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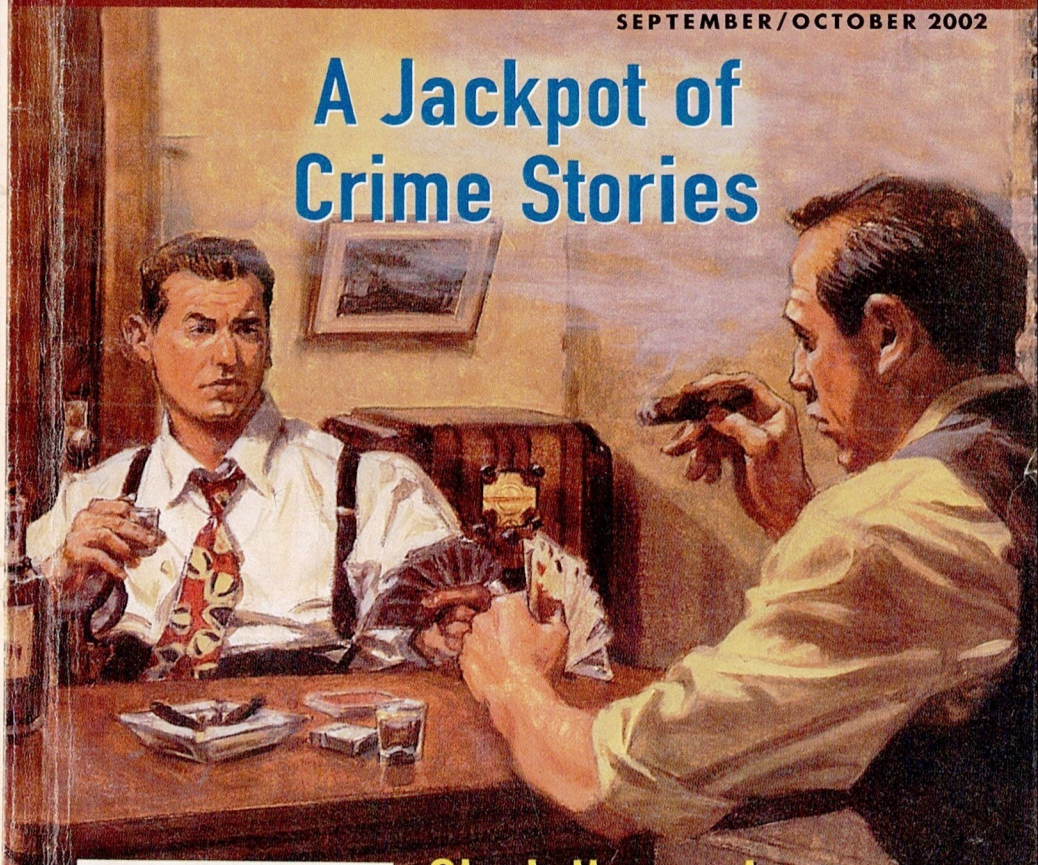

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

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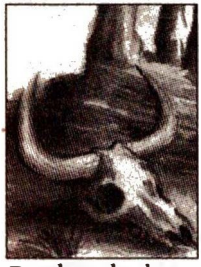

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FICTION

POETRY

Art by June Levine

To Live and Die in Midland, Texas

by Clark Howard

Frank Raine wasn't supposed to drink alcoholic beverages. He had been out on parole from the Texas penitentiary up in Huntsville for just a week, and he knew full well that the Tanqueray and tonic in front of him on the bar could put him back in the place they called The Walls for another two, maybe three years. He wasn't supposed to associate with known felons, either, but he was about to break that rule, too, waiting as he was in a small Houston bar to meet his old cellmate, Jesus Ortega. Because the Spanish pronunciation of Ortega's given name was *Hay-soose,* everyone called him "Soose." Raine had not seen him since Soose made parole some eight months earlier, but when Frank walked out of the joint a week ago, a message from a gate trusty had been passed to him, a phone number on a scrap of paper, and when he called it a couple of days later, Soose

answered. Now, as Frank Raine took his first tangy sip of the T-and-T, Soose walked in the door and Frank rose to greet him. The two men embraced and exchanged *amigos*. Soose was carrying about thirty extra pounds, and Frank patted the Latino's belly. "Who's the father, man?"

"Very funny," Soose replied, unoffended. "It's hard not to put on weight living with my mother, man; she never cooks small. Come on, let's get a booth in the back." Soose bobbed his chin at the bartender, who was also Hispanic. "Double Jack Daniels, *carnal*," he said. *Carnal* meant street brother; all Hispanic males understood it.

Authors often have favorites among their stories, and this tightly woven crime caper is one that particularly pleased its creator, Clark Howard. Mr. Howard is a five-time winner of *EQMM*'s Readers Award, a top true crime writer, and an Edgar Allan Poe Award winning short story writer. Though the setting for the tale is a place famous in connection with our current President, Mr. Bush is not one of the story's characters. ¶

The two men sat in a back booth and made small talk until Soose's drink had been set in front of him. Then Soose got down to business.

"Man, you getting out last week was like the answer to a prayer. How'd you like to split a cool two million four ways?"

"What kind of cool two million?" Raine asked.

"Dollars, baby," Soose replied with a dazzling smile. "Greenbacks. Currency. And all *unmarked*."

"If you're talking an armored truck or something like that, I'm not interested," Raine told him. "I'm waiting for Stella to get out next week so's we can get back together. I'm not looking for anything high-risk right now—"

"It ain't high-risk, Frankie," his friend assured him. "That's the beauty of it. The cash ain't even gonna be in a vault; it's gonna be in a footlocker, just like one of those you buy at Wal-Mart. Only this one is painted gold. There'll be maybe two, three, four security guards or local redneck cops looking after it. You, me, and one other guy can take 'em down with no sweat." Soose smiled again: two rows of the kind of teeth you see in toothpaste ads. "Interested now, *amigo?*"

"Maybe," said Raine. "Let's hear the rest of it."

Soose leaned forward on the table, his dark face becoming grave. "How much you know about Texas, man?"

Raine shrugged. "Good cops. Lousy prisons."

"No, I mean about Texas history."

"Not much. My people stole it from your people."

"Yeah, but besides that." Soose took a sip of his Jack Daniels. "Let me give you a little history lesson. After the *gringos* stole it from the Mexican people, Texas was annexed as a state in eighteen forty-five. For a long time, it didn't have no real borders; it jus' went on forever. Because of its size, some smart *gringos* decided to put in the state's charter that it could be divided into *five* smaller states if the people living here voted for it."

Raine frowned. "Five different states?"

"Yeah. Think about it. Today it would mean *ten* U. S. Senators instead of two."

"Whoa," Raine said quietly, pursing his lips in a silent whistle.

"Whoa is right," Soose agreed. "Anyway, when the Civil War came along, Texas went with the Confederacy, so it was no longer part of the United States and its original charter was no good no more. Then, after the war ended, Texas was readmitted to the Union in 1870 under a new state charter. This one left out the right of Texas to divide itself up. But there's a lot of feeling around that with a vote of the people, it could still be done. Not into five states, but into two: North Texas and South Texas. Just like North and South Carolina, North and South Dakota."

"What's all this got to do with a two-million-dollar score?" Raine asked.

"I'm getting to that," Soose told him. "You ever hear of an oil burg named Midland?"

Raine frowned. "Sounds familiar, but I'm not sure why."

"It's over in West Texas, in the middle of a huge wasteland that just happens to have an ocean of oil under it. 'Member about twelve, fifteen years ago, a little girl fell in a well? Baby Jessica. . . ."

"Yeah, I remember that. It was front-page stuff for two or three days. They got her out, right?"

"Yeah. Everybody that could read knew about it. Midland is famous for it. That and the fact that President Bush started in the oil business there. He calls it his hometown, says he wants to be buried there."

"You're not working up to something that involves the President and Secret Service, are you?" Raine asked prudently. "Because if you are—"

"No, man, you think I'm crazy?" Soose demurred. "Jus' listen, okay? There's this big private building in Midland called the New Petroleum Club. All the big-shot oilmen are members. They hold private parties there, business meetings, political pow-wows, that kind of stuff. A week from now there's gonna be a big fundraising luncheon there to start piling up money to run a slate of independent candidates in the next state election who will support a movement to divide Texas into two states, north and south.

They're gonna call themselves the Partition Party. A hundred of the wealthiest men in the state are behind it. I'm talking oilmen from central Texas, cattlemen from the Panhandle, telecommunications people from Houston, natural-gas pipeliners from El Paso, millionaire cotton farmers from the Rio Grande valley, shipping big shots from Galveston, you name it. There's money from all over Texas behind this idea. A hundred of the wealthiest men in the state are gonna meet in Midland for this fundraising luncheon and kick in twenty thousand bucks apiece to put the first two million into this new political party's campaign chest."

"Yeah, but they won't bring cash," Raine said, "they'll bring checks—"

"Wrong. They *will* bring cash. This is all under-the-table money. These guys don't want any record of their donations. This is how they get around the federal limit on political donations. You've heard politicians talking about 'soft' money? Well, this is what they call *quiet* money."

Raine was staring almost in disbelief at his friend. "All one hundred of these guys are bringing twenty grand to this luncheon—in *cash?*"

"You got it. Fresh currency, mixed bills, from different banks all over the state, unmarked, and—"

"Untraceable," Raine finished the sentence for him.

"Right. And it all gets dropped into that Wal-Mart footlocker that's painted gold and sitting in front of the head table. When everybody's dropped their money in, those hick cops I tol' you about will put it in the back of a station wagon to drive it to a local bank to be put in a vault. But between the club and the bank—"

"It's exposed," Frank Raine said quietly. He drummed his fingertips silently on the table. Slowly his expression morphed into the set, steady look of a man who had just established for himself an irrepressible goal. "How'd you hit on this?" he asked.

"I worked in the oil fields over in Midland while I was on parole. Me and this *gringo* kid named Lee Watts worked for an old-timer named J. D. Pike. The guy's an old wildcatter, been rich three or four times, married three or four times, gone broke three or four times. Right now he's supposed to have enough money to be on the list of oilmen invited to the luncheon, but fact is he's almost flat busted. He's got some oil leases over in Louisiana that he's sure are gonna hit, but he needs a stake. He could go out and borrow the dough, but then he'd have to share the profits if he hit a gusher. So he asked Lee if he knew anybody who might be interested in a quick and easy score for big bucks. Lee came to me with it."

"And now you're coming to me," Raine said. "Why?"

Soose looked chagrined. "Come on, Frank. I'm small time com-

pared to you. I can go along on a score like this, but I can't plan it. I can't pull it all together. It needs a *jefe."* Soose pronounced the last word *"hef-fey."* It meant chief.

"Who all's in on it?" Raine asked.

"Just the guys I tol' you about: old man Pike, Lee Watts, an' me."

"What kind of split you figuring on?"

"I already talked that over with the others, without mentioning your name, just your reputation. We agreed to give you forty percent, eight hundred grand, to engineer the whole job. The rest of us would split a million-two even: four hundred grand each."

"What about front money? Guns, getaway car, other expenses?"

"Old man Pike said he still has a little cash left for that."

Raine sat back and chewed on a piece of hard, dead skin next to one of his thumbnails. He was an ordinary-looking man, some good features, some poor, not the kind that many women looked at twice, but those who did were serious about it. He was graying at the temples and had a not unattractive scar above his right eyebrow where he'd been hit with a bottle once. It was his eyes that told the most about him: They said don't lie to me and I won't lie to you. It was best to believe them.

"When is this big luncheon planned for?" he asked Soose.

"A week from Wednesday."

Today was Tuesday, Raine thought. That gave them seven days before the day of the job. Stella would be getting out on Thursday; that would give Raine enough time to work on her, to give her the "one last job" routine. And it would give him time to check out the others on the job: an old man, a kid from the oil fields—it might be too thin from a personnel aspect.

"What about this guy who brought it to you?"

"Lee? He's okay. Texas poor, you know, but not trash. Good kid. Got a steady girl but they ain't married yet. Wants to buy a motorcycle shop with his end of the take."

"And the old man?"

"A little shaky," Soose admitted, "but tough. You prob'ly wouldn't want him in on the actual heist, just before and after."

"Can you set up a meet for Saturday?"

"Sure, perfect time. Everybody comes to Midland on Saturdays; nobody'll notice us."

"Not in Midland. The old man must be known there; the kid too, maybe even you. Make it someplace else."

Soose thought a moment, then said, "We could meet in Odessa, about twenty-five miles away. Just south of town there's a public park called Comanche Trails. There's picnic tables around. I could pick up some tostados and salsa and beer; we could eat while we talk."

"Good. Make it this Saturday, three o'clock. Listen, I need a car."

"You can take mine, *carnal.* It's a sweet little ninety-one Chrysler with leather, runs like a dream. I'll use my mother's car and she can use my sister's car. My sister's expecting; she's eight months along and don't drive much anyhow." Soose's expression firmed. "So, we're set for Saturday, *camarada?*"

"Yeah," Raine nodded. "We're set for Saturday. In Odessa."

On Thursday morning, early, Raine got out of bed in a Holiday Inn south of the main drag in Waco. He showered, shaved closer than usual, and dressed in new slacks, a pullover Izod, and new loafers. He had bought some Alberto VO5 the previous night to color the gray streaking his temples, but decided against using it. He figured what the hell, Stella would be older, too; as practical and right-on as she had always been, she would expect him to be different, too.

At a Denny's out on the highway, he had a heart-attack-on-a-plate for breakfast—eggs, sausages, biscuits and gravy, and coffee. Then he got into Soose's car and drove the eighteen miles out to Gatesville, where the women's prison was.

Stella came walking out with two other discharges, both Hispanic, at ten o'clock. She was wearing a plain cotton dress that buttoned up the front, low-heel oxfords with white socks, and carried a brown paper bundle with her personal items in it. Raine walked up and took the bundle from her.

"I've got a car over here," he said. "And a room for a couple of nights in Waco."

She merely nodded. Raine put an arm around her shoulders and walked her to the car. He could tell she had tears building up in her eyes, but she held them back. In the front seat of the car, she took a tissue from the pocket of her dress and dabbed her eyes dry. Then she forced a smile and brushed two fingertips across the hair at his temples.

"You're getting gray."

Raine smiled self-consciously. "You aren't."

"I color mine," she said.

"Can you do that in there?" he asked, surprised. Stella threw him a cynical look.

"You can do anything you want to on the inside. You should know that."

He shrugged. "I guess I thought things were different in a women's prison."

"Inside is inside," she said quietly.

He asked how her mother and sisters were, she asked how his father was.

"Dead," he told her. "Finally drank himself to death."

She asked him about his parole, told him about hers. He asked if

she wanted to stop and get something to eat; she said no, but asked him to pull over somewhere and park. He turned off on a dirt road. She opened the bundle on her lap and handed him a small school photograph.

"She's fourteen now, Frank. This is her eighth-grade graduation picture."

Unlike Stella, Raine could not keep all the tears in; one escaped from each eye and stung his freshly shaved cheeks. "My God, she's you all over again—"

"I think she's got your eyes," Stella said. "So direct and serious."

After a while, they drove on.

"Mother says she's a good kid," Stella told him. "Gets good grades. Bags groceries at a Kroger store on weekends. Runs around with a good crowd."

"That's important," Raine said solemnly.

"Don't we know it now," Stella agreed. "Lord, it seems like a hundred years ago when we left that little Tennessee town on a Greyhound bus to set the world on fire. What a couple of crazy kids we were. I'm glad Lucy's not like us."

"Yeah, me too," Raine replied softly.

They were silent for the rest of the drive to Waco.

When they got to the motel and he unlocked the door for her, Raine said, "You need some clothes. There's a big mall just down the road—"

"Clothes aren't the only thing I need," Stella told him, putting down her bundle and unbuttoning her dress.

Raine watched her. She was heavier than he remembered, as Soose was, as he knew he himself was; but the thighs had the same roundness, the hips the same sensual jut, the breasts the same buoyancy, the lips the same unspoken invitation and promise. When they got into bed, the familiarity of all the places he began to kiss and lick and bite made him able to ignore the stale prison smell of her.

After she shopped for clothes and changed into something new, they went to a steakhouse for dinner. While they ate, Stella said all the things Raine knew she would.

"I want to go home, Frankie. I want to go back to that little hick town in Tennessee and get a job in some store uptown and come home every night and fix supper. I want to be a mother to Lucy for these last few years before she's all the way grown up. I haven't held her in my arms since she was six years old, Frankie—"

Her voice broke and Raine took her hands across the table. "I know, honey, I know—"

"Do you, Frank? Do you really?"

"Sure I do. But *how,* Stel? How can we go back? Everybody in

town knows us, everybody will remember us. They know what we've been, *where* we've been. You might be able to get a job, but what about me? You think anybody would hire me? I'm a two-time loser: the Tennessee reformatory and now the Texas pen. I couldn't get a job delivering newspapers."

"There must be *some* way, Frank." Stella's voice had pleading in it, and desperation. "Just because we've made mistakes shouldn't mean we have to pay for them forever. There's *got* to be a way to start over."

"There is," he told her. "Change our names. Get new identities. It's not hard to do. Then find a place to settle down, buy a home. Florida maybe, or California. Get a little business of some kind. A franchise, maybe. Like a video rental store, something like that." He paused a beat, then added carefully, "Only to do those things we'd need a stake, money to get us started—"

"What if we could both find work somewhere new? We could start saving and—" Her hopeful words stopped suddenly, broken off by the reality of the moment. A knowing look clouded her face. "A stake, you said. You've already got something lined up, haven't you?"

"Not exactly lined up, but a good possibility. A guy I celled with in Huntsville brought it to me. It sounds quick and clean, plus the money is serious. But I'd have to take a closer look at it."

"How serious—the money?"

"Eight hundred grand. Cash. Untraceable."

"Suppose we get it—what then?" Stella asked. "Head for Mexico? Lease some lavish villa in Acapulco or Puerto Vallarta? Buy a new boat? Clothes, jewelry? Live like rich people for a few months, a year, until we're broke again? That's the usual plan, isn't it, Frank?"

"No," he said quietly, eyes lowered as if the suggestion were shameful. "No, not this time." He looked up at her. "I'm tired, Stel. I want to go home, too."

"Don't lie to me about this, Frank."

Anger flashed across his face. "I don't lie to you about anything, you know that."

Now Stella lowered her own eyes. "I'm sorry."

They finished dinner and walked a pier that bordered Lake Waco until the mosquitoes became too much for them and they headed back to the motel.

"Let's talk about this tomorrow," Stella said, her arm in his as they walked. "You always told me it was better to talk about serious things in the morning, when your mind was fresh. Remember?"

"Yeah, I remember."

On the way they came to a liquor store. "Want me to get us a

bottle of Tanqueray?" he asked.

"Why not?" Stella said. "Be like old times."

They spent Thursday and Friday nights at the motel in Waco, then got up at dawn on Saturday and started driving west across Texas. At nine o'clock they stopped in San Angelo for gas and breakfast. Then they covered the remaining 130 miles and drove into Odessa from the south just after one o'clock. They checked into another Holiday Inn and Stella went for takeout food while Raine washed up and changed shirts. During the trip, Raine had told Stella all about the job and what he knew about the men involved.

"I'll get a better handle on things after the meet," he said as they sat on the bed and ate Big Macs and fries. "Then you and I can decide if we think it's worth the risk. If we decide it isn't, we'll back off, just like you want."

They had talked incessantly about their options during their hours in the car: Their goal was to make a life with their daughter Lucy before it was too late; their choices—try it the honest way, tough it out, see if it could be done—or do it the easy way, a quick, clean job, a good take, and *this* time play it smart, don't blow all the cash on the good life. No. Instead, use it slowly to build a *new* life, a respectable life, one they could bring Lucy into.

There was now a tacit agreement between them. Frank would not go in on the heist unless it was a sure thing—a *really* sure thing—or at least as close to one as thieves ever got. It had to be too good to pass up.

But if they went for it, and it came off okay, and they were in the clear, they would hole up somewhere—somewhere *modest*—and start putting together their new life. There would be *no* Mexican villa, *no* high life, *no* boat—nothing like that.

And this would be their last job.

Their very last.

Raine picked up a city map at the motel desk and located Comanche Trails Park. He got there early and took up a parked position where he could watch the others arrive. It was one of those hot West Texas days when the air was heavy and your lips got puffy and dry if you stayed outside too much. Only about half of the picnic tables were in use, mostly by young Hispanic families. Soose had picked a good place to meet; Hispanics tended to notice little, mind their own business, and forget everything that did not concern them.

The kid, Lee Watts, got there first, driving a beat-up old Dodge Ram pickup. He had a gawky, oil-field-roustabout look to him: deeply tanned, buzz-cut blond hair, tight Wranglers, white shirt with the cuffs rolled up a couple of turns, pack of cigarettes in his

shirt pocket. He looked around for the others, didn't see them, and walked to a picnic table to wait. The table was in the far corner, off to itself. Smart, Raine thought.

Next came the old man, J. D. Pike, thin as a whip under a tan Stetson, ancient face as leathery as a work saddle, eyes concealed by mirrored sunglasses, Western shirt closed at the neck with a Bolo tie. As he emerged from his pickup, which was much newer than Lee's, he saw the younger man at once and ambled over to him.

Soose showed up in an older-model Chevy sedan and got a large restaurant takeout box from the trunk. When he was halfway to the table, Lee went out to meet him.

"There's an ice chest of beer in the backseat." Soose bobbed his chin toward the car, sending Lee to get it.

While Soose was opening the box of food and dealing out paper plates, Raine got out of the car and walked casually over to them. Lee and old man Pike turned their attention his way, studying him as he approached.

"Hey, *carnal!*" Soose said when Frank walked up. The two ex-convicts embraced. Soose introduced the others to Raine, then waved his arm over the table. "Tostados, tacos, taquitos, tamales—the works. And some good Cerveza to wash it down."

As they began to eat, Raine said quietly, "Well, it's your job, Mr. Pike. Why don't you tell us about it, start to finish, just like we don't know nothing at all."

Pike laid it out for them, pretty much the same way Soose had laid it out for Raine in the bar. It gave Raine an opportunity to scrutinize and evaluate the old man, to scope him out: the way he talked, how his eyes moved, how steady his hands were while proposing armed robbery. By the time Pike had finished, Raine was convinced that the old man was solid. Lee he would check out later, with Soose. But for now, when Pike asked, "Well, what do you think?" Raine nodded approval.

"Sounds good. I'll check the layout this afternoon. If it *looks* good, we're on."

Soose and Lee smiled broadly, while Pike pursed his lips and clasped his hands together on the table, relieved.

"We're going to have to work fast," Raine said. He was eating little, since he had eaten lunch earlier with Stella. The others, appetites apparently whetted by the job looking to be on, were wolfing down the food. "We'll need front money right away," he told Pike.

"I've got five thousand in my pocket right now," Pike said. "And I can get more, not much, but a little." The old man was being flat-out honest, Raine felt, which was good.

"I don't think we'll need that much," Raine said. "I'll take a grand for personal expenses. Give Soose three grand." To Soose, he said, "Pick up a couple of good, cold, throwaway pieces for you and

Lee. Nothing big and bulky, no long barrels, no automatics. .38 Specials with four-inch barrels if you can get them. No hollow-point cartridges; if we have to shoot anybody, I don't want them to die. And pick up an AK-47 for me, just for show; I'll need it to cover the guards while we get the footlocker into our car. Also pick up three big bandanas for masks." Raine turned to Lee. "I want you to go back to Houston with Soose. He'll get you a fake driver's license. Next Tuesday you'll use it to rent a car at Houston International. Pay cash and get something ordinary-looking, four-door sedan, but with a boss engine—a Buick or an Olds. Have it back here by five o'clock Tuesday afternoon. You can follow Soose back and you two can get a motel room somewhere on the other side of Odessa for the night." Raine drummed his fingertips on the table. "That's all I can think of right now. Mr. Pike, let us have the money and give me a phone number where I can reach you."

While Pike counted out hundred-dollar bills from a roll he took from his pocket, Raine noticed that Lee was cleaning off their picnic bench and taking the refuse to a nearby trash can. When he saw Raine watching him, the younger man grinned sheepishly. "Can't litter," he said, almost in embarrassment. "Got to keep Texas beautiful."

Raine gave him a thumbs-up in approval.

The next day, with Soose driving, he, Raine, and Lee headed for Midland, twenty-five miles north. Stella stayed behind in the Odessa motel. Raine had told her at dinner the previous evening that the job appeared good on the surface, but he wanted to check out every last detail of it before making a final commitment. Stella was pleased that Raine was being so cautious; in the past he had pulled jobs on the spur of the moment if they looked even passably good. That, of course, was what had caused them to draw six-to-ten in the Texas pens.

The drive north was along a girder-straight highway across a parched, yellowish-gray land that was the surface of the Permian Basin caprock. It would have looked like some lifeless planet far away except for the skeleton-scaffolded oil-well pumps bobbing up and down in endless monotony to suck up some of the millions, perhaps billions, of barrels of crude that had been discovered when the first gusher popped nearly eighty years earlier.

When they got to Midland, they drove through Old Town first, then cruised slowly through a mostly deserted downtown section that looked like it was just stoically waiting out the dry, heavy-heated day until closing time. The only activity was in a small plaza where people sat on park benches eating ice cream cones, and young mothers in pairs and trios pushed their toddlers in strollers and gossiped.

"Wasn't always like this," Lee said from the backseat. "Time was, when crude was thirty-five dollars a barrel, this ol' town was jumping seven days and nights a week. People had so much money, they broke sweat trying to think up new ways to spend it. Hell, we used to have a *Rolls-Royce* dealership right here in town. And just about ever'body who had a producing well owned an airplane." He grunted softly, remembering. "Fancy country clubs all over the place. Big parties all the time. But not no more. Big things now for most folks is shopping at Wal-Mart and going to the high school football game on Friday night."

"You lived here all your life?" Raine asked.

"Yeah, mostly. My old man was a rigger; tried to put together enough money to buy some mineral rights and put in a well of his own, but he never made it. We never was dirt poor, but we was definitely part of the lower class in Midland. In high school I never got invited to no swim parties or dances that the rich kids had at the country clubs. Never wore nothin' to school but old hand-me-down jeans and work shirts from my old man and brothers. Believe me, it weren't no fun living like that in Midland, right in the middle of a town full of rich oil people and their kids. We wasn't but a step up from the Mexicans." Lee glanced uneasily at Soose. "Nothin' personal, man."

Soose said nothing, but seated next to him Raine noticed a slight clenching of his jaw. Cellmates learned to recognize little things like that about each other. Soose had not liked the remark, but it was not important enough to make an issue of it. The job came first.

"Soose tells me you want to buy a motorcycle shop," Raine said, changing the subject.

"Yeah. I figure a small Suzuki dealership somewheres, not in no big city, and not around Midland for sure, but maybe up in the panhandle. Amarillo or thereabouts."

"And you've got a girl, right?"

"Yeah. Name's Wendy. She comes from the same kind of fam'ly I do: got nothin' and gettin' nowhere. She works out at the Dairy Queen right now. We plan on gettin' married soon's we can get out of this dead-end town."

"What does Wendy think of you being in on a job like this?" Raine asked casually.

"She don't know about it," Lee replied earnestly. "She wouldn't put up with nothin' like that. You don't think I'd—" Abruptly the younger man stopped talking and, where he had been leaning forward to converse, now sat back and grinned knowingly. "I get it. That was a test, right?"

"Sort of," Raine admitted. "Where you gonna tell her you got the money to buy that shop?"

"I figure to find a place for sale and tell her the owner's bringing

me in as a partner to run it and pay for it in, like, five years. She won't know the difference."

"You won't be leaving Midland right away, will you?"

"No, sir. I figure that might look suspicious. We'll wait awhile. People hereabouts know I been looking for a shop; they won't think nothin' of it if we leave in six months or so."

"Good thinking," Raine told him. "It's a good plan. Just stick to it. Don't let the money go to your head."

"I don't aim to," Lee Watts assured him.

After Lee guided them on a general tour of the area, Raine had him show them the New Petroleum Club. On the way, they passed the original Petroleum Club. "That's the old place," Lee said. "Goes back to the days of the wildcatters. Inside, it's like being on the *Titanic.* Got this huge grand staircase leading to the dining room. People who belonged there weren't just worth millions, they was worth *billions.* But it's kind of been going downhill for quite a while now."

"But this isn't where the big fundraising luncheon's being held, right?" asked Raine.

"No, sir. That's at the *New* Petroleum Club. Hang a right at the next corner, Soose."

The New Petroleum Club sat on a low mound of manicured rye grass, a cobblestone drive leading to it from the highway north of town. It was a high-tech building, all glass and chrome and polished tile, valet parking under a modernistic porte-cochere, huge U. S. and Texas state flags flying from tall silver poles.

"This here was built by the younger crowd that missed the big bonanza," Lee said. "They come along later: high-level people with Mobil and Conoco and Texaco—the ones that've got millions but not billions. There's a back road over behind it where Mr. Pike says they'll be bringing the money out. . . ."

From a narrow, blacktopped farm-to-market road running several hundred yards behind the club grounds, Frank Raine could see the less impressive rear facade of the building. There was a small loading dock off to one side, backed by service doors that he guessed accessed the club's kitchen, food lockers, and service facilities. The other side of the lower rear was a blank wall. The upper part of the rear wall had cantilevered windows floor to ceiling all the way across the structure. At the moment they were closed by horizontal blinds.

"That the dining room?" Raine asked, anxiety rising in him at the thought of a hundred Texans gathered up there watching the robbery. But Lee relieved his mind.

"No, sir. Mr. Pike said that was a big conference room that won't be in use the day of the luncheon. The actual luncheon will be around t'other side where the dining room faces a big duck pond.

Mr. Pike says won't be nobody here 'cept kitchen help. Mostly, uh—" he nodded toward Soose.

"Hispanics," Soose said.

"Yeah," said Lee. "Mr. Pike figures when all the cash has been tossed in, the footlocker will be closed up and security guards from the Permian Basin Merchant's Bank will carry it out back to a van or SUV—he don't think they'll go to the expense of an armored truck, not for just a two-mile drive. Anyhow, there'll also be a couple or three local cops out back, maybe city, maybe county, for an escort. The footlocker's to be driven straight uptown where the president of the bank will be waiting to put it in the vault. Mr. Pike says they'll prob'ly be extra alert for an ambush 'tween here and town—but he don't think they'll expect nothing right here at the back door."

"He's right," Raine agreed. "They'll be concentrating on loading the locker into whatever kind of transportation they've got. This is the place to do it, all right."

Raine's eyes darted around the back of the building. Two kitchen workers, wearing white culinary coats, came onto the dock and emptied trays into disposal cans. Raine studied them, then turned his attention to two rows of cars between the club and where they were parked.

"What are those cars over there?"

"That's club employee parking."

As they were looking, a new Lincoln drove in and parked in a reserved space nearest the club. Two men got out, one short, wearing a sport coat, the other tall and lanky, in a red Western shirt.

"The short guy is Mr. Sims," Lee said. "He runs the club. Other fellow's Ross Tabb. He organizes big hunting trips up to Canada and down to Mexico for the rich men. He's a professional rifle and pistol shot, too; got lots of trophies and stuff. Ever'body calls him 'Red' 'cause he don't never wear nothin' but red shirts."

"Will he be at the luncheon?" Raine asked.

"Oh, hell no. He ain't in the same league with these oil men; he's just hired help."

Good, Frank Raine thought. Last person he wanted around during a big heist was some hotshot hip-shooter who liked to show off.

Soose drove them back to Odessa. On the way, Raine was quiet, contemplative. At one point he said to Soose, "Pick up three of those white coats the kitchen workers wear, one for each of us." Later he said, "Get a box of surgical gloves, too."

When they got back to Odessa, they dropped Lee at his pickup, then Raine and Soose went to a local bar and had a drink.

"Well, what do you think, *carnal?*" Soose asked.

Raine shook his head. "I don't know. It looks almost *too* good." Briefly he bit his lower lip in thought. "I keep looking for some weak spot, something that can glitch up on us, but I can't find

anything. One thing I've learned is that there's no such thing as a completely *perfect* heist—but this one sure looks close to it."

"Maybe this is our once-in-a-lifetime shot, *carnal.* Guys like us don't get many chances in life. There's things I want to do for my mother before she dies, you know? Get her a nice house. Take her on a trip back to Mexico to see her sisters and brothers. She's had a hard life, an' a lot of it's been my fault. I want to give her a few good years, you know? Maybe this is my chance to make it." He paused a beat, then added, "Yours too, *amigo.*"

"Yeah," Raine agreed quietly. "Maybe this one is it. Maybe this is the one every thief looks for in life. The dream job."

After several moments of silence, Soose said, "So? Do we go?"

Frank Raine nodded solemnly.

"Yeah. We go."

The next morning, after eating breakfast at a Denny's, Raine said to Stella, "I want to take you up to Midland, honey. I want you to see where this job is going down, and I want to find a spot where you can hook up with Pike, the old man who's bankrolling the job. You'll take him to a place where Soose, Lee, and I will come directly after the job. We'll dump the getaway car and all five of us will head back to the motel in Odessa in the car you're driving. That's where we'll cut up the take."

"Why not just have the old man come to the motel and wait there with me?" Stella asked.

"Because I don't trust him," Raine said evenly. "I don't trust anybody anymore, except you. And I don't want you trusting anybody either, hear me? Nobody."

"Sure, baby," Stella replied quietly. "Whatever you say, Frankie." The tone of his voice had somehow frightened her for a moment. She had never heard him talk like that before a job. He was, she realized for the first time, a lot harder, colder, than before he went to prison. Texas pens, she had heard, did that to a man.

After breakfast, they drove up to Midland and cruised around the area for a while. Raine showed Stella the New Petroleum Club and the escape route he had planned. "As soon as we score, we leave the club and hang a left on this farm-to-market road so we can skirt around downtown Midland to pick up Interstate 10 back to Odessa. We'll find a place uptown for you to meet old man Pike, and someplace to go on the farm-to-market road for all of us to hook up."

They scouted the farm-to-market road first and located a cornfield about two miles from the robbery site. There was a dirt road that gave tractor access to the field, but fifty yards off the paved road a car could not be seen from there or from the farmhouse far across the field. From the dirt road to the Midland city limits it was exactly

four-point-three miles. "Can you remember that?" Raine asked.

"Sure," Stella said quietly. "Four-three. April third. That's Lucy's birthday, Frank."

He glanced at her, chagrinned. "Yeah, that's right. I guess I wasn't thinking."

Uptown in Midland, they selected Centennial Plaza, a once-popular park for rollerbladers and skateboarders until a city ordinance banned them, and now just a lazy location for people to sit on benches or stroll in the thick summer air. They parked and got out and entered the plaza, sitting down on the first bench they came to. "How about this spot for picking up the old man?" Raine asked.

"Suits me," Stella agreed, shrugging.

As they were sitting there, a bright green older-model pickup truck, gleaming in mint condition, pulled up and parked. A boy and girl about sixteen got out and went across the street to an ice cream parlor. Several minutes later they came back out again with large double-dip cones and walked laughing and teasing into the park, where they sat across from Raine and Stella. They sat there, bumping shoulders, nudging one another, whispering and giggling, catching ice cream drips on their tongues, while Raine and Stella watched them in amusement. The boy's name, they overheard from the banter between them, was Jerry, and the girl's name was Sue. After they had been sitting there a short time, the young couple became aware that Raine and Stella were staring at them. Jerry blushed and looked down at the sidewalk, but Sue confronted the situation.

"Is there something wrong, ma'am?" she asked, in a not unfriendly tone.

Stella smiled and shook her head. "I'm sorry, hon. We didn't mean to be rude. It's just that you two remind us of ourselves. You know, back when we were your age."

"Oh." Now Sue blushed as Jerry had. "Well, we're not really this silly all the time."

"I know. Being silly is just having fun." Stella squeezed Raine's knee. "Isn't that right, hon?"

"Yeah, sure, right," Raine replied appropriately. He patted Stella's hand. "Well, we'd best be going along," he added.

As they were leaving, Stella threw the young people a parting smile. "You kids have a fun day. Time enough to be serious when you get older."

But when she and Raine were back in their car, Stella's smile faded and a cheerless expression replaced it. "Where in the hell did our lives go, Frank?" she asked dolefully.

Raine did not answer.

Late in the morning on the day of the job, Soose pulled up to the motel in his mother's car, with Lee right behind him in a rented

gray Buick Century four-door. As they were parking, Stella was just driving away to go pick up J.D. Pike, whom Raine had called the night before to set up the meeting. Raine watched Stella driving off, then hung the DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door, and along with Soose got into the Buick with Lee.

"Got everything?" Raine asked without preliminary.

"All in the trunk," Soose told him.

"Okay," Raine said. "Let's go."

All three men were quiet on the drive north. Getting ready to steal, *seriously* steal, with guns, was, Frank Raine imagined, a lot like going into ground combat in a war. It was a tight time, a nervous time, a time to be mindful. It was no time for idle conversation. None of the three men said a dozen words the entire trip.

When they arrived at the entrance drive to the New Petroleum Club, Raine saw that the member parking lot was filled with Lincolns, Cadillacs, BMWs, and an array of other high-ticket automobiles. "Looks like a nice crowd," he said evenly.

He had Lee drive back to the employee lot and park where they could see the rear loading dock. A station wagon was parked at the dock, its tailgate down. Two overweight men in khaki uniforms, wearing gun belts, were lounging against one fender, smoking and talking.

Raine and the two men with him got out of the Buick and opened the trunk. Each of them tied a blue and white bandana around his neck and tucked it down under the front of his shirt where it could not be seen. Then they slipped into white cotton coats like the club's culinary workers wore. They pulled on surgical gloves and took rags to wipe down the interior of the car and the guns they would use. Soose and Lee each stuck a pistol in their waistband; Raine, after checking the magazine and safety, slipped the AK-47 under the right side of his white coat and held it in place with the fingertips of his right hand. Then they loitered at the open trunk as if engaging in idle conversation before leaving for the day. Inside, they felt like frogs were loose in their stomachs.

The footlocker of cash was carried out onto the loading dock by two other men uniformed in khaki, escorted by Mr. Sims, the man whom Lee had pointed out as the manager of the club. The two guards at the station wagon moved toward the loading-dock steps to help them.

"Let's go," Frank Raine said. "Nice and easy."

Raine and Soose began walking toward the loading dock, keeping the station wagon between them and the dock. Lee closed the trunk and got back into the Buick. He swung it around and drove slowly across the lot toward the club. As Raine and Soose got close to the dock and Lee drove up near the station wagon, all three pulled their bandanas up over the lower part of their faces. Raine

and Soose stepped around from opposite sides of the station wagon. It dawned on the guards just a second too late what was happening. As the two nearest the tailgate reached for their holstered pistols, Soose clubbed one of them in the temple with his gun, and Raine butt-stroked the other across the jaw with the AK-47. Both of the men dropped like sandbags. Raine swung the AK-47 around on the other three.

"Be smart, boys," he warned tensely. "Don't get killed protecting somebody else's money."

"We hear you," the club manager said, voice wavering.

Lee stopped the Buick near them and popped the trunk from inside.

"Put that footlocker in the trunk," Raine gestured with the AK-47. "Put your guns in there, too—very carefully."

As the guards were doing what they were told, Lee hurried around and snatched the ignition keys from the station wagon, and Soose relieved the two fallen men of their sidearms. The guards set the footlocker in the trunk, along with their guns, and Soose tossed in the two extra pistols he had. Lee came hurrying back around to get behind the wheel of the Buick. Just as he started to get in, a single rifle shot split the air and a .30-30 slug hit him dead-center in the middle of the forehead.

Shocked by the suddenness of it, all five men at the tailgate of the station wagon dropped into a reflexive crouch. Raine's eyes swung like searchlights, trying to find the source of the shot. Soose stared in horror at the ugly, walnut-size hole in the fallen Lee's forehead. Brain matter was already slowly mushrooming out. Then both Raine and Soose detected movement close to them and swung to see Sims, the club manager, pulling a chrome automatic from under his coat. Raine quickly brought the AK-47 around to firing position, but Soose was a split second ahead of him and shot the man twice in the chest. Then there was another single rifle shot and Soose had a hole in his forehead just like Lee did.

Now Frank Raine saw a flash of red and knew where the shooter was, and in the same split instant knew what the glitch was in this dream robbery of theirs. Lee's words came back to him: ". . . Ross Tabb . . . organizes big hunting trips . . . professional rifle and pistol shot . . . don't never wear nothin' but red shirts . . ."

The flash of red Raine had seen was in the cantilevered window on the second floor of the club, above the loading dock. A red shirt. A professional rifleman. The glitch in their dream job. A backup sniper.

Raine moved in a crouch behind the station wagon. The faces of both standing guards were paper-white, with visible sweat running down from under their hats. "You two drag your friends over there under the loading dock," Raine ordered. One of them glanced tentatively at the club manager, who was on the ground, clutching at his

chest, the heel of one foot digging spastically at the asphalt. "Never mind him!" Raine said harshly. "He chose to die, now let him! Get your friends and move!" Each guard grabbed one of the unconscious men and began dragging him to the shelter of the dock.

Raine's eyes riveted on the second-floor window, waiting for the flash of red he knew would come again. When it did, seconds later, he rose and raked the upstairs with a long burst from the AK-47. The man in the red shirt spun completely around and pitched backwards through the cantilevered window, falling with a heavy thud to the concrete dock, then lying still as a shower of glass rained down on him.

A dozen men burst out onto the dock from the kitchen. Raine fired a quick burst of rounds over their heads and they fought like slaughterhouse sheep to get back inside.

Suddenly it was very quiet behind the New Petroleum Club. Raine tossed the AK-47 into the trunk of the Buick, grabbed two of the four pistols taken from the guards, and stuck them on each side under his belt. Slamming the trunk lid, he stepped over to Lee and took the keys to the station wagon from his lifeless hand. The heavy circulation of gunpowder in the air somehow got under the bandana covering his face and made him sneeze twice, heavily. Behind the wheel of the Buick, engine still running, he threw the car into gear and sped around to the front of the building. It did not surprise him that no one was in sight out front; everyone, even the valet parking attendants, had probably run to the rear of the club to see what all the shooting was about. Heading down the cobblestone drive to the road, Raine pulled down the bandana and exhaled what he was sure was the deepest breath he had ever taken. Maybe, he thought, he had beaten the glitch after all.

At the road, he swung right and accelerated. There was a quick catch in his chest, but he ignored it. He checked the odometer as his mind drew up the numbers he needed: two miles to the cornfield where Stella waited with old man Pike; change cars; four-point-three miles from there into Midland; then pick up Interstate 10 to Odessa—

Another quick catch seized his chest. He frowned. What the hell—?

Then he found out. At the two-mile point, there was no cornfield. There was nothing on either side of the highway except flat, gray dirt, parched by an eternity of sunlight, then sucked dry by grasshopper pumps, and finally left to die under patches of scrubby mesquite.

Raine's head began to throb. *Wait a minute.* Did he have the distances reversed? Was it four-point-three to the field, then two miles to Midland—? Pulling to the side of the road, he shook his head

violently. *No.* He had the distances correct. Come out of the New Petroleum Club drive, hang a left on the farm-to-market road—

Hang a *left.* He had turned *right.*

Son of a bitch! He could not believe it. A stupid wrong turn and now he was in an identifiable car on the wrong side of the meeting place.

He couldn't go back; the law would be coming toward him from Midland. He couldn't go forward; that would mean leaving Stella behind. Anyway, every little jerkwater town in that direction would soon have its deputies out watching for the Buick. Maybe he could hide the footlocker someplace, ditch the car, and hoof it back to the cornfield; plan things from there—

Just then, something caught his eye. Far off across one of the gray flats. It was bright green, like an artificial oasis in a wasteland. Where had he seen it before? As he watched, he could make out two figures moving about—

The two kids from town that he and Stella had briefly talked with. The green oasis was the boy's shiny pickup truck. Jerry, that was his name. The girl was Sue.

There was a tractor road leading out to where they were. Putting the Buick in gear, Raine drove up to it and turned in. When he was halfway to them, he heard the crack of a small-bore rifle, and made out what they were doing: target practicing at tin cans and bottles. Jerry was probably teaching Sue how to shoot. Memories of himself and Stella from years back flooded his mind.

When Raine drove up, the two teenagers walked over to the car. He got out, smiling. "Doing a little shooting, huh?"

"Yessir," Jerry said. He was holding a .22 lever-action Winchester. A bird gun. "We ain't trespassing or nothing," Jerry assured him. "This here's open land."

"I didn't stop because I thought you were trespassing," Raine said easily. "I want to buy your truck."

"Buy my truck?" Jerry and Sue exchanged surprised looks.

"Yeah. I'm kind of a collector of old-model vehicles. I remembered yours from the other day in town."

"Oh, yeah," said Sue. "That's right. In the park."

"Yeah. I've been driving around looking for you. I'll give you twenty thousand for it. Cash."

"Twenty thousand! Why, mister, the book on this here model ain't but about six—"

"Anyhow, we don't want to sell it," Sue said. "This truck is special to us. For a special reason."

Jerry blushed beet red. "What she means," he quickly amended, "is that her and me's been restoring this pickup together since we was freshmen in high school. It means a lot to us."

"Fifty thousand," Raine said.

"Fifty thousand! Are you crazy, mister?" Jerry's mouth was hanging open.

"We don't want to sell it," Sue said firmly. "At no price." She linked arms with Jerry. "Like I said, it's special." She squeezed his arm.

"She's right, mister," Jerry said, though a little reluctantly now. "It's not for sale."

Raine drew one of the pistols from under his coat. "Look, kids, I need that truck and I ain't got time to argue with you." He bobbed his chin at Jerry's rifle. "Lay that bird gun on the ground." Jerry did as he was told. "Give me the keys."

"They're in the ignition," Jerry said.

Raine backed over to the truck and looked inside; the keys were there. Stepping over to the Buick, he removed those keys, put them in his pocket, and popped the trunk with the dashboard button. "Okay, kid," he said to Jerry, "grab one handle of this footlocker and help me set it in the back of your pickup." They moved the locker of cash into the truck bed, up close to the cab so it could not easily be seen by oncoming traffic. Raine reached in, flipped up the buckle latches, and opened the lid. Both he and Jerry momentarily stared in awe at the contents: stacks of currency, sheaves of hundred-dollar bills, banded in bundles of fifty. Bank-stamped in red: $5000. Fingering out ten of them, Raine tossed them on the ground at Jerry's feet.

"Fifty thousand dollars, kid, and nobody'll know you've got it. All you've got to do is say I stole your truck—"

"We don't want your damned money, mister! And you're not taking our truck, neither!"

It was Sue speaking. She had picked up Jerry's rifle and had it leveled at Raine, who was still holding the pistol, but had it down at his side.

"Look, miss, put the rifle down," Raine said patiently. "We both know you're not going to shoot me—"

"Oh no?" the girl said—and squeezed the trigger, exactly as Jerry had taught her.

Frank Raine felt a .22 short round rip into his right side. He staggered back two steps but did not fall; the slug had missed his hip bone.

"Lord, Susie, you shot him!" Jerry shrieked.

Raine stared at the girl. A thought surfaced of his own daughter, Lucy, fourteen, back in Tennessee. This kid couldn't be more than a year or two older than her—

"Oh my God!" Sue bawled. "What did I do? Oh Lord—!" She threw the rifle away from her as if it were a rattlesnake. Turning, she ran crying across the barren flat. Jerry looked apprehensively at Raine, and the gun he held.

"Go on," Raine said, bobbing his chin at the fleeing girl. Jerry bolted and ran after her.

Shoving the pistol into his coat pocket, Raine twisted his arm around his back, feeling for blood and an exit wound. He found none. Pulling his coat back, he pulled up his shirt and looked at the hole in his side. It was small, puckered, bleeding slowly. Taking a sheaf of currency from the open footlocker, he pressed it over the wound and hitched up his trousers to tighten his belt and hold it in place. A five-thousand-dollar pressure bandage.

Securing the lid of the footlocker, he got into the green pickup and drove away, leaving the Buick and fifty thousand dollars on the ground behind him.

On the way to the meeting place, Raine passed the entrance drive to the New Petroleum Club. He could see two police cruisers with light bars flashing in front of the place. In the next two miles before he got to the cornfield turnoff, a third cruiser, siren wailing, sped past him without a glance.

Raine's side burned like it had a lit highway flare shoved into it. He knew that every bump along the rutted tractor road was pumping an extra spurt of blood out of him, but he was sure he could make it. All he had to do was get to Stella and she would take care of him. When they got back to the motel in Odessa, she could swab it with iodine, pull the slug out with a pair of tweezers, squeeze a tube of antibacterial ointment into the wound, and pack it with gauze pads to stop the bleeding.

He would give old man Pike the green pickup and his share of the take at the cornfield. After Stella cleaned Raine up at the motel, the two of them would head south on some of the hundreds of back roads that covered southwest Texas like dusty veins.

Pike was pacing back and forth when Raine drove up. At the sight of the green pickup truck, he pulled a chrome pistol from under his coat; he put it away when he saw that the driver was Frank Raine.

Stella blanched at the sight of Raine's blood as he got out of the truck. "My God, Frankie—!"

"Never mind," he said sharply. Then to Pike, "Get the tailgate down and drag that footlocker back."

"Where's the other boys?" Pike asked as he did what Raine wanted.

"Dead. They had a sniper at the second-floor window."

"Son of a bitch," said Pike. "Was he wearing a red shirt?"

"Yeah. And I made it a lot redder." To Stella, he said, "Open the locker and count out four hundred grand for Mr. Pike." Raine leaned on the side of the truck and pulled out the other pistol he still had in his waistband, holding it loosely at his side.

"What about the eight hundred thousand them other two boys was gonna split?" Pike asked.

"I'm taking that," Raine said flatly. "You get the share that was agreed on. Everything left over is mine."

Pike hooked both thumbs over his belt buckle and nodded thoughtfully. "That slug you take come out the back?" he asked casually. Raine shook his head. "No? Then I'm afraid you ain't gonna make it, son," the old man said quietly. Stella stopped counting and stared at him. "Look at the color of that blood you're losing," Pike said. "It's damn near black. If that bullet didn't go all the way through you, then it's in your liver. You ain't gonna live an hour, if that."

As the old man spoke, Raine's vision blurred and his throat went dry and constricted. He lost all feeling in his right arm and hand; the gun he held dropped to the ground. Five seconds later, Raine dropped to the ground, too. Stella rushed over and knelt beside him. "Oh, baby—"

Pike stepped over and picked up Raine's pistol.

"Sorry, honey," Raine whispered, and closed his eyes.

"Well, little lady, looks like it's just me and you now," Pike said. "You know, you ain't bad looking. There was a time I'd've taken you *and* the money. But at my age, I tend to look less at younger women and more at older whiskey. So I reckon I'll just have to end it for you like it ended for him."

"Can't we talk it over?" Stella asked. She was still kneeling beside Raine, her hands on his body, one of them slowly working into his coat pocket for what she felt there. Pike was shaking his head.

"Sorry, little lady, but my mind's made up."

"Have it your own way," Stella said, and started working the trigger of the pistol in Raine's coat pocket. She fired four times, right through the pocket, and hit Pike with all four shots, in the chest, every one of them in a six-inch pattern. Just like the young Frank Raine had taught her years ago.

Pike was thrown back half a dozen feet and fell like a tree. Stella pulled the bandana from around Raine's neck, took the gun from his pocket, wiped off her fingerprints, and then put it back. She leaned over and kissed him on the lips.

"Goodbye, baby," she said.

At the footlocker, she took several bills out of a number of sheaves until she had counted out fifty thousand dollars. If they thought all the money was still there, they wouldn't come looking for anybody else. Fifty thousand was enough for her to get home to her mother, and to Lucy; to get settled and start over.

In the car she had come in, Stella circled around Midland and got on the interstate back to Odessa. Once there, she would wipe off her prints, abandon the car, and buy herself a Greyhound ticket. She would go back home on the bus.

Just like she left. ●

The Discount Club

by Henry Slesar

Marriage soon disposes of single friendship, so Jerry and Bobbi Spellman were pleased to discover that their new next-door neighbors were an amiable pair named Forster. Both couples were in their mid thirties. Pete Forster worked in the municipals department of a brokerage house, Jerry worked for a computer-parts company. Bobbi and Linda Forster loved to cook, and all four were rabid, if unexceptional, golfers.

One difference was Jimmy, the Spellman's little boy, just emerging from the Terrible Twos. The Forsters were childless, but it was a kind of blessing since Linda offered her babysitting services anytime, would even board Jimmy if the Spellmans ever wanted to travel. As a matter of fact, they had been talking wistfully of a second honeymoon in Vegas, and when the notion surfaced at a shared barbecue, Linda said:

"Why don't you stay at the Lido? I can get you a thirty-percent discount!"

Jerry did some quick calculations in his head. If Linda's offer was for real, the luxurious Lido would cost less than the modest hotel they had in mind.

"We can also get you a great car-rental rate," Pete grinned, chomping his hamburger. "What's the usual?" he asked his wife, and Linda said: "Thirty-five percent, forty if it's a compact."

"Actually, we wanted to drive," Bobbi said, "but we've had nothing but problems with our car lately."

"We were just about to trade in that bucket of bolts, get a nice

Recently *EQMM* received the sad news that Henry Slesar, longtime contributor to this magazine, had died. Though we don't have an exact count, we believe his published short stories numbered over a hundred. Demanding as his writing schedule must have been, he managed at the same time to run the Slesar & Kanzer advertising agency. He was also, in the '50s and '60s, head writer of *The Edge of Night*, and of 24 episodes of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. He'll be greatly missed. †

little Camaro, but you know what happened to the market."

"Tell me about it," Pete said ruefully. "Last month, my company chopped two hundred guys from the payroll. . . ."

Jerry shivered in the sunlight. "Don't talk about it. There are all kinds of rumors at our shop." He looked towards his house, already second-mortgaged.

"Listen, in case you do decide to trade in your heap, we can help out there, too. We know a dealer in Encino, save you at least five, six grand."

Jerry stopped eating and stared at his new backyard buddy. Pete didn't seem like an empty-kettle sort of guy, making big booming promises he could never keep. By the time the last briquette turned cold, they had arranged a rendezvous with the dealer, a man named Charlie Wingate.

Wingate didn't look any too happy to see Pete drive onto the lot, and Jerry decided they weren't really friends. Wingate, a paunchy man, perspired all the way through Pete's description of what they were after. Even when they went into the air-conditioned showroom, Jerry, meandering among the cars, could see the glint of sweat beads on Wingate's round face. When Pete emerged, he was grinning toothily.

"Got you a sweetheart deal," he said.

That's what it was, Jerry told Bobbi at the dinner table that night. Their new car was going to be a bargain, probably cost them less than the repair bills for their present lemon. Bobbi had good news to relate, too. Linda had dropped by that afternoon, said she'd made a tentative booking at the Lido for them, what they called a Grand Suite, and, get this, it was only *sixty dollars a night,* including breakfast! "And this," Bobbi said, handing him an envelope.

They were casino vouchers, made to look almost like real currency, although the half-naked showgirl in the center frame didn't sustain the illusion. There were ten bills, each good for a hundred-dollar bet at any table game.

"How do they do this?" Bobbi wondered aloud. "The Forsters, I mean."

Jerry wasn't as curious. "They know people." He shrugged. "Everybody knows somebody in some business or other. Look at my cousin Marty, didn't we get a good deal on our vacuum cleaner?"

"Your cousin stiffed us," Bobbi said. "He sold us the old model a week before the new ones were shipped."

"Let's not ask questions. Let's just enjoy."

But Bobbi couldn't rein in her curiosity. When Linda dropped by for coffee and neighborhood gossip, she repeated the vacuum-cleaner story. Apologetically, Linda said she could hear the whine of Bobbi's machine right across their intervening yard. If she ever

wanted one of those super-quiet models, with great pickup, she could deliver one for at least forty off, maybe more. This time, Bobbi hesitated a second or two before saying, "Yes, sure! That would be great."

There was one more blessing the Forsters had to bestow on the Spellmans. They asked about their luggage, and both admitted they were mortified every time they dragged their worn-out suitcases off an airport carousel. Of course, the Forsters had another discount deal to offer, but Jerry demurred.

"Hey, you guys have done enough for us! And besides, we want to save a few bucks to feed the slots!"

"Sixty percent," Pete said, lifting his eyebrows and doing something comic with his mouth. "Does that tempt you? Name brands, your choice."

"For heaven's sake," Bobbi said. "How many relatives do you people have?"

Linda said, "Pete has family in Wisconsin, but I don't have any, not since my father died last year."

"You might say we have a kind of club." Jerry grinned. "A discount club."

Bobbi, with Jimmy in a stroller, accompanied Linda to the small store downtown called Amelio Luggage. The old proprietor had a heroic white moustache and kindly blue eyes, but something altered their color when he saw Linda appear behind mother and baby. Bobbi was startled to see the moustache quiver and hear the old man say:

"Not again! Not again, summabitch! Why don't you leave me alone?"

Linda flushed with embarrassment. "I'm just bringing you a customer, Mr. Amelio, we're not looking for anything expensive!"

"Everyt'ing expensive when you people come in here!" He balled a small fist and slammed it soundlessly on a stack of cosmetic cases. "No more, you hear me? No more!"

"All right, all right! No more, Mr. Amelio!" Linda grabbed Bobbi's arm and wheeled her about, whispering harshly into her ear, "The old man's crazy. Senile!"

Bobbi was mystified by the event, but Linda didn't offer any further explanation, or even an apology. She asked if Bobbi wanted to look at luggage at Robin's Department Store, admitting she had no discount clout there. Bobbi said no, Jimmy was getting cranky, and she hadn't started dinner yet. . . .

Bobbi didn't mention the incident to her husband. Jerry hadn't known about the luggage hunt, and he was in a bad mood as it was. The office rumors about cutbacks were becoming a reality; sixty low-level employees had been handed pink slips. Jerry, who was only a notch ahead, didn't see why he should be spared. He spent the evening totting up monthly expenses, moaning about

the two mortgages they carried, even questioning the wisdom of the Las Vegas trip but stopping short of suggesting cancellation.

The Forsters gave their neighbors a small party before their departure, and Jerry marveled at the array of costly whiskeys and liqueurs Pete hauled out of the liquor cabinet. When Pete and Linda invited them to view the cellar, Bobbi stayed behind, not trusting her high heels on the steep wooden steps. Jerry gasped when he saw row after row of wine bottles. Jerry was no expert, but he recognized some of the labels, including a rack of Mouton Rothschilds that he knew sold for a couple of hundred dollars in restaurants.

That night, preparing for bed, Jerry noted Bobbi's uncharacteristic silence and asked her about it. She said: "Did you know Linda's name was del Castro? Her maiden name, I mean."

"No, so what?"

"They have these pictures on the piano? When you went down to the cellar, I was looking through them and I saw some snapshots stuck in the frames. They must have been at least twenty years old, they had writing on the back. Names and dates, you know?"

"Does this have a point, or what?" Jerry hadn't lost his irritable mood of the last three days.

"There was a picture of Linda as a child, clowning with this gray-haired man—it said 'July 1982, Johnny del Castro and his monkey.' Somebody's joke, I suppose. But I recognized him, Jerry! The same big face, all that sleek white hair . . ."

She finally had his attention. "You don't mean *that* del Castro? The gangster?"

"Yes! The one who died in prison last year!"

"Killed," Jerry amended. "Murdered by an inmate."

"Poor Linda," Bobbi said automatically. "I mean, if she really is—was—his daughter. When you think about it, there's a definite resemblance."

"Okay," her husband said. "So she's his daughter. What does that make her, a housewife gangster?"

Bobbi didn't say any more about it that night, but it affected her sleep. Her own father had been a garden-supply dealer in Scranton, but his real dedication was to the church. He had been a deacon as well as an occasional lay preacher, and while there was no fire and brimstone in his personality, he could be flinty and judgmental, strict with his two children, Bobbi and her brother Timothy. He would have been proud of Timothy if he had lived long enough to see him ordained.

The Forsters were a continual subject of conversation, but not in Las Vegas. The city assaulted all their senses, and the Spellmans reeled between casinos and restaurants and gaudy stage shows. The Lido wasn't as glamorous as they expected, but it didn't bother them.

All Jerry cared about were the blackjack tables; he barged from one to another looking for the Lucky One, distributing his free vouchers and then dipping into his wallet. Bobbi was preoccupied with the electronic slots, hypnotized by their light displays and discordant music; she paid no attention to the mania which had seized her husband. Only later, when the damage had been done, did she realize that it wasn't entertainment Jerry had been seeking in Las Vegas but salvation.

The third night, a man in a tuxedo sidled up to him and quietly asked him to come along. He had a slablike jaw and cold eyes, and he didn't respond to Jerry's one-word question. Jerry was taken into a small, well-appointed office, and the man behind the desk wasn't smiling. "Who gave you those vouchers?" he said. He looked ordinary, but Jerry was frightened.

"Friends of ours," he said. "The Forsters."

The man slid his eyes over to his big-jawed associate. "Married name," he said.

"Don't use any more," the man said icily, and Jerry told him they were all gone, along with five hundred cash and money obtained via credit card, a fact he had kept from Bobbi. "Then you lost enough here. Pack your bags and get out. And tell your friends, no more 'discounts.' You got the message?"

Jerry got it. Bobbi didn't. She thought Jerry had misunderstood; she was having too much fun; she loved carting buckets of quarters to the cashier's counting machine, not worried by the fact that she was losing more than she was gaining.

They were driving home when the picture cleared in his mind.

"They didn't like del Castro," he said. "I'll bet he had a stake in the Lido. Maybe these guys arranged that knife in the shower—"

Bobbi was shocked, but incredulous. "That's for the movies! That's not real life!" But she thought about it, and began to shiver. "That old man in the luggage store—he was afraid of Linda, of both of us! Even with Jimmy there, in his stroller, he was afraid!"

"The guy at the auto agency," Jerry said. "He was nervous—too nervous. Maybe scared! My God, Bobbi, what are these people really about?"

Bobbi couldn't wait to get home, to pick up Jimmy and return him to his own bunny-filled nursery. The Forsters were jolly, but they soon gauged their mood. Pete said: "You lost, huh? Not too much, I hope."

"It was a good thing we were bounced, or it might have gotten worse."

"Bounced?"

Jerry related the story and saw the Forsters look at each other with an expression bordering on guilt. That emboldened Bobbi to ask: "Please tell us what it's all about! We know it has something

to do with your father."

Pete brought out a bottle and bucket of ice. He made the drinks, but allowed Linda to do the explaining.

"I loved my father," she said in her preamble. "I didn't know what he was, what he did for a living, until I was almost in my teens. My mother kept me in a kind of vacuum, but she died when I was twelve, and my father got his name in the papers, and one day he was on television, holding a hat in front of his face. I still have the hat." There was a hint of tears, but it was brief.

"He was sentenced to prison when I was nineteen, a year before I met Pete. They said it was racketeering charges, but he denied it to me, and I believed him. What Daddy's little girl wouldn't?

"About a week before they locked him up, Daddy came to see me, and he was carrying an envelope. He said he couldn't leave me any money, those so-called 'friends' of his had bled him dry, but he had something else he wanted me to have. It was a confidential list, he said, a very important list of companies and people, people who would help me get along. All I had to do was use his name, tell them who I was, and they would be glad to give me big discounts on all kinds of things. I didn't understand at first; I didn't have enough money to buy refrigerators and vacuum cleaners and trips to the Caribbean. . . .

"Then he explained. Most of these people would give me forty, sometimes fifty percent off the regular price. He said I could make a business out of it. If I told people I could get them thirty percent off, that would leave ten, even twenty percent for me. Like a cruise, for instance. One trip could net me two, three thousand dollars, with no effort. You see what he meant?"

Bobbi said, clearing her throat: "So when we booked the Lido, bought that car, the vacuum cleaner—you got paid, too?"

Pete said: "It was still a bargain, wasn't it? You got to admit it was a bargain."

"Yes," Jerry said, eager to restore relations.

"But there must have been a reason," Bobbi said. "Why did these people give you those discounts? Did it have anything to do with your father's 'business'?"

Jerry started to say something, but Bobbi squeezed his knee.

Pete said: "Like I said, it's a kind of club . . . a very private club. And listen, if you want to join—we could give you a copy of the list! We'll split whatever you make, fifty-fifty! That's fair, isn't it?"

"You'd be surprised at the names on that list!" Linda was looking more relaxed now. "Not just retail stores. Top executives, union leaders, all kinds of people ready to do favors—"

"But why?" Bobbi said. "Because they had to? Because they were afraid that something would happen to them, to their families, if they didn't?"

Linda's face darkened. "That's no way to look at it, honey."

"Johnny del Castro was in the protection racket!" Bobbi said. "That's what your father did for a living, the newspapers said it was the job the mob assigned to him! Am I right?"

"My father is dead! We don't slander the dead!"

"Here, look!" Pete said eagerly, sliding what looked like a telephone book from the second tier of the coffee table. He flipped open the leather flap and showed them a neatly typed list.

"Look at all the local union bosses—the department stores—the hotels—cruise ships—"

Bobbi couldn't help skimming the names on the first sheet. There were at least five pages to the document. It must have taken Johnny del Castro and his cohorts years to intimidate so many people, to make them fear for their lives, their children . . .

"It's not as if we mean them any *harm,*" Linda said. "We don't threaten anybody, don't you realize?"

"No," Bobbi said. "You don't have to. They've already been threatened. You're just keeping their fear alive." She stood up and looked at her husband, and Jerry rose, too. "We have to go. Would you bring Jimmy downstairs, please?"

It was Tim who convinced her, or rather *Father* Timothy, sounding so much like their own father that Bobbi could imagine she was on a direct line to Heaven. In truth, she was almost sorry she'd called him, knowing he would have as stern and unshakable a view as Dad's. He told her:

"Can you get a copy of that list, Barbara?" It was her preteen name, the one on her baptismal certificate. "You said they offered it to you."

"Yes, they did. They wanted us to go into 'business' with them!"

"It's a list of prisoners," he said. "People in bondage to these criminals. You can free them, Sis."

"But they're not at any risk," Bobbi said in meek protest. "No real danger, not from the Forsters, for heaven's sake. Crazy as it sounds, they're not really bad people—"

"They're doing the work of the Devil," Tim said. "And you'll be aiding and abetting them if you don't do something about it."

She didn't wait to hear him repeat his favorite quotation from Burke, about how the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

Or women.

She was still brooding about the call when Jerry arrived home, two hours earlier than usual. She smelled alcohol on his breath even at the distance he chose to keep when he announced the news he had forecast a month ago. He was "downsized." He was trimmed. He was canned. He was fired.

Perhaps wanting to get out all the bad news at once, he also told her about his Las Vegas madness. He confessed that he had lost more than the five hundred in cash. He had used their credit card to enrich the casino by another three thousand. His severance pay would cover the next two mortgage payments, but after that they were looking into oblivion.

He was expecting a domestic battle. He couldn't understand why Bobbi merely turned away and went upstairs to the bedroom.

She could only deal with one problem at a time.

She called the local precinct from the bedside phone, jotting down the number on her "Things to Do" pad. She spoke to an indifferent sergeant named either Macon or Mason, but he wouldn't give her the "appointment" she asked for. "Just come down here and we'll get you someone to talk to," he said. She said she would be there in the morning.

Jerry spent the night on the sofa, presuming that was what Bobbi wanted. He was gone when she came downstairs, holding a cranky Jimmy in her arms. Could she bring a three-year-old to a police station? The only alternative was to call Heather, a high school dropout who was a sometime babysitter.

The officer she was assigned to at the 35th Precinct didn't fit the stereotype. He was a short, balding man with a nervous manner, only mildly interested in the complaint she was bringing to his cluttered desk. Oddly, most of the clutter seemed to be travel folders. His name was Hamsun.

"You told the desk sergeant you wanted to report a crime, Mrs.—" He couldn't remember her name, even though she had pronounced it clearly.

"Yes," she said. She clutched the wooden handles of the big handbag she carried. She wasn't sure she could explain her dilemma properly, but she knew the name of Johnny del Castro would get his full attention.

Before she could say it, his phone rang. He listened with a frown, shuffling the folders on his desk. He finally made sense of what he was hearing and glared at Bobbi.

"You said your name was Spellman?"

"Yes."

"What do you people think we are, an answering service?" He shoved the receiver at her. "It's for you—your husband!"

She was only momentarily baffled, remembering that she had scrawled the precinct number on a pad and noted the name of Sergeant Macon or Mason alongside it.

"For God's sake," Jerry said, "what the hell are you doing there, Bobbi?"

"I'm doing what I have to do, Jerry."

"You're ratting on the Forsters! You can't do that! They're our friends—never mind that del Castro stuff! They're *friends!*"

"They've been using us!" she said, feeling her eyes dampen. "We were only members of their damned 'discount club'!"

"They're friends, and I can prove it! Last night, after you went to bed, I went over to the Forsters, I told them what happened to me, and Pete, he said maybe there was something he could do about it—"

"What are you talking about?"

"The list, Bobbi, the list! There were names on it, people in my company—do you understand? He made a couple of phone calls—this morning I got a call from my supervisor, Harry Ward—he said my pink slip was a 'clerical error'—"

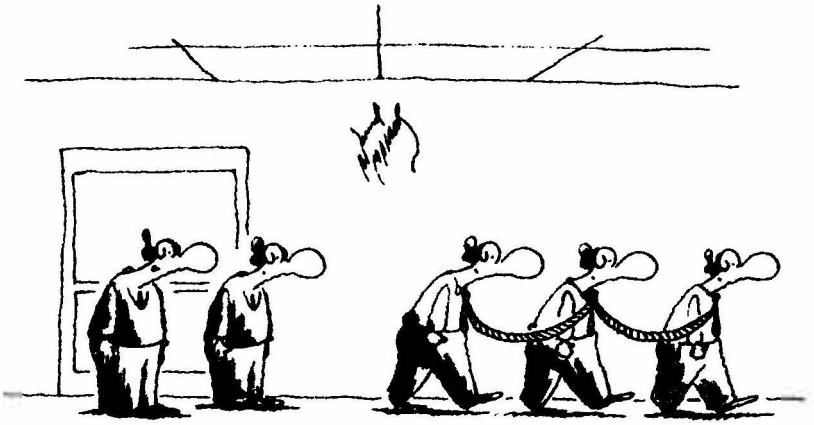
Her vision blurred momentarily as the tears were released. But then her eyes cleared. Officer Hamsun looked different, older, more troubled as he studied a travel folder with a Hawaiian beach on the cover.

"Bobbi, I'm back at work! Harry came in ten minutes ago, said I might be getting some new duties because of the cutback, but he'd make sure I got an increase to go with it. . . ."

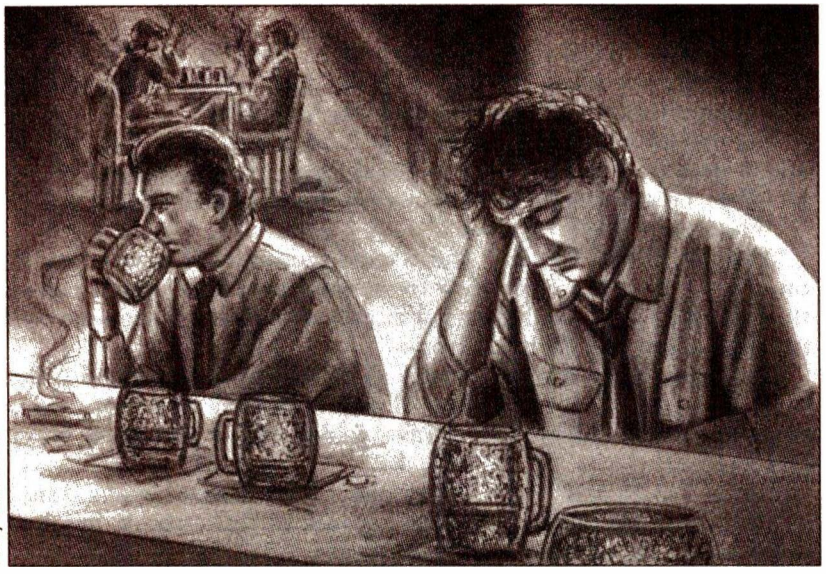
When Bobbi hung up, Hamsun leaned back and waited for her to register her complaint. Instead she said: "Are you thinking of going to Hawaii?"

"Yeah, that's what the wife wants. She thinks I'm a millionaire."

She struggled to remember the name she had glimpsed on the list. Then it came to her. "Do you know the Paradise Palms hotel? It's on the big island—it's gorgeous! And I can get you a thirty percent discount." ●



"They're part of the white-collar prison work-release program."



Art by John Stevens

TRUTH

by John Harvey

Before Jack Kiley had moved to the comparatively rarefied splendours of Highbury Fields (that courtesy of Kate, and another story which might be told), home had been a second-floor flat in the dodgy hinterland between the Archway and the arse-end of Tufnell Park. Upper Holloway, according to the *London A-Z*. A bristle of indistinguishable streets that clung, like fleas, to the rabid backbone of the Holloway Road: four lanes of traffic which, here and there, squeezed inexplicably down to two, fostering a trail of fumes which spread unusually high levels of eczema, asthma, and related diseases over the surrounding area, achieving pollution levels three times above those recommended as safe by the EEC.

Undaunted, Kiley would, from time to time, stroll some half a mile along the pavements of this great highway, past the innumerable Greek Cypriot and Kurdish convenience stores and the fading splendour of the five-screen Odeon, to drink at the Royal Arms. And why not? One of the few pubs not to have been tricked out with shamrocks and fake antiquities, it boasted reasonable beers, comfortable

chairs, and more than adequate sightlines should Kiley fancy watching the Monday night match on wide-screen TV.

It was here that young Nicky Cavanagh, nineteen and learning a trade at U-Fit Instant Exhausts and Tyres, got into an argument with one of the Nealy brothers, one of five. What the argument was about, its starting point and raison d'être, was still in dispute. Some comment passed about last Sunday's game at Highbury, a jostled arm, a look that passed between Cavanagh and the girl, underdressed and underaged, by Nealy's side. Less uncertain were the details of what followed. After a certain amount of mouthing off, a shove here and a push there, the pair of them, Nealy and Cavanagh, stood facing one another with raised fists, an empty bottle of Miller Lite reversed in Cavanagh's spare hand. Nealy, cursing, turned on his heels and left the bar, hauling his companion with him. Less than thirty minutes later, he returned. Three of the brothers were with him, the fourth enjoying time in Feltham Young Offenders Institution at the government's expense. His place was taken by a bevy of friends and hangers-on, another four or five. Pick handles, baseball bats. They trapped Cavanagh by the far wall and dragged him out onto the street. By the time the first police sirens could be heard, Cavanagh, bloodied and beaten, lay curled into a broken ball beside the kerb.

Now, some months later, Nicky Cavanagh was in a wheelchair, his only drinking done at home or in the stretch of park which edged the main road near Kiley's old flat, and Kiley himself had found another pub. Despite statements taken from several witnesses at the time, none of Cavanagh's attackers had so far been charged.

John Harvey has close to a hundred books to his credit, but his first "stand-alone" novel, *In a True Light*, appeared only last year. He began his career writing series paperbacks, for both teenagers and adults, and later launched a hardcover mystery series featuring a character, Resnick, who has come to be celebrated in crime fiction. A poet and dramatist as well as a crime writer, Mr. Harvey is frequently cited by critics for the beauty of his prose. ¶

The Lord Nelson was a corner pub, for Kiley a longer walk though none the worse for that; refurbishment had brought in stripped pine tables and Thai cuisine, wide-screen satellite TV, but left the cellar pretty much intact—John Smith's and Marston's Pedigree. The occasional Saturday night karaoke he tolerated, quiz nights he avoided like the plague: which non-league footballer, coming on

in extra time, scored a hat trick in the quarter finals of the FA Cup? Embarrassing when they misremembered his name—Keeley, Kelsey, Riley—worse when he was recognised and some good-hearted fellow, full of booze and bonhomie, insisted on introducing him to the room.

But he had been more than a soccer player, and there were those who knew that as well.

"Jack Kiley, isn't it? You were in the Met."

The face Kiley found himself looking into was fleshy, dark-eyed, receding hair cut fashionably short, a small scar pale across his cheek.

"Dave Peters."

Kiley nodded and shook the proffered hand; rough fingers, calloused palms.

"Mind?" Peters gestured towards an empty chair.

"Help yourself."

Peters set down his glass, angled out the chair, and sat. Late thirties, Kiley thought, around the same age as himself. Peters wearing a waist-length leather jacket, unzipped, check shirt, and jeans.

"I was in the Job myself," Peters said. "South, mostly. Tooting, Balham. Too many rules and regs. Shifts. Better now I'm me own boss. Damp-proofing, plastering. Bit of heavy rain and you're quids in. But you know all about that, working for yourself, I mean. Not that it ever really appealed, not to me, like. Going private." He shook his head. "Missing persons, lot of those, I reckon. Wives frightened their old man's going over the side."

Kiley shifted his weight, waiting for Peters to get to it.

"Here," Peters said, taking a folded sheet from his inside pocket and smoothing it out. "Take a look at this."

It was a poster, A3 size, composed by someone on a dodgy home computer and run off at Prontaprint! or somewhere similar. The photograph of Peters was just recognizable, the type jammed too close together but the message clear enough.

> DAVID PETERS
> Six months ago David Peters walked out on his family, leaving a gorgeous little baby girl behind. Since then he has refused to pay a penny towards the upkeep of his child. If you're approached by this man to do building work of any kind, look the other way. Don't put money into his pockets so he can spend it on whores and ignore his responsibilities.
> DO NOT TRUST THIS MAN.

"Where was this?" Kiley asked.

"On some hoarding up by the Nag's Head. And there's more of

'em. All over. Here. The Archway. Finsbury bloody Park." The anger in Peters's face was plain, the line of his scar white as an exclamation mark. "What am I s'posed to do? Go round and tear every one of 'em down?"

"What do you want me to do?" Kiley said.

"Go see her. Talk to her. Here." He pushed a slip of paper towards Kiley's hand. "Tell her it's not on."

"Wouldn't it be better if you did that yourself?"

Peters laughed, a grating sound that finished low in his throat.

Kiley glanced at the poster again. "Is it true?"

"What?"

"What it says."

"What do you think?"

"Did you leave her?"

" 'Course I left her. There weren't no livin' with her."

"And child support? Maintenance?"

"Let whichever bloke she's screwing pay bleedin' maintenance." Peters laughed again, harsh and short. "And she's got the mouth to accuse me of goin' with whores. Ask her what she was doing when I met her, ask her that. She's the biggest whore of the bloody lot."

"I still think if you could go and talk to her . . ."

Peters leaned sharply forward, slopping his beer. "She's trying to make me look a cunt. And she's got to be stopped."

"I'm sorry," Kiley said with a slow shake of the head. "I don't think I want to get involved."

"Right." Peters's chair cannoned backwards as he got to his feet. The poster he screwed up and tossed to the floor. "You ain't got the stomach for it, believe me, there's plenty who have."

Kiley watched him go, barging people aside on his way to the door. The piece of paper Peters had given him was lined, the writing small and surprisingly neat. Jennie Calder, an address in N8. He refolded it and tucked it out of sight.

He had met Kate at a film festival, the premiere of a new Iranian movie, the organisers anticipating demonstrations and worse. The security firm for whom Kiley had then been working were hired to forestall trouble at the screening and the reception afterwards. Late that night, demonstrations over, only a handful of people lingering in the bar, Kiley had wandered past the few discarded placards and leaned on the Embankment railing, staring out across the Thames. Leaving Charing Cross station, a train clattered across Hungerford Bridge; shrouded in tarpaulin, a barge ghosted bulkily past, heading downriver towards the estuary. In their wake, it was quiet enough to hear the water, lapping against stone. When he turned, there was Kate, her face illuminated as

she paused to light a cigarette. Dark hair, medium height, he had noticed her at the reception, asking questions, making notes. At one point she had been sitting with the young Iranian director, a woman, Kate's small tape recorder on the table between them.

"What did you think of the film?" Kiley asked, wanting to say something.

"Very Iranian," Kate said, and laughed.

"I doubt if it'll come to the Holloway Odeon, then."

"Probably not."

She came and stood alongside him at the Embankment edge.

"I should get fed up with it," Kate said after some moments. "This view—God knows I've seen it enough—but I don't." She was wearing a loose-fitting suit, the jacket long, a leather bag slung from one shoulder. When she pitched her cigarette, half-smoked, towards the water, it sparkled through the near dark.

"There's another showing," she said, looking at Kiley full on. "The film, tomorrow afternoon. If you're interested, that is."

"You're going again?"

"I shouldn't think so." She was smiling with her eyes, the merest widening of the mouth.

The opening images aside, a cluster of would-be teachers, blackboards strapped awkwardly to their backs as they struggle along a mountain road in a vain search for pupils, it turned out to be the longest eighty-five minutes Kiley could recall. Kate's piece in *The Guardian Weekend,* complete with photographs of Samira Makhmalbaf and suitable stills, he thought far more interesting than the film itself.

Plucking up a certain amount of courage, he phoned to tell her so.

Well, it had been a beginning.

"I'm still not clear," Kate said, "why you turned it down."

They were sitting in Kate's high bed, a bottle of red wine, three-parts empty, resting on the floor. Through the partly opened blinds, there was a view out across Highbury Fields. It was coming up to a quarter past ten and Kiley didn't yet know if he'd be invited to stay the night. He'd tried leaving his toothbrush once and she'd called down the stairs after him: "I think you've forgotten something."

"I didn't fancy it," Kiley said.

"You didn't fancy the job or you didn't like the look of him?"

"Both."

"Because if you're only going to take jobs from decent, upstanding citizens with good credit references and all their vowels in the right place . . ."

"It's not that."

"What then?"

"It's what he wanted me to do."

"Go round and talk to her, persuade her to ease off, reach some kind of accommodation."

"That wasn't what he wanted. He wanted me to warn her, frighten her."

"And now you're not going to do it?"

Kiley looked at her. Pins out of her hair, it fell across her shoulders, down almost to the middle of her back. "What d'you mean?"

"Now you've turned him down, what will happen?"

"He'll get somebody else."

"With less scruples."

Kiley shrugged.

"Maybe it would've been better for her," Kate said, "if you'd said yes." The way she was looking at him suggested that pretty soon he'd be climbing back into his clothes and setting out on the long walk home.

Some housing-department official with a cruel sense of irony had named the roads after areas of New Orleans. Anything further from the bougainvillea and *bon temps roules* of the Crescent City would have been hard to find. Kiley walked past a triangle of flattened mud masquerading as a lawn and headed for the first of several concrete walkways. *Do Not Let Your Dogs Foul the Estate,* read one sign. *No Ball Games,* read another. A group of teenagers lounged around the first stairwell, listening to hard-core hip-hop at deafening volume and occasionally spitting at the ground. They gave no sign of moving aside to let Kiley pass, but then, at the last moment, they did. Laughter trailed him up towards the fifth floor.

Two of the glass panels in the front door had been broken and replaced by hardboard. Kiley rang the bell and waited.

"Who is it?"

He could see a shape, outlined through the remaining glass.

"Jennie Calder?"

"Who's this?" The voice was muffled yet audible.

"Kiley. Jack Kiley."

"Who?"

He took a card from his wallet and pushed it through the letter box. The shape came closer.

"Who sent you? Did he send you?"

"You mean Peters?"

"Who else?"

"Not exactly."

She unbolted the door but kept it on the chain. Through a four-inch gap Kiley could see reddish hair, unfashionably curly, grey-

green eyes, a full mouth. She tapped Kiley's card with the tip of a fingernail.

"Private investigator? What is this, some kind of joke?"

Kiley grinned. "I'm beginning to wonder myself."

Out of sight, a child started crying.

"You here to do his dirty work for him?"

"No."

As the crying grew in intensity, the woman looked hard at Kiley, making up her mind. Then, abruptly, she pushed the door to, unfastened the chain, and opened it wide enough for him to step inside.

"Wait there," she said, leaving him in a square hallway the size of a telephone booth. When she reappeared, it was with a tow-haired child astride her hip. Eighteen months? Two years? Kiley wasn't sure.

"This is Alice."

"Hello, Alice."

Alice hid her face against her mother's arm.

"Why don't we go through," Jennie said, "and sit down?"

There were pieces of Lego and wooden bricks here and there across the floor, a small menagerie of lions and bears; on one of the chairs, an oddly lifelike doll, fully dressed, sat staring out. Toys apart, the room was neat, tidy: three-piece suite, TV, stereo, a dining table pushed into a corner near the window.

Without putting her daughter down, Jennie made tea and brought it through, with biscuits and sugar, on a tray.

Only when she sat opposite him, Alice clambering from one side of her chair to the other, did Kiley see the tiredness in her face, the strain behind her eyes. Jennie wearing blue jeans and a soft blue top, no-name trainers without socks; late twenties, Kiley thought, though she could have passed for older.

"So?" she said.

Kiley held his mug of tea in both hands. "These posters . . ."

"Got to him, have they?" A smile now.

"You could say."

"And you were meant to warn me off?"

"Something like that. Only I'm not."

"You said."

The tea was strong. Kiley spooned in sugar and stirred it round.

"Biscuit," Alice said, the word just this side of recognition. Jennie reached down and broke a digestive in half. "So what are you doing here?" she asked.

"If it's not me it'll likely be somebody else. I thought you should know."

"I didn't think he was going to be leading the applause."

"Isn't there somewhere you could go?" Kiley asked. "Until it blows over."

"No."

"Friends, a relative?"

"No." The child's piece of biscuit broke and pieces crumbled across her mother's top. Automatically, Jennie brushed them away and reached for the other half. "Besides, who says it's going to blow over? The day he puts his hand in his pocket, faces up to his responsibilities, that's when it'll blow over. Not before."

For the time being, Kiley was working out of his flat: He had a fax, an answerphone, directories, numbers on a Rolodex. What he didn't have: the faithful secretary secretly lusting for him in the outer office, the bottle of scotch in the desk drawer alongside the .38. When he'd jacked in his job with the security firm—no hard feelings, Jack, keep in touch—he'd contacted those officers he still knew inside the Met and let them know what he was doing. A sports agent had thrown a couple of things his way, but since then nothing. A local firm of solicitors likewise.

Recently, he'd spent a lot of time watching movies in the afternoons, starting paperbacks he never finished, staring at the same four walls. He would have sat diligently doing his accounts if there were any accounts to do. Instead he took out ads in the local press and waited for the phone to ring.

When he got back from Jennie Calder's flat, two red zeros stared back at him from the answerphone. The people in the flat upstairs were playing "Green, Green Grass of Home" again. He had a bacon sandwich at the nearest greasy spoon and skimmed the paper twice. Each time he reached the sports page, Charlton Athletic had lost away.

Still it kept nagging at him. A brisk walk through the back doubles and he was back at the estate, keeping watch on Jennie Calder's place from below.

He didn't have too long to wait. There were two of them, approaching from the opposite direction and moving fast. The one at the front bulkily built, shoulders hunched, wool hat tight on his head; the other younger, taller, tagging along behind.

By the time Kiley arrived, the front door was half off its hinges, furniture overturned, the front of the television kicked in. Alice was clinging tight to her mother and screaming, Jennie shouting over the noise and close to tears.

"Company," the youth said.

On his way over, Kiley had picked up a piece of two-by-four from a building site, solid wood.

"What the hell do you want?" the big man said.

Just time for Kiley to think he recognised him before swinging

the length of wood hard against the side of his head. Twice, and the man was down on his knees.

The lanky kid standing there, not knowing what to do.

"Get him out of here," Kiley said. "And don't come back."

Blood ran between the man's fingers; one eye was swelling fast and all but closed. The pair of them stumbled to the door, mouthing threats, Kiley watching them go.

Alice was whimpering now, tears wet against her mother's neck.

"Thanks," Jennie said. She was shaking.

Bending forward, Kiley righted one of the chairs.

"You think they'll be back?"

"Not yet."

Kiley went into the kitchen and filled the kettle, set it on the gas, made tea; he tracked down an emergency locksmith and told him to fit extra bolts top and bottom, metal reinforcements behind both hinges and locks.

"Who's going to pay for all that?" Jennie asked.

"I will," Kiley said.

Jennie started to say something else but thought better of it. She put Alice down in her cot and almost immediately the child was asleep. When she came back into the room, Kiley was clearing the last of the debris from the floor.

"Why?" Jennie asked, arms folded across her chest. "Why're you doing all this?"

"Job satisfaction?"

"Nobody hired you."

"Ah." He set one of his cards down on a corner of the settee. "Here. In case you lost the first one. Ring me if there's a need." Leaving, he leaned the dented piece of two-by-four against the wall by the front door. "Just in case. And don't let anybody in unless you're certain who they are, okay? Not anybody."

He found Dave Peters later that evening, at a table in the Royal Arms. Two others with him. The big man was still wearing his wool hat, only now there was a good inch of bandage visible beneath it, plaster sticking to his cheek. One eye was bruised and two-thirds closed.

Their companion—loose suit, dark shirt, blue-patterned tie—Kiley didn't recognise.

He crossed the floor towards them.

"What the hell . . . ?" the big man started, half out of his seat.

The one in the suit reached out and caught hold of his arm, gave a slow shake of the head. Grudgingly, the big man sat back down.

"You've got some balls," Peters said.

"I told you to go and talk to her," Kiley replied. "Sort things out. Not this."

Peters nodded. "You said you didn't want to get involved an' all. Remember that?"

"Talk to her," Kiley said again.

"What is this?" Peters scoffed. "Marriage guidance? Social bloody services?"

Kiley shrugged and took a step away.

"You," the big man said, lurching back to his feet. "Your life ain't worth livin'."

Which was when Kiley knew who he was, the place, the occasion reminding him, the family resemblance now clear.

"Nealy, isn't it?" Kiley said.

"Eh?"

"Nealy."

"What's it to you?"

"What're you fixing to do? Get those boys of yours? Wade in mob-handed like your boys did with Nicky Cavanagh?"

Nealy moved close enough for Kiley to smell the sourness on his breath. "I'll have you," he said.

"Bob," Loose Suit said quietly from the table. "Let it go."

Reluctantly, Nealy lowered his hands to his sides.

Kiley took a last look at each of them, turned, and left.

The phone went at a quarter to seven, Kiley not quite awake, wondering if he should turn over again or push back the covers and face another day.

Jennie's voice was angry, frightened. "It's the police. They're arresting me. They . . ."

Abruptly, the line went dead.

Kiley ran the bathroom tap, splashed water on his face, cleaned his teeth, and dressed.

They'd taken her to the police station on Hornsey Road, the officer on the desk fending off enquiries like Atherton on the fourth day of the Test. A Jennie Calder had been taken into custody and was currently being interviewed, that was all he would confirm. "What are the charges?" Kiley demanded.

The officer's eyes switched focus. "Next," he called into the small crowd at Kiley's back.

Margaret Hamblin's offices were in Kentish Town. Hamblin, Laker, and Clarke. When Kiley had been building up his overtime in C.I.D., Margaret had been a lowly solicitor's clerk, forever in this police station or that picking up cases nobody else wanted, learning on the hoof. Now, even if Kiley had still been in the Force, overtime was pretty much a thing of the past and Margaret was a senior partner with a taste for good wines and stylish clothes. This morning she was wearing a cord drawstring jacket and chevron

skirt from Ghost. She listened to Kiley intently, then reached for the phone. Ten minutes later, a car was taking them back to Hornsey Road, Margaret sensibly lyrical about her recent holiday in northern Spain.

This time Kiley got past the enquiry desk but not a great deal further. He was kicking his heels outside the custody suite, trying not to notice the smell of disinfectant, when two officers, one in uniform, one plainclothes, pushed their way through the double doors. Neither looked to be in the best of humour. The C.I.D. man had changed his shirt from the previous night in the Royal Arms, but the suit and tie were the same. If he recognised Kiley, he gave no sign.

An hour later, no more, they were sitting, the four of them—Kiley, Margaret Hamblin, Jennie, and Alice—in Margaret's office. An assistant had brought in coffee, Danish, and bottled water. Jennie's face was strained and pale without makeup; Alice, released from the tender mercies of a broody WPC, clung to her mother's neck, whimpering softly.

Margaret sipped at her espresso and set it aside. "Jennie's charged with keeping a brothel."

"She's what?" Kiley exclaimed.

Jennie looked away.

"I persuaded them to release her on police bail, but it seems they're considering instituting care proceedings. . . ."

"They can't!" Jennie pressed her face down against her daughter's head and held her tight.

"On what grounds?" Kiley asked.

Margaret leaned back in her chair. "That Alice is exposed to moral danger where she is."

"Surely that's a nonsense?"

"Not if the brothel charge can be made to stick."

"How can it?" Kiley asked.

Margaret looked across at Jennie and Kiley did the same. It was awhile before she spoke, her voice shaky and quiet.

"This friend of mine, Della—we were at school together—she's been seeing this bloke, married, of course. Della, she's living with her mum, got two kids of her own. Car parks and hotels aside, they didn't have anywhere to go. So I've been letting them use my place, afternoons. Just, maybe, once or twice a week."

"And you and Alice," Margaret asked, "while they were in the bedroom, whatever, you'd both be in the flat?"

Jennie shook her head. "Not as a rule. I'd take Alice up to the park, swings and slides. You know, a walk."

"And if it rained?"

Jennie hung her head; all too clearly, she could see where this was going. "If it was really bad, yes, we stayed in."

Margaret looked across at Kiley, one eyebrow raised.

"This was an affair, right?" Kiley said. "Two people having an affair. There's no suggestion of any money changing hands."

"Is that true, Jennie?" Margaret asked.

Jennie paused. "Sometimes he'd give me a fiver on the way out. A tenner. So I could get something for Alice. Just as a way of saying thanks."

"And your friend, Della? Did he give her money, too?"

"I don't know. He might have. Sometimes. I don't know."

"They're friends," Kiley said. "They're never going to testify."

"It depends what kind of pressure is put on them," Margaret said. "And besides, payment's not the crucial thing, not according to the law. A brothel is a house, room, or other place used for the purposes of illicit sexual intercourse and/or acts of lewdness."

"It's still not enough, is it?" Kiley said. "Even if they make up stuff about men traipsing up and down the stairs at all hours, it's not enough."

Tears began to fall, unbidden, down Jennie's face.

"What?" Kiley asked.

"Six, seven years ago, I was done for soliciting. King's Cross."

"It went to court?" Margaret asked.

"Yes."

"And you were fined?"

"Yes."

"How many times?" Margaret asked. "Was it just the once?"

Jennie shook her head.

Kiley reached for his coffee and set it back down.

"Is there anything else?" Margaret asked.

An ambulance went shrilly by outside.

"Della and I, we used to work at a massage parlour. Over Stroud Green. I'd look after her kids, sort of turn and turn about. Where I met him, wasn't it? Peters." She laughed a short, disparaging laugh. " 'Girl like you, you shouldn't be working in a place like this'—I think he'd heard it somewhere, some trashy film on TV."

"While you were there," Margaret asked, "the massage parlour, was it raided by the police?"

"You're kidding, right? Only regular as clockwork."

"And were you ever charged with any offence?"

"No, no. Took our names, that was it. Too concerned with getting their freebies, half of 'em, to do much else."

Margaret called up a car to take Jennie and Alice home and she and Kiley carried on their conversation over lunch at Pane Vino.

"What do you think?" Kiley asked. "Is any of this really going to stand up?"

"The brothel charge, no. I can't see it getting past first post. But the other, getting the little girl taken into care, if they were to really push it, get social services on board, I'm not so sure."

Kiley forked up a little more chicken and spinach risotto. "Let's take a step backwards, remind ourselves what's at the root of this."

"Okay."

"Dave Peters is angry. He doesn't like having his name plastered over half the billboards in north London."

"Who would?" Margaret reached across for the bottle of wine.

"That aside, there's going to be all manner of stuff between himself and Jennie, unresolved. I think he's just striking out in any way he can."

"To what end?"

"To see her hurt; have her climb down, leave him alone."

"You don't think it's a way of getting eventual custody of the child?"

Kiley shook his head. "I think that's the last thing on his mind."

Margaret drank some wine. "So what do we do? Prepare a defence for Jennie in the remote possibility things get to court? File a report with the Child Support Agency, suggesting they reexamine Peters's financial position?"

"The arresting officer," Kiley said, "that was him leaving the custody suite just before you this morning? Around forty, suit, bright blue tie?"

"DS Sandon, yes, why?"

"I saw him having a drink with Peters last night; Peters and the guy who trashed Jennie's flat."

"No law against that."

"But more than a coincidence."

"Probably. But unless you had your Polaroid camera in your back pocket . . ."

"I might be able to do better than that."

"How so?"

"Peters isn't the only one with friends inside the Met."

Seeing his expression, Margaret smiled.

At two-thirty the following afternoon, they were both sitting in the fifth-floor office of Paul Bridge, Deputy Assistant Commissioner (C.I.D.). Margaret, feeling that Ghost might be deemed frivolous, had opted for a Paul Smith suit; Kiley had ironed his shirt.

Bridge was pretty much the same age as the pair of them, fast-tracking his way up the ladder, Deputy Commissioner well within his sights. He was clean-shaven, quietly-spoken, two degrees and

a nice family home out at Cheshunt, a golf handicap of three. He listened attentively while Margaret outlined the relationship between Sandon and Peters, beginning when they were stationed together in Balham, DC and LS respectively. Drinking pals. Close friends. Still close now, some few years on, Sandon apparently at Peters's beck and call.

"I'm not altogether clear," Bridge said, when he'd finished listening, "if misconduct is where we're heading here."

"Given the evidence . . ." Margaret began.

"Entirely circumstantial."

"Given the evidence, it's a distinct possibility."

"Depending," said Kiley.

Bridge readjusted his glasses.

"Sandon's not just been harassing Peters's ex-partner, he was also the officer in charge of investigating the assault on Nicky Cavanagh."

Almost imperceptibly, Bridge nodded.

"Which was carried out, as almost everyone in Holloway knows, by four of Bob Nealy's sons. And yet, questioning a few of the Nealys and their mates aside, nothing's happened. No one's been arrested, no one charged. And Nicky Cavanagh's still in a wheelchair."

Bridge sighed lightly and leaned back into his chair.

"Peters, Sandon, Nealy," Kiley said. "It's a nice fit."

"One wonders," Margaret said, anxious not to let the assistant commissioner off the hook, "how a case like this, a serious assault of this nature, could have been allowed to lie dormant for so long."

Bridge glanced past his visitors, towards the window, a smear of cloud dirtying up the sky. "The lad Cavanagh," he said, "he should've been black. Asian or black. There'd have been pressure groups, demonstrations, more official enquiries than you could shake a stick at. Top brass, myself included, bending over backwards to show the investigation was fair and aboveboard. But this poor sod, who gives a shit? Who cares? A few bunches of flowers in the street and a headline or two in the local press."

Bridge removed his glasses and set them squarely on his desk.

"I can make sure the investigation's reopened, another officer in charge. As to the other business, the woman, I should think it will all fade away pretty fast."

"And Sandon?" Kiley asked.

"If you make moves to get the Police Complaints Authority involved," Bridge said, "that's your decision, of course. On the other hand, were Sandon to receive an informal warning, be transferred to another station, you might, after due consideration of all the circumstances, think that sufficient."

He stood and, smiling, held out his hand: The meeting was over.

❖ ❖ ❖

Whenever Kiley bought wine, which wasn't often, he automatically drew the line at anything over five pounds. Kate had no such scruples. So the bottle they were finishing late that Friday evening had been well worth drinking. Even Kiley could tell the difference.

"I had a call today," he said. "Margaret Hamblin. She managed to sit Peters and Jennie Calder down long enough to hammer out an agreement. He makes monthly payments for Alice, direct debit; Jennie signed an undertaking to stop harassing him in public."

"You think he'll stick to it?"

"As long as he has to."

"You did what you could," Kate said.

Kiley nodded.

There was perhaps half a glass left in the bottle and Kate shared it between them. "If you stayed over," she said, "we could have breakfast out. Go to that gallery off Canonbury Square."

Almost a year after his first encounter with Dave Peters, Kiley was in a taxi heading down Crouch End Hill. Midmorning, but still the traffic was slow, little more than a crawl. Outside the massage parlour near the corner of Crescent Road, two women were standing close together, waiting for the key holder to arrive so they could go in and start work. Despite the fact that she'd changed her hair, had it cut almost brutally short, he recognised Jennie immediately, a cigarette in her hand, talking to someone who might have been Della. But it was probably Della's turn to look after the kids.

"Hang on a minute," Kiley called to the driver, thinking he'd jump out, say hello, how's it all going, walk the rest of the way to his meeting near the clock tower. But then, when the driver, questioning, turned his head, Kiley sat back again in his seat. "No, it's okay, never mind."

When he looked back, a little farther down the hill, the women had gone inside. ●

Luck of the Dead

by Francis M. Nevins

How Lucky Ralston got his nickname had nothing to do with his death, and Gene Holt was ready to make an arrest by the time she heard the story, but it opened up a dimension of the case that she hadn't seen before. An aesthetic dimension. Like the tiger in the Blake poem. A fearful symmetry.

On a cool spring day in the middle of the last decade of the twentieth century, five days after Ralston died, a memorial service was held in the Ralston Investment Services auditorium on the twenty-eighth floor of the mirror-walled Exchange Tower. Gene left her desk at Major Case Squad and went. She plunked herself in a stack chair next to the center aisle, draped her all-weather coat on her lap, and squinted through bifocals as each speaker was introduced by the master of ceremonies. The first to stand at the podium was Ralston's widow, petite and perfectly formed and more than fifty years younger than her late husband. Black silk dress, minimal jewelry. A subdued radiance seemed to emanate from her as she publicly said goodbye. No one could have guessed she was the prime suspect in a murder investigation. After her came various Ralston executives, and the mayor, and an assortment of political and business bigwigs.

The last speaker on the printed program was someone named Harry Mills, a wizened old duck whose parchment face and bald pate were deeply tanned like a sun worshiper's. Gene had no idea who he was. "Thank you," he cackled to the master of ceremonies. "Thanks very much. Lucky and I go back, probably, to before most of you were born. He was eighty-three, you know—my gosh, who'd

Though he has a half-dozen crime novels and numerous uncollected stories to his credit, Francis M. Nevins's greatest output has been as an editor and scholar of mystery fiction: *St. James Guide to Crime and Mystery Writers* lists nearly two dozen books on which Mr. Nevins served as editor or critical contributor. His latest story for *EQMM* will also be available later this fall in a collection of his work entitled *Leap Day and Other Stories* (Five Star Press).

believe it to look at him?—and I'm eighty. I was an assistant director fifty-five years ago when Charlie was acting in Western B movies. He was still Charlie back then. Anyway, I was with him and the crew on location when he got the name Lucky. We were shooting this little Western, it was in nineteen and forty I believe, and Charlie was on top of this magnificent palomino stallion, racing hell for leather along some mountaintop trail with the evidence to save his innocent pal from being lynched or some such foolery. The director and the crew and I are on the camera car shooting the running insert shots. Bang! Horse goes down. Charlie sails over the palomino's head like he was shot out of a cannon and goes rolling over the cliff. That was one hell of a fall. I swear there was no way he could not have broken his neck. But when we all get to the foot of the cliff, he's alive! He's laughing! Had some cracked ribs and a chipped tooth or three, had to go to the hospital, but he looks at all of us sliding down the cliff to reach him and he laughs and says: 'Just call me Lucky, guys.' And the name stuck."

Gene hadn't heard the tale before, but she knew the shape of the rest of Ralston's life. How he'd applied for a commission in the Navy after Pearl Harbor and, as communications officer aboard a submarine, had survived several major Pacific battles without a scratch. How he'd invested his movie savings and military pay in California real estate and made a fortune and moved back to the Midwest, where he'd been born. How he'd founded Ralston Investment Services, which now took up the Exchange Tower's top three floors. Whatever the market might do, he somehow stayed ahead of the curve and his clients made money. In his eighties he was still tall and erect and handsome, with abundant snow-white hair and a body as firm as that of his fourth and final trophy wife. Health, wealth, prestige, and sex—it was as if he had a magic amulet. Until five days ago when, after a vigorous workout in the company health center on the Tower's thirtieth floor, he, to all appearances, had slipped and broken his neck in the Jacuzzi and shower room reserved for himself alone in a corner of the gym.

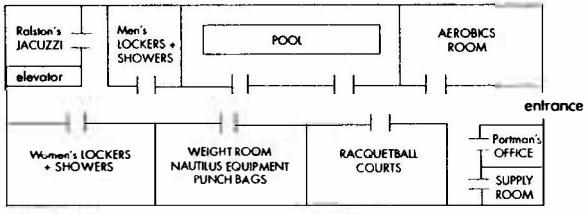
As Gene absorbed Harry Mills's story she saw in her mind's eye young Ralston catapulting out of the saddle and over that cliff, rolling and tumbling down and down and down, to land fifty-five years later on the Jacuzzi's treacherous tiled floor. As if after five and a half decades he finally had to keep his appointment in Samarra.

It hadn't been her case at first. Captain Andrews assigned it to himself as soon as Major Case Squad was called in, but over the weekend, while he was out shopping, a pickup truck had broadsided his Honda at an intersection and Andrews had wound up in

traction. He called from his hospital room Monday morning, waking Gene up and metaphorically tossing the case on her desk. At which she had sat for nine straight hours with her earphones on and the portable CD player in her bottom right drawer programmed to perform the complete Beethoven string quartets in an endless cycle while she read and reread every document in the bulging file until she could see everything about the murder almost as clearly as she heard the music. Everything but the murderer.

Lucky Ralston and his wife of four years occupied the penthouse on the roof of the Exchange Tower. "Her real name's Marla," Andrews had told Gene over the phone, in a sedated voice, "but he always called her Chickie. Each of his wives had a pet name he took from an animal. One was Bunny, one was Kitty. Number four was Chickie. He gave almost everybody he knew a nickname." Gene had heard him groan softly and wondered whether the cause was his broken leg or Ralston's taste in nomenclature. One quick skimming of the file and she knew why Andrews had stressed the point.

A private elevator operated by a key connected the penthouse with the health center Ralston had installed on the top floor for his firm's employees. On Friday, around 10:00 A.M., following his normal routine four days a week, he had taken that elevator down to the health club for a workout. On a business day, with the markets open and roaring, the club didn't open till eleven-thirty, which was why Ralston always worked out before lunch. His wife and her morning guests in the penthouse greatroom, and the health center's full-time manager in his office below, agreed on the time the soon-not-to-be-lucky Ralston had descended in his private elevator and stepped out at the rear of the health center near the locker rooms and showers. Andrews's rough sketch of the scene was in the file and enabled Gene to follow events as if they'd been captured on video.



She noted with special pleasure that the women's locker room and shower area was larger than the men's. But of course, if Ralston had put his private spa in the female zone he'd have been sued for sexual harassment before he could get comfy in his Jacuzzi.

From health-center manager Nicholas Portman's statement to

Captain Andrews, taped in Portman's office Friday: "Mr. Ralston had a regular routine, took like an hour. Nautilus equipment, weights, punch bag, skipping rope, some laps in the pool. Then he'd hit the shower, maybe soak in the whirlpool if his muscles were sore." Andrews: "And he came down this morning right at ten?" Portman: "Maybe five or six after. You could pretty much set your clock by him. I punch in anytime between eight-thirty and nine; Louie, the janitor, usually shows up a little after nine, but like I told you, he called in sick this morning." Andrews: "So your best guess is Ralston headed for the shower a little after eleven?" Portman: "Around eleven, yeah, plus or minus a few minutes. Then, after he'd gone, Mr. Strachan and the others came pounding on the door and I let them in."

Gene knew from other transcribed statements in the file who all three of the visitors were. James Strachan, one of the four executive vice presidents who had run Ralston Investment Services since Lucky, on his seventy-fifth birthday, had given up active involvement; Sally Papas, a fast-rising administrative assistant and the only member of the staff who could speak a little Korean; Syngman Cheung, a visiting bigwig from the Far East who was being wooed to pick the Ralston company as his American broker. Andrews, in his phone conference with Gene, had called him Seoul Man. "Tom," she had said gently, "promise you won't take up comedy writing when you retire?"

Peering through her bifocals at Andrews's sketch atop her desk blotter, she ran the action through her mind once more. Portman gives the three visitors a tour of the health center while Ralston lathers up in his private shower, which is four times the size of a standard model. His eyes soapy from shampoo, he gropes to turn off the hot water, steps out of the stall, and reaches for the hook on which his European toweling robe is hanging. That is when he slips on the wet floor and his feet go out from under him and he pulls the shatterproof glass door of the stall off its hinges and takes it down with him as he falls hard and breaks his neck.

Gene squeezed her eyes shut and tried to become that old man. Lying naked on the tiled floor. Knowing himself near death. Feeling the ice-rink-glassy surface and knowing his fall was not an accident. Knowing—how he knew still wasn't clear—who had spread all over the floor of the spa the bath beads whose traces the Crime Scene Unit had found an hour later. He can't move, can't cry out. Minutes pass. The three visitors reach the private spa on their tour and find Ralston dying. From James Strachan's statement to Captain Andrews: "I bent over Lucky and asked what happened to him. He couldn't seem to form words." Andrews: "But he did say something, right?" Strachan: "He somehow managed to say three words, or maybe it was four." Andrews: "Once

more now, what did he say?" Strachan: " 'Lefty did it.' Or maybe it was, 'A lefty did it.' "

And Papas and Cheung had agreed that Ralston had distinctly said either the one set of words or the other.

"And Marla, or 'Chickie,' Ralston is left-handed." Gene squinted professorially at Andrews in his short hospital gown and at the remains of his creamed beef entrée on a green plastic tray on the bedside table.

"I'd stake my pension on it," the captain grunted as he readjusted the pillows behind his back. "I took her statement in that penthouse of hers and watched every move she made. I didn't tell her about her husband's last words to Strachan till right near the end of the interview so she had no reason to try to hide the fact. She opened the great-room door for me left-handed, drank her coffee left-handed, wore a watch on her right wrist. When I got around to mentioning the Lefty thing she went white as a sheet for a couple of seconds but didn't change the way she did things. She's a damn good actress. When I was finished with her she keyed the elevator for me with her left hand and made sure I saw her do it. Cool as they come and guilty as hell."

"Tom," Gene pointed out, "Mr. Ralston's wife is named Marla and his nickname for her was Chickie. If he had meant to say she had killed him, why didn't he just use one of those names that would identify her and her alone? Why would he spend his last moments of life confusing the issue by bringing up a Lefty?"

"I expect you to answer that question before they let me out of this hole," Andrews told her. "And to bust her alibi while you're at it."

Gene had pored over the alibi evidence through two string quartets. The morning of Lucky's death, Marla Ralston had hosted a meeting of the steering committee of IOU, Interfaith Outreach to the Unfortunate, the charity to which she gave more time than any other. The meeting had begun a few minutes before ten. Lucky himself had greeted the guests, who had come up together in the express elevator from the Exchange Tower lobby to the penthouse foyer, but after a few minutes of small talk he'd excused himself and, in gym outfit, had headed down in the private elevator for his workout.

The other members of the IOU steering committee were a monsignor from the diocesan offices, a nationally known Presbyterian minister, and the rabbi of the most prestigious synagogue in the metro area. All three had sworn on their respective versions of the Bible that Marla Ralston sat in the same room with them until just before 11:30 when she'd received the phone call from down-

stairs with the news of Lucky's death. Andrews, from the transcript in the file: "She never left once? Even—you know—to go to the john or something?" Rabbi Goldner: "She excused herself once or twice to bring us a fresh pot of coffee or—you know—as you say—but she was never gone for more than a minute or two." Andrews: "How many times total?" Rabbi Goldner, after a pause: "Three, I think." Monsignor Lewis: "No, just twice." Reverend Ward: "It might have been four." But they all insisted that none of her absences had been longer than two minutes, that they could hear her in other rooms of the penthouse while she was gone—silverware clinking, water running in the bathroom—and that she'd been with them uninterruptedly after about 10:50, at which time her husband apparently was still alive and skipping rope or something. "It's a perfect alibi," Gene said. "She couldn't have done it."

"It's too perfect an alibi." Andrews's face went scarlet with frustration. "Damn it, no one else has a motive!"

"Maybe Portman did it," Gene suggested unflappably. "Or Mr. Strachan, or Ms. Papas, or that health-center janitor who never showed up for work Friday. Perhaps even Mr. Cheung, although it does seem he never laid eyes on Ralston while he was alive."

"Sergeant Holt." Andrews's attempt at a voice of command came a cropper as he tried to tug the hospital gown below his thighs. "This is not an episode of *Murder, She Wrote.* Every cop instinct I've picked up in seventeen years says the widow did it."

"Every cop instinct I've picked up in twelve says she didn't," Gene replied. "Well, perhaps in a few days we'll find out which of us is right."

Her loveliness made Gene's heart race. Marla Ralston's white-blond hair fell softly below the shoulders of a nubby knit ensemble such a dark shade of blue it seemed black. She wore no jewelry or ornaments. There was nothing in her cobalt eyes but the stunned and devastated blankness of the wounded fawn, waiting in silent agony for the second blow that would bring worse pain or death. The way she had entered the penthouse's high-ceilinged great room, the way she'd crossed the parquet and the oriental carpet that covered the floor of the living-room area, tentatively, like a stranger in a strange land—Gene had seen other women move like that. Victims of violent rape. The two women, one so lovely and the other plain as mud, sat at opposite ends of the pillow-back sofa upholstered in red leather while Gene's midget cassette recorder sat on the glass-topped coffee table between them with its Record light glowing like a ruby. Mrs. Ralston answered questions in a voice without affect, as if nothing mattered anymore.

The questions would not have been asked by a textbook cop. Gene wondered why Lucky had given each of his wives an animal

pet name. "Well, he'd always loved animals but he was allergic to just about all of them except horses so, well, maybe we were . . ."

"The pets he could never have?" Gene finished.

"You've never been married or really involved with a man, Sergeant, have you?"

Gene bit into her lower lip and tasted blood.

"I—there were some men in my life before Lucky. Men my own age or a little older. Compared to him, they were garbage. What earthly difference did it make that he liked to call me Chickie? No woman could have been happier than I was with him. Why in God's name would I have thrown it all away?"

"Well," Gene ventured, "he had money and you never had much till you married him. Some people might call that a reason."

"My parents barely scraped by," Marla admitted. "They were—both of them were compulsive gamblers and they usually lost. All they could afford to give me was two years in junior college. Then I left home and moved here and went to work at Metro Bank."

"Where you met Mr. Ralston, I think?"

"There'd been a terrible mixup in his personal checking account and he came in to straighten it out and—well, I helped him get it settled and he invited me to lunch and I guess one thing led to another. I wish you could have known what a charming man he was." They had married five months later. "I knew he was almost eighty, I knew we wouldn't have forever and so did he. Before we left on our honeymoon he had his lawyer draw up a power of attorney for me in case he suddenly became disabled. But . . ." Gene saw the tears forming and wordlessly handed over a box of tissues from the end table. The younger woman used her left hand to pull out a few. "I'm sorry. I still can't believe I'll never see him again."

Why? Gene demanded of herself. Why did this woman get four years of ecstasy with Mr. Right while toad-faced, squint-eyed, lumpy-bodied Gene Holt didn't get four minutes? It was all she could do to keep the interview professional.

No, Marla insisted tonelessly, she couldn't imagine why Lucky should apparently accuse her, nor could she name anyone of their acquaintance whom her husband called Lefty. "We have people up for drinks," she said. "Had," she corrected herself. "Maybe once a week. A catered cocktail party for business clients or people from my charity work. Once or twice a year someone Lucky knew from the movies would pass through town and we'd throw a reception for him, like Harry Mills last year. I suppose any number of them might be left-handed but I can't say I ever noticed any, not that I was looking. Oh, that reminds me, Harry's flying in from Hawaii today for the memorial service we're having for Lucky tomorrow downstairs, in the auditorium. You're—welcome to come if you'd like."

"I'll try to make it," Gene promised. "But the real problem you face isn't the fact that you are the only left-handed person in your husband's life that we've found so far. It's the fact that whoever killed him managed to get into the health club when the main entrance was locked tight. The only other way into the club is his private elevator, and only you and he had the keys to run it." Not a muscle in the widow's face moved as Gene stated the case against her. She might have been listening to a disquisition on dinosaurs. "Of course, you do seem to have an unbreakable alibi but, well, I hope you can appreciate my position at least a little."

The pearl-tinted phone on the end table cheeped discreetly and Marla Ralston's fashion-model body gave a tiny jerk of fright. She made herself reach for it—with her left hand, Gene noticed—then after listening a moment offered the handset to Gene. "For you," she whispered. "Someone named Cameron."

Gene listened in her turn and said: "Down in three minutes," handing the phone back as she switched off the recorder and got to her feet. "They're waiting for me in the health club," she said, "and I'd like to go there the same way your husband did Friday morning. Would you mind walking me to the private elevator? I have his key."

Marla led the way across the penthouse and along a glass-framed walkway lined with flowering shrubs that terminated at an elevator enclosure the shape of an upended coffin. Gene inserted the key and shook hands with the widow as the cage door hissed open. "I appreciate your help," she said. "It's, well, really not my place to suggest this, but the next time we have a chat, if there is a next time, mightn't you feel more comfortable if a lawyer were with you?"

"I don't need a lawyer," Marla answered calmly. "I did not kill Lucky. I would have died for him. I can't conceive of life without him. Please," she said as the door sliced them apart. "Please find his murderer."

One floor below the penthouse Gene stood by the elevator door and made a downward slashing movement with her hand. Twenty feet along the narrow corridor the cop in the doorway of Ralston's spa swung around so he could be seen inside and repeated the gesture. A deafening clatter roared out to where Gene and Dan Cameron stood. "Excellent!" she said. "Now, Dan, you wait here." Leaving Cameron by the elevator entrance, she retreated along the main corridor of the health club until about ten yards separated them. Then she slashed her hand down again. Cameron repeated the signal, as, in turn, did the cop in the spa doorway, and a moment later she again heard the clatter, not so thunderous this time, but still clear as a bell. She stepped into the doorway to

the vast room that held the Olympic-sized swimming pool, signaled a third time, and trotted deeper into the chamber. Nothing. The intervening walls and the pool water's lapping muffled the din. She strode out, rejoined Cameron at the elevator, and both of them marched to the spa doorway. Inside, two uniforms stood splay-footed on the tile floor, holding upright a duplicate of the shower-stall door that Lucky Ralston had yanked off its hinges when he'd taken the fall that broke his neck. "That's enough, fellows," she announced. "You can return the door to the supply house with my thanks."

"Good break for us it was bought locally," Dan Cameron ventured. Major Case Squad's newest recruit was thin as a strand of uncooked spaghetti and Gene thought he'd develop into a fine investigator in another few years if he didn't complete night law school first and vanish into the police bureaucracy. "Are you satisfied?"

"Just slightly," Gene told him. "We know now that no one on this floor could have heard the shower door falling unless he or she happened to be close to the shower room when Ralston fell."

Cameron's look was as blank as the bullets they fired in Ralston's old shoot-'em-ups.

"Remember, Dan," Gene said, "the janitor never showed up for work that day, so he couldn't have heard the sound of the falling door. Portman says he was working at his desk until he went to let in the Strachan party. His office is too far from the shower for him to have heard the crash."

"The murderer must have scattered those bath beads on the floor while Ralston was showering, which was only a few minutes before he slipped and fell," Cameron replied. "Portman could have done it, but he has no motive and he isn't left-handed."

"Mrs. Ralston has motive and is left-handed but she couldn't have done it," Gene countered sharply. "She was upstairs with three clergymen, damn it!" Following the main corridor towards the health-club entrance, Gene, through her bifocal lenses, made out a bulky figure in gray sweats standing awkwardly outside the door of the club manager's office, gawking like a rubbernecker at a street accident.

"Come along," she prompted her young colleague. "That's our next interview waiting for us."

Nick Portman sat hunched at his gray steel desk. Balding, beefy, chin nested in knuckles, eyes darting about the drab, functional office as if following the flight of a pesky mosquito, he gave Gene the impression of a high school coach whose team hasn't won a game in months. She knew from the case file that in fact he'd been a gym teacher for fifteen years until the school board had elimi-

nated his job in an economy move, and that he'd been living on unemployment checks when Ralston had hired him four months ago.

"Nah," he said. "You couldn't say I really talked with him. I mean, how do you talk with a guy while he's doing laps or using the punch bag? But while he was on the Nautilus equipment, yeah, I had a few words with him."

"What sort of words?" Gene threw a quick glance at the recorder in her lap to make sure plenty of tape was left.

"Nothing to speak of. I might have told him about a couple of improvements the place needed. Like, you know, adjusting the chlorine level in the pool. And the women wanting some flowering plants in the aerobics room like he had in that walkway on the roof. Stuff like that."

"Did he argue with you about any of these things?"

"Ma'am, Mr. Ralston was retired. He wasn't the one who had to approve expenses here anymore. I was just shooting the breeze with him."

Cameron asked the next one. "And you saw no sign of anyone else in the health club while you were chatting with Mr. Ralston?"

"Not then, no. Ordinarily Louie, the janitor, would be mopping around but he was out sick Friday. If there was anyone else in the club and he came around to chin with the boss after I'd left him, well, I couldn't have heard voices from my office here."

After a few more minutes of perfunctory Q&A Gene looked at her watch and rose from her chair, hearing her knees creak in the silence. She thanked Portman for his help, and with Cameron in her wake made her exit from the health-center office and its manager, whose face seemed to her almost the same color as his sweats.

"It's eleven-ten," she said. Actually, it was after lunch, but Gene wasn't referring to this Tuesday. She aimed the cap of her razor-point pen at the spot on the diagram that represented the entrance doors to the health center. "You come knocking."

"Precisely at eleven-ten," the probable future CEO of Ralston Investment Services intoned. James Strachan, decked out in a dark pinstripe suit with regimental tie, seemed blissfully unaware that the way he combed his mouse-colored hair did little to hide his bald spot, which glistened in the conference room's overhead lights as he bent over the enlarged photocopy of Andrews's sketch of the crime scene. He had smiled with pleasure when, on meeting him fifteen minutes ago, Gene had pronounced his name right, "Strawn," the Scottish way.

While she had been poring over the case file yesterday, Dan Cameron, at her behest, was trolling for background data among

the firm's lower-level personnel. "A sort of troika has run the place since Ralston more or less stepped down," he had reported at end of shift. "Strachan and three other executive vice presidents. That was Ralston's idea." Gene had thought of pointing out to her young protégé that troika meant a team of three, not four, but had opted not to interrupt. "Poop around the break room is that Strachan's sure to be the big enchilada now that Ralston's gone," Dan had continued. Motive enough for an ambitious organization man to commit murder? Gene wondered. If only Strachan's Friday morning tour of the company facilities with two other witnesses didn't account for every minute of his time so perfectly!

This Tuesday afternoon Gene sat at the head of the long cherry-wood table, in the high-backed brown leather swivel rocker that Ralston must have used when he was still active in the business and conducted meetings here. Sun from a cloudless sky filtered through tinted panoramic windows on Gene and Strachan and bulldog-faced Sally Papas at Gene's left and bewildered-looking Syngman Cheung at Papas's left.

"All three of you entered the health center together?" Gene asked.

"Of course." She caught the hint of testiness in Strachan's voice and sensed his displeasure at seeing the corporate throne warmed by any bottom other than his own.

"An unexpected visit, I believe?"

"It didn't take as long as I'd budgeted to explain our computer system to Mr. Cheung," Sally Papas replied. "We had some time to spare." Short orange hair, granny glasses, square aggressive chin, no makeup, twenty pounds overweight: Gene was pleased to conclude that sexiness did not seem a prerequisite to success for a woman in this company, at least not for one who spoke Korean. Her link to Strachan wasn't hurting her, either, Gene mused. According to Cameron's report yesterday, the Scottish exec was mentoring her and the two had a close but definitely nonsexual relationship. "Sort of like the two of us," Dan had ventured. Perhaps Papas might have killed Ralston to help her sponsor rise to the top of the heap, but she had the same rock-solid alibi for Friday morning that Strachan had. Damn! "I was responsible for the schedule," Papas went on. "Naturally I made sure word went out that if we got ahead of schedule we would tour the health center last thing before our luncheon engagement."

"Word went out to whom?"

"Why, to Mr. Ralston, of course. I knew he worked out in the health center several mornings a week and we didn't want him surprised by unexpected visitors."

"To no one else?"

"It was hardly necessary to inform anyone else of a mere possi-

bility," Papas said. "We knew Nick Portman would be there to let us in, and if by any chance he wasn't I had my own key to the health center." By this time Gene had learned that all too many private keys to the health center were in circulation around the top three floors of the Exchange Tower. The chances of her being able to snag the murderer on grounds of opportunity to use one and sneak past Portman to Ralston's Jacuzzi were nil.

"Mr. Ralston was to have joined the three of us at lunch," Strachan cut in. "We had reservations for noon at the Futures Club."

"Future Crub." Syngman Cheung beamed cherubically, as if grateful he'd finally heard a few words he understood. "Excerrent runch. Never happen. Murder happen. Send out for runch when detectives ret us go." Sally Papas leaned towards the Asian tycoon and whispered into his ear what Gene could only assume was a précis of the dialogue.

"The Futures Club is the rooftop restaurant in the Transnational Building," Gene pointed out, "which is at least two miles from where we now sit. With your tour of the health center tacked on to the schedule, did you still expect to make it there by noon?"

"I thought we'd just give Mr. Cheung a quick look at the gym facilities," Strachan said, and Papas bobbed her head in agreement.

"And you didn't have to wait at the health-center doors? Portman let you in as soon as you knocked?"

"Well, in less than a minute, I would say."

"And he led the three of you around the place?"

"Yes, ma'am," Papas told her. "I took him aside and asked him to keep it brisk."

"And by your watch it was eleven twenty-three when you entered Mr. Ralston's private Jacuzzi and found him dying?"

"We didn't all go in at first," Strachan corrected. "Remember, Sergeant, this was a, well, a man's sanctum, if you will. Ms. Papas was sensitive enough to hang back at the elevator door. It was the rest of us who found Mr. Ralston and, er, that was when Ms. Papas joined us."

Papas inclined to her right and whispered into Gene's ear. "I came running when Strachan let out a screech like a banshee."

And so passed half the afternoon, Gene walking and talking them through every minute of the Friday morning while the midget recorder that anchored the diagram on the conference table fixed everyone's recollection on tape. After two hours even Gene was bored. She found herself wondering what Dan was digging up, and when she couldn't control her curiosity any longer she shut down the recorder, thanked the witnesses, as usual, and accepted Strachan's offer of an escort through the labyrinth of cor-

ridors and cubicles and computer terminals to the reception area and the bank of elevators to the Exchange Tower's lobby.

"I invested eight solid hours. Some of it wasn't a waste." Dan Cameron slumped in the armchair beside Gene's desk at Major Case Squad with fatigue making his eyes twitch. Her watch gave the time as just short of nine in the evening. "I picked up a nice little collection of Ralston's nicknames for people." He flipped open his notebook. "The head of the company's legal department is George Alexander. Ralston called him Salamander. There's a guy in Germany he did business with by the name of Rudolf Duda. Ralston called him Zipadee."

Gene was too spent to endure the complete anthology of nicknames. "Could we keep it to the people we know were in the health center Friday morning?" she suggested politely.

"No problem. Let's take James Strachan." Cameron turned to another page. "Everyone I talked to says he's a compulsive workaholic. Doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, doesn't do drugs. Married to the same woman for twenty-six years, has two sons in Ivy League colleges and a daughter at Harvard Business School. That means three hefty tuitions every year, but he doesn't seem to have financial problems. On the other hand, there's no such thing as too much money, and if he takes over the firm he'll make at least twice what he's drawing down now. And speaking of hands, he's definitely not a southpaw. Ralston's nickname for him was Scotty."

"And Sally Papas?" Gene asked.

"A couple of her coworkers hinted she's a lesbian. If you're in the mood for far-out possibilities you might speculate that she killed Ralston because she had the hots for his wife. She's not left-handed but she is ambidextrous."

"What was Ralston's pet name for her?"

"He never called her anything but Ms. Papas. Makes you think he was afraid she might sue if he gave her a nickname."

"Okay," Gene said, "now tell me about Nicholas Portman."

"His worst habit is he tends to hang out in sports bars, hitting on women half his age. Probably figures if Ralston could do it, he could too. His trouble is, he isn't Lucky." Cameron's face was so empty Gene had no idea if he knew he'd said something funny. "He's definitely right-handed. If Ralston had a nickname for him, no one I talked to knew it. Remember he just came aboard at the health club a few months ago." Dan paused and his eyes seemed to brighten. "Now we come to why some of my day wasn't a waste," he went on. "Syngman Cheung."

"The tycoon from South Korea?"

"He wasn't always from the South," Cameron told her. "The guy was born in a village near Pyongyang and was a rising star in the

North Korean Communist bureaucracy till he figured out which side of the DMZ the rice was buttered on and defected and wound up making millions as a capitalist. But with a past like that, Ralston might very well have given him the nickname Lefty."

"Dan," Gene pointed out gently, "Ralston never even laid eyes on Mr. Cheung. They were to have met over lunch at the Futures Club the day Ralston died."

"Yes, but Ralston had a memo about him before they met. Prepared by Sally Papas, who seems to have a network of informants in Seoul. The name Lefty might have sprung to his mind even though they hadn't met. And," Cameron continued, "I did dig up one other possibility. Remember Louie, the guy who did the scutwork around the health club?"

"Certainly," Gene said. "He called in sick the morning Ralston was murdered."

"Judging from the empty bottles I saw in his trash can, I'd say his sickness that morning was likely a hangover. Louie was living on the streets till six months ago. The Interfaith Outreach people were trying to rehabilitate him and Ralston gave him a job as a favor to them. He lives in a cheap walkup on the north side. When I came by this afternoon he was up and dressed and watching TV. Said he felt a lot better. I noticed he was wearing a belt buckle with three initials. Dated back from before he hit the skids. Like to guess what the initials were?"

From the look in Cameron's eyes Gene hardly needed to guess. "LFT?" she suggested.

"On the money. His full name's Louis Francis Tuttle. I haven't found anyone yet who heard Ralston call him Lefty. But," Cameron went on with a touch of pride in his voice, "when I inspected his key ring I found a key to the entrance door of the health club. He can let himself in any time he pleases. Which means that he could have made up that sickness excuse and sneaked in and past Portman's office before eleven and holed up somewhere for a while and then slipped into the Jacuzzi while Ralston was showering and spread the bath beads on the floor."

"And his motive?" Gene asked sweetly.

"Maybe the envy of a failure in life for a success," Cameron said. "Otherwise none, as far as I can see. I can't place him in the building, but he can't prove he wasn't there, either. There were no bath beads in his john when I checked it."

The possibilities evoked by her talk with Cameron kept Gene tossing restlessly through the night and neither a Valium nor the cello sonatas whispering through the speaker of her bedside CD player soothed her mind enough to bring the gift of sleep. But somehow in the empty hours she saw what she hadn't seen before.

In the morning she stopped at the Squad office and left precise

instructions before climbing into her Camry and heading downtown. She reached the Exchange Tower auditorium just moments before the memorial service was to start. As survivors' stories of Lucky Ralston flowed over her like waves, as she heard Harry Mills's account of how he had come to be called Lucky, she knew his death was a sort of logical culmination, in a sense as inevitable as the unfolding of a symphonic motif. But still and all, he'd been murdered. And now Gene knew who had killed him.

As the service was breaking up she twisted in her stack chair and saw Cameron slouched against the auditorium's rear wall, next to a muscular young black man in plainclothes whom Gene recognized as another cop. At her nod they came forward and fell in behind her, making their way up the aisle against the flow of human traffic to the dais where a handful of those who had been closest to Ralston were clustered around his widow and cackling Harry Mills. There was Strachan in his black pinstripe suit, and Sally Papas still shepherding Mr. Cheung, who managed to look both mournful and befuddled with the same expression, and three or four others. Cameron and the black cop cut their quarry out of the herd like range drovers nudging a calf to the branding fire, and Gene then stepped forward to perform the verbal honors herself.

"Mr. Portman," she said, "let's have a heart-to-heart talk. Now."

"We should both of us be flipping burgers for a living," Captain Andrews groaned in his hospital bed that evening as Gene finished her explanation. Cameron was still closeted in the interrogation room at headquarters with Portman and his attorney, who had already hinted his client might be willing to make a deal. "My God, five days it took us to figure it! But with no motive . . ."

"Look at the facts without blinders on and no one else could have done it," Gene said, forbearing to mention that her superior hadn't figured it at all. "Ralston knew visitors might be coming through the health club at eleven. He cut his workout short and went into his shower at, oh, say ten-fifty. Portman followed him in and spread the bath beads on the floor. Of course, at that moment Ralston suspected nothing. He stepped out of the stall and took his tumble. Portman heard the sound of the stall door crashing to the floor and came back to make sure Ralston was dead. But he wasn't. And when he saw or heard or felt Portman in the doorway, just standing there, not doing anything to help, he knew. But by now it's after eleven. Suddenly Portman hears a pounding on the entrance door to the health club. It must have scared the wits out of him. He races out and finds Strachan and Papas and Cheung, demanding to be let in. Remember, Portman hadn't been told they might be visiting the health center that morning because it was

only a possibility. So when they reach the Jacuzzi on their quickie tour, Ralston is still barely alive and able to tell those witnesses that the person who killed him was Lefty or 'a lefty.' "

Andrews lay with his back propped against a mound of pillows and his leg rigid in traction, and his face dark with self-disgust. "Lefty," he said. "Portman. Port means the left side of a boat. Ralston served in the Navy in World War Two. Damn, if only you or I had been boat people!"

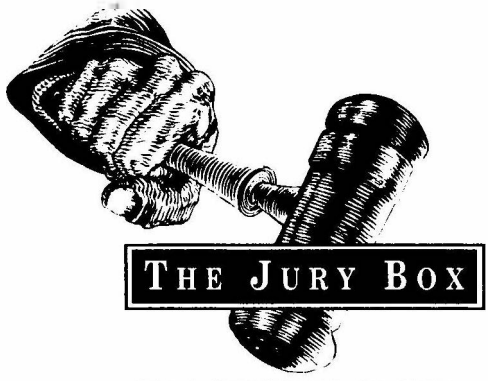
"Imagine what Portman must have gone through in the past few days," Gene said, "hoping against hope that we wouldn't pick up on what Ralston meant. He must have died a thousand deaths since Friday morning."

They were still rehashing the subtler points of the case a few minutes later when the beeper in Gene's purse went off. She excused herself, reached for the phone on the bedside table, and used it to call in. As she listened to Cameron for what seemed an eternity she felt her face going numb with shock. She missed the cradle when she hung up, and the handset clattered on the Formica.

"I'm afraid we know the motive now," she said softly. "Portman is talking up a storm. He says Marla Ralston went to bed with him and offered him half a million dollars to make her a widow. He secretly videotaped their sessions in case she turned on him later. Dan just finished watching the tape. She tells Portman she's afraid her husband will live as long as George Burns and she'll be too old to enjoy his money when he dies, and she's the one who suggests spreading bath beads on the Jacuzzi floor while Lucky's taking a shower. They're picking her up now." Gene could almost hear what must have precipitated the murder. Marla on one of her brief absences from the meeting with the clergymen makes a quick phone call to Portman in his office downstairs, telling him that the time has come, that she'll never have such a perfect alibi for herself as she has at this moment. Portman tells her that the janitor has called in sick, that he and Lucky are alone in the health center. And that brief exchange seals Ralston's doom. It was a gamble, of course, but then Marla was the daughter of compulsive gamblers, and even if Lucky were not killed but only disabled, she with her power of attorney would control his property until, soon or late, the end came for him.

"God," Andrews muttered. "What a crazy case. Ralston's dying words were on the mark twice! My cop instincts were right, I guess, but by God, so were yours."

Gene groped in her outsize purse for a handkerchief she prayed she wouldn't need. "Tom, I was—so sure she really loved him," she said, and lapsed into a frozen silence as Andrews wriggled to the edge of the bed and reached out to take her hand in his. ●



by Jon L. Breen

As I write, a short-story collection by a great American storyteller is number one on the fiction bestseller lists—and no one is surprised, including the author. A large percentage of the genre-bending Stephen King's work qualifies as crime fiction, and *Everything's Eventual: 14 Dark Tales* (Scribner, $28) includes "The Death of Jack Hamilton," a terrific addition to the John Dillinger legend. In his introduction, King wonders "how many *other* books of short stories end up on the bestseller lists in the course of any given year, and how long publishers can be expected to publish books of a type that doesn't interest readers very much." I assume they interest readers of this magazine. Ironically, single-author mystery collections, though not bestsellers, have been coming forth in such volume in the past few years, it's becoming difficult to cover them all in detail.

**** Ian Rankin: *A Good Hanging,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. Underlining Rankin's growing stature, one of the finest collections in recent memory finally appears in the U.S. ten years after its first British publication. Edinburgh cop John Rebus, generally a more relaxed figure than in his novel-length cases, does solid detective work in the title tale, a theatrical whodunit recommended to fans of Ngaio Marsh, and most of the others, all strongly plotted and rich in atmosphere and sense of place. But the best of the dozen ("Sunday") is less a mystery than a character study of immense emotional impact. (For a splendid example of Rebus's more recent book-length form, try the 2000 novel *Set in Darkness* [St. Martin's Minotaur, $6.99], notable for the contrasting styles and priorities of Rebus and his investigating partner Derek Linford, teamed on the case of a murdered Scottish Parliament candidate.)

*** Wendy Hornsby: *Nine Sons:*

Collected Mysteries, Crippen & Landru, $42 limited hardcover, $16 trade paper. Ten expertly crafted stories range from the very dark and disturbing "Ghost Caper"—the publisher all but issues a consumer warning—to a pair of tales about mother-daughter relationships written with the author's own daughter, Alyson Hornsby. There's also an unflinching nonfiction piece about a visit to the morgue. Most are from original anthologies, one from *EQMM,* and two new. The title story was an Edgar winner.

** Richard A. Lupoff: *One Murder at a Time: The Casebook of Lindsey & Plum,* Cosmos/Wildside, $15. Insurance investigator Hobart Lindsey and Berkeley policewoman Marvia Plum, usually a sleuthing team in Lupoff's novels, appear in three solo cases each before getting together in the book's strongest entry, the previously unpublished "Old Folks at Home." While the stories are not distinguished purely as mysteries, the detailed backgrounds and sympathetically etched characters make them worth reading. Also included are a historical involving the Duke and Duchess of Windsor (with a Plum family member in the supporting cast) and a parody/pastiche of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe, here called Caligula Foxx.

** Mickey Spillane: *Together We Kill: The Uncollected Stories of Mickey Spillane,* Five Star, $23.95. Among the eight entries (1952-1998) are one Mike Hammer case, several tales of nostalgic World War II veterans, and two novellas, "Hot Cat," a Cold War thriller with a trademark shock ending, and the science-fictional "The Veiled Woman," written by Howard Browne from a Spillane proposal, according to editor Max Allan Collins's introduction. The simplistic development and pervasive misogyny turn this reader off, but fans will find much to enjoy. (Spillane and Collins have collaborated in editing a superb reprint anthology, *A Century of Noir* [NAL, $15], including among its 32 contributors most American masters of the dark and hard-boiled. The introduction reveals that Spillane, that most unpretentious of literary figures, hates the term *noir* but went along with it for commercial reasons.)

*** Ken Bruen: *London Boulevard,* Do-Not/Dufour, $29.95 hardbound, $14.95 trade paper. For an effective Spillane-style finale, see the latest novel from a consistently readable British tough-guy writer. Narrator Mitchell is a typical Bruen protagonist, a brutal and sociopathic ex-con who is also super-literate and given to quoting poetry. He plays Joe Gillis to an aging stage star's Norma Desmond in an acknowledged variation on the late Billy Wilder's classic film *Sunset Boulevard.*

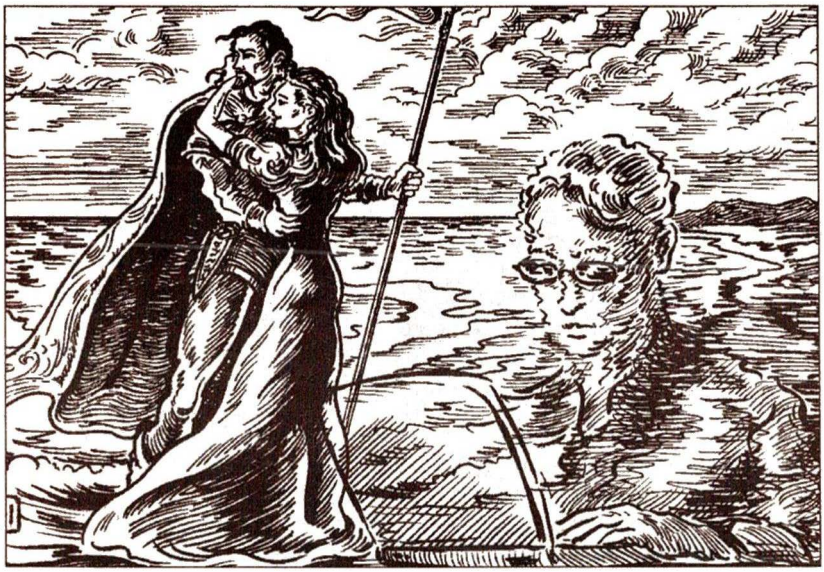
*** Paula Cohen: *Gramercy Park,* St. Martin's, $24.95. In

the Edith Wharton world of 1890s New York, famed Italian tenor Mario Alfieri and his young bride face social ruin at the hands of Thaddeus Chadwick, a deep-dyed villain out of Victorian melodrama. Unlike the historical novels that impose contemporary sensibilities on other times, Cohen's debut believably depicts the now-discredited concerns and attitudes of its period, along with well-realized operatic and high society backgrounds and a rich narrative style that (apart from the trendy present tense) is equally true to the era.

*** Katherine Hall Page: *The Body in the Bonfire,* Morrow, $23.95. Caterer sleuth Faith Fairchild takes a job teaching a short-term cooking course in a Massachusetts prep school while investigating anonymous threats to one of the few African-American students. Page is a practiced and reliable hand at this kind of domestic mystery, faking the reader out with red-herring suspects and adding just the right touch of humor, along with the requisite selection of recipes.

** Wendi Lee: *Habeas Campus,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $22.95. Another series sleuth's scholastic adventure is less notable. Boston private eye Angela Matelli is a likable character, but I question the professionalism of her ill-prepared undercover operation investigating zombies on the campus of an almost-Ivy-League Vermont college. Clumsy exposition in dialogue and other signs of authorial haste don't help. There is one memorable scene: Angie is voluntarily closed up in a morgue drawer to see if an awakened corpse could escape without help. (She's in better form in her four appearances in Lee's 14-entry collection *Check Up and Other Stories* [Five Star, $23.95].)

Ramble House, noted for its Harry Stephen Keeler reprints and originals, has now published the second volume of *The Anthony Boucher Chronicles: Reviews and Commentary 1942–1947* (www.ramblehouse.bigstep.com; $21.95). Boucher's weekly San Francisco *Chronicle* reviews, entertaining and historically instructive even when they concern writers you've never heard of, have been meticulously edited and annotated by Francis M. Nevins. Some Boucher anecdotes, as well as other material of interest to mystery fans, appear in the story notes to the late s.f. giant and sometime mystery writer Poul Anderson's *Going for Infinity: A Literary Journey* (Tor, $25.95).



Art by Mark Evan Walker

Ghost Writer

by Janice Law

Marvin was excited when his agent called. It had been awhile since he'd heard from Audrey, whose soft, raspy voice was permanently, if hopelessly, associated in his mind with sales and contracts, and the possibility of fame, if not fortune. Some foreign rights? A chapter in an anthology? Ready cash?

"Can you stop by today?" Audrey asked.

Of course, Marvin said he would, clearing out time that would otherwise have been spent in a fruitless perusal of his notebooks or in research on-line for a now overdue article or in sharpening pencils and tidying his desk and probably, the way things had been going, quitting early to hit the beach. Instead, he fought the traffic down I-95 through blizzards of snowbirds and the mind-numbing exhaust of heavy trucks to Audrey's blue glass office building in the center of Lauderdale.

Audrey Striker had been his agent for six years. Three books, U.K. rights on one, a modest movie option on another: not bad, not great, about par for the course for a midlist author of more ambition than talent and more talent than luck. What else is new?

Another agent might have done better for him but would just as likely have done worse. Besides, he liked Audrey's throaty, world-weary voice, her greed, her toughness.

She was waiting for him, that was surprise number one, and number two, Cindy, her secretary, was nowhere to be seen. He was being allowed an unprecedented private audience. "Come in, Marv," Audrey called when her office door beeped. She was sitting with her back to the blue-tinged panorama of pastel condo and hotel towers, her large, well-shaped head awkwardly balanced on her small twisted frame. Her spindly legs were propped up on a footstool. Her cane was beside her, the motorized wheelchair she used for longer distances parked in the corner.

Janice Law's latest novel, *The Lost Diaries of Iris Weed* (Forge Books), was published in January of this year to rave reviews. But interested readers can also now find most of Ms. Law's early books, including the award-winning Anna Peters mysteries. Thanks to modern print-on-demand and the new on-line publishing companies (see iUniverse), the early Annas are back in print. ¶

"I've been looking at your latest royalty statements," she said.

Marvin's heart sank. He hoped she had not called him all the way downtown just to tell him that his career was in the toilet. He took one of the handsome leather chairs and angled it away from the bright pastel towers of the cityscape toward the comforting expanse of close-packed bookshelves. He could see the slender spines of his own novels.

"I think we need to make a move in a slightly different direction, and I think you might be right for a proposal I've received."

"What sort of proposal?"

"Completion of a dark-fantasy trilogy. I have the contract in hand."

"Sorry," said Marvin, disappointed in spite of himself, "that's hardly my field."

Audrey was undeterred. "We already have a fairly detailed plot outline of the first novel, and rough—I'll be honest—*very* rough outlines of the second and third. However, with the exception of two characters . . ." She scrambled among her notes. "Ah, here we go. Someone called Lord Ostrucht and the Lady Fergaine must be spared at all costs. Otherwise, you would have almost complete freedom. And," she added, seeing Marvin was about to interrupt, "if the first novel proves successful, as I'm sure it will, you would have even more freedom with the later books. The key, Marv, dear,

is speed and quality. Write me a good book fast and we can make a lot of money."

"Look, Audrey, not that I don't appreciate it, but I write literate contemporary novels. I don't want a reputation for swords and fantasy."

Audrey gave a smile that marred rather than enhanced her fine, clean features. Nature, Marvin thought, had had a grand design in mind with Audrey and then, at the last moment, smashed it. "Your last two novels earned mid four-figure advances," she said. "You can't live on that. Think of this as work to support your serious writing. Also, I can assure you, Marv, dear, that your name will never be mentioned. Will never be, must never be; that is a most important condition."

Interesting! Marvin racked his brain to think of who could command serious advances on the basis of rough outlines. The only possibilities were names big enough to scare him just a little. It was one thing to dismiss certain popular works; it was quite another to invent the same sort of audience-pleasing junk. "How much?"

"The whole package is two point five million. I am authorized to give you a partial advance of fifty thousand dollars on signing. On completion of each novel, you and the writer whose name will appear on the jacket split the profits, advance, royalties, everything, fifty-fifty."

The sum was a shock, almost a physical shock, and it took Marvin a moment to digest the possibilities of repairing the Datsun, paying off his credit cards, leaving the Sun 'n Surf apartments.

"Are you on?" Audrey asked.

He could feel a little bubble of exhilaration growing around his heart, but he didn't quite trust himself to decide yet.

"I know you can do it," Audrey said, "and I think you can do it quickly."

"How fast and how long?"

"I need a manuscript of no less than six hundred pages; a little longer would be better, but six hundred would do."

"Whew!" said Marvin.

"We have a full year. I was able to get an extension," Audrey added a trifle grimly, "on the grounds of ill health."

"And are we sick?" Marvin asked.

"We are drunk, if you must know." Audrey's tone was drily sarcastic. "We have developed multiple addictions and responsibility issues and a damn bad attitude! I need you to do this, Marv, dear," she said in a different tone. "You and I will earn every penny, but it's a pretty penny, and having invested twenty years of work in—our author—I'm not about to lose the best contract I've ever negotiated."

"All right," said Marvin, "but I'd better have a look at the outline and I'd better read some of the other books—there are others, right?"

"The proverbial five-foot bookshelf." Audrey levered herself to her feet, grabbed her cane, and limped to the nearest bookcase. She came back with a handful of novels which she laid facedown on her desk. "There will be a confidentiality statement for you to sign," Audrey said. "All the usual. Basically, you promise never to reveal your authorship."

"As if I'd want to," said Marvin.

"But understand, Marv, dear, only your best work will do for this project."

"My best work, my heart and soul." Marvin could already feel himself adjusting to prosperity.

Audrey produced a thick folder of legal documents. She offered the confidentiality statement first. "In case, Marv dear, you should change your mind." This document was as near to ironclad as dozens of "to wits," "whatsoevers," and "to whomevers" could make it.

Marvin signed with a flourish, then turned over the first novel in the stack on the desk. "Ah," he said in surprise; he had read some of Hilaire LaDoux's novels and liked them. "I thought LaDoux did sci-fi."

"All the work is on the border of the genres," Audrey said. "Alternate worlds, alternate futures—same old human nature."

"Here's to human nature," Marvin said and held out his hand for the contract.

"You're sure?" Audrey asked. "Please be sure, Marv, dear, because there won't be time to get another writer if you change your mind."

"Worry not, sweet Audrey!" He flipped to the end of the document and signed his name. "I'm your ghost."

He left with a stack of LaDoux's novels in a Burdine's shopping bag and stopped at his local liquor store on the way home for some really good beer and a bottle of vintage Bordeaux. I'm going to be rich, if not famous, he told himself, and better by far to be at least one or the other.

Marvin sat down on his minuscule balcony, poured a Bellhaven, and opened *The Cave of the Winds,* the first novel in LaDoux's Galatan Trilogy. He read for three hours, making notes occasionally on a yellow pad as he picked out favorite vocabulary, sentence structures, the little tricks like adjectives grouped in threes and a fondness—a weakness in Marvin's eyes—for beginning with participial phrases.

After dinner, he checked the outline for *Dragon in the Sun.* It was, as Audrey had promised, thoroughly detailed. Ten single-

spaced pages outlined an epic and dynastic struggle which he found intimidatingly inventive until he realized that most of the events had been lifted from the Hundred Years War in France and the English Wars of the Roses. Okay!

Marvin made a note to himself to begin some serious historical reading—the Borgias should be good for a plot or two, and the Russians for a series. He was sure that the various Ivans and Peters, not to mention the licentious Catherine the Great, could help flesh out the skimpy notes for *Dragon* II and III.

Though Marvin normally worked in fits and starts as inspiration took him, he was at his desk early the next morning. He had a year to produce six hundred pages, which meant, he calculated, roughly two pages a day, the other two months left over for the inevitable mishaps which afflict manuscripts as well as man. He was slightly daunted at the prospect of working up scenes and characters which were not his own, and he dawdled, as he usually did, straightening his desk and hopping up to water the plants and take out the garbage. It was on this latter errand that Marvin had the happy inspiration of imaging not the novel but Hilaire LaDoux.

He sat down at his computer and told himself that this new book would be the contrivance of an invented character, a best-selling novelist of considerable talent and an unerring popular touch named Hilaire LaDoux. His LaDoux invariably started early in the morning, well before time for the first drink of the day, and tapped out exactly two—no, better make it four—pages a day, as good genre writers were known for their productivity.

Hilaire LaDoux would work to something ancient, Marvin decided, and he rejected several possibilities before selecting Monteverdi, his *Orpheus*. Unlike Marvin, who liked to write sitting on his balcony, LaDoux would keep the shades drawn and would wear something elegant and unusual, something Marvin would have to acquire. But for now, semidarkness and *Orpheus* would have to be good enough. He slid the CD into his computer, heard the chords, exotic with the everlasting strangeness of genius, and began typing: "Trotting along the long, weary, dry road into Balson, Lord Ostrucht saw clouds black as serpents darkening the horizon and laid his hand on the Blade of Zermain. He was alone now, he was the only one left . . ."

Although Marvin took some time to settle into this routine, so different from his own, novelty proved potent. Day after day, Lord Ostrucht struggled with warriors and wizards, with dragons and other chimeras of the mind, searching always for the Lady Fergaine. At first, Marvin stayed close to the original design, but very soon Ostrucht began to develop some new and interesting habits.

Marvin knew that he was really on his way when he discovered

one morning that the cliché dragon of one of the planned set pieces had evolved into a yellow-tinged mist, so faint as to be almost subliminal. This scarcely noticed alteration in the atmosphere gradually disturbed perception, causing its victims to see the world as horror, as such unrelieved and dreadful ugliness that they were driven to despair.

"That's very good," Audrey said, looking up from the latest installment of the manuscript. "That's very good, indeed." Like all authors, Marvin needed compliments and reassurance, particularly during composition, and she had learned the right way to do this: Praise only the book and never, by so much as a syllable, hint that he had a genuine flair for this sort of thing. In fact, Audrey was convinced that Marvin was writing better than ever, that a sort of literate action was his true métier. Instead, she said, "Very LaDoux. Hyper LaDoux."

Marvin smiled. "The creation of the character was the key thing—and unexpectedly inspiring."

"Lord Ostrucht," Audrey said.

"No, no, he's quite an interesting fellow, but I meant Hilaire LaDoux."

Audrey looked at him. Yes, now that he mentioned it, she could see some changes, which she had registered without attaching importance to them. An expensive haircut and good clothes were only to be expected from sudden prosperity, but she would not have expected Marvin's choices: a cerise silk shirt, and an Italian silk and wool sweater patterned in mustard, lavender, and sienna, worn with khakis and sandals. Marvin had always been a jeans and T-shirt kind of guy who owned a blue suit for good. He'd added a pair of tinted glasses, too, which shadowed his eyes and made him look subtly different, enough like the real LaDoux to give Audrey a little frisson, because no image of Hilaire LaDoux had been published for years. Well, she wasn't going to worry about that! Whatever works, she thought, and congratulated herself on spotting Marv's potential. "We'll have no problem completing the book," she said.

"No problem at all, and, Audrey, I'm getting so many ideas for volumes two and three. I've started to plant material for future books. Now this scene," he turned the pile of manuscript around and ruffled through the pages. "Here, in chapter sixteen where I've introduced Ranoch, the squire . . ."

"I like Ranoch," said Audrey.

"I'm glad you do, because I see an important role for him in the second volume."

She pulled out a yellow pad and began making notes. When they were finished, she assured Marvin that the publisher would be thrilled, then shook his hand and saw him out of the office herself,

as Cindy, who was apparently not privy to the arrangement with Mr. LaDoux, had been sent on an errand.

Marvin supposed that was only prudent, though in his own mind Hilaire LaDoux came into existence when he put on the very handsome silk jacket that Hilaire wrote in, added the blue-tinted spectacles, and slid the Monteverdi *Orpheus* into the CD player. During the less and less frequent days when Marvin took off, wore his own clothes, listened to Talking Heads, drank beer, and loafed on the beach, Hilaire LaDoux, Esquire, simply ceased to exist, leaving Marvin to enjoy the fruits of his labor and of LaDoux's reputation.

And after the first volume was published to acclaim and profit, there seemed no reason why Marvin couldn't continue writing about Lord Ostrucht and the Lady Fergaine and their ilk virtually forever. The second volume was finished and Marvin was well into the third before the first cloud appeared.

He was in Audrey's office for one of their now routine private meetings. The latest chapters of *The Dragon's Child* lay on the desk between them, and Audrey was running her delicate fingers nervously over the pages. "Quite brilliant," she said, tapping the manuscript, "everyone agrees, and you know, Marv, dear, I'd be the first to tell you if the books weren't up to par."

He did know that.

"So you'll know this is none of my doing. I'm thoroughly satisfied, and so is everybody at the publishing house."

"What's the matter?" Marvin asked, sensing a problem without really being troubled by it. He had money—and people like Audrey—to sort problems out for him. Since the great success of the *Dragon* books, their relationship had undergone a sea change: Now she waited for his calls and arranged her schedule to suit him. Now it was her plans and her strategy which came under scrutiny as much as his manuscripts.

"Well, it's Hilaire, of course. Jealousy, I'm sure. If I'd thought, Marv, dear, I'd never have let *Dragon* be nominated for any award whatsoever. Never."

"Hilaire?" It took Marvin a moment to remember that there was such a person with volition of his own, a real person whose desires could not be altered by a few lines of type. "He's unhappy? Fifteen weeks on the bestseller list, foreign rights, a pot of found money—what more does he want?"

"He's feeling creative again. He feels—well, Marv dear, he feels he doesn't need you anymore."

Marvin's first reaction was fury, modulating into shock. "He can go to hell! I've got another three novels plotted out, plus some terrific new characters!" It was illogical, inconceivable, grotesquely

and monstrously unfair. And besides, he'd been counting on the money.

"He's got an ironclad contract. Look, Marv, dear, I've tried to talk to him, but he claims he's inspired. And more important, he's determined to cut back on the drinking."

"Great for him. All right, let him write. I still have three good plots and half a dozen new characters."

"His characters," she said. "All his. You know that, Marv."

"So I change the names and we're still in business."

"And who are you?" she asked. "Do you think I can get as good a contract as you can get from selling the outlines to Hilaire? Be real."

Marvin swore there must be some way to indicate that he was the writer behind LaDoux's latest bestseller, and Audrey raised the confidentiality agreement. But she promised to hold LaDoux up for plenty. "I think even a credit isn't out of the question. Something along the lines of 'based on a story by,' which will do you good later, Marv. Besides, you can get back to your own writing now, and with what you'll make from the plot outlines . . ."

Marvin was furious, but though he had a lawyer friend go over the contract not once but twice, there was no way out. LaDoux had all rights to the books. As far as the publishing world went, it was Marvin, not Hilaire LaDoux, who was an imaginary character, or rather, what was worse, a middling author with no real prospects.

For consolation, he had a good whack of money for the work he'd done on *The Dragon's Child,* but he absolutely refused to sell anything more, causing Audrey to roll her eyes and to wonder aloud why she hadn't taken to representing sensible people like stunt men and professional wrestlers. Then she sighed and told Marv that he might perhaps change his mind.

"After all," she added, accurately, but somewhat unkindly, "now you have what you've always said you wanted: time and money to do your own writing."

So he got busy. He opened his old notebooks and took up a plot he'd begun then set aside, a story about a talented man down on his luck in paradise: a.k.a. South Florida. Marvin struggled with it for several months, but the story was dead in the water. Oh, the writing was good; Marvin had an easy style that rolled from one paragraph to the next without the slightest hitch, but also without the oddity and flare that can illuminate old stories and make familiar characters fresh.

The very smoothness that had rendered Lord Ostrucht, the Lady Fergaine, and a host of supernatural entities plausible worked against Marvin's contemporary characters. They were just a little bit boring, and, realizing that, he began to find new and creative ways to delay his stints at the computer. When he got fed

up with procrastination, he'd throw on his swim trunks and head for the beach: As far as writing went, Marvin was stymied.

Then, one depressing morning, just as an experiment, he got up early, put on Hilaire's silk writing jacket, and dropped *Orpheus* on the CD player. When he sat down to work at the keyboard, Lord Ostrucht was waiting for him, sitting melancholy on the back of his black charger, reading a farewell letter from the Lady Fergaine. Marvin almost wept with joy.

Two days later, when he'd at last obtained LaDoux's address from an unwary new editorial publicist, Marvin was surprised to find that the novelist lived not more than five miles away, along a swanky stretch between the inland waterway and the ocean. Marvin drove out that same night, burdened with a bottle of expensive white French Burgundy and uncertain intentions.

Decorative lights lined the waterway side of the narrow street, illuminating boat slips and gazebos and freestanding decks where the big spenders could sip cocktails and contemplate hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of marine horsepower. The ocean side was dark with overgrown trees and ambitious plantings. Only a few discreet lights punctuated the shadows, revealing heavy metal gates across nicely tiled driveways or else big signs indicating that trespassing on a job site is a felony in Florida. Since the neighborhood seemed full of folks constructing hurricane bait, there were plenty of these posted warnings.

LaDoux's house was of an older, less ostentatious vintage, well screened by live oaks, bamboos, and a variety of large and thriving palms—*My kind of place,* Marvin thought. The flat-roofed building was coated with a scabbed and cracked rust-colored stucco, vaguely Mexican in inspiration and adjoined by a massive screen made of blocks interwoven with a bright climbing vine. Several soft yellow lights, perhaps candles, glimmered behind this screen, and a weak bulb illuminated the weathered front door. Otherwise, the house, which was handsome in conception, but clearly neglected, remained in darkness.

Marvin stepped out of his car to the sound of surf and of cars and motorcycles passing. He rang the intercom buzzer on the gate several times, and he was ready to give up when a voice, quite loud and very close to him, asked what he was doing and what the hell he wanted. Marvin gave a start. Someone about his own height and weight was standing half hidden by the dappled purple and ocher leaves of a rampant ornamental shrub. The man wore a white shirt and an ascot, like a country-house extra in an English movie, but what sent the evening lurching in a direction Marvin had not expected was the man's appearance. Marvin immediately recognized their surprising resemblance. "I was hoping to see Hilaire LaDoux," Marvin said. "I'm a big fan of his books."

"Take a look and get out," said LaDoux, starting to turn away. Marvin noticed that he carried a drink in one hand.

"You might want to take a look at me, too," Marvin said. "I wrote your last two novels."

"What are you doing here?" LaDoux demanded, his voice rising. "You're not supposed to have any contact with me. That was in the contract!"

"No," said Marvin, "that was about the only thing that wasn't."

"Audrey should have thought of that," LaDoux said querulously. "Did she give you my address? I'll fire her if she did. No one's supposed to have my address."

"I acquired it elsewhere," Marvin said. "Look, I thought we might work out a deal. Something beneficial to us both."

LaDoux eyed him suspiciously. "What's Audrey been telling you? She's wrong to give you any hope at all. I'll get back on schedule."

Marvin decided that he was probably drunk. "This has nothing to do with Audrey. I've constructed some interesting plot outlines, and I want to talk to you about them."

LaDoux's eyes glittered. "Plots, plot ideas, used to be my forte," he remarked. "But no more. The Muse has shown me her backside lately."

"So we should talk," Marvin repeated.

"Audrey said you were being difficult. Audrey said you didn't want to sell anything."

"Well, now I need the money."

"Where is this material?"

Marvin tapped his breast pocket. He had a diskette, plus an envelope with a few printed pages from one of his detailed outlines.

"Pull your car in," LaDoux said. He opened the gate and waved Marvin up the short drive and into the dark and empty garage.

The door clattered down behind them, giving Marvin a moment's trepidation before his host switched on a light. Marvin stepped out with the bottle of wine. He followed LaDoux through the hall and a book- and paper-strewn dining room that opened onto the terrace and a rustling jungle of palms and banyans. On the west side, a heavy flowering vine cut off the lights and noise of the street with a cascade of foliage and deep red blossoms, while the east was open to the coal-black sea, fringed white with breakers along the sand. The place struck him as absolutely perfect.

"For me?" LaDoux asked when Marvin held out the bottle. "Naughty. I'm reformed, on the wagon, learning abstinence." He gave a sour laugh. "We're at the mercy of mysterious forces. That's the reality of it."

Marvin agreed; he certainly felt that way at the moment.

" 'Course, a certain awareness of mysterious forces is what pays

our bills." LaDoux opened the bottle expertly and poured the wine into two large and ornate glasses. He raised his glass silently and took a long drink. "Not bad."

Marvin said nothing.

"And your problem?" LaDoux asked, after he'd refilled their glasses for a second time. "I assume there is a problem."

"I can't do my own work anymore. The only ideas I get now are for the *Dragon* novels, for Ostrucht and his Lady. Even your beautiful terrace with the sound of the sea suggests . . . " Marvin sighed. "I've been ruined after writing your novels."

"You wrote them rather well, the critics say. Of course, my reputation provided a leg up there," he added.

Marvin nodded. He knew the ways of the literary world.

"So?"

"I thought we might collaborate," said Marvin.

"But I don't need you now, and it's time for you to depart—in the literary sense, I mean." He splashed more wine into each glass. "There's no reason for you to leave this nice Burgundy."

"Yet you were willing to buy the outline for the second trilogy."

"The flesh is weak," LaDoux admitted.

"Perhaps you'd like to see a sample."

He looked up with an eager expression and stretched out his hand. He needed help, whatever he said. "Let me see."

"One page." Marvin opened the envelope and handed over the synopsis of the first five chapters.

LaDoux put on a pair of tinted glasses and scanned the copy. "Like this wine, not *grand cru,* but very nice. And the rest?"

"Good. Audrey knows. She wanted to buy them for you."

"Audrey has somewhat lost confidence in me," LaDoux said. In the silence that followed, Marvin listened to a rustling in the shrubbery and the night wind in the palms. Perhaps Lord Ostrucht should be sent on a sea voyage to some hot, tropical land. "What do you want?" LaDoux asked abruptly.

"To write some of the books," Marvin said.

"But not all of them?"

"Not all of them."

LaDoux stared at him for a minute. "We'll drink to that," he said. "But now I want to see the rest of the plots."

"They're on this diskette." Marvin drew the floppy out of his pocket and dropped it back in. "We'll call Audrey, shall we? Have her come over and draw up a contract."

LaDoux hesitated, then smiled. There was an avidity about him that both encouraged and disgusted Marvin. "Right. We'll call Audrey. To whom we owe so much. Including this whole bloody situation." He stood up. "My office is upstairs. I never do business on the terrace."

Inside, LaDoux switched on the weak hall light and started upstairs. Marvin saw old woodwork, Mexican tiles, cracked and dirty plaster. The main stairs made a steep run to a landing, then turned left. A full moon was shining through the tall window at the top, and Marvin was about to remark on its bright beauty when LaDoux suddenly pivoted on the landing and kicked him square in the gut. Marvin gasped, his lungs suddenly airless, and grabbed the banister to keep from falling. LaDoux struck him again, in the face this time, sending Marvin tumbling backward down the stair to land flat at the bottom.

He was quite helpless. His lungs were deflated, and he couldn't make his legs work. The stair rose above him like a monstrous wave, down which LaDoux dropped toward him like a surfer. Marvin waved his arms, trying to pull air into his lungs, trying to strike LaDoux, who, clearly not as drunk as he'd appeared, caught Marvin under the arms and dragged him down the back hall. He kicked open the French door and pulled Marvin onto the grass and then, to his rising horror, toward the shore. Out of shock and surprise rose an awareness that he was very likely going to die.

Marvin tried to shout, but his voice was a cracked whisper, lost in the wind and surf. LaDoux hauled him through a low hedge and unceremoniously dropped him over the sea wall onto the sand. Marvin tried to get to his feet, but his whole body was focused on acquiring air and his limbs refused to cooperate.

LaDoux grasped him again and started toward the water, but here Marvin began digging his heels and his hands into the soft, deep sand, causing LaDoux to swerve and stagger. It was dark on the beach, too, the few lights dazzling and confusing rather than illuminating. Twice LaDoux dropped to his knees, but though Marvin could impede their progress he could not stop it. Drops of spray landed on his shirt as he was dragged through a fishy, salty-smelling band of wrack. Then LaDoux splashed into the surf, and cold water shocked Marvin's back.

There were crushed shells underfoot. Unsteady, LaDoux slipped both left and right, stumbling on every step. Waves broke over Marvin's head and sloshed down his legs. "The diskette," he managed to gasp. "It's in my pocket."

LaDoux stopped and released one of Marvin's arms, dropping him halfway into the water. Marvin jerked up his head, took a great gulp of air, and, as LaDoux fumbled in his shirt pocket, threw himself sideways, pulling LaDoux under with him.

They weren't in more than a foot of water, but the shore was at once soft and gritty, the band of ground-up shells unstable beneath them. Thrashing and struggling, they got a little farther out, then farther yet, and as they swallowed more water and took

more blows, they found it harder and harder to get back on their knees, to find their feet.

At last, they floundered into chest-deep water, and they were half swimming, half wrestling, each trying to hold the other under, when a big roller crashed into them, separating them and turning Marvin head over heels. As he felt himself dragged out by the current, he forgot LaDoux, forgot everything but the shore, dry land, air. He paddled forward, clawing for ground, and after a second wave broke over his head felt the rough band of shells under his hands and lurched onto the shore, gasping for breath and shaking with cold and shock.

He crawled onto the beach and fell forward on his face. The waves whooshed and thundered behind him, his lungs burned, the night wind chilled his sore back. He had nearly died; someone had tried to kill him; he had possibly drowned a man. With this, he remembered his danger and scrambled painfully to his feet, but he could not see LaDoux.

Marvin called softly: nothing but the sea and the rattle of palm fronds, and somewhere far away, the sound of traffic, of civilization. He limped to the water's edge and peered into the darkness for what seemed a long time before he saw a whitish something as inert as a log rising and falling in the surf. Marvin waited until he was sure of that inertia before wading out into the water and hauling LaDoux's body to shore.

Once he had wrestled the corpse up onto the sand, he laid his hand on LaDoux's chest and felt for a pulse. When all signs proved negative, Marvin sat down, put his head between his knees, and vomited on the sand. "You've killed the golden goose," said a voice in his mind.

And another, even less welcome thought followed: Hilaire LaDoux was someone whose death would be investigated, whose loss would be news. Marvin's own version of events, so implausible and peculiar that even he had trouble crediting what had happened, would come under scrutiny. He had been attacked, there had been a struggle, and Marvin had survived without anything to prove his story. It did not take a novelist's imagination to see big difficulties, both professional and legal, ahead for Hilaire LaDoux's fired ghost writer.

Marvin stood up, washed off his mouth with salt water, and began to undress, dropping his sodden clothing on the sand beside the corpse. Next he turned to LaDoux, though the body already felt cold and the slippery feel of the skin, as well as LaDoux's unsettling resemblance to himself, turned Marvin's stomach and made his hands shake.

Finally, after an exhausting struggle, he managed to get his own clothes onto the body and jammed his sneakers on its feet. The

diskette, ironically, was still in the pocket of his shirt. Marvin retrieved it and set it on the sea wall before dragging LaDoux back to the water. He towed the body out as far as he dared, and when he felt the first signs of a rip current, he let it go.

Back on shore, he bundled up the novelist's wet and sandy clothes. One shoe was missing, and he made a futile search of the sand before returning to the house. The clothing went into the washer, the remaining shoe in a plastic bag. Up in LaDoux's bedroom, Marvin found a change of clothes and dry sneakers. After he composed a brief note for Audrey, he drove north to the public beach, where he abandoned his car, keys, and wallet. He discarded LaDoux's incriminating shoe in a trash barrel. Then Marvin went down to the surf, took off his borrowed sneakers, and slogged back along the shore to the house. He let himself in, found a bottle of scotch, and went up to bed.

A day later, Marvin saw a brief report about his abandoned car, and within a week read an account of the recovery of his body. He waited a few days before calling Audrey. By then he knew a great deal more about his new identity: debts, alcoholism, dubious investments, an estranged family, and the absolute impossibility of ever holding a driver's license again.

On the other hand, he had a fair-sized bank balance, a spectacular if deteriorated house, and more important than all the rest, Lord Ostrucht and his lady, for whom Marvin, or Hilaire, as he must now call himself, had wonderful plans. He reached for the desk phone and dialed. "Audrey?"

"Yes, Audrey Striker speaking." Her response seemed tentative; voices are, after all, hard to disguise.

"Hilaire LaDoux. I'm really flying on the new novel, and I wondered if you'd like me to send you the finished chapters."

Again, the hesitation. He could almost hear the wheels turning. "Of course I would," she said with a fair show of enthusiasm. "But Hilaire, you're working? You're really working? Because I understood you wanted me to find someone to replace poor Marvin—you heard about that?"

"Yes, I did. I can't help feeling a little guilty. He sold me his last outlines, you know. Yes, yes, he cut you out, the naughty boy. But poor fellow! The writer's life is not always a happy one."

"I'd actually found someone—tentatively, you understand. I thought perhaps a woman writer this time . . ." In truth, Audrey had been nearly at her wit's end.

"Quite, quite unnecessary," he said briskly. "I've had a genuinely life-changing experience. You might say I met a ghost, Audrey, and I can assure you I foresee no more writing problems from here on in." ●

DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

THE BRICK THING

by Jack Fredrickson

I don't know what woke me. The silence, probably. All I know for sure is my eyes are open, my cheek is cold from the kitchen table, and outside it's quiet. Dead quiet. The clock on the microwave says 4:00 A.M.

I lift my head, look out the window. I don't see him. The beam from his flashlight is there, flat on the grass, but it's dim, not moving. I try telling myself he's taking a little break, but that's no good. He doesn't rest, not at night. Not anymore.

Now retired, Jack Fredrickson wrote business books in the 1980s. This first work of fiction was inspired, he tells us, by the dialect of his Bohemian grandmother and mother, who frequently used "thing" to refer to what they couldn't remember the name of. The Illinois writer is currently at work on his first mystery novel. His is a welcome new voice in the genre. ❡

I give it up. I get my pants and a wool shirt from the bedroom and go out the back barefoot, telling myself I'm a fool. What am I going to say if he's sitting on the ground taking a breather? That, since meeting with Mrs. Jablonski, I'm up every night, peeping at him through my kitchen window?

I open the wire gate, go into his yard. He's facedown on the grass, a lump in the moonlight, the hand with the chisel still reaching toward what's left of the brick thing. Like in that painting at St. Mary's that's scared me since I was a kid. *Supplication*, the little brass plate on the frame says. Begging.

The moon makes my shadow look like the devil in robes as I cross his yard. I bend down, make myself check for the pulse, but I'm shaking so bad all I can feel is the cold of his skin, like chicken parts before cooking. I hustle back to my kitchen as quick as I can move with the arthritis and call 911.

They're there in four minutes—lights only, no sirens because the

streets are empty. I point them to the back and get out of the way so they can wheel the gurney. They turn him over and bang on him, but it's for the rules. He's stiff.

They cart him out front. Some of the neighbors are on the sidewalk, in their robes. The flashing lights make red snapshots on their faces. Nobody's talking.

Massive heart attack, the driver yells at me as he jumps into the ambulance.

Execution, I think. By a guy two years dead.

Mrs. Jablonski is on the other side of Willis, so it isn't like we talk over the chain-link fence. Some shouts across Willis's yard about the weather, or my roses, is usually about it. But two Saturdays ago, she yells she's made strudel, and has extra. I don't need strudel, not with my ticker, but my wife is into the nutrition, and strudel's strudel, so I hustle out front before my wife hears and beat it down the sidewalk like I got wings. Mrs. Jablonski is holding the door, wearing a beige housedress she must have bought twenty years before her hair went white. We go through her front room—lace doilies and plaster saints—into the kitchen. Fresh coffee in a glass pot is on the stove, and the strudel, eight inches by a foot and a half, is on the yellow Formica table, lined up like a runway between the two plates. It's a setup, but that morning all I'm seeing is the strudel.

We sit. She pours coffee into scratched white mugs and serves me up a four-inch slice with a spatula that looks like a bricklayer's trowel. It's the real stuff, butter and lard, and it goes down quick. We throw some sentences back and forth: my roses; her Mr. Jablonski, dead twenty years; my wife's veggie class at the senior center. But after five minutes—timed by the wall clock, I think now—she puts another piece of strudel on my plate and starts talking about Willis, the guy in the house between us.

Strange, she says, like it just occurs to her, him working outside so late at night.

I haven't noticed, I say. Ever since we moved in, a year now, I hear him inside, all the time hammering, remodeling. But outside? I haven't noticed.

He starts around midnight, she says, when all the houses are dark. Pokes around with a flashlight, tapping, hammering. You haven't noticed?

We have just the kitchen facing Willis, I say. Both bedrooms are on the other side.

She nods.

I make conversation so I'm not just a pig, eating. What is that gray brick thing at the back of Willis's yard? I ask. Two feet wide, three feet high? Like a pillar for a gate, only short.

My husband wondered too, she says, when Mr. Angell—he lived there before Mr. Willis—built it in the spring of 1969. What's to wonder? I told my husband. It's a monument. She motions at the strudel with her trowel. There's still a foot left.

I wave it off, sure the missus will hear my arteries banging like old pipes from two houses down.

A monument? I ask, but to be honest, I'm thinking more about a third piece of strudel than the brick thing.

The strudel's got raisins.

Monument, she says. Been there over thirty years. Why would Mr. Willis work outside in the middle of the night? she asks again.

In her lap, she's twisting her paper napkin into rope, and I realize she's not just making conversation to go with the coffee. She's afraid. I try to think of something that will explain the nocturnal Willis.

Maybe he can't take the sun, I say. All this talk about skin cancer, holes in the ozones. Probably he's finishing up inside, now he's got stuff outside. He's being careful, staying out of the sun.

It's weak, what I'm saying, but she's about to shred the napkin.

Her hands relax maybe just a little. Mr. Angell, she says, now there was a careful man. Nice man, too; a shame about his daughter.

I shovel up the third piece of strudel. The missus is making vegetable burgers with organic germs for supper.

His daughter? I ask.

Lynette, she says. Pretty girl; maybe not the smartest, but sweet. Popular in high school, pom-poms even, had a boyfriend the same age. Stuck on each other—stuck to each other, Mrs. Jablonski says, making the small joke—always holding hands. Fall of 1967, they go off to the University of Illinois downstate—him on a football scholarship, her on what Mr. Angell can do without.

Mrs. Jablonski lowers her eyes, starts twisting again on the napkin rope. Figuring backwards, she says, Lynette comes back pregnant at Christmas. No more university. Stays inside, never comes out, until after the baby. July sometime.

Mrs. Jablonski looks up, her eyes wet from the memories. Remember that 1968? she asks, dabbing at her eyes with the napkin rope. Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, the riots? Things aren't bad enough, that July it's so hot you can fry kielbasa on the front steps, and back then, of course, no one can afford the air. These bungalows are ovens. All of us got our windows wide open, praying for the breeze. Except for Mr. Angell; his are shut tight. Even so, a couple of times, I hear a baby next door.

Mrs. Jablonski looks down at her lap. The napkin is starting to shred. First of August, she says softly, the windows come up. No more baby sounds. Mr. Jablonski and me, we figure adoption.

Quiet, so Lynette can have a fresh start.

I nod. Makes sense.

That same time, Mrs. Jablonski goes on, I notice the tiny new garden in the back of the Angell yard, under the tree, where there is no sun. Next time Mr. Angell is outside and Mr. Jablonski is at work, I ask. Lynette's, Mr. Angell says, for the tulips next spring, but then he hurries inside like he hears the phone.

Mrs. Jablonski picks up the pieces of napkin, tries to press them together. They fall apart back onto her lap.

Lynette kills herself that Thanksgiving, she says. The carbon monoxide. No covering that up. Police, ambulance, two fire trucks—one red, one yellow—an hour before my son and his girlfriend are coming for turkey. Mrs. Jablonski balls up the napkin shreds, drops them behind her in the garbage. The next spring, she says, no tulips come up, and Mr. Angell builds the brick thing on Lynette's garden. Pours the base, lays up the bricks, puts on the cement top. Takes him nights and two weekends. Mrs. Jablonski picks at a speck of napkin stuck to her hand. And that's the story of the brick thing, she says.

We sit for a minute, listening to the hum of the electric clock on the wall. I don't know what to say after such a story. I need to get out in the sunshine, back to my roses. Besides, I need the bathroom. I make to get up.

Wait, she says; there's the boyfriend.

I sit back down. Five more minutes, to be polite.

He never came to Lynette's funeral, she says. Thirty-one years, he stays away.

That stops me thinking about the bladder. What do you mean, thirty-one years? I ask. The boyfriend comes back after thirty-one years?

The week after Mr. Angell's funeral, she says. Moves in, year before last, she says. She's looking at me close to make sure I'm following what she's saying.

The strudel is expanding in my stomach like a lard sponge. I'm following.

Not Willis, I make myself say.

The very same, she says. Mr. Angell willed him the house.

Why would Mr. Angell will him the house?

He must have had his reasons, she says.

He must have been fond of Willis, you mean.

Quick, she strikes the wood handle of the strudel trowel on the table, loud, a gunshot, like Sister Agnes in the third grade when I'm not using my noodle. Young Willis impregnates his daughter, his daughter kills herself from the shame, she says, almost yelling. How fond would you be?

Okay, not fond, I'm quick to say. But then why leave Willis the house?

Mrs. Jablonski calms, looks out her window at Willis's backyard. One night, last of that 1968 July, she says, when Mr. Angell's car is gone, I'm coming into the kitchen for ice tea. I'm reaching for the switch when something outside moves in the light from the house behind. I look around the curtain. It's young Willis and Lynette, she says, pointing through the window.

Back by the brick thing? I ask, looking.

The brick thing wasn't there yet, she reminds, but that's the spot. Anyway, that night, I see Lynette on her hands and knees, sobbing. Young Willis is pulling at her, trying to get her up, but she's fighting him, digging her hands into the dirt to stay down.

Could you hear what they were saying?

No, just the crying. I'm thinking I should stick my head out, or at least call the police, but just then young Willis lets go. Drops her, leaves her on the ground, stomps past my outside light on the way to the front, mad, like a bull. Such a dirty face.

What do you mean, dirty face? I ask.

Dirty, muddy, she says.

Probably working construction or landscape for a summer job and comes to see Lynette right from work, I suggest.

Mrs. Jablonski shrugs. Maybe, she says, but he was wearing khaki pants and a button-collar shirt.

That doesn't seem important.

How long after that night did the baby go away? I ask.

I never hear the baby after, she says.

And Lynette kills herself the following Thanksgiving?

She nods.

Guilt from the baby for sure, I say.

For sure, Mrs. Jablonski agrees.

But something still nags. I hold up my hand for patience before I speak, so Mrs. Jablonski won't squawk. I understand why Mr. Angell leaves Willis the house, I say; Lynette's pregnancy, her suicide, they were young Willis's tragedy, too. Got to be Mr. Angell saw that. It's the only thing explains why he leaves Willis the house.

Mrs. Jablonski shakes her head, biting her tongue.

What makes no sense, I go on, is why Willis moves in. Sell the house. Take the money. But move into a dead old girlfriend's house? That I can't understand.

Mrs. Jablonski nods. I'm getting smarter.

He didn't need the money, she says. The day he shows up, he's driving a big Mercedes Bendes . . .

Benz, I say. With a Z. Expensive.

Cost a lot for sure, she says. Tell you what else: I'm a seamstress

fifty-one years, and even with my cataracts I can see the thousand-dollar suit he's wearing. Size 52.

Not 52, I tell her. That's way too big.

Two hundred fifty pounds, the day he comes in his fancy car.

Willis is a beanpole, one-fifty tops, I say, trying to remember the last time I saw him. It's been months.

Not two years ago, she says. He's lost a hundred pounds, all that hammering. Anyway, when he arrives he's got one small suitcase, like he's staying just long enough to get a real-estate lady.

So what happened? I ask.

The sign never goes up, she says. Instead, he pulls the blinds, starts hammering: tap . . . tap . . . tap . . . Slow. Not like Mr. Jablonski when he's redoing the kitchen. Then it's Bang! Bang! Bang! Like living in a drum for three weeks, but it's quick, then it's over. But not Mr. Willis. He's going slow, like he doesn't know what he's doing, and I'm all the time wondering: Why is Mr. Thousand-Dollar-Suit remodeling a bungalow in a neighborhood like this anyway? My son says his Mercedes Bendes is worth more than the house.

I never see the Mercedes, I say.

Gone, she says, waving her hand like she's shooing a fly. Third or fourth week, he leaves it on the street with For Sale in the window. Best Offer, the sign says. The car is gone in one day. Took what he could get quick. You notice his trash? Mrs. Jablonski asks.

I'm thinking if she drove an automobile like she talks, God forbid, she'd all the time be making left turns without signaling.

Trash?

Mr. Willis sets out seven, eight bags of trash every garbage day night before.

Remodeling, I say. Out with the old, in with the new.

Mrs. Jablonski's eyebrows go up. I stay up late, she says, watch Jay Leno. Sometimes, after, I take a walk to the end of the block and back. There's streetlights, and the air's good for sleeping. Once, maybe twice, the night before garbage, I try to lift one of his bags. Too heavy, so I poke a hole. Guess what I find?

I shrug.

Plaster chips. Big ones, small ones. He's pulling the plaster off the walls. She makes it sound like she discovered the ancient tomb of King Tut.

Remodeling, I say again. Out with the old.

She shakes her head, like Sister Agnes when I'm being a doofus. When Mr. Jablonski is doing our kitchen, she says, the front room is loaded with new stuff. Boxes, tools, wood. Old stuff goes out, new stuff comes in, like digestion. Ever see any new stuff coming for Mr. Willis?

I try to think, but I can't even remember seeing Willis going into

Willis's place. I shake my head. There can be explanations, but I'm out of time. My bladder has to leave. I stand up.

We go through the front room, past the doilies, past the little statues. At the door, she stops with her hand on the knob. What if he saw me watching, that night when he and Lynette were in the backyard? she asks.

It was thirty years ago, is all I can think to say. Even if Willis did see, he's forgotten.

But I am not understanding, not then. I thank her for the strudel and beat it back down the sidewalk.

That night, there's no sleeping. Too much strudel. I go into the kitchen for warm milk and am reaching for the switch when I see the flashlight bobbing in Willis's backyard. I leave the light off and sit away from the window.

I'm shocked. He's a bag of bones, with a wispy beard and hair down to his shoulders. He's on his knees, lifting patio stones, poking underneath with a crowbar. At first I think he's releveling, but he's dropping the stones back crooked. In the glow of the flashlight he looks crazy, a stick man digging for who knows what.

After an hour I tell myself I'll be just as loony as Willis if I don't get back to bed. I go, but the sleep doesn't come. I keep hearing Mrs. Jablonski's voice, over and over like on the phonograph, telling the story of Lynette, her baby, and young Willis.

And Mr. Angell.

The next night, Willis is out with the ladder five minutes after Mrs. Jablonski's lights go off. Mine have been out for an hour. In the moonlight, I watch him climb to the roof. He starts tapping the chimney flashing off with a hammer and screwdriver, slow, making no noise. Three hours it takes until he gets it off. He sets the bent metal aside and pokes inside the cavity behind with the flashlight, up, down, all around, looking at every inch. Finally, he sits up and looks at the sky in the east. It's getting light. He presses the bent metal flashing back into place—loose, no caulking, no adhesive—and climbs down. He slips the ladder off the house and goes inside. Next time it rains, it's going to be pouring buckets into his house.

I go off to bed. I got an hour and a half before the alarm. I fall asleep too tired to make any sense about what I've just seen.

Next day, at work, I can't concentrate on the machine motor I'm repairing for thinking about Willis. He wasn't up on that roof fixing anything; he was looking for something. But for what I can't imagine.

All day, the clock on my bench gives up each minute slow, and

it's eternity until I get home. I tell the wife I didn't sleep and head for the sofa. I need to be alert for later.

That night, as soon as Mrs. Jablonski douses her lamp, Willis is out with the ladder again, but this time he's up in the gutters, scooping out leaf gunk, setting it on the shingles. For a minute I think he's cleaning, but after feeling around, he brushes it all back down in the gutter. This I cannot imagine, putting crud back in gutters, and I watch until he moves the ladder to Mrs. Jablonski's side and I have to give it up and go to bed. But tired as I am, I can't drift off. I can come up with nothing that explains what Willis is doing.

There's thunderstorms the third night. Lightning, sheets of rain, the works. But none of that stops Willis. He's outside without a jacket, pulling back trim boards, looking behind with his flashlight, letting in the rain. I'm in the back of the kitchen where the lightning won't show me, punchy from the not sleeping, starting to doubt what I'm seeing. All day I'm thinking of a couple of heavyweight fighters I saw once, both of them past their primes. They kept coming back, round after round, dazed, stupid, long after both should have quit. That's Willis and me. But still I keep watching.

Two weeks, three days, I watch. Until this morning, when he finally goes at the brick thing. He's been staying clear, but now it's all that's left. Tap tap, Willis starts removing the bricks.

I'm watching, but I'm dopey. I rest my head on the table, close my eyes, and I'm out like I'm clubbed. And sometime after, the heart attack comes for Willis.

After the paramedics take him away, I dress, go to work, but I'm shaking from finding him and from the too-little sleep. And from still not knowing. By noon, even my fingernails are itching. I take a half sick day, come home, and tell the missus I'll be over at Willis's, neatening up the mess for whoever inherits.

I go to the garage for empty boxes. For the first time since I moved in, Willis's blinds are up, probably from the cops looking for next-of-kin addresses. I can see all the way through Willis's house. There are no inside walls, just naked two-by-fours, picked clean, and I see Mrs. Jablonski sitting at her kitchen table, looking back at me. She doesn't wave.

I carry the empty boxes into Willis's backyard. Willis's hammer and chisel lie on the ground next to his flashlight, dead now, in front of what's left of the brick thing. The cement top cap is in pieces on the ground behind, three dozen busted bricks scattered around it. I start breaking the rest of the brick thing apart with my little sledge, slow, so there's no strain. Every ten minutes the missus comes out. Two weeks she's worrying about my insomnia.

She doesn't know about the watching. You're going to kill yourself, she says. Why do this?

To be neighborly for the new people, I lie. I keep on removing.

Something under the mortar chips inside reflects up. I pinch it out with my fingertips. It's a plastic bag from Montgomery Ward's Automotive, one of those shiny thick ones inner tubes used to come in. Nobody's had tires that need tubes since the late sixties.

I look inside. Baby-fine strands of hair stuck to the stained head of a metal hammer. And young Willis's fingerprints, for sure, and maybe Lynette's, though I want to doubt hers. I set the bag on the ground and keep working.

I'm special careful breaking up the little base. I don't want to go too deep. That July night, that night Mrs. Jablonski worried that young Willis had seen her watching, she only saw the end. Didn't see the burying. Lynette and young Willis had been hysterical. No telling how shallow they dug in their hurry to be done.

I put the Ward's bag in the bottom of one box, then fill them all with the rubble. As I haul them out for the garbage, I try to imagine the day Willis shows up in his fancy car to collect his inheritance. He's figuring a few hours to hire a realtor and then he's gone, but then he goes inside and sees the note. Maybe Scotch-taped to a kitchen cabinet, maybe thumbtacked to a wall, it's where Mr. Angell can see it every day and be strong from knowing that someday Willis will read it and the air will be sucked out of the bastard that ruined his daughter: "Willis, I kept the tool. Enjoy the house." Nonsense to anybody else; a bomb for Willis.

Like most things about that night in 1968, Willis has made himself forget the hammer. But he's a big man now, a successful man; he can take care of this quick. He'll find the hammer and dispose of it and there will be nothing to link him to the baby if it's ever uncovered.

But the hammer is not in the cabinets, the drawers, or under the stairs. It's not in any of the obvious places. So he has to move in, explore every inch. It's slow, and the more he looks, the more desperate he gets. Who knows what other notes Mr. Angell left? Willis quits sleeping, quits eating. There's time only to look. He chips off the plaster, pulls off the baseboards, rips out the cabinets. But it's not there. Two years he picks at the ceilings, at the walls, like an animal in a cage, sucking dust. But it's not there.

He has to search outside, but now he must wait for the houses around to go dark, and nosy Mrs. Jablonski stays up late, watches Jay Leno. The daylight minutes drag like hours as he paces inside the ruined house, waiting for the dark. He's an animal now, living only for the night.

But it's not outside. It's not behind the trim or the chimney flashing, it's not in the gutters, it's not under the patio. It's not in

any of the hundred other places he looks. And then that part of Willis's mind that hasn't gone crazy understands. The brick thing. Mr. Angell knew that would be the last place Willis would look, knew that Willis would destroy himself looking everywhere else—anywhere else—rather than risk having to touch what was in that ground. But now Willis has no choice. It's all that's left.

He starts with the chisel, tap . . . tap . . . His heart, ruined from the not sleeping, the not eating, is out of control now, chugging rough from imagining what Mr. Angell, a careful man, built inside the brick thing. An explosive, maybe, or worse: an alarm wired from underground, placed next to the remains of the tiny corpse, loud enough to bring everybody running to see what Willis is doing. Tap . . . tap . . . Willis chisels away the bricks.

I set down the last of the boxes at the curb, carry back the piece of sod I bought after work. The new grass is darker, denser, but from ten feet, you can't tell the brick thing was ever there. Maybe it's wrong, there being no marker, but I'm thinking more of the memory of the confused young girl and the rage of the father who loved her. There should be no need to dig there ever again. ●

Reading the Will
by Ray Luckinbill

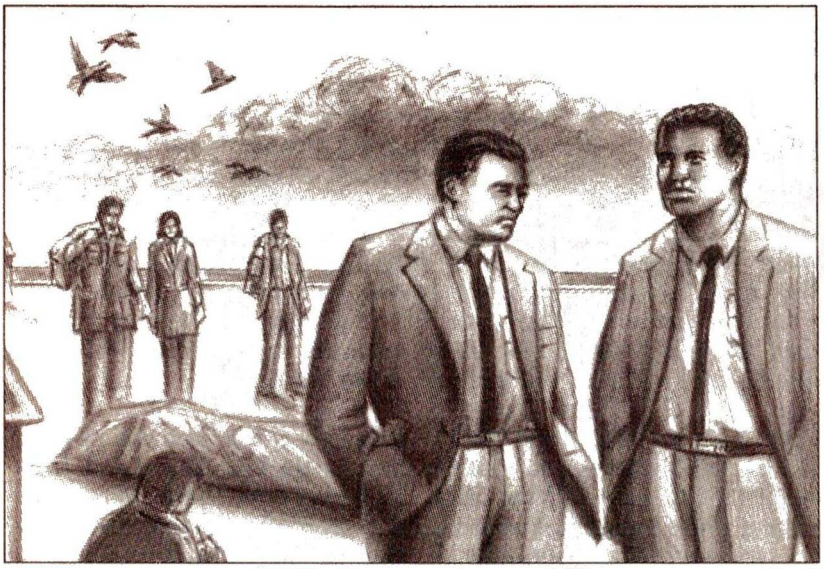
The heirs are there quite early to hear the lawyer read the will.
They are gathered in the mansion up on top of Uncle's Hill.
It is a scary, very windy, rainy, dark, and stormy night.
(I must tell you of the weather even though the term is trite.)

There is the butler and a banker and a guy that blows a flute,
And a hooker and an actress—all are there to get the loot.
"Being of sound mind," reads the lawyer...The room goes black ere more is said.
A shot, a scream, the lights come on. The actress lies there dead.

There is lots of finger-pointing about who has pulled the trigger.
But inwardly the heirs rejoice since now the pot is bigger.
A shot is heard amid the screams. The dark comes one more time.
A flashlight shows the flute guy dead, but no light has shown the crime.

As the lights come back they look around to see who isn't hit,
And realize with great relief it's now a three-way split.
They all back up against the wall. Once more the lights all fail.
The hooker and the banker die and lay slumped across the rail.

The lawyer looks around to see the butler standing there,
And orders him at gunpoint into a heavy wooden chair.
"I stole the money," the lawyer said. "Till the old man died, I hid it.
But now with all the heirs gone, I'll just say the butler did it."



Art by John Stevens

Dead and Presumed Missing

by John H. Dirckx

"Good morning! This is Kitty Partridge in the Supercool Ninety-Two traffic chopper. We're live and aloft over the Interstate, just east of downtown. Traffic is moving smoothly through the area, with only the usual rush-hour pileups at the exits. There's a small truck tipped over in the median just west of the Heron Pike interchange, so if you're eastbound there, be alert for workers on the left shoulder, and watch for possible stoppages as they right the truck and tow it into the fast lane."

Halfway through her transmission, and without dropping a syllable, Kitty Partridge reached for the camcorder with her right hand and jogged her pilot's elbow with her left. Then, using hand signals, she drew his attention to something almost directly below, and asked him to circle to the left and hover.

❖ ❖ ❖

Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn was just getting settled into his desk chair for his morning session at the computer when Lieutenant Savage appeared in the doorway. "Think you can find the Moreland Building?" he asked.

"I don't know. Is it missing?"

"Stamaty's got a possible homicide over there. Kestrel's already on his way in the evidence van, but you can probably beat him on foot at this time of the morning."

"ID on the victim?"

"None yet. Asian. Blunt injuries."

"Where in the building?"

"The roof."

John Dirckx is a medical doctor, but he rarely employs significant medical details and clues in his mysteries, nor does he often set his stories in hospitals or other medical facilities. Instead, the Ohio author writes primarily a type of police procedural, with a series character who is African-American and cases that involve all layers of society. Detective Auburn's latest case takes him to the self-enclosed world of a big hotel.

It took Auburn less than five minutes to reach the Moreland Building, a squat and sooty limestone structure that was stuffed with law offices, insurance agencies, stock brokerages, and collection agencies. The elevator got him to the fourth floor. There, Patrolman Fritz Dollinger met him and conducted him to an enclosed iron staircase that led up to the roof. When they stepped out into the bright and breezy May morning, Auburn saw that Kestrel, the evidence technician, had beat him after all.

A low stone parapet surrounded the tar and gravel roof on all sides. Much of the space was taken up by air-conditioning equipment, the elevator cabin, and the base of a soaring radio tower. In the middle of an open stretch, the body of a man lay on its back with arms outstretched, and Kestrel was squatting over it and conferring with Nick Stamaty, the coroner's investigator.

Auburn nodded to the others and inspected the body. An Asian or Near-Eastern male, between forty and fifty, slightly built, wearing black trousers with a broad satin stripe down the outside of each leg, a starched white shirt, black cutaway vest, black bowtie—the standard uniform of a bartender, banquet server, or blackjack dealer. The clothes were dusty and torn. The man's neck was bent at an unnatural angle and a livid crease ran down the right side of his face.

"Who found him?" asked Auburn.

"Traffic helicopter spotted him," said Stamaty. "He was twisted up like a pretzel when I got here. I took a whole roll of pictures

before I moved him."

Kestrel, the evidence technician, sniffed a couple of times to signify his disapproval of Stamaty's moving the body before he'd arrived on the scene to take his own pictures.

"How long's he been dead?" Auburn asked Stamaty.

"Unofficially, six hours tops."

Auburn looked at his watch. "No ID on him yet?"

"Not unless his name is Benjamin Franklin."

"Wallet full of cash?"

"No wallet, but something like twelve grand in big bills." Stamaty raised the lid of his field kit to show two clear plastic bags full of currency. "The bags were taped to his chest. This was all he had in his pockets." He handed over a key to a locker at the Amtrak station on Delaware Avenue.

Auburn surveyed his surroundings. The Moreland Building was flanked by taller buildings on either side, and people were watching them from some of the windows in one of the buildings. Something grabbed him in the pit of the stomach when he looked up to the top of the radio tower, silhouetted against the limitless blue reaches of the morning sky. "Do you think he jumped from up there?"

"Not from the top. Possibly from that lowest platform. Something bashed him in the face while his heart was still beating. Could have been that bottom strut. But I'm not climbing up there to find out."

Kestrel sniffed again. If anybody had to climb up there, it would probably be him. "Why would a guy with all that money on him commit suicide?" Kestrel asked.

"Maybe the money wasn't on him when he jumped," suggested Stamaty, who dabbled in psychology and enjoyed baiting the police with conundrums. "They say when somebody shoots himself in Monte Carlo, the cops stuff his pockets with thousand-franc notes so they can sign it out as an unsolved murder and avoid the bad publicity for the gambling casinos."

"This isn't Monte Carlo," said Auburn, "and the cash wasn't in his pockets. I think we've got ourselves a bag man here, who worked in a bar or a restaurant downtown. He got on somebody's wrong side. They wasted him and grabbed his wallet, but missed the jackpot."

"How'd he get up here, Sergeant?" asked Dollinger. "I was first on the scene, and it took the building super twenty minutes to track down a key to the roof."

"Why not from one of those windows?" Auburn pointed to the nearer of the adjacent buildings, the Skyliner Hotel, which stood about five stories taller than the Moreland Building. This side of the hotel was mostly blank brick wall, but three windows, proba-

bly in a stairwell, stood in a vertical row directly above where the body lay. "Bet you something like twelve grand in big bills he's a waiter or a bartender in there."

"Want me to check?" asked Dollinger.

"I'll come with you. I want to look at those windows from inside." He turned back to Stamaty. "Lieutenant Savage says we haven't got any missing person report on anybody who fits this description," he said, "and neither does the sheriff. Has he got any scars or tattoos?"

"Or other distinguishing marks? I didn't see any, but then I didn't do a full examination with our audience steadily growing up there in the grandstand."

Auburn talked briefly to the building superintendent, a portly individual in a maroon blazer, breathless and speechless with agitation. Access to the roof was strictly limited to maintenance personnel. As far as the super knew, nobody had been up there since the last elevator inspection in March. He assured Auburn that the dead man didn't work in his building.

Auburn and Dollinger took the elevator to street level and stepped next door to the Skyliner Dorina Hotel, arguably the most upscale hotel in town. It had started life in the nineteenth century with a different name. The wiring and plumbing had been redone in the sixties to conform to code, but most of the original mahogany, marble, and wrought iron was still in evidence.

The liveried doorman gave Dollinger's uniform a quasi-military salute. The lobby was thronged with people milling around an ornamental pool with a fountain that splashed and sparkled under a crystal chandelier. The elevator had buttons for nine floors, but the top two contained executive suites and could only be accessed with a pass card. They started out on the fifth floor to get their bearings and found that the window overlooking the roof of the Moreland Building was directly opposite the elevators. On the fifth and sixth floors the windows had spindly-legged antique tables in front of them, apparently for the purpose of concealing the accumulation of dust, dead flies, candy wrappers, and cigarette butts on the window sills.

But on the seventh floor there was no table, and a mere glance at the window sill showed that its coating of dust had recently been disturbed by something dragged across it. The window was securely latched. "This has to be it," said Dollinger. "There aren't any windows facing this way on the floors above."

Kestrel was still working about forty feet below. They tried to attract his attention, but the sun was in his eyes, and they didn't dare to touch the window, much less open it.

"I'll go," said Dollinger.

Auburn paced the long corridor, which smelled faintly of carpet

deodorizer and stale food. No sound came from behind any of the recessed doors. A couple of trays with soiled dishes and silverware rested on the floor outside the first room to the left of the elevator, from whose knob hung a "Do Not Disturb" sign. An ugly and useless side table stood ten yards down the hall from the elevator under a tarnished mirror.

As Auburn was straightening his tie, the elevator door opened and a maid stepped off pushing a wheeled utility cart full of clean linen and supplies. Statuesque despite her shapeless smock, she stood half a head taller than Auburn, and he didn't need to read her nametag to recognize Queena Dezwart.

Auburn showed identification. Years earlier, when he was a beat cop, he'd questioned her about some pilfered supplies at the Chalfont Hospital, but they both pretended they'd never met before.

"Can you tell me how many people are staying on this floor right now?"

She pulled a folded printout from her pocket and ran a polished thumbnail down the list. "There's only two rooms occupied. Seven-oh-one and Seven-oh-nine."

"You mean there's nobody in any of these other rooms?"

"Is something wrong?"

Auburn pointed out the window and down. "Don't touch anything there."

"May the Lord have mercy! He dead?"

"Yes, ma'am. Looks like he jumped or fell from this window. Recognize him?"

"I don't think so. That table's supposed to be here in front of the window. And the window's supposed to be locked."

"It is locked. Did you shut it this morning?"

"Me? Man, you was here when I got here. Maybe you locked it?" Her bantering tone of mock indignation and her total command of the situation took Auburn back ten years to their last encounter.

"I need to look around here," said Auburn. "Have you got a passkey to all these rooms that are supposed to be empty?"

She looked at him as if he'd asked her to lend him fifty dollars. "Mmm-hmm. And I got my work to do, too."

"Two rooms."

"Only one for now. This one says 'Do not disturb.' In other words, 'Queena, keep out.' "

Auburn knocked at Room 701. There was a longish delay, during which Queena Dezwart shoved her cart in the direction of Room 709, let herself in, blocked the door open, and pulled back the curtains.

At length the door of Room 701 swung slowly open to reveal a stout and rumpled man, still in his pajamas, scowling up at Auburn from the seat of a platform-style motorized invalid chair.

Auburn showed identification with one hand and took charge of the door with the other.

"Sorry to bother you so early," he said. (It was a quarter past nine.) "I'm investigating an accident that may have happened here outside your room. Did you hear anything unusual during the night?"

The controls of the chair were mounted on a straight handlebar. The man manipulated these and the wheelchair rolled back away from the door with an electric whine. "Come on in."

The room was dark except for a sliver of daylight where the curtains didn't meet.

The covers were heaped in a tangle at the foot of the bed where the tenant had evidently thrown them moments before. An open briefcase full of papers stood on the lowboy before the window.

"What is it you're looking for?" He rubbed his eyes, scratched his head, and put on a bedside light. Auburn guessed his age at about forty. His legs, shriveled and lifeless in bulky knitted wraps, were like two Christmas stockings dangling from a mantelpiece.

"We think somebody jumped or fell from the window across the hall last night. I was wondering if you heard anything." He got out a three-by-five-inch file card and a pen.

"There's always noise in a hotel. Usually I can tune it out pretty good." He rubbed his eyes again. He was gradually waking up. "There *was* some commotion out there in the middle of the night. I thought they were probably putting an extra bed in one of the rooms."

"Did you hear voices?"

"No voices."

"What time would this have been?"

"I watched TV until about one o'clock. I was just falling asleep when I heard them moving stuff out there. After that I slept okay until a garbage truck down in the alley woke me up around half-past six this morning."

"Your name, sir?"

"Billings. Chaz." He proffered a damp, pudgy hand.

"Staying here by yourself, Mr. Billings?"

"Sure. I sell fiberglass products for an outfit in Boston. Mostly to contractors and government agencies. I'm on the road most of the time. You say somebody fell out the window?"

"That's the way it looks. He may have had a little help."

"Criminy. Dead?"

"Yes, sir."

"Criminy."

In the corridor Kestrel was taking pictures of the window and its environs. "That table up the hall belongs here in front of the window," Auburn told him. "Probably ought to be dusted for prints."

Kestrel nodded abstractedly to signify his comprehension.

Patrolman Dollinger was standing next to Queena Dezwart's utility cart outside the open door of Room 709. His efforts to interview Ms. Dezwart, who was at work inside the room, seemed to be eliciting mostly chaff and back talk.

Auburn pressed the elevator button on his way to Room 709. He stuck his head in the doorway and got a good view of battered luggage and personal articles suggesting an elderly couple before Queena stopped in her tracks and fixed him with a quizzical stare. "We'll be leaving now, ma'am," he told her. "Officer Kestrel, the evidence technician, is working there by the window. When he's finished, he'll want you to let him have a look around in the empty guest rooms, storerooms, and so on." He hustled Dollinger into the elevator.

At the reception desk they had to wait while a clerk mollified a couple of complaining guests. The woman was doing most of the talking. Nothing seemed to be quite right. The room was too hot; a huge stain on the carpet was obviously blood; noisy machinery on the other side of the wall had kept them awake half the night; and before dawn they'd been awakened all over again by the noise of trash collection in the alley.

The clerk gave bland assurances of his deep regret and promised to make ample reparation. "What room are you in again, ma'am?"

She shrugged as if the question were just another indignity. "Seven-oh-nine," said her husband.

Auburn and Dollinger exchanged glances.

The man behind the counter proved to be the hotel manager. At least, his nametag identified him as Travis Marth and according to the sign on the wall behind him, that was the name of the manager.

With an elaborate show of not noticing Dollinger's uniform, or even Dollinger, he glanced inquiringly at Auburn.

Auburn showed identification. "Do you have a security officer on duty?"

Marth's eyebrows went up a millimeter or two. "Problem?"

"Possibly. I won't need to bother you with it if you have a house detective."

The phrase seemed to amuse Marth slightly. "Our concierges are trained in CPR and tae kwan do," he said. "We don't employ security guards. What's the flap?"

"The body of a man was found on the roof of the Moreland Building this morning. We have reason to believe he fell from the window opposite the elevator on the seventh floor of the hotel."

Marth made a rapid survey of the lobby. "Rosie, take the desk," he called through an open doorway behind him.

He led Auburn and Dollinger out of the lobby into a side corridor. "Is this somebody who was staying in the hotel?"

"We don't have an ID yet," said Auburn. "It's a man probably in his forties, Asian, dressed like a server or a bartender. We thought he might be an employee. Is anybody missing?"

"Not that I know of."

"Can we ask you to take a look at him—see if you know him?"

The manager consulted his watch. "Where is he?"

"Still on the roof next door."

Marth led them to the alley by way of a loading dock, and from there into the Moreland Building through a fire exit. He avoided making eye contact with either of them as they rode up in the elevator.

On the roof he stopped ten feet from the body, leaned forward as if over a railing, and shook his head. "Nobody I know."

"Do any of your staff wear uniforms like that?"

"No. Not with that shiny stuff." He was already starting for the stairs.

"I'll walk back with you," said Auburn. "Now that you've seen him, do you think he was a guest?"

Marth spread his hands wide. "It's possible. As of seven A.M. our census was a hundred and thirty-one. That's paying guests. God knows how many freebooters we've got on board. Plus we're running an Islamic wedding reception, a jewelry auction, and a cat show."

They had an elevator to themselves. As it clanked its way down to the street level of the Moreland Building, Marth became expansive. "You asked about a house detective. Believe me, Officer, they only exist in Sam Spade murder mysteries and Hitchcock movies. We don't need any cops. Our room rates are based on the assumption that the guest is going to steal the towels, the bedsheets, and the works out of the toilet."

"Still, you must have some sticky times—thefts, people missing . . ."

"Tell me about it." As they left the elevator Marth headed for the street entrance instead of the alley, evidently because Dollinger wasn't with them this time. "Believe me, in a hotel people and things are never what they seem." (Auburn was to remember that remark more than once during the course of the investigation.) "Ships that pass in the night. Everybody's a transient, nobody really lives here." They were back in the lobby of the hotel now. "Do you need me anymore?"

"Not right now. Can I eventually get a printout of everybody that's staying in the hotel? Including people that left since yesterday morning?"

Marth exhaled slowly through compressed lips. "I guess so. Were you planning to . . . interview some of these people?"

"Probably just the ones on the seventh floor. According to the maid, only two rooms are occupied up there."

The manager had resumed his place behind the counter. He touched keys at a computer and nodded. "We use that floor mostly as a reserve. The rooms are smaller and they're overdue for remodeling."

"I'm going back up there to touch base with our evidence technician," said Auburn. "We'll try not to be too conspicuous. If you hear of anybody missing, anything suspicious going on, I'd appreciate it if you'd call me at one of these numbers." He handed Marth a card and went to the elevators.

Kestrel was still puttering with camera and specimen envelopes at the seventh-story window. "There isn't much doubt that he went through here," he said, "but this should cinch it. The sand-plaster finish has been flaking off onto the windowsill, and I think it'll match some of that dust on his clothes."

"Did you check out that table under the mirror?"

"I did. It's been handled recently by somebody wearing gloves. I've got pictures." He didn't need to say "good pictures" because all his pictures were good.

"Where's the maid?"

"Beats me."

"Are you through with this window?"

"Sure am."

Auburn unlatched and opened the window, called discreetly to Dollinger on the roof below, and beckoned him to return to the hotel. While waiting, he explored the entire seventh floor, trying every door. Only two rooms were unlocked. One of these was a small enclosure next to Room 709 where a pop machine and an icemaker were producing the clatter that had disturbed the guests in that room during the night. The other was a storage and work room, where Queena Dezwart was taking a coffee break.

"That door says 'Staff Only,' " she informed him. "You work here now?"

"Temporarily. Part time. Did you notice a stain on the carpet in Seven-oh-nine this morning?"

"I been noticing a stain on the carpet in Seven-oh-nine for the past six months." She took a bite of pineapple danish and washed it down with coffee from a polystyrene cup. "It's rusty water that leaked out of the ice machine next door."

"How about letting me have your passkey for about ten minutes while I check all these empty rooms?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Just because you're a model citizen and you want to see justice done."

She handed over a magnetic pass-card attached to about two feet of fine brass chain. Dollinger arrived in time to help him with the search. They looked into every room except the two that were

occupied, but found nothing of interest. They had returned the key to the maid and were waiting for the elevator when the door opened and the man from 709 got off.

"Excuse me, sir," said Auburn. "I believe you're in Seven-oh-nine?"

"That's right." He was thin and stooped, well past retirement age. "Place is noisier than a boiler room. They going to move us?"

"Well, Mr.—"

"Dwayle. Arthur Dwayle." There were pouches under his eyes, and the rest of his face drooped like an empty backpack. The movements of his mouth when he spoke reminded Auburn of a horse eating an apple.

"That'll be up to the hotel management, Mr. Dwayle. We're investigating something that happened during the night. Did you or your wife hear any kind of commotion out here in the hall?"

"In the hall, no. All we heard was the racket of those vending machines next door. And a garbage truck this morning, before it was light." He looked up and down the empty corridor. "What happened out here?"

"Apparently a man dropped from this window onto the roof of the building next door."

"Holy smoke! When was that?"

"Probably around one or two this morning."

"Hey, maybe I do know something about that. That window was open when we went down to breakfast this morning. I shut it myself."

Auburn made a note on a file card. "Did you happen to look out?"

"If I did, I didn't notice anything out there." Dwayle moved toward the window and peered down. "Holy smoke! The guy's still down there. He's dead, isn't he?"

"Traveling for pleasure, Mr. Dwayle?"

With difficulty Dwayle tore his eyes away from the corpse on the roof of the Moreland Building. "Yes and no. I'm in town for a convention. Club I belong to. American Society of Pen and Pencil Collectors. Eastern Division. I'm secretary-treasurer."

"Is your convention being held here in the hotel?"

"No, across town. Wife's supposed to be meeting me here for lunch, but . . ." He shrugged, looked at his watch, smiled briefly, and then refolded his face on the original creases.

Down in the lobby, the level of activity was mounting as the noon hour approached. In an alcove at the rear, a man in a tuxedo was playing a grand piano whose satiny finish shone under the lights like asphalt after a rain. Chaz Billings, looking businesslike in a suit and silk tie, piloted his wheelchair skillfully around the fountain and out to the sidewalk.

Auburn and Dollinger took a tour of the lower level of the hotel, where the meeting rooms, dining room, and bar were situated. Big easels bore printed notices about the jewelry auction and the cat show and handwritten signs in Arabic and English for the wedding reception.

"Excuse me, are you chaps investigating a theft?"

The questioner was tall and thin, fortyish, with a long pink nose that seemed to be twitching with anxiety.

"Actually we're not, sir," said Dollinger. "Is something missing?"

"Camera. Somebody snatched it yesterday while I was having breakfast in there." He nodded toward the dining room.

"Have you reported it to the management?" asked Auburn.

"Oh, sure. I reported it right after it happened. I just came back in today to check with them about it."

"Are you staying in the hotel?"

"No, I work next door. I'm on my lunch hour."

"Where exactly do you work, sir?"

"Ostroff Publishing, in the Moreland Building. We do specialty law reports."

"Your name, sir?"

"Lance Holgarn."

"You say somebody stole your camera yesterday morning in the dining room. Were you eating by yourself?"

"Yes. I put it down on the chair next to mine, and somebody must have snatched it while I was sitting right there, because—"

"Did it have any identification on it?"

"The case did, sure. My name and address."

"We'll keep our eyes open, Mr. Holgarn," said Auburn, in what he hoped was a tone of polite dismissal. "But professional thieves are always operating in public places like this, and the chances are that your camera is a hundred miles from here by now. Without the case."

Since it was liver and onions day in the canteen at headquarters, Auburn had no trouble persuading Dollinger to eat lunch in the hotel dining room. The place was already half full. There were a few tourists, including a couple with two whining children strapped into highchairs, but most of the diners had the look of sales reps or people attending conferences or conventions. As they waited for a hostess to seat them, snatches of conversation came to Auburn's ears.

"Once you burst that bubble . . ."

"Tell that to Lou Connors . . ."

". . . hard enough to sell an intangible . . ."

"This guy's a health nut . . ."

". . . integrate some low-frequency variables . . ."

And then, at his elbow: "Smoking or non?" The hostess led them to a table half hidden in a recess, where Dollinger's uniform

wouldn't be seen by the majority of the diners.

Sometimes it helped Auburn to bounce questions off Dollinger's hard-headed and literal sense of reality, and sometimes it didn't. "Fritz," he asked, "why did he go through that particular window?"

"Because he was on that particular floor."

"But why was he on that particular floor? He wasn't staying in any of the rooms there. If he was dead before he went through the window, I can't see somebody taking his body there from some other floor. Especially since there's no service elevator."

"Guest of a guest?"

Auburn mused. "The guy in the wheelchair might have pulled it off, in the middle of the night, if he had enough time. Or the elderly couple could have pulled it off, especially working together."

"I noticed the old gent was pretty quick to tell us he shut the window," said Dollinger. "Thus leaving open the possibility of suicide."

"And also explaining why we might find his fingerprints on the window."

The service was fast and the food decent. It was barely twelve-thirty when they left the dining room and made their way to the alley again, since that was the shortest way back to headquarters. As they crossed the loading platform, a kitchen employee was dumping garbage from one container to another.

Dollinger stopped dead in his tracks. "Sergeant, I just saw that guy's camera! If I didn't, I'll never eat another piece of pecan pie as long as I live!"

"Don't make promises you can't keep. Where'd you see it?"

"Right there in that mess of garbage. You can still see it. Hold it, sir."

The kitchen employee had a patch over one eye, and apparently he knew only two words of English, "yes" and "no," which he employed volubly, alternately, and irrelevantly.

At length they found someone in the kitchen who understood English, and who even pretended to understand their interest in the garbage. Dollinger dexterously retrieved the camera with a borrowed broom. Its case was missing and it was smeared with gravy and salad dressing, but it appeared to be undamaged, and to contain a roll of film of which only one frame had been exposed. The batch of garbage containing the camera had come from a public receptacle in the dining room itself, which was little used and was emptied only every two or three days.

They cleaned up the camera with a borrowed towel. "You going to take it back in to the desk or call the guy?" asked Dollinger.

"Neither."

"Hey, I found it. Maybe there's a reward."

"We don't even know if this is the camera Holgarn lost. Say it is. Why did he have his camera with him at breakfast? He's not a

traveler—he works next door. And why would a thief throw the camera in the trash and keep the case?"

"And, for that matter, who turns off the light when you shut the refrigerator? Were you thinking that the camera might have something to do with the guy on the roof?"

They came to the end of the alley and started along Fourth. The sidewalks teemed with shoppers, downtown workers on their lunch hour, and people out to enjoy the spring weather.

"If we turn it in," said Auburn, "we'll probably never know that. Sometimes cameras have things in them other than film."

"You could get Sergeant Kestrel to open it in the darkroom. And then if there's film in it, he could develop it."

"I wonder what Froid would have to say about that."

"What's Freud got to do with it?"

"Not Freud. Froid—as in Mort D. The city prosecutor. Things like this make him nervous. If it were up to him, we'd all have the Miranda warning tattooed on the palms of our left hands."

At headquarters they reported in to Lieutenant Savage without mentioning the camera. Since there was still no ID on the dead man, Savage assigned Dollinger to canvass the neighborhood of the hotel to see if anyone matching his description was missing, or if he could find an establishment where workers wore that type of uniform.

Auburn drove to the Amtrak station on Delaware to check out the locker whose key had been found on the body. The cache of stolen goods he found in that locker was one of the more memorable finds of his career. Stuffed into two large suitcases he discovered, besides clothing, toiletries, and other personal articles, an incredible horde of watches, cameras, and jewelry. There were stolen driver's licenses, credit cards, and magnetic door passes from a dozen hotels. There were more than a hundred keys, a set of lock picks, and burglar's tools. There wasn't much cash, probably less than a thousand dollars, and it was all in Canadian currency. He found no drugs or firearms, but the two long-bladed steel knives in leather sheaths hadn't been designed to whittle sticks or cut twine.

He shut the materials away in the locker and went to a phone to call Savage. "I think you'd better send Kestrel and Dollinger down here with a van, Lieutenant. As in moving."

At three o'clock that afternoon, Auburn was called to a meeting in Savage's office. Lieutenant Dunbar of the Robbery Division was also present.

"We still haven't got an ID on him," said Savage, "but he's shaping up as a world-class professional thief, specializing in hotel work. Probably went in for a little smuggling, too. Anyway, his suitcases have false bottom panels, and he had a pair of shoes with hollow heels. Kestrel found some women's clothes—a reversible raincoat and a reversible beret—and we thought for a

while maybe he had a female accomplice. Then we found the wigs, and realized he was just a reversible guy."

"Is there a chance one of those photo IDs was really his? I mean, they were all—"

"Please don't say it, Cy," interrupted Dunbar, who, like Auburn, was African-American. "Please don't tell us all Asians look the same to you."

"They're still checking," said Savage, "but the chances are very much against his having left any clue to his true identity in that cache. Stamaty brought over a set of his prints and we're waiting now to run them through the FBI's computer. If we draw a blank there we'll let the Mounties have a look at them, since he's apparently been operating up there, too."

"Is the autopsy finished?" asked Auburn.

"Cause of death was brain and spinal cord injury. No certainty whether or not he was dead before he fell. Drug screen pending."

Dunbar squirmed in his chair, which, like all the other seats in Savage's office, was of unpadded wood. "So did he just try to knock off the wrong room at the wrong time," he asked, "or did he fall foul of a business rival?"

"If the killer was a guest," observed Auburn, "he could have checked out before the body was even found. How long do you think it would take to interview every guest in that hotel?"

"And how about getting a search warrant for every room in that hotel?" asked Dunbar. "If you remember your constitutional law . . ."

Savage ran a hand through his hair. "Those are the kind of questions I like to file away with the one about which tie I'm going to wear for my funeral," he said. "Cy, I want you to go back over to the hotel and get that printout of all the guests that were checked in as of this time yesterday. Better try to get a list of the hotel staff, too."

"Okay. What about these other activities they've got going on over there—a wedding reception, a jewelry liquidation . . ."

"He had all kinds of jewelry squirreled away in that locker," said Dunbar. "My guys are trying to trace it right now. Is the jewelry for the auction on the premises overnight?"

"You've got me, Lieutenant, but I can—"

"Let's let Cy concentrate on the homicide investigation, Howie," said Savage. "When your guys are through cataloguing all the souvenirs in those suitcases, they can go over to the hotel and see if the auction people are missing anything."

Before returning to the hotel, Auburn went to the forensic lab on the top floor to touch base with Kestrel. The camera had contained nothing but film. Auburn took one look at the print Kestrel had made of the single exposure on the film and started wondering all over again what Mort D. Froid was going to say about the whole proceedings.

The picture was a flash snapshot showing Mrs. Arthur Dwayle, the complaining tenant of Room 709, seated in earnest conversation with a younger but still middle-aged man on a sofa in the lower lounge of the Skyliner Hotel. Ten feet behind them, the man who now lay in the morgue, apparently dressed just as Auburn had last seen him, was doing something behind a chest-high partition, possibly watering or pruning the ornamental foliage that grew along its planter top.

When Auburn arrived back in the hotel lobby at four-fifteen, Travis Marth was still at the counter. Auburn considered showing him the photo but decided against it. Instead, he asked him to ring Room 709.

"I'll see if they're in. If you'll step into the hall there, it'll be the first phone on the left. Wait till it rings."

Arthur Dwayle answered the phone. No, his wife wasn't in. That woman had always been incapable of managing time. Or money. But he loved her dearly.

Auburn hung up, paused to remind Marth about the printout of hotel guests, and stepped next door to the Moreland Building.

He found Ostroff Publishing tucked away in a far corner of the top floor, and Lance Holgarn tucked away in the remotest corner of the suite, a cramped and stuffy office full of books and papers.

"I think we found your camera," announced Auburn. "But we couldn't tell whose it was, because the case is missing. So we went ahead and had the film developed. Is this the picture you took?"

Holgarn swallowed air. "I'm not sure."

"You mean you're not sure whether or not I'm going to arrest you if you admit taking the picture. I need some answers, Mr. Holgarn. Who are these people, and what do they mean to you? Start with the man at the back."

"I don't know his name." He took out a big cotton handkerchief that was less than dazzlingly white and mopped his face and under his chin. "I swear I never knew his name. I never even knew what he looked like until yesterday."

"Then why did you take his picture, and then throw away the camera and claim it was stolen?"

"I didn't throw away the camera. He stole it. Or somebody working with him."

Auburn was losing patience. That air-conditioning equipment on the roof should have been turned on a week ago, and there was nowhere to sit in Holgarn's office except behind the desk. Standing up to interview somebody who was sitting down always made him feel like a teenager applying for a summer job.

"How about making some sense, Mr. Holgarn? I'm investigating a murder. If you can't give me some straight answers right here and now, we'll take a walk over to headquarters and—"

Holgarn eyed the photograph lying on his desk. "Was he the one that . . ."

"You tell me."

"Okay." He pulled himself together and made a decision. "First of all, I didn't kill anybody. A couple of years ago a man phoned me here and told me he knew something that could get me fired and maybe worse. He said he'd keep quiet if I'd put ten twenty-dollar bills in an envelope and leave it in the planter in the lower lounge at the hotel at seven o'clock the next morning. Which I did."

"What did he have on you?"

"I don't have to tell you that." On this point, at least, Holgarn was quite positive, as if the stacks and bundles of law reports with which his office was lined constituted a bulwark of case law behind which he felt invulnerable.

"How much have you paid him since then?"

"A couple thousand. Every few months he'd call again. This last time, I decided to hide out down there and catch him on film when he came to get the cash."

"And?"

"And I did. He couldn't have seen me when I shot the picture, but I'm sure he noticed the flash. He must have trailed me to the dining room and stolen the camera practically out from under my nose while I was eating breakfast."

"Who are the other people in the picture?"

Holgarn studied the picture briefly and shrugged. "No clue."

"And you don't know who was blackmailing you, either? Couldn't you guess who it was, from what he knew about you?"

"No, sir."

"How did he sound on the phone? Foreign accent?"

"Yes, foreign. Maybe Indian. I don't mean—"

"I know. Where were you last night?"

"Home."

"Can you prove it?"

"Sure, if I have to. Where's my camera?"

"At headquarters. You'll get it back eventually if you can identify it."

Auburn left Holgarn his card and returned to the hotel lobby.

"Don't you ever eat or sleep?" he asked Marth.

"Sure, on the second Tuesday of each month. I've got your printout." He handed Auburn several sheets of computer paper.

"Thanks. This ought to help. Any chance I could also get a list of the people working in the hotel?"

"Regular employees of Dorina, yes. Extra banquet servers and contract workers—you'd have to do your own digging."

"The regular payroll will do for a start. What can you tell me about this jewelry auction you've got going on downstairs?"

"Been going on all week." He picked up a brochure from a stack lying on the counter and handed it to Auburn. "You can have all of these you want. Today was the last day. I hope. They had their own security, but all those sparklers made me nervous."

"I can imagine. Since you haven't got a house detective."

"Excuse me, were you looking for me?" The voice was like that of an elderly woman imitating a child of five. "I'm Grace Dwayle."

"Yes, ma'am. Got a minute?" He put the brochure in his pocket and led her to a quiet corner of the lobby.

Seen up close, she had a dowdy and dissipated look. Auburn was reminded of the ancient gag line, "Her eyes were as red as rubies; her pearls looked like teeth." Her clothes would have seemed funky on a woman half her age. Her perfume smelled like candy—the kind you buy in a five-pound bag around Easter for ninety-nine cents.

"I talked to your husband earlier today. I understand you had a noisy night."

"Did we ever?" She rolled her eyes in the direction of the reception desk, as if Travis Marth had assigned them to the room beside the vending machines with malice aforethought.

"Did you hear anything going on out in the hall?"

"That man jumping out the window, you mean? No, we didn't hear any of that. But the window was open this morning. Arthur closed it."

He handed her the picture that Holgarn had taken. "What can you tell me about those people in the picture with you?" he asked.

She took one look at the picture and glowered. "Hey, are you really the heat, or are you a private eye? That brain-dead bag of bones I'm married to—"

"I'm the heat, ma'am." He showed identification. "And I'm investigating the murder of the gentleman at the back of the picture."

"You're not wearing a ring." Now she was five again. "Are you married?"

"Not so far."

"Well, if you were, don't you think, once in a while, you might want to have a little conversation or do a little business that you wouldn't want your wife to know about?"

"I might."

"Well, then."

"Well what?"

"Yesterday I met somebody downstairs that I knew a long time ago. Somebody Arthur doesn't know about. We sat down to talk for a minute, and the next thing we knew, here comes this busybody hanging around, pruning the plants or something, before eight o'clock in the morning—"

"The man at the back of the picture?"

"Yes. And then on top of that, some nitwit walks in with a camera and takes a picture of us sitting there."

"Did you know him? The nitwit, I mean."

"No. But he was just too much. I followed him to the dining room and grabbed his camera and threw it in the trash."

"He could prosecute you for that."

"He'd have to prove I did it first. It would be your word against mine. And obviously somebody found the camera, because they developed the picture."

"What's the name of the man you were talking to?"

"You know, I've been trying to remember that . . ."

"I thought you said you knew him."

"That was a long time ago."

"Is he staying in the hotel?"

"I really couldn't say. You don't suppose I could have that picture, do you? As a souvenir?"

"I think I'll hold on to it for a while. Maybe I can find somebody else who knows the man's name."

Their parting was distinctly unfriendly.

As he walked back to headquarters, he tried to make some sense out of the data he had so far. The murdered man was a professional thief who periodically hit the Skyliner Dorina Hotel. His thieving yielded portable articles of considerable value but probably not much cash.

Holgarn worked next door and sometimes breakfasted at the hotel. Somehow the thief learned something to Holgarn's discredit and decided to pick up some pocket money at no risk to himself. His victim didn't know his identity. Even if he were apprehended collecting a payoff, he could claim he'd found it by accident.

After reporting to Savage, Auburn sat down at his desk with some preliminary background material from Records, a report from Kestrel, and the printout of hotel guests. Chaz Billings and the Dwayles had clean slates. However, there didn't seem to be any such organization as the American Society of Pen and Pencil Collectors, much less an eastern division of it, and the Chamber of Commerce had no information on any such convention in the area. Although Holgarn had no criminal convictions, he'd completed ten counseling sessions for spousal abuse seven years earlier, in compliance with a court order. If the dead blackmailer knew something worse than that about him, it hadn't yet come to the attention of the authorities.

The uniform worn by the dead man had been manufactured in California, but the firm had outlets nationwide. The dust on it matched the dust from the window sill on the seventh floor of the hotel. Whoever had moved the table away from that window had been wearing gloves of leather or an excellent imitation.

Auburn turned his attention to the printout of yesterday's census at the Skyliner Dorina. Almost his first glance turned up an oddity. The names of the Dwayles didn't appear. Instead, Room 709 was booked in the name of Guenther Rainz, and so was a suite on the floor above. The name seemed familiar.

From his pocket Auburn pulled the brochure about the jewelry auction that had been going on all week at the hotel and examined it carefully for the first time. Not only was Guenther Rainz the name of the auctioneer, it was evident from his picture that he was the man Grace Dwayle had been talking to when Holgarn snapped his shutter.

The auction brochures had been printed on blanks supplied by the Skyliner Dorina. As Auburn ran his eye over the list of in-house phone numbers on the back, his ideas suddenly began to crystallize. He picked up his desk phone and dialed room service.

It was nearly 5:30 when he made yet another trip on foot to the hotel. The tide of vehicular and pedestrian traffic was in full flood as people going home from work jostled and eddied around people coming downtown for early dinner and theater dates.

No one was behind the reception desk as he crossed the lobby. The piano player looked tired.

His knock on the door of Room 701 interrupted Chaz Billings's dinner. Auburn urged his host to continue with his meal and, without asking for permission, sat down in the armchair at the foot of the bed.

"Since I talked to you this morning, Mr. Billings, it's been confirmed that the man whose body was found on the roof next door did go through the window out here in the hall. And that a table that's supposed to be in front of the window was moved out of the way by somebody wearing leather gloves."

Billings shook his head as if to express shock and disapproval that such evil could exist in the world. "Have you got any leads so far?"

"One or two. Most travelers don't carry leather gloves around with them at this time of year. But you probably do, for those times when you have to propel your chair by hand—for example, when you don't want to use the motor because of the noise it makes."

"It's not that noisy." As if to demonstrate the point, Billings touched the controls and rolled back in a tight arc from the table where he was eating so that he faced Auburn.

"The dead man was a professional criminal," Auburn continued, "and he seems to have had a professional's knack for spotting other people's criminal operations, and a flair for exploiting them to his own advantage. By all indications, he was killed in one of the rooms on this level, to which he'd gained access by posing as a waiter.

"This morning there were two trays on the floor outside your

room, Mr. Billings. But according to room service, they only brought you one last night. The dead man brought the other one with him, didn't he?"

Billings studied him in silence.

"Of course," continued Auburn, "you're going to tell me it was self-defense, but you have the right to remain silent—"

With a touch of his hand on the joystick, Billings sent the wheelchair hurtling straight at Auburn, closing the distance between them in less than a second. Auburn's ankles were pinned firmly and painfully against the front of his chair and his arms were so encumbered that it was virtually impossible for him to draw his weapon.

Billings picked up an order book with a heavy aluminum case and swung it at his head with obvious homicidal intent. At the crucial moment Auburn's pager went off, insistently audible above the whine of the wheelchair motor and the growl of its straining clutch. This distracted his assailant just enough that Auburn was able to duck the blow, but he knew the next time that metal case struck it would probably inflict a wound just like the one the dead man had sustained before he went through the window.

While talking with Billings moments before, he'd automatically noted the disposition of the controls on the arms of the wheelchair. The joystick was on the operator's right, a mechanical brake on the left. Below and in front of the joystick, within a couple of inches of Auburn's trapped left hand, was a heavy-duty toggle switch.

Even as he prepared to dodge another swing of the metal case, he threw the switch and strained against the bar that imprisoned his legs. The whine of the motor died and the chair rolled back just sufficiently for Auburn to free his right hand and unholster his service revolver. The second blow never fell, but Billings narrowly escaped being shot through the chest at point-blank range by a man who was angry and in pain.

Auburn used Billings's phone to answer his page.

"Did you ever get any dinner, Cy?" was the first thing Savage asked.

"I'm looking at some dessert right now," Auburn replied truthfully.

"I don't know how much this is going to help," said Savage, "but the dead man was an illegal alien named Amin Rajeev Sirkash. Back in the seventies he came to the States as an exchange student and got a degree in political science. Four years ago he came back with a political delegation as an interpreter, and just vanished into the underbrush."

"And became a thief, smuggler, and blackmailer," said Auburn. "He should have stopped short of armed robbery."

When Savage arrived at Room 701 with a warrant and two uniformed officers, he found Billings, one wrist handcuffed to the

spokes of his wheelchair, watching in mute rage while Auburn finished the dinner he'd ordered for himself from room service.

They discovered nothing incriminating among Billings's effects until they turned their attention to the wheelchair. On a shelf behind the motor, two storage batteries were perched side by side, each conspicuously labeled "Explosion Hazard—Wear Eye Protection" in English, Spanish, and French. The switch Auburn had thrown was supposed to divert the motor feed from one battery to the other.

When they investigated the battery that had no juice, they found it to be a dummy crammed with precious stones, mostly unmounted. They also found the knife that Sirkash had used when, grossly underestimating the danger of such an enterprise, he had tried to rob Billings.

Questioned as to whether his presence in the hotel had any connection with the jewel auction going on there, Billings preserved a stolid silence. Auburn wasn't altogether disappointed that Lieutenant Dunbar was going to have to explore that avenue.

Down in the lobby, evening had brought a new swirl and throb of activity, and a young woman in a lavender gown had taken over at the piano. The indefatigable Marth was back at his post. Scarcely a head was turned as a uniformed officer pushed Billings's wheelchair to the desk and Savage checked him out of the hotel.

As he made his way around the fountain pool, Auburn ran into the Dwayles.

"You can keep your old picture now," said Grace. "I got fired." Her pouting demeanor was obviously put on, her words meant to tease and mystify.

Auburn asked the expected question.

"You know what a shill is, don't you?" she countered. "Arthur and I used to have a grocery store. Since we retired, things get dull and the kitty gets hungry. Sometimes I do a little work for Guenther Rainz."

"The guy in the picture with you. The guy you used to know."

"You're a bright boy. I go to auctions and act like some dotty old dowager with more money than I know what to do with. When things aren't moving, he tips me the wink and I start bidding. By the time the auction's over, all the other bidders in the room hate my guts, but if they ever dreamed Guenther and I were in cahoots, they'd string us both up on the spot.

"He's the one that made me go after that camera and ditch it. And when I told him you got the picture anyway, he gave me my walking papers."

Auburn didn't care to explain the picture to Savage. And he cringed at the thought of the mischief this formidable and amoral harpy might get into if deprived of her relatively harmless role as a booster at jewelry auctions.

He gave her the picture. ●

SEESAW

by Eileen Dewhurst

It's Liverpool gentlemen, you know, dear, and Manchester men. That was the statement my silly, shallow aunt Marcia used to trot out at some stage of my every visit, always with the same pseudo-apologetic little giggle. My mother thought it had been a catchphrase circulating the snootier Liverpool suburbs at the end of the war, but by the time I was old enough to visit Aunt Marcia on my own it was anything but true: With the decline of the Atlantic shipping trade Liverpool had lost its cachet and no longer figured among the leading cities of Britain.

Manchester did, though, and still does. A thriving, lively city giving its name to the country's second airport. My hometown. It was because I was a Manchester girl that Aunt Marcia brought out her catchphrase.

Whenever she did, her daughter Elaine would nod approvingly, enjoying an extra opportunity to feel superior to her Mancunian cousin. I hated those visits to Liverpool, but my mother always insisted I make them. Although we lived comfortably, she felt that her sister had made a better marriage than she had and wanted me to benefit from the influence of what she saw as a more elegant lifestyle.

It wasn't that Aunt Marcia and Elaine were unkind to me, apart from that one little dig. It was just that their self-assurance made me feel even more awkward than I usually did

And I *was* awkward. I don't deny it. Awkward and clumsy and very, very shy. The contrast between my cousin and myself was really painful. I can see us now, reflected side by side over the

A Liverpudlian who took a degree at Oxford and then worked as a journalist for a time, Eileen Dewhurst debuted as a novelist in the mid seventies. She is the author of nineteen books, the latest, *No Love Lost,* published by Severn House in April of this year. When she is not writing, Ms. Dewhurst says, she enjoys solving cryptic crossword puzzles and drawing and painting cats.

years in a succession of cinema, theatre, and restaurant cloakroom mirrors: Elaine's hair falling wavy and graceful and never needing a comb; mine, as I tugged at it, sprouting in unbecoming tufts round a face with rosily shining nose and cheeks however hard I scrubbed them with powder. Elaine had a creamy matt complexion that never needed any powder at all. . . .

I had one best friend at my grammar school, as shy and gauche as myself. Elaine belonged to a set of laughing, confident girls at the school where she boarded. Sometimes I coincided with one or more of them on my visits to Liverpool, and they seemed to point up my inadequacies simply by being there.

But that was then, and now—I shall never get over the surprise of it—now Elaine needs me. Needs me morning, noon, and night and waits anxiously on my coming. . . .

Elaine's youth continued on its gilded way. In her twenty-first year she made a very good marriage to a young man already coining it in the City, and went to live in his Chelsea flat. With the first baby on the way, she and Robin moved round the corner to the chic little house where Stephen was born. Two years after Stephen there came Carol. One of each. She even managed that.

I, meanwhile, trained as a nurse in Manchester, and had my fiancé walk out on me. He wasn't much cop and I soon got over him, but I didn't get over being celibate—I've a big libido and no sexual bravado, which is a difficult combination. But I threw myself into my work and discovered quite soon that I was an exceptionally good nurse. I worked my way to the top in hospitals, first in Manchester and later in London, and then decided to go freelance. I had excellent references and it was easy to get on the books of a prestigious agency. The work is very well paid.

And now when I look in the mirror (I've just done so) I see a fine figure of a woman, statuesque and high-busted, with well-defined features and cleverly cut red-brown hair that falls back into place even in a rain-lashed gale. Though I say it myself, I look good in uniform. (Some of my male agency clients have wanted me to pretend not to be a real nurse, but I'm only into the straight and they soon learn how a real nurse can make them regret such impertinence.) So, social confidence at last, as well.

Once I'd left school and could do as I pleased, I never visited Aunt Marcia again. Elaine and I, though—I can't think why—continued to exchange Christmas cards. The year I went to London I sent mine early with a change-of-address slip, so that she could send hers to the right place. With it she enclosed a note in her turn, saying that now I was so close we really must meet. Neither of us did anything about it.

And then, ten years or so later, I heard from Robin. By letter, telling me Elaine had had a stroke so severe it had left her unable

to move anything but her hands and her head. She could stutter out a few words, and write things down when she wanted to be fluent, and from her comments on books and radio and TV it was clear she could still take them in. But she could do nothing for herself, and although he saw to her needs when he was at home, on weekdays he was at work and there were, of course, other necessities requiring professional help. He knew I was now working as a freelance, and he wondered if there was any chance of my being willing to look after Elaine, taking my place in the family to which I belonged, at least for the time it took him to find the right long-term replacement for the string of unsatisfactory nurses he had been forced to dismiss.

I felt deep shock when I read Robin's letter, remembering that beautiful, quicksilver girl, and I tried not to admit to the sense of satisfaction that came with it, a sort of *The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away* feeling that glowed through me as sensually as sexual release. (I always tried not to admit to my frustration at the absence of *that.)*

At first I thought that uncomfortable mixed reaction was all Robin's letter had given me, but as I turned it over in my mind during the following few days I discovered that his proposition appealed to me. As he himself had pointed out, I could take the job on a temporary basis, and if it didn't work out I could leave. I had a nice little flat by then in Maida Vale, but if the job suited me I could let it. By the end of the week it seemed absurd not to give the idea a try, and I replied—also by letter—that I would be pleased to talk it over.

This time Robin telephoned me, incoherent with gratitude.

I was shocked all over again when I saw Elaine, my imagination not having prepared me for the transformation of that lovely, lively girl into the gaunt creature slumped in a chair, hair lank and straight, face and figure inert but for the pleading eyes and fluttering hands. By poignant contrast, these seemed even more beautiful than I had remembered them, and for a few moments the sense of satisfaction deserted me and there were tears in my eyes. Robin saw them and fervently renewed his pleas, adding that he was, of course, offering full board and an excellent salary.

I accepted. And saw something in Elaine's huge eyes that I couldn't interpret, but which might have been fear. I tried not to feel gratified.

I've been here now for two years, and I still don't know how she feels about having me permanently around. I think often about the contrast between past and present—I'm doing it now—but does she? If she does, it will be far less pleasant for her than it is for me. Whatever, I have no intention of leaving. I had enough of crises, panics, and difficult colleagues in my hospital jobs for one

lifetime, and I'm enjoying the peace and security here, and the being absolutely in charge.

At first I was wary of the son and the daughter, but I soon realized this was unnecessary. Stephen and Carol simply do not want to know. Stephen has his own place and is already following in his father's Midas footsteps; he finds it difficult now to be with the mother he used to treat like a fun elder sister, and is only too ready to accept my conscience-soothing reassurance that she understands and would hate him to be distressed. Carol is recently married and has settled in Edinburgh. Enough said.

So life is good, and can, I think, only get better.

I had a sad duty, though, this morning: I had to tell Elaine that her husband has cleared out. Bag and baggage. That he's taken everything he owns from the bedroom they used to share (Elaine, now, is confined to the best and largest of the downstairs rooms), and hasn't left a forwarding address.

I was afraid that the shock might carry her off—although it occurred to me at the same time that as she has so little quality of life that could really be for the best. The only clues I have to her state of mind are her hands and her eyes and they went into overdrive, her eyes widening and swivelling and her poor hands beating at the air. If I don't want to feel uncomfortably sorry for Elaine I have to look away from her hands. But this morning, after delivering such devastating news, I took a deep breath, seized one of them in both of mine, and started to stroke it.

I was surprised at the force with which she pulled it away, but I could sense the anger she was unable to express, and I suppose it gave her strength. She shook her head from side to side and kept saying, "No," over and over. Eventually she managed, "Not Robin."

I didn't try touching her again, but I drew up a chair and sat down beside her. "I think it would be a good idea," I told her, "not to say anything to visitors. And it isn't as though you have so many these days, is it, dear?" That was my long-delayed riposte to *Liverpool gentlemen and Manchester men,* and it cleared me of the last of my rancour. "He's all right," I went on. "Robin's all right, dear. I rang the office and he was there, they put me on to him. We agreed to tell people, for the time being, that he's having a bit of a break from the home scene. He said to tell you how sorry he is that he just can't go on any longer, and that it would have been too painful to say goodbye. Stephen and Carol know his new address, he said, but they've promised to keep it secret. I suspect he may have had a bit of a brainstorm, and needs absolute peace and quiet. At home, I mean—we both know how restful he finds the office. Perhaps he'll come back, dear, when he's over it. But I don't think we should get too excited. Better a pleasant surprise than a disappointment."

I got up then, rather quickly, because she had made a strange sound that I can only describe as a growl. The next minute, though, she was crying, and I handed her my clean handkerchief. "Not to worry, dear," I said as she wiped her eyes. "You'll be all right, I'll see to everything. In fact, I think we'll do very well on our own."

I don't understand. Robin would never leave me. Robin! The mere idea is absurd. Robin loves me so much he suffers as cruelly as I do whenever we're apart. And Muriel has told me he may have left me forever! My beloved, my devoted Robin! His presence is all that has sustained me through this terrible nightmare, kept me warm inside this cage which was once my body. Muriel's words have turned that warmth to ice.

And fear. I am terrified. I am writing the word down now on my pad. Terrified. Terrified. Terrified.

Terrified of Muriel. When she told me Robin had left me she stood too close, as she so often does, invading my small private space. Does it give her a sense of power over me? She knows I can do nothing about it, that I can't move away from her. And she has a lot of old scores to settle.

I'm terrified of a world without Robin. Robin would never choose to leave me, so I know he can have had no choice. And the only reason he would have no choice is if he was dead.

So he must be dead.

And Muriel must have killed him.

I don't know why Muriel would have wanted to kill Robin, he gave her this job she loves and he never interferes with how she does it. Perhaps it's just that she hates men, I can imagine that. Or because she's mad. I can imagine that, too. That's why she terrifies me.

When Robin offered me a mobile phone I wish I'd accepted it. But I didn't want to hear people hanging up on my stutter. I can ask Muriel to get me one, of course, and she'll tell me she'll look into it. And nothing will happen. A mobile phone is the last thing she will want me to have now.

I can talk to a visitor, or Mrs. Mop when she cleans my room, beg them to ring the office. But they'll feel they have to speak to Muriel first, and she'll tell them Robin has just gone away for a well-earned break, touching her forehead and looking significant. And then they'll think I'm the mad one and they'll do nothing.

Oh, Robin my darling, where are you? Are you lying at the bottom of the cellar steps, staring sightlessly at your wine bins? Or has she stuffed you pro tem behind the sacks in the toolshed? Knowing Muriel as I now do, I expect she has already neatly and safely disposed of you.

I cannot bear it. I must—I must!—be released from this cage so that we can be reunited. If I beg Muriel, surely she will oblige? Having killed once, she will have few qualms about killing again. My death, anyway, may already be on her agenda. Which would mean that for once we both want the same thing. I hate my cousin the murderess with a deadly hatred, but my release is in her gift, and hers alone. Next time she comes in to me I will petition her.

"Such an idea!" The nurse bridled indignantly, crumpling the offending piece of paper into a ball and shying it successfully at the waste-paper basket. "Asking me to kill you! Saying I'll find it easy because I've done it before! I've never heard such wicked nonsense, Elaine!" Even when she wasn't angry, Muriel tended to speak in short staccato sentences ending with oral exclamation marks. "And accusing me of killing your husband! I told you, Robin has had enough and just felt he must get away. So if you die it won't bring him back to you. And if he's left you in this life, he's hardly likely to want to see you in another!" Looking into Elaine's eyes, Muriel saw the pain in them and felt a sudden unfamiliar stab of remorse at having spoken so bluntly. But she had to put the poor woman off such a morbid idea. "Well, perhaps I'm wrong," she conceded. "Perhaps you'll be young and strong again in heaven, and then you *will* come back together." She had been talking half facetiously, but for a moment Elaine's eyes had glowed, and her hands had fallen peacefully together in her lap. Muriel felt another unfamiliar sensation—awareness of another person's feelings—and found herself glad that the look of pain had gone; it had made her feel quite uncomfortable.

But when she got up to the big bedroom, her indignation was back in place. Robin was on the two-seater sofa, reading the paper, and she banged down heavily beside him.

"She's just accused me of murdering you, sweetie," she told him. "She probably thinks I've dumped you in the cellar." She suddenly saw the funny side of it and burst out laughing. Muriel's laughter was a back-of-the-gods affair, and Robin clamped his hand across her mouth.

"It's all right," she said, wiping her eyes. "She's under the spare room."

"We can't take any risks."

"You worry too much."

"I do worry. Why does she think you killed me?"

"As if you didn't know!" Playfully she pinched his cheek. "She can't believe you'd ever choose to leave her."

She saw him wince, and heard his faint moan.

"Hey! None of that now!"

"No, no," he assured her, taking hold of her chubby red hand. He

would have to forget about Elaine's hands. And her eyes. . . . "It was just . . . I'm all right. I couldn't have taken another moment." Because he had reached a point where he could no longer bear to look at the remains of his wife. And had been missing for too long a faithful time what Muriel had recently begun to give him. . . .

"That's not all," she was telling him. "She begged me to kill her, too, so that you could be reunited. Said I would know what to use, that I would have access, and that it would be easy for me because I'd done it before. The cheek of it, sweetie!"

"She has to think you killed me," he said, trying not to shudder as the pang went through him. "I should have realized she was bound to. It's the only way she can explain my disappearance. As it is, she must be desperately unhappy."

"Yes . . ." Muriel bounced to her feet, her face flaming.

"What is it?"

"There aren't many situations," she answered, slowly sitting down again, "where it's in one's gift to please all parties."

"I don't—"

"She wants to die. We'd be happier without her."

"For God's sake, Muriel—"

"So far as she's concerned, I'm guilty of murder already. And if she ever finds out about you and me—and she will find out, one way or another, eventually—it'll be worse for her than death."

"Yes . . ."

"It'll be a kindness," Muriel said decisively. "Nobody should live the way she has to. And she's *asked* me, Robin, it's what she *wants*. She's right about one thing, too, sweetie. I may not have done it before, but I do know what to use and how to get hold of it. There'll be no danger. The doctor said she could go any time."

"Oh my God, yes." He could not escape her logic.

"I said this setup would work, and it's working. Trust me again now."

"I will, my Venus." He would never love her, but he adored her self-confidence.

"So why not go down for a bottle of champagne, and we can toast our humanitarian enterprise?"

"But isn't that a bit—"

"It's what we all want, my darling. You, me, and Elaine. That's all you have to think of."

After a kiss that augured well for the later part of the evening, Robin went out onto the landing and tiptoed down the stairs. As he crept past his wife's room he heard weeping, and it was a compassionate and a righteous man who opened his cellar door. ●

Art by Laurie Harden

A Case for Judge and Jury

by Amy Myers

"Tom Wasp," roared Billy Buckler, "that's a good clean sweep, that is." Ned—he's my apprentice—had just taken the tuggy cloth away, and we looked up the flue approvingly. My old Smart's sweeping machine still does a grand job. "What say you to a mutton chop and a pint of our best ale?"

I'd have been happier to say yes to our usual threepence, but Billy's tavern isn't a place where one should begin a discussion of that sort. You may know of the Old Ivy, in Ivy Lane off London's Strand. It leads to the Ivy steps on the river Thames, where the halfpenny steamboats moor. It is a dark narrow place, much dignified by the name "lane," and the tavern is as full of villains as Wapping's Paddy Goose. But business is business, and Ned and I treat Billy's chimney with as much respect as were the queen to invite us to sweep the flues of Buckingham Palace.

Billy beamed, and all fifteen stone of him wobbled in his pleasure at our acceptance. "There's rare entertainment tonight, lads: a Judge and Jury show."

I noticed that despite the smile, his face was sweating and wondered what troubled him. I knew what troubled me. Today's Judge and Jury clubs in the 1860s aren't what they were twenty years ago, or even five years ago when the famous so-called "Baron" Nicholson brought his entertainment to the Coal Hole tavern in Fountain Court, not a stone's throw away from here. As you know, these "clubs" exist for the reenactment of the latest scandalous cases, usually of murder, where the whole audience is the jury and every detail an excuse for a bawdy joke. No ladies used to be admitted, of course, though as the standard declined and more custom was needed, ladies were allowed in afterwards to view the Poses Plastiques—only they aren't usually ladies, and the spectacle of classical poses is not usually educational.

Amy Myers currently lives in Kent, where she was born, but she spent a number of years in Paris, and it was there she got the idea for her best-known character, Victorian chef detective Auguste Didier. This time a different series character, Tom Wasp, Victorian chimney sweep, takes the stage. Wasp has so far appeared only in short stories; in the works, though, is a full-length Wasp novel. A collection of Myers short stories, *Murder, 'Orrible Murder*, is also due soon.

"What's the case?" I asked Billy cautiously. You might wonder why I didn't object on Ned's behalf, he being of tender years. Ned don't climb flues, but he climbs the dirty flue of life each day. Fortunately he leaves the filth around him and always comes out into the light clean.

Billy Buckler was sweating even harder now. "Kitty Robinson," he said, "my serving girl. Pulled out of the river last week. Suicide, so they say. But who's to blame for that, eh?"

"Now that, Billy, I'm sore distressed to learn." I meant it. Kitty had seemed a pretty, modest sort of girl, or had been when she arrived up from foreign parts. Dorset, she'd said. She'd always give me a smile and Ned a bit of pie, so we were both her loyal servants.

"She's on my conscience," Billy said heavily.

"Why, Billy?" It was news to me that Billy had one. His face would still be beaming at you if he rammed a knife in your gullet.

"You'll find out this evening, Tom Wasp."

We sat, Ned and I, on a small bench separated from most of the audience. We have that smell that is natural to us, but which can

give offence to others, even though I bathe once a month. Ned doesn't, but he has his reasons, and he's out in the Good Lord's rain often enough to make him sweet even though his face is grimed with soot.

Mind you, the audience in the Ivy's cellar entertainment room was smelly enough for our stench not to be noticed. The steaming bodies of gentlemen intent on a good night out, each clutching his beer, in a stuffy, smoky room, indicated a noisy evening ahead. All manner of men were there, working men, city clerks, middle-aged tradesmen who couldn't face their homes, and the occasional masher who fancied an evening living dangerously.

"Gentlemen," roared Billy promptly at eight o'clock, resplendent in dishcloth wig and old red petticoat cloak. "Pray silence." So he was playing the judge. This seemed odd to me, since wit was not one of his attributes. He occasionally obliged his clientele with a comic song, and this—though I had not heard of such an ingredient in a Judge and Jury show before—was one of those occasions. Instead of an opening speech, his deep voice rang out with:

She was poor but she was honest,
Victim of a rich man's game.
First he loved her, then he left her,
And she lost her honest name.

So this must be the charge against a so far nameless villain. The story of this old song was that of Kitty Robinson, Billy then told us jurymen. Unusual though it was to have a singing judge and musical charge, the audience promptly bawled out the rest of the song and the chorus, adding a lot of shouted bawdy jokes along the way.

"I blame myself," cried this most unusual judge, tears pouring down his cheeks. "It was me persuaded my poor Kitty to oblige me by taking part in the Poses Plastiques, thus inflaming the lust and desire that led to her death."

A roar of discussion on lust and desire followed, with many comments on poor Kitty's anatomy. They were already forgetting she was dead, and the respect due to it, though it is true that many might not have known her, and thus be partly excused.

"But," yelled Billy, "there were others that could not see her beauty without wanting it. Was it Kitty's fault for letting herself go to the bad, or was it that of our loyal patron, Lord Pleasaunce, who seduced her to his wicked way?"

A ritual groan of disgust was suddenly broken off as the jury realised that Billy's pudgy finger was pointing directly at one of their number.

His young lordship was well known, chiefly for the amount he could drink and spend in one evening, and I knew he was a regular here. Word must have got around about the subject of the

evening's case if his lordship had come here himself on this particular evening.

"You're the jury, you hear the evidence, and you decide who was guilty," Billy ended in a burst of rhetoric.

From our bench at the rear, I could see the back of Lord Pleasaunce's top hat; it was leaning over as though he were keeling onto his neighbour's shoulder, but it suddenly came upright again, probably as its owner realised what was happening.

The actors in the drama were trooping onto the stage, as elegantly dressed as Billy himself. A weasly faced, elegantly cravatted gent was first to raise his hat. "I'm Lord Pleasaunce," he announced.

"Dammit, you cur, you're not," slurred his real lordship amiably, already in his cups.

I'd seen this weasel before, and knew him to be Lord Pleasaunce's valet. It was one Bertram Wallace, in my view a man whose chimney could never be clean, and who was known to encourage his lordship in his foolish ways.

Then a young coster leapt onto the stage beside him. "I'm honest Jack Evans," he told us, "poor Kitty's grieving sweetheart, who would have wed her were it not for this swine."

I recognised him, too, not as a patron of the Ivy, but as owner of the ginger-beer fountain carried by pony and cart along the Strand each day. Its brass pump handles and mahogany casing make it a handsome sight, though it is rare that I can find a halfpenny to indulge in a glass. Jack is a handsome fellow and goodnatured, so I was grieved for him. He was sweating, too, with the honour of taking the limelight by playing himself.

"And I'm poor Kitty's suffering mother, Hannah," shouted a handsome lady of middle years and uncommon girth.

She was greeted by outrage from the audience. "Out! No women allowed!" By time-honoured tradition, male actors played the roles of the ladies in the case in this reenactment of the dreadful deed and what had led to it.

"Any of you want to take me on?" Hannah—also obviously playing herself—stood akimbo, facing them with grim face. To the man, the audience was quelled to silence.

"Objection overruled," yelled Billy, remembering his job.

"And here's my darling daughter Kitty back from the grave for you to judge her shame," Hannah announced, now victory was hers.

"Kitty" was clad in bonnet and pink gown of great size, which was necessary since it embraced a fully-clothed masculine body beneath it. I particularly admired the large black boots visible even from our far corner.

"I am Kitty," claimed a falsetto voice, "here to show you how I have been wronged."

"How do you like to be wronged again, dearie," yelled the audience promptly. Kitty dropped them a curtsy. Her face, too, was familiar to me, but I could not place it.

We then watched the drama. A sweet six-foot-tall Kitty with posy in hand paid a tearful farewell to her mama and trotted away around the stage. She then reappeared pulling imaginary glasses of beer from a barrel; Honest Jack proceeded to woo her, and put his manly arm around her manly form.

"How about a kiss?" asks one of the audience—only the word wasn't kiss.

"Use your imagination," snarls Jack.

"Did you poke her?" asked Billy vengefully.

"I did not," whips back Honest Jack, "and there's a floorer waiting for the next man that says I did."

"But I did," says "Lord Pleasaunce." Bert Wallace was an actor born, for he seized Kitty in his arms, making various suggestive movements of his hands and body. I wondered how the real Lord Pleasaunce was taking this admission of guilt, but there was no public reprisal from under that smart top hat.

Kitty then starts patting her tummy. "Oh dear," she tells us, "I've been put up the spout."

Hannah comes into her own then. "You tell that lord he's to wed you, luvvie."

"Yes, Mama, I'll tell him tomorrow night. He's taking me to the bal masqué at eleven o'clock."

Now, the bals masqués are little higher than Judge and Jury clubs on the ladder of morality, and they thrive in the nightlife of London. If you haven't been to one, you've surely seen them. You pay your entrance fee and your fourpence for a mask, if you have not the wit to take one with you, or come clad in fancy dress, all for the pleasure of meeting the riffraff of London, such as gentlemen usually seek on the Haymarket. But it is lively, and the music a merry excuse for what the streets cannot permit to be seen.

Bert Wallace then crams on his head a big musketeer's hat with a protruding mask to cover his face, and Kitty sticks a flower in her bosom.

"Oh, how handsome you look, your lordship," Kitty cries as they do a little dance together, looking somewhat odd since Bert is only five foot three and this Kitty six foot or more. Then she pats her tummy and pleads with his lordship. "You must marry me," she informs him.

"Alas, I cannot," says Bert. "I am—" pause for effect—"to wed another."

He walks away, leaving poor Kitty in tears. She casts a hand to

her brow, sways a little, then dashes to the back of the stage where a curtain has a notice pinned to it reading "The River Thames." She pushes it aside, disappears from sight, and screams out a terrible cry for vengeance.

"Gad, Wallace," yelled Lord Pleasaunce from the audience, distinctly slurred now. "Not bad at all. Nice young filly, that Kitty."

"Time for the trial." Billy thumps his "bench" with one great fist. "Tom Wasp, I need you up here."

What was this? It was unwelcome, whatever it was, but no one says no to Billy, especially a chimney sweep of five foot with bowed legs. "You're prosecuting Lord Pleasaunce," says Billy. "Jem Wiggs has let me down. Bert Wallace here will defend his master, and you can prosecute him."

This was promotion in a big way, but an unwelcome one. The audience seemed as disgusted as I was, since a chimney sweep is poor value for money, and they jeered me to inform me of their opinion. Sweeps are not known for their comic wit, nor even for knowledge of the laws of our country. What concerned me more was that Lord Pleasaunce would no doubt take against my efforts to prosecute him, even if in jest. But was it jest? Billy's Judge and Jury case seemed to be a personal crusade against his lordship, and I was to be its instrument. I was not at all eager to vilify the gentleman whom I was to accuse of seducing poor Kitty Robinson.

A strange thing then happened. The weight of a heavy boot suddenly landed on my foot. My own boot being of far inferior quality, I felt it keenly and turned indignantly to find myself face to chest with "Kitty." Only then did I recognise him. It was young Constable Peters, whom I had met when investigating the drowning of another poor lady.

"Do it for Kitty's sake," he trilled falsetto at me as I stood amazed at this latest shock. His presence could be no accident, but since when did the Metropolitan Police investigate charges of seduction?

I took his point, however. So there I was, a player in this strangest of plays.

In my trade, I am accustomed to flues going off at unexpected angles from the main chimney, and am used to working out how each one may be tackled. This should be no different. I guessed the reason for the constable's presence, and it wasn't the moral issue of Billy's song—it's the rich that gets the pleasure, the poor that gets the blame. Billy's wink at me implied he was in the know, and I realised that I had been purposely summoned to clean more chimneys than that keeping our mutton chops warm.

I was given a dishcloth of my own to wear, which, with my blackened face beneath, suited me well, Ned told me later. Bert, now in his new role of counsel to Lord Pleasaunce, donned a dishcloth,

too, and Kitty, Hannah, and Jack retired to the side of the stage in case we had need of them.

I had no idea where to begin, so I decided to interrogate the corpse.

"I call Kitty, my lord."

There was loud discussion as to whether a corpse could give evidence about its own death, especially from Pleasaunce himself, who stood up in the audience—supported by his neighbours—to challenge me. Thinking quickly, I pointed out that Kitty had already given evidence in her own defence during the drama.

Billy crowed his approval. "Well done, Tom Wasp."

Flushed with success, I proceeded. "Who was the father of your baby?" I asked the constable.

"He was." Kitty pointed at his lordship.

"Objection." Bert Wallace was on his feet. "Not proved. I say it was Honest Jack here."

"No, I never," Jack shouted, rushing over to give him a clip on the ear. "I could never get close enough. I work all day with the ginger-beer fountain, and by the time I got back at night Kitty was working here. What's more, she slept in, and Billy wouldn't let me past the door to the living quarters."

"Is that true, Billy?" I wasn't sure if judges could give evidence.

"True enough," Billy said mournfully. "How was I to know his lordship took her to those dens of iniquity?"

I looked at Hannah in case she wanted to add anything, but she was blowing her nose on her scarf so I went on to my next point, of which I was most proud, having acquired this knowledge only recently from a Thames boatman I got talking to.

"Was there froth in your air passages when you were cut open on the slab, Kitty?"

"From my beer?" asks Billy, taking this as an insult to both of them. "She never touched a drop."

"It weren't from my ginger beer," Jack yelled equally angrily. "I was out of it the day she died."

"Not that kind of froth," I says soberly, seeing from Kitty's nod that I was on the right track. "The froth means she was alive when she went in the water, like a suicide would be."

"There was no froth," Kitty says in his falsetto, highly pleased with me. "I was dead already."

"So it is true to say," I paused for my big moment, "you were *murdered*."

"I was, I was," Kitty replied. "But I don't know who did it. I was grabbed from behind."

Well, there was uproar then, all right. Ned was standing on a bench cheering my endeavours, as were most of the audience, who

saw the show taking a rare upturn. Even the judge was cheering. Only Lord Pleasaunce wasn't.

"What's all this about?" The drink was confusing him, but not so much that he didn't see the risk here to himself.

"You're being accused of murder, your lordship," said his counsel brightly.

"Objection," yelled Billy the judge. "No one's accused him. The murderer could have been anyone. Honest Jack, for example."

Jack suddenly got very pale and pointed at Hannah. "Could as well have been her. She was here all evening."

"Whatdyer mean?" Her face went as black as mine. "Why would I want to murder my own lovely daughter?"

"You came up from Dorset when she knew she was expecting," Jack cried. "She told me she was sending you money. I thought it was what she earned, being simple, but it was what that lord there gave her. You wanted to make sure she got rid of the baby so the money could go on."

"Just like the song," I put in. *"Drinking champagne what she sends 'em / But they never can forgive."*

"We were together all evening, Jack. Remember?" Hannah snarled. "I don't like you, but I can't see you hang."

This word had an interesting effect on these actors as they realised this could get very nasty for them—and they probably didn't even have the privilege of knowing Constable Peters was present.

Jack calmed down very suddenly. "That's what I mean. You had no cause to murder her, Hannah, nor had I, and we was together anyway."

"Where?" I asked quickly. "Kitty went with his lordship to the bal masqué."

"In Jack's lodgings," Hannah said. "You're a mean bloke, Billy. You wouldn't let me stay with Kitty, so I stayed with Jack."

By this time the full extent of his danger had worked its way through to Lord Pleasaunce's brain.

"I," he shouted, "shall defend *myself.* Out of my way, Wallace!" He staggered up onto the stage, gave his defence lawyer a hefty push, seized his dishcloth, and swayed to and fro, fixing the audience with an inimical glare. Then he remembered it was his jury so he changed it to a weak grin.

"I'll tell you what happened that night," he says, "but first, Kitty—" he jabbed the constable in the bosom of his pink gown—"you weren't an innocent virgin. Couldn't have been. You were in the Poses Plastiques. Would any virtuous girl appear there?"

Billy groaned. "I persuaded her, but she was virtuous as God is my witness."

"Ah," says his lordship, displaying the kind of intelligence that

comes from aristocratic schooling, "but I couldn't know that, could I? I was entitled to think she was after fun. Does anyone here think otherwise?"

The audience cried with one accord: "No."

"I do," yells the judge, but I had to ignore this illegal intervention, even though it was helpful to my role as prosecutor.

"What happened was this." Lord Pleasaunce broke off as a hiccup intervened, then tried again. "Kitty was all too willing to oblige me, and we had many sweet trysts."

"You forced her," interrupted Jack vengefully.

"What, every time?" asks his lordship, and the audience showed its mirth.

"So," his lordship continues, encouraged, "we went to the bal masqué and she told me she was expecting and would I marry her. I could not, I told her. Unfortunately."

"Did you tell her you were engaged to a nice young lady?" Jack sneered. "You double-crossing cur."

Cheers from the audience and a few bawdy comments.

His lordship ignored him. "I gave her money, and I left her. What more could I do? The last I saw of her, she was approaching someone else on the dance floor. No shy violet, alas."

"Threatening to tell your young lady, was she?" Jack choked. "Is that why you killed her? You took her down to the Thames for a quiet talk, garrotted her, and threw her in."

The way this was going, my services were hardly needed.

His lordship suddenly became vicious. "It was you did that. You must have followed us. Now I come to think of it, it must have been you she was going to talk to on the dance floor. You had a Mr. Punch mask on."

"Tell them about his nasty temper, my lord," shouted Bert from the audience.

His lordship did. "Thank you, Wallace. This is no honest Jack, gentlemen. This is a vengeful, jealous man."

"I loved her," Jack cried.

"I know," says his lordship triumphantly, "so there was no need for me to murder her because she said she could always marry you. She laughed and said you were the kind of fool who believed her when she told you she wanted to stay a virgin until after the bells had rung."

Quick as a flash I entered the ring again. "Wouldn't Jack have been a mite surprised when a baby turned up much too early?" This was too much for the aristocratic intelligence, and I had to explain. "She would have wanted to sleep with Jack if you, your lordship, turned her away, so as to have an alternative father for the baby in good time. Especially if Jack does have a nasty temper.

Your lordship, you must be lying about what Kitty said, or when she said it."

I was doing very well, I told myself proudly. Jack could prove he was elsewhere when poor Kitty was being murdered, and Lord Pleasaunce had incriminated himself by lying.

I opened my mouth for my closing speech and then shut it again, as his lordship came in first.

"I demand," he shouted, "to cross-examine Mrs. Hannah Robinson, Kitty's mother."

Up she jumped, and I couldn't think of any objection to this, so had to let it be.

"Tell me, Mrs. Robinson," milord said, "were you at the pub that evening watching the Poses Plastiques?"

"I was. Not taking part, of course," she said modestly, in order that every man present might have a vision of Hannah's sturdy body in classical pose and non-dress.

"When did you leave?"

"At the end, your lordship." Getting muddled, she curtsied. "About eleven o'clock, when you and Kitty left."

"You then went home with Jack Evans?"

"I did, and stayed there."

"Suppose he crept out again afterwards?"

"There's only one door to the outside, your lordship, your worship—" this time she threw a pleading look at the judge—"and I was sleeping by it." She looked as innocent as a three-card trickster. "We had a glass of ginger beer, consoled each other for Kitty going off with his lordship, being quite sure—he being the gentleman he is—that he would marry her, and then we went to bed. Separately," she added virtuously.

Everything was now clear to me. My new profession was suiting me well. But what was I to do? Was I here for justice or to accuse Lord Pleasaunce? I was in a pretty pickle if the latter took priority, so I decided justice should have my marker.

"You're lying, Mrs. Robinson," I declared grandly, just as though I were a real barrister-at-law and not a chimney sweep. "There *was* no ginger beer that day. Mr. Evans told us that earlier."

Hannah Robinson promptly collapsed in tears, staggering around to clutch the red cloak of the judge. "Oh, forgive me, Your Honour. As God is my witness, he made me do it. He made me tell a lie."

The jury was entranced, eagerly waiting to find out whether the "he" was his lordship, Jack Evans, or God himself. The betting against Lord Pleasaunce trebled.

Then all became clear. "Jack went after them," Hannah sobbed. "He came back late drunk and talking wildly, face as black as thunder. 'Don't you say nothing,' he said."

"I didn't," yelled Jack.

The jury didn't believe him and the betting swung the other way.

"Silence," said Kitty's corpse, taking a stand at last. The corpse whipped off his pink dress to reveal a pigman's uniform.

Uproar again. Half the audience promptly scrambled for the door and the other half was threatening to kill the judge for exposing them to the scum of the Metropolitan Police Force.

"Free beer," yelled Billy, and suddenly all was quiet.

"This isn't about anything save Kitty Robinson," Constable Peters informed them. "I'll have the rest of you villains fair and square some other time, but tonight is Kitty's."

This speech gave Jack time to consider his own defence. "All right," he says, "I was at home, but the old hag wasn't. I knew where she was all right. Tucked up in Bert Wallace's bed, drinking gin, courtesy of his lordship's money. He paid her off to keep quiet about Kitty."

The audience took a time to absorb this new twist and so did I, but when it did the hiss and howl were instantaneous.

"He dunnit!" "He" was definitely his lordship, judging by the direction the rotten tomatoes were flying in.

Jack was flushed with success, and Billy was cheering him on, obviously having already decided the verdict.

"That's it," Jack repeated in case anyone missed the point. "In Bert's bed and in his lordship's pay." Jack's honest face was a picture of indignation.

"I never saw her again after I left the bal masqué alone!" bleated Lord Pleasaunce weakly. "He took her down to the Thames himself, garrotted her, and pushed her in, all through jealousy."

This set me thinking. It was like Friday night in the Paddy Goose house now. Jack and Hannah were engaged in fisticuffs, his lordship was threatening to sue the judge, and Bert Wallace was beating a hasty retreat. Constable Peters was standing to one side, however, so I had a quick word with him. Fortunately he agreed with me, and I was prouder than ever of my skills, regretting my station in life did not permit my attendance at legal school. Still, I wouldn't have Ned's companionship then, nor the freedom of my roving life.

Although Billy seemed to have decided the case was over, the jury was still delivering its verdict with vegetable missiles aimed at his lordship. So Constable Peters had to blow his whistle to make the audience return to its seats.

"I'm ready to make my closing speech," I announced.

"Who against?" Billy asked. "His lordship, I hope."

"For Kitty," I replied grandly.

"Thank you, Mr. Wasp," Billy replied no less formally.

Constable Peters sat down, still clutching Kitty's flower so that we wouldn't forget what this case was all about.

"I call his lordship," I said, and the barrage of rotten vegetables temporarily ceased as he turned to me.

"Now, sir, when you took Kitty to the bal masqué you were wearing the hat and mask that Bert Wallace sported tonight. Is that so?"

"Yes," admitted his lordship cautiously.

"And was Miss Kitty wearing a mask?"

"She was not. I saw no reason to pay fourpence for her mask. She was with me, and did not need one. I don't believe in wasting money."

"Thank you, my lord," I replied to this virtuous declaration, which would come as a surprise to most of the gambling dens and pubs of London.

"Is that all? Don't you want the handcuffs, Tom?" Billy asked, deeply disappointed.

"Yes, we do."

"Which of them dunnit then?"

"Oh." My second big moment had come. "The one that spoke of garrotting when no such word had been mentioned. Honest Jack."

Well, the corpse had her vengeance all right. It's not often a corpse can have the satisfaction of pinning the handcuffs on its murderer, but Kitty did that night. As I pointed out, garrotting needs a cord, and in his jealous rage, Jack would have used the first thing to hand, the cords of his mask. Kitty didn't have a mask, and his lordship's, being attached to the hat, didn't need cords.

Billy almost cried with relief to see Kitty avenged. As he put it, "She may not have been so good as I thought, but which of us is, eh, Tom? It's the rich that gets the pleasure and the poor that gets the blame. Just as I said, for Honest Jack *was* to blame. And I was right."

"None of them were nice people, Ned," I said as we walked home. "Not his lordship, nor his valet, not Kitty's mother, nor her murdering sweetheart. Not even Kitty herself. What do you think of the morals of that, Ned?"

He was silent for a moment. Then, as usual, he put me in my place by cutting through straight to the heart of it.

"She gave me a pie, Gov." ●

Secret Service

by Charles Ardai

As Anders loaded his gun, he thought about the lives he'd saved. Two presidents: Carter and LBJ. Eisenhower, too, but that was before he was president, just after the war. My God, Anders thought, was it really fifty years ago? He closed the gun, spun the chamber. More. Fifty-four years, and I'm still at it.

Two presidents, three if you counted Eisenhower. Seven senators. Maybe a dozen representatives. And who knew how many celebrities? Anders hadn't kept count.

And like children whose parents have steered them away from a danger they never saw, all of them safely unaware. They never knew of the threat, so they never knew by how little catastrophe had been averted.

Oh, if you were a public figure you were aware of the possibility—maybe not in '45, but these days, after John Lennon, after Hinckley, after JFK, for heaven's sake. You knew. You knew it could happen, and you kept people on your staff to make sure it didn't. But the sense of security such measures conveyed was a false one. Could even the best security staff prevent one madman with a weapon from getting through? The Secret Service couldn't—Reagan was just lucky the bullet only got his lung.

Anders slipped the gun into one pocket of his blazer and his invitation into the other. You couldn't see a bulge—Anders had selected a small gun and a large blazer.

None of the other guests would give a second glance to a white-haired man of means at a political fundraiser. His age made

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things easier—it had been harder to blend in with the crowd when he'd been in his twenties. But he had always managed. He sometimes thought of himself as an invisible man, unmemorable of appearance, unobserved and unremembered, but playing a more important role than anyone realized, least of all the public figures whose lives were in danger. All around them were the hobnobbers and the star-struck, the influence peddlers and the indulgence seekers, the wives in evening gowns and the mothers in facelifts—and, somewhere in the crowd, one loner with a box cutter or a pistol or a jar of acid. Anders operated quietly, spending most of his time on the fringes of a room, watching carefully but not attracting anyone's attention. The president, the senator, the celebrity—they never knew what was happening, how close they came to disaster. But at the end of the night they were alive instead of dead at an assassin's hands, and it was because of Anders that this was so.

Anders locked the door to his apartment, walked outside to the curb, and flagged down a taxi. Central Park raced by outside the windows. Anders felt his pulse quicken as they neared the restaurant. Getting old didn't mean you couldn't make a difference anymore, not after a lifetime of quietly shaping history. His only disappointment was that his contribution could never be recognized or rewarded. Not even acknowledged—the secrecy was a critical element to the success he enjoyed. But at least *he* knew the role he played, and knowing that some of the most important people in the world owed their lives to you was, when you came down to it, reward enough. You saw a law passed or a treaty signed and (at home, alone, with no one you could tell) you raised a glass to the faces on the TV screen, knowing that if it weren't for you it could never have happened.

The cab pulled up outside the driveway to Tavern on the Green. Anders tipped the driver and walked the rest of the way to the front door. A liveried doorman ushered guests inside while two interns—college-age kids, freshly scrubbed and polished for the occasion—presided over a table covered with nametags. Anders smiled in recognition: No one looks at an intern, and posing as one had been one of his techniques for remaining invisible when he'd been younger. But he didn't need it tonight. He smiled at one of them, pointed to a nametag marked "Arthur Ross," and clipped it to his breast pocket when she handed it to him.

Past the doorman, a pair of Secret Service operatives watched all the guests coming in. Anders watched them in turn. The transparent plastic earpieces coiled behind their ears were the dead giveaway, but even without them Anders would have recognized them by type and posture: humorless, beefy, tall, short hair, dark suits. You could tell a Secret Service man anywhere, which was

one of the things that made them so ineffective. As human shields they were fine, or as pursuers if anything went wrong, or even as a subtle but very visible deterrent to frighten off the less committed and the less crazy. But all it took was one person who was a little more committed or more crazy, and the best the Secret Service could do would be to catch him after the fact. And why? Because they were too easy to spot, and that in turn meant easy to avoid. You want to talk about secret service, Anders thought, I'll show you fifty-four years of secret service.

Past the mahogany walls of the entrance, past the chandeliers and mirrors of the corridors, past the swinging doors through which the waiters came with trays of full or empty dishes, past the string quartet warming up and the bartender mixing his tenth gin and tonic of the night, past all these preliminaries, was the podium where the candidate would speak. Already lit by two spotlights, one with a pink gel intended to make this stiff politician look warmer and more human. Anders walked around the empty podium, glanced casually inside the wooden lectern, tapped a finger against the foam-rubber cap of the microphone. Then moved on. The room was filling, but not full. A man in white stood ready to carve the roast beef under the heat lamp before him, but so far the handful of people hungry enough to fill a plate had contented themselves with the ravioli and gnocchi in the metal trays to one side.

Anders walked the length of the room to the second bar at the far end and when he made it to the head of the line asked for a club soda. He sipped his drink as he walked outside, through a pair of French doors, to the courtyard. Man-sized hedges formed a barrier to the outside world, while two more Secret Service men paced just inside them, looking this way and that. A few couples were circulating, admiring the paper lanterns hanging from the branches of the crooked tree that was the courtyard's centerpiece. Anders watched them for a moment and kept circulating himself. You never knew—you couldn't tell about people just by looking at them, Anders himself proved that—but he didn't think any of these couples were the sort to do the deed.

It was how he spent the night: watching, assessing, moving on. Guessing. Who, other than he and the Secret Service men, had a gun secretly tucked into a jacket pocket? Behind all the smiles and satisfied looks, who burned with hatred or, more dangerous still, hid a dispassionate impulse to kill?

When the candidate finally arrived, escorted by guards on both sides, the crowd swarmed around him, eager to get a bit of his attention, a look, perhaps a handshake to tell people about later if the man won. The room had gone from sparsely filled to standing-room-only, and around the candidate himself it was like iron fil-

ings drawn to a magnet. It wasn't that the people in the room loved him, but they had paid a thousand dollars, or five thousand, or however much, to be in the same room with him, and by God they were going to get their money's worth. He was their candidate, and if he won he would be their president, and if they got close enough to shake his hand or exchange a few words, well, they'd dine out on stories of concocted closeness for the next four years.

Anders stayed out of the fray, stirring the ice in his glass. A drink in your hand was protective coloration, like the blue blazer and the nametag he wore on it. He stood near the podium and waited as the crowd shifted toward him, getting more densely packed and louder as the candidate came closer. It was hot, from all the bodies, from the lamps, from the lack of air now that the French doors were closed and bolted. As the crowd packed more tightly around him, he caught glimpses of the candidate. He could see, then a head was in his way, then he could see again. He saw a hand reaching in toward the candidate's breast pocket—but it only held a business card, swiftly snatched by someone on the candidate's staff. Would the candidate pose for a photo? For a big donor—of course. Anything. An arm around the candidate's shoulders, a flash going off, two opportunities, but not this time; tonight a flashbulb was only a flashbulb, an embrace only an embrace.

The speech, when it came, was awkward and stiff, despite the best efforts of the lighting team to warm the candidate up. Anders remembered earlier speeches by earlier generations of candidates and couldn't help thinking that the quality of political speakers was at an all-time low. You don't expect a JFK anymore, never mind a Jefferson or a Lincoln—but when what you get isn't even a Reagan (say what you will, the man could put a speech over), isn't even an LBJ, how can you help being disappointed?

But Anders knew it didn't matter. A man like this could get elected—a man like this *would* get elected—and smart or foolish, eloquent or tongue-tied, deserving of his status or wholly, sadly unsuited to the mantle he wore, a man like this represented power, and for a certain type of person an irresistible target. You could change the course of history by killing a man—one thrust of a knife at the right moment in history and Mozart never writes his symphonies, one bullet and Spiro Agnew is your president. An instant passes, at its end a man is either alive or dead, and history quietly forks this way or that as a result. The man with his finger on the trigger is as important, in that instant, as the man on the other side of the gun. More important, even: In that instant, the balance of power shifts. The nobody wrenches history to his will while the history-maker becomes . . . nothing. History made.

Anders watched the crowd coalesce as the speech ended, joined

politely in the applause as the candidate stepped out from behind the podium and began his retreat. Smiling, waving, reaching out to shake the hands thrust out at him as he passed. The guards vigilant and attentive, but what could they do? So many hands, no time to check them all, and such friendly hands (surely the risk must be lower here, in a gathering of paid supporters, than, say, on a public street)—you watch, you stand prepared to react, but you don't prevent the donors from getting what they came for.

Anders knew how simple it would be for a man with a gun to push his way through the crowd right at this moment, press up against the candidate, and pull the trigger. No chance of getting away with it, of course, but the candidate would still be dead, so what did that matter? As the candidate drew closer, Anders felt his heart begin to race. If it was going to happen (and it could, he uniquely knew it could), this was when it would, in the press and chaos of this human maelstrom. He looked from face to face around him: laughing, nodding, drinking, trying to talk above the roar, each face like the ones around it, none more memorable than his, none less, but every one a potential killer, each a man who could change history if he chose to. And in the middle of it all, like the eye of a hurricane, the candidate inexorably advancing. Anders felt his gun through the fabric of his blazer, felt the hard metal press against the inside of his wrist. He knew from years of practice how quickly he could draw and fire—a matter of seconds, even in a crowd like this. The candidate was close enough now that Anders could hear his voice, the clipped, sparse phrases of feigned recognition, repeated over and over. Only two layers of people stood between them, then one, then they were facing each other, Anders and the candidate, and the candidate's questing hand shot firmly in Anders's direction.

How simple it would be, Anders thought, for someone in my position to pull his gun and fire, and in that instant change the world forever. How simple and irreversible. This man could be the president of the United States just a few months from now, or he could be dead an instant from now, and which it will be depends entirely on the choice I make now. How often does a man hold the world's future in his hand? How often is it given to a simple man like me, an invisible one of the invisible millions, to choose which path history takes at the fork?

Anders raised his hand and gripped the candidate's. It lasted a second, no more—just long enough for politeness. "Thank you, Arthur, I can't tell you how much your support means to me," the candidate said, all in one breath but with a passing semblance of sincerity—not worse than Carter, not really worse than LBJ at the Civic Center back in '66; but then how well or badly can anyone do in a single sentence? A moment later, the candidate was three peo-

ple away, then five, then just a receding head in a sea of heads, and finally gone.

Anders felt flushed and lightheaded. I've done it, he thought. If this man is elected, it is by my grace: I could have prevented it, and I chose not to. Everything this man does from today forward, I, Eric Anders, gave him the chance to do. A man stood before him with a loaded gun, and I kept him from being shot. His life hung in the balance, and I saved it.

How often can one man decide the course of history? Any man can do so once, and gain notoriety in the process—look at Hinckley, look at Princip. But a man who is willing to remain forever unknown, unheralded, unappreciated, and unrewarded? A man who, faced with the opportunity, the means, the power, and the will to act, chooses to refrain? Such a man can shape history, oh, let's say three dozen times in fifty-four years.

And if, as the years advance and the inevitable end draws near, he should finally decide the time has come to make his mark, to teach the world his name? To point history down the other path for once? Why, then, all the years will have prepared him well, and no precautions will stop him.

On his way out, Anders passed the Secret Service men at the front door. They paid no attention. ●

"Why don't we declare ourselves a faith-based organization and pull in some of that federal loot?"

THE PASSENGER

by Peter Turnbull

Ray Sussock found, again, that there is as much sadness and poignancy surrounding the murder of an elderly person as there is in the murder of a young person. Life taken prematurely, before its time, is always a tragedy. He had noticed this before in his career, and now he noticed it again. In this case the victim, for "victim" was the only word, was a woman who seemed to have been in her sixties when she had breathed her last. She had been found in a stand of shrubs in the grounds of Gartnavel General Infirmary, close to a footpath. She had been found early on a June morning by a man who entered the shrubs to retrieve his dog, who wouldn't come when he called him. He had slipped the lead gently round his dog's collar and tugged it away from the corpse, which he couldn't help but look at, stare at with a horrific fascination, but he tore himself away and walked to the nearest public telephone.

"What makes a good police procedural work—and what makes so many inferior ones fail—is not the procedural details themselves but the way the author constructs the characters. Since procedurals rely heavily on dialogue, the speakers must be compelling, and the things they say must be worth hearing. On both counts, Turnbull succeeds completely," said a recent *Booklist* review of the Turnbull novel *Fear of Drowning*. In this new story we see that too.

Papa Delta Foxtrot had attended. The man told the crew what he had found and where he had found it. P.C.s Wanless and Piper had walked the pathway, with the tall wall to their left, beyond which lay the disused railway line, and the green sward to their right which led up to the hospital—tall, concrete, glass, very late-twentieth-century by its design. The report confirmed, Wanless and Piper radioed to P Division and requested C.I.D. attendance and Ray Sussock, by then, seven-thirty A.M., was fully awake following his six A.M. start. In his turn he attended, viewed the corpse, which by then was discreetly beneath a sheet of plastic, and the immediate area cordoned off by a blue and white police

tape which had been tied to the branches of the shrubs about three feet from the ground. "Dead," he said to Wanless. "As you say." He asked Wanless to radio for the attendance of the police surgeon.

"Dead," said Dr. Chan, after he, in turn, had viewed the corpse. "A formality in this case, Mr. Sussock."

"I thought you'd say that, sir." Sussock felt the heat of the rising sun on his face and turned away from the glare. "But procedure has to be followed."

"Of course."

"How long dead, would you say?"

"Oh, a long time." Chan grinned. "We all are, Mr. Sussock, we're all a long time dead."

Sussock nodded. "Point to you."

"But in this case, as you can see for yourself, not long at all. A few hours. It wasn't cold last night, didn't rain. . . . I'd say about . . . well, less than ten hours. But that's off the record. As you know, I can only confirm death, and I do so at 08:45, life extinct."

"08:45, life is extinct. Thank you, sir."

"I'd like to remain at the locus, show an interest when the pathologist arrives, but I have a sudden death . . . Partick."

"Not too far, then."

"No . . . and just when I'm in the mood for a long drive. Ah, well."

Chan smiled and nodded and walked briskly away.

Sussock turned to Wanless and asked him to call P Division to confirm a suspicious death and request the attendance of the pathologist. He then asked who had found the body.

"Gentleman by the wall, sir." Wanless indicated a pale-looking young man who stood with his spaniel beneath the old wall which divided the grounds of the hospital from the old railway cutting. Sussock approached him. "Morning, sir. You found her?"

"Aye." The man nodded. He avoided eye contact. Sussock put him in his early twenties, but he had the self-important body language and attitude of one twice his years—so thought the detective sergeant. "Well, the dog did."

"That's happened before. Often."

"I should have made myself scarce. I should have cleared the pitch . . . gone offski . . . let someone else report it."

"But you didn't, did you? Sorry, your name is . . . ?"

"I told the other officer."

"Tell me."

"Bowman." He spelt his name for Sussock.

"Live close by?"

"Those houses." Bowman nodded to the neat houses beyond the railway line. Sussock followed his gaze as an orange commuter train entered Hyndland Railway Station with many faces turned towards Sussock, their attention being drawn by the police activity.

"You didn't see anything or anybody acting suspiciously?"

"A thing acting suspiciously?" Bowman leered at Sussock.

"You know what I mean."

"No . . . no, I didn't." He turned away from Sussock, who thought him a man who clearly didn't care for the police. "I went into the bushes to see why the dog wouldn't come when I called. . . . I phoned the three nines. . . . I was told to wait at the locus. I don't know what a locus is, so I waited by the phone box."

"The locus is the crime scene."

"I see. So I told the cop where to find the body and he told me to wait. I can't tell you anything else."

"All right. Thank you, Mr. Bowman. We know where to contact you if we need to."

"For this I waited?"

"Yes. Again, thanks."

That morning Dr. Reynolds had arrived at his offices at 8:30 A.M., settled down, coffee in hand, and began to read over reports that Noreen had typed for him the day previous. As he had come to expect of Noreen, frail and sickly, there were a number of typos, largely, he thought, due to the large quantities of colourless liquid she poured down her neck, usually commencing at lunchtime. She declined his advice that if she must drink, she should perhaps try red wine because of the aversion therapy the amount of impurities would cause; she stuck to Smirnoff, got drunk, and suffered no ill effects because of the purity of the drink. He had completed the reading of the second report when the phone on his desk warbled softly. He picked it up. "Reynolds," he said, one eye still on the report. He listened and then said, "On my way." Just fifteen minutes later he turned his silver Volvo off Great Western Road and parked it under the shade of the trees outside Carriages restaurant. The police officers and the blue and white tape, which he could clearly see some few hundred yards distant, told him where the locus was. He walked there. "Mr. Sussock," he said warmly when within appropriate distance.

"Morning, sir." Sussock nodded and smiled at the tall, silver-haired pathologist. "Business for you over here, sir."

"As I see," Reynolds said, falling in with Sussock as the two men walked side by side towards the police tape.

"Elderly female." Sussock held up the tape as he and Reynolds bent down and slid beneath it. "About sixty."

"That's not elderly." Reynolds grinned. "That's not elderly at all."

"You don't know how happy I am that you said that, sir." He liked Dr. Reynolds, he found him to be a good-humoured, professional man, but not at all aloof, quite ready to pass the time of day with humble detective sergeants, for instance. The two men knelt

beside the black plastic sheet as Sussock peeled it back to reveal the head and shoulders.

"She would have been quite a head-turner in her youth," Reynolds said, noting the high cheekbones, the smooth, well-balanced face. Now, at the time of her death, she had distinguished silver hair, silver like Reynolds's. But definitely silver, not grey. "But dead, as you say, as Dr. Chan pronounced. As a doornail, in fact. I'll take ground and air temperature and a rectal temperature. Can you rig up a screen, please? Rolling over a deceased lady and divesting her of her lower garments is best done behind a screen."

Sussock stood. "PC Wanless! Screen, please."

"Thanks," said Reynolds, placing a thermometer in the soil. "I'll fix time of death as close as I can, but I can tell you she was killed only a few hours ago . . . yesterday evening, perhaps . . . probably by a blow to the skull, see the blood in the hair, just a little." Reynolds placed his fingers in the scalp, close to the blood. "Distinct bruising to the skull, most blood would have gone inside . . . subdural hemorrhage will be my finding . . . the price of a pint on it."

"Banged over the head?"

"In a few words, yes. And she wasn't killed here."

"No?"

"No. The body's been laid out, you see. It's too neat . . . she wasn't banged over the head and left here. She was murdered somewhere else and her body was dumped here, but neatly so. And I would also say that the murder site is close at hand. She's been left neatly but it's still panic dumping. Had the murderer kept his head or her head . . ."

"Or their heads."

"Indeed . . . and taken the body out to a remote place in the Highlands, it probably would never have been discovered."

"Makes sense, sir," Sussock conceded. Privately he felt it made very good sense, very good sense indeed. He glanced about him, the small houses of Hyndland near the station, larger houses beyond . . . and in the other direction, the mansions of Great Western Road, built by the Victorian shipping magnates and tobacco lords. "Makes sense," he repeated, glancing up at the sun in a cloudless sky. It was, he thought, a very fine morning for the West of Scotland, often a place of low cloud and drizzle. There they were: he and the pathologist and two uniformed officers, and a deceased person of the female sex. It was not, though, a fine morning for her.

Reynolds stood after taking the rectal temperature. "There's little more that I can do here." He noted the temperature reading on a notepad. "If you'll arrange to have the deceased conveyed to the

G.R.I., I'll commence the postmortem immediately. You'll get the mortuary van down here without difficulty. The ground's baked hard, as hard as concrete, which is probably how the perpetrator brought the body here from Great Western Road."

"Probably is. So as well as living locally, he or she, or they, have access to a motor vehicle."

"Oh, I think so." Reynolds pursed his lips. "I don't suppose you have come across anything as useful as a handbag, for identification purposes, I mean?"

" 'Fraid not, sir. We could do with knowing who she is as well."

"Imagine you could. Probably more than I could. Will you be representing the police at the P.M.?"

Sussock said that yes, for his sins, he would be.

The next time Sussock saw the woman she was lying on a stainless-steel table, naked save for a starched white towel which had been draped over her coyly termed, Sussock thought, "private parts." Yet she looked different, oh so different, for now, in place of a pleasant, well-balanced face, the skin that covered the front of her skull had been pulled down and lay in folds about her eyes. Her cheeks seemed fuller and bruised, her lips swollen. Only her chin remained as Sussock had first seen it. The top of the skull had been exposed and Reynolds, looking pleased with himself, said, "Just as I thought."

"A fractured skull?" Sussock said.

"Indeed."

"A single blow?" Sussock glanced at the mortuary assistant, a man of slight build and slicked-back hair, and noted as he had on previous occasions an unpleasant gleam in the man's eyes. Sussock thought that he looked at the deceased woman like a hungry man might look at a meal.

"Just one blow," Reynolds confirmed, "but it was quite sufficient to send her into the hereafter. She was struck from behind. . . . The implement had, has, a linear quality to it . . . slender and unyielding."

"A poker?"

"That sort of thing. Now of the deceased herself. She appears to be about sixty to sixty-five years of age, well nourished. . . . She wears a wedding ring. . . . She's used to a gentle life, soft hands, clean nails. She has a distinct birthmark on the inside of her left thigh . . . about two inches across."

"Looks like Australia," Sussock said.

"Yes . . . on its side," Reynolds replied. "I see what you mean. In life she would have been five feet eight inches tall, tall for a woman, especially a woman from the West of Scotland. You know someone, somewhere, will be wondering where on earth she is."

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"I see, sir. Just let me get the 'mis per' pad. Take a few details. Right . . . your name, please, sir."

"Tamm, Lionel Tamm."

"Address."

"Sixty-three, Gosport Crescent."

"That's here in Southampton?"

"Yes."

"When did you last see your wife, sir?"

"Three days ago . . . no . . . four days ago."

"You didn't report her missing earlier?"

"She hasn't been missing earlier."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Four days ago she travelled to Edinburgh to look up her brother. She agreed to phone me at ten each evening. . . . It's been the nature of our marriage that we always keep each other informed of our whereabouts. She didn't phone last night. I phoned her hotel this morning, and they have confirmed that she didn't return yesterday. Her bed hasn't been slept in, yet her belongings are still in the room. I know my wife . . . after thirty-five years of marriage I ought to. The only reason she hasn't phoned is because she's in some form of difficulty."

"Very good, sir. We'll notify the Scottish Office. What's your wife's name?"

"Paula Tamm."

"She is how old?"

"Sixty-two."

"Does she have any distinguishing marks . . . any tattoos?"

"Tattoos!"

"Or a birthmark?"

"She has a birthmark on the inside of her left thigh, about two or three inches across."

"How tall is your wife?"

"Five feet eight inches, slim build . . . silver hair."

"She went to Edinburgh, you say?"

"Yes, to look up her brother, Mr. Pudeski. They've been estranged for twenty years now and Paula said to me that the whole business is a nonsense . . . they have to start speaking to each other while they still can. She went to his last known address, Twenty-six Hillfoot Terrace, New Town, Edinburgh. I fully supported her. They are brother and sister, only the two of them, both in their sixties, and for a full third of their lives they haven't spoken to each other. Nonsense, as she says. She didn't notify him that she was coming, intended to just arrive at his door. She wasn't going to give him a chance to avoid her. She wasn't going to take no for an answer. I have a recent photograph . . . just here in my wallet."

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Fabian Donoghue strolled down the C.I.D. corridor, pulling contentedly on his pipe, leaving a soft blue haze of sweet-smelling smoke behind him. He entered the D.C.s' room and as he did so, he glimpsed Montgomerie rapidly removing his feet from the top of his desk. "Don't want to disturb you, Montgomerie, but I want you and Richard King . . . Where is he?"

"Boys' room, sir."

"I see. I want you to have a look at this, it's a mis per faxed to all forces from the Scottish Office, it fits to a T the code four one that Ray Sussock attended this A.M."

"Very good, sir."

"Take a trip to Edinburgh, will you? Go to the brother's address. See what you see, find what you find, if you pick up a trail, follow it."

King and Montgomerie drove to Edinburgh, one hour on the M8, eastbound. A gentle drive, a time for a chat about this and that, mostly about personalities in P Division. They went to the New Town, a graceful curve of Georgian terraces and formal gardens, baking in the sun. They located Hillfoot Terrace, number Twenty-six, and climbed the wide common stair. Four storeys, four flats, none had "Pudeski" on the nameplate. King glanced at Montgomerie, who said, "Go for it." King pressed the doorbell at the top-storey flat, which had "Sinclair" on the nameplate. It was a simple nameplate, black letters on a pearl-grey background. One bell rang a simple ding-dong ring. Not for the New Town of Edinburgh are nameplates of gold letters on fancy tartan backgrounds, and doorbells which, when pressed, play "The Flower of Scotland." Such trinkets, the cops had found, belong to the housing schemes.

The door was opened slowly but positively, clearly on the terms of the occupier, who revealed herself to be a tall, stately-looking woman.

"Yes?" she said.

"Police." King flashed his ID.

"Yes?"

"Sorry to bother you, madam, but we were given this stair number as the address of Mr. Pudeski."

"Flat below. He moved out a year or two ago." And the door was shut.

The flat below had "Devlin" on the simple nameplate and a bell with a simple buzzerlike ring. Again the door was opened clearly on the terms of the occupier who, on this occasion, was a short, slightly overweight man, bald, spectacles, a ready smile . . . not at all as haughty as his upstairs neighbour.

"Sorry to bother you, sir." King flashed his ID. "But we're making enquiries into a Mr. Pudeski. We believe that he used to live here?"

"He did. I bought the flat from him two and a half years ago, a bit more, in fact . . . nearer three now."

"You don't have a forwarding address, by any chance?"

"I don't. He was a private person. Very little mail came for him. I used to drop it in at the estate agents' and they forwarded it to his solicitor. Just as I told the lady who called the other day."

"A lady?"

"In her sixties . . . said that she was his sister, which I found surprising. She was a tall lady, had an honesty about her, a warmth. I met Mr. Pudeski just the once when I viewed the flat before offering for it. I remember him being a small man, about five feet nothing, slight, avoided eye contact, shifty sort of guy. All that he'd tell me was that he'd taken retirement and was leaving Edinburgh to live out his life in new pastures. He said that, but he didn't seem to be of the manner of a professional man, more like a street cleaner than an accountant or whatever profession. But the flat was sound and the price very reasonable and that's all I was interested in."

"That I can understand. Which estate agents did you use, sir?"

"White and Fraser. The branch on Princess Street."

"Thanks."

"You could also try the Polish Club. When I moved in I received a few phone calls from people who claimed to be his friends from the Polish Club and who seemed surprised that he'd left town . . . seemed surprised that he had disappeared so completely. The club is on the edge of the New Town, Craignuek Road . . . right at the bottom of the stair and just keep going."

The woman had a pleasing view from her office window, Princess Gardens, the Castle. "We just forwarded his mail to Batesons."

"The famous Batesons?" King smiled. "Scotland's largest firm of solicitors?"

"One in every town."

"More than one office in many cases."

"We dealt with the office in Rose Street in respect of Mr. Pudeski's sale. If memory serves, the interested solicitor was a Mr. Golightly."

The woman had stainless-steel spectacles and wore a pinstriped suit in her cramped office. There was a knock on the door and a young secretary entered and handed her a file. "Thank you, Mary," said the woman. Then to King and Montgomerie she said, "This is the file in respect of Mr. Pudeski's conveyancing. It was handled by a Mr. Golightly, who left to head up our new office in Hawick. But he wouldn't be able to tell you anything that isn't in the file."

"Would Mr. Pudeski ever have come to the office?"

"Once. To sign forms. So it says here. After that, all contact was by phone or post."

"Where did he move to?"

"He went to . . . One twenty-three Fintry Place, Hyndland."

"Hyndland? Glasgow?"

"Yes . . . why? Is that significant?"

"It could very well be. The dead woman you may have read about or heard about already, found this morning."

"Yes?"

"We believe she was Mr. Pudeski's sister," said King.

"Her body was found in Hyndland," added Montgomerie.

"Well . . . he traded down. The house in Hyndland was purchased for less than half the value of his flat in Edinburgh, but that's not at all unusual. Often retiring people buy a smaller house and release some money for themselves."

At the Polish Club, the steward told King and Montgomerie that the best person to ask about Mr. Pudeski was Franz Bockner, whose address was back in the New Town, very close to Pudeski's old address.

"Joseph just stopped calling on me," Franz Bockner wheezed from his wheelchair. His house smelled like a hospital. "Joseph always called on me, twice a week, ever since I had my accident, twice a week he called . . . then he stopped coming. People at the club said he'd stopped attending . . . they said he's sold his house and moved to Glasgow. Joseph wouldn't do that . . . he hated Glasgow . . . loved Edinburgh . . . hated Glasgow. Would you reach into that drawer?"

"This one?" King pointed to a drawer in a dark-stained cupboard.

"Yes . . . there's a photograph."

King extracted a framed photograph of a group of people on a lawn. He handed it to Bockner.

"Happier times," Bockner sighed. "It was the wedding of the steward's daughter. This is Joseph Pudeski." He pointed to a tall, distinguished-looking man in the centre of the group.

"*That's* Mr. Pudeski!" King showed Montgomerie.

Montgomerie scanned the people in the photograph. His eye lighted upon a small man with piercing eyes. "Who's that?"

"Oh," Bockner groaned, "one of life's passengers. Fellow by the name of Klein, Franz Klein. Always borrowing money, calling on people at mealtimes . . . even running errands, childlike, for a pound's reward, provided you didn't count the change too closely. He latched onto Joseph Pudeski. Joseph was just too kind to reject him. You'll know Klein . . . he's got a police record."

"Really?"

"Petty theft. We didn't like him belonging to the club . . . he didn't give Poland or the Poles a good name."

King and Montgomerie returned to P Division Police Station, Charing Cross, Glasgow, situated where Sauchiehall Street crosses the M8, just across the motorway's canyon from the graceful red-brick curve of Charing Cross Mansions. They signed in and checked their pigeonholes and then went upstairs to the C.I.D. corridor, side by side, two steps at a time. In the D.C.s' room, Montgomerie peeled off his jacket and sat in his chair with his feet on his desk and hid behind the morning's copy of the *Glasgow Herald.* King walked along the corridor to Donoghue's room and finding an "In Conference" sign on the door, returned to the detective constables' room, slid into his chair, picked up the phone, and punched a four-figure internal number. "Collator? Name of Klein. . . . Franz Klein. . . . No numbers, but middle-aged . . . last address would be in Edinburgh. . . . Thanks." He replaced the phone and looked across the floor to Montgomerie's feet protruding from beneath the broadsheet. "Would you care for a cup of coffee, Malcolm?"

"Lovely." Montgomerie grinned from behind the newspaper.

"Only I wouldn't want you to overexert yourself, have to take time off with injuries sustained at work."

"Too kind of you, my man, too kind."

King, smiling, made coffee for both himself and Montgomerie. When the coffee was still hot but just drinkable, the collator tapped on the D.C.s' room door and stepped inside. He was young, fresh-faced, enthusiastic. "Mr. King?"

"Yes?"

"File on Franz Klein, sir."

King read the file. Franz Klein, sixty-three years of age, lived in the tough Edinburgh scheme of Wester Hailes and as Mr. Bockner had indicated, he had a string of convictions for petty theft. King glanced out of the window at Charing Cross Mansions, at that moment glowing red in the late afternoon sun. He pondered Wester Hailes, and he pondered the New Town—both in Edinburgh but one was chalk, the other cheese; one was black, the other white. Klein fitted the description of the outgoing owner of a prestigious flat in the New Town, yet his last known address was in Wester Hailes: needle city. "Time for a home visit, Malcolm."

"Thought you'd say that." Montgomerie folded the newspaper. He glanced up at the clock on the wall: 18:30. "You know, with luck, we'll have this one cracked this shift."

"What's this 'we'?"

At the uniform bar Montgomerie and King looked up the voter's roll for Hyndland. 123 Fintry Place was occupied by one Joseph Pudeski.

"It's not, you know," said King. "It's occupied by one Franz Klein."

"And he'll fold when we confront him."

"You reckon?"

"Yeah, I reckon. Poles are Catholics. The guilt thing cuts deep."

"That's your observation, is it?"

"That's my observation," said Montgomerie.

The house which was 123 Fintry Place, Hyndland, revealed itself to be a recently built, neat, semi-detached house, surrounded by a well-tended garden, with a small car in the driveway. King pressed the bell. Klein answered the door, for it was Klein by the photograph Bockner had shown them, but King said, "Mr. Pudeski?"

"Yes?"

"Or should we say Klein?" asked Montgomerie.

The man's face fell off. Both cops had heard the expression, but they were young men, both in their twenties, and this was the first time that they had seen the phenomenon. It was a combination of many things, a relaxing of the muscle tone, an opening of the mouth, a sagging forward of the head on the shoulders, all of which made up the movement which could only be described as the man's face falling off. Klein turned and walked into his house; King and Montgomerie followed. Klein entered the living room of his house and sank into an armchair. King and Montgomerie stood before him.

"This has been the only place I've ever felt happy," he said. "My nice little house, just me."

"What happened?" King asked softly, sensing that Montgomerie had been correct about Klein "folding" when confronted.

"She ruined it. . . . I never knew he had a sister. I thought he was by himself, like me . . . two old Poles . . . I didn't plan it, the opportunity happened."

"The opportunity?"

"To take over his life. I've never had anything, you see. We went walking one day . . . midweek . . . up in the Pentland Hills above Edinburgh. I was ahead of him and I looked round and he was lying on the ground. I went back and he was dead . . . must have been a heart attack. . . . There was no one about . . . no one for miles. The thought came to me: He didn't need his life anymore, why shouldn't I have it? His pension was paid into his bank account, all I had to do was take over his life. The only problem was his neighbours, but he didn't have a lot to do with them . . . you know, New Town folk. . . . It was just a question of giving the impression that the flat was occupied . . . burn the lights, play the radio. . . . The credit card was a problem, so I phoned the bank, telling them that I was Joseph Pudeski, that I'd lost the card, could they cancel it and send a new one . . . which they did with a note of the PIN num-

ber. Then I went to the solicitors, I chose a big firm so I wouldn't be known personally, just went the once and asked them to act for me to sell Joseph's flat, signed the form in Joseph's name."

"And then you were Joseph Pudeski?"

"Yes. Sold the flat cheaply for a quick sale, moved here. . . . I've been Joseph Pudeski for nearly three years . . . living off Joseph's pension. Why not? I've had a hard life . . . no chances at all."

"Where's his body?"

"Hidden under some rubble in the Pentlands. He fell close to a hollow in the ground. Rolled him in it after I'd taken his wallet and car keys, of course."

"Of course."

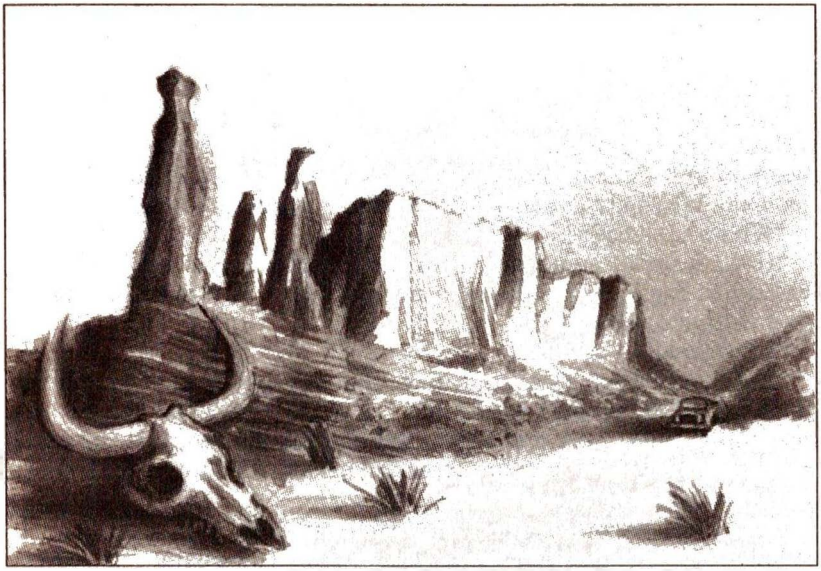
"Did everything right, notified the driving-licence people in Swansea of my change of address . . . everything. Then there was the happy time. . . . A nice house to live in, and money in the bank and a pension every month. Then she knocked on my door. I never knew he had a sister. How did she find me?"

"Same way we did, I expect. It wasn't difficult."

"She realised what had happened. Started to scream. She turned to leave . . . I keep a golf club in case of burglars. At night I pushed her body into the car . . . dumped her near here. . . . If I'd kept my head, took her out to the hills . . . or maybe here in the garden . . ."

"But you didn't. Get your jacket, Mr. Klein." ●

"Your fifteen minutes of fame will be followed by fifteen years in the federal pen."



Art by M. Bilokur

The Path of Bones

by Mary Freeman

"What if there is no water?" Panting, Teo scrambled up the boulder behind him, his brown skin slick with sweat. "What if there is nothing?"

Jeremiah Apple paused at the crest of the stone, aware of the lightness of his water bottle and the fear in Teo's voice. The desert breathed on his neck, its touch light and dry. "There'll be water." He stroked his hand across the sensuous curve of the stone. "Water shaped this," he told the boy. "The guy who mapped this hole put the contents at five thousand gallons or more. There'll be something. And if there isn't," he went on, holding out a hand to the skinny Teo, "I left a cache about a half-day's walk from here. We'll be all right."

"Okay." Teo scrambled up beside him, politely ignoring the offer of assistance.

His fear wasn't simply suppressed, it had vanished, like drops of water spilled on the burning rocks of this desert land. That was why he had let the boy join him on what would be a week-long hike into the desert to check water holes for Fish and Game. Nor-

mally, he hiked the deserts alone. He scrambled up the next cascade of boulders.

"Ah." The syllable escaped him involuntarily, and he paused, hands on a hot curve of the sandstone that had been rounded and shaped by millenia of flowing water. The *tinaja* lay before him, round as an earthenware jug, twenty feet across, its lip a soft curve as if carved by human hands, filled with a silvery treasure of water. Above would be another. And another, funnels and traps for the occasional rains that walked this parched land.

"Wow, look at that!" Shoving up beside him, Teo said a rapid Hail Mary in Spanish, then sneaked an embarrassed glance at Jeremiah. "All that water, and man, it's burning all round." His voice was hushed, as if he were in church.

A bee bounced off Jermiah's cheek, reoriented, then dived to the edge of the water to pause and sip. Slowly, Jeremiah slipped his cupped hands beneath the silver skin and raised a dripping handful. Tiny motes danced in the water, fairy shrimp or clam shrimp, ostracods, a few *Triops* even. He closed his eyes and bent his head to it, letting it flow over his lips, rich with the taste of life.

"Hey, there's stuff in the water." Teo had filled his water bottle, was regarding the shimmering dance of creatures with a jaundiced eye. "You *drink* that?"

"They're clean," Jeremiah said, and Teo shrugged. And drank.

They stripped and soaked in the hole, faces turned to the narrow lane of endless sky above, heat on the face, cool water a blessing and an amazement. After, they got out and scrambled naked up to the next *tinaja* and the next, Jeremiah keeping mental books in his head.

Three thousand gallons maybe, he figured. After the fourth pool, they found sand floors and crusted scums of dried algae as testament to vanished water. Global warming? Maybe. Or just a dry year. Rain walked a random path out here. Jeremiah made his notes and recorded the GPS coordinates. That last man to record these watering spots for Fish and Game had had a compass only. He had not done a half-bad job.

In the afternoon heat they scrambled down the tumble of water-

When she's wearing her mystery writer's hat, the author of "The Path of Bones" goes by the name Mary Freeman. That byline appears on an ongoing mystery series for Putnam Berkley, and with the publication of *Garden View*, in May of 2002, the books in that series numbered four. As Mary Rosenblum, the author has written several science fiction novels as well as many science fiction short stories. Her new story for us is her first short mystery. ¶

smoothed boulders that guarded the water and descended once more to the smooth floor of the *bajada.*

"Hey, I bet Ramon knows this hole," Teo said. "He knows all the water around."

"I bet he does." Jeremiah laughed, because he had met Teo's uncle, Ramon Montoya, at another hole not too far from here. "So how come your uncle went to Los Angeles?"

"He went to see my aunt. She is a teacher, and he will ask her for money." Teo gave him a considering look. "He told me not to tell my grandmother, but he would not mind, I think, if I tell you. It is for my college. He found a treasure, and he needs the money to get it." Teo's eyes glittered with conspiracy. "But it is a secret. You understand?"

Jeremiah said nothing at first, although he felt a moment of alarm that the quiet, hardworking Ramon might have been tricked by some Anglo with a treasure map and a glib story. It didn't fit his perception of Ramon. "I won't tell anyone," Jeremiah said.

They didn't speak of Ramon again, moving without conversation in the rhythms of hiking in desert heat. The sun leaned on you and thoughts dwindled to simple observation. *Bone. Rock. Scat.* Some of the bones had belonged to small creatures. Some might be human. People had lived in this land for millennia. Swallows of warm water kept the tongue moist, but didn't allay thirst. Thirst was a sensation in the bones out here. It inhabited you, drawing you into the moist core of your being.

The sun was setting as they reached the level stretch of ground where Jeremiah had intended to sleep. He had cached food here a week ago, and more water in plastic jugs. A huge ocotillo raised octopus arms above the site, and the containers of food were intact in their rock shelter. A scorpion retreated, sting at the ready, as he gingerly fished them out. Teo was already spreading out the camping pad and old flannel sheet that served as his bed.

"Look." Jeremiah pointed out across the flat plain of the *bajada.* "You can see them best at dusk. Or in the moonlight."

Teo rose, squinting, caught his breath. "Paths. Who made them out here?"

"People going to water." The trails glimmered, faintly paler than the surrounding rock and sand, beaten hard by thousands of years of feet making their way to those pools of water in the stone. They converged like veins, scattered with the bits of old bones of the ones who had not made their way to the end. Dust rose in the distance and Jeremiah squinted against the fading gleam of sunset, reaching for his compact binoculars. Pickup. It was following a shallow wash, heading in the direction of the distant town. Light glittered on the windshield and Jeremiah made out the Sheriff's

Department logo as the truck followed the twisting wash. As it drew parallel to them, the truck slowed, halted. Jeremiah walked over to it, bending down some to look through the open window.

"I hoped it was you." Deputy Hardy Jamison peered across the seat, his freckled face red from failed sunscreen. "Glad it's not another one of those damn college kids out for a hike."

"You lose a college kid?" Jeremiah asked.

"Nah. A couple of them found another one of those godforsaken wetbacks out there, dried out like jerky. How do they think they're gonna walk five days through this heat with a single gallon of water?" He turned his head and spat through the open window. "Least I scared the kids out of here. Told 'em a few stories."

Jeremiah now noticed the body bag in the bed of the pickup. It happened often. You found the trails of castoff clothes, shoes, sometimes even a water jug with water still in it, as the sun sapped sanity and sent the unfortunate border-crossers stumbling into the washes to die. Still they came, to pick watermelons, to clean houses. And still, they died.

"What is it?" Teo trotted up, his face alive with curiosity. "A dead one?" Then his face froze, turning in an instant to a carved mask, the color of the *tinaja* they had visited. With a cry, he scrambled over the bed of the truck, grabbing at a dusty daypack propped against the side of the bed.

"Hey!" Jamison burst from the cab. "Get your hands off, kid!"

But Teo ignored him, babbling incoherently in Spanish, now fumbling with the zipper of the bag. Jeremiah grabbed him, swung him kicking and struggling out of the truck, grappling with the boy's wiry strength. "Knock it off, Teo! What's wrong with you?"

"Ramon. It is his. His pack." Teo finally managed to get the words out in English.

"I thought he was in L.A." Jeremiah kept his grip on Teo. "Maybe it just looks like his." He looked at Jamison. "Any ID or anything?"

"Nothing but a few clothes." Jamison shrugged, his expression faintly curious. "Who did you think this belonged to, kid?"

"His uncle." Jeremiah answered for Teo. "He left for Los Angeles five days ago." He looked at Teo, then at Jamison. "Maybe we better look."

Jamison hesitated, shrugged, then reached for the zipper, giving them both one last doubtful glance.

Better to see a man dead from thirst than to imagine Ramon in that bag. Besides, Jeremiah had heard the story of Teo's arrival in this country. He nodded at the deputy, who shrugged and pulled the zipper down.

Teo cried out—a raw, wordless sound. "Close it," Jeremiah snapped. He turned Teo's rigid body to face him. Teo resisted for a

moment, then stood slack in Jeremiah's hands, staring down at the ground.

"This isn't an illegal." Jeremiah met the deputy's sceptical gaze above the boy's head. "Ramon Montoya is a citizen. He's the foreman at Robeson's ranch."

"Oh, him." The deputy shoved his hat back on his head and scratched his scalp, looking faintly uncomfortable. "He must have taken a wrong turn this time. Everyone knows he's a *coyote* . . ."

"No!" Eyes blazing, Teo leaned against Jeremiah's grip. "He finds people out here, he shows them where to go, to find water. He does not take money. He does not . . ."

"Teo. Enough." Jeremiah kept his arm around the boy as he strained against it, his fists clenched, face mottled with unshed tears. "He wouldn't get lost and die out here. Not Ramon," Jeremiah said. "He knows where the water is. This is something else."

The deputy shrugged again and sighed. "I only know what I see." He looked from Teo to Jeremiah. "You want to ride back?"

Jeremiah nodded. "We'll get our gear." He went back for their packs, followed by the silent Teo. The boy gathered his sleeping pad, his eyes black holes into an unreadable void. Jeremiah put the food and water jugs back into their cache at the ocotillo's foot. He left the water jugs visible. He always did. He had many caches. If the water here was gone next trip, the person who had taken it had more need of it than he.

The sun had vanished, and night seemed to flow up from the rocks and crevices in the ground. The sky blazed with stars, their fires undimmed by moisture or clouds. Squeezed between them in the pickup's cab, Teo stared out into the yellow splash of light across the rocks, his body swaying to the jolting progress of the pickup.

"When Ramon left, did he say anything about meeting anyone?" Jeremiah asked as they reached the faint jeep track that wound east, toward the town of Sweetwater. Teo shook his head, said nothing. "There's my truck," Jeremiah said. He spoke to the deputy, pointing to where he'd parked it in a small stand of juniper. He'd left water there, too, in the bed, where anyone who found it would not need to break a window to take it. The jugs were there, still blood-warm to the touch, still full. "I'll take Teo home, and tell Ramon's mother."

"Sure." Jamison sounded relieved. "I appreciate it, thanks." The pickup with its dark burden disappeared down the track, its taillights glowing like embers through the haze of dust, dwindling quickly.

The deputy did not want this to be a murder.

Jeremiah tossed their packs into the truck bed and started the

engine as the still-silent Teo scrambled into the front seat. Jeremiah put his hand on the shift lever, but didn't put the truck into gear. "He wouldn't have died of thirst there," he said. He was less than a day's walk from water. "They'll do an autopsy, find out how he died."

Teo gave no sign that he had heard a single word.

"Who would want to kill Ramon, Teo?"

The boy's body flinched, as if Jeremiah had jabbed him with a stick. *"No sé,"* he whispered.

Jeremiah reached over and put a hand on his shoulder, gripped hard. Ramon had told him how Teo's parents had died in a *coyote*'s locked and abandoned van with six other illegals. Only the infant Teo had survived. A miracle, Ramon had told him. Jeremiah put the truck into gear and bumped back up to the jeep track, turning eastward, toward town. They skirted the main street and small scatter of residential homes, turning off to the north, following another jeep track through scrubby rangeland to the piece of land that Ramon was buying from his boss, Wallace Robeson. An antelope crossed in front of them, eyes reflecting greenly as the headlights froze it, then vanishing into the darkness with a flash of brown and white. The driveway to Ramon's house was marked by a battered mailbox on a cottonwood post anchored in a heap of rock. The house itself was small, some homesteader's hand-built effort. Sun had silvered the warped boards and rusty sheet metal roofed it.

Before they had even reached the house, a dark shape moved on the rickety porch that shaded the south-facing door. Teo's grandmother, Ramon's mother. His mouth suddenly drier than the desert could make it, Jeremiah killed the engine. Teo was already climbing out, moving slowly, as if something might break if he hurried. He walked over to the small, straight woman in the faded dress, speaking softly, his voice trembling. The old woman raised her head, her eyes unreadable in her weathered face, veiled in shadows. Then she covered her face with hands curved like claws, and the sound of grief she made raised the hairs on Jeremiah's neck.

Teo took her arm, and with an ageless maturity led her back into the dark house. Neither of them turned to look at Jeremiah.

Jeremiah turned the truck around and retraced his path toward town. He had rented a room by the month at the grimy little motel in the center of town, but the thought of sleeping indoors tonight in the stuffy room that smelled of cigarettes and old sex nauseated him. He turned onto the main street and pulled around the bulk of the tiny City Hall to park outside the sheet-metal and brick entrance with the fading sign: Sheriff's Department. Light seeped through the grimy glass and bars of the single window. Someone

peered through the peephole when he knocked on the door. Jeremiah waited, and it finally swung open.

"I figured I was gonna hear from you." Deputy Jamison stood aside as Jeremiah entered. An inner door, handleless, formed a sort of air lock into the three rooms that formed the sheriff's office and jail. The two barred cells were empty, the metal bunks bare. A mouse skittered across the concrete floor and vanished behind one of the seatless johns in the cells. Concrete-block walls sweated musty humidity, and the air was thick and stale.

"Coffee?" Jamison hefted a pot, a mug in his other hand.

Jeremiah nodded, accepted the chipped dimestore mug with the permanent stain around its inner rim.

"We'll send the body to the M.E. in the morning." Jamison tilted back in his chair, his eyes on a faded rodeo calendar on the wall. "He sure looks like somebody who died of thirst to me. I seen enough of 'em. How many days did the kid say he'd been gone?"

"Five." Jeremiah sat down in the single straight chair opposite the desk, eyes on the wisps of steam curling from the mug.

"M.E.'s gonna find out he died of thirst. Bet you ten." Jamison's voice was lazy, but his eyes flicked sideways toward Jeremiah, quick as a lizard scuttling across a hot rock.

Jeremiah nodded and picked up his mug. "He might. You know, if you hadn't run into Teo and me, what would've happened? Just another poor sucker trying to cross."

"You're sayin' something kind of ugly here."

"I guess." Jeremiah smelled the burned bitterness of the coffee, set it back on the desk untouched. "Who doesn't like Ramon?"

"Good question." Jamison shrugged, frowning, his eyes thoughtful. "I called Robeson, his boss. According to him, he's a real gem of a foreman. Hell, he told me he sold some land to him."

It wasn't land Wallace Robeson cared much about, Jeremiah guessed, rocky and poor range. But Ramon had known there was water there and Robeson didn't.

"His mother was housekeeper for Robeson's dad. She took care of the old man after he had his stroke, up until he died." Jamison pulled a crumpled pack of Marlboros from his shirt pocket, shook one out. "Ramon didn't come out here until she took in the baby. He was in California. Maybe this has got to do with California."

"Seen any strangers around lately?" Jeremiah drawled. "That was a long time ago."

"Some things last a long time." Jamison exhaled a drifting cloud. "I can't believe those damn college kids out there. Jeeze, don't they grow brains anymore? Maybe they figure because it's a wildlife refuge it's like a big park. With running water and campsites. Idiots." He dragged on his cigarette, scowling. "If they don't die of

thirst, some crosser will knife 'em for their hundred-dollar hiking boots."

Unlikely, Jeremiah thought. The time somebody broke a window in his truck, all they had taken was the water jug. They'd left the expensive digital camera on the floor of the cab, undisturbed. He hoped they had made it through. Tired clear to his bones suddenly, Jeremiah got to his feet. "Thanks for the coffee." He carried the cup to the small grimy sink, dumped it out, and rinsed it.

"I'll let you know what I find out," Jamison said, propping both boot heels on the desk in front of him.

Jeremiah let himself out. The lights were off in the motel down the street. He fingered his room key, then got into his truck and drove down Main Street and away from town. When he was far enough out, he left the truck near a lone saguaro and hiked out onto the *bajada* with his bedroll and pack. The moon gleamed like a silvery sickle, razor-edged, and the ancient paths worn in the sand converged in the distance, leading to water, to life.

He drove back up the road to Teo's home in the bright glare of morning, the air blowing in through the window already hard with heat. Nothing stirred when he pulled up in front of the gray, slab-sided house. A lizard skittered from the brief shade of the porch and insects churred. His footsteps grated on the gravelly soil as he walked up the path to the front door. It stood ajar. "Teo?" Jeremiah tilted his head to listen, but no stir answered his call. He stepped onto the warped boards of the porch, the planks sinking slightly beneath his weight, groaning softly to themselves as he knocked. "Teo?"

A rickety table and chair stood in the center of the room. A propane burner with a black iron pot on it stood on a scabby bureau drawer at the side of the room. Wood ticked in the increasing heat. Jeremiah left the empty house and drove into town. The Fish and Game contract nudged at him. He should take a shower, get some breakfast, and, if he couldn't find Teo, head back out into the refuge again. But as he turned down Main, he spied Jamison on the sidewalk, in front of City Hall. He waved, and Jeremiah pulled over to the curb.

"You want to come along?" Jamison flicked his cigarette butt into the street. "I'm heading out to where I found Montoya." He looked up and down the street, empty in the wash of heat and light except for a scrawny yellow dog lounging beneath a parked pickup. "Medical examiner called this morning. He died of thirst, about a day and a half ago. Heat. Exposure—the usual. Had a bruise on his head, took a pretty good clip." He looked down thoughtfully at the smoldering butt on the softening asphalt. "M.E. said he'd been tied up. For a long time. Gagged, too." He

stepped off the curb and ground the butt out with his boot heel. "Hell of a thing," he said, and spat.

They drove out into the *bajada* in the Sheriff's Department truck, the four-wheel-drive rig slithering through soft sands and jolting across hard rocky shoals. Bunch grass, saguaro, prickly pear, and ocotillo patched the dun land with stubborn life. When rain chose to walk here, flowers would bloom in what seemed to be hours, yellow spiny daisy, purple aster, and broom snakeweed. Jeremiah stared at the landscape as it wheeled slowly by, not really seeing it. "Teo—Ramon's nephew—he said something about a treasure," he said at last.

Jamison gave him a sharp look, then went back to wrestling the rig through soft sand that threatened to bog them down.

"Ramon was going to L.A. to borrow money to find it. I don't think he meant some kind of treasure-map scam."

Jamison grunted, but didn't say anything until they'd cleared the sand and climbed a low ridge of rocky ground. "Haven't heard of any treasure around here. Story like that would get around fast." He turned off the engine and the truck filled instantly with the sibilant rasp of the wind. "Right there," he said, getting out. "By that pile of rock."

Jeremiah followed the deputy as he walked over to the rocks carrying a roll of yellow crime-scene tape, careful to stay in Jamison's tracks. The deputy hadn't been careful on his last trip out here. Neither had the college kids who had found Ramon. Footprints scuffed the oddly smooth and sandy ground around a faint impression that might have once been occupied by a stretched-out body. Ramon had died on one of the ancient paths. Jeremiah lifted his head, staring into the shimmering heat in the direction the body had faced. "He was heading to that canyon." He nodded. "There's water there, way back in a crack in the rock."

Jamison cursed once under his breath and began to string the tape around the impression. The neon-yellow strip fluttered in the wind, obscenely bright, out of place in this tan and ochre land. Jeremiah took his eyes away from that so-close water and began to scan the ground where Ramon had lain. He had crawled, or rather dragged his body along for a while. Jeremiah walked slowly along the tortured track, all thought condensed to a knot of rage in his chest. Thirty yards. Fifty. He must have been at the brink of death when he'd been dumped out here. Jeremiah halted, then retraced his steps to look at the tracks behind Jamison's truck. "This is the truck you were driving yesterday, right?" he called back to the deputy.

"Just got the one."

"Looks like maybe somebody dumped him out in that wash, over there." Jeremiah pointed.

Jamison followed the blurred trail of terrible effort, then squatted to stare at the parallel marks of tires in the sand. He sucked his cheeks in thoughtfully. "Pickup, looks like. Why don't you just stay put for a minute, okay?"

Jeremiah leaned against the shaded side of the pickup, watching Jamison as the deputy began to comb the area. All softness of manner left him, as if he'd tossed aside a shirt before beginning to work. Bent over the ground, his face taut with concentration, he walked a slow spiral across the ground where Ramon had struggled and died, placing his feet lightly and carefully. Jeremiah was impressed in spite of himself.

"Three-quarter ton, I think." Jamison straightened. "Drove in and dumped him out, turned around and left. Before dawn, I bet. Figured he wouldn't make it through the day. Bring the truck." Without waiting for an answer, he began to walk back along the line of tire tracks, his pace leisurely, as if out for a stroll, eyes sweeping the ground ahead, his expression intent.

Jeremiah slid behind the wheel and started the truck, creeping along to the side in first gear as the deputy searched. After a half mile, the deputy reclaimed his truck and drove along beside the track, paralleling its twisting trail until, a little after noon, they crossed a jeep track and lost it.

"Bet you ten bucks he's heading straight back to town." Jamison's face was grim as they accelerated along the beaten track. "He sure doesn't act like he's worried about anyone following his tracks."

"Why should he be?" Jeremiah shrugged. "If those kids hadn't stumbled over Ramon, who would have found him?" There were plenty of human bones out there. Some were very old. Many were not. If he was found, months or weeks from now, who would guess that he wasn't just another unfortunate crosser who hadn't made it? Ramon had gone to L.A. If he vanished, it was there. Not here. "Who knew he was leaving town?" Jeremiah said out loud.

"Good question." Jamison fumbled a fresh cigarette from his pack, lit it with the dashboard lighter. "You want to ask Mama?" He shot Jeremiah a sideways look. "She doesn't like me much right now. I wouldn't give her her son's body."

"They weren't home." That bothered Jeremiah all of a sudden. Bothered him a lot. "Maybe we ought to go out there."

"You probably passed 'em. They were in the office most of the night," Jamison said shortly. "They wouldn't go home until I could give Maria a time to pick up the body."

Maybe so, but unease still nagged at Jeremiah as he parted with Jamison in town and headed back out to the house. A car was parked in the front yard this time, a battered green Galaxy that had seen many better years. Duct tape patched the front seat and

rock chips starred the dusty windshield. A twisted skein of beads and tiny carved wooden figures hung from the rearview, along with a cluster of dyed-pink feathers and beadwork on a silver keychain, like you saw for sale at rodeos. Teo stood in the front yard, throwing rocks at a clump of yucca with pinpoint accuracy and a lot of energy. He dropped the last rock onto the ground and came over to greet Jeremiah as he climbed out of his truck.

The change in Teo shocked him. He moved with an adult's measured cadence, aware of the present, seeing consequences in each action as moment passed to moment. He was no longer a kid.

Jeremiah felt a pang of sorrow.

"I thought you had gone out to map the water holes," Teo said, and his face told Jeremiah that he accepted that, that he expected nothing else.

"The deputy and I went out to where your uncle died." Jeremiah cleared his throat, not knowing how to speak to this boy who was no longer a child. "Someone killed him."

Teo regarded him without speaking, then turned his head slowly toward the house. Jeremiah could hear voices from within, women's voices, murmuring low and steady like doves in the evening. "The *curandera* came to say that the spirits here are angry at us." He frowned toward the house. "We should leave, she says. Or they will take me next. Ramon did not believe in the spirits." He fell silent, child and man struggling for a moment to occupy the same face. The man won, and he turned back to Jeremiah with a shrug. "We will go stay with my aunt," he said. "In Los Angeles."

"Teo, can we take a walk?" Jeremiah looked out at the broken land baking in the sun. "I need to talk to you."

They walked up from the house, angling into a wash, climbing over a tumble of boulders deposited by some long-ago flood. The entire desert had been shaped by water. Jeremiah turned to look back down the slope toward the *bajada,* seeing its history in the washes that cut like veins through the sunburned land. Every formation, every fold, had been created and shaped to carry water to where it wanted to go. "This is a land of water," he said aloud.

Teo looked at him, a spark of understanding in his dark eyes. Then he turned aside, climbing like one of the mountain sheep across tumbled rock, into a narrow crevice that led back into the rising flank of the hills. The seep was there, invisible in the heat of the day. Ramon had showed Jeremiah once. Because he was searching for water, and Ramon understood that search. Or maybe it was because Jeremiah left the water jugs where they could be seen in his caches. He had never been sure why Ramon seemed to regard him as someone to trust.

They had squatted as the sun set, watching the narrow crack of

blackness in the rock. Slowly, the sand in front of it had darkened as the night cooled. When Jeremiah put his palm against it, he felt moisture. Then, he had heard the tiny chuckle of water freeing itself from the soil. As the moon rose, the light had sparkled on a thread of water winding through the sandy bottom of the miniature canyon. The slim silvery shapes of fish had darted through the crystal water, ghostlike in the pale illumination of moon and stars.

This time of day, there was nothing but dry sand and a crevice at the rock, swarming with bees. Jeremiah slid his hand into the gap in the stones, reaching. Bees clambered in his hair, sipping at the sweat on his forehead, confused by this obstacle to their flight. Shoulder pressed to the sun-hot stone, he strained and felt his fingertips brush water. The cool liquid sent a ripple of excitement down his spine, just as the *tinaja* had done yesterday.

"This is the treasure." Teo's tone was flat. "This is why he went to borrow the money. It is for water. This is why he was killed."

Jeremiah withdrew from the crack, his fingers relinquishing that link with water reluctantly. He shook his head, scattering bees who circled then dived into the crack. "Maybe." But it didn't feel right. And who would kill him for it? Robeson, the rancher, had enough water, pumped from a lucky hit on a good-sized aquifer. "Did he say anything else about treasure? Did he say anything about meeting someone?"

"No." Teo deposited a confused bee on the lip of the crevice. "There was no one."

They walked back down together, and as they drew closer to the sagging house, Teo hesitated briefly. Jeremiah followed his gaze, saw the big maroon pickup with the stock rack parked beside his truck.

"*Señor* Robeson," Teo said.

The rancher, in work-worn jeans and a faded plaid shirt, was just leaving the house as Jeremiah and Teo approached. Graying hair cut short and a weathered face testified to a life spent in the desert. He nodded and put his hat on, holding out a hand to Teo. "I'm sorry," he said. "Your uncle was a good man, and I'll miss him."

Teo shook his hand solemnly, man to man.

He turned to Jeremiah, skin crinkling around eyes and mouth as he smiled. "You must be the geologist fellow. I'm Wallace Robeson. I was just telling your grandmother," he spoke again to Teo, "that I'm returning all the money your uncle put down on this place. No sense in my keeping it, since you're not going to buy this after all. I wouldn't have charged him rent to live here, Maria. The money belongs to you."

"*Gracias, señor,*" Teo's grandmother murmured, weeping, from

the doorway. She had pulled a black shawl over her head and her arms curved over her slack breasts, as if she held an infant there. A woman stood beside her, younger, maybe thirty, with a rich, sturdy figure and an oval face full of presence and power. She had one hand on the older woman's arm, and to Jeremiah it seemed that the gesture spoke not so much of comfort as possession.

She must be the *curandera,* he guessed, purveyor of fortunes, advice, charms, and medicines. Her youth surprised him, not to mention her beauty. She looked like the portrait of some landowner's daughter from old Spain. She acknowledged his scrutiny with a single lift of an eyebrow that suggested she read minds. Jeremiah felt himself blush as he looked away.

"If there's anything you need, Maria, you just tell me." Robeson was getting into his pickup now. "Nice to meet you, son," he said to Jeremiah. "Drop by for dinner sometime. I'd like to hear what you do out there in the desert."

"*Señor* Robeson." Teo spoke with the grave voice of his newly acquired adulthood.

The rancher paused, his hand on the open pickup door. "Yes?" He was mildly impatient now, eager to be on his way.

"I will pay for the land." He regarded the older man steadily. "That is what my uncle wished."

Robeson looked incredulous, then as if he wanted to laugh. Instead, he cleared his throat, his eyes sliding toward Teo's grandmother, who was murmuring with the *curandera.* "Why don't you talk to your grandmother," he said politely. "We can discuss the contract later. Ramon was paying me two hundred and fifty dollars a month, you know. On the first of every month." He smiled at Teo, his impatience on hold, his expression kindly. "If you want to do it, that's fine. But I can't give the land away. You understand?"

"I understand." Teo's expression didn't falter. "I will have the payment for you."

The rancher shot a brief curious glance in Jeremiah's direction, then moved his shoulders in a tiny shrug and closed the pickup door. As he backed the pickup around and departed, the young woman spoke softly and rapidly to Teo's grandmother, tossing her head and shooting a brief angry glance at Teo. Her words disturbed the old woman, but she merely shook her head, her expression suddenly stubborn. The *curandera* shrugged and walked across the yard with her head high, giving Teo a brief pitying look as she passed. Without another word, she got into her car and drove away.

"I'm not going back out into the desert for a couple of days." Jeremiah looked down into Teo's unreadable eyes. "I'll be down in the motel. If you need anything, come get me."

"Gracias," Teo said with gravity.

He would not ask. There was nothing to ask for. Except for the two hundred and fifty dollars that would be due in two weeks' time and for many months after that. Feeling defeated, Jeremiah drove back into town, parking in the motel lot, but walking over to the sheriff's office. Jamison was there, and he wondered briefly if the deputy lived there.

Jamison looked up from the grimy keyboard of an out-of-date computer. "Robeson dropped by. He says he's gonna give Ramon's payments back to the family. He also said that this guy who used to work at the ranch owed Ramon a bunch of money. Ramon fired him a couple of weeks ago." He sounded relieved. "I'm checking it out. I heard he got a job on a ranch near Sells. I called the deputy out there. He's going to go talk to the guy."

"I guess that's a nice simple answer," Jeremiah said.

Jamison flushed, his eyes fixed on the wall above Jeremiah's head. "I want to tell you something. I got a call from the sheriff. He was real anxious to get this case closed. You want anything else?"

"I guess not." Jeremiah left the office, longing for the clean heat of the desert. He should probably get on with his contract. Let Jamison go find his ranch hand. Teo and his grandmother would go out to L.A. to live with Teo's aunt. Not his business.

He let himself into his motel room, greeted by hot, still air, thick with the smell of old cigarette smoke and stale sheets. Pulling open the ochre drapes, he sneezed, then cranked the single window open. The yellow chenille bedspread didn't quite mask the faint sag in the center of the bed. He went into the bathroom meaning to take a shower, but instead he washed his face and hands with tepid water that smelled faintly of chlorine and metal pipes, pulled on a clean shirt, and left the motel once more. Hesitating on the sidewalk in front of the motel, he turned left, toward the Main Street Cafe and Lounge sign halfway down the block. At night, blue buzzing neon spelled out the name and the lounge was full of men with jeans and boots and women with upswept country-western hair, playing pool and drinking, laughing loudly in a drifting haze of cigarette smoke.

This afternoon, the lunch rush was over and the varnished wooden tables were empty except for a couple of old men drowsing over the paper and a cup of coffee by the front window. A weathered woman with aggressively auburn hair, dressed in the cafe's uniform of dark green slacks, pale green ruffled apron, and ivory blouse, was filling plastic salt and pepper shakers on the service counter. "Sit anywhere," she called, efficiently tipping salt from a quart pitcher.

Jeremiah sat, enduring the brief but thorough examination by the window coffee-drinkers. A swamp cooler tinged the relative cool with a faint hint of old puddle and he looked up as the

auburn-haired waitress appeared with the laminated menu and an order pad. He took it, looking at it without really seeing it. "Can I get bacon and eggs this late?" he asked.

"Why not?" She tossed her head, pretty in a quiet way, and just too old to be called young. "Barney'll gripe, but he doesn't have anything else to do back there except read his comic books. Coffee?"

"Thank you." He handed her the menu. "Black is fine."

She retreated to the pass-through, exchanging a few quick words with the invisible cook, ending with another head toss. In a moment she was back with a glass carafe of coffee. "You're lucky. I just made a fresh pot for the help." She plunked down a thick white mug and splashed the dark liquid into it. "You're the guy out mapping the desert or whatever."

"That's me." He looked up at her, raised his mug in a small salute. "Mapping water holes, actually."

"Montoya's kid has been hanging around with you. Our deputy says somebody killed his uncle. He didn't say how." She pulled a second mug from her apron pocket, filled it from the pot, then slid uninvited into the seat across from him. "I'm taking a break, Barney," she hollered in the direction of the kitchen. "Hit the bell when the order's up."

An inarticulate grumble answered her along with the clash of pots and pans.

"Did somebody really kill him?" Her eyes were on his face.

"Yes." They were hazel, Jeremiah noted, with flecks of green.

"Bastards." She turned away, her lips thinning. "Teo's a nice kid. What the hell's he going to do now?"

"He told me that he and his grandmother are going to live in L.A.," Jeremiah said carefully.

"What kind of life is he going to have in L.A.?" The waitress turned back to him, her eyes angry. "He'll grow up with the *barrio* gangs, maybe get himself shot or end up on drugs. His uncle was going to send him to college. He dropped in here when he was in town and he talked about the kid. He wanted Teo to make something of himself, and he could, too." Another head toss. "He worked for me, Teo, scrubbing floors and windows, hauling garbage and stuff. Good kid. So what's going to happen to him?"

Jeremiah drew back at the accusation in her voice. "I don't know." He hesitated, taken by surprise by the turmoil of his own feelings. "I'm going to stay in touch with him," he said slowly, realizing that he'd decided this sometime in the past twenty-four hours. "I'll make sure things work out somehow." The promise scared him, coming out of nowhere. Too late to withdraw it now.

The waitress stared at the table, her shoulders suddenly bowed, her teeth denting her lower lip. When she raised her head, a

shadow had darkened her eyes, dimming the green. "You need to go talk to Tom Burns," she said. "Across the street, just east of City Hall. He's a lawyer." The bell dinged from the pass-through and she got up quickly. Without saying anything more, she whisked onto the table an oval stoneware platter mounded with a pile of crispy hashbrowns nestling two perfect fried eggs and two strips of crisp bacon. A stack of toast on a separate plate and a steel-lidded jar of strawberry jam followed the platter. The waitress refilled his coffee, totaled his check, and laid it on the table beside his cup. "Tell him I sent you," she said. "April." And she vanished into the kitchen.

The eggs really were perfect, with creamy yolks and a crisp brown lace at the edges. The hashbrowns hadn't come from a box. But Jeremiah barely tasted the food, his mind on Teo, his head spinning with the promise he had just made. Not to a waitress, but to himself. To Teo. It scared hell out of him.

Leaving a generous tip with the price of his meal, he made his way past the drowsing old men and out into the pounding heat of afternoon. He found the office across the street: *Tom Burns, Attorney at Law* had been lettered neatly on the weathered door whose russet paint was beginning to blister in the sun. Climbing a narrow flight of dusty wooden stairs, he found himself in a wooden vestibule, facing a glass-paned door. This one said: *Come in. Bienvenido.* When he pushed the door open, he found a stocky man in shirt-sleeves laying out poker hands on a tan legal file amidst a desktop sea of files, paper-clipped stacks of papers, and brightly colored Post-it Notes.

"April wins." He scooped up the cards, tapped them neatly into a box, then ran a hand through thinning brown hair. "She said you were on your way over. I bet her five bucks you wouldn't show."

"This town really is a fishbowl, isn't it?"

"Sweetwater?" He shrugged, got to his feet, and offered a hand. "Yeah. It is. Tom Burns. You're the naturalist."

"Geologist." Jeremiah looked at him warily. "Jeremiah Apple. So what did April want you to tell me?"

"That Ramon Montoya made a will, probably," Burns said cheerfully. "Which I can't really discuss with you, of course. He's got a sister in Los Angeles, and there's his mother. But he was really set on that nephew of his going to college. So if I didn't know any better, I'd say he'd have left anything of value—like maybe land—to Teo." Burns threaded his way between gray file cabinets stacked with dusty cardboard files to a water dispenser in the corner. "Funny. He decided just a week ago to make that will. Left me a few things to keep for him, too. Water?" He waved a paper cup in Jeremiah's direction.

"Thanks." Jeremiah drank the cool, tasteless water, eyeing the

smiling lawyer, suppressing a strong desire to punch him. "Have you talked to Jamison about this?"

"Not yet." The lawyer's smile didn't change, but his eyes narrowed. "Little towns like this, they got their own power structure. You got the big dog. Everybody else knows their place. You want to live here, you stick to your place." He glanced at his watch. "I gotta go down and see if the mail's here yet." He reached over to his desk, flipped open the file he'd been playing cards on. "I'll be right back."

Jeremiah listened to the lawyer's footsteps clattering down the stairs. Slowly he crossed to the desk, glanced down at the folder. The typed and notarized land contract lay on top, signed by Ramon and Robeson. A paper-clipped stack of receipts for the payments lay beneath it. Besides the contract, the folder contained a life-insurance policy issued a year ago. It wasn't a big policy. Jeremiah picked up the printed certificate. It would pay off the land contract with a little left over. The beneficiary was Teo. A grimy square of white notebook paper lay beneath the policy. A phone number had been written in meticulous black strokes on the blue-lined paper. It included an extension number. Jeremiah found a pen and wrote the number on the inside of his wrist. Burns's heavy tread clumped up the stairs, and he slipped the papers quickly back into the folder.

"No mail," the round-faced little lawyer announced cheerfully. "Must be late. Was there anything else you wanted?"

"Who's the big dog here, Mr. Burns?"

"I wouldn't know." The lawyer's eyes slid away from his. "You have a nice day now, you hear?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Burns," Jeremiah said through gritted teeth. "I'll leave you to your work, now." He closed the door gently, glancing at the polished and well-used mail slot in its center, then clattering down the narrow stairs. Outside, distant thunderheads churned up into the western sky, gray and ominous as mushroom clouds. Rain fell somewhere out there, recharging the *tinajas,* drowning any creatures unlucky enough to be downstream in a wash when the roaring wall of rocks, silt, sand, and water scoured new channels for itself.

He went back to his stuffy motel room and took his shower, standing under the cool, chlorinated water for a long time. When he got out, he dialed an outside line on the pink princess phone beside the bed, sweat filming his skin as the water from the shower evaporated.

You have reached Aurora Mining, a woman's voice announced. *If you know your party's extension, please enter it now.*

The hairs on his neck prickling, Jeremiah touched the numbers of the extension.

"Ron Smith here." The voice was gruff, middle-aged.

"Hello, I'm calling about Ramon Montoya, and your interest in his land here in Sweetwater, Arizona."

A long silence hummed through the line. "What did you say your name was?" The voice had gone wary.

"Jeremiah Apple. I'm a friend of his family."

"Mr. Apple, you have to understand that I can't discuss business matters with a stranger who just happens to call my office."

"Montoya was murdered, Mr. Smith. Did you know that?"

Another silence. "I don't know who you are, or what you're talking about." The voice had gone cold now, flat with decision. "I'm sorry you wasted your time." With a click, the line went dead.

Jeremiah set the receiver gently back on the cradle. He put on clean clothes, then went back out into the searing afternoon heat. It bothered him more in town than it did in the open desert. He wondered briefly why that was as he started down the block. Across the street, a woman emerged from the small drugstore, a list in her hand, her expression preoccupied. The *curandera.* She walked quickly up the street, then climbed into a dusty red pickup. *Flying J Ranch* was stenciled on the side in black letters, barely readable beneath a coat of ochre dust. Sacks of feed and three salt blocks filled the bed.

The Flying J Ranch was Robeson's.

He knew who the big dog was. Jeremiah turned around and walked back to the sheriff's office. The door was ajar, but the office was empty. Jeremiah looked around, knowing he should wait, thinking it might be important not to wait. He found a pen on the cluttered desk, pulled a torn envelope from the overflowing wastebasket.

Talk to Ron Smith, he wrote on the envelope's back. *Time to choose sides.* He added the number and extension from his wrist, dropped the note onto the only clear spot on the desk, and left the office, forcing himself to walk across the street to the motel. He wanted to run. He opened the door to the oven of his pickup cab and hesitated. A folded piece of paper lay on the seat. This was a day for leaving notes. Jeremiah unfolded it, the hairs prickling on the back of his neck again.

Señor Sherimia, I am afraid. I am at Sheep Rock. I will wait.

Sherimia. That was how Teo pronounced his name. The letters were printed in the carefully formed hand of a student, the i's neatly dotted. Jeremiah stared at it, his gut churning. A miniature dust devil twisted briefly across the corner of the parking lot, momentarily lofting a confetti flurry of cigarette butts and candy wrappers. Jeremiah shoved the note into his pocket and waited only long enough to fill the water jugs and toss his desert pack into the truck bed.

Sheep Rock was an outthrust of rock due west of where Ramon had been found. It was where he had been heading as he died. Jeremiah drove west through town, past the empty sheriff's office, heading out into the *bajada*. A few thunderheads towered far to the north, dumping their precious water into the network of canyons and washes that penetrated the mountains there. Because of those distant rains, he didn't dare take the wash that would lead him straight to Sheep Rock. The risk of a flood on its way from that rain was too great. Instead, Jeremiah turned off the jeep track he was on, bumping across the parched land, circling southward and watching for dangerous pockets of soft sand.

It took him a long time to pick his way cautiously to the hump of Sheep Rock. Shadows streaked the sand from the tangled skeletons of ocotillo and a lone sentinel saguaro. Jeremiah parked the truck at the edge of the tumbled boulders that centuries of water had levered from the face of the cliff. "Teo?" He cupped his hands around his mouth, but the emptiness swallowed his voice.

Cautiously, Jeremiah picked a way through the rock. He scrambled up one boulder, but there was nothing to see except his truck, baking in the sun. To the north, the wash was visible as a sharp-edged gash in the dun soil. He slid down to the ground and called Teo again. Ears straining, he rounded the spill of an old slide and stopped short. Teo lay sprawled in the shadows cast by the descending sun, his face slack, eyes closed. A bright trickle of crimson decorated his forehead.

Throat tight, Jeremiah sprang to his side, fingers searching for a pulse at the angle of Teo's jaw, relief surging into his throat as the shallow rise and fall of the boy's chest registered.

"Stand up."

The command banished that relief, replaced it with gut-deep cold. Jeremiah froze, his hands on Teo's limp body, searching the shadows between the boulders.

"Now, Mr. Apple." Robeson emerged from a crack of deeper shadow between two boulders, a squat automatic in his hand.

"The big dog." Jeremiah straightened slowly, fear crawling in to replace the cold.

"Pick up the boy. Take him back to your truck." The small mouth of the pistol looked wide as a train tunnel. Jeremiah had a hard time dragging his eyes away from it. Robeson made a small impatient movement with his lanky body and Jeremiah squatted, taking Teo by an arm and rolling the boy's limp weight onto his shoulders. Teo's muscles quivered and he moaned faintly.

"Easy, kid," Jeremiah murmured. Staggering beneath the boy's weight, the skin of his back crawling with the unseen pressure of that pointing gun barrel, Jeremiah made his way slowly back to his truck, skirting the boulders he'd clambered over.

"So what is your game here?" He stumbled and paused to catch his breath, feeling Teo come awake on his shoulders, the slack muscles tightening. "Easy, easy," he breathed, too low for Robeson to hear him. "You killed Ramon," he said aloud. "If two more bodies turn up, you think people are just going to shrug? Jamison already suspects you." Maybe. He threw it in for effect, anyway.

"Move." Robeson chuckled grimly as Jeremiah trudged forward again. "No one is going to find your bodies. Too bad those stupid kids were out stumbling around. A few more days and it wouldn't have mattered. Just another stupid crosser."

Jeremiah felt Teo twitch and tightened his grip warningly.

"You took the kid out into the desert again and the two of you got lost. We'll all look for you. Who knows? The sheriff might even decide that you killed Ramon, too. He's a reasonable man. We don't know anything about you, after all. You might have had drug dealings with Montoya in California. Maybe you came here for revenge."

"You must give some pretty good political donations around here." The truck was just ahead. What did Robeson plan to do? Shoot them there, where he wouldn't have to carry them? Or take them somewhere else first? Death was certainly written on Robeson's face. "Get ready to run," he breathed, his head drooping, close to Teo's ear. "Up into the rocks." Teo's muscles tightened briefly, although his head still hung slack and his eyes were closed. He had heard.

"Come on." Robeson's voice prodded. "You're almost there."

Jeremiah stumbled again and went down, not needing to fake the grunt of pain as his knee cracked onto rock. He slumped, dumping Teo's body facedown onto the sand. "Run!" He came up in a spinning turn, pain stabbing through his injured knee, flinging fistfuls of gritty sand into Robeson's surprised face. Robeson howled and his gun roared as Jeremiah scrambled into a limping run. He pitched forward into the sand, scrambled to his feet again, staggering now, heading for the spill of rock broken from the cliffs. The gun roared again. A fleeting shadow ahead was Teo, sprinting like a jackrabbit, bent double. He had come here with Ramon. He would know how to find a way back to the *tinajas*. There were hiding places there, and water.

The ground looked funny, too far away and wavery, as if he were seeing it through a layer of clear water. As if in a dream, he seemed to be running in slow motion and the air didn't want to fill his lungs. Jeremiah looked down, feeling only a faint surprise at the bright red blood soaking his shirt. No pain. Just blood. His foot missed the distant ground completely and he fell forward, into space, still moving in slow motion. Thunder rumbled, a distant growl. Rain, Jeremiah thought vaguely. Good thing he'd stayed out

of the wash. Didn't want to drown. The sky darkened suddenly, but when he squinted, trying to see the clouds, he found a face floating over him.

Jamison.

"You could have come down the wash," the deputy said. "Storm was in the wrong place to flood it. Good thing you dropped that note, so I knew where you were headed." He pulled Jeremiah's shirt open.

"Teo?" The word emerged as a whisper. He couldn't speak any louder than that. It required too much effort.

"He's getting my first-aid kit out of my truck." Jamison's lips tightened. "He's fine. I was on the floor of your damn cab, baking. I heard it all."

The storm had arrived after all. The sky was getting dark in earnest. Jeremiah heard running footsteps approaching. "Robeson?" He tried to sit up, had forgotten the rancher and his gun, which was a stupid thing to do.

"He's dead. This is going to get me into a hell of a lot of trouble." Jamison pushed him back down. "Thanks, Teo," he said, turning to reach for something.

The storm clouds opened up, and the first drops of rain stung his face, bringing darkness.

He woke up in a hospital in Tucson, with tubes running into his chest and beneath the sheets. A harried-looking doctor came in and told him he was lucky: The bullet had narrowly missed his liver and several major blood vessels. The Fish and Game department sent a businesslike woman with short blond hair, a linen suit, and a cell phone who told him that he could take his time completing his contract. They were waiving the deadline. Jeremiah had a feeling that she mostly wanted to make it clear that Fish and Game had nothing to do with this mess.

Fine by him.

Jamison showed up later to take a statement, carrying a paper sack with clean clothes from Jeremiah's motel room. To his surprise, Teo edged into the room behind him, wide-eyed and determined in this place of illness, blinking machines, and white sheets. His face lit up when he saw Jeremiah, and he came around the machines beside the bed to take his hand, careful of the IV tubing taped to the back.

"There's insurance money," Jeremiah told him. "To pay for Ramon's land. And I think some mining people want to buy it. That was the treasure Ramon meant." Not the water. Uranium, or copper, or gold. Something. College for Teo.

"I talked to *Señor* Burns," Teo said. "He is taking care of things."

"Ron Smith from Aurora Mining called the office right after you

spoke with him." Jamison dropped into the chair beside the bed, fished his crumpled pack of Marlboros from his pocket, regarded them with a sigh, then put them away. "He was pretty upset. Seems Robeson called him a few days ago and told him that Montoya had defaulted on the land contract and that he'd be the seller after all. So I went off to have a word with Burns." He gave Jeremiah a sharp stare. "I don't pick sides."

"I'm sorry," Jeremiah said slowly. "I was getting paranoid."

Jamison grunted. "I guess Robeson had gotten pretty used to thinking he could have his own way, whatever that was. I guess he didn't have much reason to think different, most of the time." The deputy gave him a sharp look. "I'm glad you dropped that note in your motel room. You were on your way out of town by the time I got back there. I took the wash and found Robeson's pickup parked there." He shrugged. "I went looking for you two and found your pickup just about the time you were coming back. So I ducked into the cab. If you hadn't acted like a fool hero, you wouldn't be here," the deputy said drily.

"If you'd told me you were there, I wouldn't have had to act like a fool."

"Next time, I'll let you know. We found the shed where Robeson kept Ramon. The housekeeper showed us. She's under arrest as an accessory." Jamison got to his feet and gripped Teo's shoulder briefly. "I'll wait for you outside," he said. "Then we'd better head back. It's a long drive."

"I am sorry." Teo stood and took Jeremiah's hand once more. "I wrote the note for you. *Señor* Robeson, he . . . said he would hurt . . ."

"It's all right." Jeremiah gripped his hand. "It's okay."

Teo looked down, frowning, then raised his head. "I walked out into the *bajada* last night," he said. "The moon was big, and I saw the paths. The ones you showed me—the ones the long-ago people made to water. I saw my uncle," he said, his dark eyes shining like windows into the desert night. "He waved to me."

Jeremiah nodded. He had glimpsed them sometimes—a suggestion of movement, a ripple in the night. People moving endlessly toward water. "He can be easy now," he told Teo. "He wanted you to go to college, and now you can go."

"Oh yes," said Teo. "I will." He started for the door, stopped, and looked back at Jeremiah. "When you are well, when you go back out into the desert, may I come?" he asked shyly. "I would like to learn more of what you do. I would like to do it, too."

"Sure you can come," Jeremiah said, meaning it. "There's always room for another geologist."

"See you," Teo said, and waved, and left.

Yes, Jeremiah thought, drifting toward sleep. A promise is a promise, and he would indeed see Teo. ●

Driver's Seat

by Ellery Queen

There were four Brothers brothers until Big Dave died. And then there were three, and that was a bad day for all of them. With Big Dave in the driver's seat there had never been any question of where they were going. The withdrawal of his guiding arm left Archibald, Everett, and Charlton Brothers steering with their noses. They were bound to land in a ditch sooner or later. Big Dave's widow saw to it that it was sooner. . . .

But that is the story.

It was the afternoon of the semiannual board meeting of The Four Brothers Mining Company. The widow had inherited her husband's quarter holdings in the closed corporation, so now—for the fourth consecutive time—she occupied Big Dave's big chair. And she almost filled it. She was a large young woman with long legs and very blond hair in albuminous swirls, and her figure was as rich and ornamented as a French pastry.

The three brothers did not mind her presence; it gave a fillip to what had always been a tedious necessity. Or, at least, Archibald and Everett did not mind; about Charlton it was difficult to say, for he had the mummified exterior and dyspeptic potential of a hot pepper drying on a wall. But Archibald was like a hairless Santa Claus, leanly ruddy and roaring, the nearly visible pack on his back crammed with long-legged blonde memories; and he amused himself by tossing his gusty gifts at Daisy Brothers across the board table as if she were his wife's upstairs maid and his wife were at Newport. Everett toyed with the widow typically, in smiling silence; he was a mouth-smiler, this Everett Brothers, with

Ellery Queen, editor, frequently published the work of Ellery Queen, writer. In fact, more than eighty short stories and radio plays bearing the Queen byline appeared in *EQMM* during Ellery Queen's tenure as editor. Many of these stories were reprints even then, and subsequent editors have continued the tradition of reprinting Queen. A few of the Ellery Queen stories were ghosted by other mystery writers, but this tale is the genuine article. . . .

cold gray skin and blunt eyes.

But the widow paid no attention to either Archibald or Everett; she did not even appear to be listening to the crabby nose tones of Charlton, who was presiding.

Until Charlton snapped, "If there's no further new business, I'll entertain a motion—"

Then Daisy Brothers looked away from the oil painting of Big Dave above Charlton's skimpy hair, and she said: "But there is."

Archibald stopped frisking, Everett's smile took on an edge of interest, Charlton raised his sandpapery brows almost audibly. They looked at one another as if the polished table had given tongue; and then they looked at her.

"The Four Brothers Mining Company was organized with one hundred shares of stock divided into four equal blocks," said Big Dave's widow. "That is, each of you and Dave put up twenty-five thousand dollars for twenty-five shares. Today the corporation's holdings are worth a hundred times the original investment."

"Hear, hear," roared Archibald.

"Yes, yes, Daisy," grunted Charlton, beginning to rise.

But Everett, still smiling, put his hand on his desiccated brother's arm.

"Since Dave's death," continued the young widow, "you three lads have gone haywire. My irresistible brother-in-law Archibald here, for instance, he's been taken to the cleaners by a big parade of cuties. Everett, you've gone over your wiseguy head in hock to the bookies and gamblers. And Charlton, you've got a headache to bellyache about for a change; without Dave to tell you what to do, you've lost your shirt in the stock market. And in the meantime your wives have kept throwing money around as if the company mines diamonds instead of coal.

"So for quite a while now each one of you has been in a nice deep hole. And for quite a while now each one of you has been trying to dig himself out by selling part of his stock in The Four Brothers Mining Company."

The brothers made little noises.

Daisy Brothers opened her bag and consulted a slip of paper. "Archibald, the great lover: Arch, you've sold nine of your twenty-five shares. Everett, the big brain: Ev, you've sold seven of your twenty-five. And little Napoleon—Charlton, I mean—you've sold ten of yours."

There was a silence. Then Archibald laughed. "I never knew a head went with those shoulders."

Everett said nothing, but his smile was thoughtful.

"So I wasn't the only one," rasped Charlton, glaring about at his brothers. "Daisy, what's the point?"

"In the original agreement you and Dave all signed," replied the

widow briskly, "there's a certain clause that was put in to prevent just what's happened. The clause says that if any partner in the corporation gets stock control, *he can buy out the others at the original cost of their stock.*"

The brothers jerked.

Charlton showed his spiked teeth. "What about it? No one's got stock control of the company!"

"Wrong, brother-in-law," said the sister-in-law. "The shares you three sold were bought through dummies . . . *by me.* Your ten, Charlton. Your seven, Everett. Your nine, Archibald. That's twenty-six shares I bought up from the three of you. And I own Dave's twenty-five. Add it up. It's fifty-one, and it gives me legal control.

"And," said the woman, very gently, "I'm exercising my rights under the agreement." She rummaged in her bag. "I have here," she said, "three certified checks. A sixteen-thousand-dollar check for your remaining shares, Archibald. An eighteen-thousand-dollar check for your remaining eighteen shares, Everett. And a fifteen-thousand-dollar check for your remaining fifteen shares, Charlton. Pony up that stock."

When Archibald found his voice, it came out blasting. "Sixteen thousand! Why, my sixteen shares are worth more than a million and a half! Do you think you can buy me out at one cent on the dollar?"

"I'll let your lawyer answer that question."

Charlton Brothers was purple to the tips of his ears. "Everett," he spluttered, "do you remember anything like that in the original agreement? Is this—is she right?"

Everett nodded, his eyes on the widow.

Charlton snarled. With his pale lips curled, he looked like an aroused vegetable. "Why, you cheap . . . ! You don't think you're going to get away with this!"

"Shut up, Charlton." Archibald came around the table to slip his arm about her shoulders. "Why don't you and I go somewhere, baby, and . . . talk this over?"

She got up so suddenly that the handsome brother almost lost his balance. "I'll give you three exactly one week to let your lawyers convince you that you'd be crazy to try to break that agreement in court. They'll tell you you haven't a prayer, but I guess you'll want to be told." She dropped the three checks into her bag, and turned to go.

But now Everett was on his feet, and he spoke for the first time. "One question, Daisy."

"Yes?"

"Why?"

Daisy Brothers leaned on the table, and its high gloss reflected something bitter, and triumphant, too. "Big Dave took me out of

the strip stable in the Boom Boom Club. He was a good businessman, Dave was. He knew a bargain when he saw one. He bought me for a two-buck license and a five-dollar bill to the J.P. and he always said I turned out the best deal he'd ever made. Well, he was right. He gave me respectability, and I gave him the ten happiest years of his life.

"And I'd have been happy, too—if not for you three and your grand dames. From the way you and your wives have treated me, anybody'd think Dave married a dead whale. No class. Didn't know all the forks. Took my degree at Roseland, and postgraduate work stripping in front of a bunch of drunks. It wasn't as if I didn't care. I tried, hard. I tried not to shame you. I even took lessons in how to come into a room without reaching for a zipper. But I was poison. . . . If it was just you jerks, I wouldn't have minded so much. But those high-class babes of yours really gave it to me, and that I couldn't take. For Dave's sake I couldn't take it. I was his wife, and his wife deserved to be treated by his family like a lady, even if she wasn't one. I made up my mind that if I ever got the chance to pay you back . . ."

Big Dave's widow straightened up, breathing as if she had been running. But when she spoke again, her voice flowed as evenly as a high-voltage wire.

"One week from today you three be at my house between two and three in the afternoon. With your stock."

Ellery found his father standing outside the David Brothers mansion on the East River. It had been raining since morning and Ellery had to splash through puddles on the driveway before he could join the Inspector under the porte-cochere.

"Was this trip necessary?" grumbled Ellery, shaking the rain from his hat. "And if so, why couldn't the taxi deposit me decently under the roof?" The protected part of the driveway was roped off.

"Tire tracks," said Inspector Queen. "I thought you'd want to sit in on this, Ellery. It's murder, it's nasty, and . . . I don't know."

Ellery perked up and looked at the tire marks. "Who, how, when, why, and so forth?"

"Mrs. Daisy Brothers, ex-club stripper. Stabbed to death between two and three this P.M. by one of her three brothers-in-law. I've got the whole story from her lawyer." And the Inspector told Ellery of the Four Brothers Mining Company board meeting of the previous week and Big Dave's widow's stock coup. "So I guess they found she was right when she told them they'd be wasting their time and money trying to beat her in court—and as a result she's lying in there in her library, still with the three certified checks, the deadest dame you ever saw. She was alone in the house—she'd given up all her servants when her husband died and she's been living here

ever since like a hermit, doing her own work."

"What about these tire marks?"

"Three cars rolled up here one at a time," said Inspector Queen with a sigh. "The marks identify the cars as a Cadillac, a Rolls-Royce, and a Chevrolet—and from the overlapping of the treads, they came in that order. The Caddy is a 'fifty-one town car belonging to the finance company—I mean Charlton Brothers; the Rolls is a secondhand job Everett Brothers picked up cheap in London last year; the Chevy is what Archibald Brothers runs around in when he's calling on his girlfriends or otherwise doesn't want to be noticed by some vulgar columnist.

"I've sweated the three gents and they've admitted coming here between two and three today, separately and alone, about fifteen–twenty minutes apart."

"And their stories are?" murmured Ellery.

"Identical. It's collusion, of course; they were all ready for me. They probably drew lots, and the brother who got tagged for the party is being covered up by the other two. Each one says she was already dead when he got here, and that he got scared and ran."

"They'd have to say that," said Ellery reflectively, "otherwise how would they account for their stocks not having been turned over to her? Let's have a look at the lady."

Big Dave's widow was a mess. Whichever brother had stabbed her with the hunting-knife letter opener from Big Dave's desk, he had wielded it with passion and without finesse, many times.

"But," as the Inspector remarked, "he wasn't out for a medal in technique. The things people do for money!"

"What's this?" Ellery had picked up a man's raincoat with the eraser end of a pencil. The raincoat was slightly damp, the lower part of the right sleeve was rain-soaked, and the front of the coat was smeared untidily and redly. It was of medium size, not new.

"We found it rolled up under that leather chair," said the Inspector. "She fought for her life and he got her blood all over his coat. Rather than risk being caught or even seen with the coat in this condition, he left it here."

"A bad mistake," said Ellery.

"You think so? You won't find any identifying marks, the pockets were cleaned out even of lint and dust, all three brothers owned raincoats like this at one time or other, and they all wear a medium size. Each one denies it's his coat, and each one says he can't produce his own coat because he discarded it long ago. So we don't get at him through elimination."

"There are other ways," remarked Ellery.

"Yes," said his father with a shrug, "we'll do a sweat, hair, and dust analysis, but they're not always conclusive. I have a hunch, son, we won't get any more out of the coat than we did out of the

knife, which doesn't show a print."

"I disagree."

"You see something I missed?" exclaimed Inspector Queen. "In the coat?"

"Yes, Dad. Something that indicates exactly which brother killed Big Dave's widow. And with nothing up my sleeve," said Ellery with a grin, "although with something definitely up his.

"Look at this coat. It's slightly damp from the rain, but the lower part of the right sleeve is rain-*soaked*. How did that part of the sleeve get soaked while the rest of the sleeve—in fact, the rest of the coat—merely got a little damp?

"The brothers came here separately, at different times, each alone in his car. It's rained all day. So the wearer of this coat drove a car in the rain. In driving a car in the rain, especially in city traffic, what do you habitually do which will get one of your coat sleeves wet?"

"Give arm signals for stops and turns . . . !" But then Inspector Queen looked puzzled. "But the driver always signals with his left arm, Ellery, and it's the right sleeve of this coat that's rain-soaked."

"Conclusion: This driver signaled with his right arm."

"But to be able to do that—" The Inspector stopped. Then he said, slowly, *"His car has a right-hand drive."*

"Charlton's Cadillac and Archibald's Chevrolet—American cars—left-hand drives," said Ellery, nodding. "But the other car is a Rolls-Royce—British; and what's more, a Rolls bought second-hand in London, so it has to have a right-hand drive. Indicating the owner of the Rolls—Everett Brothers.

"By the way, Dad, what's he look like?" ●

Old Tricks Do the Trick

by Stephen D. Rogers

They scooped up my canine,
Took off in a van.
They called making threats,
"Pay as fast as you can."
I said, "Put him on,"
I was no imbecile.
When I heard his sweet snort,
I commanded him, "Kill."

Art by Brian Rumbolo

Fun and Games at the Carousel Mall

by Tom Tolnay

Around 9:45 A.M. squadrons of automobiles began rolling into the acres of fresh-tarred parking lots that surrounded the Carousel Shopping Mall, the construction of which had been completed in the fall on a filled-in marsh near a confluence of three highways. By 9:50, the first wave of shoppers stood out in the frosty air, shivering, peering through the green-tinted, impenetrable glass doors. Just barely they could see vendors lined up along the tubelike tunnels, setting up trays of sugar-coated peanuts, salty pretzels, donuts with fifty kinds of fillings (one for each state in the Union), bags of buttered popcorn, gumdrops, and chocolates sold by the pound. Collectively the vendors served as a kind of buffer zone to slow down the army of shoppers that stormed the Carousel each morning.

By 9:55 many more automobiles were pulling up between the

yellow-painted lines, and the swelling crowds at the entrances were stirring impatiently, quoting out loud prices of sale items they had seen on television and in newspapers. High above each door was a weatherproof pivoting camera with a cyclopean glass eye that was continually feeding images of them to a windowless compound in the subbasement. Here dozens of video screens were monitored twenty-four hours a day by a rotating shift of security guards in dark blue uniforms and billed caps.

Above ground, the Carousel consisted of a massive rotunda with three floors that surrounded a spacious service area. All shops on each level radiated out from this center, and the front of each was restricted to the same width. This placed shops on relatively equal competitive footing, according to the developers, and gave each the appearance of being small enough to be friendly and unique, like a family-owned hometown store. (Every one of the shops, in fact, was part of an international retail conglomerate, with headquarters located far away, often in Japan or Germany.)

At precisely 10:00 A.M. the six doorways spaced evenly around the Carousel sprang open through the magic of an electronic timer. Shoppers swarmed onto the entrance ramps. While a few stopped at the snack vendors, most continued down into the tunnels. Along the walls, digitally-programmed advertising signs were flashing and passionate music was blaring from unseen speakers. Many of the children bounded ahead of their mothers, fathers, older siblings, grandparents. Several mothers called out to their fleeing offspring, *Meet me at Burger King at noon! I'll catch up to you at The Disney Store! Don't spend all your allowance on video games!* . . . The kids didn't look back, swiftly melting into the milieu of the mall.

Secretly the parents were glad. With the kids on their own they would be able to stroll around their favorite shops without constantly being nagged to buy a breast-feeding doll that produced "real" mother's milk or a laser gun that gave off "real" low-voltage shocks. Besides, they knew their children would be safe in the Carousel—if not here, then where could they be safe, the way

New York writer Tom Tolnay says his first love in fiction is the short story. He has published several crime-related stories with *EQMM* over the years, and produces non-genre stories for other national magazines. In 2001, he took first place in *Literal Latté*'s national short story contest with "The Ghost of F. Scott Fitzgerald." The story has since been made into a short film by Sea Lion Productions; the company plans to show it at film festivals this year.

things were going? Even out here in the suburbs, some schoolchildren were wearing bullet-proof vests beneath their sweaters to protect themselves against classmates who hid revolvers under their peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in cartoon-imprinted lunchboxes. And deadly stabbings were being committed on street corners over outrageously priced designer sunglasses.

The mother of one of the youngsters who had run on ahead entered the subterranean central area of the mall, glad to be inside where it was warm. Here she found herself surrounded by self-service purveyors of breakfast, lunch, and dinner—from scrambled eggs to pasta to tacos to hot dogs to egg rolls. The Carousel Shopping Mall, as its marketing corps pointed out repeatedly in its promotions, was "A Complete Shopping & Dining Experience—Fun & Games for the Entire Family!" The "Fun" referred to the clowns who roamed each floor handing out lollypops to the kids; visits from Santa Claus (armed with candy canes) and the Easter Bunny (packing jelly beans); plus a miniature carousel, which played nursery rhymes while carrying tots round and round. The "Games" referred to hourly drawings for door prizes---one could win anything from a free organ lesson to a free cosmetics analysis; as well as the battery of video games, where electronically devised, virtually real human beings would tear off each other's bodily parts (in color and stereophonic sound) at a cost of mere pocket change.

At the heart of the mall, the mother stopped to wait for one of the three cylindrical, high-speed elevators to descend. Because these conveyances were made entirely of glass, passengers were able to observe shops glittering stylishly around them as they were propelled upwards. Between the back-to-back elevators were "Customer Conveniences" such as restrooms, diaper-changing stations, information booth, maps of the mall, baby-stroller rentals, pay telephones, security office . . . depending upon the floor. On the top floor, stainless-steel water fountains had been installed. Shortly after the mall had opened, however, the water from the fountains had acquired a marshy odor, so a concession stand selling bottled soda, juices, and sparkling water had immediately opened nearby to make up for the inconvenience.

Soon the mother was swept away by one of the round elevators, and she emerged on the second level, where a tall man at a stall, standing erect in suit and tie, offered her a free cloth shopping bag if she would sign up for a Carousel credit card. *I already have a dozen credit cards,* she exaggerated, eyeing the carousel imprinted on the free bag. *But you don't have the one card that will take care of all your shopping needs in the Carousel Mall,* he said, and smiled. The mother hesitated, then said, *No, thank you, not today,*

and moved past him, vaguely disappointed at herself, and not noticing the momentary flash of anger that had passed over the salesman's face.

Entering the Yarn Barn, she inspected the sale items on a table up front, but none of the scattered craft kits—many were torn open and missing pieces—appealed to her. The deeper she moved into the shop, the wider it became, filling out its slice-of-pie shape, and she found herself surrounded by an ever-widening array of craft supplies and tools to make jewelry out of bottle caps and bird houses out of ice cream sticks. When she'd finished handing her credit card over to a pale, dull-eyed clerk, who dropped the block of candle wax and flowery quilted material into a plastic bag, she left the Yarn Barn with a sense of contentment and accomplishment.

Now she walked over to the housewares store, Kitchen Karma. Here she roamed among the gleaming pots and pans, the rolling pins of glass, marble, and wood, the cookie cutters in the shape of stars, daisies, and cows. Within half an hour she had purchased a set of dish towels imprinted with geese and a spatula with an apple-knobbed handle. Already she was looking forward to placing this new merchandise in a special cabinet at home with all the other items she had purchased the previous week, the previous month, but which—because she had so much to do—still had not been put to use. After drifting along several more aisles, however, it occurred to her that she had purchased the exact same items the week before. Her impulse was to go back to the checkout counter and request a refund. But then she realized that possessing these duplicates would give her a good excuse to return to the Carousel in one or two days instead of three or four.

As the morning wore on, and after the mother had slipped her credit card out of her purse several more times, she began to feel tired, and she wondered what time it was getting to be: She'd neglected to wear her wristwatch, an anniversary gift her husband had purchased at the Carousel Mall. Unable to find a clock, she strode over to The Clock Works. None of its mantlepiece or tabletop clocks displayed the same time, however, and she wondered why none of the shops was equipped with a wall clock. It's almost as if they don't want us to know when it's time to go home, she reflected, a thought that struck her as amusing. At last she stopped a woman and asked for the time. Warily the woman glanced at her watch and muttered, *Eleven fifty-six,* then fled into the nearest shop.

The mother returned to the central service area and while she waited with dozens of others for the elevators, the circular lights overhead flickered momentarily. Just then she noticed she was munching on a large chocolate chip cookie, though she didn't remember having purchased it. Not wanting to spoil her appetite

for lunch, and having put on a few pounds lately, she stuffed the remainder of the cookie into a filled-up waste can, which was surrounded by a spillover of crumpled napkins, soda cans, paper plates with pizza stains, and gnawed chicken bones. At last an elevator settled into position and she squeezed in.

In a few minutes she was standing at the wide-open doorway of Burger King. Unable to find her son, she took a place in the nearest line of customers to save time while waiting for him. In recent months she had been noticing that it took longer and longer to get served at fast-food outlets, slower really than ordinary coffee shops. But millions upon millions throughout the world were being fed by these franchises, so she knew they were doing the best they could for the public. Just as the mother reached the teenaged African-American order-taker at the counter, her son ran up to her.

What would you like to eat? she asked, straightening his baseball cap. The boy pointed to a picture of a cheeseburger deluxe, which came with a large french fries and a super-sized Coke. His mother ordered two of these "combos." When the meals were served, wrapped in foil and cardboard, along with white plastic forks sealed in tissue-thin plastic, mother and son wandered deeper into the interior to find a place to sit. But Burger King was jammed, as usual, and it wasn't until ten minutes later that they leaped into a booth moments before an elderly couple had been able to lay claim to the space. The white-haired, wrinkle-faced shoppers snarled, while the mother and son grinned triumphantly at them.

Unwrapping the foil, the mother took a big bite of her cheeseburger deluxe. All that shopping had made her hungry. That first bite made her realize, however, that they'd had to wait just long enough to make their lunch cold. Better than walking around famished, she thought, taking another bite. As she chewed through the bacon, cheese, lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, onions, ketchup, mustard, and mayonnaise that topped the burger, she was reminded that hamburgers, or slices of pizza, or hot dogs served in any of these national chains tasted exactly alike. Quality control, she thought.

Her son was picking listlessly at the fries, and his mother asked: *Why aren't you eating your burger?* He replied, *Just not too hungry,* staring at kids in the facing booth whose jaws were grinding the ground beef. This had happened during their last trip to the mall, and it made the mother mildly concerned. *Are you feeling sick?* she asked. *No, I just wanna get back to the video game I was playing—Death and Destruction at the Gates of Hell,* he said with a faint smile. *First eat your lunch,* his mother insisted. The boy looked glumly at the foil and cardboard food wrappers before him,

twisted his lips in distaste, then plucked a cold french fry out of the upright container, stuck it into his mouth, and seemed to swallow it whole.

Other parents and their offspring were wandering back and forth along the aisles, balancing burgers and beverages and shopping bags as they searched for seats. Not wanting them to have a cold lunch, too, and wanting to make her son happy, the mother gathered the remains of her hamburger and fries onto the brown plastic tray and told her son he didn't have to finish his lunch. *But you'll have to eat everything on your dinner plate tonight!* she admonished. Her son bounded off the seat and into the passing crowds outside Burger King. *Meet me at Carvel's on the second floor at three o'clock!* she called out, not quite sure he'd heard her.

Just as the mother was rising off the seat, a woman wearing a ski jacket and hiking boots, accompanied by two young girls wearing ski jackets and hiking boots, hopped into the booth, bumping her aside. She gave them a nasty look, but they only glared back at her insolently. Dumping the leftovers on her tray into the garbage can, the mother pushed her way out of the fast-food emporium. Feeling slightly queasy, and vaguely uneasy, she made her way through the expanding crowds, moving in the opposite direction to that her son had taken.

As the mother emerged from the elevator on the third level, a gang of "toughs" strode by. The young men had shaved heads and wore black denims, thick black leather belts, and heavy black boots. The young women wore black leotards or ragged-edged jeans with patches, and had silvery chains with skull amulets strung across their breasts; blue and red makeup was smeared like war paint over their ghostly white faces. Some were cursing loudly, a few smoked marijuana, and one couple kept bumping purposely into shoppers, causing the gang to laugh raucously.

Nervous, the mother waited until they had stormed by before wandering around the circular space awhile, finally entering Fashionable Fineries. Here placards announced several seasonal sales.

The prices struck her as high—higher, it seemed to her, than before the items had gone on sale. No, I'm just losing my memory, she thought with a smile. Feeling calmer again, she grazed among the cashmere sweaters and cotton bodysuits. Soon she became lost in fantasies of lingerie, picturing the transparent garments draped over her own plump body. *Wouldn't it be terrific,* she mused, *if I surprised my husband with a silky red negligee and brought some of the old spark back to our bed? Well, there's no time for that kind of thing anymore,* she admitted, *with him working such long hours and my own part-time job, just to keep up with the bills.* She let the negligee slip out of her fingers onto the counter.

By now she was feeling weary, as if she'd been harvesting corn in the fields since sunup. But it was not until she noticed the tiny digital clock readout in the register—she was purchasing two pairs of pantyhose for work—that the mother thought about the time: Three-thirty—*a half-hour late to meet my son!* It didn't seem possible that three hours had passed so swiftly.

At that moment, the lights went dim, and she noticed that it had grown chilly. Voices were rising in the corridors outside the shop.

Finding her way out of Fashionable Fineries, she headed toward the elevators and came upon hundreds of shoppers milling around, murmuring loudly, their hands and legs and heads in motion. Now she realized that one of the elevators was stalled between floors and its passengers were pounding hard on the glass as if trying to break through to get air. When the mother asked the clay-faced, skin-and-bones man beside her what had happened, he replied in rapid-fire phrases: *Credit card machines chewing up the plastic! CDs playing backwards! None of the phones working! Electronic entrance doors locked automatically! The Carousel's gone haywire!* Then the man shrieked and ran into the crowd.

Alarmed, the mother moved through the crowds toward the door to the stairwell, but it was roped off and a large red sign indicated it was closed for repairs. She noticed dozens of shoppers swarming outside the security office. Some were pounding on the door, some were shouting: *My purse was stolen! I've lost my daughter! My nose is bleeding—someone punched me!* But the door of the office didn't open. A network of loudspeakers concealed in vents crackled: *Attention, shoppers! The electronic system of the Carousel Shopping Mall has apparently been infiltrated by a virus on the ground level and the infection is spreading to the higher floors. To protect public safety, no one is permitted to leave any floor until the virus has been isolated and destroyed. Sorry for the inconvenience. . . .*

As soon as the message ended, the music that had been playing blared back on. Usually the mother didn't hear the background music, but this time she couldn't block it out because the bony man had been right—it was playing backwards, sending eerie, electronic whining sounds sailing above their heads. Now the lights grew dimmer, and this time they remained dim, casting a drab sepia tone over everyone and everything. The voices of the shoppers rose higher, but none of them were intelligible any longer, having become part of the collective roar of confusion and fear.

Suspecting her son was still at the Video Games Arcade, the mother felt a wave of panic swelling in her chest, and she entered the closest shop, Jewelry Classics. As she wound her way past customers and counters, she felt a sluggishness expanding within her, and noticed it was getting more difficult to breathe. But she forced

herself to keep moving. Her idea was to locate the emergency fire exit that was located at the rear of each shop, and use the outside fire escape to make her way down to locate her son at the arcade. Upon reaching the back wall, however, she found a door painted on the concrete surface, but no actual exit leading out of the building. Although certain the mall's Shop Directory indicated fire exits at the back of every shop, she realized she had never looked for one before. Stunned, she turned and started toward the front of the store, but the air seemed to be thickening, and her body felt as if it was gaining a pound with every step.

Midway through Jewelry Classics, she saw a man and a woman, both well dressed, reaching into a broken glass display case, scooping jewelry off the gray-velvet-covered trays and stuffing the golden trinkets into their pockets. Shaken, the mother took a different aisle to avoid the thieves. After what seemed a very long time, she passed into the central mall. Amid the crush of people she spotted the young toughs in black leather vests and metal-spiked bracelets, their eyes gleaming, their fists raised. In the blur of movement around her, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a clown with a bulbous red nose strike a child on the head with a wooden paddle. The girl fell to the floor and the crowds, now swaying out of control, trampled over the small, tender body. The child's screams pierced the mother's heart.

Unable to reach the girl, the mother pushed frantically through the mob to the stairwell. Here she ducked under the rope, past the warning sign—DO NOT ENTER! CLOSED FOR REPAIRS!—and took hold of the doorknob and yanked. To her surprise, it opened. The mother slipped inside, the heavy metal door slamming with a click behind her. Total blackness enveloped her but, determined to find her son and get him out of the Carousel Mall, she placed her hands flat against the walls and began to make her way down, one step at a time. Suddenly she realized she had lost her purse and shopping bags, but this no longer mattered to her. The cold darkness made her shiver as she continued to descend. Her primary fear just then was that she might trip over construction materials left behind by the workmen, and would tumble down the concrete stairs. Yet nothing came in her path, and a strange idea entered her mind: The Carousel Shopping Mall had lied to her, to all of them, about repairs being made in the stairwells, about the existence of fire exits, and a dense apprehension seized her. These weren't ordinary, sales-driven lies, she realized, but lies that had been used to entrap them inside a cinder-block tomb with locked doors and no windows. Frantic, she tried to get her legs to move more quickly down the stairs, but she couldn't seem to gather any momentum.

Some time later her foot stepped onto a landing, and she spotted

a thin crack of faint light. Feeling along the wall, she found the doorknob, pulled weakly, and staggered out of the stairwell. By now she was feeling immensely exhausted, and her body was shaking from the extreme cold. The lights were dim here, too, and the advertising signs were blinking too slowly, surreally, smearing yellow and purple and red light across the ceilings and walls. Music was groaning out of the iron grillwork, as if a mass of people were in great pain, having suffered wounds on a battlefield. Hundreds of shoppers and sales personnel stood all around her in the frigid air, and despite the appearance of movement caused by the blinking lights, each of them was motionless. Their shiny stillness struck the mother as curiously permanent, like things glimpsed in a flash of lightning. By now she felt entirely too weak to move, too spiritless even to be terrified any longer. Her body no longer trembled. It was only when she noticed her son—caught in place at a video game, his skin coated with an enamel sheen—that she sensed movement, and the last realization that ever passed through her being was that all of them, though frozen in place, were beginning to move in a circle around the central mall, revolving round and round and round and round. . . . ●

He Auto Be Ashamed
by Terry Lerdall Fitterer

Poor Frank was losing patience as he worked beneath the hood;
He'd guessed from the beginning that the trade-in was no good.
Poor wife (who picked the lemon) was now pulling out her hair—
For sound of Frank's profanity was heard most everywhere.

She tried to calm him with a beer, refrigerator-cool;
Her efforts were in vain—the man was stubborn as a mule.
She watched with apprehension as he ripped the engine out
And plugged her ears when Frank began to jump and scream and shout.

Then suddenly, a silence fell upon the naked Nash;
The only thing left in it was the phony leather dash.
The carburetor, battery—the engine with that quirk,
All strewn upon the lawn to watch, as Frank grew more berserk.

The ranting and the raving brought his wife a timely scare,
As she looked and saw that Frank possessed a most horrific glare.
His eyes were bugged and glassy; murder raged inside his head
When he reached the sad conclusion: Just the battery was dead!

Revenge was in control as Frank went on to smash and mar,
Then was taken into custody: the evidence—crowbar.
The judge gave him no mercy; Frank choked out a guilty plea . . .
And paid the fine for reason of 'Assault on Battery'!

THE JEOPARD

by Neil Schofield

If you are a City man and of the lunching persuasion, which most City men are by definition, you could do a lot worse than to go to La Magouille, which sits on an expensive site in the heart of the Square Mile, surrounded by solid, glass-fronted office blocks which house solid, venerable financial institutions. (Along with some of the other sort, too, of course.) It specializes in post-post-nouvelle cuisine, which means that the cooking is French provincial and that the servings are substantial. Here you'll find no artfully-placed grape quarters nestling in a comma of raspberry juice. What you will find is good food and plenty of it. The decor is classic brasserie: red and white tablecloths, lots of wood and brass, and a squad of imported waiters selected for their high insolence quotient, who wear black waistcoats and long aprons and treat you like dirt. Which is exactly as it should be. The word Magouille itself means, basically, financial fiddling or chicanery, so one must assume that the owner knows something that the rest of us merely suspect, or that he is simply cracking the French equivalent of a one-liner. Either way, he makes a small fortune.

Neil Schofield's darkly comic tale "Groundwork," a case involving malice of a domestic sort, placed third in last year's Readers Award voting. This time out, the British author turns his satirical eye on the world of business, lampooning the machinations of top executives in their race to the top. Mr. Schofield spent many years in business as a writer of material for sales conferences and product launches. P

Martin Palfreyman was a City man and liked lunching as well as the next man. The trouble today was that the next man appeared to have popped up in front of his table in La Magouille, and was bobbing and winking and grinning at him.

"Dimsdale," said the man, looking at Martin across the table to which the waiter had led him. Martin immediately became very cross. He had been pleasantly musing on nothing very much in

particular, sitting at the prized corner table in a very expensive restaurant, waiting for Norbert Verbecke to turn up and nursing a glass of Perrier because he didn't want to be too far ahead of Verbecke when he rolled in. Verbecke liked his lunch, and he liked it as expensive and as liquid as possible, which, if you're a Belgian, is a perfectly normal way of carrying on.

Now Martin had this type who looked like Mr. Punch nodding and grinning at him across the table.

"Well, I'm sure," said Martin shortly. "The thing is, I'm waiting for a client of mine. So, I'm afraid the table is taken, Mr.—"

"Dimsdale," said the man again, "Nathaniel Dimsdale, and very pleased to make your esteemed acqaintance."

Martin was watching him very warily now. He had noticed before that, despite his twenty-nine years, he still seemed to have the sort of open, boyish face that attracted the slightly loony, the unbalanced, the ones with Bacofoil hats and plastic carrier bags of letters proving that the Pope was a Venusian who was sending killer gamma rays down their heating ducts. And this one was odd beyond any doubt and he *was* carrying a large bulky brown envelope. He sighed.

"Well, I'm very pleased to meet you and all that, but as I said, I happen to be waiting for someone." He looked at the waiter for help. In vain.

"Verbecke," said Mr. Dimsdale, "yes, I know, Mr. Palfreyman, but Mr. Verbecke will, unfortunately, be unable to attend owing to his being in Coblenz."

Martin frowned. This was very odd.

"Well, this is very odd," he said.

The man glanced round. A number of lunchers had stopped their fiscal mutterings and were looking their way.

"Perhaps I might be permitted to park it for a moment?"

Martin shrugged. Mr. Dimsdale took this as an invitation and took off his coat. Martin surveyed him. In his fifties, perhaps, tall and thin with reddish hair. And he really did have the most extraordinary face, Martin thought. Twinkling brown eyes set far apart, flanking a hooked nose underneath which was a wide mouth and a prominent, pointed chin. He did look a lot like Mr. Punch, except that Mr. Punch didn't wear a bowler hat a little too large for him and a long dusty black overcoat which the waiter was now taking from him rather fastidiously with the large package. Mr. Dimsdale sat down with a sigh of relief and extended his legs.

"Oops, ever so sorry," he said, peering under the table, "was that your briefcase?"

Martin shifted irritably in his chair. He didn't move his briefcase. This was his table. He was damned if he was going to move his briefcase. The waiter was still hovering, giving them a look

which said that, personally, he didn't care one way or the other whether they wanted a drink, but since he was there . . .

Mr. Dimsdale smiled up at him.

"I think I could enjoy an aperitif, what about you, Mr. Palfreyman? Perhaps you might allow me to shout you a little something?"

Martin thought about it. If Verbecke really wasn't going to turn up, why not?

He nodded. "I'll have a dry martini," he said to the waiter. Mr. Dimsdale nodded and winked.

"A very wise choice, if I may make so bold. 'Wine is a mocker but strong drink is raging and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise,' as my old mother never tired of reminding me. And I will take a Cinzano with ice and a slice of orange if you'd be so kind."

The waiter flounced off.

"So, Mr. Dimsdale," said Martin, "what's your connection with Mr. Verbecke?"

Mr. Dimsdale shook his head. "No connection at all. To be perfectly honest and frank with you, Mr. Palfreyman, Mr. Verbecke never had any intention of coming to lunch with you, on account of not knowing that he had invited you. That was by way of being a subterfuge, so that I might meet you unbeknownst to others in your immediate entourage, and apprise you of Certain Things."

"Certain things? What things? What the hell is this all about?" Martin was becoming increasingly angry now. The arrangement he had made with Verbecke's secretary—his temporary secretary, actually, since Mademoiselle Villeret was ill, or so she said—was quite specific. Verbecke wanted to meet for lunch and she had even named the restaurant of which Verbecke had heard good things. Mr. Dimsdale was apparently reading his thoughts, for he smiled.

"An associate of mine made so bold as to impersonate Mr. Verbecke's secretary. And did it middling well, so far as I can judge."

Martin sighed. The drinks arrived. He decided that he was going to take this calmly. He sipped his martini. Mr. Dimsdale nodded with approval and took a sip himself.

"That's the way. It's slow and easy as does it. When in doubt, sit back, sip a little fortified wine, and wait. That's my motto. Now, first of all, Mr. P, it would be my enormous pleasure to invite you to lunch in Mr. Verbecke's stead. It's the least I can do. Please do me the honour of accepting."

Well, that was all right. The legendary free lunch. So it did exist.

"Well, all right, if it pleases you."

"It does please me, Mr P. Accept the thanks of Nathaniel Dimsdale, at your service, be it ever so."

He made a slight casual gesture, which Martin assumed was

meant as a graceful flourish, but a waiter across the room immediately stopped in mid sneer and started towards them. Martin noticed that Mr. Dimsdale's hands were beautifully slender, his fingers long and perfectly manicured. The waiter materialized beside them like obsequious ectoplasm. Martin was beginning to suspect that there was more to Mr. Dimsdale than you might think. Normally the only possible way to attract the attention of a waiter at La Magouille was to set fire to yourself. Or to the waiter.

Dimsdale opened his menu and said, "Perhaps, seeing as I'm the host, you'll allow me to order for both of us, Mr. P?" Without waiting, he rattled off some swift instructions to the waiter that sounded like: "We'll both have the *Bouchées feuilletées de Langouste à la crème,* and then the *Perdreaux à la Normande.*" He had an extremely good French accent, Martin noticed. "We'll have a bottle of Pouilly with the *langouste* and you can open a bottle of that fine Pommard that I like."

Martin was telling himself that this was certainly not Mr. Dimsdale's first time here.

"I hope you like young partridge, Mr. P. It's especially good here, *à la Normande,* on a bed of chopped apples. Very tasty. Now," said Mr. Dimsdale, "we've got a few moments, so let's indulge ourselves in a little chat."

Martin shook his head.

"It's extremely kind of you to invite me to lunch," he waved a hand at the crowded restaurant, "but you know, whatever it is you're selling, I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint you. I'm really not sure that I have a need for your services, Mr. Dimsdale."

"Ah," said Mr. Dimsdale, "not sure. Of course you're not sure. And how could you be when you don't know what those services might or might not be?"

"All right, I'll buy it—what exactly is it that you do?" asked Martin.

"That's a very good and forthright question, and no more than I would have expected from you. Straight to the guts of the thing. Well, Mr. P, I," said Mr. Dimsdale, taking the orange slice from his glass and sucking it contentedly, "I am what is known in the trade, among the cognoscenti as it were, as a Jeopard."

Martin frowned.

"I'm not sure I'm familiar with the word. What exactly is a—Jeopard?"

"A Jeopard, Mr. Palfreyman, as might be implicit in the word—jeopardizes."

Martin decided to humour the man.

"Just that. You jeopardize?"

"Yes, Mr. P, jeopardize—imperil, endanger, undermine, threaten, menace, call into question. Jeopardize."

Martin was sure now that he was dealing with a lunatic.

"And what do you jeopardize?"

"Ooh, as to that, anything you like. Future, fortune, comfort, well-being, security, existence even, you name it. Individual or corporate entity, it's all the same to us. You name it, we'll find a way to jeopardize it. No job too big, no job too small, not for us."

"Us?"

"Oh yes, there are a number of Jeopards around. Not as many as heretofore, due to natural wastage and a lack of new blood, which is a shame."

"But you still haven't told me what your services consist of. What is it you actually *do?*"

"Well as to that, Mr. P, the best thing I can do is to illustrate by means of an example. Suppose that you, as the Commercial Director of a large company, wishing, very creditably, to further the interests of your enterprise, intend to bid for a large foreign contract. Sealed bids, you understand, to be delivered by a certain hour on a certain date. Lowest bid wins. So you do your homework, and you are pretty sure that you have outbid all the competition, because you have your contacts and you are confident that your bid is the lowest, and seriously lower than that of your fierce competitor.

"But lo and behold, when the bids are opened, your tender is well above that of your only serious rival for the job, your hated enemy. Who wins the contract."

Martin was interested now.

"You mean that you switched the bids."

"Oh, not I, Mr. P. Not I. But let's say someone did. Or then again, suppose that you are in the banking business and for your own doubtless very good reasons you decide that a certain other bank should disappear. Vanish. Cease operations. Well, blow me down if three months later one of their dealers in a far-off place doesn't go slightly barmy, gambling on the currency markets and plunging the bank into bankruptcy."

"You're talking about Barings? But that was one bloke working on his own. He was completely off the wall."

"Ah, well you might think. But how did that particular man get where he was, in the right particular place and at the right time and completely without supervision to let him do that?"

Martin had always wondered about that chap in Singapore, and why he had been left to himself to gamble away billions of the bank's money. He nodded. He thought he understood.

"So it's just dirty tricks, is it, your business?"

"There are some as might call it that. I call it the continuation of business by other means, Mr. P. It's a hard world out there and there are some hard people at large in it, and sometimes they

employ hard methods. But then, there's hard people in all walks of life, hadn't you noticed? My old man, for instance, bless his heart, was a debt collector in the East End of London. Now, harder than him they do not come and I speak as one that knows. I'm not saying it's always necessarily fair, but then life isn't always fair, as I'm sure you've remarked."

The waiter brought their entrées and offered the wine to Mr. Dimsdale to taste. He sipped and nodded with authority.

"Perfect. Now, Mr. P, fill your boots. Like all young men you've got a healthy appetite and I hope this will be to your liking, I'm sure."

It was. The *feuilletées* turned out to be delicious pastry cases filled with minced crayfish and a superb sauce. The Pouilly was masterly.

Martin said, "You're going to think me pretty dense, but I still don't understand how you got hold of my name."

"Friends of friends of friends, word of mouth, contacts. Mine is a very roundabout sort of business in the normal way of things. There are very few straight lines. Suffice it to say that your name has come to my ears as someone who might have a need for the services of a Jeopard."

"And just why should I need a—Jeopard, as you call it?"

"Well, not to put too fine a point on it, your name has come up as being someone who has a rival."

Ah.

Yes, indeed, Martin did have a rival. Henry Godber was the thorn in his flesh, the fly in his ointment, the cloud on his horizon. Henry Godber was the only thing that marred his otherwise complete contentment with his life at Condominia. One always did have a rival, Martin had found out in his career in management. There was always someone whose career, whose personality, in a way mirrored yours, and whose prospects were more or less the same. That could add a bit of spice to life, a bit of cut-and-thrust to the daily grind. But it could equally make life miserable.

Condominia International was a holding company whose many wholly-owned subsidiaries, acquired over the years, covered a bewildering range of activities, all the way from armament technology and manufacture to double-glazing, from armoured vehicles to bathroom fittings. The managing director, George Mellish, a nice, ruddy-faced man, was due to take over as chairman in a year and a half, with an accompanying knighthood, if what certain people in high places had muttered to him, strictly in confidence, old chap, was true.

The question of his successor had been exercising him for some time. He had two candidates, each a perfect fit in his own way, Martin Palfreyman and Henry Godber. Both bright sparks, MBAs,

fast-trackers, young and thrusting, unmarried (and so able to concentrate). What George decided to do, in his impish fashion, was to make them his deputies, each responsible for one of the two main divisions of the group. That's the way to do it. Set the dogs at each other's throats and see who comes out on top.

So there was a war on. And every time one of Martin's companies was awarded the contract to double-glaze some vast hotels in Riyadh, Henry would riposte with a contract to supply crowd-control vehicles to Indonesia. Then Henry would proudly announce the sale of ten million quids' worth of road-building equipment to Mozambique, and it was absolutely vital for Martin to win a contract to supply eight high-speed chase-boats to Italian Customs to help them curb the Kurdish illegal immigrant trade.

But it was worse than that. Because George not only set them against each other in the office but elsewhere. One week Martin would be cast down by the news that Henry was playing golf that weekend with George. The next he would make sure that Henry knew that he, Martin, was invited down to The Solent for a weekend's sailing on the Mellish yacht. One day Martin would be invited to the company box at Ascot, the next, Henry would be at George's side at the British Grand Prix at Silverstone.

It was the sort of thing guaranteed to keep you awake nights.

It was the pinpricks of this rivalry, the petty little gnat bites that spoilt Martin's days. Only this morning, he had been walking down the corridor to his office when Henry had popped his head out of his own room and asked him to step in for a moment, Martin, please. Bloody cheek. As though Martin were some office junior. He had gone into Henry's office with its wall of golf and shooting trophies and had stood while Henry dealt with a phone call. Martin looked at the man. He really was a repulsive individual, blond hair smoothed back, blue close-set eyes, and a distinct absence of chin. He was wearing the inevitable power suspenders under his Gieves and Hawkes double-breasted suit. Martin could tell that it was Henry who had made the call just as he walked in, simply and pointedly to make him wait. Henry watched him with his pale little eyes as he talked, his fingers toying with a large red leather binder that was the most prominent thing among the papers on his desk.

Eventually, Henry came off the phone and had the grace to speak to him. Into the bargain, it was some piddling little thing of absolutely no importance, something better dealt with by the office manager. In the course of the conversation Henry had let him know that he was lunching with the boss today, something that Martin really didn't care to know. So what if Henry was lunching with George? Martin had lunched with George the day before. Then, to add insult to injury, Henry had gabbled something

about an urgent errand for his secretary, bolted from the room, and had quite simply not come back. Martin, after a few minutes, had left himself, swearing under his breath. *See what you're up against,* he said furiously to himself.

Oh yes, Martin had a rival.

Mr. Dimsdale had been watching him carefully, his wide-set birdlike eyes glittering humorously.

"And would I be right in saying that you and this rival of yours are pretty much level-pegging as regards background, qualifications, suitability, and such for a certain high office?"

"Pretty much," said Martin.

Mr. Dimsdale finished his last sip of white wine.

"And is this high office very important to you, personally, I mean to say? Is it the steppingstone to even greater things?"

Yes, it was. Martin knew exactly what he would do when—if—he was made managing director, exactly which subsidiaries he would sell off, which companies he would buy, how he would streamline the divisions, how he would create a more coherent and profitable whole. He knew precisely where George Mellish had gone wrong and where he had gone right. He had learned a lot, and he knew how to be better than George. And from Condominia, well, the whole world was open to him.

"And how would it be if he wasn't there, this rival of yours?"

The waiter arrived with the main course, and Mr. Dimsdale went through his little ceremony with the Pommard.

How would it be if Henry Godber wasn't there? It would be wonderful, that's how it would be. A free run at the managing director's post and completely Henry-free days in the office.

"I can see that the idea appeals, am I right?" Mr. Dimsdale was looking at him with his bird-bright eyes. He picked up his knife and fork. "*Bon appetit.*"

Martin shifted in his chair. He felt somehow that he ought to be taking charge of this conversation, that's the way he normally worked, but here he was floundering a bit. It was true that the idea of Henry not being there did appeal a lot. And he knew that there were some strange creatures who crept and slithered around in the crevices of the world of business, and that odd, inexplicable things did happen from time to time. There were stories that you could never quite get to the bottom of, there were rumours passed on with a nudge or a wink, or a raised eyebrow over a drink in one of the City's watering holes whenever the herd gathered to slake its collective thirst. It was just possible that Mr. Dimsdale was one of those creatures, and that he was behind some of those dark inexplicable happenings. But a Jeopard? No, come *on.* He wasn't even sure that the word existed.

But Martin was a businessman. Whenever you were presented

with a sales pitch, you inspected it from all sides minutely, like a watch mender. Above all, you listened and then you asked your questions.

"Supposing for the minute," he said, "—this partridge is delicious, by the way—and I'm speaking purely hypothetically here, you understand—that I might be interested in your services, and—you'll forgive me, I'm sure, but one is continually being caught out—always supposing that those services actually exist—what sort of form might those services take? So to speak."

"Dear oh dear, how you do go on," said Mr. Dimsdale, spearing a chunk of his own partridge. "Is that how you all behave in your great boardrooms? When all you might ask is: How?"

"Well, all right, to put it bluntly, yes." Martin felt a little silly.

"Then why don't you say so? The answer is that there is a multitudinous variety of ways of getting rid of a rival. In fact, it's much easier with an individual than with a company, individuals having emotions, passions, weaknesses, and what have you. Goes without saying, mind, that we'd have to know a lot more about him to decide on which particular method suited this particular gentleman, but just off the top of my head, so to speak, I can give you four sure-thing, cast-iron, copper-bottomed, tried-and-true ways of eliminating a rival and leaving your own road clear towards a bright and beckoning future. Would you like to hear them?"

Martin swallowed. He would very much like to hear them. When you were in business, you always had rivals. Fact of life. But now here was a man who said he disposed of them for a living. And who could supply references. He'd done it before. Yes, please, Martin wanted to hear.

Mr. Dimsdale nodded in a satisfied way.

"First of all, and it's a method I've always favoured because, human beings being what they are, it's a moderately easy thing to arrange, he could become embroiled publicly in a particularly sordid and stomach-churning vice scandal. Involving multiple partners and grotesquely deviant practices, *if* that were thought appropriate and desirable."

Martin summoned up Henry's face. He couldn't imagine it. He had always thought of Henry as bloodless, sexless, neuter.

"I think you might find it very difficult to involve this particular person in that sort of thing."

Mr. Dimsdale put down his knife and fork and looked earnestly across the table at Martin. He sipped his wine.

"Mr. Palfreyman, saving your presence, and never mind the young sprig in question, who is exceedingly small beer, but if you asked me to, I could involve the ***Archbishop of Canterbury*** in a sordid and stomach-churning vice scandal. I do hope you won't ask

me to, seeing as it would take some sorting out and I have great respect for the reverend gentleman and, on top of that, I live in his archdiocese. If you know how, it's the easiest thing in the world. Sad, I suppose, and a bitter commentary on the way the world is. But there we are."

Martin drank some wine and considered. Then he shook his head.

"No, I'm afraid I can't see it."

"Very well, then, for the moment, and subject to later revision, perhaps, I must accept your word for it. All right, then, how would it be if the gent in question was to be suspected of a crime, something that put him so far beyond the pale that he would henceforth be shunned by normal decent people and cast forth into another place?"

Martin was fascinated.

"What sort of crime?"

"Personally, I'd plump for drugs. Very fashionable in some City offices, I'm told."

Henry? Taking drugs? The idea was ridiculous, and Martin said so.

"So he doesn't take drugs. Many major dealers don't, I understand."

"Dealers?"

"Yes. Let's say that the Drugs Squad, acting on information received, raid his home and find, oh, let's make it a round figure, a pound of cocaine with his fingerprints on that nice shiny package, together with substantial amounts of cash."

"He's a swine, I admit, but that—I simply can't see it. It simply wouldn't hold water."

"That's only your opinion, but accepting that we have a difficult subject, I could for instance arrange for him to rob a bank or a post office. With identifying video footage, fingerprints in the getaway vehicle, eyewitness accounts, some telltale to-ing and fro-ing in his bank account, and a complete absence of alibi."

Martin laughed out loud.

"That's ludicrous. He's just not the sort. No one would ever believe that."

"Oh, you'd be surprised, Mr. P. People are ready to believe anything, in my experience. And we can all, were we ever so innocent, be accused of a crime. Any crime. All it takes is for someone to want it enough. Believe me," said Mr. Dimsdale, fixing Martin with his earnest gaze.

"But of course, if that's not to your taste, then our young gentleman could always be found guilty of gross incompetence, committing hideous errors of judgement which plunge the enterprise into chaos costing hundreds of millions and bring it near the brink of

disaster. That's always a good one, although it's a little longer in the gestation."

He mentioned the name of a French bank, partly state owned, which had cavalierly involved itself in several catastrophic acquisitions, including a Hollywood studio. He told Martin of the grisly aftermath, the sackings and resignations of a multitude of executives, one of whom had been the unlucky object of Mr. Dimsdale's attentions.

"I always like that one. Very satisfying, in an artistic way of speaking."

Martin was fascinated. He didn't know what to think. Either this was the biggest load of hogwash he had ever heard or he was being initiated into a world of which he had never dreamed.

"But it doesn't have to be so drastic. If you're the sensitive sort, if you wanted to be kind to the person we're talking about, throw him a sop, so to speak, he might be presented with an unrefusable offer. A post with a company far away, in the Americas, say, or Asia. An offer he absolutely could not turn down, so glittery and shiny was it."

"You could arrange that?"

"Be sure of it," said Mr. Dimsdale, finishing his last slice of partridge and putting his knife and fork together neatly. "In this world, for every quid, there is a quo. A Jeopard does lots of quids in his time and there are consequently lots of quos to come. I think I'll have some cheese and a glass of port, what about you?"

The question caught Martin by surprise. He had not been thinking about cheese at all.

"Now," said Mr. Dimsdale after the cheeseboard had been presented and chosen from, and he had ordered a nice glass of port, "you're an intelligent young man, you'll have realized that what I've just been giving you is a sales pitch."

Martin noticed that he slurred the last two words ever so slightly, and realized also that it was Mr. Dimsdale who had liquidated most of the two bottles of wine they had consumed. Well, Mr. Dimsdale was paying, so he was entitled.

"And the next question you'll want to ask is: How much is all this costing?"

Martin had been wondering precisely that.

"The answer is, it costs exactly what it's worth. You have to ask yourself what is the value to you of this certain high office. And then we'd work out a fee. Nothing you wouldn't be able to afford, given the golden and glittering future that awaits you."

"But it must cost a fortune to set up something as complicated as the things you've been telling me about."

Mr. Dimsdale waved a dismissive hand.

"No, no, no, Mr. P. What I've just shown you is just examples,

just examples, that's it. You'll understand that there are literally hundreds of other ways you can arrange for your rival to be not there. It all depends on him. Everybody's different, you see, everybody has his own little ways and foibles. Does he play a sport, for instance?"

"Yes, he's quite a golfer."

"Well, then. Nothing easier than for him to be caught cheating at golf. With a Very Important Person into the bargain. Nothing like cheating at a gentleman's pastime to give a dog a bad name. He'd be dining on cold shoulder for a long time, mark my words. And that would cost you pennies, that's all, pennies."

"Mr. Dimsdale, I'm sure you know your business, but the person in question is such a colourless individual, I simply don't believe that any of this would ever work."

"Oh, believe me, it would work. I've had clients you wouldn't believe butter would melt in their mouths, honest and upright, fathers of dear little children, admired by all, pillars of the community, churchgoers and all. You wouldn't believe what people believed of them. Dreadful things. Appalling things. Trust me, Mr. P, we'd find something, the right method, the right procedure."

Martin shook his head.

"Well, naturally, if all else fails, if you're sure that your rival is such a paranog—paragon—of virtue, lily-white in all respects, unassailable by more, let's say, conventional methods, then there's always," he paused as the waiter brought his port, "in the last resort, there's always *Utter* Jeopardy." The word really was in italics the way he pronounced it.

"Utter Jeopardy?"

"Yes. Of course, I don't advocate it myself, it's far from being free of risk, and it's expensive. Very expensive. To be undertaken only after deep thought and with very deep pockets."

"What on earth is Utter Jeopardy?" asked Martin, although he had a very good idea. He felt a distinct chill on the back of his neck. Mr. Dimsdale had stopped twinkling and was deeply serious.

"Let's just say that it has a strong element of finality and permanence. It's to be used sparingly, if at all, and I don't much like it myself. But there are those who swear by it and there are those clients for whom nothing else will do the trick. So there you are, what will you, we cut our coat according to our cloth."

"You mean you can—well, *get rid* of people?"

"Oh, not I, Mr. P. I abhor that sort of thing. But we have, let's say, sister organisations, who can, let's say, arrange things. My own brother-in-law, for instance, but that's another story and not a very savoury one, either."

He was silent for a solemn moment. Then he twinkled again.

"But then it would almost certainly never come to that, it very

rarely does, Mr. P, in my experience. So let's not be too downhearted."

Mr. Dimsdale drank his port. Then he pulled out a large pocket watch and gave a start.

"Good heavens, is that the time? I had no idea. I was having such a lovely time talking to you, Mr. Palfreyman, that the time has slipped by far too quickly."

He beckoned the waiter with a scribbling gesture.

"Now, Mr. Palfreyman, you're going to need time to think over what I've been saying to you, I'm sure." He fished out a card case, abstracted a small piece of pasteboard, and handed it to Martin.

"There you have my private number, and it's not everyone who has that, I can tell you. At all hours of the day or night. When you have need of me, when you've thought it out very carefully, call me, and Nathaniel Dimsdale will be at your service. But be in no doubt, Mr. Palfreyman, a young gentleman like you, with everything to play for, you'll need me, I feel it in my water."

He paid the bill with a credit card the sight of which left the waiter whey-faced and as near to grovelling as a waiter at La Magouille is allowed to come.

Martin said, "Well, it's very kind of you and all that, but I'm really not sure that I'm in the market for this sort of thing."

Mr. Dimsdale winked.

"You are, Mr. Palfreyman. My information is that you are. But you must be the judge, of course."

He rose to his feet. Martin picked up his briefcase and followed him across to the cloakroom. Mr. Dimsdale was, if not unsteady on his feet, then wavering slightly. Putting on his voluminous overcoat, he even swayed and bumped into Martin under the unmoved gaze of the cloakroom girl and the waiters. He got into quite a tangle, in fact, and Martin, amused, found himself obliged to help by holding Dimsdale's bulky envelope while he struggled.

Finally clothed, Mr. Dimsdale said, "Oops, nearly forgot. Call of nature. Wait for me outside, Mr. Palfreyman, won't be a tick," and he headed for the toilets.

Martin strolled out into the sunshine. He was seriously intrigued and at the same time, seriously sceptical. Setting aside the ethics of the thing, was it really possible to get rid of a rival like that? And was Mr. Dimsdale the man to do it? He was severely tempted, he had to admit. If it could be done, then why not? He saw the future without Henry and it worked. It worked beautifully. He would have to think about this very carefully. Perhaps he could make some discreet enquiries about Mr. Dimsdale. Someone was bound to know *something*.

Mr. Dimsdale appeared at his elbow.

"Well, Mr. Palfreyman, it's been a great pleasure to meet you, and I do hope you will think about what I've told you."

Martin handed him the envelope. Mr Dimsdale took it and pushed it swiftly under his overcoat. After pressing Martin's hand he squeezed Martin's shoulder and gave him a friendly shake.

"I like you, Mr. P. I don't always like my clients, but I like you. And if there's any way I can help you, I will."

Then he turned and was gone, threading his way through the early afternoon crowd with surprising agility and steadiness.

Martin looked at his watch. It was far earlier than if he had lunched with Verbecke, who rarely rose from the table in under three hours. So he had a good hour before he was due back. He passed that hour pleasantly browsing in the shops without buying anything but enjoying himself enormously thinking about what life might be like without Henry.

When he got to his office on the eighth floor of the Condominia building, his secretary was waiting for him.

"Mr. Mellish wants to see you straightaway, Mr. Palfreyman," she said. She flapped a hand helplessly at the man standing by her side. It was O'Hehir, the head of Security, a blocky ex-Army (CIB) sergeant-major whose haircut was not so much a statement as an overt threat.

"Well, I'll just get rid of my things," said Henry.

The blocky man stepped forward. Too far forward, Martin thought.

"Mr. Mellish's instructions were to bring you right away, if it's all the same to you, Mr. Palfreyman."

Martin ignored him and strode to his office door. It didn't budge. He turned and found O'Hehir standing, again, too close to him. His secretary stood in the background, fluttering her fingers.

"Right away, Mr. Palfreyman, that's what Mr. Mellish said. Take your briefcase for you, shall I."

This was not a question. Martin found himself walking ahead of O'Hehir along the corridor that led to George Mellish's office.

He went through the secretary's office and into George's sanctum. O'Hehir followed and closed the door. George was standing at the window, with, Martin saw, Henry Godber at his side.

George Mellish was brisk and serious. His ruddy face was redder than usual.

"Don't sit down, Martin. Just a few simple questions and I hope the answers will be equally simple."

Martin ignored George's words. "What in God's name is going on? And why the hell is my office locked?"

"Martin, it will be easier for all of us if you'll just answer my questions. I'm sure you have a perfectly good explanation."

"Explanation for what?" Martin was thoroughly confused.

"First of all, were you in Henry's office this morning?"

"Why—yes. Henry wanted to ask me something."

"That's not the way I heard it. The way I heard it was that you simply wandered in."

"That's ridiculous."

"Were you alone?"

"What?"

"Were you at any point alone in Henry's office?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, I was. Henry had some errand or other for his secretary, and he left me alone."

George glanced at Henry. Henry's face was serious and sorrowful, but there was the ghost of a nasty little smile on his face.

"And you didn't happen to notice that on his desk there was a copy of the Falcon proposal?"

So that's what all this was about. Falcon—one of Henry's fanciful code names—was a tender for a giant contract to supply radar equipment in the Middle East. Martin had grown weary of hearing Henry tell him how much it was worth—something over fifty million, apparently.

"There was a binder on his desk, yes, if that's what you're talking about."

George turned to Henry and nodded, as if confirming something. Then: "Martin, where did you have lunch?"

"What the hell has that got to do with anything? If it's anyone's business, I was going to have lunch with Verbecke, but, well, he didn't turn up." His voice trailed off. He couldn't believe he sounded so feeble.

"Yes. I can well believe it. We took the liberty of examining your diary half an hour ago, and sure enough, there was Verbecke's name. Good camouflage, that. But we also took the trouble to ring Verbecke's office, only to be told that Verbecke was in Coblenz."

"Yes, I know," said Martin. What *was* all this? "But, you see—"

George held up a hand. His face was grave.

"Let me tell you one or two things, Martin. As it happens, I know where you had lunch, because quite by chance I happened to be lunching, at Henry's invitation, with the Pollux people in their boardroom. From where, as it turns out, one has a very good view of the front of a restaurant called—La Magouille, or something, is it?" He looked at Henry.

Henry nodded. His eyes were very bright.

"And, we also had a very good view of you handing a package of some kind to someone whose appearance I can only describe as seedy in the extreme and with whom you were obviously on terms of great intimacy. What was in that packet, Martin?"

"I have absolutely no idea."

"And I suppose you have no idea what could have happened to a

copy of the Falcon proposal that Henry found to be missing when he returned from lunch?"

Martin began to have a cold feeling in his stomach.

O'Hehir spoke. He had been standing quietly behind Martin, still holding the briefcase.

"Shall I, Mr. Mellish?"

George nodded.

O'Hehir stepped forward, placed the briefcase on George's desk, and flipped the catches. Martin didn't even have the presence of mind to object, and besides, he was suddenly afraid. He *never* left those combinations open. O'Hehir flipped open the case. There was very little in it, a contract file or two that Martin had intended to discuss with Verbecke. O'Hehir went through the pockets in the lid.

"Ah," he said. He pulled out a slip of paper, nodded, and handed it to George, who scanned it, his face becoming thunderous.

"Can you explain this, Martin?" He handed the paper across.

On the slip of paper were a few words and numbers. The words were: Falcon material. The numbers were: 100,000. There was also the word Bernstaatskredit, followed by a string of numbers and letters.

O'Hehir stepped forward and took the slip from Martin.

"I've got ways, if you'll allow me, Mr. Mellish." George nodded and O'Hehir left the room, leaving Martin staring at George without the faintest idea of what to say. George knew exactly what to say, beginning with the disgust and disappointment he felt to find that a trusted lieutenant with a bright future had sunk so low as to betray the company and the colleagues who had placed their faith in him. He would never have believed it if he hadn't seen the evidence with his own eyes. He, George, had very little time for industrial spies, and especially fifth-columnists who wormed their way into the confidence . . .

He went on in this vein for some time, brushing aside Martin's attempts, first, to laugh the thing off, then to defend himself, and finally, simply and feebly, to deny.

O'Hehir returned. He glanced with contempt at Martin, then nodded at George.

"A numbered account. One hundred thousand deposited this morning, and then shortly after lunch our time, it was spirited away. I can't find out where to. But I'm sure Mr. Palfreyman could tell us if he wanted to. Very silly of you to keep this, Mr. Palfreyman. Destroyed it straight off, I would have."

George nodded.

"My instinct is to sack you, Martin, but it isn't up to me. It's a matter for the Board, and I'll be calling a special meeting tomorrow. You'll have the chance to defend yourself, of course, if you can,

but only after we've had a full inquiry, and then the Board will come to a decision, though I'm pretty sure I know what that will be. Up to that point your salary will continue to be paid, of course, damned if I know why I'm doing that, given the hundred thousand you've just squirrelled away in the Caymans, or Andorra, or wherever it is characters like you hide your pieces of silver. But I'll tell you here and now, you can wave goodbye to your stock options. And, if you please," he held out his hand, "I'll relieve you of the keys to the company car."

Martin's last sight as he left the office was of Henry's face, still smiling, and his eyes glittering with a fierce triumph.

In the taxi, Martin stared furiously out of the window. Well, that was it. He was well and truly jeopardized. He was finished with Condominia. Even though the idea was ludicrous that he, a deputy managing director of a giant company, would be so stupid as to sell commercial secrets for a lousy hundred thousand. Even though he might clear his name (he wasn't at all sure how he was going to do that, but surely there was a way, wasn't there?) there would always be a cloud over his head.

How could he have been so stupid? And how could that little bastard Henry have been so clever? Martin realized with a rush just how formidable Mr. Dimsdale was. His timing, for a start, was exquisite. Martin realized that Dimsdale and Henry must have rehearsed that carefully choreographed exit from the restaurant at least a dozen times, to make sure that the handover happened under the very eyes of George Mellish, who was lunching (quite by chance, to be sure) in the ideal spot. Dimsdale had managed the business with the envelope with beautiful furtiveness. But the greatest marvel of all was how he had managed to unlock Martin's briefcase under the table without, *for a single moment,* taking his eyes off Martin. At the same time he had had the incredible cheek to do a sales presentation to the very man he was in the process of Jeopardizing. And not just a presentation, *a practical demonstration.* Evidently not a man to waste the perfect selling opportunity.

He felt in his breast pocket and pulled out the little white card. He had Mr. Dimsdale's number. He would call him tonight. And he had a strong feeling that Mr. Dimsdale would be expecting the call.

"Nice one, Henry," he said aloud. "But what goes around, comes around. And brace yourself, because it's coming around with knobs on."

The cab driver turned to him enquiringly, but he was back in his thoughts. And as the taxi carried him out of the City towards a disturbingly uncertain future, he was already wondering just how much *Utter* Jeopardy was going to cost. ●

Art by Ron Bucalo

SPOOKY

by David Dean

It was in the year after his wife's death that his daughter insisted on giving him the dog. Angelina had rescued the animal from the pound after spotting it there with her kindergarten class on a field trip, and was irrevocably convinced that this was "his" dog.

He had tried to argue, but "Angel," as his wife and he had always called their only child, had years of dealing with such unreasonable objections from her young students and easily prevailed in his case. His lack of experience, and the fact that he had never owned a pet, was rendered moot by the simultaneous presentation of a book on the care and handling of small breeds.

"Daddy, it's all in here," she said, tapping the cover of the book, which featured a perky Highland Terrier; very unlike the creature that cowered silently under the coffee table. "You're an intelligent man, and this will present very little challenge for you . . . besides, a little challenge might be good for you right now," she intoned sagely, peering over her glasses at him, the book bobbing up and down in her hand.

"But I don't want a dog!" He dared to insist. "I don't like them!"

"Nonsense! How would you know? You told me yourself that you've never had one," she answered patiently as she stood expectantly over his supine form in the recliner. The book stopped bobbing.

Looking up at this matronly woman with her half-moon glasses, it was hard for him to remember the little person who had so delighted his wife and him as a child. "Dammit," he muttered, wondering if he would get detention for cursing . . . and took the book.

Since publication of our double issue falls in the month of Halloween, we sometimes include in the issue's additional pages a few short pieces that fall slightly outside the mystery genre but contain mysterious elements of a ghostly sort. Such is David Dean's new tale "Spooky." Set, in part, on Halloween, it's a story that will spook even those who prefer a materialistic interpretation of its events. ¶

"You won't be sorry, Daddy," Angel gushed triumphantly. "She'll liven up the house and be just the best company for you!"

"She . . . ?" he whined uneasily.

"Oh, it's all right, she's already spayed so you don't have to worry about her going into heat."

The old man winced at his daughter's casual use of such a crude term.

Angel knelt down to pet the dog on her way to the door and William saw the dog flinch, but submit stoically nonetheless, to a few strokes of its hard-looking skull. *Perhaps we do have something in common,* he thought meanly.

"I put plenty of dog food out in the garage," Angel announced with her sweeping exit. "She's had all her shots, and her vaccination record is on the counter. Put that in a safe place. You'll need it for any trips to the vet's. As to potty training . . ." She halted in the door to intone this last. "She's a mature dog, so she's probably been housebroken, but you'd better get in the habit of a few walks a day with her to make sure. . . . I left a leash on the counter in the kitchen!" The door closed and she was gone.

In the ringing silence following her exit, man and dog stared off into separate spaces without movement. From time to time, William would glance over at the dog in her shadowed retreat beneath the table and find the small animal regarding him solemnly, and each time her eyes would cut nervously away. She made no sound or movement.

"I've no use for a dog," William announced impotently to the

room. "I'm enjoying my solitude."

As if in answer, the mongrel sighed heavily within her sanctum and William turned to see that she had closed her eyes and lay with her head on her paws, composed for sleep.

"Well," he declared softly, convinced by her demeanor that she was no happier than he about the arrangement, "maybe it'll work out."

During the first few weeks, it did not. But not for the reasons William had feared. Rather than being a pest, getting underfoot, and barking at the neighbors, the dog was furtive and phantom-like, preferring to be left alone entirely. Other than when he came down in the mornings to find her food bowl empty, there were scant reminders that he shared his home with another living being. The other exception being her amazingly courteous use of the newspaper left out for her. "She's an intelligent little beast," William admitted grudgingly, disposing of yet another fouled daily.

It wasn't until the end of the third week that he even got a really good look at her. He had come downstairs from bed to get a glass of water and, much to his surprise, found her standing over her empty bowl when he switched on the light. "Hey, girl," he managed.

She peered up at him with moist, brown, almond-shaped eyes that slid away from his after just a moment. Her large ears were flattened against her narrow, sleek skull, but she did not flee. William stood over her awkwardly, unsure how to proceed without spooking her. As if to aid him, she drooped her head over her food bowl and stared into it forlornly.

"Food . . ." William muttered. "Is that it? . . . Are you hungry? . . . You're hungry, aren't you, old girl? Haven't I been giving you enough to eat?" He turned to the cabinet, retrieving the dog food, ridiculously happy over this small breakthrough in communications and unaccountably pleased to be of service. "Of course, I haven't. . . . I'm sorry, girl, I just didn't know. I'll do better, I promise!" he chattered, pouring the dried food, and ever so cautiously kneeling and reaching out his free hand to touch the dog. She stiffened and shied slightly, but did not sidle away from him.

His hand resting in the warmth of her smooth black fur felt like a triumph and, after a moment, the vibration of the hard pellets of food being crunched between her teeth could be felt through her long spine. Slowly, cautiously, he began to stroke her back, and a feeling of contentment settled over him greater than any he had known since before his wife's long illness and death. With no little surprise, William realized that tears had welled up in his eyes and that he was so very happy not to be alone any longer.

The dog could always count on two feedings after that breakthrough night and, as if in acknowledgment that their relationship

could now progress to another level, made the next move herself.

The following night, just as he was about to drift off to sleep, William was startled by a thump against his bedroom door. He sat up instantly, unaccustomed to any noise in his silent house other than the ticking of the clock. This thump was followed a few moments later by another sound that seemed to vibrate the door slightly. He could only imagine it was the kind of sound that would occur if one ran a shoe brush along the wood of the door. Then another light thump, followed by silence.

Nervously, he arose from the bed and tiptoed to the door, his heart beating strangely in his chest. He placed both hands against the door to prevent its being forced and held his breath to listen. From the other side came a long, now-familiar sigh. As he turned the knob he could feel a pressure on the other side.

The dog looked up at him from her curled-up position at his threshold, her eyes and black nose glistening in the moonlight from the landing window. "Well, look who's come a-calling." William smiled and left the door standing open for the night.

Two weeks later, William awoke to find that she had spent the night on his wife's side of the bed, curled up with her bottle-brush tail, foxlike, over her nose. She made no move to flee as he roused himself, but never ceased to regard him with the caution that was her earmark. "You're a bold little thing!" William observed cheerfully and opened the curtains to greet a new day.

Over the next few months he was rarely without her silent company, as he now found her in whatever room he happened to occupy, though she never seemed to follow him. She never barked and only occasionally growled, and then only when something unusual occurred, such as an unexpected delivery or a stray dog appeared in the yard.

It was his daughter, naturally enough, who pointed out that he had yet to name his new companion. "Dad, I don't believe you!" she admonished during one of her frequent phone calls. "You've had that poor puppy for months and you still haven't given her a name! What do you call her to get her to come?"

William thought this over, caught off guard by his own omission. "I . . . um . . . don't, I guess. She's just always there," he concluded a little defiantly. Nonetheless, he felt bad.

"If you don't name her, I will!" Angel promised.

He knew her to be good as her word and began to give the matter some thought after hanging up. *She will not name my dog,* he swore to himself, and turned to study the creature in question. The dog watched him in turn from her catlike perch on the back of the couch, from whence she had an unimpeded view of the backyard. She appeared thoughtful and uneasy, as if sensing she was

the subject of some speculation.

"Any thoughts on the matter, ol' girl?" William inquired gently.

Instead of answering, however, she returned her introspective gaze to the world without and the comings and goings of birds and squirrels. It was only a few days after the call that an unusual event resolved the issue.

The hour was approaching ten o'clock at night and William, as was his habit, sat in his comfortable old recliner and read. The dog, as had become her habit, lay alongside, the length of her body making seamless contact with the chair's skirting.

From time to time, William would drop a hand to her small head and give it a stroke or two. He had become so accustomed to this routine that when his hand found only air, he was momentarily astonished.

He sat up quickly and looked to where she always lay, but she was not in her spot. It was then that he heard the growling. His eyes sought the source and found it in the dog, who had positioned herself within three feet of the front door. Her entire being was focused on the entrance, as evidenced by her flattened ears and tightly curled tail. Her black lips had been drawn back to reveal surprisingly large canine teeth, and her short pelt stood on end the entire length of her spine. The growl came from deep within her and was almost continuous. But what disturbed William the most was that she was shaking from head to toe. She was badly frightened.

"What . . ." his voice squeaked, and he began again. "What is it, girl? Someone here?" The book slipped from his grasp to land noiselessly on the carpet, and the clock began to chime the hour. He stood up, feeling his own hair begin to rise. As if released by his action, the dog scooted quickly to her old sanctuary beneath the coffee table and vanished within its shadows.

Feeling oddly abandoned, and more than a little vulnerable, William made a dash for the door, all the while expecting the knob to begin turning. He seized it and threw the deadbolt at the same moment. The bolt sliding home cracked as loud as a gunshot to his ears.

When his heart had slowed enough, he switched on the porch light and peered out the window. There was nothing to be seen—no one was there. When he turned back to the room, the dog awaited him, tail wagging gently, tentatively—her expression one of genuine concern. She bore no resemblance to the terrified creature of a few moments before. It was as if nothing whatsoever had happened.

"Damn," William whispered hoarsely, his mouth gone dry. "What the hell was that all about? . . . You spooked the devil out of me!"

So that was it. Spooky.

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From that time forward, the pattern of their relationship remained constant—days of quiet companionship and circumspect affection disturbed only by Spooky's unaccountable and unsettling displays of anxiety. Her performance never altered, and, as William eventually realized, occurred with an almost clockwork precision—Thursday nights, at ten o'clock. To Wiiliam's astonishment, even the autumn transition to Standard Time did not throw her off schedule. She adjusted accordingly. And never once, despite numerous attempts, was he able to succeed at deflecting her from her purpose. No inducements (and he tried everything from Milk Bones to sow ears) or distractions (leaving the door open; locking her in another room; turning off the lights; playing music loudly; or remaining in another room himself) served to curtail her ritual. At last, both exasperated and fearful for her health, he took Spooky to a veterinarian.

The vet, a woman with a great tumble of curly, frizzy blond hair and granny glasses, regarded Spooky with some interest. Spooky, on the other hand, refused to even look at the young vet but stood nervously upon the examining table with shaking legs, casting occasional beseeching glances at William. The exam, so far as William could tell, had been thorough and, just as important, gentle. He stroked Spooky's long back soothingly.

"Possibly a Corgie," the vet murmured, almost to herself. "Certainly has the right build . . . the legs a bit long, though, and the coloring's wrong." She looked to William, pleased with her deductions. "She's certainly part Corgie, but mixed . . . what with, I don't know. But mongrels are the best, aren't they, girl?" she inquired pleasantly of the dog herself, scratching her affectionately behind the ears. "She's a sweetie, isn't she?" This last was directed to William, though his anxiety for Spooky's welfare had momentarily distracted him.

"Oh . . . yes. Yes, she certainly is. There's only that one thing I told you about," he added anxiously. "Any ideas there . . . I mean, is she okay?"

The vet took Spooky's head into her hands and gazed for a moment into her darting brown eyes. "She's just fine, so far as I can tell. Healthy as can be!" She released the dog, crossing her arms. "When you first described the symptoms I was afraid she might have epileptic seizures." She noted the slight tremor that began in William's hands and hastened on. "But now I don't think so, though I can't rule that out altogether," she cautioned. "It's the regularity of these fits that you've described that makes it almost impossible for me to believe it could be epilepsy. Though it's far from rare in canines, I just don't think it fits the bill here. All in all, your dog appears to be extremely healthy for her age, and very well loved, I might add. I don't think there's anything for you to

worry about," she concluded, smiling broadly at William's obvious relief. To his own embarrassment, William felt a catch in his throat at this welcome news.

Nonetheless, he persisted. "But what does it mean, . . . Doctor," he asked weakly, unsure of his use of the title. "These 'fits' of hers."

The young woman appeared to mull this over, staring into some invisible space. After a few moments she looked directly at him, obviously reluctant. "I've worked with animals all my life and I think, sometimes, they see things we can't." And with this pronouncement she excused herself for other patients and would not be drawn further on the subject.

It was during one of Angelina's weekly checks on his well-being that William told her of his visit to the vet and the reason why, carefully describing Spooky's odd behavior. He concluded with the vet's cryptic comment.

"So that's the reason you named her Spooky!" His daughter pounced on the revelation, making William feel like a schoolboy caught passing notes. She returned to preparing their coffees, stirring in cream and sugar, rattling the cups with the spoon, and chuckling to herself. William stared morosely at the tabletop, feeling much put upon that his genuine anxiety should provide such mirth. After a few moments, he became aware that a silence had settled over the room and glanced up at his daughter to find her staring at him, her preparations arrested, a puzzled look on her face.

"Daddy," she began in a little-girl voice that was most disconcerting in such a large woman. "Thursdays? . . . Ten o'clock?"

William stared back, dumbfounded at her sudden change and baffling demeanor.

"Mommy's dance nights," she continued without waiting for a reply. "Don't you remember? She always had tap classes on Thursday nights! It was the highlight of her week . . . she loved it so." Tears stood in her eyes, magnified by her glasses. "She was so crushed when she couldn't go anymore . . . when she got so sick."

William felt his own eyes grow hot and moist as the sudden memory, so carefully buried, flooded over him. He reached across the table and patted his daughter's plump hand. "She always got home by ten, or she knew I'd worry," he managed, and they both turned to look at the dog, which watched them with quiet interest.

If anything, his daughter's revelation had bonded William even more closely to the dog. In addition to the relief he felt over now knowing that Spooky's health was in no danger, there was the comforting and welcome knowledge of the source of her anxieties.

Though her alarming behavior continued as it had, it was now looked forward to by William as no other event in his quiet life,

and he could not resent the harbinger of this comfort, no matter how fearfully she herself awaited the same moment.

He now understood how complete his withdrawal had been since his wife's death and how deeply agonized he had been over her absence. Without her he had withdrawn into a half-life, devoid of serious emotion and, therefore, vibrancy—a waking coma that depended on careful routine and meticulous maintenance. With the advent of Spooky these routines had come unraveled in a way that he could not have foreseen, and it was through this creature that an epiphany had been granted him. On Thursday nights, he could bathe in the presence of his wife's spirit, if only for a brief few moments, and find the rest of his week illumined and charged with joy.

On these nights, William would rest in his favorite chair (bought for him by his wife), with music from various Broadway musicals (his wife's favorites) playing softly on his old stereo, and the door standing wide open in welcome, regardless of the weather. Unfailingly, several minutes before the hour, Spooky would take up her position and begin the series of behaviors that heralded his wife's arrival—fur on end, lips drawn back in a fearful snarl; growls rumbling through her thickset body like a small motor, culminating in her seeking the haven beneath the coffee table. Eventually, as Spooky's spell dissipated, William would rise and reluctantly close the door, the audience with his wife at an end.

It pained William that, unlike Spooky, he could neither see nor hear his departed wife no matter how hard he strained to do so. Nonetheless, since he had come to understand the dog's behavior, he had come to appreciate her almost palpable presence as surely as if he could.

As autumn wore on and winter's gray face began to peep out from an increasing number of trees plucked of their blazing adornment, William noticed a worrisome thing. Spooky was not eating well. In fact, she was hardly eating at all and her rib cage had become distinctly discernible. What was worse, she now barked during his wife's visits, something she had never done before. The distraction was almost more than he could bear; ruining the moment entirely.

Reluctantly, he took to removing her to another room and closing her in prior to the event. In fact, he no longer needed her announcement in order to be prepared. Undeterred, Spooky persisted, barking herself hoarse from her temporary exile.

Spooky's final night came the week before All Souls', which coincidentally fell on a Thursday and was looked forward to with great anticipation by William. In the weeks following the advent of Spooky's barking, her physical deterioration had accelerated markedly—her pelt losing its gloss and fur coming out in tufts

that left a forlorn trail through the house. Never a particularly active dog, she now positively languished, hardly moving during most of the week as if to conserve her energies for her Thursday night trials. And to these she committed herself as never before, hiding from William and refusing to be coaxed out until that special time arrived, and then darting out to literally throw herself at the door, snapping at the woodwork, leaving gouges and scratch marks, flecks of foam flying from her mouth.

William, exasperated beyond endurance at these disruptions of the communion he enjoyed with his dead wife, went to snatch the dog up and she bit him. In spite of her apparent fury, the bite did not break the skin, but William was stunned with hurt and outrage over such an apparent betrayal and dropped her to the floor with a sickening thud, followed by a vicious kick. She slunk away, the ten o'clock bell sounding. He slept that night with the door to his bedroom closed.

The following morning he gathered up the now listless dog and reluctantly returned her to the pound. It was a decision made not so much in anger as in sad acceptance of the fact that the creature that had made the ghostly visitations possible now seemed determined to thwart them at all costs. Besides, he consoled himself, Spooky was clearly and quite literally worrying herself to death over the whole business. Things could not go on this way. The little dog was so spent and exhausted she could scarcely raise her head from the counter to watch him depart.

He sat in the car for a moment, his chest tight with remorse and a terrifying loneliness, then forcibly turned his thoughts to the Thursday coming and drove away.

The only difference in his preparations for All Souls' was the addition of scented votive candles, a touch he felt his wife, a devout Catholic, would appreciate. The wavering points of light gave the room an otherworldly appearance, deepening the shadows in the corners and giving movement to the stillness. In the background a snappy show tune sang counterpoint to the churchlike atmosphere.

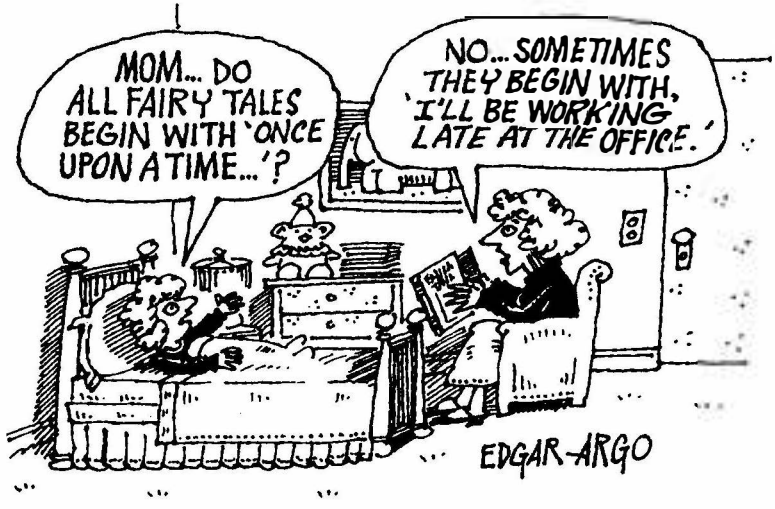
Without Spooky, William had to rely on his watch and kept nervously referring to it, a sense of guilt and sneaking regret niggling at his brain each time he did so. The thought suddenly occurred to him that without the dog, his wife might not come. Perhaps Spooky was some kind of supernatural catalyst! Anxiety nearly made him rush back to the pound. Only the fact that they were closed and the hour near prevented him.

He glanced again at his watch and saw with a start that it was three minutes until the hour. In spite of everything, he had almost missed it! He hurried to open the door and then returned to his seat to lean back in the recliner. The doorway was a dim outline

framing the greater darkness of the world without, and a steady breeze, cool and exhilarating, raced through and about the room, making the candles dance. A delicious sense of anticipation came with it and William smiled in spite of himself, happy in the invisible touch that even now he felt as surely as the wind that played across his face. As the clock chimed ten times, he closed his eyes and spoke her name aloud. When he opened his eyes again, a figure stood in the doorway.

Unable even to cry out, so great was his shock, he simply stared open-mouthed as it emerged to gather definition in the soft light of the room. The night visitor stared about, seemingly as stupefied as William by his surroundings; his small glittering eyes darting from candle to shadow, shadow to candle, restless and frightened. When they alighted on William, almost invisible in the depths of his chair, they stopped, and a determination, both sly and mirthful, coalesced his haggard features into a rigid parody of happiness. The long-bladed knife he had stolen in his escape from the asylum winked with each votive candle he passed.

It was not so much horror that froze William in place as a paralyzing disappointment over his loss, and a deep regret for his foolishness. He wondered briefly if Spooky was at that moment flinging herself against the chain-link strictures of her cage in fruitless warning. It had never occurred to him that a dog might be clairvoyant. ●



Rules of the Game

by Kate Wilhelm

I was watching a senator give a speech a couple of years ago. "They say it's not about money, it's about money. They say it's not about politics, it's about politics. They say it's not about sex, it's about sex."

Then Harry came in and said, "Hey, so the guy plays around a little. What's the big deal?"

Eleven months ago I kicked Harry out, after six years of being married. He talked me into calling it a trial separation, and agreeing to let him keep this office in our house because he had a year's supply of letterheads and cards with this address. He even had an ad in the yellow pages with this address and phone number: Computer Consultant, On Site. He hung out here, ate my food, drank my coffee, and was gone by the time I got home from work. Too late I realized that what he gained from our agreement was rent-free office space and freedom. He never paid a cent of our mortgage after he moved out.

Four months ago I left him a note in his pigsty of an office telling him I wanted a divorce. He never got around to answering. I left the divorce papers on his desk; they vanished. He was as elusive as a wet fish when I tried to reach him.

Two weeks ago I buried him.

And now here he is, Harry Thurman, as big as life, if not as solid. I can see a lamp through him. He's like a full-color transparency.

I drop the coffee-crusted mugs I'm carrying and he lets out a yelp and disappears.

A star in both the science fiction and mystery worlds, Kate Wilhelm began her career as a professional writer nearly forty years ago. In science fiction, she has been the recipient of three Nebula Awards and a Hugo Award, that genre's top honors for fiction. As a mystery writer, she has proved to have a dependable and devoted readership, with new novels appearing regularly, the most recent being *Skeletons*, from St. Martin's Minotaur.

"And stay out!" I yell at the lamp.

I step over the mess on the floor, leave the office, and close the door behind me. I'm shaking, not from fear but from anger. My fury ignited when I opened his apartment to clean it out and found expensive suits, a huge flat-screen television, DVD system, Chivas Regal . . . He drove a two-year-old BMW. For a year I lived in near poverty, meeting our mortgage payments, insurance, his and mine, taxes . . . I cashed out my 401K to meet payments, since I couldn't sell the house without his cooperation. A small inheritance from my aunt had made the down payment; I would have lost everything if I'd failed to pay up every month. My fury increased when I found two gift boxes in his bureau, one addressed to My darling Marsha. That was a bracelet with semi-precious gems and pearls. The other was to Dearest Diane, a heavy gold chain. I also found four credit-card bills totaling twenty-seven thousand dollars, for which I would be responsible since I was his widow and my name was on them along with his.

"Let it go," I tell myself, taking a gin and tonic into the living room where I sit and regard the bracelet and gold chain on the coffee table.

"Pretty, aren't they?" Harry says, and he's mostly there again, blinking on and off like a Christmas-tree light.

I close my eyes hard. "Either come in all the way, or go out, but stop that blinking!"

"I'm doing the best I can."

When I look up again, he's still there, no longer flickering, and I can still see through him.

"You're not hallucinating," he says. "I'm really here, or mostly here."

I take a long drink. "Why?" My voice is little more than a whisper.

"I don't know why. I just found myself here. You scared the shit out of me when you suddenly saw me, by the way."

"What do you mean? How long have you been here?"

"When did that real estate agent come?"

"This morning."

"I was here then. Two hundred seventy-five thousand for this place! Wow! You'll make out like a bandit. Didn't I tell you that mortgage insurance was a good idea? And double indemnity for my insurance, plus the BMW. Beautiful rich young widow. What are you going to do with all that dough?"

"Harry! Stop this. Why are you here? What do you want?"

"Aren't you scared?"

"No. I don't believe in ghosts."

After a moment, looking surprised, he says, "Neither do I."

"Isn't there someplace you should be? Report in or something?"

He shrugs expressively. He's very handsome, even if he is dead. Thick black hair just curly enough, wonderful dark blue eyes with makeup-ad lashes, cleft chin. He's wearing pale blue sweats, possibly the clothes he had on when a hit-and-run maniac clipped him and ran.

"You never used to drink alone," he says, eyeing the gin and tonic as if he's longing for one just like it.

"I never used to sit talking to my dead husband."

He reaches for the gold chain. His fingers pass through it. "Ah well," he says. "Diane ran a credit check on me and said get lost. And Marsha wanted to get married and I said there was a little complication, namely you. She got sore. If you can find the receipts, you probably can return them. Be worth your while."

I need a therapist. It's one thing to hallucinate but quite another to hold a conversation with a hallucination. It could even be a serious disorder. I drink the rest of the gin and tonic.

"Did you find the pictures?" he asks.

"What pictures?"

"Oh. Well. What are you going to do with the furniture and things?"

"Garage sale, auction. I don't know."

"You might want to look in the desk drawer. Bottom lifts out, and there's a file folder . . . I'd get them myself, but . . ." He passes his hand through the bracelet and looks at me with what I used to think was an appealing expression, like a boy caught stealing a cookie.

I go back to his office, step over the broken mugs on the floor, and head for his desk. There are pencils, pens, computer disks, miscellaneous office stuff. I dump it out and there really is a fake bottom. The folder has Polaroid shots of seven different naked women, including me. Just one among many.

I take the folder, pick up a newspaper in the kitchen, and head for the patio and the grill.

"Hey!" he says. "They're worth something, you know."

If he were not already dead, how satisfying it would be to hit him myself with a car, or a train, or a sledgehammer.

My lawyer said that if they found the guy who ran him down, we'd sue him for a million for wrongful death. Rightful death, I think, watching the Polaroid shots writhe, blacken, and curl up, emitting clouds of foul-smelling smoke.

He doesn't walk exactly, just drifts along, near me when I go out to the patio, near me when I go back inside.

"Why are you haunting me?" I demand in the kitchen. "I never did anything to you."

"I'm not haunting you," he says a bit indignantly.

"Then get out, go away, and don't come back."

"I can't," he says. "See, I'm doing my morning run, down by the river, the way I always do, and *whammo,* just nothing. Then I'm here and you're talking to the real estate agent. And neither of you seems to see me or hear me even though I'm yelling my head off."

"Who hit you? Do you know?"

"Nope. Came out of nowhere behind me."

"Have you even tried to find out what you're supposed to do now? Someone to ask what the rules are or something?"

"What rules?"

"I don't know. There must be a protocol, something you're supposed to do, someplace to check in. There are always rules."

"Maybe," he says. "I used to think there'd be a rosy-cheeked cherub waiting to take your hand and guide you, or maybe an old guy with a long white beard and a staff, maybe even a beautiful girl in a flowing white gown, something like that. But like I said, nothing, then here."

"A little guy in a red suit with a white-hot trident," I mutter. It's another bureaucratic snarl. I know something about bureaucracy, working for a law firm as I do, or did. I quit a week ago. There are always rules and procedures, routines to follow, and there are always some things that fall through the system and get lost. Like Harry.

"Look," I say, "I believe you're supposed to haunt the person or persons who did you in. You know, revenge, something like that. Or are you haunting the house? If I leave, do you stay with the house, like the refrigerator and stove?"

"I believe," he says, "the people who wrote those rules weren't the ones who knew much about it."

"Well, I'm going out now, and you stay here. Okay?" I pick up my purse, fish out the car keys, and walk out, with him close enough to touch, if there were anything to touch besides a draft of cool air.

My neighbor Elinor Smallwood comes over to say hello, and it's apparent that she doesn't suspect that he is there; neither does her dachshund. "Lori, I hope you're bearing up. Was that a Realtor I saw leaving this morning? Oh, dear, I hope if a buyer turns up, it will be someone compatible who speaks English. You know what I mean?"

I nod and return to the house. He doesn't need doors; he flows inside while I'm still working with the key.

"It isn't fair!" I yell at him. "I don't deserve this! Get out of here! Let me get on with my life."

He flickers for a moment, then spreads his hands helplessly. "I'm as stuck as you are," he says.

I swallow hard as the realization hits me: He really won't, or can't, leave. No matter what I do, he'll be there watching, commenting. I haven't been to bed with a man in a year; I dated a few times but I never let things get out of hand. After all, I was still married. Now I'm not married; I'm thirty years old, and whatever

I do, there will be my audience of one.

"Oh God, what about Carl?" I say out loud. He's the attorney from the office who is helping with my legal affairs. He suggested a quiet dinner in a discreet restaurant, and I know he intended to seduce me afterward, and I intended to let him.

"Aha!" Harry says gleefully. "You have a boyfriend!"

I head for the telephone to break my date with Carl. Actually, he never gave me a second glance until I became a fairly-soon-to-be-rich widow.

After the call I sit on the bench by the wall phone, my gaze on Harry, who is trying to pick up a salt shaker on the table. He swoops like a striking snake and his hand goes through it without causing a tremor; then he sneaks up on it stealthily, with the same effect. Over and over. God help me. If he learns to materialize completely, what then?

I start down a list of friends and family, trying to decide if there is anyone I can confide in. There isn't. Who would believe me? Jo Farrell might, but she would find it exciting and want to hold a séance or something. I can imagine telling Super Iris; she thinks we mean like Superwoman, but it's really Superior Iris, who always knows more than anyone else and is free with opinions and advice. I can hear her voice in my head: "Surely you understand that it isn't about ghosts . . ." Wherever she starts, it always ends the same: It's really your own fault.

It isn't my fault, I think then, but it certainly is my problem. I remember a little red phone book in the drawer with the false bottom. Why that when he had a Rolodex?

We go back to the office where I pick up the phone book. He tries to grab it, but the only effect is that of a cool breeze blowing across my hand.

In the kitchen I sit at the table and look over the names in the little red book. Eight women! I even know one of them, Sheila Wayman.

Maybe, I tell myself, maybe one of those women still cares, maybe she'll want him back, or maybe I can just dump him on one of them. Transfer him. Turn over custodial care . . . I can feel hysteria mingling with fury now, and I draw in a deep breath. *Eight!* I pick up the Portland phone book and look up Sheila and Roger Wayman. Southwest Spruce. A twenty-minute drive. Halfway to the door I stop. What will I say to her? I snatch up a paperback book from an end table, scrawl her name on the inside cover, and leave. He drifts along at my side.

"Where are we going?"

He oozes between molecules or something and gets in the passenger seat as I get behind the wheel. For the first ten minutes or so he comments on the beautiful June day, or the heavy traffic, or

criticizes my driving, whistles in a low tone at a woman walking a dog . . . I ignore him. When I turn onto Spruce he leans forward, looking around, and now there's a note of uneasiness in his voice when he asks again, "Where are we going?"

A minute later, when I slow down to examine house numbers, he says, "This is crazy. She might not even be home. She was a long time ago. She won't even remember me. What's the point? What are you going to do, make a scene, pick a fight with her?"

I continue to ignore him. At her house I pull into the driveway and get out holding the book. He is close behind me all the way. If she isn't home, I'll sit in the car and read and wait for her, I think grimly, but she answers the doorbell. A small boy on a tricycle is by her side, and she is fifteen pounds overweight.

"Sheila?"

She gasps, recognizing me, and her face pales. "What do you want?" she whispers.

"I'm cleaning out the house and I came across this. I was in the neighborhood and decided to drop it off." I hand the book to her.

"Wow! She's turned into a tub," Harry says at my side. Sheila doesn't even glance in his direction.

In the car again, I say, "One down, seven to go." Harry lets out a ghostly type of moan, and tries to grasp my purse. He's in the passenger seat with my purse on the same seat, where his crotch would be if he had any substance; he is looking at the purse cross-eyed as he makes a quick snatching grab, draws his hand back, and tries with the other one. I start to drive.

At home, I make myself an omelette and salad and he practices. "It's like having a muscle that you can't find exactly," he says. "Like wriggling your ears. I'll get it," he adds confidently. I'm very afraid that he will.

I plot out the following day, using a map, listing the women in the order of proximity, the closest ones on to the most distant. I had all day Saturday, when they might be home, and if not, then Sunday, on into the next week or however long it would take. I would track them down at their offices or schools or wherever they spent their time and see each one, give each one the opportunity to see Harry.

And if none of them claims him? No answer follows the question.

I don't bother with an excuse again. When Hilary Winstead comes to the door, I say, "I'm Lori Thurman. I was cleaning out Harry's office and I came across your pictures. I burned them. I just wanted you to know."

Behind me Harry says, "She makes a mean martini."

Hilary Winstead stares at me, moistens her lips, and then slams the door.

Bette Hackman is tall and willowy, very beautiful. Harry sighs

when she says, "What do you mean? I paid for those pictures. He swore that was all he had. That bastard!"

On Southeast Burnside I detour a few blocks and park at the cemetery. A few people are around, none paying any attention to us as I walk to the new grave of Harry Thurman.

"That's where you planted me?"

"That's where you belong. Get in there and go back to sleep."

He shudders and drifts backward. "You're out of your mind."

I guess I am. What I was hoping was that a guy with a long beard and a staff, or a cherub, or even a beautiful woman would cry out, "Harry! We've been looking everywhere for you. Come along now." We return to the car and I drive on.

No one answers the doorbell at Wanda Sorenson's house.

Diane Shuster says, "I could care less."

"Shrewd, but nearly illiterate," Harry comments. "Great ass, though."

I am ready to give it up. No one sees him, or notices a cold breeze, or anything else out of the ordinary.

Then he says, "How it goes is, they'd call for help with the new computer, or new software, and I'd go in and find things screwed up royally. So I'd fool around and get things working, and accidentally log on to a porn site, something like that, and then . . . One thing leads to another."

I grit my teeth and look at the next name: Sonia Welch. He nods when I turn onto River Drive. "Ah, wait until you see that house! Gorgeous place! Sonia broke it off before I was ready, actually. Afraid her old man would find out."

He sounds regretful when he says, "That was part of it, of course, the fear of discovery, a mad husband with a gun, something like that. A little added spice."

My lips are clamped so hard they hurt. I am determined to ignore him until he gets so bored he'll find a way to go somewhere else. He'll find someone who knows the rules.

"That's it," Harry says, pointing to a tall gray house nearly hidden behind shrubbery. It *is* beautiful, with bay windows, stained-glass panels, professional landscaping . . . A heavyset man in shorts, holding a can of varnish, is touching up a motorboat in the driveway.

"Hello," I say, getting out of the car. "I'm looking for Sonia. Is she home?"

The man looks me over as if I am up for auction.

"The husband. He's a shrink," Harry says. "Would you tell him your innermost secrets?"

I have to admit, although silently, that I would not. His eyes are as cold and fathomless as black ice.

"She's back on the terrace," Welch says. "Go on around." He motions toward a walkway and returns to his boat repair.

I walk under a lattice covered with roses in bloom. The fragrance is intoxicating. I see the woman before I step onto the terrace; she is dozing, apparently, with a magazine over her face against the late afternoon sun.

"Sonia?" I say.

With a languid motion she moves the magazine and looks around over her shoulder. Then she jumps up and jams both hands over her mouth, staring wide-eyed, not at me but at my side, at Harry.

"No," she cries then, and begins to back up, nearly falls over the chaise behind her, catches her balance, and continues to back up around a glass-topped table, staring, paler than death.

"I didn't mean to, Harry," she whispers. "It was an accident. Don't come closer, stay back! Please, don't come closer!"

Harry is flickering wildly, moving toward her like a cloud fired with lightning. Then he goes out. Sonia keeps backing up.

"Harry, stay away! I had to do it. I told you he was suspicious! I told you to stay away! I had to do it! You should have stayed away! Don't touch me! Oh God, don't touch me!"

I don't think she even saw me. I turn and retrace my steps under the roses and out to the car.

"Wasn't she there?" Welch asks, looking up.

"I think she's sleeping. I didn't want to disturb her. I just wanted to thank her for a favor she did me. It isn't important."

I knew there were rules, I tell myself, driving away. There are always rules. ●

"Wish I did jog regularly; I'm actually on the lam."

Art by Jason Eckhardt

CONSTANT HEARSES

by Edward D. Hoch

During George Washington's second term as President of the United States, it was not uncommon for Alexander Swift to visit him at Mount Vernon. The plantation, situated atop a hill overlooking the Potomac River, was always a lively place. On this sunny afternoon in late October of 1793, he found the President on the second floor of his round barn where horses sometimes walked in circles, threshing wheat.

"Isn't it a bit late in the season for threshing, Mr. President?" he asked.

"Alex! How good it is to see you! Stay by the stairs. I'm coming right down." When they reached the barn's main floor, he answered Swift's question. "The threshing season is over, but there is always the cleanup in preparation for winter. Tell me, how goes progress on the Patowmack Canal?"

In the years following the Revolution, Washington had become president of the Potomac Navigation Company, hiring Swift as one of his assistants. After his election to the highest office in the new nation, Washington had resigned from the canal company, but

Swift stayed on. He lived with his wife Molly and their eight-year-old son in Maryland. President Washington still took an interest in the canal company and asked about its progress whenever they were together.

"Progress is slow," he admitted, "but we're coming along."

"Will I live to see it completed?"

"I don't know that either of us will," Swift answered with a smile. "But we're certainly trying. I hope our new capital in the District of Columbia is finished sooner than the canal."

"I hope so, too. I laid the cornerstone for the Capitol building on a sunny day a few weeks ago, but the President's House still has only a foundation. I will never live there."

Benedict Arnold figures so frequently as an antagonist in the cases of Edward D. Hoch's Revolutionary War era sleuth Alexander Swift that he's beginning to take on the character of Swift's nemesis. In real life, Arnold's role in the Revolutionary War was more complicated; prior to his treachery he fought heroically for the American side in several crucial battles. We probably haven't seen the last of Arnold's entanglements with the clever Swift. . . . ¶

"If you are elected to a third term . . ."

Washington held up his hand. "No, no! Tell me, how are Molly and George?"

"Fine, sir, both of them." Washington had been especially pleased when they named their son after him.

The President turned serious as they walked toward the house. "I have summoned you here on an important matter."

"Not Benedict Arnold again?"

"Not directly, though there may be some connection. He's back in London with his family, and not faring too well, from what I hear. There is, at the moment, a much more immediate problem. I'm sure you are aware of what is happening in Philadelphia."

"The plague of yellow fever! The newspaper accounts are terrible."

Washington nodded. "It started among the sailors and grog sellers on the waterfront back in August. Poor Hamilton almost died of it, and many in the government are stricken. When I agreed to move the capital from New York to Philadelphia, I never dreamed of anything like this happening. I left the city as planned on September tenth, to spend time here until Congress reconvenes on December second. Now I am seriously considering moving the session to Germantown or some other location. Alex, we have nearly five thousand known dead in a city of fifty-five thousand. And they died a horrible death, with that yellowish skin color and black

vomit. I saw many of them myself before I came here in September."

They'd entered the big house and Martha Washington greeted Swift warmly. She was a small woman, barely five feet tall, with dark hair and a gentle manner. "It is good to see you again, Alex," she said, inquiring about his wife and son.

"Patsy," Washington asked, for that was what he called her, "could Joshua bring us some tea on the back porch?"

"I'll see to it at once."

Seated next to the President in one of the rocking chairs overlooking the Potomac, Swift felt at peace with the world. He knew, however, that the President had summoned him for a serious purpose. "I want to help however I can, sir, but of course I am not a medical man. I know nothing of the disease or how it is spread."

"Nor does anyone else, although there is a feeling that the French colonists who fled Haiti in late July might have brought it with them to our shores. Certainly it has been a bad summer in our nation's capital. Philadelphia has been hotter, drier, and dustier than anyone can remember, with an amazing number of flies and mosquitos adding to the discomfort. Only now is there some relief with the coming of a light frost, but still the death toll from the fever climbs." He was silent for a moment, and then added, "One of our Pennsylvania congressmen died of it just two weeks ago."

"Who would that be?"

"Clayton Emory. Did you know him?"

"I don't believe so."

Washington sighed. "Here is the problem, Swift, and what I am about to tell you must go no further."

"Certainly not."

"Emory was fifty-eight years old and a widower. He lived alone in a small row house that was filled with papers from his military service and from various positions he held in the colonial government. Last week, when members of his family started to clean the house out, they made a surprising discovery in one of the boxes—a large quantity of British currency, all in five-pound notes drawn on the Bank of England."

"How much is a large quantity?"

"Seventy-eight envelopes of one hundred notes each. Thirty-nine thousand pounds in all."

"That's a great deal of money."

"A small fortune," Washington agreed. "I take only twenty-five thousand dollars a year, hardly enough for the expenses incurred while serving as President. That is a bit over six thousand pounds. The money hidden in Emory's house is more than I will collect during my first six years in office."

"Are these banknotes still legal currency?"

"They are in England."

"Where did they come from?" Swift asked, taking a sip of tea.

"I want you to find out. The family notified the Treasury Department of their find, and with Hamilton still in a weakened condition I was contacted directly by post."

"You mentioned this might involve Benedict Arnold indirectly. What did you mean by that?"

Washington closed his eyes for a moment, then said, "Before West Point, when Arnold was still military governor of Philadelphia, Emory served under him. I ask myself if it is possible Emory, too, was a traitor, receiving money from Arnold."

Swift sat up straighter in his chair. "Do you believe that?"

"No, not really. But I want you to find a better explanation for me. What was he doing with all that hidden British currency, twelve years after the war ended?"

It was Alexander Swift's first visit to the new nation's capital since Washington's reelection to a second term. With construction in the District of Columbia moving slowly, the President and Congress would have to endure Philadelphia for another few years. Right now, with the yellow fever still raging and the city's streets almost empty, Swift felt a chill of apprehension. He was aware that until recently even some post riders refused to enter the city. He'd faced death many times, during the Revolution and after, but always from a human foe.

Washington had suggested he go first to the dead man's home, one of the row houses along Chestnut Street, not far from City Hall and the State House, and within blocks of the President's own residence. When he reached the house, he noticed a handbill affixed to a tree near the street. It was a poem titled "Pestilence," and had been written by Philip Freneau, editor of the *National Gazette*. The first stanza read:

Hot, dry winds forever blowing,
Dead men to the grave-yards going:
Constant hearses,
Funeral verses;
Oh! What plagues—there is no knowing!

As he read through the rest of it, a wagon trundled by. From the stench of it, he knew there were bodies beneath the canvas covering. Constant hearses, indeed.

Tying his horse to a hitching post, he rapped smartly on the closed door. After a few moments it was opened by a young woman who wore a gauze scarf across her mouth and nose. "There has been death here," she told him. "You'd best be gone."

Quickly he introduced himself. "I am Alexander Swift, sent here as a special representative of President Washington."

"Oh!" She stepped aside. "Come in, then, if you dare. The yellow-fever germs might still be loose. We don't know how it's spread."

"You are . . . ?"

"Oh, sorry! I'm Amanda Emory, the congressman's granddaughter. Here, wrap this gauze around your face. It might offer some protection."

She was a pert young woman with blond curls, perhaps still in her late teens. He took the gauze as she had instructed, though he doubted that it offered much in the way of protection. "I didn't realize he had a granddaughter this grown up. Your father must be Jonathan Emory."

"Yes, he is. He, too, had the fever, but he is resting now and seems better."

"It was you who found the hidden money?"

She nodded. He followed her into the small bedroom at the rear of the house. Wooden boxes full of papers were stacked on the floor, apparently in an attempt to organize them for ultimate removal. While she showed him the closet he started to sit on the dead man's bed and then thought better of it. The bedclothes had been removed, but the mattress was old and soiled with the scent of death. "It was right here, in this box. My father was very ill at the time and I could not ask him what to do."

"Who is your family doctor?"

"It was Dr. Shippen until he fled the city at the end of August," she replied with a trace of bitterness in her voice. "He was one of the best doctors at Pennsylvania Hospital. Since my grandfather fell ill in mid October we've had Dr. Bradley."

Swift nodded. Benedict Arnold's wife was Peggy Shippen. Her father was a judge and the doctor was a cousin. Swift remembered him faintly from Arnold's wedding, which he'd attended as Washington's representative. He would be in his late fifties now, and obviously not the bravest of men. "I've heard of Bradley," he told her. "I understand he's a good man."

"Not good enough to save my grandfather, but perhaps no one would have been. In those last days I was here as often as I could be, cleaning up his vomit, trying to make him as comfortable as possible. I pray Dr. Bradley can do better with my father's illness."

"You have no fear for yourself?"

"What good would it do? The fever is all around us, everywhere along the waterfront and in the eastern half of the city. You either flee or pray, those are the only two options."

"President Washington is concerned about the convening of Congress in a few weeks. It may be moved to Germantown."

"The frosts have helped a bit," she told him. "In a few weeks the worst might be over."

"I have heard the summer was bad."

She put a hand to her forehead. "The heat, the mosquitos everywhere, I don't know how anyone survived it. They have tried everything to stamp it out, even firing cannons in the streets of the city in the belief that gunpowder could combat the disease. There is little solace to be found, even in religion. All but one of our Catholic priests and many of our ministers have been infected themselves."

"Tell me about the money."

"My father was in no shape to clean out the house, and my mother has been tending to him night and day. I told them I would get a start on it, clearing out those boxes of old papers from his closet. It was there I found the five-pound notes, in seventy-eight envelopes. I brought my mother over the next morning to see them, and she was fearful we would be arrested if we did not report our discovery. Mother contacted a clerk at the Treasury Department, one of the few not suffering from the yellow fever, and brought the money to him."

Swift nodded. "With Secretary Hamilton still weak from the fever, President Washington was notified directly."

"I—I cannot believe my grandfather would be involved in anything criminal or treasonous."

"We have no reason to believe he was so involved," Swift replied, trying to reassure her. "You did the correct thing by turning in the money immediately, but now I must speak with your father. Is he well enough to receive me?"

"He seems better today. Let me close up here and I will take you to him."

The Emory house was but a few blocks away, on Ninth Street, and Swift walked there with Amanda Emory, leading his horse behind him. "The yellow fever has changed this city so much," she told him. "Sometimes we feel the rest of the nation has cut us off completely. People here stay indoors and avoid contact even with their closest neighbors. A man next-door to us died of the fever and was buried before we ever knew it. We only learned of my grandfather's death because Dr. Bradley had been calling on him daily and I always arranged to be there when he came, to let him in. That day we arrived together and went inside to find Grandfather dead."

At the Emory house they found that the doctor had arrived to minister to Amanda's father. Bradley was a slim man whose dour expression seemed to mirror the everyday horrors he was witnessing. "Jonathan is progressing well," he told Amanda, motioning

toward her father, who was seated in a rocking chair with a pillow behind him. "I wish I could say the same for my other patients."

Alexander Swift introduced himself. "The President is especially interested in the death of Congressman Emory. Can you tell me anything about it, Doctor?"

"He lingered for weeks, which gave me some hope that we might save him. I visited daily, and the ladies looked after him in the evenings. When the end came, it surprised me by its suddenness."

"I was there during the day when the doctor came, and Mother and I went there at dinnertime, at least until my father, too, fell ill with the disease. Then I went alone," Amanda explained. "It was terrible for Grandfather, being by himself overnight, but there was no space for him at Pennsylvania Hospital or anywhere else. We did the best we could."

Swift turned his attention to the dead man's son. "How are you coming along?"

Jonathan Emory, a man still in his late thirties, nodded and gave a weak smile. "Better than my father, I hope. Abby and Amanda had me to nurse as well as him. But I will pull through. I know I will. Already there is talk that I may fill my father's congressional seat until next year's election."

"You must get back on your feet before you make any plans," the doctor told him, and his daughter quickly agreed.

Abby Emory came downstairs at that moment. "You should have told me we had a visitor, Amanda." Though probably still in her thirties, the woman was pale and gaunt.

"I am reluctant to intrude at such a time," Swift said. "President Washington is most concerned about the large quantity of banknotes found in Congressman Emory's home. Can any of you offer an explanation?"

"What's this?" Doctor Bradley asked.

"Nothing that need concern you," Abby Emory said. "Let me show you out, Doctor."

"I'm sorry," Swift apologized when the doctor had departed. "I assumed he knew about it."

Jonathan Emory sat up a bit straighter in his chair. "He is not the family friend that Dr. Shippen was. Unfortunately, Shippen fled the city at his first opportunity. Dr. Bradley took over his files and his patients. We must content ourselves with him. It is scandalous that so few doctors remained here after the outbreak."

"You all must know Dr. Shippen's relationship to the young Peggy Shippen who married the traitor Benedict Arnold. Some members of the Shippen family were Loyalists opposed to the Revolution. It is possible one of them, perhaps even Dr. Shippen himself, attempted to bribe the congressman."

"Impossible!" Jonathan Emory told him with a trace of anger in

his voice. "No one was more loyal to the new nation than my father."

"Have you any other explanation for all this money in British currency?"

"No," he admitted, then turned to his wife. "Do you think Crouchman might know?"

"Well . . ." She hesitated, considering the idea.

"Who is Crouchman?" Swift asked.

"He was on Clayton's congressional staff," Abby Emory explained. "Houghton Crouchman. He used to call on him a few nights a week, even when Congress wasn't in session. But we've heard nothing from him since my father-in-law's death. We sent a message to him by runner and received no reply. For all we know he might be stricken with the yellow fever himself."

"Can you give me his address?"

She produced a number on Vine Street, some distance away. Swift took his leave, promising to inform them if he learned anything.

The ride to Vine Street was anything but pleasant. Whenever a wagon passed him bound for the cemetery, the odor from it made Swift's horse rear up in fright. Though the air was cooler and clearer now, the city was still awaiting the killing frost that everyone prayed would bring an end to the suffering. On Vine Street a few people were out, one woman in front of the house where Crouchman resided. When Swift asked after Congressman Emory's staff assistant, the woman informed him that Mrs. Crouchman had been a recent victim of the yellow fever and Crouchman himself had not been seen in a couple of days.

Swift went up the steps and tried the door. It was the sort that needed a key to lock or unlock it, but it swung open when he pressed down on the latch and pushed.

The inside parlor was neat and formal, as befitting a congressman's aide. "Mr. Crouchman," he called out, but no one answered. The house appeared to be empty. He made his way through the downstairs rooms and decided that Crouchman had probably fled the city following the death of his wife.

Still, there were some pieces of moldy bread on the kitchen table that did not jibe with the neatness in the other rooms. Swift doubted that Crouchman would have left it like this. He went out to the hall and climbed the stairs to the second floor. He saw at once that the master bedroom was occupied. A man was bundled up with blankets in the bed, his eyes closed. "Mr. Crouchman?" he said again.

As he moved closer to the bed he saw the yellow skin, and realized that the man was dead, struck down by the same terrible

plague that had taken his wife. The bedclothes around his neck were dark with dried blood. Swift assumed it was from the hemorrhaging that often accompanied the disease, and he braced himself as he carefully lifted the blanket. Then he saw that Crouchman's throat had been savagely cut.

Someone had taken the trouble to murder a dying man.

Swift wanted desperately to relay the news to President Washington, but the mail out of the city was only just returning to some form of normalcy. For all he knew, the President might already be riding north to inspect Germantown as a possible site for the congressional session. He went instead to the high constable's office, identified himself as the President's representative, and reported the discovery of the slain man. He knew there was unlikely to be any sort of investigation. At a time when thousands were dying, little notice would be taken of a murder victim who would have died anyway in a matter of days.

Swift returned to the Emory household and told Jonathan, Abby, and their daughter Amanda what he'd discovered. He was a bit surprised to find Jonathan Emory out of his rocking chair and moving around the house. "I am feeling much better today," he said. "The worst of it seems to be over. But I cannot understand about poor Crouchman. He was not the sort to make enemies. Is there any possibility he killed himself in despair over his illness?"

Swift shook his head. "His arms were beneath the blanket, and there was no weapon. Someone did it to him, someone who couldn't risk letting the disease run its course."

"How long had he been dead?" Amanda asked.

"I'm not a good judge of that, but certainly no more than a couple of days. A neighbor saw him recently."

She let out her breath. "That's a relief."

He could almost read her thoughts. "You feared your grandfather might be somehow involved."

"The money. I don't know what to think." She shook her head as if trying to clear it. "Crouchman was on my grandfather's staff. If any money was given to him, Crouchman might have known about it."

"That's nonsense!" her father stormed. "Your grandfather never took a bribe from anyone! He was an honest man, one of our new nation's true patriots. You have to believe that, Mr. Swift."

"Still, Crouchman's death might well be linked to the money. Did your father have other staff members with whom I could speak?"

Emory exchanged glances with his wife, and it was she who answered. "There is no harm in saying it. Since his wife's death two years ago, Clayton has been friendly with a woman named

Mrs. Langtree. So far as we know, they are good friends only. She is not a staff member, of course, but if you can find her you might speak with her."

"Do you think the money might have belonged to her?"

"I doubt it. Her husband was a minister before he died. It's not an occupation that brings in a great deal of money, certainly not in British pounds."

"Where might I find her?"

"We have no idea," her husband answered. "We haven't seen the woman in months."

"I heard she was helping out at the Pennsylvania Hospital," Amanda said.

Once again Swift ventured into the streets, as the sun began to dip low on the western horizon. The Pennsylvania Hospital was located on Eighth Street in a park area between Spruce and Pine. Usually peaceful, it had come to represent all the pain and hopelessness of the city. Since it was overcrowded, present inmates had to be protected by barring the admission of lonely or homeless people who had no one left to care for them. The blocks around the hospital were crowded with these poor souls. Some lay dying in doorways and alleys, without hope.

The man at the admissions desk told him that Mrs. Langtree was somewhere in the hospital, but he knew not where. It took Swift a half-hour to find her, ministering to plague-ridden children in one of the hospital wards. "My name is Alex Swift," he told her as she stood up at the sound of her name. "President Washington has asked me to look into the circumstances surrounding the unfortunate death of Congressman Emory."

She was an attractive woman in her forties, with bags under her eyes testifying to many sleepless nights tending the sick. "I can tell you as much about this poor child as I can about the congressman. The yellow fever is no respecter of age or class."

"You were friendly with him before he died?"

"Yes," she admitted. "We were two lonely people who enjoyed each other's company. There was nothing untoward about it."

"I'm sure not. Might I ask you about his finances? Did he have a quantity of cash on hand?"

She soothed the sick child's brow with a damp cloth, taking a moment before she answered. "I don't understand your question, Mr. Swift. Clayton was not a wealthy man. He'd had some business success in his younger days, but lately he was devoting himself to his duties in the Congress."

"Let me be frank with you, Mrs. Langtree. A quantity of British currency was found among his papers after his death. Did you have any knowledge of this?"

"Certainly not! If you are implying that he was somehow in league with the British Loyalists, you are quite mistaken. No one was more loyal to our new nation than Clayton."

"Might a member of his congressional staff, such as Houghton Crouchman, have knowledge of it?"

"I assure you there is nothing to have knowledge of! Certainly Crouchman was a valued assistant, and he called on Clayton during his illness. I understand he himself has now fallen ill with the disease."

"Worse than that. His body was found earlier this day."

She closed her eyes for a moment, perhaps in silent prayer. "Is there no end to this plague? Must it destroy our entire city?"

"Crouchman suffered from the yellow fever, but that was not what killed him. His throat was cut as he lay in his bed."

"Who would do such a ghastly thing?"

"I do not know," Swift admitted. "But my task is to find out. I know that some city residents do not bother to lock their doors at night. Was Crouchman one of those?"

"No. I visited him with Clayton on more than one occasion and his door was always locked."

"I understand that Dr. Shippen was Clayton's physician."

She nodded. "And Crouchman's, too, until the good doctor fled the city."

"What can you tell me about Shippen?"

The ill child had fallen into a peaceful sleep, and Mrs. Langtree felt she could leave him. "Let us walk for a bit, Mr. Swift, and I will tell you what little I know. Dr. Shippen is a highly regarded physician and medical educator. During the Revolution he was chief of the medical department of the Continental Army."

"A man beyond reproach until he fled the city in the face of the plague."

"Well, not quite beyond reproach. His predecessor in the position charged him with bad faith, and he was later court-martialed for financial irregularities in office. However, he was acquitted of the charges."

"Yet he tended to members of Congress?"

"There was no solid proof of wrongdoing against him, and he was always a good doctor."

"His cousin Peggy married Benedict Arnold."

"I know that. They are in England now."

"And Shippen fled the city in late August?"

"After a meeting of physicians on August twenty-fifth. He has not yet returned."

Swift was grateful for her help. "You have been of great assistance. Please continue with the fine work you're doing here."

"I am only trying to keep them alive."

❖ ❖ ❖

Night had fallen on the plague-ridden city. Riding through the almost deserted streets, Swift could feel a decided chill in the air. There would be a frost this night, perhaps a killing one. It was hard for him to believe that he had been there only a single day, moving through these dangerous streets, encountering the healthy and the dying and the dead.

The hospital office had told him that Dr. Bradley had gone home for the night. When Swift showed his warrant from President Washington, they gave him the doctor's address. It proved to be a modest home on Beech Street, near the Schuylkill River and well away from the worst plague areas.

It was the doctor himself who answered the door, looking grim. "I have worked all day, sir. I cannot go on another call tonight, no matter the circumstances."

"We met earlier," Swift reminded him. "At the Emory house."

"Oh yes. Mr. Swift?"

"Alexander Swift. May I come in?"

"Certainly. I am alone here. My wife and children have been sent to the country until the plague passes. Please have a seat."

"I must tell you that another of your patients has succumbed. Houghton Crouchman, assistant to Congressman Emory."

"I am indeed sorry to hear that. He was a good man, as was Emory himself. May I offer you a bit of wine?"

"Thank you, no. I have come on a matter of government business."

"And what would that be?"

"The matter of seventy-eight envelopes of British currency found among the papers of the late Clayton Emory."

Dr. Bradley showed surprise. "Is that so? Where did they come from?"

"From the British, almost certainly. Otherwise the money would have been in some form of colonial or United States currency. But it was the number of separate envelopes that told me what I really wanted to know."

"Seventy-eight? What does that tell you?"

"Separate envelopes, separate payments. Seventy-eight payments of five hundred pounds each. Our Revolution began with the battles of Lexington and Concord, and Paul Revere's ride, in April, seventeen seventy-five. It ended, for all practical purposes, with Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown in October of seventeen eighty-one, seventy-eight months later."

"The British were paying someone a monthly fee—"

"A large monthly fee, which ended only after the situation became hopeless with the surrender. An agent, a spy, a traitor, call him what you will."

"And this money went to Clayton Emory?"

Swift shook his head. "No, for two reasons. First, the British would hardly be paying that sort of money, month after month, to someone who was a mere private soldier in the Continental Army. And second, Emory was not in a position financially to merely let those envelopes pile up. He would have found a way to spend the money, at least in the beginning when Philadelphia was still in British hands."

"Then who did these payments go to?"

"Most likely it was Dr. Shippen. He held the important position of chief of the medical department with the Continental Army, he wouldn't have had to spend the money immediately because of his other income, and he came from a family of known Loyalists. He'd also been in trouble before, and was acquitted at a court-martial."

Dr. Bradley expressed puzzlement over that. "But if the money went to Shippen, how did it end up in Clayton Emory's closet?"

"I believe you put it there, Bradley, just as I believe you murdered Houghton Crouchman."

"That's insane!" the doctor sputtered.

"Is it? If we agree that Shippen received the money originally, someone had to take it to Emory's house, someone who knew he'd be too sick to go rummaging through his boxes and accidentally find it. Could it have been Shippen himself? No, because he fled from the city in late August, and Emory wasn't stricken with the fever until October. But who else might have come across the envelopes full of money, no doubt hidden somewhere in Shippen's own files? You, Dr. Bradley, who took over Shippen's files and patients after he fled. Once you'd discovered it, you surmised that the money was gained illicitly and determined to have it for yourself. When Shippen discovered it missing he could hardly report it to the authorities without implicating himself. Yet you couldn't take a chance on hiding it here, where some member of your family might discover it. So you took it, perhaps a dozen envelopes at a time, to Clayton Emory's home. You'd seen the boxes of papers stacked in his closet and you knew it was a perfect temporary hiding place. Even though his granddaughter was usually present when you called, it was easy enough to hide the envelopes while she was out of the room and Emory was dozing. Only he died unexpectedly. You told me yourself you were surprised by the suddenness of his death. You had no chance to remove the money when you and Amanda discovered his body, and soon after that she found the money herself. I had already deduced this much before you admitted a few minutes ago that you knew the money was in Emory's closet. The family hadn't mentioned the money's

location in your presence. You could only have known because you put it there."

"What has any of this to do with Crouchman's killing?"

"I believe he found out about you somehow. You were treating him, too, and you feared he might say something about the money before he died. You couldn't take that chance. His front door was unlocked although he always locked it. The killer didn't enter with a key or he would have relocked the door as he departed.

"I asked myself why a sick man, living alone, in bed much of the time, would leave his front door unlocked, and the answer came to me at once. It was so his doctor could enter and minister to him."

Dr. Bradley's face twisted in despair. "He called on Emory one day while I was in the closet. He saw nothing, but I feared when he heard about the money he would remember that. It wasn't really murder. He had only days to live anyway."

"That will be for a jury to decide."

He stared down at the floor, then lifted his gaze to Swift. "Do you see the yellow in my eyes, and on my skin? These are symptoms of the fever. A jury of the Lord has already convicted me."

Bradley was one of the last to die, some weeks later. Early Sunday morning, November tenth, President Washington rode alone into the city from Germantown. Alexander Swift met him and they rode together through the clean and quiet streets of Philadelphia. The first heavy frosts of winter still hung in the air.

"It is clear," Washington decided. "The air seems healthy now. The Congress will convene here as scheduled."

"The frost has done it," Swift observed. "The mosquitos are all dead and many of the birds have departed."

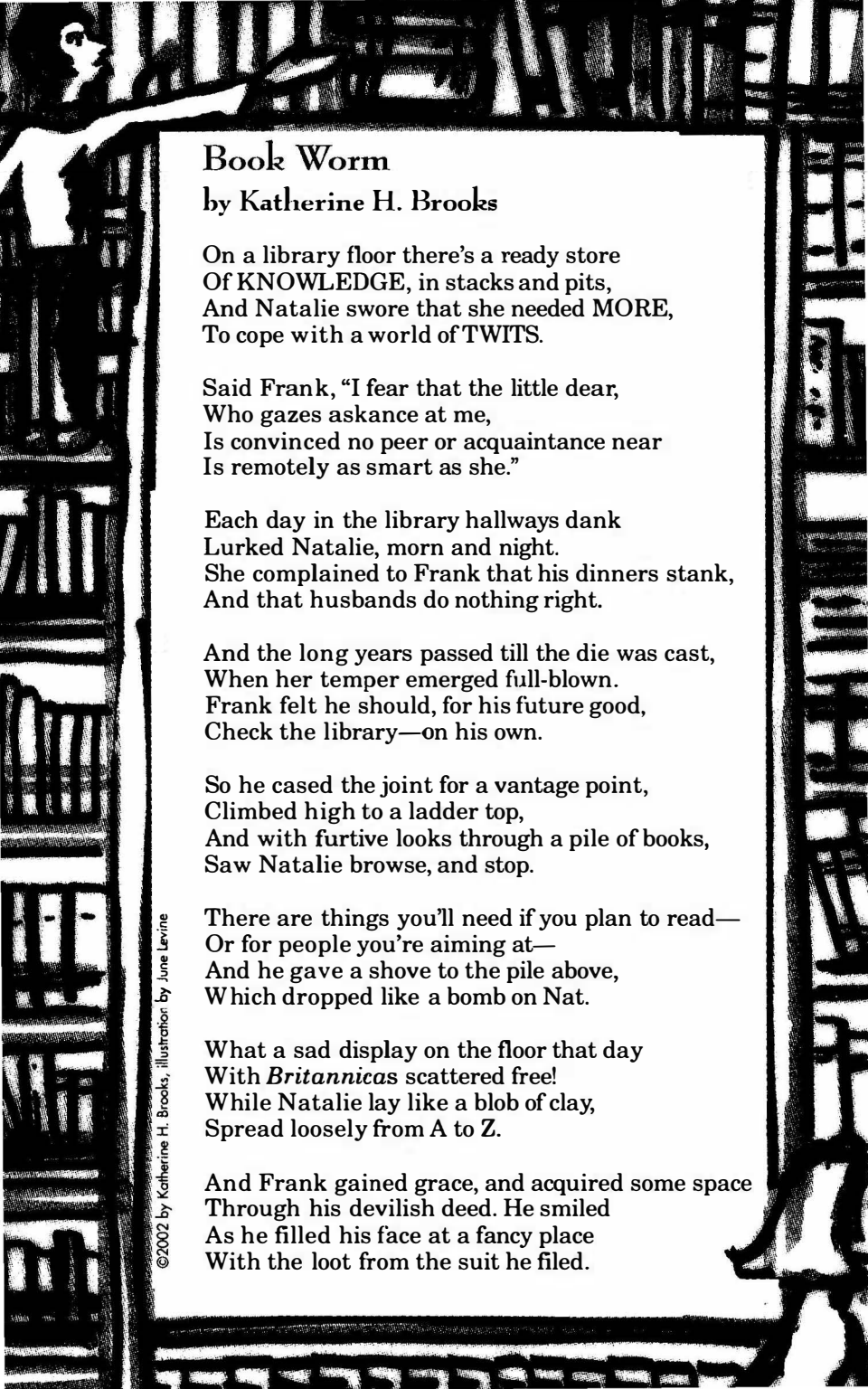
"And thanks to you, the mystery of Congressman Emory's hidden money has been solved."

Swift nodded. "It is ironic that Dr. Shippen, the cause of it all, will return to his former position at the hospital, while Dr. Bradley, who stayed to help the dying, is paying with his life."

"Bradley is guilty, too," the President reminded him. "And at least Shippen has lost all seventy-eight months of his ill-gotten wealth. He will not be retiring to England as he no doubt planned."

"We can only hope that the yellow fever will not come upon us again."

"Someday there will be a cure," Washington predicted. "There are better days coming, for Philadelphia and for the nation." ●



Book Worm

by Katherine H. Brooks

On a library floor there's a ready store
Of KNOWLEDGE, in stacks and pits,
And Natalie swore that she needed MORE,
To cope with a world of TWITS.

Said Frank, "I fear that the little dear,
Who gazes askance at me,
Is convinced no peer or acquaintance near
Is remotely as smart as she."

Each day in the library hallways dank
Lurked Natalie, morn and night.
She complained to Frank that his dinners stank,
And that husbands do nothing right.

And the long years passed till the die was cast,
When her temper emerged full-blown.
Frank felt he should, for his future good,
Check the library—on his own.

So he cased the joint for a vantage point,
Climbed high to a ladder top,
And with furtive looks through a pile of books,
Saw Natalie browse, and stop.

There are things you'll need if you plan to read—
Or for people you're aiming at—
And he gave a shove to the pile above,
Which dropped like a bomb on Nat.

What a sad display on the floor that day
With *Britannica*s scattered free!
While Natalie lay like a blob of clay,
Spread loosely from A to Z.

And Frank gained grace, and acquired some space
Through his devilish deed. He smiled
As he filled his face at a fancy place
With the loot from the suit he filed.

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Checking Out
BY ROBERT BARNARD

Without Jonathan
BY JEFFERY DEAVER

Courier and Ives
BY EDWARD D. HOCH

The Rightful King of England
BY AMY MYERS

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