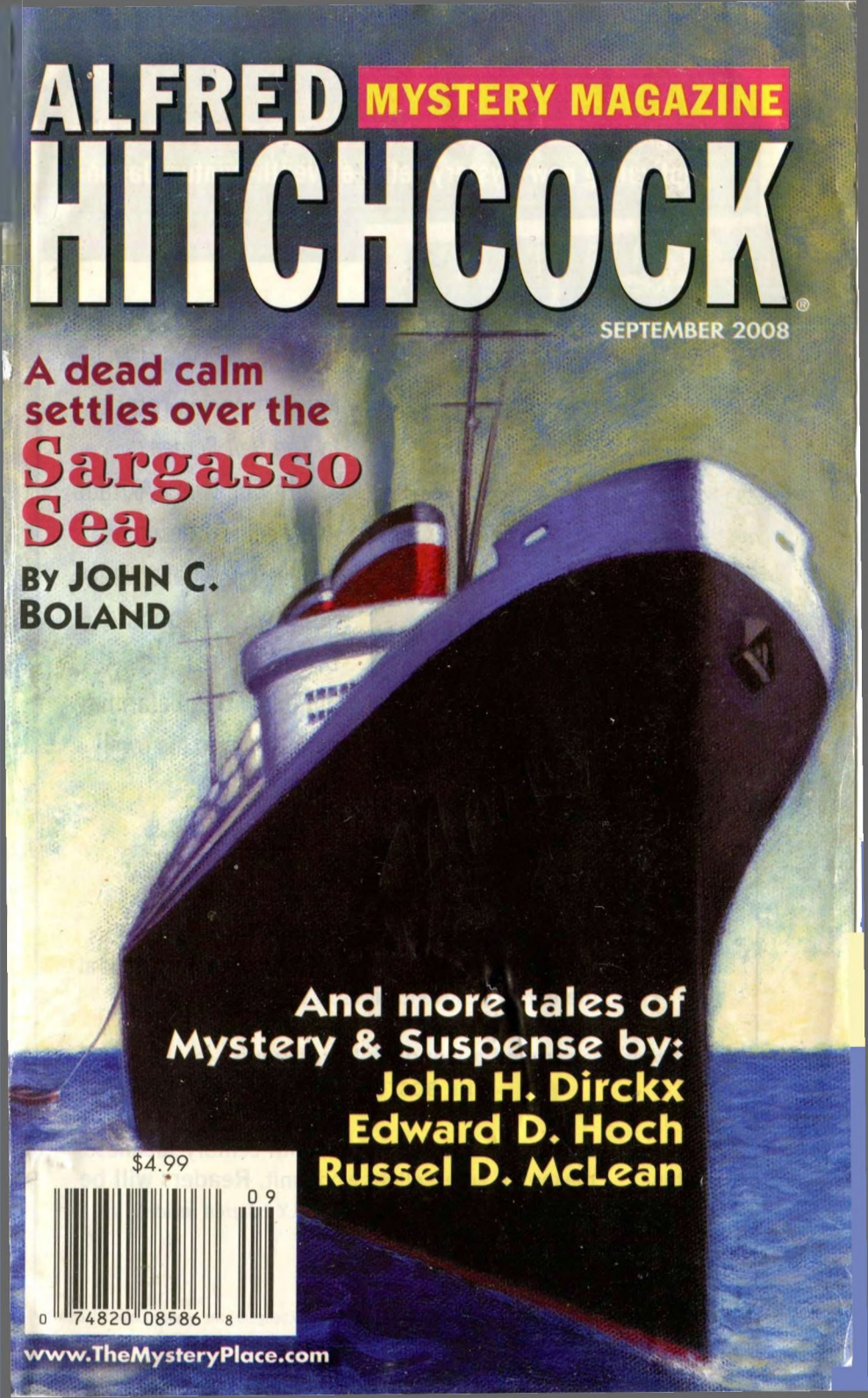
ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER 2008

A dead calm settles over the

Sargasso Sea

BY JOHN C. BOLAND



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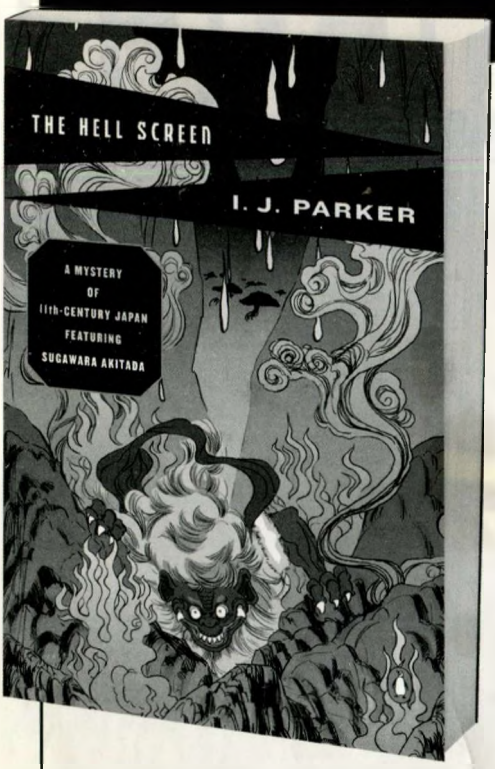

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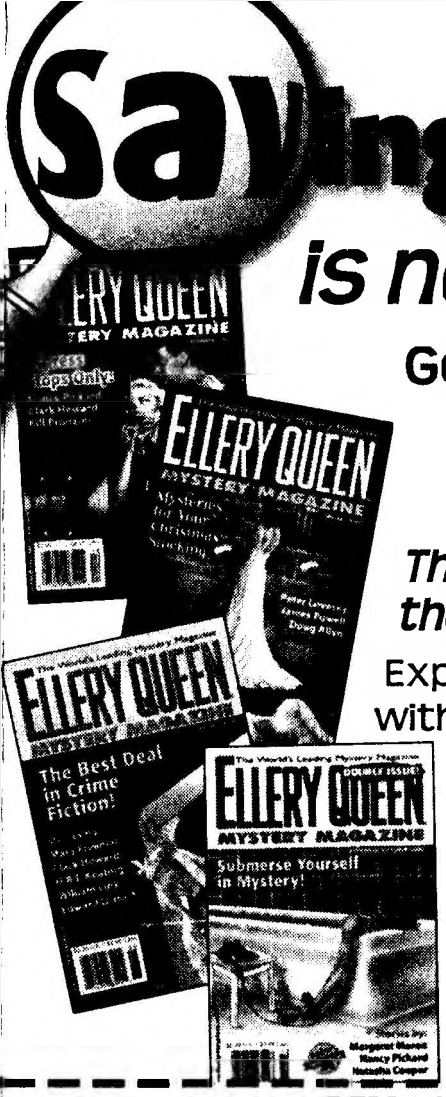

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LINDA LANDRIGAN

JUST DESERTS

Or unjust deserts, as the case may be. In either case, it is the undercurrent that links our stories this month. Whether passionate revenge or a gentle comeuppance, justice meted out restores some balance to the world.

In our cover story, John C. Boland's "Sargasso Sea," a desperately bored school administrator finds his just rewards aboard a cruise ship on eerily calm waters. In Jean Femling's "Shalimar Beach," the Salton Sea, an inland lake that is the site of an ecological disaster in Southern California, provides the backdrop for a story of an encounter between a newly divorced man and a woman whose life was turned upside down by an older suitor.

Two stories this month give us a glimpse of New York City's vibrant and ever-changing immigrant population. Harriet Rzetelny's "Death of an Anarchist" captures life—and death—in New York's Lower East Side in 1896. "The Birthday Watch" by G. Miki Hayden chronicles a day in the life of contemporary Ghanian immigrant Miriam as she navigates Midtown commerce.

We get a glimpse of the seedier parts of Dundee, Scotland in "Davey's Daughter" as Russel D. McLean's P.I. Sam Bryson goes looking for a working-class gym owner's missing daughter. The ancient Sumerian city of Ur is the setting of Donald Moffitt's story "Feat of Clay," featuring a daring scribe with a strong sense of justice.

We also have another well-plotted procedural from John H. Dirckx, "First Cousin, Twice Removed," in which Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn discovers an "accidental" death is anything but. And we have another—and sadly, last—Annie Sears procedural from Edward D. Hoch. In "Baja," Annie travels to Mexico to pick up a captured fugitive, but a seeming mistake starts a chain of events, revealing something much larger.

In addition to the great stories, Robert C. Hahn's Booked & Printed column this month points out some overseas mystery writers to watch. And J. Rentilly examines the evolution of Batman—just in time for his newest incarnation this summer in *The Dark Knight*—in his Reel Crime column.

DEATH OF AN ANARCHIST

HARRIET RZETELNY

He was thin and a bit undersized for his eleven years, with hands that were too large for his frame and a right foot that turned inward. His name was Mendy Leitner. He was dressed in ragged knickers, a shirt of coarse material, and a pair of thin, scuffed shoes that reached up to his ankles. Jumping over the low parapet onto the roof of the Ludlow Street tenement building where he and his family lived, he stopped for a minute and looked around at the Lower East Side as it appeared in this summer of 1896.

No curves. All lines and angles—buildings, chimneys, windows, doors. The wash that hung from the crisscross of clotheslines flapped like the wings of huge white birds. From the roof he got only a faint whiff of the street smells—the rotting fish, the open pickle barrels, the piles of horse dung ripening under the sun. He could hear the faint *bing bong* of the ragpicker's bell, the squawking of the chickens about to be slaughtered in the big poultry market at the end of the block, and the bellow of Moishe the scissors-grinder who was said to have the loudest lungs on the Lower East Side. His Aunt Tsipi complained endlessly about the crowding and the noise. But Mendy loved everything about this city that had become his adopted home six years ago. Except for the fact that he got hungry, as he was now, he could easily prowl the streets and back alleys all day and all night.

What to do? He could go back to his Aunt Tsipi's and Uncle Jake's apartment where he lived with his bratty eight-year-old cousin Sorele, her brainy older sister Rachel, and their boarder, Victor Navinsky. There he could swipe a piece of bread. But the idea of going home didn't appeal to him. The apartment was hot and noisy. Sorele shrieked louder than the whistles of the steamboats on the river. And when she wasn't making a tumult, Aunt Tsipi and Rachel would be having one of their never-ending arguments about why a girl of Rachel's advancing years—she was twenty-one already—wasn't married yet. As his aunt never grew

Hank Blaustein

tired of saying, looks don't last forever. But the worst thing would be for Aunt Tsipi to catch sight of him. Then he'd be lost—condemned to interminable hours of sitting on the floor of the apartment, pushing the accursed needle in and out, basting together the black woolen pieces that made up the knickers she sewed, endlessly, on the treadle machine that took up a corner of the kitchen.

Aunt Tsipi had been in a terrible mood for weeks now, ever since Uncle Jake and a group of men who worked in several small sweatshops in the neighborhood had gone out on strike. Yes, she agreed that a working man should be paid a living wage and should not have to work twelve hours a day to get it. Mendy and his cousin Rachel both supported this sentiment wholeheartedly, as did Navinsky, a self-acclaimed anarchist who made speeches at all the demonstrations calling for the workers of the world to unite and rise up against the bosses. But no work meant no money which meant no food—the pittance that Cousin Rachel earned from teaching English at the newly opened Henry Street Settlement House could barely pay for anything more than a few potatoes and some dried beans. Aunt Tsipi had been lucky to get the piecework from their neighbor Teitel, a small contractor who took pity on them. It meant there could be a Shabbos chicken on the table to go with the potatoes and beans, as she never stopped reminding Mendy.

His stomach growled. Well, he'd just have to take his chances. He scampered across the hot tar, his club foot dragging a little, until he came to the open roof door. Slipping in, he climbed down the narrow wooden stairs onto the landing. His apartment was just one flight down. The sudden darkness almost made him trip over something lying on the floor. At first he thought it was a pile of bedding—it had been a hot summer and half the people in the building slept out on the roof. But a shaft of light coming in from the open door showed him the handsome, sharply chiseled face of Victor Navinsky, who stared back at him out of large, brown, unseeing eyes.

"Mr. Navinsky, Mr. Navinsky!" He must be drunk, Mendy thought, shaking him by the shoulder to bring him to. Through the shirt, his body felt cold. Navinsky's vest was unbuttoned and Mendy could see a huge, liver-colored stain on his shirt front. Not drunk.

He began to tremble. Although he considered himself well able to deal with life on the streets, a dead Navinsky was beyond even his abilities. What to do? Should he go to his cousin Rachel? No, Rachel believed that the streets were no place for a little boy. The

streets would turn him away from his family, from what should be his one purpose in life: to become educated. Mendy was sure that finding a body wouldn't convince her otherwise. To Uncle Jake? No. Uncle Jake would only wring his hands and moan that ever since Navinsky had convinced him to go out on that accursed strike, everything bad in the world was happening to them. And Aunt Tsipi . . . what she would say didn't bear thinking about. And everyone knew better than to go to the police, those Cossacks, doing the dirty work of the bosses as they swept down on the workers' demonstrations with their fists and clubs.

But he couldn't just leave Navinsky lying there. He closed his eyes and hoped for inspiration. It finally came to him, in the form of John McCreary.

John McCreary was nursing a beer and a whole lot of dark thoughts at the long bar in Knuckle Annie's Saloon. He'd been working there as a bouncer ever since he'd been made to resign from the force last year in the wake of the Lexow Commission investigation into police corruption. Terrible shame he felt, which made him angry. Why should he feel this way? He hadn't done anything more than scores of other police officers who paid good money to Boss Richard Croker for the privilege of working for the Police Department. And most of them were still at their jobs. Not him, though. Like a piece of rotten meat you throw to a pack of wild dogs to keep them quiet. That's what he felt like.

McCreary took a long swig of his beer. He was a big man with the body of a bare-knuckle fighter, his occupation before joining the police force, and a strong face whose looks hadn't been spoiled by a nose that had been broken a few times. After a while he became aware of a hand pulling at his coat. "Mister, mister." He looked down and saw Mendy Leitner's dark-eyed, narrow little face peering anxiously up at him. "I gotta tell you something."

McCreary liked the little urchin and generally looked the other way when he came in to buy three-cent beers from Frankie, the bartender, who technically wasn't supposed to sell beers to minors. He had never seen the kid so upset.

"Slow down, boyo," he said, pulling his thoughts away from their black place. "Any tale worth telling is worth telling proper."

Mendy hesitated. Now that he was face-to-face with the big, unshaven ex-police officer, he thought maybe his idea hadn't been such a good one after all. But McCreary was *American*, which meant he wasn't like his Uncle Jake who was a such a *greener* in his greasy cap and cracked, scuffed shoes. McCreary spoke English

and he knew how to fight with his hands instead of always words, words, words. He wore fitted suits of light brown or tweed instead of the shapeless, dark-colored gabardine that hung like an old sack from his uncle's scrawny shoulders. He was the kind of man that Mendy himself wanted to be. Besides which, McCreary wasn't really a police officer anymore.

"I found a body. In the hallway, up near our roof."

"Get on with you," McCreary said, disbelief registering in his eyes. He turned back to his beer.

Mendy pulled at his coat again. "Come with me, mister. Please just come with me."

McCreary signaled to Frankie to hold down the bar, and the boy followed him out the door, into the heat of the day. They set off down Mulberry Street, walking southeast toward the Jewish quarter.

McCreary felt the change as soon as they crossed Houston Street. North of it, the neighborhood was still second-generation Irish and at least third-generation German. While there were people on the streets, most of life was lived inside the buildings. But the streets of Jewtown were teeming with life, noise, and confusion. Pushcarts were everywhere, selling clothing, kitchenware, fruits, vegetables, fish—fresh or pickled. And the people!—jabbering at the peddlers, shouting at each other, fingering the merchandise as if every pot was dented and every piece of fish was rotten.

"Here we are," Mendy said, pulling him into one of the tenement doorways on Ludlow Street.

The building was dark, stifling from the heat of the day, the air heavy with the smells of too many people in too small a place. It was a familiar smell to McCreary, bringing up memories that went much further back than the days a little over a year ago when he'd patrolled these same streets. He'd been born in the old Five Points and had grown up like a tenement rat following the death of his father, a member of the famed 69th "Fighting Irish" regiment, who had given his life to fight for the Union during the Civil War. They'd been so poor, McCreary remembered, that some nights he had nothing more than a piece of bread soaked in tea to eat.

He shook his head for a minute to shake off the memories and followed Mendy up the stairs. By the time they got to the roof landing, McCreary was wishing he was ten years younger and twenty pounds lighter. McCreary looked around him. The interior of the building below him was dark and bathed in shadows, but there was enough sunlight coming in from the open door to see the landing very clearly. With the exception of a dead waterbug on the floor near the wall, it was empty.

McCreary's large hand swooped down, caught Mendy's shirt by the collar, and lifted the boy up to the level of his own face. "Okay, laddie," he said angrily. "What's this all about?"

"I'm telling you the truth, mister, I swear it." Mendy's head was spinning. Could he have imagined the whole thing?

He closed his eyes and forced his mind back to the landing as he had seen it earlier. There was no question about it. Navinsky had been lying dead on this very same wooden floor. So where was he now? Had he become already some *neshoma*, a poor soul wandering through the afterlife? Even if this was true and his soul had already left his body, the flesh and bones of him would still be where Mendy had left him.

"Well?" McCreary growled. He dropped him back onto the floor, but Mendy knew he wasn't to be allowed to go anywhere until he managed to come up with an answer.

He stared at the floor again, picturing the scene in his mind exactly as it had been. Something else, something besides the missing body, was wrong.

"Mister, the floor is clean," he stuttered.

"What?" McCreary exploded. Was this boy a lunatic child? He followed Mendy's eyes down onto the floor. Of course. Most of the roof landings in tenements like this were covered with a layer of soot and dirt and litter. Except for the dead waterbug, this one was as clean as the surface of the bar right after Frankie had taken his rag to it.

He turned and headed up the stairs with Mendy limping along behind him. Once out on the roof, he shaded his eyes with his hand and looked around. Yes, there were fresh drag marks. McCreary followed them to the rear edge of the roof and looked down at the crumbled heap six stories below on the ground.

He turned to Mendy and took a deep breath. "Well, my boy, I'll never doubt you again when you tell me you've found a body."

That evening, McCreary was sitting at a small table in Knuckle Annie's, drinking beer with Piker Farrell. Piker was the detective who was in charge of the investigation into Navinsky's death, and he was waiting for Izzy the Doper.

"So, Johnny, what did the boy tell you?" he asked McCreary, lifting his beer. He was a beefy man with red-rimmed eyes and hands like huge knobby potatoes. They called him Piker because of his habit of never reaching into his pocket when it came time to pay the bill.

McCreary was eating some hard-boiled eggs that he'd taken from the large bowl standing on the bar. "He didn't tell me much

more than who the corpus was and that he lived with the boy's family."

"Well, the family wouldn't say much when I talked to them. Pretended they didn't understand any English." A corner of Piker's lip turned up. "You know how those people are—all a bunch of anarchists and revolutionaries. Any one of them could have murdered this Victor Navinsky."

McCreary regarded Piker with an assortment of feelings he could barely put into words. They had known each other for well over twenty-five years, from before the time he had joined the old Whyo gang—Piker, older, already a gang member, watching him and Denny Riley throwing punches at each other, singling him out to teach him a few tricks, taking him for his first drink. McCreary always thought Piker had managed to squeak through the scandals with his job intact because he knew where many more bodies were buried than he himself did.

As if he were reading McCreary's mind, Piker said. "I'll need you on this, Johnny. You would have made detective soon, and I would have asked for you to be assigned to me because you know these people from the days when you walked the beat down there." Both of them knew McCreary would've had to pay upward of two thousand dollars to the Tammany man for the privilege of becoming detective, but neither of them was going to mention it. "This reform stuff is just temporary," Piker went on. "You'll see, Roosevelt's got his sights on something a lot grander than routing out us Micks." Teddy Roosevelt was currently enjoying a stint as president of the Board of Commissioners of the New York City Police Department, swept in on the winds of reform. "As soon as he's gone, you'll have your old job back, I'll stake Annie's biggest knuckle duster on it."

McCreary didn't answer. Every time he tried to think about the future, his thoughts dissolved in his mind and he just found himself wanting another drink.

"And it can't happen too fast for me." Piker sighed.

McCreary looked up. Through the shadows of the flickering gas lanterns and the smoke from countless cigars, he saw Izzy the Doper making his way between the tables towards them. Izzy, who was one of those neighborhood characters known by everyone, Jew and non-Jew alike, looked like a battered stove pipe in a dirty cap. He caught McCreary's eye and smiled what he probably thought was an ingratiating smile.

"So let's talk first, beans," Izzy said, rubbing his thumb and forefinger together as he slid into the remaining chair.

Piker's eyes narrowed. His hand shot out and grabbed the little

man's shirt front. With his other hand he smacked him twice across the face. "Spit it out, Jew boy, or there'll be no happy dreamland for you tonight."

Izzy's head snapped left and then right. "What can I tell you?" he whined. He glanced at Piker, then at McCreary, and back at Piker again. The brim of his cap bobbed from side to side like the beak of a bird pecking at one seed and then another. "I can tell you that Mr. Victor Navinsky was an anarchist, an all-around, big-time ladies' man and troublemaker."

"So? Tell me something I don't know."

Izzy shrugged and fingered his face. "He boarded with Jake Leitner and his family. Jake is a dressmaker who thinks he can squeeze a little more out of that shnorer of a boss by going on strike."

"This is all?" Piker's eyes became two slits in his face as he peered at the skinny man. "You better give me something more than that."

"And," Izzy hurried on, "I was at a demonstration on Rivington Street where I heard Finestein the Boss ranting and raving at Navinsky that he would see them all in hell first before he'd allow a bunch of revolutionaries to tell him what he could and couldn't pay his workers." He smiled weakly. Sweat stood out on his face like the beads of liquid on the glasses of beer. It was sweltering in the crowded saloon.

Piker sat back. With evident relief Izzy collected the coins the detective tossed him and hurried out the door.

Piker rubbed the palm of his hand for a minute and turned to McCreary. "Well, let's go pay a visit to Mr. Finestein."

The tenement in which Finestein both lived and ran his sweatshop was on the third floor of a rear building, which meant that it had no direct access to the street. Piker and McCreary had to walk through another sour-smelling tenement and past the reeking outhouse that served both buildings. The apartment door opened into a stifling, windowless kitchen where a young boy who looked to be about eight or nine was struggling to remove a heavy black iron from the top of a fiery-hot, coal-burning stove. Stretched out on a long table was the completed bodice and skirt of an evening dress. The rest of the apartment was in semidarkness, and McCreary could just make out the double line of silent sewing machines that filled what he knew to be two long, narrow rooms. A woman with a coil of red hair wound around her head was seated on a chair in the corner nursing a baby. She looked up when Piker and McCreary entered but made no effort to cover herself. Her sweat-

lined face, which might have once been pretty, was pinched with exhaustion.

"They live like vermin," Piker said to McCreary in a voice loud enough to be heard by the woman. "No morals, no decency. Nothing." To the woman he said, "You speak English?"

"I do," said the boy, dropping the iron with a loud clang back onto the stove.

"We're looking for Leo Finestein. Is he your father?"

The boy shot a quick glance at the woman, who made no answering motion. So he shrugged and nodded. "In there." He pointed to a door in the wall behind him.

Piker opened the door into a windowless room that was barely bigger than the iron-framed bed it contained. A heavyset man in his underwear was lying on the sweat-soaked sheets. One of his legs was secured between two narrow wooden planks by several windings of dirty white material. Finestein looked up at the two men. Then he said something to his son in Yiddish, a language which always sounded to McCreary as though the speaker was clearing his throat.

"He wants to know if you are here about Navinsky," the boy said.

McCreary nodded. Evidently, word of the anarchist's death had already gotten around the neighborhood.

"My papa has been like this, on the bed, for two days now. One of those no-goodniks, those strikers who want to take the bread out of our mouths," the boy spit three times on the floor beside him, "threw a rock and broke it."

Piker reached over, picked up the man's encased leg, and shook it before dropping it heavily back onto the bed. Finestein screamed in pain. "You sure it's two days since this happened," he said to the boy, who pressed his lips together and nodded wordlessly. "We'll know if it's not true, and things will go worse for him."

"If Finestein has really been in bed for two days with a broken leg," McCreary said as they walked down the creaking stairs, "he couldn't be out murdering Navinsky. That leaves us right back where we started."

"Don't you worry, Johnny," Piker answered. "With all the people crammed into this neighborhood, we'll find someone else to fill the bill."

The next day was another hot one. Mendy was sitting at the end of Knuckle Annie's long bar, drinking the dregs of a beer left by a departed patron and hoping that nobody would notice him. Izzy

the Doper was sitting at a table with Piker Farrell and John McCreary. It made Mendy's stomach hurt to watch what Mr. Farrell was doing to the man, but nothing short of a raging fire would have made him get up and leave.

"Okay, okay," the man whined as he wiped the blood off his nose with a dirty sleeve. "Finestein isn't the only potato in the pot. Just last week I heard Navinsky, may he rest in peace," Izzy lifted his eyes piously toward the heavens, "having an argument with Jake Leitner."

"An argument between two Jews?" Piker said contemptuously, raising his fist again. "That's like telling me the sun comes up in the morning."

"No, no," the man cried, thrusting his hands between his face and Piker's fist. "It was about a woman."

"The daughter, Rachel Leitner!" Piker asserted with satisfaction.

Izzy raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

"What was it about?"

"Jake caught them together." He ducked his head down and said slyly, "Well, I don't have to say more, do I?"

The ache in Mendy's stomach became a stabbing pain. He had seen the way Navinsky looked at his cousin Rachel—and at most of the other young women in the neighborhood, if it came to that. But those other women were not his cousin, and their fathers were not his Uncle Jake. Mr. Farrell stood up and said loudly to McCreary, "Let's go, Johnny boy. We'll have this settled before lunch."

The sniveling little doper fink rubbed his fingers together and said, "What about my . . ."

The big detective cut him off. "No dreamland for you until Leitner is safely locked up. You steered me wrong once already. This time you better be on the money."

That day was one of the worst in Mendy's memory—almost as bad as the night his beloved mama died; almost as bad as the day his father, who had come over to America a year before the rest of the Leitners to find a home for them all, never showed up to meet them—lost, some said, to the depraved dives of the Lower East Side. And now, the sight of that Cossack of a detective slapping handcuffs onto his Uncle Jake and pushing him down the stairs . . . and then the sound of Aunt Tsipi weeping and wailing—he'd never heard her cry before and never wanted to again—while his cousin Rachel, her face as white as a freshly washed sheet, tried, without success, to comfort her. And poor little Sorele, whimpering under the table as she watched the whole thing out

of eyes that looked as scared as Mendy felt. And, worse yet, it was all his, Mendy's, fault.

Mendy slipped out of the apartment as soon as he could and made his way through the crowded streets to his little hiding place on Stanton Street, under the shed behind Henty's bakery. He had furnished it with a candle, a wooden box where he hid the Racker Coyle penny detective stories he read avidly, and a piece of an old, burnt mattress onto which he now threw himself. Why couldn't he have just left Navinsky's body where it was? Why had he gone to that big Irishman for help and brought the wrath of the Cossacks down on their heads? And now his Uncle Jake was in jail, accused of stabbing Navinsky!

He blinked away the tears that were threatening to spill out and thought about his uncle. He loved the little man like a father, but Uncle Jake was as close to being a squeaking mouse as any human could be. Could such a man actually stab Navinsky? Navinsky, who took on gangs of policemen with their billy clubs and coshes as if they were so many insects to be squashed? Mendy couldn't even imagine it!

By the time he crawled out of his hiding place, righteous anger had replaced self-recrimination. It was in this state that he made his way back to Knuckle Annie's, where he hid behind a dray cart until he saw John McCreary leaving the bar.

McCreary was thinking that an hour or two in the shapely arms of Owl Meg might cheer him up a bit when he felt a hand pulling at his jacket.

"Mister, mister." A shrill, indignant voice. "There's been an injustice done." Those words came straight from Mendy's favorite detective, Racker Coyle. "You can't let this happen."

McCreary looked down and sighed. "And what are you thinking I should be doing about it, boyo?"

"I think you should be finding the real culprit."

McCreary was touched by the boy's faith in him. Actually, he didn't believe that Jacob Leitner was the killer. From what he knew about Victor Navinsky, he couldn't see the anarchist allowing an angry father, or any angry man for that matter, to come close enough to him to stab him in the chest without fighting back. And Navinsky's hands, as McCreary had noticed, showed no signs of any recent fisticuffs. Nor did Jacob Leitner display any evidence that he had been hit recently by anyone other than Piker. But what could he do? He had no official standing, and Piker was crowing about the arrest.

No, McCreary thought, this was a woman's crime, for certain.

He thought of Rachel Leitner, whom he'd known from the days when he patrolled the area. She'd often acted as interpreter for him when he'd had to question a witness or evacuate those stinking tenements during one of the many epidemics—cholera, whooping cough, pneumonia—that routinely swept through those crowded, airless buildings. Tall for a Jewish woman, she could do with a few more curves—but then there was that mass of auburn hair the color of glowing embers, the slightly crooked smile that lit up her face at odd moments . . .

He glanced down at Mendy again. The boy wouldn't be any happier if his cousin Rachel turned out to be the culprit. But Mendy was right—there had been an injustice done—and at that moment, McCreary was as sensitive to injustices as Mendy himself. As much as McCreary didn't want to do it, he'd have to speak to Rachel Leitner, if she'd talk to him. But first he'd have another conversation with Izzy the Doper. Piker had heard what he wanted to hear. McCreary, though, was certain the little hophead wasn't telling all he knew. He wanted to have as many of the facts nailed down as he could before confronting Miss Leitner. He knew the opium den where Izzy went to smoke his dope, and hoped that he wouldn't be so far into dreamland as to not be able to talk.

Several hours later, McCreary returned to Knuckle Annie's where Mendy was waiting. Mendy's eager anticipation turned to dread when he saw the expression on the big Irishman's face. But McCreary would say nothing, and man and boy made their way south, across Houston Street, and then east to the Ludlow Street building where the Leitners lived.

McCreary sent Mendy on up to tell Miss Leitner that he, McCreary, didn't believe her father had murdered the anarchist and to convince her that she must come down and talk to him. There was no way, he knew as he settled himself on the stoop to wait, that he would be welcome in that apartment.

About ten minutes later, the boy and his cousin came out of the building. McCreary rose to his feet, touched his hat, and said, "Thank you for coming down and speaking with me, Miss Leitner."

Her eyes, as blue-green as the river on a cloudy day, met his. "I'm here to listen," she said, with a slight curl of her lip. "Not to speak."

Noticing the attention they were getting from the people around them, McCreary said in a formal voice, "Miss Leitner, would you be joining me in a little walk?" He looked at Mendy and, correctly interpreting the expression the boy's face, added: "I

wish to talk with your cousin privately. Which means, boyo, that you're not to follow us."

"Go upstairs and do some work for a change," Rachel said severely. "Your aunt can barely get out of bed. Someone has to earn a little money around here."

Mendy gave them both an aggrieved look, but for once did as he was told.

McCreary and Rachel Leitner walked east toward the river, away from prying neighbors. "Miss Leitner," he said after several blocks of silence, "I had a another talk with Izzy the Doper."

"Did you?" she asked, her whole body stiffening.

"And I believe I know the truth about Victor Navinsky's murder."

"My father confessed, you know."

"It would take a man much stronger than your father to withstand Piker when he's out to get a confession. But I know it wasn't him."

When he didn't say anything further, she collapsed down onto a stoop and asked in a voice tight with tension, "What are you going to do?"

"A lot of that will depend on you, on what you want me to do," he said.

"What I want you to do?" She dragged the "I" over several syllables. "What I want you to do is to disappear, to go back to whatever low saloon Mendy dug you out of, and leave us alone."

"And what about your father?"

Tears started down her face. Silently he handed her his handkerchief. She wept then as he sat in misery, wishing he could make it better for her, knowing he couldn't.

"I'm thinking it's a terrible choice to have to make," he said. "But in the long run, the law is easier on a woman than a man."

She fought for control of herself, angrily blotting her reddened lids. "What makes you think a woman did this?"

"First of all, Navinsky was stabbed in the chest, through an open vest, and there was no sign that he had fought to defend himself. So he must have been taken by surprise by someone he knew very well, which wouldn't have happened if he'd been facing an angry man."

"That doesn't prove it was a woman," Rachel said scornfully. "It could have been a man he thought was a friend."

"Secondly," McCreary went on doggedly, "the landing where Mendy found him was so clean when I saw it that you could have eaten off it. What man, friend or otherwise, would have done that?" Rachel stiffened again. "And, more to the point, why? Whoever cleaned up that landing also dragged the corpus up onto

the roof and threw it over the parapet so that it would be found in the alleyway, far away from your apartment." He shook his head sorrowfully. "No, Miss Leitner. Unless you can prove to me that one of the other tenants on your floor stabbed Mr. Navinsky—" Silently, almost imperceptibly, she shook her head. "—it had to be done by one of you. And not by your father."

She examined his face as if she was seeing him for the first time. "I wouldn't think that you'd believe that a woman could have carried him up that flight of stairs and thrown him off the roof."

"Miss Leitner, I grew up in a tenement not too different from yours. And my mother was strong as an ox from carrying gallons of water and scuttle after scuttle of coal and pails of ashes, and bundles of wash, and sacks of flour, up and down the stairs, all day, every day."

"So you believe it was me who killed him," she said, clenching her hands.

Once more he shook his head. "As I said, I had a talk with Izzy the Doper, and he told me the name of the woman your uncle and that rabble-rouser were arguing about."

A gang of street urchins ran by, the sounds of their shrill, high-pitched laughter echoing in the air behind them. "He was a terrible man, Mr. McCreary," she said in a low, bitter voice. "He made eyes at every woman he met. He tried it with me, and I told him what I thought of him. But her . . ." Tears welled up again and a small vein on the side of her forehead began to throb. "How could she do it?" she burst out. Then, as if answering her own question, she said, "You can't— Well, maybe you can imagine what life is like for us. It's work, work, all the time work. Papa wouldn't let me get a job in the sweatshops; he said in America I could study, become a teacher, be more than he was. I told him I could go to night school, but he said the sweatshops would kill me, would kill my spirit, like they were killing him." She closed her eyes. "If my papa and myself together came home with eight, nine dollars at the end of the week, it was a good week for us. And all the time worried about how you're going to pay the rent and feed the family and what happens if, God forbid, you get sick and can't work. And my father is a cougher, you know."

McCreary was all too aware of what that meant. Tuberculosis—called the Jewish asthma—was rampant in the tenements of the Lower East Side.

"For me, I'm young yet and Papa wouldn't let my dreams die. But for her . . ." Her shoulders sagged, as if she couldn't bear the weight of talking about it. Yet she couldn't stop either, he realized. She needed to explain it, more to herself than to him, he thought.

"Mama was sixteen when she married Papa, seventeen when I was born. She had three more children, two who died and another, my little sister Sorele, who was barely out of my mother's arms when we came over.

"I love my father dearly, but between working and coughing he probably wasn't much of a husband to her. So maybe Navinsky offered a little . . . pleasure for a while." Her whole body shuddered. "I don't know. He was there in the house, all day, alone with her. Until the strike."

McCreary thought of Tsipi Leitner, not much older than himself, pedaling her life away in front of a sewing machine. Was it so hard to imagine that she would long for a little love or passion? Had his own mother ever longed for love or passion? He recoiled at the thought. At that moment he realized how little he knew about women.

"So when my father caught them, Navinsky promised he would stop. Which he did, but then he started running around with other women. She couldn't stand it. She was like a crazy woman. Jealous, possessed, enraged. I was so worried about her that I came home early that day, and there they both were, in the kitchen, only he was on the floor dead and she was staring at the bloody knife in her hands as if she didn't know what it was." Her eyes looked sick with the memory. "How could I not help her? I'm her daughter." She bit her lip and looked up at him, her sea-green eyes scornful again. "Are you sure you weren't hidden there watching us? You seem to know exactly what happened."

"I'm thinking it's the only thing that makes sense. But I'm not sure why you first left him on the landing."

"We heard Mendy on the roof, only I didn't know it was Mendy. So we dropped him and crept down the stairs again. Who would have thought the little devil would take matters into his own hands and decide to become a hero?"

He sat silently, gingerly flexing his fingers back and forth, just letting her talk.

"I didn't know what to do when that terrible man came and took my father off to jail. If I had the courage to kill myself, I would have done it then."

She stopped and pulled herself upright to allow a man and woman to climb the stairs of the stoop they were sitting on, the woman throwing them a curious look as she went by.

"I visited Papa in his cell this morning and we talked about it," Rachel continued in a tight voice. "He knows it was Mama who murdered that fiend, but he cannot let her go to jail for it. He was coughing so bad, his handkerchief, his sleeve was full of blood."

She closed her eyes briefly. "He realizes he doesn't have long for this world. I told him whatever happened, I would take care of Sorele and Mendy, see that they got an education. But he knows I'd have to give up my own dreams in order for that to happen. So this is the only way he can take care of his family—by taking her place, he leaves them with a mother, at least."

For a moment he could see her fighting back tears. Then she turned toward him, those disconcerting sea-green eyes searching his own. "So, Mr. McCreary. The fate of our family is in your hands."

"No, Miss Leitner. I've told you the decision was up to you, and I'm thinking that you've made it."

Rachel looked down at her hands. She would be feeling in his debt, he realized, wondering what he would want from her in repayment for keeping her secret. And what could he say that she would believe? All he wanted was to get his old job back, to have the shame of it all wiped away, and that wasn't likely to happen. So he said nothing.

For some time they sat, side by side, each lost in their own thoughts. After a while, McCreary noticed a moth—or was it a butterfly?—fluttering around. It was a pale, powdery yellow color, like the sun on a hazy morning. McCreary, born and raised in the tenements, had seen very few butterflies in his life, and so hoped it *was* a butterfly and not a common moth. And if it was, how had it found its way into this brick and iron city? What did it eat? How would it live?

He tapped Rachel's arm and pointed. For a moment she stared blankly at him. Then she followed his finger and when she saw it, she didn't actually smile, but her face softened a little. For a few minutes they watched it as it swooped delicately along the iron railing, flitting in and out of the shadows thrown by the stoops, until it flew behind a pile of wooden crates and was gone from sight. He arose then and gave her his hand to help her up. Together they turned and walked back toward Ludlow Street.

SARGASSO SEA

JOHN C. BOLAND

Pointer, who shared their table that evening, said, "This ship doesn't attract party types. Two days out, two days back. It's generally pretty tranquil."

Two days out was enough, thought Carlos.

"There aren't many children on board," Pointer added. "That helps. Personally, I enjoy having young people around—couples your age, who may have read a book I haven't. The ship's library isn't up-to-date. But children . . ." His hand lifted from his glass in a small, hopeless gesture.

"They're cute if they're your own," said a small woman sitting beside Deborah. "Do you two have children?"

"Not yet," said Deborah.

"Mine weren't cute," said the small woman, who had introduced herself as Mrs. Bowles. "They aren't particularly attractive as adults, either. So I enjoy spending their inheritance on my cruises."

It couldn't be much money if she could run through it on this ship, Carlos thought, stretching to see a waiter who might bring him a glass of wine. The dining room, which had twenty-five or thirty tables, wasn't well staffed. At the moment, he couldn't see a single person who might be a server.

"Is there a captain's dinner?" Deborah asked.

"A few nights from now," said Mrs. Bowles.

Half hearing her answer, Carlos frowned. She had to be wrong. Just then his thoughts were interrupted by Pointer, who remarked, "Nobody dresses for those things. You needn't worry about that."

They made a late round of the deck, Deborah trying to spot constellations, but in truth she couldn't tell one part of the sky from another. She gave up and said hopefully, "Should we have a nightcap?"

"If we can find a waiter," Carlos said.

The morning was still and hot. Without moving, Carlos squinted past a scarred railing onto a sea that was so flat the ship could

have been dead in the water. Deborah was in the chair a foot to his left, wrapped in white, her delicate nose painted in white.

The fellow named Pointer certainly knew shipboard life. He had told them last night that they would fall into lazy habits right off. After a while, sighting a dolphin would become an event.

"One day gets to be much like another," the older man said. "When you've been sailing as long as I have."

"Are you retired?" Deborah asked.

"You could say. Had a falling out with my partners. Now I've nothing to do. Isn't that what we all dream of?"

"You know," Deborah said, sitting up, "I think we've stopped."

They were definitely stopped. Carlos got up, went over and leaned on the railing. Brown ropes of seaweed lay close to the hull, spreading away in broken patches like a half-eaten carpet, reaching into a hazy distance. He sensed someone beside him.

"Old wives' tale that the stuff wraps itself around the propeller shaft," Pointer said. "It's algae, you know. Sargassum bacciferum to be exact. I wouldn't, I suppose, want to try rowing my way out."

"Why have we stopped?"

"Oh, there may be weather ahead."

Carlos let his glance travel up the superstructure, looking for the bridge. He couldn't pick it out, but he didn't suppose it mattered. Passengers wouldn't be allowed near a ship's critical centers.

"It can't be anything major, can it? They would tell us, wouldn't they?"

"I'm sure there'll be an announcement at dinner," Pointer said.

They were underway by dinner, and the matter slipped from Carlos's mind. He asked Deborah to join a card game in the lounge, which went on late. Then there were several nightcaps and a stroll on deck. The C deck fantail, close to the water, seemed ideal for watching the phosphorescent wake. When he emerged from the men's room, he knew he was tipsy. He could see his wife ahead, no more solid than a wraith in the moonlight. He followed and was only a step behind when she gave a sign of noticing him.

She weighed next to nothing.

It struck him odd, in her short descent to the water, that she didn't scream. Probably couldn't believe it. He had trouble believing himself that he had finally done it.

He should have felt worse about it, but he felt he had separated himself from the mediocrity of his past in a profound way that

deserved awe instead of guilt. For seven years, almost as long as he had been married, he had been an assistant principal, little more than a glorified busboy to the headmaster, as his ambitions withered. Now the ambitions would flower, and who knew what lay ahead?

The police would talk to him, of course, but he would get through it. Carlos? Murder Deborah? Everyone who knew them would scoff. There was no insurance policy on Deborah's life. No bank accounts or property that amounted to anything. Their lives were tranquil, without anger or scandal. They were comfortably dull people who should have stayed married forever.

The headmaster wouldn't have tolerated divorce, but he would accept tragedy. Maybe even encourage his aide to wallow in his grief a little. So there might be a few months paid leave, which would carry him well on the way with that play he had been meaning to write.

He stumbled down to the cabin, flopped onto the berth.

Then he almost screamed.

Deborah lifted her head from a pillow and murmured, "Where have you been?"

Carlos bit the bedsheet and quivered. How had he made such a mistake? His jumbled thoughts spun. Deborah had never been more than a few paces ahead of him—except as he had come from the restroom. Who had been there in the dark, a woman of about Deborah's frailty? Carlos lay stiff and sleepless. It wasn't just the horror of having murdered an innocent person that clutched at him—how many people were truly innocent?—it was the sickening knowledge that he was still bound to her. A single cruise couldn't have *two* women fall overboard. He and Deborah would be together until he devised something else. And when would that be?

Sensing he was awake, Deborah moved closer. "I really love you, you know."

He stifled a sob.

In the morning there was no alarm over a missing woman. Carlos relaxed marginally. Perhaps she had been traveling alone, a foolish thing to do. What did people expect to happen to them when they traveled alone? She must have been one of those gray bundles of sticks who vanished into the woodwork and might not be missed for days.

Before lunch, Carlos sat beside Pointer in the lounge and said, "Another day with no excitement, hmm?" Inviting contradiction,

he half expected to hear, "Oh, I don't know. Mrs. So and So's nowhere to be found."

But Pointer didn't disagree. He nodded vaguely, lifting his glance from an empty tall glass. "I'm sleeping ten hours at a stretch."

How interesting, Carlos thought.

"Lazy me," Pointer said.

Feeling a touch on his shoulder, Carlos turned. Once he had welcomed Deborah's unexpected touches, her timid caresses, even her insistent nuzzling. Now he tightened his shoulder to avoid flinching.

"I missed you on deck," she said.

He had worried at breakfast that she would see some mark of guilt on him. But she had never understood much of anything that was inside him, and she had chatted gaily, her hand reaching repeatedly across the table for his, claiming every moment of his awareness.

He thought again: I really should feel worse about this.

"I'm going back on deck," Deborah said. "Don't be long." She waited for his answer.

"I won't be," he promised.

She left. Carlos stared at his hands. Inept hands. He could almost hear the headmaster's wheedling, "What? You couldn't get *that* right?"

"I apologize for mentioning this," said Pointer.

"Yes?"

"Your wife is rather a cloying woman. I should mind my own business. . . . But it's as if certain people carry a sign on their sleeve—'Love me or else.' I would find that hard to take."

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

Pointer's faded blue eyes, rimmed with dampness, weren't the least bit apologetic. "Haven't you ever wanted to be rid of her?"

Carlos stood up.

"You needn't worry, other people wouldn't notice," Pointer said. "But you would be happier without her, wouldn't you? Ah, there's Mrs. Bowles!"

As the little woman reached the table, Pointer whispered, "This young fellow is tired of his wife."

Her round face pitying, Mrs. Bowles said, "That's so sad!"

Pointer tapped Carlos's wrist. "Sit down, young man. Perhaps we can help. What have you done about your unhappiness? That's the question."

"Done?"

"You must have done something," Mrs. Bowles said. "Everyone does something. For example, I poisoned my first husband. That

was so many years ago." She shook her head, smiling, as if the faded memory still held pleasure. "He was a wretched character—possessive, alcoholic—and a devoted sailor. Insisted we go out on his catamaran every weekend. I never liked being on the water. . . ."

Carlos doubted she had poisoned anyone. There were faculty members at the school who were only a step or two removed from such gentle lunacy. They were easy to trap in their contradictions.

"You dislike the water," Carlos pointed out, "but you spend your time cruising."

She nodded. "Ironic, isn't it?"

"Irony is hard to escape," said Pointer. "My law practice was everything to me. Yet here I am. The mind remains sharp and analytical. Yet I spend my day snoozing. There is damn little on this boat to think about. Perhaps that's why I'm so interested in your situation. You see, if I were married to a woman such as Deborah, I'm afraid I would want to beat her brains in." He glanced at Mrs. Bowles.

"Oh, me too," she said.

"It would take a saint to resist the urge. Do you think our young friend is a saint, Mrs. Bowles?"

"He's nice looking."

"But not saintly?"

"No. But he's handsome enough to get himself a new wife—if the old one were laid to rest."

"I wonder if he's realized that."

"He would be pretty stupid not to."

They both looked at Carlos. Pointer said, "Doesn't look like a saint, and doesn't look stupid. So I would say, reasoning deductively, that he's thought about it and acted on the thought. Question for the defense: Then why is Deborah still with him?"

Mrs. Bowles answered quickly. "Botched the job!"

Carlos felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. They couldn't know, unless one of them had seen him on deck. And in that case, they knew everything. Pushing back from the table, Carlos choked, "You're both out of your minds!"

"Are you going to leave us?" Pointer asked. "It would be fun, wouldn't it, if we guessed *how* you spoiled the job?"

Mrs. Bowles covered her mouth. "I hope he didn't leave the gas on."

"No, no, Mrs. Bowles! That would take down the entire house, and he only wanted to be rid of the woman. I would bet anything he used carbon monoxide."

Carlos froze.

Pointer's fingers drummed the table. "He probably left the car running in the garage under their bedroom. What do you say, young man?"

Unable to speak, Carlos shook his head.

Deborah *knew.* That was the only explanation. Not about last night, but about July. She knew, or strongly suspected, and had poured out her fears to this old man, who wasn't nearly as sharp as he pretended. Not even a clever lawyer could arrive deductively at the exact truth. How would Pointer even know they had a garage?

Who else had she told? Her sister? Her mother?

It didn't matter, Carlos thought, stumbling from the lounge. He wouldn't dare make another attempt on her, ever. She had ensured herself a long, safe, stultifying life, with a husband as captive who could be destroyed on a whim. Each day he would wonder, had she cried out her secret to the headmaster? Were the police coming up the stairs? He would never be free. But there was a way.

He crossed the deck to the railing, swung a leg over and looked down.

The impact with the water knocked him senseless.

Blinking at the sunlight, Carlos raised himself from the steamer chair. It was late afternoon, a warm and still afternoon, like several that had passed. A thought worked its way out of the back of his mind. How many days had he been aboard?

Two days out, two days back.

It seemed much longer.

If today was the fourth day, they must be headed for port. But in all directions the horizon was empty. No birds had come to greet the ship.

If today wasn't the fourth afternoon—

"Don't you remember?" Pointer spoke from the next chair. "You threw yourself overboard."

Carlos remembered. The brutal collision with the water, its embrace. Who had rescued him?

"Used to try it myself," Pointer said. "Went overboard and found I was right back here in time for breakfast. Did it twice and got the message."

Carlos stared at him.

"Bored as I am, I'm stuck here. That's the point, I guess. I wonder about you. You tried to murder your wife—"

Carlos's head snapped around. But Deborah, in the other chair, didn't seem to be listening.

"Carbon monoxide, in the garage."

"You can't know that."

Pointer sounded amused. "Do you remember waiting with her, to get a little dose of fumes yourself to make it look good? Perhaps falling asleep?"

Carlos blinked. Very bright sky. No breeze. "I don't believe this."

Pointer chuckled. "It's just a theory. Us, this ship—a theory must fit the facts. In my case, do you punish an ambitious man by giving him all eternity to do nothing?"

Carlos felt himself slipping. The old man was insane, but there was an insidiousness in his madness. He said, "What did you do to deserve punishment?"

"I used to remember. But now, it's been so long. . . ."

Carlos thought of rational explanations. The carbon monoxide must have starved his brain of oxygen for too long, and he was lying in a hospital ward hallucinating. While doctors prepared to harvest his organs?

"I can't really sleep," Pointer complained. "I doze but I don't sleep. Sleep would be an escape."

Deborah spoke from her chair. "You were weak, darling, but I forgive you. What matters is we're together."

Together.

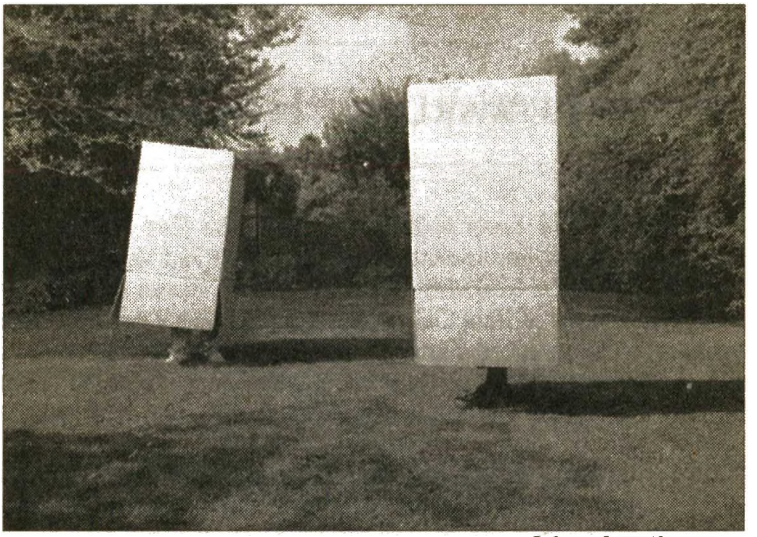
Carlos shivered.

If this wasn't the fourth day or the sixth day, which day was it?

HOW TO SOLVE AN ACROSTIC

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters from the column to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a mystery-themed quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken.

MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Boxed Up and Ready to Go

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 "September Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the March Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 140.

BAJA

EDWARD D. HOCH

Annie Sears had been a detective with the San Diego Police Department only a few months when she received an unexpected assignment. She was to accompany one of the veteran detectives to La Paz near the tip of Baja California to bring back a prisoner being extradited to the United States. Frank Munson, the detective sergeant she'd be traveling with, was middle aged and a bit stocky, wearing a belt in its last notch that told Annie he'd been putting on weight.

"This is one bad guy," he told Annie in the squad room, handing her the plane ticket for the following day's flight. "Dunstan Quentis is his name." He passed over a photograph, apparently a mug shot, showing a scruffy-looking man with a shiny shaved head. "His parents were Mexican Americans, very religious. He and his older brother both started out studying for the priesthood. After that he graduated from passing bad checks to stealing jewelry. He served a stretch in prison, and when he came out he turned to armed robbery. Last month while fleeing from a jewelry store holdup on Broadway, he hit a police officer with his car and killed him."

Annie studied the picture. "And they arrested him in La Paz?"

Munson nodded. "The store owner here ID'd him, but by that time he'd made it across the border and kept going south."

"Till there was no more south," she mused. "It was that way back east too. Sometimes people on the run get as far as Provincetown or Key West and discover there's no place else to go."

"Oh, he had reason enough to head for La Paz. His brother lives down there and for a long time it was said to be the pearl center of the world. That's changed now, but there is still an active trade in pearls."

"Is that what he stole from the jeweler?"

Munson nodded. "Pearl necklaces are his specialty. He contacted a fence there who would have bought the pearls, reset them, and sold them, but it turned out he was a police informer. The Mexican authorities arrested Quentis and he waived extradition. We get the

job of bringing him back. It's a wonder the cops made the arrest. Mexican police aren't above a bit of bribery at times."

"We're bringing him by air, I hope."

"Certainly. I wouldn't want to drive the length of Baja with a cop killer."

The following morning was a Tuesday, and Annie met Frank Munson at the San Diego airport at eight o'clock. They were booked with their prisoner on a late afternoon return flight, so it would be a fast back-and-forth trip. Munson explained that the only problem was the airport, actually at San Jose del Cabo, nearly sixty miles south of La Paz. "That's the resort complex where most tourists go, so that's where the airport is. We'll rent a car, but it's probably about an hour's drive."

"How long is the flight?"

"Over six hundred miles, close to two hours."

Their plane was a small regional jet filled with a few businessmen and assorted tourists. They had to check their weapons through, and when Munson objected, the woman at the desk explained that a couple had been arrested recently for trying to get guns on board by impersonating police officers escorting a prisoner.

Once on board, Annie strapped herself in and said, "My first case with your department involved a jeweler, the Essex killing a few months back."

He nodded. "I was on vacation then, but I heard you did a fine job."

"The jewelry business seems to be a hazardous trade."

He laughed. "I'm sure banks get robbed more often than jewelry stores."

Flying high over Baja California, it was sometimes possible to see both coasts of the narrow peninsula at once. The calm waters of the Gulf of California, once called the more colorful Sea of Cortez, contrasted sharply with the livelier waves of the Pacific Ocean. "From up here the land seems to be all desert," she remarked.

"Desert and cactuses, but there are some nice beaches. Many Californians have second homes down here."

"Have you been to La Paz before?"

"A few times. Steinbeck once wrote that you can get anything in the world there."

She smiled. "You're a literary man."

Munson shrugged. "Off and on."

"Is it true? Can you get anything in the world in La Paz?"

"We won't be there long enough to find out, will we?"

⁂

They rented a four-door sedan for transporting the prisoner. The drive north from the airport was dull and dusty, but as they approached La Paz, Annie became fascinated with the iron-shuttered colonial houses they passed on the way. Once in the city itself, luxury tourist hotels took over. In the main square, vendors did a brisk business selling lottery tickets and tacos to the visitors.

"Do you know where the jail is?" she asked.

"If my directions are correct, it should be that building on the left."

"I'll buy that. There are bars on some of the windows."

"We'd better have lunch first, so we don't have to stop once we have Quentis in tow."

It sounded good to her, so they stopped in one of the hotel restaurants that catered to tourists. The food was good and it would go on their expense account for the trip. Munson drove to the jail and parked the rental car around the back of the building, in a dusty lot near the rear entrance.

"I don't like the looks of this place," he said, nodding toward a group of youths playing ball in an adjoining field. "You'd better stay with the car and I'll go in for Quentis."

"You can't do that alone," she objected.

"One of their men can accompany us to the car. It'll be all right."

Annie waited by the car with growing unease until she saw Munson reappear with the handcuffed prisoner. She recognized the bald Dunstan Quentis at once from his photograph and held open the rear door. Munson introduced the Mexican officer, Miguel Paseo, who'd accompanied them. He wished them a safe trip back. "Be careful of him," Paseo warned, gesturing toward the prisoner. "He's a mean one."

"We'll get him back in one piece," Munson promised.

Annie made certain their prisoner's handcuffs were attached to a security belt and then got in the back seat with him, sitting behind Munson. "We're taking you to the airport at San Jose del Cabo," she told him. "Then we'll have you back in San Diego in two hours."

He looked at her and grinned, showing two gold teeth. "I'm not back yet," he said.

Munson spoke up from the front seat. "We have to warn you that anything you say during the trip may be used against you in a court of law. And if you act up we'll put leg irons on you too."

"What about the pearls?" Annie asked her partner.

"The authorities recovered them, but we just came for the prisoner. Transferring the pearls will be handled separately. There'd be

too much risk sending them back with us and the prisoner."

"Makes sense," Annie agreed.

Dunstan Quentis said very little on the drive south to the airport, commenting once on the city he was leaving. "I'll miss La Paz. They have beautiful beaches and beautiful ladies. I could have stayed here the rest of my life, gazing at the sunsets."

"And the pearls?" Munson asked him.

Quentis didn't answer. He just kept gazing out the window at the passing scene.

As they neared the airport, Annie tried to make some conversation. "We're nearly there. You'll be on the plane in no time." But her words brought no reply.

Frank Munson pulled into the rental car return area, and Annie went around to the other back door to help Quentis out. That was when it happened. Their prisoner slid out fast, bumping Annie as if by accident and knocking her off balance. Then in a flash he was gone, sprinting across the asphalt toward a chain-link fence.

"Stop or I'll shoot!" Munson shouted, his service pistol already in hand. He raised it to fire, an easy shot at that range.

Annie hit his arm just as he fired, the bullet going harmlessly off target. "Don't shoot!" she yelled. "I'll get him!"

She couldn't let the man die because of her bungle, and she was sure she could beat him to the fence. He'd never get over it anyway, cuffed to that belt. She took off running before her partner could fire again. Quentis was at the fence, with Annie not ten feet behind, when suddenly he whirled and threw the handcuffs at her face. She dodged and went down on one knee, and before she knew it, Quentis was over the fence. The car rental employees had scattered when Munson fired, and as he came running, trying to get a bead through the fence on the running man, they stayed hidden.

He fired another useless shot and turned on Annie in a fury. "Christ, Sears, don't ever do that again! You let him escape!"

"He got the handcuffs off somehow. I didn't—"

"Get in the car!"

They spun around through the rental car gate, with Munson showing his badge, and took off across the rutted field in pursuit of the running fugitive. But she could see that he'd make it to another fence and the highway before they were close enough to risk another shot.

"Frank," she managed to say as he slowed to a stop. "I'm sorry I messed up. I just didn't want you to shoot him if it wasn't necessary."

"It was necessary, Sears, believe me." He pounded on the steering wheel in frustration. "Damn!"

"What do we do now?"

"I'll tell you what we don't do. We don't go back to San Diego without him!"

Annie could imagine her whole career going out the window as they drove along the highway trying to spot him. Of course he was long gone, either on foot or after hitching a ride. "He'll head north, back to La Paz," she guessed. "He must have friends there. And a brother."

"What am I supposed to tell them back home?" His voice was still angry, and she really couldn't blame him. "That I had an easy shot at him and you bumped my arm to save a cop killer's life?"

"No," she said quietly. "Can't you tell them there was a paperwork delay with the local police?"

"That might work for a day," he admitted. "No longer."

They drove in silence for a time, past the resort hotels and golf courses, scanning the highway without much hope. Finally she said, "We have to go back to that police officer, Paseo. He must know where Quentis was living when they arrested him. And what about that older brother?"

Frank Munson nodded. "I'll call Paseo on my cell phone."

Paseo answered at once on the other end. "We had some trouble," he began. "Quentis got away from us. . . . I don't know how it happened. He got loose from the handcuffs and made a run for it. . . . Look, I need to know where he hangs out, who his brother and his friends are. . . . No, we can't go back without him. Call the SDPD and tell them there's been a paperwork delay, and you can't release him till tomorrow. . . . I know, I know. Listen, do this for me and I'll make it worth your while."

He snapped the cell phone shut and Annie asked, "Did you just offer him a bribe to lie for us?"

"It's no big deal. I'll give him a liter of rum."

"That's still a bribe."

"I'm trying to save your skin, Sears, in case you didn't notice."

That silenced her for a few minutes. When she'd finally gotten up courage to speak, she asked, "Did he give you an address?"

"Where they arrested him, yeah. Don't know if that'll do us much good. It's the last place in the world he'd head for. A man named Kurt Striker lives there. Don't know what his connection with Quentis could be."

But they had to start someplace. The address was near the docks, and that gave Munson an idea. "There's a ferry runs across the Gulf to Los Mochis on the Mexican mainland. That would be his best way out of here if he wanted to get away fast." When they

reached the harbor area they checked the schedule and found the next trip wasn't until six thirty that evening.

They found Striker's address easily enough. It was one of those iron-shuttered colonial houses Annie had admired earlier, with a line of trees separating it from the beach. A bandstand stood near the water's edge, an afternoon plaything for a half dozen small boys romping around on it. A police car was parked in front of the house and the officer, Miguel Paseo, was just coming out the door. Munson cursed under his breath and got out of the car with Annie behind him.

"He's not here," Paseo told them. "I checked."

"Not likely to come here either with a cop car out in front," Munson told him. "Who's inside?"

"Fellow named Kurt Striker and his girl."

"I want to see them."

"What's the use? Quentis hasn't been back here since we arrested him."

"I want to see them," Munson repeated.

The Mexican police officer shrugged and led the way back to the door. He rang the bell, and after a moment it was opened by a Mexican girl wearing a T-shirt and jeans. She appeared to be still in her teens. "What? You back again?"

"We need to see Striker," Munson said, forcing his way into the house. It was a shabby place, about what Annie expected along the docks, with the curtained windows admitting only dim light.

A man in an undershirt and pants came in from the kitchen. He was smoking a cigarette and had a tattoo of a harp on his upper left arm. "What is it now?" he asked, annoyed at the interruption.

"These are the San Diego police," Paseo explained. "They insisted on speaking to you personally."

"I told Officer Paseo everything I know," Striker said.

"Dunstan Quentis has escaped from our custody. It's urgent that we apprehend him," Frank said.

Striker gave him a smirk. "And how did that happen, Sergeant Munson?"

"He got free of his handcuffs somehow. We thought he might head back here."

"No chance of that."

"What was your relationship with him?"

"I met him in a bar. He was a fellow American and we struck up a friendship. He wanted to know where he could sell some pearls. I sent him to Papa Belota's, a pawn shop I visit sometimes. I don't know what happened there, but the police came and arrested him here that night."

"He'd given this as his address?"

A shrug. "I suppose so."

"Was he living here?"

Striker glanced at the girl, who said nothing. "I gave him a bed. He promised me a cut of the money when he sold the pearls."

"Did you know they were stolen?"

"Of course not! He said they belonged to his grandmother."

"All right," Munson said finally. "I need to find our missing prisoner. If he should come here or contact you, let us know."

"Will do."

As they were leaving, the girl followed them to the door. When she was closing it she whispered in Annie's ear, "Quentis here!"

At first Annie wasn't sure she'd heard her correctly, but by the time they reached their cars she repeated the words to Munson and Paseo. "She says he's in there! Right now!"

Munson doubted that. "She probably just meant he was there earlier, before he was arrested, but we already knew that."

She turned to Officer Paseo. "Can't we go back in and search the place?"

He shook his head. "We'd need a search warrant, just like in your country."

"How long would it take to get one?" Munson wanted to know.

"Depends on the judge. Probably tomorrow at the earliest, the way things move down here. It's late in the day already."

"All right," Munson told him. "Get it as fast as you can and ring me on my cell phone when you do. Can you get a patrol car to drive past here a few times? If they think we're watching the house he may stay put, if he's in there at all."

"Maybe we should stay here," Annie suggested.

Munson shook his head. "I've got one other place we might try—Papa Belota's, where Dunstan Quentis tried to sell his pearls."

The pawnshop was in an older part of the city, away from the glitter of the resort hotels. It had a large sign announcing Papa Belota's, with a crude painting of three gold balls. Steel shutters rolled down at night, and when Annie and Munson reached it a lumbering old man was pulling them down. Annie was surprised when she glanced at her watch and saw it was already after five.

"Hold up there!" Munson called to the man. "We're police. We have some questions to ask."

"I have no answers. It is after five o'clock." Munson showed his badge and the man laughed. "That's the San Diego police. You have no authority here."

"Look," Annie said, "we only have a few questions. Can't we come in for five minutes?"

"No."

"You're American, aren't you? Down here hiding from the police. Why else would you be helping the local authorities?"

He glanced around nervously and waved them inside, under the half lowered shutter. The place was a litter of objects, pawned for a fraction of their value. Violins and saxophones competed with cameras and jewelry. Annie even saw a portable typewriter from another era, reminding her of the one a character pawned in *The Lost Weekend*. Munson pointed out a German Luger, someone's relic from World War II.

"What do you want?" Papa Belota asked.

"We're looking for Dunstan Quentis," she told him. "We know he brought you some stolen pearl necklaces to sell, and you reported him to the police."

"Am I to be hounded for obeying the law?"

"We just wondered what your relationship is with Quentis."

"There is no relationship. I never saw him before he walked in here with those pearls."

"You must get many pearls in this city."

"Not so many. Folks are more likely to sell them to jewelers. But the police had issued an alert about these stolen necklaces. As soon as I saw them I reported it, and they arrested him at the address he'd given me."

There was no more to be learned at Papa Belota's. As they went back to the car Annie had another idea. "What about that older brother Quentis had down here? Wouldn't Quentis have contacted him?"

"It's worth a try," Munson agreed. He called Officer Paseo on his cell phone and asked about the brother. He made a few notes and then hung up. "Brother's name is Benedict Quentis. He's in the wholesale fish business. Runs a company that sends a boat out to buy fish as soon as they're caught. The fishermen sell to him and don't need to come into port to unload their catch."

"Do you have his address?"

"Yeah. He might still be around the docks. It's not the sort of job where there are regular office hours."

They found the brother without difficulty at the dock where his boat was anchored. He was obviously older than Dunstan but bore little resemblance to him. For one thing, he had a thick head of dark hair, handsome features, and a suave manner that seemed more capable of obtaining pearls by persuasion than by robbing jewelry stores. He was laughing and joking with his men.

"I know nothing about my brother," he insisted after they introduced themselves. "The last I heard he was serving time in a California prison. If he was on the run, he'd never come to me." As he spoke he watched his men unloading the day's catch into a wheeled cart to take inside.

"A good day?" Annie asked.

"Average." The cart bore the name of Benedict Quentis and a symbol of a cup and a coiled serpent.

"What's that?" she asked. "Do you catch snakes too?" He smiled at the question. "It is a symbol of Saint Benedict. I come from a Catholic family."

"You and your brother studied to be priests," she remembered.

"It didn't take for either of us, especially Dunstan. I think that broke my mother's heart. It's a blessing she or my father didn't live to see what became of him."

"He's wanted in the States for killing a police officer," Munson told him.

"Nothing about him would surprise me."

He had to leave then to help with the fish. "There's nothing more for us here," Munson decided.

"You don't think he could be lying?" Annie wondered.

The detective smiled. "Think Quentis is hiding here under a pile of fish? Want to go searching for him?"

"Then where do we go?"

"There's still the ferry to Los Mochis for us to check out. It's almost six thirty."

The ship proved to be a large car ferry capable of transporting scores of vehicles and several hundred passengers across the hundred and forty miles to Lechuguilla Bay and Los Mochis. The journey took almost three hours, but a good crowd was lined up for the evening trip.

"If he is here we'll never find him in this mob," Annie said.

"They all have to pass through that gate. We'll spot him if he's here."

They scrutinized the boarding passengers and even checked the cars in line, but Quentis was not to be seen. "If he's wearing a wig over that bald head we might never spot him," she said.

"You're right about that. I've been looking for baldies."

The last of the passengers hurried on just before sailing time, and Munson turned away. "Another good idea gone sour," he decided. "Maybe he stayed near the airport after all."

But then suddenly she gripped his arm. "Is that him? The man running for the gate?"

"It sure is! Stay away from me this time, Sears. I've got him."

Quentis saw them at the last moment. He seemed to skid to a stop and change direction, but Munson already had his weapon out. "Freeze, Quentis, or you're a dead man!"

The fugitive turned suddenly toward them. It was unclear whether he meant to surrender or attack them, but Munson didn't wait to find out. He fired three quick shots, all three catching the bald man in the chest.

"You had to shoot him three times?" Annie asked later.

"I wasn't taking any chances this time."

"He wasn't even armed."

"Don't worry so much, Sears. Nobody asks many questions south of the border. He's a cop killer, remember?"

Officer Paseo had come at once following Munson's call to his cell phone. Unlike Annie, he saw no problem with the shooting of a cop-killing fugitive. "They'll probably give you a medal back in San Diego. Saves them the cost of a trial. You going to take the body back with you?"

Frank Munson thought about it. "No point in that. His parents are dead and his only sibling is down here. Maybe Benedict Quentis will even pay for the funeral, though I doubt it."

"We have to tell him about it anyway, before he sees it in the paper," Annie insisted. "I'll go if you don't want to, Frank."

Munson shrugged. "It's all yours."

Quentis's body had been removed. Munson accompanied Paseo back to the police station to give them an official statement, while Annie Sears took the rental car and drove back to the dock where they'd interviewed Benedict Quentis. He was nowhere around, and the fishing operation seemed to be closed down for the day. Finally she spotted one of the men who'd been loading fish into the cart.

"I'm looking for Benedict Quentis. Is he around?"

"Gone," the man replied. "Gone home."

"Where?"

"Or maybe to the Corridor for a beer. Who knows?"

"Where is the Corridor?"

He gave her directions to a restaurant and bar a few blocks away. At first Annie didn't see him in the dim light and decided she'd have to get his home address. Then she heard his distinctive laughter and spotted him in a corner booth with a woman.

She made her way over there and asked, "Could I see you alone, Mr. Quentis? It's very important."

He glared at her, squeezing the woman's shoulder and promising to be right back. They went off to a corner near the restrooms, and

she told him his brother was dead. "My partner shot him as he was getting on the ferry to Los Mochis. He wouldn't surrender."

"Dunstan always was a stubborn fool," he said.

"Will you bury him here?"

He thought about that. "He doesn't deserve a funeral. Bury him where you like. If there's an expense, I will pay it. That's all. He was dead to me long ago."

"All right," she told him, not surprised at his decision. But something was still bothering her, something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

In the morning, she sought out a library that had English-language books. It took her some time to find what she wanted, and then she phoned Benedict Quentis from the police station. "We need you to identify the body," she told him. "Can you meet me at the morgue in the morning?"

"What is this? Can't you check his fingerprints? I haven't laid eyes on him in nearly twenty years."

"I'm sorry, sir, but as next of kin the local police say you must identify the body."

When she hung up, Frank Munson was standing over her. "What's that all about? We've got plane reservations for this afternoon."

"It won't take long, Frank. It's just something I want to check on. I messed this up at the start and I don't want to mess up again."

"Was that Quentis's brother you were talking to?"

She nodded. "I'm meeting him at the morgue in an hour."

"We don't need any identification. Paseo already sent the dead man's prints on to San Diego. That'll prove who he is."

"Just humor me. I want to make up for letting him get away yesterday."

"All right. Just make sure you're at the airport by one o'clock."

While she waited for Benedict, she spoke with the chief of detectives and phoned her office in San Diego. She had to make sure she was right this time. An hour later she was at the morgue, awaiting Benedict Quentis's arrival. When he came in he was hurried and nervous. "I don't want to see his body," he told her. "Not with bullet wounds in it."

"The wounds were in his chest. His face was untouched. He had a shaved head, so he's sure to look different from when you last saw him." She led the way in to the morgue supervisor, who pointed at one of the examining tables.

"That's the one from the ferry boat shooting," he told them.

Annie pulled back the sheet, revealing Dunstan Quentis's shaved head.

Benedict peered at the body. "I don't know. He looks so different now." He bent over and pulled the sheet down a bit further, revealing his left arm, and took a deep breath. "This isn't my brother," he said quietly. "This isn't Dunstan."

Annie allowed herself a slight smile. "Because there's no tattoo, right?"

She found Munson with Officer Paseo in the police squad room. "It's all over, Frank," she told him.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Dunstan Quentis is still alive. You shot the wrong man."

He stood up, shaking his head. "That's crazy. Paseo here already sent the dead man's fingerprints to San Diego."

"Then I guess you've both got a lot of explaining to do."

Two local detectives had entered the room behind her. One of them said, "You'd better surrender your weapons."

"What is this?" Munson yelled. "Has everyone gone crazy?"

"Only you, Frank. How did you ever expect to get away with this?"

"Do you mind telling me what you're talking about?"

"Two things struck me as odd when we called at Striker's house yesterday. First, he called you by name—Sergeant Munson—though no one had mentioned your name or rank. Then as we were leaving, the teenage girl with him whispered 'Quentis here' in my ear. I didn't realize she was trying to tell me that Striker was really Quentis. But I remembered the tattoo of a harp on his upper arm. When his brother Benedict told us he used the serpent and cup as his logo because it was a symbol of Saint Benedict, I remembered that harp. I spent some time at a library this morning and discovered that a harp is a symbol of Saint Dunstan. It was a religious family, as Benedict told me. I checked with the SD police and learned that Quentis had a harp tattoo."

"I know nothing about this," Officer Paseo muttered without much passion.

"I think you know everything about it. Quentis had money from his robberies. Once he was arrested it wasn't too difficult for him to bribe you and arrange for Frank to handle the supposed extradition. You picked me as your partner, Frank, because I was new to the force and you figured I wouldn't ask questions. You showed me a mug shot of Quentis, which was really a shot of Striker, already set up to take his place. Once down here, you found an excuse to enter the jail alone to pick up Quentis. Paseo came downstairs with you both and in the lobby the switch was made. Quentis became Striker and Striker became Quentis. You brought

the bald Striker out in handcuffs while the real Quentis escaped out another door. It might never have worked in a San Diego jail, but down here it was easy."

"If I knew he wasn't really Quentis, why did I shoot him?"

"Supposedly you'd arranged for him to escape, slipping him a key to the handcuffs. But in truth killing him was always part of the plan. He'd be buried here, and Quentis's real fingerprints would be sent to San Diego as proof of his death. Quentis would start a new life as Striker. But I hit your gun arm and saved his life the first time, which complicated everything. We met the phony Striker and we met Benedict Quentis. I put a few ideas together and asked Benedict to identify his brother's body. The tattoo was missing, of course, and I knew the truth."

One of the detectives took over the story then. "We arrested the real Quentis at Striker's home an hour ago. It looks as if you'll be flying home alone, Miss Sears. Quentis and these two will all face charges here—everything from bribery and prison escape to murder."

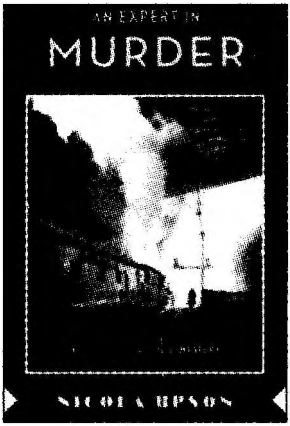
"I think I'll enjoy the trip." She turned to Munson. "I'm sorry I didn't work out as your partner, Frank. I guess you should have picked a man for this job."

Booked & Printed

Robert C. Hahn

The American mystery market has been enlivened in recent years with an infusion of first-class foreign works. This month's lineup features three far-flung authors making their U.S. debuts; not only are the stories these authors tell vastly different, but so are the circumstances surrounding their publication.

Nicola Upson makes a stunning debut in the United States with her first novel An Expert in Murder (Harper Collins, $24.95), which was published in the U.K. earlier this year. For anyone who appreciates the classical British mystery this is one you can't afford to miss. Skillfully rendering the milieu of 1930's London, particularly its theater world, and featuring author and playwright Josephine Tey as a lead character, Upson delivers a brilliantly complete literary mystery.



Tey's hit play, "Richard of Bordeaux," is entering the final week of its lengthy run at the New Theater in London's West End, which is reason enough for the Scottish author (real name Elizabeth Mackintosh) to make the train journey down to London. On the train she meets and befriends young Elspeth Simmons, a fan of the mysteries Josephine wrote under the name Gordon Daviot, as well as a particular fan of her hit play.

Simmons is also going to London for the play. Her young man works at the New Theater and has managed to secure choice tickets for them as a special treat. When the train arrives the two women separate with plans to meet later at the theater. That meeting never takes place as Simmons, returning briefly to the train car to retrieve her bag, is quickly and ruthlessly stabbed and slain.

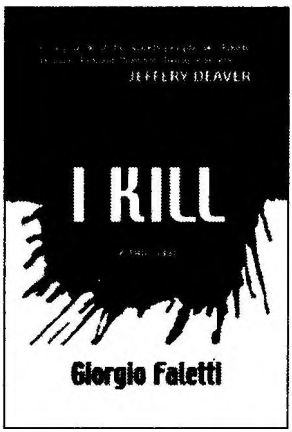
The discovery of her body, and the tableau created around it by the killer, brings Detective Inspector Archie Penrose on to the scene. Penrose is a friend of Tey's: He and her lover, Jack, had served in WWI together—until Jack was killed. One of the many clever touches Upson has fashioned is to make Penrose the model for Tey's fictional detective, Alan Grant.

Upson takes us into the theater world and introduces a memorable cast of characters: impresario Bernard Aubrey always thinking ahead to the next production; lead actor John Terry anxious to break his theater contract to film a movie; the talented, bawdy Motley sisters, Ronnie and Lettice, theater designers extraordinaire; aging actress Lydia Beaumont at that awkward age between leading and character roles; and Lydia's latest romantic interest, Marta Fox.

Upson weaves a mystery that involves all these lives against a backdrop of the cataclysmic events wrought by the devastation of the Great War. It is an impressive and accomplished debut that satisfies on every level: a complex murder carried out with audacity and verve; a setting that is vivid and compelling and reflects its time perfectly; and vibrant characters that remain vivid long after the book is shut.

Giorgio Faletti's I KILL (Baldini Castoldi Dalai Editore, $24.95) represents a dual first. The first of three thrillers by this Italian author is also the first entry into the U.S. market by the publisher. The book is being distributed through Independent Publishers Group.

Faletti's thriller is an auspicious debut for author and publisher alike. Despite its nearly six hundred pages, there are few places where the pace lags in this story of a serial killer who disrupts the glitz and glamour of normally peaceable Monte Carlo with a pair of sensational murders.



The killings are presaged by a call from the killer to Jean-Loup Verdier, host of Radio Monte Carlo's most popular call-in show—a program that is broadcast throughout much of Europe. No one takes the caller too seriously until his eerie pronouncement, "I kill . . ." assumes bloody form.

The first victims attract attention not only because of their fame—Jochen Welder, a famous race car driver, and Arianna Parker, a brilliant chess player—but because of the dramatic way in which they were dispatched and the gruesome ritual mutilation that followed their deaths.

FBI Special Agent Frank Ottobre is in Monte Carlo visiting his friend Police Commissioner Nicolas Hulot of Monaco, into whose lap this case falls. Hulot is quick to ask his friend to apply his expertise, but as the case develops their roles will change considerably.

The killer's taunting calls to Jean-Loup continue to precede the killings and provide almost the only clues the careful killer leaves. Cat-and-mouse games continue with plenty of cunning surprises as casualties mount and a ruthless American general enters the chase with an agenda of revenge that threatens anyone who gets in his way.

Special plaudits are due the translating team of Muriel Jorgensen, Lenore Rosenberg, and Antony Shugaar who rendered this hefty volume into fluid English that reads smoothly and easily.

Martina Cole's American debut is a very different story. Cole's CLOSE (Grand Central, $24.99) is the British author's thirteenth novel. Despite the fact that she has had many best-selling novels in England, this is her first foray into this country.

Her first novel, *Dangerous Lady,* was a bestseller back in 1992. Since then she has written more than a dozen books and seen two of her novels turned into successful TV series. It is curious that Cole's novels have not entered the U.S. market sooner given the success so many British crime fiction authors enjoy here. But Cole is hoping to rectify that.

Close is the saga of the Brodie clan's ups and downs in the rough and sordid crime world of East London. Covering a forty-year period from the 1960's forward, the novel deals with a criminal underworld where cops are often on the take and the law of the jungle prevails. The only ones you can trust are family, and you can't really trust them. In this world Patrick Brodie makes his mark, capping his rise to the top of the heap with a bold and violent deposing of the current "Face."

Brodie controls the liquor, the clubs, and the prostitutes, and has a hand in everything that goes down in his territory. He marries Lily whose loyalty, smarts and resolve resonate throughout the saga.

Brodie in his turn is deposed even more cruelly and violently than his predecessor, and Lily must hold her family together any way she can until her sons can wreak their vengeance. Lily's resolve, strength, and endurance stand out vividly in a novel where men rule almost all aspects of their society.

Cole writes from the criminal's point of view, and her novels are violent, expletive-filled, misogynistic, and entertaining all at the same time. In East London and Essex (Cole's home town), her books are not only most read, but also most stolen from bookshops. It will be interesting to see if this British "godfather" type saga can sell as well here as it does at home.

FEAT OF CLAY

DONALD MOFFITT

It had been a vexing morning for the scribe Nabu-zir. First there had been the difficulty with the temple official Lu-inanna over the inventory lists that he said the temple scribes were too busy to work on today. He had promised a half mina of silver for the job, which had turned out to be twice as long as he'd said, and which had eaten up half the morning. And then Lu-inanna had tried to fob him off with a quarter mina. Next there had been the loan agreement, where the two parties had kept changing the terms after the clay had already been inscribed. Nabu-zir had ruined a half dozen tablets that could no longer be smoothed over and rewritten, until he'd finally had to tell the two fools to go away and come back when they were ready to imprint their signature seals.

And finally there had been that cursed wedding contract.

Nabu-zir stared after the departing wedding group and shook his head. They were halfway to the temple steps and they were still quarreling. The bride's father had balked at putting his seal on the tablet, claiming that the father of the would-be groom had reduced the agreed bride price. The young man's father, in retaliation, had accused the other of evading his own obligations. The two hired witnesses had then chimed in, each on the side of his principal, and almost come to blows. Then they had all turned on Nabu-zir, blaming him for the impasse. Meanwhile the poor girl, whose mother was a household slave, had burst into tears, while the embarrassed young man stood by helplessly.

The six of them turned the corner into the ziggurat precincts and disappeared. Nabu-zir breathed a sigh of relief. The contract was now binding under the law, and if the contending parties tried to continue their nonsense inside the temple, the priest would put a stop to it, with a stern reminder of the penalties for abrogating a contract with a scribe's seal on it.

He squinted at the sky. The sun god, Utu-shamash, was at his height, and it was long past time for his midday beer. He signaled to the beer wife plying her trade across the plaza, and she

Tim Foley

hastened to ladle out a pitcher of her brew and cut a drinking tube for him. But before she could start across the square toward him, a shadow fell across his face; he had another customer standing in front of him.

The newcomer had come alone. He was a young man of good birth in a flounced linen skirt with one end draped across his shoulder. But the skirt was not fresh, and the grime of several days rimmed the hem and flounces. Nabu-zir raised his eyes to the young man's face and saw red-rimmed eyes and a haggard expression.

Before Nabu-zir could greet him, the young man burst out, "You are the scribe Nabu-zir, who sits in the courtyard of the moon god?"

Nabu-zir replied gravely, "This is the courtyard of Nanna-sin, the moon god and father of Utu-shamash, the sun. And I am Nabu-zir."

"I am Shamshi-enlil, second son of the merchant Azid-shum," Nabu-zir's visitor told him, then stopped, seemingly unsure of himself.

Nabu-zir studied the young Shamshi with awakened interest. Azid-shum was one of the richest men in Ur, with a big house within the shadow of the ziggurat and trading posts as far away as the city of Kish. His skin boats came regularly floating down the twin rivers with their cargoes of lumber, stone, metals, and other precious goods from the northern frontier.

"Everyone in Ur knows the name of Azid-shum," he said. "Why have you come to me?"

Shamshi-enlil hesitated. "Everyone says you are a fair man," he said.

Nabu-zir waited.

"Everyone says you are not afraid to take the part of a poor man when an injustice has been done, even to challenge the *nu-banda*, the chief inspector himself, on behalf of a client."

Nabu-zir ran his eyes down the elaborate flounced skirt. It bespoke wealth, soiled though it was. "But you are not a poor man," he said.

Shamshi-enlil's face fell. The words poured out. "There is in our house a slave named Elutu, who was a farmer upriver near Larsa before he had to sell himself, when he lost his field through taxes. He told me the story of his neighbor, also a farmer, who came near to losing his own field through the actions of the same greedy tax inspector, who made false claims and seized his cattle. No scribe but yourself would deign to write a letter to the king, being afraid of retaliation by the temple administrator. But you

did not fear the power of the temple, and through the king's wrath, the tax collector was removed and the man's property was restored to him."

He stopped for breath, then finished in a rush, "This Elutu lamented to me that he had not gone to you before he lost his freedom, and seeing that I too was a victim of injustice, spoke your name to me, though it put him in danger from my brother."

"So you took the advice of a slave and sought me out," Nabu-zir said dryly. He cast a pointed glance at the bedraggled garment. "After spending the night walking the street."

Shamshi-enlil flushed. "For the sake of Anu, god of the great above, will you hear me out or not?"

Nabu-zir grew thoughtful. "I remember the case of your farmer. Come, we will go to my house, away from prying ears." He gathered up his styluses and whittling knives. "Here, help me to carry this tub of clay."

Nabu-zir's house was in the waterfront district, nestled among the mud brick hovels that fronted the inner canal. He sent his serving woman, Nindada, to the tavern across the alley to fetch beer. He seated his guest beside the hearth, where he could get a salutary view of the little shrine to the moon god, and sat down facing him. While they waited for the beer, Shamshi had a furtive look round the mud brick interior with its sparse wall decorations.

"Not what you're used to, eh?" Nabu-zir could not help saying.

The young man mumbled a flustered apology.

"Never mind," Nabu-zir said. "Not the way you'd expect a scribe to live, but it's comfortable enough for me." Out of pity, he decided not to mention the two people buried in funeral urns under the floor, the parents of the previous tenants.

Shamshi was saved from further embarrassment by the arrival of Nindada with two pitchers of beer. He poked a straw through the brewing debris floating on top and took a sip. Nabu-zir did likewise, after piously spilling a few drops on the hearth for the moon god.

"Now then," Nabu-zir said, settling back comfortably, "what's this all about?"

"How the thing was done," the boy said miserably. "That's what I can't understand. Is there a wind demon who can penetrate solid clay? Perhaps I need a *mashmashu*, an exorcist, and not a scribe like yourself."

Nabu-zir saw that young Shamshi was floundering, his thoughts dashing off in all directions like the wild asses in the proverb, and needed help to tell his story.

"This has something to do with your older brother?" he suggested.

Shamshi nodded gratefully. "Ubar-sin. He has always been wild and unrestrained. My father was so grateful to the gods for his firstborn that he never laid a burden on him, never denied him anything. Ubar-sin was never put to work, never was asked to carry reeds as the young and the little are wont to do or follow the caravans that brought our father wealth. He was given everything he asked for, and he wanted more and so grew up to think even the gods were in debt to him. Our father told him, 'My son, you have brought me sorrow, have tortured me to the point of madness and death,' and still Ubar-sin would not mend his ways."

"And now Ubar-sin has done something to worry your father, is that it? Something that requires an exorcist or a scribe?"

"My father is dead," Shamshi-enlil said bitterly. "Even as we speak, he is presenting himself to the seven judges of the underworld."

"Azid-shum, dead?" Nabu-zir said. "And you have come to see a scribe?" It was becoming clear. "Is there something about the inheritance? But I can do nothing about a will that is properly inscribed and attested."

"That's what I thought. I was a fool to come here!" Shamshi-enlil stood up abruptly, ready to go.

"Sit down and finish your beer," Nabu-zir said, "and we will talk."

". . . and this fox of a scribe, Puzar-il, when he was finished, read the tablet back to us and enjoined us to sign it with our cylinder seals. Ubar-sin was very angry, so angry that he cursed our father and cursed the very gods. Then he was frightened by the penalty for such recklessness, for our father might have shaved his head, put a slave mark upon him, and sold him. So, though he did not beg forgiveness, he put his seal on the tablet along with mine, thinking to get around our father later. So then Puzar-il inscribed an envelope of clay with a summary of the will and sealed up the tablet."

Nabu-zir had sent Nindada out twice more for beer, and his young client's tongue had become sufficiently loosened. Shamshi leaned forward expectantly, waiting for a response.

Nabu-zir pondered the facts of the story for a while, then said, "A successful merchant like your father must have known something of the art of writing. Did he not think to verify the document before signing it?"

"It is true that my father as an educated man had learned

something of the art over the years, though of course he never went to the scribe school as a youth, to be whipped into learning by the *ummia*, like yourself. But the signs he knew were mostly concerned with goods and numbers, so that he could verify receipts and bills of lading and such things. He made a quick examination, and the document must have looked all right to him, with the lists and quantities of the property to be divided. And he trusted Puzar-il. They had done much business together for a long time."

Nabu-zir pounced on the last statement. "So this fox of a scribe, as you call him, had participated in your father's dealings before, and doubtless saw to his client's advantage when making out receipts—" He raised a knowing eyebrow. "—and such things."

Shamshi looked sheepish, but pretended a flash of anger. "One does not become a big man by being soft. But my father was honest in his dealings."

"Oh, we can be sure of that. The fines for falsifying a receipt can be ruinous. One could even lose a finger or two."

Shamshi's answer was a stubborn silence.

"Besides," Nabu-zir went on imperturbably, "a fox of a scribe would not leave a trail for the hounds to follow, is that not so? But let us return to the matter of the tablet. Did you notice anything amiss at the time?"

"Me? What would I know?"

It was like leading a stubborn donkey. Nabu-zir waited him out.

"It is true that my father tried to instruct his sons in what he knew of writing so that we might assist him in his business. For a short time he even paid a teacher from the scribe school to come to our house and tutor us. But Ubar-sin could not be taught. He disappeared when the teacher came, or sat in insolence, not listening."

"But you were different?"

"I learned a little," Shamshi admitted. "But not much more than my father. I could manage commercial writing, but I could not have managed a letter or read poetry, like the story of Gilgamesh, with any fluency. Besides, I was not given time to do more than glance at the tablet and its envelope before imprinting my seal."

"And what did your glance tell you?"

"Everything seemed in order. There were the property lists, in columns separated by lines. At the top of each section was a picture sign for my name or Ubar-sin's, with the wedges that say *ahi*, the brother sign. The columns for Ubar-sin were very short. Mine were long."

"So your father intended to disinherit his eldest son and instead make you, the second son, the master of your brother?"

"He was very wroth with Ubar-sin and said he needed a lesson. He said that he would not leave his life's enterprise and the management of his wife and his household to a spoiled child in the skin of a man. He said several times that day that he saw no other way of making Ubar-sin change his profligate ways. But he held out hope to Ubar-sin that if he were to one day show that he had learned his hard lesson, he would restore his portion."

Nabu-zir said thoughtfully, "So your father had no notion that he might die anytime soon?"

"No. He wore an amulet against the *asaku*-demons that cause illness, and though he was a man in the fullness of his years, they did not trouble him."

"Hmm. But soon after the making of his testament, the goddess of death did, in fact, visit him?"

"Yes. He felt her presence, and called for an *ashipu*-priest to remove the curse, though the demons had closed his lips to food and water, and sat on his limbs to make them weak. The priest brought a kid, and put him in the bed with my father. He then touched my father's throat with a wooden knife, and cut the kid's throat with a knife of bronze. Then he dressed the kid in my father's clothes and performed the ritual of mourning. But the goddess of death was not deceived, and my father passed away the next morning."

"What then?"

"We sent for the *kalu*, the funeral priest, of course, and the proper rites were performed, with a hired lyre player for the dirges. A coffin of clay was made, one befitting my father's importance and not a reed mat or two jars wrapped together mouth to mouth, as suffices for common folk. He was provided with food and drink for the journey to the nether world and gold to pay the ferryman. And a pit was prepared under the floor for his burial."

"And his cylinder seal, it was buried with him?"

"Of course. How would he make his declaration to the seven judges without it?"

"And the seal remained around his neck all during the preparations for burial?"

"Where else would it be?" Shamshi was starting to look annoyed.

"Can you swear to that?"

"The body was never left alone," Shamshi said with strained patience. "If I was busy, there was always a servant or the priest or a dependent."

"Did your brother not help during this time of grief?"

Shamshi gave a great sigh. "He could not be found. He was ever one to evade his responsibilities. Perhaps he returned at night to sleep, but if so, he was gone before dawn."

"So though you were the second son, and the will that elevated you had not been opened yet, all the preparations were left to you?"

"Yes. I am used to Ubar-sin's ways."

"And when did you see him again?"

"Not until the third day, after my father had been buried. And then he immediately insisted that we go before a judge for the opening of the will. He seemed very eager."

"Did that not strike you as odd? After all, the will disinherited him. If what you say is true, he knew that."

"Who ever knew what Ubar-sin was thinking? He did not think. He was like a moth that flies into the flame. Even as a child he would often act to do himself harm."

"And you had other things on your mind," Nabu-zir. said sympathetically.

"Yes."

"Let us go on. So you went before a judge of the inheritance court to have the envelope broken and the will read. I assume that Puzar-il was present, and took the usual oath, knowing the terrible penalties for perjury."

"Yes."

"And the original witnesses. Were they present?"

"One had died. The other attested to the authenticity of his seal impression on the tablet."

"And his impression on the envelope as well?"

"The envelope was displayed to the court before Puzar-il was given leave to break it, and the witness raised no objection. What does it matter? All the seals on the tablet were authentic."

"Including yours?"

Shamshi bit his lip. "Yes."

"Can you be sure?"

"My seal cannot be mistaken," Shamshi said. "It was carved in marble by the finest craftsman, and shows the rising of the sun god and his bride, Aya, the dawn. Attending them is the goddess of love and war, Inanna, and Enki with his fish, and the creation goddess Aruru, with many, many details. There was even a tiny crumb of clay at the tip of one of Inanna's wings that I remembered from when I rolled the seal over the tablet."

"Was it the same seal I see hanging from your neck now?"

"Yes, it is the same seal I have worn all my life."

Nabu-zir eyed the little cylinder thoughtfully, as though he had never seen one before. It was a tiny thing to hold a person's

identity, no larger than his little finger. It hung from a thin gold chain which passed through a hole that had been drilled lengthwise through the marble.

"Did it leave your neck at any time between your father's death and the reading of the will?"

"No."

"Even at night?"

"No, I slept with it."

Nabu-zir nodded approvingly. So did he. So did most people. One's identity was a precious thing.

"It comes down to this so far," he asserted. "The seals on the tablet cannot be doubted, not even yours. And yet you say the terms of the will had been altered."

Despair contorted Shamshi's youthful features. "Where my name had been, my brother's was inscribed. Where my brother's name had been, my name was. The laws of disherison were clearly etched, as they had been before. But now they applied to me, not Ubar-sin." He buried his face in his hands. "The thing that was hardest to bear was that now all the reproaches that my father had meant for Ubar-sin—that he had brought him sorrow, that he had driven him to the point of death—were now laid at my feet instead. The judge looked at me with loathing when he announced his decree."

Nabu-zir gave the young man a moment to compose himself, then said, "It is possible to smooth wet clay with one's thumb and rewrite a word or two, you know. I have done it myself many times. Even after the surface has begun to harden a little, one may sprinkle a little water on the spot to soften it and perhaps rub in a little fresh clay. It is not possible after the tablet has begun to shrink within its envelope, though for a day or two, if the sealed tablet has been kept out of the sun, I suppose the thing might be done."

An expression that might have been the beginning of hope flickered across Shamshi-enlil's face. Nabu-zir continued, his brow wrinkled in thought.

"But the tablet was wrapped up in its envelope, and all its seals were intact. So we must look instead to the envelope. Everyone had a look at the writing on the envelope before it was smashed, though I suppose the judge did not bother to read it through, other than to verify its subject matter. Were the same seals in place?"

"Yes, all of them."

"Yours, your brother's, your father's, the two witnesses, and, of course, the scribe's, Puzar-il's. Did you yourself verify them?"

"Once I realized that the will had been altered, I reexamined the

seals on the tablet itself very carefully and could see no reason to doubt them. By now the judge was becoming impatient, but before the temple janitor could sweep up the fragments of the envelope, I picked through them to find the seals."

"That was intelligent of you. Your clear thinking after such a blow is commendable. What did you ascertain?"

"I saved the fragments, much good will it do me."

Shamshi fumbled at his garment and drew out a small linen packet that had been tied up with a knot. Nabu-zir untied the bundle and spread its contents on the table.

"This imprint shows Enki, the god of learning," he said, holding up one of the larger fragments. "I take it that this is the mark of the scribe, Puzar-il."

Shamshi confirmed it with a nod.

Nabu-zir held up another shard. He paused for a moment to admire the exquisite detail. It showed, among other things, a donkey caravan, trains of skin boats, bursting storehouses, all being blessed by a whole pantheon of gods.

"And this," he said dryly, "will be the seal of your esteemed father, Azid-shum?"

The young man made a sign of respect. "You are correct, Nabu-zir."

"And this one?" he said, holding up a third fragment.

Shamshi said, without bothering to look more closely, "It belongs to my brother."

"And where is your seal?"

Shamshi sifted through some of the smaller fragments and pushed three of them into rough alignment. "There," he said.

"You can tell?"

"Everything is as it should be. The tree of life, the fish god, the blessed Inanna."

"And yet the images do not seem quite as sharp to these tired eyes. Or am I mistaken."

"Perhaps the impressions crumbled a bit at the edges when the clay split. Or perhaps I was not quite as careful when I rolled my cylinder across the clay."

"Perhaps," Nabu-zir allowed. He picked up the remaining intact shard. "And this one?"

"It belonged to the dead witness. An old friend of my father's."

"Convenient," he said. "He is not here to dispute it." He squinted at the jagged piece of clay. "This one seems the slightest bit blurred, too, in a couple of spots. What about the other witness?"

Shamshi shoved the few remaining fragments into alignment. Nabu-zir saw a conventional scene of a new year's celebration, with a procession of naked priests filing up the ramp of the ziggurat with

their offerings, and the sacred coupling of the god and goddess reenacted by the high priest and the high priestess.

"A pious man," Nabu-zir remarked. "Also an old friend of your father's?"

"A household retainer. Buzu by name. He was one of those charged with our management as boys, and I am sorry to say he often turned a blind eye to Ubar-sin's escapades."

"But not to yours?"

"No. He was ever quick to use the stick. And when the reading of the will made it clear that Ubar-sin is to be the master, he began to show me disrespect. He laughed when Ubar-sin threatened to put the slave mark on me and sell me, as a father is entitled to do. Perhaps it was a joke, but I am afraid to go home."

Nabu-zir stood up. "You will stay here for the time being," he said decisively. "My servant Nindada will see to your needs. I will put my seal on the doorpost, that no one may enter while I am gone. I think I had better see this scribe, Puzar-il."

He found Puzar-il's spot after making inquiries in the bazaar. A slave, a scruffy boy with pimples on his face, was scraping a residue of dried clay off the bricks and gathering a stool and sunshade and other possessions in a small pile.

"My master is not here," the boy said in an insolent tone. "He has gone home."

"And where might your master's home be?" Nabu-zir said.

The boy scanned Nabu-zir's unassuming costume. "That is not for any tablet-writing *dub-sar* to know," he said and turned away.

Nabu-zir said mildly, "*Dub-sar* I may be, boy. And you must surely be the donkey that eats its own bedding to speak that way to a freeman. It is a strange slave indeed who does not know where his master lives. Show me the tag that lists the name of your owner, that I may be sure you are not a runaway, to be reported to the patrol."

The boy's hand darted reflexively to the little clay tablet he wore around his neck. "My master lives in a house a few paces from the first eastern gate," he said sullenly. "It may be recognized by a niche next to the door containing an image of Nabu, the god of scribes. If he knows you learned it from me, I will be beaten."

"I will not tell him," Nabu-zir said.

"If he is not there," the boy volunteered, "you may find him at the shop of Lugal-kan, the seal maker, in the next street."

Nabu-zir thanked him and set off for the city's eastern wall. It was a long walk in the sun; though the afternoon had advanced, the coolness of evening had yet to arrive.

He found the house with little trouble. The image of Nabu was where the boy said it would be, larger than most such effigies and painted in garish colors. There was no rope end with clay seal barring the door, so Puzar-il was at home.

He planted himself in front of the door, and without raising his voice, said, "Puzar-il, I wish to see you."

There was no response, though he could hear voices within, so he repeated himself.

After an interval, the door opened to the width of a man's hand, and a large brute with the shaven head of a slave said, "Go away."

Before the door could be closed, Nabu-zir said, letting his voice carry, "You are not very courteous to a fellow scribe, Puzar-il. I thought the two of us might have had a collegial discussion of the amazing testament of the late Azid-shum."

Silence hung in the air for a moment, then a voice from within said grudgingly, "Let him in."

The burly door slave stepped aside, and Nabu-zir entered. The first thing that struck him was the rich aroma of roasting pork and pungent spices wafting in from the rear courtyard. Two female slaves were bustling around a table laden with dishes of delicacies and painted drinking vessels with gold straws. A large footed harp adorned with a golden bull's head rested in a corner, presumably left there by the musician who would entertain during the banquet.

Nabu-zir's eyes leapt to the corpulent man sitting on a gilded chair in the center of it all. "I see you have become prosperous, Puzar-il," he said.

"I was always prosperous, Nabu-zir," Puzar-il said sourly. "Not like you."

"I see you know who I am."

"You are the pestilential fellow who writes letters to kings and otherwise stirs up trouble."

"As we were taught in scribe school, we are enjoined by the goddess Nanshe to protect the poor from the rich, to seek justice for the orphan and widow, to see that the man of one shekel does not fall prey to the man of one mina."

"Worthy sentiments for schoolboys," Puzar-il sneered. "But one learns that there is a real world."

"Worthy sentiments that are esconced in law," Nabu-zir said mildly. "That is why there are punishments for those who, as Nanshe says, substitute a small weight for a large weight, who substitute a small measure for a large measure, who take the possessions of another through trickery."

Puzar-il's jowls worked. He said tightly, "The testament of Azid-shum is not at all amazing. He left the greater portion of his legacy

to his eldest son, as is common. The seals were in place, including the seal of the younger son, and a judge of the temple read the tablet."

"And yet the younger son says the tablet that he put his seal to gave him the greater portion."

Puzar-il heaved a great sigh. "You and I have heard such claims before. The young pup was unhappy with his share, and thought to better it."

"I have heard that it was the older pup who was unhappy with the will when it was inscribed, and showed his anger. He had to be coerced by his father to sign the tablet and its envelope, and he took it badly."

"Where are the witnesses who would testify to such a thing, other than the young pup who was disinherited? Where are the signed documents that would confirm it? You are playing a dangerous game, Nabu-zir. The prize is the death penalty."

"I make no accusations, Puzar-il. I am just asking questions."

"You have asked enough questions. Leave, or my man will throw you out. I will gladly pay the fine for any injuries."

"What, Puzar-il? You are not going to invite me to your banquet to help you celebrate your newfound wealth?"

Puzar-il's bloated face turned purple. The oversize slave took a step toward Nabu-zir. Nabu-zir looked at him coldly and said, "Stay where you are, fellow."

The man took a step back. Nabu-zir gathered his garment about him and, with a nod to Puzar-il, unhurriedly left.

The shop of Lugal-kan, the seal carver, was in the next street, as the boy had said, next to a rather disreputable-looking tavern. It consisted of little more than a cluttered workbench under a seedy awning, not the tidy establishment that Nabu-zir would have expected of a free artisan.

The man squatting at the bench looked up warily at his approach. He was a scrawny fellow with the one-eyed squint of someone who has done much close work over a long period of time.

There was something else about his face that interested Nabu-zir: a faded rough patch on his forehead where a slave mark might have been removed. If so, the man might have good reason to be wary of strangers. He would have been questioned by busybodies many times through the years. The law decreed the death penalty for illegally removing the slave mark, both for the runaway slave and the person who performed the operation, unless he could prove that he had been deceived into believing that the slave had been legally manumitted.

"Ah, Lugal-kan," Nabu-zir said genially. "I was told I might find you here."

The fellow looked at him suspiciously. "And who might it be who told you that?" he said.

Nabu-zir lowered his voice, as though they had a secret in common. "Why, my fellow scribe, the estimable Puzar-il."

At the mention of Puzar-il's name, a peculiar expression that might have been fear flashed across the seal maker's face and disappeared so quickly that Nabu-zir could not be sure that he had seen it.

"What is it that you wish of me?" the man asked cautiously.

Nabu-zir lowered his voice again. "What else but a seal? Puzar-il had great praise for your skill and artistry."

That provoked a snappish outburst. "It is not Puzar-il's custom to praise anyone for anything. Rather it is his way to find fault and threaten."

Nabu-zir had decided that the seal maker was not a crony of Puzar-il, as he had thought, but rather someone over whom Puzar-il had some kind of hold. "And yet," he said, choosing his words carefully, "he praised you as a man of discretion. He said that I need have no fears about trusting you."

Apparently that struck the right note. Lugal-kan leaned forward and said, "Perhaps we had better talk inside," and Nabu-zir knew that he had been provisionally admitted to the circle of scoundrels.

He followed Lugal-kan into the mud-brick hovel behind the awning. Lugal-kan closed the door behind them and cast a furtive look around the place, as if to assure himself that some mischief-making demon had not flown in ahead of them.

Nabu-zir took stock of his surroundings. The single room was mean and shabby. A smell of stale beer hung in the air, and the only food he could see in the larder was an open sack of grain bearing the label of the ordinary citizen's ration, as well as a few onions and a couple of discs of unleavened bread. But the workbench was another story. The array of sculpting tools beggared the meager equipage outside, and there was an ample supply of marble and other fine stone. Evidently this was where Lugal-kan did his real work, out of public view.

He was careful not to specify anything specifically illegal and so risk scaring Lugal-kan off. "I need to reproduce a cylinder seal that I have lost," he said in a confidential tone. "An old client entrusted me with it because he did not want to weary himself with the business of personally certifying some hundreds of petty declarations of produce from his agricultural holdings. And now he wishes his cylinder back, and I cannot put him off much longer."

Lugal-kan sized him up with his squinty eye. "This cylinder would go to its rightful owner? Not to be used by someone else?"

"I swear by all the gods, Lugal-kan, that nothing would be done with the cylinder that would attract the attention of the superintendant of the inspection, the agrig, or his policeman. Though I must say that my client is very wealthy, and the temptation would be great, if one were foolish."

The seal maker still seemed hesitant, so Nabu-zir threw him another fish. "Of course, as we both know, if there is any profit to be made from this, Puzar-il will get the lion's share."

From the play of expressions on Lugal-kan's face, Nabu-zir could see all the little thoughts darting back and forth like minnows. After a pause, Lugal-kan said, "There is no seal carver better than I in all the land of the two rivers. I learned my art in Eridu, and was renowned there, until circumstances forced me to flee to Ur. But even a talent like mine cannot ensure that some small imperfection might not be noticed by a seal's owner. Particularly when I would not have the seal itself to copy, but only an impression made by it."

"My client is old, with weak eyes, and the seal was worn from years of use. Besides, he is a little foolish, and not inclined to notice things."

Greed struggled with caution in Lugal-kan's scarred face. He said, "The gods are my witness that I have not agreed to do anything to falsify a contract, but only to perform a service for a seal's rightful owner. The burden is on you."

"You will not be sorry, Lugal-kan. Your reward will be great."

The little man became brisk. "You will bring me one of the tablets with the imprint of the seal on it. Bring the one with the clearest impressions, and if there is any doubt, bring me two or three."

"You will have them tomorrow."

Lugal-kan was anxious to get rid of him now, but Nabu-zir wandered over to the workbench as if by curiosity and picked up one of the unfinished cylinders that were lying there.

"This promises to be a fine work of art," he said, pretending admiration. "I can see why Puzar-il relies on you." But while he spoke, his eyes searched the bench and its surroundings. There was a little spouted tin pot resting on a small brazier, and next to it, some chunks of wax and an untidy heap of flattened fragments to be remelted.

The little sculptor was at his side in an instant, his hand outstretched. "Give me that!"

Nabu-zir made as if to hand it over, but contrived to drop it before the other could snatch it from him. Lugal-kan immediately scrambled to pick it up, and while he was distracted, Nabu-zir managed to palm a few of the wax fragments and tuck them into a fold of his garment.

"Forgive me, Lugal-kan," he said. "I did not mean to disturb your work. I will bring you the tablets tomorrow."

He took his time sauntering to the door, to feed the man's irritation and further distract him. When he was past a bend in the narrow street and could be sure he was out of sight, he paused to examine the wax segments he had palmed. They contained fractured images of the sort that might be found in the imprint of any cylinder seal, except that they were in bas relief, not incised.

None of them were of particular interest, except to confirm what he had already deduced. Except for one. Nabu-zir thanked the gods for his luck. He held the wax segment up to the wâning sunlight to be sure. Though the images were incomplete, they plainly showed part of a frieze featuring the ascending sun god and his bride, attended by several other gods. There was Inanna with her bow, and though Enki, the fish god, was not visible, it was clear from a levitating stream of fish that he had been present in the part of the frieze that was broken off.

But the clincher was a tiny imperfection: a minute fleck at the tip of one of Inanna's wings that must have originally been an unwanted crumb of clay. It was welcome evidence. It insured that the accuser in what might turn out to be a capital case would not himself be put to death.

Nabu-zir set his lips in a tight line and tucked the wax fragment away safely, for now it contained his own life. He quickened his stride and headed for home.

When he reached his waterfront house, the light was already growing dim, and some of the bazaar merchants were beginning to fold their awnings. He frowned when he saw his door. The rope end with the gob of clay bearing his seal was hanging loose. Trespass was a serious crime in Ur, and not lightly risked except by the stupid and the ruthless.

He pushed open the door, afraid of what he might find. Shamshi was gone, an overturned chair attesting to a struggle. Nindada was huddled in a corner, her garment in disarray. She lifted a bruised face to him, blood still trickling down her forehead from a cut in her scalp.

"They came and took him, lord," she said. "He fought, but there were three of them."

He helped her to her feet and sat her down in a chair. She made no complaint about her injuries, as another might have done in her place. Nindada had lived a hard life and was glad of it when he had rescued her from the temple's wool factory where she worked as an indentured weaver amidst a throng of other underfed women and children. In return she had given him her unswerving loyalty and, more to the point, an unexpected resourcefulness that eased his daily life.

"Who was it?" he asked.

She clutched at his arm. "One was his brother. I heard him use the word *ahi*. He was the leader."

"And the others?"

"One I took to be a free household servant. I heard him called Buzu. He had an arrogance above his station. After they bound the young man's hands, they taunted him, saying he would soon learn what it was to be a slave. The third was an ox of a man, the sort whose value is his strength." For the first time her voice wavered. "I'm sorry, lord. I could do nothing to stop them."

He patted her arm. "You need not trouble yourself, Nindada. You have done well. Tend to your wounds. You have leave to use the salve from the alabaster jar, which was made with the most expensive ingredients and compounded with powerful incantations. Then rest."

He went to the chest where he kept the weapons he had collected over the years and selected a bronze dagger he had confiscated from a murderer, hiding it under the shoulder drape of his garment. On second thought, he added a stout cudgel, which he could carry openly. The wax segment he had stolen from Lugalkan, he hid at the bottom of the chest.

He paused at the door to look back. Nindada was already straightening things up, righting the overturned chair. Nabu-zir shook his head and stepped out into the night.

The assistant administrator, Lu-inanna, was annoyed at being disturbed after sunset, when he was looking forward to relaxing over a jar of beer or two with some of his temple cronies.

"Really, Nabu-zir," he said, "aren't you being a little overzealous about some misunderstanding in an inheritance case? Can't it wait until morning?"

Nabu-zir stood his ground. "I tell you, Lu-inanna, a murder has been committed. And another murder might take place while we are standing here arguing."

"Are you sure you want to do this? The penalty for a false accusation of murder is death for the accuser himself."

"I am sure. And if that is not reason enough for you to act, there is the matter of the housebreaking and the beating of my servant."

"Come now. The penalty for inflicting an injury is only a small fine if the victim is a servant or a slave. Likewise the penalty for unlawful entry."

"If you wish to split hairs, Lu-inanna, the penalty for trespass by a day is a fine, but death if by night. And the sun had already set. So you already have a capital case."

Lu-inanna sighed. "Really, my overexcitable friend . . ."

"Or must I go to the high priest and tell him that nothing was done while a crime against the state and against the gods was being committed?"

"All right, all right! Give me a few minutes to find the chief constable."

"We'll need a few armed men. And a torch bearer."

"Enough, Nabu-zir! Does the dog teach the lion to hunt?"

"And I'll need a warrant."

"Write it yourself while you are waiting."

Despite the assistant administrator's show of indifference, four burly patrolmen and a torch bearer were found in less time than it takes water to boil. The patrolmen wore leather helmets and carried short spears, looking impressive enough for his purpose. Nabu-zir strode at their head, just behind the torch bearer, carrying his cudgel. The clay warrant, still soft, was tucked next to his skin along with the bronze dagger.

They marched through the silent and deserted streets of Ur past row after row of blank mud-brick walls, each house marked only by the single arched door that gave access to the foyer and the courtyards within. Only the distant flicker of an occasional torch or lamp signaled the presence of others with business abroad.

Nabu-zir halted them at the door to the merchant's house. There was nothing to distinguish it from the less affluent houses on either side, except that, from the distance between doors, it could be seen to be wider.

He tapped softly, not wanting to alarm the doorkeeper within. The door opened a crack and he immediately pushed past the doorkeeper, the patrolmen right behind him. The man tried to flee but was caught and held by one of the patrolmen before he could raise the alarm.

"Do not try to flee, and do not shout for help," Nabu-zir warned him. "This is temple business."

He produced a warrant and read it aloud. The man reacted with incomprehension, but the sight of the temple seal frightened him

into compliance. Nabu-zir left one of the patrolmen to guard him, and led the others through the lobby and into the courtyard.

The whitewashed walls of the surrounding complex rose above them, bordered by a continuous wooden gallery that supported an upper story. Nabu-zir made a beeline for the door to the central hall, with the policemen pounding along behind him, and burst through to an evil scene. Young Shamshi-enlil was bound to a chair, with three menacing figures looming over him. A glowing brazier stood on a nearby stand, with a branding iron heating in it.

There was an arrested moment before the three were aware of the intruders, then they turned to face Nabu-zir and his escort. Nabu-zir could tell at a glance which one of them was Shamshi's brother, Ubar-sin, and he recognized the other two from Nindada's description.

"What villainy is this?" Ubar-sin shouted, and the big one, the ox, made a move toward a battle-ax that was leaning against a table. Nabu-zir raised his cudgel, but the policemen were also raising their weapons, and the man thought better of it.

"The villainy is yours, Ubar-sin," Nabu-zir said, "and you have been found out."

Ubar-sin spoke with contained rage. "A father may sell his children as slaves, and my father's will made me the father of my brother."

"You and the scribe you bribed with a promise of a share of the riches falsified the will, and when the judges of the assembly render their verdict, it is your brother who will be *your* father, to dispose of you at his pleasure. But he will not get the chance to sell you, for the court will decide the punishment for all your crimes. Including, I believe, the murder of your father."

Ubar-sin turned ashen. "Who are you, to speak to me like that?" he said.

Nabu-zir produced the clay tablet and held it up. "Shall I read you the warrant, Ubar-sin? This time there is no dishonest scribe to change it to your liking."

He motioned to one of the policemen, who came forward and cut Shamshi loose. "Thank the gods that they saw fit to send you here in time," Shamshi said shakily. "They were about to mark me as a slave. Buzu wanted me killed. He said it would be safer, that no question would ever come up that way. But my brother said it would do to sell me to one of the northern caravans, that I would never be seen again."

Nabu-zir turned to Buzu. "You were going to be made rich too. Rich enough to contemplate murder, it seems. What was your part

in this? Were you the one who poisoned your master, Azid-shum? Did you steal the old man's seal after he was dead, long enough for Ubar-sin to take it to his bought scribe to provide a stamp on a new envelope?"

All of Buzu's cockiness was gone. "I did not poison my master," he said sullenly.

"No one will care if yours was not the hand itself. You will be sentenced anyway, as an accomplice."

He turned to Ubar-sin again. "How did you poison your father, elder brother? What did you use? Mandrake? Nightshade? Some concoction bought in a thieves' den, sprinkled in your father's evening tipple? It doesn't matter. We will find out."

"None of this can be proved. And there is no voice to speak out."

"Dumb objects always have a voice, Ubar-sin. And they have already spoken out."

An excited chittering of voices could be heard from beyond the hall from the servants, who had become aware that something was going on, but who did not dare intrude. But the three patrolmen had shifted their attention to the archway behind Nabu-zir, and he turned his head to see. The fourth man, the one he had left with the night doorman, was coming through the arch, gripping a household slave firmly by the elbow.

"This one is named Elutu," he said. "He has something to tell you."

It was Shamshi who spoke first. "Elutu, you were the one who spoke the name of Nabu-zir to me!" he cried, his voice breaking with emotion. "The goddess Nanshe must have spoken in your ear, for he has brought me justice! As justice will be brought for you! I swear it!"

"You can let go of him," Nabu-zir said to the patrolman. "He will not run away."

"He came to me in the door chamber, babbling his head off," the patrolman said stiffly. "I thought it my duty to bring him to you, since it was no longer necessary to hold the watchman."

"You acted with commendable initiative," Nabu-zir assured him, "and I will say so to the chief constable." He turned to address Elutu, who was rubbing his elbow and quivering with a desire to speak. "You saw something, but you were afraid to speak before, is that it?" he said.

Ubar-sin, his face livid, tried to rush forward, and had to be restrained by a policeman. "You will not speak against your master!" he shouted. "I will punish you!"

"You are my master no longer," the slave said defiantly. He advanced toward Nabu-zir, his chin up like a free man. "I was one

of those assigned to watch the body of Azid-shum before the burial. I was alone with him during the night, and I saw his cylinder seal around his neck, as always. While the household slept, this one—" He nodded toward Ubar-sin. "—who had not been seen all day, crept into the house and ordered me out of the chamber. When I heard him leave the house again, I went back. At first I noticed nothing, but then I saw that the cylinder seal was gone. The same thing happened the next night, and this time the seal was back around Azid-shum's neck."

"You will testify to that before the judges?"

"Yes, Nabu-zir."

Ubar-sin went wild, and tried to break free. The guard quelled him with a rap on the side of the head.

Unperturbed, Nabu-zir continued: "Doubtless we will find other servants able to tell us more about the circumstances surrounding Azid-shum's death. Such as the symptoms pointing to a poisoning rather than a visit by a demon sent by the goddess of death."

"They will be afraid to talk, lord."

"They will have nothing to fear," young Shamshi said, stepping forward. "I will see to that."

". . . and so," Nabu-zir summed up, "only two of the seals had to be forged on the envelope—those of the disinherited Shamshi-enlil and the surviving witness. The envelope, as usual, got only a cursory look before being smashed, and in case there might be any question of Shamshi-enlil demanding a closer look after the will was opened, that impious scribe Puzar-il had cleverly started a crack in those two spots to ensure that those seal impressions could not be whole. All the seals on the will itself, of course, were authentic."

The great assembly hall was packed to bursting with the free citizens of Ur, and hundreds more who could not be squeezed inside were milling about restlessly in the outer plaza. Because of the overriding importance of the trial, the judges had decreed that a full council of the citizenry would be involved in deciding the case. There was an oft-quoted proverb: "Do not wander into the Assembly to be drawn into other people's quarrels, and risk being forced to testify in a lawsuit not your own." But the sensational nature of the Shamshi-enlil case had drawn even the uninvolved and wary to the assembly hall.

The defendants were grouped together in front of the judges' raised thrones, guarded by spearmen. There were four of them: Ubar-sin and his principal accomplice Puzar-il in the fore, and the

two henchmen, Buzu and the ox, in the second rank. The seal carver himself, Lugal-kan, had fled the city as soon as he had heard that Puzar-il had been arrested, probably to hide in Eridu. It didn't matter. All the cities of the plain cooperated in returning fugitives, and eventually Lugal-kan would be brought back to Ur for arraignment. What did matter was that in his haste he had left behind enough evidence to show how the fraud had been committed.

The evidence was on display on an offering table from the temple, a gilded platform that was usually laden with the daily tribute of grain and other commodities. Today, for all the crowd to see, it held the brazier and tin pot that had been used in the forgeries along with one of the forged seals that Lugal-kan had failed to dispose of, the wax fragments that Nabu-zir had stolen, and the clay shards that Shamshi had had wit enough to retrieve.

The crowning piece of evidence was the clay tablet itself, with its smoothed-over and rewritten names. The names had been altered skillfully enough so that the deception could not, in all honesty, be detected, but Nabu-zir had made effective use of it in his summing-up, holding it up before the indignant crowd and whipping up their emotions.

He held the tablet up for a last reminder of what the trial was about, but it was unnecessary for him to speak. A murmur of outrage spread through the crowd, and a stocky citizen at the front said, "To change a document after it has been sealed is a crime against the gods, worse than murder, and murder has been done here as well! Even a judge of the temple may be punished if he changes his judgment after it has been inscribed on clay!"

There was a cacophony of voices as others sought to speak. Nabu-zir replaced the tablet and settled back to wait. It was going to take hours, but the verdict was not in doubt.

Nabu-zir and Shamshi-enlil were enjoying a beer together and discussing the events of the previous day, when Nindada came hurrying in from the vestibule, where she had been sweeping away the morning's dust.

"Lord," she said, a little out of breath, "the inspector Lu-inanna just turned the corner down the street and is headed this way. He is bearing an armful of tablets. I cannot deny him entrance. What shall I do?"

"Do not trouble yourself, Nindada," Nabu-zir said. "Doubtless he has come here to gloat. He will be taking credit for bringing Puzar-il and the others to justice. Go across to the tavern and fetch a jar of beer for him. And bring back more beer for us as well."

She hurried out, leaving her broom. Nabu-zir turned to Shamshi

and said, "He will be asking a large offering for the temple now that you are rich," he said.

"He will have it," Shamshi said. "The gods created man to support them."

"Ah, yes," Nabu-zir said. "We support them, and they support us. That is why we have daily offerings and monthly offerings, and offerings in between."

"As to the slave, Elutu, he shall be a farmer again. I am freeing him and will see to it that he is given back his field."

"Meaning a generous offering to the temple."

"Yes. It is the least I can do for him. I am in his debt for sending me to you. He is a brave man."

"He will have to be brave. The temple's tax collector will want a third of his crop."

Lu-inanna chose that moment to enter. If he had heard the remark he gave no sign. Nabu-zir went on smoothly, "Ah, here is Lu-inanna now. You can discuss the matter with him."

Lu-inanna deposited his load of tablets on the table and sat down heavily. "And what matter is that, Nabu-zir?" he said.

Shamshi interposed a reply: "I wish to buy back a field that was confiscated by a tax collector, so that its owner will not have to pay rent to the temple in addition to his crop tax."

Lu-inanna manufactured a smile. "It is good to see you looking so prosperous, Shamshi-enlil. We shall have to name you Lugal-Shamshi now that you are a great man. I presume that this is about that slave of yours."

"He is a slave no longer," Shamshi said.

"Under the code of Nanshi, outright ownership of land is permitted," Nabu-zir pointed out.

"Ah, our scribe is now a legal scholar," Lu-inanna shot back. To Shamshi he said, "Come round to the temple tomorrow and we will discuss it."

Nabu-zir tilted his head toward the pile of tablets on the table. "What have you brought me, Lu-inanna?" he said. "More payroll lists to be copied?"

"Something more interesting, Nabu-zir. A record of yesterday's trial, on eleven numbered tablets. We will need many copies. One for the legal library, another for the judges of the assembly, others for the libraries at Kish and Uruk and Eridu. It will keep you busy for many days."

"Yes," Nabu-zir mused. "It will be consulted for years to come."

"A warning to all those who might seek to steal someone else's name. All four will be put to death. We cannot have such a thing. Ur itself might fall."

"And what of the fifth, the sculptor of the seals?"

"He did not get far. He was intercepted on his way to Eridu. But he will not be tried here in Ur. We will have to send him back to Eridu. It seems he had a mark on his forehead. He had it removed by some scoundrel doctor. Not a slave mark. It said, 'A fugitive, arrest him.' He will face charges enough in Eridu."

"One can almost feel sorry for him. Eridu is not as merciful as Ur. They will make an example of him."

Nindada arrived with the beer, and further talk broke off. After a sip, with Nindada still in the room, Lu-inanna said slyly, "Your servant is very handsome, though not young. The temple should never have let her go. Will you sell her?"

"She is not for sale," Nabu-zir said. "Her freedom was written in clay when I bought her debt, and she has the tablet to prove it."

Solution to the July/August "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

A. Makeshift
B. Cubbyhole
C. Oxtail
D. Radish
E. Remits
F. Inhabited
G. Galveston
H. Abbreviate
I. Nephews
J. Nicked
K. Evocative
L. Writhed
M. Yorkshire
N. Off the cuff
O. Radiator
P. Kowtowed
Q. Thirsts
R. Hornet
S. Rotaries
T. In the red
U. Lookalike
V. Lakehurst
W. Eye shadow
X. Rhinestone
Y. Sabbath

QUOTATION

Author—M(aureen) CORRIGAN
Work—NEW YORK THRILLERS (*Newsday*, January 29, 2006)

"If a rookie crime writer has ambitions of breaking into the elite ranks of hard-boiled novelists who've staked out New York City as their turf, he or she had better be brash . . . That's exactly what Richard Hawke does in his debut novel, 'Speak of the Devil.'"

DAVEY'S DAUGHTER

RUSSEL D. MCLEAN

One, two
"Y'see . . ."
Huff-huff
". . . Sam . . ."
Huff-huff
". . . the matter . . ."
One, two
". . . of money . . ."

He relaxed. Stepped back. Kept dancing a little, back and forth, arms loose and fists ready. He was getting on, but there was still a strength about him. Maybe he was a little loose around the edges now, but he still seemed dangerous. I'd never seen him in the ring, but from photos and the way he moved, I knew he'd been a real hard bastard.

He took a few deep breaths, slowed down the dance.

I stepped back from the punching bag. No need to hold it steady, now.

"I ken ye think ye're doing the right thing," he said, "but I dinnae take charity."

"Not charity," I said. "Mates', rates."

"Aw, don't piss me about." He stepped back and moved over to the ring where two boys were working on their punches. Davey yelled at them, "Keep at it, lads. No slacking!" They picked up the pace.

I said, "I'll find her."

"At yer usual fee." He didn't even let me start protesting. "Else I'll knock yer block off. For nothing. How's that for mates' rates?"

Davey's daughter Kirsty was sixteen years old. Sweet sixteen, they say, but in my line of work you come to realise they're always anything but.

Kirsty was missing now for three days. Davey could have—and maybe should have—gone to the police, but he came to me. He

didn't like the local coppers, and more importantly, they didn't like him.

I'd known him now for four years, which was enough time for him to get over the idea that I had been one of the enemy. He thought the police had their place, but where he grew up that place seemed to be harassing him and his mates.

Saying the force has changed is one thing. Proving it to some people is quite another.

So when his daughter went missing, he called me.

And because he'd done me some favours in the past, I took the case, no questions asked.

Davey's gym was falling into disrepair. Health and Safety would probably have a field day. Dundee's working-class gyms used to be part of a thriving community. The lads lapped it up, all that controlled aggression. It was where Davey had learned, in his words, "how tae be a man," and it had instilled enough pride in him that when the last owner died, he took over the business. But as Dundee became less of a working-class city and the metropolitan poseurs took over, a gym became less a place to work out than a place to be seen. Clubs like Davey's took the heaviest financial hits.

So, yeah, in part my offer of mates' rates was charity. But mostly it was because I liked the man.

And I knew how much he loved his daughter.

First time I met Kirsty, she had been twelve years old. Small and innocent. Mischievous too. Always grinning like there was some joke going on only she could understand.

I knew she was growing up. The past couple of years, much as Davey still talked about his daughter in loving tones, he also sounded exasperated and afraid. She was becoming a woman, and Davey had no idea to handle that. How to handle her friends, her boyfriends. How to handle her.

Sweet sixteen. You soon realise how much of a joke that is.

She was going with a lad from round Douglas way called Mick. To give him his most common name: Mick the Mick. Irish, and not about to deny the Blarney Stone as long as it gave him the freedom to make girls swoon.

I made Mick my first priority. Davey said that Mick and Kirsty had been fighting of late. Sounded like another girl, but Davey's daughter didn't tell him anything these days, no matter how much he told her he loved her.

Knowing Mick the Mick, it wouldn't be a surprise.

I'd run Mick in more than a few times while I was still a cop-

per. He was twenty-nine years old now and as much a part of Dundee as the Overgate or the Howff cemetery. Known as a jack-the-lad. A rascal.

A pain in the arse.

I rapped hard on his door and waited. The hall in the tenement smelled faintly of something acidic. Difficult to ignore.

I rapped again.

Kicked the door.

A voice inside said, "Jaysus, gimme a minute!"

Mick the Mick.

When he opened the door, he was wearing a thick dressing gown, and his hair was messed up like birds had been trying to make a nest on his head. "What the hell, d'y—"

I pulled him out into the hall. He yelped.

"Remember me?"

"I owe you money?"

"I arrested you."

He tried to focus. "Aye, police?"

"I was."

"Right."

I gave him a shake. "Where's Kirsty?"

"Who?"

"Your girlfriend."

"No, there's no girl tying me down like—"

"Wrong answer." I pushed him into the flat. He didn't resist. His body was loose, and resisting would be too much effort. Probably the thought didn't even cross his mind. He was too fried.

We danced through to the living room on thick carpets. The posters on the wall were mostly classic '70s stuff. *Serpico. The Godfather.* Like a student pad that was trying too hard. That was how Mick had come to Dundee, and even if the university had chucked him out, it seemed that was how he intended to stay.

I threw Mick on the sofa. He was skin and bones. All the same, the fabric sagged.

"Kirsty," I said.

"I'm telling you—"

I kicked the telly that sat on a low display unit. The screen cracked.

Mick looked ready to piss himself. "Aw, Jaysus Christ, man!"

"She's sixteen years old. Dark hair. The kind of smile could melt you if you're not careful. Apple of her daddy's eye." I made eye contact, hammered the point home. "Her daddy, who could take your head off."

"The old man's a washed up—"

"The old man could still kick your arse."

Mick considered this. Really considered. Cocked his head, rolled his eyes. No sarcasm. Genuine effort.

Then he said, "She's not with me. Not anymore."

"You got bored?"

"She was . . . she was seeing some other fella."

"Who?"

"She wouldn't say. Just told me to sling my hook."

"And you had no idea?" I crouched down, getting to his level. Making sure he knew there was a kind of conspiracy between us. An understanding.

He fell for it.

"Could be that bollix, Fosty."

"Fosty?"

"Aye, Fosty. Christ . . . what's his name? Tom Foster. Yeah, that's it."

"But his mates call him Fosty?"

"Don't know he has mates, exactly."

"Tell me where I can find Fosty."

He told me. And when I was leaving, he asked, "That prick's not coming round, is he? Like, Kirsty's da?"

I didn't answer. Left him shaking on the sofa. Drugs or fear, I didn't give a shite.

Ros, my girlfriend, said it: "Sam, you've become a hardass, you know that?"

She's American, which means she's allowed to use words like "hardass." Anyone else does it in Dundee, they're poseurs and deserve what they get.

After leaving Mick's apartment, I had to wonder if she was on to something. I was feeling on edge, and not just about Davey's daughter. For several months I had been finding my temper more and more difficult to control. I'd been through some crap, culminating in my best friend almost getting locked up on murder charges, but all the same, a year ago, I'd never have burst in on Mick all balls and bravado. Never have threatened him without taking another tack first. But I was going at this investigation like the proverbial bull in a china shop.

When did I become careless?

And when was I going to pull back?

Fosty's place was only a ten minute drive from Mick the Mick's.

A halfway house. Purpose-built. Barely over ten years old and already looking like over one hundred years of winds had battered it from the outside.

Through the main doors, a front desk. Behind that, a gaunt man who looked like he'd rather be waist deep in cow manure than sit there.

"I'm here to talk to one of your, ah, residents."

The man regarded me coolly. "Police?"

"No." I produced a card, placed it on the desk when he didn't reach for it.

"Didn't know we had private investigators in Dundee."

"Well now you do."

"Even in Scotland? What do you really do?"

I didn't have time to argue with him. Said, "Thomas Foster."

The gaunt man didn't bother checking the register. He just rolled the name around once and then said, "He's leaving us soon."

"Aye?"

"A real success story." Heavy on the sarcasm. "Turned himself around. Found the Lord and aw that shite." He gave up. "Jesus, suckered some poor wee bint into taking him in."

"Who's the . . . bint?"

"Like I pry? Look, I sit here, I hear things, and I don't really care."

And he seemed so socially conscious, as well.

"So is he here tonight?"

"Like I said, pal, you're not the police."

"This is important."

He looked at the card again. "Christ, you can print these at service stations. They put a machine in the Overgate where you pay a quid, get fifty of these tae pass around tae anyone who cares."

I pulled out my ABI licence.

He wasn't convinced. "Association of British Investigators? Never heard of it."

The average bloke on the street thinks that investigators exist only in the pages of cheap crime novels. They're mythical creatures, products of an overactive imagination. Sometimes that perception works to our advantage, gives us as professionals the element of surprise. Most of the time, like with the gaunt prick behind the desk, it means that our work is railroaded, knocked right offtrack.

He wasn't about to let me in to see Fosty. He wasn't even going to call the eejit downstairs. He offered to "take a message."

It wouldn't work. Fosty wasn't the kind of man to get back in touch with someone he didn't know. And if I said what I wanted to

talk to him about, he'd probably do a runner and I'd have to start over. By which point Kirsty would be even farther out of reach.

Maybe even . . .

No, don't think like that.

I turned to leave.

I was at the door when the gaunt man said, "Why do you want to talk to him?"

"It's a personal matter between my client and—"

"I can get you to him."

I hesitated. He wanted something, surely. Money?

I turned round "How much?"

He raised his arms, mock-affronted. "Aye, you think that little of me?"

"I only just met you."

"And already here you are, thinking you know me."

"So tell me what you want."

"Is it to do with the girl?"

"You mean the *bint* you mentioned earlier?"

He hesitated, maybe regretting his choice of words. Figuring me for her brother, perhaps. Or her father. "Aye, her."

"Maybe."

"She's young, y'see. Folks who pass through— You get all kinds. People who've fallen on hard times, they're the worst to see. 'Cause, see, they're people. Real people. But then there's guys like Tom Foster. And this girl—she's, what, seventeen, eighteen?"

"Sixteen."

"Jesus. And you think, whatever he's got coming . . ."

"Aye, he deserves it." Making out like I was on his side, but I didn't commit to anything.

"Like I say, you see these people, talk to them, make nice because it's your job. But every so often you wish that someone would . . ."

I knew what he was saying. He was backwards coming forwards, right enough, but it didn't stop him from making the point. I wanted to talk to Tom Foster, I'd be doing it with my fist. That was the guarantee this gaunt bastard wanted.

I tried to weasel my way out. "If he deserves it . . ."

"He deserves it."

"I used to be a copper. Learned about interrogation. I need something from Foster. Sometimes you can get more out of a man if you're not trying to knock his head from his shoulders."

The gaunt man said, "Pish."

I didn't know how I was going to play it, but I figured something

would work out. Maybe Foster wouldn't play ball. Give me an excuse, at least, to look like I was playing ball.

The gaunt man knocked on the door to Foster's room.

No reply.

Again.

Nothing.

The gaunt man sighed, pulled out a swipe card. "Master key."

"What about privacy?"

"For emergencies. The people who stop here, we hope they're clean, like not using, but sometimes . . ."

I nodded. "All the same."

"Like he'll be crying about invasion of privacy when you're done with him, eh?"

He swiped the key. Opened the door.

Recoiled.

I pushed past, saw the blood on the bed sheets first and then saw what had once been Tom Foster crumpled in the corner. Head bowed down, chin balanced on his chest. His skin was pale where it wasn't stained near black by blood. His arms hung uselessly by his sides and his pale chicken-legs were splayed out in front of him. It would have been funny if it weren't so horrific.

The gaunt man risked entering the room again just behind me. I said, "Looks like someone beat us to it."

"Oh Jesus," he said. Sounding ready to puke. His spiel earlier had been all talk, and I'd known that. There's a line between fantasy and reality that most people can't cross.

I said, "Call the police."

"But—"

"Call them."

The gaunt man left the room. I went to Fosty's corpse, knelt down, and gave him the once-over. Just a look. I still retained my copper's training, knew enough not to disturb him.

"So tell me what happened to Kirsty," I said.

Fosty, not surprisingly, said nothing.

D.I. Sandy Griggs glanced at the corpse as he came into the room. "Tell me you didn't do this."

"You know I didn't."

He nodded. "The way Ros looks at you sometimes, I'm not so sure."

Like a kick in the gut, that. Sandy and me have known each other since high school. If there's really such a thing as a best friend, I guess he comes close.

"I wanted to talk to him."

"Aye? Guess he wasn't up to it."

"So you're Tayside's brightest and best?"

He tried for a smile, but it died when his eyes flicked back to Fosty. He said, "We really need to talk."

"There's not much I can tell you."

"Procedure."

We left the room. Out in the corridor, Sandy stopped a uniform, said, "McNee, did the SOCO team give an ETA?"

The young lad said, "Ten minutes, sir."

Sandy nodded. "Nobody goes in or out, got it?"

"Aye, sir." He stood point outside the door.

Already a few curious neighbours had crept out of their beds to see what all the fuss was about. They were all the same, greasy hair, deep-lined features, soulless eyes. Haunted, but perhaps momentarily relieved to realise that it wasn't them in that blood-stained room.

Sandy and I went outside. He sparked up.

"Thought you quit."

He offered me a cigarette. I took it.

Sandy smiled. "Now we both have a secret."

"Katie still getting you on that health kick?"

"And failing. Lately, though, she's not been so bad." Meaning after he got cleared on trumped-up charges of assault and corruption. An investigation that nearly screwed his career.

"I haven't smoked in six months."

"Aye?" He took a deep drag.

I joined him. He knew I was lying. I hadn't given up. Just learned self-control, enough that Ros would believe I'd quit. We all keep secrets, even from those we love.

"Tom Foster," said Sandy. He cracked his knuckles, rolled his head like he was stretching out a kink in his neck. "From what I know, a real prick."

"You don't end up in a place like this if your life's on track."

"Tell me about it," he said. "But Foster . . . record long as your arm. B and E, ABH, GBH, one collar for rape. Dropped, sadly."

"A real character."

"That's what they say."

"Someone like that probably has a lot of enemies." I thought of the gaunt man on door duty. Barely knew Foster, and he practically propositioned a stranger to bounce the poor bastard's head off a wall.

"Did you get a good look at the corpse?"

I nodded, tried not to visualise.

Sandy said, "Vicious."

"I came here because it looked like Foster was going to provide a lead in an investigation."

"Care to share?"

I shook my head. "Client information is—"

"Privileged," he finished for me. Shook his head, blew out smoke. It caught in the moonlight. "How many times do I have to hear you say that?"

I tried a grin.

Sandy looked away. "This is bad business."

"It's always bad business."

"If you were still on the force, you'd have backup."

"If I was still on the force . . ." But I wasn't here to get into recriminations or start bad blood between myself and the one man I still considered a true friend. I bit my lip, hard enough I thought I could taste blood.

Sandy said, "If you say you know nothing, aye, sure, I'll take it at face value. But . . ."

I turned away, took another drag on my cigarette. It tasted foul. Maybe it really was time to quit. I let it drop to the pavement, ground it beneath the toe of my boot.

"Sam, you're not alone."

I tried to laugh it off. "Nah, mate," I said. "Don't try it."

He walked past me, back inside the building. "I did it," he said. "Gave you a chance, eh?"

"Aye. What are friends for?"

I drove a few streets away before parking under the orange glow of a streetlight and taking the phone out of my pocket.

Rule number one: Never interfere with a crime scene. Maybe I was getting carried away. Maybe I was getting stupid. Maybe I knew that I had made a promise to my client and had to do everything within my power to close this case.

There was a girl's life at stake.

And the police could handle that better than . . .

I'd started this. Because for no other reason than I wouldn't be able to live with myself, I was going to finish it. Ros called me a stubborn bastard with good reason.

I scrolled down the list of received calls. A few anonymous numbers, then: KirstMob. Received earlier that evening, just past six.

I dialled.

Waited.

A girl's voice picked up. She sounded nervous, as though she wasn't sure she should really be answering.

"Kirsty?"

"Uh . . ."

"I know it's you. We need to talk. If you're in trouble—"

"Who are you?"

"I work for your father. . . . He just needs to know that you're all right."

There was silence. I thought for a second that she might hang up. Instead she broke down in tears on the other end of the line.

. . . *to know that you're all right* . . .

Like, by that point, there was ever a chance.

Kirsty met me on a street corner, near a group of high-rises due for demolition. With the lights off, the windows boarded up, and their shadows soaking up any light, they were imposing monoliths, reminders of a social failure that we try to deny.

She sat on the kerb, her knees tucked up against her chest. Her head rose slightly on my approach. She looked so small and fragile.

I parked the car, got out, and walked round. Even in the half light, I could see her pale skin standing out against the dark patches of bruises on her face.

Her summery dress was torn and dishevelled, and the backs of her hands were dirty, covered with . . . something.

I didn't want to draw conclusions, as I sat down beside her.

"Your dad's worried for you."

"I cannae go home. No after . . . Just . . . just tell Dad that this is better than . . ." She raised her hands to her face. Then I saw the backs of her hands clearly and realised it wasn't just mud and dirt.

"Tell me what happened."

"I can't . . ."

"Tom Foster had a violent history and—"

"It's no his fault, not really."

"You can't say it was your—"

"Like hell I'm saying that!" She got to her feet. She was suddenly filled with a righteous anger that seemed to flow through the ground like an electric charge. Her muscles tensed and her expression was filled with hate. "No Fosty's fault, no my fault—that bastard Mick—"

"He told me you split up."

"More like he sold me on. Like his bloody property."

I felt sick, couldn't bring myself to stand. Looking at Kirsty, seeing that anger and realising it masked a fear and shame that had been coursing through her. Because of what had been done to her.

And what she had done herself.

She came with me in the end. I took her to a hospital.

Called her father.

Then Sandy.

I didn't say much other than I had found her, that something had happened. Figured she could tell the police the rest if she wanted to.

Davey arrived at the hospital, looking like he'd gained decades in the space of a few days. His eyes were red raw, supported by bags. He saw me in the reception at Ninewell's A and E, came over and said, "Tell me."

I shook my head. "She's been through some . . . I won't lie and say she's fine, Davey. But she's alive and she'll pull through this."

"Oh, Jesus."

I grabbed the attention of a nurse. Davey insisted on seeing his daughter. I waited until she relented, then slipped outside.

My mobile started to ring. I looked at the number.

Sandy.

He could ask his questions later.

I made sure I dumped Fosty's mobile in the Tay before driving home.

Ros was asleep on the sofa, the light from the TV illuminating her gently. Graham Norton on the BBC fawning over whatever celebrity he could get his hands on.

I clicked it off.

Ros stretched. "Hon?"

I kissed her on the forehead, told her I needed a shower.

She was already in bed when I got out. I slipped beneath the sheets, draped an arm around her waist, felt her body heat, and took comfort in the simple fact of her presence.

She turned over so that she could look at me. "There's something—"

"This is me," I said, trying it with a smile.

"Yeah, guess there's always something, huh?" That Alabama accent usually sounded so comforting, and yet there was a sting behind it, something I couldn't quite identify. "Always." She held it a moment. "Sandy called."

"Aye?"

"I know what your work is, Sam. I know who you are. And I accept it all . . . but sometimes I worry."

I was silent for a moment. "I know. Lately, I've been—"

She finished for me. "A little intense. That's how I'd say it, hon."

"Really?"

She waited a while before saying, "I love you, babe."

"I love you too."

"You know what that means, hon? That sometimes, you have to let me in."

The phone woke me around three o'clock.

Davey said, "What'd they do tae my girl?"

I felt confused and sluggish, his words taking a moment to register. "Davey, what the hell?"

"What'd they do tae her?" His voice was slurred with drink.

"We'll talk in the morning."

"We'll talk now."

I slipped out of bed. Ros, awake now as well, looked at me and her brow creased gently with concern.

"You need to get some rest, Davey. We'll talk in the morning."

"We'll talk now!" He sounded like a cornered animal, snarling at me down the line, then he pleaded, "Christ, Sam, please, we need tae . . ."

I said, "Davey, tell me where you are."

Mick the Mick's door had been heaved off its hinges. Like a tornado had swept through the building with deadly intent.

No one else around. The neighbours maybe thinking it better to keep themselves to themselves. Or else they were so used to the sounds of violence in the night that none of them even thought about calling the police.

I walked in.

Mick the Mick was on the floor, his body shuddering gently, tears mixing with blood on his face. A right mess. Worse than I'd left him. And—this made me stop in my tracks—a look of gratitude when I walked in.

Davey was on the sofa, smoking a cigarette. His fingers and hands stained with Mick's blood. He was bright red, a nice sweat worked up. Dressed in a white T-shirt and tracksuit bottoms. If it wasn't for the location and the blood he could have been relaxing after a workout.

"Irish here wouldn't have lasted long in the ring, aye?"

"Aye, maybe there's that."

"Any one of my lads couldae killed him. One blow. Knocked that sorry head ae his right off his shoulders." He looked meaningfully towards Mick, who whimpered and ducked his head into his chest. "That mean I'm getting sloppy as I'm getting on?"

"No," I said. "It means . . . it means you know what you're doing."

"Nah," said Davey. "I want tae kill him. Knock his block right off."

"Then why call me?"

"When I've had a few drinks, like, I get emotional."

"Don't we all?"

"Chrissakes," Mick whimpered, "I don't want to die!"

Davey flicked his cigarette at Mick. Caught the poor sod in the face with the ash end. Mick screamed. "Christ, lad," said Davey, "Keep your gob shut!"

"You called me," I said, "because you don't really want to kill him."

"That so?" Davey laughed hard.

"Aye, it's so." I stepped forward. "I know you feel like you could do it. Like you should do it. And a prick like Mick, thinking about what he did, aye, he'd deserve it too."

"Aw, Jesus."

I turned on the lad, snarled at him. "Shut your bloody mouth, or Davey's the least of your worries!"

Mick whimpered.

Davey laughed.

I stepped forward again. Taking it slow. "But, Davey, this isn't how the world works."

"Aye, what, I call the police?"

"Sure, you call the police."

"And they slap him on the wrist?"

"I give you my word, they'll feed him to the bloody lions."

Davey looked at Mick. His body was shaking, his muscles bunching. "Jesus, Sam, if only it were true."

"Kirsty's alive, Davey. She'll talk, in her own time, and the police are going to lock this bastard up."

"Room and board and three square bloody meals a day?" Davey sounded like he couldn't quite believe it. "What kindae punishment is that?"

"Aye, that's it," I said. "Tell yourself how cushy it is in prison. That he's going to be treated like royalty. Because it's all crap, Davey. He's going to be screwed over in there. Even if I have to use my own connections to make sure of it." I was right in front of him now. I caught his eyes with mine and hoped he wouldn't see any weakness. "And what good does it do Kirsty if you end up inside instead of this worthless bag of shite?"

Davey tried to look past me. I stayed on the way.

He got to his feet. His muscles kept bunching. I thought of springs uncoiling, wondered if I'd even have time to get out the way.

And he moved.

I'd seen him knock young lads on their arses. Not even trying. In this state, I wondered if he'd prove how serious he was about knocking my block off.

But the punch never landed.

Instead, he pushed himself against me, his head against my chest. I thought of boxers in the ring, getting close to the other guy so he couldn't get in a punch. How sometimes they could look like they were embracing each other.

Davey roared.

The sound was muffled.

It hurt worse than any punch.

Three days later Davey was on bail, pending trial, facing, as he'd said, a slapped wrist. I told him time and again he was a lucky bastard.

Every time, he gave me this look that was somewhere between accepting and pissed off.

Mick the Mick, on the other hand, was facing a number of charges. If they couldn't get one to stick, they'd get another. Sandy told me he wouldn't give up on this one till Mick got what was coming.

The lass herself was still in hospital. Her face was pale and puffy, and every so often she would shiver uncontrollably beneath the tightly tucked sheets like someone had turned the heating down past freezing.

I would watch her from the end of the ward, but never approach her. The nurses would watch me in turn, perhaps wondering what I was doing, but always enough doubt in their minds to leave me alone.

Davey was allowed to visit her.

At first, he kept his distance from her bed, watching her, his body screaming impotence—a need to act and no ability to do so.

And then she said something. The first words I had heard in days. I couldn't hear them from where I stood, but I saw her lips move and her father stagger like he'd received the worst sucker punch of his life.

But he pressed on towards her. Reached out and took her hand.

The touch seemed to steady him.

And for a moment—just a moment—I felt a strange elation. Like maybe things could work out after all. And in a world like this, any chance of redemption or resolution or even the smallest of happy endings is a minor miracle. Cause enough for celebration.

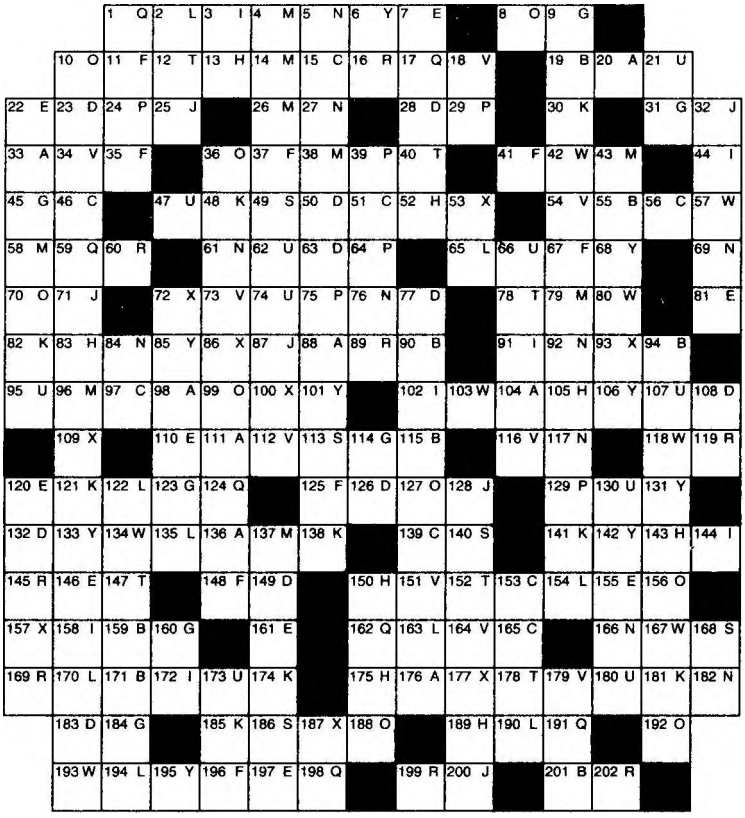
I watched them for a moment more, before I turned on my heels and left the hospital.

Dying Words

Acrostic by Arlene Fisher

For instructions on how to solve the acrostic puzzle, turn to page 28.
The solution to the puzzle will appear in the October issue.

DEFINITIONS	WORDS
A. Puerile	33 20 88 111 104 136 176 98
B. 2002 Chen Kaige movie	159 201 90 55 19 115 94 171
C. Supermodel posture, maybe: slang	56 139 51 15 97 153 165 46
D. Vojvodina's locale	77 50 23 149 108 183 132 63 126 28
E. Condiments container: 2 wds.	155 120 197 7 81 22 110 161 146
F. Like eight-track tapes	35 41 67 11 125 37 148 196
G. Patterns of flow	123 160 184 114 45 31 9
H. Museum regular, perhaps	83 13 143 189 52 105 150 175
I. Fast-food units	144 172 91 44 158 102 3
J. — Rising, 1916 event	71 32 200 25 128 87
K. In a far from adroit way	181 82 174 185 30 141 121 48 138
L. Snug site	170 194 154 65 2 190 163 135 122
M. Khoisan language	79 26 14 137 58 38 4 96 43
N. Marine alert: 2 wds	92 5 76 61 117 166 27 182 69 84
O. "Years of Renewal" author	127 99 10 192 8 188 36 156 70
P. Nehemiah follower	64 29 129 24 75 39



Q. Becomes evident

191 1 17 59 162 198 124

R. Convention bigwigs

202 145 16 199 89 119 169 60

S. Hugh Laurie TV role

186 140 113 168 49

T. Chewed the scenery

178 12 152 78 40 147

U. Perissodactylous mammal

107 130 180 95 62 173 66 74 21 47

V. Front section, in some spots

164 54 179 34 112 18 116 151 73

W. Sought information

134 103 193 42 167 118 80 57

X. The Blade, e.g.

100 86 157 53 93 109 177 187 72

Y. Helicopter: slang

131 101 85 133 142 106 68 195 6

FIRST COUSIN, TWICE REMOVED

JOHN H. DIRCKX

At four A.M. the birds started waking up. Willy Kennebaugh, who had been dozing fitfully through much of the night, also jolted abruptly awake. Somewhere in the house a creaking of wood and a muffled thump had thrown him into a sudden sweat of almost superstitious terror.

The sounds had come not from the direction of his mother's room but from the main staircase leading up from the front hall. Having lived in this house all his forty-four years, Kennebaugh was well familiar with every nocturnal snap and groan of its ancient timbers. For five minutes he lay motionless, perspiring ice water from scalp to toenails, and heard no further noises. At length he mustered enough courage to sit up on the side of his bed and pull on his slippers in the dark.

Uppermost in his mind was the fear that some of the vagrants from the colony in the woods at the bottom of the hill had gotten bored with carousing on wine and whooping like savages in the middle of the night and had decided to launch an assault on the nearest house. This was an abiding dread of long standing that returned nightly to beset his timid soul as the shadows began to fall.

Kennebaugh shuffled along the shadowy passage toward the head of the stairs. After arriving there he peered with elaborate caution around the worn newel post. A faint glow of breaking day, straggling through the grubby, uncurtained window on the landing, showed him a vague motionless shape huddled there. With mounting horror, his heart slamming in his throat like a truck engine missing on two cylinders, he started down the stairs.

It seemed to him like hours before the EMTs arrived. Then they swarmed into the house, deployed a mountain of paraphernalia, and carried out a series of lifesaving maneuvers with maddening slowness, while Kennebaugh kept hovering and getting in their

way. Finally they assured him, with crisp and impersonal tokens of sympathy, that his mother had expired and that further efforts at resuscitation would be futile.

Nick Stamaty had barely settled himself behind his desk in the coroner's office when the first call of the day was passed on to him by a secretary. Fire and Rescue was calling to report the death, at home, of Iris Kennebaugh, widow, age sixty-four, around four A.M. that morning. "Too late for homicide and too early for suicide," quipped Stamaty. "No signs of foul play?"

"No, sir, we're just making a formal report. Deceased was on a couple of heart medicines and the next of kin is the one who called us." Stamaty took down the information, entered it in the departmental computer, and got on with the next item on his agenda, which was to boot up the espresso machine.

Several cups later, in the middle of the afternoon, he received another call about Iris Kennebaugh. This one came from Petra Bothnerby, of Neighbors and Bothnerby Funeral Homes, Inc. Ms. Bothnerby was obviously in a terrible dither, her usually beguiling Scandinavian accent so muddy this afternoon as to render her words almost unintelligible. At length Stamaty got the message that, in the case of Mrs. Kennebaugh at least, four A.M. hadn't been too late for murder at all.

He instructed the undertaker, quite unnecessarily, to cease and desist from embalming the body, summoned the mortuary squad to transfer it from the funeral parlor to the coroner's mortuary, and alerted the forensic pathologist, Dr. Valentine. Then he called the Department of Public Safety.

At five P.M. that day four men convened at the mortuary for the postmortem examination of the remains of Iris Kennebaugh. Stamaty and Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn, deep in conversation, paced the parking lot, enjoying the magnificent spring weather, until Dr. Valentine drove up. When they all went inside they found that Julius, the attendant, had positioned the body on the stainless steel table and laid out the instruments.

Valentine, sixtyish with a waxed mustache, pulled on gown and rubber gloves and plunged into business with more energy than most people can muster at the beginning of the workday. With a magnifying glass in one hand and a millimeter rule in the other, he went carefully over the exterior of the body, dictating his findings to a pedal-activated recording machine.

As often happens within a few hours after death, the decedent had the ageless and inscrutable appearance of an image carved in marble or ivory by a master hand, rather than of someone who had

once walked and talked, loved and suffered. Of principal interest was a clean bullet hole in the upper abdomen, surrounded by the unmistakable surface charring and powder tattooing characteristic of a point-blank gunshot wound. Dr. Valentine took several photographs before gently inserting a probe to explore the tract bored by the projectile and determine its direction of travel.

"The wound is in the midline of the epigastrium," he told the machine as well as his live audience, "eight and one-half centimeters below the xiphoid. It appears to have been made by a medium-caliber bullet fired from below at a distance of less than ten centimeters from the skin surface and at an angle of approximately forty-five degrees from the vertical."

Since the deceased's somewhat threadbare two-piece flannel pajamas showed no corresponding hole and no evident traces of powder, the assumption was that the gun had been fired at her bare midriff, between pajama tops and bottoms.

By this time, Auburn and Stamaty were eager to get to the scene of the death, interview the decedent's son, search for a weapon, and resolve the fundamental question whether this was suicide or homicide. But they stood by patiently while Valentine proceeded in his brisk but meticulous fashion to open the body and carry out each step of the forensic autopsy, preserving specimens of organs and fluids for laboratory study.

The bullet had grazed the undersurface of the heart—a somewhat timeworn heart with a leaky valve and coronaries full of sludge—slashing a small artery and causing a fatal internal hemorrhage. Eventually Valentine removed a .32-caliber lead slug from the victim's spine, working it loose with rubber-shod pliers so as not to deform it further or disturb its surface markings.

"This will be available for examination as soon as we run it through the autoclave to kill off any resident aliens," he told Auburn. "Just let us know where you want us to send it."

"That'll depend on whether or not we find a .32 caliber weapon at the scene," said Auburn.

He and Stamaty left as Valentine and Julius were preparing to take off the top of their patient's skull with a power saw.

Dene Hollow Road sounded more picturesque than it looked. It zigzagged through barren, rocky heights alternating with boggy valleys, a region which apparently had never lent itself to agriculture and for similar reasons had thus far escaped the attention of residential developers. Here and there a ramshackle house stood on a random piece of level ground amid a jungle of tacky lawn ornaments, scrap iron, and weeds. The few larger flat zones had been put to commercial purposes—a body shop, an appliance

warehouse, a remodeling and construction company. Of sidewalks or streetlights there was no trace.

The Kennebaugh place, evidently a combination of residence and business premises, was largely screened from view by a straggling thicket that ran alongside the road. The driveway led to a graveled parking area, where a pickup and a much heavier truck laden with ladders on racks stood in front of a big aluminum structure that might have been a barn but evidently wasn't. A narrow track led farther back to the house, a very old two-story redbrick with four chimneys, two gables, and a roof that was long out of warranty.

Auburn and Stamaty had driven separately. They parked side by side just off the road in the graveled lot and got out to reconnoiter. The evening shadows clustered thickly back around the house, which lay buried among ancient trees just coming into leaf.

"I don't see any lights back there," said Stamaty.

"You almost never do," said a voice from the gloom almost at his elbow. With a rustling of dead leaves and a crackling of underbrush, an elderly man emerged from the thicket. Even in the twilight Auburn recognized him as a retired newspaper reporter who had given him a few headaches in years past.

"They're too cheap to turn on the lights," continued the newcomer. "Or too poor, I could never figure out which. We were just wondering what happened over there last night." "We" included a much younger woman in a running suit, with a dog on a leash—too long a leash to suit Auburn's taste. "I guess somebody died, since you guys are here?"

"Aren't you Stu Byron?" asked Auburn.

"Right. The old nose for news, you know. Can't break the habit." Byron's laugh was an irritating chatter, like three golf balls rattling around in a cocktail shaker. "This is Monica Norgel."

Monica, trying half-heartedly to control the carnivorous tendencies of her dog, managed a tired wave.

"What happened over there last night?" asked Auburn.

Stu Byron shifted into the tabloid mode. "Around four or five this morning an ambulance came howling out of the night at about ninety per and stopped there in the gravel like a supersonic jet trying to land in a sand trap. By the time I got my glasses on and my brains in gear, they drove away again. No siren, no red light."

"Where do you live?"

Byron twisted in his tracks and pointed vaguely toward higher ground. "Up there on top of the hill. Monica lives a little farther along around that bend to your left."

"How well do you know the Kennebaughs?"

"Hardly know them at all. We see Willy pretty much every day, going back and forth on jobs, and his mom was out there all day yesterday working in her garden on the slope next to the house. But neighbors don't mix much around here. I've never been in their house and they've never been in mine. Which one of them was it?"

Auburn was experiencing a resurgence of long-standing animosity against this meddlesome oaf, and perhaps in an effort to suppress it he proceeded to tell Byron more than he would likely have told an intimate friend who had no particular right to the information. "Mrs. Kennebaugh died during the night."

"Mm-hmm. We thought it would be Iris rather than Willy. I bet they've been digging through the old files down at the newspaper all day. Might even have something about it tonight on the news at eleven."

"Something about Mrs. Kennebaugh?"

"Well, about her husband's family. He's been dead five or ten years now. This happened back in the sixties, when you were still packing a cap gun. The old man and his wife were found shot to death and their kid badly injured. The kid's governess or nanny or what have you was missing, and so were thousands of dollars in cash and jewelry. They never did find her, and the jewelry never turned up, either. It was front-page stuff for a couple of months. Hey, we better get back. My wife isn't very well, and Monica's got a couple teenagers who like to bounce each other's heads off the flagstones in the patio."

Monica unceremoniously yanked her hound away from Auburn's ankles and they all melted into the shadows.

Stamaty picked up his field kit and shouldered his camera case. They started across the graveled parking area toward the house, Auburn using his flashlight to help them avoid potholes, old fenceposts, and other hazards. As the house grew more distinct in the violet spring twilight, Stamaty pointed out the design features—the tall peaked roof and gables, the elliptically arched limestone window heads, the one-story kitchen tacked on under a sloping roof at the rear like an afterthought—that marked its age, proving it a true survivor from the mid-nineteenth century.

The planks of the covered porch creaked under their feet. The gloom here was intense. Auburn manipulated the heavy brass knocker on the front door, setting off sepulchral echoes within and without. At length a light shone behind the windows that flanked the door, and a moment later another flashed on in the porch ceiling.

The disheveled man who opened the door looked thoroughly

rattled. His T-shirt hung slackly from his sagging shoulders but stretched taut as a balloon across his bloated middle.

"Mr. Kennebaugh? I'm Detective Auburn with the Department of Public Safety and this is Mr. Stamaty from the coroner's office." They both showed identification. "Sorry to disturb you without calling first."

"That's all right. Come on in."

The front door opened directly into a square living room with a stone fireplace. The room was crowded to capacity with bric-a-brac and antique furniture that looked as if it might have been sitting right there since it was brand-new. A lingering smell of recently scorched food offered little competition to a dusty, musty aroma of much older vintage.

Kennebaugh closed and bolted the door and invited them to sit down. "I'm sorry if I don't seem to be thinking very straight tonight," he said. "This whole thing has hit me like a Mack truck."

"We understand how you feel, sir," Stamaty said in his satiny baritone. "Please believe that we wouldn't be here bothering you without a good reason. Could you just tell us briefly what happened last night?"

Kennebaugh lowered his heavy frame into an overstuffed chair that looked as if it had been bearing his weight resolutely for many years. "I went over all that with the paramedics," he said, "but I guess you have to file your own reports." He ran stubby fingers up over chubby cheeks and massaged his eyelids noisily for several seconds. "Like I told them, I got back from a job a little before midnight last night."

"What kind of job, sir?" asked Auburn.

"Replacing burned-out light bulbs in the rotunda at Carney County courthouse."

"Are you the owner of the business?"

"Yes. Back when my dad started it, he did general electrical contracting. Since he died, we've been specializing in servicing lighting fixtures and replacing bulbs and tubes in hard-to-reach areas—parking lot floodlights, ceiling lamps, and chandeliers in churches, theaters, public buildings . . ."

Auburn tried to imagine the plump and ungainly Kennebaugh dangling from a forty-foot ladder to change bulbs in a chandelier. "Sounds like you're kept pretty busy."

"Actually I'm not doing all that well. There's a lot of guys out there with extension ladders taking service contracts away from me. In fact, I just had to let my last helper go. Plus overhead and insurance are eating me alive."

"Was this a service call at the courthouse last night?"

"No, sir. I have a regular maintenance contract with them, but I can only work when the building is closed to the public. I was there from about eight last night till a little after eleven, and the drive back took me about an hour."

"Did you see your mother or talk to her after you got home?"

"No. She has a heart condition and she's usually in bed by ten o'clock. I mean 'was.' When I came in late I didn't bother her."

"When was the last time you saw her alive?"

"When I left last night, right after dinner. Say seven, maybe a quarter till."

"Did she seem all right to you then?"

"As well as ever. She ate a good dinner and she was doing the dishes when I left."

"Was she alone in the house when you left?"

"Sure."

"When you got home did you notice anything unusual in the house? Anything out of place, or signs that somebody had been in the house, anything damaged?"

"No."

"Did you hear anything during the night?"

"Like I told those paramedics, I heard a couple thumps there on the stairs around four this morning. I thought somebody might have broken in, and since my mother's bedroom is on the ground floor—"

"Have you had break-ins before?"

"No, but it's only a matter of time. There's a woods back of us here where a bunch of bums hang out most of the year. They live in shelters made out of sticks and cardboard and plastic sheeting. They build fires with anything that will burn and sometimes the smoke gets pretty toxic. Most nights we can hear them out there raising Cain, drunk or high on drugs—"

"Have you complained to Public Safety?"

"Numerous times. And they've run them out of there and knocked down their shelters numerous times. But they always come back."

"Have you ever had any kind of trouble with them?"

"No, just the noise and the smoke, and the fact that we don't want riffraff like that so close to our property." Evidently sensing that the conversation had drifted off on a tangent, Kennebaugh finished his account of the events of last night. "So we figured, me and the paramedics, that she woke up during the night with heart pain or breathing trouble and was on her way up to get me, but only got as far as the landing before . . . before she . . ." He seemed momentarily lost in painful reverie.

Stamaty resumed control of the conversation. "There have been some new developments since the funeral director picked up your mother's body this morning. An examination showed that she died of a gunshot wound to the heart."

After a moment of stunned silence, Kennebaugh covered his face with his big clumsy hands and rocked back and forth moaning like a child with a toothache. "Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, that can't be."

"I'm afraid it's true, sir. Are there any firearms in the house?"

"Lord, no!"

"Could you show us where you found your mother last night?"

Kennebaugh rolled out of his chair and led them to the foot of the stairs. "Right there on the landing. I'm afraid that light is burned out."

It figures, thought Auburn, that a guy who made his living by replacing burnt-out light bulbs would put off replacing the ones in his own house indefinitely.

Auburn's flashlight beam picked up a few dribbles of dried blood on the tattered stair runner. "I think you said your mother's bedroom is on the lower level. Have you been in there since you found her on the stairs?"

"Well, no, actually I haven't."

"I think we'd better take a look. We'll ask you not to touch anything—that includes light switches, doorknobs . . ."

Kennebaugh preceded them through a dim hallway to a ground-floor bedroom. Auburn used the butt of his flashlight to switch on the ceiling light. He had already seen the tenant of this room in death. To the impressions he had formed about her then, he began to add inferences about her in life.

The décor in the bedroom was spartan, the bedstead and matching bureau and vanity table stained and scratched. The TV in the corner had rabbit-ears antennae and a screen the size of one of the paperback romances that lay scattered around the room like toys in a nursery.

The bedclothes trailed in a wild tangle from the bed halfway across the floor.

Auburn resisted the temptation to straighten them out in search of bloodstains or a bullet hole before the scene had been photographed.

More striking than the state of the bedclothes was the fact that an air conditioning unit had been shoved out of its position on the sill of one of the two windows and now lay on the floor between the bed and the wall. Torn pieces of weather stripping and adhesive still adhered to both the air conditioner and the sash window, which had been drawn down nearly shut.

Kennebaugh stood in the doorway, staring and immobile.

"I know this is hard for you, sir," said Auburn, "but please look around here and see if anything seems to be missing. Remember, don't touch anything."

Without shifting his position, Kennebaugh pointed to an old-fashioned but opulent jewel case atop the bureau. It sat slightly askew, with two of its drawers partially pulled out. "Check that," he said. "My mother had lots of antique jewelry that she wouldn't ever sell, even though she never wore it."

Not a single piece of jewelry was to be found in the case.

"Was the jewelry insured?"

"I don't think so."

"Is there any chance your mother would have had a list or a description of the pieces that are missing?"

Kennebaugh was shaking his head, with hands spread wide, in an attitude of utter helplessness.

"We need to look through the rest of the house," Auburn told him. "We know approximately what time your mother died, but we don't know when she was shot. Since you didn't hear the shot, the burglar must have been here before you came home last night. In that case, he may have cleaned out other rooms."

The medicine cabinet in the downstairs bathroom contained three kinds of heart pills prescribed for Iris Kennebaugh.

"Do you mind if I take these along with me?" asked Stamaty. "Just as a back check on the laboratory findings."

"Is that routine?" asked Kennebaugh, seemingly reluctant to let the medicine out of his possession.

Stamaty nodded suavely. "I'll give you a receipt for them. Or if you prefer, I can just copy the labels . . ."

"No, that's all right. They can't do her any good now."

There was nothing much in the dining room except dust and disused furniture. The fixtures and cabinetry in the kitchen and pantry at the back were like something out of a museum. The upstairs of the house matched the downstairs in its general air of dilapidation and decay—discolored wallpaper, cracked plaster, ancient furniture. Kennebaugh's spacious bedroom, which also served as a business office, was as disorderly as a pigsty and as homey as a toolshed.

Auburn pushed open the doors of the two front bedrooms with the tip of his shoe to avoid touching the doorknobs. One of them, like Kennebaugh's bedroom and the one downstairs, had a window air conditioner. But the bureaus and closets in these rooms contained only a few articles of worn clothing.

While Auburn and Stamaty lingered in the upstairs bath with its

free-standing tub, Kennebaugh went back downstairs to the kitchen, where they could hear him running water and clanking pans and dishes.

Stamaty unstrapped his camera and started downstairs.

"You in a hurry, Nick?"

"Frankly, I am. Because in about two minutes you're going to call Kestrel out here to collect evidence, and I want to get my pictures and go before he blows in and starts counting the stripes in the wallpaper."

"Well, come here and take a picture of this first." Auburn led him into the left front bedroom, the one with an air conditioner in the window. Stooping, he raised the lower edge of the dust ruffle on the bed and pointed underneath to an irregular scrap of newspaper. "With a close-up setting."

"What am I recording for posterity? Blood stains?"

"Take another look. Those headlines about welfare cuts and the teachers' strike were in yesterday morning's paper."

Afterward they used their flashlights to inspect the downstairs bedroom window from the outside. A stone walk ran along the foundation of the house here, with only a three- or four-inch gap where early spring weeds had already established a foothold. They found no marks on the ground and no clear evidence of tool damage to the window frame.

Stamaty shot several flash pictures and bustled off through the dark to his car as if he dreaded even a passing encounter with Kestrel in the parking lot. Auburn went back inside to help Kennebaugh look for a list of the missing jewelry. His chief motive for hanging around until Kestrel arrived was to make sure Kennebaugh didn't start wandering around his mother's room touching things, moving them out of place, and leaving traces of his own presence for the evidence technician to find and spin into one of his devious and improbable theories.

Auburn left as soon as Kestrel arrived. During the long drive home he phoned headquarters to request that Records initiate full background probes in the morning on Iris Kennebaugh and her son.

After morning report the next day, Auburn sat down with Lieutenant Howell Dunbar, chief of what the lieutenant himself liked to call the Department of Unplanned Giving. Like Auburn, he was African American, but the two had never become close. A retired army officer, Dunbar was a stickler for protocol and a walking monument to the military adage, Rank Has Its Privileges.

"Another hunting accident," he growled in his gravelly bass. Dunbar delighted in baffling people.

Auburn eyed him inquiringly. "Hunting accident as in . . . ?"

"The killer was hunting for something to lift," explained Dunbar, "and the victim woke up by accident. Does the name David Dakin mean anything to you?"

"He was a carpenter—"

"Roofing and siding contractor. Remember his M.O.?"

"Pushing air conditioners out of first-floor windows. Till the time a neighbor saw him at it and called Public Safety."

"Why isn't this him?"

Auburn thought briefly and counted off the reasons on his fingers. "First, because he always worked during the daytime. Second, because he never carried a firearm as far as we know. And third, because he's been staying at the Losers' Hotel at Batesville for the past three or four years."

"Was. The parole board evicted him less than a month ago. Something about needing his cell for a crooked cop. Why don't you get Dakin's current address from Dormeyer and pay him a call?" Lieutenant Dunbar had a tricky way of saying "Why don't you?" so as to make it sound exactly like "I want you to."

An obituary notice in the morning paper indicated that Iris Kennebaugh was to be cremated the following day after a service at the funeral parlor. The paper was making the usual social crisis out of the murder and burglary on Dene Hollow Road. Moreover, as Stu Byron had predicted, they had raked up the forty-year-old family tragedy and drawn vague parallels to the present case.

Arthur Kennebaugh, the brother of the late Iris Kennebaugh's late husband and Willy Kennebaugh's uncle, had an "emotionally unstable" daughter named Gilda. This branch of the family, which had broad real estate and manufacturing interests, could easily afford to hire a full-time companion to act as a keeper for their unruly daughter.

Rachel Ferrante, a newly certified teacher just two years older than Gilda, served satisfactorily as her companion for six months. Then she suddenly vanished, along with the family jewels and a vast hoard of cash, possibly of disreputable origin, which Arthur had kept in a safe at home. Rachel left Arthur Kennebaugh and his wife shot to death with one of Arthur's hunting rifles, and Gilda semicomatose from a severe blunt head wound. Gilda's underlying mental trouble, aggravated by the shock of the experience, made it impossible for her to give a coherent account of the event.

Neither Rachel Ferrante nor the stolen articles had ever been traced. Some believed that she was another victim of the crime rather than its perpetrator and that she had been carried off by the thieves and probably murdered. But later, as elements of

Ferrante's lurid past came to the surface, the majority view was that she herself had been the instigator of the crime, or at least a willing accomplice.

Auburn was adding the highlights of this ancient and no doubt irrelevant saga to his computer file on the Iris Kennebaugh murder when Mark Dormeyer, the parole officer, who worked odd hours and was often out of his office for extended periods, finally returned his call. Before consenting to reveal David Dakin's current home address, phone, and place of employment, Dormeyer gave Auburn the third degree about his interest in this parolee.

Dakin was working as a warehouseman at a wholesale building supply company. Even though the management of the company knew of his criminal record, Auburn decided to wait until Dakin got home from work, since their interview might well culminate in an arrest.

When he returned to his office after lunch, he found preliminary results of confidential background probes on Iris and Willy Kennebaugh. By collating these with information in Iris's obituary and drawing some obvious inferences, he put together an outline chronology of the family history.

Iris had worked as a stenographer at a paint factory before her marriage and for some years afterward, evidently until Willy was born. Her late husband Gerald, Willy's father, had owned and managed a successful electrical contracting firm, which had passed to Willy on his father's death at age fifty-four. Perhaps Willy hadn't inherited his father's business acumen; maybe he just wasn't a very good electrician. In any event, the business had been going downhill for the past eight years, and the family finances were now exceedingly shaky.

David Dakin, recently paroled after serving part of a prison term for a daytime burglary of untenanted premises, was living in a three-room apartment on Charleston Pike. For various reasons, including the unsavoriness of the neighborhood, Auburn decided to take along a uniformed colleague. To put it more accurately, Patrolman Dollinger, at the wheel of a cruiser, took Auburn along as a passenger.

Dakin came to the door chewing a substantial portion of whatever he was having for dinner. He was a colossal man with a bald pate and deep-set eyes like a gorilla. If prison fare had taken any inches off his waistline, he was losing no time in putting them back on.

Auburn showed identification. "Mr. Dakin? Sergeant Auburn with Public Safety. Good to have you back among us." Auburn was habitually courteous with malefactors, except now and then

in the heat of battle. "I hope you're getting things back together again."

"Trying to. Come on in." Dakin swallowed his food and glanced in the direction of the kitchenette as if wondering how long it would be before his next mouthful. He wiped his hand on his shirt and shook hands with both of them. Like many big men, he had a grip as gentle as a woman's. "Are you checking up on me?" He was talking to Auburn but looking at Dollinger's uniform.

"Not exactly. I'll leave that up to Sergeant Dormeyer. I just wondered where you were Tuesday night."

The apartment was small and sparsely furnished, with cardboard boxes stacked in odd corners and an overpowering atmosphere of carryout chicken and fries.

"This past Tuesday?"

"Yes, sir."

"I was at my brother's up till about midnight. Sit down, both of you." He cleared things off the worn sofa, but Auburn and Dollinger remained standing. Dollinger also remained silent throughout the interview, possibly distracted by the pervasive aroma of food.

"Where does your brother live?"

"At 357 Rushmore Avenue. Ron and Blair had me over for dinner and after that we set around and had a few, you know, and played some cards."

"Blair is your sister-in-law?"

"Yes. Well, they ain't exactly married."

"What time did you get there?"

"I drove there from work. I was probably at Ron's by about twenty after five. What's the beef?"

"And you were there until midnight or so?"

"Yes, sir, at least. And Ron and Blair will back me up on that one hundred percent."

"Is Ron's last name the same as yours?"

"Sure."

"Where does he work?"

"Advance Dry Cleaners out on Pearl."

"Mind if we look around here?" Auburn's application for a search warrant had been denied on the grounds that he lacked probable cause. "You're within your rights to say no. You're not under arrest, you're not charged with any crime, and I don't have a warrant to search."

"Sure, you can look around. There ain't nothing to see but a lot of mess."

He was absolutely right about that.

After leaving Dakin, Auburn and Dollinger drove to Ron Dakin's place on Rushmore. He was a more compact and refined version of David. He confirmed his brother's alibi in every particular. His friend Blair Damico worked till nine on Thursdays at a party supply store up the street. Auburn and Dollinger visited her there, and as soon as she got over her panic attack or hysterics or whatever it was that the sight of Dollinger's uniform had brought on, she too confirmed David Dakin's alibi for Tuesday evening.

Next morning, the day appointed for the cremation, Auburn verified by phone that Dakin had been at work until five on Tuesday, as scheduled, at the warehouse where he was employed.

Before ten o'clock he met briefly with his supervisor, Lieutenant Savage, to discuss the case. The markings on the .32-caliber slug removed from the body didn't match any set of markings on file. Kestrel's investigations at the Kennebaugh residence had yielded the usual blitz of technical information, most or all of it seemingly useless as criminal evidence. Ron Dakin and Blair Damico had snow-white backgrounds, making it unlikely that they had collaborated with David in the robbery and murder or were supplying him with a false alibi.

"Kennebaugh mentioned a hobo camp within earshot of their house," said Auburn. "I checked on that with Fourth District this morning. There's a woods down behind Dene Hollow Road and a culvert with a storm sewer running through it where tramps hang out during the warmer weather. The neighbors, including the Kennebaughs, have been complaining for years about the noise down there and the smell of burning trash. Fourth District runs them out, they come back."

Savage tapped the file lying open on his desk. "One or two of those tramps could have pulled this off," he conceded. "But if they did, they're long gone."

"I still think it'd be worth checking down there, maybe looking for the weapon."

"My stars, Cy, if I sent Kestrel to a place like that to gather evidence it would be like sending an archaeologist to dig at Gettysburg or Bunker Hill with a soup spoon. We wouldn't see him for two months. And if you're thinking of questioning any bimbos you happen to find down there, forget it. They didn't see nothin', didn't hear nothin', don't know nothin'."

"They won't talk to a cop," agreed Auburn. "I was thinking of putting on some old clothes, messing up my hair, shuffling along out of the woods around sundown . . ."

"All by yourself?"

"I think that would work better, don't you?"

Savage peered at him for a long moment. "Probably," he said at last. "But if I were you, I'd shuffle out of those woods right after lunch and not wait till dark. And, Cy—this is your idea, not mine. Don't come crying to me if you get blown away with that .32."

Auburn left his car in the parking lot of an abandoned church about a mile from the hobo jungle, locking his badge and his service revolver in the trunk. The cap he was wearing had a visor that looked like the mudflap of a garbage truck and his shirt had begun life as a pajama top designed with the free-spirited adolescent in mind. The last time he'd worn the pair of Levi's he had on was when he'd helped his brother-in-law clean out a basement. To enhance the effect of their liberal embellishment of rust, soot, and paint, he had replaced the belt with a length of cotton clothesline.

The lowering sky, with its threat of a downpour, held no terrors for Cyrus Auburn. His father, who had worked for decades as a mason in all sorts of weather, had impressed upon him early in life the principle that umbrellas are for the effeminate and the effete. But without a sun to guide him, he had to navigate by dead reckoning.

At first he followed a rural road that wound and doubled among rocky rises and weedy lowlands. Finally leaving the road, he struck off across a trackless waste in the general direction of his goal. The land behind the Kennebaugh property sloped gradually down toward a thickly wooded culvert, at whose bottom an ancient and badly weathered open concrete channel carried a viscous trickle of turbid water.

In the midst of a small clearing stood one of those mysterious structures that one often sees near moving water—an ugly, windowless hovel of brick with a padlocked iron door and bizarrely shaped bits of pipe jutting out of its top and sides. By the look of things, many fires of brushwood and rubbish had blazed in the lee of that building. But today the ashes were cold.

Among the nearby trees lay a tangle of wild honeysuckle, some of it in bloom, within which Auburn found a half dozen rough shelters constructed of boughs, cardboard, and plastic sheeting. Despite signs of recent human tenancy, the only living creatures he encountered there were birds and squirrels foraging beneath the dismal sky.

What had he been thinking when he planned to come here at night? He could hardly see anything at two o'clock in the afternoon, at least today. Picking up a yard-long scrap of rusty iron, he started poking among the heaps of garbage and debris that lay everywhere around him.

He found no cache of illicit drugs, no stolen jewels, no dismembered corpses. Just a very old .32 caliber Smith and Wesson revolver with one round fired.

The rain started just as he was trying to decide on the shortest route back to his car.

It was late in the afternoon when, his hair still damp, he returned a call from the coroner's office.

"Have you got anything so far on this Kennebaugh homicide?" asked Stamaty.

Auburn told him about finding the revolver. "Anything new at your end?"

"Oh, yes. The plot sickens. The preliminary blood tests showed up a major discrepancy. There's no trace of the heart medicines she was supposed to be taking. But there are exactly seven more pills missing from each bottle than there would have been if she'd been taking them on schedule since the day the prescriptions were filled."

"Well, thank you very much." Auburn pondered in silence for a while. "Do you think it was the son? Tried to polish her off by juggling her medicines, and when that didn't work he slipped her a dose of lead?"

"And faked the break-in and ditched the piece down where the vagrants gather to make merry? It sure looks that way, doesn't it?"

Auburn guessed correctly that the rain would dissuade Stu Byron from taking his evening constitutional. Byron answered his call and acceded enthusiastically to Auburn's plea for further information about the Kennebaughs. In fact, perhaps scenting sensational developments, he even offered to come to headquarters to discuss them as he had done during his years as a newspaper reporter. Auburn assured him a telephone interview would suffice.

"I just wanted to ask you about something you said the other night. You saw Mrs. Kennebaugh working in the garden a few days back?"

"Correct. The day she died, in fact."

"Would you say she was a pretty active, healthy type of person?"

"Sure, considering her age. She could handle a spade with the best of them. And she did all the shopping—groceries and so forth. That old bomb she drove has a cracked muffler, and we'd hear her going by, flying low, about four or five times a week."

Auburn slept on that but found in the morning that he was no wiser than he'd been the night before. While he slept, the journalists had been busy. Although his finding of the revolver hadn't yet leaked out, the morning paper hinted sinisterly that the break-

in at the Kennebaughs' might have been faked. Auburn thought he detected the hand of Stu Byron in some of the racier passages.

Kestrel had found no fingerprints on the revolver. The piece was very old and its serial number couldn't be traced. The ballistics report was still pending. Around ten o'clock, while Auburn was shuffling reports and using a magnifying glass to bring up details in Kestrel's photographs, his phone rang.

"Sergeant, there's a lady down here who says she's gotta talk to you ASAP, PDQ, and the day before yesterday."

Auburn looked at his watch. "Has this woman got a name, or just initials?"

"Says her name's Iris Kennebaugh."

Why, sure, Auburn commented to himself. "I'm coming down," he said.

One of the few things of which Auburn was certain when he entered the waiting area off the main lobby was that the stout woman standing by the counter was not the one whose autopsy he had attended Wednesday afternoon. She was as tall and broad, and if age had put a few dents in her fenders, it hadn't yet dimmed the shine in her headlights or made her front bumper sag.

"Oh, Sergeant! I've seen your picture in the paper and on TV."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I have to talk to you right away. Willy doesn't know I'm here." She had applied makeup sketchily and in haste, and Auburn suspected her light raincoat concealed a correspondingly sketchy job of dressing. "We never thought this could turn into such a mess. We never dreamed that she'd been shot."

Auburn started for the elevator and beckoned her to follow him. "Who'd been shot?"

"My niece Gilda. That's whose body they cremated yesterday."

"Could you show me some identification, ma'am? Just routine."

"All I have is my driver's license." She handed him that as they rode up in the elevator. "I left everything else at home so it would look like Gilda was . . . me. But I needed this for identification, to rent an apartment."

When they reached Auburn's office he closed the door, made sure she was seated comfortably, and swept the litter of papers on his desktop to one side. "Please start from the beginning," he said, "and take all the time you need."

"The beginning was a long time ago—almost fifty years. My late husband Gerald came from a very wealthy family in the East. Gerald's father believed his son had married below his station, as they used to say, because I worked as a secretary and my father was a remodeling contractor. So he cut Gerald out of his will and

wouldn't give us a penny to help us get started.

"Gerald was drafted during the Korean War, and afterward he tried to get an engineering degree with his veterans' benefits, but that didn't work out. So he became an electrician and started up his own company with some borrowed money."

Despite her agitation, Iris Kennebaugh impressed Auburn as a disciplined and clear-thinking woman.

"Gerald had a niece, Gilda, his brother Arthur's daughter. If you read yesterday's paper, you know about her. She was—I don't know what they'd call it nowadays, not exactly retarded, but peculiar—hyperactive, unmanageable, just plain wild. They had to have somebody with her all the time to keep her from setting fire to the furniture or running away. Or both.

"And like it said in the paper, this guardian, Rachel Ferrante, hit Gilda over the head—it was about two weeks before the Robert Kennedy assassination—shot both parents, and ran off with all Arthur's money and all Gilda's mother's jewelry. After that Gilda got worse. Brain damage. She hardly talked, and she'd sit for hours staring at a flower or trying to wipe a sunbeam off the floor.

"Well, Gerald and I took her in to live with us, not entirely out of charity or family feeling. Gerald's father was still living and we figured he'd eventually come around and help us with her upkeep, maybe even put Gerald back in his will now that Arthur was dead.

"Gilda was nine years older than Willy. There was never any question of raising them together as brother and sister, but Gilda always had a quiet room with her own TV, and good food, and nice comfortable clothes. But when Gerald's father died, every penny of his estate went to some cousins in the East. We got nothing and neither did Gilda.

"But by that time we'd had her on our hands for years, and we couldn't just throw her out in the street. After Gerald died it got even harder for me to make ends meet, but by that time Willy was running the business, and we did the best we could. One day Willy said to me, 'Mother, if Gilda ever dies, we're going to tell the undertaker she's you. Because Dad insured you for a quarter of a million, but we're never going to get a penny out of her.'

"I didn't take him seriously at first, but the more I thought about it, the better it sounded. Nobody in the neighborhood besides the two of us even knew Gilda existed. She looked much older than she was because she didn't eat right or get any exercise. The business wasn't doing well, and as Willy said, I was worth more dead than alive.

"So when I got home from my bridge party Tuesday night, and Willy told me Gilda had died—"

"What time did you get home?"

"Probably about ten."

"Your son told you at ten o'clock Tuesday evening that she was dead?"

"Yes. He said he found her about eight-thirty."

"Where?"

"In bed. At least he thought she was dead. And so did I, though I only looked at her from the doorway. Of course we thought she'd died a natural death. We didn't turn on all the lights or we would have seen the damage to the window."

"So then you decided to exchange identities with Gilda?"

"We had a terrible scramble, putting her things away in the closets upstairs and moving all my things out of my bedroom and down to hers. Then I crammed everything I could in one big suitcase and Willy drove me to Wilmot, where I stayed overnight at a motel. The next day I moved into an efficiency apartment. . . . Oh, Sergeant, I still have a cab waiting outside with all my things."

Auburn sent a clerk out front to pay off the cab driver and collect Mrs. Kennebaugh's luggage.

"The plan, as I understand it, was for your son to call the undertaker Wednesday morning and report that you had died during the night?"

"Yes. And to be sure and have Gilda cremated without a viewing, because none of my friends could mistake her for me, dead or alive. But from what I heard on the news, Gilda obviously wasn't dead when we thought she was, and during the night . . . Oh, that must have been so terrible for Willy!"

"You say you haven't been in touch with him since Tuesday?"

"No, not even to tell him where I was. That was what we agreed on, so there wouldn't be any slip-ups. Not for at least a week."

"We're going to have to bring your son in for questioning this morning, ma'am. Does he have a cell phone where we can reach him if he's out on a job? Or would he be working on a Saturday?"

"I can give you that number. Are we going to be arrested?"

"We'll have to ask you to stay around until you've signed formal statements. We'll probably be making some criminal charges. Do you have a lawyer you've worked with before?"

When Iris Kennebaugh and her suitcase had been relocated temporarily in another room, Auburn called Stamaty.

"Nick," he said, "I'm afraid of what I'm about to hear you say. Is there any chance you rolled a set of fingerprints on Iris Kennebaugh before she was released to the undertaker for cremation?"

"That's routine."

Thank the Lord for routines, said Auburn to himself, and for people who stick to them. It was a thought he hadn't often entertained in the past.

"What's the gig?" Stamaty wanted to know.

"The gig, Nick, is that Iris Kennebaugh is down the hall right now working her way through a lunch tray from the canteen."

"Would you want to repeat that a little slower?"

Around two thirty P.M. two patrolmen took Willy Kennebaugh into custody on a charge of illegal disposition of human remains with intent to commit fraud. Once he arrived at headquarters he wasn't permitted to see or communicate with his mother. Nearly five hours passed before Auburn was ready to meet with him. During that interval both detainees were treated to dinner and other creature comforts at city expense. Neither had decided yet to retain a lawyer.

Auburn took Fritz Dollinger and a police stenographer with him into the conference room and started the session by having Dollinger read the prisoner his rights for the second time. Kennebaugh, wearing a voluminous coverall and workboots with soles like the treads of snow tires, fidgeted as he nodded his comprehension of the regulation cautions.

"Mr. Kennebaugh," said Auburn, "according to your witness statement, as amended today, you were at home on Tuesday evening, not at the Carney County courthouse. Around eight thirty that evening, while your mother was away from the house, you found your cousin Gilda Kennebaugh dead. Or at least you believed she was dead."

Kennebaugh nodded again.

"But then during the night you heard noises and found her lying on the stair landing. You called an emergency squad and they determined that she was indeed dead, at least by then. All correct so far?"

"Yes, sir." If Willy smiled here, it was only because Auburn had passed right over the fraudulent exchange of identity between Iris and Gilda. And if that smile was faint and sickly, it was because Willy was sure Auburn was eventually going to come back to it.

"When we made our investigation on Wednesday, the appearances suggested that the tenant of the downstairs bedroom had been shot by a burglar, who had broken in by pushing in the window air conditioner and stolen some jewelry. But if you found her in a condition resembling death as early as eight thirty, the burglary must have taken place while it was still light. And although

the gunshot would have to have been fired while you were in the house, you say you didn't hear it."

Kennebaugh nodded agreement with these conclusions of Auburn's, and his furrowed brow showed that he found them just as mystifying as Auburn did.

"Another thing. If the two of you only moved that jewelry box downstairs after your cousin had been shot, what became of the jewelry? There was no sign of damage or looting in any room except the downstairs bedroom. Even if a burglar had cleaned out the jewel box while it was still upstairs, your mother would have noticed that it was empty before she took it down.

"But that gunshot wound is the hardest thing of all to understand. Because the pathologist says it was almost instantly fatal. And although there were bloodstains on the stairs, there weren't any on the bedsheets. So that looks like she must have been shot right where the paramedics found her. Doesn't it?"

Kennebaugh started to comment, thought better of it, and sat silent.

"Let me suggest another version of your statement. At eight thirty you found your cousin apparently dead and thought she had died a natural death. When your mother came home at ten you told her that. The two of you moved a few things around in the house so you could persuade the undertaker that the dead woman was your mother, and then you drove your mother to a motel in Wilmot.

"During the night you woke up and got a shock when you realized that your cousin hadn't been dead after all. But by that time you'd already sent your mother away and set the stage for her fake death. You practically had your hands on that life insurance money, and now here was your corpse still alive. So . . . you shot her. At four o'clock in the morning. And then you faked the break-in and the robbery. And I imagine you got another shock when the paramedics didn't even notice the gunshot wound."

Willy Kennebaugh was nodding again, even though the gesture now amounted to a confession of deliberate homicide. Auburn felt nothing but pity for his prisoner. Until earlier in the week, Kennebaugh's worst fault had probably been just that he was a loser—unskilled, unambitious, unsuccessful. And what was probably his first venture into serious crime had swiftly progressed from fraud to murder. Which he had botched every which way.

"Where did you get the gun?"

"My father used to carry it in the truck when he was out on a job by himself. I don't know where he got it. I doubt if he ever fired it in his life."

"All right, Mr. Kennebaugh. I'm going to let you talk to your mother upstairs now. And I can't urge you strongly enough to get in touch with a good lawyer before Monday." Auburn gathered his papers together and stood up. "There's one other thing I'd like to get straight with you.

"The autopsy on the woman you shot on Tuesday showed that she had had at least one child. That worked all right when we thought she was your mother, but it didn't fit so well with the idea that she was your cousin. Before the body was released to the undertaker for cremation, a set of fingerprints was taken. And those prints prove that the dead woman wasn't your cousin Gilda Kennebaugh. She was Gilda's companion, Rachel Ferrante, who's been wanted for murder and grand larceny for the past thirty-six years."

Kennebaugh was now shaking his head just as vigorously and persistently as he had nodded it before.

"It was Gilda," said Auburn, "who hit Ferrante over the head with a granite statue, shot both her parents, and took off with the money and the jewelry. The authorities had to put the story together with the help of neighbors and relatives who hadn't seen Gilda for years, and they got it backwards. Your aunt and uncle must have kept her pretty completely out of sight because even your mother didn't pick up on the switch."

"I sure never saw Gilda until after they died." Kennebaugh's broad brow was gray and pearled over with droplets of sweat. "Does my mother know about it now?"

"If she does, she didn't get it from me."

"Well, will you promise me never to tell her that it wasn't Gilda we took care of all those years? Because if she ever finds out, we'll have to cremate her all over again. And once was enough for me."

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

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qvwxyzabcd**trusme**fghijklnop

From "Trust Me," AHMM, June 2007

He looked up, startled, with a sharp instrument in each hand and an expression that made me glad I always go armed on a homicide case.

—Loren D. Estleman

REEL CRIME

J. RENTILLY

Long before the controversies of jingoism, camp dilution, or rubber nipples, all the way back to the moment Bill Kane and William Finger first committed to paper the mythology of a long-suffering billionaire turned demonic crime fighter, the character of Batman—nay, The Dark Knight—was a detective, a mystery solver, a noirish gumshoe, inspired in equal parts by Sherlock Holmes, Dick Tracy, and The Shadow.

Sure, over the years Batman has become known for his gadgetry, his 'Biff! Zap! Pow!' fisticuffs, and his sleek, nightmarish costume—nipples (in the 1995 film, *Batman & Robin)* or not—but, at the core of the character is a steely determination, a preternatural gift of deduction, and a passion for cracking tough cases. It's not for nothing that Batman has spent his career in publishing with Detective Comics.

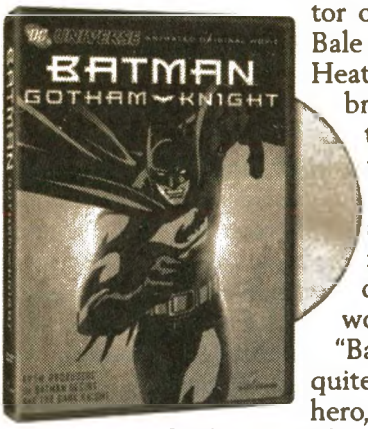
"For seventy years, Batman has been referred to as 'the world's greatest detective,'" says Mark White, Associate Professor of Political Science, Economics, and Philosophy at College of Staten Island/CUNY and co-author (with Robert Arp) of *Batman and Philosophy: The Dark Knight of the Soul.* "Sure, Batman is an Olympic-class athlete and master of many martial arts and boxing styles. He has his physical prowess, like a superhero needs. But at his best he solves crime using impeccable logic and amazing powers of observation."

Christian Bale as Bruce Wayne/Batman in *The Dark Knight.* Photo by Steven Vaughan.

It's the sheer humanity of Batman's backstory—orphaned at an early age when his parents are gunned down in cold blood, Bruce Wayne commits his life to solving crimes in his beloved Gotham

City—that has kept the character current through several generations of fans.

This July, Warner Bros. will release their much-anticipated *The Dark Knight*, written and directed by Chris Nolan, the director of 2005's *Batman Begins*. Christian Bale returns as the Caped Crusader and Heath Ledger appears as The Joker. To bridge the narrative gap between the two films, Warner Home Video will that same week release *Batman: Gotham Knight*, a direct-to-DVD animated movie consisting of six interlocking stories, teeming with darkness, mayhem, and detective work.



"Batman's appeal can be summed up quite easily: he's the thinking man's hero," says Arie Kaplan, author of the forthcoming book, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books*. "And he's popular not only with fans of superheroes, but with fans of detective fiction too. Because he's only a man in a costume solving crime with pure intellect and deductive reasoning, he's more like Sam Spade or Sherlock Holmes or James Bond than he is guys with incredible powers, like Spider-Man or Superman. Batman is one of us."

Indeed, inspired by pulp fiction, *noir* literature, as well as Victorian mysteries, Batman—from his first appearance in *Detective Comics #27*, "The Case of the Chemical Syndicate," May 1939—was playing sleuth to a perplexing homicide. Two issues later, readers were introduced to Batman's cherished utility belt—"pretty much a portable forensics lab," according to Kaplan.

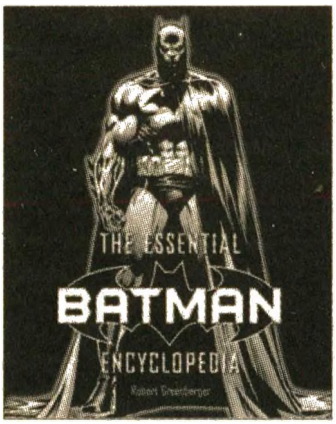
"Right off the bat, pun intended, Batman was solving mysteries in the classic fashion," says Kaplan. "Like all great detectives, Batman relies on scientific analysis of clues."

Paul Levitz, Publisher/Editor at DC Comics, notes that over the years countless authors of literary thrillers and detective fiction—from Gardner Fox to Mike Barr to Billy Schwartz to Walter Gibson to Brad Meltzer—have contributed to the character, adding to The Dark Knight's appeal to lovers of tight, provocative mysteries, not merely four-colored commotion.

"Batman has frequently tipped his hat to the classic mysteries," says Levitz, who counts among his favorite Batman series the 1964 run, edited by Julius Schwartz, called *The*

Mystery Analysts. "Batman worked with a club of detectives, each one an analog for a classic detective-story figure. They were great pieces."

"Batman is always in the Batcave, studying criminal files, scouring the Net for information to improve his databases. He visits murder scenes and figures out clues, just like a classic detective," says Bob Greenberger, author of *The Essential Batman Encyclopedia.* "And he notices stuff even the mightiest heroes in the DC universe may have missed. A few years back, Superman couldn't find a kidnapped Lois Lane, but Batman did. Everyone considers Batman the smartest hero on Earth."



Brad Meltzer, who penned the best-selling DC mystery, *Identity Crisis,* prominently featuring Batman, always adored Batman's sleuthing expertise. "One of my earliest Batman memories is a story where he teaches a class about being a detective, using the example of a man who walks backward in his shoes to leave the crime with no footprints," says Meltzer, whose next novel, *The Book of Lies,* will be published in September. "But Batman figures it out because the footprint is deeper in the toe instead of the heel. I ate every panel of that. I was ten."

Through the years, however, Batman comics—not to mention the campy-culty Adam West television series of the 1960's and the feature films of the past twenty years—have spent less time with procedural and more time on pyrotechnics and cliffhanging.

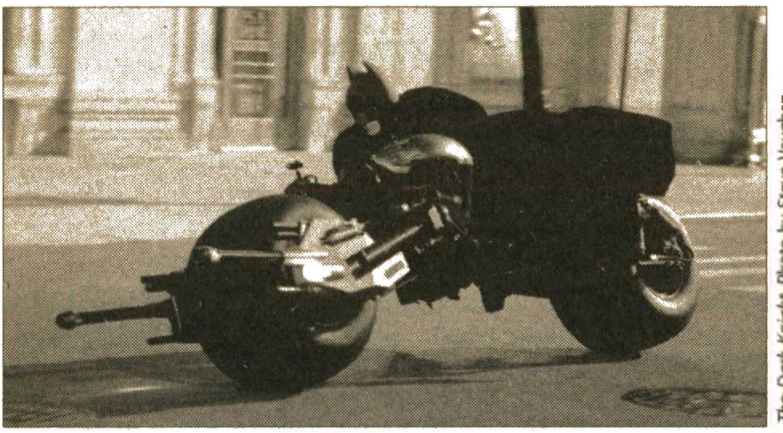
"As comics were increasingly seen as a children's medium, the detective work was downplayed in favor of simpler adventures," says Greenberger.

Still, many interviewed for this story—Batman enthusiasts and experts, admittedly—say The Dark Knight suffered more mightily with this dumbing-down than he ever did with such nefarious villains as The Joker or The Riddler. "There's a scene in 1995's *Batman Forever* (directed by Joel Schumacher) where a car crashes into a barrel filled with glitter," says Arie Kaplan. "Glitter, people! That's what Batman had been reduced to for a while."

DC's Levitz confesses, "Some writers are more passionate about constructing and solving a complicated mystery, while others are

more interested in a great romp. Both are completely valid."

In recent years, Batman—in feature films, animated TV series, and comic books—has returned to his noirish roots and his classic detective work. "I think there has been a return to the detec-



The Dark Knight. Photo by Steve Vaughan.

tive work," says *Batman & Philosophy* author White. "Detective Comics, ideally, has always focused on this side of him, and I think it's truer today than it has been in a long time. People are hungry for great crime-solving stories, and Batman is delivering them."

In addition to Meltzer's *Identity Crisis*, recent comic series penned by Grant Morrison and Paul Dini, separately, have been widely heralded for their brain-twisting mysteries. And Bruce Timm and Paul Dini's animated series, *The Batman*, has been given high marks.

Everyone interviewed for this story believes that filmmaker Chris Nolan, the acclaimed director of *Memento*, delivered the goods with 2005's *Batman Begins*, and is looking forward to this summer's *The Dark Knight*.

"Ultimately, this is a character that has been around for more than seventy years," says Paul Levitz. "The world changes a lot in seventy years, and so do the stories we tell. Sometimes Batman is more dramatic. Sometimes he's more comedic. Sometimes he's doing a lot of detective work. Other times, he's using his fists. It goes with the times."

Levitz, though, along with so many mystery lovers, is clearly pleased to see Batman back to his crime-solving roots. "I've always been happiest when Batman is solving mysteries I never could," he says. "It's the brain in that character, not the brawn that is most interesting to me. And I know I'm not alone."

THE BIRTHDAY WATCH

G. MIKI HAYDEN

Miriam had bought Nana three or four ten-dollar watches on the street, yet for some reason, they never seemed to last longer than a month. Miriam herself didn't own a watch, but then she never held a job where she had to be at a certain place at a particular time. Besides that, Nana simply liked to wear a wristwatch, which made her feel like a lady of some value. Therefore, Miriam decided to buy her daughter a watch for her birthday in February, and she began small forays here and there on 125th Street in Harlem where they lived to look at what was in the stores.

The sad truth was that either the watches Miriam saw were horribly ugly or they were extremely expensive. The one watch she saw and liked in Marshalls department store was gone by the time she went back to buy it. Thus she determined to go on an excursion to Midtown Manhattan looking for a watch that would make her young and beautiful child happy.

Miriam found some ads for Bloomingdale's in a newspaper she saved out of her building's recycling stack. The department store advertised watches, and Miriam spotted a couple of gold-plated ones under a hundred dollars—watches that would shine splendidly against Nana's dark mahogany coloring. Miriam then studied a well-creased transit map until she understood how to get to Fifty-ninth and Lexington, and one morning she put a significant amount of cash in a handkerchief between her breasts and descended into a subway station other than the one closest to home.

At Fifty-ninth Street, she got out and entered the overwhelming store through the basement. Luckily a sign listed the floors for each of the departments and Miriam was able to find her way to the jewelry area on the main floor.

She didn't see in the cases either of the watches she was interested in buying. Moreover, the less expensive watches were of silver, while the gold-colored ones had small diamond chips and cost quite a lot. The jewelry clerk was engaged with a gentleman

Kate Forman

interested in spending around a thousand dollars on a slender gold bracelet.

Miriam walked away in order to regroup. She examined scarves and purses that interested her, especially their price tags. People paid as much as seventy-nine dollars for small, nothing purses and forty dollars for scarves to decorate their necks—not keep them from the cold, no, because the material was silk, but decorate their necks. The world had gone truly berserk in a scramble for such luxuries as struck them as necessary to their continued existence. Miriam smiled to herself.

Then she saw it. A slender white boy had slipped such a scarf from its hook and put it into the inside pocket of his shabby leather jacket. Miriam looked around to see if anyone else had noticed the move; the store must have security to protect its goods. Concentrating on the young man—maybe he was eighteen or maybe he was a year or two older or younger—Miriam followed him toward the door. This is not your business, Miriam Obadah, she told herself. You're in this store to buy a watch. She bit her tongue to try to stop from doing anything rash.

Finally, when the boy was about to exit Bloomingdale's entirely, Miriam sidled up quite close to the thief and clearly enunciated four simple words into his ear, "Aren't you forgetting something?" She just couldn't help herself.

He turned and looked to see who had spoken. One emotion after another was etched on the suspect's face: guilt, bravado, fear, and anger.

"The scarf," she said, as if he didn't know.

"I was about to pay for it," the boy protested.

"Is there a problem?" asked a man. Since the man didn't have a coat suitable for the cold January weather, Miriam could only assume he worked for the store.

"The son of my employer has a mental disorder," Miriam said. She indicated to the boy that he was to remove the scarf from inside his jacket. Panic and resentment still warring in his expression, he obeyed her, and Miriam grabbed the scarf and handed it back to the worker. "We're terribly sorry," she added. "I hope you will be sure not to let him in the store on his own."

"If you'll come up, we can take a picture of him," the worker offered.

Miriam shook her head, took the boy's clammy hand, and led him outside, onto the street.

"Was that really necessary?" asked the young man.

"Because of you, they must charge forty dollars for a simple scarf," Miriam chided. "All the shoppers must pay for your theft."

"Because of their capitalist greed, you mean." He made a rude face.

"Your mother would be very ashamed," Miriam countered. "And trust me, you know nothing of political and economic systems. Besides which, you will ruin your young life if you continue on such a dishonorable path." The crowds swirled by them while automobile horns honked in the street, and Miriam had to raise her voice to be heard.

"Well, you're smarter than I am, okay," the boy shot back. "But now I have nothing to sell and won't be able to buy any dinner."

Ah, no dinner. He scored a point with her on that account.

He obviously could see she was vulnerable to such a line of reasoning, and he pressed on. "You'll have to give me a twenty for some food. I could have sold the scarf for a twenty."

"Or you could have wound up in jail," she argued. "But I'll find someone to help you now. Churches always feed the poor." She looked around. The only churches visible on Lexington Avenue were to the shopping gods. Her mind wandered back to her mission. This was a wonderful street to look for a watch. But no; she had taken on responsibility for the boy.

Then she saw their salvation. This was good—a nun in traditional habit, collecting money. The nun wanted alms for the poor, and here was the poor. Besides which, nuns always knew what to do in any situation.

Once again Miriam took the boy's wrist and hauled him off.

"Excuse me, Sister," she said to the nun.

"Yes, my child. Would you like to make a donation to St. Anne's? To the poor?"

"I'm afraid not today, Sister, but can you direct us to a church where this boy can find a meal and some help?" Miriam appealed to the holy woman, who looked both startled and annoyed.

The nun's reaction caused Miriam to examine the woman a bit more closely and observe that she was dressed in the habit of a Carmelite, a contemplative and cloistered order founded by Saint Teresa and having nothing to do, that Miriam knew of, with Saint Anne. Moreover, the woman's wimple had a food stain on it and not a fresh one.

"Ah, you are a Franciscan sister," she suggested to the nun.

"Yes," the woman agreed readily.

Miriam, in her girlhood in Ghana spent in a British Catholic school there, had learned all the orders and the saints, among other arcane facts. This woman collecting for "charity" was no nun.

Miriam backed away from the "nun" and turned to retrieve the shoplifting boy . . . But he was gone! She couldn't believe it.

She'd taken her eyes off him for one careless second, and he'd fled her ministrations. Why? She had intended to help him find food and shelter and a social worker to set him straight. Perhaps his having run off made her life easier, but she was really very disappointed.

"Every dollar you give goes to help the poor," called out the nun.

Charity is positive in society and maybe giving will do the giver good *wherever* the money goes. However, what this woman was doing wasn't acceptable. If people found out, they would become even more cynical about donating to those in need.

Miriam located a policeman on the corner. "The nun sitting in the nook by Bloomingdale's collecting for charity is a fake," Miriam said.

The officer frowned at the West African woman, as if she'd just accused a real nun of something dreadful. "Well, sir, she's dressed as a Carmelite but says she's collecting for St. Anne's. Do you see?"

No, he didn't.

"I asked her if she was a Franciscan, and she agreed," Miriam clarified. "But she's dressed as a Carmelite. And of course Carmelites—" Miriam held her palms up to demonstrate that her point was quite obvious. "They don't come out into the world."

The policeman seemed finally a little bit interested. "You're sure?" he asked.

"Positive," insisted Miriam. She didn't bother to mention the old food stain on the portion of the habit that should be spotlessly white. She shuddered to think of a real nun being so slovenly.

"Okay," said the officer. He went off to handle the matter, and Miriam peeked around for her shoplifter, but the boy was really and truly gone.

Back to the business at hand—Miriam walked downtown a couple of blocks, where she found a small jewelry shop to her liking. Inside, she spotted a watch that appealed to her, and when she asked the clerk, he told her the cost was a hundred and ten dollars. With tax, that would come to almost one-twenty. She had that much with her, so why not splurge? She liked the watch, but still she wavered.

In the meantime, her concentration was broken by a young Hispanic couple looking at a diamond ring. The man was trying to please the woman, always a good sign for the future.

But Miriam couldn't see the diamond very well, and she wanted to take a better look. "What a pretty ring," she told the couple. "I know something about diamonds." She had learned a great deal as a girl, when she had worked for a diamond merchant.

The clerk helping the couple smiled tightly when the couple

handed the ring over to Miriam. His eyes were fixed rigidly on her. Perhaps he thought she was going to pocket the piece.

First she looked at the price tag on the item, then she took up the jeweler's loupe, which the clerk had set down on the counter. "What a shame," she said after a moment.

"That's a certified diamond," the clerk said loudly.

Miriam smiled. "Look," she said to the young woman and she handed the girl the jeweler's loupe. "See that fracture?" she asked. Under the 10x magnification of the loupe, the flaw, filled with resin so it wouldn't be obvious to the naked eye, was clear.

"Oh," said the girl, "I do see that."

Miriam again looked at the watch and imagined it on Nana's wrist. The woman put the diamond ring back down on the counter. "I don't think so," the bride-to-be said.

Miriam decided that she would buy the watch. She opened her purse.

"Get out of my store, all of you," the clerk began to shout in excitement.

Miriam was startled. What right had he to be so angry? He was the one who was trying to cheat. She backed up as he continued to yell, and she and the young couple fled from the store.

"How unfortunate," Miriam told the couple meekly. "But in selecting diamonds, one has to be careful."

"Thank you so much," said the girl.

Miriam gave them a quick primer on buying diamonds and the couple walked off to see what they could find crosstown at the Forty-seventh Street Diamond Exchange.

Miriam continued walking down Lexington, but the neighborhood changed character and she saw no more nice little jewelry stores—only large office buildings. Tired out and chilled, at Forty-second Street, she got on the crosstown bus with a free transfer on her MetroCard.

The bus was crowded, so she had to stand. She watched with interest the several young people of both genders who sat complacently. Of course Miriam herself didn't appear to be as old as she was—she used a henna compound to keep her hair from going gray. When two rather ancient women got on at Fifth Avenue, however, Miriam *had* to say something to two boys who sat. "You two handsome men have youth on your side. Your muscles are strong. Let these ladies rest. They've worked hard to produce your world and to give birth to you and your brothers."

Those around her who stood nodded their agreement, though the women on whose behalf she spoke said no, no, they were getting off in a couple of blocks.

The boys, both embarrassed and reluctant, simultaneously stood. Miriam persuaded the women to sit, and five minutes later they all got off when the driver called, "Times Square. Broadway."

Once off the bus, the women thanked her. "Such manners of the youth today," decried Miriam. "Do you know of a store around here where I might find a pretty watch for under one hundred dollars?" The women directed her north to a store called Swat, and Miriam set off up Broadway.

Despite the cold, the day was sunny and the street was mobbed. Miriam, her eyes out for the store the ladies had directed her to, paid attention to nothing else. Suddenly, however, she felt the touch of a small human hand in her own and she looked down to see that a black boy no older than five or six had confidently thrust his hand into hers.

"Hello," Miriam called to him. The boy looked up, startled. He withdrew his cold hand and gazed around in confusion and distress. Well, heavens. Miriam caught up his arm so that he wouldn't get swept away in the crowd and shouted loudly, "Has anyone lost a little boy? Here, mothers, have you lost your child?" She picked up the youngster and held him aloft for his mother to see.

People walked around her, and no eager black woman responded with tears and hysterical thank you's, grabbing her child.

The little boy all the while hadn't stopped crying, so Miriam took a handkerchief from her pocket to dry his tears and wipe his nose.

Standing against the wall of a building, offering the child to the world at large as it passed, Miriam eventually spotted a police venue opposite her in the wide traffic island between uptown and downtown.

She crossed over to give the boy into official custody, and by the time she left, an arrangement was being made to bring the youngster a frozen custard. A bit peculiar, Miriam thought, to offer a child an ice cream as a substitute for his beloved mother, but the police officers were men, warmhearted and clueless.

She found the watch store where the women had told her it was, though the name was Swatch, not Swat, which only minimally made any more sense. Absolutely hundreds of watches were available and Miriam disliked every single one of them. Not the watches, she supposed, but the bands, which she found ugly.

She sat on a platform near the entrance for a few minutes to rest up for her further exploration. She would buy Nana a proper watch today if it killed her. She surely wasn't coming back downtown, where thieves abounded, young men let old women stand while they rested their sturdy muscles in their seats, and where mothers let go of their children's little hands in a crowd.

Soon Miriam was back up and at her quest. On the sidewalk, however, someone bumped into her, with a quick apology. A man with a hot dog had spread mustard over her coat. Wait a minute! She herself was from a country of experienced and devious thieves. Miriam stepped back quite deliberately and onto someone's stylishly clad foot, giving rise to a sharp cry from a healthy set of female lungs. Instead of apologizing, Miriam crunched down on the foot a little further, while she firmly closed her purse, which someone had begun to unzip. Once she lifted her own foot from the offender's foot, the would-be thief limped off speedily. Miriam was quick enough to whirl on the man who had gotten the condiment on her wool coat and smack him in the face with her now secure handbag.

"You pack of jackals," she cried out and went to hit him again, but he was gone.

Then, to her satisfaction, she saw an officer running after the pickpockets. How wonderful! She slung her purse across her shoulder and walked south again toward Forty-second Street. Macy's, at Thirty-fourth, was her destination.

Slow as she was, she was able to see the officer return, hauling the man who had dirtied her coat. This wasn't a bad country, after all. "I'll testify against him," she called out to the policeman. He stopped and gave her his card and she said she'd call. "That's no way to behave," she told the thief. "What kind of life do you create for yourself? The path you have chosen is a thousand times harder than going to work every day. But God will forgive you if you make amends now."

"Aren't you the woman who brought in the little boy before?" asked the officer.

"Yes, sir. I am."

"He's back with his mother. She was very relieved," the policeman told her.

"Good," said Miriam. "Though she must be more careful."

They parted at once, and Miriam continued her stroll. The robbery attempt had shocked her and slowed her down. Also, her feet hurt. If she didn't find the watch today, maybe she'd try again in a day or two. She kept looking to see the stain on her coat. She'd get it out with water and a brush, she supposed.

Then on Forty-second Street, a man accosted Miriam to ask her something. She tried to dodge him, fearing some new scheme against her person. Ready to either listen or flee, she stopped a few feet away from the man and looked into his sad blue eyes. She tried to detect some sign of insincerity, but maybe he really was sad about something. Or very practiced. "I just

would like to know where there's a pawn shop, ma'am."

She *had* passed one and she tried to think of where. At the same time, she kept a wary eye on the man. The collar on his brown wool coat was turned up to ward off the cold, and he hadn't shaved in a couple of days, but his hair was neat.

"Well, I can picture it in my head" she said. "I'll try to take you there because I'm not a hundred percent sure."

"Oh, thanks. Thanks a lot." He fell into step with Miriam. "I'm going to pawn my watch," he confided. "It's a good one too. But I'm in a bit of a jam."

"Of course," she answered. These days everyone was in a bit of a jam.

The man took the watch off his wrist and showed it to her. Funny that he was going to pawn a watch, when she was looking for one. Of course, she didn't want a man's watch with a worn leather strap. "Very nice," she said.

"It's a Breitling," he told her proudly. "I bought it secondhand myself, but for sixteen hundred dollars."

The words "secondhand" and "sixteen hundred" didn't seem to her to go together. If this stranger was trying to fabricate a con, she wasn't having any. The pawn shop owner would bear the brunt. Pawnbrokers, however, should know their trade.

"I was beaten up and robbed the other night," the man continued, "and I need seventy-five dollars to get down to Florida where I have a good job waiting." So he *was* trying to sting her for the money, she decided. Oh well.

There. She couldn't believe it. She'd found the pawnshop, which she'd merely glimpsed and hadn't exactly even "noticed."

The man opened the door for Miriam to enter the store along with him, so she did.

He hadn't put his watch back on and he immediately offered it to the clerk, who grunted over his examination.

Miriam should have left, but she was curious, so she stood and watched the pawnbroker work. He set down the watch. "I can give you fifty dollars for it." Ah, so the watch was worth something, after all.

The owner of the watch looked obviously disappointed. He shook his head. "I need a hundred," he said.

Miriam turned to the pawnbroker to see his reaction. The man dismissed the idea that he would pay any such incredible amount for the watch.

"I'll give you a seventy-five," Miriam broke in, though she wasn't quite sure why. Maybe the man was telling the truth about being beaten and robbed—and, anyway, if the watch was

worth fifty, surely it was actually worth seventy-five.

The pawnbroker appeared alarmed. "I'll give you eighty-five dollars," he said.

"I'll sell it to the lady for seventy-five," said the watch owner. "She was very nice to me."

Well, Miriam hadn't been all that nice. She hadn't trusted him and now she felt bad. She turned her back to the men, reached into her coat, and pulled the money-holding handkerchief out of her dress. She then counted out eighty-five dollars. Yes, she would give him the extra ten. She didn't want to cheat him out of anything.

As to what she was doing, she herself was surely puzzled, since she hadn't come shopping for a secondhand man's watch but for a brand-new, gold-colored woman's watch.

"Great," said the seller, who gave Miriam the watch. He counted out the bills and offered her back her "extra" ten.

She shook her head. "You might want to get the watch again though," she said, realizing suddenly how these things usually worked.

He shrugged and backed away toward the door while he tucked his money into his pocket. "Easy come, easy go," he said. Then he came back into the shop and much to her surprise kissed her on the cheek. She had done nothing for him! He hurried away.

"He stole the watch," said the pawn shop clerk. "Did you see what a hurry he was in? He sold it to *you* because he didn't have to give his name and identification."

"Oh, I don't think so," said Miriam. "I believe he was an honorable man."

"You'd be surprised," said the clerk. "Can I see the watch again?"

Miriam gave it to him in trepidation. She had just given away the money with which she was going to buy Nana's present. Now she would find out that she had thrown away the money because she was such a bad judge of character.

"Yeah," said the clerk. "He must have stolen it. It's a really nice watch. Can I buy it from you? For me, that is."

"Why didn't you buy it from him?" Miriam asked suspiciously. She examined the cases for women's watches. She had just fifteen dollars left.

"That was business, but I'd like the watch for myself. I'll give you a hundred for it. You make fifteen dollars."

As if she couldn't read the shifty look in his eyes. "Good heavens, no," she said in surprise. "This is an incredible watch. It's a Breitling." Just then, she caught sight of a lady's watch in the case that was rather handsome, though these all were secondhand. "Can I see this?"

The minute he moved it, she saw the price tag, which read $209, way out of her range. She spent some time examining the watch, anyway, so as not to embarrass herself.

"I'm going to look on the sheets to see if the Breitling was stolen," the clerk said, picking up some pages from under the counter.

"Yes," she agreed. She was a bit curious too.

He looked through the papers while she continued to scrutinize the unaffordable watch. She wondered if he would offer her more for the Breitling or whether she might back down and take the hundred dollars.

"Maybe it *was* his," said the pawn shop clerk, putting down the pages. "Or maybe it hasn't been reported yet."

Miriam abandoned the woman's watch and looked around the store at many guitars and an old fur or two. But there was nothing cheap as in the thrift shops.

"I'll trade watches with you," the clerk said after a minute of this. "My boss will kill me, but I'll think of something."

Aha! He really, really wanted the watch. "Well, you probably only paid fifty dollars for the women's watch," she said. "The woman's watch is nice but it's secondhand, after all."

"It's not secondhand! It's pre-owned!" He was indignant.

"Someone else wore it. It's not like new." That, to Miriam, was secondhand.

"All right," he said. "You take the women's watch, plus I give you fifty."

"Eight-five," she said. "The women's watch might be worth nothing at all. I'd be cheated."

He didn't answer, but took a roll of bills out of his pocket and counted out eighty-five dollars. He moved the women's watch in her direction. He already had the Breitling.

She nodded in agreement. "Do you want me to sign anything?"

"No. It's a private deal," he said.

She turned from him and arranged the cash again where it belonged, then put the watch into her purse. Had the negotiation been a little too easy? "Thank you," she said. He shrugged.

Though she had all the cash she'd come downtown with, on her way out she wondered if she'd been cheated by the pawnbroker in regard to the woman's watch.

Still tired and her feet still more or less on fire, Miriam began to walk again to Fiftieth Street to return to the East Side on the crosstown bus. She ruminated on her recent transaction and tried to decide what to do about the watch. She had one for Nana, but it was secondhand. She could still buy the girl a new watch, however, since she again had the cash.

Maybe she should go back to the store where they'd thrown her out? No. She ought to have more pride than that. At Forty-seventh Street, she realized she might go where the young couple in love had gone—to the Diamond Exchange. They'd said the booths inside sold watches too.

Miriam entered the big store at 55 West Forty-seventh Street. The place reminded her of the open markets in her home country of Ghana, though here the shops were under a warming roof and the products being sold were far different from the cloth, cocoa, and shea butter marketed by the vendors at home.

She stopped at several counters and looked at the merchandise until, at the rear of the big main floor, she found some watches in a showcase that resembled the one she had been given at the pawn shop. She brought out her watch and showed it to the clerk who had been eyeing her with a frown. She didn't say anything, but he gasped in what sounded like shock.

"That's a Van Cleef and Arpels ladies dress watch," he croaked. He cleared his throat, then bit his lip. "That's a beautiful item." His eyes focused on her in rapt attention. She could see he was seeking out an explanation as to why a heavyset black woman with an ugly mustard stain on her coat was showing him this nice (though secondhand) watch.

"Those are diamonds around the face," he added reverentially.

"Yes," she agreed, not all that impressed. "Grainers." That was the industry term for small, inconsequential diamonds—diamonds the size of a small grain of rice. "Half grainers."

He stared at her. "Where did you get this, if you don't mind my asking."

"A birthday present," she said. That wasn't an answer to his question, exactly, but it wouldn't have been a lie if the question had been "why?" rather than "where?"

"Someone cares for you very much then," he said.

She nodded and studied the watches in the case. Suddenly she saw it: The watch she had nearly bought in the store near Bloomingdale's. "Can I see that little gold watch?" she asked. She might be able to complete her shopping right here.

"That's not gold," he answered, as if confused. "It's just gold colored." He took the new watch from out of the case and showed it to her. Then he kept his eye on her fancy watch while she turned over the watch from the case, marked at ninety-nine dollars. Ah, a ten dollar discount. She liked it and knew that Nana would like it, too, but she set it down.

He sighed. "I'll give you five hundred for the watch," the man said at last. He licked his lips.

Miriam kept her equanimity. Her mother had told her once that in bargaining, "You're not asking for enough unless your palms sweat."

"Throw in this other watch and you have a deal," she said coolly. Her heart had accelerated to a fast trot, so she guessed she was asking just about the right amount.

He was the one who seemed to be sweating though. "Okay," he answered, "but please tell me that you didn't steal the watch."

Miriam laughed quietly. "I'm exactly the opposite of that type," she informed him. "Once, as a girl, I walked ten kilometers to return a hundred cedis too much that I received in change—about a dime."

The man began to count out five hundred-dollar bills for her, but she asked for twenties. He then gave her the watch in a blue velvet box. Their dealings done, Miriam carefully placed everything in her purse, praying to God she would be able to return home without being robbed. She must be more careful even than usual.

"Do you realize how nice this watch is?" he asked, looking down again at the watch she'd just sold him.

"Yes, it's nice," she answered, "but I really wanted something new." He gave her a puzzled look. "Not pre-owned," she explained.

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. The expression on his face told her he believed he'd seen just about everything, and this transaction capped it all.

Back on the street once more, she felt as if she were walking on air, though her feet and legs were absolutely killing her. How much would a cab to 123rd Street cost? She laughed at herself, because she would never be that much of a spendthrift.

She had only one more stop to make before she went home. For that, she put a bill in her pocket. Back at Bloomingdale's and eager to get onto the subway, she looked around. If she could find the boy, she'd give him the twenty.

But though she spent several minutes in the search, he didn't show up. What a shame. Oh well. She'd make sure someone else in need got the money instead.

At home, before lying down to rest her very tired body and whirling mind, Miriam took the velvet box out of her purse, opened it, and studied the pretty little gold-colored watch.

What a wonderful birthday present it would make. That was the main thing.

She understood, of course, that the two watches she had sold today had been worth a great deal, but this was exactly the one that Nana would like.

God had certainly blessed Miriam today. Her shopping trip had been a great success.

SHALIMAR BEACH

JEAN FEMLING

Free. Craig lets himself drop into the loge seat, four in from the aisle and high above Stadium Court 1 at Indian Wells Tennis Complex, and stretches his legs, luxuriating. *Free free free.* The crowd is filling in rapidly for the first match, and almost directly below him the players, the bald-headed Pole Bohacik and Rafael Nadal in his signature bright blue shirt, are already warming up. From up here the octagonal stadium is a multicolored basin buzzing with life. Three days of perfect solitude. For Craig the big change starts today—in fact, it's already started. High time; he's forty-one already.

Craig is totally alone; nobody living even knows he's gone to Palm Springs except his dad. Nobody he knows ever sits up here. And nobody's waiting for him or counting on him, no duties that can't be deferred. His ex's lawyers have finally backed off. Just live in the present, like the guru says. Kiss the moment and let it go.

They say Nadal has changed his serve. Craig watches to see if he can pick up the new move. A girl pauses at the end of Craig's aisle and then, breathing audibly, moves in two seats and sits. No babes, he reminds himself. No eye contact. She's trim and curvy enough, in standard khaki shorts, sleeveless shirt, white-billed cap, running shoes—pretty but not beautiful, which is good, always. She stows her Navajo rug-looking bag and water bottle under the seat and slaps her hands over her face, either laughing or crying, he doesn't know which—maybe she doesn't either.

You can always tell a girl raised rich, Craig thinks, which makes her presence here alone even more unusual. The great haircut, tousled but elegant. The sleeveless shirt of beige linen, with rows of fine tucks. Her fingernails natural pink with perfect moons and little white crescent tips. Rich girls are composed of the best of everything; their very flesh is more refined, like hand-fed Kobe beef.

He's paying too much attention to her. Craig shifts away a quarter turn. Exactly what he intends not to do. He is not his father.

And then she's all tennis from the get-go, sucks up everything

going on down there. Never looked at her ticket coming in, which could mean she and he are in the same situation. Craig's loge ticket is for another section over in the sun. This shady section was sold out, but he's gambling there'll be seats enough to go around. Probably someone is meeting her here—also good.

Great tennis. From up here the court is a giant game board, and each player's strategy and responses sharp and indelible. After one of Nadal's brilliant returns Craig and the girl look toward one another and grin in shared appreciation.

At the end of the terrific first set tie break, itself worth the whole trip, a couple leans in to ask the girl to move over so they can sit in the end seats, and she does, giving Craig an apologetic glance as she settles beside him. He feels a pleasant warmth emanating from the smooth, tanned thigh just inches from his. After the second set he excuses himself and asks her to hold his seat while he goes out.

"Don't be too long," she says. "You don't want to miss any of this."

"Not a chance," Craig says.

In the third set they exchange appreciative glances and then brief comments after a choice rally or superior point.

"Aren't these great sight lines?" Craig asks. "Like we're hanging out in space."

Half turned away, she murmurs, "It makes me want to jump," so softly that he wonders if he imagined it.

At the end of the match (Nadal takes it) they stand in the roar, applaud, stretch. "I'm Craig." He holds out his hand.

She hesitates, considering. "Deena." She touches his fingertips.

They're both from L.A. Deena loves to watch tennis more than any of her friends do, she says; that's why she comes down alone. He tells her he's an accountant in the entertainment business, and at once wishes he'd lied: It sounds so disgustingly boring. Who would know? Deena says she's a project manager. Craig doesn't believe it, figures she just says it to fit in.

She leaves her bag with him while she goes out, taking only a small clutch. She's beginning to relax around him, and Craig starts to think of her as a possible dinner partner, at the least. Nothing can come of it, no danger of that: He has far travels planned ahead, the Adriatic coast, Nepal, Antarctica. Maybe Deena is just an opening note, part of the prelude. She comes back slightly flushed, refreshed, and sparkling.

The section is full; somebody will surely uproot them now. But the day just gets better. The next match is a grueling three-setter between a Russian and an Argentinian, with endless rallies and

frequent service breaks. Deena is getting sunburned, her nose shiny. She likes the Argentinian, he comes to the net more, besides which the Russian infuriates her by arguing so much. Basically he's a big baby, she says—here he is doing his life's work and he won't even try to control himself. They bet ten dollars on the outcome. The Argentinian skids and falls, bloodying his elbow, and the Russian gets mad and throws his racket, but finally wins.

Deena takes out a ten dollar bill and hands it to him as they make their way slowly out and down the stairs, letting the crowd flow around them. From the landing Craig sees the snack stands and smells sausages and suggests they grab something.

"Actually," Deena says, "I'm too hungry for a snack." She takes out two energy bars and hands him one.

"That's good," Craig says. "Actually, I was hoping for the pleasure of your company at dinner."

"I can do that," she says. "One thing: no hookup." Startled, he doesn't answer at once. "No sex," she says, over enunciating.

"You're the boss, ma'am," he drawls sarcastically. "Strictly your call, lady."

Deena smiles. "Good."

Craig feels like he's just been slapped. She doesn't mean it. After all, she's still here with him. That speaks louder than words.

Passing through the exit, Deena veers toward the ticket windows. "I'm going to get my loge for tomorrow now, to be sure," she says. "I've got stuff to do first thing in the morning."

"Good idea." Craig does likewise.

They meet again at seven in the lobby of Deena's hotel, a monster resort with artificial "lakes" outside and in. "Not my style *at all*," Deena says. "Our office manager booked it for me." She's wearing a white sleeveless shirt and trousers, elegant but severe, and lets him take her elbow as they step onto the little boat gliding them across the indoor water to the restaurant of their choice.

Admiring their reflection in the water, he says, "Good-looking couple."

"You think so? I think it's outrageous." Deena launches into a diatribe about Palm Springs's one hundred twenty golf courses draining the valley's aquifer. Oh God, Craig thinks, she's a greenie. Here we go.

"You've heard it all before, right?" she says, and quits. She orders a steak and fries, not one of those girlie salads, appreciates his choice of wine, of which he drinks most, encourages him to talk about himself, and eats everything in sight, including the bread. An excellent sign—she has hearty appetites.

Craig tells her about his now ex-wife, the civilized divorce, and

his resolve to get away and rediscover himself. He debates aloud the Adriatic (possibly Nepal, definitely Antarctica) and inevitably brings up Dad, whose accountant he is (there's one of his major mistakes). Charming Robbie, the producer, instant center of every group, like a door blown open into any room. A specialist in pleasure. Not that good looking, but women adore him. When he moves in, marriages crash and burn. Probably I sound jealous, he thinks. Probably I damn-all am.

Eventually Craig remembers to ask Deena about herself, but he mostly forgets to listen to the answers. She lives in West L.A., alone except for her old Burmese cat Molasses, she's a project manager for a big developer, and aside from the tennis, she's here on a pilgrimage.

"I'm going down to the Salton Sea tomorrow morning. Early." She starts to gather herself together. "Are you familiar with the Sea?"

"Never been there. I hear it's the pits. A disaster."

"Another world. You'd have to see it to understand," she said. "I grew up in the desert. Left there fifteen years ago, and I've never been back. It's time."

"It's really early." Craig, annoyed, looks at his watch.

"Not for me. Come on, I'll buy you a nightcap."

At the bar she gets him a snifter of very good brandy, and then another. "What do you mean, you grew up in the desert?" he asks.

"My daddy and my momma were rednecks. That's what they called themselves," she says. "Desert rats. They didn't care for other people at all. Had a big dog and a couple big shotguns. I had to fight them to get on the school bus. I expect they're still out there somewhere."

"You want to go and see them tomorrow?" Craig doesn't believe a word of it. Sounds like the kind of story Robbie would tell.

"Oh no. They moved on," Deena says "No forwarding address. I'm going down to Shalimar Beach. I lived there a while. Actually, what I miss the most are the stars. Out on the desert. They're wonderful."

She points at his second empty glass. "After all that sun, you better take it easy."

Craig takes the hint, begins to sag and wobble, and almost tips over a barstool.

"Oh, wow," she says, disgusted but not angry. "You can't drive in that shape. You better come upstairs and get your head clear. I may have something to help . . ."

In her room Craig drops onto one of the queen beds and shuts down dead asleep for a few minutes. When he comes to, Deena's

in cotton pajamas, just getting into the other bed. He props himself unsteadily on one elbow, looking across at her.

"All right," she says, not friendly. She pulls something out from under her pillow and brings it over to show him. It's an old wooden-handled kitchen paring knife, slid inside a man's folded handkerchief, its blade sharpened to a razor edge that has a wave in it. "Feel it," Deena says. "Feel the point."

He does. "You know this is totally unnecessary," he says.

"Right under my pillow," she says. "Good night," she adds, turning out the light.

In the night Craig finds himself in the bathroom, peeing by the dim light from outside.

"Close the door!" she yells.

When Craig wakes at first light, Deena is in the bathroom, dressed and drying her hair. "Why didn't you wake me?" he says, jumping up.

"I wasn't aware I'd invited you along."

"Ah, come on. After you've whetted my appetite?" His mouth feels coated and slimy, and his shirt smells. "Ten minutes. At least let me get my toothbrush and a clean shirt out of my car."

"Use mine; I can get another down there." The idea is revolutionary. He slathers her brush with toothpaste, and even so can barely get it in his mouth. He's shocked at himself—what about kissing? American culture is sick.

Ten minutes later, they're gliding along empty, palm-lined boulevards.

"This is the last shade you'll see," Deena says. "Enjoy it." This morning she looks quite different, her hair pulled up and hiding behind big, round sunglasses.

Without consulting him, Deena drives through a McDonald's and gets three Egg McMuffins, two for him, and two almost-drinkable cups of coffee. "Cuisine later," she says.

Craig decides to apologize for last night.

"No big," she says. "I've had my . . . episodes, encounters with uncontrolled substances."

"Had, you say. You mean that's all over."

"Oh yes," Deena says. "It's all all over."

On the highway heading south, Deena points out green fields and palm groves off to their right. "Where your salad last night came from."

Buildings dwindle and scatter, giving way mostly to barren flatlands with the ruddy desert range beyond. On Craig's right, the Salton Sea appears, a silver-blue sheet stretching southward to a hazy, indistinct horizon.

"Twenty-five percent saltier than the ocean," Deena says. "Fastest water in the world. They set world speedboat records here back in the sixties. Picture a hundred thousand people out here watching."

"Hard to," he says. "How old were you when you left?"

"Seventeen." She smiles at him. "Makes me thirty-two. I've heard you wondering." She's somehow much friendlier, and Craig's suddenly convinced that today the real Deena will be revealed.

Deena pulls off the highway onto a drive leading past a big boarded-up motel, to a white and blue building with a vaguely steamship look. Its upper story is one huge oval, like an ocean liner's smokestack, with three giant portholes and the name in script: ACES & 8S. Whatever was under the 8S had been painted out.

"We're not where we're going yet," Deena says, opening her door. "I need to check something, we'll just be a minute." Closed long before her time. Once it was a yacht club, Jerry Lewis and the Beach Boys played there. And then it got flooded out.

"We used to climb up in there." She points to the yawning portholes. "Ugh! Generations of bird droppings. Filthy." She heads around the side of the building toward the water, with Craig trailing behind. He's remembering something.

"Aces and eights," he says. "That's a dead hand. Unplayable." But she's too far ahead to hear.

Two curving stone breakwaters shelter rows of tall pilings. The water's color is somewhere between liquid rust and black coffee, and it stinks. "What's wrong with this water?" he asks.

Deena has climbed down to the near breakwater. "Everything. Algae, all of the alkali, fertilizer runoff—you name it." She steps out onto the breakwater.

"What are you doing?" he calls out. An elaborate abandoned swimming pool sits on a rise above the water, and he moves closer to look it over.

"Nothing." She turns around and comes back. "Out there's the best place to see the stars. No lights at all. Let's go."

"A neat little ruin," he says. "Wish I'd brought a camera."

"You don't want to miss your tennis." Deena is heading for her car.

This is one controlling chick. Craig figures he may have to divest himself of her in the near future. Right now, though, he's having an adventure. He can hear himself telling it.

On down the highway, Deena says, "You haven't asked me why I left yet." A couple miles go by. "It was a guy. Of course."

They're coming up on some kind of settlement. Houses and trailers line the highway and range out toward the beach. Deena turns onto the edge road that runs toward the water. "Welcome to Shalimar Beach," she says. "Eight blocks across."

"Any of your people left hereabouts?"

"Oh, I doubt it." They pass a smallish market with an iron grill still closed over the door, and a block farther on, Burt's Bar & Grill, likewise not opened yet. After another couple blocks, Deena says without slowing, "Right here. This guy pulls up in a cream Caddie and asks me, 'Which way is the beach?' Being funny of course, but you know, real likable. So I wind up getting in to show him the way, which he clearly didn't need. I was due at the market in half an hour. Oh, I made it all right.

"He came into the market a couple hours later and wanted to take me to lunch. The upshot of it was . . . I went. Walked out and got in that car, all puffy leather inside like a whipped cream cave, and blew away. Never even thought to lock the cash drawer. Of course somebody cleaned it out, and all the steaks and most of the booze. I couldn't come back then, could I?"

And then what? Craig wants to ask, but knows better. It's all going to come out sooner or later. She wants to tell it.

Near the beach the road goes left alongside a sand berm higher than their heads, so that the sea is invisible to them and to the people living behind it. Four blocks later there's an opening. They come out on a beach marred with heaps of broken concrete and seven or eight derelict buildings and vehicles, a gutted hull of an Airstream trailer, and a windowless, rusted-out school bus. In the water a ruined winch stands, and a row of skinny poles leprous with chemical growths marches into the shallows.

"This looks like something by Dalí," he says. "Salvador."

"I know who Salvador Dalí is." Deena points at a wooden shell covered almost up to its window frames. "That was my aunt's snack stand. They had some really wet years, and the lake rose."

"Those buildings didn't fall down," Craig says. "They were buried." He crunches across to the Airstream, stomping on the thick, crystallized alkali that squeaks underfoot like crusted snow. Where he smashes through the top layer he sees more deposits and formations below, down and down. Deena waits silently for him to be finished.

Craig walks out to the Sea, that rich, vile water. An endless pale festoon scallops the high-water line, numberless dried, hand-sized fish, their black eye-holes staring.

"Tilapia, " Deena says. "They lose birds too. About a million last time."

Craig squints into the dazzle, trying to see across to the opposite shore. "How deep is the lake now?"

"Around fifty feet, I think. Maybe less," she says. "Nights are the best. The stars. You ever—? No, that's right, you never get farther down than the Springs, do you? Absolutely magical. Awesome. That's what I want."

Deena stops at the top of the berm to give him one good look at the town. About half the houses are boarded up, a couple of them surrounded by razor wire. The only life he sees is a man with two big dogs inside a high chain-link fence.

"You did the right thing," he said. "Leaving."

Heading back out, Deena stops at the now open market. "I doubt anybody'll recognize me," she says softly. They go in together, and she strikes up a conversation with the young Asian boy behind the counter. Does anybody around rent outboards? And she and the boy go out back together. Craig wanders through the store, turning things over. The dark farthest end smells of brandied fruit and ant poison. He picks up a can of creamed corn, which he's never seen before, and a small package of Cracker Jack, leaves a five-dollar bill on the counter, and goes out to wait in the shade.

Deena comes outside laughing and animated and stands in the doorway, talking to Craig. "I got it!" she says. "He found an outboard for me. And I got the anchor, so we can go out tonight."

Deena drives like a banshee going back; Craig has to call her on it. They're utterly relaxed together now, he notices: She scratches her butt, and he catches himself picking his nose.

Craig finds himself asking, "So where did this guy take you?" although he does not want to know the details.

"Indio." She nods toward the opposite shore. "A great two-hour lunch, and eventually a really nice motel. All the AC you could ever, ever want. Five days we spent there—in the morning he'd go back up for the tennis and leave me money to go shopping for clothes, and then he'd come back down at night."

"Huh. You were underage, right?"

She sniffs as if he's made a joke. "He was a wonderful lover, tender and considerate. Stuff I couldn't have imagined. By the fifth day it got a little wild, he was bringing down coke. I've never had another experience like that." Deena was silent till they passed Aces & 8s. "I thought I was in love with him. Well, I was. So . . . five days, and then nothing."

"Like how?"

"He didn't come back like he said he would. He didn't call. No word, just 'See you tonight' and then . . . nothing. Like I'd just ceased to exist."

Craig does not want to know what happened to her next; he wants this conversation to be over. "Well," he says. "If he could see you now."

The rest of the day is mellow and unremarkable. They do get to see Justine Henin, the little Belgian firecracker, play: Her serve holds up pretty well and she wins. Craig does not allow himself to think about tonight. They have dinner at a good Mexican place on Highway 111 that Deena knows, dawdling till it gets darker.

"I don't want to get there too early," she says. Craig hasn't heard any more about her life after "the man," but he figures he ought to ask. They go back to Deena's hotel for Craig's car so he can drive. But she doesn't want to bother to go upstairs now.

Heading south, Deena is excited, which bodes well for Craig's evening. Everything turns her on—those sharp volcanic cones so close to Indian Wells and the farther ranges all ruddy now in the last sunlight, and then the sunset colors in the water. "That filthy stuff looks totally innocent from here, doesn't it?" he says.

Eventually he says, making conversation, "Well, you must feel pretty proud of yourself. You say drugs are totally in your past. All over now. That's a big deal."

"Yes. All, all over now."

It's after dark when they turn in at Aces & 8s. Craig parks at the side of the building as Deena directs. She's out and up to where she can see the water, while he's still scrabbling in the glove compartment for his little flashlight.

"It's there!" she calls back. Next thing she's digging around in the dirt at the foot of a frowsy palm tree; she comes up with keys on a leather fob just as Craig arrives with his flashlight, pointing straight ahead.

Deena considers a moment. "Good idea," she says.

The boat, aluminum hull and about twelve foot, sits alongside the breakwater, maybe thirty feet from shore. With no light around but starlight, it'll be tricky getting out there.

"Look at the stars," Deena says, hushed. "A thousand thousand suns, spinning away."

The sky is truly dazzling—both darker and brighter than Craig has ever seen. "Definitely worth the trip," he says.

"Isn't it? Thank you for saying that." She's ahead of him on the rocks, crouched low, and he shifts the little dancing circle of light back and forth between her feet and his.

"You know how to operate an outboard, I gather," he says.

"Oh, sure, my dad taught me real young, took me along fishing so I could do all the cleanup."

The anchor is a concrete block with a length of rope attached to a cleat on the gunwale. Deena directs Craig to the middle of the boat. Crouching low, she swings the block across to him, and he barely breaks its fall. She steps into the stern and starts the motor with no trouble. It's shockingly loud. She idles it down and maneuvers slowly through the rows of tall, slender pilings and out into open water.

"Good job," Craig says as they pick up speed.

The movement of their going makes a small wind passing over Craig's skin. The scatter of lights on their shore recedes, but those opposite come no nearer. Slowing, Deena says, "Nobody knows where you are. Oh, except for the kid at the market."

"It's not like we're worried about a tsunami," he says. "Earthquake, maybe. We're right on the fault."

Deena lies back, her face turned to the sky. "God! The stars. Too many to count. Too many to hold in your head. I used to think we go there—after. Maybe I still do."

She shuts the motor off. Now the boat lies still in the water, barely even rocking. Craig realizes that he has no idea how to start the motor again. But how hard can it be? Uneasy, he asks, "Are there still fish out here?"

Deena waves a hand in dismissal. "Of course I couldn't afford coke," she says. "So it had to be crank. Sparkle. Cristina. I've kicked the meth twice. I can't go through that again."

Craig makes a sympathetic noise. It's not enough, but what is?

"What comes next—I feel a little sorry for you," she says. "I was going to take you along, but then I figured, why? You didn't really do anything."

Take him along? Alarmed, Craig straightens up quietly. He's got to do something, he hasn't a clue what, but he's got to try. "I'm not following you. How do you mean, you feel sorry for me?"

"I saw your dad last Thursday."

"What?"

"In Santa Monica," she said. "Not that hard to find, once I decided to look. That coffee place where he hangs out, on Montana? He never recognized me, of course. A shame about his arthritis. He never said anything, but you can see how it hampers him."

"Wait a minute." It's a solid blow to his chest; Craig can't process this. "How do you know my dad?"

"I stole one of his credit cards in Indio. Because I wanted something of his. I didn't even know his last name. I've talked to him several times now. Just somebody's nanny, waiting to pick up the

children, right? He said I reminded him slightly of someone." She smiled at that. "My all-purpose face."

Now she's bending over the rope, doing something with it. Craig shines the light on her hands. The rope loop is free of the cleat, and she's just fastening a clear plastic strip around her wrist and through the loop, snugging it up; it looks like the kind of tie you use to fasten a trash bag, with notches you cinch up.

"Hey!" He can't believe this. She's locked herself to that chunk of concrete. He starts to slide toward her.

"Stop it!" she yells. "You'll tip the boat over." Meaning, she will. "And turn off that light. It spoils the view."

Craig presses the light against his leg, concealing it entirely. Deena slides her forearms into the open concrete block and carefully pushes herself up halfway onto the gunwale, her back to the water. When she hoists the block onto her lap the boat lists over on that side, its lip only a few inches from the water.

"Hey, hey, wait a minute," Craig says, visibly holding himself motionless. "Just listen, baby. There are some good ways now to deal with this, this drug thing. Surefire—"

"Your dad should be here instead," she says. "But I couldn't make it happen. He adores you, you and the grandkids are the apple of his eye. He worries that you don't get enough joy out of living." She snickers at that. "He was always talking about you." She stops, but Craig, dumbstruck, can't think of anything to say.

"You know how it's going to look," she goes on. "They'll nail you for sure. Who wouldn't believe you did it? Now it'll all come out. But you don't have to worry, you'll be all right in the long run. You know what they say: Money always walks."

She shifts again. "Say goodbye to Robbie for me." The boat rocks and Craig dives at her, grabbing for her arm. "No!" she screams and tips backward into the water, hugging the concrete block to her chest.

He lunges into the splash reaching after her but touches nothing, the boat recoils and then springs farther back, shipping water, and Craig goes over into the warm soup. He's going down and down twisting, churning, groping for anything. Panic inflames him: Which way is up? Thrashing, he bursts through the surface under the stars and grabs onto the boat. Beyond the roar, water runs off him in tinkling rivulets.

His eyes burn. There's no sign of Deena, not the slightest ripple. Craig's flesh is alive with a thousand cuts. He sees the lighted flash below him turning slowly, drifting downward, dimming. Deena went in face up, looking toward the stars. He will never be able to forget it.

JACK LONDON

THE LEOPARD MAN'S STORY

He had a dreamy, far-away look in his eyes, and his sad, insistent voice, gentle-spoken as a maid's, seemed the placid embodiment of some deep-seated melancholy. He was the Leopard Man, but he did not look it. His business in life, whereby he lived, was to appear in a cage of performing leopards before vast audiences, and to thrill those audiences by certain exhibitions of nerve for which his employers rewarded him on a scale commensurate with the thrills he produced.

As I say, he did not look it. He was narrow-hipped, narrow-shouldered, and anæmic, while he seemed not so much oppressed by gloom as by a sweet and gentle sadness, the weight of which was as sweetly and gently borne. For an hour I had been trying to get a story out of him, but he appeared to lack imagination. To him there was no romance in his gorgeous career, no deeds of daring, no thrills—nothing but a gray sameness and infinite boredom.

Lions? Oh, yes! he had fought with them. It was nothing. All you had to do was to stay sober. Anybody could whip a lion to a standstill with an ordinary stick. He had fought one for half an hour once. Just hit him on the nose every time he rushed, and when he got artful and rushed with his head down, why, the thing to do was to stick out your leg. When he grabbed at the leg you drew it back and hit him on the nose again. That was all.

With the far-away look in his eyes and his soft flow of words he showed me his scars. There were many of them, and one recent one where a tigress had reached for his shoulder and gone down to the bone. I could see the neatly mended rents in the coat he had on. His right arm, from the elbow down, looked as though it had gone through a threshing machine, what of the ravage wrought by claws and fangs. But it was nothing, he said, only the old wounds bothered him somewhat when rainy weather came on.

First published in Leslie's Magazine, *August 1903.*

Suddenly his face brightened with a recollection, for he was really as anxious to give me a story as I was to get it.

"I suppose you've heard of the lion-tamer who was hated by another man?" he asked.

He paused and looked pensively at a sick lion in the cage opposite.

"Got the toothache," he explained. "Well, the lion-tamer's big play to the audience was putting his head in a lion's mouth. The man who hated him attended every performance in the hope sometime of seeing that lion crunch down. He followed the show about all over the country. The years went by and he grew old, and the lion-tamer grew old, and the lion grew old. And at last one day, sitting in a front seat, he saw what he had waited for. The lion crunched down, and there wasn't any need to call a doctor."

The Leopard Man glanced casually over his finger nails in a manner which would have been critical had it not been so sad.

"Now, that's what I call patience," he continued, "and it's my style. But it was not the style of a fellow I knew. He was a little, thin, sawed-off, sword-swallowing and juggling Frenchman. De Ville, he called himself, and he had a nice wife. She did trapeze work and used to dive from under the roof into a net, turning over once on the way as nice as you please.

"De Ville had a quick temper, as quick as his hand, and his hand was as quick as the paw of a tiger. One day, because the ring-master called him a frog-eater, or something like that and maybe a little worse, he shoved him against the soft pine background he used in his knife-throwing act, so quick the ring-master didn't have time to think, and there, before the audience, De Ville kept the air on fire with his knives, sinking them into the wood all around the ring-master so close that they passed through his clothes and most of them bit into his skin.

"The clowns had to pull the knives out to get him loose, for he was pinned fast. So the word went around to watch out for De Ville, and no one dared be more than barely civil to his wife. And she was a sly bit of baggage, too, only all hands were afraid of De Ville.

"But there was one man, Wallace, who was afraid of nothing. He was the lion-tamer, and he had the self-same trick of putting his head into the lion's mouth. He'd put it into the mouths of any of them, though he preferred Augustus, a big, good-natured beast who could always be depended upon.

"As I was saying, Wallace—'King' Wallace we called him—was afraid of nothing alive or dead. He was a king and no mistake. I've seen him drunk, and on a wager go into the cage of a lion that'd turned nasty, and without a stick beat him to a finish. Just did it with his fist on the nose.

"Madame De Ville—"

At an uproar behind us the Leopard Man turned quietly around. It was a divided cage, and a monkey, poking through the bars and around the partition, had had its paw seized by a big gray wolf who was trying to pull it off by main strength. The arm seemed stretching out longer and longer like a thick elastic, and the unfortunate monkey's mates were raising a terrible din. No keeper was at hand, so the Leopard Man stepped over a couple of paces, dealt the wolf a sharp blow on the nose with the light cane he carried, and returned with a sadly apologetic smile to take up his unfinished sentence as though there had been no interruption.

"—looked at King Wallace and King Wallace looked at her, while De Ville looked black. We warned Wallace, but it was no use. He laughed at us, and he laughed at De Ville one day when he shoved De Ville's head into a bucket of paste because he wanted to fight.

"De Ville was in a pretty mess—I helped to scrape him off; but he was cool as a cucumber and made no threats at all. But I saw a glitter in his eyes which I had seen often in the eyes of wild beasts, and I went out of my way to give Wallace a final warning. He laughed, but he did not look so much in Madame De Ville's direction after that.

"Several months passed by. Nothing had happened and I was beginning to think it all a scare over nothing. We were West by that time, showing in 'Frisco. It was during the afternoon performance, and the big tent was filled with women and children, when I went looking for Red Denny, the head canvas-man, who had walked off with my pocket-knife.

"Passing by one of the dressing tents I glanced in through a hole in the canvas to see if I could locate him. He wasn't there, but directly in front of me was King Wallace, in tights, waiting for his turn to go on with his cage of performing lions. He was watching with much amusement a quarrel between a couple of trapeze artists. All the rest of the people in the dressing tent were watching the same thing, with the exception of De Ville, whom I noticed staring at Wallace with undisguised hatred. Wallace and the rest were all too busy following the quarrel to notice this or what followed.

"But I saw it through the hole in the canvas. De Ville drew his handkerchief from his pocket, made as though to mop the sweat from his face with it (it was a hot day), and at the same time walked past Wallace's back. He never stopped, but with a flirt of the handkerchief kept right on to the doorway, where he turned his head, while passing out, and shot a swift look back. The look

troubled me at the time, for not only did I see hatred in it, but I saw triumph as well.

"'De Ville will bear watching,' I said to myself, and I really breathed easier when I saw him go out the entrance to the circus grounds and board an electric car for down town. A few minutes later I was in the big tent, where I had overhauled Red Denny. King Wallace was doing his turn and holding the audience spellbound. He was in a particularly vicious mood, and he kept the lions stirred up till they were all snarling, that is, all of them except old Augustus, and he was just too fat and lazy and old to get stirred up over anything.

"Finally Wallace cracked the old lion's knees with his whip and got him into position. Old Augustus, blinking good-naturedly, opened his mouth and in popped Wallace's head. Then the jaws came together, *crunch*, just like that."

The Leopard Man smiled in a sweetly wistful fashion, and the far-away look came into his eyes.

"And that was the end of King Wallace," he went on in his sad, low voice. "After the excitement cooled down I watched my chance and bent over and smelled Wallace's head. Then I sneezed."

"It . . . it was . . .?" I queried with halting eagerness.

"Snuff—that De Ville dropped on his hair in the dressing tent. Old Augustus never meant to do it. He only sneezed."

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

BY RMMTYX JE, HIQGIRYX, LCIB Q HBQGE CSHIGJUYSI

CS YQWB BQSX QSX QS YNEGYHHCMS IBQI UQXY UY

ARQX C QRLQOH AM QGUYX MS Q BMUCWCXY WQHY.

—RMGYS X. YHIRYUQS

CIPHER: _

ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Solution on page 107

THE STORY THAT WON

The March Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Frances Lowe of Orlando, Florida. Honorable mentions go to Katherine Bennett of Pembroke Pines, Florida; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; A. M. Gavin of Los Angeles, California; Adrian Ludens of Rapid City, South Dakota; Randy Pigman of Brownsburg, Indiana; James A. Stewart of Butler, Pennsylvania; Rudy Uribe, Jr. of Valley Glen, California; and Valerie Whisenand of Glencoe, Arkansas.

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BAND ON THE RUN

FRANCES LOWE

Seven men in black suits and carrying musical instruments marched up Main Street. The parade had ended an hour earlier; therefore, they did not arouse suspicion as they hurried along.

However, the local police station began getting calls reporting home invasions and missing musical instruments.

One frantic parade watcher reported an expensive diamond ring and pearl necklace were missing from her home.

Chief Donegan scratched his head. How could this many thefts occur when all his officers were on the streets?

As he patrolled in his cruiser, he observed the band of men marching up the street. He didn't remember seeing this group in the parade, so he stopped them to ask questions.

He said to the trumpet player, "I'd like to hear you play taps on that thing."

The band man put the trumpet to his lips and let out a few discordant notes.

The chief pulled out his pistol and handcuffs with the comment, "Sorry, son, you blew it!"

THE LINEUP

JOHN C. BOLAND'S first published story, "Stand-In," appeared in these pages in September 1976. He wrote a half-dozen financial mystery novels in the 1990s. His last story for AHMM, "Marley's Woman," appeared in the September 2007 issue.

JOHN H. DIRCKX retired in 2003 after practicing primary care medicine for forty years. He remains active as a technical writer and editor, with emphasis on medical lexicography, and indulges in book collecting and fiction writing for amusement and relaxation.

JEAN FEMLING has published several mystery novels, as well as fantasy, children's and crime/suspense short stories, a non-fiction travel book, and articles on everything from graphoanalysis to junior rodeo riders. This is her first story for AHMM.

Booked & Printed columnist ROBERT C. HAHN reviews mysteries for *Publishers Weekly* and *New York Post*, among other places, and is the former mystery columnist for the *Cincinnati Post*.

A short story Edgar winner, G. MIKI HAYDEN teaches writing at *Writer's Digest's* online workshops. She is author of *Writing the Mystery* and *The Naked Writer*, a writing style and composition book. Her last story for AHMM, "A Killing in Midtown," appeared in the January/February 2008 issue.

EDWARD D. HOCH published nearly a thousand short stories before his death in January 2008. He was presented with the Grand Master Award by the Mystery Writers of America in 2001. "Baja" is his 106th contribution to AHMM.

RUSSEL D. MCLEAN'S first novel, *The Good Son*, will be released in Winter 2008/2009 by Nottingham, England publisher Five Leaves.

DONALD MOFFITT has published six science fiction novels since 1977. "Feat of Clay" is his first contribution to AHMM.

J. RENTILLY is a Los Angeles-based journalist who covers film, music, and literature for a variety of national and international publications.

HARRIET RZETELNY is currently working on a novel featuring her AHMM series characters, social worker Molly Lewin and Detective Steve Carmaggio. Although she currently lives on Cape Cod, her mysteries continue to be about New York City and its people, past and present.

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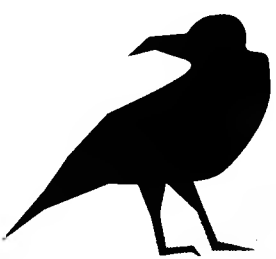

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