview my client, did you actively consider looking for any other possible perpetrator of this crime?"

Proctor squirmed a bit on this one, I thought, and said, "We followed up on every bit of evidence we found. There just wasn't any that pointed in another direction."

"No other key-holders of Westgate and Davies who owned one or more bats?"

"I . . . don't know," Proctor said.

"No other key-holders without an airtight alibi?"

"I couldn't swear to that, either."

"So is the fact of the matter that there was no evidence pointing at anyone else, or that you and your team didn't bother to look for it?"

But he didn't make the cop answer that question, he just sat down. And I thought that was pretty smart and was relieved, because if he'd followed through on the whole thing he'd have had to say something like "Did you explore who might have benefited from Byrd's death?" and that would have led to questions about whether the widow would get any life insurance, which the jury probably would have found pretty insensitive and tasteless after having seen her and her grief for themselves. No, I thought that Mockton dealt with the police evidence pretty well on the first day.

I said as much to 6 that night at dinner, but before she could give an opinion, there was loud tut-tutting from the biddies across the table, and then the court official who was with us stuck his nose in and said, "Mr. Albertson, you must not talk about the case with anyone, including other jurors."

"Sorry," I said, "but I thought that meant we shouldn't talk about whether he's guilty or not. I didn't think getting the facts clear about what we heard today counted."

"Well, it does," the court official said. "It all counts. You're not to talk about the case at all."

"How about to give the lawyers points for style? Because that Valentine's voice really gets up my nose."

There was a lot of reaction at the table to that but I said, "Hey, hey, I hang on every word Valentine says. It was just my little joke. I'm funny that way."

"As in 'not'?"

The voice came from down the table, and everybody noticed, because it was the first thing the young black guy had said the whole day. He had a strong, rich voice and the way everybody turned to him made me wonder if he was going to be a player after all.

But the court official took the edge off it all by saying, "And may I take this chance to remind everyone that because you are not to watch any news coverage of the trial, the television sets in your rooms have been removed. There is, however, a jury lounge, and you may watch television there until ten o'clock."

"Boring," I said. "Who's for the bar?" I turned to 6 and she flashed me one of those smiles.

But the court guy said, "Sorry. There's a TV in the bar so it's off limits."

"Well," I said, "what say we all just vote the guy 'not guilty' now, so we can go home and catch *ER?*" I only gave it a moment before I said, "Hey, hey, joke, joke."

But there was no joke when 6 slipped me a napkin with her room number on it. When I saw what it was and glanced at her, she gave me a little nod.

Which put me in something of a quandary. I was not *looking* to cheat on Annie. Sure, I do notice women and maybe I flirt a little bit, but it's not serious. I'm not one of these guys for whom commitment is like garlic to a vampire. I don't think you can get much more committed than I am to my little Annie.

But on the other hand, when a woman, like 6 in this case, misunderstands your intentions, I know enough of the world to be careful how I respond. One of the lessons of life is that a carelessly spurned woman can be a loose cannon.

So in the end the way I worked it out was, if I was to say to 6, "Sorry, but I've got a steady girlfriend," that would be fine in itself, no problem. But what she would do is say, "So let's be friends. Tell me about her," which I did not want to get into.

I could have lied and made up stories or a different girlfriend, of course, but to tell the truth I've gotten into trouble before telling lies and I don't like to do it unless I really have to, which I have learned the hard way. So how I saw it, I really didn't have much choice—unless I was going to tell her I was a fairy, which didn't appeal to me, either.

What I did was go to the TV room after dinner. All the jury was there except 6 and the young black guy, and I made a point of saying nothing at all, just to prove to them I wasn't one of these gotta-be-the-center-of-attention types. I stuck it out through a couple of sitcoms, but about nine I left and what I did was go to 6's room.

She pretended to be surprised to see me. She *said* she only gave me the room number so I could call her on the hotel phone. "But you're here now, so come in."

For a while we did talk about the case. She agreed Mockton had done pretty well today, but that Valentine had his moments, too.

Then she asked me again if anything had been wrong with me when Byrd's widow was on the stand.

"Only that I could see all the guys ogling her when they *ought* to be ogling you," I said.

"Men talk such shit," she said, but she smiled that smile, and it served to get us onto more personal matters. I didn't know if the court guy would have approved, but I didn't have *his* room number so I couldn't call and ask him.

Valentine began the next day with the forensic guy, who repeated what Proctor the cop had said the day before about dents fitting the bat and how there was Byrd's blood on a lot of Hall's stuff and how there was hair and skin, only the forensic guy took longer about it. He also took longer to concede Mockton's hair-in-the-air point. But maybe it just felt longer because I was so tired.

Then Valentine brought Proctor back and they went through what Charles Allen Hall had said when he was questioned. And I had to concede it was true the story didn't make Hall look very good.

To begin with, he hadn't been cooperative—but hey, who is when they're innocent *and* hungover? Then Hall said that after he got fired he guessed he went to the West End Bar and got drunk. But when the cops came back saying nobody at the West End remembered him, Hall said he remembered now, he'd thought about going to the West End but instead he went to a package store and bought a bottle of Scotch and he drove around and around in his car drinking it.

"Where did you go on this drive?" he'd been asked.

"I don't remember exactly, except I stopped and got gas, and then I stopped and bought another bottle—and some nuts, I remember peanuts in there somewhere—and then I drove around some more until I ended up on the Marianne Bridge and I sat there drinking and I was thinking about throwing myself off it. But while I was thinking that, the sun came up—that made me think different. It made me think, 'Maybe I can get through this,' so I chucked the empty bottles over the railings and went home again and I went to sleep and that's where I was when you guys showed up." The way Proctor read it from the transcript of the interview tape made Hall sound pretty unreliable. I wonder if they teach them how to do that at the police academy.

It also did not help Hall when Proctor went through how the police had not found any bar or liquor store in town which could confirm anyone buying Scotch whiskey at the times Hall gave, nor could they find a gas station where anybody remembered him.

"How hard did they look?" I asked 6 in a note. But I agreed that it sounded bad, and even worse when Proctor said that when the

police looked at Hall's car it was nearly out of gas.

When Mockton questioned Proctor about this phase of his testimony, he asked, "Did you, in the course of your investigation, look for any witness to place either Mr. Hall or his car at the scene of the crime that night?"

Proctor said they did look, but hadn't found anyone.

"And may I assume," Mockton said, "that because Mr. Hall was your only suspect, and because you knew that your evidence against him was weak, that your team tried very, very hard to find such a witness?"

Valentine didn't like that question, and eventually Mockton had to change it, but the gist was that the cops had tried to find a witness to put Hall at the scene but couldn't. "You must remember," Proctor said, "that the crime took place at three A.M. and that witnesses are always thin on the ground at that time of night."

Mockton got the judge to remind the cop to answer only the questions he was asked, but Proctor had made his point, and I saw Valentine smile.

And the truth of the matter is that there wasn't a whole lot more of the trial after that. Mockton didn't contest the gas station, bar, or liquor store evidence—so the cops hadn't found anyone, so what? And Valentine didn't have any more case to make. So he said, "We have no need to call any more witnesses, Your Honor. The Prosecution rests."

So it was Mockton's turn, and the first thing he did was to move that the case be dismissed for lack of evidence. I thought that was pretty smart, because it helped underline his point that there wasn't much evidence against Hall.

The judge wasn't playing, however. She said, "Let's let the jury decide on that point, Mr. Mockton. Proceed, please."

What he did first was to call the secretary from Westgate & Davies, and he asked her what Charles Allen Hall was wearing the day he was fired.

His point was that if he was still wearing the same clothes when the police picked him up, then where was the blood?

However, on cross-examination Valentine got the secretary to say that Hall seemed always to wear the same kind of clothes to work and that if he had two blue shirts she didn't know Hall's clothes well enough to say on that day he was wearing one rather than another. So he could perfectly well have thrown one set of clothes away and still looked pretty much the same. I thought Valentine did pretty well there.

The next person Mockton called was a truck driver who said he'd seen a car like Hall's parked on Marianne Bridge about five in the morning.

But Valentine got him to say that he couldn't be certain it was

Hall's car or even that there was only one person in it.

Then Mockton called Hall's landlady, who said what a nice man Charles Allen Hall was, how he always paid his rent on time, and also how badly his wife had treated him by running off with a dog groomer.

When the judge asked Valentine if he had any questions for the witness, Valentine just a gave a big, theatrical shrug and shook his head.

"In that case," the judge said, "we will break now for lunch."

I had missed breakfast, so I was starving. And I also made a point of drinking a lot of coffee so I'd have a chance of paying attention to whatever happened in the afternoon.

So I was feeding my face and trying to think of something to say to 6 so she'd understand that after the trial finished, that was it, when from down the table I heard the young black guy say, "It'll be interesting to see what Hall has to say for himself, *if* he takes the stand."

The court guy said, "Please," and raised a finger.

The black guy nodded, and didn't even say "sorry." I scrunched up my nose, thinking that if it had been me saying that, the court guy would've given me another big lecture.

They get it easy these days, black guys, I think. Although I also had to concede that what little this particular guy had said made sense each time. It would be interesting to see how he played out in the jury room, for or against, which might end up being quite influential.

It was then that 6 passed me a note which said, "Cat got your tongue?" It wasn't till I thought about it later that I realized she was making her own joke about what we got up to during the night. At the time I just smiled.

When the trial reopened after lunch, the first thing Mockton did was put Charles Allen Hall on the stand.

"Mr. Hall, did I advise you to testify in this trial?" Mockton asked him.

Hall cleared his throat and said, "No. You said that there wasn't enough evidence to convict me, but I insisted anyway." Here he turned to us in the jury box. "I wanted to tell them for myself that I'm innocent."

It turned out that Hall had a high, nasal voice. If Valentine's style of talking was irritating, with Hall it was the voice itself. I could see in a minute why Mockton had advised him to keep quiet, and it had nothing to do with the strength of the evidence. Maybe it's just we're all so used to seeing trials on television with good-speaking actors that it catches us by surprise when someone takes

the stand and sounds awful. I knew it couldn't help Hall any, no matter what he said.

In fact, Mockton's questioning dealt only with Hall's having gotten drunk after he was fired, with his inexperience with large quantities of hard liquor, and with his innocence of all the charges.

"They offered me a deal," Hall said—God, the whine!—"but I'm not going to plead guilty to anything when I am not a violent man and I am completely innocent. That would be wrong."

Mockton left it at that. But Valentine didn't.

"On the subject you introduced when you testified you are not a violent man," Valentine said, "is it or is it not true that you have twice been convicted of violent crimes?"

And what became clear was that Hall made a bad mistake when he said he wasn't violent, because he gave Valentine the opening to talk about the time Hall resisted arrest—for drunkenness—and hit a cop, and the time he got in a fight with a nightclub bouncer for drooling on his date, and pleaded guilty. And, as bad, there was a police record of his wife calling them to say he'd threatened to kill her. No, it was not a good thing for Hall to open the door to. Or window. The poor guy got more and more rattled the longer he went on. As well as the voice, what we, the jury, got treated to was Hall's growing edginess, which he expressed by rocking in his chair and not seeming to be in control or able to concentrate.

It sure made *me* think that the guy was perfectly capable of doing something violent. God help his cellmate if they ever did send him to the slam. Or God help Hall, depending on who his cellmate was. . . .

On redirect Mockton had Hall say again what a bad year it had been for him, and how he was innocent and shouldn't have to prove it. That wrapped up the trial, except for the closing statements.

With them, unsurprisingly, Valentine went the *victim* route, where Mockton went the he-may-have-behaved-stupidly-but-he's-innocent-of-all-charges route. The judge reminded us what the charges were and what Mr. Valentine had to prove for us to convict, and then she sent us to our deliberations.

The young black guy was elected as our foreman. It happened so fast that it felt like they'd all decided it ahead of time. Maybe they did, last night, in a commercial after I'd left the sitcoms to visit 6.

"My name is Darryl Jackson," the black guy said. "And our concern here is to come to a just verdict, assessing whether the accused had motive, means, and opportunity to commit the crimes he is accused of, assessing whether the prosecutor proved these three things, and assessing whether there is any reasonable doubt about the defendant's guilt."

Looking back, it seems like Jackson kidnapped the whole session.

Or maybe it was just the contrast between the way he spoke—which was articulate and direct—and our recent memories of Hall's voice and the way he got rattled. It was like Jackson snowed us. That's my best "assessment" of what happened, looking back.

To begin, he had us vote. "It's pretty clear," he said, "that Mr. Hall is not guilty of first-degree murder, because as the judge said, that requires premeditation. Speaking personally, it didn't sound to me like Mr. Hall could premeditate his way out of a paper bag. But perhaps others of you have a different opinion?"

Well, who's going to put a hand up for murder one after that?

"No?" Jackson said. "No one wants to argue that taking the bat with him implies premeditation? Well, I agree. The bat need only mean that he planned to smash up the computer. So now that we're down to the nitty-gritty, I suggest we have a secret ballot and consider the charge of murder in the second degree: Did he know what he was doing might kill poor Byrd, but he didn't plan to do it. Shall we vote?"

Tell you the truth, I was surprised that as many as three of us voted "Not Guilty."

Jackson said, "Well, a large majority of us feel that the correct verdict in this case is guilty of murder in the second degree. Given that the balance of our opinion is so one-sided, I think it would help if we invite our three not-guiltys to identify themselves and tell us what their reservations are. So, who voted 'not guilty'?"

I felt guilty just putting my hand up.

"Predictable," Jackson said. "Who else?"

6 put her hand up and, to my surprise, so did one of the biddies.

Jackson turned to 6 and the biddy first. "What did you feel was the weakness of the prosecution case?"

They both said, in essence, that they didn't think the case had been proved beyond reasonable doubt.

"Would you favor convicting him for manslaughter?" Jackson asked. "Or is it your opinion that Hall should be set free?"

The biddy went for manslaughter like a shot. 6 dithered, saying she'd consider it, but that she'd need to think about it, and that she thought we ought to discuss the evidence more. And as she said that, she turned to look at me.

Jackson did, too. "And you, Juror 5?" he said. "Do you think manslaughter is the correct verdict?"

I could almost hear him think, "Which might get us out of here in time to see *ER?* Oh, no. That was last night." Sarcastic bastard.

Showtime. I took a breath. I said, "My feelings about the verdict seem to be stronger than those of the others. I don't feel that the prosecution has proved its case at all."

"Hmmm," Jackson said. "All right, let's consider motive. . . . If we have to believe that Hall was angry at being fired, decided to take

revenge, got interrupted, and, having a violent streak, struck out at the person interrupting him, then motive is okay by me. Or do you think he had no motive?"

I said, "He had possible motive, sure."

"Okay, let's consider means. You don't go for the bat?"

"The bat's not the problem."

Jackson raised his eyebrows. "Opportunity?"

"Obviously he had the opportunity," I said, "but what I'm worrying about is what wasn't presented."

Jackson said, "But we are charged to evaluate what they gave us."

"I'm saying there could easily be reasonable doubt."

"Go on."

"There could be any number of other people out there who might have done it. Like, for instance, it could have been a burglar who was interrupted."

"A burglar with a key?" Jackson said.

"Or what about other possible disgruntled employees? I'm not at all convinced that the police explored the other possibilities."

"I think that's a fair point," Jackson said. "Anything else?"

"Isn't it smart when someone is killed to ask who benefits from the death?"

"You're accusing Mrs. Byrd?" Jackson said. His expression said he found what I was saying hard to believe.

"Not at all," I said. "But Byrd might have had other relatives who had problems with him, or he might have owed money, or . . ." I could feel myself running out of steam. "The point is that there are so many possibilities that weren't raised, and therefore weren't eliminated."

It was 6 who turned to me and said, "There's still the key. How did anyone else get in?"

"All those employees had keys. And it's not just them. How about whoever does the cleaning?" I said. "Like, a cleaner could have a key and a relative, say, copies it, and uses it to go in to look for money, and, say, Nat Byrd interrupts him and Byrd gets killed and then the person smashes up the place to make it look like . . . something else. And maybe it was only accidental that what got smashed was what Hall worked on."

There was a silence in the room. Then Jackson said, "Something like that could have happened, I suppose. But we had no evidence from the defense to make any such suggestion."

"How much money did they have to check stuff like that out? It's not like Hall is O.J."

"And, two," Jackson said, "it's quite a coincidence that Hall's stuff is damaged the very same day he gets fired, don't you think?"

"But coincidences happen," I said. "They do. They really do."

"Hmm," Jackson said.

"Look," I said, "give me a few minutes to think about this. All right? All right?"

"Well . . ."

"Where's the john? I need the john."

And I left the deliberation room to lock myself in a cubicle and . . . deliberate.

I don't like injustice. I never have. I never understand how people can say, "No reasonable doubt," so easily. Just about everything has doubt. You never know. Not really.

I never asked to be on this jury. What I did ask was *not* to be on it. Not. But then it happened.

So what was I supposed to do? I'm part of a jury. I'm supposed to listen to all the stuff and scratch my chinny-chin-chin and say yes, he did it or no, he didn't do it. And that's all right, I can play that game. For a while.

But then, then Valentine rolls in the widow.

And that's what finishes it off. Kills it stone dead, like Nat Byrd. Poor old dumb innocent Natty Byrd. The *victim.* Yep. He was that, all right.

And what am *I* supposed to do? What are my options?

Suppose I stonewall it. Suppose I say to the other jurors, "Say what you like, but I'm voting Hall 'Not Guilty' to everything." And then we go a few rounds with them trying to convince me, and I hold out. And maybe if I get to sleep on it I can be more convincing tomorrow about why he shouldn't be convicted, and maybe I get a few of the others to vote with me. Or maybe I don't.

But I can still hold out, and then Jackson would tell the court guy to go back to the judge and say, "The jury's split and no, there's no chance of a unanimous verdict."

So the judge declares it hung. And Hall is not convicted. Which is no more than justice, because the guy is innocent.

And what happens then is that maybe there's another trial and maybe there isn't. But probably there is. Because the vote is eleven to one for guilty, and because it *is* an election year.

So there's another trial, and another jury. A trial and jury without me. But *with* the widow.

The poor, grieving widow, who would have to go through the whole business again. Testifying, answering questions.

And maybe, just maybe, second time around she would be asked different questions. Worse questions.

Like, did your husband have any life insurance you are the beneficiary of?

Yes, she would say. A lot. A whole lot.

Like, did you make a copy of your husband's keys and give them to your lover?

Not that she would answer that truthfully.

Like, was the plan that your lover would kill your husband and then make a mess so that it looked like your husband had interrupted a burglar?

If anyone ever asked her such a question she'd just sit there silent and beautiful. But in her heart she'd be saying, "He was *supposed* to break a window so it looked like a break-in, only he forgot, the dummy, what with the distraction of just having committed his first murder."

No, those would be bad questions to be put to Bernice Joanne Regina Byrd, my Jo-Annie.

Despite the surprise—and shock—of her being called to give evidence this time, those questions weren't put to her. And they mustn't be put to her. And I mustn't act in such a way that makes it possible for them to be put to her. I just mustn't.

Poor Charles Allen Hall. It certainly has been a bad year for him. He's a *victim* here, too. Coincidences *do* happen.

But I have no choice. I have to change my vote and find him guilty here, of something. When all he's really guilty of is being unlucky.

I didn't have the slightest idea whose computer I was pounding on with *my* aluminum softball bat. Or whose desk. Or whose filing cabinet.

Annie and I never once expected someone else to go down for the murder. But, for sure, we have no intention of going down for it ourselves.

What we expected would happen was that the police would come to her and check her out. And they would find big life-insurance policies, all right, but all dated from before she and her natty Natty first married. He was an important number-cruncher. The company valued its young, healthy, important number-crunchers. The medical and life policies came as part of the Natty package.

Years pass. Natty has his bad luck. And one fine day Annie and I meet in a mall when she laughs at me for failing to be polite to the mother of an unphotogenic little monster. And we go for a cup of coffee. And together we dream about living somewhere else, comfortably.

Which now we will.

There's a knock on the cubicle door. I hear Jackson's rich voice. "Are you all right in there?"

The true answer is that I don't know. But I say, "Fine. Out in a minute."

Which is more than poor, unlucky, nasal Charles Allen Hall will be.

Oh well. Maybe Mockton will appeal. ●

A Deal in Horses

by Edward D. Hoch

Romanian Gypsy Michael Vlado first appeared in a short story in 1985, and he has proven to be one of Edward D. Hoch's most colorful characters. The Vlado stories rely more heavily on setting (Eastern European) than other Hoch mysteries, and the puzzles are often woven around real political events. Our 60th anniversary issue would not be complete without a story from MWA Grand Master Hoch. †

Michael Vlado often sold the horses he raised at his farm in Gravita, a Gypsy village in the foothills of Romania's Transylvanian Alps. Sometimes he would load one or two into his horse trailer and be gone for days, delivering his cargo to buyers in southern Europe. It was usually safer to travel in that direction, avoiding the Gypsy-hating towns to the north and west.

His journey this chilly spring would be a relatively brief one, some seven hundred miles across Bulgaria to Istanbul, where a buyer was waiting for a pair of the thoroughbred horses Michael took pride in raising. The man would probably race them a few times and then breed them himself. A young Gypsy, Rajko Kerns, was accompanying Michael on the journey to help with the horses. Kerns had lived in Gravita less than six months, and Michael suspected he'd been drawn there by the remoteness of the place. As king of this particular Gypsy clan, Michael took an interest in all new arrivals, but he never asked what they might be fleeing from.

"You're fitting in well with us in Gravita," he told the young Rom. "Have you decided to stay?"

"We are made to wander," Rajko answered. "You must know that."

"Not everyone. Romanian Gypsies are not as nomadic as others. We are content to work our farms and live our lives."

Always prepared to do battle, like many young Gypsies, Rajko wore a throwing knife strapped to his left forearm, beneath his tunic. Michael had the proper export papers for his horses and they crossed the Bulgarian border without difficulty, but as they approached the Turkish checkpoint he suggested that Rajko remove the dagger from beneath his sleeve. "They've been known

to frisk Gypsies," he said. "We don't want them accusing you of carrying a concealed weapon."

The young man gave up his dagger with some reluctance and Michael locked it in the truck's glove compartment as the gate near Edirne loomed ahead of them, guarded by Turkish soldiers wearing long coats and helmets. Michael showed his papers and they crossed the border without incident. It was dark, and they stopped for a few hours' sleep at the side of the highway, continuing before daybreak on a straight line into Istanbul. The buyer for the horses was a prosperous breeder named Julian Brenz whom they'd arranged to meet at his stable on the north side of the city at eight A. M.

Michael found the place without difficulty and parked outside the big double doors. He went back to comfort the horses after the journey while Rajko entered the stable to announce their arrival. The next thing Michael heard was the boom of a shotgun fired inside the building. He ran to the door and found Rajko bleeding on the floor from a massive chest wound. The young Gypsy gasped once and died in his arms.

That was how it began.

The captain of police was named Ahmet Izmir. He was a burly man with a moustache who wore a blue uniform with a white cap. As soon as he learned that Michael and the victim were Gypsies, his face took on a sour expression. "Are you certain you came here to sell the horses and not to barter for drugs?" he asked Michael.

"Of course I'm certain!"

"There are Gypsies involved in the drug trade here, bringing opium across the Bosphorus from the poppy fields to the east."

"I know nothing of that!" Michael insisted. "It was to be a straight business deal with Julian Brenz, payment in Turkish lira for my two thoroughbreds. Where is Brenz? Is he here?"

Captain Izmir shook his head. "We found no one in the stable, only a half-dozen horses. A man who cares for them lives down the road, but he was away having breakfast with his family at the time of the shooting. Whoever killed your friend must have fled out the back. Perhaps he was interrupted while trying to steal the horses, though they are of little or no value."

"I was to meet Julian Brenz here," Michael insisted.

The officer shrugged. "Brenz has various business interests around the city. An employee of his sometimes oversees the stable, another Gypsy named Zare. I do not know his last name."

"My dealings were with Brenz himself. I spoke with him on the telephone. Now I want the person who killed Rajko."

"There is nothing I can do." The captain turned away, then reversed himself and added, "In the present climate, Gypsies are suspect here. I would advise you to return home with your horses."

"Someone must know where this man Zare can be found."

"Try the Gypsy Locate Service," Captain Izmir told him, his tone suggesting a certain disdain. "Or call Julian Brenz. It's the same thing."

"I'll want to take the body back with me, for burial in our village."

"An autopsy must be performed and there will be papers to fill out. It would be simpler to bury him here."

"I'm taking him back," Michael said with finality.

When they allowed him to leave the crime scene, he drove out of the stable area with his truck and horse trailer. He never considered the possibility of returning home without trying to find Rajko's killer. The young man deserved that much. He found a nearby stable where he could board the horses for a few days and then telephoned home to tell his wife Rosanna what had happened. It would be her job to break the news to Rajko's friends. He didn't bother with a hotel room, knowing he could sleep in his truck if necessary.

It was early afternoon, and since he'd had no breakfast he stopped in a restaurant called Café Medusa. Its prices seemed reasonable and the menu offered a large choice of Turkish cuisine. When the waiter brought his food he asked, "Do you know of the Gypsy Locate Service?"

"I have heard of it," the waiter replied. "We have many Gypsy customers."

"Where is it located?"

"Somewhere near the Grand Bazaar in the city's center. Its address is in the telephone directory."

The Grand Bazaar was a vast network of covered streets and buildings with little domes set in its rooftop. There, at nearly two thousand businesses, shoppers could buy anything from gold and silver to carpets, leather goods, and even jeans, each sold in its own area. Michael had established that the office of the Gypsy Locate Service was in one of the buildings near the Nuruosmaniye Mosque, and he finally found the place after some difficulty.

The small office was quite modern, with a computer and banks of filing cabinets. The thirtyish woman behind the desk wore tinted glasses and spoke with a British accent. "Hello! I'm Laurette Davis. How may I help you?"

"This is the Gypsy Locate Service?"

"It is."

Michael identified himself and smiled slightly. "Most Gypsies are nomadic. How are you able to keep track of them?"

She motioned him to a chair. "The Service was begun in the western United States about fifty years ago. I don't believe it exists there anymore, but the office here is an offshoot of it. We rely on information from the various clans and maintain a reg-

istry of Gypsies' names together with their particular skills. It's useful to would-be employers and to people seeking relatives. Naturally, the area we cover is centered in and around Istanbul, but we survey outlying regions of the country as well. It has been estimated that a half-million Gypsies, mainly of the Arlije tribe, reside in Turkey at the present time."

"I understand some are involved in the drug trade."

"That is true," she admitted, "but others languish in prison for mere traffic offenses. The courts here are not lenient toward Gypsies."

She was a pleasant woman with a cool attitude who seemed quite knowledgeable on the subject. He wondered how she had come to be employed in such a position, and asked her. She smiled somewhat sadly and told him, "My husband had a job here piloting freighters through the Straits of the Bosphorus. He died last year and I decided to stay on, at least for the time being. We had many friends in the business community and one of them arranged for this job."

"The man I seek has the given name of Zare," Michael told her. "I do not know his family name, but he is employed by Julian Brenz at his stable on the north side of the city."

She pursed her lips and hit some buttons on the computer keyboard. "Our database is indexed by first and last names. With some Gypsies you never know which is which. I see several men named Zare here, but—yes, here's a Zare Pasa who's employed by Mr. Brenz. Apparently he resides at the Brenz estate."

"I understand Brenz is in the horse business."

She hesitated. "Mr. Brenz is not a Rom and therefore is not in our database. But he is a well-known horse trainer and breeder."

"Just where is this estate?"

"On the Bosphorus, beyond the Naval Museum. I can show you on this map." She marked an area near the Bosphorus Bridge. "Some of the homes out there are like palaces."

"Thank you," he said, pocketing the small map. "Is there any charge for this service?"

"Not for you," she said with a smile. "We operate this service mainly for businesses. They pay us a retainer. Come back if I can help you further."

"I'll do that."

Michael crossed over the Karakoy Bridge, watching the ferryboats that endlessly plied the Golden Horn, and continued on the highway that ran northeast along the Bosphorus. Before long he discovered what Laurette Davis had meant about the palaces in the area. Each seemed larger than the last one, and most sat directly on the water. When he came to an estate with the name of Brenz

Enterprises clearly visible, he turned in the main gate and parked his truck near a white limousine. Almost immediately a tall middle-aged woman wearing a caftan approached him to inquire about his business.

"I'm here to see Mr. Brenz," he said. "Tell him it's Michael Vlado, come about the horses."

She gave him a weak smile. "I am Delores, Julian's wife. Come in and I will summon him."

He was escorted into the house and kept waiting for some ten minutes before Julian Brenz appeared. The man was not at all how Michael had pictured him from their telephone conversation. His deep voice seemed betrayed by a body that was shorter and squatter than expected, and his face was marred by a reddish birthmark on the right temple.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Vlado," he said, extending his hand. "I am sorry you had to wait, but I was dozing a bit. I had difficulty coming awake this morning. Have the horses arrived safely?"

"They have. They're stabled in Istanbul. Right now I'm more concerned about the death of my assistant. He was killed at your place this morning."

Brenz nodded sadly. "Captain Izmir telephoned me about the death of a Gypsy youth at my stable. I know nothing more."

"I thought you were to meet me there."

The man shook his head. "Not personally. You must have misunderstood."

"Then who was there in your place? Who was meant to conclude the deal for the horses?"

He shrugged. "One of my men. I forget which."

"Was he named Zare Pasa?" Michael prompted.

A flicker of surprise crossed Julian Brenz's face. "How do you know Zare? Is your clan affiliated with the Istanbul Gypsies?"

"Captain Izmir mentioned his name. He said Zare sometimes managed the stable for you. However, I expected you'd have been there yourself to examine my horses before completing the deal."

"I had other matters. Zare was supposed to meet you and handle it, but he was late arriving. I explained it all to Captain Izmir."

"Did you explain why my assistant was murdered?" Michael was growing tired of running around in circles.

"I have no knowledge of that."

"Then perhaps I can speak with your man Zare."

"I'm afraid that would be difficult at present. He has his chores with the horses. I don't know when he'll be finished."

"I need to speak with him," Michael insisted. "If he wasn't at the stable this morning, he might have some idea who was there. You must know where on your property he can be found."

"You might try the north barn," he answered with a sigh. "It's

about a hundred yards up that hill."

As Michael left the house, he saw Brenz pick up a cell phone and punch in a number.

The trek up the hill to the north barn took longer than he'd expected, possibly because he paused to admire some fine thoroughbreds running in the pasture. There was a great deal of expensive horseflesh on display at Julian Brenz's estate, and Michael found himself wondering where the money came from. At the barn he was told that Zare was out watering the horses but would return soon. He waited a few minutes and presently saw a dark-haired young man enter. Silhouetted against the outside light, he could almost have been Rajko restored to life.

"Are you the Gypsy named Zare Pasa?" Michael asked.

As he stepped closer, the resemblance to Rajko faded. He was simply a Rom youth of an unpleasant type Michael knew all too well. They would always make their way in the world, one way or another, and innocent Gypsies would be punished for their sins. "Who are you?" the man asked without answering Michael's question.

"Michael Vlado. I traveled here from Romania to sell thoroughbreds to your employer, but my assistant was killed at Brenz's stable early this morning. Brenz says you were supposed to be there."

"No. I was busy elsewhere."

"Then who was to meet me?"

"I do not know."

Michael was growing impatient. "I want answers from someone."

The hard lines of Zare Pasa's face seemed to relax a bit. "You are a Rom like myself, so I will tell you the truth. Brenz phoned me at four this morning to say I must meet you at the stable and conclude the deal with the horses. I knew he was with his mistress, calling from her bed. I could hear a woman's voice. I had another appointment at that time, and since you were bringing the horses here from Romania I supposed you might easily be an hour late. When I drove up to the stable around nine, I saw the police cars and I knew something bad had happened. I kept on going."

"So you asked no one to take your place?"

"Brenz would not have trusted anyone else to buy the horses. I hoped I could complete my business and be there close to eight."

"So who was waiting for us to arrive? Was someone trying to steal my horses?"

Zare shrugged. "I know nothing else." He turned away, back to his tasks with the horses.

Michael left the barn, wondering what appointment could have been so important that the Gypsy would have risked his job to keep it. He returned to the big house and found Julian Brenz having a drink with his wife before dinner. "I don't wish to interrupt,"

he said. "What arrangement shall we make regarding the horses?"

"It is no interruption," Delores Brenz insisted. "Please join us in a glass of raki. Julian has told me what happened to your employee and you have our deepest sympathy."

"Thank you." He accepted the aniseed-flavored spirit from her and sat down. Its taste was much like the French pastis or absinthe, and though he cared for none of them, he understood that in Istanbul raki was a drink to accompany every conversation.

"What did you learn from my man?" Brenz wanted to know.

"Nothing of importance. He was delayed and was late reaching the stable. Or so he says." He took a sip of his drink.

Brenz shook his head. "These Gypsies! Do you find them as undependable as I do, Michael?"

"I am the king of my clan," he answered, reminding Brenz of that fact. "Aside from their nomadic habits, I find my people to be much like other people. There is no reason for the fear and loathing they engender."

The short man snorted. "That may be true in the hills of Romania where you live, but here in Istanbul they smuggle in opium for the processing of heroin, and then support themselves by selling it."

"Zare Pasa does this?"

"I suspect as much. If I knew it for a fact I would fire him. It is said by some that he has regular customers among dock workers and the crews of the cargo ships that pass through our port."

It was Mrs. Brenz who spoke then, with a surprising sharpness to her voice. "You wouldn't fire him, Julian. You couldn't exist without Zare to cover for you. Where were you last night when you phoned him to be at the stable in your place this morning? You certainly weren't in our bed."

"I'd better be going," Michael decided, downing the remainder of his raki.

Brenz saw him to the door. "Don't mind Delores. She's like that sometimes. When will I see my horses?"

"Tomorrow. Do you want them here or at the stable in the city?"

He considered that. "Phone me tomorrow noon and I'll let you know."

Michael slept in his truck again that night, and in the morning he visited Captain Izmir at police headquarters. "I've come about Rajko's body," he began. "Are you ready to release it to me?"

Izmir glanced up from a cluttered desk. Without his white cap, his thinning hair added years to his appearance. "The autopsy is complete and revealed nothing unexpected. A shotgun fired at close range can do terrible damage. So far as I am concerned, you may take possession of the body at the city morgue this afternoon. Here are the papers you must fill out for the border crossings."

Michael sat down at an empty desk to complete the documents. "Is all this really necessary?"

"Indeed yes. There are many cases on record of drugs and other contraband being transported across borders inside the dead bodies of humans and animals."

"Julian Brenz suspects that Zare Pasa may be in the drug business."

"We try to keep track of his movements, along with other Gypsies, but our resources are limited. There are unconfirmed reports of seamen dying from heroin he supplied." He walked over to a side table. "Come look at this."

"What is it?" Michael could see only a small bale of hay, seeming out of place in a policeman's office.

Captain Izmir lifted the top half and it came apart, revealing a center consisting of a brown, sticky substance. "This is opium. It comes here in bales of hay and cans of dog food, in children's toys and hollowed-out lumber, waiting to be smoked or, more likely, converted into heroin."

"It's a serious problem," Michael agreed. "Could there have been some sort of drug war that caused Rajko's death?"

"We know of nothing like that."

Another thought came to him. "Could Brenz himself be involved in the drug trade?"

"It's doubtful. He makes his money in other ways. Do you suspect him of killing your assistant?"

"He was supposed to meet us at the stable but he phoned Zare in the middle of the night to take his place. Zare thinks he was phoning from his mistress's bed."

"That's very possible."

"Who is it whose charms keep him from his morning appointments?"

"Probably the Englishwoman at the Gypsy Locate Service. Brenz set up the service for area businessmen and hired Mrs. Davis to run it."

"Really!" The news surprised Michael. He had difficulty picturing the cool Laurette Davis in bed with Julian Brenz.

The captain shrugged. "Adultery is not one of the crimes that concern us here."

Michael completed the documents and watched while Captain Izmir placed an official stamp on each of them. Then he left the headquarters building and walked through the crowded streets, pausing momentarily to observe a Gypsy entertainer with a dancing bear. Having no tokens to operate the telephones in the sidewalk booths, he finally entered a tavern where a singer with a banjo was threading his way among the tables of luncheon customers. He telephoned Brenz at his home and asked about the horses.

"Take them to the stable again," he told Michael. "Zare will be there this time to complete the deal."

"What time?"

"Two o'clock?"

"I'll be there."

Michael ate a light lunch and then drove to the stable where he'd boarded his two thoroughbreds overnight. Both seemed in fine condition and he paid the bill and loaded them into the trailer. It was only a short drive to Brenz's stable from there. As he pulled up he saw a pickup truck from Brenz Enterprises parked in front of the building. Apparently Zare was there today as planned. Perhaps it was the memory of the previous day's events that made him unlock the glove compartment and retrieve Rajko's dagger. He slipped it into the back of his waistband and walked toward the stable door.

Zare turned as he entered. The young Gypsy held a knife in his right hand, blade upward for thrusting. Michael tried to ignore it and said, "I've come with the horses for your employer."

As he stepped closer, he thought he saw blood on Zare's blade, and that was when the man lunged at him. Michael jumped back nimbly and pulled Rajko's weapon from his waistband. "Are there any rules to this?" he asked, trying to make a joke of it, remembering that someone had once written there are no rules in a knife fight.

When the young Gypsy thrust again, Michael parried the blade with his dagger and dodged to one side. Behind him, the frightened horses whinnied in their stalls. They came together then like duelists, each gripping the other's wrist, and Michael managed to throw Zare down to the sawdust floor. But Zare clung to his weapon and lunged at Michael's leg, knocking him off balance. They rolled together in the straw, into one of the stalls where the terrified horse's hoofs beat down around their heads. Then Zare was suddenly on top again, and rose to his knees to deliver the final thrust of his knife. Michael struck out with his foot, catching Zare in a vulnerable spot, and the Gypsy collapsed, impaling himself on Rajko's dagger with a final deflating sigh.

Michael took a deep breath and heaved the body aside, struggling to his feet. Turning toward the darkened rear of the stable, he said, "You can come out now, Mrs. Davis. I've done your work for you."

Laurette Davis stepped out from the shadows, pointing her shotgun unsteadily at his chest.

"You're a wise man, Mr. Vlado," she said, standing far enough back to stay out of his reach. "Or perhaps only a good guesser."

"I never guess. I simply observe. The first time I met Zare," he nudged the dead man by his foot, "he was entering a barn with the light behind him and for just an instant he reminded me of my assistant, Rajko. It must have been the same with you as you

waited here yesterday morning. We arrived and Rajko entered through those doors. You were expecting Zare, and you fired as soon as you thought you saw him. You killed the wrong man."

She shook her head, trying to smile. "Why would I want Zare dead?"

"You told me your husband died last year. He was a pilot, guiding ships through the Bosphorus. Zare was selling opium and heroin to men working the docks and cargo ships. Some of his customers died. I think it was drugs that killed your husband, one way or another. When you established they'd come from Zare, you wanted him dead, too. Your first opportunity came yesterday, but you bungled it, probably because Zare had a prior engagement with a drug dealer."

"You have nothing to tie me to that killing."

"I think I do. Assuming Zare was the intended victim, the killer had to know he'd be here yesterday. Yet Zare himself didn't know it until Julian Brenz phoned him at four in the morning. Zare heard a woman's voice and I know from Mrs. Brenz that the woman wasn't his wife. You are known to be Brenz's mistress, and you were with him when he called. In fact, I imagine luring Zare here yesterday was all your idea. I can almost picture you telling Brenz to stay with you and send Zare to that early meeting in his place, just as you no doubt urged Brenz to send Zare here today."

"Your Gypsy logic defeats you," she said, though he saw that the shotgun barrel was wavering. "If what you say is true, that I kept Julian with me yesterday morning, then I have a perfect alibi for the time of your friend's murder."

"A drug or a sleeping potion in a glass of wine would have knocked him out after he made the phone call. You drove here, waited in the shadows to kill Zare, and hurried back to Brenz before he awakened. He happened to mention that he had trouble waking up yesterday."

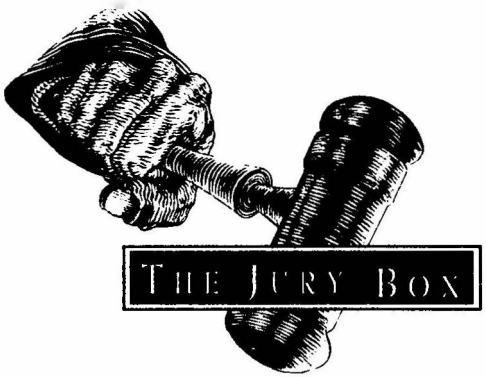
She seemed suddenly very tired. "What will you do now?"

"Call Captain Izmir. I cannot allow Rajko's death to go unpunished."

The shotgun slipped from her grasp and she took her hand away from her side. Suddenly Michael remembered the blood on Zare's blade. "You are too late for that. Zare has already punished me for my error. Two errors, really. In the second one, I let his knife slip between my ribs before I—"

Those were the last words she uttered. Michael grabbed her as she started to fall and laid her on the stable floor beside Zare. Then he found a telephone and called Captain Izmir.

He would drive to Brenz's home and collect his payment for the horses. After that there was nothing more to be done, except the lonely drive home with Rajko's body. ●



by Jon L. Breen

The little book in front of me is among the most unusual ever reviewed in this column. For one oddity, it is a paperback with a dust jacket; for another, its dimensions are about 4 x 6 inches, a non-standard size in the United States; finally, it is a previously unpublished novel by the prolific American mystery writer Harry Stephen Keeler (1890-1967), who today is generally forgotten but is celebrated by a small cult following.

Keeler was a unique figure in popular fiction. His plots were outlandishly complex, stupifyingly unlikely, riddled with jaw-dropping coincidences, but worked out with a certain off-center logic. His outrageous characters and their mannered dialogue, the ornate prose that described their activities and surroundings, the streets they walked and the laws they were subject to were at one remove from recognizable real life. Though some found him unreadable and his ability to get published at all a mystery, enough readers enjoyed his work that he was published for years by a major American publisher (Dutton), then by a minor one (Phoenix), and even when his last English-language market (Britain's Ward, Lock) dropped him in the early '50s, he continued to find readers in Spanish and Portuguese translation.

*** Harry Stephen Keeler: *The Six from Nowhere*, Ramble House (www.ramblehouse.bigstep.com), $19.95. Constantly cash-strapped circus operator Angus MacWhorter, featured in several earlier Keeler novels, possesses a unique McGuffin: a new issue of a pulp detective magazine that a colorful variety of rogues are unaccountably determined to get their hands on. Written in 1958, this dizzying parody of mystery plotting is far from the best Keeler, but it displays the attributes that lead this reviewer (at risk of his credibility with readers of refined literary

tastes) to choose the unappreciated genius over the harmless madman label. For the full (and Keeler-complicated) story of the MacWhorter series, see the introduction by Francis M. Nevins, the law professor/ critic/ mystery writer who has been promoting Keeler as a neglected master for more than thirty years. The publisher also has several Keeler reprints available in the same diminutive format and at the same price.

**** David Cray: *Bad Lawyer,* Carroll & Graf/Penzler, $24. The pseudonymous Cray—I have my suspicions but won't speculate—introduces New York attorney Sid Kaplan, on the comeback trail after almost ruining his career via substance abuse, aided by two associates (and roommates) with equally checkered pasts. He takes the case of enigmatic Priscilla Sweet, a battered wife who shot her drug-dealing husband Byron to death but may avoid a murder conviction with a claim of self-defense. Paralleling the first-rate courtroom action is Kaplan's increasing sexual attraction to his client as well as his doubts about the real nature and motive of her crime. The climax is both shocking and believable. (The writers of the jacket copy do reader and author no favors when they tip a mid-novel plot surprise.)

*** Robin Paige: *Death at Epsom Downs,* Berkley, $21.95. The turbulent British turf world of the 1890s comes to life in an admirably well-researched entry in the series about gentleman sleuth Lord Charles Sheridan and his American novelist wife Kate. Principal historical figure in the cast is an intriguingly depicted Lillie Langtry, with brief but memorable appearances by the Prince of Wales and jockey Tod Sloan. Susan Wittig Albert and Bill Albert, the writing team behind the Paige pseudonym, add to the verisimilitude with some well-chosen epigraphs, concluding authors' notes, and a bibliography.

*** Bill Crider: *The Nighttime is the Right Time: A Collection of Stories,* Five Star, $23.95. One of the most unpretentious and versatile pure entertainers in the mystery field presents eleven of his best short stories, all but one written to order for theme anthologies. The series characters of his novels—small-town Texas sheriff Dan Rhodes, Galveston private eye Truman Smith, and my favorite, college English teacher Carl Burns—make one appearance each, along with three characters created for short stories: the 1950s mystery-writing team of Bo Wagner and Janice Langtry (locked-room specialists), 1940s Hollywood P.I. Bill Ferrel, and (in two humorous entries including the title story) a first-person werewolf detective. Crider's rarer dark side emerges powerfully in two of the non-series tales, "A Night Out with Carl" and the chilling cele-

bration of a Father's Day tradition, "Blest Be the Ties."

*** Susan Dunlap: *The Celestial Buffet and Other Morsels of Murder,* Crippen & Landru, $16 trade paper, $40 signed limited hardcover. Another admired novelist presents 17 stories, four about her Berkeley cop Jill Smith, one about her gymnast-turned-private-eye Kiernan O' Shaughnessy, two about an afterlife sleuth called the Celestial Detective. Usually humorous, sometimes dark, and ranging in date from her 1978 *EQMM* first story "Double Jeopardy" (originally titled "Death Threat") to the 1999 modern Adam and Eve allegory "A Worm in the Winesap," Dunlap's tales show us a venturesome pro having as good a time as the reader.

Three for the reference shelf: James Sallis's *Chester Himes: A Life* (Walker, $28) is a terrific biography of the greatest African-American mystery writer, also a major novelist regardless of racial or genre niches. If you were to limit your holdings of the myriad secondary sources on Agatha Christie to three or four titles (not a bad idea), one of them should be Charles Osborne's *The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie* (St. Martin's Minotaur, $25.95), first published in 1982 and now lightly updated. For a remarkably detailed and entertaining exploration of a specialized subgenre, see John E. Kramer's *Academe in Mystery and Detective Fiction: An Annotated Bibliography* (Scarecrow, $65).

Speaking of subgenres, a stellar group of crime writers explore the sexy dark in the first of a new anthology series, *Flesh and Blood: Erotic Tales of Crime and Passion* (Mysterious, $12.95), edited by Max Allan Collins and Jeff Gelb. Lawrence Block's disturbing leadoff story "Sweet Little Hands" pretty well defines the erotic noir category. Also among the highlights are Annette Meyers's chilling tale of troubled youth, "You Don't Know Me"; Dick Lochte's hardboiled account of underworld double-cross, "In the City of Angels"; and Edward D. Hoch's "The Club of Masks," a story of 1930s Paris that delivers the erotic goods without disappointing Hoch fans looking for a solid and surprising detective puzzle. All the stories are originals save Donald E. Westlake's "The Girl of My Dreams" (*EQMM,* April 1979).

Art by John Stevens

THEY'RE ALL ALIKE

by Andrew Vachss

1.

The sleek, dark coupe slipped confidently through the tight grid of narrow streets, weaving an intricate tapestry with the afterimage of its taillights. Even past midnight, harsh heat still hovered over the asphalt. The humidity was so thick a faint mist settled over the coupe's tinted windows. Through that soft filter, the man watched the brightly dressed women posture and pose as he glided past. They made him think of the lush flowers he had once seen in a jungle, long ago. All that sweet fruit, ripe on the vine.

But looks couldn't deceive him. He knew the fruit was poison. He knew what it would do to any man who tasted it.

As he turned a corner, one of the girls quickly pulled up her yellow spandex micro-skirt and gave herself a spank, her face a mockery of ecstasy. The man kept driving.

The greedy whores didn't know what he wanted. The selection wasn't up to them. *He* made the choices.

A chubby blonde in a red halter top shrieked "Faggot!" as he passed her by. In his rearview mirror, he saw a black girl in iridescent blue hotpants give the blonde a high-five.

The man felt the familiar acid-bath of rage in his chest, but his expression never changed. The name-calling didn't mean anything. They didn't know him.

If they did, they'd never mock him.

As if by tacit agreement, the cops pretty much stayed out of the warehouse district after dark, and the nightgirls didn't stray into the better parts of the little town. The good citizens liked it that way, and that's who the cops "served and protected." The man smirked at the idea that the stupid sluts felt safer without cops around. Safer from a simple prostitution bust, sure. But not from a much harsher judge than they would ever encounter in court.

He made another slow circuit, the movement of the powerful car calming him as it always did. *Careful, careful,* he cautioned himself. He'd hunted the same area for a while now. He knew nightgirls vanish all the time. They get tired of The Life. Run off with a new pimp. Move on to someplace where they hear the money is better. AIDS, overdoses, jail . . . plenty of reasons for any of them to disappear from the streets.

But he also knew that if you picked too much of the fruit, sooner or later the cops would start looking for the harvester.

Maybe it was time for him to nomad again. The prospect didn't concern him. He was rootless. And he knew that wherever he went, he would find what he needed.

Some of the girls were stunningly bold. It almost felt like an assault the way they charged his car every time he slowed down to a prowler's crawl. *If they only knew,* he thought, *they'd run like rabbits who saw the shadow of a hawk.*

A hawk. Yes. The man liked that image. A solitary, hunting hawk. A righteous hawk, circling . . . then descending suddenly out of the night sky.

Some of the girls looked fresh and new. He knew that look wouldn't last long. The Life would claim their bodies as it had their souls.

Maybe he was doing them a favor, the ones he chose.

He knew appearances didn't matter. The nightgirls may come in all sizes, shapes, and colors, but they're all alike. Every one of

Fans of Andrew Vachss will be treated to new work by the author at both novel and short-story length this fall, for at the same time this issue goes to newsstands, Alfred A. Knopf will release *Pain Management,* the latest novel in Mr. Vachss's Burke series. *Coast Magazine* said of Andrew Vachss: "There is no other living American author with prose as razor-clean." It is that, we believe, that makes his work so mesmerising. †

them. Wicked, evil women. Sweet and ripe-looking on the outside, but venom at their core.

It was their fault. They gave him no choice.

It was a lot easier now than when he'd started. He never fought the feelings anymore. He knew there was only one thing that would soothe him.

For a while, anyway.

Agony. The word was a prism in his brain, refracting all the light in his vision. *Agony.* He knew the truth, now. The only way it could ever be. *Agony.* Inflict it, or suffer it.

There was nothing else.

2.

I can always tell, she thought. *Sometimes, just from the way they use their cars to stalk. And when I see their faces, when I hear them talk, I* always *know.*

When she saw the dark coupe for the third time that night, she deliberately walked a half-block down from the corner, distancing herself from the safety of the other girls. She positioned herself against a bent aluminum lamppost with a burnt-out bulb and clasped her hands behind her.

No fishnet stockings or five-inch spike heels for her. She had better luck in a simple little white dress, standing primly, as if waiting for a bus. Her heart fluttered in her chest. She fancied he could hear it, even from so far away.

And that it would draw him closer.

The dark coupe slid to a gentle stop next to her. As she walked toward the passenger-side window it zipped down as if in sync with her movements. *It's like I have X-ray eyes by now,* she thought. *I can see right into his mind. Ropes. Handcuffs. Maybe a gun. Always a knife. Or a razor. And, in the trunk of his car, a Polaroid camera. Or a videocam.*

3.

"Are you dating?" the man asked. *No way this one's an undercover,* he thought to himself. *They always try to blend in, dress up outrageous, look like all the rest.*

"Maybe," the girl said, softly. "But I don't date just anyone."

"How much for a—?"

"Don't talk nasty," the girl interrupted him. "That's what I mean. I only date nice men. Are you a nice man?"

"I can be *very* nice," the man assured her. "Very generous, too." Now he was certain she couldn't be a cop. They always wanted you to offer a specific amount of money for a specific sex act, so that it would stand up in court. This one, she acted like it was her first time out.

"All right," the girl said, "but not . . . here, okay? It's not . . . private."

The man knew "here" meant the pool of darkness behind the abandoned factory building where the nightgirls always directed

their tricks to park. Privacy didn't mean anything to hookers, but safety did. Usually, he had to talk them out of going there. This one would be easier than usual. "We could go to my house," he said.

"No," she said softly, leaning into the car through the opened window. "I'd be too scared. Maybe after we have a few dates, I would. But I know a place. It's not far from here. You know that spot off 109 where they have the picnic tables?"

"Sure," the man said.

4.

Don't wait! she screamed inside herself as the dark coupe pulled into the deserted highway rest stop. *Sometimes, they try it right away.*

As he was unzipping his fly, she brought up the tiny .25-caliber automatic and shot him in the face. He made a grunting sound, hands pressing against his temples as if he had a horrible migraine. She shot him four more times, not aware of the moaning sound coming from her mouth . . . a banshee wail louder than the muted *pop!*s of the little pistol.

There wasn't much blood. There never was. And she never got any on her little white dress.

She backed out of the car carefully. Opened the trunk with the key she had pulled from the ignition switch. *Yes!*

It was about a mile through the woods to the access road where she always left her own car. From experience, she knew it would take her about a half-hour.

5.

Maybe they're right, he thought to himself. *Maybe I* am *a natural-born wuss.* He circled the fringes of nightgirl territory in his beige compact sedan for what seemed like the tenth time that night, certain they were laughing behind their hands as he passed by.

They're just plain . . . scary, he thought. *I mean, they could have diseases and everything.* And he'd heard they all had pimps. Huge guys who'd cut your throat for whatever was in your wallet.

He had promised himself it would be tonight. No backing out. If only he could find one that wasn't so . . . dangerous-looking.

The moment he saw her, he knew she was the one. That pretty little white dress. The sweet expression on her face. Somehow, he just knew *she* wouldn't laugh at him if he had trouble with . . .

6.

She backed out of the sedan carefully. With the smaller cars, there was a greater chance of getting some of the blood on you.

She opened the trunk. Empty. That didn't matter, she told herself. It just meant he had been too cautious to bring his torture equipment with him. Probably had it back at his place. She knew it had to be *somewhere* close at hand.

Because they're all alike. ●

Art by Laurie Horden

PIRANHA TO SCURFY

by Ruth Rendell

It was the first time he had been away on holiday without Mummy. The first time in his life. They had always gone to the Isle of Wight, to Ventnor or Totland Bay, so, going alone, he had chosen Cornwall for the change that people say is as good as a rest. Not that Ribbon's week in Cornwall had been entirely leisure. He had taken four books with him, read them carefully in the B and B's lounge, in his bedroom, on the beach, and sitting on the clifftop, and made meticulous notes in the loose-leaf notebook he had bought in a shop in Newquay. The results had been satisfactory, more than satisfactory. Allowing for the anger and disgust making these discoveries invariably aroused, he felt he could say he had had a relaxing time. To use a horrible phrase much favoured by Eric Owlberg in his literary output, he had recharged his batteries.

Coming home to an empty house would be an ordeal. He had known it would be and it was. Instead of going out into the garden, he gave it careful scrutiny from the dining room window. Everything outside and indoors was as he had left it. The house was as

he had left it, all the books in their places. Every room contained books. Ribbon was not one to make jokes, but he considered it witty to remark that while other people's walls were papered, his were booked. No one knew what he meant, for hardly anyone except himself ever entered 21 Grove Green Avenue, Leytonstone, and those to whom he uttered his little joke smiled uneasily. He had put up the shelves himself, buying them from Ikea. As they filled he bought more, adding to those already there until the shelves extended from floor to ceiling. A strange appearance was given to the house by this superfluity of books as the shelves necessarily reduced the size of the rooms, so that the living room, originally fifteen feet by twelve, shrank to thirteen feet by ten. The hall and landing were "booked" as densely as the rooms. The place looked like a library, but one mysteriously divided into small sections. His windows appeared as alcoves set deep in the walls, affording a view at the front of the house of a rather gloomy suburban street, thickly treed. The back gave on to the yellow brick rears of other houses and, in the foreground, his garden, which was mostly lawn, dotted about with various drab shrubs. At the far end was a wide flowerbed the sun never reached and in which grew creeping ivies and dark-leaved flowerless plants which like the shade.

"Piranha to Scurfy" concludes the series of Ruth Rendell short stories *EQMM* has been running since December of 2000. Most of the tales we've published over the past months have also now been published in Ms. Rendell's recently released short-story collection *Piranha to Scurfy and Other Stories.* A new Rendell novel will also soon be available; it is a nonseries work entitled *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me* (Hutchinson/U.K.; Crown/U.S.). ✝

He had got over expecting Mummy to come downstairs or walk into a room. She had been gone five months now. He sighed, for he was a long way from recovering from his loss and his regrets. Work was in some ways easier without her and in others immeasurably harder. She had reassured him, sometimes she had made him strong. But he had to press on, there was really no choice. Tomorrow things would be back to normal.

He began by ranging before him on the desk in the study—though was not the whole house a study?—the book review pages from the newspapers which had arrived while he was away. As he had expected, Owlberg's latest novel, *Paving Hell,* appeared this very day in paperback, one year after hardcover publication. It was priced at £6.99 and by now would be in all the shops. Ribbon made a memo about it on one of the plain cards he kept for this

purpose. But before continuing he let his eyes rest on the portrait of Mummy in the plain silver frame that stood on the table where used, read, and dissected books had their temporary home. It was Mummy who had first drawn his attention to Owlberg. She had borrowed one of his books from the public library and pointed out to Ribbon with indignation the mass of errors, solecisms, and abuse of the English language to be found in its pages. How he missed her! Wasn't it principally to her that he owed his choice of career as well as the acumen and confidence to pursue it?

He sighed anew. Then he returned to his newspapers and noted down the titles of four more novels currently published in paperback, as well as the new Kingston Marle, *Demogorgon,* due to appear this coming Thursday in hardcover with the maximum hype and fanfares of metaphorical trumpets, but almost certainly already in the shops. A sign of the degeneracy of the times, Mummy had said, that a book whose publication was scheduled for May appeared on sale at the end of April. No one could wait these days, everyone was in a hurry. It certainly made his work harder. It increased the chances of his missing a vitally important novel which might have sold out before he knew it was in print.

Ribbon switched on his computer and checked that the printer was linked to it. It was only nine in the morning. He had at least an hour before he need make his trip to the bookshop. Where should it be today? Perhaps the City or the West End of London. It would be unwise to go back to his local shop so soon and attract too much attention to himself. Hatchard's, perhaps then, or Books Etc. or Dillon's, or even all three. He opened the notebook he had bought in Cornwall, reread what he had written, and with the paperback open on the desk reached for the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary, Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable,* and *Whittaker's Almanack.* Referring to the first two and noting down his finds, he began his letter.

21 Grove Green Avenue,
London E11 4ZH

Dear Joy Anne Fortune,

I have read your new novel *Dreadful Night* with very little pleasure and great disappointment. Your previous work has seemed to me, while being without any literary merit whatsoever, at least to be fresh, occasionally original, and largely free from those errors of fact and slips in grammar which, I may say, characterise *Dreadful Night.*

Look first at page 24. Do you really believe "desiccated" has two s's and one c? And if you do, have your publishers no copy editor whose job it is to recognise and correct these errors? On page 82 you refer to the republic of Guinea as being in *East* Africa and as a former British possession, instead of being in West Africa and formerly French, and

on page 103 to the late General Sikorski as a one-time prime minister of Czechoslovakia rather than of Poland. You describe, on page 139, "hadith" as being the Jewish prayers for the dead instead of what it correctly means, the body of tradition and legend surrounding the Prophet Mohammed and his followers, and on the following page "tabernacle" as an entrance to a temple. Its true meaning is a portable sanctuary in which the Ark of the Covenant was carried.

Need I go on? I am weary of underlining the multifarious mistakes in your book. Needless to say, I shall buy no more of your work, and shall advise my highly literate and discerning friends to boycott it.

Yours sincerely,
Ambrose Ribbon

The threat in the last paragraph was an empty one. Ribbon had no friends and could hardly say he missed having any. He was on excellent, at least speaking, terms with his neighbours and various managers of book shops. There was a cousin in Gloucestershire he saw occasionally. Mummy had been his friend. There was no one he had ever met who could approach replacing her. He wished, as he did every day, she was back there beside him and able to read and appreciate his letter.

He addressed an envelope to Joy Anne Fortune care of her publishers—she was not one of "his" authors unwise enough to reply to him on headed writing paper—put the letter inside it, and sealed it up. Two more must be written before he left the house, one to Graham Prink pointing out mistakes in *Dancing Partners,* "lay" for "lie" in two instances and "may" for "might" in three, and the other to Jeanne Pettle to tell her that the plot and much of the dialogue in *Southern Discomfort* had been blatantly lifted from *Gone With the Wind.* He considered it the most flagrant plagiarism he had seen for a long while. In both letters he indicated how distasteful he found the authors' frequent use of obscenities, notably those words beginning with an *f* and a *c,* and the taking of the Deity's name in vain.

At five to ten Ribbon took his letters, switched off the computer, and closed the door behind him. Before going downstairs, he paid his second visit of the day to Mummy's room. He had been there for the first time since his return from Cornwall at seven the previous evening, again before he went to bed, and once more at seven this morning. While he was away his second greatest worry had been that something would be disturbed in there, an object removed or its position changed, for though he did his own housework, Glenys Next-door had a key, and often in his absence, in her own words, "popped in to see that everything was okay."

But nothing was changed. Mummy's dressing table was exactly as she had left it, the two cut-glass scent bottles with silver stoppers set one on each side of the lace-edged mat, the silver-backed

hairbrush on its glass tray alongside the hair-tidy and the pink pincushion. The wardrobe door he always left ajar so that her clothes could be seen inside, those dear garments, the afternoon dresses, the coats and skirts—Mummy had never possessed a pair of trousers—the warm winter coat, the neatly placed pairs of court shoes. Over the door, because he had seen this in an interiors magazine, he had hung, folded in two, the beautiful white and cream tapestry bedspread he had once given her but which she said was too good for daily use. On the bed lay the dear old one her own mother had worked, and on its spotless if worn bands of lace, her pink silk nightdress. He lingered, looking at it.

After a moment or two, he opened the window two inches at the top. It was a good idea to allow a little fresh air to circulate. He closed Mummy's door behind him and, carrying his letters, went downstairs. A busy day lay ahead. His tie straightened, one button only out of the three on his linen jacket done up, he set the burglar alarm. Eighteen fifty-two was the code, one-eight, five-two, the date of the first edition of *Roget's Thesaurus,* a compendium Ribbon had found useful in his work. He opened the front door and closed it just as the alarm started braying. While he was waiting on the doorstep, his ear to the keyhole, for the alarm to cease until or unless an intruder set it off again, Glenys Next-door called out a cheery, "Hiya!"

Ribbon hated this mode of address, but there was nothing he could do to stop it, any more than he could stop her calling him Amby. He smiled austerely and said good morning. Glenys Next-door—this was her own description of herself, first used when she moved into 23 Grove Green Avenue fifteen years before, "Hiya, I'm Glenys Next-door"—said it was the window cleaner's day and should she let him in.

"Why does he have to come in?" Ribbon said rather testily.

"It's his fortnight for doing the back, Amby. You know how he does the front on a Monday and the back on the Monday fortnight and inside and out on the last Monday in the month."

Like any professional with much on his mind, Ribbon found these domestic details almost unbearably irritating. Nor did he like the idea of a strange man left free to wander about his back garden. "Well, yes, I suppose so." He had never called Glenys Next-door by her given name and did not intend to begin. "You know the code, Mrs. Judd." It was appalling that she had to know the code, but since Mummy passed on and no one was in the house it was inevitable. "You do know the code, don't you?"

"Eight one five two."

"No, no, no." He must not lose his temper. Glancing up and down the street to make sure there was no one within earshot, he whispered, "One eight five two. You can remember that, can't you? I

really don't want to write it down. You never know what happens to something once it has been put in writing."

Glenys Next-door had started to laugh. "You're a funny old fusspot, you are, Amby. D'you know what I saw in your garden last night? A fox. How about that? In *Leytonstone.*"

"Really?" Foxes dig, he thought.

"They're taking refuge, you see. Escaping the hunters. Cruel, isn't it? Are you off to work?"

"Yes, and I'm late," Ribbon said, hurrying off. "Old fusspot" indeed. He was a good ten years younger than she.

Glenys Next-door had no idea what he did for a living and he intended to keep her in ignorance. "Something in the media, is it?" she had once said to Mummy. Of course "for a living" was not strictly true, implying as it did that he was paid for his work. That he was not was hardly for want of trying. He had written to twenty major publishing houses, pointing out to them that by what he did, uncovering errors in their authors' works and showing them to be unworthy of publication, he was potentially saving the publishers hundreds of thousands of pounds a year. The least they could do was offer him some emolument. He wrote to four national newspapers as well, asking for his work to receive publicity in their pages, and to the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport, in the hope of recognition of the service he performed. A change in the law was what he wanted, providing something for him in the nature of the Public Lending Right (he was vague about this) or the Value Added Tax. None of them replied, with the exception of the Department, who sent a card saying that his communication had been noted, not signed by the Secretary of State, though, but by some underling with an indecipherable signature.

It was the principle of the thing, not that he was in need of money. Thanks to Daddy, who, dying young, had left all the income from his royalties to Mummy, and thus, of course, to him. No great sum, but enough to live on if one was frugal and managing as he was. Daddy had written three textbooks before death came for him at the heartbreaking age of forty-one, and all were still in demand for use in business schools. Ribbon, because he could not help himself, in great secrecy and far from Mummy's sight, had gone through those books after his usual fashion, looking for errors. The compulsion to do this was irresistible, though he had tried to resist it, fighting against the need, conscious of the disloyalty, but finally succumbing, as another man might ultimately yield to some ludicrous autoeroticism. Alone, in the night, his bedroom door locked, he had perused Daddy's books and found—nothing.

The search was the most shameful thing he had ever done. And this not only on account of the distrust in Daddy's expertise and

acumen that it implied, but also because he had to confess to himself that he did not understand what he read and would not have known a mistake if he had seen one. He put Daddy's books away in a cupboard after that and, strangely enough, Mummy had never commented on their absence. Perhaps, her eyesight failing, she hadn't noticed.

Ribbon walked to Leytonstone tube station and sat on the seat to wait for a train. He had decided to change at Holborn and take the Piccadilly Line to Piccadilly Circus. From there it was only a short walk to Dillon's and a further few steps to Hatchard's. He acknowledged that Hatchard's was the better shop, but Dillon's guaranteed a greater anonymity to its patrons. Its assistants seemed indifferent to the activities of customers, ignoring their presence most of the time and not apparently noticing whether they stayed five minutes or half an hour. Ribbon liked that. He liked to describe himself as reserved, a private man, one who minded his own business and lived quietly. Others, in his view, would do well to be the same. As far as he was concerned, a shop assistant was there to take your money, give you your change, and say thank you. The displacement of the high street or corner shop by vast impersonal supermarkets was one of few modern innovations he could heartily approve.

The train came. It was three-quarters empty, as was usually so at this hour. He had read in the paper that London Transport was thinking of introducing Ladies Only carriages in the tube. Why not Men Only carriages as well? Preferably, when you considered what some young men were like, Middle-aged Scholarly Gentlemen Only carriages. The train stopped for a long time in the tunnel between Mile End and Bethnal Green. Naturally, passengers were offered no explanation for the delay. He waited a long time for the Piccadilly Line train, due apparently to some signalling failure outside Cockfosters, but eventually arrived at his destination just before eleven-thirty.

The sun had come out and it was very hot. The air smelt of diesel and cooking and beer, very different from Leytonstone on the verges of Epping Forest. Ribbon went into Dillon's, where no one showed the slightest interest in his arrival, and the first thing to assault his senses was an enormous pyramidal display of Kingston Marle's *Demogorgon*. Each copy was as big as the average-sized dictionary and encased in a jacket printed in silver and two shades of red. A hole in the shape of a pentagram in the front cover revealed beneath it the bandaged face of some mummified corpse. The novel had already been reviewed and the poster on the wall above the display quoted the *Sunday Express*'s encomium in exaggeratedly large type: *"Readers will have fainted with fear before page 10."*

The price, at £18.99, was a disgrace, but there was no help for it. A legitimate outlay, if ever there was one. Ribbon took a copy and, from what a shop assistant had once told him were called "dump bins," helped himself to two paperbacks of books he had already examined and commented on in hardcover. There was no sign in the whole shop of Eric Owlberg's *Paving Hell.* Ribbon's dilemma was to ask or not to ask. The young woman behind the counter put his purchases in a bag and he handed her Mummy's Direct Debit Visa card. Lightly, as if it were an afterthought, the most casual thing in the world, he asked about the new Owlberg.

"Already sold out, has it?" he said with a little laugh.

Her face was impassive. "We're expecting them in tomorrow."

He signed the receipt B.J. Ribbon and passed it to the girl without a smile. She need not think he was going to make this trip all over again tomorrow. He made his way to Hatchard's, on the way depositing the Dillon's bag in a litter bin and transferring the books into the plain plastic hold-all he carried rolled up in his pocket. If the staff at Hatchard's had seen Dillon's name on the bag he would have felt rather awkward. Now they would think he was carrying his purchases from a chemist or a photographic store.

One of them came up to him the minute he entered Hatchard's. He recognised her as the marketing manager, a small, good-looking blond woman with an accent. The very faintest of accents but still enough for Ribbon to be put off her from the start. She recognised him, too, and to his astonishment and displeasure addressed him by his name.

"Good morning, Mr. Ribbon."

Inwardly he groaned, for he remembered having had forebodings about this at the time. On one occasion he had ordered a book, he was desperate to see an early copy, and had been obliged to say who he was and give them his phone number. He said good morning in a frosty sort of voice.

"How nice to see you," she said. "I rather think you may be in search of the new Kingston Marle, am I right? *Demogorgon?* Copies came in today."

Ribbon felt terrible. The plastic of his carrier was translucent rather than transparent, but he was sure she must be able to see the silver and the two shades of red glowing through the cloudy film that covered it. He held it behind his back in a manner he hoped looked natural.

"It was *Paving Hell* I actually wanted," he muttered, wondering what rule of life or social usage made it necessary for him to explain his wishes to marketing managers.

"We have it, of course," she said with a radiant smile, and picked the paperback off a shelf. He was sure she was going to point out

to him in schoolmistressy fashion that he had already bought it in hardcover, she quite distinctly remembered, and why on earth did he want another copy. Instead she said, "Mr. Owlberg is here at this moment, signing stock for us. It's not a public signing but I'm sure he'd love to meet such a constant reader as yourself. And be happy to sign a copy of his book for you."

Ribbon hoped his shudder hadn't been visible. No, no, he was in a hurry, he had a pressing engagement at twelve-thirty on the other side of town, he couldn't wait, he'd pay for his book. . . . Thoughts raced through his mind of the things he had written to Owlberg about his work, all of it perfectly justified, of course, but galling to the author. His name would have lodged in Owlberg's mind as firmly as Owlberg's had in his. Imagining the reaction of *Paving Hell*'s author when he looked up from his signing, saw the face and heard the name of his stern judge, made him shudder again. He almost ran out of the shop. How fraught with dangers visits to the West End of London were! Next time he came up he'd stick to the City or Bloomsbury. There was a very good Waterstones in the Grays Inn Road. Deciding to walk up to Oxford Circus tube station and thus obviate a train change, he stopped on the way to draw money out from a cash dispenser. He punched in Mummy's pin number, her birth date, 1-5-27, and drew from the slot one hundred pounds in crisp new notes.

Most authors to whom Ribbon wrote his letters of complaint either did not reply at all or wrote back in a conciliatory way to admit their mistakes and promise these would be rectified for the paperback edition. Only one, out of all the hundreds, if not thousands, who had had a letter from him, reacted violently and with threats. This was a woman called Selma Gunn. He had written to her, care of her publishers, criticising, but quite mildly, her novel *A Dish of Snakes,* remarking how irritating it was to read so many verbless sentences and pointing out the absurdity of her premise that Shakespeare, far from being a sixteenth-century English poet and dramatist, was in fact an Italian astrologer born in Verona and a close friend of Leonardo da Vinci. Her reply came within four days, a vituperative response in which she several times used the f-word, called him an ignorant swollen-headed nonentity, and threatened legal action. Sure enough, on the following day a letter arrived from Ms. Gunn's solicitors, suggesting that many of his remarks were actionable, all were indefensible, and they awaited his reply with interest.

Ribbon had been terrified. He was unable to work, incapable of thinking of anything but Ms. Gunn's letter and the one from Evans Richler Sabatini. At first he said nothing to Mummy, though she, of course, with her customary sensitive acuity, could

tell something was wrong. Two days later he received another letter from Selma Gunn. This time she drew his attention to certain astrological predictions in her book, told him that he was one of those Nostradamus had predicted would be destroyed when the world came to an end next year and that she herself had occult powers. She ended by demanding an apology.

Ribbon did not, of course, believe in the supernatural, but, like most of us, was made to feel deeply uneasy when cursed or menaced by something in the nature of necromancy. He sat down at his computer and composed an abject apology. He was sorry, he wrote, he had intended no harm, Ms. Gunn was entitled to express her beliefs; her theory as to Shakespeare's origins was just as valid as identifying him with Bacon or Ben Jonson. It took it out of him, writing that letter, and when Mummy, observing his pallor and trembling hands, finally asked him what was wrong, he told her everything. He showed her the letter of apology. Masterful as ever, she took it from him and tore it up.

"Absolute nonsense," she said. He could tell she was furious. "On what grounds can the stupid woman bring an action, I should like to know? Take no notice. Ignore it. It will soon stop, you mark my words."

"But what harm can it do, Mummy?"

"You coward," Mummy said witheringly. "Are you a man or a mouse?"

Ribbon asked her, politely but as manfully as he could, not to talk to him like that. It was almost their first quarrel—but not their last.

He had bowed to her edict and stuck it out in accordance with her instructions, as he did in most cases. And she had been right, for he heard not another word from Selma Gunn or from Evans Richler Sabatini. The whole awful business was over and Ribbon felt he had learnt something from it—to be brave, to be resolute, to soldier on. But this did not include confronting Owlberg in the flesh, even though the author of *Paving Hell* had promised him in a letter responding to Ribbon's criticism of the hardcover edition of his book that the errors of fact he had pointed out would all be rectified in the paperback. His publishers, he wrote, had also received Ribbon's letter of complaint and were as pleased as he to have had such informed critical comment. Pleased, my foot! What piffle! Ribbon had snorted over this letter, which was a lie from start to finish. The man wasn't pleased, he was aghast and humiliated, as he should be.

Ribbon sat down in his living room to check in the paperback edition for the corrections so glibly promised. He read down here and wrote upstairs. The room was almost as Mummy had left it. The changes were only in that more books and bookshelves had

been added and in the photographs in the silver frames. He had taken out the picture of himself as a baby and himself as a schoolboy and replaced them with one of his parents' wedding, Daddy in Air Force uniform, Mummy in cream costume and small cream hat, and one of Daddy in his academic gown and mortarboard. There had never been one of Ribbon himself in similar garments. Mummy, for his own good, had decided he would be better off at home with her, leading a quiet, sheltered life, than at a university. Had he regrets? A degree would have been useless to a man with a private income, as Mummy had pointed out, a man who had all the resources of an excellent public library system to educate him.

He opened *Paving Hell.* He had a foreboding before he had even turned to the middle of Chapter One, where the first mistake occurred, that nothing would have been put right. All the errors would be still there, for Owlberg's promises meant nothing, he had probably never passed Ribbon's comments on to the publishers; and they, if they had received the letter he wrote them, had never answered it. For all that, he was still enraged when he found he was right. Didn't the man care? Was money and a kind of low notoriety, for you couldn't call it fame, all he was interested in? None of the errors had been corrected. No, that wasn't quite true; one had. On page ninety-nine, Owlberg's ridiculous statement that the One World Trade Center tower in New York was the world's tallest building had been altered. Ribbon noted down the remaining mistakes, ready to write to Owlberg next day. A vituperative letter it would be, spitting venom, catechising illiteracy, carelessness, and a general disregard (contempt?) for the sensibilities of readers. And Owlberg would reply to it in his previous pusillanimous way, making empty promises, for he was no Selma Gunn.

Ribbon fetched himself a small whisky and water. It was six o'clock. A cushion behind his head, his feet up on the footstool Mummy had embroidered, but covered now with a plastic sheet, he opened *Demogorgon.* This was the first book by Kingston Marle he had ever read, but he had some idea of what Marle wrote about. Murder, violence, crime, but instead of a detective detecting and reaching a solution, supernatural interventions, demonic possession, ghosts, as well as a great deal of unnatural or perverted sex, cannibalism, and torture. Occult manifestations occurred side by side with rational, if unedifying, events. Innocent people were caught up in the magical dabblings, frequently going wrong, of so-called adepts. Ribbon had learnt this from the reviews he had read of Marle's books, most of which, surprisingly to him, received good notices in periodicals of repute. That is, the serious and reputable critics engaged by literary editors to comment on his work, praised the quality of the prose as vastly superior to the general run of thriller writing. His characters, they said, convinced, and he

induced in the reader a very real sense of terror, while a deep vein of moral theology underlay his plot. They also said that his serious approach to mumbo jumbo and such nonsense as evil spirits and necromancy was ridiculous, but they said it *en passant* and without much enthusiasm. Ribbon read the blurb inside the front cover and turned to chapter one.

Almost the first thing he spotted was an error on page two. He made a note of it. Another occurred on page seven. Whether Marle's prose was beautiful or not he scarcely noticed, he was too incensed by errors of fact, spelling mistakes, and grammatical howlers. For a while, that is. The first part of the novel concerned a man living alone in London, a man in his own situation whose mother had died not long before. There was another parallel: The man's name was Charles Ambrose. Well, it was common enough as surname, much less so as baptismal name, and only a paranoid person would think any connection was intended.

Charles Ambrose was rich and powerful, with a house in London, a mansion in the country, and a flat in Paris. All these places seemed to be haunted in various ways by something or other but the odd thing was that Ribbon could see what that reviewer meant by readers fainting with terror before page ten. He wasn't going to faint, but he could feel himself growing increasingly alarmed. "Frightened" would be too strong a word. Every few minutes he found himself glancing up towards the closed door or looking into the dim and shadowy corners of the room. He was such a reader, so exceptionally well-read, that he had thought himself proof against this sort of thing. Why, he had read hundreds of ghost stories in his time. As a boy he had inured himself by reading first Dennis Wheatley, then Stephen King, not to mention M.R. James. And this *Demogorgon* was so absurd, the supernatural activity the reader was supposed to accept so pathetic, that he wouldn't have gone on with it but for the mistakes he kept finding on almost every page.

After a while he got up, opened the door, and put the hall light on. He had never been even mildly alarmed by Selma Gunn's *A Dish of Snakes,* nor touched with disquiet by any effusions of Joy Anne Fortune's. What was the matter with him? He came back into the living room, put on the central light and an extra table lamp, the one with the shade Mummy had decorated with pressed flowers. That was better. Anyone passing could see in now, something he usually disliked, but for some reason he didn't feel like drawing the curtains. Before sitting down again he fetched himself some more whisky.

This passage about the mummy Charles Ambrose brought back with him after the excavations he had carried out in Egypt was very unpleasant. Why had he never noticed before that the

diminutive by which he had always addressed his mother was the same word as that applied to embalmed bodies? Especially nasty was the paragraph where Ambrose's girlfriend Kaysa reaches in semidarkness for a garment in her wardrobe and her wrist is grasped by a scaly paw. This was so upsetting that Ribbon almost missed noticing that Marle spelt the adjective "scaley." He had a sense of the room being less light than a few moments before, as if the bulbs in the lamps were weakening before entirely failing. One of them did indeed fail while his eyes were on it—flickered, buzzed, and went out. Of course, Ribbon knew perfectly well this was not a supernatural phenomenon but simply the result of the bulb coming to the end of its life after a thousand hours or whatever it was. He switched off the lamp, extracted the bulb when it was cool, shook it to hear the rattle that told him its usefulness was over, and took it outside to the wastebin. The kitchen was in darkness. He put on the light and the outside light which illuminated part of the garden. That was better. A siren wailing on a police car going down Grove Green Road made him jump. He helped himself to more whisky, a rare indulgence for him. He was no drinker.

Supper now. It was almost eight. Ribbon always set the table for himself, either here or in the dining room, put out a linen table napkin in its silver ring, a jug of water and a glass, and the silver pepper pot and salt cellar. This was Mummy's standard and if he had deviated from it he would have felt he was letting her down. But this evening, as he made toast and scrambled two large free-range eggs in a buttered pan, filled a small bowl with mandarin oranges from a can, and poured evaporated milk over them, he found himself most unwilling to venture into the dining room. It was, at the best of times, a gloomy chamber, its rather small window set deep in bookshelves, its furnishing largely a reptilian shade of brownish-green Mummy always called Crocodile. Poor Mummy only kept the room like that because the crocodile green had been Daddy's choice when they were first married. There was only a central light, a bulb in a parchment shade, suspended above the middle of the mahogany table. Books covered, as yet, only two sides of the room, but new shelves had been bought and were only waiting for him to put them up. One of the pictures on the wall facing the window had been most distasteful to Ribbon when he was a small boy, a lithograph of some Old Testament scene and entitled "Saul Encounters the Witch of Endor." Mummy, saying he should not fear painted devils, refused to take it down. He was in no mood tonight to have that lowering over him while he ate his scrambled eggs.

Nor did he much fancy the kitchen. Once or twice, while he was sitting there, Glenys Next-door's cat had looked through the win-

dow at him. It was a black cat, totally black all over, its eyes large and of a very pale crystalline yellow. Of course, he knew what it was and had never in the past been alarmed by it, but somehow he sensed it would be different tonight. If Tinks Next-door pushed its black face and yellow eyes against the glass it might give him a serious shock. He put the plates on a tray and carried it back into the living room with the replenished whisky glass.

It was both his job and his duty to continue reading *Demogorgon,* but there was more to it than that, Ribbon admitted to himself in a rare burst of honesty. He *wanted* to go on, he wanted to know what happened to Charles Ambrose and Kaysa de Floris; whose the embalmed corpse was and how it had been liberated from its arcane and archaic (writers always muddled up those adjectives) sarcophagus, and whether the mysterious and saintly rescuer was in fact the reincarnated Joseph of Arimathea and the vessel he carried the Holy Grail. By the time Mummy's grandmother clock in the hall struck eleven, half an hour past his bedtime, he had read half the book and would no longer have described himself as merely alarmed. He was frightened. So frightened that he had to stop reading.

Twice during the course of the past hour he had refilled his whisky glass, half in the hope that strong drink would induce sleep when, finally, at a quarter past eleven, he went to bed. He passed a miserable night, worse even than those he experienced in the weeks after Mummy's death. It was, for instance, a mistake to take *Demogorgon* upstairs with him. He hardly knew why he had done so, for he certainly had no intention of reading any more of it that night, if ever. The final chapter he had read—well, he could scarcely say what had upset him most, the orgy in the middle of the Arabian desert in which Charles and Kaysa had both enthusiastically taken part, wallowing in perverted practices, or the intervention, disguised as a Bedouin tribesman, of the demon Kabadeus, later revealing in his nakedness his hermaphrodite body with huge female breasts and trifurcated member.

As always, Ribbon placed his slippers by the bed. He pushed the book a little under the bed but he couldn't forget that it was there. In the darkness he seemed to hear sounds he had never heard, or never noticed, before: a creaking as if a foot trod first on one stair, then the next; a rattling of the window pane, though it was a windless night; a faint rustling on the bedroom door as if a thing in graveclothes had scrabbled with its decaying hand against the panelling. He put on the bedlamp. Its light was faint, showing him deep wells of darkness in the corners of the room. He told himself not to be a fool. Demons, ghosts, evil spirits had no existence. If only he hadn't brought the wretched book up with him! He would be better, he would be able to sleep, he was sure, if the book wasn't

there, exerting a malign influence. Then something dreadful occurred to him. He couldn't take the book outside, downstairs, away. He hadn't the nerve. It would not be possible for him to open the door, go down the stairs, carrying that book.

The whisky, asserting itself in the mysterious way it had, began a banging in his head. A flicker of pain ran from his eyebrow down his temple to his ear. He climbed out of bed, crept across the floor, his heart pounding, and put on the central light. That was a little better. He drew back the bedroom curtains and screamed. He actually screamed aloud, frightening himself even more with the noise he made. Tinks Next-door was sitting on the window sill, staring impassively at the curtain linings, now into Ribbon's face. It took no notice of the scream but lifted a paw, licked it, and began washing its face.

Ribbon pulled the curtains back. He sat down on the end of the bed, breathing deeply. It was two in the morning, a pitch-black night, ill-lit by widely spaced yellow chemical lamps. What he would really have liked to do was rush across the passage—do it quickly, don't think about it—into Mummy's room, burrow down into Mummy's bed, and spend the night there. If he could only do that he would be safe, would sleep, be comforted. It would be like creeping back into Mummy's arms. But he couldn't do it, it was impossible. For one thing, it would be a violation of the sacred room, the sacrosanct bed, never to be disturbed since Mummy spent her last night in it. And for another, he dared not venture out onto the landing.

Trying to court sleep by thinking of himself and Mummy in her last years helped a little. The two of them sitting down to an evening meal in the dining room, a white candle alight on the table, its soft light dispelling much of the gloom and ugliness. Mummy had enjoyed television when a really good programme was on, *Brideshead Revisited,* for instance, or something from Jane Austen. She had always liked the curtains drawn, even before it was dark, and it was his job to do it, then fetch each of them a dry sherry. Sometimes they read aloud to each other in the gentle lamplight, Mummy choosing to read her favourite Victorian writers to him, he picking a book from his work, correcting the grammar as he read. Or she would talk about Daddy and her first meeting with him in a library, she searching the shelves for a novel whose author's name she had forgotten, he offering to help her and finding—triumphantly—Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne.*

But all these memories of books and reading pulled Ribbon brutally back to *Demogorgon.* The scaly hand was the worst thing and, second to that, the cloud or ball of visible darkness that arose in the lighted room when Charles Ambrose cast salt and asafoetida into the pentagram. He reached down to find the lead

on the bedlamp where the switch was and encountered something cold and leathery. It was only the tops of his slippers, which he always left just beside his bed, but he had once again screamed before he remembered. The lamp on, he lay still, breathing deeply. Only when the first light of morning, a grey trickle of dawn, came creeping under and between the curtains at about six, did he fall into a troubled doze.

Morning makes an enormous difference to fear and to depression. It wasn't long before Ribbon was castigating himself for a fool and blaming the whisky and the scrambled eggs for his disturbed night rather than Kingston Marle. However, he would read no more of *Demogorgon.* No matter how much he might wish to know the fate of Charles and Kaysa or the identity of the bandaged reeking thing, he preferred not to expose himself any longer to this distasteful rubbish or Marle's grammatical lapses.

A hot shower, followed by a cold one, did a lot to restore him. He breakfasted, but in the kitchen. When he had finished he went into the dining room and had a look at "Saul Encounters the Witch of Endor." It was years since he had even glanced at it, which was no doubt why he had never noticed how much like Mummy the witch looked. Of course, Mummy would never have worn diaphanous gray draperies and she had all her own teeth, but there was something about the nose and mouth, the burning eyes and the pointing finger, this last particularly characteristic of Mummy, that reminded him of her.

He dismissed the disloyal thought but, on an impulse, took the picture down and put it on the floor, its back towards him, to lean against the wall. It left behind it a paler rectangle on the ochre-coloured wallpaper but the new bookshelves would cover that. Ribbon went upstairs to his study and his daily labours. First, the letter to Owlberg.

21 Grove Green Avenue,
London E11 4ZH

Dear Sir,

In spite of your solemn promise to me as to the correction of errors in your new paperback publication, I find you have fulfilled this undertaking only to the extent of making *one single amendment.*

This, of course, in anyone's estimation, is a gross insult to your readers, displaying as it does your contempt for them and for the TRUTH. I am sending a copy of this letter to your publishers and await an explanation both from you and them.

Yours faithfully,
Ambrose Ribbon

Letting off steam always put him in a good mood. He felt a joy-

ful adrenalin rush and inspired to write a congratulatory letter for a change. This one was addressed to: The Manager, Dillon's Bookshop, Piccadilly, London W1.

21 Grove Green Avenue,
London E11 4ZH

Dear Sir or Madam, *(There were a lot of women taking men's jobs these days, poking their noses in where they weren't needed.)*

I write to congratulate you on your excellent organisation, management, and the, alas, now old-fashioned attitude you have to your book buyers. I refer, of course, to the respectful distance and detachment maintained between you and them. It makes a refreshing change from the over-familiarity displayed by many of your competitors.

Yours faithfully,
Ambrose Ribbon

Before writing to the author of the novel which had been directly responsible for his loss of sleep, Ribbon needed to look something up. A king of Egypt of the seventh century B.C. called Psamtik I he had come across before in someone else's book. Marle referred to him as Psammetichus I and Ribbon was nearly sure this was wrong. He would have to look it up and the obvious place to do this was the *Encyclopaedia Britannica.*

Others might have recourse to the Internet. Because Mummy had despised such electronic devices, Ribbon did so too. He wasn't even on the Net and never would be. The present difficulty was that Psamtik I would be found in volume eight of the *Micropaedia,* the one that covered subjects from *Piranha* to *Scurfy.* This volume he had had no occasion to use since Mummy's death, though his eyes sometimes strayed fearfully in its direction. There it was placed, in the bookshelves to the left of where he sat facing the window, bound in its black, blue, and gold, its position between *Montpel Piranesi* and *Scurlock Tirah.* He was very reluctant to touch it but he *had to.* Mummy might be dead, but her injunctions and instructions lived on. Don't be deterred, she had often said, don't be deflected by anything from what you know to be right, not by weariness, nor indifference, nor doubt. Press on, tell the truth, shame these people.

There would not be a mark on *Piranha Scurfy,* he knew that, nothing but his fingerprints and they, of course, were invisible. It had been used and put back and was unchanged. Cautiously he advanced upon the shelf where the ten volumes of the *Micropaedia* and the nineteen of the *Macropaedia* were arranged and put out his hand to Volume VIII. As he lifted it down he noticed something different about it, different, that is, from the others. Not a mark, not a stain or scar, but a slight loosening of the thousand and two pages as if at some time it had been mistreated, violently

shaken or in some similar way abused. It had. He shivered a little but he opened the book and turned the pages to the P's. It was somewhat disappointing to find that Marle had been right. Psamtik was right and so was the Greek form, Psammetichus I; it was optional. Still, there were enough errors in the book, a plethora of them, without that. Ribbon wrote as follows, saying nothing about his fear, his bad night, or his interest in *Demogorgon's* characters:

21 Grove Green Avenue,
London E11 4ZH

Sir,

Your new farrago of nonsense (I will not dignify it with the name of "novel" or even "thriller") is a disgrace to you, your publishers, and those reviewers corrupt enough to praise your writing. As to the market you serve, once it has sampled this revolting affront to English literary tradition and our noble language, I can hardly imagine its members will remain your readers for long. The greatest benefit to the fiction scene conceivable would be for you to retire, disappear, and take your appalling effusions with you into outer darkness.

The errors you have made in the text are numerous. On page 30 alone there are three. You cannot say "less people." "Fewer people" is correct. Only the illiterate would write: "He gave it to Charles and I." By "mitigate against" I suppose you mean "militate against." More howlers occur on pages 34, 67, and 103. It is unnecessary to write "meet with." "Meet" alone will do. "A copy" of something is sufficient. "A copying" is a nonsense.

Have you any education at all? Or were you one of those children who somehow missed schooling because their parents were neglectful or itinerant? You barely seem able to understand the correct location of an apostrophe, still less the proper usage of a colon. Your book has wearied me too much to allow me to write more. Indeed, I have not finished it and shall not. I am too fearful of its corrupting my own prose.

He wrote "Sir" without the customary endearment so that he could justifiably sign himself "yours truly." He reread his letters and paused awhile over the third one. It was very strong and uncompromising. But there was not a phrase in it he didn't sincerely mean (for all his refusing to end with that word) and he told himself that he who hesitates is lost. Often when he wrote a really vituperative letter he allowed himself to sleep on it, not posting it till the following day and occasionally, though seldom, not sending it at all. But he quickly put all three into envelopes and addressed them, Kingston Marle's care of his publishers. He would take them to the box at once.

While he was upstairs his own post had come. Two envelopes lay on the mat. The direction on one was typed, on the other he recog-

nised the handwriting of his cousin Frank's wife Susan. He opened that one first. Susan wrote to remind him that he was spending the following weekend with herself and her husband at their home in the Cotswolds, as he did at roughly this time every year. Frank or she herself would be at Kingham station to pick him up. She supposed he would be taking the one-fifty train from Paddington to Hereford which reached Kingham at twenty minutes past three. If he had other plans perhaps he would let her know.

Ribbon snorted quietly. He didn't want to go, he never did, but they so loved having him he could hardly refuse after so many years. This would be his first visit without Mummy, or Auntie Bee as they called her. No doubt they, too, desperately missed her. He opened the other letter and had a pleasant surprise. It was from Joy Anne Fortune and she gave her own address, a street in Bournemouth, not her publishers' or agents'. She must have written by return of post.

Her tone was humble and apologetic. She began by thanking him for pointing out the errors in her novel *Dreadful Night*. Some of them were due to her own carelessness but others she blamed on the printer. Ribbon had heard that one before and didn't think much of it. Ms. Fortune assured him that all the mistakes would be corrected if the book ever went into paperback, though she thought it unlikely that this would happen. Here Ribbon agreed with her. However, this kind of letter—though rare—was always gratifying. It made all his hard work worthwhile.

He put stamps on the letters to Eric Owlberg, Kingston Marle, and Dillon's and took them to the postbox. Again he experienced a quiver of dread in the pit of his stomach when he looked at the envelope addressed to Marle and recalled the words and terms he had used. But he drew strength from remembering how stalwartly he had withstood Selma Gunn's threats and defied her. There was no point in being in his job if he was unable to face resentful opposition. Mummy was gone, but he must soldier on alone and he repeated to himself Paul's words about fighting the good fight, running a straight race, and keeping the faith. He held the envelope in his hand for a moment or two after the Owlberg and Dillon's letters had fallen down inside the box. How much easier it would be, what a lightening of his spirits would take place, if he simply dropped that envelope into a litter bin rather than this post box! On the other hand, he hadn't built up his reputation for uncompromising criticism and stern incorruptible judgment by being cowardly. In fact, he hardly knew why he was hesitating now. His usual behaviour was far from this. What was wrong with him? There in the sunny street a sudden awful dread took hold of him, that when he put his hand to that aperture in the postbox

and inserted the letter a scaly paw would reach out of it and seize hold of his wrist. How stupid could he be? How irrational? He reminded himself of his final quarrel with Mummy, those awful words she had spoken, and quickly, without more thought, he dropped the letter into the box and walked away.

At least they hadn't to put up with that ghastly old woman, Susan Ribbon remarked to her husband as she prepared to drive to Kingham station. Old Ambrose was a pussycat compared to Auntie Bee.

"You say that," said Frank. "You haven't got to take him down the pub."

"I've got to listen to him moaning about being too hot or too cold, or the bread being wrong or the tea, or the birds singing too early or us going to bed too late."

"It's only two days," said Frank. "I suppose I do it for my uncle Charlie's sake. He was a lovely man."

"Considering you were only four when he died, I don't see how you know."

Susan got to Kingham at twenty-two minutes past three and found Ambrose standing in the station approach, swivelling his head from left to right, up the road and down, a peevish look on his face. "I was beginning to wonder where you were," he said. "Punctuality is the politeness of princes, you know. I expect you heard my mother say that. It was a favourite dictum of hers."

In her opinion, Ambrose appeared far from well. His face, usually rather full and flabby, had a pasty, sunken look. "I haven't been sleeping," he said as they drove through Moreton-in-Marsh. "I've had some rather unpleasant dreams."

"It's all those highbrow books you read. You've been overtaxing your brain." Susan didn't exactly know what it was Ambrose did for a living. Some sort of freelance editing, Frank thought. The kind of thing you could do from home. It wouldn't bring in much, but Ambrose didn't need much, Auntie Bee being in possession of Uncle Charlie's royalties. "And you've suffered a terrible loss. It's only a few months since your mother died. But you'll soon feel better down here. Good fresh country air, peace and quiet, it's a far cry from London."

They would go into Oxford tomorrow, she said, do some shopping, visit Blackwell's, perhaps do a tour of the colleges and then have lunch at the Randolph. She had asked some of her neighbours in for drinks at six, then they would have a quiet supper and watch a video. Ambrose nodded, not showing much interest. Susan told herself to be thankful for small mercies. At least there was no Auntie Bee. On that old witch's last visit with Ambrose, the year before she died, she had told Susan's friend from Stow that

her skirt was too short for someone with middle-aged knees, and at ten-thirty informed the people who had come to dinner that it was time they went home.

When he had said hallo to Frank, she showed Ambrose up to his room. It was the one he always had, but he seemed unable to remember the way to it from one year to the next. She had made a few alterations. For one thing, it had been redecorated, and for another, she had changed the books in the shelf by the bed. A great reader herself, she thought it rather dreary always to have the same selection of reading matter in the guest bedroom.

Ambrose came down to tea looking grim. "Are you a fan of Mr. Kingston Marle, Susan?"

"He's my favourite author," she said, surprised.

"I see. Then there's no more to be said, is there?" Ambrose proceeded to say more. "I rather dislike having a whole shelf full of his works by my bed. I've put them out on the landing." As an afterthought, he added, "I hope you don't mind."

After that, Susan decided against telling her husband's cousin the prime purpose of their planned visit to Oxford next day. She poured him a cup of tea and handed him a slice of madeira cake. Manfully, Frank said he would take Ambrose to see the horses and then they might stroll down to the Cross Keys for a nourishing glass of something.

"Not whisky, I hope," said Ambrose.

"Lemonade, if you like," said Frank in an out-of-character sarcastic voice.

When they had gone, Susan went upstairs and retrieved the seven novels of Kingston Marle which Ambrose had stacked on the floor outside his bedroom door. She was particularly fond of *Evil Incarnate* and noticed that its dust jacket had a tear in the front on the bottom right-hand side. That tear had certainly not been there when she put the books on the shelf two days before. It looked, too, as if the jacket of *Wickedness in High Places* had been removed, screwed up in an angry fist, and later replaced. Why on earth would Ambrose do such a thing?

She returned the books to her own bedroom. Of course, Ambrose was a strange creature. You could expect nothing else with that monstrous old woman for a mother, his sequestered life, and, whatever Frank might say about his being a freelance editor, the probability that he subsisted on a small private income and had never actually worked for his living. He had never married nor even had a girlfriend, as far as Susan could make out. What did he do all day? These weekends, though only occurring annually, were terribly tedious and trying. Last year he had awakened her and Frank by knocking on their bedroom door at three in the morning to complain about a ticking clock in his room. Then there had been

the business of the dry-cleaning spray. A splash of olive oil had left a pinpoint spot on the (already not very clean) jacket of Ambrose's navy blue suit. He had averred that the stain remover Susan had in the cupboard left it untouched, though Susan and Frank could see no mark at all after it had been applied, and insisted on their driving him into Cheltenham for a can of a particular kind of dry-cleaning spray. By then it was after five, and by the time they got there all possible purveyors of the spray were closed till Monday. Ambrose had gone on and on about that stain on his jacket right up to the moment Frank dropped him at Kingham station on Sunday afternoon.

The evening passed uneventfully and without any real problems. It was true that Ambrose remarked on the silk trousers she had changed into, saying on a slightly acrimonious note that reminded Susan of Auntie Bee what a pity it was that skirts would soon go entirely out of fashion. He left most of his pheasant *en casserole,* though without comment. Susan and Frank lay awake a long while, occasionally giggling and expecting a knock at their door. None came. The silence of the night was broken only by the melancholy hooting of owls.

A fine morning, though not hot, and Oxford particularly beautiful in the sunshine. When they had parked the car they strolled up The High and had coffee in a small select cafe outside which tables and chairs stood on the wide pavement. The Ribbons, however, went inside where it was rather gloomy and dim. Ambrose deplored the adoption by English restaurants of Continental habits totally unsuited to what he called "our island climate." He talked about his mother and the gap in the company her absence caused, interrupting his own monologue to ask in a querulous tone why Susan kept looking at her watch.

"We have no particular engagement, do we? We are, as might be said, free as air?"

"Oh, quite," Susan said. "That's exactly right."

But it wasn't *exactly* right. She resisted glancing at her watch again. There was, after all, a clock on the cafe wall. So long as they were out of there by ten to eleven they would be in plenty of time. She didn't want to spend half the morning standing in a queue. Ambrose went on talking about Auntie Bee, how she lived in a slower-paced and more gracious past, how, much as he missed her, he was glad for her sake she hadn't survived to see the dawn of a new, and doubtless worse, millennium.

They left at eight minutes to eleven and walked to Blackwell's. Ambrose was in his element in bookshops, which was partly, though only partly, why they had come. The signing was advertised in the window and inside, though there was no voice on a

public address system urging customers to buy and get the author's signature. And there he was, sitting at the end of a table loaded with copies of his new book. A queue there was, but only a short one. Susan calculated that by the time she had selected her copy of *Demogorgon* and paid for it she would be no further back than eighth in line, a matter of waiting ten minutes.

She hadn't counted on Ambrose's extraordinary reaction. Of course, she was well aware—he had seen to that—of his antipathy to the works of Kingston Marle, but not that it should take such a violent form. At first, the author, and perhaps also the author's name, had been hidden from Ambrose's view by her own back and Frank's and the press of people around him. But as that crowd for some reason melted away, Frank turned round to say a word to his cousin, and she went to collect the book she had reserved, Kingston Marle lifted his head and seemed to look straight at Frank and Ambrose.

He was a curious-looking man, tall and with a lantern-shaped but not unattractive face, his chin deep and his forehead high. A mass of long dark womanish hair sprang from the top of that arched brow, flowed straight back, and descended to his collar in full, rather untidy curves. His mouth was wide and with the sensitive look lips shaped like this usually give to a face. Dark eyes skimmed over Frank, then Ambrose, and came to rest on her. He smiled. Whether it was this smile or the expression in Marle's eyes that had the effect on Ambrose it apparently did, Susan never knew. Ambrose let out a little sound, not quite a cry, more a grunt of protest. She heard him say to Frank, "Excuse me—must go—stuffy in here—can't breathe—just pop out for some fresh air," and he was gone, running faster than she would have believed him capable of.

When she was younger, she would have thought it right to go after him, ask what was wrong, could she help, and so on. She would have left her book, given up the chance of getting it signed, and given all her attention to Ambrose. But she was older now and no longer believed it was necessary inevitably to put others first. As it was, Ambrose's hasty departure had lost her a place in the queue and she found herself at number ten. Frank joined her.

"What was all that about?"

"Some nonsense about not being able to breathe. The old boy gets funny ideas in his head, just like his old mum. You don't think she's been reincarnated in him, do you?"

Susan laughed. "He'd have to be a baby for that to have happened, wouldn't he?"

She asked Kingston Marle to inscribe the book on the title page "For Susan Ribbon." While he was doing so and adding, "with best

wishes from the author, Kingston Marle," he told her hers was a very unusual name. Had she ever met anyone else called Ribbon?

"No, I haven't. I believe we're the only ones in this country."

"And there aren't many of us," said Frank. "Our son is the last of the Ribbons but he's only sixteen."

"Interesting," said Marle politely.

Susan wondered if she dared. She took a deep breath. "I admire your work very much. If I sent you some of my books—I mean, your books—and if I put in the postage, would you—would you sign those for me, too?"

"Of course. It would be a pleasure."

Marle gave her a radiant smile. He rather wished he could have asked her to have lunch with him at the Lemon Tree instead of having to go to the Randolph with this earnest bookseller. Susan, of course, had no inkling of this and, clutching her signed book in its Blackwell's bag, she went in search of Ambrose. He was standing outside on the pavement, staring at the roadway, his hands clasped behind his back. She touched his arm and he flinched.

"Are you all right?"

He spun round, nearly cannoning into her. "Of course I'm all right. It was very hot and stuffy in there, that's all. What have you got in there? Not his latest?"

Susan was getting cross. She asked herself why she was obliged to put up with this year after year, perhaps until they all died. In silence, she took *Demogorgon* out of the bag and handed it to him. Ambrose took it in his fingers as someone might pick up a package of decaying refuse prior to dropping it in an incinerator, his nostrils wrinkling and his eyebrows raised. He opened it. As he looked at the title page his expression and his whole demeanour underwent a violent change. His face had gone a deep mottled red and a muscle under one eye began to twitch. Susan thought he was going to hurl the book in among the passing traffic. Instead he thrust it back at her and said in a very curt, abrupt voice, "I'd like to go home now. I'm not well."

Frank said, "Why don't we all go into the Randolph—we're lunching there anyway—have a quiet drink and a rest and I'm sure you'll soon feel better, Ambrose. It *is* a warm day and there was quite a crowd in there. I don't care for crowds myself, I know how you feel."

"You don't know how I feel at all. You've just made that very plain. I don't want to go to the Randolph, I want to go home."

There was little they could do about it. Susan, who seldom lunched out and sometimes grew very tired of cooking, was disappointed. But you can't force an obstinate man to go into an hotel and drink sherry if he is unwilling to do this. They went back to the car park and Frank drove home. When she and Frank had a

single guest, it was usually Susan's courteous habit to sit in the back of the car and offer the visitor the passenger seat. She had done this on the way to Oxford, but this time she sat next to Frank and left the back to Ambrose. He sat in the middle of the seat, obstructing Frank's view in the rear mirror. Once, when Frank stopped at a red light, she thought she felt Ambrose trembling, but it might only have been the engine, which was inclined to judder.

On their return he went straight up to his room without explanation and remained there, drink-less, lunch-less, and later on, tea-less. Susan read her new book and was soon totally absorbed in it. She could well understand what the reviewer had meant when he wrote about readers fainting with fear, though in fact she herself had not fainted but only felt pleasurably terrified. Just the same, she was glad Frank was there, a large comforting presence, intermittently reading *The Times* and watching the golf on television. Susan wondered why archaeologists went on excavating tombs in Egypt when they knew the risk of being laid under a curse or bringing home a demon. Much wiser to dig up a bit of Oxfordshire as a party of archaeology students were doing down the road. But Charles Ambrose—how funny he should share a name with such a very different man!—was nothing if not brave, and Susan felt total empathy with Kaysa de Floris when she told him one midnight, smoking *kif* on Mount Ararat, *"I could never put my body and soul into the keeping of a coward."*

The bit about the cupboard was almost too much for her. She decided to shine a torch into her wardrobe that night before she hung up her dress. And make sure Frank was in the room. Frank's roaring with laughter at her she wouldn't mind at all. It was terrible, that chapter where Charles first sees the small dark "curled-up" shape in the corner of the room. Susan had no difficulty in imagining her hero's feelings. The trouble (or the wonderful thing) was that Kingston Marle wrote so well. Whatever people might say about only the plot and the action and suspense being of importance in this sort of book, there was no doubt that good literary writing made threats, danger, terror, fear, and a dark nameless dread immeasurably more real. Susan had to lay the book down at six; their friends were coming in for a drink at half-past.

She put on a long skirt and silk sweater, having first made Frank come upstairs with her, open the wardrobe door, and demonstrate, while shaking with mirth, that there was no scaly paw inside. Then she knocked on Ambrose's door. He came at once, his sports jacket changed for a dark grey, almost black suit, which he had perhaps bought new for Auntie Bee's funeral. That was an occasion she and Frank had not been asked to. Probably Ambrose had attended it alone.

"I hadn't forgotten about your party," he said in a mournful tone.

"Are you feeling better?"

"A little." Downstairs, his eye fell at once on *Demogorgon.* "Susan, I wonder if you would oblige me and put that book away. I hope I'm not asking too much. It is simply that I would find it extremely distasteful if there were to be any discussion of that book in my presence among your friends this evening."

Susan took the book upstairs and put it on her bedside cabinet. "We are only expecting four people, Ambrose," she said. "It's hardly a party."

"A gathering," he said. "Seven is a gathering."

For years she had been trying to identify the character in fiction of whom Ambrose Ribbon reminded her. A children's book, she thought it was. *Alice in Wonderland? The Wind in the Willows?* Suddenly she knew. It was Eeyore, the lugubrious donkey in *Winnie the Pooh.* He even looked rather like Eeyore, with his melancholy grey face and stooping shoulders. For the first time, perhaps the first time ever, she felt sorry for him. Poor Ambrose, prisoner of a selfish mother. Presumably, when she died, she had left those royalties to him, after all. Susan distinctly remembered one unpleasant occasion when the two of them had been staying and Auntie Bee had suddenly announced her intention of leaving everything she had to the Royal National Lifeboat Institute. She must have changed her mind.

Susan voiced these feelings to her husband in bed that night, their pillow talk consisting of a review of the "gathering," the low-key, rather depressing supper they had eaten afterwards, and the video they had watched failing to come up to expectations. Unfortunately, in spite of the novel's absence from the living room, Bill and Irene had begun to talk about *Demogorgon* almost as soon as they arrived. Apparently, this was the first day of its serialisation in a national newspaper. They had read the instalment with avidity, as had James and Rosie. Knowing Susan's positive addiction to Kingston Marle, Rosie wondered if she happened to have a copy to lend to them. When Susan had finished reading it, of course.

Susan was afraid to look at Ambrose. Hastily she promised a loan of the novel and changed the subject to the less dangerous one of the archaeologists' excavations in Haybury Meadow and the protests it occasioned from local environmentalists. But the damage was done. Ambrose spoke scarcely a word all evening. It was as if he felt Kingston Marle and his book underlying everything that was said and threatening always to break through the surface of the conversation, as in a later chapter in *Demogorgon* the monstrous Dragosoma, with the head and breasts of a woman and the body of a manatee, rises slowly out of the Sea of Azov. At one point, a silvery sheen of sweat covered the pallid skin of Ambrose's face.

"Poor devil," said Frank. "I suppose he was very cut up about his old mum."

"There's no accounting for people, is there?"

They were especially gentle to him next day, without knowing exactly why gentleness was needed. Ambrose refused to go to church, treating them to a lecture on the death of God and atheism as the only course for enlightened mankind. They listened indulgently. Susan cooked a particularly nice lunch, consisting of Ambrose's favourite foods: chicken, sausages, roast potatoes, and peas. It had been practically the only dish on Auntie Bee's culinary repertoire, Ambrose having been brought up on sardines on toast and tinned spaghetti, the chicken being served on Sundays. He drank more wine than was usual with him and had a brandy afterwards.

They put him on an early afternoon train for London. Though she had never done so before, Susan kissed him. His reaction was very marked. Seeing what was about to happen, he turned his head abruptly as her mouth approached and the kiss landed on the bristles above his right ear. They stood on the platform and waved to him.

"That was a disaster," said Frank in the car. "Do we have to do it again?"

Susan surprised herself. "We have to do it again." She sighed. "Now I can go back and have a nice afternoon reading my book."

A letter from Kingston Marle, acknowledging the errors in *Demogorgon* and perhaps offering some explanation of how they came to be there, with a promise of amendment in the paperback edition, would have set everything to rights. The disastrous weekend would fade into oblivion and those stupid guests of Frank's with it. Frank's idiot wife, good-looking, they said, though he had never been able to see it, but a woman of neither education nor discernment, would dwindle away into the mists of the past. Above all, that lantern-shaped face, that monstrous jaw and vaulted forehead, looming so shockingly above its owner's blood-coloured works, would lose its menace and assume a merely arrogant cast. But before he reached home, while he was still in the train, Ambrose, thinking about it—he could think of nothing else—knew with a kind of sorrowful resignation that no such letter would be waiting for him. No such letter would come next day or the next. By his own foolhardy move, his misplaced *courage,* by doing his duty, he had seen to that.

And yet it had scarcely been all his own doing. If that retarded woman, his cousin's doll-faced wife, had only had the sense to ask Marle to inscribe the book "to Susan," rather than "to Susan Ribbon," little harm would have been done. Ribbon could hardly understand why she had done so, unless from malice, for these days it

was the custom, and one he constantly deplored, to call everyone from the moment you met them, or even if you only talked to them on the phone, by their first names. Previously, Marle would have known his address but not his appearance, not seen his face, not established him as a real and therefore vulnerable person.

No letter had come. There were no letters at all on the doormat, only a flyer from a pizza takeaway company and two hire-car cards. It was still quite early, only about six. Ribbon made himself a pot of real tea—that woman used *teabags*—and decided to break with tradition and do some work. He never worked on a Sunday evening but he was in need of something positive to distract his mind from Kingston Marle. Taking his tea into the front room, he saw Marle's book lying on the coffee table. It was the first thing his eye lighted on. The Book. The awful book that had been the ruin of his weekend. He must have left *Demogorgon* on the table when he abandoned it in a kind of queasy disgust halfway through. Yet he had no memory of leaving it there. He could have sworn he had put it away, tucked it into a drawer to be out of sight and therefore of mind.

The dreadful face, fish-belly white between the bandages, leered at him out of the star-shaped hole in the red and silver jacket. He opened the drawer in the cabinet where he thought he had put it. There was nothing there but what had been there before, a few sheets of writing paper and an old diary of Mummy's. Of course there was nothing there, he didn't possess two copies of the horrible thing, but it was going in there now. . . .

The phone rang. This frequent event in other people's homes happened seldom in Ribbon's. He ran out into the hall where the phone was and stood looking at it while it rang. Suppose it should be Kingston Marle? Gingerly he lifted the receiver. If it was Marle he would slam it down fast. That woman's voice said, "Ambrose? Are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right. I've just got home."

"It was just that we've been rather worried about you. Now I know you're safely home, that's fine."

Ribbon remembered his manners and recited Mummy's rubric. "Thank you very much for having me, Susan. I had a lovely time."

He would write to her, of course. That was the proper thing. Upstairs in the office he composed three letters. The first was to Susan.

21 Grove Green Avenue,
London E11 4ZH

Dear Susan,

I very much enjoyed my weekend with you and Frank. It was very enjoyable to take a stroll with Frank and take in "the pub" on the

way. The ample food provided was tip-top. Your friends seemed charming people, though I cannot commend their choice of reading matter!

All is well here. It looks as if we may be in for another spell of hot weather.

With kind regards to you both,
Yours affectionately,
Ambrose

Ribbon wasn't altogether pleased with this. He took out "very much" and put in "enormously," and for "very enjoyable" substituted "delightful." That was better. It would have to do. He was rather pleased with that acid comment about those ridiculous people's reading matter and hoped it would get back to them.

During the weekend, particularly during those hours in his room on Saturday afternoon, he had gone carefully through the two paperbacks he had bought at Dillon's. Lucy Grieves, author of *Cottoning On,* had meticulously passed on to her publishers all the errors he had pointed out to her when the novel appeared in hardcover, down to "on to" instead of "onto." Ribbon felt satisfied. He was pleased with Lucy Grieves, though not to the extent of writing to congratulate her. The second letter he wrote was to Channon Scott Smith, the paperback version of whose novel *Carol Conway* contained precisely the same mistakes and literary howlers as it had in hardcover. That completed, a scathing paean of contempt if ever there was one, Ribbon sat back in his chair and thought long and hard.

Was there some way he could write to Kingston Marle and *make things all right* without grovelling, without apologising? God forbid that he should apologise for boldly telling truths that needed to be told. But could he compose something, without saying he was sorry, that would mollify Marle, better still that would make him understand? He had a notion that he would feel easier in his mind if he wrote to Marle, would sleep better at night. The two nights he had passed at Frank's had been very wretched, the second one almost sleepless.

What was he afraid of? Afraid of writing and afraid of not writing? Just afraid? Marle couldn't do anything to him. Ribbon acknowledged to himself that he had no absurd fears of Marle's setting some hitman on to him or stalking him or even attempting to sue him for libel. It wasn't that. What was it then? The cliché came into his head unbidden, the definition of what he felt: a nameless dread. If only Mummy were here to advise him! Suddenly he longed for her and tears pricked the backs of his eyes. Yet he knew what she would have said. She would have said what she had that last time.

That *Encyclopaedia Britannica* Volume VIII had been lying on the table. He had just shown Mummy the letter he had written to Desmond Erb, apologising for correcting him when he wrote about "the quinone structure." Of course he should have looked the word up but he hadn't. He had been so sure it should have been "quinine." Erb had been justifiably indignant, as writers tended to be, when he corrected an error in their work that was in fact not an error at all. He would never forget Mummy's anger, nor anything of that quarrel, come to that; how, almost of their own volition, his hands had crept across the desk towards the black, blue, and gold volume . . .

She was not here now to stop him and after a while he wrote this:

Dear Mr. Marle,

With reference to my letter of June 4th, in which I pointed out certain errors of fact and of grammar and spelling in your recent novel, I fear I may inadvertently have caused you pain. This was far from my intention. If I have hurt your feelings I must tell you that I very much regret this. I hope you will overlook it and forgive me.

Yours sincerely,

Reading this over, Ribbon found he very much disliked the bit about overlooking and forgiving. "Regret" wasn't right either. Also, he hadn't actually named the book. He ought to have put in its title but, strangely, he found himself reluctant to type the word *Demogorgon.* It was as if, by putting it into cold print, he would set something in train, spark off some reaction. Of course, this was mad. He must be getting tired. Nevertheless, he composed a second letter.

Dear Mr. Marle,

With reference to my letter to yourself of June 4th, in which I pointed out certain errors in your recent and highly-acclaimed novel, I fear I may inadvertently have hurt your feelings. It was not my intention to cause you pain. I am well aware—who is not? of the high position you enjoy in the ranks of literature. The amendments I suggested you make to the novel when it appears in paperback—in many hundreds of thousand copies, no doubt—were meant in a spirit of assistance, not criticism, simply so that a good book might be made better.

Yours sincerely,

Sycophantic. But what could be more mollifying than flattery? Ribbon endured half an hour's agony and self-doubt, self-recrimination and self-justification, too, before writing a third and final letter.

Dear Mr. Marle,

With reference to my letter to your good self, dated June 4th, in which I presumed to criticise your recent novel, I fear I may inadvertently have been wanting in respect. I hope you will believe me when I say it was not my intention to offend you. You enjoy a high and well-deserved position in the ranks of literature. It was gauche and clumsy of me to write to you as I did.

With best wishes,
Yours sincerely,

To grovel in this way made Ribbon feel actually sick. And it was all lies, too. Of course it had been his intention to offend the man, to cause him pain and to make him angry. He would have given a great deal to recall that earlier letter but this—he quoted silently to himself those hackneyed but apt words about the moving finger that writes and having writ moves on—neither he nor anyone else could do. What did it matter if he suffered half an hour's humiliation when by sending this apology he would end his sufferings? Thank heaven only that Mummy wasn't here to see it.

Those letters had taken him hours and it had grown quite dark. Unexpectedly dark, he thought, for nine in the evening in the middle of June with the longest day not much more than a week away. But still he sat there, in the dusk, looking at the backs of houses, yellow brick punctured by the bright rectangles of windows, at the big shaggy trees, his own garden, the square of grass dotted with dark shrubs, big and small. He had never previously noticed how unpleasant ordinary privets and cypresses can look in deep twilight when they are not clustered together in a shrubbery or copse; when they stand individually on an otherwise open space, strange shapes, tall and slender or round and squat, or with a branch here and there protruding like a limb, and casting elongated shadows.

He got up abruptly and put the light on. The garden and its gathering of bushes disappeared. The window became dark, shiny, opaque. He switched off the light almost immediately and went downstairs. Seeing *Demogorgon* on the coffee table made him jump. What was it doing there? How did it get there? He had put it in the drawer. And there was the drawer standing open to prove it.

It couldn't have got out of the drawer and returned to the table on its own. Could it? *Of course not.* Ribbon put on every light in the room. He left the curtains open so that he could see the streetlights as well. He must have left the book on the table himself. He must have intended to put it into the drawer and for some reason had not done so. Possibly he had been interrupted. But nothing ever interrupted what he was doing, did it? He couldn't remember. A cold teapot and a cup of cold tea stood on the tray on the coffee

table beside the book. He couldn't remember making tea.

After he had taken the tray and the cold teapot away and poured the cold tea down the sink, he sat down in an armchair with *Chambers Dictionary.* He realised that he had never found out what the word "Demogorgon" meant. Here was the definition: *a mysterious infernal deity first mentioned about AD 450. [Appar Gr* daimon *deity, and* gorgo *Gorgon, from* gorgos *terrible].* He shuddered, closed the dictionary, and opened the second Channon Scott Smith paperback he had bought. This novel had been published four years before, but Ribbon had never read it, nor indeed any of the works of Mr. Scott Smith before the recently published one, but he thought this fat volume might yield a rich harvest if *Carol Conway* were anything to go by. But instead of opening *Destiny's Suzerain,* he found that the book in his hands was *Demogorgon,* open one page past where he had stopped a few days before.

In a kind of horrified wonder, he began to read. It was curious how he was compelled to go on reading, considering how every line was like a faint pinprick in his equilibrium, a tiny physical tremor through his body, reminding him of those things he had written to Kingston Marle and the look Marle had given him in Oxford on Saturday. Later he was to ask himself why he had read any more of it at all, why he hadn't just stopped, why indeed he hadn't put the book in the rubbish for the refuse collectors to take away in the morning.

The dark shape in the corner of Charles Ambrose's tent was appearing for the first time: in his tent, then his hotel bedroom, his mansion in Shropshire, his flat in Mayfair. A small curled-up shape like a tiny huddled person or small monkey. It sat or simply *was,* amorphous but for faintly visible hands or paws and uniformly dark but for pinpoint malevolent eyes that stared and glinted. Ribbon looked up from the page for a moment. The lights were very bright. Out in the street a couple went by, hand-in-hand, talking and laughing. Usually, the noise they made would have angered him but tonight he felt curiously comforted. They made him feel he wasn't alone. They drew him, briefly, into reality. He would post the letter in the morning and once it had gone all would be well.

He read two more pages. The unravelling of the mystery began on page 423. The Demogorgon was Charles Ambrose's own mother who had been murdered and whom he had buried in the grounds of his Shropshire house. Finally, she came back to tell him the truth, came in the guise of a cypress tree which walked out of the pinetum. Ribbon gasped out loud. It was his own story. How had Marle known? What was Marle—some kind of god or magus that he knew such things? The dreadful notion came to him that *Demogorgon* had not always been like this, that the ending had

originally been different, but that Marle, seeing him in Oxford and immediately identifying him with the writer of that defamatory letter, *had by some remote control or sorcery altered the end of the copy that was in his, Ribbon's, possession.*

He went upstairs and rewrote his letter, adding to the existing text, "Please forgive me. I meant you no harm. Don't torment me like this. I can't stand any more." It was a long time before he went to bed. Why go to bed when you know you won't sleep? With the light on—and all the lights in the house were on now—he couldn't see the garden, the shrubs on the lawn, the flowerbed, but he drew the curtains just the same. At last he fell uneasily asleep in his chair, waking four or five hours later to the horrid thought that his original letter to Marle was the first really vituperative criticism he had sent to anyone since Mummy's death. Was there some significance in this? Did it mean he couldn't get along without Mummy? Or, worse, that he had killed all the power and confidence in himself he had once felt?

He got up, had a rejuvenating shower, but was unable to face breakfast. The three letters he had written the night before were in the postbox by nine and Ribbon on the way to the tube station. Waterstones in Leadenhall Market was his destination. He bought Clara Jenkins's *Tales My Lover Told Me* in hardcover as well as Raymond Kobbo's *The Nomad's Smile* and Natalya Dreadnought's *Tick* in paperback. Copies of *Demogorgon* were everywhere, stacked in piles or displayed in fanciful arrangements. Ribbon forced himself to touch one of them, to pick it up. He looked over his shoulder to see if any of the assistants were watching him, and having established that they were not, opened it at page 423. It was as he had thought, as he had hardly dared put into words. Charles Ambrose's mother made no appearance, there was nothing about a burial in the grounds of Montpellier Hall or a cypress tree walking. The end was quite different. Charles Ambrose, married to Kaysa in a ceremony conducted in a balloon above the Himalayas, awakens on his wedding night and sees in the corner of the honeymoon bedroom the demon curled up, hunched and small, staring at him with gloating eyes. It had followed him from Egypt to Shropshire, from London to Russia, from Russia to New Orleans, and from New Orleans to Nepal. It would never leave him, it was his for life and perhaps beyond.

Ribbon replaced the book, took up another copy. The same thing, no murder, no burial, no tree walking, only the horror of the demon in the bedroom. So he had been right. Marle had infused this alternative ending into *his* copy alone. It was part of the torment, part of the revenge for the insults Ribbon had heaped on him. On the way back to Liverpool Street Station a shout and a thump made him look over his shoulder—a taxi had clipped the

rear wheel of a motorbike—and he saw, a long way behind, Kingston Marle following him.

Ribbon thought he would faint. A great flood of heat washed over him, to be succeeded by shivering. Panic held him still for a moment. Then he dived into a shop, a sweetshop it was, and it was like entering a giant chocolate box. The scent of chocolate swamped him. Trembling, he stared at the street through a window draped with pink frills. Ages passed before Kingston Marle went by. He paused, turned his head to look at the chocolates, and Ribbon, again almost fainting, saw an unknown man, lantern-jawed but not monstrously so, long-haired but the hair sparse and brown, the blue eyes mild and wistful. Ribbon's heartbeat slowed, the blood withdrew from the surface of his skin. He muttered, "No, no thank you," to the woman behind the counter and went back into the street. What a wretched state his nerves were in! He'd be encountering a scaly paw in the wardrobe next. Clasping his bag of books, he got thoughtfully into the train.

What he really should have done was add a P.S. to the effect that he would appreciate a prompt acknowledgement of his letter. Just a line saying something like *Please be kind enough to acknowledge receipt*. However, it was too late now. Kingston Marle's publishers would get his letter tomorrow and send it straight on. Ribbon knew publishers did not always do this, but surely in the case of so eminent an author and one of the most profitable on their list . . .

Sending the letter should have allayed his fears, but they seemed to crowd in upon him more urgently, jostling each other for preeminence in his mind. The man who had followed him along Bishopsgate, for instance. Of course he knew it had not been Kingston Marle, yet the similarity of build, of feature, of height, between the two men was too great for coincidence. The most likely explanation was that his stalker was Marle's younger brother, and now, as he reached this reasonable conclusion, Ribbon no longer saw the man's eyes as mild but sly and crafty. When his letter came, Marle would call his brother off but, in the nature of things, the letter could not arrive at Marle's home before Wednesday at the earliest. Then there was the matter of The Book itself. The drawer in which it lay failed to hide it adequately. It was part of a mahogany cabinet (one of Mummy's wedding presents, Ribbon believed), well-polished but of course opaque. Yet sometimes the wood seemed to become transparent and the harsh reds and glaring silver of *Demogorgon* to shine through it as he understood a block of radium would appear as a glowing cuboid behind a wall of solid matter. Approaching closely, creeping up on it, he would see the bright colours fade and the woodwork reappear, smooth, shiny, and *ordinary* once more.

In the study upstairs on Monday evening he tried to do some work, but his eye was constantly drawn to the window and what lay beyond. He became convinced that the bushes on the lawn had moved. That small thin one had surely stood next to the pair of tall fat ones, not several yards away. Since the night before it had shifted its position, taking a step nearer to the house. Drawing the curtains helped, but after a while he got up and pulled them apart a little to check on the small thin bush, to see if it had taken a step further or had returned to its previous position. It was where it had been ten minutes before. All should have been well but it was not. The room itself had become uncomfortable and he resolved not to go back there, to move the computer downstairs, until he had heard from Kingston Marle.

The doorbell ringing made him jump so violently he felt pain travel through his body and reverberate. Immediately he thought of Marle's brother. Suppose Marle's brother, a strong young man, was outside the door and when it was opened would force his way in? Or, worse, was merely checking that Ribbon was at home and when footsteps sounded inside, intended to disappear? Ribbon went down. He took a deep breath and threw the door open. His caller was Glenys Next-door.

Marching in without being invited, she said, "Hiya, Amby," and that Tinks Next-door was missing. The cat had not been home since the morning, when he was last seen by Sandra On-the-other-side sitting in Ribbon's front garden eating a bird.

"I'm out of my mind with worry, as you can imagine, Amby."

As a matter of fact, he couldn't. Ribbon cared very little for songbirds, but he cared for feline predators even less. "I'll let you know if I come across him. However—" he laughed lightly "—he knows he's not popular with me so he makes himself scarce."

This was the wrong thing to say. In the works of his less literate authors, Ribbon sometimes came upon the expression "to bridle"—"she bridled" or even "the young woman bridled." At last he understood what it meant. Glenys Next-door tossed her head, raised her eyebrows, and looked down her nose at him.

"I'm sorry for you, Amby, I really am. You must find that attitude problem of yours a real hang-up. I mean socially. I've tried to ignore it all these years but there comes a time when one has to speak one's mind. No, don't bother, please, I can see myself out."

This was not going to be a good night. He knew that before he switched the bedside light off. For one thing, he always read in bed before going to sleep. Always had and always would. But for some reason he had forgotten to take *Destiny's Suzerain* upstairs with him and though his bedroom was full of reading matter, shelves and shelves of it, he had read all the books before. Of course he could have gone downstairs and fetched himself a book, or even

just gone into the study, which was lined with books. Booked, not papered, indeed. He *could* have done so, in theory he could have, but on coming into his bedroom he had locked the door. Why? He was unable to answer that question, though he put it to himself several times. It was a small house, potentially brightly lit, in a street of a hundred and fifty such houses, all populated. A dreadful feeling descended upon him as he lay in bed that if he unlocked that door, if he turned the key and opened it, something would come in. Was it the small thin bush that would come in? These thoughts, ridiculous, unworthy of him, puerile, frightened him so much that he put the bedside lamp on and left it on till morning.

Tuesday's post brought two letters. Eric Owlberg called Ribbon "a little harsh" and informed him that printers do not always do as they are told. Jeanne Pettle's letter was from a secretary who wrote that Ms. Pettle was away on an extended publicity tour but would certainly attend to his "interesting communication" when she returned. There was nothing from Dillon's. It was a bright sunny day. Ribbon went into the study and contemplated the garden. The shrubs were, of course, where they had always been. Or where they had been before the small thin bush stepped back into its original position?

"Pull yourself together," Ribbon said aloud.

Housework day. He started, as he always did, in Mummy's room, dusting the picture rail and the central lamp with a bunch of pink and blue feathers attached to a rod, and the ornaments with a clean fluffy yellow duster. The numerous books he took out and dusted on alternate weeks but this was not one of those. He vacuumed the carpet, opened the window wide, and replaced the pink silk nightdress with a pale blue one. He always washed Mummy's nightdresses by hand once a fortnight. Next his own room and the study, then downstairs to the dining and front rooms. Marle's publishers would have received his letter by the first post this morning, and the department which looked after this kind of thing would, even at this moment, probably, be readdressing the envelope and sending it on. Ribbon had no idea where the man lived. London? Devonshire? Most of those people seemed to live in the Cotswolds, its green hills and lush valleys must be chock-full of them. But perhaps Shropshire was more likely. He had written about Montpellier Hall as if he really knew such a house.

Ribbon dusted the mahogany cabinet and passed on to Mummy's little sewing table, but he couldn't quite leave things there, and he returned to the cabinet—to stand, duster in hand, staring at that drawer. It was not transparent on this sunny morning and nothing could be seen glowing in its depths. He pulled it open suddenly and snatched up The Book. He looked at its double redness and at the pentagram. After his experiences of

the past days he wouldn't have been surprised if the bandaged face inside had changed its position, closed its mouth, or moved its eyes. Well, he would have been surprised, he'd have been horrified, aghast. But the demon was the same as ever, The Book was just the same, an ordinary, rather tastelessly jacketed, cheap thriller.

"What on earth is the matter with me?" Ribbon said to The Book.

He went out shopping for food. Sandra On-the-other-side appeared behind him in the queue at the checkout. "You've really upset Glenys," she said. "You know me, I believe in plain speaking, and in all honesty I think you ought to apologise."

"When I want your opinion I'll ask for it, Mrs. Wilson," said Ribbon.

Marle's brother got on the bus and sat behind him. It wasn't actually Marle's brother, he only thought it was, just for a single frightening moment. It was amazing, really, what a lot of people there were about who looked like Kingston Marle, men and women, too. He had never noticed it before, had never had an inkling of it until he came face to face with Marle in that bookshop. If only it were possible to go back. For the moving finger, having writ, not to move on but to retreat, retrace its strokes, white them out with correction fluid, and begin writing again. He would have guessed why that silly woman, his cousin's wife, was so anxious to get to Blackwell's; her fondness for Marle's works—distributed so tastelessly all over his bedroom—would have told him, and he would have cried off the Oxford trip, first warning her on no account to let Marle know her surname. Yet—and this was undeniable—Marle had Ribbon's home address, the address was on the letter. The moving finger would have to go back a week and erase *21 Grove Green Avenue, London E11 4ZH* from the top right-hand corner of his letter. Then, and only then, would he have been safe. . . .

Sometimes a second post arrived on a weekday but none came that day. Ribbon took his shopping bags into the kitchen, unpacked them, went into the front room to open the window—and saw *Demogorgon* lying on the coffee table. A violent trembling convulsed him. He sat down, closed his eyes. He *knew* he hadn't taken it out of the drawer. Why on earth would he? He hated it. He wouldn't touch it unless he had to. There was not much doubt now that it had a life of its own. Some kind of kinetic energy lived inside its covers, the same sort of thing as moved the small thin bush across the lawn at night. Kingston Marle put that energy into objects, he infused them with it, he was a sorcerer whose powers extended far beyond his writings and his fame. Surely that was the only explanation why a writer of such appallingly bad books, misspelt, the grammar nonexistent, facts awry, should

enjoy such a phenomenal success, not only with an ignorant illiterate public but among the cognoscenti. He practised sorcery or was himself one of the demons he wrote about, an evil spirit living inside that hideous lantern-jawed exterior.

Ribbon reached out a slow wavering hand for The Book and found that, surely by chance, he had opened it at page 423. Shrinking while he did so, holding The Book almost too far away from his eyes to see the words, he read of Charles Ambrose's wedding night, of his waking in the half-dark with Kaysa sleeping beside him and seeing the curled-up shape of the demon in the corner of the room. . . . So Marle had called off his necromancer's power, had he? He had restored the ending to what it originally was. Nothing about Mummy's death and burial, nothing about the walking tree. Did that mean he had already received Ribbon's apology? It might mean that. His publishers had hardly had time to send the letter on, but suppose Marle, for some reason—and the reason would be his current publicity tour—had been in his publishers' office and the letter had been handed to him. It was the only explanation, it fitted the facts. Marle had read his letter, accepted his apology, and, perhaps with a smile of triumph, whistled back whatever dogs of the occult carried his messages.

Ribbon held The Book in his hands. Everything might be over now, but he still didn't want it in the house. Carefully, he wrapped it up in newspaper, slipped the resulting parcel into a plastic carrier, tied the handles together, and dropped it in the wastebin. "Let it get itself out of that," he said aloud. "Just let it try." Was he imagining that a fetid smell came from it, swathed in plastic though it was? He splashed disinfectant into the wastebin, opened the kitchen window.

He sat down in the front room and opened *Tales My Lover Told Me* but he couldn't concentrate. The afternoon grew dark, there was going to be a storm. For a moment he stood at the window, watching the clouds gather, black and swollen. When he was a little boy Mummy had told him a storm was the clouds fighting. It was years since he had thought of that and now, remembering, for perhaps the first time in his life he questioned Mummy's judgment. Was it quite right so to mislead a child?

The rain came, sheets of it blown by the huge gale which arose. Ribbon wondered if Marle, among his many accomplishments, could raise a wind, strike lightning from some diabolical tinderbox, and, like Jove himself, beat the drum of thunder. Perhaps. He would believe anything of that man now. He went around the house closing all the windows. The one in the study he closed and fastened the catches. From his own bedroom window he looked at the lawn, where the bushes stood as they had always stood, unmoved, immoveable, lashed by rain, whipping and twisting in

the wind. Downstairs, in the kitchen, the window was wide open, flapping back and forth, and the wastebin had fallen on its side. The parcel lay beside it, the plastic bag that covered it and the newspaper inside torn as if a scaly paw had ripped it. Other rubbish, food scraps, a sardine can, were scattered across the floor.

Ribbon stood transfixed. He could see the red and silver jacket of The Book gleaming, almost glowing, under its torn wrappings. What had come through the window? Was it possible the demon, unleashed by Marle, was now beyond his control?

He asked the question aloud, he asked Mummy, though she was long gone. The sound of his own voice, shrill and horror-stricken, frightened him. Had whatever it was come in to retrieve the—he could hardly put it even into silent words—*the chronicle of its exploits?* Nonsense, nonsense. It was Mummy speaking, Mummy telling him to be strong, not to be a fool. He shook himself, gritted his teeth. He picked up the parcel, dropped it into a black rubbish bag, and took it into the garden, getting very wet in the process. In the wind the biggest bush of all reached out a needly arm and lashed him across the face.

He left the black bag there. He locked all the doors and even when the storm had subsided and the sky cleared he kept all the windows closed. Late that night, in his bedroom, he stared down at the lawn. The Book in its bag was where he had left it, but the small thin bush had moved, in a different direction this time, stepping to one side so that the two fat bushes, the one that had lashed him and its twin, stood close together and side by side like tall heavily-built men gazing up at his window. Ribbon had saved half a bottle of Mummy's sleeping pills. For an emergency, for a rainy day. All the lights blazing, he went into Mummy's room, found the bottle, and swallowed two pills. They took effect rapidly. Fully-clothed, he fell onto his bed and into something more like a deep trance than sleep. It was the first time in his life he had ever taken a soporific.

In the morning he looked through the yellow pages and found a firm of tree-fellers, operating locally. Would they send someone to cut down all the shrubs in his garden? They would, but not before Monday. On Monday morning they would be with him by nine. In the broad daylight he asked himself again what had come through the kitchen window, come in and taken That Book out of the wastebin, and sane again, wondered if it might have been Glenys Next-door's fox. The sun was shining, the grass gleaming wet after the rain. He fetched a spade from the shed and advanced upon the wide flowerbed. Not the right-hand side, not there, avoid that at all costs. He selected a spot on the extreme left, close by the fence dividing his garden from that of Sandra On-the-other-side. While he dug he wondered if it was commonplace with people, this bury-

ing of unwanted or hated or threatening objects in their back gardens. Maybe all the gardens in Leytonstone, in London suburbs, in the United Kingdom, in the world, were full of such concealed things, hidden in the earth, waiting . . .

He laid *Demogorgon* inside. The wet earth went back over the top of it, covering it, and Ribbon stamped the surface down viciously. If whatever it was came back and dug The Book out he thought he would die.

Things were better now *Demogorgon* was gone. He wrote to Clara Jenkins at her home address—for some unaccountable reason she was in *Who's Who*—pointing out that in chapter one of *Tales My Lover Told Me* Humphry Nemo had blue eyes and in chapter twenty-one brown eyes, Thekla Pattison wore a wedding ring on page 20 but denied, on page 201, that she had ever possessed one, and on page 245 Justin Armstrong was taking part in an athletics contest, in spite of having broken his leg on page 223, a mere five days before. But Ribbon wrote with a new gentleness, as if she had caused him pain rather than rage.

Nothing had come from Dillon's. He wondered bitterly why he had troubled to congratulate them on their service if his accolade was to go unappreciated. And more to the point, nothing had come from Kingston Marle by Friday. He had the letter of apology, he must have, otherwise he wouldn't have altered the ending of *Demogorgon* back to the original plot line. But that hardly meant he had recovered from all his anger. He might still have other revenges in store. And, moreover, he might intend never to answer Ribbon at all.

The shrubs seemed to be back in their normal places. It would be a good idea to have a plan of the garden with the bushes all accurately positioned so that he could tell if they moved. He decided to make one. The evening was mild and sunny, though damp, and of course, at not long past midsummer, still broad daylight at eight. A deck chair was called for, a sheet of paper, and, better than a pen, a soft lead pencil. The deck chairs might be up in the loft or down here, he couldn't remember, though he had been in the shed on Wednesday evening to find a spade. He looked through the shed window. In the far corner, curled up, was a small dark shape.

Ribbon was too frightened to cry out. A pain seized him in the chest, ran up his left arm, held him in its grip before it slackened and released him. The black shape opened its eyes and looked at him, just as the demon in The Book looked at Charles Ambrose. Ribbon hunched his back and closed his eyes. When he opened them again and looked again he saw Tinks Next-door get up, stretch, arch its back, and begin to walk in leisurely fashion towards the door. Ribbon flung it open.

"Scat! Get out! Go home!" he screamed.

Tinks fled. Had the wretched thing slunk in there when he opened the door to get the spade? Probably. He took out a deck chair and sat on it, but all heart had gone out of him for drawing a plan of the garden. In more ways than one, he thought, the pain receding and leaving only a dull ache. You could have mild heart attacks from which you recovered and were none the worse. Mummy said she had had several, some of them brought on—he sadly recalled—by his own defections from her standards. It could be hereditary. He must take things easy for the next few days, not *worry,* try to put stress behind him.

Kingston Marle had signed all the books she sent him and returned them with a covering letter. Of course she had sent postage and packing as well and had put in a very polite little note, repeating how much she loved his work and what a great pleasure meeting him in Blackwell's had been. But still she had hardly expected such a lovely long letter from him, nor one of quite that nature. Marle wrote how very different she was from the common run of fans, not only in intellect but in appearance, too. He hoped she wouldn't take it amiss when he told her he had been struck by her beauty and elegance among that dowdy crowd.

It was a long time since any man had paid Susan such a compliment. She read and reread the letter, sighed a little, laughed, and showed it to Frank.

"I don't suppose he writes his own letters," said Frank, put out. "Some secretary will do it for him."

"Well, hardly."

"If you say so. When are you seeing him again?"

"Oh, don't be silly," said Susan.

She covered each individual book Kingston Marle had signed for her with cling film and put them all away in a glass-fronted bookcase from which, to make room, she first removed Frank's *Complete Works of Shakespeare,* Tennyson's *Poems, The Poems of Robert Browning,* and Kobbe's *Complete Opera Book.* Frank appeared not to notice. Admiring through the glass, indeed gloating over, her wonderful collection of Marle's works with the secret inscriptions hidden from all eyes, Susan wondered if she should respond to the author. On the one hand a letter would keep her in the forefront of his mind, but on the other it would be in direct contravention of the playing-hard-to-get principle. Not that Susan had any intention of being "got," of course not, but she was not averse to inspiring thoughts about her in Kingston Marle's mind or even a measure of regret that he was unable to know her better.

Several times in the next few days she surreptitiously took one of the books out and looked at the inscription. Each had something different in it. In *Wickedness in High Places* Marle had written,

"To Susan, met on a fine morning in Oxford," and in *The Necromancer's Bride,* "To Susan, with kindest of regards," but on the title page of *Evil Incarnate* appeared the inscription Susan liked best. "She was a lady sweet and kind, ne'er a face so pleased my mind—ever yours, Kingston Marle."

Perhaps he would write again, even if she didn't reply. Perhaps he would be *more likely* to write if she didn't reply.

On Monday morning the post came early, just after eight, delivering just one item. The computer-generated address on the envelope made Ribbon think for one wild moment that it might be from Kingston Marle. But it was from Clara Jenkins, and it was an angry, indignant letter, though containing no threats. Didn't he understand her novel was fiction? You couldn't say things were true or false in fiction, for things were as the author, who was all-powerful, wanted them to be. In a magic-realism novel, such as *Tales My Lover Told Me,* only an ignorant fool would expect facts (and these included spelling, punctuation, and grammar) to be as they were in the dreary reality he inhabited. Ribbon took it into the kitchen, screwed it up, and dropped it in the wastebin.

He was waiting for the tree-fellers who were due at nine. Half-past nine went by, ten went by. At ten past the front doorbell rang. It was Glenys Next-door.

"Tinks turned up," she said. "I was so pleased to see him I gave him a whole can of red Sockeye salmon." She appeared to have forgiven Ribbon for his "attitude." "Now don't say what a wicked waste, I can see you were going to. I've got to go and see my mother, she's fallen over, broken her arm and bashed her face, so would you be an angel and let the washing-machine man in?"

"I suppose so." The woman had a mother! She must be getting on for seventy herself.

"You're a star. Here's the key and you can leave it on the hall table when he's been. Just tell him it's full of pillowcases and water and the door won't open."

The tree-fellers came at eleven-thirty. The older one, a joker, said, "I'm a funny feller and he's a nice feller, right?"

"Come this way," Ribbon said frostily.

"What d'you want them lovely Leylandiis down for then? Not to mention that lovely flowering currant?"

"Them currants smell of cat's pee, Damian," said the young one. "Whether there's been cats peeing on them or not."

"Is that right? The things he knows, guv. He's wasted in this job, ought to be fiddling with computers."

Ribbon went indoors. The computer and printer were downstairs now, in the dining room. He wrote first to Natalya Dreadnought, author of *Tick,* pointing out in a mild way that "eponymous"

applies to a character or object which gives a work its name, not to the name derived from the character. Therefore it was the large blood-sucking mite of the Acarina order which was eponymous, not her title. The letter he wrote to Raymond Kobbo would correct just two mistakes in *The Nomad's Smile,* but for both Ribbon needed to consult *Piranha* to *Scurfy.* He was pretty sure the Libyan caravan centre should be spelt "Sabha," not "Sebha," and he was even more certain that "qalam," meaning a reed pen used in Arabic calligraphy, should start with a k. He went upstairs and lifted the heavy tome off the shelf. Finding that Kobbo had been right in both instances—"Sabha" and "Sebha" were optional spellings and "qalam" perfectly correct—unsettled him. Mummy would have known, Mummy would have set him right in her positive, no-nonsense way, before he had set foot on the bottom stair. He asked himself if he could live without her and could have sworn he heard her sharp voice say, "You should have thought of that before."

Before what? That day in February when she had come up here to—well, oversee him, supervise him. She frequently did so, and in later years he hadn't been as grateful to her as he should have been. By the desk here she had stood and told him it was time he earned some money by his work, by a man's fifty-second year it was time. She had made up her mind to leave Daddy's royalties to the lifeboat people. But it wasn't this which finished things for him, or triggered things off, however you liked to put it. It was the sneering tone in which she told him, her right index finger pointing at his chest, that he was no good, he had failed. She had kept him in comfort and luxury for decade after decade, she had instructed him, taught him everything he knew, yet in spite of this, his literary criticism had not had the slightest effect on authors' standards or effected the least improvement in English fiction. He had wasted his time and his life through cowardice and pusillanimity, through mousiness instead of manliness.

It was that word "mousiness" which did it. His hands moved across the table to rest on *Piranha* to *Scurfy,* he lifted it in both hands and brought it down as hard as he could on her head. Once, twice, again and again. The first time she screamed but not again after that. She staggered and sank to her knees and he beat her to the ground with Volume VIII of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica.* She was an old woman, she put up no struggle, she died quickly. He very much wanted not to get blood on the book—she had taught him books were sacred—but there was no blood. What was shed was shed inside her.

Regret came immediately. Remorse followed. But she was dead. He buried her in the wide flowerbed at the end of the garden that night, in the dark without a torch. The widows on either side slept soundly, no one saw a thing. The ivies grew back and the flower-

less plants that liked shade. All summer he had watched them slowly growing. He told only two people she was dead, Glenys Next-door and his cousin Frank. Neither showed any inclination to come to the "funeral," so when the day he had appointed came he left the house at ten in the morning, wearing the new dark suit he had bought, a black tie that had been Daddy's, and carrying a bunch of spring flowers. Sandra On-the-other-side spotted him from her front-room window, and, approving, nodded sombrely while giving him a sad smile. Ribbon smiled sadly back. He put the flowers on someone else's grave and strolled round the cemetery for half an hour.

From a material point of view, living was easy. He had more money now than Mummy had ever let him have. Daddy's royalties were paid into her bank account twice a year and would continue to be paid in. Ribbon drew out what he wanted on her direct-debit card, his handwriting being so like hers that no one could tell the difference. She had been collecting her retirement pension for years, and he went on doing so. It occurred to him that the Department of Social Security might expect her to die sometime and the bank might expect it, too, but she had been very young when he was born and might in any case have been expected to outlive him. He could go on doing this until what would have been her hundredth birthday and even beyond. But could he live without her? He had "made it up to her" by keeping her bedroom as a shrine, keeping her clothes as if one day she would come back and wear them again. Still he was a lost soul, only half a man, a prey to doubts and fears and self-questioning and a nervous restlessness.

Looking down at the floor, he half expected to see some mark where her small slight body had lain. There was nothing, any more than there was a mark on Volume VIII of *Britannica.* He went downstairs and stared out into the garden. The cypress he had associated with her, had been near to seeing as containing her spirit, was down, was lying on the grass, its frondy branches already wilting in the heat. One of the two fat shrubs was down, too. Damian and the young one were sitting *on Mummy's grave,* drinking something out of a vacuum flask and smoking cigarettes. Mummy would have had something to say about that, but he lacked the heart. He thought again how strange it was, how horrible and somehow wrong, that the small child's name for its mother was the same as that for an embalmed Egyptian corpse.

In the afternoon, after the washing-machine man had come and been let into Glenys Next-door's, Ribbon plucked up the courage to phone Kingston Marle's publishers. After various people's voice mail, instructions to press this button and that and requests to leave messages, he was put through to the department which sent on authors' letters. A rather indignant young woman assured him

that all mail was sent on within a week of the publishers receiving it. Recovering a little of Mummy's spirit, he said in the strongest tone he could muster that a week was far too long. What about readers who were waiting anxiously for a reply? The young woman told him she had said "within a week" and it might be much sooner. With that he had to be content. It was eleven days now since he had apologised to Kingston Marle, ten since his publishers had received the letter. He asked tentatively if they ever handed a letter to an author in person. For a while she hardly seemed to understand what he was talking about, then she gave him a defiant no, such a thing could never happen.

So Marle had not called off his dogs because he had received the apology. Perhaps it was only that the spell, or whatever it was, lasted no more than, say, twenty-four hours. It seemed, sadly, a more likely explanation. The tree-fellers finished at five, leaving the wilted shrubs stacked on the flowerbed, not on Mummy's grave but on the place where The Book was buried. Ribbon took two of Mummy's sleeping pills and passed a good night. No letter came in the morning, there was no post at all. Without any evidence as to the truth of this, he became suddenly sure that no letter would come from Marle now, it would never come.

He had nothing to do, he had written to everyone who needed reproving, he had supplied himself with no more new books and had no inclination to go out and buy more. Perhaps he would never write to anyone again. He unplugged the link between computer and printer and closed the computer's lid. The new shelving he had bought from Ikea to put up in the dining room would never be used now. In the middle of the morning he went into Mummy's bedroom, tucked the nightdress under the pillow and quilt, removed the bedspread from the wardrobe door, and closed the door. He couldn't have explained why he did these things, it simply seemed time to do them. From the window he saw a taxi draw up and Glenys Next-door get out of it. There was someone else inside the taxi she was helping out but Ribbon didn't stay to see who it was.

He contemplated the back garden from the dining room. Somehow he would have to dispose of all those logs, the remains of the cypresses, the flowering currant, the holly, and the lilac bush. For a ten-pound note the men would doubtless have taken them away, but Ribbon hadn't thought of this at the time. The place looked bleak and characterless now, an empty expanse of grass with a stark ivy-clad flowerbed at the end of it. He noticed for the first time, over the wire dividing fence, the profusion of flowers in Glenys Next-door's, the birdtable, the little fish pond (both hunting grounds for Tinks), the red-leaved Japanese maple. He would burn that wood, he would have a fire.

Of course he wasn't supposed to do this. In a small way it was against the law, for this was a smokeless zone and had been for nearly as long as he could remember. By the time anyone complained—and Glenys Next-door and Sandra On-the-other-side would both complain—the deed would have been done and the logs consumed. But he postponed it for a while and went back into the house. He felt reasonably well, if a little weak and dizzy. Going upstairs made him breathless in a way he never had been before, so he postponed that for a while, too, and had a cup of tea, sitting in the front room with his feet up. What would Marle do next? There was no knowing. Ribbon thought that when he was better he would find out where Marle lived, go to him, and apologise in person. He would ask what he could do to make it up to Marle, and whatever the answer was he would do it. If Marle wanted him to be his servant he would do that, or kneel at his feet and kiss the ground or allow Marle to flog him with a whip. Anything Marle wanted he would do, whatever it was.

Of course, he shouldn't have buried the book. That did no good. It would be ruined now and the best thing, the *cleanest* thing, would be to cremate it. After he was rested he made his way upstairs, crawled really, his hands on the stairs ahead of him, took *Piranha Scurfy* off the shelf, and brought it down. He'd burn that, too. Back in the garden he arranged the logs on a bed of screwed-up newspaper, rested Volume VIII of *Britannica* on top of them, and, fetching the spade, unearthed *Demogorgon.* Its plastic covering had been inadequate to protect it and it was sodden as well as very dirty. Ribbon felt guilty for treating it as he had. The fire would purify it. There was paraffin in a can somewhere, Mummy had used it for the little stove that heated her bedroom. He went back into the house, found the can, and sprinkled paraffin on newspaper, logs, and books, and applied a lighted match.

The flames roared up immediately, slowed once the oil had done its work. He poked at his fire with a long stick. A voice started shouting at him but he took no notice, it was only Glenys Next-door complaining. The smoke from the fire thickened, grew dense and grey. Its flames had reached The Book's wet pages, the great thick wad of 427 of them, and as the smoke billowed in a tall whirling cloud an acrid smell poured from it. Ribbon stared at the smoke for, in it now, or behind it, something was taking shape, a small, thin, and very old woman swathed in a mummy's bandages, her head and arm bound in white bands, the skin between fish-belly white. He gave a small choking cry and fell, clutching the place where his heart was, holding on to the overpowering pain.

"The pathologist seems to think he died of fright," the policeman said to Frank. "A bit fanciful that, if you ask me. Anyone can have

a heart attack. You have to ask yourself what he could have been frightened *of.* Nothing, unless it was of catching fire. Of course, strictly speaking, the poor chap had no business to be having a fire. Mrs. Judd and her mother saw it all. It was a bit of a shock for the old lady, she's over ninety and not well herself, she's staying with her daughter while recovering from a bad fall."

Frank was uninterested in Glenys Judd's mother and her problems. He had a severe summer cold, could have done without any of this, and doubted if he would be well enough to attend Ambrose Ribbon's funeral. In the event, Susan went to it alone. Someone had to. It would be too terrible if no one was there.

She expected to find herself the only mourner, and she was very surprised to find she was not alone. On the other side of the aisle from her in the crematorium chapel sat Kingston Marle. At first she could hardly believe her eyes, then he turned his head, smiled, and came to sit next to her. Afterwards, as they stood admiring the two wreaths, his, and hers and Frank's, he said that he supposed some sort of explanation would be in order.

"Not really," Susan said. "I just think it's wonderful of you to come."

"I saw the announcement of his death in the paper, with the date and place of the funeral," Marle said, turning his wonderful deep eyes from the flowers to her. "A rather odd thing had happened. I had a letter from your cousin—well, your husband's cousin. It was a few days after we met in Oxford. His letter was an apology, quite an abject apology, saying he was sorry for having written to me before, asking me to forgive him for criticising me for something or other."

"What sort of something or other?"

"That I don't know. I never received his previous letter. But what he said reminded me that I *had* received a letter intended for Dillon's bookshop in Piccadilly and signed by him. Of course I sent it on to them and thought no more about it. But now I'm wondering if he put the Dillon's letter into the envelope intended for me and mine into the one for Dillon's. It's easily done. That's why I prefer e-mail myself."

Susan laughed. "It can't have had anything to do with his death, anyway."

"No, certainly not. I was going to mention it to him in Blackwell's but—well, I saw you instead and everything else went out of my head. I didn't really come here because of the letter, that's not important, I came because I hoped I might see you again."

"Oh."

"Will you have lunch with me?"

Susan looked around her, as if spies might be about. But they were alone. "I don't see why not," she said. ●

NEXT ISSUE...

The California Contact
BY CLARK HOWARD

The Gift of Gab
BY DAVID WILLIAMS

Ride a Red Dragon
BY MARK COGGINS

Blind Alley
BY MARY JANE MAFFINI

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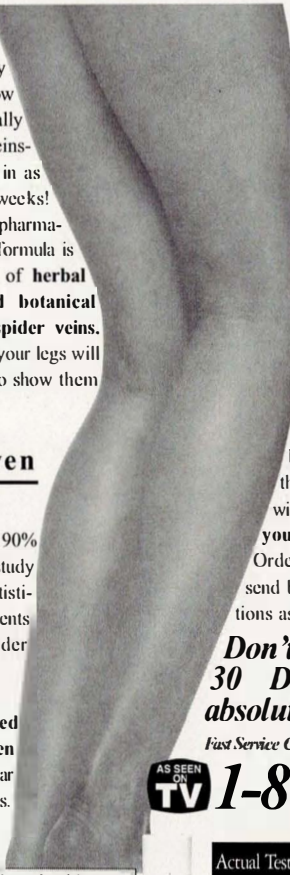

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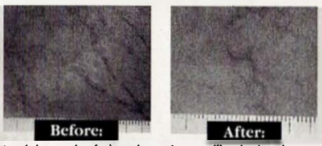

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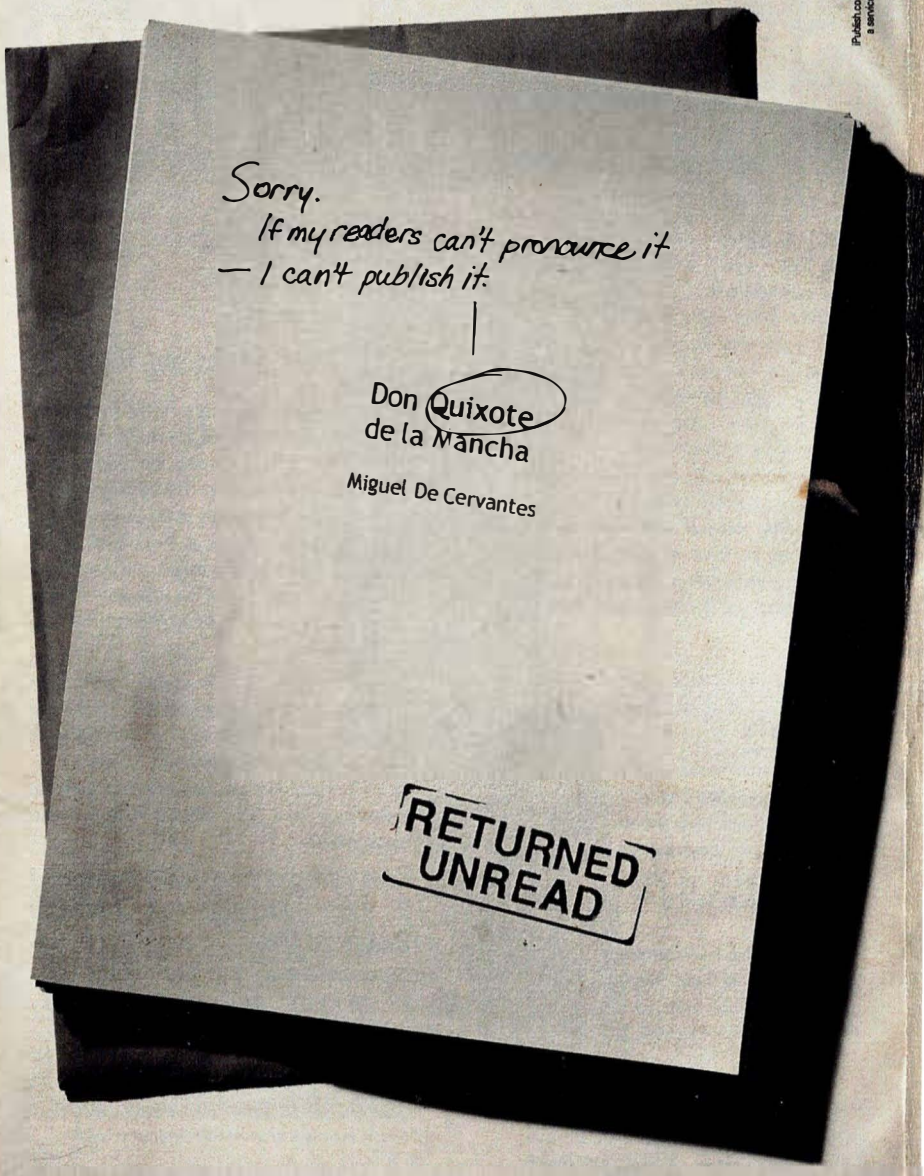

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