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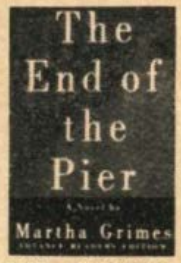

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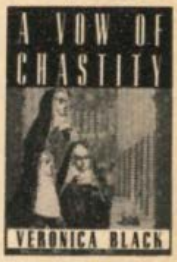

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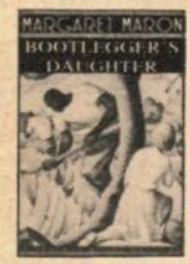

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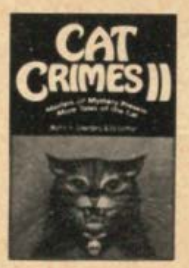

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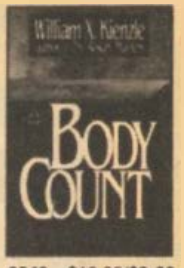

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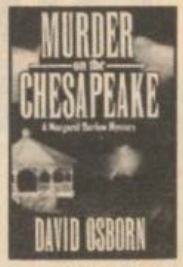

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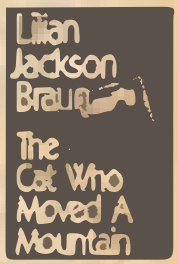

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DEAD AS A DODO

by COLIN DEXTER

It was more from necessity than from kindliness, just after 5:00 P.M. on a rain-soaked evening in early February, 1990, that Chief Inspector Morse of the Thames Valley police leaned over and opened the Jaguar's near-side door. One of his neighbours from the North Oxford bachelor flats was standing at the bus stop, was getting very wet—and was staring hard at him.

"Most kind!" said Philip Wise, inserting his kyphotic self into the passenger seat.

Morse grunted a vague acknowledgement as the car made a few further slow yards up the Banbury Road in the red-taillighted queue, his wipers clearing short-lived swathes across the screen. Only three-quarters of a mile to go, but at this time of day twenty minutes would be par for the progressively paralytic crawl to the

flats. Never an easy conversationalist himself—indeed, known occasionally to lapse into total aphasia when driving a car—Morse was glad that Wise was doing all the talking. "Something quite extraordinary's happened to me," said the man in the dripping mackintosh.

In retrospect, Morse was aware that he'd listened, at least initially, with no more than polite passivity. But listen he had done.

Philip Wise had gone up to Exeter College, Oxford, in October 1938; and in due course his linguistic abilities (particularly in German) had ensured for him, when war broke out a year later, a cushy little job in an Intelligence Unit housed on the outskirts of Bicester. For two years he had lived there in a disagreeable and draughty Nissen-hut, and when the chance came of his taking digs back in Oxford, he'd jumped at it. Thus it was that in October 1941 he had moved into Crozier Road, a sunless thoroughfare just off the west of St. Giles'; and it was there that he'd first met Miss Dodo Whitaker ("Only the one 't,' Inspector") who had a tiny top-floor bed-sitter immediately above his own room in the grimy four-storey property that stood at Number 14.

Why on earth she'd been saddled with a name like "Dodo," he'd never discovered—nor enquired; but she was certainly a considerably livelier specimen than the defunct *Didus ineptus* of Mauritius. Although physically hardly warranting any second glance, especially in the wartime "Utility" boiler-suit she almost invariably wore, she had the inestimable merit of being interesting. And sometimes, over half a glass of mild beer in the ill-lit bar at the rear of The Bird and Baby, her wonted nervousness would disappear, and in her rather deep, husky voice she would talk with knowledge, volubility, and wit about the class structure, about the progress of the war—and about music. Yes, above all about music. The pair of them had joined the record library, thereafter spending a few candle-lit evenings together in Dodo's room listening to everything from Vivaldi to Wagner. On one occasion, Wise had almost been on the verge of telling her of the Platonic-plus pleasure he was beginning to experience in her company.

Almost.

Dodo had a brother called Ambrose who now and then managed to get a weekend leave-pass and come to stay with Dodo, usually (though quite unofficially) sleeping on the floor of her single room. Almost immediately, Philip Wise and Ambrose Whitaker became firm friends, spending (somewhat to Dodo's annoyance) rather too

many hours together drinking whisky—a commodity plentiful enough, if overpriced, in The Bird and Baby, but a rare one in the wilds of Bodmin, where Ambrose, with two stripes on each arm, spent his days initiating recruits into the mysteries of antiquated artillery pieces. He was a winsome, albeit somewhat raffish, sort of fellow whose attraction to alcohol apparently eclipsed even his love of music (Dodo spoke of Ambrose, amongst other things, as a virtuoso on the piano). Those weekends had flashed by, with Wise far too soon finding himself walking across Gloucester Green to see his friend off at the Great Western station late on Sunday afternoons.

Brother and sister—what an engaging couple they were!

Rich, too—at least their parents were.

Dodo, in particular, made no secret of her parents' extremely comfortable lifestyle, which Wise himself had once (and only once) experienced at first hand, when Dodo had suggested—on his having to spend a week in Bristol in February, 1942—that he stayed with them; had even loaned him a key to the family mansion in case they were out when he arrived. Wise had already known that Dodo's parents lived in Bristol, since he'd noticed the postmark on the letter (doubtless from Mummy) that lay each week on the undusted mahogany table in the small entrance hall of Number 14—her name in the address, incidentally, always prefixed by the letter "A." Alice? Angela? Anne? Audrey?—Wise had never been told and, again, had never enquired. But that little fact was something else he'd known earlier, too, since he was with her when, with a practised flourish of those slim and sinewy fingers, she'd signed her membership card at the record library. As for the parents, they turned out to be a straight-laced, tight-faced pair who remained frigidly reserved towards their guest throughout his short stay, and who appeared less than effusively appreciative of Dodo—and almost embarrassingly dismissive of Ambrose. Oddly, Wise had not found a single fond memento of their talented offspring in the Whitaker's gauntly luxurious villa, and not a single family photograph to grace the daily-dusted mantelpieces.

It was three weeks after his return from this ill-starred visit that Dodo left Oxford, her wartime work (something "hush-hush," it was understood) necessitating a move to Cheltenham. Only about forty miles away—and she'd keep in touch, she said.

But she hadn't.

"Forty-eight years ago, this was, Inspector. Forty-eight! I was twenty-three myself, and she must have been about the same. Year or two older, perhaps—I'm not sure. You see, I never even asked her how old she was. Pretty spineless specimen, wasn't I?"

In the darkness, Morse nodded his silent assent, and the Jaguar finally turned into the Residents Only parking area.

Wise contrived to keep talking as the two men dashed through the rain to the entrance hall. "I'd be glad to give you a cup of tea . . . or something . . . You see, I haven't really told you anything yet."

As they sat opposite each other in the living area, Wise passed across a white, six-page booklet containing details of *A Service of Thanksgiving for the Life of AMBROSE WHITAKER, M.A. (Cantab.), F.R.A.M. 1917-1989,* and Morse glanced cursorily at the contents: music; hymn; lesson; music; address; prayers; hymn; music; blessing; music; more music. Observing only that if he ever had a voice in his own funeral arrangements he would join Whitaker in choosing the "In Paradisum" from the Fauré *Requiem,* Morse handed the leaflet back.

"The thing is this," continued Wise. "I saw an obituary in the *Times* in December, and I was sure it was the same man I'd known in the war. Quite apart from the pretty unusual Christian name, as well as the *very* unusual spelling of the surname, everything else fitted, too: born in Bristol, prodigy on the piano—everything! And I just couldn't help thinking back and wondering whether *she* was still alive—Dodo, that is. Anyway, a fortnight ago I read about this memorial service in Holborn, and I decided to go up and pay my last respects to an old friend—and perhaps . . ."

"Find some plump-bosomed old spinster—"

"Yes!"

"Did you find her?" asked Morse quietly.

Wise shook his head. "There were an awful lot of important people from the musical world—I hadn't realized what a name Ambrose had made for himself. I got to the church early and stayed outside for a good while watching the people going in, including—pretty obvious who she was—Ambrose's wife, who drew up in a chauffeur-driven Rolls—registration AW 1! But I didn't see the woman I was looking for—and she wasn't in the church, either. I'd have spotted her straightaway if she had been. She was smallish, stockily built—just like her mother. And there was something else. She had a nasty little red scar—well, a nasty *big* scar really—just across the

left-hand side of her jaw: a bicycle accident when she was a youngster, I think. She was awfully conscious of it and always used a lot of face powder to try to cover it up a bit. But it was still pretty noticeable, I'm afraid. Well, to cut a long story a bit shorter, I went up to Ambrose's wife after the service and told her I'd known her husband in the war and said how sorry I was and all the rest of it. She was pleasant enough, but she seemed a bit strained, and there were other people waiting to have a word with her. So I didn't say much more except to mention that I'd known her husband's sister as well." Wise paused a second or two before continuing.

"Do you know what happened then, Inspector? Ambrose's wife pointed to a grey-haired woman in a black dress standing with her back to us, a woman very much the same height and build as Dodo had been: 'This gentleman here says he used to know you, Agnes. . . .'

"Agnes!

"But I didn't hear any more—I just didn't know what to do—or say. You see, the woman in black turned round and faced me, *and she wasn't Dodo Whitaker.*"

It was Morse who broke the silence which followed. "Ambrose only had the one sister?"

Wise nodded, a wry, defeated smile upon his face. "Yes—Agnes. He never did have a sister named 'Dodo'!"

Again the two men were silent.

"Well?" asked Wise, finally.

It had always appeared to Morse an undeniable fact that coincidence plays a far greater role in human affairs than is generally acknowledged. And here was yet another instance of it—it must be! Wise's tale was interesting enough—assuredly so: but it wasn't much of a *problem*, surely? Ostentatiously he drained his whisky, gratefully witnessed the replenishment, and then pronounced judgement: "There were two Ambrose Whitakers, both musical men, and both from Bristol, and the one you knew wasn't the one who died."

"You think not?" The half smile on Wise's face made Morse rather uncomfortably aware that a slightly more intelligent analysis had been expected of him.

"You don't think," suggested Morse weakly, "that Agnes might have had some plastic surgery or something?"

"No, no. It's just that there are far too many coincidences for *me* to swallow. *Everything* fitted—down to the last detail. For example,

Dodo told me that she and Ambrose once got a bit morbid about the possibility of his being killed in the war and how he'd told her that he'd settle for a couple of bits of music when they buried him: the 'In Paradisum'—"

"Lovely choice!" interjected Morse. "I saw that in the service."

"—and the adagio from the Mozart Clarinet Concerto—"

"Ah yes! K662."

"K622."

"Oh!"

Morse knew that he wasn't scoring many points; knew, too, that Wise was perfectly correct in believing that the coincidences were getting way out of hand. But he had no time at all to develop the quite extraordinary possibility that suddenly leaped into his brain; because Wise himself was clearly most anxious to propound his own equally astonishing conclusions.

"What would you say, Inspector, if I told you that Dodo wasn't Ambrose Whitaker's sister at all—*she was his wife.*"

Morse's face registered a degree of genuine surprise, but he allowed Wise to continue without interruption.

"It would account for quite a few things, don't you think? For example, it always seemed a bit odd to me that when Ambrose got any leave he invariably came all the way from Cornwall here to Oxford—via *Bristol,* at that!—just to see his *sister.* You'd think he'd have called in on his parents once in a while, wouldn't you? They were much nearer than Dodo was, and well worth keeping the right side of, surely? But it wouldn't be surprising if he took every opportunity of coming all the way to Oxford to see his *wife,* would it? And that would certainly tie up with him sleeping in her room. You know, with all that family money he could have taken a suite in the Randolph if he'd wanted. Yet instead of that, he slept—or so he said—on Dodo's *floor.* Then again, it would probably account for the fact that she never once let me touch her physically—not even hold hands. She was fond of me, though—I know she was. . . ."

Momentarily Wise stopped, nodding slowly to himself. "For some reason the Whitakers must have disapproved of Ambrose's marriage and wanted as little as possible to do with his wartime bride—hence their cool reception of me, Inspector! There may have been talk of disinheriting him—I don't know. I don't *know* anything, of course. But I suspect she was probably pregnant underneath that boiler-suit of hers, and as her time drew nearer she just *had* to leave Oxford. Then? Your guess is as good as mine: she died—she was

killed in an air raid—she got divorced—anything. Ambrose remarried, and the woman I met at the memorial service was his *second* wife."

"Mm." Morse was looking decidedly dubious. "But if this Dodo girl *was* his wife, and if his parents couldn't stand the sight or sound of her, why on earth did they write to her every week? And why did she think she had the right to invite *you* down to Bristol? To *have* a key, even—let alone to give *you* one." Morse shook his head slowly. "She must have been pretty sure she could take their goodwill for granted, I reckon."

"You think they *were* her parents, then," said Wise flatly.

"I'm sure of it," said Morse.

Wise shook his head in exasperation. "What the hell *is* the explanation, then?"

"Oh, I don't think there's much doubt about that," said Morse. But he spoke these words to himself, and not to Wise. And very soon afterwards, seeing little prospect of any further replenishment, he took his leave—with the promise that he would give the problem "a little consideration."

The following Monday morning, Morse stood beside the traffic comptroller at Kidlington police headquarters and watched as "AW 1" was keyed into the car registration computer. Immediately, the VDU spelled out the information that the car was still registered under the name of Mr. A. Whitaker, 6 West View Crescent, Bournemouth; and noting the address, Morse walked thoughtfully back to his ground-floor office. After ringing Directory Inquiries, and getting the Bournemouth telephone number, he was soon speaking to Mrs. Whitaker herself, who in turn was soon promising to do exactly as Morse had requested.

Then Morse rang the War Office.

Ten days later, Philip Wise returned from a week's holiday in Spain to find a long note from Morse.

P.W.

I've discovered a few more facts, but some of what follows may possibly be pure fiction. As you know, records galore got destroyed in the last war, affording limitless opportunity for people to cover up their traces by means of others' identity cards and so on, especially after a period of chaos and carnage when nobody knew who was who or which corpse was which.

After Dunkirk, for instance.

Gunner (as he then was) Whitaker was the only man of thirty on board who survived, quite miraculously, when the *Edna* (a flat-bottomed barge registered in Felixstowe) was blown out of the water by a German dive-bomber on May 30, 1940. He was picked up, with only a pair of waterlogged pants and a wristwatch to call his own, by the naval sloop *Artemis,* and was landed at Dover, along with tens of thousands of other soldiers from almost every regiment in the land. (My own imaginative faculties now come wholly into play.) In due course, he was put on a train and sent to a temporary rehabilitation camp—as it happened, the one here in Oxford up on Headington Hill.

The fact that he was in a state of profound shock, with his nerves half shot to pieces, is probably sufficient to account for his walking out of this camp (quite literally) after only one night under canvas, and hitchhiking down to Bristol. But he didn't walk out alone. He took a friend with him, a man from the same regiment; and they both quite deliberately got out of the camp before either could be redocumented and reposted. This second man had only a mother and sister as close family, who were both killed in one of the very first air raids on Plymouth; and for some (doubtless considerable) sum of money, donated by the protective Whitaker parents, this man agreed to leave on permanent record the official War Office version of his fate after Dunkirk—"Missing presumed killed"—and for the rest of the war to assume the name and role of Ambrose Whitaker. In short, my guess is that the man who came up from Bodmin to see Dodo *was not Ambrose Whitaker at all.*

Your own guess about things fitted some of the facts well enough; but those facts also fit into a totally different pattern. Just consider some of them again. First, there was the weekly letter from Bristol, from parents who seemingly didn't even want to acknowledge their daughter and who hid all the family photos when you stayed with them. Odd! Then, take this daughter of theirs, Dodo. No great shakes physically, and only just up to attracting an impressionable young man after he'd had a few pints (please don't think me unfair!) in a dim pub lounge or a candle-lit bedroom—yet she decided to hide whatever charms she'd got under a baggy boiler-suit. Decidedly odd! What else did you tell me about her? She was nervy; she had a deepish voice; she wore too much face powder; she knew a great deal about the war. . . . (You've guessed the truth by now, I'm sure.) Her Christian name began with "A," and you saw her sign her name that way at the record library—with the sinewy fingers of an executant musician. But that *wasn't* odd, was it? Her name *did* begin with "A," and Ambrose Whitaker, as we know, was himself a fine pianist. And so it wasn't only the scar on her jaw she was anxious to conceal with those layers of face

powder—it was the stubble of a beard that grew there every day. Because Dodo Whitaker was a man! And not just any tuppeny-ha'penny old man, either: he was *Ambrose Whitaker*.

Two points remain to be cleared up. First, why was it necessary for Ambrose Whitaker to pose as a woman? Second, what was the relationship between Ambrose and the artillery corporal from Bodmin? On the first point, it's clear that if he wanted to avoid any further wartime traumas, Ambrose couldn't stay in Bristol, where he was far too well known. Even if he moved to a place where he wasn't known, it wouldn't have been completely safe to move *as a man;* because suspicious questions were always going to be asked in wartime about a young fellow who looked as if he might well be dodging the column. So he took out a double insurance on his deception—for him a desperately needed deception—not only by moving to Oxford, but also by dressing and living *as a woman*. On the second point, we don't perhaps need to probe too deeply into the reasons why the sensitive and effeminate Ambrose was happy to take every opportunity of spending his nights with (forgive me!) the rather crude, whisky-swilling opportunist you got to know in the war. Such speculation is always a little distasteful, and I will say no more about it.

I rang Ambrose's widow, asking for a wartime photograph of her husband, and I gave her your address, telling her you are an archivist working for the Imperial War Museum. You should hear from her soon; and when you do you'll be as near as anyone is ever likely to be to knowing the truth about this curious affair.

E.M.

It was two days later that a still-pyjamaed Wise took delivery of a stiff white envelope in which he found a brief note together with a photograph of a young man in army uniform—a photograph in which no attempt had been made to turn the left-hand side of the sitter's face away from the honesty of the camera lens, or to retouch the line of a cruel scar that stretched across the face's lower jaw. And as Philip Wise looked down at the photograph, he saw staring back at him the familiar, faithless eyes of Dodo Whitaker.

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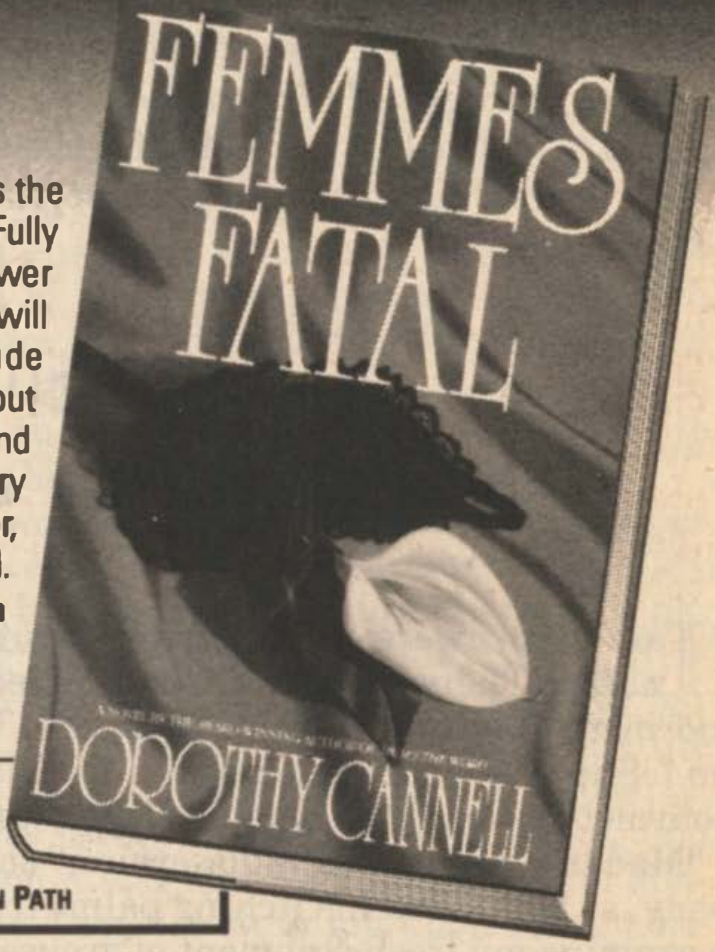

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EXOTIC CUISINE

by GEORGE BAXT

"I am quite aware of my terrible reputation," stated the septuagenarian Theresa Camus. "I am incredibly rude, incredibly nasty, and incredibly unpleasant. Therefore, I must be incredibly rich. I am." She was addressing Andre du Blancmange, proprietor of Le Gourmet Deluxe, who was incredibly greedy.

"Madam does herself a disservice," said Andre, a certified servile toady, as he rubbed his itching palms together. "Would madam care to examine my fresh shipment of grouse? I also have some very rare ortolan bred in the Forbidden City of China. Ortolan is not easy to come by these days." When he smiled his obsequious little smile, his ears wiggled and his nose wigwagged, and the old lady restrained an urge to punch him in the jaw.

"You said you'd have rhinoceros steaks today. Well?" Her hands on her hips, her eyes narrowed into dangerous slits.

"Madam did not forget."

"I never forget. Have you got them?"

"I most certainly do. I also have fresh breast of tapir and roast leg of llama. I have a marvelous recipe for that, handed down to me from my great-grandmother, who was born in the Peruvian Andes.

She was the one who was afraid of heights. It's a very special recipe requiring marinating the llama's leg for seventy-two hours in a marinade consisting of . . ." He looked about him to make sure they were out of earshot of eavesdroppers, and then as a further precaution, leaned forward and whispered in her ear.

The old lady digested the information and said, "Interesting. Very interesting. So it requires edelweiss. Do you have edelweiss?"

"Indeed I do, madam. Three Swiss mountain climbers gave their lives to procure these edelweiss. Fortunately, one of them had placed his crop in a knapsack which survived the fall intact."

"Du Blancmange, you are a gustatory scoundrel." She rattled off her order and instructed him to have it delivered to her mansion within the next two hours. Later, he padded the amount he entered into her account, payable monthly, and then went to his office in the rear of his establishment to polish off his lunch of the burrito special from the fast-food Tex-Mex diner down the street.

Theresa Camus was a large woman. She stood five feet nine inches in her stockinged feet, and weighed over two hundred and sixty pounds. Her grandson Chester had compared her to a Sherman tank. Now she was barreling along the main street of Mayflower, New Hampshire, an exclusive enclave created some fifty years ago by her late and unlamented husband Vernon. Thanks to Vernon and the village's charter, you had to be incredibly rich to own property, build, and reside in Mayflower. Several Rockefellers, Astors, and Vanderbilts did not qualify, and it was rumored that a certain Mellon had defenestrated from the Chrysler Building upon being notified of his rejection. As she made her way to her next port of call, Theresa paused briefly to confront a baby in its carriage and it took the tyke and its mother five minutes before they realized Theresa had stolen the tot's lollipop.

Theresa Camus. Tessie. Little Tess. Seventy years ago, at the age of five, Little Tessie Farina was one of the most adorable children to be found in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn. She was the youngest of eight of poor but dishonest parents who ran a numbers racket. Soon they were poor no longer and the Farinas moved to the Washington Heights section of Manhattan where Theresa blossomed into a tall, stately beauty, who at Vassar majored in wealthy husband. When not busy weaving in and out of the Vassar daisy chain, Theresa had her good eyes out for a likely prospect. When she was introduced to Vernon Camus at the annual Harvest Moon Ball and Supper sponsored by an organization known as G. and G.,

Theresa knew she had found her man. G. and G. stood for Gourmands and Gluttons. Like his exclusive fellow members, Vernon loved to eat. He ate anything and everything. Later there would be nasty rumors as to how he had survived an expedition into the Brazilian jungles, when he and only he of a party of ten had survived a plane crash that stranded them for over three months. When he emerged from the jungle, he was forty pounds heavier.

Theresa loved to cook. She got that from her father's mother, who was born to the celebrated Ballabusta restaurant family. And like her grandmother, Theresa was on her way to becoming a brilliant gourmet cook. Before meeting Vernon, she had planned on opening a restaurant after graduation. But when she learned that Vernon was the heir to a monumental fortune, she concentrated on winning his love. After they were married, Theresa cooked and Vernon ate. Their first child was prematurely born four months after they were married. It was a girl and they named her Rose. Two years later, they were blessed with a son, Norton. Shortly after, Theresa published the first of her many cookbooks. This led to a syndicated newspaper column that was published around the world, and now, in her seventies, Theresa was gathering in even more millions with her syndicated television program. At the beginning of the eleventh year of their tumultuous marriage (there were arguments about sauces, cuts of meat, savory aspics, and not too savory chateaubriands that were occasionally overcooked), Theresa began to suspect Vernon of trying to manipulate her personal wealth. Shortly after, Vernon was dead of a suspected heart attack brought on by acute indigestion. The village of Mayflower that Vernon had founded was only two years in existence, but Theresa took over its stewardship with a firm hand, and over the years, she single-handedly converted Mayflower's Gourmands and Gluttons into glorious gourmets. Mayflower's fame spread across the world and Theresa Camus was a household name.

Fame and wealth did not bring happiness, sadly enough. The Camus daughter Rose married Dr. Oliver Folger, a dietician whom Theresa loathed instantly. He harped on cholesterol, and fatty substances and heart disease and strokes, and was soon not welcome in Theresa's house. He didn't dare let her know he was a closet glutton, taking trips abroad on his own to Paris and Rome where he could gorge to his heart's content. When Rose found out about his secret vice, she scolded him severely and mercilessly, and then joined him on his international eating binges. Norton Camus, the son, proved

to have evolved into a wastrel, a liar, a womanizer, and a cardsharp. His wife, Titania, designed high-style clothing for women and was somewhat successful at it. But unlike her mother-in-law, she couldn't cook worth a damn, though she loved her food. Norton prevailed upon Theresa to invite them more often for a meal, but Theresa couldn't stand Titania because although she respected and enjoyed food, she was very careful about her diet in fear of gaining weight and being an adverse advertisement for her line of clothing. It was about this time that the family began to realize that Theresa talked to herself a lot, muttered dire imprecations under her breath, and hoarded her splendid gastronomical concoctions in the gargantuan walk-in freezer she had constructed in her ample basement.

The freezer became as famous as its mistress. There were speculations as to what fabulous culinary creations it contained. Geraldo Rivera tried to make a deal with Theresa to open the freezer for a one-hour television special, much as he had done years earlier with Al Capone's secret basement (which revealed nothing). If she were to be a party to such a tasteless spectacle, Theresa privately opined to her housekeeper, Nellie Baker, she preferred Oprah Winfrey to Geraldo, as Oprah had such a terrible weight problem.

Rose and Oliver Folger had no children as, tragically, Rose was barren. Titania and Norton, however, had one child, a son. They named him Chester and briefly, Theresa thawed towards them. She adored Chester, who was the apple of her eye until in his tenth year she realized that like many apples, he was rotten to the core. Chester was indeed a chip off the old block. Like his father, he lied and cheated and stole money from his grandmother's handbag. Nellie Baker caught him at it several times, and she would never forget the day she caught him attacking the fabulous freezer with a crowbar.

Theresa was unhappy. She was lonely. She wouldn't permit a replacement for Vernon because she was positive every man who showed an interest in her was actually interested in her vast wealth. Her books, her columns, her TV shows occupied most of her time, but she usually ate alone, occasionally asking Nellie to join her. During one such meal, Nellie, who was gently outspoken and genuinely fond of her employer, said to Theresa, "Mrs. Camus, you're over seventy now."

"I can count," snapped Theresa.

"Your family is all you've got."

"I've got my money and I've got my freezer."

"But they're cold comfort. Don't you think you should consider making peace with your loved ones?"

"Loved ones, ha! They don't love me and I don't love them."

"They always call to ask after you."

"And I can tell you why," roared Theresa, "it's the money they're after! I know about Norton's gambling debts! I know Chester can't cut it trying to write articles for the newspapers and the magazines. You think I don't know he's been trying to sell exposés about me to *New York* magazine and *Vanity Fair?*" She pushed her chair back and began circling the table, building up a head of steam. "You think I don't know he sold that article to the *Enquirer* calling my husband a cannibal! Just because he survived that South American expedition. The very idea of his eating human flesh! All that gristle." She shuddered. "The truth is, he was rescued by a tribe of cannibals who worshiped him as a god because there was an epidemic in the village and he had a bag of medicine with him and saved the lives of the chief and his family. So they looked after him. They housed him and they fed him. Lots of meat soups and meat pies, and a polite guest doesn't ask what kind of meat they're using, right?"

"Right," agreed Nellie as she repressed a wave of nausea and pushed aside her plate of woodchuck liver *en gelee,* a new Theresa Camus creation inspired by a wildlife series she watched on PBS.

"My son Norton is a bum! They'll be writing books about him and his Mafia friends one day and then he'll be played in the movies by Joe Pesci. And that wife of his, that Titania. All she wants is for me to back her in a chain of dress shops!"

"They could be highly profitable," Nellie suggested.

"Woman, haven't you heard there's a recession? Dress shops and department stores are going bankrupt all over the world. I read in the papers that in Bali they're selling sarongs for dust cloths. Bah!" Her eyes were misting. "And my Rose. I really expected a lot from her. So she marries a doctor who tells everybody not to eat my wonderful gourmet food."

"No he doesn't!"

"Yes he does! No cholesterol, he yells. No fats! My dishes are loaded with them."

"Your dishes are delicious."

"Delicious? They're masterpieces! They shouldn't be eaten! They should be framed and hung in museums!" She clasped her hands together. "Delicious is what you die from and what a way to die! Oh . . . oh . . ." she was clutching her breast.

"What's wrong? What is it?" Nellie leapt to her feet and assisted Theresa into a chair.

"It's nothing," gasped Theresa, "it's just a spasm."

"I'll call a doctor."

"No, no! He'll want something to eat."

"Mrs. Camus, you're so pale. And you're trembling."

"I'm not afraid to die, believe me, I'm not afraid. All that food in the freezer, what will become of all that food in the freezer?"

"You could arrange to send it to Russia."

"Water, Nellie. A glass of water."

After sipping some water, color returned to Theresa's cheeks. She loosened the belt around her waist and felt even better. "I know they expect to divide everything."

"Who?"

"Rose and her husband. Norton and his wife. That rotten Chester I used to dote on. Well," she said after a long, contemplative pause, "I don't expect them to love me ever, but it would be nice to know they thought kindly of me after I'm gone."

"Oh, Mrs. Camus, now I know God is smiling at you."

"Why? I made a joke?"

The following morning, Theresa visited her lawyer and dictated a new will. Her lawyer, a soul of discretion until bribed, was somewhat astonished by her about-face, her lavish generosity to her family. He was astonished further when she awarded them the full contents of her freezer to do with as they wished. She was especially generous to Nellie Baker, whom she described as "my devoted servant and friend." As she dictated, her face took on a rare, beatific expression. It was as though Theresa expected to be rewarded with sainthood some time in the future. But just as suddenly, the visage of the virago returned and Theresa said to the lawyer:

"I think they were responsible for spreading the rumor."

The lawyer looked perplexed. "Which of the many?"

"The one that claimed I murdered my husband, that I poisoned Vernon and made it look like acute indigestion."

"I'm sure you didn't."

"I wouldn't put it past Chester to try to sell that to some supermarket rag. Oh God, I was once such a loving and unsuspicious woman. But now, look at me, in the coda of my life, trying so hard not to be so mean and rotten and hateful and nasty before it's too late." She sighed and very slowly began to put on her gloves. "When will the will be ready for me to sign?"

"Let me see, today's Tuesday. How's about Thursday afternoon?"

"What time?"

"Any time after lunch."

"I'll be here at three o'clock. I'll bring you some of my yak's cheese blintzes. You'll love them."

The lawyer had paled but she hadn't noticed. "I'm sure I will."

"Unpasteurized yak's cheese," said Theresa. "It's got more flavor unpasteurized."

Only her doctor was aware that Theresa had but a short time to live. Nellie Baker suspected it, but Theresa was so friendly and cheerful these days that Nellie was beginning to believe in miracles. Theresa had made overtures of friendliness to the family, sending them hampers of food, and twice she had Rose and Titania to tea, favoring them with a preview of her whale-blubber crepe suzettes.

On the day she signed the will, Theresa took a walk on the main street. Several toddlers in carriages, now wise to her, hid their goodies under their blankets and were startled that Theresa merely favored them with a wink or a friendly flutter of her fingers and kept on about her business. Every afternoon in her kitchen, there was a rush of activity as Theresa cooked dish after dish, each an exquisite culinary creation. These were wrapped and placed on a special shelf in the freezer.

Theresa dictated so many columns to her secretary that the poor girl's fingers almost went paralyzed at the typewriter. She filmed her television program twice daily, and soon had enough on hand to cover the next year of her contract. Theresa went at a feverish pace and her associates marveled that she hadn't spent herself. Her doctor begged her to curtail eating her own cooking and stick to the bland diet he'd prescribed for her, but Theresa dismissed him with a disdainful wave of the hand, thinking of the turn-of-the-century gourmand Diamond Jim Brady, who when warned by his doctor that his eating indulgences would lead to his premature death, indulged himself with a massive banquet for one, thereby eating himself to death.

Rose Folger said to her husband Oliver one evening as they were dressing to go to Chinatown to celebrate the Year of the Skunk with a thirty-five course repast, "Something's wrong with Mother."

"There always has been," said the doctor.

"This is different. Nellie Baker says she's getting her house in order, like maybe Mother doesn't have much longer to live."

"You think so? Well, if what that crooked lawyer of hers told you is true, you're coming into one hell of an inheritance."

"Oh, my," said Rose, and blushed.

"You know what, hon, we've never been to a luau in Hawaii. When you get your money, what say we fly to Hawaii and have them do us one slap-up of a luau. Suckling pig, baked dog, breaded donkey brains . . ."

Rose was salivating. "Oh, hurry, hurry, let's get down to Chinatown before I starve to death."

A curtained hearse drove past Norton and Titania's split-level home in Parkchester. A hail of bullets tore through the walls of the house and broke windows while Norton flung Titania to the floor and held her tightly to him. She was screaming hysterically while Norton attempted to comfort her. "When we get my mother's money, we'll bulletproof the house. Won't that be nice?"

Titania stopped screaming and growled, "And in the meantime, what will the neighbors think?"

Chester Camus sat at his typewriter in his filthy studio apartment on the Lower East Side, his fingers moving swiftly across the keys, knowing that one day soon he would be able to afford a superior model word processor. But now, his old Olivetti would make do as he wrote his grandmother's epitaph. Nellie Baker, who still adored him, had tipped him off that the doctor said Theresa's days were numbered, and Chester had struck a deal with *People* magazine to provide them with an exclusive grandson's-eye view of the last days of the celebrated *cuisinière* Theresa Camus. The phone on the desk rang and he said, "Yes?"

"It's me." He recognized Nellie Baker's voice. "She's going. I'm in the bedroom with her. She's babbling away."

Chester's fingers flew as Nellie spoke.

In the bedroom, Theresa lay on the bed, a crucifix entwined with her fingers. A priest sat in a chair administering last rites and wondering if he dare ask Nellie for a ham and cheese on rye with lots of mustard. Theresa's babbling was making him hungry.

"Asparagus vinaigrette au Liechtenstein . . . veal scallopini à la Minelli . . . heart of artichoke in peanut butter sauce with a waft of pesto . . . reindeer tongue braised with Welsh leeks . . ." Her eyes stared ahead lifelessly, but miraculously enough, she looked young. She was a girl again. She was a student at Vassar and last night

she had met Vernon Camus, the man she intended to marry, the man she would one day poison to death as punishment for his perfidy. "Vernon . . ." she whispered.

Nellie spoke softly into the phone and Chester typed: " 'Vernon,' she whispered, evoking her late husband's name. . . ." Then Chester heard a strange sound. "What was that?"

"She burped," said Nellie. And Theresa Camus was dead.

The Camus mansion was alive and breathing with the odor of haute cuisine. Nellie Baker was preparing for Theresa's family the special meal the old lady had been cooking at a feverish pace in those frantic days before she died. Seated around the dining room table were Rose and Oliver Folger, Norton and Titania Camus, and their son Chester. They were praising Chester's story on his grandmother's last moments effusively.

"You'll win a Pulitzer Prize!" predicted his father. The five babbled away merrily as Nellie brought in savory dish after savory dish, each a triumphant culinary memorial to the magic of Theresa Camus. Nellie heard the phone ring; the nearest one was in the kitchen. She hurried to get it and it was a food columnist calling. He wanted to know the menu of Theresa's last supper and Nellie was delighted to tell him. She spoke for about ten minutes and then felt something was wrong. It was very quiet in the dining room all of a sudden. She excused herself, hung up the phone, and hurried to the dining room.

Theresa Camus' last meal became a legend. She had succeeded in poisoning her son and daughter, their spouses, and her one grandchild. To the very end, she was mean and nasty and awful and rotten, and Nellie Baker built a monument to her in Mayflower's one public park. Nellie endowed a chain of cooking schools and took a lover. True, Andre du Blancmange was a bit of a philanderer, but on the other hand, Nellie had been taught by Theresa to cook some of her more intricate and exotic dishes. To think, thought Andre, that Theresa Camus had left all that money to her housekeeper. The lovely and charming Nellie Baker, who would finally consent to marry the charming and persuasive Andre du Blancmange and then slowly and miserably become mean and rotten and nasty and horrible, and finally, one afternoon, would cook a special dish for her husband, from a very special recipe created by Theresa Camus.

"Q"

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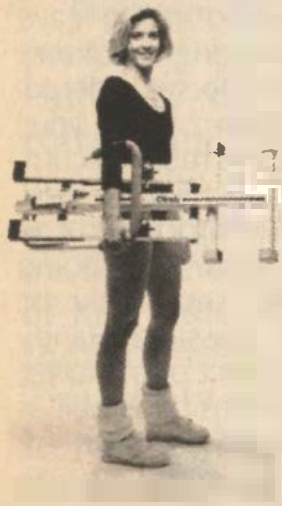

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ONE BEAUTIFUL BODY

by GILLIAN ROBERTS

English teachers do not have power lunches.

It took a while to get this concept across to Ivy Jean Hoffman, but then, we moved in different circles.

I was surprised to find Ivy Jean still in Philadelphia. I had thought she'd moved on as literally as she had figuratively. I was still more surprised to find her in my neighborhood, and I was stupefied to find her in a supermarket, since she and food have been at war longer than the Arabs and the Israelis. Then I noticed that her cart contained nothing to chew or slurp or gnaw. It was piled high with nonedibles. A dozen boxes of designer facial tissues, an industrial-sized aluminum foil, bundles of soap, three colors of toilet paper, and five boxes of plastic wrap. I wondered what leftovers she wrapped in the plastic and foil.

"Amanda Pepper!" she chirped. "I don't believe it!" Which gives you an idea of her sincerity. She knew my center-city address and

she also knew that, unlike her, I ate, so why shouldn't she believe I'd forage for food in my own neighborhood?

We sent make-believe kisses across our carts. Ivy's face barely moved. Way back when we were both eleven years old, she mastered the starlet's wide-eyed amazed stare to avoid building future wrinkles.

"I live right across the square now," she said.

I was not going to join Welcome Wagon.

"Finished redoing our condo this morning."

Maybe that's what she'd encase in plastic wrap.

"You have to see it. Must be time for our annual lunch, anyway." She pulled an organizer out of an alligator bag and flipped pages, looking for a window of opportunity in which to fit me. "Oh, dear," she murmured, "no wonder I'm stressed out."

I explained why I, too, would have difficulty making a date. With five sections of English, one study hall, one yearbook meeting, and sporadic lunch duty, I didn't "lunch." Furthermore, my school's definition of an hour was as skimpy as a psychiatrist's, though less well paid.

Ivy Jean Hoffman responded to the facts of my life with incredulity. "I can't believe you stand for being treated like a *slave!*" Her outrage made it clear, as it was intended to, that she was treated and paid extremely well and I was a mere lackey. "But we *have* to get together," she wailed. "Isn't there any time at all?"

We both knew weeks had more than five days, but we also knew that Saturday and Sunday were for fun, not for each other. "I have a free period after lunch Thursdays," I said. If I didn't prepare lesson plans or meet with disgruntled students, I could extract an hour and a half midday.

"But Thursday's perfect! This coming one I'm having the reunion committee to lunch. Nikki and I are co-chairs." Nikki was another high-school acquaintance and Ivy's business partner. "You zip over, you hear?" Sometimes Ivy played Southern Belle, although the high school she was reuniting had been just slightly west of Philadelphia.

"I really don't want to work on the reunion committee," I said.

"I hear you. Come anyway, Mandy. It'll be fun!"

I doubted that. Ivy Jean was a legacy. Our mothers had been close friends and so desperately wanted us to follow suit that the fact that we disliked each other from conception on didn't matter. Year after year, Ivy and I shared celebrations: we sat next to each other at *The Nutcracker* each December at the Academy of Music; we watched

our dads burn burgers on July Fourth; we rode the waves at Beach Haven and even shared a high-school graduation party.

And still and all, Ivy—to me—was selfish, shallow, and stupid, and I was—to her—bookish, unstylish, and boring.

But when we were finally, happily separated in college, Ivy's mother died in a terrible automobile crash. Embarrassingly soon after, her father married a creature who kept forgetting there was such a person as Ivy and, somehow, Ivy's father's memory also failed. Ivy's bed was donated to Goodwill and the room quickly filled with cribs for newborn twin boys. That's about when Ivy began using me as a touchstone, proof that she did indeed exist.

She was obnoxious, self-obsessed, and unreliable, but she was also truly unmoored and lost. She gave a new meaning to the word insecure. It seemed little enough to shore her up, give her a personal history fix, prove that somebody remembered her. I was her past. And that is why, once a year, two women who didn't like each other nonetheless "did" lunch. Our table talk was always the same. First, we validated the past with a round of nostalgia in which celebrations remembered were infinitely more pleasurable than they'd been when actually lived. Then we validated her present. We did Ivy—Ivy's face, Ivy's body, Ivy's food, Ivy's problems, Ivy's business, and Ivy's husband, all of which topics were basically interchangeable.

Ivy had been an unpopular child. She was convinced this had been due to her having been plain and pudgy.

I thought her obsessive concern with her appearance would subside once she snared Mitchell and married him, but I'd been wrong. Their marriage wasn't the answer to anything. Body size was. Ivy knew the caloric count of every menu listing in North America and the details of every get-thin-quick scam. I have "lunched" with her when she ate only red meat, only bananas, only protein, only carbohydrates, only beans and rice, only fruit, only fruit juice, only water. I listened to details of spas visited, diet gurus consulted, wraps and massages attempted, and lipo suctioned.

I listened and nodded. Now and then I said she would kill herself dieting. "You'll be a beautiful corpse," I'd say. An old joke, but she never laughed.

In the gospel according to Ivy Jean, goodness equaled thinness. Virtue equaled trimness, success equaled freedom from cellulite. Her single measure of man—or woman—was the span of the waist, hips, and thighs. Evil was "letting yourself go."

Five years ago, Ivy Jean turned her private obsession into public cash. She co-created "The You Within," or TYW to the initiated, a high-priced diet boutique that promised not only to unveil the thin woman smothered inside your flab, but to outfit her, style her hair, and set her free.

A ripe and timely idea. Ivy and Nikki now had three clinics and a fourth due to open. There was talk of nationwide franchising.

I bent over my grocery cart and camouflaged my half gallon of ice cream with a low-cal TV dinner. "Sounds like things are going wonderfully for you."

She rolled her eyes. Eyeballs never wrinkled, so she was fairly free with hers. "There's a reason I stock up on aspirin." And indeed, an economy-size bottle of extra-strength headache pills contained the only ingestible items in her basket. "Just between us," she said, "I haven't been too brilliant about picking partners. I'm talking business and marriage."

I knew her anxiety was sincere because she scowled, activating muscles and risking lines. "I wouldn't tell anybody but you," she continued, "because you're practically family, but Nikki makes me so *nervous* the way she fights over every penny the business needs—and I *eat* when I'm nervous and I'm becoming a *pig*—and what will that do to my *business?* Nothing *fits* and I have a TV spot for TYW to shoot next week! An *ad!* She's *destroying* me, and if she—" She stopped herself, looking momentarily confused. Once off the topic of herself, she was on unsteady ground. "And you?" she finally said with an air of discovery. "What's new?"

"Nothing much. Still teaching."

"And men?"

"Kind of." I didn't think she could understand the allure of my now and then, mostly now, thing with a homicide cop like C. K. Mackenzie. After all, it was my opinion that Ivy's husband Mitchell could be replaced by a boa constrictor—as long as the snake was rich—and nobody, most of all Ivy, would notice.

There was talk that Ivy Jean craved husbands—anybody's—the way other women lusted for chocolate. She had even once computed how many calories were burned at an assignation.

"Hmmm," Ivy said, spotting the Rocky Road in my cart. "Ice cream. Sixty percent fat. You know my saying: a minute on the lips, a lifetime on the hips." She seemed much cheerier, buoyed like a missionary who'd stumbled across a native worshiping tree roots. "I have a wonderful chart of fat percentages I want to share with you

on Thursday," she said. "And don't worry. Lunch will be simple. I'll make something light."

The elevator deposited me in the foyer of Ivy's condo. The others were already there—partner Nikki and five other former classmates, all contemplating Ivy's locked door. We rang, knocked, chitted and chatted, but by twelve-fifteen, I was hungry and edgy.

"She does this all the time," Nikki grumbled. "Most unreliable—"

"I'm going downstairs," I said. "The lobby has chairs. And a phone. I'll call her. Maybe she fell asleep. Anybody want to join me?"

We all packed into the small elevator and descended. The lobby was not much larger than Ivy's foyer and it had a total of three chairs. We became excessively polite and democratic, which meant that none of us used the chairs. We all stood in a clump near a woman in a glow-in-the-dark lime outfit. She guarded a large carton filled with Styrofoam containers. "Mrs. Hoffman expected me half an hour ago," she whispered harshly at the guard. "I'm her *caterer*."

"But ma'am, I buzzed her apartment. She isn't home." He wore a cranberry uniform trimmed smartly in gold braid, but he looked defeated, as if he'd been drummed out of the corps but allowed to keep the costume.

"You don't understand! She wanted me out before her—she's expecting—" She finally noticed us, did a quick count, added one for the missing hostess, and her shoulders sagged. She lowered her voice, but we could all still hear her. "She didn't want her guests to know I'm doing the—"

So the simple and light thing Ivy made was a telephone call. It didn't really surprise me. Ivy was afraid of touching food, as if calories could be absorbed through the fingertips.

"Couldn't I set up and leave?" The caterer was frantic. "Now my next order's late, too. I'm going to lose every client I have! *Please?*"

The guard considered her, her carton, and the unscary seven of us. "Well," he said, "she did tell me about this little party of hers. I have the guest list, so if I could double-check your names, ladies, I don't see why I couldn't let you into Mrs. Hoffman's." Slowly, slowly, demanding driver's licenses and a major credit card for I.D., he went through the list.

While the first of our group went through the guard's routine, Nikki seemed to lose it, but quietly. "Damn Ivy. Completely inconsiderate and self-centered. She probably forgot. Found something more exciting, like aerobics in bed. A nooner. With whoever."

"Whomever," I murmured.

"You shouldn't say that, Nikki!" For a second, I thought I had an ally, but Barby White wasn't talking grammar. I could see her eyes moisten.

"Sorry!" Nikki snapped. "I didn't say *who,* did I?"

Whom, I said, but silently.

Barby White sniffled.

"Well, then," Nikki said, "if the shoe fits, wear it."

Bad grammar and excessive use of cliches. It was obvious that Nikki was no good.

"You're so mean!" Barby wailed.

"Come on," Nikki said. "Grow up. Sometimes the truth hurts, but knowledge is power. You'll get over it, and so will he. He'll come back. Ivy has a short attention span."

The guard called Nikki's name.

Barby stood to my right, by herself. Her skin flushed, then drained, pale to beet-borscht red to pasty bloodlessness.

I was almost as stunned as she. Zoological images filled my brain. Nikki was a snake, a cat, a cur, a rat. The rest of the reunion committee seemed to agree. I heard a whispered chorus of reactions on my left.

"That was way, way below the belt."

"But Barby must have known, don't you think? I mean if *we* did, surely she must!"

"It was obvious that she knew. Why else would she react that way? But all the same . . ."

"I don't think she did. The wife's always last. Besides, would Barby be on Ivy's committee if she knew?"

The guard decided that Nikki was who she was and called Barby. Looking loose and flabby, like one who had definitely Let Herself Go, Barby turned to nobody in particular and said, "My husband wouldn't sleep with that broomstick." But she walked to the guard like someone drugged.

"Neither will Ivy's husband," somebody said. "His girlfriends tend to be voluptuous."

One by one we were okayed by the guard and then finally admitted into the absolute splendor of Ivy Jean Hoffman's abode. Muted, exquisite colors were on the glazed walls, oversized paintings, bleached and waxed floors, rich fabrics, fresh flowers in oversized vases. It was, in short, your generic incredibly rich person's living room.

We whispered, as if in a museum, running reverent light hands over smooth woods and exquisite accessories, and then we sank into downy sofas and waited.

And waited some more. Half my break time and all my patience were now completely gone. "I'm going to have to leave," I said.

"Me, too," another woman said. "Do you think I could take a peek around before I go?"

"Might as well while you can," Nikki said. Her mood seemed permanently soured ever since the altercation with Barby. "The creditors will probably be up to repossess it before the next reunion committee meeting."

She greeted our shocked expressions with a shrug. "It's no big secret. Ivy's uncontrolled spending on this place has Mitchell near bankruptcy. He's always saying so."

"He must be using hyperbole," I suggested.

"I don't know who he's using," Nikki said. "But I know he probably couldn't afford anybody too expensive anymore."

"Exaggerating," I said. "Using a figure of speech."

Nikki raised an eyebrow. "I know Ivy and her spending, so I doubt that he's hyper anything."

Maybe because our curiosity was the only thing we could feed, we began investigating, heading for the kitchen first, perhaps hoping for a stray grape or cracker. Instead, we found a twenty-first-century laboratory, a prototype for a space station, with not an alien microbe in sight. Except for what the harried caterer had forgotten to remove. A Styrofoam container and two salad dressing lids lay on the black granite counter. I personally thought plastic pollutants were a wonderful touch, and very much in keeping with the futuristic theme, but somebody joked about how angry Ivy would be. On behalf of the caterer's future, I tidied up. It took a while to find the compactor and when I did, it was filled to the brim with more Styrofoam boxes floating atop a sea of plastic wrap, but I shoved my trash in, slammed the gizmo shut, and pushed the button to squeeze it all in. Ivy's kitchen was now the way she liked things—devoid of any sign of life.

We moved on, stomachs growling in the lettuce-colored dining room where the bread sticks and salads the caterer had put out looked as good as the baronial decor. We toured Mitchell's paneled lair, admiring its "manly" color scheme and aroma, both dark, both tobacco, and the ornately carved racks—one for pipes, the other displaying antique, expensive pistols. We moved to the media cen-

ter, electronics swaddled in fine cabinetry that silently opened at the push of a hidden control panel. We murmured through Ivy Jean's Art Deco home office, and in the mirrored state-of-the-art gymnasium we stared at our non-state-of-the-art reflections.

And then we reached the master bedroom.

Nikki had been right. Ivy Jean was in bed. But she'd been wrong about the rest. Ivy was alone and she wasn't doing aerobics because she wasn't doing breathing. There was a large and ugly hole in the center of her chest and an ivory-handled gun in her hand on the bloodstained spread.

I don't know who screamed first, but the whole group backed up. Some, gagging, rushed off to bathrooms. Barby, skin now parchment hue, shook her head, over and over, and Nikki exhaled loudly, the way you do when a hard job is finished.

I stared, horrified and immeasurably sad for Ivy and the dead body she'd never enjoyed. I looked at the wisp on the bed, all bones and no conviction, a heartbreaking waste, and wished for another chance at lunch with her, another chance to convince her that she did, indeed, exist.

"Don't touch anything," I whispered to whichever committee members were still in the room. It was a foolish thing to utter, even in a whisper, because we'd already fondled and stroked most of the apartment. "I'll call the police," I added. At least that made sense.

A gaggle of specialists appeared. Some headed for the bedroom to inspect, identify, and label, and others questioned the reunion committee.

"Why on earth are you keeping us?" I asked Mackenzie. I was being interrogated in a flowery, wickery guest bedroom. "I have to leave or my tenth graders will never know 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.' "

"Movin' fast as we can," he said. Whatever our relationship, when push comes to shove, what matters is that he's a cop. Especially at a crime scene. I was given permission to use the guest room telephone to call my school. The brief and painful conversation that ensued gave me a brain ache. My principal has remarkably low tolerance for staff involvements in murders.

"An entire classroom of kids who'll never thrill to 'Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink.' And I'm in big trouble, too."

"I'll write you an excuse," Mackenzie said. "Now, tell me everythin' about Ivy Jean Hoffman."

I did just that, back to communal *Nutcracker* outings and forward through today's gossip. "And that's it. And none of it explains why she'd kill herself," I concluded.

"She didn't."

"But—the gun, I saw, we all saw—"

"Somebody wanted you to think she did. For starters, she shouldn't have been holdin' it. Gun shoots out of the hand of a real suicide. And if she'd fired it, powder burns would be on the front and back of her hand, not just the palm, like they are. There's even somethin' peculiar, somethin' wrong about the bullet hole itself. . . ."

"Murdered," I said. "Murdered. But by whom?"

"From what you said, there was enough money and sex and cheatin' and anger right in the committee for a whole passel of murders."

"That was only talk. Besides, none of us was in here until after she was dead."

He lifted an eyebrow. "How 'bout somebody comin' up earlier? Ivy'd let any one of you in and then, bang, she'd be dead and you could leave. Later, you come back and look innocent. That's why we're checkin' y'all for powder burns."

"That's ridiculous. How do you think we arranged for her to undress, lie down, and be shot?"

Mackenzie paced the small room. "I need to work on that part."

"Furthermore, the front door was locked."

"Door locks automatically when you close it."

"The guard," I said. "He knows who came up here."

"This one's shift started at noon and he says the mornin' guy's the building owner's nephew. He flunked out of drug rehab and tends to sleep on the job when he isn't drinkin'. Didn't log a single visitor to the building all mornin', let alone the last hour. Frankly, I think the tenants could save a lot of money by replacin' him with a photo of a guard. Be just as effective."

"Why'd you single out the last hour as important for visitors?" I asked.

"That's when she was killed. Her temperature's still normal, so figure it out yourself. A body drops a degree and a half an hour, more or less. And a skinny thing like her with no body fat would cool down fast. No insulation."

"She thought she was fat," I murmured.

"Rigor's movin' fast, but she's pretty muscular," he said. "A weird thing—the body's salty. Must've worked out and not showered. Lay down for a nap, maybe?"

"Sweaty? On her brand-new spread?" But before I could further explain domestic niceties, there was an explosion of male sounds outside. Mitchell Hoffman was back in his castle. We went out to watch.

"Why would Ivy do such a terrible thing?" he wailed. "Why?" He put his hand to his face as if hoping there were tears there. There were not. He dropped his hand. He was a rotten actor and obviously had no idea of how grief felt.

After he'd been taken aside and informed that it was murder, he erupted. "Where's goddamned security? What are we paying for? I'll have their heads, by God, I'll—"

No horror, no sorrow, no tears, no surprise, no questions, especially the ones about who would do such a terrible thing or why anyone would consider it. My money was on Mitchell, and after Mackenzie had finished questioning him, I said so.

The detective sighed. "He has motive, sure. In over his head and couldn't afford a divorce. It's his gun, too. But he also has an alibi. He's been, since nine A.M., in a corporate strategy meeting—don't ask what that means—and he has one dozen witnesses for every minute of it. Includin' trips to the men's room, he says. So. Cherchez la femme. Or les femmes, perhaps?"

Aiding and abetting Mackenzie's suspicions, neither Nikki nor Barby had decent alibis. Nikki claimed to have worked alone at home all morning and Barby had been in and out of stores, killing time, not Ivy. Unfortunately, she'd bought nothing and no salesperson was likely to remember her.

They found no powder burns on any of us, but we'd had lots of time to wash or chemically treat our hands or do whatever killers did to hide evidence.

"Why aren't you thinking about a lover?" I demanded. Mackenzie and I had relocated to a corner of the living room, where we were eyed suspiciously by my former high-school classmates, as if we were forming a clique and snobbishly excluding them. "Somebody with a key who didn't even talk to the guard," I said. "Because if it wasn't a lover, why was she lying naked on top of the bedspread?"

"No signs of sex so far. Could she have sweat enough in anticipation to make herself salty? Or maybe the caterer . . ." Mackenzie mused. "Maybe she was already up here first and—"

"If you'd seen the woman, heard her, you'd know how far-fetched that is. She called Ivy 'Mrs. Hoffman' and she was scared to death of losing her as a customer." Mention of the caterer triggered

thoughts of all her work, of the wilting salads. "That food's going to spoil." I couldn't even repackage it, since I'd crushed all the containers in that gizmo. "Should I wrap and refrigerate it?" I asked, hoping to snag a lettuce leaf. I was exceedingly hungry, even though it was probably inappropriate to feel such mundane urges at this time. "You don't need it as evidence. She wasn't poisoned, after all."

"Don't touch anything, okay?" Mackenzie said.

Something nagged at me besides hunger. Something I'd already said echoed, but too distantly to catch.

"She really thought she was fat?" Mackenzie asked.

I nodded. "Obsessed. You've seen her at her worst, though. With clothes on, she didn't look that scrawny." It was a shame she'd died naked. As soon as they allowed, I'd dress her as a last act of decency.

More mental nagging. Bits and pieces of the day bumped and clumped in my mind, like magnetic shavings. I sifted through them. Ivy, Ivy, of course. The Ancient Mariner. Water, water. Obsession. Sex. Salt. The incompetent guard. Salty bedspread. Mitchell and money. Perfection. Mitchell and other women. Ivy and other men. Quick rigor mortis. Water, water.

Now I was not only hungry, but thirsty. I wondered if I could disturb the scene of the crime, or at least the water faucet. I'd wear gloves and leave no fingerprints. But even so, a human touching anything in that pristine house was an intrusion. Ivy appeared to have been as fanatical about her house as she'd been about her body.

Pathetic Ivy. So driven and frightened and obnoxious and needy. So *hungry*.

Anorexic Ivy complaining last Friday that she was too fat, that a TV commercial for TYW would be ruined.

Ivy shopping for nonfood. Five boxes of plastic wrap and not a leftover to cling to.

The compactor. Styrofoam floating on a sea of— "Mackenzie," I said. "I have it."

"I've known that for a while now."

"I'm talking about Ivy's murder."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Could body temperature be a wrong estimate of time of death?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Sure, if, say, the victim had a fever when she died and the coroner didn't know it, or if the temperature of the room was real high or low. Things like that."

"Or a thing like the corpse had been done up like a mummy in plastic wrap?"

"What's that? A kinky sex trick?"

"A kinky diet trick. To sweat off pounds. Instant sauna."

"You're kidding."

"Dangerous. It can raise your core temperature." I'd read that warning in a fitness magazine. I read about diet and exercise a lot, trusting my muscles to acknowledge my good intentions and firm and tone themselves.

"Well, well, well," he drawled. "Her core temperature was up and she was sweating. The Case of the Salty Corpse. Amanda Pepper does it again."

"Yards of plastic wrap in the compactor," I said. "I assumed the caterer put it there, but she used Styrofoam containers. Ivy put it there."

"Correction: Amanda Pepper almost does it again. Ivy's murderer put the plastic wrap in there. She was shot while she was wrapped. Pretty much point-blank, but it wouldn't seem logical to imply that a woman had wrapped herself in plastic before shooting herself, would it? That's why the wound looked odd. I'll bet the lab finds melted or fused plastic wrap in it, but even so, they'd never have guessed why."

"So you think the killer saw that she was wrapped up and fairly immobile—certainly couldn't jump up and trot away easily—shot her and unwrapped her—"

"And put the gun into her hand," Mackenzie added, "and—"

"—left for a corporate strategy session." We smiled at each other. For once, the most logical suspect was the most logical suspect. "And sober, stoned, or not, the guard didn't log anybody coming up here because nobody did. The mister left for work, that's all."

"So maybe," Mackenzie said slowly, "instead of givin' you a note for your principal, we should give you a police citation."

"I'd settle for a late lunch."

"How do cheeseburgers with fries sound?"

"Here? In this house? Pornographic. Sacrilegious. Depraved. But I want onion rings, too. And Rocky Road and Oreos afterward." I would exorcise the diet devil who had possessed Ivy Jean until only bones, obsession, and plastic wrap were left.

Poor lost Ivy. Rest in peace.

I hoped she could, but I doubted it. What, after all, would she do for all eternity with no body of her own or others to criticize and desperately try to improve?

In order to tackle such a metaphysical puzzler, my brain required feeding. And so began my first annual Ivy Jean Hoffman Memorial Lunch.

In the end, out of respect, I told them to hold the onion rings.

MINUTE  MYSTERY

I NEVER FORGET A FACE

by KATE SEAGO

Mrs. Faddle fussed with her packages as the tall, thin man with the bushy moustache came down the narrow aisle of the commuter train car. As he slid into the only empty seat—it had to be next to her, didn't you know—she glanced sideways at him past the camouflage of her newspaper.

"Don't I know you from somewhere?" she asked in her most pleasant voice. Mrs. Faddle made it a point not to intrude, but a little conversation would be nice—and he did look so familiar.

"I don't think so," the man said with a smile. He nodded toward the paper. "Do you work the crossword?"

"Goodness, no!" twittered Mrs. Faddle. "Would you like it?"

Her seat companion smiled again. Mrs. Faddle handed over the paper. "Here—I'm quite through with it."

He thanked her politely, pulled out a pen, and began to work the puzzle. Mrs. Faddle kept quiet as long as she could. "Imagine," she finally exclaimed, "working it in ink! You must be quite clever."

There was that smile again, but no conversation. "Do you ride this train often?" she insisted. "I'm sure I've seen you before. I never forget a face."

The moustachioed gentleman shook his head, intent on his puzzle; Mrs. Faddle had to content herself with looking out the window. A few minutes later the train pulled into the next stop. Her seat mate folded the paper and placed it on the seat. He nodded politely to Mrs. Faddle, strode to the exit, and was gone.

The train pulled out. Idly, Mrs. Faddle glanced down at the folded newspaper. Under the headline "Embezzler Sought," she saw a picture of her recent traveling companion. On the picture he had penned a bushy moustache.

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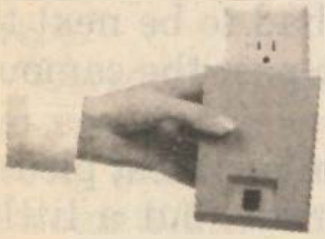

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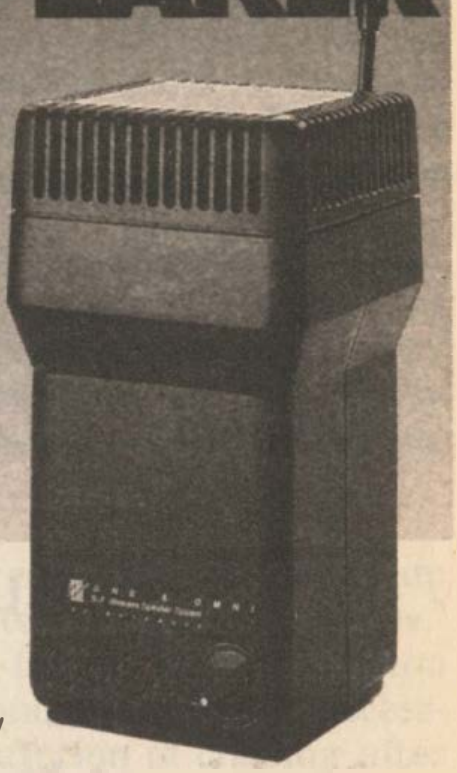

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a *NEW* Dr. Sam Hawthorne story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"Did you see anyone else?" Sheriff Lens asked as he joined us. "This Leather Man he mentioned?"

"No one. But of course the road was dark." She hesitated. "There was a Leather Man in these parts long ago. I don't know much of the legend, but our local historian could tell you."

"I don't believe in ghosts," the sheriff told her. "The fella you're talkin' about's been dead nearly fifty years . . ."

THE PROBLEM OF THE LEATHER MAN

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Ever since I'd moved to southern New England in the early 1920s (Dr. Sam Hawthorne told his guest, lifting the glass for a sip of brandy), I'd heard occasional stories about the Leather Man. At first I thought it was a mere legend to frighten the children at night, but later I learned that there really was such a person—a laconic wanderer dressed in a homemade leather suit who toured Connecticut and eastern New York State for some thirty years until his death in 1889.

The summer of 1937 was when the Leather Man returned, and in Northmont we weren't ready for him.

It was Sheriff Lens who roused me with a phone call at three in the morning on the first day of August. "Hawthorne," I mumbled into the bedside phone.

"Doc, I got a bad accident out on Turk Hill Road, near Putnam. You were the closest one to call."

"I'll be there," I answered shortly and hung up. My head was back on the pillow when I jerked myself awake and clambered out of bed. I wiped my face with a wet washcloth, dressed quickly, and hurried out to my car. Except for an occasional patient in labor, it was rare for me to be called out at that hour. Although automobiles had become more numerous on the roads around Northmont, accidents were infrequent.

I reached the scene of this one within fifteen minutes of the sheriff's summons. A black Ford had run off the road and turned over in a ditch. Sheriff Lens's car was on the road about ten feet away and the sheriff himself was doing the best he could with the badly injured driver. A woman from a nearby farmhouse stood watching from a safe distance.

"How bad is it?" I asked the sheriff.

"Bleedin' from the head, Doc," he answered quietly, standing up to greet me in the glare of his car's headlights. "It's March Gilman."

I knew Gilman from the Rotary meetings, though he'd never been a patient or close friend. He was a man around forty with a successful feed grain business in town, and a reputation of chasing after the ladies.

"Bad wound," I said, dropping to my knees beside him. "Have you called the ambulance?"

"Right away, but they were having some engine trouble. That's when I phoned you."

I leaned closer to the bleeding man. "March! March, can you hear me?"

His eyes flickered open for just an instant. "What—?"

"You've had an accident, March."

"Leather . . . the Leather Man—"

"What's that?" I asked. I'd heard him clearly enough but I didn't understand the words.

"Leather Man . . . in the road. Tried to avoid him and . . . went into ditch."

"What Leather Man, March? Who was he?"

But that was all he said, and in the distance I could hear the clanging of the ambulance bell along the dark dirt road. I tried to stanch the flow of blood from his head until it arrived, but I knew the life was draining out of him.

As they were loading him into the ambulance, the woman who'd been watching moved closer. When she stepped into the light I recognized her as one of the teachers from the Northmont grammar

school. "Miss Whycliff—I didn't realize it was you."

"I still live here in the homestead," she replied, arms folded across her breasts as if to protect herself from the mild night air. She was an attractive but plain woman in her late thirties, unmarried and carrying on with life after the death of her parents. There were women like her in most rural communities.

"What happened here?" I asked as Sheriff Lens saw the ambulance on its way.

"I don't really know. He must have been driving fast. I heard the car go by the house and then skid and go into the ditch. I think it woke me up. I threw on some clothes and when I saw he was injured I phoned the sheriff at once."

"Did you see anyone else?" Sheriff Lens asked as he joined us. "This Leather Man he mentioned?"

"No one. But of course the road was dark." She hesitated. "There was a Leather Man in these parts long ago. I don't know much of the legend, but our local historian could tell you."

"I don't believe in ghosts," the sheriff told her. "The fella you're talkin' about's been dead nearly fifty years."

"Some people have seen him this summer," she replied. "I've heard talk that he's back."

"Rubbish!" Sheriff Lens told her. He was not one to believe in things he hadn't seen for himself.

Hannah Whycliff shrugged. "Will you send someone to tow this car out of my front yard?"

"First thing in the morning," he promised.

He drove to Pilgrim Memorial Hospital then, and I followed in my car. March Gilman was dead by the time we arrived.

Mary Best was busy with her office chores, getting out the August first billing, when I arrived a little before ten. "I just phoned you, Sam. I was worried when you weren't here at nine."

"I had a three A.M. emergency, so I decided to sleep an extra hour."

"The accident that killed March Gilman?"

I nodded. "I suppose the news is all over town."

"Pretty much. I gather he was someone important."

"Small-town important," I told her. Mary had taken over as my nurse after April married and moved to Maine. Sometimes I forgot she'd only been in Northmont two years and didn't yet know everyone. "What's my schedule for today?"

"It's pretty slow. Mrs. Ritter at ten-thirty and Douglas Greene at eleven, and then you're free for the day."

At noon I drove over to see Sheriff Lens. "Just looking at the hospital report on March Gilman," he said. "Died of massive head injuries. No surprise there. He had a bad bleeding wound and a lesser one that probably caused a mild concussion."

"I'm sorry I couldn't do anything to save him." I sat down by his desk. "But this business about the Leather Man still bothers me. Hannah Whycliff said the town historian would have information about the legend. Would that be Spencer Cobb?"

"Only one I know, and he's sorta unofficial."

Spencer Cobb had an office in our little library building on the far side of the town square. I found him on a short stepladder, checking an atlas of old New England maps in a leather-bound volume with a scuffed and disintegrating cover. "Hello, Sam," he greeted me. "What can I do for you?" He was white-haired, though barely fifty, and smoked a pipe almost constantly.

"I've got a historical question for you, Spencer. Ever hear of the Leather Man?"

"You're really going way back now. Come—sit down while I dig out some old references." He was actually the county surveyor, but since the job only occupied a small part of his time he'd taken on the additional duties of Northmont's historian.

Presently he laid an old photograph before me on the desk. It showed a scruffy man in his fifties seated on a wooden bench eating a piece of bread or a bun. He was clad entirely in a bulky, shiny garment with crude stitching plainly visible. The pants and coat seemed to be made of the same patchwork material—leather scraps held together by thongs. He wore a visored cap and boots that seemed to have wooden soles. Resting next to him was a leather bag perhaps two feet square.

"This was the Leather Man," Spencer Cobb said. "The photograph was taken not long before his death in 1889."

"Tell me about him."

Cobb struck a match and relit his pipe. "He first appeared in this area in the late 1850s, dressed as you see him here. For the next thirty years, summer and winter, he followed a particular route, walking along country roads from the Hudson River on the west to the Connecticut River on the east. It took him about thirty-four days to complete each circuit of three hundred sixty-five miles. He came as regularly as the full moon, though every thirty-four days instead

of the moon's twenty-nine or thirty days. Once they established his route, some thought it had a mystic significance, with the three hundred sixty-five miles standing for the days of the year."

"Who was he? Did anyone know?"

"He rarely spoke—only a few words in broken English. Though he had his regular stops, if anyone questioned him too closely he would abandon that stop in the future. People were frightened of him at first, but they came to know him as a peaceful man who wanted no trouble. It was believed from his accent that he was French."

"What happened to him?"

"In December of 1888 someone noticed a sore on his lip that appeared to be cancerous. He was taken to a hospital in Hartford, but promptly ran away. The press identified him as a Frenchman named Jules Bourglay who'd fled his homeland following business losses and a tragic love affair. However, none of this was ever proven, and when the Leather Man died of cancer the following March, his meager belongings offered no clue to his identity."

"A fascinating story," I agreed. "But there have been recent reports—"

Spencer Cobb nodded. "I know. The Leather Man is back. I've been hearing stories all summer. Since I don't believe in ghosts I can only assume that someone is retracing the old route, for reasons of his own."

"I have a road map in the car. If I bring it in, could you outline the route for me?"

"Certainly. I have it in one of these old newspaper clippings. There's a great deal of material available because so many people at the time kept scrapbooks of his comings and goings."

I watched while he carefully copied the route of the Leather Man. If this new traveler was retracing the old route, I figured I should be able to locate him without too much difficulty. I'd become fascinated by the story, and curious about what he knew regarding the accident that killed March Gilman.

"Thanks, Spencer," I told him. "You've been a big help."

I went back to the office and plotted the distances on the map. "Why are you doing all this?" Mary Best asked. "What happens if you find him? Are you going to walk with him?"

"Maybe."

"That's the funniest thing I've heard!"

"Look, he's covering three hundred sixty-five miles every thirty-four days. That works out to better than ten and a half miles a day, every day. Why should anyone in his right mind do such a thing?"

"The original Leather Man did it. Maybe this is his grandson or something."

I could see she was laughing at me, but I wanted to find him. With the unfolded map beside me on the seat, I set off in my car along his route. Hannah Whycliff's house was as good a starting point as any, and I drove up there to begin my search. Her car was gone, and Gilman's wrecked vehicle had been towed away as promised. I parked in the drive and walked back to the road, looking for traces of the accident. The gravel in front of her house was unmarked, and only a broken piece of bumper remained in the ditch as evidence of the accident.

I tried to imagine where the Leather Man might have been crossing, then decided he'd have stuck to the road, especially at that hour of the night. But why had he been walking at all? Apparently he slept overnight with people, or in fields in good weather. What was he doing up at three in the morning?

I got back into my car and started driving.

After twenty miles of slow and careful searching over the next hour, I came to the conclusion that the Leather Man was nowhere to be found. Perhaps he'd given up his trek, if he'd ever begun it. Maybe the whole thing had been a myth. I stopped in a filling station that had a public telephone and called Mary back at the office.

"I can't find him," I told her. "I've covered the twenty miles between Northmont and Shinn Corners and he's nowhere on the road. Any emergencies back there?"

"All quiet."

"I guess I'll give up and head back in."

"Maybe you've been going the wrong way," she suggested.

"What?"

"You've been driving in a counterclockwise direction around his route. Maybe he walks in a clockwise direction."

"Damn!" I tried to think why I'd driven the way I did, and decided it was because March Gilman had been going in this direction when he went into the ditch and killed himself. Of course that proved nothing. If there had been a man in leather on the road last night he might have been walking in either direction. "Thanks, Mary. You could be right."

Next I phoned Spencer Cobb and asked him the crucial question. "You never told me which way the original Leather Man walked. Was it clockwise or counterclockwise?"

"Let's see—clockwise, I believe. It's not stated as such in the papers I have, but that seems to have been the case."

"Thanks, Spencer."

"Have you found him?"

"I'm on the trail."

I retraced my route and then kept on going past the Whycliff house, skirting Northmont and heading back east. I took it especially slow this time, and before I'd gone three miles I spotted a slim, brown-clad figure walking ahead of me in the road. He moved to one side as I drew up next to him, but I didn't drive past.

"Want a ride?" I called out the open window.

"No, mate. I'm walking."

He spoke with a strange accent, not quite British, and there was no arguing with his words. I made a quick decision and pulled up behind him, parking my car off the road. I hurried to catch up with him and asked, "Don't mind if I walk with you, do you?"

"Suit yourself, mate."

I fell into step beside him. Up close, I could see that he was indeed wearing a leather suit, not made of separate pieces held together by thongs like the original Leather Man, but one that fit him quite well and reminded me a bit of the buckskin garments one associated with Daniel Boone and other frontiersmen. He carried a knapsack of the same material, with a few possessions bundled into the bottom of it.

"Headed anywhere in particular?" I asked.

"I'm on a trek."

"That's a nice leather suit you're wearing. I hear people call you the Leather Man."

He turned his head in my direction and I got my first good view of his sandy hair and weathered face. He was probably in his forties, but I could have been off by ten years either way. His eyes were the palest blue I'd ever seen. He looked nothing like the picture of the old Leather Man that Spencer Cobb had shown me.

A car appeared over the hill ahead, traveling at a good speed, raising a small cloud of dust behind it. "Who calls me that?" the man asked.

"People who've seen you on your route."

The car slowed to pass us and I saw Hannah Whycliff behind the wheel, heading home. I waved and she waved back. "Haven't seen many people," he muttered. "Just when I stop occasionally for food or a night's rest."

"That woman who just passed us—you were in front of her house at three this morning."

"Might have been," he acknowledged. "When there's a moon I like to walk for part of the night and sleep through the morning. It's cooler that way."

"What's your name? Mine's Sam Hawthorne."

"Zach Taylor." He extended a bronzed hand and we shook.

"Zach as in Zachary?"

"That's right."

"We had a president by that name. Long ago."

"So they tell me."

We were setting a steady pace, a bit faster than I liked to walk. "You're not from around here. Are you British?"

"Australian, mate. Ever hear of a place called Alice Springs?"

"Vaguely. I might have seen it on a map once."

"It's real outback country there. Nothing but desert."

"What brought you to New England?"

"Just decided to see the world. Got this far and thought it was nice enough to stay a while. I spent the spring in New York and then came up here."

It was getting late in the day, almost dinnertime, but we kept walking. "Your trek is following the route of the original Leather Man, more than fifty years ago," I observed. "That's more than coincidence."

"Well, I was wearing this leather outfit and someone mentioned your Leather Man up in these parts. I looked up his route at the library and decided to follow it."

"You've been doing this all summer?"

"Yes."

"If you were out at three this morning you must have seen an automobile accident. A Ford tried to avoid you and went into a ditch."

Now he eyed me with open suspicion. "Is that what this is all about? Are you a policeman, Sam Hawthorne?"

"No, I'm a doctor."

We were approaching a railway crossing where I knew the crossing guard. He was an elderly squinty-eyed man named Seth Howl-

ings, and as we approached he came out of his shed to lower the gate across the grade crossing. "Hello, Seth," I called out.

He turned toward me. "Dr. Sam! Haven't seen you in a long time. And on foot, too! What happened to your car?"

"I'm getting some exercise today. Is there a train coming?"

"Sure is! Can't you hear it?"

I could then. It sounded a distant whistle and in another moment it came into view. It was a twenty-car freight train, traveling at moderate speed. "You've got good ears to hear it coming that far away," I told Seth after the train had passed.

"Best there are," he said with a toothless grin as he raised the gate. "I could hear a cow mooing in the next county."

I chuckled and fell into step beside Zach Taylor. "How late you working tonight, Seth?"

"Till my wife picks me up. She keeps track of my hours."

"See you later."

We crossed the tracks and set off down the highway again. "You know a lot of people in this area?" Zach asked.

"Quite a few. I've been a doctor here for fifteen years."

"You hungry? I've got some sourdough bread in my sack here, and a little whiskey to wash it down."

"You're tempting me."

The whiskey burned going down, but the bread had a nice original taste. We paused only about ten minutes before we were off again. Another car passed us, but the driver was no one I knew. Traffic was sparse on this section of the road.

"I was asking you about that accident with the Ford," I reminded him after a time of walking in silence.

"Yes. You were, weren't you?"

"You saw it?"

"I never saw the car until it was on top of me. Don't know where he came from. I dove to one side and he ran off the road. I could see he was dazed but he didn't seem badly hurt, and I'm not one to get involved in those things."

"So you just kept going."

"Sure. I walked for another half-hour and then found a haystack to sleep in. How's the bloke in the car?"

"He's dead."

"God, I'm sorry to hear that."

"You should have stopped to help him, Zach."

He took out the whiskey again and downed another healthy shot, passing the bottle to me. "Last time I stopped to help someone at an accident, I spent a couple nights in jail. Damned cops thought I was a hobo."

"Aren't you, in a way?"

"Not a chance, mate! I've got money on me. Sometimes I even pay for my lodging and food, when I can't get it free."

"But you're wandering the back roads of New England."

"Man, I'm on walkabout!"

"What?"

"Walkabout. I don't suppose you know the word. It's an Australian custom—an Australian Aborigine custom, really—meaning an informal leave from work during which the person returns to native life and wanders the bush, sometimes visiting relatives."

"So this is your walkabout."

"Exactly."

"What is it you've left back home?"

"A wife and family, actually. I hope to return to them someday."

We walked on as night fell, and I realized that it must be after eight-thirty. Where had the day gone, and how far had I walked with this man? More important, how many shots of his whiskey had I drunk? "Won't you be stopping for the night?"

"Soon," he agreed. "Soon."

He told me more about his wife and children as we walked, and about life in Australia. He recounted exploits of the legendary bandit Ned Kelly, who wore a suit of homemade armor in his battles with police. After a time the whiskey bottle was empty and he hurled it into the brush along the road.

"I am too tired to go further," he finally admitted. Up ahead, a lighted sign announced a house that offered beds and breakfast for travelers. "I'll stay here for the night," he told me.

"Then I'll be leaving you and going back to my car." As soon as the words were out of my mouth I realized how foolish they were. We'd been walking for hours. It would take me half the night to return to my car.

"That's too far. Stay the night with me, mate."

I thought about phoning Sheriff Lens for a ride, but I'd drunk more whiskey than expected and I didn't want him to see me wavering a bit as I walked. Maybe it would be best to sleep for a few hours.

A fat, middle-aged woman greeted us at the door of the big house. "Welcome, travelers," she greeted us. "I'm Mrs. Pomroy. Looking for a place to spend the night?"

"That we are," Zach Taylor told her. "Can you accommodate us?"

"I've got two nice beds right at the top of the stairs. Ten dollars each and that includes a sturdy breakfast in the morning."

"We'll take them," I agreed, feeling sleepier by the minute.

"Glen!" she called out, and almost at once a small man with grey hair and a slight limp appeared. "This is my husband, Glen. He'll show you to your room. Glen—number two, top of the stairs."

He smiled at us halfheartedly. "Good to have you folks stop. Any bags?"

"No, mate," Zach told him. "Just us."

He led us up the stairs and his wife called out, "You can pay in the morning. I'll wake you at eight for breakfast if you're not up yet."

The room was large and cheerful, even by the uncertain light from a single floor lamp. There were two beds covered with flowery spreads, and a water pitcher and bowl. "Bathroom's down the hall," Pomroy told us. "We leave a little light on all night."

I shed my outer clothes and fell into bed, exhausted. The combination of all that walking and the shots of whiskey had proven to be too much for me. I had a glimpse of Zach climbing into the other bed, and then I was asleep.

It was daylight when at last I opened my eyes. I was aware that someone was knocking on my door and I looked at the pocket watch I'd left on the table next to the bed. It was five minutes after eight. Then I noticed that Zach's bed was empty, the spread pulled neatly into place. It looked undisturbed.

"Just a minute!" I called to the knocker, pulling on my pants.

I opened the door to find Mrs. Pomroy standing there. "Time for breakfast, if you want it."

"I'll be right down. Where's the other man?"

She looked blank. "What other man?"

"Zach Taylor, the fellow who was with me."

Mrs. Pomroy stared me straight in the eye. "You were alone, mister. There was no one with you."

Sheriff Lens arrived within a half-hour of my call. Mrs. Pomroy's place was across the county line, so he was officially outside his jurisdiction, but that didn't stop him from asking Mrs. Pomroy a few questions.

"Doc here says he came in last night with another man. You say he came alone."

She glared at me and then back at the sheriff. "Alone he was."

"Then why'd you give me a room with two beds?"

She shrugged. "It was empty. You were the only guest we had."

Sheriff Lens shifted uneasily. "I've known Doc a good many years, Mrs. Pomroy. If he says he came here with someone—"

"It was obvious he'd been drinking heavily, Sheriff. He couldn't even walk straight. Maybe he was with someone else, but not here."

The sheriff glanced at me inquiringly. "Is that true, Doc?"

"This fellow, the Leather Man, had a bottle of whiskey. We had a few shots while we walked."

The woman's husband came in from outside and she immediately lined up his support. "Tell them, Glen. Tell them this man was alone."

The short man glanced at me. "Sure was! I was glad to see he wasn't drivin', the shape he was in."

I sighed and started over again. "There was a man with me. He went to sleep in the other bed. His name is Zach Taylor and he's wearing a leather suit, almost like buckskin."

They both shook their heads, unwilling to budge from their story. Maybe they killed him for his few meager possessions, I thought, but then why wouldn't they have killed me too? "Come on, Doc," the sheriff said, his arm on my shoulder. "I'll give you a ride back to your car."

As I turned to leave, Mrs. Pomroy reminded me, "That'll be ten dollars for the room."

Back in his car, Sheriff Lens was silent until I spoke. "I found this so-called Leather Man, and when he wouldn't stop to talk with me, I parked my car and walked with him. He's Australian, on something called a walkabout. Trying to find himself, I guess. He saw the accident but didn't think Gilman was seriously hurt. He was afraid of getting involved so he kept on walking."

"What about the drinkin', Doc? Is that part true?"

"He had a bottle with him. After a while I took a couple of swigs from it. I'll admit it hit me harder than I'd expected, but I knew what was going on at all times. Zach Taylor was with me when we took the room at Mrs. Pomroy's place."

"Did you sign a register or anything?"

"No. She rents rooms and gives you breakfast, that's all. She's not operating a hotel."

"You think they killed him or something?"

"I don't know what to think. The last I saw of him, he was climbing into the bed next to mine."

"But the bed was made this morning."

"I slept so soundly Mrs. Pomroy could have brought a parade of elephants in there and I wouldn't have known it. She could easily have come in and made the bed."

"The door wasn't locked?"

I tried to remember. "I don't think so. I'm sure we had no key."

He stared hard at the highway ahead. "I don't know what to think, Doc."

"Well, I can at least prove he was with me. When we get to the railroad crossing back across the county line, stop the car."

We reached it in another ten minutes, and I saw old Seth Howlings coming out of the crossing guard's little shed. "Hello, Seth."

"It's Dr. Sam again! But in a car this time."

"Howdy, Seth," Sheriff Lens said, getting out to join me.

"Hello, Sheriff. Beautiful day, isn't it?"

"Sure is!"

I walked closer to him. "Remember when I came by yesterday afternoon, Seth?"

"Sure do! Just as the five thirty-five was passing through."

"Remember the man who was with me?"

He looked blank. "You was alone, Dr. Sam. Are you trying to trick me?"

"Alone?" the sheriff repeated. "Are you certain of that?"

"Certain as I can be. Dr. Sam walked up and we chatted some while the train passed. Then he crossed the tracks and went on his way."

"Alone?"

"Alone."

I was in the middle of a nightmare from which there was no awakening.

Sheriff Lens and I drove on. "I'm not crazy, Sheriff."

"I know that, Doc."

"And I wasn't drunk enough to have imagined the whole thing. In fact, I never would have had any whiskey at all if Zach Taylor hadn't given it to me."

"Still, that old coot would have no reason to lie. You can't think he's in some sort of conspiracy with the Pomroys! They probably don't even know each other."

"I don't know what to think at this point. But I'm damned if I'm going to let it rest! I have to prove I wasn't imagining this Leather Man."

Sheriff Lens thought about it. "Someone must have seen you on the road together."

"There were only a few cars, and no one I knew except—"

"What is it?"

"Hannah Whycliff. She passed us in her car and waved. I'd forgotten about her."

We drove on to the Whycliff house, where the image of the Leather Man had made its first appearance in March Gilman's headlights. Hannah Whycliff's car was in the driveway and she came to the door when the sheriff rang the bell. She greeted us both and then asked, "Is this more questions about the accident?"

"Not exactly, Miss Whycliff," the sheriff said. "Doc here has a problem. He was with this so-called Leather Man yesterday, but now the man has disappeared and two different people deny seeing him with Doc."

"I remember you passed and waved when I was walking with him. It was late yesterday afternoon."

She turned to look at me. "I remember seeing you, Dr. Sam. I wondered what had happened to your car, but I was in a hurry and couldn't stop."

"Then you saw the Leather Man?" Sheriff Lens prompted.

"No, Dr. Sam was alone. I saw no one else."

The thing was so fantastic I simply shook my head and gave a humorless chuckle. It defied the laws of logic. "Tell me, do you know Seth Howlings, the railroad crossing guard? He's just this side of the county line."

"I may have seen him but I'm sure I've never spoken to him. Why do you ask?"

"And how about a couple named Mr. and Mrs. Glen Pomroy, over in the next county? They rent out rooms in their house for overnight guests."

"I never heard of them. What are all these questions for?"

"We're tryin' to find witnesses who saw Doc with this Leather Man," the sheriff told her. "The man might have been responsible for that accident in front of your house."

"I never saw any Leather Man. The doctor was alone."

"Thank you, Miss Whycliff," the sheriff said. We walked back to the car.

I settled into the front seat and said, "She's lying."

"Sure, and so are the Pomroys and old Seth. But why, Doc? These people don't even know each other."

"I don't know," I admitted. "I only know they're lying."

"Do you think the Leather Man could have hypnotized them so they didn't remember seeing him?"

I snorted at that suggestion. "Hannah Whycliff drove past us in a car. The best hypnotist in the world couldn't have done it that fast."

"Then there's only one other explanation, Doc. Do you believe in ghosts?"

When I told Mary Best about it the next morning, she saw things a bit more clearly than I did. "We have to find the Leather Man, Sam. We have to locate this Zach Taylor and learn the truth."

"He's probably dead and buried somewhere out behind the Pomroy place."

"But maybe he isn't! Maybe he just went away!"

"Then why are they all lying about it? The sheriff even raised the possibility he was the ghost of the original Leather Man, but that one was French, not Australian."

"Can you get along without me today? I'm going out looking for him."

"You're wasting your time, Mary. Even if you find him, that won't explain why everyone lied."

"Everyone didn't lie. Only three people lied—four, if you count Mrs. Pomroy's husband. There has to be a reason."

I let her go. There were patients to be seen, but I handled them all without her. I spent most of the day thinking about Zach Taylor and my walk with him. He'd appeared there on the road, and then he'd disappeared. Maybe I'd never walked with him at all. Maybe I'd imagined the whole thing.

It was only later, toward the end of the day, that I realized what I'd done. March Gilman had been alive in that ditch after the car went off the road. After causing the accident, Zach Taylor had killed and robbed him. Deciding I might be suspicious of him, he bribed the Pomroys to deny his existence. Then he walked back and bribed old Seth and Hannah Whycliff too. That was the only answer.

And I'd let Mary Best go out alone in search of a murderer.

It took me less than a minute to realize that I was getting foolish in my middle age. If Zach had killed Gilman and thought I suspected

him, he had more than enough opportunity during our walk to leave me dead in a ditch too. There'd be no need to try bribing four people who might later blackmail him.

I thought about it some more, and remembered something I'd read not too long before. I reached into the bookcase in my waiting room and selected a volume of essays, *While Rome Burns,* by Alexander Woollcott. One of them, "The Vanishing Lady," deals with the legend of a young Englishwoman and her frail mother, recently returned from India, who visit the Paris Exposition in 1889 on their way back to England. The mother vanishes, and the hotel staff denies she ever existed. Their room has different furnishings and wallpaper. All traces of the mother are gone. In the end, a young man from the British Embassy establishes that her mother died suddenly of the black plague, contracted in India. The conspiracy of silence was necessary to prevent panic from driving visitors out of Paris and ruining the Exposition. In a footnote at the end, Woollcott says that he traced the original story to a column in the *Detroit Free Press*, published during the 1889 Paris Exposition. But the author of the column could no longer remember whether he had invented the story or heard it somewhere.

All right, was there any possibility the Australian had suffered from some illness? Had he died during the night and his death been hushed up by the Pomroys, who'd then bribed the others?

But Zach Taylor hadn't appeared ill at all. He was the picture of health, in fact. And the Pomroys would have had no way of knowing that Seth Howlings and Hannah were the only persons who'd seen us. Old Seth hardly seemed the sort to be bribed, anyhow.

By late afternoon I'd had no word from Mary and I was beginning to worry about her. I went out to my car after the departure of my last patient, thinking I should begin searching for her. Just then I saw the familiar little roadster pull into the parking lot. The Leather Man was next to her in the front seat.

"I thought you were dead," I told him. "Where'd you find him, Mary?"

"On his route, just where he was supposed to be. If he wasn't dead, I knew he'd be there."

"Good to see you again, mate," Zach said as he got out of the car. "Your little girl here is certainly persuasive. Once she found me she insisted I had to come back with her. This disrupts my whole route."

"We'll drive you back to where she picked you up," I assured him. "Or anywhere else you want to go. Just tell me what happened at the Pomroys' place last night."

"You mean where we stayed? Nothing happened. I got up early and left. I wanted to be on the road, and you were still sound asleep. Sorry I didn't say goodbye."

"Did you talk to Mrs. Pomroy?"

"It was too early for breakfast so I just paid her and left."

A small, sharp idea was gnawing at my brain. "How much did you pay her?"

"Twenty dollars, mate. I paid for your bed too!"

I went back inside and called Sheriff Lens.

When we returned to the Pomroy house, Glen Pomroy was on the front porch, scrubbing the steps. He looked up expectantly as we approached, but his expression soured when he recognized me. "Is your wife around?" I asked.

"We don't want trouble."

"Neither do I. We just want to see Mrs. Pomroy."

She appeared at the screen door then, pushing it open slowly. "I'm here," she said.

"We found the Leather Man," I told her. "He paid you for both our beds."

"Yeah, I forgot that," she answered glumly. "Guess we owe you ten dollars." The denials had gone out of her.

"You figured I was too drunk to remember clearly, so you made up the bed after he left and lied about his ever being here. That way you got an extra ten dollars out of me. It may have seemed like a minor swindle to you, but it caused me a great deal of trouble."

"I'll be contacting your sheriff to keep an eye on you," Sheriff Lens told them. "If there are any more complaints from your guests you'll both be makin' your beds at the county jail."

When we were back in the car he turned to me and said, "That takes care of the Pomroys, but it doesn't explain the other two. They both claimed you were alone too."

"Seth Howlings is our next stop. When we get there, don't say anything at first. Let me do all the talking."

Seth was seated in the crossing guard's little shack, dozing, but he came awake instantly as I approached. "How are you, Seth?"

"Back again, Dr. Sam? I've seen more of you the past two days than I usually do in a month."

"I doubt that, Seth. I doubt if you've seen me at all. Who's this standing with me now?"

My question seemed to unnerve him, and he shifted his gaze from my face to a point just to the left of me where no one stood. Then he seemed to look in the other direction, but his eyes skipped quickly past Sheriff Lens.

"Seth," I said quietly, "you're blind, aren't you?"

His hands began to shake. "I don't need eyes for this job. I can hear them trains comin' from the next county! The sound travels along the rails, and their steam whistles can be heard for miles."

"How did it happen, Seth? Why didn't you go to a doctor?"

"I never had no pain, just halos around the lights, and my vision kept narrowing down till it was just like looking into a tunnel. After a while even that was gone. I figured at my age it didn't make no difference. My wife drove me to work here every day, and picked me up. So long as I could hear the trains comin' and lower and raise the gate, what difference did it make?" His face wore an expression of utter sadness. "Will they take my job away from me, Dr. Sam?"

I knew it was glaucoma, and there was nothing anyone could do for him. "Probably, Seth. I'm sure you're good at it, but you wouldn't want to cause an accident, would you? Suppose some little child wandered onto the tracks and you didn't hear him."

"I wouldn't want that," he agreed.

"This is Sheriff Lens with me. He'll see about getting a replacement for you right away."

The sheriff put a reassuring hand on Seth's shoulder. "I'll have someone out here within an hour, and we'll arrange with your wife to pick you up."

Back in the car, I shook my head in wonder. "To think we had a blind man guarding that railroad crossing—"

"How'd you know, Doc?"

"He answered people when they talked to him, but he never spoke first to someone. When I asked about the man who was with me, his immediate reaction was that I was trying to trick him. What did he mean by that? It was an odd choice of words if he had seen me alone at the crossing. And both times I saw him he mentioned my coming on foot or in a car, as if to convince me he could see. Then I remembered Zach never spoke while we were there. And Seth emphasized hearing the train, not seeing it. With his wife to pick him up, and relying on his ears, he could do the job."

"Blind people's hearing is supposed to be very sensitive," Sheriff Lens pointed out. "He must have heard the footsteps of two people if he knew you arrived on foot."

"We approached just as a train was coming, and that distracted him. Only I spoke, and after the train passed I remember falling into step with Zach Taylor. If he listened then, he'd have heard only one set of departing footsteps. When we questioned him, he feared I suspected something about his blindness so he stuck to the story he thought was true—that I was alone."

"So Seth Howlings and the Pomroys had their own entirely different reasons for denying the existence of the Leather Man. But what about Hannah Whycliff? Isn't it stretching coincidence a bit far to have a third person who didn't see him for some reason?"

"We'll call on Miss Whycliff next," I answered grimly.

It was almost evening when we turned into her driveway once more. This time it took her a while to answer the ring. "I hope we're not interrupting your dinner," I said.

"No, no. What is it this time?"

"I'm afraid it's still about the Leather Man. We've located him at last."

"How does that concern me?"

"You lied about not seeing him with me on the road yesterday. You see, the sheriff here started out his questioning by telling you that two other people had already denied seeing the Leather Man with me. That was a mistake. You quickly decided it was to your advantage to agree with them, to tell the same lie. You wanted the Leather Man to be gone, to never have existed."

"Why would I want that?" she asked.

"Because you were afraid he saw you murder March Gilman."

Her gaze shifted from me to the sheriff and back again. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Zach—the Leather Man—saw the accident and didn't think Gilman had been hurt badly at all. He hadn't seen the car coming until it was almost upon him. You told me you heard the car skid on the road as Gilman tried to apply the brakes, yet when I examined the road yesterday morning, just hours after the accident, the gravel was unmarked by any trace of skidding. Zach didn't see the car coming because it came out of your driveway, Miss Whycliff. It didn't skid. It wasn't going fast at all, but it went off the road to avoid the Leather Man. March Gilman was thrown clear and dazed. Before he became fully conscious you saw your chance. You came down to the road and hit him with something—perhaps a hammer. He was barely able to speak by the time I arrived, and he died soon after. There was evidence of two blows to the head."

"Why would I kill March Gilman?" she asked.

"I don't know. He had a reputation as a ladies' man. What went on between the two of you—"

"Get out of here, both of you! Get out this instant!"

I turned back toward the driveway, just as Mary pulled her car in behind the sheriff's. "We have a witness," I said softly.

Her eyes widened as she saw the Leather Man step out of the car and walk toward us. "No! No, keep him away from me!"

"He really exists, much as you wanted him not to. He's going to tell us what he saw."

"Keep him away!" she shouted. "I'll tell you! I killed March Gilman. And I'll tell you what he did to deserve it!"

"What's the matter with her, mate?" Zach asked as the sheriff led her away.

"She thought you were someone else," I told him. "She thought you were the avenging angel."

"No," he said with a grin. "I'm just a chap on walkabout."

a *NEW* short story by

DAVID WILLIAMS

Best known as the creator of investment-banker sleuth Mark Treasure, David Williams is retired from a career in advertising and now lives in Surrey, England, where he devotes his time to writing fiction. Publishers Weekly *describes him as "a careful craftsman who builds suspense through the deft placement of seemingly unrelated details." His most recent novel,* Treasure by Post, *was published by St. Martin's Press last spring. . . .*

TAKE TWO HUSBANDS

by DAVID WILLIAMS

"This paper's got far too much smut in it," plain Maud Guttins complained, noisily turning the pages.

"Court reports, is it, dear?" her husband Lancelot Guttins commented tentatively while putting more marmalade on his breakfast toast. He vaguely wished she might be right. But it was too much to hope that the *Tidcombe Times* had gone over entirely to pornography.

"Too many of the court reports simply cater for the prurient," Maud went on. "It's not even normal sex either. Not most of it."

You had to admire the way she could complain, and read, and slurp up Shredded Wheat all more or less at the same time. "Can I have some more coffee, dear?" he asked.

She took his cup, and poured the coffee.

It was at that moment that in his mind's eye he saw the kitchen door fly open and a group of shouting, leather-jacketed junkies burst in, overturning the table, grabbing the protesting Maud,and dragging her away with them, to be an imprisoned object for their wicked ways, never to be seen again.

This sequence was Mr. Guttins's favourite Maud imagining. The intruders were sometimes American Indians in full warpaint, or jack-booted Nazi SS, or fiends from outer space. What followed after their entry was always more or less the same.

"Of course, sex before marriage is the absolute norm these days," Maud went on, unaware of the awful fate that had just befallen her, and handing back the cup. "The absolute norm."

Mr. Guttins sighed quietly. He couldn't help feeling that it had been sex *after* marriage that had been upsetting Maud for the last twenty-five of her forty-eight years. Pretty well since she had given birth to Kevin—after doing her bit, as her mother had put it so cogently at the time. Kevin was married himself now. An engineer, he had emigrated to Australia, which was just as well, because his wife hadn't got on with Maud.

"Isn't it time you were going, Lancelot?"

"Yes, dear."

Dark, with plenty of hair still, a small moustache, and kind eyes, Mr. Guttins was a wiry man, and small, a touch smaller even than his wife, but more energetic. There was a spring in his step as he got outside into the June sunshine. He was dressed conservatively in the style he thought befitted a retail pharmacist. He stopped to pluck a yellow rosebud from one of the floribunda bushes along the drive, doing so expertly with the penknife from his pocket. Gardening was his nominal hobby. But for real escape he relied on harmless fantasy.

He looked back at the house as he closed the gate behind him. It was solid, detached, double-gabled, and redbrick, standing in its own bit of garden like its identical neighbours in this solid, redbrick seaside town in the south of England. You couldn't see the ocean from here, in inappositely named Nelson Avenue, but you could smell it when the wind was right.

Mr. Guttins fixed the rose in the lapel of his clerical grey jacket, adjusted the black-banded straw hat on his head, and made off down the avenue with short, quick steps. It was an eleven and a half minute steady walk to Pembroke's, the chemist shop he managed on the eastern side of the town, near the sea front. He was not obliged to walk. There was a frequent bus service from the corner which he sometimes used in the winter, and very occasionally Maud drove him to work in their year-old Rover 200. Mostly though, he chose to walk. He said it was healthier. In fact, it was because he

could thus more easily attend to the needs of the young women along the route who daily begged his urgent attentions.

Of course, the begging was in the same category of imagining as the leather-jacketed junkies. Mr. Guttins was a deeply frustrated middle-aged husband with a frigid wife. The lurid and preposterous sex life he led was entirely in his mind.

Fourteen minutes after leaving the house he was inserting the key in the front door of the shop. The walk had taken longer than need be on account of an extra two-minute interlude—the time he had taken nominally to tighten both his shoelaces alongside the municipal tennis courts. Two nubile, and already minimally clothed girls had been out for an early game at the courts. Mr. Guttins had imagined himself indulging their brazen pleadings to disrobe them, meeting their entreaties with deft hand movements—and practised too, since he had played the same scene the day before. He had enjoyed the subsequent revelations, but left the creatures begging for the further satisfactions they had demanded next.

Mr. Guttins's fantasies were reasonably controlled.

"Excuse me? Do say you're opening the shop now?"

The stunning young woman who had spoken was struggling to get out of the low Mercedes Coupé parked at the kerb across the narrow pavement in front of Pembroke's. Mr. Guttins turned in her direction at the very moment when her long legs—clad in sheer black pantyhose under the shortest of red skirts—had parted, a trifle indelicately, to ease the movement of the rest of her remarkable body.

It was a moment before he could utter. His thoughts had still been savouring his adventure with the abandoned tennis players. He pointed to the notice on the door without taking his eyes off this fresh, real personification of loveliness, not to mention lust. "Officially we're not open till nine," he said at last, already in his mind wresting the last flimsy garment from her willing body. Then he smiled nervously and doffed his hat, feeling his cheeks redden in response to the exciting contraction in his loins as she stood before him, to his perception, naked and unashamed.

"It's a prescription. For . . ." she paused momentarily, the big brown eyes considering Mr. Guttins more carefully than before, "for my husband. For his heart. I tried to get it filled last night. The chemist I went to didn't stock it." Standing beside him, she shook the mass of bouffant blonde hair before opening her white leather handbag. She pouted a little as she searched for something in the

bag, her tongue running around her lips and making them shine. "Here it is," she said, looking up. Her white, V-necked, collarless blouse was bursting at the front, revealing under the two top, open buttons not only a generous amount of cleavage but also a breath-taking treat of firm, genuinely unencumbered bosom.

Mr. Guttins started undressing her all over again.

"Urgent, is it?" he asked, swallowing and taking the prescription from the long, tapering fingers that touched his with a quite electric effect. The perfume she was wearing was for him more provocative than any advertisement could have claimed for it: it also smelled more expensive than anything stocked at Pembroke's.

"It's terribly urgent." She moved even closer to him, as if they were sheltering from a sudden shower under the narrow lintel above the shop door.

"I see it's a repeat private prescription." He pretended to reread the words so that his eyes could continue to feast on the genuinely unencumbered bosom.

"From my husband's Harley Street doctor. For quite a small amount of—"

"Digoxin syrup. Yes. It's not a proprietary. I mean I'll have to make it up for you." He went on seeming to study the writing. "It's just for a week's supply."

She nodded. "That's why I'm always having to get a fresh lot."

"Well it's quite strong stuff. You don't want too much of it lying about." He glanced at his watch. It was 8:41. "Come inside, won't you? I think we can manage it all right."

He ushered her through into the shop ahead of him. "I'll have to close the door again, I'm afraid. My assistant doesn't get here till nine. There's a chair if you want. I'll just . . . yes." He went behind the counter, then unlocked the glass door into the dispensary beyond.

"I'm intruding on your quiet time, I expect?"

"No, no, not at all. That is—" He looked up to find her standing in the dispensary doorway. "Oh, I'm afraid—"

"I mustn't come any further? Of course not. It's just that I adore the atmosphere of chemist shops. Especially a small one like this. With such a dear little old-fashioned dispensary."

"We're old-fashioned all right." He took off his suit jacket, then, in his imagination, everything else he had on. He hung up the jacket and, turning to face her, languidly put on his white cotton working jacket—treating it like the sexy silk dressing gown he imagined it

had become. He was sure he heard her catch her breath: well, that was understandable.

Indeed, Mr. Guttins was not in the least surprised at the increasingly approving gaze that in reality the woman was keeping on him: it came so close to the way she looked at him in his fantasy.

"Old Mr. Pembroke, the owner, won't change anything if he can help it. Or modernize. He has three shops like this one," the pharmacist continued, perfectly able to carry on normal conversations and mundane activities while indulging in an imaginary orgy.

"Quite a little chain."

"Along the coast, yes. This is the only one in Tidcombe." He did up the lower button of the white jacket while imagining he was loosely knotting the dressing-gown sash.

"A gold mine, is it?"

His hands gave an uncertain gesture as he looked along the line of drawers above the dispensing table. "That's not my province, I'm afraid. I make this shop pay. I've been here over fifteen years. It suits me," he ended lamely.

"Good for you. You're married, I see."

He glanced down at the wedding ring she had noticed. "Yes. For a little longer than er . . . fifteen years." He gave a chuckle to cover the subterfuge, then his expression changed. "Oh, dear, I'm afraid I don't have enough Digoxin to fill the prescription."

"Oh sh . . . too bad," she responded, the tapered fingers pulling at the long gold chain that was glinting enticingly in her cleavage.

"Look, why not take what I can make up? That's about a day's dosage. Then come back this afternoon for the rest," he suggested. "I can easily get a fresh supply during the day. I mean if that's convenient."

She frowned. "It means driving down again from Hightops. And you know what the traffic's like in the afternoon. I think I'd better—"

"Hightops? That's on my route home. Or nearly," he put in quickly, and inaccurately. Hightops was the exclusive section of town, a good deal out of his way, and a steep climb—except Mr. Guttins would have scaled Everest barefoot for the chance of seeing this vision again. "I could bring the rest of the prescription with me. That's if you wouldn't mind paying for all of it now?" He still remembered to ensure observance of the shop rules.

"Could you? You are sweet. Of course I'll pay now. Tell me how much." She opened her bag again. "And I'll give you directions to

the house. Our name's Hallier, by the way. Well you can see that from the prescription. I'm Kate Hallier."

It was shortly after 5:45 when Mr. Guttins arrived sweating at the house in Hightops. The steep, bending drive was cut deep into the chalk soil—banked, and sheltered by conifers on both sides. The visitor came upon the north, entrance-front of the building quite suddenly, and, despite his determination, it must be admitted gratefully, as he emerged beyond the last line of trees. It was a substantial house, too high up to be overlooked—a 1930s flatroofed villa, rendered in white, with a marvellous view of the sea to the south.

"You walked? You poor lamb. I thought—"

"I like to walk." He was carrying his jacket when she opened the door to him. "I've brought the prescription."

"Never mind that. Come in for a drink. Unless you have to hurry home. To your wife. I'm sitting by the pool. It's still lovely and hot there."

Mrs. Hallier was wearing a thigh-length, diaphanous yellow wrap which she was still tying in a bow at the neck. Underneath, Mr. Guttins could make out the briefest of matching bikini briefs through the parting in the wrap. It didn't seem that she had the bikini top on, but it was difficult to be sure the way the wrap material was bunched. But because she was so close to being unclothed already, he had no need of make believe.

"Thank you. I'd like that. I'd like that very much. My wife has her bridge always on Tuesdays. And . . . and on Wednesdays," he added unnecessarily. He had started to sweat again, but now it wasn't from the exertion of the climb.

"And this is Tuesday." She smiled tolerantly.

"Yes. So there's no hurry. None at all. What a very nice house."

"We like it. We're renting it this year, with a view to buying. It's *very* private." She took his arm as she guided him through the square hall, across the drawing room, and through sliding windows onto a wide paved terrace. A kidney-shaped swimming pool was sheltered and suntrapped below the terrace, down some curved stone steps. "My husband's supposed to be living in a warm climate. We should have gone to Florida or Italy, but he insists on carrying on with his business. And he doesn't like flying any more. Or being too far from his British doctors. He's older than me. Seventy-six." Mr. Guttins, in thrall to the grip on his arm, calculated that this made

her husband older by about fifty years. "Tidcombe is the compromise," she added.

"Could I ask what business your husband's in?"

"Antique furniture. The pricey kind. He has a gallery in Bond Street. He's there now. Seeing an American client."

"Oh, from what you said this morning, I thought—"

"He left at lunchtime. With . . . with the chauffeur. Back Thursday. That's his routine midweek. We have a flat above the gallery. But I hate London. Especially in summer."

"He'll need his Digoxin syrup?"

"No, he has enough to last him. With what you gave me this morning," she said as they went down the steps to the poolside. "Let me take your jacket. Would you like a swim? The water's heated to a sinful ninety degrees."

"I . . . I haven't brought a costume."

She shrugged. "That really doesn't matter up here. If you want, I expect there's a spare one in the changing room over there."

"Next time perhaps." He was ashamed at his lack of courage.

"If that's a promise. With your physique, I'll bet you're a fabulous swimmer." She smiled, squeezed his arm muscle, then stood away from him a little to look him up and down, still in her warmly appraising way.

"Hardly that," he replied with more justification than he intended. "I used to swim a lot. Tennis was . . . is my sport really."

"I like tennis too. Pity we don't have a court here. Sit over there then, and I'll get you that drink. Whiskey, gin?" She waved her hand at a raffia-bound drinks trolley behind them near the steps.

"Gin and tonic. Thank you." He sat awkwardly and sideways on one of two mattressed, long white lounger chairs set only inches apart, and half shaded by a huge sun umbrella. He was feeling overdressed and aware he should at least remove his shoes if he was going to sit properly. He had dealt with the shoes but was still trying to settle himself on the chair when she came back with his drink.

"Topless doesn't embarrass you, does it? You being a medical man? The English generally are so prudish about that kind of thing."

"No, no . . . I mean, not at all," he answered weakly in a strained voice, while trying to cloak both his embarrassment and his excitement.

She had discarded the wrap and was now standing over him in the slim bikini briefs. He swallowed and took the glass. This was the

most erotic experience of his whole life—and it quite surpassed his fantasies.

On Mr. Guttins's second visit, on the following Tuesday at the same time, Mrs. Hallier casually led her guest into a mutual exchange of intimate confidences about their lives. This revealed that they were equally disenchanted with their marriages.

It was not until Mr. Guttins's third visit, on Wednesday the day after that, and when there could be no pretence that he was bringing a prescription for her husband, that the exchanges took the form of actions, as well as words. This might have happened earlier, but Mrs. Hallier had been determined not to rush things unduly. Now the lounger chairs were pushed tightly together like a double bed. Mr. Guttins had arrived in time for the light lunch she'd prepared by the pool—smoked salmon, then strawberries, with champagne to drink. It was early closing in Tidcombe on Wednesdays. He had told Maud he wouldn't be home for lunch because he was stock-taking: Maud was at her bridge club from four o'clock to seven.

"But I told you, I've always preferred older men," Kate Hallier protested later as they lay naked, side by side in the sun, still sipping the champagne. Earlier he had been wearing the swimming shorts she had found for him the day before. He assumed they belonged to her husband. They had been a touch too big for him anyway—as she had pointed out when she had relieved him of them in the pool. "Well, slightly older men," she enlarged. "Men your age, for instance. It's just that Cedric's too old for . . . well, you know . . . almost everything really." She ran a hand down his hairless chest, her nails scoring the flesh.

Mr. Guttins gave a contented moan. "But he's rich," he said. Cedric Hallier was certainly decrepit-looking as well as old. Kate had produced a photograph of herself with the old boy taken at the pool. She had been hugging him like a sugar daddy: Mr. Guttins had found the picture obscene.

"Being rich isn't everything," said Kate. "You're much better off than he is really. You're the perfect age. You have your health and strength, a good job, nice home, I expect, despite—"

"But I don't have a gorgeous wife like you to have . . . to make love to." He still had difficulty mouthing the more daring phrases. Even so, he had never before talked to a woman in the way he talked to this one. His fantasies had not involved much conversation. The

present experience was as liberating as making love to Kate—or almost.

"That's easily fixed, silly. You could divorce Maud. Marriage doesn't have to be forever, you know?"

"But I've no one else to go to."

"Aren't I good enough? I'd marry you. Or live with you."

"But you hardly know me."

She put her glass to one side and, leaning over him, kissed him slowly on the lips. "Except I was crazy about you the moment I saw you. Didn't you notice? I don't go in for casual affairs. Not my style, darling. But you are." Her finger traced an outline on his forehead, then his cheek. "This is the first time I've ever been unfaithful to Cedric. I've been tempted, of course. I've told you how awful it's been for me all these years." There was a catch in her throat so that he thought she might be about to cry, until she went on more firmly. "I've been waiting for you to come along. For longer than I can tell you. You're perfect, my sweet. We're perfect together." She kissed him again.

Of course, he wanted to believe her. She had made his imaginings come true: all of them—and better than just true. "But you wouldn't divorce Cedric for me?" It was less a question than a supplication.

She lay her head back on the cushion. "You said the Pembroke shops are for sale." Her tone was thoughtful, and implied that she wasn't changing the subject.

"Mr. Pembroke wants to sell, yes. It's common knowledge in the town. But he can't get his price."

"Wouldn't you like to be the buyer?"

"Yes," he answered boldly. "And . . . and I'd know how to run the shops too. I mean much better than they're being run now." In fact he'd never once thought of himself in the role of proprietor of anything. Simply, she had the effect of spurring him on recklessly to undreamed-of goals—to a new kind of fantasy.

Kate sighed. "What an idyllic life. To own a nice little group of chemists shops. Traditional ones. And live right here."

"No chance of that, I'm afraid," he responded. "Mr. Pembroke wants nearly a million pounds for the three. He won't sell them separately either."

"Cedric's worth ten times that."

Mr. Guttins gave a despondent murmur. "But he's not likely to buy them for me, is he?" he offered flatly.

"But I will, when Cedric's dead. I promise. I inherit everything." She rolled her body back toward his. Her hand moved down his chest. "Pity we can't kind of hurry him along."

"To his . . . to his death, you mean?" Although he had hesitated over the word death, for some reason such an appalling proposal didn't seem appalling to him at all, not at that moment. It was like one of his imaginings, where there were no consequences.

"Yes. It'd be doing him a favour. He's getting no pleasure out of life, and he's often in great pain. But they won't operate on his heart. He wouldn't survive. Well, that says it, doesn't it?" She pressed herself even closer to him. "He's just longing for the end, really. The work keeps his mind off things, that's all. Yes, it'd be a kindness. I know just the way to do it too."

"You mean you'd want me to—"

"No darling, I'd handle it alone. It'd be nothing to do with you. Not the actual ending."

"But how—?"

She stopped his words by placing her other hand over his mouth. "Tell you later," she murmured. "When nothing more urgent is demanding attention."

"You'd need to make up two prescriptions that look the same, with the same dates on the labels. But one would be his normal Digoxin, and the other very high strength Digoxin. Lethal strength. It'll need to be that." She seemed to savour the word lethal.

They were lying side by side again in the sunshine as she went on. "I'd put the normal strength bottle in his bathroom cabinet on the first night. That'd be a Thursday."

"You have separate bathrooms? And . . . and bedrooms?"

"Er . . . yes. Because of Cedric's snoring. He'd take the dose as usual, so his fingerprints would be on the bottle. That could be important. He takes just the one dose at night. Well, you know that. On the Friday, I'd switch the bottle for the high strength one. After pouring out enough of what's in it to make the levels the same. So he couldn't notice any difference." She paused. "Then when . . . when it's all over, when he's gone, I get rid of the second bottle, and put the first one in its place. That's after I've poured away most of what's in it. It'll just look as if he's taken too much."

"By mistake or on purpose?" Mr. Guttins asked quickly.

"No one could ever know for certain, could they?" She stretched her arms above her head. "He likes the taste. I always think he's

going to take too much anyway." She turned her head to look at Mr. Guttins. "That'd work, wouldn't it?"

He swallowed. He was in awe at the way she had everything so clear in her mind. "Yes, it should work all right," he said. "And it's so simple. Is it too simple, d'you think?"

"Simple schemes are always the best. No complicated trimmings to go wrong." She had answered with the same authority as before.

"You say he's never been to a doctor in Tidcombe?"

"No. Only in London."

"In that case, if he died here there'd have to be a post-mortem."

She pushed herself up on her elbows. "So they'd find he'd taken too much of his syrup. It's what they'd be expecting. It'd be his fault he'd taken too much."

"So long as they didn't think you'd given him an overdose."

"How could I do that? Hold him down and pour it into him? Lace his coffee with it? Nearly a whole bottle? It'd take that much, wouldn't it?"

"In the normal strength, yes."

"So he'd have known straight away. Anyone would, with that quantity. And it has a very distinctive taste. And smell."

"That's true." It still bothered him that she could be suspect. But he wanted her plan to work more than anything else in the world. He was already imagining life with her in this house. "People won't think it odd when we get married later?" He asked, but confident that she'd have the answer to that too.

"Only if we did it straight away. Of course, we'd have to wait a decent interval."

"But how would we sort of . . . come together, even then? I mean, when would I leave Maud?"

"Oh, that's easy. Once Cedric's gone, I'd have my solicitors buy all the shops from Mr. Pembroke. As a straightforward investment. I'd appoint you general manager, so we'd have to meet. Often. At the shops and here. One thing would lead to another. We'd fall in love. You'd leave Maud. She'd divorce you. We'd marry, and live here happily ever after."

"Yes," he said eagerly. "Yes," willing it all to come true—imagining that it had.

"Yes, of course, Doctor Chalcott, I'll come right away. It's no trouble," Mr. Guttins had said into the telephone ten minutes before this. It had been just after six-thirty on Saturday morning. "No I

understand perfectly, Doctor. Better to get it cleared up straight away. Less distressing for the relatives. . . . Yes, I agree. See you shortly then."

The call had woken him. They usually slept in an extra half hour on Saturdays because he opened the shop later that day. Maud, in the other bed, had wanted to know why Dr. Chalcott was calling. She knew Dr. Chalcott. He wasn't the Guttins's doctor, but he practised in the town, in the Hightops district.

Mr. Guttins had explained things briefly to his wife. A Mr. Cedric Hallier had died suddenly. He had a prescription for the treatment of a heart condition filled at Pembroke's every week. Dr. Chalcott had been called in. He was at the dead man's house now and wanted the prescription identified. That had satisfied Maud, who had gone back to sleep.

Mr. Guttins had dressed quickly and was now in the Rover driving to the house in Hightops. He hadn't been there for ten days—not since his fourth visit, which Kate had made even more memorable than the others. That had been two Wednesdays ago, a week after Kate had proposed the plan to have Cedric kill himself. Mr. Guttins had thought then that despite his desire for Kate, once he was away from her, his resolve to see the thing through might crumble. But on his visit a week later he had been keener than ever.

He had accepted that he hardly ran any risk at all. The only danger was still that Kate might be suspected of giving the overdose. But in a wishful thinking way, Mr. Guttins had managed to detach himself from the consequences of that happening.

It was on that final visit that he had delivered the extra-strong prescription of Digoxin. He had dated the label for the second Thursday following—and put a smudge of red ink in the label's right-hand corner. That had been to make it easy for Kate to identify. It wouldn't do to mix the two bottles.

No one he knew had ever seen Mr. Guttins enter or leave the sheltered driveway of the house at Hightops. Kate had questioned him carefully on that, but he'd been quite sure. The road had very few houses in it, and he'd remembered distinctly it having been empty on his first visit. On subsequent visits he had been feeling far too guilty to enter when anyone was looking. And he had never told Heather, his unglamorous assistant in the shop, about the special deliveries either.

Kate had come into the shop for the normal Digoxin prescription on Thursday, two days ago. It had been midmorning and she had

handed the form to Heather, who had passed it to Mr. Guttins. He had been in the dispensary at the time and had remarked pointedly to Heather that Mrs. Hallier had been in before for the same reason. He had even come out of the dispensary to wish Mrs. Hallier the time of day after he had prepared the bottle of syrup.

And now, he assured himself, it was all over bar the shouting. He could hardly believe it.

The Rover took the steep drive in its stride, soaring to the top with the same sort of zest that its driver was experiencing. He parked beside Dr. Chalcott's big Volvo. It was Dr. Chalcott he had told Kate to call when the time came. He was one of the older practitioners in the town, a bluff individual who could be relied on to draw the obvious inferences from the facts presented. And the doctor had made that plain enough to Mr. Guttins on the telephone.

"Come in, old chap. Nice to see you. Sorry to get you out of bed." It was Chalcott who answered the door. "A word in your ear." The benign, heavily built doctor drew the pharmacist aside in the hall before continuing in a lowered voice. "Probably a simple cardiac arrest, but he just could have swallowed too much of that anti-congestive you've been supplying."

"Signs of that, you said?" the pharmacist commented, in the professional tone he used in the shop when old ladies asked for advice on the best choice of cough mixture.

"Hm, some signs." The doctor sniffed. "Possibly just my suspicious mind. Chap's heart condition finally did for him, I expect. Knew him, did you?"

"No. Mrs. Hallier picked up the prescription every week."

"Did she now? Attractive woman. Very distressed she's been. They must have been close. More so than you'd expect, really." The doctor's eyebrows rose in a questioning way to punctuate what, to Mr. Guttins, had seemed slightly curious observations. "She showed me the prescription. From some Harley Street quack. Limited to a week's supply, presumably because the old boy wasn't to be trusted with more. In case he did himself a mischief? That's the thing that made me wonder. I see you've dated the prescription on the back each time you've dispensed it. Very proper."

"The last time was on Thursday. So you think he might have taken an overdose?"

The doctor made a noise with his tongue like water dripping onto stone. "Post-mortem will show it if he did. There'll have to be one, of course. I gather he was wealthy." He made the dripping noise

again. "Another reason to be sure everything's . . . er . . . on the up and up. So if you could just have a look at that Digoxin, then the body can go straight to the hospital morgue. We're in the kitchen. There's coffee going." He led the way along the hall.

"It's Mr. Guttins, isn't it?" said Kate as they entered the kitchen. She was seated at the table. A dark, handsome man of about her own age was standing behind her. Mr. Guttins assumed that this was the chauffeur whom, of course, he hadn't met, although there was something vaguely familiar about the face. There was a coffee pot and several cups on the table. Kate and the man were both in dressing gowns—Kate's being a frilly, glamorous affair in white nylon. She looked as if she had been crying.

To Mr. Guttins, Kate looked like the most desirable woman on earth—and she was all his, no kidding, no fantasies.

"Good morning, Mrs. Hallier," he responded. "I'm sorry to hear the sad news."

"You're very kind." She touched her eyes with the tissue in her hand. "He seemed so well last night. Then Jack took him a cup of tea early, as usual, and found him dead." She looked up at the man behind her. "It was a terrible shock for us both."

"We won't keep you much longer, Mrs. Hallier," said the doctor. "I just want Mr. Guttins to have a look at the bottle of Digoxin over here." He moved across to the counter under the window and picked up the brown glass container. "Dated the fifteenth," he said. "That's two days ago." He held the bottle up to the light. "And a quarter of the contents consumed. Or a bit less than that. Which is as it should be." He handed the bottle to the pharmacist. "Shows the patient hadn't taken too much by mistake. Certainly not from this bottle. That about right, Mr. Guttins?"

Mr. Guttins stared at the bottle, opened his mouth, but no words came out. He had been disturbed at how full the bottle was. Now his gaze was rivetted on the red ink smudge on the label. It was the bottle with the high strength mixture.

"So it was a heart attack, doctor?" asked the man behind Kate. It dimly registered with the preoccupied Mr. Guttins that the accent was more cultured than you would normally expect in a chauffeur. "Perhaps my father should have been taking more of the medicine, after all. My wife was always impressing on him not to overdo that stuff, weren't you, darling?" He put both his hands on Kate's shoulders.

"Patients like the taste of Digoxin syrup, Mr. Hallier," the doctor replied with a half smile. "If he did take . . . a touch too much, the postmortem would show it."

"Oh, father wouldn't have risked a serious overdose. Much too fond of life for that. And fit for his age." The man who so resembled the old man in the picture with Kate, and who had so clearly identified himself as that man's son, as well as Kate's husband, now shook his head. "Funny, Kate's been complaining for years because he wouldn't hand over the business to me. Now it'll all be mine, and we can sell it, and live abroad as Kate wants, but I'm going to miss him like anything. I loved my father very much."

This patently genuine statement impressed Dr. Chalcott, but not nearly so much as it did Mr. Guttins.

"The business was run as a partnership between you and your father, Mr. Hallier?" the doctor asked, conversationally.

"No. I've just been a salaried dogsbody, secretary, chauffeur, you name it. Should have made me resentful, I suppose, but it didn't. Kate found it harder to take. Especially as it seemed father intended living forever. And now this has happened, I can't help feeling guilty, as if—"

"He was so lively yesterday," Kate interrupted loudly. She had moved one hand up to her shoulder to squeeze her husband's fingers. "We wondered if the Digoxin could have been stronger than usual, didn't we, Jack?"

Dr. Chalcott looked across at Mr. Guttins, who still hadn't uttered a word. "Mr. Guttins here is much too careful a pharmacist to make a mistake with a prescription," said the doctor.

"Oh, I didn't mean to suggest that," said Kate carefully, her eyes quite dry now. "Not precisely. But, as you said, from what's left in the bottle, my father-in-law couldn't have taken too much. All I meant was, pharmacists are such busy, overworked people. They must make occasional mistakes, like everybody else."

"We're all human, of course," the doctor agreed blandly, sipping his coffee.

Kate smiled. "And if anything goes wrong," she went on, "I suppose a pharmacist just gets a ticking off, doesn't he? That's only fair because of the enormous responsibility he carries every day. I mean, there wouldn't be a criminal charge? Not over one professional error?"

"What are you getting at, Kate?" her husband asked, frowning.

"Nothing. Really, I just got carried away. Sorry." She had been looking at Mr. Guttins's trembling hands as he held the bottle. "I'm sure Mr. Guttins doesn't make mistakes, it was just that . . . Are you all right, Mr. Guttins?" she added next, in a concerned voice, and getting up. "You look terribly hot. Why don't you sit down? Here, let me help you off with your jacket."

DETECTIVERSE

MOTHER GOOSE MAYHEM

Little Jack Horner

by B. E. C.

Little Jack Horner sat in a corner,
Eating curds and whey.
He wanted to cry; It should have been pie.
But he'd married Miss Muffett in May.

Miss Muffett decided he needed to diet,
So she put him on curds and whey.
But while losing the fat,
He lost muscle too,
And finally wasted away.

Miss Muffett was left a rich widow, they say,
With houses and money and land.
But soon this was pooped;
The CID snooped,
And frightened Miss Muffett away.

THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

Martha Grimes and Sharyn McCrumb are quite different writers, but they have several things in common. Both are American women who have used British backgrounds in earlier books—sometimes for McCrumb, always for Grimes. Both clearly believe a small town or village, whether British or American, is at least as good a locale for fictional murder as a large city and that in-depth exploration of character is at least as important as a fast-paced story or a complex puzzle. Both give the detecting chores in their latest books to small-town sheriffs. Both have an evident desire to move closer to mainstream fiction without losing their genre roots entirely. And my only real complaints about their latest novels are both related to popular music.

*** Martha Grimes: *The End of the Pier*, Knopf, $20. After eleven volumes named after British pubs and featuring a Scotland Yard detective, Grimes writes of an American background for the first time. The personalities and relationships of the three main characters—Rainbow Cafe waitress Maud Chadwick, who spends her evenings from Memorial Day to Labor Day sitting on the pier spinning fantasies and watching the parties of the summer visitors across the lake; her son Chad, about to enter his last year of college; and local sheriff Sam DeGheyn, who sometimes joins her on the pier as a respite from his rounds—are more central to the book than Sam's hunt for a serial killer of women, though that case is satisfactorily solved in the closing pages. Grimes is a formidable stylist who really gets inside her people. For me, there was only one false note: the characters are in a musical timewarp, with both the college youth and their not-so-old parents relating to old standards that (much as I love them) I know are not contemporary.

*** Sharyn McCrumb: *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*, Scribners, $19. Spencer Arrowood, the Appalachian sheriff who first appeared in the outstanding *If Ever I Return, Pretty Peggy-O* (1990), doesn't do much detecting in his second adventure, in which his creator produces her darkest novel yet and moves still closer to the mainstream. The characters, notably pregnant minister's wife Laura Bruce, whose husband is away in the Persian Gulf, and local seer Nora Bonesteel; the events, including the mass murder of several members of a family and life-threatening pollution from a local river; and McCrumb's evocative style are enough to compensate for the lack of a real puzzle, but Arrowood's obsession with country singer Naomi Judd seemed somewhat over-indulged.

*** Robert Irvine: *The Spoken Word,* St. Martin's, $17.95. The fifth case for Salt Lake City private eye Moroni Traveler has a terrific opening situation: the grandniece of Latter-Day Saints Prophet Elton Wooley has been kidnapped. The condition of her release is one only the Prophet is in a position to deliver: a revelation from God giving equal rights to women in the Mormon church. Traveler's boyhood friend Willis Tanner calls in a marker to convince him to take the case. Adding to his problems are his partner (and father) Martin's increasing obsession with family history. Another strong entry in a remarkable series.

*** Vincent S. Green: *The Price of Victory,* Walker, $19.95. This notable first novel centers on a U.S. Army court-martial for drug-dealing and is highly recommended to devotees of garrison fiction and courtroom combat. Besides a generous measure of expert and enthralling trial scenes, the author presents a vivid picture of Army life in present-day Germany and of Amsterdam vice. I suspect defense advocate Jack Hayes will be seen again, whether in another military assignment or a civilian legal role.

*** Ronald Lewitsky: *The Wisdom of Serpents,* Scribners, $19. The second novel about civil liberties lawyer Nate Rosen, first met in the author's *The Love That Kills,* is a considerable advance over its predecessor. Rosen comes to a small Tennessee town to defend the religious freedom of a locally-distrusted snake-handling church and winds up representing one of its members on a charge of killing her husband. The novel combines the very conventional with the very unusual: there are plentiful clues for Rosen, more in the Great Detective mode than most current characters, to solve a fair-play whodunit puzzle, plus a religious theme of a centrality rare in secular detective fiction.

*** Marc Berrenson: *Bodily Harm,* Avon, $4.50. It's the fashion for crime writers to be as hard as possible on their series characters, but Berrenson puts his L.A. lawyer Ben Green through the emotional wringer to an almost unprecedented degree. In the course of prosecuting cop Ezekiel Thibodoux, a serial-killer of children, Green again confronts a personal tragedy: the unsolved murder of his own daughter. Despite the continuing story-line, knowledge of earlier books in the series is not essential. It's a grim tale, not without its cliches of dialogue and narrative, but unquestionably involving.

** Stuart Woods: *Santa Fe Rules,* HarperCollins, $20. Bestseller Woods's latest has a dandy opening: with his private plane sidelined for repairs, movie producer Wolf Willett discovers he has somehow misplaced a whole day, dooming him to celebrate Thanksgiving alone at the Grand Canyon. Then he reads in the newspaper that three people have been found murdered in his Santa Fe home: his wife, his longtime director/collaborator, and himself! Woods offers nothing special in the way of style or characterization, and some of his dialogue is pure miniseries, but his masterful

manipulation of plot and pace keeps the pages flying . . . right up to a profoundly silly letdown of a solution.

If asked to name the longest running active mystery series, many readers would guess Ed McBain's 87th Precinct, which began in 1956. But at least two still-active private eyes have been around longer than that, if neither with quite as unbroken a run. William Campbell Gault's Brock Callahan, who first appeared in 1955 with *Ring Around Rosa,* returns in *Dead Pigeon* (Carroll & Graf, $3.95), with an appropriately laudatory introduction about its eighty-two-year-old author by Bill Pronzini. In the fourteenth Callahan novel overall and the seventh since his early-eighties comeback, Brock returns to L.A. for the funeral of old friend and fellow football player Mike Gregory. Though he's a bit lower key now than back in the fifties, Brock is looking for revenge, and his investigations end in a tense and (typically of the author) ethically ambiguous shoot-out.

Michael Avallone's Ed Noon first appeared in *The Tall Dolores* (1953). There is no new Noon novel to recommend, but two sixties novelettes have been announced for reprint back-to-back in chapbook form in *Open Season on Cops/The Arabella Nude* (Gryphon, P.O. Box 209, Brooklyn, NY 11228; $6.95). Always glad for an excuse to visit what Francis M. Nevins, Jr. calls the "Nooniverse," I dug out my old issues of *Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine* to reread the stories, which have all the customary wild plotting and unfettered prose, showing Avallone's rare ability to be simultaneously derivative and distinctive.

International Polygonics continues to keep alive the reputation of two of the most popular mystery writers of the thirties through fifties, sometime collaborators Stuart Palmer and Craig Rice. Schoolteacher sleuth Hildegarde Withers is in fine early form in Palmer's 1932 grade-school whodunit *Murder on the Blackboard* ($5.95), while Rice's trio of John J. Malone and Jake and Helene Justus detect and imbibe with merry gusto in 1943's *Having Wonderful Crime* ($6.95).

S.S. Van Dine (Willard Huntington Wright), whose arrival on the American mystery scene with the first Philo Vance novels had an unprecedented impact in the mid-1920s, has surprisingly escaped the attentions of biographers in the years since. John Loughery has taken on the challenging task and done a splendid job in *Alias S.S. Van Dine* (Scribners, $24), the first full-length book on Vance's creator. His treatment of Wright the editor and art critic may be better than his account of Van Dine the novelist, but he has elucidated many of the questions and misconceptions (most created by the fantasizing subject himself) about a fascinating American life.

As if creating a satisfying mystery were not challenge enough for a second story, Angie Irvine set out at the same time to pose a problem for her husband, writer Robert Irvine, to solve in the tale that follows hers, ". . . And Sons." She succeeded brilliantly, and so seamless are the two pieces that they might easily be taken for the work of a single hand. . . .

FATHERS

by ANGIE IRVINE

You feel the sound before you hear it. It echoes in the chambers of your skull as swarms of vibrations tease the tiny bones in the inner chamber of your ear. It sets your teeth on edge and makes you nervous to the bone. I hate the rolling drum of thunder. It comes too late to let you know that lightning has already struck.

I was up on Wasatch Drive, skirting the eastern rim of the Salt Lake basin, trying to get home before the storm hit. We didn't make it. A particularly loud bang sent Alf scurrying for the backseat and the sluice gates were opened. For a minute I thought I'd have to pull over, things got so bad, but my '41 Chevy pulled through like a champ. She's nearly fifteen years old, one of the last of the prewar models, and built like a tank.

When we reached the house, I opened the door and Alf bounded out. While an occasional loud noise scares him, he doesn't mind the rain. He was a working sheepdog before he hooked up with me and is used to being out in all kinds of weather. I'm not so hardy. I made a dash for the front porch and almost tripped over the kid huddled in the doorway. He looked like a drowned rat, but right away I knew who he was.

"Well, you've made it this far, you might as well come in." He got to his feet and just stared at me. "Your ma around?" He shook his

head. "Come on then." I opened the door and shoved him through. Alf squeezed in behind.

The kid dripped a puddle in the middle of the living room and Alf helped out by showering us both as he tried to shake his fur dry. I put a match to the logs laid in the fireplace. The house I live in was built by one of the original Mormon pioneers and doesn't sport central heat.

"You'd better get out of those clothes, you'll catch your death of cold." I got a towel and my robe from the closet and brought them back to the living room. The kid was still dripping on the rug. "You got any other clothes with you?" He shook his head. So far we weren't having much of a conversation. "Okay, strip. Then put this on after you're dry." I threw him the robe just as the phone rang.

"Traveler here." The voice on the other end was filled with panic. Although it was distorted with fear, I recognized my office landlord, Barney Chester, right away. "Slow down, Barney, take a breath. I can hardly understand you."

"Martin, you've got to come down right away. There's a body in the lobby."

"Calm down, Barney. Is it anyone we know?"

"You're darn right it is. It's Gustavson, and you know they're going to blame me."

There was bad blood between Barney and "Gussie" Gustavson, all right, although it was mostly on Gustavson's part. Both he and Barney were what you might call high rollers. And one night in a high-stakes poker game the property now known as the Chester Building changed hands. Gustavson had inherited the place from his father, along with a salted silver mine and ten thousand shares of worthless penny stock. It was mostly drink combined with a natural recklessness that prompted him to offer the building as collateral for his mounting gambling debts. He never thought that Barney would actually take possession. And Barney might not have if Beau Palmer, Barney's lawyer and participant in the game, hadn't insisted that the bet was legal.

"Okay, don't touch anything. It's twenty to six. At six sharp you call the cops, whether I'm there or not. You got it?" There was a long pause and for a minute I thought maybe he'd hang up, but then I could tell by his tone of resignation when he said okay that he'd do as I asked.

"I'm on my way." I hung up and turned to the kid. "There's an emergency, I've got to go. I expect you to be here when I get back.

Alf here's a guard dog and he won't let you leave. Understand?" The kid looked wide-eyed and nodded his head. Alf's former owner had trained him well, but I was none too sure that he'd think the kid was some lost sheep. Still, I had to take the chance.

I made it in ten minutes despite the rain. At that hour most people were going home after a day of work or shopping. All the traffic was out of town. When I pulled up I saw Barney pacing up and down in front of the building, looking like he was fixing to rob a bank but hadn't got his nerve up yet.

"What're you doing out here? It's a good thing some cop didn't run you in for loitering."

"I didn't want to stay inside with . . . with you know." His teeth were chattering, but I wasn't sure it was from the cold.

"Well, let's go inside and take a look." I grabbed his arm and propelled him through the revolving doors into the lobby. Even on a bright day the light's none too good. Today the place looked like a coal mine. "How'd you find the body, Barney? Trip over it?"

"It's over there, Martin, by the cigar counter. I did trip over it. See, his legs are kinda sticking out."

I went over to the counter. Gustavson was lying on his back. There were no marks and there was no blood. I felt for a pulse just to make sure that he wasn't really sleeping off the effects of a night on the town. He wasn't.

"Call the cops, Barney."

"But Martin, aren't you going to do anything?"

"It'll be a few minutes before they get here. Call them, Barney. I'm not going to make him disappear for you, if that's what you hoped."

Barney went over to the pay phone and dialed the operator. There was a phone by the counter but he would have had to step over Gustavson to get to it.

"Okay, the cops are coming. What are you doing, Martin?"

"I'm trying to search him, without messing him up too much. The cops don't like people messing with the corpse. This the way you found him?"

"Uh, he was face down. I mean I had to turn him over to see who it was, didn't I?"

"Find anything?" The speaker that asked that question wasn't anyone I was too anxious to hear right now. Ben Horne is the chief of detectives for the Salt Lake City police force. He isn't my favorite

person. He's stubborn, has a terrible temper, and is not as smart as he thinks he is. But he's honest, tries to be fair, and has a thirst for justice the likes of which I've never seen in any other man.

"Ben, you sure got here fast. Barney just made the call a couple of minutes ago." I got up off my knees. I don't like being at a disadvantage with Ben. Being down on my knees in front of him sure seemed that way.

"Didn't catch Barney's call, unless he made it anonymously. Got a tip about fifteen minutes ago. Now you're bucking for obstruction of justice unless you get out of here faster'n a scalded cat. But before you do, I want to see what you took out of the dead man's pocket."

"Nothing. You know I wouldn't do that kinda thing." He did, too, but he was none too pleased to find me ahead of him.

"Then get out. No, not you," he added to Barney, who was trying to follow close behind me.

"Hang in there, Barney," I called out. "I'll get Beau Palmer to come right down." Palmer had an office in the Chester Building, but at this time of night was probably bending his elbow at the Alta Club. "Barney won't talk until his mouthpiece is here," I added, purely for Ben's benefit. Then I got out quick.

It had stopped raining by the time I got home. The kid was waiting up for me. He was curled up on the couch with Alf close beside him. "Okay, kid, let's have it. You're eight hundred miles from where you ought to be and you're too young to be out on your own. Where's Kary?"

The kid hung his head. I could see this conversation wasn't going anywhere. I decided to let up a little. "You hungry?" The kid looked up and I took it for a yes. "I'm going to fix us something to eat." Well, I'm only good for scrambled eggs, but can I ever make them. I dragged the kid into the kitchen and started slicing spuds real thin. "This is the way my ma used to do it when we'd go up to Little Cottonwood."

"Mom says you kill people." I nearly sliced off my finger. First words out of the kid and they certainly took me by surprise.

"Your ma's wrong there, kid. When I fought in the war I had to kill people. That's what wars are all about. But I don't do that anymore." Least not so's I can help it.

I finished up on the spuds and started the onions. Alf was starting to drool something awful.

"I came home from school and she wasn't there anymore."

"Something happen to Kary, I mean your ma?"

"Nah, I guess she just went away. She took her clothes."

I was starting to lose my appetite. What kind of woman would abandon an eleven-year-old boy? The one I married, I guess. "So how did you get here?"

"Well, I got tired of waiting in case she decided to come back. The time before it was only a week. So I decided to hitchhike. I was lucky to get a ride on a truck all the way from L.A. to here. He dropped me off at the train station."

I put the spuds and onions in a skillet and set them to fry. "How'd you get here? How did you know where I live?"

"First I looked you up in the phone book, then I found a cop. I told him that I'd come up on the train and had been waiting for you to pick me up. I had your address and I told him that you'd said to take a taxi if you got held up, but I lost my money. He got me a taxi. He said he'd send someone over to the house to get the money back and check up on me tomorrow."

I sat down. "Kid, we're in big trouble. That's going to be a social worker calling tomorrow. I'm going to have an awful lot of explaining to do."

The kid grinned as if I'd just made a big joke. "You don't think I gave the cop your right name and address, do you?"

I beat up the eggs and threw them over the spuds and onions. Great, here I was saddled with a kid that had all the makings of a first-class criminal mind.

I got the summons by phone first thing the next day. Ben Horne wanted me in his office, pronto. I had a dozen things I needed to do, but I knew I had to take care of Ben first. No use getting thrown into the hoosegow just because Horne was getting up a head of steam. He looked pretty mad when I walked into his office. His normally fair face had a mottled look and it crossed my mind that ol' Ben was bucking for a coronary.

"Well, you took your time getting here," he snapped.

"Sorry, Ben. I got here as quick as I could."

He waved away my reply with a shake of his head, like a punch-drunk boxer trying to decide if he could last the round. "The mayor's been on my case about the bullion robbery, and on top of that now I've got this Gustavson thing. I haven't slept for forty-eight hours."

"You look like you could use it, Ben. No offense intended."

"None taken. In a minute I'm going to send you over to get your statement down, but first I want to talk to you man to man. We're stretched real thin right now, and I'm not going to turn down the use of extra eyes and ears. You see anything I should know about?"

"Maybe. The floor wasn't wet. Neither was he. I figure the body was put there before the rain started."

Ben nodded. "Could've been killed someplace else." He hesitated, and a kind of sly look came over his face. "How about his pockets?" he added.

That got my dander up a bit, but I figured now wasn't the time to get up on a high horse. "Didn't search all his pockets, but I got the feeling someone cleaned him out. Nothing in the jacket pockets anyway. There was something, though."

Ben leaned forward.

"The side pockets of his jacket. The insides were dirty."

"I don't give a hoot about Gustavson's personal hygiene," Ben roared. "Go on across the hall and give your statement." It was no good arguing with Horne when his temper was up, although there were a lot of questions I would have liked to ask him.

After I gave my statement, I looked up Jim Hays. I first met Jim when he was a rookie cop. He'd done well since then. Not only had he gotten off the beat and into plainclothes, but he'd acquired a wife, a mortgage, and a brand new baby boy. He looked rumpled and tired, just the way Ben had.

"Looks like your little boy's keeping you up nights, Jim."

He looked up and gave me a big smile. "Good to see you, Martin. It's not Jimmy, it's this bullion heist. We've been getting a lot of heat on this." Hays was extremely conscientious and my guess was that if Ben had been without sleep for forty-eight hours, so had Jim.

"I hate to bother you about something I'm involved in, but would it be possible to see the autopsy report on Gustavson?"

"Hasn't come through yet, or I'd let you take a peek. Tell you what, soon as it comes in I'll give you a call."

"Thanks, Jim. If I'm not there you can leave a message with the answering service. Hope you get a break on the bullion job."

"We're going to need one. It took a well-organized gang to pull off this one. Half a million dollars in silver is a heavy load to move, but there's been no sign of it. Either they're clean out of the state or else they're holed up somewhere."

"If the silver's out of the state, that means the FBI."

"By rights it's a federal crime already. That stuff was headed for the Denver mint. The only thing that's held the governor off from calling them is Horne," he added glumly.

"Well, I'll keep my ears open. I sometimes hear things."

"Thanks, we need all the help we can get."

I decided to go over to the office and see if Barney was at his usual haunt. If Ben had held him I would have heard from old man Palmer before now.

Barney was in the lobby all right, pacing up and down, turning the air blue with the smoke of his cigar. You practically needed a gas mask to make it to the elevator. It's a wonder the church hadn't had the building condemned.

"Barney, let's go upstairs to my office. We've got a few things to discuss."

Barney nodded and put out the cigar. Technically I was working for him, but he knew that I liked to keep the office smoke free in deference to my more sensitive Mormon clients.

I keep a pint of Seagrams around for medicinal purposes, naturally, and I figured that we both could use a small jolt.

"Now tell me all you know about Gussie, Barney."

"Not much to tell, Martin. You know we weren't on speaking terms ever since that poker game."

"He ever come to see you again, after you took possession of the building?"

"Naw. I don't think he came here natural-like, Martin. He had no cause to come calling."

"Well, Barney, if he didn't come here on his own two feet, he must have been brought. Know anybody who might want to do that? Somebody mad enough to kill Gussie and put the blame on you?"

"Plenty people knew that Gussie wanted the building back, but I don't know anybody'd want to see me face a firing squad." In Utah, they didn't hang you for murder one, they just took you outside and shot you.

"I did hear one thing, though," Barney continued. "Gussie had prospects."

"What's that supposed to mean? Did he think he was getting the building back? Was he marrying money? What?"

"Don't know. Just prospects. Lem at the barbershop mentioned it. Seems Gustavson was there a day or so ago and got the full works. Just got his suit out of the cleaners, too. Now he never spent that

kind of money unless he was up to something. Don't know what though."

"Barney, if he just got his suit out of the cleaners, do you have any idea why his pockets would be dirty? I mean real dirty, like he'd been carrying dirt in them."

I saw the flush creep up Barney's face before I finished talking. He told me that he didn't know and I knew he was lying.

"Look, Barney. Just because Horne didn't lock you up doesn't mean you're off the hook. You think about that for a spell. I can't help you unless you're straight with me, understand?" He squirmed some, and for a moment there I thought I'd lost a friend.

"Don't know for sure, Martin, but you know Gussie liked to sell a few shares every once in a while."

"In the Annie Lode? Those shares are worthless. The Annie played out years ago."

"Well, shares are only worth what you think they are, Martin."

"And everybody knows about the Annie, don't they."

Barney dug his hands in his pockets and squirmed some more. "Sometimes old mines come back. Sometimes a new vein is discovered."

He didn't have to say anything more. I got the picture. "You figure he'd been up to the Annie?"

"Don't know for sure. I've known Gussie for years. He even stuck me with some of that stock. I don't know anything for sure, but it wouldn't hurt me none if some rich ore was suddenly discovered."

"Except that Gustavson's dead. What were you going to do, Barney, go up there and 'discover' it yourself?"

"Aw heck, Martin. It was just a passing thought. Let it go." He had the grace to look ashamed, but then scuttled out of the office before I could say anything more. I wasn't happy.

I got on the phone to call Ben, but he'd finally gone home to get some sleep. I tried Jim Hays, and he was still hanging in. I explained why I thought the dirt in Gustavson's pockets was significant and also that he might have been up to the Annie Lode. Jim thanked me and promised to pass the information on. I went home to the kid.

What I didn't expect was Horne waiting for me. Him and the kid were playing seven card stud, and it looked to me like the kid was winning.

"Afternoon, Ben. First time you ever showed up at the house. Take it you didn't have any trouble finding it."

"Not a bit, Martin. Always knew where you lived. Just respected your privacy."

"And now?"

"And now, you and me, we're going to take a little walk."

I could see that the kid wanted to put his two cents in, but I pressed down on his shoulder and gave him a warning squeeze. "I'll be back in a few minutes, kid. You and Alf wait lunch for me."

Ben and I sauntered down the avenue. I waited for him to speak.

"Martin, you know I've got my plate full."

I also knew that he hadn't come to cry on my shoulder.

"But busy as I am," he continued, "I'm not going to overlook this."

He handed me a sheet of paper. It was a missing person's report on the kid. It had been filed out of L.A.

"She got legal custody?"

I knew he was referring to Kary. I nodded.

"You going to do something about it?"

"Don't know what I can do. She's not a fit mother, but I don't reckon I've got a prayer in court. I doubt that she really wants him back. He's something she can hurt me with."

"You snatch him?"

"No, he came on his own hook."

"Thank God for that. I'm an officer of the law, Martin, and you know I've sworn to do my duty." He was silent for a spell. Then he spoke again. "You know, Martin, I'm tired. I'm so tired this all seems like a dream to me. Think I'll go home and have a good long sleep." Without another word, he walked back to his car and drove away.

I walked back to the house, confused. I couldn't rightly predict what Ben was going to do. It seemed that he was giving me some time, but how much?

The kid seemed put out some that Ben hadn't come back.

"He owes me thirty-seven cents, Pa."

"Kid, we got bigger troubles than that. Besides, that's a lesson to you to never get in a poker game with a cop."

I looked down at him and thought about Jim and his brand-new baby. A man should have some piece of himself out there in the future. Besides, I kinda liked the kid. He deserved better than what he'd got with his mother.

"Does that mean I've got to go back?"

"Look, Moroni . . ."

"Mo," the kid interrupted. "People call me Mo. I don't let on I've got a weird name. The kids at school think it's short for Morris."

"Okay Mo, you can stay if you want, but I've got to make a living. I'm going to have to leave you alone a lot and you're going to have to go on the straight and narrow. That means school every day and doing your homework without me being around to nag you. No hooky and no tall tales to cops or teachers. Do you think you can stick it?"

The kid looked solemn, but nodded. He put out his mitt and he shook on it, just like a man. I might have to make a fight of it, but plenty of people in this town owed me favors, including Ben Horne.

I don't like calling in markers. I never have. People say they owe you, but they hope to never pay. The difference between a job and a favor is that with a job, the price is up front. It's better to do favors for free than make an enemy by asking too much in return. Well, this time I was going to ask for everything I could get.

I waited until the next day before I called Horne. The least I could do was let him get some sleep. His mood didn't seem to have improved, but he allowed that he could spare me ten minutes at the end of the day. I'd no sooner put down the phone than it rang again. It was Jim Hays.

Jim sounded edgy, but so would I, considering everything that was going on. "Got the report. Nothing interesting in it. The dirt in his pockets was just that, common dirt."

"Thanks a lot, Jim. Sorry to put you to any trouble. Guess my idea was just a wild hare."

"Think nothing of it, Martin. Always glad to do you a favor." He hung up and I thought it was time to talk to Barney again.

He wasn't in the lobby and he wasn't in the dingy closet that he called an office. I was walking back to my own office when I heard loud voices coming from old man Palmer's place, which was down the hall from mine. I recognized the voices.

Barney and Beau Palmer were having a regular set-to. I couldn't understand what they were saying so I thought I'd just walk in without knocking. When they saw me they jumped apart like two kids at the jam jar. They looked just as guilty, too. "Glad to find you both together. I've got more questions for you, Barney, and it makes it all the better that your lawyer's with you."

Old man Palmer jumped right in. "Well, you aren't the police, Martin. And Barney's not going to answer any more questions."

"You're darn right I'm not the cops, and Barney here is supposed to be my client. Only I don't work for nobody that's not straight with me."

"Come on, Martin," Barney wheedled, "I've told you all I can."

"Well, for one thing, Gussie's pockets were just plain dirty."

"What do you mean dirty?" yelped Beau. "That weren't no dirt!"

Barney and I both stared at Beau. "I-I-It was you called the cops, wasn't it?" Barney stammered. He only developed a speech impediment when he was in a blind rage. He started to advance on Palmer.

"You got me wrong, Barney," Beau pleaded, backing up. "Martin, tell him. I'm an officer of the court. I can't knowingly hide a body. Soon as I saw you put it there, Barney, I was duty bound to inform the law."

"Beau, you're fired. I know it's your word against mine." Barney turned toward me. "I don't know why he's lying. I didn't do it, Martin, I swear."

"What's got into you two? You used to be good friends."

The two of them looked at each other and for a minute I thought they weren't going to give. Finally a look of shame came over Barney's face.

"It's the money, I guess. That much money, it kind of does things to you."

"What money?" I didn't like what I was hearing and I was starting to get a bad feeling.

"More money than you ever dreamed of," Barney replied. "I guess there's enough for three."

"I'm getting tired of you two beating around the bush, now out with it."

"We found it," Beau leaped in. "It's a treasure trove and we got a legal claim to it. Excepting the percentage that goes to the state," he mumbled. "Keep quiet, and a third of it's yours."

"You never were a very good lawyer, Beau. Maybe that's why I never retained you myself. This money you're talking about, it doesn't happen to consist of little silver bars, does it? Maybe tucked away in the Annie Lode?"

I could see from their faces that I'd got it right. I felt cold all over and they must have seen it in my expression because they stopped moving around and got real quiet like. I've seen that look on rabbits just before a rattler strikes. I felt mean enough to do the job.

"Did you kill Gussie for the money?"

A look of horror crept over their faces. "It was an accident," Beau gasped. "We were both there. We were following him. We knew he was going to salt the mine. We planned to catch him red-handed."

"There was some kind of booby trap. It broke his neck," Barney chimed in.

"So you moved the body so nobody would search the mine."

"Right, but I didn't count on it showing up here." Barney pointedly stared at Palmer.

"Well, maybe Beau thought there was just enough money for one. I wondered who made the anonymous tip. I think we ought to have ourselves a . . . Oh Lord. What was in his pockets? Was it silver dust?"

"Don't know for sure, Martin. I kinda got cold feet thinkin' whoever stashed that silver might still be around. Beau offered to take care of everything."

Beau managed to look offended. "I emptied out his pockets so there wouldn't be any connection with the mine, but it was high-grade mix sure enough."

I walked out the door, leaving them with their mouths hanging. The cold feeling I'd gotten earlier had spread until I felt that I was hollow at the core and likely to stay that way for the rest of my life.

Ben didn't believe me.

I tried to be patient. "The state is crawling with cops. An abandoned mine at Park City is an ideal place for the robbers to stash the loot until things cool off. It was only dumb luck that they chose the Annie Lode and Gustavson decided to salt the mine."

"And you're suggesting that one of my best men was in on it."

"Not at all." I could feel the heat rising in my face. "That silver is just sitting there. Look at the effect it had on Beau and Barney. I think the temptation just got to be too much."

"There's a dozen explanations and all of them are better than yours," he spat.

"Then where is he?"

"Look, he's a bright young boy and a tad overeager. Maybe he wanted to make sure before he called in the troops. After all, he had less information to go on than you have."

"You think that's why he lied to me? Did you know he had ordered an analysis of the dirt? You know the minute anyone figured out that dirt was silver dust, there'd be a cop up there checking out a possible scene-of-the-crime. Gustavson found the silver; so could anyone else."

Ben looked away. It would be hard to lose one of his own. Especially someone he considered special, like Jim Hays.

"He was in debt, wasn't he?" I continued. "It would be a pretty big temptation."

"Not as big a temptation as I've got to throw you out of this office," he growled.

"Either way, he could be at risk."

"What do you mean?"

"The site was booby-trapped. That's how Gustavson was killed. There could be others."

I never saw a big man move so fast. I thought he'd drive off without me, but at the last minute he leaned over and opened the passenger door. We headed east with lights and sirens toward Park City.

The thunderclouds were gathering over the Wasatch Mountains as we hit the last rise into the town. Park City is shoehorned into the intersection of three canyons making up a pocket-size valley. A few battered frame houses still cling to the mountainside, but for all practical purposes Park City is a ghost town. The rail spur to the Annie crawled halfway up the side of the eastern-most canyon on the far side of the town. We parked the car at its base and started the long climb. I could feel the low rumblings of the approaching storm in the pit of my stomach and knew we were in for a gullywasher.

"It's no good, Ben. The mechanical donkey is at the top, which means Jim or somebody's up there. This storm is going to break any minute now and this railway's going to become a river." Ben looked at me with scorn and just kept trudging up the tracks. What could I do but stick with him?

Suddenly he called out "Jim boy," and I saw movement at the mouth of the mine. I couldn't make out clearly what happened next, Ben's bulk loomed too big in front of me, but I saw the flash. It could have been a lightning strike, it could have been something else. A plume of debris arched toward the skyline, then fell back, wiping out the entrance to the mine. I saw the falling debris bury whoever was standing there and he was gone before the angry roar, like thunder, came rolling down the hillside to hammer at our ears.

My face was wet and it took me a minute or two to realize that it had started to pour. I reached out and took Ben by the shoulders and we stumbled down the track as best we could. When we got to the bottom Ben took me hard by the arm and said, "He died in the line of duty. Got that? Go home to your boy and remember that. He died in the line of duty." He didn't speak again all the way home, but then, he didn't need to.

. . . AND SONS

by ROBERT IRVINE

A trumpet sounded. Atop the Mormon Temple across the street, the Angel Moroni had his horn to his mouth as if summoning the dead. But his namesake, Moroni Traveler, knew an acoustical illusion when he heard one. He slammed his office window on Mad Bill, Salt Lake City's Sandwich Prophet, who was blowing a bugle to call attention to his latest solicitation: DONATIONS ARE YOUR TICKETS TO HEAVEN.

"You're not a believer, are you?" Traveler's prospective client asked.

Traveler turned away from the window and sat down. "I hope you're looking for a private detective and not a theologian."

"I don't like being here."

"I know that."

Anson Horne's eyes narrowed; his teeth clenched. As a lieutenant in Salt Lake City's police department he'd made Traveler's life miserable often enough.

"I want your father in on this, too," the policeman said.

"Martin's down south on a missing person."

"Yeah. Well, we've found one he lost a long time ago." Horne shoved a newspaper clipping across the desk. The headline read: LOST ANNIE MINE TO BE OPENED AS TOURIST ATTRACTION IN PARK CITY.

"I heard developers bought it," Traveler said. "They're going to turn it into a theme park, with train rides and make-believe prospecting."

"It used to be called the Annie Lode before half a mountain collapsed on it. That's where your father comes in. He was there with my father when the whole shebang came down."

Traveler nodded. Martin had been telling that story for years. Someone had been killed, Traveler remembered. A cop. There'd also been talk that stolen silver bullion, worth half a million dollars, had been stashed in the mine but never recovered because of the massive cave-in.

"Excavation crews have been working on the Annie since spring," Horne went on. "This morning they opened her up."

"And?"

"They found a body all right. Only there was no silver." He paused to let that sink in. "There were two witnesses when the Annie got buried. Your father and mine."

Horne's father, Ben, was dead and beyond blame.

"Where do I come in?" Traveler said.

"I wouldn't be sitting in your client's chair if I didn't need help. Word around the department is that my father killed the man they found in the mine, a brother officer named Jim Hays, and took the silver for himself. They can't prove it, but that's what they're saying."

"What are they saying about my father?" Traveler asked.

Horne dismissed the question with a wave of his hand. "Dad took Martin with him to the mine. He was leading the way when they saw Jim Hays standing just inside the entrance. Then the mountain blew. The trouble is, Martin was behind my father. His view was partially blocked. It was my father who swore Hays was still alive when the mountain came down on him."

"That doesn't prove your father guilty of anything," Traveler said.

"He was in charge of the original investigation. In case you didn't know it, whoever knocked over that armored car killed two guards doing it. Now they're saying Horne and Hays were in it together and then had a falling out."

"If that were true, your father would have been a rich man."

"He died off-duty and poor. I had to quit college to help support the family." Horne swallowed so hard his Adam's apple shimmied. "I want to hire you, to clear his name."

To avoid the policeman's tortured face, Traveler stepped out from behind his desk and crossed his office to the corner window. From there he had an unobstructed view of Salt Lake's ten-thousand-foot eastern barrier, the Wasatch Mountains. Lightning flashed above the peaks where thunderheads were piling up. Sooner or later, the clouds would spill the storm into the valley below. Twenty miles beyond the barrier lay the Lost Annie and Park City, a ghost town when Traveler hiked there as a boy. Now it was a ski resort full of out-of-state money.

"My son's coming up on college age with no money for tuition," Horne went on. "I don't want the same thing happening to him that happened to me. Let the rest of the police department snicker behind

my back. I don't care, but I don't want that kind of life for my son."

Traveler swung around to face the policeman. "What happens if it's true about your father?"

Horne stood up and held out his hand. "I don't have the money to pay you, if that's what you mean. But I'll give you my personal marker, redeemable on demand."

Traveler didn't hesitate. He knew what it had cost the man to make that pledge. They shook hands and Anson Horne fled the office.

Traveler paged his father, then went back to admiring the Wasatch Mountains. Every time he looked at those peaks, he thought of Brigham Young crossing them, and the Rockies, too, escaping persecution to reach this, his promised land, his City of Zion. Only now, Zion was known as Greater Salt Lake, with over a million people and everything that went with them.

The phone rang. When Traveler picked it up, his father was calling long distance from southern Utah.

"I got your message," Martin said. "What's the problem?"

Traveler told him.

"You'll have to handle it yourself. I can't get away for another day at least."

"Your reputation's at stake here, too," Traveler reminded him.

"A man my age has better things to worry about."

"I was only a boy when you told me the story. Refresh my memory."

"My advice is to start with who's left. Barney Chester was in on it, of course, trying to manipulate penny stock he held in the Annie. He and that lawyer, the late Beau Palmer, they found the silver. They used to be thick as thieves."

"Palmer had a son, didn't he?"

"Oscar. He went to a fancy law school back East, then came home to set up with his dad as a big-time lawyer. By then, the Chester Building wasn't good enough for the Palmers. They moved to the Walker Bank Building, with wood paneling and oriental rugs on the floor. It was no wonder Oscar got himself elected to the state legislature.

"Most everybody else is gone. Ben Horne, Jim Hays. That leaves you with the families to check out. Hays's wife lives in one of those old pioneer relics out near the Jordan River. As for Ben's wife, she never liked us Travelers any better than her son, Anson, does. As

far as I know, she still has the family home up on the avenues."

"What about the pair who knocked over the armored car?"

"A couple of bodies showed up in the Great Salt Lake a few months later. Ben Horne always figured they got themselves double-crossed by whoever planned the job. There was no proof either way, of course."

"Is there anything else I ought to know?"

"Only that half a million dollars in silver thirty years ago would be worth a lot more today."

"All I have to do then is find somebody rich."

Barney Chester was behind his cigar counter working on the eternal flame, a kind of pilot light for tobacco-addicted customers. The flame had been flickering toward extinction for the last few days. At the moment, an unlit cigar was clamped between Barney's teeth.

With him were Mad Bill and Charlie, who had a bugle slung around his neck on a piece of heavy twine.

Bill, still inside his sandwich boards, blew on his hands.

"I suppose that means you want a cup of coffee?" Barney said.

"Only to ward off the cold."

"It's spring outside."

Charlie tucked his hands into his armpits. "A storm's coming."

"Have it your way," Barney said. "Just let me finish up here first."

"They opened up the Lost Annie today," Traveler announced abruptly.

Barney twitched so hard he burned his fingers. "Look at me." He held out a trembling hand. "I used to be steady as a rock. If I hadn't been, I'd be dead now."

Traveler refused to be sidetracked. "They found Jim Hays's body after all these years. Only now they're saying he was murdered, because there was no sign of the silver."

"Don't look at me like that, Moroni. I learned my lesson when my old friend Gussie Gustavson got killed salting the Annie."

"What about those penny shares of yours? You must have made a bundle when developers bought the place."

Barney busied himself pouring coffee into four plastic cups. "I dumped them years ago for a couple of hundred bucks. I was broke at the time and happy to get it. If I'd known the Annie would come to life again, I'd have held on for sentimental reasons if nothing else."

Barney seemed an unlikely suspect, Traveler had to admit. The man's only asset, the Chester Building, was usually half empty. As a result, he did the janitoring himself, though the Sandwich Prophet, and his lone disciple, Charlie Redwine, helped out sometimes in return for basement sleeping privileges during bad weather.

Charlie sweetened two cups, his and Bill's, from the peyote pouch he kept around his neck. Then they drank deeply, sighed, and closed their eyes.

Shaking his head, Barney blew out the eternal flame and ran a pipe cleaner through the spout. When he relit it, the flickering was worse than ever.

"We might as well light up before it dies altogether," he said, and held out a box of Muriels from his well-stocked counter that included La Palinas, Robert Burns, and Upmanns. Next to the cigars he kept nostalgic displays of Sen-Sen and Chiclets. There was also a rotating postcard rack filled with long-gone sights: the Doll House restaurant, the Black Rock Beach resort, the Coconut Grove, and even photographic scenes of Park City when it was still a mining town. The cards, part of Chester's collection, changed occasionally, but were never for sale. Each was protected inside its own plastic sleeve.

Traveler took a Muriel to be hospitable, but wouldn't light up while there was work to do, not in Mormon country, where tobacco had been a sin since Joseph Smith's time. Bill and Charlie, having no such qualms, began blowing smoke toward the ceiling fresco where Brigham Young was leading a hand-cart battalion to the promised land.

"Who'd you sell the Annie shares to?" Traveler asked.

Barney blew a smoke ring. "My lawyer, Beau Palmer. He called it a legal maneuver to keep me out of future trouble. Right after that, the old shyster up and moved out on me. He said his son, Oscar, wouldn't want to join the family firm if it was still located in a place like the Chester Building. I was glad to see the old boy go after that trick he played on me with Gustavson's body."

Bill opened his eyes long enough to say, "I had a girlfriend once named Annie. She was a beauty."

"So was my Annie." Barney nodded at the revolving rack. "I've got a postcard of her here somewhere. At one time, she was the richest silver mine in Park City."

The cards, Traveler noticed, progressed from boom town to ghost town, but stopped short of Park City's transition to high-priced sub-

urban real estate. One of them showed dirty-faced miners in lamp-topped helmets standing in front of an open mine shaft.

"It's bad luck to give a woman's name to a mine," Charlie said, clutching his peyote bag.

Lightning was working its way across the valley floor by the time Traveler crossed the Jordan River and parked in front of the Hays house, a salt-box bungalow perched on a rough-cut stone foundation. A new Cadillac sedan stood in the driveway. Its sticker price, still on the window, was more than Traveler made in a year.

Since he'd called ahead, Mrs. Hays opened the door wearing a flowered dress, nylons, and a carefully sprayed beehive hairdo.

"Don't waste your time telling me about the Annie," she said. "I've already heard what they're saying about my Jim. He was a fine man. He died doing his job, not hiding the silver like some claim."

She showed Traveler into a tiny parlor crammed with two sofas facing a fifty-inch television set and an upright piano. Framed photographs ran across the top of the piano. Childhood started on one side and culminated in a young man wearing a graduation gown on the other.

"That's Jim Junior," she said in answer to Traveler's questioning look. "When I think what Ben Horne's widow must be going through right now, I thank God my Jimmy isn't a policeman."

She handed Traveler the graduation photograph. "That shows him getting his business degree. Because of it, he's living the good life down there in California. He and his wife invited me to come stay with them any time I want. All I've got to do is say the word." She snapped her fingers. "Generous to a fault, that's my boy. Just like his father. Jim Junior bought my new car you passed on your way in."

"It's not every son who pays his parents back for raising him," Traveler said.

"That's the only good thing I can say about Big Jim being a policeman. They take care of their own. Because he died in the line of duty, which was the official ruling at the time, insurance paid for this house and Jim Junior's college."

"The Hornes weren't so lucky," Traveler said.

"I remember." She pulled at her skirt until it covered her knees. "Technically, Ben wasn't on duty when he died."

"Did your husband ever talk to you about the silver robbery?"

"That's a long time ago, Mr. Traveler."

"They're saying the senior Horne was in cahoots with your husband."

She shook her head. "I'll have to call that poor woman, maybe fix her a casserole."

"You didn't answer my question."

Mrs. Hays plucked at a lace doily on the arm of her chair. "You can't change what's already done, Mr. Traveler. I have my memories. They belong to me, not you."

It was raining when Traveler parked in front of the Horne place, one of those single-story Victorians scaled down by hard times in the 1930s. Its Ionic columns were too small, its carved cornice perfunctory, and its gabled front porch cramped for a man Traveler's size.

The stooped, grey-haired woman who appeared behind the glass storm door nodded at Traveler but made no move to let him in.

"Remember me?" he said.

She tightened the sash around her faded housecoat. "I thought you'd turn up sooner or later. You're here to gloat, no doubt, like the rest of them. To see the name of Horne dragged through the mud."

Lightning flashed.

Mrs. Horne cringed when the thunder arrived. "My Ben never killed anybody, and now they're slandering my boy, too, saying, 'Like father, like son.' "

Her eyes filled. "I used to say the same thing about you and your father. I'm sorry for that now."

"I'm working for your son," Traveler said.

"It's too late for him. I feel that in my heart." She hugged herself. "I begged my boy not to be a cop. We needed the money, though, and the job was there because of family tradition. But that's the end of it. I want my grandson to make something of himself."

"Anson told me there wasn't enough money for college," Traveler said.

"I'm an old woman," she said, "soon to be called home. Poverty doesn't scare me any more than you do. I told Anson to sell the house if he has to, anything to send the boy to college. But he won't do it while I'm alive."

"Your grandson will need a home one day."

She shook her head. "Like I told Anson this morning, it's too late for us Hornes. Hiring you was a waste of time and money. I told him."

"Did your husband ever talk about Jim Hays?"

"My boy asked me the same thing."

"What did you tell him?" Traveler asked.

She stared him in the eye until thunder made her wince. "I always thought my husband made too much of what happened to that man. Fussing all the time, Ben was. I didn't want my son going off half-cocked the same way."

Traveler waited, feeling the rain dripping from the overhang and down the back of his neck. Finally, she sighed and hugged herself. "If you ask me, Jim Hays got what was coming to him."

She slammed the door in his face.

Oscar Palmer had a westside office in the state capitol building. When Traveler arrived, the senator drew his window shades against the temple view in the valley below and pointed to a leather chair in front of his desk.

"I've been waiting for you." Palmer was lean and tan and smiled when he spoke. He was said to be next in line to run for governor. "Ever since I read about the Annie in the paper this morning."

"Why would you expect to see me?"

"Because of the Annie shares my father bought. After he cornered the market, what there was of it, those shares made our family's fortune. They put me through law school."

"Harvard, wasn't it?"

The senator nodded.

Traveler leaned back and smiled. Oscar Palmer was pushing forty. Twenty or so years ago, when money was needed for school, stock in the Annie wasn't worth a damn.

Traveler said, "Barney Chester tells me your father moved out of the Chester Building not long after you graduated from high school."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Your father leased half a floor at the Walker Bank Building."

"Law is big business," Palmer replied.

"I used to hike near the Annie when Park City was still a ghost town," Traveler said.

Palmer shrugged.

"She was spooky in those days," Traveler went on. "Half the class at East High used to dare one another to spend the night outside

the boarded-up shaft. Jim Hays's ghost could be heard moaning right through the rockfall, or so our litany went."

The senator shook his head. "The mine was strictly off limits for me. Dad said the entire area was undermined with tunnels and could cave in at any time. He was a rock collector himself, and used to spend his weekends in Park City looking for another way into the Annie. I remember him saying that someone who used to work the mine told him there was another entrance, one that had been abandoned because it was so dangerous."

"When was that?"

"Only my father could answer that."

"When did he sell his shares?" Traveler asked.

"They're still in the family," Palmer said. "I'm a partner in the new theme park. I put up the land, my partners provided the financing."

"Then how did your father put you through law school?"

Palmer drummed his fingers on his desk for a moment. "What the hell. Now that they've opened up the Annie, it can't make any difference. I don't know for sure, but I think my father found that old entrance. He may have been able to reach the silver. I'm only guessing, of course. But when I went over his books after he died, they showed more money than his law practice could account for."

He smirked. "Dad was too smart a lawyer to cash in all that silver at once, if that's really where his money came from. What I'm telling you is strictly off the record. You'd never be able to prove a thing anyway."

"Who told him about the second entrance?"

"A powder monkey whispered in his ear, Dad said."

"My father was on the scene when the Annie blew. He said the explosion brought the whole mountain down. It would take an expert, a powder monkey, to do something like that."

"I figured that out a long time ago," Palmer said.

"I'm beginning to wish I hadn't," Traveler answered.

By the time Traveler got back to the Chester Building, Barney had the eternal flame in pieces on top of the cigar counter. Bill and Charlie, driven off the street by a real gullywasher, were standing nearby kibitzing. Their coffee cups, judging by the smell, had been salted with fortified wine.

Traveler handed Bill a twenty. "Don't you think it's time we had some brandy for our coffee?"

"We can take a hint when we're not wanted," Bill said.

Holding the sandwich board over their heads, Bill and Charlie went out into the rain in search of the nearest state liquor store.

Traveler poured himself a cup of black coffee and then spun the postcard rack. As soon as he found the Park City miners, Barney got busy applying a light coat of oil to the metal fittings.

Traveler extracted the card and laid it on the counter. "Could I borrow your magnifying glass?"

"Don't bother, Mo," Barney said, keeping his head down. "That's me on the left. The picture was taken the day they closed down the Annie."

"How old were you then?"

"Just a kid. Who else would have been dumb enough to quit high school and take a job like powder monkey?"

"If you worked the Annie," Traveler said, "you'd know if there was a back way in."

Rather than look Traveler in the eye, Barney began reassembling the eternal flame. "It wasn't really a working entrance in my time. Years before, they'd hit some bad gas pockets in that part of the mine. When one of them finally blew, they closed down the original shaft and dug a new one, the one you see there on the postcard."

"I talked to Oscar Palmer. He thinks his father found that old entrance."

"For years he kept asking me, so I told him. I never thought he had the guts to go back inside that mountain looking for the silver. I wasn't about to try it myself. It wasn't just gas pockets I was afraid of. There was blood on that silver. Two armored-car guards had been shot, not to mention the hold-up men found floating in the lake."

"Tell me about the silver."

Barney sighed. He was down to the last fitting. "Finding it was an accident. Beau Palmer and I were following Gussie Gustavson, who was salting the mine so he could jack up the price of his penny shares. When we stumbled on that silver, it made me crazy for a while. I knew that mine like the back of my hand, so it was easy to ditch Beau. I got him lost and then went back for the loot, stashing as much as I could carry in a branch shaft near the old entrance. I might have gone back for it, too, if I hadn't heard the Annie groan, warning me off. I'd just gotten clear when some of her old timbers gave way, burying my hiding place but good."

Barney stopped speaking to attach the eternal flame's spout and tighten it into place. "That's when I came to my senses. The Annie

was telling me what to do. I went back and rigged a booby trap at the spot where Gussie'd got killed. You've got to understand. There were signs posted all over that mountain. Danger. Keep out. There was a barbed-wire fence, too, so I figured whoever came back for the silver would be the one who'd done the killing."

"Did you know Hays would be the one?"

"You don't understand. I planted the dynamite, but I never primed it. That booby trap was still safe when I walked away."

"What the hell happened then?"

"Like I said, there were gas pockets all over that mine. Maybe I imagined it, but I thought I could smell gas when I was planting the explosives. The way I figure it, some kind of spark set off the charge and killed Hays. It wouldn't have taken much, just striking a match or firing a gun. For years I've been telling myself that Hays must have panicked when he saw Ben and Martin coming and taken a shot at them."

"Face it, Barney. We'll never know what happened for sure."

Traveler heard footsteps and turned to see his father carrying a soggy *Tribune,* which he'd been using to keep the rain off his head. He deposited the mess in Barney's wastebasket.

"Why the long faces?" Martin asked.

Barney, speaking haltingly, recapped the conversation. When he finished, Martin stared at Traveler until he nodded.

"We're in agreement," Martin said. "There's no use reopening a case when sentence has already been passed."

Barney shook his head. "You're forgetting Anson Horne."

"There's no need to feel sorry for yourself," Traveler said. "When a man like Oscar Palmer wants to be governor, he'll do almost anything to avoid bad publicity. He'll even create a scholarship for a policeman's son."

Barney wiped tears from his eyes, then struck a match and held it to the spout.

Eternal flames burned for presidents, Traveler thought, and unknown soldiers. As for Jim Hays, a cigar-store flame was the best he was ever likely to get.

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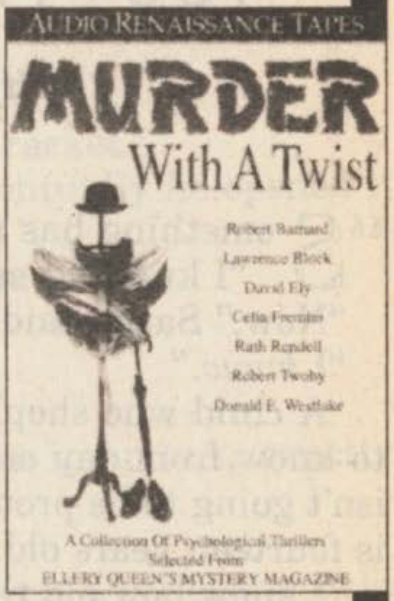

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a *NEW* short story by

MICHAEL Z. LEWIN

Michael Z. Lewin lives in Somerset, England, where he works as a columnist for a local newspaper. His two series of mystery novels, one featuring P. I. Albert Samson, and the other police lieutenant Leroy Powder, were begun in the 1970s; this year, for the first time since 1984, Samson is back in a book entitled Called by a Panther *(Mysterious Press). Those who were engaged by the wisdom and resourcefulness of the protagonists in Mr. Lewin's novels, will be equally taken with the hero of this new story . . .*

YOU PAY FOR EVERYTHING

by MICHAEL Z. LEWIN

1.

"Something has to be done, Eugene."

"I know," I said.

"Now," Sarah said. "It has to be done now."

"I *know.*"

"A child who shoplifts needs to learn from the experience, needs to know from day one that actions have consequences and that he isn't going to be protected from those consequences all his life. Roy is fourteen years old."

"I know how old the boy is," I said.

"*I* can talk to him, of course." She looked at me. "But . . ."

"I know," I said.

"When we agreed that you would have more to do with his discipline, I had no idea that—"

"I know," I said.

"Mind you, I should have known something was up. That girl. Those kids. But I had no idea."

Neither had I. "I . . . I'll talk to him."

"Now?"

"In . . . I need a little time to think what I'm going to say."

"He's going to go back to the shops and apologize to the shopkeepers and work it off."

"I need a little time."

"But tell him now."

"I said—"

"I mean, tell him now that you're going to talk to him in a few minutes."

"I . . ."

"You have to, Eugene."

"All right, all right. Where is he?"

"In his room."

"All right."

She stared at me.

"I'm going," I said.

I went.

At the bottom of the stairs I called, "Roy."

"He'll never be able to hear you over that racket."

I went upstairs. I knocked on his door. Eventually he opened it.

"Oh. It's you," he said.

"Who did you expect? The laughing policeman?"

"It had to be somebody, I suppose."

"Roy . . ." I said.

"Right first time."

"Roy, I expect to see you in the dining room in an hour exactly."

"What about?"

"What do you think 'about'?"

"Yeah. All right." He looked at me as if he were a little bit puzzled.

I turned and left him.

Sarah was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. "Well?"

"I'm seeing him in the dining room in an hour exactly."

"An hour!"

I raised my voice slightly and said, "If he has time to stew and get worried, it will be more effective."

"Honestly!"

"Let me do it my way."

She turned without saying anything more and went to her study.

I went to the dining room to think about how, exactly, I would say what I had to say.

2.

Roy turned up three minutes late. That he came at all, without my having to call him, I considered to be a good sign. He came into the dining room. He stood inside the door.

"Close the door. Then sit down across from me."

"Look, I did it and I'm sorry, all right? It wasn't the smartest thing in the world, especially to get caught. I know that."

I stood up and said, "Close the door, and then sit across from me."

He was surprised.

He shrugged, but did it.

"I want to tell you a story," I said.

A smirk.

"What's funny?"

"You reminded me of a comedian all of a sudden."

"I can see to it that your life is made very unpleasant," I said.

Neither of us knew how true that was, but the idea wasn't so funny. "Say what you have to say," he said.

"I want to tell you a story that an old man told me once."

Roy sat motionless.

"This old man was in a British Home Stores one day. It was a long time ago. Well, quite a long time ago. It was a wet day. One of those days when you think, If God meant people to live in England he'd have given them gills, you know what I mean?"

Seemingly not. A mistake. Never mind.

"And the old man was drying himself off. He had just come in and he stood to the side, a few rows into the store, and he was drying himself off, as I said, and he suddenly noticed a girl.

"The girl turned out to be about your age, but she looked older, about seventeen. She had long straight hair the colour of summer sand and she had chocolatey brown eyes, the kind that are so rich and warm that they make you wonder why you ever thought eyes of any other colour were pretty. A lovely girl. Absolutely perfect and gorgeous.

"But as the old man looked on, he saw her take two cardigans off the counter and put them into a pocket she had sewn inside her raincoat. The old man couldn't believe it. He stood transfixed. And as he did so, he saw her move along the counter and take two more."

"What colour were they?" Roy asked.

"What?"

"The cardigans. I just wondered what colour they were?"

"How the hell do I know what colour they were?" This was an awful child and I hated him.

"I just thought the old man might have told you."

"He didn't. All right?"

His silence was acquiescence.

"So the old man saw her steal four cardigans and then, then suddenly she looked up as if she had felt him watching her. She turned to face him and all she did was look into his eyes. They stood that way for several seconds. That's a long time when two people are looking at each other, but this old man was a very precise person, and if he said it was several seconds, I'm sure it was.

"And then the girl said, 'Are you going to shop me, or what?' But the old man said, 'No. Not if you come with me for a cup of tea. For I have something to tell you.'

"Well, rather than be turned in, the girl went with the old man to the store's restaurant and they got a pot of tea for two and found a quiet table and sat down. And after a few uneasy moments, the old man said, 'Now listen to me. I want to tell you something.' "

I looked at Roy.

He looked at me. But only for a moment.

"Do you see?" I said. "What I want to tell you is what this old man told that girl."

"Yeah, all right. Get on with it, will you?" But he didn't say this last bit sharply, so I didn't take offence.

I said, "What the old man told the girl was something that had happened to him when he was younger. This old man had had a daughter and *she* had shoplifted once and they found out about it at her school. The man who found out was the deputy head and he found out because he was questioning a friend of the girl's about something else and the friend had misinterpreted a question and she answered it in such a way that the deputy head became suspicious and asked her more questions, as if he already knew, and that tricked the girl into telling him everything she knew about the shoplifting. I don't remember the details of what the old man told me, but you know the kind of thing."

Roy sat motionless.

"Well, the point is this. The deputy head came to the old man and his wife, just as Mr. Morrison came to your mother and me the other day, and the deputy head told them what he had found out and that led to a big family row. Just like the one we had here last night."

I gave Roy a moment to remember.

Then I said, "Only more so, because the girl was not the type anyone would have expected to get herself involved in something like that. Which is not to say that we don't think highly of you too, Roy, but you aren't exactly serious, quiet, and studious—and wouldn't want to be—but this girl was.

"Anyway, the old man said there was a sleepless night or two, and tears and recriminations and apologies and all that. And then, two days later, there was an incident at the school."

I paused for a moment to try to heighten the impact on Roy.

Then I said, "At the school a girl, another girl, went to her teacher and said that some money had been stolen from her bag during P.E. This was not the first time that money had been stolen from children during this P.E. class, and the teacher had been keeping a special eye on the comings and goings of the girls in the class. And it happened that the old man's daughter had asked to go to the changing room during the particular class that the other girl said she'd been in when her money was stolen.

"Well, you can imagine what happened. Can't you?"

Roy said nothing, but he was paying attention.

"The P.E. teacher told the deputy head. And the deputy head called the old man's daughter into his office. And he asked her about the stolen money. But she denied she had taken it.

"But the deputy head didn't believe her. And—with the P.E. teacher there—the deputy head questioned the old man's daughter for more than two hours. He tried everything he could think of. He tried shouting at her. He tried saying he *knew* she had taken the money. He tried threatening her with what would happen if she didn't confess. He tried to tell her he understood and if she would only confess, he wouldn't punish her, that the important thing was that she own up. He talked sweetly to her. He shouted at her. He tried absolutely everything he could think of. But the girl wouldn't admit taking the money."

"Maybe she didn't take it," Roy said.

"That's what she said and kept saying, and even though she was getting more and more hysterical as the deputy head kept saying 'I know you did it. I know you're guilty,' all the way through she kept denying it. But by the end she was in tears and screaming and really mixed-up. And finally the deputy head realised that he wasn't going to get the girl to admit taking the other girl's money.

"Now during the time that the old man's daughter was being interrogated she said over and over again, 'Let me call my father.

Please call my father,' so after the two hours, when the girl was no longer able to do anything but cry, the deputy head rang the father, who was at home. He explained that the daughter was under suspicion of stealing some money. He explained that the daughter denied it, but that he, the Deputy Head, frankly thought that she was guilty. And could the old man, who obviously was younger then, could he come and pick his daughter up from school and perhaps talk some sense into her himself.

"The old man told me that he then asked to speak to his daughter. The deputy head put her on and the daughter said to him, 'Daddy, they say I stole some money, but I didn't do it.' "

It was getting to me. I could hardly swallow or hold the rush of tears from the feeling I had for what I was about to say.

But I stopped for a moment and breathed harder. So I could tell Roy, "And the old man told me that he said to his daughter, 'Confess if you did it.' That's what he said to her. 'Confess if you did it.' "

I didn't cry. But I had to stop again and I blinked my eyes and breathed hard.

Roy was studying me.

It took a long time for me to get going again, but I said, "The old man was crying when he told me what he had said: 'Confess if you did it.' "

"Is that it?" Roy asked.

"No," I said.

He waited for me.

Eventually I said, "I'm not going to drag this out. The old man came to the school and he picked up his daughter and brought her home. What happened was that that night the daughter took her own life."

I waited for Roy.

He said nothing.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Yeah. She topped herself."

"She 'topped' herself. Yes. She topped herself and she left a note for her father and the note said, 'You didn't believe me.' "

"That's pretty tough," Roy said quietly.

"It turned out that the girl at school whose money had been stolen decided next day that it hadn't been stolen at all. But it was too late by then."

"Yeah, tough," Roy said again.

"Well, I was telling you that the old man, a long time after all this had happened, was telling this story to the girl in British Home Stores."

"Is that the one on Market Street?"

"Yes, as it happens."

"And the girl had brown eyes."

"What?" I had made that up, and I couldn't remember what I had said, only that she was pretty. But I've always loved those rich brown eyes, like my first wife had. Only she always wished she'd had blue eyes like her sister. Silly girl.

"Oh yes. Brown eyes," I said.

"So what happened?"

"About what?"

"The girl with the brown eyes that the old man caught boosting sweaters."

"Well," I said, "he took her for a cup of tea."

"A pot."

"Yeah, a pot of tea. He took her for a pot of tea and told her this story and he could see that even though the questions she asked were a bit unfeeling, the story had actually moved her, that she had really taken it in. And the conclusion he wanted her to draw was this: that things that you do have consequences. Like, in your case, *you* are going to have to go back to all the shops you stole from and give back what you stole to the owners and apologise to them."

"There was only the two. There's no point in talking like I'm Al Capone or something."

"But it's more than that, Roy. The point is that the consequences of your actions can be bigger, far bigger than ever you think they're going to be. Life is a terribly dangerous business at the best of times. I can go to an appointment on any single day and find out that when I come back your mother has been killed or . . . or hurt. Or she can find out that I've been hurt or killed, or you have been. All by things we have absolutely no control over. Like a car or a crazy person."

"The world's full of nutters," Roy contributed.

"But the point is that we are all potential victims of things we can't control. So it's just plain crazy for us to take big chances with the things that we *can* control. Do you *understand?*"

Roy blinked. He said, "No. You're saying I've got to keep indoors all day every day in case I get run down by a car?"

"Don't be stupid! You're trivialising what I'm saying to you."

"I'm not stupid. You're just not making yourself clear."

"What I'm saying the old man was saying is this: His daughter shoplifted. *That* was the crazy risk, because she didn't think through the consequences of her action and what it might mean to her. To her it meant that later, in a critical situation, her father no longer believed in her, and she decided she couldn't live anymore without her father's belief.

"She never knew that she would die as a result of her shoplifting, but she did! And what was the father supposed to do? Believe her against the opinion of the school? Fresh from the upset and confusion of just having learned that his princess of a daughter—the quiet one, the studious one—had, all the time, been consorting with a little gang of vicious, ugly, crazy children who lured her into crime and smoking and drinking and then, when she was dead and gone, had the nerve, the brazen gall to claim that it was she who had led them, that it was her idea all along. I could have *killed* them when I heard that. ***Killed*** them!"

After I stopped crying and pounding the table I realised that Roy was looking at me with a degree of fear in his eyes. He shook a little and said, "Look, Uncle Eugene, I know I was really stupid to steal stuff. I'll never do it again."

I couldn't speak. I just nodded.

"Is it over? Can I go?"

I nodded again, and he got up and left quickly and closed the door behind himself.

3.

A little later I was working in the study when Sarah knocked and came in.

"Hi," I said.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Writing a little story."

"Is it all right if I interrupt?"

"Sure. I'm nearly finished and I know how it comes out."

"What did you say to Roy?" There was an urgency in her voice, but it was not a displeased urgency.

I tried to think of how to describe what I had said.

While I was thinking Sarah said, "Whatever it was, he came out of the dining room almost running. He actually apologised to me. He was ever so much more contrite than he was this afternoon."

"Good. That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"Well, sure."

"What's a brother for if not to help his only sister out when she's in a tough spot with her eldest child?"

"But what did you *say?* No one's had that kind of effect on Roy since Arthur died. Come on, you've got to tell me what you told him."

"Well," I said, "I told him a little bit about the time Dad found out you'd been shoplifting."

"*I've* told him about that. But having my bottom spanked for picking up comics that weren't mine is hardly the kind of stuff that would affect a hard case like Roy."

"Well, let's just say this," I said. "There is hardly any point in being a writer if you can't embellish the truth a bit. Now is there?"

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Dorothy B. Davis is an editor, researcher, and published author of non-fiction. While still in college, she wrote a play that was produced, in part, at Barnard's Minor Latham Playhouse, but it was only last year, after a career spent largely in publishing, that she began seriously to write fiction. She tells us that another mystery short story is in the works . . .

PARROTS IN MY GARDEN

by DOROTHY B. DAVIS

In September I lost my job. "Attrition," Mr. Peterson told me regretfully. Over his shoulder, through his wide picture window, facing toward Potter's Woods, I watched two big crows straddling a limb of an old tree, huddling over it, pecking intently at the bare wood, getting every last insect out of it before flying off elsewhere, leaving it behind. Mr. Peterson stood erect, at attention. There was nothing he could do about it. "Sorry, Eileen."

And my husband. The week after I lost my job my husband left me, too. He took me by surprise as well. But I should have seen it coming I see now, for there were two crows, not just one, pecking on that buggy old limb outside Mr. Peterson's office. "Attraction," Wayne told me, reproachfully. I could smell the whiskey strong on his breath, nothing new about that, as he rose stiffly from his recliner chair in the den. There was nothing he could do about it either. Not even "Sorry, Eileen." I'd had my job and my husband for over forty years, each.

And Sue Annie, the plump, dowdy, foolish woman Wayne was leaving me for, was a mere child, not yet forty. She'd been my friend. More than that. She had no family, no friends but us, so taking pity on her, I'd treated her as if I were her mother and she my daughter. I'd had no idea the floozy was sneaking around behind my back.

After he broke the story Wayne lurched quickstep away from me into his bedroom, snapped his closet light on with a jerk, strode forthrightly in, began hastily yanking clothes off hangers, grabbing clothes off shelves, rolling them up end over end into untidy balls, throwing all with a vengeance into suitcases and boxes that stood ready around him, all the while earnestly avoiding my glance. "It's all your fault," he yelled, looking straight ahead of him. "What I've been living with all these years. What I've put up with. How'd I stand it living with an ugly old fussy old hag bag like you for so long? Always getting in my way, always telling me what to do. I'll tell you what to do."

"Same to you and double, you bastard," I yelled back at him in a voice so loud it surprised even me. "Up yours! Up Sue Annie's!" The words were out of my mouth before I knew it.

He looked my way then.

Outside now a nasty storm is raging, as only November knows how to brew. Its wind and rain are rattling my windows, pounding on my doors. You'd think to hear them that they were trying to get at me, as I sit here all alone. You'd think to hear them that they were intent on blowing me away, on ripping me apart. But I'm not afraid. I've locked my doors. I've shut my windows tight. Rant and rage and rattle from now to kingdom come! I'm out of your reach now and forever. Get off my case, you bully wind!

After he'd thrown everything he felt like into his boxes and suitcases, Wayne mopped the sweat from his face and neck with his handkerchief, blew his nose a good solid blast, and then leered wickedly at me. "Sue Annie is nowhere near as pretty as you used to be," he said. "Sure is hard to imagine now, but once you were a real knockout." He cut me to the bone saying that, and he knew it, too. But I pretended it didn't matter a fig to me. "So when she first took a shine to me, all I felt was flattered," he said. He ran his fingers through the few strands he had left of what used to be his thick curly mop.

"Well, my looks and your hair must've run off together," I said then as sarcastically as I could, and by the look on his face I knew I'd hit my mark. His lips and voice grew harder.

"Until all of a sudden, I was overwhelmed by passion," he yelled. I couldn't believe my ears. Wayne? Passion? At his age? At our age? But, yes, I can believe it now. And a kind of passion seized him right then and he grabbed me snugly by my shoulders, his thumbs drilling straight into my arm sockets, his eyes boring straight into my eyes.

"Suddenly I couldn't resist," he said, as though he was bragging about it to me. "I was overpowered by a force bigger than anything I've ever felt before. Even from you, in the days when you used to be a knockout." He spat these whiskey words into my face. So I spat right back at him, a good blob, got him smack in the left eye. I've always been a good shot.

"She's a young woman, Eileen" is what he scatter-spat back in my face. His aim has always been lousy. "And she wants me a whole darned lot. She's a young woman and she wants me a whole darned lot." He had to repeat it, as though, even at such close range, I hadn't heard it the first time. Or maybe he was still trying to convince himself of it. Then he swiveled abruptly away from me to survey the room. "So I've taken our savings," he said, "bought a van, some property, a house." He spoke softly, scarcely moving his lips, as though he were a ventriloquist, or maybe a dummy, as though he were an actor, delivering an unimportant aside, throwing the words away. So that's when I knew the jig was up. Here was the motivation for Sue Annie's crime of stealing a husband—mine. What some women won't do to get a house these days. I don't have to be told. Now I know, personally.

"We're leaving for it this afternoon," he said. "To start a new life. A new family. To keep himself from going to seed a man's got to keep on sowing his seed." He flung his arms wide as he said this, as though this were the grand finale of some soap opera going on in his head, of which he was the star, of course, or as though he were quoting some new verse he'd found in his Bible. I guess it must have been in Sue Annie's, too.

The wind is pounding like surf against my windows, shifting them back and forth in their frames, with thudding noises, like the sounds boats make hitting up against their slips, when they're being tossed about by a gale.

There was no reasoning with Wayne, of course, about what he was doing. There never had been. He'd always been all jeers. And age hadn't mellowed him, as it does some people. He'd never been one to graciously accept the inevitable. Always said he'd rather go down fighting! Who? I always asked him. Fighting who? Fighting what? Well, now he's gone, fighting the whirlwind, but that's how he wanted it.

Wayne accidentally knocked his precious silver-backed soft-bristled baby hairbrush behind the dresser as he reached to get it, so he went down on hands and knees to fish it out. He'd outgrown the

trousers he was wearing. I'd been telling him this for the longest time, but he never listened to me about it, of course. They were green. His trousers. When last sighted, Wayne was wearing his kelly green corduroy too-tight trousers. He always was such a bright, colorful guy. In marked contrast to my own conservativeness, or drabness, as he liked to style it. I always saw us as two birds: he the male bird with the bright, showy plumage, me the homely female, sitting camouflaged on her nest. The shirt Wayne had on with his kelly green too-tight corduroy trousers was cardinal red, his sweater was buttercup yellow. His fatty rear cleavage popped out of his too-tight kelly green trousers when he bent over to retrieve his precious silver-backed soft-bristled baby hairbrush. And it took all my strength to stifle the urge to give him a good hard swift kick in the you-know-where. But I managed to restrain myself. It wouldn't have changed anything, might actually have made things more difficult.

"Where for art thou roaming?" I asked him.

Instead of answering right away, he continued to scrounge around under his dresser, looking for money, I guess. "Alaska," he said at last, as he closed one eye, sighted under the dresser with the other. He must have imagined I was under there somewhere, since that's where he was looking as he answered my question.

"It's cold in Alaska!" I protested. "And it's so far away. And with your age, and your heart condition, and the kind of strenuous life you'll be leading, you'll be dead in less than a week. Why don't you just be sensible and stay here at home with me?" I said this as calmly as I could. I wanted to give him another chance, to be reasonable.

But it wasn't calm enough to suit Wayne. "Now don't you fret about this, Eileen," he said, turning his head sharply and peering up at me from the carpet with a wince, which I hoped came from getting a vicious carpet burn on his cheek. "I know how you can get," he said. "Don't you get like that now. I told you how things are, how they're going to be. Don't get it into your head that there's anything you can do about it now to stop me. There's no way you can. You don't own me, Eileen, and I'm sick of your controlling ways!"

The next thing I knew he was on his way out the door with his warm winter parka.

I followed after him, desperate now. I still couldn't really believe what he was doing, even while he was, even after he had. I cried and pleaded with him as soon as he opened the door and began to

actually carry the boxes and suitcases through it and down the walk. I followed after him, begging him to stop, to reconsider, making a regular old fool of myself. How could he do this to me? What was I going to do? At my age? He was leaving me penniless. He'd taken all our savings. At a time when I was jobless. How was I going to pay the taxes? I'd lose the house. How was I going to live? What would I eat? How would I pay the electricity? The oil? What was I going to do? He did not favor me with a reply. But even then, I still couldn't really believe he was leaving me forever. I tried to fight it. Even after he'd slammed the back door shut for the last time. Even after he'd staggered down the walk under the last box. Even after he'd set foot on the vinyl-coated step for the last time and swung himself into the driver's seat of his shiny new powder-blue van, and pulled the door shut with a big bang behind him. Even after he'd gunned the big vehicle down the street and squealed it around the corner.

I could see him then racing around the next corner and the next, then all the way down the long swamp-lined road in a tearing rush to get to the big old house by the sea that Sue Annie rented, where she would be waiting for him, breathless with anticipation, her bags packed, too.

When I went back inside my house I cried and carried on for hours. My mind was filled with thoughts of old people who should know better being overpowered by these urgent forces, these passions bigger than they are, chasing after blooming youth. The truth, as now I'd so painfully learned it, was that deep awful drives, as inevitable as birth, as death, control our relationships. We don't. Forces beyond our mastery do. And these forces dominate our relationships and cause us to act as we do in them. That's the bottom-line truth, and we women must always be wary, always be ready for anything, not be taken by surprise.

Icy rainwater spray is sluicing down my windowpanes now in sheets that look like jelly when it's boiled enough.

I could hardly sleep all that long night, woke up to a clammy feeling of nightmarish dread and searingly painful emptiness. As though there were nothing whatsoever left inside of me. It was nearly impossible for me to face what had happened. Very very early that morning, even before first light, I went outside, and after I rested my bones on the weathered old bench Wayne had set out for me once a long time ago, and briefly inhaled the cool stillness, I worked harder in my garden than I've ever worked before in my

whole gosh darned life. Digging, digging, planting, planting, smoothing, smoothing. And when I'd finished, I felt better, although I was enormously tired. So I sat down on the bench, being careful not to get a deadly splinter from it. My friend Julia nearly died from one once. Ignored the slight swelling the day after she'd gotten one in her hand without knowing it. Till the red line appeared up her arm. She went right away to emergency, spent a week in intensive care, hovering between life and death. The line between them is splinter thin.

As I sat there, tired and numb, I looked out at the state lands that border our lonely little property, at the hundreds of green trees, each one of them puffed out in its own special way, as the sun, shining strongly, insistently down on them, highlighted all their leaves so that they all stood out, separately, together, a shimmering.

As I look through my rain-soaked window now, I see wet, bare, tendriled, tentacled trees dancing wildly in the wind, like seaweed caught in the unruly waves of a turbulent tide, and it is so hard for me to imagine how they looked to me that morning in September, how they appealed to me, even in the midst of my desolation, as I gazed at them at the precise moment of my very great shock, which jolted through my whole body with all the force of electricity, as I was gripped by an overwhelming mystical experience, saw a miraculous sign meant for me alone. For bright flashes of kelly green and buttercup yellow and cardinal red were streaking back and forth through all the trees. The colors Wayne was wearing when I'd last seen him. And the first crazy thought that sprang into my mind was, "It's Wayne. It's Wayne. He's flying back to get me." Yes, I really imagined, if only for an instant, that it was Wayne flying around up there in his green corduroy trousers and his red shirt and his yellow sweater. That's the weird way it was with me that morning. All my misery and all the work I'd been doing, I guess. But it wasn't Wayne, of course. It was parrots. Two of them, escaped from some cage somewhere, flying from tree to tree in the state park that borders our yard, just as though they were in the Amazon rain forest. They even flew through my garden, screeching at the top of their lungs. Having a real good time, ignorant of their impending fate, of course, as such creatures are.

Real salt tears came to me then. I cried about a lot of things, I guess, but what was most on my mind was that winter was nearly here. And green and red and yellow tropical birds perish in the cold.

The day after that I needed a coat to sit outside in my garden, where I've taken to sitting every day I can now. I feel less lonely there, communing with nature, kind of. And as I pulled my coat close about me, I realized the real cold was on its way, all right, and those parrots were doomed. I never did see them again. They're dead now. I'm certain of it. For I know why I saw those parrots.

It's cold in my kitchen now as I sit here, wishing that winter would not come for me, either. That it would never come. But winter is coming. It is. For all of us. It is a-comin' in.

Will my windows never cease their infernal rattling? It's nearly nighttime dark outside now and it's afternoon. Afternoon. But I'm as cozy as I can be in here in my hot-pink bathrobe and my fuzzy purple sweater, and my turquoise blue quilty slippers, and my striped chartreuse and orange socks, sipping my hot tea toddy. And I have a big gold bow in my hair, too, that once belonged to Sue Annie.

As I look through my shaking windowpanes at my dried-up, battened-down garden, and at those trees that now look to me like skeletons being tossed crazily about by this wild November wind, I know that somewhere out there are those parrots, their small lifeless bodies flightless now, like little sandbags, lying somewhere out there on that soaking ground, being covered and uncovered by those restless swirlings of wet brown leaves, being blown about in the mud and the muck by the angry wind. And I know this just as sure as I know that Wayne and Sue Annie didn't go to Alaska, like he said they were going to. His deed said Florida. But they didn't go to Florida either. Wayne and Sue Annie, two colorful creatures having a real good time, were as ignorant as the parrots were of their impending fate. I still ache, just thinking about what happened.

Dear whiskey-breath Wayne, such an easy target, as always, even though you tried to flee from me. "I'm still a knockout," I shouted at you, and laughed, as I pulled the trigger. Dear childish Sue Annie, why did you let me take you by surprise? You should have been more wary. Women should always be wary. Wayne was already slumped lifeless over the steering wheel when you came trustingly to the door to meet him. Dressed in bright colors, too, like the whore that you were. Your eyes soft with anticipation, wearing that tawdry gold bow in your hair. And there stood I, instead of him, to welcome you in my own inimitable way. What a blast! Yes, Sue Annie, we women must always be wary. We can never tell what lies in store for us in our relationships.

Your house was in a desolate place. Beneath the rocky cliff the sea runs deep. I could have rolled you both down there, inside that tacky powder-blue van. But I wanted to have you nearer to me. I don't like being by myself, never have. Wayne knew that. He should have listened to me, worked things out with me. The police don't suspect a thing, of course. For they, like those very few people who might have noticed, knew, before he even bothered to tell me, that you and he were going far, far away from here, never to return. And so you did. And so you have. Like the parrots, your big flightless bodies are out there in my garden, ripped apart. Wayne's wrapped in his useless parka that he carried just to show me. The two of you lie far beneath that sodden ground, where I buried you so laboriously, where I sowed you—my big seeds—so deep, that fine morning in September, just before the sign of the parrots appeared unto me, to illuminate what I'd done. I buried you away from each other of course. You're out of his reach. He's out of yours. And both of you are far, far away too from the reach of this pelting rain, from the strength of this relentless wind, from this earthly cold, and far beyond the grasp of those overpowering forces that overtook you, those big passions beyond our mastery that control our relationships and how we act in them. Those urgent forces that overtook the two of you, and then—in a shocking and totally surprising way, that long ago day in September—overtook me, too.

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YMWQ-2

a *NEW* short story by

IAN STUART

The English village provides the perfect setting for Ian Stuart's mysteries, which focus on the problems of ordinary people and rely on the observations of amateur sleuths. In this story, a young reporter assigned to cover a crime discovers new aspects to old acquaintances . . .

JIMMY MY SON

by IAN STUART

There was hardly anyone about in Stetchcombe High Street at twenty to nine in the morning. Only one car was parked by the row of three shops opposite the Rose and Crown. Kate Peters pulled in behind it, locked her Metro, and entered Colters, the little tobacconist's and newsagent's on the corner.

Norma Keen, the young manageress, was behind the counter, smart and efficient-looking as usual.

"Hi," Kate said. She helped herself to the few odds and ends she wanted from the shelves and paid for them. "Oh, and I'll have these," she added, taking a tube of extra-strong mints from the rack at the end of the counter.

"Still not smoking?" Norma asked sympathetically.

"No." Kate sounded triumphant. It was three weeks now since she had had her last cigarette, and she was trying to convince herself that the worst was over.

"How's the new job going?"

"Great."

Last week Kate had changed her position at the local paper from editor's secretary to junior reporter. The pay was less, but it was what she had always wanted to do—why she had taken a job at the

Lingford Mercury in the first place—and she was thrilled.

"Have you covered any big stories yet?" Norma asked.

Kate laughed. "Not yet. Give me time. So far it's been mostly baby shows and an inquest."

A small boy came through the door behind the counter. He was about eight, a bright-looking kid with Norma's auburn hair and a taking grin.

"Hallo, Jimmy," Kate said.

The little boy noticed her for the first time. "Hallo, Miss Peters." He turned back to Norma. "Mum, Steve said he won't come home till late tonight. He told me to tell you, because you were busy."

"Oh," Norma said. "All right, Jimmy."

"Bye, Mum. Bye, Miss Peters." Jimmy scuttled out by the shop door on his way to school.

Kate noticed Norma's expression and wondered why she looked embarrassed.

"I've let one of the spare rooms," the girl said, as if she felt some explanation was required of her. "The flat's too big for Jimmy and me when Mark's away. It's only for a month or two, and the money helps. Kids cost the earth these days; Jimmy's always needing new clothes and growing out of his shoes or wanting things for school."

His mother doted on him, Kate thought. Norma wouldn't let him go without anything, if she could help it. Kate hadn't liked her much when they were at school—Norma was older and a bit bossy and they had different friends—but, give her her due, she was a good mother. And that included being firm with Jimmy when it was necessary. Which was just as well, since Mark Keen was in the merchant navy and away from home much of the time.

Kate had never met Mark. Norma had gone to Liverpool to live when they were married; then, three years ago, she had moved back south to be nearer her family. Not that it was large or very close. Norma's parents had died when she was a little girl, and now there were only the elderly aunt who had brought her up and a cousin or two somewhere.

Kate believed she knew why the other woman had looked embarrassed just now: it didn't take much to start tongues wagging in a little place like Stetchcombe, and Norma was a vivacious, attractive young woman.

"I don't blame you," she said. "Is he all right?"

"What do you mean?" Norma demanded defensively.

Kate told herself she had put her clumsy foot in it again. When would she learn to weigh her words before she spoke? "Just, is he any trouble?" she explained. "It must make more work for you."

"He's all right," Norma answered shortly. She turned and started arranging packets of cigarettes on a shelf behind the counter.

There was a moment's awkward silence.

"Well, I must go," Kate said. "You never know, my big story may be breaking. See you."

"Bye," Norma said.

Kate went out to her car, put her purchases on the passenger seat, and drove to Lingford.

James Bolton, the *Mercury*'s editor, came into the reporters' room at a near-gallop. A wiry, prematurely bald man with glasses, he nearly ran everywhere in the mistaken belief that by doing so he projected an image of dynamism to the rest of the staff. Once inside the door, he stopped and looked round. Apart from Bob Downes, who was covering an important local planning inquiry, the only occupant was Kate. Could she do it?

He reassured himself with the thought that she had been in the job three weeks now and was shaping up well. Moreover, this was a straightforward story; all she had to do was talk to the victim, the police, and any witnesses, and write a report.

"There's been a robbery at Stetchcombe," he announced. "A shop called Colters."

"Colters!" Kate exclaimed.

"Yes, why?" Light dawned on the editor. "Of course. You live out that way, don't you? Go over there and see what you can get, Kate. Apparently two men attacked the manageress, tied her up, and got away with the safe."

"Poor Norma," Kate said, standing up and making sure she had a notebook and pen in her handbag. "Was she hurt?"

"Not as far as I know. I haven't heard any more. Is she a friend of yours?"

"Not really. We were at school together and I pass the shop every day on my way here. I get odds and ends there sometimes. I tried this morning, but the shop was still shut."

"All right," Bolton said, "see what you can do." He charged out, almost colliding with the doorpost on his way.

"I thought Norma was just a bit late opening, but she must have been inside, tied up," Kate said.

Bob Downes looked up from a pile of papers he was studying. "Kate Peters, the *Mercury*'s fearless crime reporter." He grinned.

Kate threw a paperclip at him and went.

It took her less than a quarter of an hour to reach Stetchcombe. There, a little knot of people had gathered outside Colters. She parked behind a Ford with the county police crest on its sides and got out.

A policeman was on duty outside the shop. Inside, Detective-sergeant Canning was giving instructions to two other men. Norma was in the little room behind the counter that served as an office. Kate and Canning knew each other slightly, and they exchanged nods.

"All right if I talk to Norma?" Kate asked.

"Sure," the sergeant agreed. He was young and looked confident. Privately, he thought that Norma might talk more easily to Kate, and while she was talking she might remember something useful. "I'll want another word with her, then we'll have finished here," he said.

Kate went into the office. Norma looked shaken, she thought. Not that that was surprising, she had been through a pretty terrifying experience. Norma, usually so immaculate, now looked dishevelled. Her jacket and skirt were crumpled and her hair was untidy. Kate felt a sudden warm rush of sympathy for her.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I was just going to open," Norma answered in a dull voice. "The side doorbell went. When I opened it there were two men there. They pushed me aside and barged their way in."

"What were they like?"

"I don't know. I didn't take much in; I was too startled and they had those ski-mask things over their heads. One sounded young. I think I'd heard his voice before, he had a London accent. He could have come into the shop for something. The other was older, middle-aged. His voice was much deeper. They tied me up, gagged me with an old handkerchief, and left me here. The gag was horrible; it stank." Norma shuddered.

"Who found you?" Kate asked.

"Mrs. Hughes. She lives just down the street, and she comes in every morning about half-nine for her cigarettes. When she found I hadn't opened and I didn't answer her knocking, she went and got Arthur Wells, the butcher. He came in by the side door and untied me."

"Poor you," Kate said. She made a mental note to talk to Mrs. Hughes and the butcher. "How much did they get away with?"

"I don't know exactly. I hadn't done it up, but it must have been about a thousand pounds. I bank twice a week; I was going this lunchtime."

Kate wondered whether it was luck the robbers had struck today, or had they known the weekend's takings would be in the safe?

Apparently Canning was thinking the same thing. "Did anyone know there would be so much there?" he asked.

"I suppose they could have done," Norma answered. "But I didn't tell anybody."

"They could have known when you banked?"

She nodded.

"Can you tell me anything, Sergeant?" Kate asked.

"Nothing Mrs. Keen hasn't already told you," he replied. "It looks like a professional job. They must have parked their van or whatever they used in the passage beside the shop. It's only a few feet from there to the side door, and they could pull on their masks without being seen."

Kate glanced at Norma. She looked near the end of her tether. "Norma ought to go and lie down," she said.

"I can't, I have to get Jimmy's dinner," the older woman protested. "He'll be home soon."

"He can have fish and chips or something for once. You stay here and I'll make some tea." Kate stood up. "Will you have a cup, Sergeant?"

"Thanks, love," Canning said.

"It's on the second shelf in the larder," Norma called.

"I'll find it."

Kate was glad of the opportunity to be alone and think. She longed for a cigarette and felt resentful, as if it were Fate's fault she had given up smoking. She found the tea and the pot and filled a kettle.

Eight forty-five on a Monday morning seemed an odd time to raid a shop, she told herself while she waited for the water to boil. All the same, it had proved rewarding from the robbers' point of view. Had they counted on the weekend's takings still being in the safe or had they known?

One man had been in a position to know: Norma's lodger, Steve.

There was another thing: these days Stetchcombe was pretty much a dormitory village; most people who lived there worked in Lingford, and once they had gone the street was almost deserted

until the housewives who remained came out to do their shopping. If Mrs. Hughes hadn't come in for her cigarettes, Norma might have stayed tied up until Jimmy came home from school for his dinner. Bell would have known it was unlikely there would be any witnesses, and he could have known too that Mrs. Hughes came in every morning.

"We'll probably find the safe dumped somewhere with its door forced," Canning was saying when Kate rejoined the others. "It sounds like a pretty gimcrack affair."

Kate had something else on her mind. "What time does Steve go to work?" she asked.

Norma gazed at her, and Kate, bending over to put down the tray, saw the fear come into her eyes.

"Why?" she demanded. "He hadn't anything to do with it."

"I just wondered if the men knew he'd have left," Kate explained.

"It depends what he has to do. Sometimes he goes before half-seven."

"What time did he go this morning?"

"About twenty past eight. He'd left before Jimmy went to school."

Canning had been listening without interrupting, now he wanted to know, "Who's this Steve? You haven't said anything about him."

"He's a lodger," Norma replied.

"Why didn't you mention him?"

"There wasn't any point, he'd gone before those men came here."

"What do you know about him?" Canning asked.

Norma's head came up. "What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Well, to begin with, what's his full name?"

"Steven Bell."

"Do you know where he comes from? Any other address?"

"No."

"Where does he work?"

"Joynson's, the people who're building the new road. He drives a lorry."

"Did he know how much was in the safe?"

"No!" Norma sounded distressed. "You can't think Steve . . . He wouldn't. Anyway, neither of the men was anything like him, one was far too young and the other was too old."

"I didn't suggest he would," Canning pointed out reasonably. "But we'll have to have a word with him in case he can tell us anything."

"What sort of thing?"

"He may have seen somebody hanging about round here. Or a car. Heard something in a pub."

"Oh," Norma said.

She's protecting Steve, Kate thought. That sticks out a mile. Probably she's in love with him. Now, either she knows he's involved, or she was telling the truth when she said she didn't see the men who attacked her and she's afraid one of them was him.

"Will you catch them?" Norma asked.

Canning shrugged. "I don't know. We'll talk to Bell and the neighbours and put everything we get through the computer and see what it comes up with. They've probably pulled the same trick before, crooks usually stick to the same way of working."

Norma didn't look reassured.

"We'll do what we can," the sergeant promised. "But we haven't a lot to go on unless somebody saw their truck or whatever they used parked in the alley."

There was a sound outside. Kate saw Canning stiffen and look through the open door to the shop. Then the street door opened and Jimmy burst in. His cheeks were glowing from excitement and running all the way home, and his hair was tousled.

"What's happened, Mum?" he asked. "There's a policeman outside and he says some robbers came here. Did they have guns?"

"No, Jimmy," his mother told him. "It's all right."

The little boy noticed Kate and the sergeant for the first time. "Hallo, Miss Peters," he said.

Jimmy looked at Canning. "Are you a detective?" he asked.

"That's right," the sergeant told him.

"Cor!" Jimmy turned back to his mother. "I'm starving," he announced with the happy anticipation of a hungry ten-year-old boy who confidently expects to be fed. Now he knew that the robbers hadn't carried guns, his interest in the raid was waning. Kate suspected it would revive once the pangs of hunger had been satisfied. "What's for dinner, Mum?"

Norma was close to tears. "I haven't had time to get you anything," she told him. "Can you find some fish and chips in the freezer, darling? I'll come in a minute and cook them."

"Cor, great." Fish and chips were Jimmy's favourite meal, and his mother didn't often let him have them.

He headed for the door. As he reached it he turned. "What were Steve and that other man carrying out this morning?" he enquired curiously.

Three pairs of eyes turned to him.

"What do you mean?" Norma asked in a strangled voice.

"I saw them. They carried something out through the yard and put it in a pickup truck. It looked awf'ly heavy."

"When was this, Jimmy?" Canning asked.

"About a quarter to nine. Keith was late and I had to wait for him. I was by the end of the passage when Steve and the other man came out and I saw them. We were late for school; there was a row about it," Jimmy concluded resentfully. After all, it hadn't been his fault. More brightly, he added, "I heard Steve say, 'I'll be back in a minute to fix things.' He was talking to you, Mum; didn't you hear him?"

"No," Norma whispered. "You're wrong. You can't have heard him say that."

"I did, Mum. What was it they were putting in the truck?"

Norma didn't answer. She had gone very pale.

"What will happen to Jimmy?" Kate asked. It was lunchtime two days later, and she and Canning had met for a drink and a ploughman's lunch in the Dolphin at Lingford. Steven Bell and his male accomplice, a youth named Bailey, had been picked up and charged together with Norma. Bell was in custody pending the magistrates' hearing; Norma and the boy had been released on bail. The safe had been found dumped in a hedge, its door hanging open, but the cash had been recovered.

"One of Norma's cousins and his wife will look after him if necessary," Canning replied.

"Will his father be able to come home?"

"I doubt it." The sergeant smiled grimly. "He isn't in the merchant navy—he hasn't been for the last six years—he's doing five years in Walton for a string of robberies."

"Oh no!" Kate exclaimed. "So that's why Norma was short of money. I couldn't understand it, sailors aren't badly paid and she had her wages from the shop."

Canning nodded. "He and Bell met inside, they shared a cell for a time. When Bell was released, he came down here where he wasn't known to have a look round. Keen had talked a lot about his wife and Bell saw his chance. He's a right bastard."

"And he talked Norma into going along with his plan," Kate said.

"Maybe—I doubt it. According to him, it was the other way round. He's thick as two planks. I can't see him planning even this job and

carrying it through. He wouldn't think about when there'd be the most money in the safe, breaking into houses when the people are out is more his line. Grab what's there and scarper."

"What will Norma get?" Kate asked.

"Being a woman, probably a suspended sentence; especially as she's got a kid and her husband's inside. She may even get away with probation. She'll claim she was dominated by Bell, and they'll believe her. Didn't anybody ever tell you it's a woman's world?"

"Look . . ." Kate began indignantly. Then she saw that Canning was grinning at her. "All right. But she *was* infatuated with him."

"If that's what you call it; I'd say she fancied him." The sergeant paused. "Ironic it should be the kid gave her away. She does dote on him."

DETECTIVERSE

K-9 COP

by MARIE LYNCH

A dashing detective named More
Had manners his folk did deplore:
Altho' he was able to eat at the table
He dined from a bowl on the floor!

What could be the reason—the workload?
The season?
Blight in the cranberry bogs?
Alas & alack, an answer came back—
The guy had just "gone to the dogs"!

a *NEW* short story by

DONALD OLSON

For another story on the subject of parenthood, we turn to Donald Olson, long-time contributor to EQMM, *and the author of six mystery novels. Mr. Olson lives in a hundred-year-old house in Jamestown, New York, where he settled after traveling around the country working at a variety of jobs. He is now a full-time writer, and we have several more of his beautifully crafted stories to offer in the coming months. . . .*

SHUTTERBUG

by DONALD OLSON

The birthday party went off better than Joan had hoped.

Harry Lee had no friends so there were only the family and a couple of cousins near Harry Lee's age, which was eleven. He received gifts ranging from the infantile to the most complex board games. His father Ralph wheeled in the bike, Harry Lee's first two-wheeler, and his grandmother gave him a fairly expensive camera and three rolls of film.

The excitement everyone conspired to foster left Harry Lee characteristically unmoved. He examined each gift with a faint scowl of deliberation, thanked the donor politely, and seemed relieved to be left alone while the grownups had coffee on the sun porch and the other youngsters settled down to play one of the board games.

Joan presently heard her daughter Bambi utter a sharp squeal. "Hey, Mom, Harry Lee just took our pictures."

Joan came to the door. "He was only pretending."

Harry Lee shot her a withering look. "I was not."

Joan crossed to where he sat. "But, darling, you have to learn how to insert the film and the—oh, but how *clever* of you. You mean you already read the instructions?"

"Didn't have to." When he concentrated too hard his eyes crossed slightly, raisin-colored eyes in a fine-boned eggshell-pale face. His hair, dark and curly like his father's, was not quite thick enough to disguise the elflike prominence of his ears, yet despite its lack of animation, the small face possessed a certain grave beauty.

"You might have *warned* me, Harry Lee!" cried Bambi crossly; although ordinarily a vain and somewhat prissy child, she had been picking her nose when Harry Lee clicked the shutter. Her annoyance brought a slyly mischievous grin to Harry Lee's face, suggesting the timing of the shot had been deliberate. Joan, on the other hand, could not have been more delighted. She ran to the door. "Come on in here, everybody. Harry Lee's going to take our picture."

It might be said that from that moment at the birthday party, something clicked in Harry Lee's inscrutable young mind. It was as if the camera gave him a sixth sense that brought the other five suddenly to life. It became almost like another appendage to his frail little body; he was never without it. He took it to school with him, and to Sunday school; he carried it with him on his bike as he roamed the neighborhood; he even took it to bed with him. And he used it, incessantly. In less than two days he'd gone through the three rolls of film.

"Let's not overdo it, sport," cautioned Harry Lee's father at the dinner table. "Film costs money, you know."

"Oh, Ralph," snapped Joan pettishly. "I hope you're not going to begrudge Harry Lee the means to pursue his hobby. It's marvelous he's at last found something to interest him."

Well, hadn't Dr. Armitage, the psychologist, said much the same thing? For Harry Lee had been a source of worry to his parents ever since kindergarten. He was not, to put it plainly, an *ordinary* child. As Dr. Armitage had said: "Harry Lee is not a *verbal* person, but he does have this extraordinary *visual* sense. Our tests have proved that. What he needs is something to take him out of himself, but no, I'd say he's much too young to be labeled a social misfit."

Now Harry Lee's father left the table. "I'd better do my Saturday samaritan act. See you later."

Joan had talked him into mowing the lawn and doing other odd jobs for her friend Betty Vanderhoff who lived a couple of blocks down the street. Joan felt a consuming pity for poor Betty, who was married to a frequently absent traveling salesman, an abusive brute of a man whose unreasonable jealousy had led to more than one act

of violence. Once Betty had even had him arrested.

Neither Ralph nor Joan was quite so pleased when Harry Lee brought that first batch of snapshots home from the drugstore and proudly displayed them before his parents. Joan was appalled. The birthday snaps were conventional enough, except for the one of Bambi picking her nose. But the others . . .

"Harry Lee, when did you take this?"

With a slyly innocent expression, Harry Lee peered over her shoulder. "I sort of snuck up on you when you and Daddy were having that fight. You didn't even see me."

Joan looked at Ralph. "Honey, anyone would think you were going to murder me."

Ralph chuckled. "I felt like it." It was after that cocktail party at the country club where they'd both had too much to drink. Joan's face was captured in all the ugliness of rage. Ralph, facing her in the picture, had one arm raised as if to give her the back of his hand.

Joan said it wasn't funny. "And look here, Ralph. The one of you in the driveway. It looks as if you're—scratching yourself."

Ralph glared at Harry Lee. "Listen here, sport, you don't just snap pictures you think might be funny. You don't sneak around taking pictures like this."

"Why not, Daddy?"

"Because you don't, that's why."

Joan was rapidly going through the other snaps. "Harry Lee, who *are* these people?"

"I don't know. Just people."

"People you don't even *know?*" Some were obviously taken in town, others in rustic settings. Ralph grabbed one out of Joan's hand. "Hey, this is no stranger. It's the Bentley woman next door."

Joan peered at it. It was a trifle out of focus. "In her backyard behind that high hedge she refuses to clip. But look at all the beer cans! And who is *that?* Oh, my Lord, it *is*. It's the mailman! What's he doing?"

"What's it look like he's doing?" Ralph's voice hardened as he locked a hand over Harry Lee's thin shoulder. "Okay, young man, a hobby's fine. A hobby's great. But you use a little judgment, understand? You take any more pictures like this, your precious camera's going to come up missing. Is that clear?"

Obviously, it wasn't. "Daddy, it's no fun taking dumb old ordinary pictures. No one looks real. They're all pretending."

"Harry Lee," broke in Joan, still studying the snapshots, "where did you take these?"

"Sunday school picnic. Midway Park. Mrs. Ransom took us on a nature walk in the woods. Boring. I snuck off. That's a chestnut tree beside the pond."

"I *know* it's a chestnut tree. Who's that underneath it? It looks almost like Mr. What's-his-name, the new curate, and . . ."

"It is. I guess they got bored, too."

Joan exchanged stunned looks with her husband. Harry Lee was all innocence. "I guess maybe they were getting ready to go skinny-dipping."

"Oh, brother," murmured Ralph.

When Joan discussed this disturbing twist with Dr. Armitage, he did not share her concern. "Don't you see, Harry Lee's trying to make a statement with these pictures. Despite his lack of verbal fluency, he's gifted with extraordinarily precocious insight, the power to discriminate between the genuine and the bogus. Really, you mustn't be alarmed. And I must warn you, it might be disastrous for you to discourage Harry Lee's interest in his hobby. Quite the contrary, you must actively encourage him."

Selling this idea to Ralph in his present state of mind required all Joan's powers of persuasion. He continued thereafter shelling out increasingly larger sums for film and film processing until one evening the doorbell rang and a livid Mrs. Bentley thrust a snapshot into Joan's hands.

"I hate to say this, Mrs. Durstine, but I really think there's something wrong with that boy of yours. I mean the *nerve*. He tried to *sell* me this snapshot."

As snapshots went, it was in clearer focus than the ones Joan had already seen, nor was it grossly offensive apart from its being a rather unflattering picture of its subject who was physically ill-equipped to wear so brief a bikini.

"Can you believe he wanted me to fork over five bucks for it? What he got was a piece of my mind. I wasn't going to make a fuss, but then I find out he pulled the same stunt on others. Mr. Porter, the mailman, happens to be a casual friend of mine, nothing more. I'm a respectable widow. Oh, yes, that kid of yours tried to put the bite on Mr. Porter as well."

This naturally produced a ruckus that left all but Harry Lee in a near hysterical state. Joan managed to talk Ralph out of actually confiscating the camera, although he stoutly refused to advance

another penny for film. This led to a visit shortly thereafter from Tom Pickup, the pharmacist, a bowling buddy of Ralph's, who reported Harry Lee's theft of several rolls of film from the drugstore. Ralph would have seized the camera on the spot had Harry Lee not hidden it and refused to hand it over. Peace was restored only after he promised faithfully to end his blackmail stunts and never, on pain of the most dire punishment, trespass again on other people's privacy.

Soon after this, Harry Lee approached his parents with a request for his own darkroom and equipment to process his films.

"Absolutely not," said Ralph, despite Joan's approval. Harry Lee seemed to accept this meekly enough, but then came up to his father a couple of days later in the backyard where Ralph was preparing the grill for a neighborhood cookout. Harry Lee stood watching for a minute and then ventured to inquire if Mrs. Vanderhoff was coming to the cookout.

Ralph kept fussing with the grill. "Of course. Betty's one of your mom's closest friends. Why do you ask?"

Before replying, Harry Lee glanced back toward the house, then handed Ralph three snapshots. "I guess Mrs. Vanderhoff really appreciates your going over there and washing her car and stuff every Saturday."

Ralph stared at the snapshots for a long moment in absolute silence, a silence one could almost feel. His face appeared to lose a bit of its tan. Slowly he turned his gaze upon Harry Lee.

"I ought to give you the hiding of your life, young man. Didn't I warn you? Didn't I?"

"What's wrong, Daddy? Mommy kisses *me* when I do something nice for her. Why shouldn't Mrs. Vanderhoff kiss you?"

Ralph stuffed the snapshots hastily in his pocket. "You're not showing these to your mother. You're too young to understand, sport, but she might get the wrong idea."

Harry Lee nodded solemnly. "About the darkroom, Daddy. That little cubbyhole in the basement would be perfect. And the stuff I need's not that expensive. I made a list."

Joan congratulated Ralph on finally showing a little more sense about Harry Lee's hobby. Perhaps he'd begun to realize what a truly clever little lad he had for a son.

Harry Lee's modest list of requirements for the darkroom grew in proportion to the advancement of his skill, while Ralph continued

to gripe about the cost of his son's hobby, perfunctory objections lacking any force of decision.

"It's worth every penny," said Joan, "considering the change it's made in Harry Lee's behavior."

"Don't kid yourself. Just because he's stopped trying to blackmail the neighbors doesn't mean he's changed. I don't trust him. He's too quiet, too sly."

"Did it ever occur to you that Harry Lee might not trust *you,* Ralph?"

Ralph gave her a sharp look. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"He gave you his word he wasn't up to any more tricks with his camera, and then he catches you snooping around his darkroom. Trust is a two-way street, you know."

"What's he trying to hide? Why should he need a cabinet with a padlock strong enough for Fort Knox? How do we know he's not still up to his tricks? Besides, it's what goes on in that other darkroom I worry about."

"What other darkroom?"

"His brain."

"Dr. Armitage has given us nothing but good reports about Harry Lee."

"Dr. Armitage sees him one hour a week."

"And how many hours do you see him? Or see me, for that matter."

"Meaning what?"

When she frowned, Joan's face bore an uncanny resemblance to her son's. "All these late hours at the office. And even on Saturdays I find it hard to plan anything, never knowing how soon you'll be home."

"You saying *you* don't trust me? Is that what this is all about?"

"Let's just drop it, okay? I'm sick to death of arguing."

The arguments nevertheless continued, grew more frequent and acrimonious. It was as if, with Bambi spending the summer with her grandmother and Harry Lee occupied in the basement or out taking pictures, the couple felt less constrained to hide their differences. Joan wished keenly for someone to confide in. Of her friends, she had always felt closest to Betty Vanderhoff, yet in the past few months Betty seemed to have grown distant and aloof, all but inaccessible.

One afternoon, just as Joan hung up after hearing another of Betty's excuses for being unable to get together for lunch, she turned

to find Harry Lee regarding her thoughtfully from the basement doorway.

"I don't understand it," she said. "Betty and I used to be so close."

With one of his familiar scowls, Harry Lee said, "Doesn't Mrs. Vanderhoff have a husband, Mommy?"

"Occasionally. He's away a lot, selling. Just as well for Betty. He's not a very nice man."

"You mean he does bad things?"

"Well, if vowing to kill your wife if you find her with another man isn't bad, I don't know what is." At times when they were alone together, Joan found herself talking to Harry Lee as if he were indeed the adult his unchildlike manner implied.

Harry Lee was silent for a moment, then said, "Doesn't he have an office or anything, like Daddy?"

"His firm has an office downtown. Company called Bancroft Engineering. I suppose he works out of there."

Harry Lee leaned lightly against his mother's thigh. "Mommy, do you love Daddy a lot?"

Joan stooped to plant a kiss on his pale cheek. "Of course I do, darling. What a funny question."

"Then why are you always fighting?"

"Maybe if we stopped fighting something worse would happen. Maybe we fight because we *do* love each other."

"What do you mean, something worse?"

She gave him a vigorous hug. "Oh, Mommy's just talking, sweetheart. I don't know. Maybe if Daddy spent more time at home things would be better. But don't you worry your head about it. Everything will work itself out."

Three weeks later Joan received a breathless phone call from Marlene Shevory, one of the women Joan and Betty used to play bridge with.

"Joan! Have you heard the awful news? Betty Vanderhoff is dead!"

"*No.*"

"Wait, there's more. Not just dead—murdered! Bob told me all about it. It should be in the paper tonight." Bob Shevory was a detective on the police force.

"Oh, my God, you don't suppose her husband—"

"Who else? Lew's already in custody. No surprise, really. We all know he threatened to kill Betty if he ever caught her playing around. You know what that guy's like."

"You mean she *was*—playing around, I mean?"

"So it appears. Bob was there when they questioned Lew. Seems somebody sent Lew photographs of Betty and some guy. That's what set him off. I suppose Lew must have hired a private eye to keep tabs on Betty, although he denies it."

"Then they know who the man was," said Joan. "The guy Betty was seeing?"

"That's the funny part. Whoever took the pictures knew what he was doing. They show Betty's face—and a lot more—clear as crystal, but the guy's face is too blurry to recognize. Lucky for him, I'd say, or it might have been a double murder."

Joan shuddered. "Poor Betty. No wonder she's been too busy to see me. Ralph will be stunned. He always said he didn't much like Betty, but he was a real doll about doing little things for her—at my urging."

As it happened, Ralph had already heard the news before coming home that night. It seemed to have affected him more strongly than Joan might have expected. After all, it wasn't as if he really *liked* Betty. He had three drinks before dinner and was unusually quiet at the table. It seemed to have been unnecessary for Joan to caution him against mentioning the murder in front of Harry Lee. "Not that he doesn't know about it. He was in the kitchen this afternoon when Marlene called me."

Several times Joan looked up from her plate to find Ralph staring morosely across the table at Harry Lee, who sat chewing his food with his customary air of placid deliberation.

"What's the matter, Ralph? You're not eating."

"I'm not hungry."

He disappeared into the den as soon as he left the table. Harry Lee helped with the dishes and then vanished into the basement. Joan removed her apron, touched up her makeup, and combed her hair before opening the den door.

"Ralph, come into the living room for a minute."

"What for?" He lay on the sofa staring at the ceiling, the newspaper open across his chest.

"You'll see."

When he entered the room he found Joan perched on the loveseat, Harry Lee in the middle of the room adjusting his camera on its tripod.

Joan patted the seat beside her. "Come sit down. Harry Lee wants to take our picture."

For a moment it appeared Ralph might object, then meekly he took his place beside her. Harry Lee, head cocked to one side, stood mutely regarding them.

"Not like that," he said finally. "Sit closer. And Daddy, put your arm around Mommy."

Ralph did as he was ordered. Harry Lee made a final adjustment to the lens and looked up with that quirky frown which seemed to add years to his age.

"That's it," he said. "That's perfect. But smile, Daddy, smile!"

DETECTIVERSE

DEBT BLOW

by DIXIE J. WHITTED

After tracing a killer from Kent,
With his money and energy spent,
Holmes found on his door
The dread Sign of Four:
"Butcher, Baker, Suitmaker and Rent."

a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

William Bankier's human-interest stories are among his best, and we have noticed a recurring theme in those we've published recently. Often the protagonist is, if not exactly a rolling stone, someone without the traditional roots of marriage and family. What makes these stories so interesting is the alternative attachments the characters form—a reflection, perhaps, of the times in which we live. . . .

OUT OF THE ASHES

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Perry Lockhart opened the glove compartment and frowned at his collection of parking tickets. After only four months in Baytown, he had $180 worth. That was a lot of money for a man who sold household cleaning products door to door. And whose most recent commission check was half what he used to earn in Montreal. Next time he was around the market square he would visit the police station and see if he could get Gordie Rubinstein to write them off.

What happened to Nick Maddox this morning? It was half past nine. Lockhart and his trainee were thirty minutes late getting started. Climbing out of the old grey Chevy, the Montrealer slammed the door and stood there, breathing hard. These days, even getting out from behind the wheel was an effort. The bathroom scales at the boardinghouse had scared him this morning. He was nine pounds heavier than the last time he checked his weight. It was a hassle to tuck his shirt inside his pants. Lockhart recognized the problem. Banished to the boondocks by the boss at Snoball Products, he had lost much of his self-esteem. One way out was to eat himself to death.

"This is only for a few months," Corinna had told him as he was putting his things in the car. They both knew she was lying. "You'll get established in Baytown. You'll develop the territory and start making good commissions. Then I'll come and join you."

They didn't even kiss goodbye. There was too much resentment in the air. Catching her with the boss in the corner office that Friday afternoon when he came in late was a moment Lockhart would never forget. There was a smell of whisky as he opened the door. He heard sudden movement as the two of them changed positions quickly. Then he was standing, frozen, with his heart trying to break through his rib cage.

"Perry!" Corinna could always smile. "We're just having a little drink."

"Grab a glass," the boss said, scrubbing a balled handkerchief across his mouth.

Lockhart made things worse, if that were possible, by dropping his sample cases and walking away. Leaving the building, driving home to the empty cottage on the lakeshore.

The weekend was painful. They were civil to each other but the buried animosity was a constant threat. Corinna spent a lot of time on the telephone, upstairs where he could not hear her. Lockhart was glad there were no children to be hurt by this miserable affair.

On Monday, he confronted his boss on the sixteenth floor of the building on Dorchester Boulevard. The executive was not impressed. He said Lockhart was making a lot out of a little. He advised him to grow up. He pointed out it took two to tango. Corinna, who had been a secretary at the head office before Lockhart came aboard, was a big girl. She could make up her own mind what she wanted to do with her life.

A white Thunderbird turned the corner and rolled to a stop behind the Chevy. Nick Maddox slipped out, slammed the door, and sauntered forward, hands in the pockets of his grey glen-check suit. His white shirt was open at the collar, a striped tie loosened and pulled well down. "Hey there, Pere," he said. "Sorry I'm late."

"You overslept."

"No, she did." The grin was joyful. Teeth right out of a chewing-gum commercial. Thick red hair close-cropped and healthy as the pelt of a forest animal.

"Then let's do it." Both men climbed into the older car, Lockhart switched on and began the short drive to the neighbourhood they would be working that day.

Maddox said, "We should take my car."

"Too flashy. People don't want to buy from somebody who owns a better car than they do."

Lockhart understood why the company had hired Nick Maddox. He was one of Baytown's brightest and best. But there was something missing. The description "underachiever" came to mind. Star quarterback on the high-school football team, Nick opted not to go on to college. Instead, he was extending his teenage freedom into his twenties, cutting a swathe, getting away with it. Until his father pinned him down and used financial incentives to force him into the trainee job.

The company accepted him because Nick would be an asset in Baytown if he ever got his act together, while his father, publisher of the Baytown *Banner*, would always be a good friend to have. But there was a difference of opinion in the Maddox household.

"My mother hates me doing this," Maddox said one day as he and his paunchy supervisor were eating hamburgers for lunch at The Round Spot. "She thinks it's beneath me."

"I bet she doesn't like the girls you go out with, either."

"How did you guess?"

"Mothers do that for a living." Lockhart's mother, recently deceased, had been suspicious of Corinna. "They aren't always wrong."

Maddox was watching his companion eat in the mirror behind the counter. There was admiration in his stare. "You're this funny guy, Pere," he said. "You just plod along and do what you're supposed to do. You're real patient with me, you never hassle me."

"I'm being paid to show you the job."

"I've had lots of teachers. They were mostly little dictators."

"Speaking of funny. When you call me Pere? I know you mean it as short for Perry." Lockhart finished his burger and began licking relish from his fingers. "But in Montreal, it's the French word for father."

Something happened to the young man's handsome face. "That's all right with me," he said.

There was no predicting how a day would go. This one went better than the average. Maddox would station himself on a front porch, a pace behind Lockhart and one to the left. The older man, holding a brochure and a free sample of rug cleaner, would ring the bell.

"Good morning, ma'am. We represent 'Snoball Products,' the complete line of household cleaners that saves you money and cuts down on your work."

"Aren't you Oscar Maddox's boy?" The lady in the doorway was focussing on Nick. "My son Gary was on the football team with you. You'd better come inside."

This was a good sale. Not all householders recognized Nick, not every encounter ended with a signed page in the order book. But it was a better than average day.

They quit work at four because the ladies were busy preparing supper now and would not want to see a salesman at the door. "Let me buy you a beer," Nick suggested.

"Sounds good to me."

They drove in both cars down the hill to Front Street, where they parked close to the Coronet Hotel. Nick led the way into the men's beverage-room and took a table near the door.

When the cold draft beer was on the mahogany table and the first long swallow had half-emptied a glass, Nick said, "Are you planning on settling down in Baytown?"

"That was the idea. It may not be in the cards."

"Let me guess. Your wife doesn't want to come. She hates small towns."

"Something like that."

They drank beer until six o'clock. Then Nick said, "Come up home for supper."

"I'm not expected."

"My mother doesn't do the work, the housekeeper does." Nick got up from the table. "Come on, she'll set another place."

They drove both cars to Lockhart's roominghouse on Station Street. There, he parked the Chevy and got into the Thunderbird for the drive up the hill to a grey stone two-storey building on an acre of ground. There was a curving gravel driveway between mature maples and oaks.

Naomi Maddox was custodian of the handsome features inherited by her only son. She was elegant in a white linen suit. Her golden hair, in a clever salon cut, moved when she did. She offered Lockhart a cool hand and a matching greeting. Then she went in the kitchen to speak with "Cook" while Nick led his guest into a den and found two beers in a small refrigerator. The telephone extension emitted a giveaway jingle. "She's calling Father," Nick explained. "Ordering him home to help her cope."

Oscar Maddox was a matching bookend for Naomi. His gunmetal pin-stripe suit was expensively tailored for his tall, athletic frame. The red hair, darkened by age, was parted in the middle and slicked

back behind aristocratic bat's ears. As he made what he called "a couple of sundowners" for himself and his wife, he delivered a lecture to his son. The speech played as if he had been working on it all afternoon in the editorial offices of the Baytown *Banner*.

"Mr. Lockhart knows exactly what he is doing, Nick. You would do well to follow his example. He did the right thing in coming here from Montreal. Virgin territory, waiting for the right man to get in there and open it up."

The younger Maddox coughed into his beer and winked at Lockhart.

"I predict he will prosper, sooner rather than later. Promotion will follow. The company will expand and, at that time, an ambitious trainee will move onward and upward. I trust the message in what I am saying is not being lost on you, son."

"Message received and noted."

"Don't make fun of your father, Nicholas," Naomi said, drawing attention to the boy's sarcasm.

Oscar handed a glass to his wife. Clink, sip, kisses in space. "I suggest we move to the table," Maddox said.

With the beverage-room beers inside him, plus two in the library, and now endless wine with the roast beef, Lockhart was tight enough that he almost began to enjoy himself. But he never quite lost the feeling that he was not really welcome here, that he would have to use a gun to get in again. Nick might have been sincere with his invitation. But maybe he also wanted to aggravate his parents. Or, at the very least, to let Perry see what he was coping with at home.

"I went to bed at one last night," Maddox said to his son. "I was watching the late show. You were not in when I turned out the light."

"I was with friends."

"That Keefer girl?"

"No, she took off for Toronto last autumn. After you cornered her in the boathouse at the cottage. Don't you remember, Father?"

Naomi rolled her eyes in Lockhart's direction. "The things the boy says."

"I still hear from her. But it was Marie Clarke last night. Would you like me to invite her over so you could get to know her better?"

Lockhart thanked his hostess and left immediately after the meal. He said he had paperwork to attend to before bed. He refused Nick's offer of a lift, saying the walk home would clear his head. And it

was downhill all the way. Outside, he dropped some change when he was taking out his handkerchief. Bending over, searching at the base of some shrubbery, he heard Naomi Maddox's voice baying just inside an upstairs window.

"Is that silent oaf supposed to be training my son? God!"

The following evening, Lockhart found the time to drive by the market square, park in front of the arena, and walk across to the police station. Sergeant Gordie Rubinstein was on duty at a desk just inside the open doorway. He looked up as the salesman came in. "Hey, it's Vido Musso!" he said, referring to a famous saxophone player in the Stan Kenton band.

"It's Shelley Manne!" Lockhart retorted, invoking the name of the band's percussionist. On his first Friday night in town, Lockhart had driven up West Hill to the fairgrounds where he walked in stag to the regular dance at the Park Pavilion. He was on the wall, drinking a soda, watching the dancers, and enjoying the local orchestra, The Admirals, who were surprisingly good. When they struck up the stock arrangement of Kenton's "Eager Beaver," a gangling, balding man beside him, wearing his white shirt collar neatly folded outside the lapels of his blue blazer, said, "Yeah!" and began reacting to the up-tempo swing. His eyes were brimming with elation.

When the number ended, Lockhart said, "The real thing."

"Did you ever see the band?"

"In Montreal, at the Seville Theater. Between movies. The tartan jackets alone were worth the price of admission. Not to mention Maynard playing 'Maria.' "

Gordie Rubinstein introduced himself. "I saw them at the Palace Pier in Toronto. I think I own everything they ever recorded."

When the pavilion closed, the men drove down the hill in the Chevy for steak dinners at the Paragon Cafe. At some time during the meal, Rubinstein announced he was a police officer. Lockhart told about his demotion to the Baytown market without getting into the problem with Corinna. After eating, they transferred to Rubinstein's bungalow near the golf course. The rooms were furnished with a good eye. "All her work," the policeman said, presenting a framed photograph of a young woman with a broad forehead and calm eyes. "She drowned swimming in Oak Lake," he said. "We'd been married less than a year."

Lockhart felt as if he'd walked into a wall in a dark room. "Lord, how does a person deal with that?"

"It was six years ago," Rubinstein said, because there was no other answer to the question.

They listened to other bands besides Kenton. Rubinstein's collection of 78s and tapes filled three shelves under a counter topped by two sixteen-inch turntables and a cassette deck. Django, Pres, Bird, Slim and Slam, Dickie Wells, Art Tatum . . . the program was diverse. When the sky brightened, they ate scrambled eggs and toast and drank two quarts of orange juice. Then the weary salesman drove home and went to sleep.

Now, he said to the Baytown cop behind his desk, "Got a problem, Gordie." He produced the parking tickets, bound together by a rubber band. "What am I supposed to do with these?"

Rubinstein riffled through the citations, lips moving as he ran a total in his head. "Hundred and eighty," he said, eyebrows raised.

"That's a lot of money for me. I have to leave my car on the street when I walk door to door. Some traffic warden hates my Quebec plates."

Rubinstein grinned. "The whole Quebec independence thing has certain people ticked off." He removed the rubber band and spread the tickets on the desk. "There may be a way."

"I'd sure appreciate it."

"Listen." Rubinstein changed his mood. "Is the Maddox kid still working with you?"

"Most days."

"Be careful."

"What do you mean?"

"He could be trouble."

"He's just a kid."

"On the surface. Keep quiet about this, okay?" The policeman focussed on Lockhart, eye to eye. "Cocaine is coming through here in large amounts."

"Through Baytown?"

"Some stays here. Not much. We know who uses it and we're not worried. But the bulk of it is shipped to Toronto. Big, big money. The provincial police are about to become involved. Chief Greb is not happy. He wants it cleaned up. Fast. By us."

Lockhart thought about it. "Is Nick involved?"

"We're almost certain. We have no proof. But it's only a matter of time."

A rotund man in his late fifties and wearing a blue uniform came through the open doorway. His leather belt squeaked and so did one boot.

"Morning, Chief," Rubinstein said.

"What's all this?" Greb's attention was on the parking tickets instantly. He began turning them over one at a time, as if he might reveal the Hanged Man.

Rubinstein explained Lockhart's problem, having introduced the Montrealer. He did a good job of justifying his friend's parking situation.

Greb wasted no time coming to a judgement. "Pay the tickets," he said, walking away and disappearing into his office.

Lockhart telephoned Montreal, discouraged and finished for the day at three o'clock. He got hold of Corinna at the head office. "Are you able to talk?"

"What's up?"

"It isn't working."

"Give it time."

"I should never have left. I think I'll come back."

This got her attention. "Don't, Perry."

"That's my territory. What am I doing in bloody Baytown? I'm being harassed. I got another parking ticket today, two hundred bucks since I came here."

"Is that it? You want me to send you money?"

"I want to come home."

"It can never be the way it was."

Friday morning, Nick Maddox did not put in an appearance. Lockhart waited past nine-thirty, then started off on his rounds. He did not do well. No doubt about it, the kid made a difference.

At five, he parked in the market square, within sight of the Coronet Hotel. But before going there, he dropped in on Gordie Rubinstein. "I still didn't pay those tickets," he said. "Am I embarrassing you in front of the chief?"

"Greb has other things on his mind," the cop said.

"When do you finish? I'm going for a beer."

"I'm here till ten o'clock."

There was something about this town in summer. Doorways were always open, and you never left directly. You lingered, and thought of something else to say. "Young Maddox never showed today."

"He's part of the problem." Rubinstein made a face. "We'd like to haul his butt in here and question him about the drug traffic. But his old man owns the paper."

"I know."

"They've been running negative stories on Greb. His contract is up for renewal in the spring. He'd like to be extended for another five years. If he busts Oscar Maddox's son for drugs, valid or not, Maddox will finish him off."

"I don't believe Nick is guilty."

"Go drink your beer, Perry. And keep on dreaming."

Lockhart occupied his favourite table, enjoying the buzz of conversation, the smell of the hops, the breeze from the ceiling fan. Nick Maddox arrived just before dark. He was dressed in black jeans and pullover. He had not shaved. His eyes were active. "Good, you're here." He sat down and picked up Lockhart's beer.

"Where were you?"

"I had to get some things together. I did a lot of driving today. Listen. Can I borrow your car?"

Lockhart craned his neck for a look out the window and along Front Street. He saw the Thunderbird parked in front of the cigar store. "What's the matter with your own?"

"I want to go somewhere and not be conspicuous."

"I've got a lot of unpaid parking violations. You might get hauled in."

"That's the least of my worries. Will you give me the key to the Chevy? I'll leave it in front of your place when I'm finished with it."

"Are you in trouble, Nick?"

"No." The bright eyes kept on flitting, settling everywhere but on Lockhart.

"I know you can't talk to your folks. You could talk to me."

"Aren't they a pair?" Maddox took out the key to the Thunderbird and slid it in front of his companion. "Treat yourself to a ride home."

Lockhart handed over his key. "Why do I feel I shouldn't be doing this?" he said.

The impulse to follow Maddox, to keep an eye on him, was overpowering. As soon as Nick left the beverage room, Lockhart got up from the table and stood in the doorway. Without being seen, he was able to watch the boy unlock the Chevy, climb behind the wheel, start up, and pull away. Catching up would not be a problem; Nick was driving slowly, becoming accustomed to the strange car.

Lockhart had somewhat the same problem with the Thunderbird. But the powerful car had fewer idiosyncrasies than his old clunker. Soon he was crossing the south bridge over the river and turning left on Water Street with the taillights of the Chevy visible ahead.

They were crossing the Bay Bridge. Whatever Maddox's secret business might be, it was leading the cars into Prince Edward County. The road climbed and turned, cutting through farm country, past cornfields and orchards. Lockhart had to concentrate on not getting too close. Maddox seemed to be in no hurry.

Lockhart pushed radio buttons, finally hitting music. It was the local station, its powerful signal dominating the AM band. He recognized the closing bars of the Tommy Dorsey classic, "Opus No. 1." "This is Einar Klein's Nachtmusic on CBAY. And this is Einar Klein speaking, reaching back for the vintage tracks. Are you ready for this? Jazz at the Philharmonic with its once-in-a-lifetime rendition of 'Perdido.' Hold on, now. Flip Phillips is about to blow all the choruses you really need."

Lockhart could not believe his luck. He was gliding through darkness in a plush bucket seat surrounded by an astronaut's control panel, warm orange and green. Powerful music was rocking and rolling out of the quadraphonic speakers. His anxieties, the unpaid tickets, his humbling banishment from Montreal, Corinna's betrayal—none of these imperfections could touch him now as he followed the broken white line along a golden tunnel through the night.

Maddox was slowing down. Lockhart did too, keeping his distance. The Chevy pulled off the road and stopped. Lockhart rolled onto the shoulder, well off the pavement and behind a cluster of low shrubs. He switched off, the lights died, the music ended abruptly. He waited, face at the open window.

In the silence, he smelled a large body of water, heard the lapping of waves. They were at the shore of Lake Ontario. As his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, Lockhart could distinguish between the black shoreline and a paler mass which was the lake. Ten minutes passed.

The door-slam of the Chevy was a familiar sound. Lockhart saw a shaft of light moving across uneven ground. Maddox was walking down to the shore.

Leaving the heavy door open, he climbed out of the T-bird and felt his way through tussocks of knee-high grass. The ground was packed sand. As he crossed a ridge above the water, Lockhart almost

fell. He crawled the rest of the way on hands and knees.

In addition to the rhythmic surge and clatter of waves, there was now a new element. In the distance, a powerful inboard engine rumbled as a launch approached. Maddox's light made sweeping motions. The launch drew closer, the engine throttled down, then cut back to a coughing idle. Lockhart could see a broad-faced light a quarter of a mile out. Soon he could hear the dip and splash of oars, pulling hard.

A skiff took shape in the beam from the light on shore. One man rowed. Another was kneeling in the prow. A few yards from shore, he jumped over the gunwale and waded through water knee-deep. He was carrying a suitcase, which he handed to Nick Maddox. Maddox was ready with an envelope in his hand. He passed it over. The man from the boat glanced inside the envelope, then thrust it up under the front of his sweater. A few words were spoken. Finally, with Maddox lighting the way, the stranger splashed back to the skiff and climbed aboard.

Lockhart knew it was time to get out of there. The transaction was over. He crawled for twenty yards, then crouched and ran back to the car. Inside, he watched Nick arrive at the back end of the Chevy. He unlocked the trunk, stowed the suitcase, slammed the lid, then hurried forward to place himself behind the wheel. In seconds, he was switched on and under way, tires throwing sand until the car slewed back onto the road.

Lockhart took off in pursuit. Now he had a decision to make. What had just happened was clear. Maddox was, indeed, involved in the shipment of drugs to Toronto, probably from the same source across the lake in New York State. The suitcase no doubt held several kilos of cocaine. Cash payment was in the envelope. The question was, what should he do now?

The fact that the illegal cargo was in the trunk of his car could be a problem. If Nick wanted to, he could say the Montrealer was in on it. Why else had he let his car be used for the pickup? It would be his word against that of the son of the *Banner* publisher.

Anyway, there was nothing in it for Lockhart. He was by no means committed to staying in this town. Who cared whether cocaine arrived in Toronto through Baytown or through the international airport? Arrive it would, regardless. Any involvement could result in his getting sucked in and being falsely accused. He knew of at least one vindictive member of the local police. What about all the tickets attracted by his Quebec plates?

The twin red lights ahead were pulling away. Maddox was in a hurry to get wherever he was going. The road was deserted except for these two cars. Despite his wish not to become involved, Lockhart found himself putting his right foot down. The powerful car surged ahead. The red lights came back quickly as the distance closed.

Inside the Chevy, Nick Maddox was breathing hard. His pant cuffs were wet from the exchange at the shore. His heart pounded with excitement. This was big time! With his share from the delivery, the largest ever by far, he could get out of Baytown. No more accepting handouts from his father, with all the strings attached. He could get out from under the suffocating influence of his mother. With the cord cut at last, he could go and never look back.

Headlights in the rearview mirror nearly blinded him. Why didn't the driver overtake and pass? He was the only other car on the road. Suddenly, Maddox realised he was being followed. Impulsively, he pressed the accelerator and the old car vibrated as its speed passed sixty. The road had many curves. Some were not properly banked. The young driver had to concentrate, leaning his weight as the car swerved around a sharp turn. The steering was loose, the unfamiliar wheel needed a lot of split-second correction. Another turn the other way. Nick cursed at the top of his voice as the Chevy left the road, skidded across gravel and grass, turned 360 degrees twice, then slammed against a tree. The door flew open and Nick, not wearing a seat belt, was thrown from the car. With a muffled explosion, the Chevy burst into flames.

Lockhart saw the revolving headlights. He heard the collision and saw the fire. The Chevy was burning fast, totally engulfed now in flames. Nick was lying too close. Leaving the T-bird's lights on, he ran and dragged the unconscious man farther away. He knelt beside him, looking for blood. There was none. But there was an eerie stillness to the figure lying prone. Maddox was not breathing.

Lockhart tried to remember what he had read about mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. He drew down Nick's jaw, put fingers inside his mouth to make sure he had not swallowed his tongue. The throat was clear. He pulled back Nick's head so that the chin was up. Then he inhaled, put his lips to Nick's open mouth, and blew breath inside. At the same time, he applied synchronized pressure to his chest. He repeated the process. Nothing was happening.

A car approached and slowed on the winding road. It rolled to a stop. The driver came running. "Are you all right?"

"I am, he's not," Lockhart said. "Get to a phone."

"I've got one in my car." The man ran away.

Lockhart continued the CPR. He could hear the man's voice a short distance away as he summoned the paramedics. Lockhart's right hand was on Maddox's chest. He felt a rise and fall. Nick was breathing!

Ten minutes later, an ambulance arrived from Baytown. The pros took over. One of them got up from examining the accident victim and approached Lockhart, who was standing with the other driver. "Are you the one who did the CPR?"

Lockhart raised a hand. He felt too weak to say anything.

"You saved the guy's life," the paramedic said. There was respect in his eyes.

The ambulance drove away with Maddox inside. A police tow-truck would be there soon to haul away the burnt-out hulk of the Chevy. The other driver went home when Maddox said he would be the one to wait and describe the accident to the cops.

Alone at the scene, Lockhart went closer to his car and looked at what was left. The trunk lid had sprung open in the fire. The suitcase and its contents were smoldering ashes. If the police examined it closely, they might determine it had been full of cocaine. It would confirm their suspicions about Nick Maddox.

On the other hand, they might just haul the wreck away. It would depend on whether they bought Lockhart's story.

When the police arrived minutes later, he kept it simple. He had always wanted to drive a Thunderbird. So, after a few beers at the Coronet, he had persuaded his friend, Nick Maddox, to let him have a test drive. Nick took over Lockhart's Chevy. It was fun. But out here on the winding road, he was timid with the unfamiliar car. Nick, who was following, became impatient. He tried to pass and lost control. Fortunately, according to the paramedics, Nick was probably going to be all right. "I hope I can persuade him to buy me a new car," Lockhart concluded.

Oscar Maddox and Naomi were on their way out of Baytown General as Lockhart was going in to see Nick. Maddox saw the salesman coming and peeled off to confront him. His wife kept on walking toward the parking lot. "They tell me you saved my son's life," the publisher said.

"I did what anyone would have done."

"But you did it. If there's anything I can do for you, let me know."

Lockhart thought about it. "Actually, there is. I have some parking tickets I haven't been able to pay."

"Forget about them," Maddox said. "I'll talk to Chief Greb this afternoon."

Lockhart went inside the hospital building. Maddox would be surprised when they told him the tickets amounted to $200.

Nick looked good. "I won't be here much longer," he said. "They're running tests, but nobody expects to find anything. Hey, you saved my life."

"Everybody says that."

The boy had not stopped peering into Lockhart's eyes. "You were following me."

"I was curious."

"Did you see it happen?"

"The drug delivery? Sure did."

"They tell me the Chevy burned. Did you check it out?"

"The suitcase went up in smoke. And everything in it."

Maddox thought about that. At last he said, "The people in Toronto should let me off the hook when they hear. It was a done deal, they won't like it. But they'll write it off." He frowned. "And I won't get paid."

"You're through with that kind of money anyway, Nick. I've been meaning to tell you."

"I don't want to hear this."

"Because if you keep on with it, I intend to have a chat with my friend Gordie Rubinstein. They suspect you already. My eyewitness account could put you away."

Maddox closed his eyes. It was as if he were talking in his sleep. "Why would you do that to me?"

Lockhart leaned forward and placed a hand over one of Nick's hands on the folded bedspread. "They call it tough love," he said. "Remember, I'm your *pere.*"

A nurse came into the room. She wrapped a cuff around the patient's arm and checked his blood pressure. "How do you feel?" she asked.

"Ready to go home."

"Talk to the doctor when you see him this evening."

When she was gone, Lockhart said, "Consider this. You're a good kid but you're screwing up. You need a fresh start."

"Save your breath."

"In case I need it for another mouth-to-mouth?" Lockhart grinned at the handsome face on the pillow. "I'm heading back to Montreal. I should never have left. When I get back, I'm going to tell the boss to give me back my territory. If he won't, there are other firms I can work for. I'm a good salesman."

"You don't even have a car."

"And you're coming with me. You're a better salesman than I am."

The boy was not ready. "Stuff that. I don't need another old man telling me what to do."

"You need this one," Lockhart said.

That evening, the telephone rang at Lockhart's roominghouse. It was Nick Maddox calling from the hospital. "Progress report," he said. "They just told me I go home tomorrow. So listen. We could head for Montreal whenever you say."

"You decided to come?"

"I've done crazier things. I can give it a trial."

Not for a long time had Perry Lockhart felt so triumphant. "Then all I have to do is get some wheels and we can hit the road."

"That's not a problem," Nick said. "I'm taking care of the paperwork tomorrow. You now own a white Thunderbird."

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People on the go always have so much to carry around. The Everything Bag makes it a snap. This oversized shoulder bag is constructed of tough, water-resistant canvas material and features nine roomy pockets. Plus, an unusual zipper design enables the bag to expand to double its normal width—to a full eight inches. Adjustable 2" wide straps provides a real comfort feature. In 3 great colors. **$24.98** ($4.00) #A1955-Blue; #A1956-Khaki; #A1957-Gray.

TO ORDER: Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in ( ) payable to **MAILORDER MALL**, Dept. 122 EL; P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-365-8493**. NJ residents add 6% sales tax. We honor MasterCard/Visa Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or C.O.D orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. 30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund. Allow 30 days for delivery.

▼ LAMBSWOOL DUSTERS

Lambswool contains a natural static charge that makes dust literally leap off surfaces. Our dusters are imported from England. They are the fluffiest, highest quality lambswool in the world! We offer a set of four lambswool dusters: our 27" duster, our telescoping duster which extends to more than four feet—lets you reach high corners, top shelves, overhead lights and collapses to 28", and two mini dusters. **$22.98** ($400) #A1870

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Tired of waking up to an annoying buzz? Why not awake to a crowing rooster and time report! Our battery operated talking alarm clock announces the hour and gives the time with the push of a button. Sleek design in white with LCD readout. Takes 4 "AA" batteries (not included). 5½"x 3"x4". **$27.98** ($4.50) #A1916.