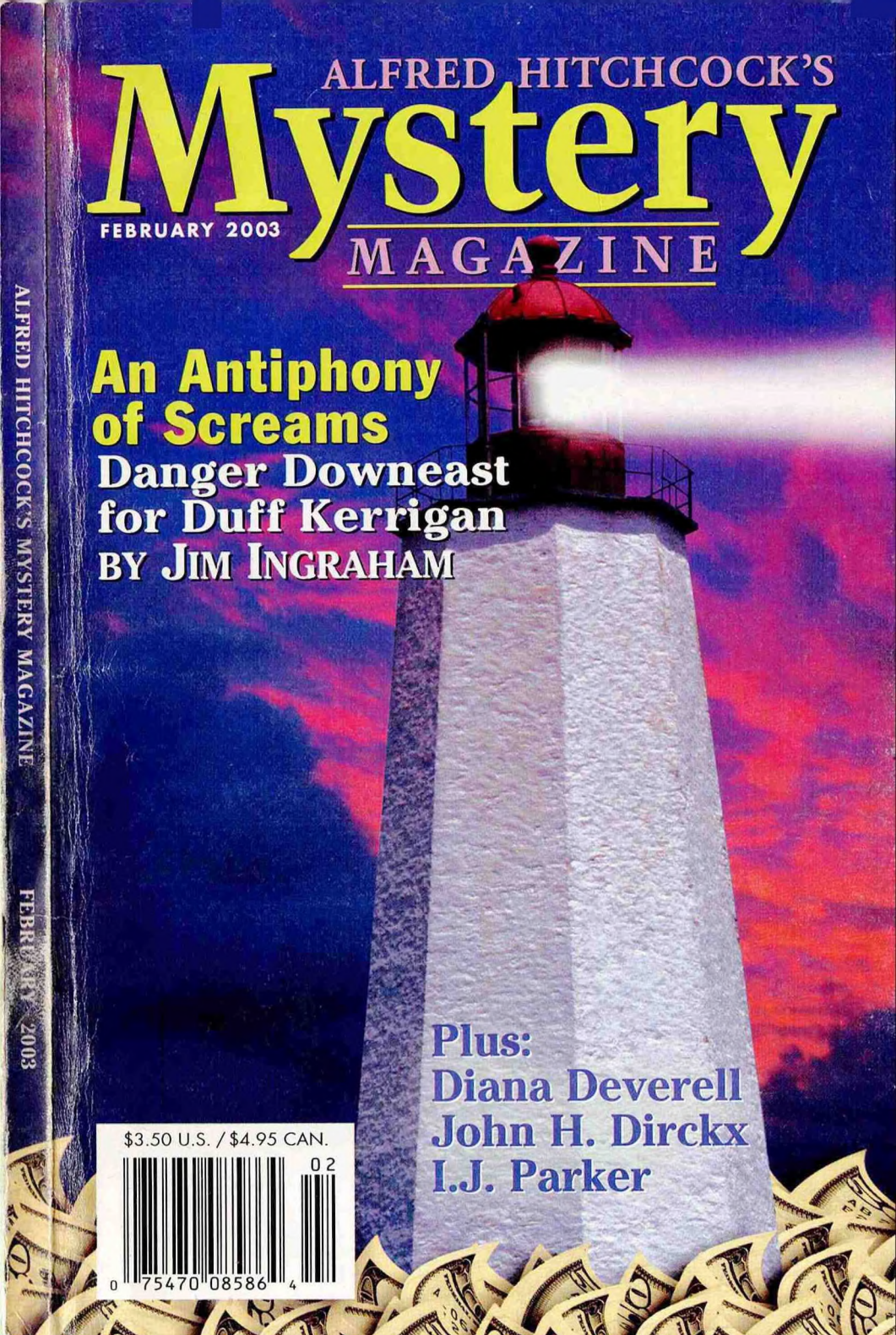
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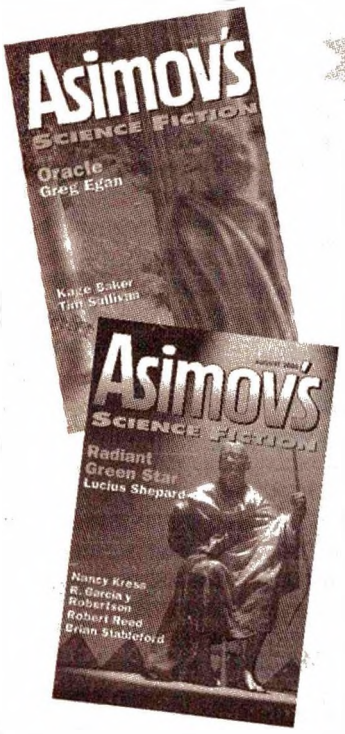

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EDITOR'S NOTES

Linda Landrigan

Stories do more than entertain us; they help us gain purchase in an uncertain world. The stories in this issue feature characters who set aside their own concerns and attempt to improve a small corner of the planet; whether they are successful is less important than that they cared.

Despite her fragile nerves after the fall of the World Trade Center, Molly Lewin, a social worker in Harriet Rzetelny's story "Amazing Grace," reaches out to touch the lives of those most affected when a young street kid is murdered.

In I. J. Parker's new story "The O-bon Cat," Sugawara Akitada's despair over the death of his son leads him to confront the "ghosts" of another family dealing with loss. For those who want to read more of this dignified sleuth from ancient Japan, Ms. Parker's first novel, *Rashomon Gate* (St. Martin's Minotaur), takes readers back to Akitada's early days as a clerk in the Ministry of Justice. As always, the time (eleventh century) and place (ancient Kyoto) are beautifully depicted.

More about this series can be found at www.ijparker.com. And check out our own Website (www.themysteryplace.com) for links to AHMM author sites.

New to us this month is Rick Noetzel, whose "Second from the Right" is his first story publication. This Georgia native comes to writing from a career in computer programming and with some modesty claims, "Norman Rockwell would refuse to paint me because I am too normal. I am an avid reader. I play golf

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AN ANTIPHONY OF SCREAMS

Jim Ingraham

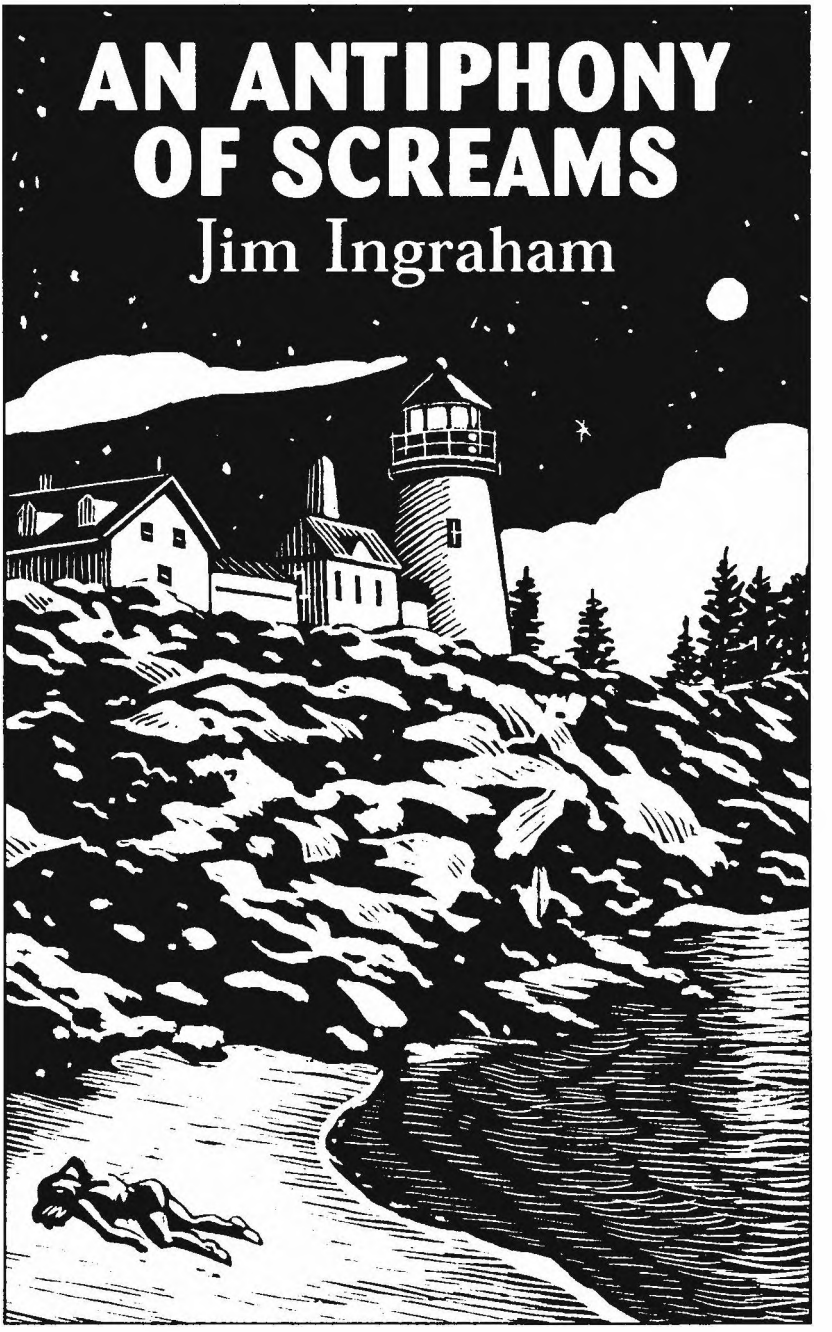


Illustration by Dan Krovatin

At Cape Margaret on the coast of Maine, I stopped my Jeep in darkness in the visitors' parking lot at the lighthouse and watched the Ford Ranger move toward the beach, its headlights shining on scrub pines and juniper and green shacks at the barrier rail where the road ended. The sky was clear and there was a wide streak of light under the moon on the ocean. Salty wind brushed my face as I climbed the fence and slid down the banking and ran along the edge of sand, inhaling odors of dead fish and decaying seaweed.

I was a hundred yards from the pickup truck when it stopped near the shacks. I watched the driver get out and run around to the passenger side, lean in, and pull the girl off the seat. I watched him drag her free of his wheels, step over her, slam the passenger door shut, then run around the truck, get in, and make a half circle and come back up the road. I don't think he saw my Jeep. I don't think he knew I had followed him.

Her name was Susan Crawford and I found her lying face down, grains of sand stirring near her mouth as I shined a light on her. I rolled her onto her back and brushed a thread of seaweed off her face. She wasn't hurt, just moaning drunk. She rolled onto her side and drew up her knees and vomited into the sand, then she lay there shuddering in a stench of wine, sobbing and muttering to herself.

In wind coming in off the ocean I carried her to the lighthouse parking lot and propped her into the passenger side of my Jeep, pushing books and cassettes to the floor. I draped an old army blanket over her and drove the thirty miles down the coast to Brackett Shores. I ought to have called the lawyer, but I was tired and disgusted. I was pretty sure she hadn't been molested. There hadn't been time. If they wanted her in a hospital, her sister would have to bring her. I had done what I was hired to do.

There was warm drool on my neck as I carried her up the brick walk past darkened windows in the old seaside mansion. I pressed my thumb into the white button beside the door. It was more than a minute before the interior hall light came on, then the light over my head. I felt a quiet shock of recognition when Anne Crawford opened the door where so many years ago I had said goodnight to her, smiling into those blue eyes that now stared at me in astonishment from a face I might not have recognized had I met her anywhere but here—no longer the slender girl I had known in high school, now a thirty-three-year-old woman who had become not quite matronly, but was getting there.

"Duff Kerrigan!" she exclaimed, her left hand closing the lapels of her robe, a diamond glinting on her finger. "Oh my God! Is she all right?"

"Just drunk," I said. "May I come in?"

"Oh!" She stepped back, holding the door open, eyes fixed on her sister. "In here." She pointed toward a room that had changed little—the same brown striped wallpaper, the same brown carpet, the same pictures on the walls—a high-ceilinged room I had once thought elegant. Now there were moisture stains on the wallpaper and heavy odors of mold. The pictures looked faded. One of the windows was cracked.

I lowered the girl onto a sofa I remembered well.

"How did you . . . I mean, why you?" She gestured vaguely at Susan, who lay with knees drawn up, her back toward us.

"She needed a ride home."

The answer didn't satisfy her, but she let it go.

"You sure she's all right?" She bent over the girl, feeling her face.

"Far as I know."

She lingered over her sister for a long time, then straightened up and tucked strands of chestnut hair under folds of a blue towel turbaned around her head, as though suddenly self-conscious. "You caught me in the shower," she said with youthful shyness.

I foolishly thought it would be impolite to reject her offer of coffee, so I followed her down the hallway toward the kitchen past framed nineteenth-century paintings, which I now believed of doubtful value but had once been impressed by. Her mother had bought them in Europe. The family, I remembered, had sold some more important paintings years ago, one of them a Juan Gris. It hadn't occurred to me then that the family might be running out of money.

As we passed an open door, a voice called out, "I am indisposed at the moment."

Anne reached for the knob, intending to close the door, but lost her footing and accidentally pushed the door open upon her father, in robe and slippers, sitting at a table in what Anne used to call the library. The room held a strong breath of whiskey and cigarettes.

"My own concoction," he said, raising a glass, pretending to stare at me through jagged crystal. "May I offer you one?"

When I shook my head, he turned to his daughter. "Anne?" His eyes were blearily out of focus.

A strand of white hair fell limply over his left eye. He ran a finger across his forehead to lift the strand and set it carefully among others on his scalp, then lapped his fingers and dabbed clumsily at the top of his head.

Maybe to recapture a memory, I glanced at a painting of him on the far wall made when his hair was black and the muscles of his face were firm. He was in hunter's clothes. There were trees in the background and a ten-gauge shotgun cradled on his forearm. In the dimness of the wooded background there was a faint outline of what looked like an English mansion, no doubt an allusion to ancestors who may never have existed.

"Do you realize," he said, "that every twenty-six million years

our earth is visited by a death star, sister of our sun? Did you know our sun had a sister?"

"I met her at Leona's party the other night," Anne said. "A hot little number." She was holding the doorknob, drawing it toward her, for my benefit hiding disgust behind a weary smile.

"Wait! Don't close it! I'm serious, Anne."

He had lowered his drink and was screwing his face against some interior pain, saliva dropping like a moving thread off his wet lip. He caught it and studied the little pool that formed on his palm.

"Before you get any more serious," Anne said, walking to the table, taking the drink from his hand, "I think you'd better go to bed."

He was studying the drool on his palm, an angry look in his expression. "Don't feel well," he said. His face paled. He pushed his chair back, leaned forward, and threw up all over his knees.

With disgust, Anne closed the door and urged me down the hallway to the kitchen. "I'm sorry you had to witness that."

I was sorry I had come into this house. In the old days I had seen Cyril Crawford only from a distance. The image had always been of a lean, self-confident, flamboyant aristocrat. Watching vomit slide down that aristocrat's chin seemed an unhappy metaphor for this entire evening.

I sat in the kitchen with Anne only long enough to take a few sips of the coffee she made for me. I was tired. It had been a long day, and looking at cracks in the floor and yellowed ceilings and chipped woodwork was depressing. This was more than genteel neglect. The house was falling apart. It smelled of rotting timbers. I was young when I heard that the Crawford thread mill had gone into receivership. I hadn't thought about the effect that might have had on the family that had once been so proud, so envied.

"Like they put their whole fortune on a shingle and pushed it out to sea," Ned Gronig said to me the next morning as we sat over coffee and scrambled eggs in Lefty's Diner—boat horns outside in the harbor, trucks bouncing over the cobblestones, fish odors sneaking through the screened door, distant cries of seagulls. I felt at home here; my loft was in a warehouse just down the street.

A black ant came from behind the salt shaker and was approaching my coffee cup when Ned reached across the table and crushed it with his thumb. He flicked the mangled corpse onto the floor and wiped his thumb on his thigh.

"Hey, Ralph," he yelled at the man behind the counter, "why'n't you spray this place?"

"What for?" Ralph said.

"Bugs. The second one this morning."

"You don't like it, go someplace else."

"Where?"

"Anywhere. This ain't the only restaurant in town."

"This is a restaurant?" Ned grinned at me, a big guy with heavy-lidded eyes, thick curly brown hair, the kind of man who leans over people, dominates them with a benign kind of eagerness. I'd known him since we were kids. He was the last guy on Earth I would have expected to become a lawyer.

"I got the guy's plate number," I said. "He deserves at least a beating."

"He probably saw you following him and knew you'd pick her up. And if you did, you'd stop following him. But he's not important. It'll just be somebody else next time. I'm not out to punish anyone."

"He wasn't just some ape looking for a good time. He came out of the manager's office and went straight to her table. Didn't say a word to the guys sitting with her. He just lifted her to her feet and got her outside to his truck and drove straight to the beach and dumped her. I don't think he knew I was watching."

"She's underage. They just wanted her off the property."

"They've got younger girls than Susan dancing on that stage. That wasn't the reason."

"Maybe you're right." Ned did a little tap dance with his fingers, eyes fixed on mine. "You want to stay with it?"

"The woman who called Anne?"

"Virginia Moranski. She's the hostess out there, a friend, I guess. She said the kid could be in trouble. So I called you."

"That was two hours before I got there. What kind of trouble? She was sitting with some guys. Nothing special going on. She wasn't in the gambling room or anywhere near those little bedrooms in back. They weren't worried she was a minor. That's the least of their sins."

"Maybe, but if it's not connected to what I hired you for, don't get into it. You're costing me money."

"Can I confront Susan directly?"

"I don't care how you do it. Just find out why she's not going back to college. Anne says it's Susan's idea, but I don't believe it. Cyril won't talk to me. Susan thinks I'm a jerk. She was doing great up there. As, a couple of Bs. Everybody up there thought she was coming back. I can't give her that money unless I know it's in her best interest."

When I was hired Ned had told me Susan's grandmother had left a hundred thousand dollars in her will expressly committed to Susan's education. It was what he called a precatory will. The money wasn't in a trust. It was just the old lady's intention that the money be used for college. If Susan wanted it for something else, she'd need Ned's consent. He was the executor of the estate. To get it without his consent, she'd have to wait until she was twenty-five, which was six years away.

"It's Anne who doesn't want to wait," Ned said. "I don't think Susan gives a damn. She doesn't seem to give a damn about anything. And that's what worries

me. She used to be loaded with enthusiasm. Something inside her has died. And it happened suddenly."

"A problem at the college?"

"Not that I could find. Everything up there's paid for. Room, board, tuition, spending money, the whole thing. No smell of scandal. Why the hell would she throw it away? And, believe me, giving it to Anne would be like tossing it into a cyclone. If all Susan wants is to get drunk and meet guys, she could do it off campus and the guys would be her own age, not the losers she's been getting drunk with at The Hangout."

"I'll see what I can find out."

"Just don't get involved with George Baker. Who the hell knows why he does things?"

"He runs the gambling?"

"He owns the place. He runs everything."

That afternoon I found Susan on the hill behind the barn at the rear of the old mansion. She was on a blanket under a dead branch of the only remaining tree of what had once been an apple orchard. She didn't notice me until I was halfway up the path. She glanced at me with mild curiosity, then turned her gaze across the fields and the half mile of salt marsh that stretched way out to the harbor. It was a Monet kind of afternoon—white puffy clouds on a naked sky.

"Why is it you?' she said.

"I don't know. Want me to be someone else?"

"I don't want you to be anything," giving me a brief look of dismissal that reminded me of her mother. She was prettier than either Anne or her mother but seemed no stronger than mist, a pale child in jeans and faded blue blouse, goose bumps pebbling her white arms.

"You cold?"

"I'm trying to get what meager sun there is in this godforsaken New England."

"May I sit down?"

"No."

When I finished laughing, I said, "You remember me?"

"My sister does."

"Come on, Susan. We used to be friends."

"Used to be is a long time ago." She was barefoot, hugging her legs, chin on her knees, her face abandoned to her thoughts.

"You don't remember last night? I brought you home."

"My sister remembers. My sister remembers everything. Please tell me what you want and go away."

"I need something."

"And you came to me. How original."

"I'm looking for someone."

"Bless you."

Her eyes were fixed on something beyond the salt marsh. When I lowered myself to the grass, my knee popped. She looked at my knee, then with serene indifference looked away. The sun was still high over the distant islands, the air fragrant with sea smells. Across the great blanket of trembling grass there

were boat horns bleating in the harbor.

"That guy you were with last night. He have a name?"

"I imagine so."

"Come on. You must know him."

"Ah, yes. I know all the horny Johns on the coast of Maine. My dear sister, I'm sure, told you all about me. I'm the Marilyn Monroe of New England."

"You took a ride with him."

"And that's when you rescued me."

"I brought you home."

"To my dear sister."

"You were drunk."

"I wonder why."

She gave me a lingering glance that questioned whether I was worthy of her interest. Apparently I wasn't.

For a while I contented myself with admiring her delicate skin and pale brows and dark lashes. She had all the features beauty requires. Break your heart to think of her spreading it out for barstool Johnnies.

Long after I believed she had lost interest in me, she said, in a voice that seemed to have come out of a dream, "Sooner or later, things end, don't they."

And with that, she got up and walked down the path toward the house, dragging the blanket behind her.

I caught up with Susan's college roommate on a tennis court a few miles down the coast in Saco—a curly-headed sprite in white shoes and shorts and blouse. She came straight up to me, out of breath, toweling sweat off her face, grinning, waving off her partner, a guy old enough to be her father and maybe was.

"Only if you'll get me an iced tea," she said, dropping into a canvas chair at a table under a broad parasol. Her arms and neck glistened with sweat.

"Whew! I'm pooped!" She didn't look pooped. I suspect she could have leaped the ten-foot cyclone fence with only a short running start.

I brought two plastic containers out of the clubhouse, set one in front of her, and sat down across from her, faintly aware of not-unpleasant female odors drifting at me, listening to her over the pok . . . pok . . . pok of tennis balls and laughter out on the court.

"She wasn't a confider," she said. "You know what I mean?"

"But you must have known whether she had a boyfriend."

"Not . . . I don't know. There was this guy, a motorcycle freak. He couldn't have been a student. It was like for a couple of weeks she'd come in late every night, or not at all. Then, I don't know, I guess he dumped her. She wouldn't come out of our room for two days, never went to class. I think she had . . . Somebody told me once she had dysthymia, adjustment disorder or something. I guess that's worse than just being depressed. Anyway, she was unhappy all the time after that. Guys would come around but she wouldn't go out with them. And they were nice guys, unlike the moron who dumped her."

"When was this?"

"I don't know . . . a few weeks before finals."

"Did she take them?"

"I think so. She left earlier than me, but I'm pretty sure she took them. She was a good student, you know. She had this thing about making a life for herself, getting off on her own, a profession, something like that. She hated her family. That's why I don't understand . . ."

"So she planned to come back?"

"I thought so. I was pretty sure she did. I didn't see her all summer. I had to go to Wyoming with my parents and hang out with the horseflies. For a while we emailed. She never said anything about, you know, dropping out or anything. I got back only a couple of days before classes started. I tried calling her. I just thought she'd show up, and then they put this other girl in our suite."

"You contacted Susan?"

"She called me. Said she wasn't coming back but she'd come to see me. Only she never did."

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"Christmas. I tried twice before that, but couldn't find her. I even drove down there, but only her father was home, and he wouldn't let me in the house. I don't want to be mean or anything, but he wasn't very nice. He kept walking away from me, out in that shiny grass shooting birds. Wouldn't even tell me where she was. Every time I asked, he lifted his gun and banged away at something. He's scary. My father said he used to head up a lot of charities. Aren't they rich?"

"Used to be," I said.

I swallowed some tea, watched two old ladies stumbling over each other batting balls around the court, shrieking with laughter.

"This guy she was seeing—he got a name?"

"Waldo. Can you believe anyone would name their kid Waldo?" She laughed so hard she had to set her drink down, sweat dripping off her nose.

"Know where I can find him?"

She wiped the back of her hand across her nose, then rubbed her hand on her shorts. "All I know is we picked him up one night at this garage in Auburn. I think he worked there."

"You didn't like him?"

"I mean . . ." She threw up her hands. "In a dirty kind of way he was good looking. But he wasn't anything I'd ever bring home. I mean, he was the kind of loser you go out with only if you hate yourself. No character. No philosophy. You know what I mean? He'd find fault with everything, like what he had was so much better, and he didn't have anything. I don't know what she saw in him."

It was down a side street in a warehouse district at the north end of town—a faded building next to a field of car wrecks. There was an old Coke machine and a rack of used tires blocking one of the bays. There was a girl in an office sitting on an old desk jiggling ice cubes in a Pepsi container.

"He don't work here now," she

said, taking a cube from the container and wiping it on a zit on her cheekbone.

"Know where I can find him?"

She tossed the cube out the open door and wiped her fingers on her leg, got off the desk, walked to the garage side, and leaning on a doorframe, stuck her head into the garage. "Hey, Kenny. There's a guy here looking for Waldo."

"What guy?"

"I don't know. He's looking for Waldo."

The girl straightened up and came back to the desk and hoisted herself onto it. "He only worked here part time, and that was . . ." She yelled at the open doorway. "When did he quit?"

"Last spring." A man followed the voice into the doorway wiping his hands on a blue paper towel, sizing me up. "He in trouble?"

"I just want to talk to him."

"He didn't actually quit. He just stopped showing up. I owe him a couple of days' pay. You find him, tell him to come around."

"Any idea where he is?"

"Maybe his brother knows. He's down in Westbrook." He reached into a drawer in the desk and took out a worn phone book, flipped through it, ran a finger down a column of names. He jotted something on a memo pad, ripped off a page, and handed it to me. It read *Luther Divers, 324 Elwell Street*, and a phone number.

"Anything you can tell me about Waldo?"

"Nothing special. Did his job. Don't know why he hasn't picked up his money."

The girl didn't say anything. She kept looking into the sweating Pepsi container, bobbing the cubes up and down with her finger.

There was a large brown dog chained to a tree outside an opened garage door at 324 Elwell Street. Leaning on the clapboards, no more than three feet from the dog, was a black Harley-Davidson. The dog lay quietly in the shade under the tree, told to stay there by a tall, balding man who came into the driveway and watched me get out of my Jeep. He was wearing a stained undershirt and cutoff jeans, loose threads dangling over dirty knees.

Because of the dog, chained or not, I stayed near the mailbox at the edge of the street. "Looking for Waldo," I said. "Know where I can find him?"

"He don't live here. What you want him for?"

"I have some money for him."

"How much?"

"It's back pay from that garage job he had."

"You can give it to me."

"Afraid not. Know where I might find him?"

"How much money is it?"

"I really couldn't say. I'm just doing a favor for a friend."

"I'll see he gets it."

"You know how to reach him?"

"Not an address, but I think he's in California." He grinned. "That's where he headed last time."

"Last time?"

"This about a girl? Was one after him a couple of years ago, said he knocked her up."

And that, I thought, could explain the depression.

In the early morning I was on the phone with Lieutenant Mike Kadish of the local police, a good friend and one-time boss. I gave him the tag numbers of the Ford Ranger. He kept me on hold for about twenty minutes before he gave me a name and an address.

"He could be bad news. Why do you want him?"

"If he's dirty, I'll give it to you."

"Give it to Winona Dyer. He's one of hers. He did three and a half at Thomaston for aggravated assault. Don't turn your back on him."

Winona Dyer was a parole officer. I tried calling her when I drove off but kept getting a busy signal. Then my phone died and I didn't have one of those dashboard chargers.

The right front wheel of my Jeep settled into a pothole at the curb in front of an old apartment house on Cumberland Avenue not far from the cathedral. It was Saturday morning and I hadn't slept well. Neither apparently had Price Whitney, who came to the door in the upstairs hall and stared at me with sullen dislike. He had one of those hair doughnuts around his mouth. He was in T-shirt and jeans. Looking at him I became acutely conscious of the varnished railing behind me and the ten-foot drop to street level.

"It's about your truck, the Ford Ranger," I said.

He was holding the door half open studying my face, not a man I'd want to tangle with—he weighed maybe two twenty and had the thick neck of a linebacker. "What about it?"

Maybe the churlishness was a mask. Maybe not. I wasn't anxious to find out.

"There was one like it at The Hangout the other night," I said.

He leaned into the hallway and looked left and right, maybe checking for cameras or the police. He stepped back and focused on me. "So what?"

"I think I can do you some good if you'll talk to me."

"Do me some good? What's that supposed to mean? Who the hell are you?"

"It's about the girl you dumped at Lighthouse Beach."

That didn't scare him. It kindled some interest. A little push, his eyes seemed to say, and you're over the railing. Maybe the churlishness wasn't fake.

"It was reckless negligence," I said, "and that could put you back in prison."

So now he knew what I knew and that caused something to die in his eyes. We both watched a boy come dancing down the stairs, run past us, and hurry down to the street.

"Why don't we go inside and talk," I said. It seemed preferable to standing against the railing.

He didn't want me inside. He gave me a hard look, then mut-

tered something and slammed the door.

"It's me or the cops," I said, but not loud enough to penetrate the door panels. Better wait until I had some leverage.

I went down the steps and stood on the sidewalk staring up at second-story windows. No curtains moved. No face appeared.

From a corner drugstore I tried Winona Dyer again, not to turn Whitney in, just to let her know I was dealing with one of her charges.

"If he's working at The Hangout, he's in violation," she said. "Some relative of his tried to get him work there, but I stopped it. As far as I know he works on a maintenance crew at Lighthouse Beach. If you find out otherwise, let me know. And don't give it first to the cops. It makes me look bad."

On my way home I stopped at my sister Kate's over on Railroad Street. Hadn't seen her in a couple of weeks. Al was out of town and she had to attend a meeting at her rehab center and had no one to look after the kids. So I spent three hours in her front yard keeping two laughing boys from killing each other. I noticed that Al had fixed the swing and done away with the sandbox. I don't know what kind of therapy Katie was getting, but things seemed to be going well for her. When you have a sister with a drug problem, you don't ask questions. You're there if she needs you.

Early Sunday afternoon I found Virginia Moranski at home in shorts and a pale blue shirt, floppy at the waist, sleeves rolled up. She wasn't obviously dressed to excite anyone, but she was an attractive woman—a little too brassy for me, but I can be flexible. It was a two story condo—wall to wall everything in pale blues and amber, a gray stone fireplace wide enough to sleep in.

"Very nice," I said, though it was an expensive dwelling for a nightclub hostess. I followed her across an amber carpet into a kitchen/dining area separated from the main room by a low wall and a barrier of pale wooden spindles that went all the way to the ceiling.

"Just a place I lease," she said. "I'm not really this pastel. At least I try not to be."

While she was making iced tea in the kitchen, I wandered to a bookcase and idly checked out her interests. Fiction, mostly—Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing, Eudora Welty, Edna O'Brien. She had good taste.

"You read mostly women?"

She leaned back from the counter to see what I was talking about. "I'm a woman's woman," she said.

I didn't spend much time on that. I noticed laughter in her eyes when she came into the room carrying glasses with tall spoons sticking up and wedges of lime teetering on the rims. She set a glass in front of me, sat across from me, crossed her legs, and said, all smiles, "So what brought you here?"

The smiles disappeared when I mentioned Anne Crawford. The calf of the raised leg tightened.

"Just wondering why you called Anne the other night."

"Why? What's the problem? We're friends. Her sister was drinking too much."

"You said she was in trouble. What kind of trouble?" I sipped at the tea, watching her eyes narrow.

She said, "What'd you say your name was?"

"Your bouncer, Price Whitney, took her down to the beach, pulled her out of his truck, and left her there on the sand. It wasn't just to get her off Baker's property."

Her eyes widened. "You saw that? She didn't jump out of his truck and run off?"

"Is that what he said happened?"

She waited.

"What was he supposed to have done with her?" I said.

She didn't answer, but I had inspired some thinking. She studied me a while and apparently decided she had said enough. She got up, walked to the door, and pulled it open.

"You haven't been here," she said, waiting for me to leave.

I took a long drink of tea, sat there a few seconds longer, then shrugged, got up, and went to the door. "Tell George Baker I saw his boy abandon a drunken girl on the beach." I might have added I saw her getting drunk in his club, but what with the gambling and the prostitution, that wouldn't have troubled him.

"Don't trip on the stairs," she said as I went out the door.

Around ten the following morning I went into Jerry's Appliances on Congress Street and asked a chubby, sad-eyed woman where I might find Anne Crawford, who, I'd been told, managed the place. I had also been told the store was in trouble because of competition from the mall.

The woman glanced hesitantly at a closed door at the end of a long row of white refrigerators.

I started toward the door and the woman said, "You can't go back there!"

I found Anne perched on a carton with a clipboard on her lap. She looked freshly laundered in navy slacks and a blue and white blouse and manila sandals. She wasn't happy to see me, not here, not at work in a retail shop. At home, on that big chunk of land at the edge of the sea, she could pretend to still be a Crawford of old. Here she was a salesclerk.

Before I could lower myself to a carton opposite her, she asked, "Did Gronig tell you to pester Virginia Moranski? Why'd you go there?"

"She said I pestered her?"

"Why'd you go there?"

"I wanted to know what kind of trouble Susan was in."

She gave that a big frown and got angrily to her feet and headed down an aisle of unopened cartons. I trailed after her into a small corner office where I stood at an inside window and watched two teenage girls in the show-

room giggling over a washer-dryer display while Anne went to a coffee machine. She didn't offer me anything. She filled a cup and dumped powder into it and stirred it with the blade of a ruler which she lifted off a desk.

"Susan's not in any kind of trouble," she said matter-of-factly, dismissing the suggestion, tossing the ruler into a wastebasket.

"So why didn't she go back to college?"

"She didn't want to! What's so hard to understand?"

"Did that guy Waldo get her pregnant?"

The question startled her. She stood at the desk and leaned back, denting her rump on the desktop. "What did Gronig hire you to do? Or you on your own?"

"I didn't see any signs of a baby at your house. Did she get an abortion?"

She glared at me, took a deep breath, glared at the floor, then suddenly moved from the desk and strode out of the office into the showroom and busied herself at the cash register. It didn't take much to see fear under the anger.

"I don't know what's going on, Anne," I said in a low voice, standing in front of her bowed head. "But maybe I can help."

Without looking up at me, as though talking to the table, she said, half telling me, half pleading with me, "Leave us alone," in a husky voice loaded with a degree of despair I never thought I'd see in Anne Crawford. It wasn't just my intrusion into her privacy that troubled her. There was something heavy going on.

"So where'd you get the idea she was pregnant?" Ned asked, eyeing me from the other side of his desk, pictures of his kids on the wall behind him, a couple of framed diplomas, not a very big room. There was a bust of Lincoln next to a picture of his wife on the desk and a vague smell of alcohol in the air.

I told him about Waldo.

"But you're guessing."

"It could explain the depression. You know him?"

"I heard he came to the house looking for her." The thought made him laugh. "I can just picture Cyril driving him off the property. Not exactly the kind of guy Cyril would want hanging around his daughter."

"They argued?"

"Anne said they were yelling at each other when she left."

"Maybe he did get Susan pregnant."

He shrugged, leaned back in his swivel chair, and looked down his face at fingers clasped over his belly, a posture he affected when he wasn't being entirely open with me. It didn't mean he was lying. It often meant he had a problem and didn't know where to go with it.

I told him about my little session with Virginia Moranski. "If I read her right, she went straight to George Baker and told him some guy saw his boy dump Susan drunk on the beach. And if that got Whitney fired, it might put him in a mood to tell us

what's going on. He has to know. By the way, does Anne hang out there?"

"I don't know. Cyril's got an endowed chair in the gaming room, I'm told."

"What's he gamble with?"

"Who the hell knows?" Ned sat up and scrubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. "I don't like any of this. Maybe it's got nothing to do with why she quit college."

"Right now," I said, "it doesn't matter. The kid's in trouble. We can't leave her."

"It's Anne who pays me, not Susan."

"The girl's in trouble, Ned. You can't abandon her."

"I'd be doing what she wanted."

"No, you wouldn't."

He could have taken Susan's denials at face value months ago and given her the money. He just didn't like complications, especially those involving the police. He was a probate lawyer. If the police came in, he lost control.

Outside in my Jeep I tried contacting my voice mail at the loft. I forgot my portable wasn't working. I drove back to the apartment house on Cumberland Avenue looking for Price Whitney. The kid who had come dancing down the stairs was on the sidewalk throwing a tennis ball against the building, catching it one handed, whirling and throwing it at the back door of a panel truck, apparently imagining himself making a double play.

"Mr. Whitney upstairs?"

"I don't know." When he threw the ball, it hit a clapboard wrong and flew into the air, making him run into the street to catch it. He ran a few extra steps, stopped, came back. "Yeah, his truck's in the yard there," pointing at an empty lot across the street. "What you want him for?"

"Business," I said and went into the building, mounted the steps two at a time, and tapped Whitney's door. After almost a minute the door opened and a sullen, unshaved face peered out at me. Stale odors of sweat drifted from the room.

"Why don't I come in?" I said, although I wasn't eager to. He looked filthy. What I could see of the room looked filthy—newspapers on the floor, a torn shade on a window, an opened pizza box on a coffee table in front of a brown sofa, a dented beer can. Even from across the room I could see dust on the windowsill.

"I'd like to talk to you," I said.

"What for?" he asked, looking up and down the hall, glancing up the stairwell.

"I want to know why you dropped the girl on the beach and why you went back to The Hangout and told them she ran off. It's pretty obvious you were protecting her."

"So what is it to you?" he said.

"She's a friend of mine and she's in trouble and I want to help her. I don't have anything against you."

"Where'd you find out about me?"

"You know Virginia Moranski?"

"That bitch. It figures." He stud-

ied my face a while, then stepped back. "Come on in if you want to," sliding his hand along the panels to hold the door open, unmindful, apparently, of the armpit odors.

It was a nearly empty room, no pictures on the walls, nothing other than the sofa and the coffee table. "So what do you want?" as though only idly curious, perhaps a little impatient, but there was nothing threatening in his expression. He didn't seem as confident as he had been earlier. I was tempted to ask whether Moranski had reported him to Baker but decided to leave it alone.

"You were expected to take Susan somewhere," I said.

"Moranski said that?"

"I'm not a cop," I said, "and I'm not interested in hurting you, but if something criminal is going on, I lose my license if I don't report it. You help me and, as far as I'm concerned, you're in the clear."

He walked out of the room and came back lighting a cigarette. He took a deep drag and let smoke pour from his nostrils, all the while studying my face. I don't know what he was thinking, but he obviously was working on something.

"You want to help the girl?" he said, finally.

"Yes."

"It's got nothing to do with me, and I don't know what the hell they're doing, but it's my sister's husband. I'm pretty sure he did it."

"Did what?"

That got a surprised look. "It ain't why you're here?"

"What are you talking about?"

"It's been on the TV all morning," he said.

"What has?"

"The car. They found it out in Scarborough. I didn't even know her name until they said it. I knew the car. Every night I saw her stick it in the parking lot."

"What're you talking about?"

"The Crawford girl. Her VW. They found it last night in a ditch off the turnpike. You didn't know that? I thought that's why you're here."

"Susan Crawford's car?"

He nodded.

"Last night?"

"Two o'clock this morning, something like that."

Which means Anne had to know about it when I talked with her. The police wouldn't have had reason to call Ned. But Anne? No wonder she was scared. But why didn't she say something?

"Susan okay?"

"They're looking in the woods for her. But they ain't gonna find her there, believe me."

"You know where she is?"

"Things my brother-in-law was cooking up with the guy that owns The Hangout."

"George Baker?"

"I don't know what they're doing. I just know I'm not part of it. That's why I dropped her at the beach. Look, if I tell you this, does it have to get to the cops? I don't want my sister to get in trouble."

"It doesn't have to get back to anybody," I said. "Do you know where she is?"

"I know where I think she is.

Man, you gotta believe I got no part in it. I couldn't go to the cops. They wouldn't believe me anyway," a little humanity beginning to show in the eyes. Dig far enough into these guys and you find someone hiding in there, sometimes.

"Where is she?"

"First you talk to my sister. It's got nothing to do with her, either. It's that jerk she's married to. Name's Romero, Felix Romero. But you go see her at work. I don't want you go busting in her house, scaring the kids."

"Where do I find her?"

"I'm not involved in it. Remember that. I never wanted to hurt the girl."

"They wanted you to? George Baker?"

"I don't know what they wanted, just for me to take her to Windham."

He told me where his sister worked. I wrote down the address, went out to my Jeep, and drove to a street phone and called Mike Kadish.

"Not yet," he said, "but there's a crew looking for her. Skid marks suggest that her car was forced off the road. No blood, anything like that. And her bag was on the passenger seat. That guy Whitney you been looking at? He have anything to do with this?"

"I don't think so."

"Don't hold out on me."

"If I find out anything, I'll get it to you."

I gassed up at a Mobil station on Brighton Avenue and drove out of the city and across the little bridge near the big white stack in Cumberland Mills, and within an hour pulled into the parking lot of the Saccarap Thread Mill in Windham. Ten minutes later I was on an upturned box on an outdoor smoking balcony talking with Price Whitney's sister, Madeleine.

"Why'd he send you to me? I got nothing to do with it," said a thin woman with a red and white bandana tightened over gray hair, no makeup.

"She's at your house?"

"You're not a cop?"

"Just a guy looking for her," I said. "She's a friend."

She didn't believe me but didn't send me away. She was in her early forties, wearing jeans and a denim jacket over something white, cotton, maybe a T-shirt. She didn't look much like her brother, but like him she was evasive, pretending to be at ease, leaning on the brick side of the building, cigarette dangling off a pale lower lip.

"I guess my brother wouldn't send a cop out here." She took a last drag on the cigarette, dropped it at her feet, and scrubbed it into the concrete, looking sadly across the street at a row of mill houses. "They said she's Baker's girlfriend. You know him?"

"I know who he is."

"I was asleep when they brought her in. He told me she worked at the club and they were going to, I don't know, 'cold turkey' is what he said. She just looked

asleep when I saw her. But they had this woman with her. I don't think she's a nurse or anything, just some woman to look after her."

"They said she was drugged?"

"Hooked on it, is what they said. Brought her here to 'detox' her. But you'd know that if you're her friend. I mean you'd know she was a druggie," she said, watching me carefully.

"I know she has a few problems," I said. "I just want to look in on her, see she's okay."

"That's not why you're here." She looked away disgusted. When I said nothing, she added, "Look, I got kids. I don't want any trouble out there."

"I just want to bring her home," I said. "She shouldn't be here. She should be in a hospital."

She got a cigarette from a pack of Marlboros and spent a few thoughtful moments tapping the filter on her thumbnail. She snapped on a small plastic lighter and leaned the cigarette into the flame.

"A bedroom in your house is not where she belongs," I said.

She sighed, dragged on the cigarette while she gazed across the street, then leaned down and picked up the cigarette she had crushed, carried it to a pail near the door, came back, and said with angry determination, "That's what I told my husband. I've heard about 'cold turkey.' I don't want anyone taking a fit in my house. I don't want my kids seeing that."

"Why don't you tell me where you live. I can go there. The kids in school?"

She looked at her watch. "For a few more hours."

"When they get home she'll be gone."

"You're gonna do it whether I say so or not, aren't you," she said.

"She belongs in a hospital."

"My husband won't just let you take her out."

"Holding someone against her will is a felony. Unless he's stupid enough—"

That got a private smile. Her gaze drifted off me and she studied the floor. She took another drag on the cigarette and picked something off her lip. "Just do it before my kids get home. Don't say I sent you."

She told me where she lived.

It was one of those old New England farmhouses on an empty country road—barbed wire and poison ivy on stone walls, fields randomly studded with wild juniper, and a two story house colorless as fish chowder, shades drawn on front windows, weeds in the cracks between two slabs of cement steps that led up to a front door nobody ever used.

I stopped at a telephone pole behind forsythia bushes. There was a Dodge pickup nosed up to a barn at the end of a long driveway. To the right, a shed connected the barn to what was doubtless the kitchen, finger dirt around the knob of a door this side of a window through which I could see a room lit by a naked bulb in a ceiling fixture.

I pulled into the driveway. No one came to the window. I went over and rapped on the door, waited, then stepped into a small entryway that smelled of rancid cooking oil. There were plant pots and a broom and dustpan halfway up narrow stairs. The layout was familiar. There would be bedrooms up there. The rooms behind me at the front of the house, although I couldn't see into them, I sensed were sparsely furnished, clogged with dead air from being closed off in winter and rarely used in summer.

I rapped on the door, waited about a minute, then tried the knob and opened the door into a large kitchen. There was steam rising off a pot on a black cast-iron stove across the room, two wooden chairs at a kitchen table, dirty dishes in a porcelain sink next to a small white refrigerator. The linoleum, badly worn, sagged into the floor in front of the sink.

A woman came in from the shed carrying a bucket and mop. She looked at me, then turned and yelled into the shed. "Felix, come in here! There's a man here!"

"I came for the girl," I told her.

She either didn't hear me or didn't want to deal with me. She lowered the bucket and mop, went to the sink and turned on a faucet, and started rinsing dishes, her back to me—a short woman with fat legs under a blue denim skirt, long gray hair dangling on a brown and white blouse.

"Now just what in hell do you want?" came a voice from the opened doorway, followed by a large, fat, bearded man in farmer's overalls.

"I'm here to get the girl," I said. "Didn't George call you?"

"George never sent you," he said with cold certainty. "I know who you are and you got no business here. Now get the hell out!"

"I guess you must be Felix Romero."

"Never mind who I am. Get out of my house!"

"I'm taking the girl," I said.

"You ain't taking nothing." He wasn't as big or as menacing as he probably thought he was standing there behind a bulging gut, glaring at me.

"Kidnapping is a felony," I said. "Give me the girl and you don't have a problem. Try to stop me and you'll go to prison."

"What the hell's he talking about?" the woman said. "They told me—"

"Shut up!" he said, not looking at her, and walked toward me, pointing his finger. "I said get out! George Baker never sent you here, and there's no girl here."

"What's he talking about?" the woman said.

"Kidnapping," I told her.

Her eyes widened. "That girl?"

"Shut up!" Felix yelled at her.

"I won't shut up! You tell me what's going on!"

"You're mixed up in a felony, lady," I told her. "Don't make it worse. Just tell me where the girl is."

"I ain't mixed up in nothing," she said. "She's upstairs. I'm just here to—"

Felix grabbed my arm as I tried to get past him. I pushed him away. He swung at me. I knocked his hand aside, spun him around, and rushed him across the room, pinning him face down on the table.

"You want me to hurt you, I will," I said. "I'm taking the girl out of here. Now don't be foolish."

When I backed off he turned around, half sitting on the table, face bright red, out of breath, holding his hand to his chest, scared apparently of something more important than me. He didn't move or say a word when I told the woman to show me upstairs.

I went two steps at a time to a room over the kitchen. Shades were drawn on narrow windows but I could see Susan bunched up under a sheet, her face on her forearm, her eyes closed. I tried to jostle her awake. Her skin was warm but she didn't move. I lifted her off the bed and carried her downstairs where the woman was still at the sink, Felix still at the table, a little bottle of pills next to his hand.

I asked the woman what she had given Susan. She brought a plastic pharmacy vial out of her skirt pocket and handed it to me.

"I don't know what they are," she said. "I was told they'd just keep her under and wouldn't hurt her. I didn't know anything about this, mister. I was just hired to help. They told me she was sick. I wouldn't get involved . . ."

I lost the rest of it as I took the vial from her hand and lugged Susan out to my Jeep.

Little specks of moisture hit my face as I stood in the corridor at Cumberland General talking with Mary Andersen, the charge nurse, a tall, gaunt woman with sparkling dark eyes and a wet mouth, probably one of the few people on earth who drink the recommended eight glasses of water a day, but also a pleasant woman, if homely.

There were a lot of gurneys along the wall, a lot of people walking around. "We'll notify her sister," she said. "And I'm obliged to tell the police you found her. They've been calling."

I gave her my card and headed out of the building, hoping to avoid the police until I could find out how the Crawfords intended to handle this. If Susan refused to press charges the police would have no reason to get involved. All they knew was that Susan's car had gone off the highway and she had been found in Windham. There was no evidence of a crime unless she provided some. Or someone did.

On my way through the city I stopped at the National Assurance Company office to pick up a check and some late assignments and, hoping to avoid the police, spent the rest of the day on the beach helping Elric Hoagy wash out his Jonesport fishing boat. In my high school years I had hauled lobster traps for Elric and occasionally, even now, especially in winter, made the run down the bay for him when he wasn't feeling up to it. He was in his seven-

ties and suffered from what he called "chronic lumbago."

That night I slept on his screened porch and got to the hospital around noon the next day. A nurse told me Susan was recovering well but was dehydrated and in need of rest.

"Her sister's with her," she said.

I stood a few seconds in the doorway looking in at a slender form under a white sheet, yellow hair on a white pillow, and an IV tube from an infusion pump attached to a pale arm. Anne was sitting by the bed. When she noticed me she quickly got up and came to the door, evidently to keep me out of the room.

I asked, "Have the police been here?"

"There was a woman here. I don't know what she was. She just wanted to know what had happened."

"And you told her."

"I told her Susan was picked up by some friends and that she's fine."

"She's not pressing charges?"

Anne sighed. "She wasn't harmed. There's no need to get the police involved."

"Have you talked to Ned?"

"He's on his way over. Look, we appreciate what you've done. We're really grateful, but everything's getting straightened out. You don't have to—"

"Ned is giving you the money?"

"Just let it go, Duff. It isn't your problem."

I watched Susan turn onto her back and stare at us, interested in what we were saying.

Anne started to close the door. I held it open. "You're sacrificing her future! For what? Baker? You owe him money? Is that what this is?"

Susan rolled onto her side, drew up her knees, facing away from us. I watched her body rocking as she sobbed.

Anne glanced at her, then put a hand on my chest. "Please." She pushed me away and backed into the room and closed the door. I was angry, but there was no point making a fuss. I went down the corridor and sat on a bench facing the nurses' station and waited for Ned.

"So, how is she?" he said, breezing in off the elevator, not happy to see me.

"Weak, very tired." I put a hand on his arm. "There's something going on here a lot dirtier than Cyril's gambling debt."

"Who said there's a gambling debt?" He pulled away, didn't want to talk with me. "Where's her room?"

I pointed down the corridor. "You can't give that kid's money to George Baker."

"What I *can't* do," he said, "is let Susan go through any more of this. What'll they do next time, break her legs?"

"There won't be a next time."

"And you're going to stop it?"

"The police will stop it when I tell them what I know."

We had reached the room. He opened the door and I pulled it closed. "You can't walk away from this. She was kidnapped for God's sake! You're abetting a felony."

"You don't know what you're talking about." He pushed the door open.

Susan raised herself on her elbows. Anne looked up from her chair. Ned just stood there looking at the two of them. The indecision lasted almost a minute, then muttering to himself, he turned and pushed me back into the corridor, followed me outside, and closed the door.

"So what do you want?" he said, scowling, angry at me because I had made him think about what he was doing.

"Baker's not going to do anything more to Susan. He's going to hide. When I give my story to the police, they'll go after Price Whitney and he'll tell them what he knows. He doesn't want to go back to prison and he won't let his sister take a kidnapping rap. It'll all spill out. The guy who abducted her, that guy Romero in Windham? He won't take the rap for George Baker."

"How do you know it's a gambling debt?"

"You know Cyril gambled out there. And you know he doesn't have any money. What else could it be? Why else would George Baker have her kidnapped? She was a hostage. You know that."

"And you have to go to the police, right?" It's not what he wanted, not what Anne Crawford wanted, but he knew I had no choice. I had witnessed a crime.

To get him off the subject, I asked, "Is there a lien on the Crawfords' property?"

"I'm sure they have plenty of equity, if that's what you're wondering."

"What I'm wondering is why Susan is taking this punishment. Her grandmother's gift was her ticket to independence. Would she give it up to bail out a drunken father who can't pay a gambling debt? She has to know he could sell that land. She's not stupid."

"That land is all that connects them to what they used to be."

"I can't believe Susan gives a damn about that."

"Cyril would die if he lost that place."

"He's already dead," I said in disgust.

Whether he shared my concern I have no idea, but he had at least listened. He hung his head for a while, then looked up at me. "Okay, go talk to the police."

"You'll hold off?"

"And don't put any of this on your expense sheet," he said. "I'm not paying for it. You're on your own." He opened the door and went inside. So he fired me to vent his anger. For some reason, it made me laugh.

I got a call around seven that evening from a Lieutenant Percy Hyde of the state police, who wanted to know how I had connected the house in Windham to what had happened on the interstate. I told him what Price Whitney had told me.

"And what connected you to Price Whitney?"

I told him.

"I want you at ten o'clock to-

morrow morning here in my office."

From ten the next morning until eleven fifteen I sat on a hard bench in an empty hallway staring at framed pictures of dead politicians on a long dirty wall. Then I sat for two hours with a woman in a small room explaining how my assignment from Ned Gronig had led me to the house in Windham.

"And you'll testify to this?"

"If necessary."

"Sure you're no longer working the case?"

"I was fired."

"Good," and she gave me a civil servant's smile and shut off the recorder. "You'll be available, in case we need more?"

"You have my phone number," I said.

I had to walk a block and a half to where I had left my Jeep. I phoned Ned. His secretary told me he was in New York and wouldn't be back for three days. She also told me that Susan Crawford had not filed a complaint against anyone. "So far as I know."

"Do you know whether he assigned any money to the Crawfords?"

"You'll have to ask him about that."

I wanted to call Anne and ask her, but she'd say it was none of my business, and I guess she was right. I was off the case. I had done what I could. I felt lousy about what that family was doing to Susan, but there was nothing I could do about it.

I spent the next morning on the harbor side of my loft dangling my legs off the end of the pier, watching two guys chipping paint off the hull of a Coast Guard cutter, breathing salty wind, glancing occasionally up the harbor at a white sail moving past the old Civil War fort, listening to sea gulls crying their sad complaint as they glided over choppy water looking for fish. Dark clouds were coming in from the sea. When the rain started, I went inside and made myself a ham and egg sandwich and had just turned on my PC when the phone rang.

It was Susan Crawford. She wanted to talk to me.

She came up the back stairs to my door in a wet yellow slicker and yellow rain hat, water dripping in a circle on the floor near her feet. She looked frightened and subdued, a different Susan from the sunbather I had met under the apple tree. The real girl here, I believed, was no longer hiding behind sarcasm.

"Come in," I said. "You look cold. Are you cold?"

She just stood there shaking her head.

"Come on inside. I'll make coffee."

She didn't move. She said, "Will you come to my house?"

She could have asked me that an hour earlier on the phone. "You drove all the way here?"

"Something I have to show you."

I wasn't eager to go out in the

rain, but there was so much despair in her face I couldn't argue. "Okay. Let me get a jacket."

I followed her VW all the way to Brackett Shores wondering what was going on under the yellow hat I could see through her rear window. It wasn't fear or shyness that had kept her out of my loft. I think she had decided that explanations wouldn't accomplish anything. And standing in her yard in the rain where the wind made swales of bending grass slide across the salt marsh as if it were being swept by an invisible broom, I watched her get out of her car, look back at me, then head down the path toward the old barn behind the house.

I could hear the snapping sound of rain hitting her hat. I couldn't see her face, but I knew I was following a lonely girl who I believed had acquired some courage.

I watched her step onto the plank ramp between sagging barn doors, then suddenly stop and jerk a hand to her face, stagger back, and drop in a slow sagging motion to her knees, crying out in anguish. I ran to her and stared at a massive splatter of blood and brains on boards outside an empty horse stall where her father lay on the floor, his face a rubbery mask, his eyes bulging from a shattered skull, the shotgun on his legs.

She clung to me only a few seconds, then pushed me away. "I have to call my sister," she said, getting up. I followed her down the path and got my portable from the Jeep and called the police.

Four or five cops came out and spent more than an hour talking with Anne, showing the body to the medical examiner, making arrangements for all of us to come to the station in the morning to give our statements. Anne and I were in the kitchen sharing some leftover clam chowder when Susan came in wearing fresh slacks and a loose-fitting sweatshirt. There were two detectives with her. All the others had gone with the ambulance.

She led all of us out a back way to the barn. I know Anne had no idea what this was about. I didn't know, although it was obvious that Susan hadn't known her father was dead. She had brought me here to show me something else.

Someone had draped canvas over the bloody stains on the horse stall.

Susan pointed inside. There was nothing there but some hay and a few tools.

"I told him—" She put a hand over her mouth and pointed trembling fingers at the hay. "Under there," she said. "I told him—" The words broke off into anguished sobbing. She turned away and Anne put her arms around her and led her from the stall.

One of the cops got a shovel and scraped hay aside, revealing a pile of loose dirt in a hole in the planking. A putrid stench drove us back. We saw what looked like a bundle of old clothing, then we saw a hand. Anne was called over. She recognized the emblem on a leather jacket.

"I think it's the one who came here last spring," she said.

The identification was confirmed next day at the morgue by the man from Westbrook. "It's Waldo," he said. "You guys know what happened to his bike?"

Three days later I sat across the desk from Ned in his small office. Before calling me, he had spent a few hours with Anne and Susan out at the salt mash. "From what Anne said, Cyril told Susan it was an accident. When Waldo came to the house, Susan told her father she didn't want to see him. They argued and Cyril pointed the shotgun at him and told him to get off the property. According to Cyril's version of it, Waldo lunged for the gun and it went off, both barrels right in the chest."

"And Susan didn't see it?"

"She was upstairs in the bathroom. She said she heard the shot but it wasn't an unusual thing to hear. It was a while after that, I guess, that Cyril told her Waldo had taken off."

"So when did she know?"

"I don't think she wanted to know. But that's when she started hitting the bar out at The Hangout. Then last week she was in the barn doing something and noticed the smell. I think some animals had gotten in there."

"What made her think it was Waldo?"

"That's what Anne asked her, and she said she just knew. I guess she confronted Cyril with it this morning. They argued and she drove into the city, I guess to get you."

I took a sip of the coffee Ned's secretary had brought in. It was laced with Jack Daniel's, not bad tasting, although I'm not a drinker.

"By the way," Ned said, "Susan denied having been pregnant."

"You believe her?"

"Why not?"

"Think they'll sell the place?"

"You'll love this," Ned said, laughing. "She's already had an offer from George Baker. She's going to hold him up, she said, for an extra hundred thousand to pay for what he did to Susan. It's in exchange for not pressing charges."

"And Susan's going back to college?"

"She's already rented an apartment up there. Oh, and the cops found Waldo's bike in the salt marsh. Anne said his brother came down to pick it up and wanted to know how to find the garage where Waldo worked."

TEXAS TWO-STEP

Diana Deverell

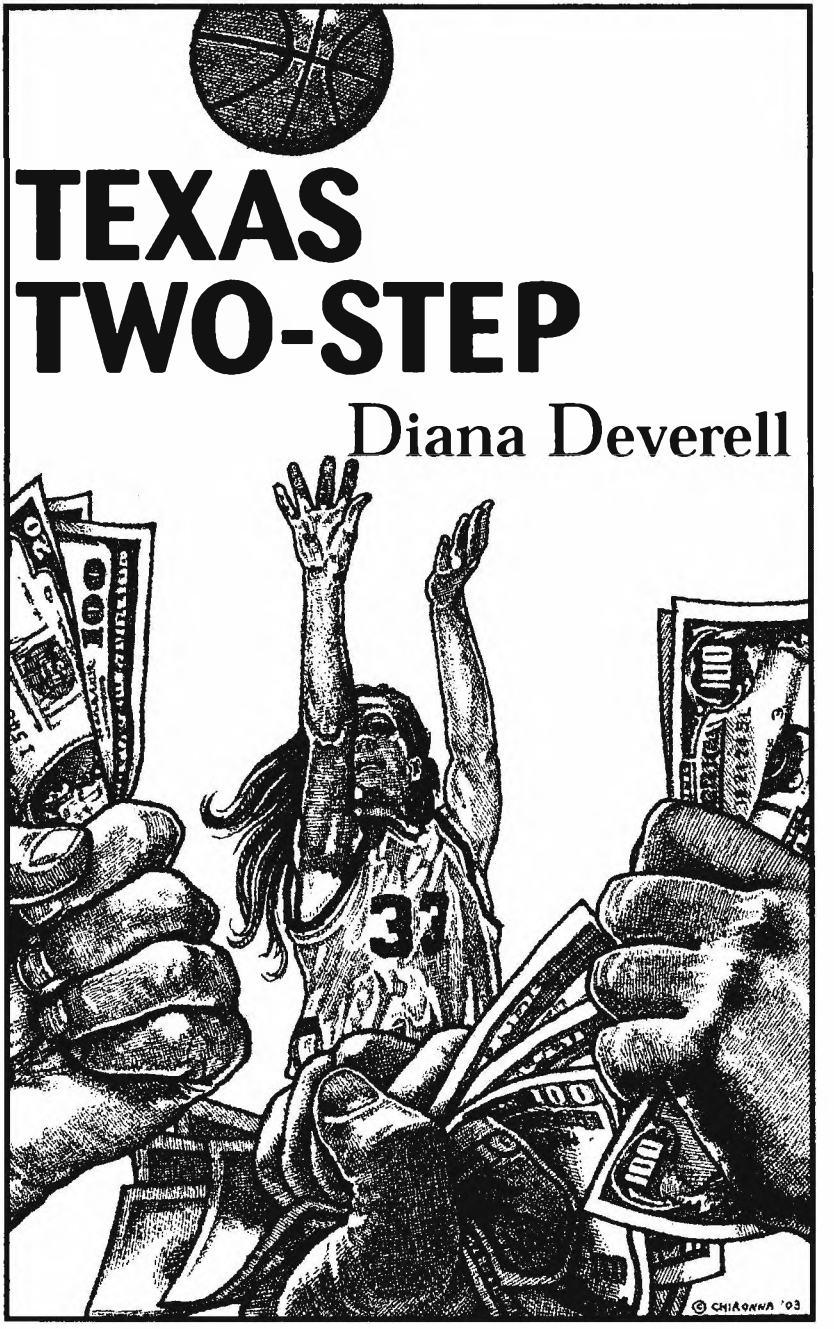


Illustration by Ron Chironna

So, had star forward Meghan Cronin tried to throw the first-round game? FBI Special Agent Dawna Shepherd was ninety-nine percent convinced the answer was no. Meghan hadn't intended to miss those free throws last night in the NCAA Women's Basketball Championship playoff against Oregon State. Most likely, she'd put up those bricks only because she had tournament jitters.

Dawna caught a whiff of frying onions from the campus grill and her stomach grumbled noisily. Six o'clock on Saturday night and she'd been at it all afternoon. Time to kick back and get some chow. She'd already gone farther than the Bureau required. But then, the Bureau hadn't sent Dawna to Nacogdoches State University. She'd interrupted her West Texas vacation as a favor to her old friend and former college teammate, Guadalupe Navarro, who had a big—very big—thing about illegal gambling on college sports. Lupe had been in her first year at Tulane in 1985 when five players on the men's basketball team were caught shaving points in exchange for cash and cocaine. Appalled, Lupe had transferred to UT where Dawna had later joined her as a Lady Longhorn. She'd told Dawna often how high rollers ruined the game she loved.

Now Lupe was on the coaching staff at Nacogdoches State and she was still outraged by illegal betting, which Lupe feared was the explanation for what she believed she'd witnessed last night. She'd shown Dawna the crucial seconds of videotape and the odd expression on Meghan's face at the moment she knew her second shot would fail. Relief was what Lupe read there. The head coach had disagreed and he'd told Lupe to back off. But Lupe—being Lupe—wouldn't let it go. She'd tracked Dawna down, called her in to investigate Meghan on the sly. And Lupe would not be satisfied until Dawna checked out every lead Lupe had given her. Which left one more interview to finish tonight.

Dawna found an occupied pay phone near the grill. She loitered ostentatiously nearby, mentally urging the multiply pierced, lime-haired coed to hurry. The fog off the lake hadn't lifted all day and mist blurred the edges of the surrounding buildings. Dawna caught an alarmed glance from the coed and she checked out her reflection in the display window. With her high-rising hairdo and platform shoes, she'd added at least three more inches to the six three nature had given her. In boot-cut jeans topped by a tweed blazer, her silhouette was all long legs and backbone. Not a student, and from the nervous way the caller ended her conversation, not a woman you'd want to mess with on a foggy night.

Dawna inhaled the scent of french fries blended with the piney tang of East Texas. Then she dialed the number for Meghan Cronin's younger brother, Michael. And for the third time, the answering ma-

chine in his apartment asked her to leave a number or drop by his fraternity house.

Dawna would've preferred to speak to Michael alone. Not likely he'd reveal anything new about his sister, not in front of his frat brothers. Dawna had already learned that Meghan Cronin came from Beverly Farms, a town outside of Boston. A green-eyed redhead with an exuberant grin, she'd led her high school to four consecutive state championships and been named All-American by the Women's Basketball Coaches Association. Early in her freshman year at Nacogdoches, she'd torn the ACL in her left knee, missing the season while she had reconstructive surgery. Now she was twenty-three years old, a fifth year senior, and the leading scorer for the Axewomen. Nacogdoches State had lost only two regular season games—both while Meghan was benched recovering from a possible concussion.

Posing as a sports reporter, Dawna had heard from Meghan's roommates, teammates, and male and female friends that Meghan was a comedian equally adept at one-liners and practical jokes. Despite her life-of-the-party demeanor, she went to bed early most nights, got up on Sunday mornings in time for Mass, swilled nonfat milk from gallon containers, and ate huge quantities of green vegetables and very little meat. No minor vices: Meghan didn't drink, smoke, or cheat on her taxes. Nor did she wager. She was so fiercely opposed to gambling that she wouldn't even buy a lottery ticket.

Dawna had talked to seven people and the sole criticism of Meghan came from the guy she'd dropped mid-season: "Basketball was the only thing she took seriously."

Too seriously to blow a free throw on purpose, Dawna figured. One more interview and she could make that report to Lupe. She owed Lupe, after all. For the past six months, Dawna had been teaching at Quantico East, the FBI's International Law Enforcement Academy in Budapest. She'd saved all her vacation time for March—for March Madness, really—combining a visit to her folks with the end-of-the-month Big Dance in San Antonio. She hadn't guessed that Lupe's Axewomen would capture the Southland Conference title. The first and second round games in Nacogdoches had sold out while she was in transit from Budapest. Dawna had cursed her luck.

So when Lupe had reached her by phone at eleven thirty last night and offered her a reserved seat at Sunday's game against Texas Tech, Dawna had agreed instantly to Lupe's price. Leaving her girlhood home at sunrise, Dawna had traveled by plane and rental car across Texas, from the treeless plains to the moist woodlands of the east, arriving in Nacogdoches in time for lunch with Lupe. "I have to know," Lupe had told Dawna. "I have to know for sure."

Lupe had told her that Michael Cronin was a former high school athlete who'd never played at the collegiate level. He'd transferred to

Nacogdoches his sophomore year. At first he'd shown up often to watch Meghan practice, but Lupe hadn't seen him much this season. She had a *feeling* about Michael, which meant there was no way Dawna could skip this interview.

With a no-nonsense stride, she covered the three blocks to the frat house and found the brothers finishing their evening meal. The dining room was set up like a sports bar with TV monitors in the four corners showing local news, both ESPN channels, and CNN Headline News with the sports ticker running across the bottom of the screen. No surprise that Meghan's brother, a former high school player, had joined a house that followed athletic events.

But noteworthy—very noteworthy—that he belonged to precisely the kind of sports-obsessed collegiate community where illegal gambling thrived.

Dawna chalked up a mental three-pointer for Lupe as she zeroed in on a Neanderthal who'd ripped the sleeves off his jersey to expose massive biceps. When she asked him for help, he flexed winningly before pointing out her quarry. She wished she had time to bust the hulking fellow for steroid abuse. But suddenly her investigation was heating up, her focus on Meghan's brother.

Who turned out to be a rangy strawberry blond with freckles even more virulent than his sister's. He sat alone at a table for six, staring moodily at a dish of vanilla ice cream surrounding a mega-brownie.

When Dawna got close she saw that his right arm was wrapped in bandages and cradled in a sling. She took the chair across from him. "Michael Cronin?"

"Mike." His grin was as engaging as Meghan's, his eyes the same pine-needle green. "And you're the reporter. I got the message you left on my machine." He beckoned to a white-jacketed nineteen-year-old clearing the next table. "Tanner, bring the lady a dessert."

"I won't turn that down," Dawna said.

Mike beamed like a good host as the waiter centered a dessert plate in front of Dawna. "Have a second piece if you want. Take your time, I've got all night if we need it." He sounded as if he were willing to stay in this room till dawn.

And maybe he was, she realized. He looked as though he hadn't slept, his skin pasty and marks like bruises beneath his red-rimmed eyes. He should've been home napping this afternoon, resting that injured arm. But the message on his machine implied that he'd been at the fraternity house all day. And Dawna had a good guess as to why. Mike was here to follow the betting action.

"You'll want coffee with that," he said rising. He went to the urn on the sideboard. The little finger on his left hand was splinted. Awkward, he overfilled a cup so that he had to grab a napkin to mop the counter.

Jumpy, she decided, and though he was charmingly likable, there was a tinny edge to his hospitality, like the telltale flavor of canned laughter. Mike was nowhere near as relaxed as he wanted to appear. And the patch-up job on his arm was pristinely white. "That break pretty recent?"

"Happened early this morning. You know, too many late-night brews, lost my balance." He forced his face into what he must have thought was a rueful expression, but Dawna saw more wariness than embarrassment in the look.

The room had emptied of diners. Tanner, the waiter, finished wiping tables and left Dawna alone with Mike, the two of them seated too far from the door to be easily overheard by passersby.

Mike seized on their sudden privacy to change the subject. "So, you're doing a piece on Meghan. What, you want to hear how she made life miserable for her little brother?"

"Nope." Dawna leaned across the table so her face was six inches from Mike's. "I want to hear how you got Meghan to shave points for you last night."

"She didn't." The little color in his face drained away, leaving the freckles stark as stick-on beauty marks. "Where'd you get a crazy idea like that?"

Dawna bluffed. "I saw her intentionally miss those free throws."

"You can't prove that."

Dawna snorted. His last sentence was all the proof she needed. Meghan had tried to keep her team's victory margin lower than predicted. Unfortunately for anyone gambling on her ability to do that, Meghan's efforts had been inadvertently thwarted by the head coach. He'd yanked Meghan and put in an excited freshman who sank one from outside the arc in the final seconds. Nacogdoches won by seventeen and beat the point spread by two and a half.

"Your sister didn't quite pull it off, did she? If she lets the Axewomen cover the spread against Texas Tech tomorrow, what part of your body will your bookie break next?"

"You don't know shit."

"I know gambling operations don't usually come after welshing students. So tell me why you're so special."

He shoved his chair back. "You're no reporter."

"No." Dawna caught him around the left wrist, pinning him in his seat. "But I am exactly who you need. You can't get out of this on your own."

Anger and stubbornness tightened his jaw, pulling his lips into a straight line. But fear flickered in his green eyes.

"I can help Meghan," Dawna said.

At the sound of his sister's name, his features sagged.

"Trust me," Dawna added.

He stared back at her, trying to hang onto his resolve. But he was too exhausted. Slowly, the mulish fury on his face gave way. What was left was the same expression Meghan had worn the night before. Relief—Lupe'd had that right, too.

"You got to help Meghan," he said urgently. "She's in big trouble. If she doesn't throw the game tomorrow night, before she ever gets to the Sweet Sixteen, they'll do a Tonya Harding on her. I can't even say that to her, she'll freak. Her knee, she can't bear the idea, anyone hurting her knee again."

"Tell me who *they* are," Dawna demanded.

He hesitated, then forced out the words. "Guys I know from my job. I'm an attendant at Twenty-Four Hour Fitness during the evenings, nine o'clock till two. Three guys on swing shift at the RV plant. They come in most nights to work out." He swallowed. "I owe them five grand."

"What, they're running a bookmaking operation?"

"No, no. I booked their action. They won."

Dawna got it, finally. She released his wrist. "And you couldn't pay off."

"Right."

How had this clean-cut frat-boy jock ended up taking bets from local bonebreakers? "I need the whole story, right from when you got involved with gambling."

"You mean here in Nacogdoches?"

The way he asked, she knew he'd gotten into trouble before he transferred to his sister's school. "From when you started. Wherever you were then."

"You mean at Boston College." Now Mike was eager to talk. "Freshman year at BC was when I got into it. Everybody else in the dorm was betting football. Hell, I wasn't playing anymore, and it made the games more interesting. I started out betting through my roommate. Then his bookie gave me my own account."

"And he let you run a tab." Credit was what made illegal sports betting so attractive to cash-poor students. A gambler didn't have to part with a cent—until his losses reached a limit established by the bookie.

"I thought I had it under control," Mike continued. "I was doing just a quarter a game, maybe a dollar over the weekend." Dawna understood that Mike had been placing twenty-five dollar bets, totaling a hundred dollars over three or four days. "But then there was a Thursday night game and I got carried away, betting a dollar parlay and the under, another dollar straight, and another on the under."

Gamblers don't get hooked by losing. Mike's next words didn't surprise Dawna.

"I won everything. I was up like three hundred and seventy-five for the night. I mean, I was golden. But then I lost five hundred over the weekend, five-fifty with the vig."

"Vig" was the bookie's ten percent edge on a bettor's losing bets. If a gambler won a five hundred dollar bet, he kept his five hundred and the bookie owed him five hundred more. But if he lost a five hundred dollar bet, he owed the bookie an extra fifty dollars "juice" or "vigorish" on top of the five hundred he'd lost. To break even with the bookie, a gambler had to win 52.38 percent of his bets.

"The whole year went like that," Mike continued. "I'd lose. Then I'd double my bet thinking, if I win, I'm even. I started drawing out cash on a credit card my parents gave me for emergencies."

"But you never got even."

"I lost probably about eighteen thousand dollars. My folks caught on, of course. They were mad. But at the same time, glad. They thought I was spending all that money on drugs. I mean, gambling was better than drugs, right? Still, they figured I was mixed up with the mob and I was going to get hurt. They said I had to stop betting. And I wanted to. I promised to stop. We had a big family conference, Meghan, too. We all agreed, I had to get away from BC and the people I was running with. Meghan said if I came here she'd look after me. I guess they were all thinking, 'Nacogdoches, Texas, Mike'll be safe there.' Like who'd be making book in Nacogdoches?"

"Somebody," Dawna said. "Any campus, doesn't take long to find somebody taking bets."

"First day," Mike said. "Right in this house I hear a guy laying down his action for the weekend. But I stayed away from it. And Meghan, she tried to help me. Like she's telling me, 'I'm here Mike, let me know if you need me.' And that was good. But in some ways, it wasn't. Hard to take sometimes, not being in the game anymore."

Dawna nodded. She knew how that felt, going from playing the game to watching it. Not the same high, not ever again.

"For a year or so, I was okay. But I missed it, you know, the rush when you win. And gradually, I got back into it. Just a bet here, a bet there. Start of football season, I opened an account with Louis—he used to be a student here, runs his own book now. Then people down at Twenty-Four Hour Fitness started betting through me—another trainer, a server at the juice bar, the maintenance man, some of the customers. And that was okay, I liked that. Until . . ." His voice trailed off.

Dawna prodded. "Until what?"

"February. That's when everybody on my ticket got hammered. I mean, none of us could win a bet. We were down ten thousand by March first. I maxed out on my credit cards, I couldn't raise more cash. Which is when Louis cut me off."

"Your bookie wouldn't take any more bets until you paid him what you owed him."

"Which I couldn't do. So I told people I couldn't take any more action. But these three guys, see, Duane, Kyle, and Lance, they acted like they didn't hear me. Duane, he comes back from delivering an RV to Nowhere, Washington, and he and Kyle and Lance, they're after me to place five thousand on some Civil War game in the PAC–10. Now these three guys are born losers, they can't pick worth a damn. I was just so tempted to take their money. Still, Duane seemed to think he knew something. I checked the spread. And when I got back to them, I moved the line a little, you know making it Huskies minus twenty-nine instead of twenty-four and a half."

"Making it more likely they'd lose the bet," Dawna clarified.

"And they still wanted to put their money on the Huskies," he marveled.

"So you booked it yourself, figuring you'd take their money plus the juice."

"Fifty-five hundred, damn I needed the dough."

Dawna doubted that Mike would ever have collected a dime from the three local toughs. Which was probably why the trio had chosen to book through him—they risked nothing financially if they lost the bet. "But they didn't lose."

"The other team pulled their best player an hour before game time. Some injury flare-up, an old concussion, or something. Damn Huskies walked away with it, won by thirty points. And I got screwed. I couldn't pay off." He grimaced. "Duane was cool about it. He was willing to forget the whole thing. Only Kyle and Lance, they had to have their share of the five grand, more than sixteen hundred apiece. We're talking and Kyle, he like grabs my hand and he's bending my finger back. 'You get our money,' he tells me and everybody heard the bone snap. 'Next time I'll do you worse.' "

"You didn't tell the police."

"Cops would've busted me, too. No, I had to find another way out."

"Sure you did." Gamblers don't understand when they're irrevocably beaten. A bettor always looks to make up his losses, get ahead again. So Mike had dragged his sister into it. "You came up with the idea of using Meghan."

"Not me. I never said one word about Meghan to those guys. I wouldn't do that to her. But Duane, he already knew she was my sister. He knew her stats and everything. And he was the one said that she was a player who could control the final score of the game. Last night, he and Kyle and Lance bet against Nacogdoches so they'd get their money back."

Dawna saw a slick con game shaping up behind Mike's story. "Suddenly those three found a new bookmaker, I take it."

Mike nodded.

"Except," Dawna pointed out, "if your pals bet against the Axewomen last night, they doubled their loss."

"Turns out they made only token bets on last night's game. They wanted to see if Meghan would really come through for me. See, they never talked to her. They didn't trust me when I said she'd do it. But last night, it looked to them like she came close enough. Right now the spread is Axewomen by five and these guys have put down ten grand on Texas Tech." Another shudder made him tremble. "Kyle, he really, really can't afford to lose. Makes him crazy."

Dawna let her gaze rest on Mike's cast. "Seriously crazy."

Mike stared at his broken arm. "He didn't have to do this. But he wanted to. And he'll hurt Meghan, too, he really will. My mistake, letting them get me alone last night. I'm not taking that chance again. And I warned Meghan, 'Make sure you're never alone.' But sooner or later, you know, she's got to come outside. And Kyle, that's what he'll be waiting for. For Meghan to be alone."

In her head, Dawna was going through the criminal charges against Duane and Kyle and Lance: assault, making terroristic threats, extortion, and conspiracy to violate gambling law. She knew the territory—illegal sports betting was Bureau turf. One call to Bill Meeks, the Special-Agent-in-Charge of the Houston office, and by dawn on Sunday, Duane and Kyle and Lance would be in the arms of the FBI. Mike would be too, but that couldn't be helped. He had booked the original bet. And it wasn't all bad news. And going this route, she could get some help for Mike's problem. She glanced up, caught him watching her.

"So, how are you going to help Meghan?"

"Still thinking it through." Sure, Dawna could keep these goons from going after Meghan's knees. And she could eliminate the pressure on Meghan to throw the next game. But what about Meghan shaving points last night?

It was bound to come up. If Duane and Lance had any brains at all—or if their lawyers did—those two would try to lay off the more serious charges on Kyle, who'd done the assault. Either Duane or Lance, trying to save himself, was likely to nail Meghan. The Bureau wouldn't ignore a charge of point shaving. Bill Meeks would open an investigation into Meghan's attempt to throw Friday night's game.

Alleged attempt, Dawna corrected herself. Okay, she was sure now that Meghan had missed those shots intentionally. To Dawna's surprise, she didn't give a damn. The video image of the shooter at the free throw line flickered through Dawna's mind. Hell, Meghan hadn't even been certain she could miss.

Dawna didn't intend to miss. After all, as Mike had argued, nobody could prove Meghan had blown those free throws on purpose. And Meghan was the victim here.

"Okay," Dawna said to Mike, "first thing you told me was that your sister didn't shave points last night. But you told Duane and his friends that she did. And that she'll do it again on Sunday. And you're letting me think that you were telling them the truth. But I think you spoke true in the first place. I don't believe your sister would risk her entire future to save your neck."

"But she—"

Quick, she cut him off. "Listen to me. Carefully." She waited until she was sure she had his full attention. "I'm surprised you even asked her to fix the game. Knowing what it would cost her if she got caught. She'd have a criminal record. She'd lose her eligibility to play. She'd be benched for the rest of the playoffs. Her future would be tarnished. No way you're going to convince me your sister would risk all that for you."

The crease between Mike's eyes deepened. Trying to understand what Dawna wanted from him.

To lie, of course. But she couldn't say that. "Come on, Mike. Your sister doesn't deserve all this grief. You can't let her be busted because you've got a problem."

He got it then, Dawna could tell by the way his forehead smoothed out. "Okay. You got it right. She never said she'd help me."

"So you were lying when you told Duane and Kyle and Lance that Meghan would do what they wanted."

"I hoped I could talk her into it." He gave Dawna the almost-rueful look again. "I guess I knew I couldn't. Maybe Kyle suspected as much. I think that's why he broke my arm and threatened to hurt Meghan worse. But even if she'd known about the threat, it wouldn't have worked. She'd never have thrown the game."

Dawna frowned at him. "You're sticking with what you said to me originally? She didn't shave points."

Mike nodded.

"And she'll tell me the same story?"

"You can count on it."

"Okay, so long as you're sure of that." Dawna stopped herself from patting Mike's hand, settled for giving him an atta-boy smile. But she still wasn't happy. As soon as the FBI opened an investigation, the university would suspend Meghan from the team until all questions were answered. She wouldn't be exonerated in time to play on Sunday night. The Axewomen would be in trouble without her in the lineup. Even if Nacogdoches did beat Texas Tech, the game would be very close. The Axewomen likely wouldn't win by more than the spread. Duane, Kyle, and Lance already had their bets down on the game. Those three lowlifes would clean up.

It was so unfair Dawna wanted to spit. How had basketball and justice ended up at opposite ends of the court?

Dawna felt her spine stiffen. There was a way out, if she'd just take it. What the hell, illegal gambling wasn't exclusively FBI turf. She had to stop thinking Bureau. Start thinking Texas, instead.

"I need to make a call," she said to Mike. "You got a phone I can use where I won't be overheard?"

"You calling the cops now?"

"The top cop. Chief of police in Amity, Texas."

Dawna's dad, of course, Donald Raymond Shepherd. And while Donny Ray didn't know every other police chief in Texas, he had Rangered years ago with Sergeant Zachary Taylor Smith who was now with the Texas Department of Public Safety in Nacogdoches. And Sergeant Smith was more than happy to help Donny Ray's little girl. When Dawna laid out the facts, he invited her and Mike to meet with him in his office in half an hour.

Dawna brought her rental car to the frat house, loaded Mike into it, and hustled him over to the Public Safety Building. Sergeant Smith turned out to be a massive fifty-two-year-old dressed casually for a Saturday evening in lemon-yellow sweats. His un-coplike hairdo was longish and curly, gray hair frothing above the Ovaltine-colored skin of his face. He clasped both of her hands between his and beamed at her. "Dawna Raylene," he began, in the annoying way her dad's friends always did. But she forgave him for remembering her awful middle name when he added, "Used to love watching you play. I'd'a sworn you couldn't get more beautiful. Damn, I couldn't have been more wrong."

She blushed—these old guys always had that effect—and she automatically responded in the way she'd been taught, "Thank you, sir."

"Call me Z. T.," Sergeant Smith said, "everybody does." He ushered Mike and Dawna into his office, and after he'd spent an hour with them, he dragged in the on-call Assistant District Attorney. Mike waived his rights in exchange for the usual assurances—"it'll go easier with you, son"—and told the whole story again.

At ten thirty Mike was sent home with cryptic instructions from Dawna to talk to his big sister. Sergeant Smith spent the next twenty minutes with a pair of troopers he'd called in from patrol, and at five minutes before eleven he had Dawna chauffeur him to a fifty-acre manufacturing facility on the outskirts of Nacogdoches where luxury motor coaches were turned out twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The sergeant instructed her to park at the edge of the employee lot and turn off the ignition and lights. They waited in the darkness, a hundred feet from the cabinet shop in which Duane, Kyle, and Lance had spent the last ten hours turning high quality hardwoods into glossy paneling, countertops, and European-style kitchen cabinets.

Peering through the windshield, Dawna saw young men crowd out

of the shop's exit. The pair of burly troopers culled a skinny blond from the herd and yanked him to one side of the door. "Kyle Buncombe," Sergeant Smith said aloud. "Mean as a snake but about half as smart."

The shorter trooper held onto Kyle while his partner grabbed a bald guy with a Fu Manchu mustache. "Duane Holsum," according to Sergeant Smith, "the only one with any brains."

As if to prove the sergeant's point, a flabby fellow broke from the crowd and ran awkwardly toward their edge of the lot. Dawna's body tensed. Her fingers closed around the door handle and her shoulder dropped, ready to push the door open with her body. She sensed Sergeant Smith doing the same.

"Wait," he said, his eyes locked on the approaching fat man. The bigger trooper was now in pursuit and the runaway was running full tilt, apparently unaware that the darkened car in front of him was occupied. When he was ten feet away, Sergeant Smith said, "Now."

As if they'd rehearsed the move, Dawna and the sergeant flung open both front doors. The interior light came on, illuminating the two of them standing beside the car, legs apart and arms raised in the familiar pistol shooter's stance. A fake, at least in Dawna's case, but she was counting on her posture to fool the fat man, make him imagine a gun in her weaponless hands, something to match the snub-nosed revolver held by the sergeant. "Lance Stevens," he said calmly, "you're under arrest."

Lance skidded to a stop, gasping. Seconds later, the massive trooper was behind him, snapping on handcuffs. "You can't arrest me," Lance said. "I ain't done—"

The sergeant cut him off. "Let's get these boys downtown."

The trooper prodded Lance, moving him toward the waiting paddy wagon. "You don't want me," Lance whined over his shoulder. "The college boy, he's the one you want."

"Is that right?" the sergeant asked.

"Him and his sister," Lance shouted. "Whole thing was their idea." He kept up his patter but the words became unintelligible as he got farther away.

Dawna let her breath out in a silent sigh. Damn, what would the sergeant make of that?

"Definitely the dumbest of the litter," he muttered, climbing into the car.

Dawna slid behind the wheel. The slamming of her door was echoed by the closing of the one on the jailhouse van. Sergeant Smith motioned Dawna to follow it. "Like I said," he continued, "Duane's the only one who can think. Got to figure he put this all together. Saw a way to get his hooks into the Cronin boy."

Dawna started her engine and put on her headlights. "You think Duane set Mike up?"

"Duane'd be the one put the pieces together. Always been a gambler, always looking for a way to get himself an edge. Running a number on a college boy, that'd be just his style."

Dawna ran the wipers to clear the windshield of mist. She pulled out of the lot behind the police vehicle. "You think the arrests will hold up in court?"

"Kyle's got a record of assault. He'll do some time for hurting the Cronin boy. The gambling won't count for much. As soon as court opens on Monday, the other two will be fined and go on probation, same as Cronin. Illegal betting is minor stuff in these parts. 'Course Cronin will have to participate in Gamblers Anonymous, since you asked for that."

"He agreed to it. Mike's a compulsive gambler and he knows he can't handle it by himself."

"Made him an easy mark for Holsum, that's for sure." Sergeant Smith rubbed his chin and stared at the cottony fog caught in the car's lights. "You know, I go to all the Axewomen games. I'm a big fan of Meghan Cronin. And I wondered why she played so badly last night."

He'd heard Lance's quickie version of events. Now he was passing Dawna the ball, waiting to see what play she'd run. Dawna knew better than to try a fake against this man. She met him head on. "You think Meghan really meant to miss those foul shots?"

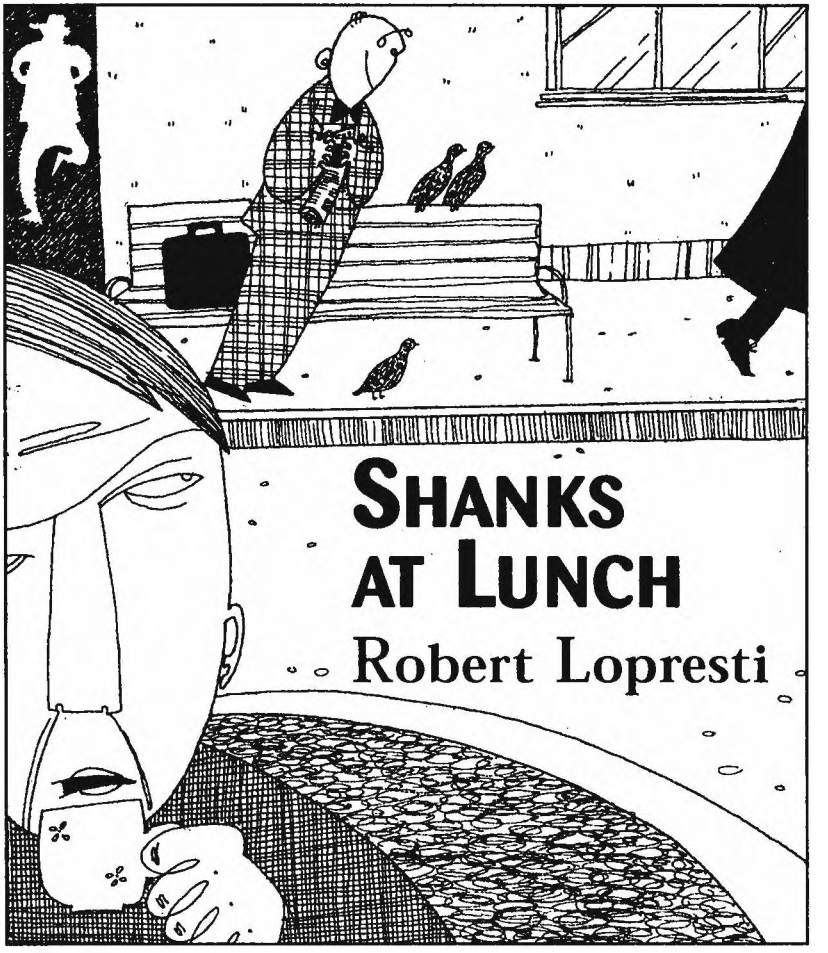
"Nobody'd blame her if she did. Big sister helping her little brother out of a jam. Be the right thing to do, far as most people are concerned."

Dawna felt her nerve ends vibrating. Had all her careful maneuvering come to nothing? Was the sergeant going to open an investigation into Meghan? She pulled into the lot behind the Public Service Building and parked next to the sergeant's Crown Vic. She kept her voice casual. "How about you? You think she did the right thing, Sergeant Smith?"

"Call me Z. T." He levered himself out of the passenger seat, then leaned back into Dawna's car. "I don't work for the NCAA. Hell, makes no difference to me what Meghan Cronin was thinking last night. But I guess you probably figured that's how I'd play it."

Well, damn, he'd known all along why she called him instead of by-the-book Bill Meeks. For the same reason that Lupe had called her. If you can get the home court advantage, you take it. Any fool knows that.

"Been a pleasure doing business with you," she said, quickly adding, "Z. T." She grinned. "Purely a pleasure."



SHANKS AT LUNCH

Robert Lopresti

"For heaven's sake, Shanks, try to behave yourself today."

Leopold Longshanks looked at his wife with one raised eyebrow. "Behave myself how, dear?"

Cora was frowning at the traffic light, tapping a foot as if DON'T WALK had been holding them up for hours instead of seconds. They had plenty of time to walk the two blocks, but Shanks was wise enough not to say so.

"What was that?" asked Cora.

"Is there some particular behavior you wish me to avoid?"

"Don't monopolize the conversation."

"No monopoly. Got it."

"And don't just sit there like a lump."

"No lumps. Right." The light

changed and they marched forward. Shanks reflected that so far he could get in trouble by talking too much or by talking too little. Sounded like a fun afternoon.

Poor Cora. She wasn't usually like this, but she was approaching her first press interview with all the enthusiasm of a prisoner marching to the gallows.

"You know," Shanks said cautiously—he didn't want her to think he was attempting to desert—"if you don't want me to be there at all, I could meet you after—"

"No. You better come along. I suppose that if the questions get too tough I can draw on your vast experience."

Standard sarcasm, but delivered too quickly. Twenty-plus years of marriage had taught Shanks to spot a white lie as soon as it raised its nervous little head. In this case, he suspected Cora had had to promise his presence to clinch the interview.

That was too bad; she deserved better. But Shanks had been a writer for too long to expect the publishing business to be fair.

As they reached the tea shop, Cora saw herself in the front window and dug up a brand-new worry. "I should have worn the green dress. I look like a sack of potatoes in this thing."

Ah. He knew the proper response for that one. "You look terrific in that outfit."

"But I look better in the green—"

"True."

"True?" She spun around to stare at him, as if he had proclaimed that she looked elderly. *And* six months pregnant.

"But you don't want to show up this lady reporter too much, do you? I mean, in this outfit there's a chance she won't be totally outclassed."

Cora grinned and looked a little more like herself. "Flatterer."

They had just gotten settled into a table by the tea shop's front window when their guest arrived. Shanks was a fair judge of interviewers, and by the time Rose Marotta had shaken hands he had classified her as a Modified Gusher (magazine variety), given to limp questions and inaccurate quotations. If anyone had been there to take a bet he would have offered three-to-one odds that she would ask the Worst Question.

"What a pleasure to meet you!" she bubbled. "The wife of such a famous author! And you, Leopold Longshanks! I've been reading your books since I was a child!" And having offended both of her subjects, she sat blithely down to dine with them.

"Mr. Longshanks, I want—"

"Call me Shanks. Everyone does." That got him a kick under the table. Apparently he was already talking too much. After they ordered depressingly dainty little sandwiches—he would need a steak when he got home—he took the gamble of saying more. "I am so glad you want to interview Cora about her wonderful first novel."

"Oh, absolutely," Rose said, blinking a lot, as if suddenly remembering why she was there. "So tell me, Cora, what is it like now that there are *two* novelists in the house?"

Well, that was nearly on topic, anyway. While his wife gave a sparklingly fresh, carefully rehearsed answer to that, Shanks gazed out the window—they had arranged for the two women to face each other, with the odd man out sitting between them.

He frowned. There was a bench in front of the bank across the street and someone had left a black bundle under one end. It looked about the right size and shape for a laptop computer in a leather case.

He had been looking for a good opening for an Inspector Cadogan novel about terrorism. A bomb left at a bus stop? Too much of a cliche, perhaps.

Rose was asking Cora if he had given her any advice about writing. Shanks had warned his wife that the reporter would either write that he had been her loving mentor, guiding her progress toward authorship, or else that she had nobly put off her writing for all these years to support him. That Cora had developed an interest in writing on her own a few years ago and worked at her craft more or less independently did not fit any of the current myths, so he knew the reporter would shoehorn her into the role of either lucky pupil or self-sacrificing spouse. The best Cora could hope for was being permitted to select which cliche would be applied to her.

A middle-aged man with a tan sports coat and bow tie sat down at the end of the bench farthest from the bundle and opened a newspaper. Immediately a younger man in a red nylon jacket came over and sat down at the other end of the bench. He spotted the bundle and said something to the other man.

Is this yours? Shanks guessed.

Bow Tie shook his head and went back to his newspaper. Redcoat picked up the bundle.

And Cora kicked him again. He had missed a question. "Rose was saying, darling," Cora muttered through gritted teeth, "how much she enjoyed your books about Tom and Tina Shaw."

"You write so well about women," said the reporter, "I was wondering if Tina is based on your lovely wife."

"Well," said Shanks. "Everything I know about women I learned from Cora. That's why I am so glad she has written a novel, so that everyone else can learn from her, too."

Which steered the conversation away from him for awhile. Across the street Redcoat had opened the bundle—it *was* a laptop computer—and was fiddling with it. He said something to Bow Tie, who reluctantly slid down the bench to help.

"I don't consider it a romance novel," Cora was saying with a chill in her voice. "If you must have a label, women's fiction is more accurate."

"Oh, I love women authors," said Rose. "Grafton, Paretsky, Christie, Sayers . . ."

Shanks wondered whether the interviewer had known in advance that Cora had *not* written a mystery.

The two men on the bench were very excited about something on the computer screen. From the furtive glances they cast around the street and the way they leaned together to speak, it must have been something they weren't supposed to see. My, my. What was *that* all about?

Shanks frowned. It all seemed vaguely familiar, like a scene he had read once, or even one he had written.

A man in a black coat came into view at the left edge of the shop window. He halted for a moment and then started forward toward the men on the bench.

Shanks sat up straight. In the moment his peripheral vision caught that little hesitation—the man in black assessing the scene before marching in—he realized what he was watching. The Pigeon Drop! The oldest short con in the history of confidence games.

He had read all about it while researching *Clothesline,* the novel that won him his first Edgar. In the end he had rejected the Pigeon Drop as too old and corny to be believable, and yet here it was, large as life, on the streets of Madison.

The con men had simply modernized it by using a laptop computer instead of a wallet. Nothing odd about that, he reflected. On the streets of Caesar's Rome they probably did it with bags of gold. What was the Latin for "never give the sucker an even break"?

The man in the black coat and gray fedora had overheard the two men on the bench and forced his way into the conversation. Now they were telling him, reluctantly, what they had found on the computer.

What was that, Shanks wondered. Swiss bank account numbers? A stock market tip? Something that required immediate cash and promised an immediate, if illegal, gain. Preferably, the supposed loser of the money would be an anonymous corporation or, better yet, someone it would be a downright public service to rob. A software billionaire, say.

He desperately wanted to tell Cora about what he was seeing, but that would be a mistake. Rose's article would be all about Leopold Longshanks solving a real-life crime and Cora Neal's novel would be a footnote. Grounds for divorce.

The three men were making their plans now, heads together for conspiratorial whispers. *I know how to get at that money! But I need some cash to pay someone off.*

Or open an account. Or any of a dozen excuses.

Fedora was tapping rapidly at the computer. Redcoat was pulling out his wallet. And Bow Tie, with an excited nod, was heading for the bank. To draw out his life savings, no doubt.

The two con men watched him

go. Fedora said something that made Redcoat laugh.

Rose, meanwhile, was asking the Worst Question. "So tell me, Cora, where do you get your ideas?"

Shanks had prepped his wife for that one, and she steered firmly away from the meaningless generalities that made so many authors look like mystics or morons. "Well, the idea for this book came from an article I read two years ago about a dating service for people with severe phobias . . ."

Shanks's fingers itched to whisk out his cell phone. Call the police and . . . No. Cora would accuse him of grandstanding, of ruining her first interview.

"Excuse me," he said. "Need the restroom." His wife looked as if he was deserting her in her hour of need but that couldn't be helped.

He found a pay phone at the back of the restaurant and dialed 911. Cell phone calls, after all, could be traced. "There's a robbery going on on Blake Avenue, between Third and Fourth, in *front* of the bank. No, not a bank robbery. In front of the bank." He described the victim and the two conspirators. "It's happening even as we speak, so get over here. My name? Miles Archer."

He returned to the table. Bow Tie had also come back and was giving Redcoat a fat envelope, full of cash no doubt. In order to count the money Redcoat handed the laptop over to Fedora.

Oh, that was good. Shanks was watching for it and yet he barely saw it. Fedora had slipped the black case under his black coat for just a moment and pulled it back out.

But it wasn't the same case now. The working computer was tucked under the trenchcoat. The black leather case he handed to Bow Tie held a junker, or maybe something else that weighed about the same.

Redcoat was done counting Bow Tie's money. He handed it back to Fedora with his own, and Fedora marched off, supposedly to a bank or a broker, or whatever the scam called for. Redcoat and Bow Tie stood, watching him go, talking excitedly.

Rose asked Shanks to autograph one of his paperbacks. "For my little nephew. He just loves your books." Reporters were so selfless; they always wanted autographs for someone else.

Across the street, Redcoat was getting antsy. He did a good imitation of a man in need of a restroom. Finally he turned urgently to Bow Tie, and Shanks guessed what he was saying. *I'll be right back. Promise me you won't move an inch! You've got the computer. We're trusting you!* Then he walked off briskly in the opposite direction of the one Fedora had taken.

And then there was one. Shanks was fascinated. When would Bow Tie get suspicious enough to peek in the case and discover that he wasn't holding the computer with the secret formula, or Swiss bank account numbers, or whatever he thought he had seen?

The bland lunch and equally bland interview were rolling to an end. Cora smiled as she handed Rose another copy of the packet of information on her novel. Shanks had warned her never to underestimate a reporter's ability to lose P.R. material.

Outside, a police car came rolling up. Shanks was interested to see a cop open a back door and let Redcoat out of the back. No handcuffs, so he wasn't under arrest, but he certainly wouldn't have come along willingly. That probably meant he had acted suspiciously when the cops spotted him, so they had decided to hold onto him while they checked things out.

Now Bow Tie was being questioned by a cop. He looked guilty as hell and very confused. After all, he thought he was part of a conspiracy to rob the owner of the computer. But the cop had been told he was the victim of a robbery. Quite a puzzle.

"Time to go," said Cora.

Shanks paid the bill and the three of them stepped out into the daylight just as Bow Tie opened the computer case and a couple of bricks fell out. No computer. After a moment of shock Bow Tie decided he would be happy to cooperate with the police, mostly by screaming things at Redcoat at the top of his lungs.

The three lunch companions stopped for a moment to watch the scene across the street. "What do you think that is all about?" Cora asked.

"Who knows?" he said.

Rose smiled. "Could this inspire your next mystery, Shanks?"

He shrugged. "Reality is overrated as a muse. Imagination leads to fewer libel suits."

The reporter laughed and waved goodbye.

Cora let out a breath. "How do you think it went?"

Shanks tried to look judicious. "Pretty well, I think. Your answers were better than her questions, but you can't help that."

And, just to make it perfect, here came a second police car with Fedora. Not a good day for the flimflam boys.

Cora took his hand. "Oh, Shanks. Do you really think my book will sell well?"

"It's a damned good novel, honey. If there's any justice, it will do just fine."

His wife sighed. "Yes, but is there any justice?"

Fedora and Redcoat were being fitted for handcuffs as Shanks and his wife walked past. The two con men looked mightily annoyed. Bow Tie was still calling them imaginative but accurate names.

Shanks laughed. "Oh, sometimes there is justice, my love. Every once in a great while." And he took her hand.

THE O-BON CAT

I. J. Parker

Illustration by Meredith Lightbown

OTSU, LAKE BIWA, ELEVENTH CENTURY JAPAN, DURING THE O-BON FESTIVAL.

The First Day: Welcoming the Dead

He was on his homeward journey when he found the boy. At the time, caught in the depths of hopelessness and grief, he did not understand the significance of their meeting.

Sugawara Akitada, not yet in the middle of his life, was already sick of it. A man may counter hardship, humiliation, even imminent death with resources carefully accumulated in his past and draw fresh zest for new obstacles from his achievements, but Akitada, though one of the privileged and moderately successful in the service of the emperor, had found no spiritual anchor in his soul when his young son had died during that spring's smallpox epidemic. He went through the motions of daily life as if he were no part of them, as if the man he once was had departed with the smoke from his son's funeral pyre, leaving behind an empty shell now inhabited by a stranger.

Having completed an assignment in Hikone two days earlier, Akitada rode along the southern shore of Lake Biwa in a steady drizzle. The air was saturated with moisture, his clothes clung uncomfortably, and both rider and horse were sore from the wooden saddle. This was the fifteenth day of the watery month, in the rainy season. The road had long since become a muddy track where puddles hid deep pits in which a horse could break its leg. It became clear that he could not reach his home in the capital but would have to spend the night in Otsu.

Otsu was the legendary place of parting, a symbol of grief and yearning in poetry and prose. In Otsu, wives or parents would bid farewell, perhaps forever, to their husbands or sons when they left the capital to begin their service in distant provinces of the country. Akitada himself used to feel uneasy about his return on such occasions. But those days seemed in a distant past now. He cared little what lay ahead.

At dusk he entered a dense forest, and darkness closed in about him, falling with the misting rain from the branches above and creeping from the dank shadows of the woods. When he could no longer see the road clearly, he dismounted. Leading his tired horse, he trudged onward in squelching boots and sodden straw rain cape and thought of death.

He was still in the forest when a child's whimpering roused him from his grief. But when he stopped and called out, there was no answer, and all was still again except for the dripping rain. He was almost certain the sound had been human, but the eeriness of a child's pitiful weeping in this lonely, dark place on his lonely, dark journey seemed too cruel a coincidence. This was the first night of the three-

day O-bon festival, the night when the spirits of the dead return to their homes to visit before departing for another year.

If his own son's soul was seeking its way home also, Yori would not find his father there. Would he cry for him out of the darkness? Akitada shivered and shook off his sick fancies. Such superstitions were for simpler, more trusting minds. How far was Otsu?

Then he heard it again.

"Who is that? Come out where I can see you!" he bellowed angrily into the darkness. His horse twitched its ears and shook its head.

Something pale detached itself from one of the tree trunks and crept closer. A boy of about five or six. He caught his breath. "Yori?"

Foolishness! This was no ghost. It was a ragged child with huge, frightened eyes in a pale face, a boy nothing at all like Yori. Yori had been handsome, well-nourished, and sturdy. This boy in his filthy torn shirt had sticks for arms and legs. He looked permanently hungry, a living ghost.

"Are you lost, child?" asked Akitada, more gently, wishing he had food in his saddle bags. The boy remained silent and kept his distance.

"What is your name?"

No answer.

"Where do you live?"

Silence.

The child probably knew his way around these woods better than Akitada. With a farewell wave, Akitada resumed his journey. Soon the trees thinned and the darkness receded slightly. Gray dusk filtered through the branches, and ahead lay a pale sliver that was the lake and—thank heaven—many small golden points of light, like a gathering of fireflies, that were the dwellings of Otsu. He glanced back at the dark forest, and there, not ten feet behind, waited the child.

"Do you want to come with me, then?" Akitada asked. The boy said nothing, but he edged closer until he stood beside the horse. Akitada saw that his ragged shirt was soaked and clung to the ribs of his small chest.

A deaf-mute? Oh well, perhaps someone in Otsu would know the boy.

Bending down, Akitada lifted him into the saddle. He weighed so little, poor little sprite, that he would hardly trouble the horse. For the rest of their journey Akitada looked back from time to time to make sure the boy had not fallen off. Now and then he asked him a question or made a comment, but the child did not respond in any way. He sat quietly, almost expectantly in the saddle as they approached Otsu.

Ahead beckoned the bonfires welcoming the spirits of the dead. Most people believed that spirits got lost, like this child, and also that they felt hunger. Otsu's cemetery was filled with tiny lights which marked a trail to town, and in the doorway of every home offerings

of food and water awaited the returning souls, those hungry ghosts depicted in temple painting, skeletal creatures with distended bellies, condemned to eat excrement or suffer unending hunger and thirst in punishment for their wasteful lives.

In the market people were still shopping for the three-day festival. The doors of houses stood wide open, and inside Akitada could see spirit altars erected before the family shrines, heaped with more fine things to eat and drink. So much good food wasted on ghosts!

They passed a rice cake vendor with his trays of fragrant white cakes. Yori had loved rice cakes filled with sweet bean jam. Akitada dug two coppers from his sash and bought one for the boy. The child received it with solemn dignity and bowed his thanks before gobbling it down. As miserable and hungry as this urchin was, he had not forgotten his manners. Akitada was intrigued and decided to do his best for the child.

He asked if anyone knew the boy or his family, but he soon grew weary of the disclaimers and stopped at an inn. The boy had looked around curiously but given no sign of recognition. Akitada lifted him from the saddle and, with a sigh, took the small hand in his as they entered.

"A room," Akitada told the innkeeper, slipping off the sodden straw cape and his wet boots. "And a bath. Then some hot food and wine."

The man was staring at the ragged child. "Is he with you, sir?"

"Unless you know where he lives, he's with me!" Akitada snapped irritably. "Oh, I suppose you'd better send someone out for new clothes for him. He looks to be about five." He fished silver from his sash, ignoring the stunned look on the man's face.

After inspecting the room, he took the child to the bath.

Helping a small boy with his bath again was unexpectedly painful, and tears filled Akitada's eyes. He blinked them away, blaming such emotion on fatigue and pity for the child. The shirt had done little to conceal his thinness, but naked he was a far more shocking sight. Not only was every bone clearly visible under the sun-darkened skin, but the protruding belly spoke of malnutrition, and there were bruises from beatings.

Judging from the state of his long, matted hair and his filthy feet and hands, the bath was a novel experience for him. Akitada borrowed scissors and a comb from the bath attendant and tended to his hair and nails, trying to be as gentle as he could. The boy submitted bravely. Afterwards, soaking in the large tub as he had done so many times with Yori, he fought tears again.

They returned to the room in the cotton robes provided by the inn. Their bedding had been spread out, and a hot meal of rice and vegetables awaited them. At the sight of the food, the boy smiled for the first time. They ate, and when the boy's eyes began to close and the

bowl slipped from his hands, Akitada tucked him into the bedding and went to sleep himself.

The Second Day: Ghostly Phenomena

He awoke to the boy's earnest scrutiny. In daylight and after the bath and night's rest, the child looked almost handsome. His hair was soft; he had thick, straight brows, a well-shaped nose, and a good chin; and his eyes were almost as large and luminous as Yori's. Akitada smiled and said, "Good morning."

Stretching out a small hand, the boy tweaked Akitada's nose gently and gave a little gurgle of laughter.

But there were no miracles. The boy did not find his voice or hearing, and his poor body had not filled out overnight. He still looked more like a hungry ghost than a child.

And he was not Yori.

Yet in that moment of intimacy Akitada decided that for however long they would have each other's company he would surrender to emotions he had buried with the ashes of his firstborn. He would be a father again.

Someone had brought in Akitada's saddlebags and the boy's new clothes. They dressed and went for a walk about town. Because of the holiday the vendors were setting out their wares early in the market.

Near the Temple of the War God they breakfasted on a bowl of noodles. Then Akitada had himself shaved by a barber, while the boy sat on the temple steps and watched an old storyteller who regaled a small group of children and their mothers with the tale of how the rabbit got into the moon.

On the hillside behind the temple, a complex of elegantly curving tiled roofs rose above the trees. Akitada idly asked the barber about its owner.

"Oh, that would be the Masudas. Very rich but unlucky."

"Unlucky?"

"All the men have died." The barber finished and wiped Akitada's face with a hot towel. "There's only the old lord now, and he's mad. That family's ruled by women. Pshaw!" He spat in disgust.

There was no shortage of death in the world.

Akitada paid and they strolled on. The way the boy clung to his hand as they passed among the stands and vendors of the market filled Akitada's heart with half-forgotten gentleness. He watched his delight in the sights of the market and wondered where his parents were. Perhaps he had become separated from them while traveling along the highway. Or they had abandoned him in the forest because he was not perfect. The irony that a living child might be discarded, while Yori, so beloved and treasured by his parents, had been snatched away by death was not lost on Akitada, and he spoiled the

silent boy with treats—a pair of red slippers for his bare feet, a top to play with, and sweets.

No one recognized the child; neither did the boy show interest in anyone. But one odd thing happened. After having clung to Akitada's hand all day, the boy suddenly tore himself loose and dashed into the crowd. Akitada panicked, desperately afraid he had lost him forever.

But the boy had not gone far. Akitada glimpsed his bright red shoes between the legs of passersby, and there he was, sitting in a doorway, clutching a filthy brown and white cat in his arms. Akitada's relief was as instant as his irritation. The animal was thin, covered with dirt and scars, and looked half wild. When Akitada reached for it, it hissed and jumped from the boy's arms.

The child gave a choking cry, too garbled to be called speech. He struggled wildly in Akitada's arms, sobbing and repeating the same strangled sounds, his hands stretching after the cat. Akitada felt the wild heartbeat in the small chest against his own and soothed the choking sobs by murmuring softly to him. After a long time, the boy calmed down, but even after Akitada bought him a toy drum, he still looked about for the stray cat.

When night fell, they followed the crowd back to the temple where the O-bon dancers gyrated in the light of colored lanterns. Akitada had to lift the boy so he could see over the heads of people. His eyes were wide with wonder at the sight of the fearful masks and bright silk costumes. Once, when a great lion-headed creature came close to them, its glaring eyes and lolling tongue swinging his way, he gave a small cry and burrowed his face in Akitada's shoulder.

It was shameful for a grown man to weep in public. Akitada brushed the tears away and knew that he could not part with this child.

He lost the boy only moments later.

Someone in the watching crowd shouted, "There he is!" and a sharp-faced, poorly dressed woman pushed to his side. "What are you doing with our boy?" she demanded shrilly. "Give him back!"

Akitada could not answer immediately, because the child's thin arms had wrapped around his neck with a stranglehold.

A rough character in the shirt and loincloth of a peasant appeared behind the woman and glared at Akitada. "Hey!" he cried. "That's our boy! Let go of him." When Akitada did not, he bellowed at the bystanders, "He's stolen our boy! Call the constables!"

Akitada loosened the boy's grip and saw sheer terror on his face.

But it was over all too quickly. A couple of constables appeared and talked to the couple, whose name was Mimura. The man was a fisherman on the lake about a mile north from Otsu near the forest where Akitada had found the boy. They handed the weeping child over to his parents with a warning to keep a better eye on him in the future.

Even though Akitada knew he had been foolish to give his affection

to a strange child, his heart ached when the parents dragged the whimpering boy off. He suspected that they had abused him and would do so again, but he had no right to interfere between a parent and his child. This did not stop him from wandering gloomily about town, trying to think of ways to rescue the boy.

Then he saw the cat again.

Perhaps it was due to the festival's peculiar atmosphere or his confused emotions, but he was suddenly convinced that the cat was his link to the boy. This time he knew better than to rush the animal. He kept his distance, waiting as it investigated gutters and alleyways for bits of food. At one point it paused to consume a large fish head, and Akitada hurriedly purchased a lantern. Eventually the animal stopped scavenging and moved on more purposefully. The streets got darker, there were fewer people, and the sounds of the market receded until they were alone on a residential street, the cat a pale patch in the distance—until it disappeared into a garden wall with the suddenness of a ghost.

Akitada was still staring at the spot when the soft flapping of straw sandals sounded behind him. An old man approached. A night watchman with his wooden clappers. In the distance sounded a faint temple bell, and the watchman paused to listen, then used his clappers vigorously, calling out the hour in a reedy voice. The middle of the night already.

When the old man had finished, Akitada asked, "Do you happen to know who owns a brown and white cat hereabouts?"

"You mean Patch, sir? She lives in the dead courtesan's house." He pointed up the street.

Patch? Of course. The cat was spotted. And that must be what the boy had tried to say. "The dead courtesan's house?" Akitada asked.

"Nobody lives there anymore," the watchman said. "It's a sad ruin. The cat belonged to her."

"Really? Do you happen to know who owns the property now? I might want to buy it."

The watchman shook his head. "Dear me, not that place, sir. The courtesan killed herself because her lover deserted her, and now her angry ghost roams about the garden in hopes of catching unwary men to have her revenge on. I always cross to the other side when I pass."

Akitada looked at the watchman doubtfully. It was the middle of the O-bon festival and the man was superstitious. "How did she die?"

"Drowned herself in the lake."

"Were there any children?"

"If so, they're long gone. The house belongs to the Masudas now."

Akitada thanked the man and watched him make a wide detour up ahead before following more slowly.

When he reached the spot where the cat had disappeared, he saw that a section of the wall had collapsed and he could see into an overgrown garden hiding all but the elegant curved roof of a small villa. The night watchman turned the corner, and Akitada scrambled over the rubble, aware that he was trespassing and feeling foolish, but more than ever convinced that he must find the cat.

A clammy heat rose from the dense vegetation. Everywhere vines, brambles, and creepers covered shrubs and trees. His feeble lantern picked out a stone Buddha, half-hidden beneath a blanket of ivy. Strange rustlings, squeaks, and creaks were everywhere, and clouds of insects hovered in the beam of his lantern. The atmosphere was oppressive and vaguely threatening. When he felt a tug at his sleeve, he swung around, but it was only the branch of a gaunt cedar.

There was no sign of the cat, just dense, towering shrubs and weirdly stirring curtains of leafy vines and wisteria suspended from the trees. He would have turned back, had he not heard a door or shutter slamming somewhere ahead.

When he reached the house, he was covered with scratches and itching from insect bites, and his topknot was askew. But there, on the veranda, sat the cat, waiting.

The small villa was dark and empty, its shutters broken, the paper covering its windows hanging in shreds, and its roof tiles shattered on the ground. The balustrade of the veranda leaned at a crazy angle, and where once there had been doors, black cavernous spaces gaped in the walls. But once it must have been charming, poised just above the lake with its lush gardens, perhaps a nobleman's retreat from official affairs in the capital.

The lake stretched still and black to the distant string of tiny lights on the far shore where people were celebrating the return of their dead. No one had lit candles or set up an altar in this dark place, but Akitada suddenly felt a presence, which sent shivers down his back. He looked about carefully, then walked to the villa. The cat watched his approach with unblinking eyes, motionless until he was close enough to touch it, then it slipped away and disappeared into the house. He called to it, the way he had heard young women and children call to their pets, but the animal did not reappear.

The veranda steps were missing, as was most of the floor. The house, vandalized for useful building materials, had become inaccessible to all but cats. He was turning away, when he heard a faint sound. It might almost have been a wail and was definitely not made by a cat. He swung around and caught a movement inside the house.

A tall pale shape—a woman trailing some diaphanous garment?—had moved across the opening to one of the rooms and disappeared. For a moment Akitada blinked, the hair bristling on his head. Then he called out, "Who is there?" There was no answer.

Running around the corner of the house, he climbed one of the supports and held up his lantern, directing its beam into the room where he had seen the woman. The room was empty. Dead leaves lay in the corners and rainwater had gathered in puddles on the floor. In spite of the warm and humid night, Akitada felt suddenly cold.

When he stepped down from his perch, his foot landed on something which broke with a sharp crack. In the light of the lantern, he saw a shimmer of black lacquer and mother-of-pearl, a wooden toy sword, proof that a small boy had once lived here. He picked up the hilt and saw that it was just like one he had bought Yori during the last winter of his life. It had been an expensive toy, its handle lacquered and ornamented to resemble the weapon of an adult, but Yori's pleasure in it as father and son had practiced their swordplay in the courtyard of their home had been well worth it. A sudden irrational fear gripped Akitada. He felt as if he had intruded in a strange and forbidden world. When he reached the broken wall again, his heart was pounding and he was out of breath.

Dejected, he returned to the inn. He was no closer to finding the boy or making sense of what was troubling him. A courtesan's ghost, a cat, and an expensive toy? What did it all matter? He was too weary to bother.

The Third Day: The Ghosts Depart

In spite of his exhaustion he slept poorly. The encounter with the child had brought back all of the old grief and added new fears, for he lay awake a long time, thinking that he had abandoned the boy to his fate without lifting a finger to help him. When he finally did fall asleep, his dreams were filled with snarling cats and hungry ghosts. The ghosts all had the face of the boy and followed him about, their thin arms stretched out in entreaty.

Toward dawn he woke drenched in sweat, certain that he had heard Yori cry out for him from the next room. For a single moment of joy he thought his son's death part of the dream, but then the dark and lonely room of the inn closed around him and he plunged back into despair. Waking was always the hardest.

The last day of the O-bon festival dawned clear and dry. If the weather held, Akitada would reach Heian-Kyo in a few hours' ride, but he decided to chance it and spend the morning trying to find out more about the boy, the cat, and the dead courtesan. He thought, half guiltily and half resentfully, of his wife, but women seemed to draw on inner strengths when it came to losing a child. In the months since Yori's death, Tamako had quietly resumed her daily routines, while he had been sunk into utter despair.

The curving roofs of the Masuda mansion rose behind a high wall, its large gate closed in spite of the festival. Did the Masudas lock in

their ghosts? Akitada rapped sharply and gave his name to an ancient male servant, adding, "I am calling on Lord Masuda."

"My master is not well. He sees no one," wheezed the old man.

"Then perhaps one of the ladies?"

The gate opened a little wider and Akitada was admitted. The elegance of the mansion amazed him. No money had been spared on these halls and galleries. Blue tile gleamed on the roofs, red and black lacquer covered doors and pillars, and everywhere he saw carvings, gilded ornaments, and glazed terra cotta figures. They walked up the wide stairs of the main building and passed through it. Akitada caught glimpses of a painted ceiling supported by ornamented pillars, of thick grass mats and silk cushions, and of large, dim scroll paintings. Then they descended into a private garden. A covered gallery led to a second, slightly smaller hall. Here the old servant asked him to wait while he announced his visit to the ladies.

From the garden came the shouts and laughter of children. An artificial stream babbled softly past the veranda, disappeared behind an artificial hill, and reappeared, spanned by an elegant red-lacquered bridge. Its clear, pebble-strewn water was quite deep. A frog, disturbed by Akitada's shadow, jumped in and sent several fat old koi into a mild frenzy.

Suddenly two little girls skipped across the bridge, as colorful as butterflies in their embroidered gowns, their voices as high and clear as birdsong. An old nurse in black followed more slowly.

Lucky children, Akitada thought bitterly, turning away. And lucky parents!

The old man returned and took him into a beautiful room. Two ladies were seated on the pale grass mats near open doors. Both wore expensive silk gowns, one the dark gray of mourning, the other a cheerful deep rose. The lady in gray, slender and elegant, was making entries into a ledger; the other, younger lady had the half-opened scroll of an illustrated romance before her. The atmosphere was feminine, the air heavily perfumed with incense.

The lady in gray raised her face to him. No longer in her first youth but very handsome, she regarded him for a moment, then made a slight bow from the waist and said, "You are welcome, my lord. Please forgive the informality, but Father is not well and there was no one else to receive you. I am Lady Masuda and this is my late husband's secondary wife, Kohime."

Kohime had the cheerful, plain face and robust body of a peasant girl. Akitada decided to address the older woman. "I am deeply distressed to disturb your peace," he said, "and regret extremely the ill health of Lord Masuda. Perhaps you would like me to return when he is better?"

"I am afraid Father will not improve," said Lady Masuda. "He is

old and . . . his mind wanders. You may speak freely." She gestured at the account book. "I have been forced to take on the burdens of running this family."

Akitada expressed his interest in buying a summer place on the lake within easy reach of the capital and in a beautiful setting. Lady Masuda listened politely until he asked about the abandoned villa. Then she stiffened with distaste. "The Masudas own half of Otsu. I would not know the house you refer to. Perhaps . . ."

But the cheerful Kohime chimed in. "Oh, Hatsuko, that must be the house where our husband's . . ." She gulped and covered her mouth. "Oh!"

Lady Masuda paled. She gave Kohime a look. "My sister is mistaken. I am sorry that I cannot be of more assistance."

Akitada was too old a hand at dealing with suspects in criminal cases not to know that Lady Masuda was lying. Of the two women, Kohime was the simpler, but he could think of no way to speak to her alone. Thanking the ladies, he left.

Outside, the old servant waited. "There's someone hoping to speak to you, my lord. The children's nurse. When I mentioned your name, she begged for a few moments of your time."

Turning, Akitada caught sight of the elderly woman in black peering anxiously over a large shrub and bowing. He returned her bow.

"I don't believe I have met her," he told the old manservant.

"No, my lord. But when her son was a student in the capital, he was accused of murdering his professor. You cleared him and saved his life."

"Good heavens! Don't tell me she is the mother of that . . ." Akitada had been about to call him a rascal, but corrected himself in time, ". . . bright young fellow Ishikawa."

"Yes, Ishikawa." The old man laughed, rubbing his hands, as if Akitada had been very clever to remember. "When the gentleman is ready to leave, I shall be waiting at the gate."

Akitada had no wish to be reminded. It had happened a long time ago, in happier years, when Akitada had been courting Yori's mother, but he sighed and stepped down into the garden.

Mrs. Ishikawa was in her sixties and, it seemed, a much respected member of the Masuda household, having raised both the son and the grandchildren of the old lord. Akitada managed to end her long and passionate expressions of gratitude by asking, "How is your son?"

"He is head steward for Middle Counselor Sadanori and has his own family now," she said proudly. "I am sure he would wish to express his deep sense of obligation for your help in his difficulties."

Akitada doubted it. Ishikawa, a thoroughly selfish young man, had been innocent of murder but deeply implicated in a cheating scandal which had rocked the imperial university, and he had held Akitada

responsible for his dismissal. But as Akitada gazed into her lined face with the kind eyes smiling up at him, he was glad he had spared someone the pain of losing a son.

"Perhaps you can help me," he said. "There is an abandoned villa on the lake I was told belongs to the Masudas, but Lady Masuda denies this."

The old lady looked startled. "Peony's house? Lady Masuda would not wish to be reminded of that."

Peony was a professional name often used by courtesans and entertainers. Akitada guessed, "Lady Masuda's husband kept Peony in the villa on the lake?"

Mrs. Ishikawa squirmed. "We are not to speak of this."

"I see. I will not force you then. But perhaps you can tell me about a cat I saw there. It was white with brown spots."

Her face brightened momentarily. "Oh, Patch. Such a dear little kitten, and the boy doted on it. I used to wonder what became of it." Tears suddenly rose to her eyes and she clamped a hand over her mouth, realizing that she had said too much.

Akitada pounced. "There was a little boy then?"

"Oh, the poor child is dead," she cried. "They're both dead. My lady says Peony killed him and then herself." A stunned silence fell. Oh, sir," she whimpered, "please don't mention that I told you. It was horrible, but there was nothing we could do. It's best forgotten." She was so distressed that Akitada nearly apologized. But his mind churned with questions and, while he respected her loyalty, he saw again the boy's face as he was dragged away from him.

"Mrs. Ishikawa," he said earnestly, "two days ago I found a deaf-mute boy. He was about five years old, and when he saw the cat, he recognized it. I think he tried to say its name."

She stared at him. "He's the right age, but Peony's boy talked and sang all day long. It couldn't be him."

From the garden came the voice of Lady Masuda calling for the nurse. Mrs. Ishikawa flushed guiltily. "Forgive me, my lord, but I must go. Please, forget what I said." And with a deep bow she was gone.

Akitada stared after her. If she was right about Peony's child being dead, then the boy belonged to someone else, perhaps even to the repulsive couple who had dragged him away. But how did Lady Masuda come to tell such things to the nurse? Surely because Mrs. Ishikawa had known Peony and her son and had been fond of them. The elegant lady who had been bent over the account book knew what was in the interest of the Masudas, and the dubious offspring of a former courtesan was best assumed dead.

As he walked back to the gate, the glistening roofs of the Masuda mansion testified to the family's substantial wealth, all of it belonging to an ailing old man without an heir. Akitada wondered about the

deaths of the courtesan Peony and her child. Perhaps all the years of solving crimes committed by corrupt, greedy, and vengeful people had made him suspicious. Or perhaps his encounter with the wailing ghost had put him in mind of a restless spirit in search of justice. He was neither religious nor superstitious, but there had been nothing reasonable about the events of the past two days. Or about his own state of mind.

And suddenly, there in the Masuda's courtyard, he realized that the bleak and paralyzing hopelessness that had stifled him like a blanket for many months now had lifted. He was once again pursuing a mystery.

Turning to the old servant who waited patiently beside the gate, he asked, "When did the young lord die?"

"Which one, my lord? The old lord's son died three years ago when his horse threw him, but the first lady's little son drowned last year." He sighed. "Now there are only the two little girls of the second lady, but the old lord cares nothing for them."

Akitada's eyebrows rose. "How did the boy drown?"

"He fell into the stream in the garden. It happened a year ago when Mrs. Ishikawa was away on a pilgrimage and the other servants weren't watching."

So Lady Masuda had also lost a son. And Peony, and possibly her son, had died soon after. Also by drowning. Were all these deaths unrelated accidents?

A picture was beginning to shape in Akitada's mind. To begin with, the story was not unusual. A wealthy young nobleman falls in love with a beautiful courtesan, buys out her contract, and keeps her for his private enjoyment in a place where he can visit her often. Such liaisons could last months or lifetimes. In this case, only the death of the younger Masuda had ended his affair, and there had been a child. What if Lady Masuda, who had lost first her husband and then her only son, had in a grief-maddened state one night wandered to the lake villa and killed both the rival and her child?

Akitada had much to think about. He thanked the old man and left.

Crowds already filled the main streets of Otsu, most in their holiday best and eager to celebrate the departure of their ancestral ghosts. Akitada contemplated wryly that for most people, death loses its more painful attributes as soon as duty has been observed and the souls of those who were once deeply mourned have been duly acknowledged and can, with clear conscience, be sent back to the other world for another year. Tonight people everywhere would gather on the shores of rivers, lakes, and oceans and set afloat tiny straw boats containing a small candle or oil lamp to carry the spirits of the dear departed out into the open water where, one by one, the lights would grow smaller until they died out completely. But what of those whose lives and families had been taken from them by violence?

Akitada asked for direction to the local warden's office. There he walked into a shouting match among a matron, a poorly dressed man, and a ragged youngster of about fourteen. The warden was looking from one to the other and scratched his head.

As he waited for the matter to be settled, Akitada pieced together what had happened. Someone had knocked the matron to the ground from behind and snatched a package containing a length of silk from under her arm. When she had gathered her wits, she had seen the two villains running away through the crowds. Her screams had brought one of the local constables who had set off after the men and caught them a short distance away. The package was lying in the street and the two were scuffling with each other.

The trouble was that each blamed the theft on the other and claimed to have been chasing down the culprit.

The ragged boy had tears in his eyes. He kept repeating, "I was only trying to help," and claimed his mother was waiting for some fish he was to have purchased for their holiday meal. The man looked outraged. "Lazy kids! Don't want to work and think they can steal an honest person's goods. Maybe a few good whippings will teach him before it's too late."

The matron, though vocal about her ordeal, was no help at all. "I tell you, I didn't see who did it! He knocked me down and nearly broke my back."

The warden shook his head, apparently at the end of his tether. "You should have brought witnesses," he grumbled to the constable. "Now it's too late, and what'll we do?"

The constable protested, "Oh come on, Warden. The kid did it. Look at his clothes. Look at his face. Guilt's written all over him. Let's take him out back and question him."

Akitada looked at the boy and saw that he was terrified. Interrogation meant the whip and even innocent people had been known to confess to crimes when beaten. He decided to step in.

"Look here, Constable," he said in his sternest official tone, "whipping a suspect without good cause is against the law. And you do not have good cause without a witness."

They all turned to stare at him. The warden, seeing a person of authority, cheered up. "Perhaps you have some information in this matter, sir?"

"No. But I have a solution for your problem. Take both men outside and make them run the same distance. The loser will be your thief."

"A truly wise decision, sir," cried the matron, folding her hands and bowing to Akitada. "The Buddha helps the innocent."

"No, madam. The thief got caught because his captor was the better runner."

They all adjourned to a large courtyard, where the constables

marked off the proper distance, and then sent the two suspects off on their race. As Akitada had known, the thin boy won easily. He thanked Akitada awkwardly and rushed off to purchase his fish, while the thief was taken away.

"Well, sir," cried the delighted warden, "I'm much obliged to you. It might have gone hard with that young fellow otherwise. Now, how can I be of service?"

Having established such unexpectedly friendly relations, Akitada introduced himself and told the story of the mute boy. The warden's face grew serious. When Akitada reached the Masuda family's account of Peony's death, the warden said, "I went there when she was found. There was no child, dead or alive, though there might have been one. Bodies disappear in the lake. The woman Peony had drowned, but there was a large bruise on her temple. The coroner's report states that the bruise was not fatal and that she must have hit a rock when she jumped into the lake. But there were no rocks where she was found, and the water was too shallow for jumping anyway."

"Then why did you not speak up at the time?"

"I did not attend the hearing. Someone told me about the verdict later. I did go and ask the coroner about that bruise. He said she could have bumped her head earlier." The warden added defensively, "It looked like a suicide. The neighbors said she'd been deserted by her lover."

Akitada did not agree. He thought Peony had been struck unconscious and then put into the water to drown, and if the boy was indeed her son, he might have seen her killer. But that boy was mute. Or was he?

"The boy I found," he said, "was terrified of the people who claimed him. I thought at first it was because he expected another beating. Perhaps so, but I think now that they are not his parents. I believe he has a more than casual connection with the cat and could be Peony's missing son."

"Holy Amida!" breathed the warden. "What a story that would be!" He said eagerly, "They live in a fishing village outside town. I'll ride out now and check into it. If you're right, sir, it may solve the case. But that would really make a person wonder about the Masudas."

"It would indeed. I'll get my horse from the inn and join you."

The weather continued clear. They took the road Akitada had traveled two days before. On the way, the warden told Akitada about the Masuda family.

The old lord had doted on his handsome son and had chosen his son's first wife for both her birth and beauty, but the young lord did not care for his bride and started to visit the courtesans of the capital. His worried father sought to keep him home to produce an heir by presenting him next with a sturdy country girl for a second wife.

She proved fertile and gave him two daughters before he lost interest again. It was at this time that the young husband had installed Peony, a beautiful courtesan, in the lake villa, where he stayed with her, turning his back on his two wives. The old lord forced him to return temporarily to his family, and the first lady finally conceived and bore a son, but her husband died soon after.

And, mused Akitada, while all of Otsu took an avid interest in the births and deaths in the Masuda mansion, hardly anyone cared about the fate of a courtesan and her child. In fact, he was surprised they had been allowed to continue living in the villa.

When Akitada and the warden reached the fishing village, they found the man Mimura leaning against the wall of a dilapidated shack, watching the boy sweep up a smelly mess of fish entrails, fins, and vegetable peelings. Dressed in rags again, the child now sported a large black eye.

"Hey, Mimura?" shouted the warden. The boy raised his head and stared at them. Then he dropped his broom and ran to Akitada, who jumped from his horse and caught him in his arms. The child was filthy and stank of rotten fish, and he clung to Akitada for dear life.

Mimura walked up, glowering. "If it's about the boy, we settled all that," he told the warden. "I should've asked for more than the bits and pieces he gave the kid, and that's the truth." He turned with a sneer to Akitada. "You had him a whole day and night. That ought to be worth at least two pieces of silver."

The warden reddened to the roots of his hair, and Akitada realized belatedly that he was being accused of an unnatural fondness for boys. A cold fury took hold of him. "That child is not yours," he thundered. "And stealing children is a crime."

Mimura lost some of his bravado, and the warden quickly added, "Yes. This boy's not registered to you, yet you claimed him as your own. I'm afraid I'll have to arrest you."

Mimura's jaw dropped. "We didn't steal him, Warden. Honest. He's got no family. We took him in, the wife and I."

"Really? Out of the goodness of your heart? Then where are his papers? Where was he born and who were his people?"

"I'm just a poor working man, Warden. This woman gave him to my wife and she paid her a bit of money to look after him." He turned to call his slatternly spouse from the shack.

She approached nervously and confirmed his story. "I was selling fish in the market. It was getting dark when this lady came. She was carrying the boy and said, 'This poor child has just lost his parents. I'll pay you if you'll raise him as your own.' I could see the boy was sickly, but we needed the money, so I said yes."

"Her name?" the warden growled.

"She didn't say."

"You called her a lady. What did she look like?" Akitada asked.

"I couldn't tell. She had on a veil and it was dark. And she was in a hurry. She just passed over the boy and the money and left."

"How much money?" the warden wanted to know.

"A few pieces of silver. And a poor bargain it was," Mimura grumbled. "He's a weakling and deaf and dumb as a stone. Look at him!"

"Did you give him the black eye?" Akitada asked.

"Me? No. He's a clumsy boy. A cripple."

Akitada lifted the boy on his horse. "Come along, Warden," he said over his shoulder. "You can deal with them later. We need to find this child's family."

On the way back, the small, warm, smelly body in his arm, Akitada was filled with new purpose. He outlined his suspicions to the warden, but he spoke cautiously, for he was now certain that the child could hear very well.

"So you see," he said, "we must speak to Lord Masuda himself, for the women are covering up the affair."

The warden, who had been admirably cooperative so far, demurred. "Nobody sees the old lord. They say he's lost his mind."

"Nevertheless, we must try."

The Masuda mansion opened its gates for a second time. If the ancient servant was surprised to see Akitada with a ragged child in his arms and accompanied by the warden, he was too well-mannered to ask. But he shook his head stubbornly when Akitada demanded to see the old lord.

"Look," Akitada finally said, "I think that this boy is Lord Masuda's grandson, the child of the courtesan Peony. Would he not wish to know him before he dies?"

"But," stammered the old man, "that boy is dead. Lady Masuda said so herself."

"She was mistaken."

The old man came closer and peered up at the child. "Amida!" he whispered. "Those eyebrows. Can it be?"

He took them then. They found the old lord in his study. He sat sunken into himself, one gnarled hand pulling at the thin white beard which had grown long with neglect, his hooded eyes looking at nothing.

"My lord," said the servant timidly. "You have visitors." There was no reaction from Lord Masuda. "Lord Sugawara is here with the warden." Still no sign that the master had heard. "They have a small boy with them, my lord. They say . . ."

Akitada stopped him with a gesture. Leading the child to the old man, he said, "Go to your grandfather, boy."

For a moment he clung to his hand, but his eyes were wide with

curiosity. Then he made a bow and a small noise in the back of his throat.

Lord Masuda's hand paused its stroking, but he gave no other sign that he had noticed.

The boy crept forward until he was close enough to touch the gnarled fingers with his own small ones. The old hand trembled at his touch, and Lord Masuda looked at the child.

"Yori?" he asked, his voice thin as a thread. "Is it you?"

The boy nodded, and Akitada's heart stopped. He turned to the servant. "Did he call the boy 'Yori'?"

The servant was wiping his eyes. "The master's confused. He thinks he's his dead son whose name was Tadayori. The child looks like him, you see. We used to call him Yori for short."

It was a common abbreviation—his own Yori had been Yorinaga—but Akitada was shaken. That he should have crossed paths with this child during the O-bon festival when his grief had caused him to mistake the small pale figure for his son's ghost and he had called him "Yori" now seemed like a miracle. Fatefully, the child had come to him, and together they had encountered the extraordinary cat which had led him to Peony's villa and the Masudas.

The old lord was still looking searchingly at the child. Finally he turned his head and regarded them. "Who are these men?" he asked the servant. "And why is the boy dressed in these stinking rags?"

Akitada stepped forward and introduced himself and the warden. Lord Masuda looked merely baffled.

"My lord, were you aware of your son's liaison with the courtesan Peony?"

A faint flicker in the filmy eyes. "Peony?"

"They had a child, a boy, born five years ago. Your son continued his visits to the lady and acknowledged the boy as his." There was just a broken sword for proof, but a nobleman buys such a sword only for his own son.

The old lord looked from him to the boy and then back again. "He resembles my son." The gnarled hand stretched out and traced the child's straight eyebrows. "You hurt yourself," he murmured, touching the bruised eye. "What is your name, boy?"

The child struggled to speak, when there was an interruption.

Lady Masuda swept in, followed closely by Kohime. "What is going on here?" she demanded, her eyes on her father-in-law. "He is not well . . ."

Akitada's eyes flew to the child. He had hoped for a confrontation between the boy and Lady Masuda, and now he prayed for another miracle. He saw him turn toward the women and his face transform into a mask of terror and fury. Then he catapulted himself forward, his voice bursting into gurgling speech. "I'll kill you, I'll kill you," he

screeched. But he rushed past Lady Masuda and threw himself on Kohime, fists flying.

Kohime shrieked, gave the child a violent push, and ran from the room.

Akitada bent to help the boy up. He had guessed wrong, but his heart was filled with joy. "So you found your voice at last, little one," he said, hugging him. "All will be well now."

"She hurt her. She hurt my mother," sobbed the child.

"Shh," Akitada said. "Your grandfather and the warden will take care of her."

Lady Masuda was very pale, but her eyes devoured the child. "Oh, I am so glad he is alive," she cried. "How did you find him? I've been searching everywhere, terrified by what I had done."

The old lord looked at her. "Are you responsible then?" he asked, almost conversationally. "He resembles your son, don't you think? Both inherited their father's eyebrows."

She smiled through tears. "Yes, Father. But he's so thin now, poor child. And I gave that woman all the money we had."

The warden cleared his throat. "Er, what happened just then, sir?" he whispered to Akitada.

"I think Lady Masuda knows," Akitada said. "It would be best if she explained, but perhaps the child . . ." He turned to the boy. "What is your name?"

"You know. Yori. Like my father," he replied, as if the question were foolish.

Lord Masuda's face softened. "Yes. That was my son's name when he was small. But you were about to suggest something, Lord Sugawara?"

"Perhaps Yori might be given into the care of your servant for a bath and clean clothes while we discuss this matter."

"Oh, please let me take him," pleaded Lady Masuda.

"No," said Lord Masuda. "You will stay here and make a clean breast of this." She hung her head and nodded. Her father-in-law looked at the old servant. "Send for my other daughter and bring the child back to me later." When they had left, he sat up a little straighter. "Now, Daughter. Why was I not informed about my grandson and his mother?"

She knelt before him. "Forgive me, Father. I wished to spare you. You were so ill after my husband died."

"You were not well yourself after you lost your child," he said, his voice a little gentler.

"No. I had known all along where my husband had been spending his time. Women always know. I was jealous, especially when I heard she had given him a son while I was childless. But then my husband returned to me, and after my own son was born, I no longer minded so much that my husband went back to her."

Lord Masuda nodded. "My son told me that he wished to live with this woman and her child. As he had given me an heir, I permitted it."

Lady Masuda hung her head a little lower. "But then he died. And when my son also passed from this world . . ." Her voice broke, and she whispered, "Losing a child is the most terrible loss of all." For a moment she trembled with grief, then she squared her shoulders and continued. "I became obsessed with my husband's mistress and her boy. I wanted to see them. Kohime was very understanding. She came with me. It was . . . an awkward meeting. She was very beautiful. I could see they were poor and I was glad. We watched the boy play with his kitten in the garden, and suddenly I thought if we could buy the child from her, I could raise him. He was my husband's son, and . . ." She hesitated and looked up fearfully at Lord Masuda.

He grunted. "I should have taken care of them. If you had brought him to me, no doubt I would have agreed to an adoption."

"I went home and gathered up all the gold I could find, and Kohime added what she had saved, and we went back to her. But when we told her what we wanted, she became upset and cried she would rather die than sell her son. She snatched up the boy and ran out into the garden. We were afraid she would do something desperate. Kohime ran after her and tried to take the child. They fought . . ."

Lord Masuda stopped her. "Here is Kohime now. Let her speak for herself."

Kohime had been weeping. Her round face was splotched and her hair disheveled. She threw herself on the floor before her father-in-law. "I didn't mean to kill her," she wailed. "I thought she was going into the lake with the child, so I grabbed for her. When we fell down, the boy ran away. She bit and kicked me. I don't know how it happened, but suddenly I was bleeding and afraid. My hand found a loose stone on the path and I hit her with it. I didn't mean to kill her." She burst into violent tears.

Lord Masuda sighed deeply.

Lady Masuda moved beside Kohime and stroked her hair. "It was an accident, Father. The boy came back," she said, her voice toneless. "He had a wooden sword and he cut Kohime with it. I saw it all from the veranda of the villa. When Kohime came running back to me, she was covered with blood. I took her into the house to stop the bleeding. She said she had killed the woman." She brushed away tears.

A heavy silence fell. Then Akitada asked gently, "Did you go back to make sure Peony was dead, Lady Masuda?"

She nodded. "We were terrified, but after a while we both crept out. She was still lying there, quite still. The boy was holding her hand and crying. Kohime said, 'We must hide the body.' But there was the boy. Of course, we could not take him back with us after what had hap-

pened. We thought perhaps we could make it look as if she had fallen into the water by accident. We decided that I would take away the boy, and Kohime would hide the body because she is the stronger. I tried to talk to the child, but it was as if his spirit had fled. His eyes were open, but that was all. He let me take him, and I carried him away from the house. I did not know what to do, but when I saw a woman in the market packing up to return to her village, I gave her the money and the child."

The warden muttered, "All that gold, and the Mimuras beat and starved him."

"And you, Kohime?" asked Lord Masuda.

Kohime, the plain peasant girl in the fine silks of a noblewoman, said with childlike simplicity, "I put Peony in the lake. It wasn't far, and people thought she'd drowned herself."

"Dear heaven!" muttered the warden. He looked sick.

"You have both behaved very badly," said Lord Masuda to his daughters-in-law. "What will happen to you is up to the authorities now."

After a glance at the warden, who shook his head helplessly, Akitada said, "Peony's death was a tragic accident. No good can come from a public disclosure now. It is her son's future we must consider."

The warden was still staring at Kohime. "It was getting dark," he muttered. "You can see how two hysterical women could make such a mistake."

"You are very generous." Lord Masuda bowed. "In that case, I shall decide their punishment. My grandson will be raised as my heir by my son's first lady. It will be her opportunity to atone to him. Kohime and her daughters will leave this house and reside in the lake villa, where she will pray daily for the soul of the poor woman she killed." He looked sternly at his daughters-in-law. "Will you agree to this?"

They bowed. Lady Masuda said, "Yes. Thank you, Father. We are both deeply grateful."

Akitada looked after the women as they left, Lady Masuda with her arm around Kohime, and thought of how she had said, "Losing a child is the most terrible loss of all."

When they were gone, the old lord clapped his hands. "Where is my grandson?"

The boy came, clean and resplendently dressed, and sat beside his grandfather. "Well, Yori," the old man asked, "shall you like it here, do you think?"

The boy looked around and nodded. "Yes, Grandfather, but I would like Patch to live here, too."

They put down their offering of fish. The cat was watching them from the broken veranda. It waited until they had withdrawn a good

distance before strolling up and sniffing the food. With another disdainful glance in their direction, it settled down to its meal, and Akitada threw the net. But the animal shied away at the last moment and, only partially caught, streaked into the house, dragging the net behind. A gruesome series of yowls followed.

"Patch got hurt," cried the boy. "Please go help her."

Akitada had to climb into the villa. He used the same post from which he had looked for the ghost, but this time he swung himself across the veranda and into the empty room. Walking gingerly across the broken boards, he found the cat in the next room, rolling about completely entangled in the netting. Carefully scooping up the growling and spitting bundle in his arms, he returned the same way. He had one leg over the window frame when he heard the mournful sound of the ghost again. Passing the furious cat down to the boy, he looked back over his shoulder.

One of the long strips of oil paper covering a window had come loose and was sliding across the opening as a breeze from the lake caught it. When its edge brushed the floor, it made the queer sound he had heard.

So much for ghosts!

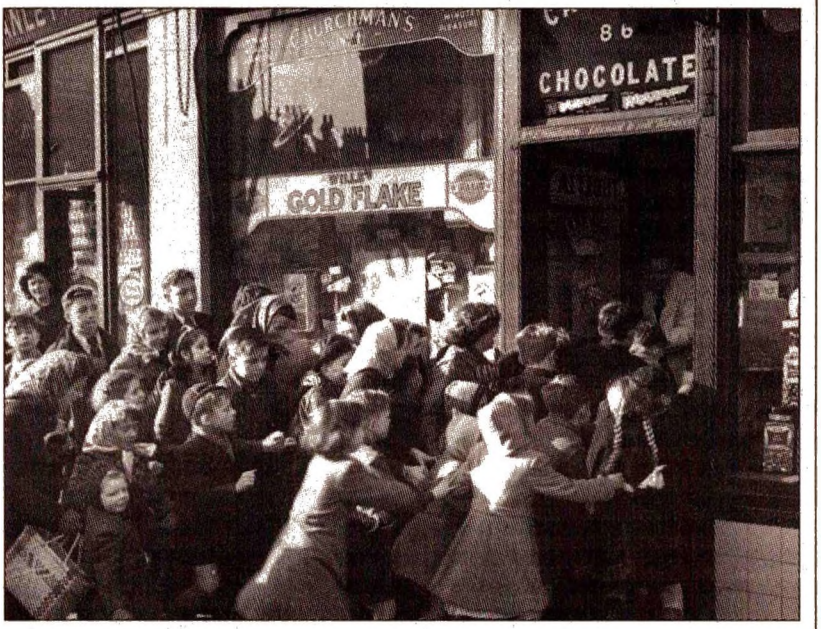
Outside, Patch, a very real cat, began to purr in Yori's arms.

It was almost dark before Akitada returned to the inn to collect his belongings and pay his bill. He would not reach home until late, but he wanted to be with his wife on this final night of the festival. They would mourn their son together, sharing their grief as they had shared their love.

When he rode out of Otsu, people were lighting the bonfires to guide the dead on their way back to the other world. Soon they would gather on the shore to send off the spirit boats, and the tiny points of light would bob on the waves until it looked as if the stars had fallen into the water.

Someday he would return to visit this other Yori, the child who had come into his life to remind him that life places obligations on a man which cannot be denied.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Hulton Archive

Barbarians at the gate. We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "February Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

AMAZING GRACE

Harriet Rzetelny

Illustration by Linda Weatherly

He had a face like a Botticelli Venus. Ethereal-looking and perfectly oval, with a long, straight nose, gently arching brows over sea-blue eyes, and fine, light-blond hair.

The comparison ended there. His body was underfed and gangly. Ribs showed through his faded T-shirt. Grimy sneakers, no socks. I knew his name was Ray and that he was about seventeen years old. He was standing with another street kid whom I didn't know in front of a used-clothing store called Time and Again. They were panhandling.

I was on my way to work—I'm a social worker for a homecare agency that serves the elderly and disabled in this run-down area of Brooklyn, which is how I met Ray; his stepfather's mother was one of our clients. Ray didn't live with them—there was some kind of problem in the family, which my boss Leo ("Families are trouble and they're not the client.") Stuttman had told me to stay out of. I smiled at Ray, and was about to pass them by when the other kid became aggressive. He was Ray's shadow-self—black curly hair, dark brown, luminous eyes, and a slight, almost graceful body—maybe Latino or Middle Eastern. He was in my face, shoving his paper cup at me.

Ray took one look at my expression, waved him back, and said: "Chill, Ari. That's not the way to do it." He settled his bony rear against one of those late-model Japanese cars that I can never tell apart. On the hood next to him was a mini-boombox, hand painted with a picture of the sun coming up, or going down, behind some buildings. Jim Morrison's boy/man voice wafted through the speakers, admonishing some ashen lady to give up her vow and save our city from an uncertain future.

"Watch this," he said to Ari. He held out his own cup toward me, suddenly shy and tentative. "Spare any change? I'm homeless and looking to finance my college education. I also haven't eaten for three days." Since a half-full bag of greasy french fries stood on the hood next to his boombox, I could only grin at him. He grinned back, and then said to Ari, "See, that's the way to do it. Play on their sympathy."

Ari gave him a dirty look, turned his back, and made off down the street.

I was charmed. Inclining my head towards the boombox, I said, "Jim Morrison. I'm a classic rock fan from way back." Also folk, jazz, blues, gospel—all of the rich mélange of music from the great fertile delta that spawned rock and roll.

He nodded. "A poet of cityscapes and urban life." So. A thinking man's panhandler. "Wonder what he would've written about the city now?" Our eyes met for a moment. It was late October, in the autumn of the World Trade Center disaster which stopped the earth on its axis for so many of us. We no longer talked about it all the time, but it lurked behind ev-

ery conversation, filling the spaces between the words.

"He burned up pretty quickly, didn't he," I said. Jim Morrison had lived a lifetime and died before his twenties were over.

Ray raised and lowered his narrow shoulders. "Cities ain't no place to grow old. Can you imagine Jim Morrison as an old man?" The bony shoulders hunched over and his body now took on the slightly palsied shake of a very old man. He held out his cup, rattling the few coins that were in it. "Come on baby, light my fire," he whined in a tenuous, very old voice. "Yeah, right!" he said in his normal voice as he straightened up. One corner of his mouth turned up slyly.

I laughed out loud. This kid was something else. "Are you really homeless?" I asked. "Or is that part of your scam?"

"Living on the streets ain't so bad, at least in the summertime." It was warm, as it had been for most of the autumn, but winter was just around the corner.

"Isn't it dangerous?" The neighborhood, a low-lying mix of residential and commercial buildings, was okay in the daytime when there were enough people around. But at night, everyone left the streets except the homeless and the predators.

"Living at home can be more dangerous." His eyes darkened and got stormy. Remembering I wasn't supposed to get involved, I asked him about his boombox and he told me he'd painted the picture himself. Then I looked at my watch and realized I had to get going, so we said goodbye.

The day dragged by. Steve Carmaggio, my on-again-off-again boyfriend and an NYPD detective, was playing his disappearing trick again. He was up to his ears, he said, working all kinds of hours. But I knew what was wrong: in the six weeks since the World Trade Center collapsed, burning up several police officers he'd known over the years, he'd had an upsurge of the nightmares and gut-wrenching memories that were the legacy he'd brought home with him from Vietnam. He'd gone through several bouts of this in the years I'd been going with him, and each time he would disappear somewhere deep inside of himself where, despite all my efforts, I couldn't reach him. It felt like I was pounding on a door that I knew he was behind, but which he wouldn't open.

Quitting time finally came, and I took the subway into Manhattan. As I walked up First Avenue, past the posters of the missing—those who had been in the World Trade Center on that horrible day and whose faces were now plastered on every light post and building wall—the tears piled up behind my eyes. *Missing since Sept. 11. Ernie Acevedo. 5' 10", 160 lbs. Help us find him. . . . Missing since Sept. 11. Maggie Brian. Last seen on the 98th floor of the south tower. Her children want their Mommy back. . . .* I climbed the stairs to my little studio apartment on East Eigh-

teenth Street, dumping my keys, the mail, and a container of pasta salad I'd picked up for dinner on the table.

I wasn't hungry. I slipped a CD of The Doors into my player. *When the music's over . . .* Jim Morrison's long-dead voice filled the silence of my apartment, exhorting us to turn out the lights. I had an image of Ray, his angelic face behind that sly grin, the painted sunrise—it *was* a sunrise, I decided—lighting up his boombox. How did he stay so hopeful, so alive, in the midst of so much grief and loss?

As it turned out, he didn't stay that way for long. When I got to work the next day, Paulina Jablonz, our receptionist, called me over. "Did you hear about the murder last night?" she asked, her blue eyes opening wide. "Manny found him." Manny was our porter, night security man, and occasional escort for our nurses and homecare workers who had to go into particularly high-crime buildings.

"It happened on this block. Some junkie kid, used to panhandle around here." Paulina shook her blonde curls sadly. "I grew up three blocks from this office, you know. Things were fine, a real nice neighborhood. Don't get me wrong, we were all poor, but you could leave your door open and nobody would bother you." I shook my head in commiseration with her. "Manny told me the kid was killed for his boombox."

A boombox? I felt a prickling down my spine. No, I told myself quickly. Not Ray. It couldn't be.

"It's not bad enough we got terrorists out there looking to blow us up," Paulina went on, "but these junkies . . ."

She stopped and looked at me. "Molly, what's wrong?"

I didn't want to say anything until I was sure. "Where's Manny?"

Manny was in the staff room, a stuffy cell-like space that doubled as a storage room, a conference room, and anything else that screamed out for a few feet of space in our no-frills, too-small office. He was about sixty, with iron-gray hair and the big barrel chest of the chronic asthmatic. It was said around the neighborhood that if Manny didn't know about it, it hadn't happened yet. He also chain-smoked little cigarillos in flagrant violation of the office no-smoking policy, but Stuttman never made a point of it. We all wondered what Manny had on him

"*Hola,* Manny," I said. "*Cómo está?*"

A paroxysm of coughing interrupted him before he could answer me. "Ah, Miss Molly," he answered in English when he could at last speak. "Not bad." He took another drag—he claimed it stopped the coughing. Apparently it did, because he went on: "Did you hear what happened?"

"Yeah."

"I thought maybe I'd get on the Eyewitness News, but the media is all busy with this terrorist stuff."

"Do you know who it was?"

He nodded. "His name was Ray. His grandma is one of our clients."

A rush of grief and rage nearly knocked me off my feet. "What happened?"

He told me the grisly story of going to put out the trash and finding Ray in the alleyway with a knife sticking out of his chest. "It don't surprise me the kid is dead," he concluded.

"What do you mean, Manny?"

"He's been livin' with a junkie whore and a fag in that squat over near the expressway. That kind will kill each other over anything."

"You think one of them killed him for his boombox?"

Manny shrugged, an eloquent gesture that expressed exactly what he thought of junkie whores and fags. "Or it could'a been the whore's pimp. I heard that the kid took her away from him, and he wasn't too happy about it." He shrugged again. "I tol' all this to your boyfriend, he's investigatin'. I don't think he was too interested, though. Probably wants to be down at the World Trade Center with the rest of his friends, digging out those poor people." He took another drag on his cigarillo and looked up at the smoke curling around the ceiling. Then he said softly: "We got enough dead to worry about already. These are just a bunch of junkies. Let 'em kill each other. Nobody's gonna miss 'em."

I felt tears, like lead balls behind my eyes. Ray's death was hitting me so hard, I knew, because of all those other deaths. At that moment I missed Steve terribly. I called his cell phone and left a message. Then I went to the case files and pulled open the last drawer . . . some Slavic name starting with a V . . . Vatchik. There it was. Gadya Vatchik. She lived with her son, Stanley Vatchik, and his wife, Helen. Ray's name, listed on the face sheet under *Additional Family*, was Brattigan.

Steve didn't call me back. Just before the end of the day, I walked over to the Vatchik's apartment. They lived in a squarish, three story row house, one of six that had apparently been built at the same time. Several of them, including theirs, had a mustard-colored facade, the product, no doubt, of a hot-shot siding salesman who had left his mark on the neighborhood. I rang, but as there were no buzzers, Stan Vatchik had to come down the stairs to let me in.

I'd been to the apartment only once before, to help old Mrs. Vatchik complete a Medicaid application, but Stan let me in without any questions. He led me up two flights and into the dark apartment full of oversized furniture. He was a well-built, good-looking man in his mid forties. Chronic dissatisfaction played around his mouth. I hadn't really liked him the first time I'd met him, and now I found myself scrutinizing him. He must have misinterpreted my look because his eyes, raking me over, held out

the promise of all sorts of things I had no interest in doing with him. A middle-aged, ebony-colored woman with intricately braided hair—Marie Louise Castenet, the homecare worker—already had her coat on. She gave me a brief nod and hurried out of the apartment.

Stan led me into a tiny living room and offered me a seat on a faded brown sofa. He was currently out of a job, he told me, because he'd worked for an office supply company whose biggest customers had all been located in the World Trade Center.

"I'd take you in to see my mother," he said, "but she's sleeping right now. Always takes a late-afternoon nap."

"I want to express my condolences over the death of your stepson," I said.

"Thank you." He dropped his gaze to look, I assumed, appropriately mournful. "A troubled kid. He gave my wife all kinds of agony."

As if on cue, the door opened and Helen Vatchik walked into the room.

I greeted her warmly. She had her son's fine blond hair, his blue eyes, and his high, arching brows. But what looked ethereal and angelic in Ray looked tired and bleached out in his mother, as though she were some beach angel, rolled over and over by the waves and scrubbed out by the sand. She also had a deep purple-blue bruise on the side of her cheek. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that Stan had given it to her. Would she talk to me if I got her alone? I doubted it.

"I came to offer my condolences," I said. "I knew Ray and liked him."

She nodded and her lip started to tremble.

"Sit down, why don't you, Helen," Stan said. But it wasn't really an invitation. It was a criticism of the fact that she was still standing there and didn't have the brains to sit down. She did as she was told, displacing almost no space in the overstuffed chair.

"I was telling Miss Lewin that it's hard to know what to do with kids these days," Stan said. "He was always getting into trouble. Arrests for soliciting, stealing, fighting—you name it, he did it. We tried talking to him, punishing him—we even had our minister talk to him—but would he listen?" He shook his head contemptuously. "They sent him to one of those group homes, but even they couldn't control him." He glared at his wife as if she were personally responsible for Ray's contentiousness. He turned back to me. "He was a fag, you know." His tone implied that this was reason enough for his murder. "And he lived with whores and addicts. I hate to say this, but maybe God knew what He was doing."

Helen's eyes were riveted on Stan. She looked like she was ready to cry but couldn't unless he gave her his permission.

"Why don't you offer our guest a drink or something," he said as if he were talking to a brain

damaged child. When I shook my head no, he went on: "I'd be very surprised if they ever find the piece of street garbage who killed him. They got the murderers of cops and firefighters and real heroes to worry about."

I'd had enough of Stan. I got up, scrounged in my bag, and handed Helen my card. "I'm really sorry about this, Mrs. Vatchik," I said softly. "I'd like to put you in touch with a grief counselor. Give me a call." But I knew he'd never let her do it.

I walked up to the subway. In the shadows of the early evening sky, the crumbling buildings of post-industrial Brooklyn were hunched around me like so many abandoned and forgotten figures. An old-time gospel song popped into my head: *He was Mary's own darling, he was God's chosen son. Once he was fair and once he was young. His mother she rocked him, her little darlin', to sleep. But they left him to die, like a tramp on the street.* I could picture Ray lying dead in that littered alleyway. But slowly, in my vision, he became one of hundreds piled up in the rubble.

I passed Diamond Lil's, then turned and went back to look in the window. Steve was sitting at the bar. I went in and sat down next to him.

"Up to your ears in work?" I said sarcastically. "I don't see anybody dead in here."

Steve, too, had blue eyes and sandy-colored hair, a product of his Northern Italian ancestry. But there was nothing Botticelli-like about him. He sat with his big shoulders hunched over a beer mug. He turned bloodshot eyes up to me. "I'm sorry, Molly. I've been in a lousy head."

"Why do you have to disappear like you do?" I asked. "I'm ready to put up one of those posters, you know—*Steve Carmaggio, last seen on the morning of nine eleven . . .*"

He put his hand over mine and said softly, "I know, Molly." The warmth of his skin spread up through my arm and down into my chest, like a shot of brandy on a very cold day. With his other hand he signaled Milo for a white wine for me. "It's been a tough few days," he said in the flat voice I'd come to know as the one he used when he didn't trust his feelings. "I went down with Rhoda Lenniger yesterday to identify Pete's remains." I closed my eyes. Steve had known Pete from way back. Pete had taken a job with the Port Authority Police because Rhoda didn't want him working the streets. I'd met him at a couple of parties.

"Well, not that there was much to identify." He took another pull on his beer mug. "They showed us a charred hand with a ring on one of the fingers. It was his wedding ring, inscribed 'From R to P'."

I touched the side of his face. "I'm sorry, Steve."

"Yeah," he said. For a little while he was silent. Then he said: "I had this dream last night. Or maybe it was a memory. It's hard to tell sometimes." He took a deep

breath and let it out. "I'm back in 'Nam," he said softly, "walking through a village after we've bombed the hell out of it. It's dead silent. Even the birds are gone. Burnt up, probably. We come to a charred field, and it's lined with the blackened skeletons of trees. And hanging from the branches are body parts—arms, legs, skulls—just hanging there as if they were some kinda bizarre leaves." For a moment his eyes went far away. "I'm just an eighteen-year-old kid from Our Lady High School on Long Island," he continued in a strangled voice. "Nothing ever prepared me for this."

"Steve . . ." I took his hand and brought it to my lips. "Come home with me."

He did, even letting me drive his Ford Taurus because he was in no condition to get behind the wheel, and we made sad, sweet, passionate love. But when I woke up the next morning, he was gone. Just a note saying he couldn't sleep and he'd call me later.

It was Saturday morning, with nothing I felt like doing except being in bed with Steve. I turned on the TV. Another memorial procession, the sound of *Amazing Grace* played on a bagpipe wailed away in the background like an animal in pain. I was too full of grief to watch it any more. So I took the subway back into Brooklyn and walked over to the river. The sun coming up behind me sent ripples of spun gold across the water. On the Manhattan side, the smoke from what used to be the World Trade Center spiraled slowly upward into the now-empty sky. I turned and walked east to the burned-out squat near the expressway where Manny told me Ray had been living.

It was the remains of a house, actually, listing to one side like a sinking boat, with sheets of plywood covering the holes where doors and windows had once hung. I went around to the back where the plywood had been pulled aside and peered in. "Anyone home?"

By this time my eyes were adjusted to the light, and I could see a woman-child sitting on the floor with her back against the far wall. A lit candle on a saucer sat next to her. Behind her were the remains of a staircase that had once led to the second floor. I entered and said, "Hi, I'm Molly Lewin. I was a friend of Ray's."

She was a light-skinned African-American, small-boned, with a mop of dark, curly hair and a bridge of freckles across her nose. A burnt spoon lay on the floor next to the candle, so I assumed she had recently taken a hit, although I didn't see the needle. She looked up, focusing on me with eyes that seemed to be rising slowly from the depths of the primal sea, and said, "Hello. I'm Laura."

"I was a friend of Ray's," I said again, awkwardly. "I'm sorry about his death."

She bowed her head, perhaps in acknowledgement of my sympathy. "Can't believe he's never coming home." Her eyes sank back

down into her inner ocean. I stood for a while gazing at her until her eyes slowly refocused. This time she looked me up and down—wary, on guard. "Who did you say you were?"

I told her my name, and that I was a social worker who worked with Ray's stepgrandmother. This seemed to reassure her. "I'm gonna miss him," she said sadly. "He was the sweetest man I ever knew."

"It's hard when you lose someone like that," I answered, slipping down onto the floor near her so we would be at eye level.

"He wanted us to be a family."

"A family?"

"Yeah, me and my kids." The sadness spread across her face. "Got two kids in foster care. Ray was gonna help me get 'em back." She needed to talk, and in the way some children will instantly confide in a stranger, she talked to me about Ray. She told me how they had both run away from families who didn't want them, how he had loved her although she didn't know why, how he was trying to earn enough money so they could have a home, how he dreamed of being a rock poet.

"He was always writing in this little book," she said. "Just like that Jim Morrison guy he was always listening to."

"A journal," I said. "Do you have it?"

She got up and rummaged among some clothes and things on the other side of the room. When she turned around she was holding a small book with pictures of Jim Morrison pasted on the cover. She gently stroked it, as if it were a beloved pet. Then she offered to sell it to me for twenty-five dollars.

I blinked. Well, I thought, she doesn't have any special widow's fund to help her through a hard time. So I bought it from her. I was taken with Ray, curious to learn more about him. I left the squat, thinking I'd walk back toward the river, when I heard somebody come up behind me.

I whirled around, wishing I had the can of mace I usually carried in my work bag. It was Ari.

"What'd she tell you?" His whole face looked somehow out of focus, and his voice was raspy and harsh. When I didn't answer, he went on: "He didn't love that stupid bitch, he was just trying to save her." His lip curled. "For all his smarts, he never figured out that you can't save no junkies." Tears were gathering in his eyes. Roughly, as if he had no time or space for them, he wiped his sleeve across his face. "It was *me* he loved. He tol' me he did."

Suddenly, he caught sight of the journal I was holding. "That's mine!" he hissed, moving in as if to grab the book away from me.

I stepped back. "I don't think so, Ari." But his grief was so potent, I softened my tone and said, "Look, I just want to read it. There may be some clue in here as to who killed him." As I said the words, I wondered if I could be looking at Ray's murderer. Ari was volatile enough to have killed Ray in a fit of jealous rage over

Laura. He wouldn't be the first young man who killed the thing he loved. For a moment, it seemed he would fight me for the journal, and I wasn't quite sure what I would do. But suddenly he stopped, his face crumbling. It was like watching an ice sculpture dissolve in the heat of the sun. He shot me an agonized look, turned on his heel, and was gone.

I realized I'd been holding my breath and let out a deep sigh of relief. I went into a hole-in-the-wall coffee shop for a belated breakfast and a look through Ray's journal. The entries were dated. Some were poems, some critiques of books he had read that he thought were really cool, like *The Lost Writings of Jim Morrison*, and some were his musings. There was an affectionate poem about Ari—"the dark-eyed wind from the East." And one written three months ago about Laura that began:

> The moon's crescent shining
> on your jet black hair sings
> to me. Oh, lovely Laura,
> dreaming your needle dreams.

He seemed to have loved them both, but to have had no illusions about them either. I thought about Laura. She had been on a mellow high, perhaps heroin, when I found her. But junkies often use a lot of different drugs. She might also use crack, which makes people paranoid and violent. Could *she* have killed him?

Another poem called "P. Diddly" was a chilling description of a particularly nasty pimp who brutalized the women he turned out. I wondered if he had been Laura's pimp and, if so, if he'd decided on murder as a way of paying Ray back. A poem, "Desolation," written two weeks before he died, brought up the images I had been watching on TV for the past month and a half:

> Burnt-out buildings,
> crazy, tilted, twisted
> staring empty-eyed corpses.
> A city dying, crying,
> A graveyard filled with
> shattered hopes.

As I read on, I realized Ray wasn't writing about the World Trade Center. He was writing about the burnt-out, abandoned buildings that were the legacy of no jobs and declining real estate values in the streets around the expressway. In fact, he could have been describing the squat he and Laura had lived in.

I closed the book and pushed my coffee cup away. The World Trade Center wasn't the only disaster site in our city. Ray had seen his world with open eyes, but it hadn't destroyed him. It had taken some unknown person with a knife to do that.

My cell phone made its little beeping noise. I took it out and flipped it open. It was Steve. "I'm sorry I ran out on you last night," he said.

"So am I, Steve," I answered. I had a momentary desire to scream at him. Instead, I sighed and asked, "Steve, are you work-

ing on the Ray Brattigan homicide?"

"Yeah." His voice sounded wary, a little belligerent. I had gotten involved in helping him solve a few past crimes because I know the neighborhood and its people so well. And while he never turned down my help, he had mixed feelings about it.

"Are you looking at anybody for it?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I knew him and liked him. His stepgrandmother is one of our clients."

Silence while he decided whether or not to let me in on it. Then: "We like his girlfriend's ex-pimp."

"Have you arrested him?"

"He's done a bunk. We've got an APB out on him. You know something?"

"Well, not about him specifically, although I think he's mentioned in a journal that Ray kept."

"A journal?" I could almost hear him licking his lips. "You have it?"

So I traded him a dinner for a look at the journal. We agreed to meet later at Liotti's in the neighborhood. I decided to go into the office and catch up on some of the endless paperwork that I never seem to get to. By the time I arrived and greeted the weekend crew, my enthusiasm for paperwork was less than zero. So I opened the door of the staff room and, sure enough, Manny was sitting at the table puffing on a cigarillo and drinking café con leche out of a Styrofoam cup. We talked for a few minutes. I told him I'd seen Laura and asked him what he knew about her ex-pimp.

"I know he's in Rikers, waiting trial on some assault charge."

"How do you know this?"

"Well," he said, "he's got an aunt, Flo, who I, uh, well, I go up to her place and drink some beer every now and then."

I'll bet, I thought.

He coughed and took another drag on his cigarillo. "I was up there last night, so I asked her about him. She tol' me she was out visiting him the day before. He's been inside for over a month because they couldn't make bail for him."

I called Steve and left a message that if he wanted to find Laura's pimp, he should look in Rikers. I glanced at the pile of paperwork sitting on my desk and picked up Ray's journal. One poem brought me up short:

Grandad

I see you old man,
Remorseless as the eagle
or the falcon or the fox
The teeth of your eyes ate
away her guts
and left her stripped, an
easy meal
for your successor.
I know you old man,
I see beyond the hungry
eyes,
right into your empty soul.

My cell phone beeped. "Can you believe this?" Steve's voice. He went on without waiting for an answer, "You're right, as usual,

though I hate to admit it. The pimp, one DeVanne Parker, has been lost in the system because his paperwork got mislaid or misplaced or something. Turns out he was safely in Rikers the night Ray became DOA."

We commiserated for a few minutes—cops and social workers both deal with bureaucracies where people and papers get lost on a regular basis. When we hung up, I still had a couple of hours before we were to meet. Plenty of time to get some of the hated paperwork out of the way. Instead, I left the office and walked over to the squat. The Grandad poem had gotten me thinking and I wanted to talk to Laura again, but the squat was empty. I started back toward the office, resolved to do my duty, and saw her sitting on the cracked stoop of a sagging building, talking on a cell phone. I walked over. She finished her conversation and shot me a look. She might have been high, but she remembered who I was.

So did the waiter in the hole-in-the-wall coffee shop to which I invited her.

"More coffee, Miss?" I nodded.

"I'll have an ice cream soda," Laura announced and sat back against the cracked leatherette of the booth. "I never had an ice cream soda until Ray bought me one," she said sadly. "Funny, isn't it? I was drinking gin by the time I was ten, but I never had an ice cream soda until six months ago." She sighed. Her cell phone rang. She flipped it open and put it to her ear. After a minute or two of "I'm sitting in a coffee shop, gonna have me an ice cream soda" type of conversation, she hung up, opened her bag, and took out a small mirror and a tube of lipstick.

"Ray wrote a poem called 'Grandad.' Did you know his grandfather?"

"I never met him." She applied the red gloss to her lips, closed the tube, and put it back in her bag. "He lived in some fancy house on Long Island, or someplace like that. Ray would go and visit him sometimes, but he never took me with him." She shrugged. "Even he knew the old man wouldn't go for someone like me." Her phone, which was sitting on the table, rang and she picked it up. This time the conversation was more a series of "yeahs" and "uh-huhs." As she talked, I wondered if she'd already found herself a new pimp who'd given her the cell phone. Or maybe she'd made a fast decision to go into the dealing end of the drug business. I realized she couldn't afford to stay in mourning for Ray for very long, but couldn't she at least make it through two days? Finally she hung up and went on as if we'd never been interrupted: "It's, like, so weird you should ask about Ray's grandfather. He died around the time those buildings got blown up."

I could feel the little flutter I get in my heart when I know I'm on to something. "Did he have money?"

"He must've. He owned some

kind of business he was always trying to get Ray to go into. Ray wouldn't have none of it, though. Told me the old man used his money to control people. Like when his mother went off with that lowlife she married, his grandfather cut her off without a penny."

"Do you know if he left Ray anything in his will?"

She looked uncomprehending. "How would I know?"

"Did he get a letter or something?"

The cell phone again. This time she said, "I'll call you back." She put the phone down on the table and regarded me as if I was an idiot child. "Where we gonna get letters? You think the post office delivers to a burnt-out old house?"

She was right. Perhaps the letter, if there was one, came to him at his mother's apartment. How would I ever find out?

Suddenly her eyes got excited. "Some lawyer type came looking for Ray a couple days before he was killed. I thought he was from the City, so I never told Ray about it. Maybe he was from his grandfather." She was literally jumping up and down in her seat. "Do you think I'm gonna get something? We were almost married."

My adrenaline shot way up. Lawyers, or their agents, don't go around looking for homeless people unless there's a very good reason. Her phone rang again. I gave the waiter some money and left Laura to her excited conversation.

I walked over to Liotti's. It was dimly lit and smoky near the bar. Steve came in just a few minutes after me, and we went to a table in the back room. First thing he did after we gave Vinnie our drink order was to give me a long, deep kiss that made me forget every disappearing act he'd ever pulled. Then he said, "I *am* really sorry I left last night."

"Well," I said when I got my breath back, "I was too this morning. But I learned a lot today that I wouldn't have learned if I'd been lolling around with you in bed all day."

He eyed me with a half-quizzical, half-suspicious expression and said, "What are we talking about here? You spent the day in the library?"

I grinned at him and told him what I'd discovered about Ray's grandfather and the lawyer type who'd been looking for Ray. Then I showed him the journal.

"It's easy enough to find out whether the old man left him anything," Steve said as he flipped through it. "Wills are public documents. I just have to get the old man's name, which could be Brattigan if the mother wasn't married when she had Ray. If not, we'll tell her we need her maiden name for the records."

"Yeah, and if Ray inherited and died without having made a will, Helen would inherit as next of kin. Which means Stan would get it."

"It's a good motive, I'll say that for it." He closed the journal. "If the lead you've given me turns

out to go nowhere, I'll give this journal more of a look. But right now, I don't want to read some DOA's poetry."

We ate and talked, but when I asked him to come back with me, he told me he was picking up his kids the next day and he was going home to clean his apartment. He saw the expression on my face and had the grace to blush. "Steve . . ." I started. But he put up a hand to stop me. "I'm sorry, Molly. But you don't want me the way I've been the past few nights. I wouldn't want me."

"Steve, I want you any way you come." I could tell by the set of his jaw, though, that his mind was made up. So I sighed and told him to say hi to his kids from me.

I spent a restless Sunday doing chores and met a friend for dinner in the evening. I must have run the gauntlet of those missing faces at least four times while walking up and down First Avenue. Each time it left me shaken and in tears. I didn't hear from Steve, nor did I hear from him at work on Monday, even though I left him two messages.

I got home Monday evening feeling depressed and turned on the TV. One of the news programs was showing a segment about the way people in the city were opening their hearts to one another in response to the disaster. Blacks and whites hugging each other. Thousands of volunteers ready to help with anything. Billions of dollars donated. It didn't help me feel any better. Steve, who was supposed to be my boyfriend, couldn't even spend an entire night with me. I turned the TV off, vowing to end it with him. It was time to get on with my life. I called a couple of my friends, but no one was home. Ray's journal was on the table. I opened it and found this poem:

> Out of the night I came
> shivering, alone and helpless.
> Like a dumb beast I was,
> raging wordless in the dark
> Til God filled my soul with
> poetry
> And taught me the words for
> love.

I slammed the book closed, full of the anger that I typically feel at the destruction of something beautiful. It felt better than the grief that I'd been carrying around. I started pacing up and down my living room, the sound of bagpipes wailing in my head. *Amazing Grace.* What were the words to that song, anyway? I took out one of my old LP's, placed it carefully on my antique turntable, and turned it on: *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound / That saved a wretch like me.* The deep, somber voice of the great gospel singer Mahalia Jackson poured out of the speakers like molten gold from a spigot. *I once was lost, but now am found / Was blind, but now can see.* I turned the record off and sank down on my rocking chair. Like divine grace, love had come as a revelation to Ray. It didn't matter that Ari and Laura hadn't been deemed worthy by other

people. He loved them both and they, each in their own ways, had loved him back. Why was such a simple thing always a struggle for Steve and me?

I was just about to go in for a shower when I heard the outside buzzer. Steve. I felt absurdly happy and angry with him at the same time. He came in, gave me the thumbs-up sign, and said, "We got 'em." His voice was full of satisfaction, but he looked incredibly weary, and I knew he probably hadn't slept for days.

"Them?"

"Yeah." He flopped down onto my daybed, ready to tell the story. "It was just like you thought. The kid's grandfather left him a lot of money. They wanted it, and as next of kin, Helen inherited from Ray. All they had to do was to kill him."

"They?" I shook my head. "I don't think so, Steve. She's a battered woman. She might have been too frightened to stop him, but . . ."

"Are you kidding?" he snorted with derision. "The whole thing was her idea."

"You mean that's what Stan told you."

He shook his head. "Molly, let me tell you how it went down. You know the way we do it when we haven't got any hard evidence. We put 'em in separate rooms, convince each one that the other gave him up and that if he doesn't want to take the whole rap, he'd better tell his side of the story, be full of remorse, all that kind of crap." He got up, went to my minifridge, and took out a beer. "Well, Stan wouldn't say a word against her at first."

"You mean, after you told him that she gave him up, which she hadn't done yet."

He shrugged. "It's always a wonder to me that anyone believes anything a cop tells them." He popped the top, took a long swallow, and went on: "But the minute I told her Stan was talking, she couldn't wait to get her side in. She hated them both—Stan and her son. She told me some of the things Stan had done to Ray, to prove how sadistic Stan was." His lip curled. "Not that she ever tried to stop any of it, mind you. I think she probably egged him on—Stan finally told me it was Helen's idea to dump the body in that alley. According to her, Ray didn't deserve to live, much less inherit anything." He looked at me out of bleak eyes and said: "Don't get me wrong. Stan's no angel. You know how I feel about men who hit women." I nodded. "And *he* did the whacking. But she's some piece of work, let me tell you."

I still couldn't get my mind around it. "She seemed like such a frightened little creature."

"She was, when *you* met her. She was scared to death they were gonna get caught." Grinning a little of his crooked grin, he said, "Molly, you're way too trusting about people. You believe everything the books say about these women all being victims. Well, most of them are a pretty sad lot, that's true. But

you'd be amazed at what viciousness some of these poor little victims are capable of, especially against their own children." He must have sensed how I was feeling because he added, "Come on, Molly, don't look like that. It was your lead that broke the case. The NYPD lost out on a first-rate detective when you went into social work."

The last sentence was said with a little teasing note that was supposed to make everything all right. But for once it didn't work. "Steve," I said, trying to keep my voice level, "you and I need to talk." He put the beer can down on the floor and gave me the look that frequently follows those words when women say them to men.

"I can't do this anymore." I meant it to sound determined, but it came out more as a plea. "You can't just show up, out of the blue, whenever it suits you." My eyes were filling with tears. "I can't take the loneliness, the disconnection, the never knowing where you are or when you'll call." When he didn't say anything, I added: "I think we should stop seeing each other."

All the animation went out of his face, as if it had been wiped away by a sponge. I looked at my hands, relieved to have it finally out there, unsure of what I really wanted him to say.

There was a long silence. Then: "I been doing a lot of thinking the past couple of days," he said in a low voice. "You know, since this whole World Trade thing happened, 'Nam has been on my mind a lot."

I nodded, wary of him and his ways of pulling me back in.

"I want to tell you this story." He took a long pull from the beer can, settled back on my daybed, and closed his eyes. "A week or so after I first got there, we were ambushed bad. Half the guys I came over with, guys I'd been talking to just that morning, were lying there dead. I'm all broke up. This sergeant, Mason T. Buffet his name was, from Alabama, he takes me aside and says, 'Boy, I'm gonna teach you a little something about survival.' I still remember his words like they were engraved on my brain." He opened his eyes and went on: " 'You don't want to get close to anyone here. You don't want to know what town they come from, you don't want to know about their girlfriends, their mothers, their kids. That way when they die, you won't feel anything.' "

As always, when he told me these things, I wanted to reach out and touch him. But I stopped myself.

"It was good advice then, Molly. It got me through that goddamned war."

"And now?"

"Now?" His shoulders went up and down. "It got me a broken marriage, a lot of failed relationships. I'm still here, though. It got me that. But now I keep asking myself, is it enough?" He spread his hands out, palms upward, as though looking for a heavenly answer. "I don't know. What I do

know is this: Pete's memorial is tomorrow, and it's going to be real hard for me. I came here because I wanted to be with you tonight, and to ask if you'd come with me to the service."

I felt a rush of elation. Was he finally letting me in? But then my doubts swept over me like cold mist obscuring the sun. Had he come here really wanting to say this? Or had he just made it up on the spot, to throw me a bone and keep me from leaving? And would he do his disappearing act again as soon as the memorial service was over? He'd told me himself never to trust anything a cop tells you.

I closed my eyes and breathed in deeply. What does it take to really open someone's heart? For Ray it had taken discovering the poetry that lived inside him. For the people of this city, it had taken a disaster. For Steve? I just didn't know. I pictured Ray sitting on that car with his boombox. For him the answer was simple: Keep loving. And he hadn't been wrong. Because in the end, it wasn't his willingness to keep loving the hard cases that had destroyed him.

Did I have that kind of faith? I took another deep breath and let it out. Then I picked up my phone, called the office, and left a message that I was taking a personal day. I hung up, went over to Steve, and put my arms around him. With a small sound that could have just been a sigh, he put his head down on my chest.

(continued from page 3)

and go to Little League games. I make up funny stories for my kids because I love to see them laugh."

You may have noticed a new name among our columnists last month. We have changed our format slightly and now have a small roster of regular book reviewers, one of whom is our Mary Cannon. Mary first started reviewing books for AHMM in 1982, and has since brought her insights to countless columns and profiles for us. Look for more of her features in future issues. Our reviewer this month is Don Herron (a short bio appears on page 142). Last month, our reviewer was Robert C. Hahn, who also reviews for *Publishers Weekly*. He is the former book editor of the *Cincinnati Post*, and its current head librarian.

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the March issue.

Despite his suave appearance, Randolph Ritz was deeply worried. The recent rash of robberies was giving his hotel an unwelcomed reputation. In emergencies, he always hired the best; in this case it was the Tracewell Agency, operated by Jim and Janice Tracewell.

"Your usual fee and a thousand dollar bonus if you solve the mystery within twenty-four hours," declared the hotel owner. "I've arranged a suite for you on the fifth floor."

When the Tracewells had settled into the Ritz Hotel, Janice asked, "Any suggestion on where to start?"

"Well," Jim replied, "it seems more than coincidence to me that these robberies started just after 'Soft Shoe' Snively was released on parole. He'd been convicted on similar robberies of luxury hotels, though his wife and accomplice was released for lack of direct evidence."

"What does this Snively character look like?"

"Who can say? He's a master of disguises and false identities. His wife, however, invariably uses the name Elaine and dresses in red. She's five-six, blonde, curvy, and by now around forty."

"So, all we have to do is locate the man with the attractive blonde lady in red."

It wasn't that simple. Staying at the hotel were eight blonde women, all dressed in red, all the right height and age, and all curvaceous . . .

The Tracewell Agency set to work in earnest.

1. The hotel desk clerk would reveal only that each of the couples under suspicion registered from a different state; one was from New York. Each couple was on a different floor—from floors 3 through 12—but none was on floor 6 or 10. Each had a room ending in a different number—from 21 through 30—but none had a room number ending in 23 or 27.

2. Of the eight men, three were attending the National Health Conference (or so they claimed)—the dentist, the doctor, and the ophthalmologist; four claimed to be there for the American

Builder's Convention—the contractor, the architect, the plumber, and the electrician; and the eighth man claimed to be a journalist assigned to cover the conventions. One husband was named Earl.

3. Alvin's room was three floors below that of Mr. Norris and three floors above that of the man registered from Wyoming. Their room numbers ended in 21, 22, and 24 (in some order). None of the three claimed to be a dentist.

4. The woman from Texas was two floors below Cecil's wife and two floors above Debbie. Their husbands (who did not include Mr. Keller) claimed to be an architect, a contractor, and an electrician (in some order). The lady from Texas had a room number with the last two digits one less than those of Cecil's wife but more than those of Debbie.

5. The journalist (who wasn't Alvin) was on the floor immediately below Bert and immediately above the man whose room number ended in 25. Their last names were Immel, Lange, and Moore (in some order). None was married to Freda (who was on the floor just below the lady from South Dakota).

6. Mrs. O'Hara had a room number whose last two digits were two less than those of the lady from Tennessee and two more than those of the plumber's wife. Their first names were Alice, Clara, and Helene, in some order. None of the three was on floor 5 or floor 8.

7. The ophthalmologist was on the next-occupied floor below the man whose room number ended in 26 and on the next-occupied floor above Mr. Jergens. They were registered from Arizona, South Dakota, and Virginia (in some order).

8. The doctor's room was somewhere below that of Mr. Pilcher and somewhere above that of the man registered from Utah.

9. The man from Arizona (whose room was on the floor above Hank's room) had a room number whose last two digits were two greater than those of the contractor and four greater than those of Freda's husband.

10. The last two digits of Helene's room number were exactly two more than those of Clara but less than those of Mrs.

Moore. None of these three women was married to Dan (who is not Mr. Immel).

11. Fred was on a lower floor of the hotel than Gerta's husband.

Jim and Janice conferred after their day's investigation and compared notes. "Too bad we didn't learn which blonde was Elaine. Nobody mentioned her," Jim said.

"Oh, that wasn't necessary," Janice said blithely. "By elimination, I know the name her husband is using and where they are staying in the hotel. All we have to do is shadow them and catch them in the act."

The Tracewells were successful. The very next evening, the guilty pair emerged from room 518, still pocketing a diamond ring, sapphire necklace, and cash belonging to the rightful occupant. Hotel Security was alerted and the stolen articles recovered.

"One more thing," Janice declared. "We still have to collect our exorbitant fee from Mr. Ritz."

What name and cover was the hotel thief using?
Which room did he and his accomplice-wife occupy?

See page 111 for the solution to the January puzzle.

LASTING IMPACT

John H. Dirckx

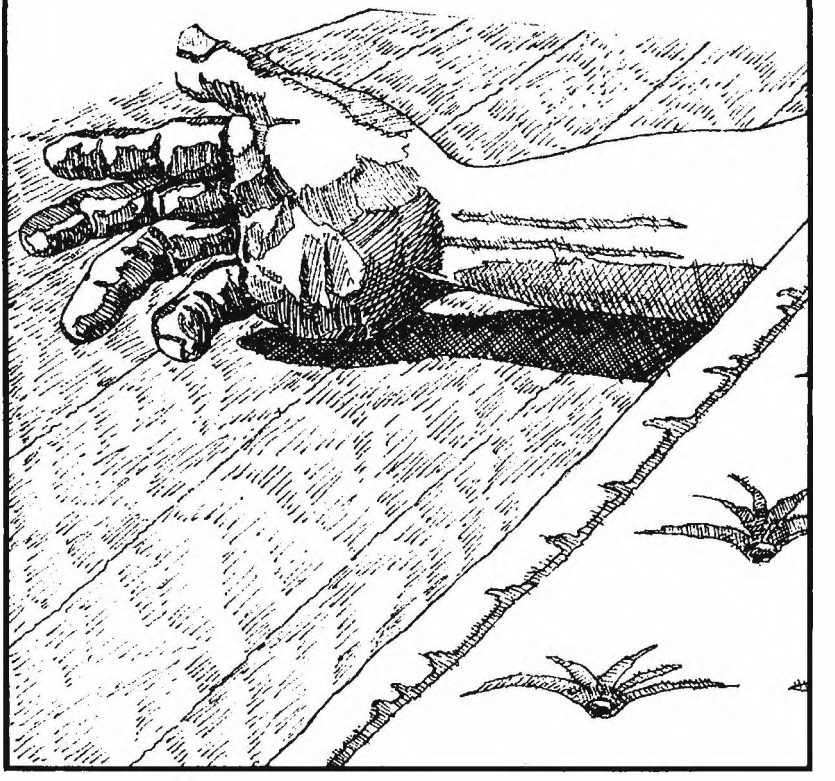


Illustration by Meredith Lightbourn

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 2003

The Chamber of Commerce called it Historic North Town. To the federal housing authorities it was the Drysdale Reclamation District. The university administration euphemistically styled it the Alternative Housing Area. And the Department of Public Safety had a rule that officers never went there except in twos, day or night.

The cosmopolitan and heterogeneous colony that lived in the Drysdale District was made up largely of people connected with the university—students, professors without tenure, and dormitory and cafeteria employees. But there was also a sprinkling of transients with no visible means of support, people who spoke broken English and came and went chiefly after dark.

By and large, the people who lived in the area had other things on their minds than elevated cholesterol, static cling, or blighted begonias. But most of them did expect hot water for their morning showers.

At seven A.M. on a cold and soggy Thursday in March, Keith Vidalka hammered on the door of the manager's apartment with a fist like a pork shank and roared in a voice like a bullhorn, "Tennyson! Hey, Tennyson! If I wanted to take a cold shower, I'd stand out in the rain."

Eventually Tennyson, wrapped in a flannel blanket in default of a bathrobe, opened the door and stood yawning and blinking in the raw light of the entry hall. "No hot water?"

Vidalka, a head taller and a hundred pounds heavier, leaned close with an air of vague menace. "How did you guess?"

Tennyson rubbed his eyes and leaned away. "Let me put on some shoes and I'll go see if it's the pilot light in the water heater."

"Do that."

A female voice called down from the second-floor landing in a tone at once chiding and conciliatory. "Keith, I can boil you some water on the stove to shave."

"Do that, Hazel," Vidalka said and stalked up the stairs. Before he reached the landing she had disappeared back into the apartment.

The rain lashed the building first on one side, then another as the wind shifted. At seven thirty A.M. Hazel Vidalka, wearing a raincoat and carrying an umbrella and a heavy vinyl bookbag, headed for the bus stop at the corner on the way to her job as a fourth-grade teacher. Around eight, Damon Rutledge, the tenant across the hall from the Vidalkas, phoned Tennyson to report that he had no hot water. A little before nine, Keith Vidalka, looking just as unkempt as he had two hours before, slammed out of the house on his way to the bus stop.

Later in the day, a panel truck with senile degeneration of the valves pulled up in front of the apartment and parked. It was still raining. A wiry, rusty-haired man in a soiled coverall dodged puddles and buzzed at the front

door. He balanced his toolbox on the porch rail while he waited.

After tinkering in the basement for half an hour, the plumber informed Tennyson that the water heater had burned out and needed to be replaced.

"What's that going to cost?" Tennyson was eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and decorating his sweater with samples of it.

"Four, five hundred. You want sixty gallon or eighty gallon? You got sixty now."

"I don't know. I'll have to get in touch with the owner."

"Where's he at?"

"Someplace where it never gets this cold or this wet."

"How many units you got in the building?"

"Four. But one's empty."

"I'll write you up an estimate for a sixty-gallon tank. Got a pen?"

"You can use this one."

"Got some paper?"

When Tennyson awoke two mornings later to find that large, heavy drops of water were falling with sullen deliberation from the center of a dark wet patch on his bedroom ceiling, he thought at first that the rain, which continued unabated, was filtering down from some gap in the roof.

Then he remembered that the Vidalkas' water bed was directly overhead.

Knowing that there were already two patrolmen at the scene, Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn hazarded a solo visit to the Drysdale District despite the departmental rule. A cruiser was parked in front of the apartment building on Lorenzo Avenue, and further along the street Auburn recognized a white police evidence van and the van from the coroner's office, also white.

The building was typical of the neighborhood, a gaunt old frame house with an aluminum siding job perpetrated years ago by amateurs and air conditioners wrapped in blue plastic in three of the windows.

It was still raining. Patrolman Fritz Dollinger, drenched to the skin, met him on the front steps.

"Has his wife turned up yet?" Auburn asked as he sought shelter under the inadequate canopy over the porch.

"Not yet. She teaches at A. G. Bell Elementary. We thought she might be there, even though it's Saturday, but the apartment manager has her work number and there's no answer. I want to show you something before we go in."

He stepped off the porch and Auburn followed him along the front walk and into the side yard. Three days of unremitting rain had turned the ground into chocolate pudding. It wasn't often that Auburn questioned the wisdom of things his father had taught him, but standing there with rain running through his hair and dissecting its way under his collar, he began having second thoughts about the stern paternal dictum, "A man doesn't use an umbrella."

Dollinger led him to a basement window well and pointed. A steel sash window, opaque with filth, bore traces inside and out of muddy hands, and the dead leaves in the well had recently been disturbed. A stout figure was moving about in the sketchy light of the basement.

"Is that Stamaty down there? I thought the body was upstairs."

"It is. That's Fremantle."

"Who's Fremantle? Can we get in out of the rain?"

"New evidence tech." Dollinger led him to the rear of the building, where a heavy steel door adjoining the alley was propped open with a garbage can lid. They entered a cold, damp, dirty, cluttered porch.

"So where's Kestrel?"

"Rank has its privileges," said Dollinger. "Since they put him in charge of the lab he doesn't have to work weekends. Unless he wants to."

Auburn ran his eye over the accumulated rubbish on the porch—lawn chairs, a snow shovel, a garden hose, red clay flowerpots, a bicycle minus its front wheel, a stepladder minus a rung, a spade, stacks of old newspapers. They went up the back stairs to the Vidalkas' apartment.

The first thing that passed through Auburn's mind when he saw the corpse was the phrase "stuffed animal." Keith Vidalka, wearing underwear and socks, lay on his back in a tangle of bedclothes. He was a gross hulk of a man, well over six feet tall and probably weighing close to three hundred pounds. His slate-colored face had a coarse, bestial quality even in death, and his large ears stuck straight out from the sides of his neck among stiff coils of hair. A potent aroma of stale liquor hung in the atmosphere.

Nick Stamaty, the coroner's investigator, looked up from his clipboard, winked solemnly at Auburn, and pointed a rubber-gloved finger at a livid blotch on the dead man's forehead, just at the root of the nose.

"Blunt instrument?" asked Auburn.

"Some kind of impact, anyway. Maybe he just staggered against something. I've been breathing the air in here for ten minutes and I'm about ready to take the pledge."

"We couldn't find anything on him downtown," said Auburn. "No convictions, anyway. They're still checking." He waded across the mushy carpet toward the bed. "What's with all this water?"

"Broken window," said Stamaty, as if he were explaining why dogs can't fly. "Thought maybe the water bed popped its cork. Or stopped a slug."

"The only hole here is in the window, and a slug didn't make that."

Auburn inspected the broken window, which faced the alley. Rain was still blowing and drifting in, spattering the half-drawn blind and continuing to soak into the carpet. A few fragments of glass lay on the windowsill and the floor. To the eye of the trained

investigator, the broken edges of the pane that remained in the frame presented unequivocal evidence that the breaking force had come from outside and that, as Stamaty said, it hadn't come from a bullet.

Apparently whoever did the breaking had been standing on the rusty steel fire escape that ran across the back of the building. Auburn didn't remember seeing the fire escape from below. Craning his neck, he saw that the part of it that reached to the ground was hinged and counterweighted, so that it remained horizontal at the second floor level until somebody climbed onto it. He looked more closely at the window.

"It's nailed shut," said a strange voice behind him.

Fremantle, the new evidence technician, was short and stocky and deliberate in his movements, and he smiled constantly as if brimful of amusement at some private joke. The strap of a camera case cut across his shoulder. The silver border of his name tag, which might have been laminated that morning, indicated that he was a civilian.

Stamaty made introductions. Fremantle went on smiling, but he didn't shake hands.

"Good thing they never had a fire," said Auburn. He examined the rusty heads of the spikes that someone had driven long ago through the frame of the window into the jamb, thus thwarting the purpose of the fire escape and risking the wrath of the fire marshal. "It's pretty obvious nobody climbed through here, isn't it? What about that basement window?"

"That's a horse of another color," said Fremantle. "There aren't any tool marks on the basement window, but it may not have been latched in the first place. No prints I can use, either, but somebody climbed in or out, or both, since this rain started. There's a toolbox down there, too, with a pry bar, couple of wrenches, pieces of bent wire. You get the picture."

Auburn went back to the living room through which he and Dollinger had entered the apartment and made a brief tour of inspection. Rain pelted the windows, gurgled in the gutters, scoured the downspouts. The apartment was tidy but austere, and about as cheerful as a dentist's office. An antique rolltop desk bore orderly stacks of books and papers. Liquor bottles and glasses figured prominently in the general decor.

Auburn resisted the temptation to borrow a bath towel and dry his hair. "So how long's he been dead, Nick?" he asked when he returned to the bedroom.

"He's not stiff yet. The heater in the water bed was on the lowest setting. Judging by his present temperature, I'd say he's been dead less than six hours. That's unofficial."

A sudden commotion downstairs announced the arrival of the widow. Shrill expressions of distress drowned out Patrolman

Terry Krasnoy's consolatory efforts. Auburn gritted his teeth and went down.

They were in the office, also known as the living room of the resident manager's apartment. Hazel Vidalka stood in the middle of the room shaking her head and wailing. Krasnoy was just helping her out of her raincoat. Before laying it on a chair, he unceremoniously searched the pockets. A big vinyl portfolio lay dripping rain onto the floor just inside the door.

Auburn showed his badge, expressed his sympathy and his regret that he had to question her, and asked her to sit down. She didn't.

She was tall and willowy, her finely chiseled features revealed resoluteness and chronic strife. Long strands of tawny hair strayed from beneath a sodden toque pulled down over her ears like a helmet. She was rapidly growing more composed.

Auburn took out a three-by-five-inch file card and recorded her name in an upper corner. "Have you been away all night?" he asked.

"I left about ten o'clock last night."

"Was your husband here when you left?"

"Yes. That's why I left. He was getting . . . rough."

"In what sense? Abusing you physically?"

She looked in the direction of the stairs for one frantic moment as if she wondered if he was really dead. "He couldn't help it," she said, with a hopeless shrug. "Keith had a drinking problem."

"Had he had any help with that? Rehab, detox, AA?"

"Repeatedly. It didn't take." She was wearing a spoon ring on her left little finger but no wedding band or engagement ring. Two of her fingernails were badly torn. "It seemed as if he couldn't work without some alcohol in his system. When he was dry he just sat around looking at the walls and not looking at me."

"What kind of work did he do?"

"He edited puzzles and bridge and chess material for the Statler News Syndicate. Downtown in the Bossart Tower. Sometimes he worked at home, and other times he didn't work at all, for days at a stretch."

"Did he do drugs too?"

"Not that I know of." She decided to sit down.

"What happened last night?"

"He cashed his paycheck downtown and tried to spend it all at the bar next door to the bank. When they threw him out he came home and complained that dinner was cold, and he said I spent too much on clothes, and . . ." She shrugged helplessly. "I knew things were going to get violent again, so I got out."

"Had you reported the abuse to the police?" he asked, knowing perfectly well that she hadn't.

"It didn't happen very often."

"I understand you teach school."

"I teach a roomful of nine-year-olds all day, and then at night I come home—came home—to an-

other one. I'm on two drug abuse committees. What are they going to think when they find out my husband drank himself to death?"

"Mrs. Vidalka, I don't know just what Officer Krasnoy told you . . ." Krasnoy, standing behind her where she couldn't see him, shook his head. "There's a possibility that your husband's death wasn't due to alcohol. He seems to have a head injury . . ."

"What kind of head injury?"

"Sort of a bruise, across his forehead. Do you know anything about that?"

"He didn't have it when I left. He might have fallen. He fell on the steps and knocked himself out a couple of years ago."

"Apparently he was in bed when he died. There are some other things. The bedroom window was broken, and apparently somebody climbed in through a basement window last night."

She stood up again, wide eyed, restless. "A basement window?"

"We're still investigating that. As of now, we can't rule out foul play. Do you know of anybody who might have wanted to kill your husband?"

She took two long steps to the front window, looked out into the rain-soaked street, and turned back. "No, I don't. But he knew lots of people I didn't. People at work, people he hung around with in bars. And he could be obnoxious."

"Was there anybody up in the apartment with him when you left last night?"

"No."

"Where did you go?"

"I took the bus to Belmont Mall and spent the night doing lesson plans on a bench in the grand concourse."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Did you see anyone there that you know?"

"In the middle of the night? No, of course not." She swallowed suddenly when she realized he was asking her if she could prove an alibi.

"Eventually I'll want you to check and see if anything's been stolen or disturbed upstairs. The apartment has already been searched for a weapon, but the officers doing the searching wouldn't necessarily know if anything was missing. Would you rather wait until your husband's body has been taken away?"

"Oh, yes, please."

"It may take some time. Is there somewhere you'd like to wait?"

"Could I talk to Damon Rutledge? He lives across the hall from us upstairs."

Krasnoy took her up. No sooner had they left the room than the apartment manager emerged from his bedroom like the clandestine visitor popping out of the closet in a stage farce.

"Heavy stuff," he said, shaking his head. He was slight and sallow, with a balding crown.

Auburn pulled out a blank file card. "Your name, sir?"

"Randy Tennyson. Like the poet." He seemed disappointed

when Auburn didn't ask him what poet.

"Building manager?"

"Yes, sir. Also perpetual graduate student in anthropology."

"Were you here all last night?"

"No, sir. Didn't get in until after three. I play in a group at The Lime Tree. That's a coffeehouse."

"Did you hear anything unusual during the night—after you got in, I mean? Any commotion upstairs?"

"There was so much thunder last night I thought Father Zeus had decided to bust up a couple of continents and sell them for scrap. I didn't know anything was wrong upstairs until this morning, when I woke up and found my ceiling on a crying jag."

"What time would that have been?"

"Nine-ish. I went upstairs in my skivvies to tell the Vidalkas their water bed was leaking, but nobody came to the door, so I came back down here and got my pass key and went in. You know what I found."

"I think I do, but why don't you tell me, just so I'll be sure?"

"Keith was in bed, not breathing. Hazel wasn't there. The water bed wasn't leaking—the back window was smashed in, and it was raining in all over the floor."

"Did you touch anything or move anything in the apartment?"

"No, sir. Just backed out and got on the horn to you guys."

"Were the lights on in the bedroom?"

"No, and the blinds were down. But the blind on the broken window was flapping around in the wind, letting in enough light off and on so that I could see Keith wasn't with us any more. Kind of spooked me, you know?"

"The officers who were first on the scene found evidence that somebody had climbed in through a basement window."

"So I heard. I haven't been out to look yet. It's plenty wet in here for me. My bedroom ceiling is still dripping."

Auburn drifted toward the bedroom and, eliciting no objections from Tennyson, drifted on in. "Are you pretty sure nothing is damaged or missing here in your apartment?" he asked. He took a long look around the room. Books and papers and clothes lay everywhere, as if Tennyson had just moved in yesterday. An expensive-looking electric guitar rested in an expensive-looking case.

"Pretty sure. Looks like the same old pigsty to me."

A chill went up the back of Auburn's neck as he discovered a squat green lizard the size of a rat inspecting him with malignant disdain from a glass case on top of a bookshelf.

"Iguana?"

"Skink, actually," said Tennyson. "Native of Australia. Totally benign unless you happen to be an insect."

Auburn followed him back to the office. "They found a tool chest down in the basement, too. Would that be yours?"

"No way. I can't even remember which way you screw in a

lightbulb. It probably belongs to the plumber. Guy that's supposed to be replacing the water heater. Thing of it is, the owner of the building's down in Puerto Vallarta getting skin cancer, and I haven't been able to reach him."

He picked up a card from the windowsill beside the desk and handed it to Auburn.

"Lowell's Home Repairs 515-3969" had been imprinted on the card with a rubber stamp crudely made from a kit. Across the bottom straggled another line, "Always buying jewelry, watches, and knives." Even without the mint-chocolate scent, Auburn would have been fairly certain that the card had begun life as a divider in a candy box.

"Doesn't spend much on stationery, does he?" Auburn asked. "This thing looks like a ransom note."

"You should see his homepage."

"What can you tell me about the Vidalkas?"

"Keith and Hazel? Just your normal dysfunctional marital unit, leading lives of boisterous desperation."

"Did she drink too?"

"No. Getting wasted was strictly a masculine prerogative in that household," Tennyson said, as if it were an impartial observation of tribal customs.

"Did he beat up on her often?"

"Well, she didn't get those bruises and black eyes from her fourth graders," said Tennyson, a shade less objective. "And she didn't walk into the bathroom door in the dark, either, like she said. Not every weekend."

"Do you think she might have just got fed up and decided to seek a permanent solution?"

"Not Hazel. She was the model wife—absolutely unbeatable. Actually, I was taking bets on which one Keith would kill first, her or Rutledge."

"Rutledge is the neighbor across the hall? Something going on there?"

"You'll have to figure that one out for yourself."

"What does Rutledge do for a living?"

"Math tutor. The university sends him all the dunces he can tute. He's got some other racket going, too, but I could never figure out what it was. He's got four phone lines going into his bedroom."

"Did you ever see or hear any overt signs of hostility between Vidalka and Rutledge?"

"You talk like a social worker uptown—no offense intended. No, but then I don't sit around keeping tabs on the tenants all day."

Auburn moved back into the entry hall and looked around, noting topographic details. The building had two stories with two apartments on each floor, one on either side of a hall that ran from front door to back door. The stairway to the second story started about a third of the way back and made a hundred and eighty degree turn at a half landing, so that the top step was directly in line with the bottom one, and the front doors of the upstairs apart-

ments were directly over the front doors of the downstairs apartments.

"Are the front and back doors of the building locked all the time?"

"Right. All the tenants' keys unlock them. Visitors have to buzz the apartment they want from the front porch and wait for the tenant to release the lock electrically."

"Who lives across the hall here?"

"That's vacant. Half the fixtures in there have been borrowed to replace stuff in the other apartments, and most of the windows are jammed. One of the cops already searched in there."

"Krasnoy?"

"The one with a face like a Halloween mask."

"Krasnoy." Auburn tried to call the plumber on the manager's phone but got no answer.

With enormous bustle and noise, the mortuary crew removed Vidalka's remains from the premises. Auburn made a quick unauthorized search of Hazel Vidalka's portfolio as he carried it and her raincoat upstairs, and confirmed that it did indeed contain lesson plans. He found her talking to Stamaty in the upper hall about the eventual release of Vidalka's body by the coroner. He asked Dollinger to escort her through the apartment.

Meanwhile, he interviewed Damon Rutledge, who turned out to be, like Auburn himself, African-American.

In any setting, Rutledge would have been an imposing figure. His long hair and bushy beard, streaked with gray, sat on him like a space helmet. His chest was as round as a barrel, his limbs sinewy and skeletal. His eyes had a murky, veiled look, suggesting the prophet or the mass murderer.

Evidently the living room was where he did his tutoring. One wall was covered with bookshelves. Papers with graphs and equations were strewn along a counter in front of a computer whose screen was dark. A large, slick plastic poster showing the signs of the zodiac in garish colors sounded an incongruous note.

Auburn showed identification. "I think you know what happened across the way."

"All I know is what Hazel told me, which is that Tennyson found Keith dead in bed a couple of hours ago."

"Were you here all last night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you hear anything unusual over there during the night?"

"No."

"I understand you do tutoring. Did you have any pupils here yesterday?"

"I had one here from nine to ten yesterday morning."

"Mind telling me the name?"

"Robin Stainer."

Auburn wrote the name on the file card in his hand. "Male or female?"

"I don't take women pupils."

"Did you have any visitors here after ten yesterday morning?"

"No, sir."

"How well did you know Keith Vidalka?"

"Too well." Rutledge's brief broad smile sent ripples through his beard like the wind in a wheat field. He spoke in the earnest, searching tones of a revival preacher. "Keith was a tragic blend of genius and frailty. He could play ten games of chess at once in his head, but he couldn't break the grip of alcohol on his soul."

"Did you ever have any trouble personally with him?"

"Trouble? No. He pretended to be jealous of me because I let Hazel use my computer. But really he preferred that arrangement to having her stay late at school to work on the computer there. That way, she could come home on time and fix his meals and wash his clothes and generally wait on him hand and foot."

"You say he pretended to be jealous. Did he ever threaten you—or her?"

Damon pondered his spidery fingers and remained silent for so long that Auburn finally realized he wasn't going to answer.

Auburn got up and moved toward the doorway at the rear of the apartment. Rutledge got there first. "I don't know if Tennyson mentioned this," said Auburn, "but the back window in the Vidalkas' bedroom was broken in. I'd like to have a look at the fire escape from your back window, if you don't mind."

"I do mind. Unless you've got a hunting license."

The door to the hall stood ajar. Dollinger knocked on the door and stuck his head into the room. "Sergeant, she says some jewelry is missing."

Auburn turned his back on Rutledge, who was starting to get under his skin, and joined Dollinger in the upstairs hall. Hazel Vidalka, looking more stunned and miserable than ever, was holding a two-piece pink chinaware rabbit figurine, the head in one hand and the body in the other. "My rings are gone," she said with tears in her voice. "My diamond and my wedding band and my mother's diamond."

"Where did you keep that?"

"I kept it on the dresser in the bedroom."

"Is anything else missing?"

"I don't think so."

"Could your husband have pawned them or sold them?"

"I don't think he would have done that. Keith wasn't a bad person, officer, just sick." She added, so softly that Auburn barely caught the words, "Terminally sick."

Auburn wrote down a precise description of the missing jewelry. "Are you planning to stay here in the apartment?" he asked.

"I think so. I don't have anywhere else to go."

"If you change your address, I'd like you to call me at one of these numbers."

Auburn's clothes were starting to dry out in places. At least his pant legs were no longer cling-

ing to his skin like a leotard. He went downstairs and made a quick tour of the vacant apartment across the hall from the manager's. It was damp, unheated, and full of junk. As Tennyson had said, the bathroom and kitchen had been largely stripped of fixtures. Even the lock on the front door was gone. Then he went to the basement.

There wasn't much doubt that somebody had scrambled in through the damaged window, or out through it, or both. On the floor in a corner stood the toolbox Fremantle had mentioned. It was small and plastic, like a tacklebox or an artist's kit, but it did contain tools. Besides wrenches and a small pry bar Auburn saw a tube of cement, a linoleum knife, a twist drill with a wooden handle, and a clear plastic box that contained watchmaker's tools and what might have been a picklock.

Vidalka's wound, if it was a wound, apparently hadn't bled, but Auburn was examining the wrenches and the pry bar for bloodstains with his flashlight when Fremantle shuffled down the basement stairs.

"The manager thought these might belong to the plumber who's replacing the water heater," Auburn told him.

"Hardly a typical outfit for a plumber," Fremantle said. "Those are burglar's tools, and they're mine now."

"Don't you think we'd better get a warrant before we take anything out of the basement?"

"Krasnoy's on his way downtown right now to pick one up."

"Well, then, I hope it covers the entire premises. Somebody had to climb out on that fire escape to kick in the Vidalkas' window. I want to see if Rutledge's back window is nailed shut, too. In fact, there are lots of answers I'd like to get before I leave here."

Fremantle snapped the lid of the toolbox shut with the toe of his shoe, threaded a piece of string through the handle, and picked it up, holding it away from his body to avoid smearing any prints. "We've got all the answers already," he said with smug self-assurance. "We just don't know yet what questions they're the answers to."

It was still drizzling. Auburn went to his car and radioed Krasnoy, already en route to the courthouse, to get warrants issued for each of the apartments in the building in addition to common areas. Then he called headquarters to request background checks on Keith Vidalka and the surviving residents of the apartment building. He also called in a description of the stolen jewelry to Robbery and made another unsuccessful attempt to reach the plumber.

It was nearly noon. Getting warrants issued on a Saturday might take hours. Leaving Fremantle and the uniformed men in possession, he drove five blocks north to Wakefield Avenue, an east-west artery, and stopped at a neighborhood cafe he'd patronized before without

lethal consequences. He finished his fries and coffee in the car while getting an address from the phone company on Lowell Bradford, the elusive plumber.

When he arrived back at the apartment building on Lorenzo, he found that the search warrant had been served on Tennyson, as resident proprietor of the building and custodian of common areas such as the basement, and that Fremantle had already left with his spoils. Dollinger and Krasnoy were in the office finishing off a sixteen-inch deep-dish pizza, and Tennyson was improvising on the guitar in a hybrid style somewhere between flamenco and engine knock.

Damon Rutledge took about five minutes this time to answer Auburn's knock at his door. He accepted Auburn's word that he had a warrant and didn't even ask to see it.

His bedroom was practically a duplicate of the room off the landing—books, papers, and another high countertop, this one with three computers. The bed crammed against one wall looked like something added as an afterthought.

Not only was Damon's back window not nailed shut, but it stood open a couple of inches and was letting in a cool damp breeze and an occasional drop of rain. With some difficulty Auburn raised it further and stuck his head and shoulders out into the drizzle. The fire escape was red with rust except in a few spots where remnants of sun-blistered black enamel clung to the surface. The rain had scrubbed away any traces that might have been left by whoever broke the Vidalkas' window.

"Ever been outside there?" Auburn asked Rutledge.

"Never."

Auburn threw a leg over the windowsill and hauled himself out onto the fire escape. The movable section barely budged under the pressure of his foot. With more force the hinge slowly yielded, shrieking like a wounded elephant. It seemed obvious that it hadn't been lowered in years, maybe not since it had been installed. Auburn climbed back inside.

"What do you do with all these computers?"

Rutledge allowed himself a dour smile. "I solve problems for people who don't have the patience to do it for themselves," he said.

"What kind of problems? Math problems?"

"Among others."

Auburn arranged with Krasnoy and Dollinger for them to make routine inquiries in the immediate neighborhood, particularly at the houses across the alley, where somebody might have seen some activity on the fire escape. The rain was tapering off and the sun was trying to come out. Auburn headed for the address that went with the plumber's phone number.

It was an ordinary-looking house on a residential street, but

a sign in a front window informed him that "Lowell's Construction" was in the rear. Probably the business changed names from time to time.

Lowell Bradford was making unpleasant noises with a file at a workbench on one side of a garage cluttered with lumber, pipe, machinery, and rubbish. His truck, which remembered Watergate, was parked in the other half of the garage. Bradford was lithe and loose-limbed, and his hair was exactly the color of a rag that had been used to wipe up rusty oil.

He jumped half out of his skin when Auburn spoke to him from behind.

"Yes, sir, what can I do for you?"

Auburn showed identification. "Just a routine investigation. I understand you're doing some work at an apartment building over on Lorenzo—new water heater?"

Bradford put down his file and wiped his hands on his coveralls. He had pouches under his eyes like somebody who stayed up all night watching television, or maybe climbing through basement windows.

"Supposed to be. I'm waiting for the owner to make a deposit. What's the deal?"

"When was the last time you were over there?"

"Day before yesterday. Thursday."

"Haven't been back since?"

"I'm still waiting for them to call about the deposit. What's the deal?"

"Did you leave some tools over there in the basement?"

"Well, let me see, did I? Could be. Are there some tools over there?"

"Yes, there are, and it looks like they might have been used in a break-in."

"Oh, there was a break-in over there, was there?" He picked up his file again and examined it critically.

The alley was a river of mud. Auburn stepped into the garage to wipe his feet on the pitted concrete floor and took a look around the shadowy interior. "Are you sure you haven't been over on Lorenzo since Thursday? Say about two or three o'clock this morning?"

"Hey, buddy! I mean, what's the deal?"

"I understand you buy jewelry and watches."

"Sometimes. Got a brother-in-law, runs an antique exchange over in Wilmot. Him and me do a little trading now and then. Why?"

"Because some jewelry is missing from that apartment on Lorenzo—"

"Well, I ain't got it. You can look around—"

"And a man was killed there during the night."

Bradford shifted abruptly from indignation to profanity.

"Somebody got in a basement window," said Auburn. "Right near the water heater. Right near where the toolbox was. Know anything about that?"

"I surely do not. And I don't

steal stuff. And even if I did, I wouldn't need to break in; I'm a locksmith."

Auburn recorded the name of Bradford's brother-in-law and left him with a lot to think about as he resumed his filing.

It was after four when Auburn checked in at headquarters and found his immediate superior, Lieutenant Savage, waiting for some kind of report. He summarized the case as it had so far evolved, and they mulled over the major issues, which seemed to consist largely of inconsistencies. "Are we sure," asked Savage, "that this is a homicide?"

"Stamaty believes Vidalka suffered some sort of impact."

"Whatever it was seems to have made a lasting impact on his future."

"I don't know. The coroner might rule that the head injury wasn't lethal—that Vidalka just literally had one too many."

They mulled some more. Supposing it was homicide, was the murder incidental to the theft of Hazel Vidalka's jewelry? Did the jewelry even exist? Who would bother to climb into the basement of an apartment building, knowing that they'd have to get through at least one locked door to find anything worth stealing?

Who but Damon Rutledge could have got to the Vidalkas' bedroom window to kick it in? And what was the point of such a crude expedient, anyway? What kind of racket was Rutledge running, and what was the real reason why the people he called his pupils visited him? Where had Hazel really spent the night?

"Too many coincidences here for me," Auburn said. "Somebody climbs in the basement, somebody breaks the bedroom window but doesn't climb through, somebody steals some jewelry, somebody maybe bashes Vidalka in the head . . ."

"Do you remember Captain Morsch?"

"Vividly. I made detective about a year before he retired. Very soft on teenagers. Tended to fall asleep in meetings."

"You didn't know him during his best years. He used to say that when you think you've got too many facts, you just don't have enough yet. How's this to wrap everything up? The wife hires Rutledge to kill her husband, and gives him the rings as payment. She waits till Vidalka drinks himself into his weekly coma, then slips out for a few hours, leaving the key to the apartment with Rutledge. Rutledge goes across the hall, clobbers Vidalka with a croquet mallet or whatever, then goes back to his own place, crawls out on the fire escape, and pops the window to give the illusion that the robber slash murderer got in that way."

"Without noticing that the window's nailed shut?"

"Sure, without noticing. If they never made mistakes—"

"I know. But what about the weirdo downstairs? He's got his own key to the apartment. And who slithered through that base-

ment window? And what about this plumber, who isn't sure if those are his tools or not? He's got connections where he could easily recycle hot jewelry, and he might be dumb enough to bash a guy while pulling off a robbery. He doesn't act like he's got enough smarts to scratch his nose in the dark."

County regulations required that Vidalka's remains be kept on ice for twenty-four hours, to allow any viruses he had on board to self-destruct before the autopsy took place. And since it was the weekend, Records would be pursuing the background checks in idling gear. Savage and Auburn decided to close up shop for the day.

A balmy spring wind was drying off the streets and sidewalks when Auburn got home. Two doors up from his house the neighbors were having a porch sale, and after eating dinner Auburn wandered over to see what was left.

"*Tarde venientibus ossa,*" said his neighbor, who taught high school. "Latecomers get the bones."

"Looks like you sold a lot of stuff in spite of the rain."

"We advertised the sale for nine o'clock," she said. "There were people here with pickup trucks before eight."

He glanced over the audio cassettes, worn kitchenware, and old magazines without much enthusiasm. Among a few tools lying on an odd bar stool he noticed a wooden-handled twist drill that was apparently the twin of the one he'd seen in the toolbox in the basement on Lorenzo Avenue. He picked it up and examined it with idle curiosity, and then suddenly began moving off the porch with the drill still in his hand.

"Did you want to buy that drill, Mr. Auburn?"

"Yes—no, thanks." He put it down distractedly and headed for home.

By now it was well past six P.M. and there was no answer when he called the lab. Since the dispatcher had no phone number for Fremantle, Auburn saw no point in bothering the lab technician who was on night call. The highway was crowded with Saturday night revelers, now that the weather had cleared. He was back at headquarters before seven.

Lieutenant Strickland, the watch commander, unlocked the property room for him and stood in the doorway jangling his keys while Auburn ascertained that the toolbox wasn't there. "Probably still in the lab," Auburn said.

"Nobody up there now," Strickland assured him with an air of finality.

"We can get in, though, can't we? I just want to check on something that can't wait till Monday."

"Come on. But if Sergeant Kestrel complains about a pencil being out of place, I'm sending him straight to you."

They found the toolbox in the laboratory's locked storage room. According to the attached routing slip, Fremantle had completed

his examination of it. The box had been wiped clean of dust and oil inside and out, and so had the tools, which lay in order inside the toolbox, neat as a picture in a Sears catalog.

"Just the thing for tackling Fort Knox," remarked Strickland in a tone of bland irony.

Auburn picked up the drill and shook it. Unlike the one at his neighbor's sale, it didn't rattle.

"Not much of a weapon, Cy."

"Not much of a drill, either, without any bits. They're supposed to be stored inside the handle. And the cap won't screw off."

It took them ten seconds to confirm that there weren't any loose drill bits in the toolbox. Auburn took the drill to a workbench in the lab and examined it under a strong light with a magnifying glass. "The cap's been cemented on," he reported. He opened drawers and cabinets, searching for a suitable tool to force it off.

"You sure go out of your way to look for trouble, Cy," said Strickland. "First you mess with Kestrel's toys, and now you're getting ready to tamper with evidence."

"Right in front of a superior officer." Auburn seized the cap of the drill handle in the jaws of a powerful plier and wrenched it off. The wood cracked slightly but the cap came off to reveal a bundle of facial tissues stuffed into the hollow handle. Inside were two diamond rings and a wedding band.

Auburn caught up with Lowell Bradford at Chan's German Pizza, a neighborhood saloon where the most nourishing solid fare available were the mint-flavored toothpicks. The plumber was alone at the bar, working on his third or fourth beer. Auburn made the pinch so discreetly that not even the bartender knew what was happening. Bradford went quietly, saying nothing either before or after Auburn gave him his rights.

They booked him in at the night desk on a charge of robbery. Then Auburn spent an hour closeted in an interrogation room with Bradford and a stenographer. The prisoner had had just enough alcohol to decline the offer of legal counsel, but not enough to give himself away without a struggle.

Auburn conned him slightly by suggesting that, since the stolen jewelry hadn't been found in his possession, or even removed from the building, a charge of robbery probably wouldn't stick. On the other hand, Bradford's initials were scratched on several of the tools in the toolbox, and his last name was on one of them.

Eventually he admitted stealing the jewelry. His story was that on Thursday, while working in the basement of the apartment building on Lorenzo, he had unlatched a basement window and left some tools behind. On Friday morning he parked his truck at the corner and, having previously learned from Tennyson that four people lived in the building, waited until four people came out. (Presumably the fourth

one he saw come out was Rutledge's pupil, Robin Stainer, rather than Rutledge himself.) Around ten A.M. he had gone around to the alley, slipped in through the basement window, taken his lockpicking tools upstairs, and burgled the Vidalkas' apartment.

Hearing what he thought were movements in the apartment across the hall, he had returned to the basement, secreted the loot in the handle of the drill, which he left behind, and slipped out by the alley door. "I don't walk through no alley with no jewelry in my pocket," he informed Auburn.

He staunchly maintained that it had been between ten and ten thirty A.M. on Friday that he had visited Lorenzo Avenue, and that there had been no one in the apartment unit he'd robbed. And that he had never in his life stolen anything before. Auburn sent him to the cells and went home.

On Sunday morning he called Hazel Vidalka to tell her the jewelry had been recovered and would be returned to her in due course. Any gratitude she might have felt seemed to be swamped by other emotions. He was at headquarters twice that day about other matters, but, as expected, it was Monday morning before he got any feedback on the Vidalka murder.

Vidalka, thirty-four, had been employed for years as a constructor of puzzles and an editor of columns and articles on chess, bridge, and other games of skill. He had a long history of alcoholism but no criminal convictions. Hazel, thirty-three, was an elementary schoolteacher with a clean past record. They had been married for seven years, during five of which they'd lived on Lorenzo Avenue. Their only car had been repossessed three months earlier; their credit rating was abominable, their savings apparently nonexistent.

Damon Rutledge, forty-four, was a graduate of MIT. He was on indefinite medical leave from his position as a math professor at the university because of a progressive neurologic disorder. He served as webmaster of two unrelated enterprises on the Internet, a higher mathematics exchange site sponsored by a textbook publisher and a zodiacal dating service conducted under the aegis of a national chain of health food stores. His record was clean.

Randall Tennyson, thirty-one, had been enrolled at the university in a graduate program in anthropology for eons. If there were any skeletons in his closet he had probably dug them up himself somewhere on an archeological expedition. His alibi for the first half of Friday night was fairly secure, but The Lime Tree, the coffeehouse where his group played, closed at two thirty A.M. The group enjoyed the usual aura of suspicion about drug use, but nothing concrete had ever come to light. Routine door-to-door inquiries in the neighborhood had yielded no usable data.

Lowell Bradford was the quintessential fly-by-night contractor. (His brother-in-law was the quintessential shady dealer in gems and precious metals.) The Better Business Bureau had a whole file drawer devoted to Bradford's misdeeds. He wasn't a bonded locksmith, and anything he knew of that trade he had probably picked up during two stretches in Treadwell Reformatory as a teenager. He had had no criminal convictions as an adult.

The autopsy on Vidalka showed pulmonary congestion and edema, and blood tests suggested acute alcoholic intoxication as the probable cause of death. He had a fresh undisplaced fracture of the nasal bones, which could have resulted from an accidental fall. There was moderate cerebral congestion but no evidence of brain injury or hemorrhage.

"So did she or didn't she?" Savage asked. "Kill him, I mean."

With a silent shrug, Auburn laid out four file cards on his desk, one for each of the murder suspects—Rutledge, Tennyson, Bradford, and Hazel Vidalka.

"You did that like an expert, Cy. Ever play bridge?"

"Not that I can remember."

"Take it from me—you're a born dummy."

Auburn had an hour to kill before his appearance in court at Bradford's arraignment. He headed for the top floor to see whether exposure to a little of Kestrel's laconic and mordant discourse might inspire any useful insights. As soon as he got off the elevator he became the unwilling eavesdropper to a tongue-lashing that Kestrel was administering, evidently to Fremantle, in the lab office.

"Do you know what this makes us look like?" squawked Kestrel. "A bunch of idiots! You're supposed to be a forensic scientist—a detective's detective. You're on the scene to gather and examine evidence, not stand around waiting for a guy with a book of blank parking tickets in his pocket to tell you where the loot is."

"Hey, I brought it in," came Fremantle's aggrieved retort. He probably wasn't smiling any more.

"Sure you did. But did it occur to you to check out the hollow handle? Or to check the door of the apartment for signs of forced entry, or bring in the broken window pane—"

"I got good pictures."

"—or the sheets off the bed, or the water off the floor? If it's at the scene it's evidence, and if it isn't nailed down you bag it and you tag it."

Auburn did a silent about-face, pushed the elevator button, and kept pumping it until the door opened. He now knew exactly what Kestrel thought of him. He also had more than an inkling how Keith Vidalka had been done to death. Back at his desk, he phoned a local department store for some technical information and then went to see Lieutenant Savage.

"Captain Morsch was right," he told Savage. "I was missing an essential factor—the rain."

As soon as he had appeared in court to enter a formal accusation of burglary against Lowell Bradford, he applied for and received an arrest warrant on a murder charge. Then with both Dollinger and Krasnoy he headed for the apartment building on Lorenzo Avenue and used every minute of the trip to outline his theory. When Tennyson buzzed them in they went straight to the back porch to bag and tag a specimen.

Damon Rutledge received them with chilling signs of hostility. "No more searching, sir," Auburn reassured him. "We just want a little straight talk. To save some time, let me tell you that we already know about the hose and the water bed."

Rutledge said nothing.

"Yesterday you said you help people find solutions. What kind of solution did you help Hazel Vidalka find?"

The question was met with sullen silence.

"Okay, Mr. Rutledge. It's Doctor, isn't it? Dr. Rutledge, I know you're a mathematician, and you don't like to admit you've backed a loser, but we're talking about first-degree murder here, and I've got an arrest warrant in my pocket. You have too much to lose by playing dumb. Forget about chivalry. It can be fatal."

Seven years earlier, before joining the detective squad, Auburn had applied for training in Crisis Management to get off the street beats. He'd been turned down. A woman psychologist with hair shorter than his and glasses on a chain had clicked chewing gum in his face while sorting out all his complexes and neuroses from cradle to as-we-speak in five hundred words or less. She'd concluded that he was too impatient, too intolerant, and too impulsive to "assume an effective interventional role in scenes of domestic conflict." So instead he was now a detective who got called to scenes of domestic conflict only after the battle was over and there was a citizen down.

When Hazel Vidalka finally came to the door, she looked so haggard they hardly recognized her. The only lamp in the living room was heavily shaded, and she stayed as far away from it as possible. "I'm afraid to look in a mirror," she said. "I've had to wash my hair in cold water the last three days."

Auburn waited till she was sitting down. "Tell us about the water bed, Mrs. Vidalka," he said. "In your own words. Just take your time."

"What about it?"

"All about it." His mouth was dry as he recited the Miranda formula.

"Have you talked to Damon?" she asked.

"We have. But we already knew."

"I was afraid it wouldn't work," she said. She seemed perfectly calm and self-possessed, as if she were telling her class of fourth-

graders about Napoleon's invasion of Russia. "At school we've been doing projects on water for the past three weeks. Everything nowadays is natural resources, conservation, the environment. Never mind what started the Civil War, or what's the capital of Utah. Over the Christmas break I attended a two-day seminar in Philadelphia on teaching water. The hydrologic cycle, dams, siphons, hydraulic pumps, caissons, artesian wells, cartesian divers . . ."

"I saw your lesson plans," said Auburn.

Sudden comprehension flickered in her eyes.

"When I came home Friday night, Keith was out cold on the bed. I couldn't rouse him and I knew it would be hours before he came out of it. Then I happened to notice that my rings were gone. I thought he'd probably pawned them to make a down payment on a car because he'd asked me to do that only last week. I guess I just couldn't stand it any more—what he was doing to himself, what he was doing to me . . .

"It had been raining for two days and the forecast was for a continuous downpour until noon Saturday. Nobody in the building would notice the sound of a little more water running. I got the hose from the back porch and siphoned most of the water from the water bed out the side window. As soon as I could budge the water mattress, I pulled it out from under him so he slipped down inside the wooden shell. Then I pulled it over on top of him and started filling it again. I left one of his arms outside so I could tell when his pulse stopped . . ."

"A water bed the size of yours," said Auburn, "holds a hundred and eighty gallons of water. That's three quarters of a ton of dead weight, in round numbers. A sustained pressure that great is more than enough to suffocate even a big man. And break his nose."

She ignored the interruption, eager to get her story over with. "After his heart stopped beating, I drained enough water out again to pull the mattress off him and get him on top of it, but—well, you obviously know the rest, or you wouldn't be here."

Auburn nodded. "The hose connection leaked when you refilled the water bed with your husband on top of the mattress, and you were afraid the wet carpet would give away what you'd done. So you consulted Damon, and he told you what to do next."

"He said I should open a window so it would look like it was rain that had soaked into the carpet. But the window next to the wet place in the carpet was nailed shut. So Damon let me climb out on the fire escape from his side to break the window. Will he get in trouble?"

"Yes. But the the worst that Damon can be charged with is being accessory after the fact to first-degree murder, and then only if that charge sticks against you."

"You mean it might not?"

"The coroner was ready to sign out your husband's death as due to acute alcoholic intoxication. We have to take you downtown and file a formal accusation on the basis of what you've told us. From there on, it's between your lawyer and the courts to weigh and measure and label your transgressions."

When he heard himself talking like that, Auburn knew he was getting slap happy over the wrap-up of a case. And he felt so dissatisfied with the outcome of this particular case that he made Dollinger and Krasnoy do the rest of the talking.

"Mr. Raleigh? Hi, this is Randy at the place on Lorenzo. Been trying to get hold of you since Thursday. I wanted to let you know the building needs a new water-heater. We've had some other problems too, like a leaking water bed and a broken window, and some water damage to the ceiling of my place. And that's not all. Keith Vidalka's dead, and both the other tenants are in jail, but I sure would like to have some hot water again. Thing of it is, the plumber's in jail too . . .

"What? Randy. You know me, Randy. Randy Tennyson. Like the poet. . . ."

SOLUTION TO THE JANUARY "UNSOLVED":

Ben Smith shot Gina Quinn.

DAY	HUSBAND AND WIFE	STATE	SPECIALTY
Mon.	Cal and Helen Rankin	North Carolina	arsonist
Tue.	Abe and Julia Peters	Louisiana	extortionist
Wed.	Ed and Ida Tillett	Michigan	burglar
Thu.	Ben and Flora Smith	Ohio	dynamiter
Fri.	Dan and Gina Quinn	Kansas	counterfeiter

Second from the Right

Rick Noetzel

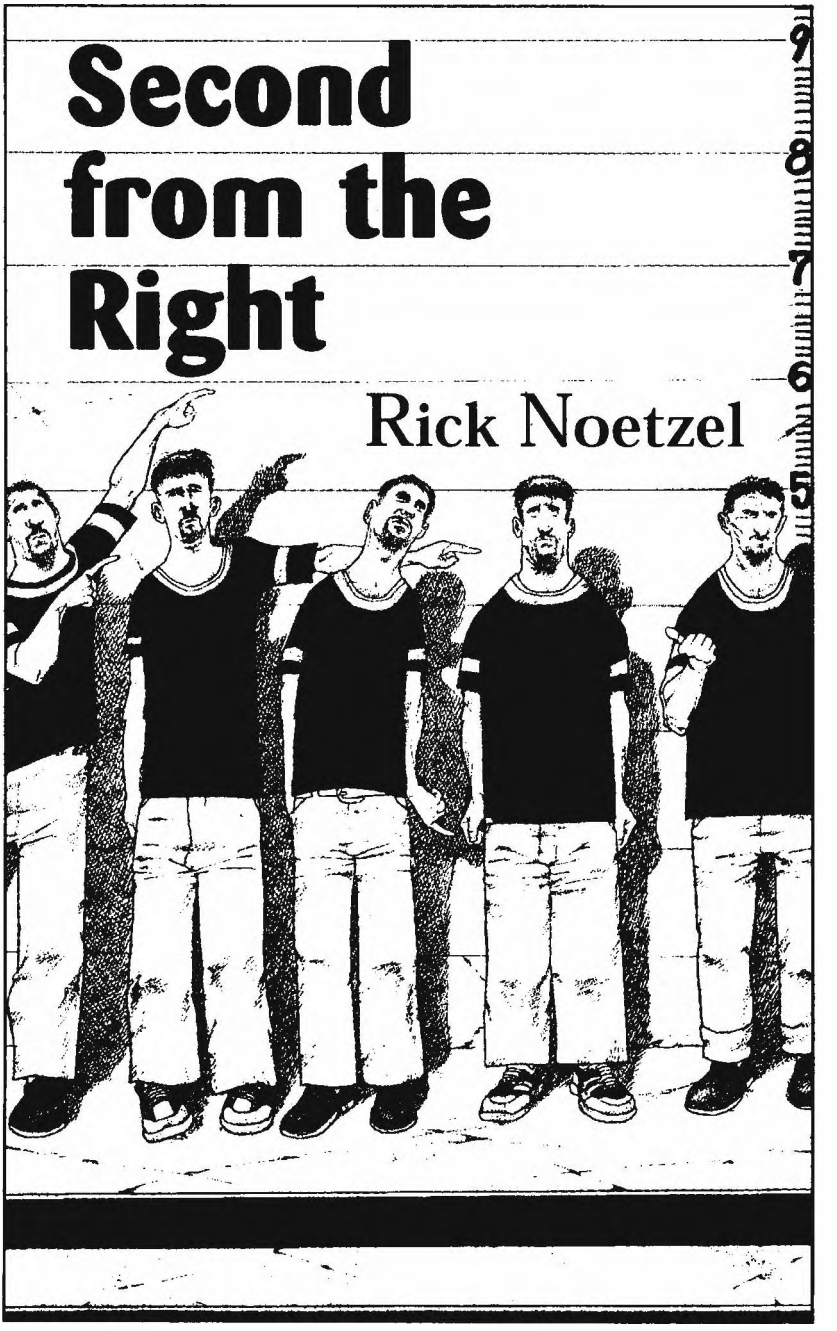


Illustration by M. K. Perker

"I was robbed! In broad daylight!" The elderly woman leaned back in the wooden chair and pulled a Kleenex from her suitcase-sized purse. She dabbed her eyes before she continued. "What's this neighborhood coming to when an old woman like me can't even cash her check!"

I took some notes on my pad, sighing to myself. The neighborhood she was talking about was more like a war zone every year; nobody was safe, much less an eighty-something-year-old woman walking around with a Social Security check in her hands.

"Mrs. McClanahan, did they take anything besides your check?"

"No, Detective Gilchrist, they didn't. Just my gov'ment check, already signed on the back and everything." She dabbed again. "I don't know what I'm going to do now without my money." She clutched a hand to her chest and leaned over the scarred desk. "Do you think there's a chance of getting my money back when you catch him?"

Not one chance in a million, I thought. "I don't want to lie to you, Mrs. McClanahan. Your money has probably already been spent. In a crime like this, he's going to get rid of your check as quickly as possible." She looked distraught, so I tried to offer a little comfort. "When you leave, you'll have a copy of the police report. If you contact the Social Security office and send them the report, they can send you another check. It takes a little while, but you can get your money."

Mrs. McClanahan looked like she needed the money. Her floral-print dress was neatly pressed, but old and beginning to fray at the seams. Her purse and shoes were designer brands and matched each other, but the leather was faded and scratched. She had her hair styled, but age and chemicals had drained the color from her once-blonde hair, leaving it a lifeless, dull beige. She represented one of my worst fears of retirement—having to scrimp and struggle to stretch the dwindling money until I died. I felt sorry for her and hoped my discomfort didn't show.

I was a bit ashamed at my reaction. It wasn't as if I was anywhere near retirement myself. I was only forty-two years old, stocky and muscular, just like my father. A life of weightlifting and police league softball had given me an athletic build, but I had been fighting a softening around the middle as my desk time had increased. I'd been a police officer for sixteen years, working my way through the different departments as I advanced in rank or grew bored. Patrol, Traffic, and Juvie had all been my home for a time. My current assignment was in Robbery, a much welcome change, in my opinion, from my previous two years in Vice. In four more years I could take a voluntary retirement, but I would probably celebrate by transferring into another division instead.

"Mrs. McClanahan, I think I have all the information I need to fill out the reports. Would you like a cup of coffee while I type these up?"

She nodded, so I fetched two cups of coffee from the squad room pot. I sniffed at the jet-black brew while pouring it. It didn't smell *too* old, but I added extra sugar, just in case.

While Mrs. McClanahan waited at my desk, she kept up a constant stream of conversation and I learned much about her cats, grandchildren, and bridge club. None of this required the slightest contribution on my part. Just a fresh ear for the lady to bend, I thought. It can't hurt.

In a little while I finished and got her signature on the required forms. "I'll be in touch," I said, as we walked to the precinct's front desk. My lack of optimism must have shown.

She stopped walking and looked at me. "Will you really try and catch him?"

I tried to look reassuring. "Yes, ma'am. Your description was very good. Most of the robberies in that area are perpetrated by drug addicts. They tend not to be very smart about their crimes, so I might just get lucky this afternoon."

She looked relieved and gave me a quick hug. "Thank you, Detective Gilchrist. I know you'll catch him."

I was a little embarrassed over the hug and caught the snickers from the desk officers. I said goodbye and turned her over to the rookie cop who was driving her home. I watched the two walk out the door; then glaring at the desk sergeant as I passed, I went back to find my partner.

"So, what's he look like?" Detective Theodore Wilkinson asked, sipping his coffee. He looked at the cup in adoration. "Ah, the nectar of the gods. I tell you, after drinking that swill in the squad room . . ." His voice trailed off as he took another sip.

My partner and I were in our car outside Emma's Diner, a local cop hangout that would never make the Michelin Guide. We were headed to the spot where Mrs. McClanahan had been robbed, but first we made our traditional stop for a fresh cup of coffee for Wilkinson.

Wilkinson had been a Robbery detective for ten years and had been assigned to show me the ropes. Everybody, cops and crooks alike, seemed to know "T. W." and I was glad to be teamed up with him. We'd been partners for the last year and got along well in spite of our differences. Wilkinson was a cop who didn't look like a cop. Short and balding, he weighed about one forty soaking wet. People meeting him for the first time saw the cheap suits and garish ties and assumed he was an accountant or insurance agent. Until they saw his eyes, that is. He had quick eyes that noticed everything and never stopped moving.

I started the car and pulled out of the lot. "Young Hispanic male. Late teens, early twenties. Five foot eight, maybe a hundred and forty pounds."

T. W. shook his head. "There are hundreds of men who look like that in this neighborhood."

I smiled. "How many wear a 'WWJD' necklace, T. W.?"

T. W.'s look was incredulous. "You're kidding me, right? We've got a guy, wearing a 'What Would Jesus Do' charm, running around robbing people?" He stared out the window. "That's a new one."

"Mrs. McClanahan says that it was tucked inside his shirt, but it came out when he jumped at her. Also, she scratched him when he grabbed the check. He grabbed it, she tried to pull it back, but got the back of his wrist instead." I grinned a little. "She broke two nails, so she knows she drew blood. Even so, pretty bad idea, fighting these guys."

"Instinct, probably. He grabbed her stuff; she tried to grab it back. She's lucky he didn't hurt her too badly."

Only a bloody nose, I thought, nodding in agreement. Spotting the crime scene, I pulled into a parking space next to a twenty-four-hour check cashing business. We got out of the car and, ignoring the parking meter, walked inside.

The man behind the counter stood up when the door opened and put down a magazine. He groaned as he hoisted his three hundred pounds out of his chair, adjusted a pair of blue jeans that looked like a denim tent, and stepped up to the counter. His unkempt, greasy hair fell over his eyes, and he shoved it back with a swipe of his ham-sized paw. He grimaced when he saw us come in.

"Luther, how are you doing?" T. W. greeted the man cheerfully, ignoring the sour look on his face. "Detective Gilchrist, I don't believe you've ever met the distinguished proprietor of this fine establishment, Luther Dupont."

"Fine establishment" was a bit over the top, even for my partner. A&A Checks wouldn't be considered *fine* by the dregs of society, I thought, as I looked around. Some cheap chairs and a couple of small tables lined the walls. Advertisements for money orders and cashier's checks decorated Luther's counter, along with a stack of credit card applications from a local bank. The cheap wood paneling gave the room a gloomy feel, which the burgundy shag carpeting only accentuated. One of the fluorescent lights was burned out, leaving a shadowy patch along one wall.

The owner waved off T. W.'s greeting. "What do you want?"

T. W. looked offended. "Now, Luther, is that any way to talk to me? After all I've done for you?"

Luther glared at him. "You've done nothing but cause me trouble. You cops spend so much time here half the neighborhood thinks I'm a snitch and the other half thinks I'm a crook."

"Well, I think they're both right," T. W. laughed. I joined the laugh-

ter and, stepping up to the counter, wiped my fingers on the dusty surface.

"We're here about the robbery yesterday," I said.

"Don't know nothin' about it."

"Luther, Luther," T. W. said, shaking his head. "It happened right outside your door. You expect me to believe that some old lady gets mugged right there—" He pointed toward the glass door. "—and you don't see a thing?"

"I'm telling you the truth, T. W. It didn't happen in front of the door, so I didn't see anything. I only got involved when she came running in here, yelling and bleeding." He waved his hands around at the walls. "How am I supposed to see outside?"

The fact that there were no windows in the room contributed to its cheery ambiance. The door offered the only view of the world outside.

"Luther, do you take me for a fool?" T. W. leaned over the counter. "You still have your security cameras outside taking pictures of your storefront and the alley door?" Luther hesitated, which just angered T. W. "C'mon, Luther, I saw the cameras in their little wire cages outside."

Luther nodded slowly.

"Good," T. W. said. "I'll need your tape from yesterday."

Luther opened his mouth as if to protest, but decided differently. He ducked into his back office and returned in a moment with a videocassette. He handed it to T. W. "I want the tape back when you're done with it."

T. W. nodded. "I'll be sure to make a special trip back to this rathole just to see you, Luther."

I interrupted their conversation. "Does a gold chain with a WWJD charm on it sound familiar?"

"WWJD?" Luther asked. "Is that some type of wrestling organization?" He seemed pleased with his wit.

"It stands for What Would Jesus Do," I clarified.

Luther shook his head. "Naw. The only Jesus I've seen around here is Jesus Picato." He pronounced the name as hay-soose, in Spanish fashion. "He's got a little business around the corner on Twelfth and Legion."

"A little business?" T. W. seemed interested.

Luther spotted his interest. "Gonna cost you."

T. W. stared at him for a minute before pulling twenty dollars from his wallet. I watched Luther snap the twenty up and stuff it in his pocket before it could escape. "He's pretty new in town, deals a little on the corner. Place has been empty since Tinsel got picked up last year."

I grinned. James "Tinsel" Towne had been dealing crack and a little heroin on the same corner when he got clumsy. He dropped a pack-

age and an old lady walking back from the bus stop picked it up and brought it to us. When she picked him out of a lineup, Tinsel pled to a possession and distribution charge, landing in jail for a couple of years. That was before I started working this part of town, but T. W. had told me the story.

Jesus Picato, I thought. "T. W., you think we should pay Mr. Picato a call at his office?"

T. W. grinned at me. "Excellent idea." He turned back to Luther. "We'll see you later, Luther." We left the building and headed for the car.

"Thanks for the warning, guys!" he called after us as the door was closing.

I was glad to be back outside in the fresh city air. I breathed deeply, replacing the smell of cheap cigars and desperation with that of auto exhaust and old garbage.

T. W. and I drove down Legion Avenue and pulled over when we neared Twelfth Street. Legion was lined with small stores. On one side a mom-and-pop grocery was sandwiched between a drugstore and a bookstore. On the other side of Legion were two small restaurants, Italian and Chinese. A butcher shop was next to the Chinese place, which brought to mind a couple of cat jokes that I hadn't yet told T. W. Maybe later, I decided, making a mental note.

"Lots of traffic around here," I noted.

T. W. looked around and nodded. "Yeah, urban renewal is getting a toehold in down here. Lots of money coming in, buying the old buildings. Driving away the dealers and junkies is hard, but it's working around here." He strolled toward the corner. "Over the last couple of years, I bet I've busted a half dozen dealers in this area."

"In Robbery? Shouldn't Narcotics be doing that?"

He shrugged. "It seems a few of them have tried to supplement their income by moonlighting in my territory. Two muggings, a purse-snatching, a few B&E's."

That's odd, I thought. Drug dealing was a short-lived profession, but it paid well while it lasted. Why would anyone grab a wallet and run those risks for—what?—a couple hundred dollars at most?

T. W. must have read the question on my face. "They're not the brightest bunch, Tony. Sometimes they just do stupid things." He looked toward the corner. "Take a look."

Two teens were leaning in a doorway near the corner. A third stood near the street, looking around and watching the people. He said something to his partners as we approached.

All three were dressed alike. Black jeans, crimson T-shirts, and expensive Nike tennis shoes. Since the day was brisk, all three wore black and silver Oakland Raiders jackets. Gold chains, flashing bright-

ly in the afternoon sun, hung around their necks. As we drew nearer I studied the three chains. One chain with a small gold coke spoon hanging from a clasp was worn by the teen near the street. Very seventies retro, I thought. One plain chain of thick gold links was worn by the man facing me from the doorway. And one chain I couldn't see until the other teen turned to face me—that one had four small letters dangling from it. WWJD. Bingo.

T. W. had seen it also. "Jesus Picato?"

"Who wants to know?" Coke Spoon asked. He glared at T. W. until T. W. fixed his stare on him. T. W. isn't a big man but, oh, those eyes. Coke Spoon's bravado vanished and he looked around at the traffic, finding a passing Ford Tempo to be highly interesting.

"I'll ask again. Which one of you is Jesus Picato?" T. W. demanded.

Muttering under his breath, WWJD stood up and faced us. "I'm Jesus."

"Jesus, I'm Detective Gilchrist. This is my partner, Detective Wilkinson. We'd like to ask you a few questions." I looked at his partners. "Alone."

Jesus turned to his friends and spoke in rapid-fire Spanish. My street lingo was limited to only a few phrases, all involving food, so I had no idea what he said. His friends, however, thought his comment was quite amusing.

T. W. moves surprisingly quickly when he wants to, and he grabbed Jesus and slammed him into the brick side of the building. He was nose-to-nose with Jesus and unleashed a torrent of Spanish into his face. Jesus paled a little and responded to T. W., then he called something out to his friends. T. W. nodded and let go of the kid's shoulders. He then turned toward the other teens.

The two teens held their hands up in front of their chests and smiled, backing away. After a few steps they turned and walked down the sidewalk, each looking back periodically.

I turned my attention to Jesus. "What do you know about A&A Checks?"

"Over on Tenth? I know that fat ass runnin' the place is so scared of us he built himself a little prison to keep us away." He grinned. "Only, he's in the cell and we're running around out here."

"You and your friends ever think about taking it down?"

He stared at me. "Now, why do you go asking me something like that? I make more in one day than he brings down in a month."

"Is that right, Jesus? You make more doing what?"

"Oh, a little of this, a little of that." He looked from one to the other of us. "You know the drill."

T. W. nodded to him. "Oh yeah, I know the drill." He pointed down the street. "Right now, the drill is that we need you to come to the station with us and answer a few questions."

"You're kidding, right? Am I under arrest or something?" He looked offended at the thought.

"No," I said, "you're not. Cooperate with us and you'll be back here in a couple of hours, dealing rocks to the local lowlifes."

He protested half-heartedly, but started walking toward the car. I walked after him and opened the car door. "Jesus, you feel bad wearing a WWJD necklace?"

His face cracked open in a huge grin. "Why? It's my name, ain't it?"

I spent the next two hours with Jesus, asking a variety of questions. In a nutshell, he denied everything—robbing anyone outside A&A Checks, knowing anyone who robbed anyone outside of A&A Checks, even knowing anyone who committed crimes in general were all out of the question.

While I walked through the basics with Jesus, T. W. was busy. He came and left throughout the interview, working on other tasks—arranging a lineup for Mrs. McClanahan to view, checking with Narcotics about Jesus, and reviewing the security tape.

After two hours, Jesus was starting to get restless and asked for a lawyer. "I don't trust you," he said to me. "You're setting something up on me."

I leaned over the desk and ran my fingers across the years of cigarette burns. "Mr. Picato, you can walk out of here right now." I tried to sound sincere. "I mean it, right now, if you do one thing." I hesitated, making sure that he was interested. "Take off your jacket."

"What? My jacket?" He ran his fingers along the zipper. "Why do you want my jacket?"

I shrugged. "Maybe I'm a Raiders fan."

He stood up and took the jacket off, handing it over the table to me. On his right wrist was a patch of gauze bandage, held on with medical tape looping his wrist. Two thick scabs extended from either side of the bandage.

"What happened there?"

Jesus looked disgusted. "Some crazy old woman, man. Screaming at me, calling me names." He shook his head. "None of my boys were around, so I just pushed her away, told her to get the hell away from me. She clawed me like a cat." He picked at the edge of the bandage. "She's lucky. Anybody else with me and I'd of had to come down a little hard on her, know what I'm sayin'?"

"This was a bag lady? A street person?"

"No, man, that's the thing. She and her friends are always over at the Mary Maggie, playing cards and bingo. I don't know what her problem was."

I nodded. The Mary Maggie was the local name for the Mary Magdalene Social Hall a few blocks from his corner. A couple of nearby

Catholic churches maintained the building and used it for church and neighborhood functions.

"You know her?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I just seen her walking around, that's all. Can't miss her, carrying that big-ass purse around."

Alibi time, I thought. He's finally figured out why he's here and he knows that she'll recognize him. Time to come up with a reason why she recognizes him.

T. W. checked his watch. He caught my eye and nodded.

We both stood up. T. W. opened the door to the hall while I walked around to Jesus's side of the table. "Mr. Picato, we're going to need you to stand in a lineup for us. If what you're telling us is true, then you're out of here in five minutes."

"I thought I could leave if I showed you my jacket."

"Please," I insisted, waving my hand toward the door.

"I want a lawyer." He stayed seated.

I sighed. "No problem. Asking for a lawyer prevents us from questioning you any further, but it doesn't prevent us from placing you in the lineup. You are not under arrest, but Detective Wilkinson and I won't ask you any further questions." The interview was being recorded, after all, so I wanted to sound good for the DA's office.

Jesus stood up and went with T. W. As T. W. stepped out of the room, I leaned over to his ear. "The video?"

"I watched it." He grimaced. "Nothing. The angle was wrong or maybe she was farther from the door than she thought. We need this ID from her." I patted him on the arm and he headed down the hall.

I stepped into the squad room and greeted Mrs. McClanahan. She had been waiting at T. W.'s desk for about ten minutes, chatting with the young uniformed officer who had brought her in. I'm sure the officer now knew far more about brewing a proper mint tea than he would ever need to. I interrupted the conversation and dismissed the grateful man. When he had gone, I explained to Mrs. McClanahan what was happening and what we were asking her to do.

"I know all that, Detective." She winked at me. "I used to watch 'Matlock.' "

The halls were busy as I led her down to the lineup room. The witness side of the room was small, meant to hold only a few people. There were no chairs, tables, or any type of amenities in the bare, cell-like room. The only color in the room came from the thick red drapes covering one wall. Mrs. McClanahan and I stood in front of the drapes, and when she indicated that she was ready, I pulled the cord and opened the curtains.

She could see the five men through the one-way mirror. All were Hispanic, ranging in age from eighteen to twenty-four. They were dressed casually in blue jeans and T-shirts. None was displaying any

necklaces. T. W. did his best to remove the superficial differences among the men. We wanted Mrs. McClanahan to identify the face, not the clothing.

Mrs. McClanahan gave it her best shot. She studied the faces from all angles, looking at each one intently as they stepped forward and spoke the same line. Each man repeated, "Give it up!" and returned to his spot, looking bored.

After all five were finished she nodded to me. "Second from the right. That's him."

Jesus Picato was the second man from the right. "Are you sure, Mrs. McClanahan?"

"Positive. After the fright he gave me, I'd know that face anywhere." She frowned at the glass. Each man had a gauze bandage on his wrist, matching the one that Jesus wore. "Just check his arms. You'll find my scratches."

I knocked twice on the glass, my signal to T. W. that we were successful. As I pulled the drapes closed, I saw him gathering the men and escorting them toward the door. Jesus would be taken back to the interrogation room where, in a few minutes, he would be formally charged with the assault and robbery. After being charged, he would be taken to a holding cell until his attorney arrived. Based on the physical evidence and the eyewitness identification, the attorney's first action would be to prepare a plea bargain and get Jesus as little jail time as possible. This case was a slam dunk for T. W. and me. As I watched the men file out of the room, I was satisfied that Mr. Jesus Picato would be leaving our lovely jurisdiction for a number of years.

While T. W. was walking Jesus through the next steps of the process, I was filling out more paperwork on the results of the lineup and the positive identification by the victim. If the world ever ran out of trees, criminals would run rampant because policemen can't fight crime unless they can record it in triplicate.

My mind wandered and I managed to screw up one of the interview forms by writing "Jesus Picato" in the blank for Arresting Officer. Oops, I thought, that'll mess up the clerks. If a mistake like that gets into the system, it's easier to hire Jesus and put him on the payroll than it is to correct the computer.

I balled up the paper and tossed it toward T. W.'s trash can across the aisle. The paper hit the side of the desk and fell to the floor, three feet from the can. "Nice shot, Shaq," I muttered to myself and got up to pick up my trash. As I retossed the ball of paper into it, a sliver of black plastic caught my eye at the bottom. I pushed some of the papers aside and uncovered an unmarked, black-cased videotape.

"Hmmm," I said, picking up the videocassette. It looked like the one from the check casher, but why would T. W. toss it away? Looking

around, I didn't see him, so I took the tape into one of the interview rooms and popped it into the VCR.

A split screen appeared on the TV. Half of the black and white image showed the front of A&A Checks, filmed from the side. The other half showed the side alley, looking down the narrow passage toward the street. A metal door in the side of the building was closed and nobody was visible in either half. A date/time stamp was in the lower corner, reading 6:03 A.M. of the previous day. Luther must put a tape in each morning, I thought.

I fast forwarded the tape, watching people walk down the sidewalk in high-speed motion. I watched the jerky figures bounce across the screen, a pantomime of motion, watching life through a series of blinks.

As I approached three P.M. on the timer, I slowed the tape and watched for Mrs. McClanahan. At 3:07, I saw her step into the alley and look down the street in each direction. What's she doing in the alley? I wondered. A car passed by and she watched it move down the street. She waited a moment, then peered out again. This time she opened her purse and slung it against the wall, spilling the contents all over the ground. A wallet and some lipsticks fell to the ground, skidded farther into the alley. A tortoise-shell hairbrush flew out of the purse and bounced off the wall, striking the elderly woman in the nose. She staggered back and blood began to trickle down her face. Moving quickly, she tossed the purse down and ran her fingers through her hair, leaving strands hanging over her eyes. She opened her mouth and gave a silent shriek, moving out of the alley and onto the sidewalk. She ran inside the check casher's, disappearing from view.

"Damn," I said to myself, stopping the tape.

"Damn, indeed," I heard T. W. say behind me.

I turned around. "She made it up. She made the whole thing up."

T. W. nodded. "It would appear that way."

"Jesus Picato's story about being scratched by some crazy old woman? He was telling the truth?"

"Yep."

"T. W., we've got to get in touch with the DA and his lawyer. He's been set up and we know about it."

T. W. cocked his head, as if considering what I said. "No, I'd rather let things stand as they are," he said after a moment.

I stared at him. "How?"

"A few years ago I noticed that someone starts causing trouble in the neighborhood and all of a sudden an old lady gets mugged by that person. Usually they're like Jesus, a drug dealer, too small for Narcotics to care much about, but bad for the locals. One was a wife beater; another was a violent drunk." He walked over and ejected the tape.

"I realized that this particular bridge club had an eighty-percent mugging rate, high by any standard, I started asking questions."

"Mary Maggie Social Club."

"Feisty broads, let me tell you. Once I figured out what they were doing, I started helping. Everything's legal, except for one little detail. I ran the lineups and put the guys in order as they walked into the room."

"Second from the right."

"Every time. Victims, witnesses—they all know about it." He snapped the videocassette in half. "So, what are you going to do?"

I looked at his eyes. He stared back at me without looking away, without a sign of remorse or shame. I shrugged.

"Cup of coffee?"

He grinned. "Emma's Diner, here we come."

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Adventure of the Proper Comma

August Derleth

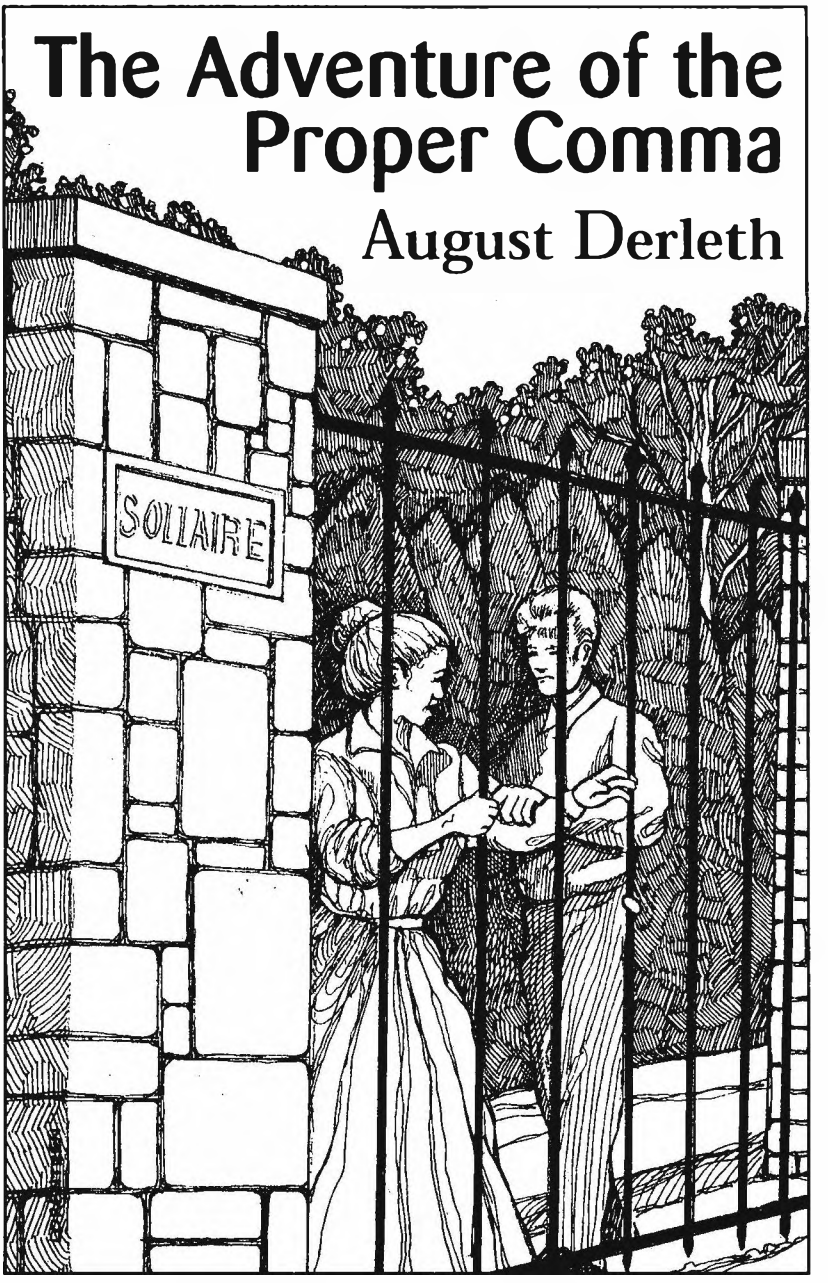


Illustration by Delynne Lorentzen

When I look over my notes on the problems which commanded the attention of my astute friend, Solar Pons, during 1922, I find myself faced with some difficulty in the selection of a typical adventure. For that year included, among others, the singular case of Hrenville, the paralytic mendicant, and his remarkable macaw; the perplexing riddle of Lily MacLain and her extraordinary clairaudience; the complex puzzle of the five Royal Coachmen; and the horrible affair of the Tottenham Werewolf. But the story which comes to the fore is none of these; it is rather that lesser adventure which I have filed in my notes as that of the Lady in Grey, though Pons is adamant in maintaining that it is more correctly referred to as *The Adventure of the Proper Comma.*

It came to Pons' attention from an uncommon source; perhaps no other adventure ever reached him by way of the little group of urchins he often asked to assist him, and whom he called his Praed Street Irregulars—bright, alert lads, always willing to lend what unobtrusive assistance they could for an honest sovereign. As boys, they were able to go unnoticed many places where Pons would have drawn attention, and they were thus on occasion of invaluable help to him.

Early one evening in March, David Benjamin, a shock-haired youth, swarthy in the darkness of his skin and the acknowledged leader of the Praed Street Irregulars, came apologetically up the stairs and knocked almost timidly on the door.

"Ah, that is one of the boys," said Pons, raising his head. "Fearful of rousing Mrs. Johnson, I daresay. Open to him, Parker."

I opened the door and revealed David in the act of snatching his cap from his head.

"Come in, David, come in," said Pons with hearty invitation. "What is troubling you, lad?"

"Mr. Pons, sir," said the boy, walking into the room. "We thought as 'ow you ought ter see this."

He handed Pons a stone so small as to be almost a pebble. Pons seized on it with interest and held it under the lamp on the table. I bent forward, ranging myself beside him where he leaned over the stone in his palm. Scratched crudely on the stone, apparently with a pin or similar tool, were two words:

HELP, PLEASE

Pons viewed David with narrowed eyes. "Where did you get this, David?"

"We went down Walworth way today, sir. Bert, 'e's got 'n aunt near the *Elephant and Castle,* an' we went down ter visit 'er."

He began to talk with more animation, now that it was plain that he had not come in vain, for Pons' interest was manifest. Bert's cousin, having shown his visitors all about the premises of his parents, took them on a tour of the neighborhood. They had ended up at a strange, walled place some distance away from the house at which they had been visiting, but in one or two places there were wrought-iron gates breaking the continuity of the stone walls. They had clustered about one of these gates and were peering into the grounds, where men and women in grey uniforms were walking about within the enclosure, all apparently accompanied by guards or companions to watch over them, when suddenly a woman in a grey uniform had run toward the gate, closely pursued by a guard, who reached her just as she got to the gate, which was securely locked and barred. She had caught David's eye—he was the oldest of the four boys—and, as she clung to the bars of the gate, the stone had slipped from her fingers to the ground at David's feet. Her right hand bore a crooked scar across the back near the wrist. The guard had pulled her roughly away, and returned to the gate to chase them away. David had retrieved the stone. As soon as he had seen what was written upon it, he had consulted with his companions, who were unanimously of the opinion that it should be brought to 7B, Praed Street, and delivered to Solar Pons without delay.

"So's soon as I got back home, I came round with it," finished David.

"And quite right, too, David. Here." He fished a sovereign out of his pocket and gave it to David, who smiled gratefully. "Now I'll just keep this stone. I may need you again, and I'll send word to you if I do. We shall just look into this."

David thanked him and took his departure, clattering down the stairs in marked contrast to the stealth of his entry.

"That was surely a wasted sovereign," I said.

"I doubt that any contribution toward the development of the faculty of observation in man is ever truly wasted, Parker," said Pons thoughtfully, contemplating the stone. "Why do you say so?"

I could not help smiling. "Because I recognized the place from the boy's description. It is the private sanitarium of Dr. Sloane Sollaire. For mental patients, of course. That stone is only a pathetic but typical gesture to be expected from people who are sufficiently deranged to be incarcerated."

"Indeed," murmured Pons, still turning the stone in his fingers. "I wonder that you can be so dogmatic, Parker."

"Medicine is my field, Pons," I replied, not without some satisfaction.

"Ah, I would be the last to dispute it. But I fancy there are nooks and crannies of the torso as well as of the mind about which even our best medical men are not yet comprehensively informed."

"True," I conceded.

"Who knows the vagaries of the human mind? Indeed, I myself am the last to claim such knowledge. I find it constantly refreshing to probe and peer into the depths. At the moment I am intrigued by this message. I could not help reflecting, as I listened to David's account, how slyly it was done, how cleverly."

"Oh, some of those poor people are very cunning."

"Paper is obviously denied them. But pins and a stone! There is tenacity there, Parker."

"They are tenacious, too."

"I daresay they are occasionally everything normal, sane people are, not so?"

"There are times, yes, when . . ."

"Even grammatical," said Pons, putting the stone before me.

There was an undeniable comma properly placed between the two words scratched so laboriously upon the surface of the stone.

"I submit, Parker, that grammatical accuracy is not a common attribute of deranged individuals, particularly of those who are making so frantic an appeal for help as this."

"My dear fellow," I protested, "there is no hard and fast line between the sane and the insane."

"How true!" He gazed at me quizzically, his dark eyes intent and distant. "We have been in the doldrums recently, and I fancy this is as good a time as any to improve my knowledge of the insane in our institutions. Tomorrow I will have you incarcerate me in Dr. Sollaire's sanitarium."

"What?" I cried out. "Pons, you aren't serious!"

"I was never more so."

"But it is such a mad scheme!"

"Ah, I shall be mad as a hatter, if necessary. I have always had a fondness for Alice's table companions."

"Pons, I don't like Dr. Sollaire."

"You are trying to prejudice me, Parker," Pons bantered.

"His reputation . . ."

"Pray permit me to discover it for myself."

"Oh, come," I cried impatiently, "Sollaire is not a man to take lightly. I have reason to believe him dangerous, and his establishment no less so."

"There is always a fascination about danger," countered Pons. "And things have been uncommonly dull of late."

I shrugged and gave up for the evening, determined to talk him out of his mad plan in the morning.

But the following day found Pons up with the sun and about one of his most detestable habits—revolver-practice in the front room which served as our sitting-room and study. The sharp crack of his weapon woke me, and when I came from my bedroom I found not the familiar companion of most of my days but an unrecognizable fellow in the guise of a middle-class merchant of some means and a woeful inability to select his clothing. Indeed, had it not been for Pons' addiction to revolver-practice, I should have had grave doubts that the gentleman into whom he had transformed himself was indeed the companion of my quarters, for he had made up his face so skillfully, and without the addition of any hirsute adornment, that he did certainly resemble far more the slightly deranged individual he had set out to become than Solar Pons. Tossing his revolver to one side, he collapsed his chest, hunched his shoulders, losing height, and clasped his hands nervously before him, thus still further retreating into his role.

"Mr. Samuel Porter, late of Canada, at your service, Parker," he said in a rasping voice, totally unlike his own.

"You are determined to go through with it, then?" I asked, sitting down to breakfast.

"I am."

"On nothing more than a poor lunatic's pebble?"

"On less—so little a thing as a properly placed comma."

He sat down opposite me. "I shall take the role of a retired businessman who has gone over the edge worrying about his Canadian investments, which have recently taken a little drop, as you will see by the financial columns of the *Times.* I have been visiting relatives in London—I leave you to produce them, if necessary—and you are committing me for observation, but not molestation. I must have a relatively free hand within such boundaries as are allowed me."

"Pons, I hope I can dissuade you from this wild scheme," I protested.

"Say no more, Parker. I shall expect to be committed this morning. Pray make the necessary arrangements, and plan to call on me tomorrow afternoon."

Accordingly, since Pons was adamant, and after a lengthy telephone conversation with Dr. Sollaire, I delivered Pons in midmorning to the private sanitarium in the vicinity of the *Elephant and Castle,* and left him with profound misgivings in the care of a man who, for all his impressive reputation, was little more than a charlatan in medicine.

After a restless night, impatient at the slow passage of time, I presented myself at Sollaire's sanitarium for a consultation with my patient. I was shown into a visiting room, and presently Pons, whom I had described as a patient who was excitable and much given to talking to himself, was ushered into my presence. He stood glowering at me just past the threshold until the attendant left us; then he came forward hesitantly, acting his part perfectly.

"It is Dr. Parker?" he asked.

"Come, sit down, Mr. Porter," I replied. "Are you enjoying your rest here?"

Pons came forward, saying in a loud voice, "They treat me very well. But it is expensive, is it not? And who is to pay for it?" To this he added in a whisper, "What a model of fusty stuffiness you are, Parker!"

"Please speak freely," I said.

He gave a barely perceptible shake of his head, by which I understood that we might be under optical or auditory observation, but he seated himself near me and began to talk a farrago of nonsense, dropping his voice from time to time ostensibly to mutter to himself but in reality to convey to me some vital information. The lady with the scarred hand, he had discovered, was the second wife of Dr. Gerald Buxton, a well known Park Row practitioner. She did not believe herself insane, but did not actually know her condition, which was not typical of a deranged condition. Pons had caught her attention and would manage to talk to her again. He intended that he should remain here for another day, until the hour at which the patients were permitted to walk about the grounds, which was between three and four o'clock in the afternoon.

Having imparted this information, he proceeded to give me a set of instructions, which, stripped of the nonsense he talked in character, came to this:

"Present yourself here at three-fifteen tomorrow afternoon to remove me either temporarily or permanently. You will employ a cab, preferably with Alfie More driving it. Alfie is to be told to follow my orders no matter what occurs. You may be knocked down and left behind, as much a victim as Mrs. Buxton's attendant. Reach David Benjamin and persuade him to have the Irregulars at the carriage entrance to create a diversion as soon as the gate is opened for us, and generally to impede pursuit."

Since all this was put to me sotto voce, I could not protest. "But, my dear Mr. Porter," I said in some alarm, "if the conditions for you here are not satisfactory, what do you intend I should do for you?"

"I'm going back to Canada," he announced in a loud voice, and added, "I intend to abduct Mrs. Buxton."

I gasped. "Think it over for another day, at least," I implored.

"I have made up my mind," replied Pons, and rose.

I presented my compliments to Dr. Sollaire, a tall, ascetic man clad in a black frock coat, wearing a Van Dyke beard on his weak chin and pince-nez over his grey eyes, and made a report to him.

"Your patient—" he glanced at a file on his desk "—ah, Mr. Porter—makes no complaint, Dr. Parker?"

"None, sir," I answered. "But he is restless. I have persuaded him to take an additional day. He now believes that he wishes to go back to Canada, and I may sanction the journey."

"There is no history of violence?"

"None, Doctor. The man is utterly wrapped up in himself and his troubles. He may be given every liberty, except, of course, his freedom. I will expect to call for him, unless he changes his mind, tomorrow afternoon."

I rose. Dr. Sollaire came to his feet also, leaning forward with his grey eyes fixed on me.

"Tell me, Dr. Parker—we have your office address, but not your home address—are you not the same medical man who makes his home with Mr. Solar Pons?"

I saw no reason to deny a fact which could have been discovered so readily.

"An extraordinary man," murmured Dr. Sollaire.

"There are those who think so," I agreed.

He raised his eyebrows. "Do I detect a note of hesitation?"

"I could not say. But Pons' methods are certainly not those of a physician, sir," I said with heat I did not find it necessary to manufacture.

He smiled. "Very well, Dr. Parker. We shall wait upon your wishes in the best interests of the patient."

I went about following Pons' instructions with profound doubt of his wisdom. While it was manifest that he intended to exclude me as a suspect in his plot—so much was in his plot—so much was in his promise that I might be knocked down and left behind—I was nevertheless gravely uneasy over the part he required me to play in a scheme which was fundamentally illegal.

Promptly at the designated hour, I presented myself at Dr. Sollaire's sanitarium, paid my respects to its director with a request that a statement be sent to me, and then sat to await Pons' coming. He came presently, arguing volubly with his attendant, and I immediately asked him whether he had determined to leave and attempt a trip to Canada. That he had was evident, for the attendant carried the small bag he had taken with him to his voluntary incarceration. Remaining in character, he answered that he had, and

went on to talk such nonsense that the attendant shrugged and grinned.

The three of us made our way from the grim building into the walled yard, where other patients now walked about together with attendants. Alfie More and his cab waited at the carriage entrance, toward which the attendant spurted ahead in order to open the gate and stand on guard against any attempt at escape of any other patient.

Just as we were about to pass from the grounds, Pons stopped doggedly before the opened gate.

"I won't go," he cried. "They've kept my razor."

"Come, come," I said soothingly. "I'll get you another."

"I want my own. It was my father's. I hid it in the table drawer in that room."

The attendant came forward. "He's mistaken, Doctor. He didn't bring any razor. He hasn't touched his face, and we didn't shave him. Your orders."

"Yes, yes, I know," I answered nervously.

During this altercation, a young and not unattractive woman had moved in our direction, accompanied by her attendant, a burly fellow who promised to offer Pons more difficulty than he had bargained for. Just a few steps away stood Alfie More's cab, the door swung wide, waiting on our entrance; no one was in sight save an elderly woman walking down the far side of the street, which was a narrow side street debouching upon the thoroughfare beyond.

"Come now, Mr. Porter," I said persuasively. "We're off to Canada."

At this moment, the lady in grey came up rapidly, crying, "Oh, what are they doing to that poor man?" with her attendant at her heels, calling, " 'Ere, now, Missus. 'Ere, come away from that gate."

Suddenly Pons leaped from his role. With one sweep of his arm, he knocked me against his own attendant with such force that both of us went sprawling. With a sharp jab of his fist, he floored the lady's attendant. Almost in the same movement, he took her by the hand and hustled her into the cab even as both attendants were coming to their feet. As if by magic, the Praed Street Irregulars materialised from nowhere, crowding, with shouts and cries, between the cab and the attendants, tripping, pummelling, and generally harrying them, as well as myself, for I had come to my feet and run, shouting, after the fast-vanishing cab. Behind us an alarm bell had begun to ring, but the cab was already out of sight, and with its passage from the narrow side street, the Irregulars, too, melted away like mist.

I turned to face Dr. Sollaire, who stood controlling himself as best he could.

"The address of his relatives, quickly, Doctor," he said. "We must lose no time. That woman is dangerous—dangerous."

I gave him the address of the mythical Samuel Porter's "nephew," amid my protestations and apologies, to which Sollaire paid not the slightest attention. He hastened off with the address, leaving me to stand in the street as if I had ceased to exist.

It was two hours before I returned to my Praed Street lodgings. I had not thought it prudent to go anywhere but to my office, having paused en route only long enough to telephone a warning to "Porter's nephew." I found Pons alone in the living-room, his lean figure bent over a reference volume I could not at once identify. He did not look up at my entrance, but manifestly recognized my step.

"Ah, Parker, I fear I was too rough with you this afternoon. My apologies."

"It's nothing," I answered. "But what the devil are you up to? The police have been at my office, putting me through it. Porter, of course, has disappeared."

"Vanished without trace," he agreed. "That is what the papers will say."

"What have you done with Mrs. Buxton?"

"I have given her a sedative and allowed her to sleep. She is in your room."

"My room!"

"Pray do not alarm yourself, Parker. You will double with me tonight."

"Have you notified her husband?"

"I fancy he will pay us a call before too long a time has elapsed." He gave me a long, searching glance. "What do you know of Dr. Gerald Buxton, Parker?"

"Oh, Park Row connections. Dowagers' doctor. Exorbitant charges. A high liver who throws away his money at the races and elsewhere."

"He himself had his wife confined."

"Of course. Pons, I warned you that you were making a mistake."

"Ah, but the lady made none. Mrs. Buxton is his second wife. She was the former Angeline Magoun. Does that convey anything to you?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Daughter of the late soap magnate, Andrew Magoun. An only child, too."

"An only heir," added Pons dryly. "Dr. Buxton's first wife died in a sanitarium in Bristol. I submit that it is more than a coincidence that two of his wives should go mad. I submit, moreover, that it is even more of a coincidence that both the ladies should be heiresses—in a

minor way, of course, but yet, heiresses—and well insured, leaving Dr. Gerald Buxton beneficiary."

I stared at him open-mouthed for a minute before I found my voice. "Pons, Buxton may be what medical men tend to call a 'hand-holder,' but he has no need to be what you are suggesting he is."

"And, finally, I respectfully draw your attention to recently published gossip that Dr. Buxton has been seen escorting yet a third young lady, likewise an heiress, to Covent Garden and certain imported American plays. Dear me, but he is an enterprising man!"

"He has a devoted following."

"Indeed! As Despréaux says, *Un sot trouve toujours un plus sot qui l'admire.* Above all else, pray remember that Dr. Buxton must not know of his wife's presence in our quarters. I daresay the man is no fool; he will not spend much time looking for Mr. Samuel Porter when once he learns of your connection with me."

"And his wife—what had she to say?"

"Buxton had her committed three months ago. She has lost weight; her dresses no longer fit her. She believes she is being slowly and systematically poisoned. Buxton sends in her own medicines; Dr. Sollaire and his staff discreetly look the other way. He is not a pleasant man, your Dr. Sollaire, but alas! one who has managed to keep himself out of the hands of the law for the time being. If she is to be believed, her husband has no such elite practise as to justify his lavish expenditures; he has had himself declared her guardian, and forced her to sign a power of attorney to him. She and her fortune are thus at his mercy."

At this moment a cab which had been coming down the street at a swift pace drew up at our door, and within moments the outer door of our lodgings was wrenched open with some violence, followed by the pounding ascent of the stairs.

"A big man, in a hurry," said Pons tranquilly. "Pray contain yourself, Parker. He would appear given to violence of word and deed."

The door of our quarters was opened without ceremony, and our visitor thrust himself into the room where we stood. He was certainly a big man, large of frame, porcine, with a florid, full face, sensuous lips surmounted by a bushy moustache, and protruding eyes, which glared at us in fury.

"Dr. Buxton, I presume," said Pons, smiling.

"Ah, you know me. That is not a coincidence," said Buxton from between tight lips. His lower jaw thrust out, and his fingers trembled on the heavy ebony cane he carried.

"I make it my business to know a good many people, Dr. Buxton." Pons nodded in my direction. "My companion, Dr. Lyndon Parker."

Buxton gave me a contemptuous glance. "Your lackey, sir. I am not deceived. Where is my wife?"

"Do you have reference to the wife already disposed of or the one whose case is under disposition?"

Buxton grew almost purple with rage. He raised his cane and shook it at Pons, but in a moment leaned forward, one hand flat on the table between him and Pons, and said in a choked voice, "I know you, Mr. Solar Pons. You meddling busybody! I warn you—don't get in my way, or I'll break you—like this."

He dropped his cane to the table as he spoke, snatched up a broom which our long-suffering landlady had left behind, and broke it with one angry motion. In answer, Pons reached down, took up our visitor's heavy cane, snapped it in mid-air, and handed the pieces to Buxton.

"Pray do not forget your stick, Doctor."

For a moment the two men faced each other in silence. Then Buxton turned with an inarticulate growl of rage and made his way out of our lodgings as stormily as he had come in, flinging the pieces of his ebony cane to the floor.

"A dangerous man," I said, after the outer door had slammed. "And an angry man."

"Say rather a badly frightened man," retorted Pons.

He went around, picked up the pieces of Buxton's cane, and threw them into the fireplace. Then he returned to the table, taking something from his pocket.

"Mrs. Buxton had presence of mind enough to bring along two of the capsules she has been taking at her husband's direction. An analysis of their contents might prove interesting and informative."

"Pons, he would hardly dare poison her."

"Would he not, indeed? Dr. Sollaire sees only what is convenient for him to see. She has not been mistreated; every attendant can and would testify to that. Dr. Sollaire can produce a case history to show her steady decline and physical deterioration. If Buxton raised no question, no one else would be likely to; no near family relatives would survive her. You are too willing to suspend the faculty of belief, Parker. This man is wilful, devious, dark; he brooks no interference. He may well return here with a warrant within twelve hours; by that time Mrs. Buxton will be in the care of Sir Francis Jeffers, to whom I explained the circumstances over the telephone. I daresay Buxton will think twice before challenging the opinion of so distinguished an alienist."

"Pons, he will find a way to get her back."

"I think not. She will see her solicitor after Sir Francis has seen

her. Once she has gone that far, Buxton is finished. It remains to be seen to what lengths he may go before then. I have a surprise or two in store for him yet." He rubbed his hands together with evident relish. "Now then, Parker, let us get on with an analysis of Dr. Buxton's medication."

When I returned from Thorndyke & Polton with an analysis of the capsules Mrs. Buxton had carried with her, I found Sir Francis Jeffers listening to Pons' story. Sir Francis, an austere, bemonocled man past middle age, nodded gravely to me, his narrowed eyes flashing only briefly in my direction.

"Dr. Parker has had Mrs. Buxton's medication analysed," explained Pons. "Come, Parker, tell us what you found. I observe my guess was not wide of the mark."

"Sulphonal. Each capsule contained 0.64 gram."

Sir Francis gazed at me speculatively. "Ah, the design is to prolong life for some months. What was the prescription?"

"I think we can ascertain that by asking the lady," said Pons. "If I am not mistaken, I hear her stirring."

He rose as we spoke, excused himself, and vanished in the direction of my chamber, from which he returned in a few moments escorting a raven-haired woman of thirty or thereabouts, who clung to his arm almost tenaciously.

"Mrs. Buxton, may I present Sir Francis Jeffers and Dr. Lyndon Parker?"

She nodded without speaking, her eyes looking warily from one to the other of us. Her hands were trembling, her thin-lipped mouth was stubborn, her wan face clearly betrayed ill health.

"Mrs. Buxton, how long were you with Dr. Sollaire?" asked Sir Francis gently.

"Six weeks, I think."

"And the capsules your husband prescribed for you? How often have you taken them?"

"Daily—until I began to think there was something wrong."

"Will you tell us how you came to be where Mr. Pons found you?"

"My husband put me there."

"Against your will?"

She smiled tiredly. "No. But he kept me there against my will. He had always been very kind to me, very considerate. I had no reason to distrust him. He told me I was not well, and I did feel unwell after a while. He said there was nothing physically wrong, but that my mental health might be affected. He suggested a short stay at the sanitarium. I did what he asked. But I did not feel that I was

so unstable as to justify his keeping me there; yet every time I asked him to move me, he put me off, and at last I understood that he did not mean to take me away from there at all. I was closely guarded most of the time. My letters were not delivered; I could not telephone or wire, nothing. I tried everything. Once I threw a letter over the wall, but they recovered it, and after that I was denied paper and pen. Then, that little stone—oh! I am so grateful to that boy, whoever he is, and to you, Mr. Pons."

"Give me your hands, Mrs. Buxton," commanded Sir Francis.

Unhesitatingly she surrendered her hands. He held them for a few moments in his, gently touching her palms, then clasped them together and patted them reassuringly.

"You are nervous, tired, ill, Mrs. Buxton. I am sure it is not serious—now that we can dispense with your husband's capsules. Will you put yourself in my care?"

"Certainly," she answered at once. "But I must see my solicitor to cancel the power of attorney I gave my husband."

"And who is he?"

"Leonard Runciman. He will be at his home at this hour, I am confident."

"Very good. My car is downstairs. May I send you to Mr. Runciman with my driver? I will join you there in a little while."

"If you will, please."

"I have telephoned him," said Pons.

"Thank you."

Sir Francis saw her solicitously from our quarters. Pons shielded her from weather by shrouding her in his Inverness, and stood at the window looking down to see that she was safely dispatched.

"One never knows the extent of a brute like Buxton's persistence," he murmured. "Ah, there she goes. Sir Francis is coming back."

He turned from the window to face the door in the familiar pose with his hands clasped behind him, and his feral features almost hauty in their strong aquilinity. He spoke as soon as Sir Francis crossed the threshold.

"What do you make of her, Sir Francis?"

"I cannot be certain, but I think she is as sane as you or I. She has been through an ordeal, she is extremely nervous, she is unsure of herself. But she has a hard inner core of resistance; she will come out of it all right. You did her a singular service, Mr. Pons."

"Her condition is consistent with the symptoms of sulphonal poisoning?"

"Certainly. Sulphonal probably accounts for it. She will need

care. What a fiendish plan! I can hardly conceive of her husband's doing it."

"Not only once—but twice. His previous wife, too, died in an institution."

"Good God! What manner of man can he be?"

Pons' alert ears caught the sound of wheels outside. He smiled grimly.

"If I am not in error, you may find out," he answered.

Once more the outer door was flung open with a crash; once again came that insistently demanding pounding up the stairs; once again the door of our quarters was opened without the formality of a knock, and Dr. Gerald Buxton stood there—somewhat disheveled, carrying a new stick, his porcine features flushed with anger still.

"Mr. Pons, I've come for my wife. I should warn you—your quarters are surrounded."

Pons stepped tranquilly to the windows facing Praed Street and gazed down. "Ah, you have brought your bully boys," he murmured. "I had thought you might be so unwise as to go to the police."

"Sir, my wife!" repeated Buxton.

"You are too late, Dr. Buxton," answered Pons. "She is in the care of Sir Francis Jeffers, who is, I fancy, a better authority on sanity than you, sir."

"You prying scoundrel!" shouted Buxton in a rage, half raising his cane in a threatening gesture.

"Ah, yes, I think to pry farther still, my dear fellow. An application to the Home Office for an exhumation of the body of your first wife might be in order."

Buxton smiled sardonically. "You must think me a fool, you meddling detective." His voice dripped contempt.

"On the contrary, I have a high regard for your abilities, if not your methods, Dr. Buxton," replied Pons. "You were doubtless clever enough to avoid the use of any poison which might be detected so late. But there is little need to prolong this painful scene. The capsules you were giving your wife were analysed this evening, and the sulphonal in them, at least, is still evident. Your wife has cancelled your power of attorney, and will begin an action against you tomorrow. Your little plans, Dr. Buxton, will not materialize this time in quite the patterns you designed. The capsules, together with your wife's story and my deposition, will be in the hands of Scotland Yard before midnight. Pray allow me to bid you good evening."

Buxton stood briefly as one transfixed. Not a flicker of emotion crossed his face, and one arm was still upraised in a gesture of

threatening defiance. He might have been statuary for the moment after Pons had finished speaking. If he saw his house of cards collapse, if he visualized what the newspapers would do to him, if he saw his private world destroyed, he gave no sign. Then his face whitened, a kind of explosive sound burst from his thick lips, he turned and ran down the stairs without troubling to shut the door after him.

Sir Francis broke the silence with a discreet cough.

"Paranoid," he said with conviction. "Certifiable."

"A man given to violence. But his wife is now beyond his reach. Upon whom will he turn next?" said Pons. "We shall hear of him again."

Nor was Pons in error. The morning papers carried word of Dr. Gerald Buxton. He had shot himself in his Park Row quarters.

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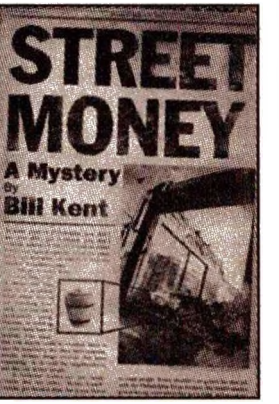
BOOKED & PRINTED

Don Herron

From the moment when Edgar Allan Poe imagined murder victims found inside that mysteriously locked room in the Rue Morgue, Paris, the mean streets of cities have served as a perfect arena for crime writers. Sure, most of us know you could get killed almost anytime, even in the most innocent of settings, but it is hard to shake the feeling that a city, any city, is a particularly dangerous place indeed.



Take Philly, for instance, where the political fix-it man Benny Cosicki goes about "getting himself dead" in **Street Money** (St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95), the opening novel in Bill Kent's lively new series. Philly has history going back to the Revolutionary War and before. With neighborhoods blighted by the closing of factories, the more affluent have fled to the suburbs and now face the morning commute in "to smog-stained concrete, potholed asphalt, broken-down storefronts on streets where weird people stood on the corner and shouted obscenities at the traffic." It's the kind of place where a bad guy can state with confidence, "Ms. Cosicki, this is a city. Everyone watches. No one does a thing."

Andrea "Andy" Cosicki, however, does not intend to let the death of her father go uninvestigated. Shortly before he met his suspicious end, Benny used his connections to get her a job with the *Philadelphia Press,* where she gets stuck writing the "Mr. Action" column under the supervision of N. S. Ladderback. Unexpectedly, she finds Ladderback an ally in the off-hours sleuthing. The spunky, athletic cub reporter and the aged veteran who has spent decades writing the obit column make a fascinating odd couple, especially as Ladderback's eccentricities are revealed—he suffers from agoraphobia, and learned forensic science from his parents, who were medical examiners. This pairing seems to have that potential magical chemistry mystery fans keep hoping for, like the day Archie Goodwin met Nero Wolfe.

An award-winning correspondent for the *New York Times,* Kent (His previous books include *Under the Boardwalk* and *On a Blanket with My Baby.*) has a lot of fun with the newspaper milieu, and ob-

viously he has his city tagged. The solution to the crime is solidly rooted in the place and people, where "maybe you really did make a mistake that you could've avoided, but it is also possible that there were real reasons, people, money, or others things involved." His opening section is a full-tilt poetic tribute to Philadelphia, which I enjoyed. But then I once dated a woman who had one of those "absolutely perfect South Philly kaplink-kaplonk" accents, and think hearing about "the kind of places that catered to the people who catered to the people who like very much to be catered to" is kind of sexy. For readers who can't take much of that sort of thing, rest assured Kent soon gets down to business. You can't help but hope that Andy Cosicki will say "Yes" immediately the next time Ladderback demands of her, "Do you want another assignment?"

With his Joe Gunther mysteries set in Vermont, Archer Mayor is one of the most popular writers working the homicide scene outside Big Town, USA, but lately he's feeling the need for a little more room to swing his cat around. Recent novels have put Gunther in charge of a statewide agency, instead of merely policing about Brattleboro, and this time the action moves completely uptown to the streets of New York. As if sensing that his loyal audience might be a bit suspicious of this radical change of scene, Mayor treats **The Sniper's Wife** (Mysterious Press, $23.95) almost as a spin-off, using the loose cannon on the force, Willy Kunkle, as the main protagonist. When NYPD calls to tell him his ex-wife has been found dead from a drug overdose (inside a locked room—shades of Poe!), he suffers renewed guilt over the fact that his marriage split up because of his drinking, and that time he hit her. Certain there's more to her death than appears on the surface, Willy, who picked up the code name Sniper in Vietnam, tears up Manhattan looking for clues. Soon Joe and series regular Sammie Martens travel south to serve as backup. The sniper never gets as medieval on the bad guys as you might expect, though, because Mayor is a quieter writer than that. At most, the action goes late Renaissance, and it takes Gunther's deductive reasoning to unravel that locked room puzzle.

After a botched jewelry store heist which has left a dying man behind him, and his associate mortally wounded, Wychovski figures his best hope for escape is heading for Chicago. "He would take his chances in the street. This was a big goddamn city, the toddling town. Big, bad, millions of people." Unfortunately, he's going to cross paths with homicide detective Abe Lieberman, who has a couple of other murders on his plate as well in **Not Quite Kosher** (Forge, $23.95), his seventh outing. A veteran author of several series, including the Toby Peters Hollywood mysteries, Kaminsky has reached a masterful level at noodling these novels

(continued on page 142)

THE STORY THAT WON

Hulton Archive

The September Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Susan Osborn of West Hills, California. Honorable mentions go to Frank Johnston of Jacksonville, Florida; George Moser II of Norman, Oklahoma; James De Knight of Brigantine, New Jersey; Michelle Mellon of Walnut Creek, California; Herschel E. Mathews of West Chester, Pennsylvania; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; E. Gearhart of Duluth, Georgia; Dave Bloxham of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia; and J. P. Salisbury of Browns Mills, New Jersey.

HIGH PROTEIN DIET by Susan Osborn

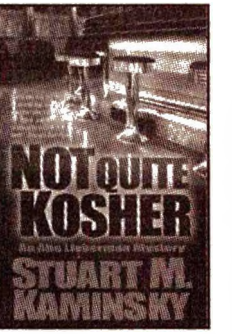
It had been raining continually for the last four weeks. In London that's an oppressive time, a time when your mind can play tricks on you. It wasn't so much the rain that was getting to me; it was the consequenses of it that brought about my despair. Having given up meat products of any sort sixteen years ago, the rain was sabotaging my food supply. The vegetables in the market were either pathetic at best or the hothouse variety shipped in from Europe. I'd been deprived of a decent meal for weeks now.

Walking through the streets, I could tell from the smells that lingered in the evening air that the monstrous rainfall did little to disrupt the lives of common carnivores sitting in their warm homes feasting on stews and roasts.

It was during one of these bitter moments that I saw them. Surely my eyes were deceiving me, but the loud rumblings from my stomach helped confirm my suspicions. At the bottom of the steps that led to the abandoned marketplace were two of the largest porcini mushrooms I have ever encountered. As they moved toward me my mouth watered and the ache in my stomach became unbearable. The next thing I knew, I was at the police station covered with blood, being accused of a heinous crime, too heinous to name. As a strict vegetarian, I am deeply insulted. Oddly, however, I *do* have a satisfied feeling in my stomach.

(continued from page 140)

along, giving the day-to-day incidents in the life of Abe and his partner Bill Hanrahan equal weight and interest to the crimes under investigation. Hanrahan plans a sudden marriage, even though his rival for the woman's hand is head of an Asian crime syndicate who is quite likely to order serious trouble. Abe, among other worries, is concerned about paying the astronomical costs for his grandson's upcoming bar mitzvah, plus the committee at his synagogue has decided that he is the perfect person to phone his namesake Senator Joseph Lieberman about speaking at a fundraiser. " 'I didn't even vote for him,' Abe confessed. . . . 'I voted Libertarian.' " *Not Quite Kosher* is tough enough to convince a reader that Chi has some authentic mean streets and gentle enough to appeal to a wider mystery-loving audience. Every page is a pleasure to read.



—Don Herron is best known in the mystery field for leading the Dashiell Hammett Tour in San Francisco since 1977. Among his books is Willeford, *a biography of crime writer Charles Willeford. Recently his hard-boiled short story "Knives in the Dark" appeared in* Measures of Poison, *the 20th Anniversary anthology from Dennis McMillan Publications.*

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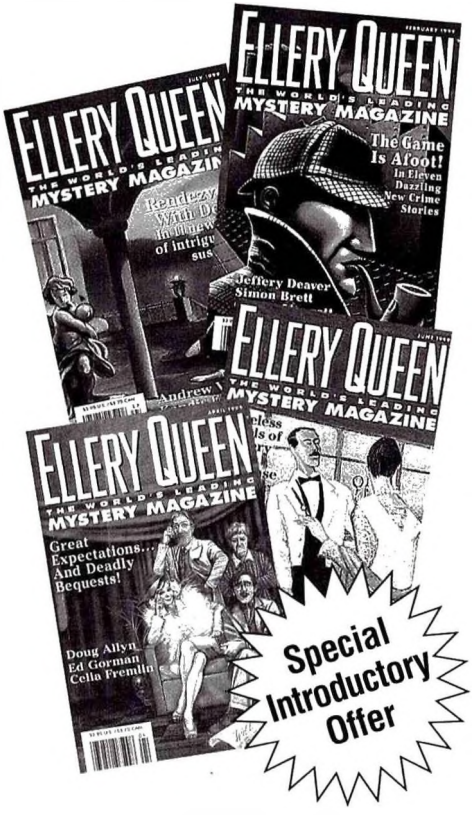

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