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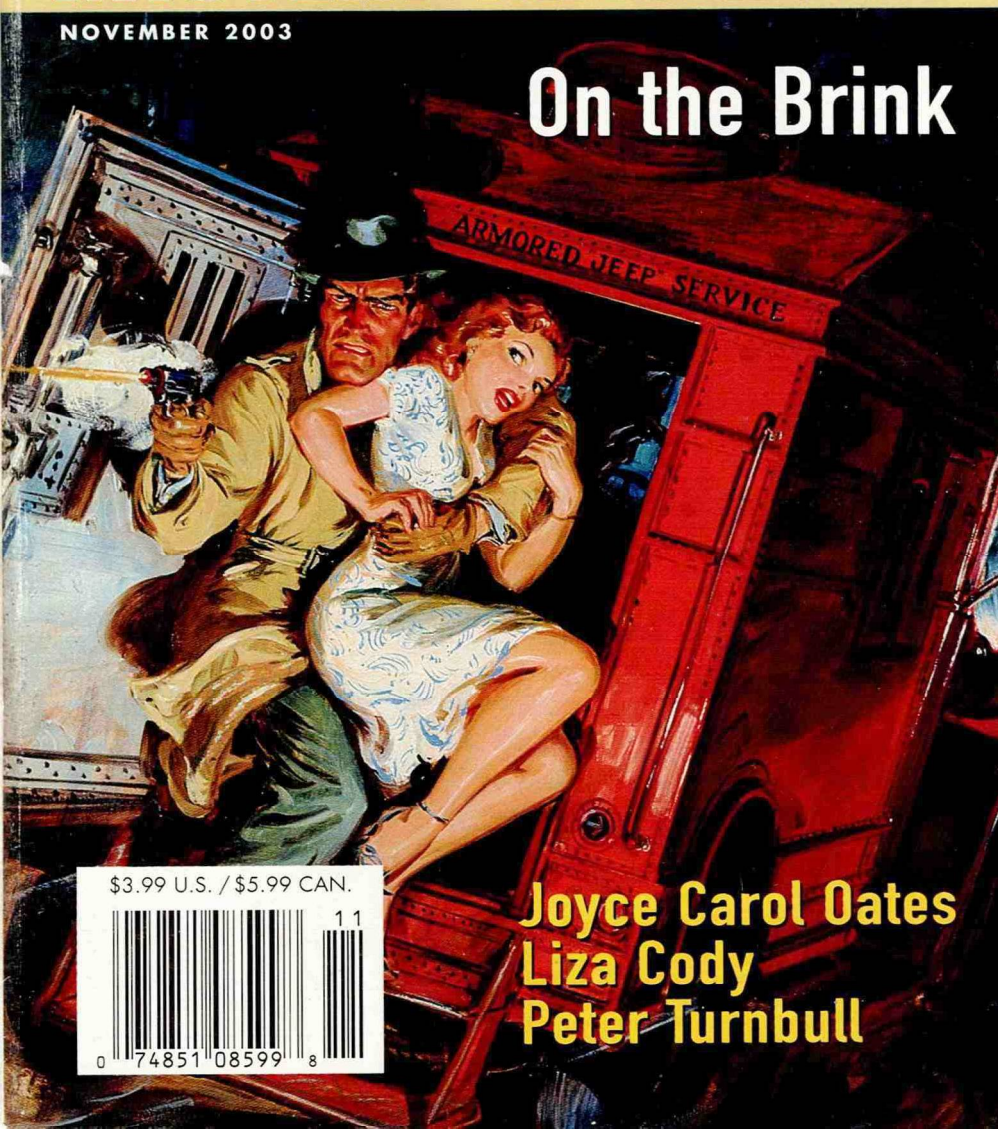

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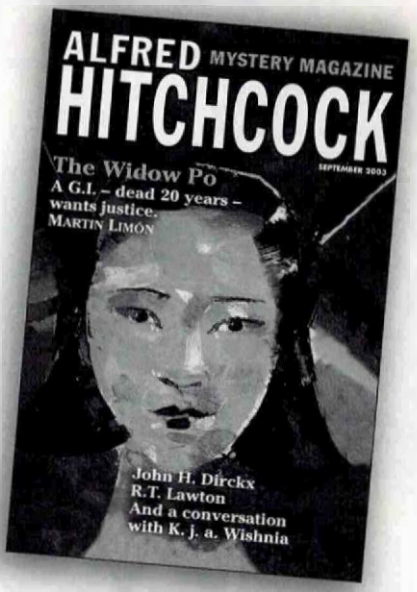

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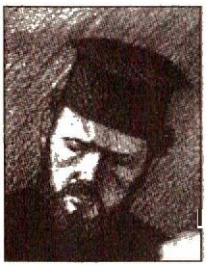

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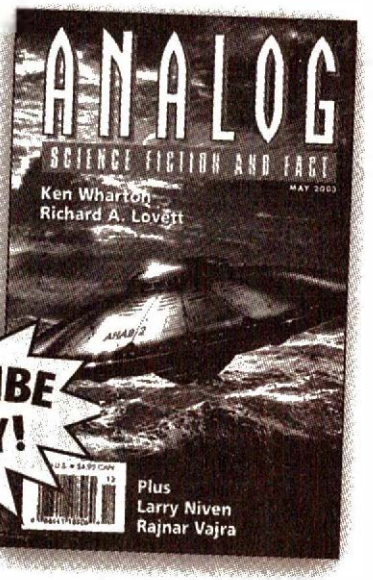

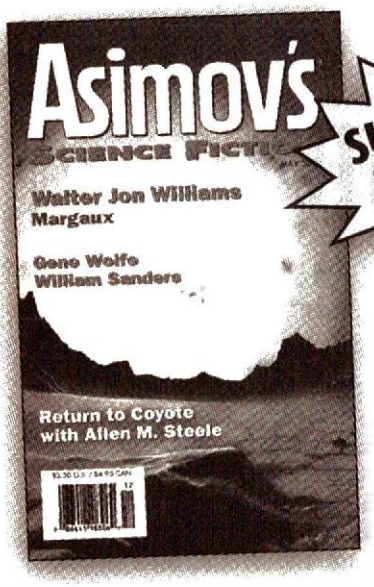

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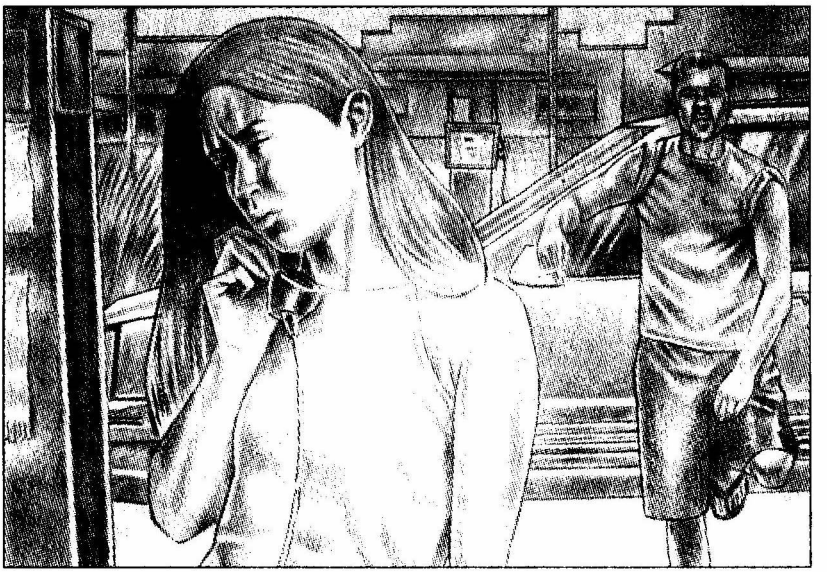


Art by Daniel Galanaugh

The Hunter

by Joyce Carol Oates

At the phone booth outside the Kwik Shoppe on Route 31, Spedwell, New Jersey, there she stood bathed in light. My eyes knew to follow such light. Hair shimmering-pale falling to her hips. Face turning to me like a crescent moon. Quick shy smile. She would say *It was meant for us to meet, that was why I smiled.* For she had dialed the number of one who failed to answer and if he had answered she would not have turned restless and anxious and her eyes lifting to mine across the oil-stained pavement to where I stood beside my pickup about to climb inside. Ignition key in my hand.

In that instant in such a way our lives were joined forever.

Hannah her name was: an old name. Out of the past. A name you would see chiseled in gravestones, in the oldest churchyards.

I had known in that instant seeing Hannah across a distance of perhaps thirty feet that there was this about her, young as she was and her body lean as a boy's and the sparrow-bones of her shoulders revealed inside her loose tank top I wanted to caress, and to kiss, so fragile a sudden blow might shatter them. I had known

that Hannah's soul was not a child's soul but predated her years on earth as my soul is an ancient soul out of place in these times of godlessness and a mongrel mixing of the races.

Liam Gavin I was named, for I was of the hawk, a hunter of the sky. Liam Gavin my grandmother-born-in-Galway named me, for my young mother abandoned me at my birth to be raised by my grandmother.

Hannah and Liam Gavin were our names then, together. As if always our names had been together like carvings in stone.

Joyce Carol Oates may well be the best known and most widely read of American literary authors. Both a National Book Award winner and a *New York Times* bestselling novelist, she has written of a great variety of characters, from celebrities to politicians, academics, teenagers—even serial killers. Her ability to take the reader deep inside whatever type of character she employs is remarkable. (See *The Tattooed Girl*/Ecco.)

She came to live with me. My place I was renting in Spedwell. Upstairs over the pet-supply store with the dusty display window, that was so often closed over the summer. Five minutes' walk from Luigi's Pizzeria where I worked. And Hannah wished to work, but was too young. But Hannah came by the pizzeria to assist me often. There was no harm in this, my employer did not object. On deliveries Hannah rode with me in the van to keep me company after dark. Walking with me to customers' front doors, ringing the bell. If it was Hannah, with her long shining hair and smile like a candle flaring in the dark, that handed them the pizza in its big flat cardboard box, the tip would be as much as one dollar more than if Liam Gavin had brought them the pizza instead.

Did Liam Gavin resent this fact?

Certainly I did not. For all facts exist to be considered, and utilized.

In small towns like Spedwell you see through lighted windows in the evenings. In summer especially, when windows are open. Often a front door will be ajar, or fully open. Even if you wish not to see at such times, to resist temptation, your eyes lead you to see. For in a small town like Spedwell they don't trouble to pull down their blinds. There is quiet here mostly, and trust.

Hannah said, I love it that people see us together. I love it that they see Liam and Hannah.

It wasn't clear until we had been together for some weeks that Hannah did not always speak the truth. Small untruths I would catch her in. That she would deny, shaking her head like a deceitful child. Long hair rippling and the scar tissue on her face shiny

as teeth. There were men she smiled at in the pizzeria when she believed I couldn't see her face. On the street, a car or a truck passing and Hannah would narrow her eyes, staring. Telephone calls she made in secret, that I had reason to know of. When I spoke to her of such things she denied them, always she denied what I knew to be true which was an insult to me. The man she'd tried to call, that day by the Kwik Shoppe, was a trucker whose route was Newark to Atlanta, and I had learned that Hannah had ridden with him in his truck before coming to live with me. And there was the mailman who parked his van at the curb and climbed the stone steps to the building where we lived, that was built on a small hill at the end of Main Street. Six days a week this mailman, a black man of no clear age, their skins are so smooth-dark and their behavior so friendly-seeming. This Negro with a thin black moustache like it was drawn in crayon on his upper lip.

Six days a week he would come to place mail in the row of mailboxes outside our building, that were made of cheap metal and rusted and their locks long broken. It was rare that I would see him, for I was at work, but I understood that Hannah would see him, seated on the front stoop in the sun her thin legs bare and pale and her feet bare, and there she would paint her toenails. My portable radio beside her. Hannah's deceitful face uplifted, her slow smile. The ugly scar on her face did not deter her from offering herself to even a black man whose odor would cling to her for hours.

Saying, Hi there. No mail for me today again I guess?

Never any mail for Hannah. Who had no last name.

Lonliness I would write *eats at the heart. All my life I have been lonly. But I have faith, this will change somday soon.*

Our teacher's name was Mrs. Knudsen. We were instructed to call her Mrs. Knudsen and when she said, at the third class meeting, Please call me Evvie, Evvie is my name, some of us were unable to make the switch. Because you don't want your teacher to be somebody like yourself. There is a need to believe that your teacher is somebody different from you.

Mrs. Knudsen she was to me then. Saying, This is very good work, Liam Gavin. The way you express yourself is clear and direct and your vocabulary is well chosen and what you say is always interesting. Except you have misspelled a few words, I will show you.

She showed me in her own handwriting that was so beautiful:

loneliness someday

There were about twenty of us in the class. The number changed each time. Men were released from the facility, or somebody new

signed up for the course. Improving Your English Skills it was called. Tuesday and Friday mornings at ten A.M. This was Red Bank Correctional where my sentence was eleven months to two years but would be reduced to seven months for good behavior. For always in such places Liam Gavin is a cooperative prisoner, a Caucasian.

Word was out in Red Bank, the English teacher Mrs. Knudsen was a good-looking sexy woman, which was true in a way of speaking, but Mrs. Knudsen was not the type of good-looking sexy woman the average inmate at Red Bank would desire. For Mrs. Knudsen was not young. Later I would learn she was thirty-seven. She did not look anywhere near that old, but you could see she was not young. Her hair was graying-brown and looked like she had washed it and combed it through but nothing more so it was frizzy and limp. Her face was solid and creased around the mouth from years of smiling. In the fluorescent lights you could see lines beside her eyes. Some days she wore a dark lipstick that did make her look sexy, her mouth like something you would wish to kiss, or to bite, but other days her face was pale and a little shiny as if she'd rubbed it hard with a rag. Most days she wore slacks and a turtleneck sweater or a shirt and jacket. It is likely that Mrs. Knudsen was instructed to wear loose clothing to come into the facility, which is intelligent advice. It is the advice I would give to any woman.

The thing you noticed most about Mrs. Knudsen was her laugh. A quick loud laugh like she was being tickled. You liked to hear that laugh. In a prison facility, nobody laughs much. But when we had our classroom "discussions" Mrs. Knudsen attempted a sense of humor to put her students at ease, treating us like you'd treat older high school guys, and it was true that most of Mrs. Knudsen's students were younger than her, in age at least. In Red Bank as in other state facilities there are few men beyond a certain age, most of us were younger. By young I mean under thirty. Many young Negro prisoners who know one another from the street and do their business in prison, or try. There are some men not from cities, though, but from small towns, or rural parts of the state, and these were mostly white men. I was one of these.

Improving Your English Skills was a course that ran all the time at Red Bank when they could get teachers to teach it. The teachers were volunteers. I took the course only when Mrs. Knudsen taught it. And only for ten weeks because my parole came through. For good behavior as I have said. In such places the guards who are mostly white like me, and trust me. Mrs. Knudsen liked me, and trusted me, and I have reason to believe she wrote a good report on me for the parole board. This was clear for when we met again, five weeks after I was released, by accident we met at

the Medlar Mall, Mrs. Knudsen smiled at me right away and put out her hand to me as nobody ever did in Red Bank or anywhere, and said, Liam, is it? Hello!

Like it was such a surprise, and it made her happy. Like I was somebody she knew and had a fondness for.

The fiery light in Mrs. Knudsen's eyes. I was not sure that I had seen it before, in Red Bank. Beneath her loose clothes it had been hidden. I saw now that her eyes were warm and dark and hopeful.

Let me buy you a cup of coffee, Liam Gavin. You're looking very well.

You're looking very well is not something anyone would say to me, of people that I know or work with. Yet when Mrs. Knudsen uttered these words, I felt very happy.

Starbucks! Not a place I would ever go. Yet Mrs. Knudsen insisted, and inside seated at a small table I inhaled the smells, I looked around and saw that it was okay, nobody was staring at me or wondering who I was. *You are not one of us, you don't belong here*—these sneering words I would have expected, yet did not register. For so many people look like me now. White guys in their twenties, even high school kids. Mrs. Knudsen had her way of putting me at ease, asked me questions in a kind of slow searching voice like teachers do, how was I, what was I doing now, did I have a job, did I have a family, where did I live. Saying with her smile that made creases sharp as knife-marks beside her mouth, You were one of my best students, Liam. You were always so attentive. You sat so straight. You wrote such interesting compositions. You made me feel less . . . despair.

I was surprised to hear this. I didn't know where to look. The coffee mug in my hand was heavy, and shaky.

Mrs. Knudsen laughed, saying in a lowered voice sometimes yes she did feel despair. There was embarrassment between us for you don't expect your teacher to say such a thing but there was excitement too at such a confession. Mrs. Knudsen's hand too shook a little holding her mug of coffee. There was a look like a girl's—daring, flirty, pushy—in her face I had not seen at Red Bank where Mrs. Knudsen had asked us to call her Evvie but mostly we had not, out of politeness and clumsiness we had not called her anything to her face. Where she wore loose clothes and no makeup most days never looking like she looked now at the Medlar Mall, never in sexy trousers that showed the curve of her hips and a sweater tucked into the waist of the trousers, and her mouth shiny with lipstick.

In a scolding voice saying, Evvie, please call me! I call you Liam, don't I?

Evvie, I said. Ev-vie.

But the word was strange on my lips, like a foreign word I could pronounce but did not comprehend.

Mrs. Knudsen was telling me of her family. Her husband who was a very busy man she said, an accountant. Her son who was fourteen and no longer needed her. Not even to console him when he's feeling blue. He just goes to the computer, and the door to his room is shut. Everything is e-mail, e-mail; that damned e-mail. Of course I understand he's no longer a little boy, I understand that. I wouldn't want him to remain a child. I love him too much. My husband . . .

In this strange intimate way Mrs. Knudsen talked to me in Starbucks. Like we were old friends meeting after many years. She was leaning forward with her elbows on the table. She had three cups of coffee, and I had two without finishing the last. She asked if I was hungry and I said yes so she ordered chocolate chip cookies which I ate trying not to drop crumbs onto the table. This first time we met in the Medlar Mall that would seem to be, if you'd seen us, by chance. Mrs. Knudsen would consider it so. She had no idea I had moved to Medlar. When I was released from Red Bank I looked through telephone directories for three counties until I found the right Knudsen family. Medlar was not too distant, the parole board allowed me to live in Medlar so long as I had a job there, as I did. And so I moved, and so I came often to the Medlar Mall at different times of day. I did not drive past Mrs. Knudsen's house. I knew the address, and I knew where the street was, but I did not drive on that street. Nor did I telephone that number even to hear Mrs. Knudsen's voice. I would not do such a thing. I was on parole, and I knew better. Mrs. Knudsen knew better too, it was not allowed to see people from Red Bank outside the facility if they are on parole. I thought *She is forgetting this. She is pretending to forget.* The knowledge made me happy, for it was our secret between us.

After the Starbucks, Mrs. Knudsen asked if I needed a ride anywhere and I said yes, that would be good. So Mrs. Knudsen drove me a few miles north on the highway to the place I was staying in, that had been a motel but was converted now to one-room efficiency apartments. Mrs. Knudsen said it must be lonely here, this is a melancholy place, and I shrugged and said, It's okay.

Close-by was the Amoco where I worked. To get to the mall I took the local bus. Soon I would have a car. I waited for Mrs. Knudsen to say she'd like to see my apartment, see how I'd decorated it, but she did not.

But Mrs. Knudsen took my phone number. And two days later Mrs. Knudsen called me. For she believed I must be lonely, she said. I had told her that my family was scattered, which was true. She understood how hard it must be, on parole like I was. In Red

Bank you did not inquire why another inmate was inside, nor did Mrs. Knudsen inquire why I had been sent there. In one of the papers I wrote for Mrs. Knudsen I spoke of my conviction for aggravated assault, a fight I had gotten into with a man I didn't know, and had not meant to hurt so bad as I did, in a bar in Trenton. This was two months after Hannah betrayed me but still I was in that mood, quick to flare up and wishing to hurt even a stranger who pissed me off by the way he looked at me. But of this charge, and whether my sentence was fair, Mrs. Knudsen never spoke, nor would she.

The next week, on Wednesday when I was working half-day, Mrs. Knudsen took me to lunch at a restaurant in Pinnacle, and afterward to a bookstore called the Bookworm. In a big old wood-frame house, and down in the cellar was the Paperback Treasure Trove, that smelled like a graveyard but Mrs. Knudsen seemed to like it, shelves of moldy old paperbacks for prices low as 50¢—25¢—10¢. Mrs. Knudsen picked out a dozen paperbacks for me saying, Oh Liam, you'll like *this!*—you'll love this! excited as a young girl. It made me smile to see her. Some of these were young-adult books, *The Solar System, In the Age of the Great Dinosaurs, The Red Pony.* Biographies of John F. Kennedy, Babe Ruth, the first astronauts. In Mrs. Knudsen's warm brown eyes I saw the hope of something like pain, it came so strong. Her eagerness to believe something of me I could not comprehend, still less name.

The moldy old books, I wanted to toss down in disgust. I was not fifteen years old. I was not a mental deficient. Instead I thanked Mrs. Knudsen for her kindness. For the books, and for the lunch. Mrs. Knudsen touched my wrist saying in a scolding voice, Now Liam, call me Evvie, please!

Between us there was that flare of light, so fierce you would not believe it could ever go out. But I have grown wary of such, and distrustful.

Liam Gavin I was named, yet there was a being deep inside Liam Gavin who could not be named. This being had never been baptized in any church. No woman had sung lullabies to him cradling him in her arms.

This being seemed to reside in my eyes, I thought. Sometimes in the region of my heart. Sometimes in my belly. And sometimes between my hard-muscled legs.

Between my legs, a fist-like thing that grew rigid and angry with sudden blood.

This thing had no name. It came of a time before there were names, nor even words. Before God spoke with a human tongue.

This woman of all women, I did not wish to harm. In her arms I

wept and she was forgiving of my weakness. As women are forgiving of weakness if it is a bridge to their strength.

A light played about her head that was small and sleek, hair cut short. She had had chemotherapy she said, her hair had been thick and had fallen out and when it grew back it was light and fuzzy, soft as a child's and of no color, like thistledown. So she cut it short herself with a scissors, that she need not think of it any longer. As she ceased, she said, thinking of all vain things.

She was a potter and a weaver. So many created things were displayed in her house, you stared at them in wonder. Inside this house of bright colors like flowers, and a smell of modeling clay and paint. And baking bread she made herself, and fed to me: coarse whole grain with nuts, raisins, sunflower seeds. Meals she prepared for me in stoneware crockery, wild rice, polenta. Liking to watch me eat, she said. For she had so little appetite herself, yet yearned to feed others.

Her skin was pale as parchment. Her very face seemed shrunken. Her eyes were ringed in shadow yet became alert and glittering when she worked. Speaking to me, if she was not tired, she lifted these eyes and I felt something turn in my heart, they were beautiful in a way no other man could see. For Liam Gavin has been blessed in this, to discern beauty where another man, careless and crude, would not see beauty.

I was not certain of her age. She might have been older than Mrs. Knudsen. Yet she might have been much younger. She was of a smallness different from Hannah. In my arms she required protection. I thought *Here at last is one who needs me more than life itself.*

Outside her windows were feeders for birds. I helped her hang the newest of these, from a corner of the roof. She thanked me and her eyes filled with tears like precious jewels. Inside her kitchen we would watch cardinals, chickadees, juncos, house finches, jays at the feeder beating their wings in the air, lighting on the perches. These birds she would identify for me. The male cardinals' red feathers bright as blood, astonishing to see. If she was tired we would lie on her sofa beneath one of her handmade quilts in the late afternoon as the sun slanted in the sky and dusk came on and we would watch the birds unseen and hear their small cries. Sometimes we slept, the birds' cries mingled with our dreams. And sometimes we shared the same dream, of the two of us lying together beneath a handmade quilt watching birds at a feeder, their small wings flailing the air.

It was a happy time for me. My happiest time I think. But it was a strange time. For Olive was the only woman I had known who could peer into my soul as through a window. The others, it was a mirror they had seen. Their own faces they had seen, and adored.

My love who was so frail, as if her bones were hollowed out. Yet when I was trapped in one of my nightmares, she would wake me. She would grip my face that burned with fever between her small cool hands and she spoke to me as you would speak gently to a child, to wake him but not to frighten him.

Liam! Liam Gavin. I am here, I will always be here. You are safe with me.

When Olive was first missing, they came to ask me questions. For it was known, I was Olive's friend. I had been living in her house for five months. So many questions they asked of me, yet I answered these questions. I did not attempt to flee. You would suppose, I was puzzled as anyone was, and alarmed, that Olive had gone away. They asked how had we met, and I told them of how passing through this small town Upper Black Eddy on the Delaware River I saw an arts fair beside a church, and stopped, and marveled at the rich colors of certain of the vases and pots, and there were weavings of a kind I had never seen before, and such paintings—! I could not look away but stared and stared.

I did not tell them the complete truth: that the pots, vases, weavings, by Olive or by others, scarcely interested me. What held my attention was a single small painting of a boy of about twelve, with my face.

An angular Irish face it was, strong-boned, frowning, pale blue eyes and lank hair the hue of burnt copper, a shade lighter than my own had been at that time in my life.

Olive did not paint much any longer, she said, but formerly she had done portraits, and this was a "dream portrait" as she called it, of one who had appeared to her in a vision, but was not known to her.

I did not tell them how I saw the small name written in the corner of the canvas: *Olive*. Of how I knew that *Olive* would be my fate, before I looked up to see the woman observing me from only a few feet away.

Softly this woman uttered one word only, as I turned to her.

You!

I did not tell the police officers such truths, for these were private and sacred to me. For I knew I would be misunderstood.

Numerous times I was asked what I knew of Olive Lundt—for that was her full name—and where I believed Olive might have gone and I could repeat to them only that I did not know. That there were many things in Olive's life of which she did not tell me. For Olive was an artist and not an ordinary woman, and because of this she led a life of inwardness and secrecy. In Upper Black Eddy it was known that Olive often went away, by herself. She stayed with friends at the Shore. She stayed with friends in the Poconos. In cold months she drove to Key West where she lived

with artist friends. She had been married, years ago. She was not close to her family who lived in Rutherford, New Jersey. She had many friends but certain of these friends did not know of one another, for Olive wished it that way. That no one know very much about her. During times of sickness, she did not want her friends to see her. It might have been a time of sickness now, I told them. It might have been her cancer returning. When Olive would wish to be alone.

They did not want to believe me, for of all the persons they interviewed in Upper Black Eddy Liam Gavin was the one they suspected. Or wished to suspect. Because I was a parolee, and had what is called a criminal record, and had shared a house with Olive. Yet these police officers were men like myself. Like the prison guards at Red Bank, they knew a certain kinship with me. I answered their questions honestly. I had made no attempt to leave Upper Black Eddy. I spoke without guilt. I did not speak with the air of one who has been hurt or betrayed. More, I spoke in stumbling bewilderment. Wonderment. That Olive would depart one night without saying goodbye, and without explanation.

Would you take a polygraph test? I was asked.

I would! I would gladly.

At the start Olive was so trusting, she gave me her checks to cash. She gave me money to shop for food. Many times Olive said, I could curl up in your heart, Liam Gavin.

Later I came to believe the woman was testing me. She was testing her faith in me. As if half wishing I might steal her money and disappear. For then she would have smiled saying *It was to be. I am meant to live alone.*

In the third month I was living in Olive's house, her son came to her. She had told me that she had a son but he had not seemed real to me. The boy was eight years old. At the time of Olive's cancer he'd been five and six and she couldn't care for him so he went to live with his father and his father's new wife in Tom's River in south Jersey. He was a quiet child, small-boned like his mother. But sullen and guarded in my presence. I vowed I would win this boy's trust. I would win his love. I spoke softly in his presence. I took him canoeing at the boat rental in New Hope. I repaired his broken bicycle. Yet he would not smile at me, rarely would he speak to me. Soon in the household the boy became a seed or a small bone in my throat I could not swallow, yet could not cough up. I did not hate him. I took care to hide my impatience with him. For there was a hope in my heart at this time that I would love him, and I would be a father to him. For it was time for me to marry. Seeing me with her son Olive said, I love you, Liam, that

you love my son! The tragedy of his life is, his own father does not love him.

Olive did not seem to see that her son did not love me, there was this strange blindness in one who used her eyes so shrewdly in her work. I would come to perceive that this is the willful blindness of the artist, who sees only what she wishes to see. For Olive in her innermost heart lived not for others but for *her work* as she spoke of it.

There came the hour when the boy shrank from me even when I smiled at him, and I thought *He will have to die.* It was a calm thought, as a hawk, high in the air, sights its prey far below on earth, and prepares to strike, swiftly and yet without haste. Then in my arms in our bed one night Olive began to weep, that the boy lay sleepless—she knew!—in his room, and she felt such guilt of him for she could not love him as a mother should love her child. Oh Liam, Olive said, I gave him up, when I believed that I would die. I wanted to spare him. I pushed him from me. I made him live with his father and his stepmother, he has never forgiven me. He will never trust another woman in his life.

I had to acknowledge that this was so. I felt a rage of pity for him. This boy so like myself whose mother could not love him, who had turned her face from him. And I knew that I could not lift a finger against him.

After this, it happened that I began to test Olive by certain measures. I wished to know if she loved Liam Gavin, or if she loved *her work.* For she spoke of *her work* fiercely yet tenderly as if she both hated it and loved it, *her work* deep in her body as an eye in its socket, or a bone encased in flesh. *Her work* she valued beyond her son. Through clumsiness I overturned a tall earth-colored vase Olive had spoken slightingly of yet in that instant I saw her eyes flash fury at me, and I knew that she had pride in the vase, as she had pride in all her created things, though she spoke and behaved in humility. It was the first time any woman or girl had looked at Liam Gavin in such a way. My hand leapt out, the back of my hand striking Olive's parchment face. Astonished, she fell backward, she was sobbing, shivering. Yet there was an exaltation in her, that at last a man had dared to strike her as she deserved. Yet I ran from the house through a marshy field to the edge of the river where in broken pieces like crazed eyes the moon was reflected and where some minutes later the woman came to me, to touch my arm gently. For I understood that she would come to me, she would not expel me from her house and her bed. I understood the woman's pride was such, she had convinced herself she was without pride.

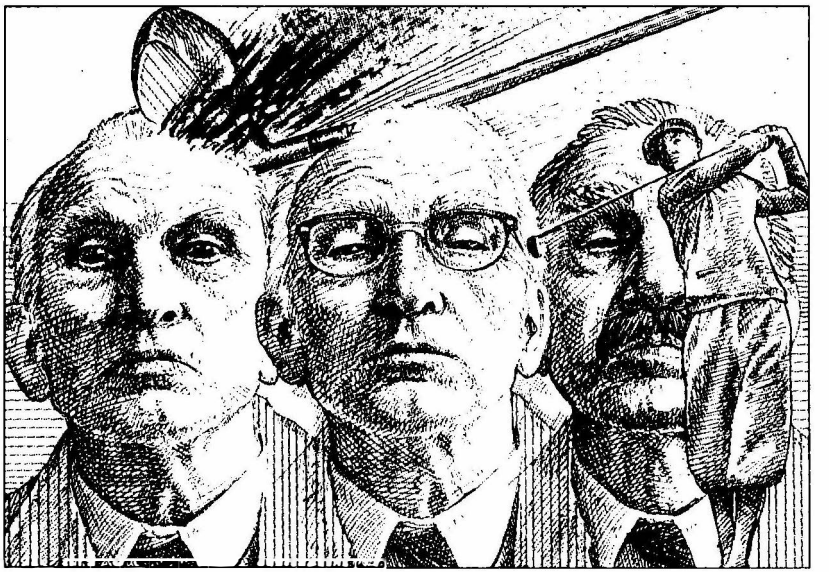
She would send the boy back to his father, she said. As a way of placating me. For she thought it was the boy who had come

between us. She would do this for me, telling herself it was for Liam Gavin and not for herself, that the boy was a burden to her, a hook in the heart, a reminder of weakness she had no wish to recall.

We were tender as new lovers that night. For I had not wished to hurt this woman, truly. She was so shrunken and frail: the bone of her skull nearly visible through her wispy child's hair. Forgive me, I asked of her, and she forgave me of course, it was a sign of the woman's strength to forgive a man's weakness. Yet in that instant when the vase had shattered at my feet I understood that Olive had no need of me. She was a potter, a weaver. She had *her work*. She was not yearning and hungry for love as Mrs. Knudsen had been. She had not the innocence of Hannah who was a child in deception as in love. In her heart Olive betrayed me every minute of every day for in her heart there was no room for any man.

Yet I did not act upon this knowledge at once. The way of the hawk is to ascend, to contemplate his prey from a great height. The way of the hunter is swiftness yet not haste. And there was a sweetness to our lovemaking, that required me to be so gentle, like lovemaking to a child, that excited me, and when I was angry, the excitement that passed between us too was sweet. When the fire coursed through my body, Olive dared to approach me, and hold me. Olive was strong enough for such, and took pride in it. Saying, You see, Liam, I am your lightning rod! I can save you from yourself. My love, you're safe here with me.

That polygraph I passed, like the others. ●



Art by Allen Davis

A Plague of Lawyers

by Peter Turnbull

First, in the far distance, were the hills, the Campsie Fells to the north of Glasgow. Second, in the middle distance, as a man would view this scene from the edge of the built-up area, was a vast area of green, of foliage. There were woods, large open areas of coarse grass, broken up occasionally with sandpits and close-cut lawns. It was a golf course and on one of the greens were three men. They were dead.

It was a joke—not just a joke but one of those jokes. The sort that does the rounds, then dies. Or so it would seem, but it doesn't die, it lies dormant for ten years, for twenty years, even for thirty years, and then it becomes reactivated and repeated by folk who have heard it for the first time, and it eventually reaches the ears of someone who had first heard it many, many years earlier. Ray Sussock had heard the joke and had laughed at it the first time he had heard it. Actually it *was* funny, it still is, he thought, it has a timeless quality about it. It'll do the rounds and then become dormant for a generation or two and then, again, be reactivated,

though Sussock doubted that he'd be around when the joke once again emerged for its next tour. If he was, he'd be ga-ga in a psychogeriatric ward of a hospital. He was already sixty years of age. It was thirty years earlier that he had first heard the joke, another thirty years would put him in his nineties . . . maybe he'd be around. But he doubted it. He'd first heard the joke when he was fit, smoking heavily, still single, a DC just out of uniform. He was drinking in a theme pub on Bath Street called the Claymore, all tartan and clan crests. Such a pub might have done well in southern England, where Scotland is seen as "quaint," but to do up a bar like that in Glasgow, which is not a city to suffer fools, was to invite ridicule. Ray Sussock and his mates had gone into the Claymore, considered the theme of the pub over a pint, and had not entered the place again. The rest of the Glasgow drinking fraternity seemed to have had the same reaction, because the Claymore closed shortly after it had opened. It was reopened as McNaught's Bar, had walls of dark panelling, shelves containing old hard-backed books, and leather-backed seats. McNaught's Bar did well. Very well. But it had been in the Claymore that Ray Sussock, a single man, a detective constable in his thirties, had first heard the joke. It was told by an overweight man in their company who had a loud voice, was full of himself, but didn't seem to be doing anything in life, and when Sussock had last heard from him he didn't seem to have changed: still full of himself, still loud-mouthed, still not bothered or aware that life was passing him by. Guy called Broughton. Now it was young Tony Abernethy who told the joke. Abernethy, who wasn't even born when Sussock had first heard the joke as he and Broughton and big Carl Henderson and lean and lanky Ian Silcock threw the lager down their necks in order to get out of the Claymore as quickly as possible. Then, young Tony Abernethy was not, as they say, even thought of. He himself had not even met the woman he was to marry. . . . It was a strange feeling, as though it was the life of another person, not his life at all. It was a more pleasing life as well. He glared at Abernethy. "That was not funny."

"I was trying to lighten things up, Sarge."

The adventures of the likable cops of Peter Turnbull's "P Division" continue now primarily in short stories for *EQMM*, for Mr. Turnbull has been concentrating on a new series, set in his native Yorkshire, in recent years. The latest novel-length case for the York force is *Dark Secrets* (Severn House). "Recommend Hennessey and Yellich (the series heroes) to all fans of British procedurals," says *Booklist*. †

"Well, don't. This is serious." Sussock looked about him. The Campsies in the distance, above them the blue sky with cloud at 3/10's, as the RAF would have it. Mild for April. Very mild. And dry. No rain now for a few weeks, unusual for the west of Scotland, especially in April. It's true, he thought, true, true, true, the climate is changing. Closer at hand were clumps of trees and vast areas of coarse grass and the smart, well-tended lawns at the edge of which he and Abernethy presently stood, on the edge of the ninth green of the Whitecross Golf Club. The ninth green was surrounded by fifteen constables; a police "jeep," a minibus, stood at the edge of the green, as did a police Land Rover. Both vehicles had their blues flashing.

Dr. Chan stood on the green, his coat tugged by the occasional breeze. He glanced at Sussock and Abernethy and then looked down at the bodies of John McNamara, Robin McLean, and Cameron Frost, who, unlike Dr. Chan, were prostrate, and unlike Dr. Chan, they were life-extinct. Dr. Chan's presence was a formality. In his capacity as police surgeon he pronounced the three men deceased and vacated the locus. Sussock watched as Sergeant Piper supervised the erection of a screen around the green, and then turned and walked to where Paul Murphy sat, beyond the edge of the green near a stand of youthful oak trees. Sussock noticed a pile of cigarette butts in the grass between his knees.

"Still shaken?" he asked as he approached.

"Wouldn't you be? Mind, I suppose you see this every day." Murphy was dressed in a light blue wind- and waterproof golfer's jacket. It looked new and smart.

"Not every day. Not quite. Feel up to answering a few questions?"

Murphy nodded.

"Well, briefly, what did you see?"

"As I told the other officer; I can't add to it."

"Tell me."

"Well, we came to the ninth, saw them . . ."

"We?"

"Me and my pal wee Jock Weir."

"And?"

"And we saw them, lying there. . . . Jock ran to the clubhouse to raise the alarm. . . ."

"And you didn't see anything?"

"No." Murphy shook his head. "As you can see, the ninth green is on high ground, it's elevated, extra-tall flagpole for that reason, see . . . you can't see the surface of the green until you're practically standing on it. Me and Jock got up here in one stroke each; it's not a long drive from the eighth, but it's the elevation that's the problem, you have to hit—"

"Yes, yes."

"Sorry, yes, well, we got up to the ninth and there they were, like a battlefield. They'd been battered stupid, blood everywhere. Just an hour earlier they were chatting to each other. We saw them tee off, we had the following time; we saw them start and we followed them, caught sight of them from time to time, then lost sight of them when they climbed up to the ninth."

"Know them well?"

"No. They were club members, knew them by sight. Didn't seem to mix much. I know that they're lawyers; beyond that, not much."

"They're solicitors?"

"Yes. Solicitors and notaries public. Not just lawyers but colleagues, partners . . . same firm. Most folk want to get as far from their workmates as possible each weekend, but not those three; each Saturday morning they play a round of golf together, and they always want an early tee time. They work in the same small office from Monday to Friday and get up with the lark each Saturday for a round of golf together. That," Murphy nodded to the screen being erected around the green, "is the law firm of McNamara, McLean, and Frost. Not a big firm, but well established. I talked to my solicitor the other day and happened to mention them and he raised his eyebrows as if he was impressed that I should know those guys, even if it's only as a member of the same golf club."

"I see. So you didn't see anything suspicious?"

"Not a thing. But . . . well, just look around you, what do you see? This green is elevated and surrounded by woodland. You just can't see this green from anywhere, not just from anywhere on the golf course, but not from anywhere. The open end of the green faces the Campsies, maybe with a hugely powerful telescope . . . but apart from that, the ground falls away to the teeing-off point for the tenth green, and even that's reached via a pathway through the woods, and on the other side it goes down towards the road, see. . . ."

Sussock looked to his left, the direction indicated by Murphy, and saw the top of a gleamingly clean blue-and-yellow Kelvin Scottish double-decker cross the vista from left to right in the middle distance, hidden, then revealed, then hidden again by the foliage. Beyond the line of the road were the rooftops of a small cluster of houses.

"That's the road to Kilsyth."

"So I see."

"The only way you can tell it's there is when a double-decker bus or another high-sided vehicle travels along it."

"Again, so I see."

"It's the nearest road to the ninth green. You can't see the green from the road, even from the top deck of a bus on the road, and

look at the vegetation. . . . You could hide two companies of infantry between this green and the road and you'd only see them if you were close enough to touch them."

Sussock could see what Murphy meant. Batter three men to death, escape into the shrubs and the trees, down to the road, a waiting car . . . time from the green to the road, sixty seconds at the outside. He glanced at Abernethy, who was securing golf clubs into large cellophane packets and supervising the loading of three golf caddies into the rear of the police jeep. "Tony!"

"Yes, Sarge?"

"Tony, when you've done that, can you take a wander to the road?"

"The road?"

"That direction, through the woods. You might pick up a path. Take a few constables with you, as many as you think fit. I don't know what you'll find, if anything, but you'll know it when you find it. It's the likely escape route."

"Very good, Sarge."

Sussock returned his attention to Murphy, who had lit another cigarette. "What did you do when you found them?"

"I told you. Jock Weir ran to raise the alarm . . . I stood here taking it in. . . . I mean, at first it looked like someone had dumped three piles of bloodstained clothing on the green, and then they became the three old guys that I had seen tee off an hour earlier and had seen from time to time just ahead of us on the course. Didn't watch them. Me and Jock had a game to play."

"Aye. . . ." Sussock sighed. He could never see the attraction of hitting a very small ball over a very large expanse of land. But there was, he had observed, no doubting the following of the sport. The flash of the scene-of-crime officer's camera brought Sussock's mind back to the matter in hand. "Then . . . ?"

"Well, I went to each in turn. I'm no doctor, but they were dead, all right. . . . I've heard the expression 'batter his brains out,' but I never thought I'd see it. I sell used motors and I never thought I'd see a man's brains on the outside of his skull."

"Aye. Tell me . . ." Sussock watched the screen being erected around the green. "Were those gentlemen popular in the club?"

"Popular . . . ? I couldn't tell you. Didn't seem to mix much, but then I only knew them by sight. You'll need to talk to the club secretary about that. . . ."

"A plague of lawyers be upon you." The club secretary revealed himself to be a small man of neat, if not fastidious, appearance who seemed swamped by his huge desk in a wood-panelled room which smelled strongly of polish. Everything on the man's desk, everything in the office, was in its place.

"Excuse me?" Sussock had always subscribed to the notion that a tidy desk was the sign of a sick mind. He felt uncomfortable in Spratt's presence. He had always preferred desks which were as his was, a shifting sand of papers, pens, and mugs with dried coffee dregs in the bottom.

"It's an ancient Turkish curse," explained Spratt. "Or a curse from ancient Turkey. I don't know what the correct grammar is, but what I mean is that in the Turkey of a thousand years ago, enemies wished a plague of lawyers on each other. They had lawyers then, too, you see."

"I see."

"No, they were not universally popular at the club. . . . I felt I knew what the curse meant when I met them. My previous experience with lawyers, my house purchase, for instance, had not been unpleasant; their fee was steep but the service was faultless. I was in good hands. But when I met McNamara, McLean, and Frost, I felt I understood the curse. They had a predatory quality about them, more than most men, more than most profit-seeking individuals. They seemed to lack morality; never actually misbehaved, but as I grew to know them I felt that if they saw a pocket or an open wallet, they'd empty it, they'd strip unsuspecting people of all their funds in the same way a swarm of locusts would strip a field of crops. Then I saw the parallel: a plague of lawyers, a plague of locusts, either will descend on you and leave you with nothing. . . . But I confess I can't believe what's happened." He glanced out of his office window at the car park which needed resurfacing, the few parked cars, the police vehicle, the club steward helping a constable to turn arriving club members away, the gently lapping blue lights.

"Well, it'll take time to sink in, these things do." Sussock shifted his position as he sat in the hard, straight-backed chair in front of Spratt's desk. Spratt himself leaned back and swivelled gently from side to side in his executive chair. "So, tell me about their popularity or lack of same."

"Well . . . in the first place they held themselves aloof, which didn't go down well; didn't mix socially or sportingly. There was a sort of incestuous quality about their relationship."

"Incest?"

"No, I don't mean that sort of incest, what I mean is that they just had time for each other and no one else. They were more than partners in the same law firm; they were brothers-in-law."

"Really?"

"Really. Each had married into the same family of three sisters, each taking one of the sisters as his lawful wedded. Their father-in-law was also a lawyer. A big name in the Glasgow law scene. Married into the profession, related to each other . . . they just had no time for the outside world unless it was to take it to the cleaner's."

"Any enemies?"

"In the club? No. But no friends, either. Came here every Saturday morning having spent the week together, played a round, and went away. I understand that they even took their main holidays together. So you see what I mean by 'incest.' "

"I do indeed."

"Have separate houses, though."

"I'm relieved to hear it."

"But in very close proximity—same street, no less."

"Do you have their addresses to hand? Their wives have been notified but I'd like to take note."

"Of course." Spratt swivelled to his left and tapped rapidly and dexterously on a computer keyboard and then tapped the Print button. His fawn-coloured machine whirred and clicked and a sheet of paper slid from it. Spratt picked the paper up and handed it to Sussock.

Sussock was not at all computer literate and had no wish to be so, not at his age, on the brink of retirement, but was often impressed by what such machines could do. He glanced at the addresses, all on Roman Road, Bearsden. Where else would wealthy solicitors live but Roman Road, Bearsden?

Outside, he said so to Piper. "I mean, where else would solicitors live except Bearsden? The place is overrun with lawyers."

"And secondhand-car dealers."

Sussock smiled.

"No, it's true, Sarge. I kid you not. I remember hearing about this academic guy who wanted to write a paper about something and so he decided to chase up the Maryhill Fleet."

"The what?"

"The Maryhill Fleet, as in a fleet of ships. It was one of the famous Glasgow street gangs and the Fleet's turf was Maryhill and so this academic type set out to find out what had happened to them twenty years on."

"And?"

"They'd all become secondhand-car dealers, gone to live in Bearsden, and had sent their children to private schools."

Sussock grinned. "Solicitors and secondhand-car dealers are in the same league after all. Is there a difference?" Again Tony Abernethy's joke came to mind, but he thought better of mentioning it. The matter was past. He held on to his hat as a sudden zephyr whipped across the car park.

Abernethy left Sussock to walk from the green to the road, taking three constables with him as he had been asked. He found the murder weapon in a stand of wormwood.

It was a golf club. A driver, congealed with blood about the bottom

end, it seemed to have been cast away as if in panic by someone moving along a clear, well-trodden pathway which drove through the woods from the green towards the road. It was seen as a silver stem gleaming against the shrubs, almost upright, as it had come to rest. It was handled gingerly with gloved hands and eased into a plastic packet and then handed reverentially to a constable to be conveyed to the jeep and to be placed with other artifacts.

Abernethy and two constables continued towards the road. The path which they followed was well worn, of compacted soil, the sort used by men and women exercising their dogs or by children on cycles, so thought Abernethy. It was that sort of path. It emerged dangerously, suddenly, onto a B road, worn, pitted in places, well overdue for resurfacing. Nearly opposite the point where the path emerged was a gateway to a field where a car not only could be parked, but where one had been parked. Beyond the gate, to the right, were houses, the roofs of which could be seen from the ninth green. Abernethy crossed the road and examined the soil at the entrance to the field. A car had been parked there for some time, judging by the depth of the indentation. It had distinctive wear on the front passenger-side tire, and had been driven away westward. Towards Glasgow. He turned to the nearest constable. "Stay here."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't let anybody disturb these tire tracks."

"Understood."

"I'll get the scene-of-crime officer with his camera and plaster down as soon as. Take photos and get casts of this, I think."

MONDAY 10:00 HRS.—11:30 HRS.

Fabian Donoghue pondered the reports about the triple murder on the golf course: Abernethy's, Sussock's, the scene-of-crime officer's, the pathologist's report, and the witness statements. He also looked at the black-and-white photographs provided by the scene-of-crime officer of the murder locus, taken from a distance; of the victims as they were found on the green; as they were on the stainless-steel dissecting table in the pathology laboratory, with closeups of the injuries. He also looked at the X-rays of the shattered skulls and legs of the victims.

All he could think about was dinosaurs.

He thought it ludicrous that he should think of such a thing when he should be giving his all to the matter in hand, but the image would not go away. It was persistent. Insistent. In the end, the only thing he could do was to go with it.

It wasn't so much dinosaurs as it was one particular incident, a few bloody, vicious minutes one day during prehistory which had

been trapped in time. He had once been watching a documentary on television, sitting down with his family, his wife and two children. The program was about dinosaurs, and it took viewers to a location in California in the United States and showed film of tracks in rocks which were made by a large number of fast-moving beasts—judging by their stride length—which had feet with talons. The tracks moved at right angles towards a group of other footprints indented in the rocks, made by animals who were flat-footed and had a short stride pattern and were thus deemed to be slow-moving. Where the tracks met were found a large number of fossilised bones, all from the same species of dinosaur, known to be a herbivore. The program related that fossilised dinosaur bones collect only in certain places: for example, where a long-since disappeared river deposited them as it bent, or in tar pits where animals fell in and couldn't recover, or where a group of one species attacked another. And this is what had happened one day millions of years ago in what is now California. By the tracks left in the rocks, it was deduced that a herd of slow-moving herbivores had been ambushed by a group of fast-moving carnivores. The herbivores had been moving across the valley floor and had suddenly been seized by panic, because there was a clear point in their tracks where the beasts began moving in various directions, and where their stride became elongated as they attempted to run. At this point the tracks of the fast-moving carnivores met the tracks of the herbivores. And the large number of bones, all of the same species of herbivore, indicated that the carnivores' ambush had been a success from their point of view. It was a single incident preserved for eternity because the floor of the valley had been covered in semi-solid volcanic clay, soft enough to allow the dinosaurs' feet to make deep tracks but sufficiently solid to retain the tracks. Eventually, it had solidified even further into actual rock, preserving the tracks. Donoghue allowed his mind to go with the dinosaur incident because here in front of him were reports and photographs which related a very similar story, not of beasts but of humans, not forty-eight million years ago, but forty-eight hours ago. But, as with the dinosaurs, it was possible to piece together what had happened.

Three men in their late middle years had climbed up to the ninth green, which was elevated and surrounded on three sides by foliage and could not be seen from any other part of the golf course. A man, a single attacker, had waited in the foliage at the side of the green. Judging by his footprints in the soft April soil, he was tall and heavy, about fifteen stone. Judging by his stride across the green, he was fast and fit. It had to be a man; he wore male shoes, he was too fast for his weight to be female. When the attacker burst from cover, the three men had panicked and had

run in several directions, judging from the positions of their bodies after the attack. The attacker had grabbed a putting club from one of the men, and had used it to attack the legs of the three golfers, not to kill them but to bring them down, to prevent them escaping. The pathologist had been able to confirm this by pointing to the linear fractures on the brittle thighs and shins, which fit exactly with the shaft of the putting club which was found beside a golf caddy. Once his victims had been disabled, the murderer had then selected a driving club from the caddy near which the putting club had been found, and had then beaten the three elderly men about the head until they were dead. From start to finish, the attack had probably lasted less than one hundred and twenty seconds. The attacker then fled from the green, following the path through the woods, throwing away the murder weapon as he did so. He came to where he had parked his car and drove it away. The casts of the tires indicated a small car with unevenly worn tread on all four wheels.

"Money." Donoghue laid his pipe in the ashtray.

"Sir?" Sussock sat forward.

"Money. Money is the motivation for this crime. Three wealthy men were ambushed then bludgeoned to death by a tall, fit, and probably youthful man who, judging by his small car with worn tires, was strapped for cash."

"Makes sense."

"It's the suddenness of it which frightens me, Ray—a golf club putting green on a Saturday morning, you'd think it was the safest place in the world and then death bursts from the bushes. Hardly bears thinking about. Three lives snuffed out in as many minutes, probably less. Pity the last one to die, knowing what was happening."

"Indeed."

"So, Ray. Feelings, suppositions, suspicions, anything you like, just throw it in the pot. I like a good stew."

"Well, sir, it wouldn't be unfair to say that they were not universally popular. Some feelings that they generated in people we have spoken to have bordered on open hostility, but we have yet to find a motive."

"Yet." Donoghue nodded. "I like that. Good. Yet to find a motive. And yet, of course, you may not. It occurs to me that they may well have been random targets. A felon, a sicko, a twisted mind who wants to kill someone, anyone, and has some local knowledge and some knowledge of the layout of the golf course, lies in wait, just waiting for a group of vulnerable players. . . ."

"It's a possibility, but I wouldn't think it likely. It seems to have been too early in the day for a random attack. It seems to me that somebody got up early and drove to the club to ambush Messrs.

McNamara, McLean, and Frost, and no one else."

"I think I agree with you, Ray." Donoghue nodded, smart in his three-piece suit with its gold hunter's chain looped across his chest. "So tell me about the bereaved."

"The bereaved, sir?"

"The wives of the hereto aforementioned deceased."

"Sorry, bit slow on the uptake, sir. . . . Well, I visited them on Saturday afternoon, about three hours after the news had been broken to them. . . . You know, it seemed strange . . . couldn't put my finger on it . . ."

"You saw them separately?"

"Together."

"Together?"

"They're sisters, sir."

"Of course."

"They were all in the home of Mrs. McNamara, she's the eldest sister. Very proper ladies, very pukka. The thing was that there was an odd sense of relief in the room."

"Now that's interesting. That three sisters should be bereaved on the same day, yet their mood is one of relief."

"I caught sight of one of them winking at the other while I was talking to the third. A cop's eye, trained to pick up things."

"I would expect nothing less from my officers, Ray. So what do you think?"

"I think that we're looking at a conspiracy to murder."

"Simple as that?"

"As simple as that, sir. As simple as that. We have a picture from sundry places of three very unpopular men, three unpleasant individuals who seemed to want only each other's company, and always have been like that. They met not when they became brothers-in-law, I found, but when they were undergraduates. So Mrs. McNamara said. At university they were known as the 'three wise men.' Even in those days, they had time only for each other, they were totally focused on each other. They seemed to think and speak as one person, so I was told, as if the same personality shared three different bodies."

"I've heard of that, but only in respect of twins. The three deceased didn't meet until they were eighteen, I assume?"

"I think so, sir, and I don't think it was as extreme as the psychiatric condition to which you refer; it's more that they kept in such close company that their attitudes and mannerisms spilled from one to the other—I would think, never having met them in life—and they had become very similar individuals."

"The relief among their widows holds my interest."

"And mine, sir. But I can't see a way in. They're clever."

"Not so clever that they didn't hide a wink."

"No . . . indeed. That's a slip that will cost them, I'd reckon."

"It's pointed us in a direction I'd be keen to explore."

"They'll be well-off, their homes are nice piles of bricks. They'll have money in the bank, holiday homes on Skye. . . . They didn't at all seem to be the grieving widows worrying about their incomes. . . . "

"But you don't think they'll crack with a frontal assault, so we'll need some form of evidence."

"It didn't connect in my mind, son." The woman was portly, lank black hair, middle-aged, inexpensive dress, cigarette in the corner of her mouth, which remained in place even when she spoke. Her legs were puffy about the ankles and finished in faded and worn carpet slippers which Abernethy thought would have been bright scarlet when new.

"What did you see, Mrs. . . . ?"

"Gorman," said Mrs. Gorman. "That's G-O-R-M-A-N."

"Yes." Abernethy scribbled on his pad.

"What did I see? Well, son, my door here looks out onto the golf club across the road. See?"

Abernethy turned. Across the small garden in front of Mrs. Gorman's small and, judging by a pervading odour, very damp house, the ground fell away to the sunken road and rose again to give way to the woodland and open spaces of the golf course, in which woods Abernethy had forty-eight hours previously found the bloodstained murder weapon. "Yes."

"Well, as I was standing at my door here, I see'd him, son. Came running out of they bushes, frightened-like, and got into his motor and drove away, son. Then I heard they three lawyers, battered to death, oh . . . three old men, they say. It's all the talk round here, son. . . . Who'd do that?"

"Who indeed. . . . Would you recognise this man again?"

"No." Said with finality.

"No?"

"No. See, son, I once had a wee experience that I learned from. See, when I had a wee job I worked alongside this wee guy who was a wee bit heavy, and a messy dresser, and had a bad limp after an accident, and I was outside my place of work one lunchtime, a fine clear day one summer, and I see'd a wee guy with a limp and untidy dress walking towards our place of work and I said to myself, 'There's wee Stewart on his way in after his lunch break.' The next day I met Stewart and I said to him that I saw him going in yesterday, and it turned out that he'd been off that day to attend a wedding in Edinburgh. . . . I learned . . . see, if I had to have stood in a witness box I'd have sworn it was Stewart I'd seen . . . but it was somebody that looked like him in the place where Stewart would be likely to be . . . just a coincidence, but I'd

put two and two together and I'd made five. After that I said I'd never swear to seeing anybody at any time or place unless I was close enough to touch them, and unless I'd spoken to them, son."

"Good for you." Abernethy smiled. "We're never happy with witness evidence alone for just that reason. But could you describe him? Put us in the right direction?"

"Oh aye, I'll do that for you, son. Well, he was tall, muscular, like a marine, fit, moved like an athlete, not an ounce of fat on him, but he'd be heavy."

"Clean-shaven? Beard?"

"Clean-shaven. He was feart, well feart, bulging eyes, I thought I'd ken a pack of hounds chasing him, so I did. Then he ran to where he'd parked his car and made off."

"What sort of car was it?"

"I couldn't tell you, son. They all look the same to me."

"Big? Small?"

"Small. A small wee motor. Imagine a big guy like him in a small motor. Like a pea in a pod."

"Colour?"

"White."

It was Monday, 11:30 hours.

WEDNESDAY 14:00 HRS.—23:00 HRS.

Tony Abernethy entered P Division Police Station and signed in at the uniform bar. Elka Willems, in a crisp white shirt and checked cravat, her blond hair done up in a tight bun, her high cheekbones displaying her Nordic ancestry, smiled at him and said, "Ray Sussock says to tell you to join him in interview room two when you come in."

Abernethy nodded. "Room two." He replaced the ballpoint on the In-and-Out pad and walked down the corridor to the interview rooms. He tapped on the door of interview room two.

"It's our man," said Sussock when, moments later, he stood in the corridor in response to Abernethy's tap on the door.

"Really?" Abernethy beamed. "All wrapped up in five days. Fabian will be pleased."

"All wrapped up bar the shouting. I asked Constable Willems to ask you to make yourself known to me when you came in; thought you'd want to sit in. There's no work to do, it's a full cough."

"He's coughing?"

"He is—he's going to, so he said."

"How did we find him?"

"Sharp-eyed traffic cop. Our man was found drunk at the wheel of a little white VW, that alerted the cop. He clocked the front tire, and . . ."

"Uneven tire wear?"

"That's it. So he booked him. That was yesterday. He had to be allowed to sober up before he could be interviewed."

"Who's in there with him?"

"No one."

"No lawyer?"

"Waived his right. Says he wants the whole thing off his chest."

Abernethy followed Sussock back into the interview room. The two cops sat down. Sussock looked at the tall, well-built man who appeared to be in his mid thirties and said, "Henry, this is DC Abernethy . . . Tony, this is Henry Sullivan."

Abernethy and Sullivan nodded to each other.

Ray Sussock switched on the tape recorder attached to the wall. "The time is now fourteen-oh-five, DC Abernethy has entered the room. Henry . . . ?"

"Yes?"

"You stated to me that you murdered Mr. McNamara, Mr. McLean, and Mr. Frost on Saturday A.M. last?"

"Yes."

"Still happy to proceed without a lawyer?"

"Yes. I want it off my chest." Sullivan had a soft voice, he had a gentleness about him. He was not at all the sort of man Abernethy would have thought to be a mass killer.

"What happened, Henry?"

"Suppose it all started a year or two ago. I went to McNamara, McLean, and Frost for legal representation. I won't go into the details, but they let me down, gave me bad advice, ruined me financially. I had a gym, I wanted to expand, borrowed money to invest in new premises . . . it all collapsed because I went along with their advice. But what really got under my skin was their attitude. I dealt with Mr. Frost, but they were all the same . . . they were not bothered, professional detachment just wasn't the word for it . . . their attitude was, 'Oh well, that's a mistake we can learn from, and here's our fee. You've lost everything, but you owe us for our services.' I mean, not a word of apology . . . not a brief bit of emotion, of concern . . . it rankled . . . got under my skin."

"So much so that you murdered them, Henry?"

"No."

"No?"

"No. I was at my gym, all this took time to resolve so I had about eighteen months to get out . . . A week, two weeks ago, I was at my gym, clearing my office before the new owner moved in, and, well, these three women trooped in. All very proper, if you please. They said, 'We don't want to tell you who we are but we understand that you have a grudge against the firm of McNamara, McLean, and Frost,' so I said that they may be right. Then they said, 'How

much money do you need to clear your debts and start afresh?' So I said, 'One hundred thousand pounds.' These three women, elderly women they were, looked at each other and nodded and then said, 'Very well. We will offer you that sum to murder the senior partners in the firm of McNamara, McLean, and Frost. We have worked out how it can be done, but it will need someone with strength, speed, and agility. Such as you, Mr. Sullivan.'" Sullivan put his hand to his forehead. "I said yes, but only if they told me who they were. They talked amongst themselves and said, 'Very well, they are our husbands. Our motive need not concern you.'" He paused. "I'm sorry I did it. I'm just grateful to get it off my chest. You'll be arresting them as well, aye?"

Sussock nodded. "Oh yes . . . yes, I think we'll bring them in for a wee chat. First we'll need a statement from you, Henry."

"You've got it, Mr. Sussock."

At her home, her room and kitchen in Longside, Elka Willems stood in the shower as she always did at the end of a shift, showering off the day's work. She bowed her head into the water, having it as hot as she could get it, letting it really bite into her pores. She thought of the women being marched into the police station, all very pukka, not at all the usual customers that the police get. The stern and chin-out, ramrod-still Mrs. McNamara, the wide-eyed and shocked-looking Mrs. McLean, and the ashen-faced Mrs. Frost, who wore her guilt on her sleeve. She would doubtless be the first to be interviewed.

Elka Willems pushed her face up into the shower and she thought about the joke Ray Sussock, who at that moment was snoring in a deep sleep on her bed, had told her. He had been right to reprimand young Abernethy for telling it when he did, at the locus of the murder, but in other circumstances, a quiet night shift, a girls' night out, it would be a good joke, and she thought it well to practice it. She stepped out of the shower and wound herself into a full-length towelling robe. . . . What was it? . . . "Lawyers . . ." No, get it right, Willems, girl, get it right. It's better if it's right. . . . "Psychologists are using rats . . ." no . . . no . . . "are using lawyers in their experiments instead of rats . . ." She flicked on the electric kettle. A mug of hot chocolate would help her sleep. . . . "There are three reasons: first is that . . ." What was it? . . . Oh yes, that's it. "The first reason is that there are more of them." No . . . say, "more lawyers than rats" . . . it's better, "more lawyers than rats, and the second reason is that"—good one, this—"there are some things a rat just will not do . . . and the third reason is that after a time you can actually grow fond of a rat."

She curled into a chair, sipping the hot chocolate and practising the joke. It was Wednesday, 23:00 hours.●

PASSPORT TO CRIME

WHO'S AFRAID OF ED GARPO?

by Fred Kassak

Translated from the French by Peter Schulman

When my first cousin's son (my first cousin, a.k.a. the third-rate actor who got himself killed along with his wife, a third-rate actress, when they were both on the road in a third-rate play and riding in a third-rate bus that crashed) asked me if I could help him find a job and a place to live in Paris, I happily offered him (at a modest rent that I didn't feel the need to declare on my taxes) the sixth-floor maid's room turned *studette** in the building I owned, in which my wife and I lived on the third floor. And it was just as happily that I got him a job warehousing books at my publisher's.

When the boy was born, his parents had asked me to be his godfather, an honor I felt I couldn't refuse even though I was slightly peeved that they hadn't named my own godson after me (Alain) but preferred to name him Edgar instead.

To be perfectly honest, I had been a somewhat inattentive godfather for quite some time. I had never had any children of my own (nor had my wife) and I had little interest in other people's children, as I couldn't bear the thought of anything distracting me

Fred Kassak, a.k.a. Pierre Humblot, first appeared on the French mystery scene in the '50s when he won the *Grand prix de Littérature policière* for his first novel (in English: *We Don't Buy on Sunday*). His reputation increased when his novels, whose witty style appealed to a variety of French filmmakers, began to be adapted for film. His novel *Come Kill With Me* is available in English on the Web.

* A *studette* is a tiny studio without a bathroom.

from my work. A writer's first duty is to devote himself exclusively to his work. Everything else is superficial.

As for my work, I don't think this is the most appropriate time to talk about it. I would simply remind those who might not be familiar with it that, in a style which, I dare to flatter myself in saying, upholds the purity and clarity of the French language and which is in keeping with the rules dictated by our great literary tradition, I endeavored to portray a certain high-minded, self-centered, hypocritical, and vain bourgeoisie.

At an early age, Edgar had distinguished himself by his stunning lack of studiousness, which was exacerbated by his propensity for violent sports. With no help from his parents (with whom he had all too often shared an itinerant lifestyle) and with no diploma whatsoever, he was hard-pressed to find either a job or an apartment once he had completed his military service, and was quite relieved when I provided him with both.

As such, Edgar was indebted to me, but life and the study of the human soul have taught me that we always find good reasons to be ungrateful, and, as I have blithely written in one of my novels: "Indebtedness has never been grounds for gratitude."

I have to say, however, that the boy was not completely unlikable in my eyes. Despite our difference in age (I was pushing sixty) and in a society where soon-to-be senior citizens spend all their time scorning young people, he seemed to have a certain respect for me.

In the *studette,* my wife had installed a little shower near the kitchenette. But rare are those in our day and age who are satisfied with the bare essentials, and Edgar wasted no time in asking us if he could use our bathroom from time to time. I attach no importance to the material world and the idea of ownership is practically a foreign concept to me. I therefore barely criticized my wife for having granted him permission to do so once a week.

When he was either going to or coming from the bathroom, we would sometimes meet and exchange a few words. Besides the fact that I have no prejudices in terms of class, an author owes it to himself to be curious about everything and I asked him succinct questions about the warehousing of books before going on to explain to him (in great detail) what was wrong with those who had written them.

One day, he was emboldened enough to ask me if he could read one of my own books and I cheerfully lent him several of my most accessible novels. He returned them to me a week later and told me how impressed he was with the subtlety of their narratives and their stylistic craftsmanship.

I immediately had him over for dinner, much to the shock of my wife, who had somehow come to the conclusion that I looked down upon him. I quickly explained to her that the boy was no mediocre

thinker, and for a writer my age, the approval of young people is a strong indication that one's work will withstand the test of time.

Over dessert, when we had finished talking about my books, I asked Edgar about his other literary tastes, half out of courteousness, half out of curiosity. He had hardly read anything my living colleagues had written (I was able to reassure him that he was not missing much) and he had a predilection for *B.D.*s.* He was familiar with all the great authors of *that* genre, the deceased as well as the living. He thought that he had a particular talent for that kind of artistic expression and had even completed several comic-book layouts. And, while we were on the subject, since we both worked for the same company, which, coincidentally, also had a comic-book division, could I please slip in a few words of introduction to my editor on his behalf . . . ?

I smothered the words "subculture," "para-literature," and "some nerve" that were lining up on my tongue. Why not, after all? I owed it to my reputation to encourage the young ones, especially those whose "means of expression" were in no danger of competing with mine. Nonetheless, just to be sure of what I was about to support, I asked Edgar to fill me in on the kinds of comic books he designed: humor, satire, science fiction, or sadomasochistic porn?

"I'm adapting Edgar Allan Poe's *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque.*"

I recoiled in my chair and my wife dropped her little spoon onto her dessert plate. There was a silence before I forced a smile.

"Are you doing it because you share the same first name?"

"Because I think he's awesome!" Edgar said, looking at us incredulously. "Don't you agree?" he said, using the familiar *"tu"* form of address.

(I suddenly realized that I found it jarring that he used the *tu* form with me and that he referred to me as his uncle, and by my first name to boot. But he was my godson and I couldn't stop him from doing that. I also noticed that there was something about him that I found repugnant: his gelatinous lips clashed with his athletic bearing. Those thick, viscous, and undulating lips resembled two snails caught in the act of endless copulation and disentanglement.)

"For me," I said, articulating each of my words with great precision, "Edgar Poe is a literary histrionic who is solely interested in shocking his reader. He is a mere manufacturer of bloody and morbid phantasmagoria, the pretentious—even pontificating—form of which barely masks an incoherent essence. A grab bag of cheap thrills! Even as a child, I had an instinctive, visceral aversion to him, from the first time I picked up one of his books, and this continued with all subsequent readings—which, I can assure

* *B.D.* stands for *"Bande dessinée"* and can be translated as "comic book," but in France they're taken seriously; published in hardcover, for both adults and children.

you, were few and far between. Your aunt knows that he is the author I hate the most. So, you see—"

"That's strange," Edgar said. "It's as though you had a personal vendetta against him."

"I hate false glory, that's all. And what 'masterpiece' are you adapting at the moment?"

" 'The Tell-Tale Heart.' "

I couldn't help springing to my feet and shivering with disgust: "THAT ONE!"

"Why not?"

"Come now! It's . . .THE WORST!"

"Honestly, I don't think so . . . "

"If I remember correctly, an individual tells us that he is seized, gradually, with an urge to murder his old neighbor not out of any hatred towards him, nor to steal his gold, but because one of his eyes 'resembled that of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it' which 'makes his blood run cold.' He becomes so obsessed with this 'vulture's eye' that he believes that only the old man's death could permanently free him from it. That's about right, isn't it?"

"That's the right one, all right," Edgar said as he looked me over, slightly perplexed.

"One night, as he creeps into the old man's bedroom, the old man, who was sleeping, suddenly jumps up in terror with his vulture eye wide open. And suddenly, the crazed narrator begins to hear 'a low, dull, quick sound . . . It was the beating of the old man's heart.' And the heartbeat, which becomes 'louder and louder,' begins to make so much noise in the silent night that the narrator fears it will wake his neighbors up. 'With a loud yell,' he lunges towards the old man and proceeds to strangle him until the infernal heart finally ceases to beat and until that abominable eye is finally closed once and for all. After which, he cuts the body into pieces which he skillfully hides under the floor. . . . Am I still on track?"

"Yes, that's pretty much the gist of it."

"Nevertheless, alarmed by the screaming, the neighbors decide to call the police. The policemen interrogate the narrator about the old man's disappearance. He tells them that he went away on vacation, escorts them to the room in order to show them that the gold has not been stolen, and, in a euphoria induced by having committed the perfect crime, invites them to sit and rest awhile. He laughs and jokes with them, and feels quite at ease . . . when suddenly, he begins to hear 'a low, dull, quick sound' . . . which grows 'louder—louder—*louder*' . . . to the point where he is at the end of his rope and blurts out to the police (who, curiously, did not seem to hear a thing): 'I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!' . . . Did I do a good job in summarizing it?"

Edgar sized me up with accrued confusion.

"Man, for someone who purports to have read the least amount of Poe possible, you seem to know him pretty well, Uncle Alain!"

"Such a masterpiece doesn't need to be read very often to be remembered! It's a condensed bit of blather."

"Poe's subtitle was 'A Madman's Defense.'"

"That's the easiest trick in the book! You can make a madman say and do anything! But even for a story about a madman, it's filled with completely implausible details. Come on, it doesn't hold up at all! I never would have dared to hand it in to my editor; I wouldn't even have dared to put such drivel down on paper."

"That may be, Uncle Alain," said the viscous lips as they splashed lightly, "but we're talking about the great Edgar Allan Poe! . . ."

After that, I would have been completely justified in letting Edgar fend for himself with his beloved artistic expression. But, as my wife finally convinced me, I would have been guilty of a meanness that was beneath me, and might have had imputed to me an offense equal to his. I also have to say that my wife thought of Edgar as the son we never had, and was sometimes excessive in her kindness towards him. I had enough trust in her conjugal loyalty to be sure that she would not have recommended just anything to me, however: When Edgar volunteered to show me his little bubble drawings, I felt perfectly comfortable passing this chore on to her. And when she assured me that they were accurate representations of Poe's incoherent rambling, I took her word for it, sight unseen. Mind you, my thoughts were decidedly elsewhere, as I was on the verge of finishing my own novel.

I took advantage of my handing in my manuscript to the main editor of my publisher's literary division to talk to him about Edgar—while making sure I let him know that I wouldn't be upset in the least if he did not want to pursue this matter, and would drop the whole thing if my efforts on Edgar's behalf were the slightest bother to anyone he worked with. Nevertheless, and to my dismay, he felt compelled to call his equivalent in the *B.D.* division, and I was able to tell Edgar that very night that I had succeeded in getting him an interview for the following week. For which he thanked me to the point where his sluglike lips trembled with delight. I forgot all about it after that, as I became solely preoccupied with how my manuscript was about to be received. Even an author of my stature (as my dear old deceased colleague, the author Henri de Montherlant,* once remarked with such subtlety) is always a little bit nervous right after handing in a manuscript to his editor. I still hadn't heard anything by the time the cocktail party rolled around.

* 1930s author known for morality plays and preachy narratives. Committed suicide.

It was the annual reception for the "Pain Prize," the prize awarded to the most moving account of the loss of a loved one. This year's laureate was the mother of a soap-opera actress who, with the help of a journalist who was a specialist in that sort of thing, managed to describe the agony of her eighteen-year-old daughter's death of leukemia in just 380 pages.

The happy winner was quickly dropped in favor of the buffet, which everyone swarmed—and where I came face to face with my editor. In truth, I was expecting to see him there, and that was even why I had decided to attend the party: Would he mention my manuscript? I wondered. As soon as he saw me, a giant smile spread across his long face. "My dear friend! I was just about to call you, in fact!" He downed a glass of champagne, fattened up his plate with foie gras, took me by the arm, and led me to a window recess. "I had to thank you for that little masterpiece you gave me!"

"Really?" I said as a wave of relief and joy rushed through my body (despite his rather restrictive use of the word "little").

"Absolutely fantastic, my dear friend!"

"You're too kind, dear friend."

"So rich in its descriptive power! And what virtuosity!"

"You're too kin— Excuse me? What virtuosity?"

"In the sense that it was both faithful to the spirit of Edgar Allan Poe, and yet completely unique as well! I'm not a big fan of the comic-book genre, but this! I can't tell you how grateful we are to you for having recommended that boy to us, my dear friend! I understand he's related to you in some way?"

"He's my . . . godson."

"A real thoroughbred! What I also appreciated is his talent for expressing so much in so few words. By the way, old boy, I hope you won't mind my saying it, but I found your latest book a trifle verbose. I think a few cuts here and there would do it some good. You seem a little pale all of a sudden. How about joining me for a shot of whisky at the bar?"

Normally, my novel should have come out well before my godson's comic book. It had been scheduled a long time ago, while—thanks to me—his comic book had appeared to them all of a sudden—like the Virgin Mary to Bernadette. Moreover, it takes a long time to manufacture a hardcover comic book with color drawings. And yet, in the end, various scheduling glitches delayed my novel's publication date, while miraculous technological innovations hastened his. As a result of all this, his comic book came out before my novel:

PHANTASMA-GORE
by Ed Garpo

The jacket cover had a drawing of a heart (dripping blood) erupting from between the planks (which were also doused in

blood) of a greenish floor. It was all quite alarming, but, after all, Poe deserved no less.

After having given me an autographed copy of his magnum opus, Edgar, as it turns out, took off for Angoulême for the opening of a festival dedicated to his fine art form. Needless to say, I wasted no time forgetting him so that I could concentrate on the publication of my own book.

A few evenings later, I was having dinner with my wife, happily watching the evening news, which featured an inter-European massacre chock-full of bloody images, when, brutally and without warning, they cut to a report on the closing ceremonies of the Angoulême Festival, with a closeup of the bloody heart from the cover of *Phantasma-Gore,* which had won first prize. This was followed by the obligatory interview with Edgar, who, smiling with all his lips (which were as sluglike as ever), spoke about his unwavering admiration for Edgar Allan Poe, about how he had always dreamt of adapting Poe, about the strategies involved in adapting Poe's work, and about all the words of encouragement his editor had given him. Not one word about me. It was enough to make one throw up. Which, of course, I did.

In response to the thinly disguised criticisms with which I greeted him upon his return, he could only muster a mealy-mouthed explanation of how he was afraid I would have been offended were he to have attached my prestigious name to his humble little comic book—as though he were still so naive as to think that any author would mind hearing his name mentioned no matter what the context might be.

In any case, *his* name was certainly mentioned all over the place. And his face was equally ubiquitous. With his slug-lips, Ed Garpo was invited to every possible "arty" talk show on television and on the radio. As for the newspapers, there were entire pages devoted to the "aesthetic ramifications" of *Phantasma-Gore*—along with the requisite pictures of Ed Garpo and his slug-lips. They all declared that he had brought some badly needed new blood to the anemic world of French comic-book writers. *Phantasma-Gore* was prominently displayed in all the bookshops and in every supermarket under huge signs that boasted: "As seen on TV," accompanied by pictures of Ed Garpo and those omnipresent slug-lips. Predictably, *Phantasma-Gore* was an enormous success, proof positive that mass media produces mediocre masses.

As though by chance, Edgar never missed an opportunity to tell the world that he was my godson. As a result of this, when my book finally came out, all that the few critics who bothered to review it could come up with was that, given the astoundingly

implausible aspects of my story, I should have asked my godson to turn it into a comic book, which would at least have given the reader something interesting to look at. Obviously, I was virtually ignored by both the television and radio media, and my book was pulled altogether because of sluggish sales.

To say that, given the circumstances, my editor behaved in a completely odious manner would be an incredible understatement. When I voiced my displeasure at the way he was handling my novel, he replied that word of mouth was the best form of advertizing there was, but the word of mouth on my novel was pretty poor, and that the only way it could be marketed at all would be to highlight, in bold letters, the fact that the book was written "**BY ED GARPO'S GODFATHER.**" I slammed the door as I stormed out of his office. When I walked down the hallway, a colleague greeted me derisively, as did the interns, the receptionists, the administrative assistants, and even the doorman: They all looked at me in a contemptuous manner.

Don't think that I wasn't listening! I could hear you perfectly as you whispered "Paranoia" into each other's ears. I suppose you're going to suggest that I was paranoid. Why "paranoid"? Of course, I was always a little hypersensitive, but who would be so cruel as to bring attention to it with such exaggeration? "Paranoid"? You had better reflect on your choice of words and notice the lucidity—or rather, the cold-bloodedness—with which I am telling you this story.

My extreme sensitivity allowed me to perceive all the different forms of derision of which I was the target—even the most dissimulating and treacherous kinds. And when I say that I could no longer attend a cocktail party or a dinner without seeing the derision that was behind the most innocent of glances and between the most inoffensive of words it's because DERISION WAS IN THE AIR! Don't make me yell it out.

And who was responsible for all this derision? The most derisive one of them all continued to dwell right under my roof and to come to dinner at my apartment with great regularity. Every week, I had to see his slug-lips embrace and disentangle themselves from each other as they sucked on his fork, as they oozed a viscous blend of admiration and gratitude while seemingly (and derisively) remaining oblivious to the humiliation I had to endure because of him.

I can't say for sure when exactly the idea came to me, but once it was conceived, it pursued me day and night. It had to be the lips. Every time I looked at them, disgust and panic grabbed me by the throat. And, slowly but surely, it dawned upon me that Ed Garpo had to be destroyed before he and his slug-lips could swallow me up, digest me, and relegate me to being "Ed Garpo's godfather" until the end of time.

And yet, there was still time: He had only published one comic

book. Sure, it was a big hit, but a book has a short life span; in two weeks it would be completely forgotten. More than quality, what makes an author is quantity. There was still time to stop him before he could come out with a *Phantasma-Gore II, III, IV* . . . which his editor would no doubt ask him to crank out with great urgency.

If you have any doubts about my mental state, behold the brilliance, the art of exploiting circumstances to their fullest, the skill with which I proceeded.

In order to crush a man, one must always make use of his passions. Besides Edgar Allan Poe, Ed Garpo's other passion was *U.L.M.* single-engine flying.* Thanks to the apparently generous advance he received on his next comic book, he was able to obtain a *U.L.M.* pilot's licence, purchase, with four other *U.L.M.* fanatics, a *U.L.M.* plane, and leave all the horrors of civilization behind by taking off, as he did regularly, at the Persan-Beaumont flying club. The airfield was easy to get to from my house. He could easily have found larger accommodations with more amenities than my little *studette,* with a bathroom that would have eliminated his need to use mine. But because of Persan-Beaumont, he wanted to stay in my neighborhood, which complicated his apartment search by limiting his options—but which, in fact, suited me perfectly. For the extraordinary ingenuity of my plan demanded that he continue to use my bathroom for a certain amount of time.

The beauty of it all lay in the fact that he himself had inspired the plan when, one evening, as an answer to one of my wife's questions, he had said that what he found particularly thrilling about U.L.M. flying was that it was fraught with danger. I can still hear him now: "By definition, the planes are ultralight, and therefore ultrasensitive to the slightest wind, and because they lack any power reserves, they must maintain the same speed in flight as during takeoff. At two hundred, four hundred meters in altitude, even in ideal weather, that kind of flying necessitates an intense level of concentration. The slightest moment of inattention, the slightest loose bolt, and you crash. . . ."

My wife's eyes opened wide as she oohed and aahed. I just nodded my head as I finished my soup. If you had seen me, you would never have imagined the kind of explosion that "crash" made in my head.

A fiery image of slug-lips spit out into the sky.

My sabotaging the plane by unscrewing some bolts was out of the question, of course, because of certain insurmountable obstacles that cropped up, not the least of which was the fact that I have absolutely no mechanical knowledge.

But I knew a lot about eye drops.

Not too long before, I had asked my wife a few questions after a

* *U.L.M.* stands for *"ultra leger motorisé,"* an ultralight single-engine plane which can also resemble a hang glider with a propeller on it.

strange type of eye drop had popped up in the medicine cabinet. She informed me that they belonged to Edgar, which didn't surprise me in the least: Ever since he'd started taking his baths in my bathroom, he'd had a tendency to consider my medicine cabinet as an extension of his own. Without my having to prompt her at all, my wife explained to me that he used the eye drops right before he flew in order to insure optimal visibility.

I suddenly recalled this bit of information when Edgar brought up the dangers of flying, and my scheme was hatched shortly thereafter: Thanks to his drops, I would insure that he would fly with *minimal* visibility, with all the predictable consequences that such a detail would entail.

I just wanted to make sure that "right before he flew" was to be taken literally and did not mean approximately: "right before *going off* to fly"—which would have killed my idea right there and then.

I was relieved to find out that, despite her gender, my wife had expressed herself with precision: The flask disappeared from the medicine cabinet when Edgar left for Persan-Beaumont (twice a week, on average), and reappeared upon his return. Edgar therefore brought it with him and made good use of the drops *right before he took off.*

You will never understand how this idea came to me, nor how I could have concretized it with such precision and talent if you are unaware that, like all sensitive creatures, I was always in some sort of pain. A creative writer who is continuously sitting at his desk or in front of his typewriter in the silence of his office is surely concentrated on what he is creating, but also has an eye on his gut. At the mercy of my daily woes, I thought that I was afflicted with all sorts of grave illnesses, from intestinal obstructions to interstitial nephritis, in addition to the more familiar types of cancers. These slightly hypochondriacal tendencies pushed me to consult a plethora of medical works and instilled in me a strong passion for medicine and medications in general. That's why, even though I might have been incapable of sabotaging a little plane, I was most competent when it came to dealing with eye drops.

As such, I knew that atropine causes intense dizziness through the dilation of the pupil and a suspension of ocular adjustment. It was imperative that this sort of dilation, which could eventually trigger a certain amount of suspicion, be compensated with eserine which, in turn, causes an opposite contraction within the pupil.

I also had to add a pinch of coniine (which causes blurred vision) as well as—the cherry on the cake—a dash of stramonium (which can cause dizziness and hallucinations). Some of these substances can be found in over-the-counter products, others in homeopathic herbs. With Edgar spending all of his time drawing in his *studette* and my wife spread thin across the four corners of the neighborhood

❖ ❖ ❖

I didn't regain consciousness until I was in a hospital bed, in intensive care, in too much pain to ask anyone what had happened to me, and too weak for anyone to tell me.

Then, little by little, my condition started to improve, and I found myself right here, in this room. With you, Professor, who looked at me with such pride and benevolence, with you, Doctor and Nurse, smiling as you watched me, and you, my wife, who stared at me with great affection.

But no Edgar.

Professor, you informed me that I have been suffering from a congenital heart deformity (the only deadly illness that escaped my mind) which came to light only as a result of the intense shock that I experienced upon seeing Edgar when he came home after his accident. I survived only because of an astonishing string of circumstances which led to a successful but serious and delicate operation. I was now out of harm's way and back in the affectionate hands of my loved ones.

"And what about Edgar?" I asked. "How is he doing?"

You looked at each other, and my wife was the one who answered first, with a wistful smile on her face:

"You're strong enough now, so I don't have to beat around the bush with this: He's dead."

"Dead?" I cried out as I sat upright in attention. "But when did this happen?"

"Almost right after your attack. Miraculously, he had walked away from his accident practically unscathed; all he had was a broken wrist and some cracked ribs. Or so we thought, at least. We had overlooked a slight nick on his head . . ."

"Which occurs quite frequently with this kind of wound," (as you continued, Professor). "Your godson was able to come home, in full command of his faculties. But in fact, he had sustained a skull fracture, which led to a fatal hemorrhage. . . ."

It was highly imprudent, but I absolutely had to know:

"And the accident," I enquired, "was caused by . . . ?"

"Some sort of mechanical glitch, no doubt. It's hard to know for sure given all the debris from the aircraft. Your godson, though, had complained about some visual difficulties, as well as some dizziness and hallucinations, but . . ."

"But?"

"But he must have been suffering already from the effects of the brain trauma he had just undergone."

"That must have been it," I said. "Poor boy!"

I shook my head in sadness, while inwardly being overwhelmed with an intoxicating sense of triumph.

"A heroic end to a heroic life," I added profoundly. "He was a very

admitted—he always felt a little apprehensive before a flight. But his apprehension actually excited him. I asked him if, at his age, he couldn't find any other sources of excitement. He shook his head, grinning ear to ear: No, he couldn't, because he had no woman to share his life with. Until further notice, therefore, he would be devoting his life exclusively to Ed Garpo.

Fine. If that's what he wanted. I gazed at him with curiosity as he downed his last cup of coffee: Could he not feel that it was his very last one? As I watched his slug-lips, I thought about how I would no longer have to see them flap up and down again.

As soon as he left the apartment, I raced towards the bathroom. The drops were gone: All I had to do was wait.

Everyone knows that there is nothing more torturous than waiting. It was even harder to take in my case because I had to put on a good face in front of my wife. In order to avoid her, I could have locked myself up in my office and pretended to work, but I still had to have lunch with her, and she obviously noticed that I was hardly touching my food at all. She looked me over with concerned tenderness:

"You're not hungry? You're not feeling well? You're so pale! You wouldn't be hiding some sort of flu from me, would you?"

In a rather lively fashion, I told her that I was indeed fighting something, but I was fighting it all alone, and was old enough to take care of myself like a grownup. In the wake of her pained expression, however, I apologized and told her that I was tormenting myself over the ending of the novel I was working on—which was not a complete lie.

In fact, my anxiety was oppressive and was giving me cramps to the point where I was having difficulty breathing.

After lunch, I went to stretch out on my bed with the help of a tranquilizer. But I could find no rest: When and how would I learn of the news?

I began to imagine how I was going to come up with the most appropriate response: shock and grief, but within reason. Above all, I couldn't overdo it. It was at that point that I heard the front door open. And men's voices. And among those voices . . . I leapt to my feet: There were three men wearing aero-club jackets. My wife had already gone up to the door to greet them. Edgar was among them. Bandages wrapped his stomach and held up his arms; his head was also wrapped in bandages. His slug-lips managed a grin and pronounced with a flap, "Hey there! Don't panic! But I just had a close call!"

Apparently, I no longer needed to think about how to react: A red-hot branding iron sizzled across my stomach, another one seared my back. I could hear myself scream out in agony, and felt myself falling into the depths of darkness.

in search of an apartment for him, I was free to extract, mix, and dose in perfect peace. The dosage was of crucial importance because the product could not be activated until Edgar was up in the air. That's why my project would have been impossible to carry out if he had put the drops in before leaving the apartment, as I would never have been able to concoct a deferred version of the drug that could have taken effect as soon as he arrived at Persan-Beaumont. At best, he would have gotten into a car accident, but the last thing I would have wanted was to have another motorist get killed—or worse, to have someone actually save *his* life.

There was little likelihood of anyone saving his life after a plane crash. The real risk was in the ensuing investigation, which could potentially reveal the visual difficulties he would endure and lead to an analysis of the drops. In my eyes—I dare say—that presented only a moderate risk, and therefore a risk worth taking.

Obtaining the exact dose became exceedingly difficult, and all the more annoying in the sense that I had to use myself as a guinea pig, which caused all sorts of dilations and contractions to my very own pupils, in addition to some partial blindness and dizziness.

And one hallucination.

Once, during a lugubrious afternoon of work, I heard a gentle knocking at the door of my office, and with a silky swish of material, a man dressed in elegant nineteenth-century attire entered the room. He made no effort to say hello and, without the slightest hesitation, walked right up to me and sat down on a corner of my desk. He sat down, looked at me, and that was it. He had a high and bulging forehead under black, curly hair; thin and sardonic lips beneath a short moustache; and deep-set black eyes, eyes that were filled with horror, with pity—and irony. "Who are you?" I cried out as I sat up straight. "Get out! And don't come back!" He remained motionless. He said: "Nevermore!"—and disappeared.

My vision and my reason were so perturbed that I almost "crashed" right down on the floor. My concoction was apparently right on the money.

All that was left for me to do was to substitute my own mixture for the drops that were in the flask—which I did on the eve of Edgar's flight date.

It was a long night, and I couldn't sleep a wink. That morning, as I was lying in a catatonic state next to my wife, who was snoring peacefully, I heard Edgar enter our apartment, then go into the bathroom to run his bath. I would have preferred staying in bed, but I usually got up when I heard Edgar and had breakfast with him. I had to do what I usually did.

So, courageously, I forced myself to get up, went to make some coffee, and, greeting Edgar cordially, asked him how he had slept. Apparently, he had slept better than I had, even though—he

talented artist. His death is a great loss to the *B.D.* profession."

I was feeling confident enough to allow myself this brazen bit of sarcasm. You were all too clueless to have even detected it. As a matter of fact, I don't think you were listening to me at all. There was a pregnant silence. My wife looked at you, then turned towards me and gently whispered in my ear, as she squeezed my hand, "His death saved your life."

Now it was my turn to remain speechless as I stared at you all, not daring to understand what had happened. You took it upon yourself to dot all the *i*'s for me:

"Your condition required an emergency heart transplant—and therefore a compatible donor. That donor was brought to you by the Heavens in the form of your godson. And since he left no document behind opposing such an operation . . ."

I was still staring at you all, petrified, as my heart began to beat through my ears.

"I know that he would have endorsed it," my wife insisted. "He really liked you, you know!"

The poor woman ascribed my incredulous stupor to some sort of sorrow, when, in fact, I was feeling quite elated! Yes! Not only did I succeed in knocking off Ed Garpo, but I had also . . .

A cold chill suddenly swept through my bones. My head began to throb, and it seemed to me that the pounding was getting louder and louder in my ears. I would have liked to have been all alone, but you had pretty much settled into my room.

"Me too," I said in a halting manner, "me too. I'm positive he would have agreed to this. I'm positive that the author of *Phantasma-Gore* would have appreciated it. Wouldn't he? It's worthy of his great talent, don't you think?"

I talked and I talked, to get rid of that noise in my ears—until I realized that the noise was *not* within my ears.

As much as I tried to heighten my voice, the noise increased, becoming louder and louder . . . a low, dull, quick sound . . .

I sat up in my bed in a cold sweat. Couldn't you hear it? And yet the noise became louder, louder, and louder! You were all looking at me in such a benign fashion with your smiles stuck to your faces like cotton candy! You *pretended* not to hear anything! *You suspected me from the beginning!* And you did it on purpose, didn't you, Professor, putting *THIS* in my chest! And, at the moment, you're enjoying my disgust! I understood it all! And it took this for me to finally understand why I'd always had a visceral disgust for Edgar Allan Poe!

The incessant, infernal noise filled the room. I couldn't bear it any longer and I was at the end of my rope when I shrieked:

"That's it, you bastards, I confess! I was the one who killed him! Take a good look at those eye drops! BUT STOP THAT BEATING FROM HIS HIDEOUS HEART!" ●

LONG AFTER MIDNIGHT

by Donald Olson

Donald Olson started writing, he tells us, almost as soon as he learned the alphabet. He has been making his living at the trade for nearly thirty years now. Though he did complete and sell several novels in the 'seventies, most of his output has been short stories. He isn't quite as prolific as Edward D. Hoch, but his stories arrive at *EQMM* in batches of at least half a dozen once or twice a year. ✝

Ten o'clock and Tom still hadn't come home. He'd called her that evening to say he'd have to skip dinner; he'd be working late at the health club catching up on the books before the long weekend they'd planned to spend together.

"I'll reserve a table at Petillo's for dinner tomorrow night," he'd said. "There's something I want to tell you and something I want to give you."

Helen had a good idea what he wanted to tell her. A marriage proposal, however, was not something she wished to share with a restaurant full of strangers; she'd waited too long for it to happen. So she had decided to surprise him, if only to end the suspense.

She had unpacked the groceries, put the wine to cool, then returned to the living room where she'd stood with that indecisive air of having so much to do she didn't know where to start. It was the first time she'd been in Tom's apartment—they always ended up at her place on the Upper East Side—and she felt a bit like an intruder, although the super, disarmed no doubt by Helen's winsome looks, expensive clothes, and the bag of groceries, had not hesitated to let her into the apartment when she'd confided her plans to surprise her fiancé (well, wasn't he that?) with a special-occasion dinner.

Eagerly she made her preparations, arranging the table in front of the imitation fireplace, laying the silver and china and her own Irish-linen napkins before setting to work in the tiny kitchen—on a gourmet meal of Tom's favorite dishes. No misgivings now, only a rising excitement which soon left her feeling uncomfortably warm and aware of a mounting uneasiness as she kept looking at the clock.

Where could he be? Surely he couldn't still be working. Perhaps it had been remiss of her not to have made certain he had no other plans.

She put the dinner on hold, nothing that couldn't be reheated when he arrived, and stepped out onto the narrow terrace, looking down over the parapet upon the beetling traffic far below. The rain had stopped, leaving the neighboring buildings veiled in a thickening autumn mist. Helen tried to pick out the building not many blocks away that housed the health club where Tom was assistant manager and where they'd first met.

Tom was the embodiment of all those athletic models used in TV fitness-apparatus commercials, with good looks as well. The regimen he'd prescribed for Helen had begun to show results, except on what she called her "stubborn hips." At thirty, Helen was five years older than Tom and infinitely richer. Her father had died in a road accident when Helen, who had escaped serious injury, was nineteen. Her mother had remarried and moved to California, leaving Helen in possession of the plush East Side apartment that had so impressed Tom. As did the Mercedes Helen had insisted he make use of unless for some reason she really needed it herself. Ever since the accident, she had avoided getting behind the wheel whenever possible.

With everything under control in the kitchen, time now seemed to pass grudgingly. Helen reproached herself again for not making sure Tom meant to come straight home after working late. She pictured him in some bar, oblivious of her concern. An unrealistic picture in view of his having told her he didn't like the bar scene when she'd made it clear it was definitely not her milieu. No, he was most likely still at the club.

The apartment offered no diversions. No books, only a few magazines on subjects that failed to enthrall Helen. On an impulse she called her only close friend, Rachel, who had roomed with her at Hunter College.

"You weren't in bed, were you?" Helen asked.

"A night owl like me? But aren't you usually pounding the pillow by eleven? Is anything wrong?"

"No. In fact, I'm not at home. I'm at Tom's place."

"Alone?"

"Yes. I've been waiting hours for Tom." She went on to explain about the surprise she'd planned for him.

"Don't I recall your saying you'd never been to Tom's apartment?"

"This is the first time."

"What's it like?"

Helen looked around. "I guess you'd call it shabby-genteel. The typical jock's digs." Just plain depressing would be closer to the truth. Small wonder Tom had avoided bringing her there.

"Funny," said Rachel, "I still can't imagine your falling for the Mr. Universe type. You were always such a shrinking violet, at least in school, O happy days of yore."

"There's nothing dumb about Tom," replied Helen with a trace of acerbity. She was quite certain that most people wondered not what she saw in Tom but what he saw in her. Not that Rachel had ever implied that Tom might be more impressed by Helen's material advantages than by her charms. All she'd done was to caution Helen not to be swept off her feet.

They made plans to have lunch within the next fortnight.

Now Helen began to feel a nervous strain of expectancy as the clock's hands crept all too slowly toward midnight. Had she been foolish, she worried, to spring this surprise dinner party on him? Was it possible he might *not* propose and that the evening would end in a dismal anticlimax? Tom was not, after all, the easiest person to read.

That it would mark the start of their first weekend together away from the city was another reason for this being a special night. Helen had shown Tom snapshots of the lodge at Lake George. She had never been there since her father died in the accident one summer day on their way home from the lodge. "Looks like a terrific spot for a honeymoon," Tom had commented.

Helen found herself pacing the floor, glancing ever more frequently at the telephone. It hadn't rung since she'd arrived, and now the temptation to play back Tom's earlier messages on the answering machine grew nearly irresistible. Would it be an inexcusable discourtesy, a sort of minor forced entry? They had no secrets from each other, Helen told herself, so what harm could it do?

Presently, as if without her volition, her fingers began playing tag around the machine until a mischievous excitement overpowered her scruples.

A man's voice: "Thomas, old buddy, I can't wait much longer. My bank's funny, it won't let me deposit promises. Call me."

It was the next voice that made Helen recoil as if stung. A woman's voice: "Darling, in case I forgot to tell you, I left the tickets in your bottom drawer. I wish we were taking off today. Kiss-kiss."

With a feeling of disbelief, Helen replayed the message. The silence of the apartment seemed all at once sinister, menacing. All her efforts to make the dingy room inviting, the pretty effect of the table by the fireplace, the silver and candles and napkins, assumed a grisly impropriety. She had the uncanny feeling of having blundered into the home of a stranger.

She found the tickets in the bottom drawer of the bureau in Tom's bedroom: two plane tickets to London on a flight from Kennedy on the following Monday. One in Tom's name, the other in Helen's. The feeling of disorientation grew more acute, but more revela-

tions were to come. In the same drawer Helen found a woman's photograph, and looking at it realized where she had heard the voice on the answering machine before. Allie Quinn! The blonde who also worked at the health club.

Wild thoughts raced through Helen's brain. Tom and Allie! Impossible. "Blondes don't turn me on," Tom had replied when Helen had remarked on the Quinn girl's beauty.

The impulse to flee from the apartment died almost as soon as it arose, replaced by a driving urgency to discover what further secrets Tom's apartment might reveal.

Lacy black lingerie in the guest-room bureau. A red dress Helen recalled Allie Quinn wearing one day at the club. Damning clues to Tom's duplicity but no less mind-shattering than what Helen found in a small drawer holding Tom's accessories, including the ruby cuff links Helen had given him: a pawn ticket for the diamond-and-emerald ring Helen had assumed she must have mislaid.

Feelings of outrage, bewilderment, and of having been violated in a way as unspeakably hideous as rape left Helen groping wildly for some meaning to explain these horrors.

She found the answer in Tom's desk; only then did the strands of this web of deceit begin to acquire a recognizable pattern. Copies, taken with some sort of camera, of Helen's own private papers: birth certificate, passport, bank books, financial statements.

And the key to her apartment she had so trustingly given to Tom.

Still, the worst remained to be discovered. Atop a half-dozen of Helen's love letters to Tom lay a postcard, stamped and ready to be mailed, addressed to Helen's mother in California: "Dear Mom, Tom and I are flying to London Monday. Will marry there and honeymoon in Venice. More later. Love, Helen."

Had she not known better, Helen might almost have sworn she'd written it herself, it was that skillful a forgery.

But what could she do, go to the police? What good would that do? Except to expose her own poor judgment. A plain Jane with money taken for a ride by a good-looking younger man. What did all her discoveries prove as to Tom's intentions? That he planned somehow to get rid of her with some bizarre notion of having Allie Quinn impersonate her, assume her identity? This was the stuff of TV melodrama.

Furthermore, Helen's natural inclination had always been to run away from trouble, blind her eyes to unpleasantness. What had Rachel called it? Escapist tendencies? So now her first thought was to leave the apartment just as she'd arranged it, maybe even the candles alight, and run away. It would be clear to Tom what had happened, especially if she were to leave those bureau drawers wide open. The super would describe the young woman he'd let into the apartment. She could picture Tom in a

panic, trying desperately to reach her. Only she'd be gone. She'd be—yes, she'd escape to the lodge. Rent a car, pack a bag, and head for Lake George. She had to get away to where she could be alone and make up her mind what to do.

But before she could act on this impulse, irrational as it might have been, she heard the sound of Tom's key in the door.

"Helen? My God, sweetheart, what are you doing here? How did you get in?"

"The super let me in. I've been here for hours. I wanted to surprise you. I made dinner but I'm afraid it's inedible now." She said all this without the faintest tremor in her voice.

He looked toward the kitchen and at the table so artfully arranged. "Darling, I'm sorry. But I told you I'd be tied up all evening." His own voice and deep-set brown eyes betrayed no more than an apologetic amusement. "I'm sorry I ruined all this for you. It all looks lovely."

"No matter," she said lightly. "The wine's not ruined." She fetched the bottle from the kitchen, poured them each a glass. "My own fault. It never occurred to me you'd be working this late." She glanced at her watch. Could it really be this long after midnight?

"There was a lot to catch up on," he said. He moved to take her in his arms but she turned away.

"Were you alone?"

Was that a flicker of disquiet? "At this hour? Of course I was alone."

She handed him the glass and, holding her own, stepped out onto the terrace. No stars were visible in the sky, only the glow of lights from the city that never slept. Tom followed her onto the terrace, put his muscular arms around her waist. She pulled away from him.

"You're not angry, are you?" he said softly.

"Angry? Why should I be?"

"I'll make it up to you, you know. Tomorrow night. At Petillo's, remember?"

"Oh yes. You said you had something to tell me, and to give me."

"You must wait till then, okay?"

"Whatever you say."

Again he moved closer. "Meanwhile, we've got the rest of the night. You'll stay, of course."

"I'm not sure you'll want me to."

"Why ever not? I know the place is a dump. Do you blame me for never bringing you here?"

She glanced up at him. "I got so bored waiting for you. I was naughty. I snooped."

"Helen—"

"No, Tom, don't say anything. I listened to the messages on your

machine. There was one from Allie Quinn. And I found a few of her things."

Only the slightest pause before he said, dismissively, "Oh, that. You *are* angry. No need to be. Allie stopped over one night. She'd been drinking. I wouldn't let her drive home."

"Please, Tom, don't lie to me. Not anymore. There's a lot more to it than that, you know there is. The plane tickets and all the rest. I saw *everything.* What were you planning, Tom? I wasn't intended to return from our weekend at the lodge? You and Allie—Allie impersonating me—flying to England. A fraudulent marriage. When did you first get this harebrained idea? As soon as you'd got to know me?"

He made a gesture, half placatory, half protest. "You've got it all wrong, Helen. Listen to me. I swear I was going to tell you everything tomorrow night."

"Oh yes, and you were going to give me something. An engagement ring, I thought, foolish me."

"Something like that."

"*Something* like that? Like maybe the ring you stole from me? Don't bother denying that, too. I found the pawn ticket."

"I only borrowed it. I was in a bind. I owed some people a lot of money. I couldn't ask you. I couldn't take *money* from you."

"Not until I was dead, you mean."

"All *right,*" he said sharply, almost angrily. "That's the way it started. It was all Allie's idea. I swear to God it was. I think she'd seen too many Hitchcock movies. I'd known her long before I met you. But I never realized what she was really like. Not until after I'd met you. Until I'd fallen in love with you."

"Please, Tom, don't insult my intelligence."

"I do love you, darling. But Allie knows things about me. Things in my past that I'm not proud of. When she came up with this crazy idea I had to play for time. But *kill* you? Oh, sweetheart, how could you ever believe that?"

"Because it doesn't take a psychic or a detective to read the clues."

His voice hardened. "If you really believed that, you wouldn't still be here. You would have called the police." He set his glass on the parapet rail and lightly touched Helen's arm. "I swear I was going to tell you the truth. Tomorrow night. At Petillo's. The honest truth about everything, even if it meant the end of everything between us. That's why I couldn't see you tonight. I had it out with Allie tonight at the club. I told her I wasn't going through with it. I told her I loved you and didn't give a damn what sort of trouble she tried to make. I told her she was fired, that I never wanted to see her again. I'm finished with her. She's a dead issue."

He still thinks it will work, Helen thought bitterly. *He still imagines I'm so enchanted with the man he pretended to be, so easily*

dazzled by his sheer physical magnetism, by that charm he can turn on so effortlessly.

The noise of sirens was by no means unusual in those steel canyons below, and perhaps if one had not at that instant sounded its keening note Helen might not have said what she did, or done what she did.

"Hear that?" she said. "Did you honestly believe I wouldn't tell the police? Look down there."

Tom leaned over the rail. Helen was small but she was not weak. She moved swiftly, unthinkingly, taking Tom altogether by surprise.

She heard only one anguished cry, and then there was silence.

When the police arrived in answer to Helen's frantic call, she didn't have to pretend to be distraught as she told them how she'd been in the kitchen when she'd heard Tom's cry. She still couldn't believe what had happened, she kept repeating.

"He'd been drinking when he arrived. He seemed terribly agitated, worried about money he owed, about threats to his life. But no, I'll never believe he killed himself. We'd been so happy at first. We planned to get married. It must have been an accident."

And they believed her. Why shouldn't they? How could it be proved otherwise?

Later, she changed her mind about staying at her own apartment after she'd driven away in the Mercedes, which Tom had parked in the street. Stopping only long enough to pack her bag and toss it onto the seat beside her, she headed out of the city, undaunted by what would ordinarily have made her reluctant to make the long trip to Lake George alone, driven by the need to get away from everything and everyone. And what better sanctuary than the lodge?

A wise decision. By the end of the weekend Helen felt that it might be possible to pick up the pieces and go on with her life, to recover in time from the effects of that brutal experience. As she was preparing to leave the lodge she stood looking around her for the last time at the encircling woods and the lake below. "Sounds like a terrific place to spend a honeymoon," Tom had said. Only it wasn't a honeymoon he'd been planning. Had his deadly intentions been successful, Helen wondered where on this property she might have been buried. Or in the lake.

With a shudder, she fetched the boxes she'd packed with things to bring back to the city, certain she would never again return to the lodge. Setting the boxes on the ground, she inserted the key in the trunk and raised the lid. A cry broke from her lips.

Like those of some bird or animal stuffed and displayed in a museum, Allie Quinn's wide-open dead green eyes stared up at her. ●

Art by Laurie Harden

PANDORA'S SOCKS

by Edward D. Hoch

I was just weeks away from receiving my graduate degree at Princeton, and I'd promised Ives there would be no more involvement with Andrew Kogan. Two of his overseas trips had led us into murder, something that wouldn't look at all good on our meager resumes. That was why I was a bit apprehensive on returning from the campus library to find Ives entertaining a slender man in a white shirt and tie who looked for all the world like one of those Mormons the FBI likes to hire.

"Stanton, this is Roger Burris," she announced. "He's come about Andrew Kogan."

"Oh?" I wasn't about to commit to any further comment until I had a clue as to what was going on.

But sure enough, he flipped open his wallet and showed me the badge and photo ID. "Roger Burris, FBI. I'd like to ask you some questions about Mr. Kogan."

"We haven't seen him for months," I said quickly. "Not since January."

"Andrew Kogan was killed last Wednesday morning by a car

bomb in Athens. We don't know whether it was a terrorist attack aimed at Americans or whether it was connected to his somewhat shady business ventures overseas. You may be aware that his company has been in trouble with our government."

"We don't know any of the details about that," I insisted, looking toward a silent Ives for backup. "He just hired us for a couple of courier jobs, in London and Havana."

Burris was a bleak man who seemed rarely to change expression. He pursed his lips and slipped some papers from his briefcase. "This is a copy of the will Kogan had drawn up in Athens shortly before his death. It leaves his business to you, Mr. Stanton. Here also is a copy of his death certificate and a translation of the autopsy report."

It used to be his series character Jeffery Rand that Edward D. Hoch had travel the globe on cases involving foreign states and matters of international security; nowadays it is more often his newer team of Stanton & Ives, the Princeton University grad-student couple we saw last investigating a Hemingway-related murder in Cuba. This time Stanton & Ives are summoned to Greece, where they become embroiled in a case that may involve terrorism. †

"He left his business to me?" I tried to grasp what he was saying.

"Of course, there's still a government claim on it, so there's not much there. But it seems to show a close relationship between you two."

"There was no relationship at all," Ives insisted, finally breaking her silence. "We were temporary employees, not even that! We received free transportation and a hotel room in return for courier service."

"Kogan was exporting restricted materials without a license."

"We didn't know that when he hired us. He paid us so little for our time, perhaps he left the business to Stanton here to compensate for it."

He could see he was getting nowhere with us. "In any event, the Athens police are wondering if you'll be coming over to settle his affairs. Apparently he maintained an office there."

"I don't think we'd want to do that," Ives replied quickly. "He must have had relatives."

"None that we can locate. There was a young Englishwoman named Pandora Webster in Athens with whom he had some sort of relationship. He was killed leaving her apartment." He was silent for a moment and then added, "I need to check with Washington. Will you be here if I call later today?"

"I have some studying to do," I told him.

"Fine. I'll be in touch."

After he'd gone, Ives turned to me and asked, "In touch about what?"

I shrugged. "I have a feeling Kogan is going to be even more trouble dead than alive."

Juliet Ives and I had been together through much of graduate school, and I still marveled at her quick wit and long legs. I'd even taken her home to Long Island to meet my folks over the spring recess, and she'd been a hit with my father if not my mother. "That's the young woman you went to London and Havana with, isn't it?" she asked. "What do you know about her? What do her parents do?"

"I know everything about her, Mother. Her father teaches high school in Albany and her mother works for the state. She's a nice girl."

"She seems to have her hands all over you."

"Ives is a very tactile person."

"Why don't you call her Juliet? It's such a nice name."

"We use last names a lot in college. She claims she hates Juliet because there's no Romeo."

"Well, I call her Juliet," my mother answered.

I was remembering that conversation while we waited, with some apprehension, for the FBI to call back. "You said once you had no Romeo. Aren't I your Romeo?"

She snorted and bit me on the shoulder. "If you were, I'd have to stab myself!"

Agent Burris called a few minutes later, and the news was not good. "Can you get a few days off from classes?" he asked.

"What for?"

"I'm flying to Athens in the morning to determine if Kogan's death was a terrorist act aimed at Americans. I've obtained authorization for you and Miss Ives to come along at government expense."

I glanced at Ives. "Come along with you to Athens? What for? We know nothing about how he died or who was responsible."

"We're trying to help the Athens police as much as possible," Burris explained. "They feel you could answer some questions about his business practices. If we can produce both of you, they might be a bit more cooperative on the terrorism angle."

When I hung up a few minutes later I shrugged and said to Ives, "How do you say no to the FBI?"

"I'd have found a way."

But we were on the plane the following day, flying across the ocean in the company of Agent Burris. We had three seats

together, with Ives in the middle, and she spent much of the time taunting the FBI man. "What was your biggest case?" she asked, and when his vague answer failed to satisfy her, she kept on with the questions. Poking him gently in the armpit she asked, "Do they let you carry your gun onboard?"

"I check it through," he answered grimly without taking his eyes from the magazine he was trying to read.

"Are you a good shot?"

"Good enough."

"How many people have you killed?"

"Not a one. I've never had to fire my weapon on duty."

"Oh!" She sounded disappointed. "Then you wouldn't be very good at saving us from the bad guys."

"Ives, lay off," I told her, and switched the conversation to the sights of Athens. Burris had been there before and filled us in on the Acropolis, the Parthenon, and other ancient wonders.

"They've been restoring the Parthenon," he told us, "but like all such restorations it's been controversial." He filled us in on some history, and for the remainder of the flight it was possible to forget that he was a government agent with a gun in his luggage.

Our plane settled down to a perfect landing at Hellenikon Airport, and Burris had a car waiting to take us to the Athens Hilton on Vassilissis Sofias Avenue. Its marble lobby was quite luxurious and Ives whispered, "I wonder how much this trip is costing the American taxpayers."

The first thing she did in our room was to bounce up and down on the king-size bed, proclaiming it just right. We tossed around on it a bit and then unpacked. Ives changed into a short-sleeved blouse and denim skirt. We met the FBI man downstairs.

"The Greeks rarely take a lunch break," he told us, "but we can go to an ouzeri. They serve ouzo, beer, and wine along with snacks."

"I'm here under duress," Ives objected, tossing her long brown hair. "The least you can do is feed me."

"Later," he promised. "After the police interview."

The investigator who met with us, Lieutenant Saripolos, was a dour man with large hands and a black moustache. He spoke good English and seemed impressed with the fact that we'd traveled from America to aid in his investigation. "This man Kogan, he was a friend of yours?"

I explained our business connection as briefly as possible, reiterating that I had no idea why he'd made a will leaving his courier firm to me. "We're just a couple of grad students he hired for a courier job. Then there was a second job and that was it. We knew our government was investigating him, and we stayed clear of

anything illegal." Though this last was not completely true, it sounded good and the Greek officer seemed to accept it.

Burris cleared his throat. "I'm here on behalf of the United States government, to see if the killing of Andrew Kogan could be linked to other terrorist acts against American citizens. As you're well aware, he is not the first American to die a violent death here in Athens."

Lieutenant Saripolos seemed to ignore Burris and let his eyes wander over Ives, openly admiring her long legs beneath the denim skirt. But when he spoke, it was about her arms. "Miss Ives, I would advise you to carry a sweater or jacket. If you plan on sightseeing you should know that women must cover their arms when visiting churches here."

"I hadn't exactly planned on church," she replied, giving him one of her sultry grins.

He ignored her and hurried on, "The circumstances of Andrew Kogan's death leave it open to two possibilities. The first, of course, is a terrorist attack. Apparently he had spent the night with this woman—" He glanced at his notes— "Pandora Webster. When he left her apartment in the early morning and started his car, a bomb went off, killing him instantly. Any terrorist seeking to kill an American might have chosen him for his nationality alone."

"And the other possibility?" Burris asked.

"Kogan maintained an office here, with a paid manager, for no apparent reason. He had some sort of shady relationship with a Turk named Osman Emre, who also knew Miss Webster. Emre seems to have dropped out of sight since the killing. It's possible he planted the bomb, either because of some business rivalry or a rivalry over Miss Webster."

"Does this man Emre have a police record?"

"He was linked, some years back, to illegal arms sales in the Middle East. However, the charges were dropped for lack of evidence."

I remembered Kogan's involvement with illegal shipments of computer chips. There could be some connection, and I saw that Ives had the same reaction, her eyes taking on that thoughtful look I knew so well.

Lieutenant Saripolos questioned us at greater length about our dealings with the dead man, but we could add little to what we'd already told him. "I think," Burris said, "it would be wise for me to meet with Pandora Webster. She is the one most likely to know if Kogan's murder could have been a terrorist act."

"You are certainly welcome to speak with her, if she is willing," he told the FBI man. "I will give you her address. I ask only that any new information you uncover be shared with me."

"Of course."

Outside the headquarters building, Roger Burris attempted to give us a quick brush-off. "You two will probably want to see some of the sights. There's no need to accompany me to this woman's apartment."

Ives had an answer for that. "She might be more at ease with a woman present. We'd better go along."

Pandora Webster's apartment was located on Kanari Street, only a block or so from Parliament and the National Gardens. It was a modern building with a small courtyard for parking. Burris commented, "It's a likely place for a terrorist act, close to the seat of government." He called our attention to one portion of the courtyard, where blackened bricks bore witness to the force of the explosion.

Saripolos had phoned ahead to tell her an American official was coming to talk with her, and Pandora Webster met us at the door of her second-floor apartment. She was an attractive blond woman in her thirties wearing a bulky sweater over snug jeans. Her accent was British upper-class, and she showed no surprise that Ives and I were accompanying Burris. "Come in," she said. "I'm getting used to answering questions. The police and press have been asking them for a week now. Could I get you some tea?"

We accepted her offer. Burris showed his identification and introduced us as business associates of the dead man. "How often did Andrew Kogan come to Athens?" was his first question.

She served us tea in dainty little cups and then seated herself on a white leather sofa that looked expensive. The legs of her jeans rose a bit to reveal a pair of not-quite-matching socks, one maroon and the other dark green. I wondered if she'd dressed quickly in a dimly lit bedroom after Burris called her. "About four times a year," she answered. "He tried to get over here every season."

"How did you two meet?"

"At a diplomatic reception some years back. I believe it was the annual Independence Day party at the American embassy. I was invited because I hold a minor post at the British embassy. I should be at work right now, but I took the afternoon off after Lieutenant Saripolos called. It wouldn't look good to be questioned at work." She passed some biscuits around. "Andrew and I stayed friends, and he always gave me a call when he was in the city."

"Pardon me for asking, but was your relationship intimate?"

"We were close friends, and he'd spent the night here before he was killed. I told the police that." It was hard for me to imagine Andrew Kogan, with his bad hairpiece, in bed with anyone, much less this attractive British lady, but then I remembered that he'd

brought his secretary to London with him when we did our first job for him. Perhaps I'd underestimated him.

"Tell me about his murder. Did you see it happen?"

She nodded. "He got up early, before seven, and left without breakfast. Said he was meeting a fellow named Osman Emre. I watched him from that window." We walked over to it with her. "He had a rental car and it was parked down there, just inside the courtyard in that scorched part."

"The parking area isn't locked at night?"

"No. People come and go at all hours. We've never had any trouble before. He went down to the car and unlocked it, then waved up to me. He got in and turned on the ignition and the whole thing just—just blew up."

"Did you notice anything suspicious the previous night?"

She thought about it. "I looked out once and there was a green car parked across the street, but I thought nothing of it at the time."

"Have you ever seen this man Emre?" Ives asked. Burris shot her an annoyed glance but allowed the woman to answer.

"I've known him for some time, but not well. Andrew was meeting him on business of some sort."

"At his Athens office?"

"I assume so. He made a phone call to Muriel Murex, his office manager, before he left."

Burris asked the next question before Ives did. "Was she at home or in the office?"

"Since he phoned her a little after seven, I assumed she was still at home."

"Is she an American?"

"She's a Greek citizen of mixed parentage. I believe the police have questioned her."

The FBI man seemed to close in for the kill. "You said you didn't know this Osman Emre well, but Lieutenant Saripolos seems to think you two were having an affair."

The Englishwoman scoffed. "You police are always so far behind on the facts! We had a brief fling eight, maybe ten years ago when I first came to Athens. It's been over since the Ice Age. I don't know him very well *now*. Especially, I don't know exactly what he does for a living."

"But you could make a guess."

She shrugged. "Andrew told me he was trying to sell nine shoulder-mounted missile launchers, the sort guerrillas and terrorists could use to shoot down commercial aircraft. We're always hearing rumors of that sort at the embassy, but nobody puts too much stock in such talk."

"Was Andrew Kogan involved in illegal arms sales?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "We never talked about his business."

I switched to a lighter topic. "You probably know that the original Pandora was the first woman on earth, according to Greek mythology."

"I know, and the gods gave her a box which was not to be opened, much as God warned Eve against eating the fruit of the forbidden tree. I've been hearing that story for as long as I've been here, especially from cheeky young men after they've had a few drinks. They always say they want to open my box."

We finished our tea and Burris said it was time to go. Outside, he mentioned something about having to check in, and left us to our own devices. "Go see the Benaki Museum," he suggested. "It's just around the corner and has a fine mix of art treasures. I'll see you back at the hotel."

Ives and I chose an ouzeri instead, while we planned our next move. "I'm beginning to think they paid our way over here to lure the killer out of hiding," I said. "Burris might be figuring us for sitting ducks."

"Let's forget about Burris and go back to that great bed," she suggested.

"I think we need to see the lawyer who drew up that will." I'd brought the papers with me in my jacket pocket and I took out the will. His name was at the top: *Roscoe Drummond,* with addresses in London and Athens.

Ives unfurled her street map and pinpointed the location. "It's about six blocks from here, near the National Gallery."

"Let's go."

We caught Roscoe Drummond just as he was closing his office for the day. He was younger than I'd expected, perhaps still in his early thirties, with a pale complexion and the sort of light sandy hair that made his eyebrows all but disappear. "You'll have to come back in the morning," he said briskly. "We're closed for the day. It's almost five o'clock."

"Can't you give us five minutes?" Ives asked, turning on the charm. "It's about Andrew Kogan. This is Walt Stanton, the beneficiary in his will."

Drummond relented a little and shook my hand. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Stanton. Come in. I can certainly spare five minutes, or maybe even ten." He flipped the office lights back on and directed us to chairs opposite his desk. "You came all the way from New York?" he asked, addressing his question to us both.

"Princeton, New Jersey, actually. This is Juliet Ives. She accompanied me on the two trips I made for Mr. Kogan."

Roscoe Drummond opened a file drawer and took out a slender folder. He glanced at it as if to refresh his memory and then sat

down. "I drew this up for Andrew Kogan just two weeks ago. Perhaps he had a premonition."

"Did he say anything to indicate that?"

"No. I don't remember him saying much at all."

"Had you had previous dealings with him?" Ives asked.

Drummond brushed back his hair nervously. "Nothing major. I drew up some export documents for his firm."

"Did he tell you anything about me?"

"Just that you were a young associate and someone he could trust to keep the business going should anything happen to him."

"Do you know Pandora Webster?" I asked.

"No."

"Did you have any reason to believe Kogan feared for his life?"

"No. When people reach middle age it's not uncommon for them to make out a will."

"But his residence was in New York," I pointed out. "Why wouldn't he use a New York lawyer for this? Doesn't it appear that the need for a will arose suddenly, while he was in Athens?"

"He'd dealt with our London office on occasion. It wasn't unusual for him to turn to us. I understand he was having legal problems back in America, which would have involved his American lawyer."

I still wasn't quite satisfied, but I shifted to another question. "Just what is the value of this business he's left to me?"

"That depends on how his legal problems in America are resolved. I'd certainly advise you to close the Athens office and discharge its manager. She receives a salary which is a drain on the business."

"That's Muriel Murex?"

"Correct." He wrote down the address of the office for us.

"We should tend to that right away," I agreed. "I'll call you later if we have any other questions."

"Certainly. The will should be probated, of course, and Greek law differs from the requirements in Britain and America."

"Can I leave that in your hands?"

"Of course."

"Then we'll let you be on your way."

He saw us out and hurried off to his car. "I suppose it's too late to catch this Muriel Murex at the office now," Ives said.

"Let's give it a try anyway. It's just after five and it's close-by on Marasli Street."

"All we're seeing are office buildings," Ives grumbled. "What about the Acropolis?"

"That's not where the office is."

"Then let's go back to that great bed."

"Come on," I insisted, half dragging her along.

The building was still open when we reached it and we found the office of Air Couriers International on the third floor. That was the name Kogan had originally used in New York, until his government troubles. I could see lights on behind the frosted glass of the door, and when I tried the knob it opened. At first my eyes went to the filing cabinets and the papers strewn on the floor. It wasn't until Ives entered behind me and let out a gasp that I saw the body behind the desk.

It was a middle-aged woman, her head bloodied by a blow from a heavy bookend that lay near the body. I knew I wouldn't need to discharge Muriel Murex. Somebody had done it for me.

Roscoe Drummond had known we were heading for Kogan's office, so we had no choice but to call the police. I didn't want to be considered a suspect in the killing. Lieutenant Saripolos had given me his phone number and I reached him in minutes. Before long, we heard the familiar pulsating sound of European sirens in the street.

"Tell me about it," Saripolos said when he arrived a few minutes later. Other building employees had quickly confirmed that the dead woman was Muriel Murex, who had been working only part-time since her employer's murder, coming in each afternoon to check on the mail. We told the Greek police officer about our visit to the lawyer's office and then coming here to find the body.

"It looks as if someone killed her and searched through the files for something," Ives reasoned.

"We were lax in not impounding these files as soon as he was killed," Saripolos admitted. "We were too quick to lean toward the terrorist theory."

There was another possibility I had to suggest. "The two killings might not be connected. Someone might have read about Kogan's death and come here to rob the office, not realizing Miss Murex would be here."

"I suppose so," he admitted. "But the lock wasn't forced or jimmied. She may have let him in, though her own key ring is on the floor near her body, as if she had just come in and surprised him."

I stared down at the body, trying to imagine what she might have been like in life. Then one of Saripolos's men threw a sheet over her and the image vanished. "Come on," I said to Ives. "Let's go."

I decided to inform Pandora Webster of this latest killing and find out what else she knew. We found a telephone and I called her. She answered on the second ring. "What is it?" she asked after I identified myself. "What's happened?"

"I'm afraid there's been another killing. Kogan's office manager, Muriel Murex, was found dead in his office."

"My God!"

"You have to tell me more about this man Emre. He could be the killer."

"Osman would never kill anyone."

"Where can we find him?" I asked.

"He's left Athens. I believe he lives somewhere in Monemvasia."

"Where's that?"

"It's an ancient walled town south of here, across the Aegean Sea. I swear it's like no place else on earth. You can reach it by hydrofoil, but I'd advise you not to go there. It is a place of narrow alleyways and no cars. Even the shops are few. Many of the ancient structures are in ruins, but people still live there and fish. There are cafes for the tourists, nestled in clefts of rock. It is like stepping far into the past."

"And Osman Emre lives there?"

"I believe so, yes."

"All right. Please see if you can find an address for him. We'll check with you in the morning."

We'd had a long day, and after dinner we finally made it into that big hotel bed. Possibly because she'd given up smoking, Ives was a great one for pillow talk after sex. Tired as we both were, this night was no exception.

"Stanton?"

"Go to sleep!" I told her, my voice muffled by the pillow.

"Stanton, I've been thinking."

"About the murders?"

"No, about Kogan's business. Maybe we could make something out of it."

"A courier service?"

"More than that. We could help people with problems."

"Like private detectives?"

"No, silly! How about this: Stanton & Ives, International Expeditors."

"What does it mean?"

"Well, we could expedite things on the international scene."

"Go to sleep, Ives."

When I called Pandora's apartment in the morning there was no answer. "We'd better go over there," I said. "Just to make sure she's alive."

"Stanton, she's probably at the British Embassy. She works there, remember?"

I phoned the embassy with growing unease, and learned that she hadn't reported in yet. "Come on!" I told Ives. "Something's happened."

We took one of the city's cheap taxis to her Kanari Street

address. "Do you think that means *canary* in English?" Ives wondered.

"Who knows? It's Greek to me."

Ives punched me on the arm. "*Julius Caesar,* act one, scene two."

Pandora didn't answer the bell, and after three rings Ives tried the door. It was unlocked. "You're not going in there, are you?" I asked, remembering the unlocked door at Kogan's office.

"Of course. Isn't that what we came for? To find her body in the bathtub?"

But Pandora's body wasn't in the bathtub or bed or anywhere else in the apartment. She was simply gone, and so were many of her clothes. The bureau drawers were empty, and there were several empty hangers in the closet. "She's run off," I decided.

"What's this on the floor?" Ives stooped to pick up one of those sticky yellow Post-it memos with a single word written on it: *Olive.*

"What's it mean?"

She shrugged. "The Mediterranean region has a great many olive trees. They're a profitable crop."

"I wonder if there are any in the Monemvasia region."

"You think that's where she's gone?"

I nodded. "Perhaps to warn Emre. Maybe he wasn't that far in the past after all."

Her attention drawn to a cluttered desk in one corner of the bedroom, Ives began searching through drawers. "She certainly didn't take everything. Maybe she's coming back. Look! Here's an address book."

I flipped quickly through to the *E* page. "We're in luck. Here's an address for Osman Emre in Monemvasia. I wonder what time that next hydrofoil leaves."

We were just entering a taxi in front of Pandora's apartment when I heard someone call my name. It was Agent Burris, back on the job and probably looking for Pandora, too. He'd spotted us, but I wasn't about to get involved with him at that moment. I told the driver to keep going. The taxi delivered us to the hydrofoil dock with only minutes to spare. We purchased tickets with my credit card and as we boarded the sleek-looking vessel I saw another car pull up.

"It's Burris," Ives said. "He must have followed us."

"If he makes it onto the boat, we're sunk. Emre will never talk to us with an FBI man along. If my suspicions are correct, he'd probably shoot us first. There are two people dead already."

Happily, the boat's whistle sounded and the gangplank went up while he was still parking his car. He came running up to see us pull away from the dock, the hydrofoil just gearing up to its cruis-

ing speed. The vessel had a small deck area with a passenger cabin behind the wheelhouse and another larger passenger cabin below deck. I estimated it could carry about a hundred passengers altogether, though on this day we had fewer than twenty. There was no space for cars, but Pandora had told us no cars were allowed in Monemvasia.

"What time is the next boat?" I asked one of the crew who spoke English.

"Not until this afternoon. We only have two boats on this run, and the trip takes three and a half hours each way."

"Three and a half!" Ives groaned. "I should have brought something to read."

"Is there any other way to get there?"

"An early morning bus from Athens, but it takes the whole day. There is no airport."

I was relieved, and I assured Ives that Burris couldn't catch up to us before the next hydrofoil arrived in late afternoon. She settled down and we watched the coastline slip away as we headed into the open Aegean Sea.

We bought some coffee and a couple of snack bars with a Greek name we couldn't decipher. "These taste awful," Ives decided after a couple of bites, tossing hers away.

"It's an acquired taste."

"Yeah. Do you still have that copy of Kogan's will? It'll give me something to read, at least."

I dug around in my jacket pocket and passed her the papers Burris had given me back in the States. She reread the will, puzzled over the Greek in the death certificate, and started on the translated autopsy report. Before long she threw it down. "I'm sick just reading it! The hair on top of his head was only singed. The entire rest of his body was burnt and blackened by the explosion."

"The bomb must have been under the car," I surmised.

She read a bit more and threw it down again. "How can people spend their lives doing autopsies? Do I really want to read in detail about what Andrew Kogan had for breakfast before being blown up by a car bomb?"

"Let's go out on deck and look at the scenery. There's an island off to our right."

The wings on either side of the fast-moving hydrofoil sliced a path through the waves. As we passed close to land I could make out some people on the beach waving to us. "What island is that?" I asked the English-speaking crewman.

"It is called Hydra, a very old place important in smuggling and piracy. During Greece's war of independence, beginning in eighteen twenty-one, it became a graveyard for scores of sailing ships destroyed in battle."

When we were alone, Ives thought about that. "These Greek islands would be the perfect place for a transfer of illegal weapons. Those nine missile launchers, for instance, if they really exist."

"I was thinking the same thing."

"How big are they?"

I shrugged. "I remember reading once that the original missile launchers, the bazookas developed during World War Two, were fifty-four inches long and weighed twelve pounds. Today's launchers may be a bit longer and heavier, but not much."

Ives stared at me. "You just have these facts at your fingertips?"

"Like *Julius Caesar,* act one, scene two," I said, returning the punch on the arm.

The walled town of Monemvasia, on a rocky island linked to the mainland of Greece by a long bridge, was a spellbinding place that Pandora Webster had not oversold. The streets were heavy with isolation and a serenity that belonged to another age. Fishing boats moved in and out of the harbor, passing a working lighthouse, with ruined buildings and a ruined fort holding sway over all. There was a lower town and an upper town, with souvenir shops and cafes nestled in the island's rocky face. It was down one of the narrow twisting streets of the lower town, with its rough stone paving, that we found the address from Pandora's apartment. But the door was locked and no one answered.

"Where are you, Osman Emre?" Ives asked of no one in particular.

"Well, he's not here, that's for sure. Looks like we made the trip for nothing."

We were starting back down the narrow street toward the docks when a familiar figure suddenly stepped out of an alley on our right. It was Agent Burris, and he had a revolver pointed at us.

"How did you get here?" Ives wanted to know. "Fly?"

"A helicopter with pontoons. I landed in the harbor an hour ago and waited for your arrival. I wanted to see where you would lead me."

"To a dead end. No one's home at Osman Emre's house." I hadn't raised my hands at the sight of the gun, but I was careful not to move my arms. "Can't you put that thing away? We're not armed."

He thought about it for a moment and finally holstered his weapon. "I guess there's nowhere you could run to here. What's so important about Emre? Did I miss something?"

"He's the only lead we have," I told him. "Kogan's office manager is dead, his attorney seems to know nothing, and Pandora Webster has flown the coop."

We'd started walking back down toward the dock, and a funeral procession was winding its way through one of the adjoining

streets. A black-robed orthodox priest led the way while six burly men carried the large coffin. Some thirty mourners, mostly older women in black dresses, followed along. They seemed to be heading toward the docks where a fishing boat waited.

"Who died?" Ives asked a young man who stood watching the procession.

"Some old fisherman, no one I knew. He wanted to be buried at sea."

"Lots of people for such a small place."

The young man shrugged. "They're paid mourners. The priest hired them."

It came to us both at once, only Ives moved faster than I did. She ran across the rough stones directly at the funeral procession, and all I could do was follow. Behind us, Burris shouted for us to stop.

Ives hit the middle pallbearer on the left side, knocking him off balance. He lost his grip and the coffin came loose from the others' grasp. It hit the stones with a thud as some of the black-clad women started screaming. The priest leading the procession turned, startled, and quickly drew a Luger pistol from under his robe.

"It's Emre!" I yelled to warn Ives.

"Emre's dead!" she yelled back. "It's Andrew Kogan."

Then Burris fired his weapon from fifty feet away and hit the bogus priest square in the chest. I ran to him then, kicking the Luger out of reach, and saw that it was indeed Kogan, his priestly headpiece dislodged.

"Crazy!" he muttered as his mouth filled with blood. "I trusted you. I was—was going to make you my partner—"

Some hours later, with Andrew Kogan's body and the coffin filled with nine missile launchers stowed safely aboard, we flew back to Athens on Burris's government helicopter. "You did pretty well for never having shot anyone before," Ives observed.

Burris shrugged. "First time lucky, I guess. But how did you two know Kogan was still alive?"

"I didn't know," I confessed. "It was Ives who figured it out."

He simply stared at her. "How?"

"Well, I suppose it was Pandora's socks. They didn't match. Stanton thought she'd gotten dressed in the dark, but then after she left in such a hurry we found this little Post-it note on the floor with *Olive* written on it. She was sticking notes on each pair of socks so she'd know what color they were. That note fell off, and one of the socks she was wearing yesterday could be described as olive in color."

"How did that tell you Kogan was still alive?"

"It told me Pandora was color-blind, and that meant she was lying

when she told us she noticed a suspicious green car across the street from her apartment the night the bomb was planted. I figured if she lied about that, she might be lying about something else. On the boat ride over here today I read the autopsy report on the badly burnt body believed to be Andrew Kogan, and I realized that it wasn't Kogan at all. The report mentioned that the hair on top of his head was only singed, but Kogan wore a hairpiece on top of his head. He had virtually no hair there. And it told what he'd eaten for breakfast, while Pandora said he'd left her apartment without breakfast. Conclusion: The car-bomb victim wasn't Kogan. Since Osman Emre hadn't been seen since the bombing, there was a good chance he was the victim. The police relied too much on Pandora's eyewitness account, and the fact that the bomb was in Kogan's car."

"Did he also kill his office manager, Miss Murex?" Burris asked.

"I'm sure he did. He must have gone to the office to collect some files and she walked in on him. Her key was on the floor, as if she'd just arrived, so she probably surprised her killer. The fact that the lock hadn't been tampered with tells us the killer most likely had a key. He killed her in a sudden act of violence so she couldn't tell anyone he was still alive, then messed up the files to make it look like a robbery. When we told Pandora she was dead, the Englishwoman decided to flee before he killed her, too."

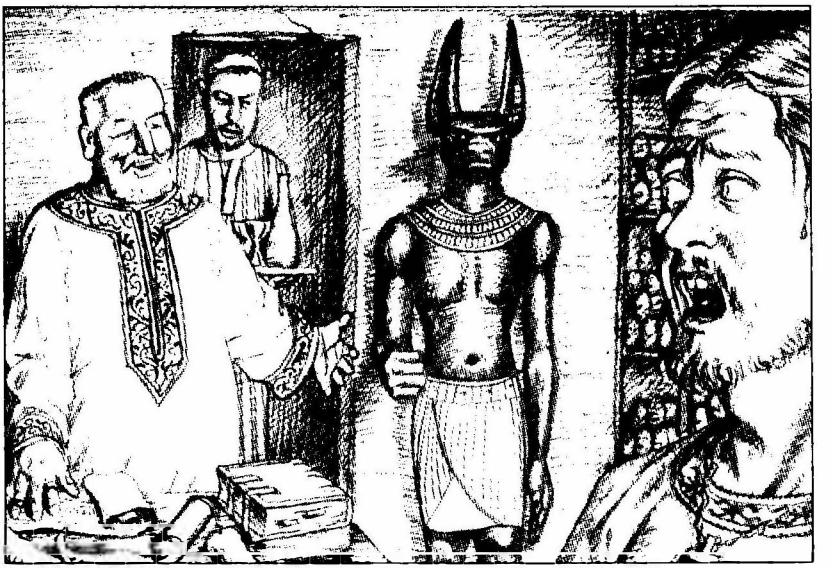
"She was arrested at the Athens airport this morning," the FBI man confirmed. "That's why I went to her apartment and saw you two just leaving. The police are merely holding her for questioning now, until we get to the bottom of this. But what was Kogan trying to accomplish by killing Emre and playing dead? And why did he leave his business to you?"

I turned again to Ives for answers.

"Drawing up that will shows he planned it all in advance," she reasoned. "Those nine missile launchers could be worth big money if sold to terrorists, and he wanted it for himself. Once Emre told him they were hidden in Monemvasia, he planted the bomb in his own car and tricked Emre into using it. He had to do something about the business, though, or the government might have seized it. He figured you'd helped him in the past and might do so again. If you managed to get the government off your back and kept the business going, he would have reappeared in our lives and become a silent partner under an assumed name."

I kicked gently at the coffin near our feet. "Ives was faster than me. I was just beginning to figure out that nine missile launchers would fit nicely into a coffin, and the best method of getting them out of Monemvasia was to carry them away in a bogus funeral, not to be buried at sea but to be spirited off to waiting terrorists."

She nodded. "A coffin full of missile launchers. That was the real Pandora's box." ●



Art by Jason C. Eckhardt

Strange Gods, Strange Men

by Margaret Frazer

Godric had built his hermitage in the long, tight curve of the river Wear, in a small clearing among the thick-grown trees, and except when visitors came deliberately aside from the road to Durham there was only the sound of the swift-running water and the whispering of trees. Over forty years he had been here in the greenwood beside the rushing river, private with his prayers, in search of God, and only sometimes, when the rain was falling or the gray mist hung thick among the trees, did he remember . . .

Remember blue seas and a sky of a kind of blue never seen in these cold northlands. And green, green marshes, and the thick smell of the delta marshes and black Nile mud, and Alexandria glowing white under a sun that baked to the bones, the way heat in an oven must feel to bread, making it grow and brown and turn

to something more than it had been.

Godric had felt himself, then, turning into someone he had not been, and by then he had been so many things. A barefoot Norfolk peasant boy. A peddler along East Anglian roads with everything he owned in a pack on his back and most of it for sale. A crewman on seagoing merchant ships ranging from England's east coast to Flanders, and north to Denmark and Scotland and back, taking his peddler's ways with him, selling and buying to sell again from one port to the next until he was a merchant himself, half-owner of a ship and giving orders instead of taking them.

"History fans will relish every minute they spend with the characters in this powerfully created medieval world. Prose that at times verges on the poetic is another plus," said *Publishers Weekly* of Margaret Frazer's twelfth book in the Edgar-nominated Dame Frevisse series. (See *The Bastard's Tale*/Berkley.) Ms. Frazer's first fiction for *EQMM* also employs a medieval setting. Her sleuth here is a real historical figure, a traveler in the mysterious East. ¶

Those had been good days, steering his ship through the gray swells of the North Sea with no one to answer to but himself and the waves and whatever weather came—and maybe God, if God happened to take notice of him. It had been a better feeling than came with the deep drinking of good wine or the hot-loined loving of a woman. Freedom—and all the world to choose from for his way.

He had chosen to go East. Not merely "east," which, until then, had meant Flanders' coast, but *East*. To the Holy Land, where the Crusaders' names rang like the clang of swords—Godfrey of Bouillon, Bohemond, Tancred, Raymond of Toulouse—and the cities were all legends. Antioch, Jaffa, Tyre, Sidon. *Jerusalem*.

The fabled East.

Even then, he had not been such a green boy as to expect the East to be like his imaginings. If you could true-imagine how a place was, why bother going there? It was to Find Out that he was ever drawn onward, and in the East he had found out heat that made him worry, for the first time, over what the fires of Hell were like. Had found out dirt and more flies than he had ever thought existed. Had found out how legends looked when they were half tumbled into ruins and half built over by later-come peoples. Had found how many quarrels there could be not only with the supposedly conquered but among conquerors themselves. Christ! but the place seemed to breed as many quarrels as it bred flies, and when he and such of his crew as wanted it had made pilgrimage to

Jerusalem and the Jordan River, he had been glad to cast off from Jaffa, to put out to sea beyond the land's heat, the cities' stench, and the Crusaders' quarreling.

But he was there to make his fortune, and fortunes were made in ports, not at sea, so he had roamed the coast of the East as he had roamed Europe's, learning where profits were and then making them. There had been ventures and adventures, and it had been a venture at pilgrim-carrying that took him to Alexandria the first time . . . the only time.

It had ever amused him how merchants and pilgrims could go easily—as easily as anything was easy in that stewpot of peoples and religions and never-slacking, ever-bribable officials—where Crusaders would have had to fight for every inch they stood on. That voyage, he had sailed out of Jaffa with a load of Coptic pilgrims bound for holy sites in Egypt. He had picked up enough Greek and bits of Arabic by then to get himself food and drink, and follow dealings through his interpreter, but he had not understood much of what those pilgrims called praying. They were Christians, right enough, but not Godric's kind, and not a word of Latin among them so their prayers had sounded wrong, but they had made less trouble than some things he had transported, and besides, they were excuse to go to Egypt. To Alexandria.

Alexandria. The name itself sang of legends. Of Alexander the Great. Of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar. Of St. Mark and St. Catherine and unnumbered other martyrs under Roman emperors. And beyond Alexandria was Egypt and more legends—Joseph and Moses and Pharaoh; statues that sang at dawn; pyramids said to be as big as mountains and maybe full of gold.

It had been stories as well as poverty that had set Godric's feet on the road when he was hardly more than a boy. Stories had made him want to see instead of only hear of places and wonders, and that late summer of the year of God's grace 1101 it had been stories as well as profit that turned his ship's prow toward Alexandria with a load of psalm-chanting Coptic pilgrims.

But one thing he had learned about stories was that the truth behind them was so often less. For instance, Jerusalem was a holy city, but now he knew it was also narrow streets crowded with ages-old arguments between uncounted different kinds of Christians, different sorts of Jews, and Muslims whose differences Godric had not even tried to understand; but if his vision of a holy city was slackened by all that, in recompense he had come away better understanding Christ's fury in the Temple. Before he was out of the place, Godric had had the urge to take a whip to a few dozen people himself. So he was ready for the pyramids to be molehills instead of mountains and the mighty Nile hardly more than the Thames.

He began to realize he'd under-guessed the Nile when—long before there was any sight of land—the blue-beyond-belief waters of the Mediterranean turned mud-colored with what one of the pilgrims assured him was the outflow from the Nile, leaving Godric to wonder at a river that carried so much so far.

Then had come Alexandria.

Stretched along the seacoast behind its harbor walls, glaring white under the high, hot sun, it was a crowd and sprawl of buildings spiked upward with the strange, lean towers from which Muslim holy men called their people to heathen prayer. Godric left it to his pilot to bring them into harbor while he stared—well, gaped like the country boy he used to be—at the Pharos, the thick, three-tiered tower at the end of the curve of land that made the city's Old Harbor. "More than a thousand years old," one of the pilgrims told him. "Built before the Romans came to Egypt and still there long after they've gone." It was showing its age, Godric thought, noticing even through his wonder the broken and remade parts of it, but that it was there at all was enough.

Business took over once they were into the harbor, with officials to be dealt with and all the rest. It was late afternoon, the shadows lying blue across the streets, before Godric set to a charge especially given him and paid for in advance by a merchant in Jaffa, to take a waxed-canvas-wrapped box of papyrus scrolls by his own hands to Timotheus the Scholar. "Anyone will be able to take you to his house," the merchant had assured him, "and he will likewise reward you for their delivery. Old books, worthless to many but precious to him, which is why I would have you do it, none other."

Payment in hand and promise of more were reasons enough for Godric to follow a hired guide whose French and Godric's were much of a kind—rough-learned but serviceable—through the city's confusion to the door of what the guide swore was indeed the house of Timotheus the Scholar. The man's knock brought a slave who traded words rapidly with him, then stood back with a bow and sweep of an arm, inviting them both to enter. Godric was not tall, but had to bend to pass through the doorway, something he had grown used to since coming to the East, because, save for churches and fortresses, most outer doorways were made to make any attacker bend over as he entered, his neck and back open to attack—a more than sensible precaution, given the number of times since coming to the Holy Land that Godric had seen a mob go rioting through the streets, usually for reasons he was never able to sort out; but still the gooseflesh crawled on the back of his neck whenever he went through a doorway like that.

Once inside, all was different in the better houses, with high ceilings and gracious rooms and shaded courtyards, nor could

there be doubt that Timotheus the Scholar's house was a better house. Left with his guide to wait in a plain, windowless room just inside the streetward door, Godric could see through an inner doorway to a pillared walk around a courtyard garden thickly green with plants for which he had no names, with somewhere the sound of flowing water.

"So," he asked his guide, "this Timotheus, who is he?"

The man nodded at the long wooden box under Godric's arm. "A scholar. He buys books from everywhere. Pilgrims, too. He deals in pilgrims."

That much Godric understood, first because of the box he carried and second because he had been told that the walled place near the harbor where he had left his load of pilgrims belonged to this Timotheus and that everything they would need for their trek to the holy sites at Wadi Natron and farther—even to St. Catherine's monastery on Mount Sinai, if any were that mad for holiness—could be provided for them there. To guess from how many pilgrims besides his own lot were there, including the ones he was to sail with tomorrow, returning to Jaffa, there was profit to be had in the trade.

"He's a Christian?" Godric asked.

"A Christian," his guide agreed. "As I am, God be praised."

"As are most people in Alexandria, odd though that may seem," said a portly, upright man from the inner doorway. He wore a long, loose robe of blue linen with intricately woven bands in greens and black at hem and wrists and throat, but was bare-headed, his dark hair slightly grayed at the temples, and he spoke in clear French. Godric's guide immediately bowed to him and spoke rapidly in some other language. Godric, not inclined to bow, waited until the man said, again in French, "Thank you, Youssef. I'll see to someone taking him back to his ship. You need not wait. Here."

Youssef went quickly to take the coin the man held out to him, bowed again, bowed to Godric, and quickly left. Before Godric could begin a protest, the man in the inner doorway said, smiling, "No, he hasn't left you in a den of thieves. I am truly Timotheus the Scholar. Those are my books?"

The man's eager look and gesture at the box satisfied Godric. Only a scholar would look with that much passion toward a bundle of old scrolls, and Godric allowed, "They are."

Timotheus laughed. "Come in, I pray you. I should give you as courteous a welcome as I give them, should I not?"

He moved away. Godric followed him into the colonnaded walk. It went around the courtyard garden, doors opening from it into various rooms. Outside, in Alexandria's streets, all was late afternoon heat, pale dust, and the glare of sunlight off white-plastered walls. Here, all was shade and greenery and a fountain playing

coolly. Instead of the raucous cries of street vendors, there was somewhere the sound of children laughing.

"In truth, what I hope," Timotheus was saying, "is that I may persuade you to be my guest this evening." He stopped, smiling, outside one of the doorways. "I am hoping that you will trade, for a fine supper and comfortable bed, stories of the world and your travels in it."

That was a trade Godric knew how to make. He had gathered stories in his travels as readily as he had gathered any other stock-for-trade, the difference being that a Flemish blanket or a barrel of Danish tar could only be sold once, but a story could be used over and over again. Believing both the supper and the bed here would be good, he smiled back at Timotheus and said, "It would be my pleasure."

Timotheus led him inside and up a stairway, past one floor to a third, and into a room that was undeniably a scholar's domain. In the middle was a large table where Timotheus cleared space among books, scrolls, and written-on papers, bade Godric set the box there, then begged his pardon and set to opening it. Godric took the chance to look around. He had been in the East long enough to be used now to the unexpected shapes of things, the strange patterns and sometimes colors like to nothing at home, and he could see past the strangeness to know that everything in this room was richly and beautifully made, from the silver-worked lampstand with its curving arms and oil-burning cresset lamps to the ivory-inlaid backs of the room's several chairs to the fine-carved wood tracery over the room's one window. Even the doors of the cupboards covering all one wall, some of them standing open to show crowds of books, were beautifully fretted, while another wall was arrayed with square-boxed shelves crammed full of scrolls. To Godric's eyes, some of the books and most of the scrolls seemed the only things not new and fine in the room, but despite slight acquaintance himself with such things—he had his own book of the Psalms and that satisfied him—he vaguely knew that very probably the older ones were the more valuable.

Leaving Timotheus sorting battered scrolls from the box onto the table, Godric moved away to the window, looking out through the wooden screen's pattern of vines and leaves to find there was nothing to be seen but flat rooftops and the sky, its midday blaze of light gentling toward evening now. A pad of footsteps on the stairs turned him toward the doorway, the one part of the room to which he had not yet given heed, and he was startled into exclaiming, "All the saints defend us!" as he instantly signed against evil, not at the servant with a laden tray standing in the doorway but at the . . . Thing beside the door—a statue like nothing he had ever seen before, even in paintings on church walls of Hell, which was

where it surely belonged. Man-shaped and man-high, of wood either black in itself or painted, it stood with one foot forward and one arm stiffly down at its side, the other arm bent at the elbow as if upon a time it had held something in its now-empty fist. It was naked save for an elaborately carved, gold-painted collar circling its shoulders and upper chest and some sort of stiff, gold-painted garment around his . . . *its* loins. And an "it" it certainly was, because despite the body's perfection, the head was . . . some sort of dog's? Long-snouted and prick-eared like a dog, anyway, but a terrible dog, staring arrogantly, with more than a dog's knowing, into distances beyond human sight, beyond human knowing. Places Godric was instantly sure *he* did not want to know of or ever see.

But his outcry had at least raised Timotheus from the scrolls, to exclaim in earnest apology, "Good sir, I beg your pardon!" But he beamed at the demon-thing as he added, "I was that startled, too, the first time I saw it. Someone who knows I am fond of such things had me come to his place to see it. His men had found it—there's much to be found in the sands—and he wondered if I would pay to have it or should he let his men destroy it as they wanted to." He gave brief order in his own tongue to the servant, who immediately came to set the tray at the far end of the table from the scrolls, then bowed himself backwards out the door. Godric saw the man's fingers move in a sign toward the statue as he went, though Timotheus, from where he stood, probably did not, busy with pouring wine from a silver pitcher into a silver goblet and exclaiming, "Think of wanting to destroy it!" He handed Godric the goblet and gestured that he help himself to anything from the several dishes of sugared dates, sesame cakes, and things Godric did not recognize.

"A thing older than Rome," Timotheus went on. "Probably older than the great Alexander, who founded this very city, and maybe old even when the Hebrews labored here in Egypt. Men's ignorance and fear are terrible things. How could they think of destroying it?"

Since destroying was exactly what Godric thought best to be done with it, he asked, instead of answering, "It's a demon, is it? Some Egyptian demon?"

"I have thought and thought on that, and I think, no, it is not a demon. I think it is a god. The old Egyptians had many and I think this was one of them."

"It's an idol, then!"

Timotheus took up the other goblet, considering before he answered, "I suppose it was, but those to whom it was a god are long gone. It is neither god nor idol anymore to anyone. I think it is nothing now but a statue." He brightened. "And very good for

keeping servants and children from coming here when I am out." He gestured toward one of the chairs. "I am a poor host, to keep you standing while I pleasure in what you brought me. Sit, please you. Drink. Eat."

They both sat, and Godric, more curious than ever about his host, asked, "You're interested in old things as well as cupboards, then?"

Timotheus immediately bounded to his feet. "I am. Yes. Let me show you." Leaving his goblet on the tray, he went to the shelves and opened one of the doors. "See here."

From where he sat, Godric could see and did not rise to go closer. Arrayed on three shelves were a crowding of statues, all far smaller than the Thing across the room, some of them as stiffly posed but with different heads, and a few wearing long, clinging gowns that showed they were meant to be female. Others were of a kind he had learned to call Greek and, set against the Thing and others of its kind, they no longer looked so strange as they had, but he signed himself with a cross against all of them before he thought not to.

Timotheus, who had been reaching for one of the Egyptian things, stopped. "Ah," he said with understanding. Seemingly not offended, he shut the door, and came to sit again, saying lightly, "Most people feel thus toward them. Happily, that means my tomb-finders do not have a large market for them and I have them cheap."

"Someone robs tombs for these things?"

Timotheus shrugged both shoulders. "The Egyptian ones. The others, they show up when holes are dug for buildings and other things. Sometimes so do the other ones, too, but mostly they are from tombs, yes, because that's where these things mostly are. It does not matter. The dead are long dead and have no use for them and were not Christians anyway, and better their treasures are here for me to admire than left unknown in the dark."

The dark, thought Godric, was exactly where they belonged.

"Of course, all is done secretly between the sellers and I," Timotheus went on.

"The Muslims would destroy them as idols," Godric said.

"I think not, no. They tolerate our Christian ways most broadly. The trouble would be that they would understand there is profit being made from them and increase the *dhimmi* for myself and those I buy from. You know about the *dhimmi*?"

Godric nodded. Among the bits and pieces of information he had gathered in the East was knowledge of the tax laid by the Muslim government on those under their governance but not of their faith. "It's high here?" he asked.

Timotheus laughed. "Any tax is high to he who pays it." He held

out the dish of sugared dates. "Especially when there are other things he would rather do with the money. The *dhimmi* is our best protection, though. Men do well to remember that."

"Protection?"

"Men pay because they are not Muslims. Therefore it best suits the Muslims to make no haste to convert anyone to their faith. The more who are not Muslims, the more there are to pay the *dhimmi*. You see?"

"You mean, the few are made to bear the costs of the many?"

"The few?" Timotheus was openly surprised. "No. It is the other way. There are many more Copts in Egypt than there are Muslims. Many more."

It was Godric's turn for surprise. "How can that be?"

"Isn't everything by God's will?" Timotheus asked.

There was an undertone of scorn to the man's voice which Godric neither liked nor approved, and he said stiffly, "Then by God's will, the Christians will someday rise and take back what is their own."

Mouth momentarily stopped with one of the sesame cakes, Timotheus shook his head vigorously before he swallowed and said past a struggle with laughter, "No. No. Not before Judgment Day, I should think. No. We are too much fighting among each other to fight the Muslims, who at least keep us from killing each other most of the time."

"I don't understand."

"Who does? Most do not even try. First, there are all the different sorts of Christians. A few of your Latin Church are here, but too few to matter. Others worship more in the way of Constantinople, but mostly there are Copts, with their belief that they are closer than any other Christians to Christ's and the Apostles' teachings because it was here and through the Holy Land they actually walked and talked as men among other men. But among Copts, there are the Monophysites and Melkites disagreeing with each other on the true nature of Christ and, of course, groups within those groups disagreeing over yet finer points of divinity. Then there are our Muslim lords. We are presently ruled by the Fatimids, who are Shi'ite, but before them here in Egypt were the Abbasids, who are Sunni. The difference between Sunni and Shi'ite I cannot tell you, but though the Abbasids are gone, many Sunni remain and quarrel with Shi'ites over both God and politics, which are never far apart, here, anyway. Besides all that, there are Jews, a very few, but divided between the Rabbanites and Karaites, likewise with matters of faith over which they quarrel. Nor do I think he and his kind—" He nodded toward the Thing beside the doorway. "—are altogether forgotten among the very common people."

It was too much and too strange, and to take their talk a different way, Godric nodded toward the shelves of scrolls, because he happened to be facing them, and said, "Most of those look to be old."

Timotheus beamed at them like a proud parent upon his children. "They are, and some of those you brought me today are older still. Old knowledge. Almost no one wants it and so I gather it. There was a great library here at Alexandria once. A copy of every book in the world was here, they say. Christians burned it all." Briefly he sounded as bitterly angry as if it had happened yesterday. Then he smiled. "So I make my own small Alexandrian library, with old scrolls and new books. I even have the Muslims' holy book."

"But you haven't read it?"

"Of course I have. How better to learn about another people than by what they hold sacred?"

Though Timotheus's admission was as disgusting to the mind as his demon-statues were to the eye, Godric held back from signing himself with the cross again. The man was his host, after all, much though Godric was beginning to regret he had agreed to stay for supper and the night.

But either Timotheus understood he had gone too far or else he had no farther to go, for he began to ask Godric about himself and his travels. Those being ever easy to talk on, Godric let the man keep him to it until the same servant as before came to say the supper was ready and the other guests were come.

"Other guests?" Godric asked.

"When I heard my pilgrims were arrived and knew the ship's captain would be bringing my scrolls, I invited others to dine with us. I gave myself the pleasure of your traveler's tales this afternoon; we hope you will give us your traveler's news this evening. We all are eager to hear whatever you can tell us from the Holy Land about these Crusaders. They quarrel among themselves, too, I understand?"

That was too true, and certainly nobody's secret, and Godric obliged his host and fellow guests with reports of them through the many-coursed meal of strangely spiced but mostly delicious dishes, eaten in an inner room of the house while seated on brightly woven, oddly patterned cushions around a low table, while servants came silent-footed from the shadows beyond the soft light of the beautifully wrought hanging lamp. As he had found elsewhere in the East, men's ways were strange but their living, at its best, was very comfortable; when the meal was done they lingered at the table, sipping some sort of wine not made of grapes, while he willingly answered all the questions Timotheus's very knowledgeable friends asked, slow though the going some-

times was between his French and rough Arabic and Timotheus's translating.

There was much concern over how far the Crusaders were likely to drive their conquests, how great a supply of more men they could bring out of Europe, whether they were likely to turn their armies toward Egypt soon. There was even half-wary excitement at the thought of Christian men restoring Christian rule to what should be Christian lands.

Timotheus was the only one openly doubtful of the good of that. "These are Western Christians, remember. We'd likely find them harder to live with than our Muslim lords."

"If nothing else," one of the men said grimly, "there'd be no more *dhimmi!*"

Timotheus laughed. "They'd think of something else."

It was late when Godric followed a servant away to another part of the house to a waiting, welcomed bed. He slept deeply and awakened to a sense of something wrong. He rolled over and looked toward the narrow window where dawn showed palely pink. It was the hour for people to be stirring, yes, but too early for—Godric thrust the bedclothes aside and began to dress—too early for the crying out and running footsteps he could hear from elsewhere in the house.

He left the chamber, his feet tangling briefly in the reed mat and blanket on the floor outside it where a servant had slept across the doorway, there both in case of the guest's need and as guard the guest did not go wandering through the house in the night. The servant, though, was gone, and Godric had to find his own way, first to the courtyard, and then through the clot of servants crowded and chattering at the foot of the stairs up to Timotheus's room. He asked what was the matter, but if they understood his Arabic, he did not understand theirs, and because he was never patient with standing around waiting to know things, he shouldered his way to the stairs and up them.

The door to Timotheus's room stood open, with a woman and two men standing just inside, and Timotheus sprawled, very obviously dead, on the floor at the feet of his dog-headed demon-statue. Very obviously and terribly dead—his face purpled with engorged blood, his eyes protruding, his tongue outthrust from his gaping mouth. Throttled, Godric immediately thought. Or poisoned.

The woman was turned away, hands pressed over her mouth, gasping, summoned to this horror without time taken to bind back her hair or cover her head. Timotheus's wife, Godric guessed from the fineness of her linen gown and the gold in the wide-banded embroidery around its sleeve-ends. The man standing beside her was offering no comfort, busy with staring at a far corner of the

ceiling, sick-faced and gulping. Godric recognized him as the servant who had brought food and drink yesterday and then word that the guests had come. Only the other man seemed in control of himself, looking up from the body to demand of Godric, "Who are you?"

Godric's Arabic stretched far enough to understand the question, but he had to answer in French, "His guest. I brought that." He pointed at the box, still on the table.

The man cocked his head, not understanding, but the other servant turned, eyes still carefully up from Timotheus's body, said something in Arabic, then said in good French to Godric, "Eskander is steward of the house. I'm Ibrahim, my master's scribe and scholar. You should not be here."

Maybe not, but Godric knew perfectly well that, for choice, the outsider, the foreigner, would be the first one to be accused of what was plainly murder, and instead of leaving he asked, "What happened?"

"We do not know. My mistress awoke and found he had not come to bed. She summoned Eskander, who came here and found him and raised a cry—and that was foolish—to wake all the household. We came and . . . you see." Ibrahim made a tight, small gesture at the body without looking at it.

Eskander said something. Ibrahim answered him, then translated, "He says the master has been stabbed as well as strangled."

Godric made to go forward. He had seen enough men dead in enough ways that he was not squeamish over another one. But at that moment Ibrahim gave a cry of horror. With wildly shaking hand he pointed at the demon-statue, and Godric, the woman, and Eskander all looked, too—at the statue and at the bloodied dagger held upright in its outthrust fist.

Eskander bolted to his feet, joining Ibrahim in making signs to ward off evil and gabbling what were probably charms. Godric would have joined them, but a soft, sighing gasp swung him around in time to catch Timotheus's wife as she slumped downward in a faint. Distracted from their own horror, Eskander and Ibrahim came to help, but as Godric eased her into a chair she was already reviving and doubled over, her black hair sweeping to the floor as she held her head between her hands, gasping for breath.

Ibrahim asked, rather desperately, "My lady Rodia, shall I send for your woman?"

Lady Rodia shook her head in refusal and after a moment straightened and said to Godric in surprising French, "Thank you." And even more surprisingly asked, "What do you know of this?"

"My lady speaks French?" Godric said.

"I have French, Italian, Greek. My father was a merchant who did not think ignorance an ornament for a merchant's wife."

"Timotheus was a merchant?"

"Yes, though of late his trade has been in pilgrims out of Syria more than anything."

"And books."

"That is not trade to my husband. That is . . . *was* pleasure." Her calm was taut, as if she were holding onto it with both hands lest it escape. A little less calmly, she said, "Eskander," and gave some order too quickly for Godric to follow, to which Eskander bowed, then hurried from the room. Ibrahim spoke a question or protest but Lady Rodia answered him curtly and said to Godric, "I told Eskander to stop the servants' babbling down there, to tell them nothing but make sure the outer doors stay shut and locked. Ibrahim wants me to send for authorities but I want to ask questions first. This . . . " She moved a hand at the demon-statue without quite looking at it. " . . . this is not right. This is . . . " Words and her hold on her calm failed her. "At least cover your master's face!" she said sharply at Ibrahim, and started to cry.

Ibrahim looked around, momentarily at a loss, then snatched up a woven cloth covering the end of the table. As quickly, Godric took it from him, saying, "Let me. See to your mistress."

Ibrahim was willing enough to do that, but rather than simply laying the cloth over Timotheus's ghastly face, Godric knelt beside the body, gingerly moving the head for a better look at its throat. First, Timotheus had not been strangled with rope or cord. The mark around his neck was wrong for either of those. Godric lifted the dead man's left hand, then his right, looking at them while at the same time judging that though the hot night would have slowed the body's stiffening, there was some, which meant Timotheus had been dead for many hours rather than lately.

He was studying the dagger wound when Lady Rodia asked, "What are you doing?"

Godric laid the cloth over Timotheus's face then, stood up, and turned before he answered, "Seeing how his death happened."

Ibrahim made a wordless, impatient exclamation and pointed, his fingers spread in a warding sign like yesterday, toward the demon-statue. "That!" he cried. "That is how it happened! The god took him by the throat with one hand to choke him and stabbed him with the other!"

"Why would the god do that?" Godric asked. While he spoke, he made himself go closer to the demon-statue, looking now at the dagger it held. "If not for Timotheus it would have been destroyed when it was found. It should have been grateful to him, not murderous."

"It is a demon. How can we know why it would do anything?" Lady Rodia asked.

Godric gingerly took the dagger from the statue's hand and

brought it to her. "Do you know this dagger? Was it Timotheus's?"

Lady Rodia averted her eyes. It was Ibrahim who answered, "He used it here for cutting papers, string, such like. He kept it there." He pointed to one of the shut cupboards.

"Why would a god need a weapon?" Godric asked. "Why couldn't a god simply strike him dead? And even if it did choose to use a weapon, why go on holding it?"

"To show its power," Ibrahim answered. "To frighten people back to worshiping it."

"Besides," said Godric, "Timotheus wasn't stabbed until after he was dead. Probably not until he was lying on the floor."

"How can you know that?" Ibrahim demanded.

"I've seen enough wounds to know what they do to a man. This one wouldn't have made for a quick kill. It's into the middle of his belly and looks more as if someone knelt and drove the dagger into him after he was already lying down. There is too little blood, too. More should have spilled from a man upright and with a still-beating heart."

Neither grief nor shock had made Lady Rodia stupid. Quickly enough she said, "Then whoever murdered my husband hoped to play us for fools. To make us think that demon-thing had done it."

"It seems so," Godric agreed. "Eskander is ordered to make certain the doors are kept locked so no one can leave the house now? Could anyone have left in the night?"

"Eskander and I hold the only keys," Lady Rodia answered. "He would have locked the doors when my husband's guests left and there is no way to unlock them until he or I do it."

"So if you say *that* did not kill him," Ibrahim said, "then you say one of us did it." He sounded both angry and frightened, as well he might. To be locked in with a murderer, not knowing who he was, was an ugly thing. "Or you did it," Ibrahim added, suddenly ready to be angry at him.

"He could not have," Lady Rodia said firmly. "Of everyone in the house, he is maybe the only one who could not have. Was not Ysac sleeping across his door, making sure he did not leave his room?"

"If Ysac still lives," Ibrahim said grimly.

"Then go you and see if he does," Lady Rodia ordered. "He'll be with those at the foot of the stairs. Go find him. Go."

Ibrahim seemed unhappy he had made the difficulty but with a silent bow he obeyed her.

"Is he slave or free?" Godric asked when he was gone.

"Free. My lord husband said he wanted a free mind, not a slave mind, to help him with his work."

"Ibrahim helped with his work? Yet he served yesterday. He brought food and drink to us here."

"Because none of the slaves like coming here. Because of *that*."

She nodded toward the demon-statue without looking at it, and though she kept her voice steady and her words calm, her hands were clutched to each other in her lap and her breath came short with the effort to control herself for now. "What else have you learned from looking at my husband's body? How do you see so much?"

"I captain a ship in all kinds of seas and weather, with all kinds of men in my crew. It's good to see things, to avert trouble or be ready for it when it comes."

"Before Ibrahim comes back, or Eskander, tell me more. You say my husband was not killed by the dagger. Was he choked to death, then?"

"At a guess, from the mark in the neck's flesh, a thickly twisted cloth was used, yes. There are more sure ways of throttling a man, so maybe this was a murder of the moment, since even the simplest planning could have provided a knotted cord for the work."

Lady Rodia frowned at him. "A twisted cloth? That tells us nearly nothing." She was quick as well as clever, to see that so readily. Since most men wore elaborately twisted headcloths and women went with at least their hair veiled, almost anyone could easily, at a moment's notice, come by a cloth to twist into a garrote. "So we have nothing. He was stabbed with his own dagger. He was strangled with a cloth that anyone could have had. The . . ." She had to look for the French word. ". . . the constable will tear our lives apart and not find out my husband's murderer because we have nothing. Word of that thing—" She gestured at the demon-statue without looking at it. She was beginning to keen and rock forward and back. "—will spread. People will believe we are a damned house . . ."

Godric interrupted her. "But we do have something."

She instantly sat still. "What?" she demanded.

"There is blood under your husband's fingernails."

Lady Rodia straightened. "He scratched the man killing him."

"I think he scratched his own throat, trying to claw the cloth away. There are scratches and blood there, too."

Lady Rodia rose to her feet, eyes narrowed. "Enough blood that there will be blood on the cloth, too?"

"I think it possible. A little blood, anyway. Little enough the murderer may not have noticed it in his haste and the night-shadows."

"Then we will search, you and I. Everywhere in the house. For a bloodied cloth or one that is wet from being washed. Come."

Ibrahim returned just then. Lady Rodia ordered him to stay with Timotheus's body, ignored what seemed the beginning of a frightened protest, and swept Godric out of the room and down the stairs with her. At their foot she ordered Eskander to keep every-

one there in the courtyard except for a maid she took to attend on her, and explaining nothing to anyone, she and Godric began their search.

While they had talked over Timotheus's body, the faintly colored dawn had swollen to a blaze of saffron and rose that had barely begun to fade before they returned up the stairs, taking Eskander and two large slaves with them. Ibrahim was standing not in the room but several steps down from the door and said, before he could be asked, "I could not stay alone in that room."

"No," Lady Rodia said. "I doubt you could." But, ordering the slaves to wait at the door, she went in unhesitatingly. Godric, Eskander, and Ibrahim followed her. She crossed the room to as far from the body as possible, then turned and held out the many-folded length of white cloth she carried. "This is yours, Ibrahim. We found it in your room. There's blood on it. Why is there blood on it?"

The man's face went still, though there were quick thoughts behind his eyes. "Blood?" he asked.

What followed between them was in their own language, for Eskander and the guarding slaves to understand, but Godric followed well enough. Lady Rodia explained and accused. Ibrahim protested and denied. Lady Rodia explained more, and then her anger and Eskander's both poured out at Ibrahim, who was suddenly angry back, spat at Timotheus's body, made a warding sign, and declared something with agitated gesturing of both hands.

Lady Rodia and Eskander stared at him, dumbstruck. Godric took the chance to ask,"What does he say?"

Slowly Lady Rodia answered, "He says my lord husband was planning to convert. To become a Muslim. That is not possible."

"It is. He was," Ibrahim said. "I found him with the papers for it last night."

"He would not!" Lady Rodia cried. "No!"

Quickly Godric asked, "Did your husband always laugh at the *dhimmi?* Laugh at taxes?"

"Laugh?" Lady Rodia looked at him as if he were mad. "He always cursed them as taking away money he could have used for more rescuing of his ancient scrolls, for buying more of his books."

"Yesterday, every time he spoke of taxes, he laughed," Godric said.

Lady Rodia slowly shook her head. "No."

"I see things, hear things, as an outsider," Godric said. "What may be familiar to you comes new to my ears. Yesterday Timotheus's failure of faith was in everything he said. Every belief was talked of in the same way. Copts, Muslims, Jews, demon-worshiping Egyptians. He talked as if none were better than the other. If he felt that way, then it might well be that ceasing to be a Christian was not a matter of the heart or soul to him, only better business."

Ibrahim burst into speech again.

"What?" Godric asked.

Lady Rodia held up a hand for him to wait, let Ibrahim finish, then answered, dull-voiced, "Yes. That's how he talked, Ibrahim says. And, yes, I can hear him saying those things that way. He always talked as if no belief was better than any other. But he laughed at the *dhimmi?* Then, yes, I believe." Tears welled in her eyes. "We are all Christians in this house. To do this thing, he had to have had no care at all what would have happened to us, left with nothing but our shame. I would have had to divorce him. Everything would have been lost. But he did not care." She looked around the room, even straight at the demon-statue, and though there were still tears in her dark eyes, her face had hardened into loathing. "This. All this and that thing are what he cared for. Not for us." She turned to Godric, a woman used to giving orders and being obeyed, her voice as hard as her face now. "You will be seen back to your ship. You will be paid much to say no word of this and to leave before you can be asked. Paid very well to go and not come back. You understand?"

Godric understood but asked, "Ibrahim?"

"He defended this house. He should not suffer for it. We will deal with all this as seems best. We will find a way and leave you out of it. If we can."

But if they could not, it was better a foreigner and stranger be guilty than someone valued in the household. Someone who had been willing to kill to defend the household against disgrace.

Godric bowed to her and did not argue and had his crew aboard ship, the pilgrims loaded, and his ship away, headed out past the Pharos, before the sun was three hand's-breadths above the horizon.

He had never gone back to Alexandria.

But sometimes, here where his own God-quest had brought him, he remembered it and then. Years of traveling, miles of seas and miles of roads, pilgrimages of his own, and an endless deep heart-searching had finally brought him, years ago, to here and God. Not to the God of raw sands and sun-baked wastelands and endless quarreling among worshipers, nor to where old dead gods with demon-shapes still stood staring out at nothing, waiting for their worshipers' return, but simply to a green wood in northern England beside a clear, rushing river under a sky that rained as many days as it did not. A place not full of too many gods. ●

AUTHOR'S NOTE: In histories of the Crusades you will find mention of *"Gudericus pirata de regno Angliae."* The pirate Godric of the realm of England. You will also find St. Godric of Finchale in the calendar of saints, and they are one and the same, the story of his very long life come down to us as he told it in his old age to Reginald of Durham—although *this* story is not in there.

DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

NOBODY'S BUSINESS

by David Knadler

He found the truck parked in a dying apple orchard, about a hundred yards from the Canadian border. Brand-new Ford F-150 with a temporary registration sticker in the window. Fancy golf-club case in the back. The tag on it said Steve Connelly, a guy who, according to his wife Jane, hadn't been home for a couple of days. The doors were unlocked, keys in the ignition. The hood was cool to the touch. Could have been parked here two days ago, or two hours.

Sheriff's Deputy John Ennis did not consider himself a particularly shrewd detective. But he did know it was one thing for a husband to be missing, and another for a husband to be missing without his pickup. This was Worland, Montana, after all. The good news: There was no body, no blood.

He looked around, half hoping Connelly would emerge smiling from the trees. People sometimes came up here to hunt gophers; from what he'd been able to tell, Connelly was the sort of guy who had the leisure time to do it on a Monday morning. A rack in the back window of the pickup held one rifle; there was room for two. But then the same could be said for about ninety percent of the pickup trucks in this part of the state. Firearms in vehicles were as common as four-wheel drive.

The orchard was on the northern edge of what the locals called the old McCormick place, a ranch that had been bought years ago by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to replace wildlife habitat flooded by the Stone Hill dam project on the other side of the val-

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ley. The whole ranch bordered Canada. From here it was possible to drive right up to the border itself, which people new to the area sometimes did, up a narrow track so overgrown it was more like a rough tunnel through the fir and lodgepole. Out of curiosity, Ennis hiked that way to have a look.

The border was kind of surprising when you came on it for the first time: a clear-cut swath forty feet wide that stretched straight through the dense timber to either horizon, as though Paul Bunyan had come by on his riding lawnmower. The border was more than three thousand miles long, but in Montana, as in most northern-tier states, you could stroll across it almost anywhere without noticing the difference. Canadian trees and American trees looked pretty much the same.

Still, it was an international boundary, and for years the locals had been trading rumors about drug dealers and terrorists and black helicopters and battalions of U.N. troops skulking in the trees. In his two years on the job, Ennis had received hundreds of such calls. He'd even gone so far as to check a few out. All he ever found were trees. And the trees weren't talking.

From where he was standing, it was a couple of miles back down to Highway 93 and the Smithville border station; from there it would be about four miles south to the Connelly driveway. Another mile or so and you'd be in Worland, Ennis's base of operations as upholder of the law in this little corner of Kootenai County. He gazed up and down the border, then started back to the Blazer. Not a tough walk back to the Connelly place from here, he reflected, for somebody in sound mind and good health. But who left a brand-new pickup sitting in the middle of nowhere with the keys in it? Not to mention the rifle, the golf clubs. Ennis was beginning to have a bad feeling about it.

Jane Connelly had called to report her husband missing the day before, a Sunday morning. He hadn't returned from work Friday, she said. He'd been filling in at the pro shop out at the Loon Lake golf course and had told her that morning he'd be home around seven or eight.

"He sometimes stops at that bar, Goose's, on the way home," she said on the phone. "It got late and I thought maybe he'd decided to make a night of it. I tucked the girls in and went to bed. Then in the morning, when he wasn't here, I just thought he'd been home already and left early." There was a pause. "He sometimes does that; gets up and goes out to golf."

She didn't sound as though she expected Ennis to do much about it, for which he was grateful. Even in a small town like Worland, a guy missing for a weekend wasn't cause for an all-points bulletin. Back in Philadelphia, a call like that wouldn't have got-

ten past the dispatcher, unless there was a dead body or two to go with it. But Ennis had found himself that day with nothing better to do—not unusual in this particular jurisdiction. So, driving by later, he'd decided to stop in at the Connelly place, see if the prodigal husband had returned.

It was a nice home, by Worland standards. A double-wide, as so many of the homes were in a valley dependent on the dying logging industry, but it was set on a foundation at the far end of a ten-acre lot and surrounded by poplars and aspens. Neatly trimmed lawn, flower beds, even a fish pond out back.

It was hot that morning, ten-thirty and already pushing eighty degrees: dog days of August. The AC in the battered Chevy Blazer hadn't worked from day one. Add that to the standard county-mounty polyester uniform and you were talking serious perspiration. As he came up the lane, driving slowly to keep the dust down, Jane Connelly emerged from a dense raspberry patch at the side of the house that was taller than her by at least a foot. She held a bowl overflowing with berries so ripe they were almost black.

She didn't seem aware of the heat. But she was well protected from the sun: an oversized long-sleeved shirt, jeans. Gardening gloves, floppy straw hat, and enormous sunglasses. She was a small, slim woman. Barely five feet, he guessed. Ennis had seen her before a few times, out at Morgan Lake with her kids, or coming out of the IGA with groceries. At the lake she wore a dark blue one-piece swimming suit, which revealed quite a bit of pale skin, some freckles. He supposed that with such a fair complexion you couldn't spend a lot of time in the sun. She had short red hair, tucked behind her ears now. Not what you'd call beautiful but good-looking enough to turn heads in a town this size. He thought guiltily that maybe she'd turned his head, too. Was that the real reason he had driven out here?

"Hi," she said. "Want a raspberry?"

Her smile surprised him. Ennis was wearing sunglasses himself, and between the two pairs he couldn't really see her eyes. Her voice was soft but betrayed no anxiety.

"Thanks." He took one. It was warm on his tongue and as sweet as cheap wine. Maybe a little overripe, the best kind to have with cream and sugar.

"I can't keep up with them," she said. "But I hate to see them go to waste."

She extended the bowl again, and he took another, feeling a little unprofessional about it.

"Still no word from Steve, I guess?"

"No. It's funny. I really expected that he'd be back by now."

"Has he ever, you know, not come home before?" That sounded

idiotic. He was thinking of a better way to phrase it, but she shook her head.

"Oh, he usually tells me. Normally he would call at some point. I just . . ." She frowned. "I don't know. I had no idea he hadn't come home. Then it was Saturday night and I assumed he was out with his friends. So then this morning I started wondering if maybe he'd been arrested or in an accident. And I thought I'd better call."

Ennis nodded, thinking: Faced with the two-day absence of her husband, and the possibility of his arrest or injury, she seemed to be bearing up well. He supposed that the honeymoon in the Connelly marriage was long since over.

"Was he supposed to work today? Or tomorrow?"

This elicited a somewhat thinner smile.

"Well, Steve is . . . he likes to say he's between jobs. The golf course sometimes calls him, to fill in. The pro shop. He spends a lot of time there anyway, so it works out okay."

"And I guess you must have called out there?"

"I talked to a girl; she said they haven't seen him since he left on Friday."

"What does he drive?"

"You'll know that when you see it." Now Ennis heard an edge in her voice. "It's a big red Ford pickup. Brand-new. Four-wheel drive. He's only had it a week."

Ennis had once imagined himself owning such a truck, in the days when he had just moved here from Philly, looking to reinvent himself as some kind of rugged outdoorsman. Then he had weighed the cost: Probably more than Jane made in a year as the receptionist at Kootenai Electric Co-Op. Unless Steve was pulling down some major dough selling golf apparel part-time, it didn't take an accountant to calculate that a pickup like that might heavily stress the Connelly family finances.

He was about to mention this, but she seemed to have read his thoughts.

"He told me it was a great deal," she said, sounding unconvinced. "Too good to pass up. Said he needed it to get to work. And he was tired of driving the van."

They were standing next to a maroon Plymouth minivan that might have come off a used-car lot in Kabul. This would be Jane's rig, he guessed. Three little kids and Montana winters could be hard on a vehicle. But still, he thought. Driving a pickup that might well be worth more than your house . . .

"Well, I'll ask around. Keep an eye out." Ennis adjusted his hat, feeling a little foolish for being here. Steve Connelly wasn't really missing; he just hadn't come home last night or the night before—and he was beginning to seem like the kind of guy who did that sort of thing once in a while. He wondered why Jane had bothered

calling even now. Maybe to embarrass her husband, teach him a lesson in some passive way she had perfected over the years. Steve would show up soon enough, Ennis thought. He'd be groggy and contrite, probably, after a barely remembered weekend with one of the boozy lovelies who frequented Goose's Saloon on a Friday night.

A little girl, about seven, came out onto the porch. She was still in her nightgown and barefoot, squinting in the brilliant sun.

"Mommy, are we going to church?"

The question seemed to pain Jane. She looked down, then back at her daughter. "Not today, honey. Not today."

"Laura's in the bathroom," the little girl said gravely. "She's crying and won't come out."

"I'll be right there, honey, okay?"

She looked at Ennis. He decided it was time to be going.

Ennis had scheduled a run out to Old Man Poliscz's place that afternoon. There had been further complaints about the old geezer's Rottweilers menacing the neighbor kids. Goose's Saloon was on the way and the deputy, as usual, was in no real hurry. On impulse, he pulled the cruiser into the bottle-littered parking lot.

Like most bars on a Sunday morning, Goose's was a place that could make you feel hungover even if you didn't drink. It had to do with the smell of cigarette smoke, sharp and toxic, layered so thickly on the battered barstools and tables that it dulled reflections. And the smell of stale beer and whiskey, of course, which had been spilled or pissed or vomited and then carelessly, over the years, mopped into the wood and scarred linoleum. Dark veneer paneling along the walls seemed to absorb what little light came through the windows. A couple of pool tables, both of which looked as though they might have fallen off the truck a couple of times on the way here. A rack on the wall held an assortment of crooked cues. At Goose's, Ennis knew, these were more useful for aggravated assault than actual pool.

"Hello?" he called. "Sheriff's office! Anybody around?"

Immediately a dog started yipping from somewhere in back. Presently there was some movement, a few muttered curses. The dog yelped and a door slammed. "Yeah, yeah, coming! Jesus! Damn dog, shut the hell up!"

Donna Petty emerged, tucking her sheer blue blouse into a pair of acid-wash cutoffs. She wore her limp blond hair in a ponytail, tinted glasses, and skin as brown and leathery as fine Corinthian leather. She was clutching a pack of Virginia Slims. At the sight of Ennis in his uniform she laughed, revealing even rows of antique-looking teeth. "John Law! You're late, honey. Shoulda been here last night, could have slapped the cuffs on me."

Even at this hour, which must have been near the crack of dawn

for her, Donna had taken the time to burnish her thin lips with pale lipstick, some of which had rubbed off on the filter of her cigarette. She was medium tall, and Ennis guessed her weight at about ninety-five pounds, most of which appeared to be distributed around a pair of impossibly large breasts, which she continued to deny were surgically enhanced. The overall effect was of a Barbie doll that had been placed too near the stove.

Ennis smiled. "Hey, Donna. Looking for Steve Connelly. Seen him around?"

"Steve? What's he done?"

"Nothing. Just hasn't been home in a couple of days. His wife is getting kind of worried."

Donna chuckled knowingly. She moved behind the bar and ran some soda into a glass mug. "I'll bet," she said. "I know Steve. A man's gotta have it. If he doesn't get it at home, he gets it someplace else."

She took a little sip from her glass and winked. Ennis shuddered inwardly, but returned what he hoped was a game smile. Some women loved a man in uniform.

"Has he been in here?"

She cocked her head to one side, tapped ash from her cigarette. It was a coquettish pose that did not become a woman edging up against sixty, particularly in a smelly bar on a Sunday morning.

"Hmm," she said. "He *could* have been in here. Or maybe not. It's hard to remember. I've been so busy trying to make ends meet."

There was a long pause. Ennis stared at her. "What, you want money?"

She smiled and leaned on her elbows, affording an expansive view of evenly tanned cleavage. "Buy a girl a drink, Officer?"

"Was he in here or not?"

She wiggled her eyebrows in response. Ennis rolled his eyes.

He opened his wallet: seven bucks in wrinkled ones. "Here," he said. She frowned; in the movies, evidently, tight-lipped bartenders got at least twenty. "C'mon," Ennis snapped. "It's all I have."

She shrugged, swept up the crumpled bills, and stuffed them somewhere between her breasts in a surprisingly graceful motion. This was a move right out of the movies, too, and Ennis was willing to bet she had practiced it in front of a mirror. She took a sip from her soda, made a face, and fortified it with a touch of Johnny Walker Red.

"I remember now: He was here Friday. Not last night, though. You want a drink?"

"On duty," he said. "Was he here long?"

Another heroic drag on the cigarette, its end glowing bright red. She exhaled, the smoke billowing in Ennis's direction. She curled

her hair with a finger.

"Wasn't here at closing time, I know that. Sometimes he, uh, stays late. Helps me close up." The sly smile returned and Ennis was afraid she was going to wink again. "He and another guy had some words, went out into the parking lot, but he came back."

"They were fighting?"

"Just having words," she repeated. "No swinging. Not that I mind, long as they take it outside. I didn't see anybody bleeding afterward."

Ennis thought there was a little disappointment in her tone. "So. When did he leave, about seven? Eight?"

"Could have been somewhere in there."

"Who was the other guy?"

Donna frowned. Examined her long nails. "You know, umm . . . seven bucks doesn't go real far these days."

"Neither does my patience." Ennis put an edge in his voice. She wanted to pretend she was in the movies, he'd give her the hard-nosed flatfoot. "C'mon. Who was the other guy?"

Unruffled, she took a sip from her morning cocktail. She squinted through the cigarette smoke and shrugged again.

"George Wick. Works at the mill. I think they're golfing buddies or something. You ever golf? I had a boyfriend take me once. I hated it."

Loon Lake golf course was about five miles south of Worland, also on the way to the Poliscz place. Well, he thought, the old guy probably wasn't going anywhere. He turned in and drove the quarter-mile to the pro shop. It wasn't the sort of course where you really needed a pro; a fivesome in tank tops and cowboy boots was just teeing up. One in the afternoon and they were all clutching cans of beer.

Ennis recognized the girl working in the pro shop: Sarah Benefield. She'd thrown up in the back of the Blazer last spring after being picked up at the annual Kootenai High senior kegger. Her nervous smile at seeing him became even more so when he mentioned Steve Connelly. Ennis was afraid she'd swallow her gum.

"Um. Is he in, like, trouble?"

"You know him pretty well?"

Her face reddened abruptly. This was interesting. It seemed Steve may have been casting his bread on the waters even beyond Goose's Saloon.

"No. I mean, he works here. You know. We just joke around. That's all." She became suddenly preoccupied with the display of golf balls on the counter.

"How old are you now, Sarah?"

"Seventeen. Why?"

"No reason. I think Steve must be around thirty-five."

"So?" A trace of teen defiance now. Ennis hoped her parents

were strong people.

"His wife's worried about him. Hasn't been home for a couple of days. Have you seen him since Friday?"

This startled her. "No." She looked at him, concern now replacing her guilt. "Is he all right?"

"If I knew that . . . Never mind." He slipped a card out of his wallet and handed it to her. "If he shows up, you need to let me know, okay?"

She nodded. "Maybe Bill has seen him," she said. She pointed out the window to the driving range, where a portly guy in a Tommy Hilfiger getup had just sliced a mighty drive over the high fence and into the weeds on the other side. That would be Bill Meeker, who owned the place.

Meeker hitched up his baggy shorts at the officer's approach. "Steve? He's out here four, five times a week," he said. "Hell of a golfer, for somebody self-taught. Looks like a pro, even if he ain't one."

"When was he supposed to work next?"

Meeker shrugged, selecting a 3 wood from his bag. "It varies. Kind of when he feels like it and I feel like paying him. Couple days a week on average. Sometimes more if I got a tournament or something."

"I was wondering: How can he afford that new pickup?"

"What, that Lariat? He's leasing the damned thing; said he came into some money, couple thousand or so, when his wife's old man died. What he makes here, forget about it. We kind of settled on ten dollars an hour and a season pass. That and whatever he can make giving lessons." Meeker leered. "He's got a couple of the older ladies coming out; act like maybe they could give him a couple lessons, too."

Ennis completed his mission at the Poliscz place, lecturing the old codger about keeping his dogs restrained and glancing around, as he usually did, for the fully operational .30-caliber machine gun the old guy was rumored to keep somewhere around Camp Poliscz as the first line of defense against U.N. troops or Muslim terrorists.

"You know," the old man was saying, "my dogs ain't the problem. One-world government: That's the problem. New World Order. Hell, the U.N. is this far from putting us under martial law and you're out here flapping your gums about a couple of dogs, just puppies. I got some literature you need to read. Ever hear of the WTO?"

The old man's two puppies, the size of small deer, eyed Ennis balefully from behind the screen door Poliscz was holding shut with his foot. They took turns uttering low growls.

"Mail it to me," Ennis said. "Anyway, until the U.N. makes its move

I got to worry about your puppies taking a leg off one of those Foster kids. Okay? Or Stanley, the UPS guy. He no longer finds it amusing getting chased back to his rig. I'm getting two or three calls a week."

Poliscz snorted. "These dogs wouldn't hurt a fly," he said. He didn't address their disposition toward children and UPS drivers, but Ennis decided to let it go for now. The old man complained querulously for a few minutes more, this time about Alan Greenspan. But in the end Ennis left with a small box of tomatoes and a couple of zucchini that he really doubted he could use.

One more stop on the way back: the Town Pump, a gas station/convenience store that, like most such places in Montana, turned most of its profit now not on gas or convenience but on the double row of poker and Keno machines in back, a dim little room the sign out front referred to optimistically as "Lucky Lil's Casino." There was no Lil, and it wasn't really a casino, and you damned sure couldn't count on the luck. But there it was.

Ennis gassed up the cruiser with the county credit card and went in for a cup of coffee.

"Yo! Philly's finest!" Chuck Butler was behind the counter. He'd been greeting Ennis that way, doing a crappy impression of Sylvester Stallone, ever since he found out the deputy had once been a policeman in the City of Brotherly Love. "You look like a man in search of fried chicken, couple of corn dogs."

When Chuck Butler was trying to move the fried chicken, that suggested it had probably edged a week or two past the guaranteed freshness date. The corn dogs *were* a staple of the bachelor life in Worland, but Ennis's belt had been feeling a little snug lately and he was trying to cut down.

"Save 'em for the Canadians," Ennis said. "They love American cuisine." He filled a Styrofoam cup with impenetrable black coffee and brought it to the counter.

"Yo! The big spender!" Butler said.

Ennis opened his wallet, found it empty, and remembered his conversation with Donna. "Uh, I'm a little short, Chuck. Lemme catch it next time."

"Yo, Adrian!" Butler bawled for no particular reason. He laughed. "What, man? County don't pay you enough to buy a cup o' joe? Go on, take it. Shit, it's probably about eight hours old anyway."

Ennis didn't doubt this. He put his wallet away. "You know Steve Connelly?"

"Hell yeah. Worthless bastard. What did he do?"

"Nothing. Hasn't been home for a couple of days, is all. His wife called. I'm curious as to his whereabouts."

Butler snorted. "Couple of days, huh? Lucky her. Let's see: I think he probably came in here Friday night. He sometimes picks up a half-rack when he's done with a hard day on the golf course.

After sundown; I don't know."

"Yeah? He mention heading somewhere, planning a grisly suicide or anything like that?"

"Nah. Probably out bird-dogging some more nooky on the side. Hear him tell it, the guy gets more than anybody else in this town. Now I hear he's been boinkin' that Benefield girl, used to be a cheerleader? Like to get me some of that." He scratched the stubble on his substantial jowls. "Him and that earring. You seen that? That look is so *over,* man. Why do all the women go for assholes?"

Ennis had no answer for this.

"He didn't say much, which ain't really like him. Most times he stops here, you can't shut the son of a bitch up. And that damned pickup. What I don't get: I work about eighty hours a week in this shithole; I'm toolin' around in a friggin' Ford Focus. He spends his time fornicating and golfing and can afford a rig like that." Butler shook his head, sighing mightily. "Something ain't right in this country."

"I think he's leasing it," Ennis said.

"Whatever. You still got to put a few thousand down on a truck like that. Ol' Steve couldn't lease a wheelbarrow without sneaking into his wife's purse." Butler leaned forward. "You know her dad died in February. Ron Henson. Pancreatic cancer. Taught English at the high school; wasn't rich, but I heard he left his girls a few thousand each."

Ennis nodded. You had to love small towns; not many secrets.

"That's what it is," Butler said. "Connelly always buys Busch beer when he comes in here, cheapest stuff we have—surprised he doesn't try to steal it. But a couple weeks ago he starts buying Heineken. Heineken. You believe that? In this town, that's the mark of new money, my friend."

He had a couple more calls that afternoon: kids reported smoking reefer at Morgan Lake—thankfully gone by the time he arrived—and Bob Bozarth over at the Sweet Rest trailer court; someone had evidently breeched the security of his Sears storage shed, getting away with a Craftsman toolbox and two lawn chairs, green in color. It was quite a crime wave.

After investigating the Bozarth scene, Ennis remembered that George Wick, Connelly's erstwhile drinking buddy, also lived here in the Sweet Rest.

Ennis left the cruiser parked where it was—let Bozarth think he was going door to door in search of the missing lawn chairs—and walked a couple of rows over to the Wick residence. He found George—a grown man in a Metallica T-shirt—and his family unloading camping gear from their ten-year-old Chevy pickup, which sat about three feet off the ground on gigantic all-terrain tires. Wick didn't seem particularly happy to see the deputy stroll

up, his wife even less so.

"What's up?" he said. Between wary glances, his wife Wendy, and daughter Emily, who looked about twelve, kept hauling stuff inside. His son, maybe seven or eight, wrestled a little bicycle from the back of the truck. He quickly mounted it and made to ride away.

George pointed at him. "Hell you think you're going? You help your mom and sister, Brandon. I don't want to see you on that bike until the truck's unloaded."

Glumly, the boy let the bike fall to the gravel and shuffled over to the pickup. After some thought he seized a Frisbee and carried it toward the trailer with all the speed of a sedated sloth.

George glared. "You better pick up the pace, boy, or I'll tan your hide."

"Just in the neighborhood," Ennis said, in a way he hoped was disarming. "Nobody's seen Steve Connelly in a couple of days. I'm asking around."

The news seemed to surprise Wick. "Really? Hell, I just saw him Friday . . ." he hesitated.

"Yeah, you guys were hoisting a few at Goose's, right?"

Now he became guarded. "Friday? Well, yeah; I guess I might have stopped in there."

"Steve say anything about his weekend plans, anything like that?"

"Nope." Wick turned back to the pickup, grabbed a cooler, and started lugging it around back. Ennis followed him.

"Ain't much more I can tell you," Wick said. He set the cooler down behind the trailer and upended it, spilling ice onto the browning lawn beside the patio. Ennis had the feeling this was about all the moisture the lawn was going to get this summer. George kicked at the ice; he seemed surprised to find an unopened can of Bud, opened it, and chugged down about half with the enthusiasm of a man who had just walked across the Mojave.

He belched. "Whew. Hot today."

The Wick patio was a concrete slab about eight feet square, beneath a canopy George had evidently fashioned from rough mill lumber and corrugated fiberglass panels. Two aluminum lawn chairs of dubious integrity—Ennis noted they were not green—flanked a dusty Weber barbeque grill. Beyond a stunted blue spruce, the patio commanded a nice view of the trailers on the other side of the gravel street. Ennis reflected that, except for the patio, the place was a lot like his own.

"I'm getting the impression it's not real uncommon for Steve to just take off for a couple of days. Not tell anybody. That your experience?"

George, a tall, rangy guy, just shrugged. He settled into one of the chairs, took another pull off the beer—maybe thinking the pickup would be unloaded without his assistance if he drew this

out long enough. He removed his NASCAR cap and ran a hand over his balding scalp, startlingly pale against the tan on his face.

"I got no idea where the hell he might have gotten off to. Okay? He never said a thing to me."

"Donna said you guys might have had words."

George grimaced, pulled at his nose. "Yeah? Ol' Donna. That skank don't miss much, does she?"

Ennis said nothing.

"We were just bullshitting. That's what you do in a bar. He didn't mention nothing about taking off."

"She thought you two had some kind of disagreement."

George shook his head. "Nope. We just talked, that's all. I asked him about something and he maybe took it wrong. No big deal. Son of a bitch always had kind of a short fuse."

"Yeah? What did you ask him about?"

George thought about this. "You know, I'd love to help your big manhunt here, but that really ain't any of your goddamn business, is it?" He cocked his head back and finished the beer, then wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "It was a private goddamn conversation."

"Maybe so. But I gotta tell you, George: It turns out something happened to Steve Connelly and you're the last guy to talk to him, then your conversation isn't so private anymore."

George laughed. "Yeah, right. You don't know anything happened to him. This ain't Philly. Christ, lotta guys get sick of their old ladies, take off for the weekend." He crumpled the can in his fist, sent it rattling across the patio. " 'Specially ol' Steve. That ain't a crime."

"No, I guess not." Ennis got up, adjusted his hat. "Okay, George. Catch you later, then."

He got around to the side of the trailer before George put up a hand.

"Okay, damn it, there was one thing . . ."

"There's a reason I didn't want to talk about this," George said. "Good chance it could all be just bullshit. So you gotta make sure it don't go no further. Unless, you know . . ."

"Just spill it, George."

Now they were both sitting in the lawn chairs, George leaning forward and talking as low as he could, his breath a dense fog of his latest beer and what could have been about four of Chuck Butler's corn dogs.

"My girl, Emily. She's eleven, friends with Steve's daughter Laura. Last weekend Laura stayed the night over here. They do that sometimes, watch videos and shit. Next day, Emily told her mother—that's Wendy—that Laura's got some trouble at home."

George cleared his throat. "I haven't said nothing to Emily about it. I don't want her to think she can't talk to her mom without, you

know, everybody being in on it. But 'course Wendy told me, and we been thinking if we should say anything about it . . . "

George appeared to be waiting to be prodded further, but Ennis waited. George began to fidget. "See, Laura said . . . well, it was about her dad. She told Emily her dad has been coming after her. At night."

"What, beating her?"

George shook his head. "No. You know, at night. I ain't sure I believe it. Kids that age, they get pissed off at their parents, they can say anything. Just to raise hell. See that kind of crap on TV, Ricki Lake and shit, think if they don't get what they want all they have to do is make up some story . . . "

Ennis remembered his visit to the Connelly place. The oldest daughter, Laura, crying in the bathroom. "Wait. So what your daughter says is, Laura Connelly says her dad had been molesting her?"

George winced at the word. He nodded. "Christ, true or not, something like that can ruin somebody's life, it gets out. Kids don't realize."

"What do you think? What's your wife think?"

George shook his head. "Ain't really our business. I mean, one thing, she's not his natural daughter. So I guess there's that. But I thought I better mention something to him, give him a heads-up. Then he got pissed and was ready to take my head off. Hell, I was just trying to save him some grief."

Ennis stared at Wick, found himself wanting to take the guy's head off, or at least slap him open-handed. "What was he planning to do about it?"

"I don't know. He just said it was nobody's business. And if I said anything more about it, he'd kill me, basically. I told him to go ahead and try. But he got in his truck and left."

"You got the impression he was headed home?"

"Beats me. Probably. Besides Goose's and the Town Pump there's noplace else to go in this town." Wick shrugged, licking his lips. He kicked at the melting ice, perhaps hoping another beer would reveal itself. "But look, you don't need to mention anything I said, right? To Jane or anybody? Small town, word gets out."

Ennis just looked at him. Then turned again to go.

Ennis swung by the office and called the Connellys' number. It rang for a while. Jane finally answered, sounding tired and a bit distant. Ennis told her what he'd learned at Goose's Saloon and the golf course—basically what she already knew. He decided, for now, not to mention his conversation with George Wick.

No, she said, still no word from her husband. And again, she didn't sound particularly frantic. "He could have just decided to go," she said. "I guess men have been known to do that, haven't they?"

Women, too, Ennis thought. He told her he'd check back tomorrow,

then hung up. The front window of the sheriff's office faced Main Street and he stood there awhile, watching the occasional battered pickup rattle by. Sunday night in Worland. Not for the first time he thought back to Philadelphia, where he had begun—and probably should have ended—his brilliant career in law enforcement.

Not many pickups in Philly. You did see a lot of eight- or nine-year-old Nissan Maximas with darkened windows, riding low and thumping out bass notes you could feel two blocks away.

Philly liked to call itself a city of neighborhoods, and that was true—quite a few of them the sort of neighborhoods where dead bodies did not seem jarringly out of place. A guy went missing in those neighborhoods, it was a good bet he'd turn up before long wearing a couple of gunshot wounds and an expression of dull surprise.

Ennis had gotten used to that after five years as a beat cop. It was one of those jobs you got into coming out of the Army, thinking it would do until a real job came along. And then you just kept doing it because it seemed like too much trouble to do anything else. But he'd decided during the last of those years that he'd never get used to being shot at. After a grinning crackhead had emptied his Tech 9 in Ennis's direction—happily to no effect—Ennis and his wife Anna had decided it was time to move West.

Montana got a lot of people like that, he had since discovered, people thinking where they were made a big difference in who they were. But the state, for all its scenery, had proven something less than paradise. And small-town life had proven a lot less than fulfilling for Anna. It hadn't taken her long to discover that her dissatisfaction with life ran quite a ways beyond geography. Now she was selling real estate in Seattle. She hadn't mentioned it, but Ennis guessed she was also looking for a husband by now. He smiled bitterly at this; he was looking for a husband, too: Jane Connelly's husband, an asshole of a guy who was going to have a few things to answer for whenever he decided to show up.

Ennis realized he really *was* looking for Connelly now, no longer just milking the excuse to pass the time of day with the man's good-looking wife. Ol' Steve was beginning to seem like someone who needed a little wakeup call.

The next morning, Ennis arrived at City Hall to find Monte Meeks, the game warden, helping himself to the fresh coffee the dispatcher made every morning.

"You still looking for Steve Connelly?"

Ennis nodded. "I'd like to know if he turns up. You seen him?"

"I was just up at the old McCormick place. Somebody poaching bear up there. But there's a red Ford pickup in the orchard. Nobody around. Looks like it might be his."

Ennis knew the place—site of that senior kegger last May,

which had concluded with the winsome Sarah Benefield yarking keg beer and pizza onto the floor of the Blazer. He filled up his own go-cup with coffee and headed north.

Fifteen minutes later he was peering in the driver's-side window of the empty pickup. It still smelled new, and was immaculate except for the thin patina of dust it must have acquired on the road up here. Next to the set of new Callaways in the back was a twelve-pack of Heineken, or what remained of one. Six of the bottles were empty. Ennis used his handkerchief to pick one up. He upended it; a few drops dribbled on the ground.

Ennis had parked the Blazer about a hundred feet away, then walked up, scanning the ground as he went. The gravel road was overgrown with weeds, and if someone had passed this way it was beyond his skills to detect. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, a cigarette butt, maybe. A condom, a tire track that didn't match the pickup's tires, a footprint at the edge of a mud puddle. Hell, maybe Connelly's body, spread-eagled on the ground. He found nothing.

Had Connelly run out of gas? He opened the driver's door and turned the key, again using the handkerchief: The gauge showed a nearly full tank. He checked the ashtray: clean. He left the door open and moved slowly around the pickup, again scanning the ground, a regular Sherlock Holmes. But twenty minutes of ranging through the high grass yielded nothing beyond the obvious: Somebody had driven the truck here; somebody had then left by other means, not caring too much what happened to it. It wasn't that convenient to push through the tall grass, so it seemed that whoever that person was had taken the road.

Ennis had an idea this person wasn't Steve Connelly, and as he returned to study the interior of the truck he realized why: The seat had been pulled nearly all the way forward. Connelly was close to six feet and probably not the kind of guy who liked to drive with his chest pressed up against the steering wheel. Ennis thought about this, then locked and shut the door.

Standing in the small kitchen of the Connelly home, Ennis was struck at how untidy the inside of the house seemed in comparison to the trim, precise landscaping outside. He guessed that was what it meant to have three kids, two of whom had abandoned their cereal bowls at the dining-room table and were now sprawled on a well-used couch watching a videotape of *Beauty and the Beast.* The volume was a little louder than it needed to be.

"I'll be right there," Jane Connelly called from a bathroom down the hall. One of the younger girls had admitted Ennis with the admonition that he advance no further into the house. Jane and someone else—Ennis guessed her oldest daughter—had been on

the back deck as he turned up the driveway, and he had watched them both move quickly inside as he drove up. He supposed he should have called.

Two pictures graced the paneled wall beyond the dining-room table: one of Jane Connelly and her three daughters arrayed in their Sunday best and determined smiles, the other of Jesus, gazing wistfully in the direction of the ceiling. There was no picture of the man of the house, just a nail in the wall.

The kids were oblivious to his presence so he ventured into the dining room and looked around. More bric-a-brac on the walls, much of it of a religious nature. A plaque, praying hands in relief: "Bless this House." That painting of the old man praying over his bread. Another picture of Jesus feeding the multitudes. It was not a wild stab in the dark to suppose that Jane Connelly had, over the years, discovered Jesus to be a better man than her husband.

On the snack bar between the kitchen and dining room was a Bible, opened to the book of Matthew. A passage had been highlighted; Ennis bent closer. Matthew 7:16: "Ye shall know them by their fruits." There was more, but then Jane emerged from the hallway.

Even indoors she still wore the oversized sunglasses she'd had on the day before, but now Ennis noticed the corona of a purplish bruise around her left eye. She seemed to realize this and her hand rose involuntarily to her face as she half turned from him.

"Turn that down," she instructed the girls. The older one, without taking her eyes from the screen, withdrew the remote from a tangle of blankets and lowered the volume exactly one notch, to no discernible effect.

"I'm sorry," she said. "The girls just love that movie."

"That's okay. I found Steve's pickup this morning."

Again, the sunglasses kept him from reading any expression in her eyes. "Where?"

"Up by the border. That old orchard on the McCormick place. Keys were still in it."

She nodded. "He sometimes goes shooting up there."

Ennis said nothing. In the living room, the two girls began to sing along as the Beast's kitchen utensils started their big production number.

Jane watched them, appeared ready to order another reduction in volume, but then just smiled. "Let's talk outside," she said.

They sat on the rickety front porch in the shrinking patch of morning shade. Jane put her hand on the railing and moved it back and forth.

"These steps, they're about ready to fall apart. I want a real porch, with a roof over it."

"Yeah, an outside deck, it's better to use screws instead of nails," Ennis said sagely.

"I was going to get one built this year," she said. "A guy in town—you know Bob Bozarth?—he said he'd do it really cheap. But then Steve decided he needed his pickup . . ."

They sat in silence, listening to the sprinkler sputter on the front lawn.

"That's a nasty shiner," Ennis observed.

Jane nodded, maybe relieved at not having to conceal it any longer. "I know. It looks terrible. The girls first thought I messed up my makeup. They thought it was funny. But then it got bigger, and started changing color . . ."

"How'd it happen?"

Jane looked at her hands, folded in her lap. "What do people always say, they ran into a door? Well, me too. I ran into a door. Stupid, isn't it?"

"Does Steve hit you a lot?"

She took a few seconds to answer, then slowly shook her head. "No. Hardly ever, really. A couple of times when he came home, if he'd been drinking. Sometimes I guess I would say the wrong things, make him mad."

Ennis didn't remark on her use of the past tense. "Do you know George and Wendy Wick? Their daughter Emily?"

She didn't reply, and Ennis wondered if she'd heard him. But then she bowed her head and her thin shoulders shook, almost imperceptibly. She was weeping, Ennis realized. He wanted to touch her shoulder, comfort her somehow, but those gestures sometimes got misinterpreted.

"I know them," she said. "Emily is a nice girl. She and Laura . . ."

She took off her glasses and looked at him, and despite the tears Ennis now saw something more than grief in her unlined face. Anger, maybe even rage.

"What did they say? Are they talking about it? They think it was their business? It's nobody's business. Not theirs, not yours. Nobody's but mine."

She stood up, thrust her hands into her pockets. Ennis watched the sprinkler, clocking through forty-five degrees and then sputtering back to do it again.

"He could hit me," she said at last. "He could take my dad's money. But I'll be goddamned if he could use one of my girls."

She was looking at him again. Ennis found it hard to meet those eyes, the one swollen red, the other blue and clear. She turned away after a few seconds, and he found himself looking up at the windless sky, then at the faintest wisp of clouds beginning to form above the mountains, then at the Connellys' ten-acre alfalfa field in the middle distance, and finally at Jane Connelly's garden just across the

yard. It was a well-tended garden, neat rows of corn and carrots and sweet peas and tomatoes. She'd be busy canning soon, he thought; a garden this big, you had to can or you'd waste most of it.

Only one part of it seemed to be unproductive, a space on the far edge of the garden where nothing grew, not even weeds, even though the dirt seemed fertile enough. And freshly turned.

Jane sat down. She dabbed at her eyes.

"I never should have married Steve," she said. "I should be shot for it. I know God will forgive me, but I don't know if Laura ever will." Her tears welled up. "That bastard. I knew he wasn't perfect. But I didn't know he was evil. I just never knew.

"He wasn't even sorry," she said. "He said Laura was lying . . . but I knew, right then. A mother knows."

She bowed her head. Her lips moved, as if in prayer.

Ennis sighed, considering the new blisters on Jane's hands, the wheelbarrow leaning against the garden shed, the missing picture in the dining room. He considered Steve Connelly's new pickup, parked within easy walking distance from here, the seat drawn all the way forward. He considered that the Lord worked, sometimes, in not-so-mysterious ways.

She looked up at him. "What will happen to my girls?"

The truth was, Ennis hadn't made up his mind. Not right then; and he thought maybe there was no hurry to decide.

"I don't know," he said. "I've seen it happen that a husband leaves and he just doesn't come back."

She blinked. "What do you mean?"

He replaced his hat, put on his sunglasses. "I mean that in a case like this, sometimes there's nothing more you can do. Sometimes you just have to wait and see."

She seemed confused, but he left it at that. If she wanted to do things differently, cleanse her conscience later, that was okay, too. For now, he guessed these girls needed their mother. He stood, turned to go, and noticed a face at the kitchen window, a young girl, pretty, but with a face that even from here seemed immeasurably sad. He tried to smile. She met his glance and then retreated quickly into the dimness of her home.

Ennis eased the Blazer down the driveway, slowly again to keep the dust down. He thought of the worn Bible Jane Connelly had been studying in her dining room. He remembered another verse, one a little less comforting than anything Matthew had to say. A Philadelphia police sergeant, years ago, had been fond of reciting it at particularly gruesome crime scenes. The prophet Jeremiah: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: Who can know it?"

Got that right, he thought. He waited for a logging truck to go by, then turned the cruiser toward town. ●

NATURAL CAUSES

by David Dean

Lieutenant Selbourne just managed to sweep a few files over the brochure as his office door was flung open. The overeager and annoying Detective Desmond braced himself within the doorframe and levered the upper half of his scrawny body into the room while keeping his feet on the threshold: a belated, and token, acknowledgment of the lieutenant's prohibition against entering without announcing. He regarded his superior with muddy, sardonic eyes and just the faintest play of a smile on his thin lips. "Want the latest?" he challenged.

Selbourne regarded the none-too-clean Desmond with a trepidation born of a long history of dealing with climbers assigned to his unit. It seemed that as he neared retirement the ambitious circled ever closer, showing less respect with each passing year; increasingly, they took little bites. But Selbourne was too wilted from the sodden heat to waste energy on putting the upstart back in his place. It seemed he seldom had energy for such things anymore. He thought longingly of the cool green pines and icy-looking lakes captured so lovingly in the glossy photos that rested beneath the welter of files on his desk. Desmond showed his long, crooked teeth as if reading his thoughts.

"What is it?" Selbourne asked, annoyed, while watching the oscillating fan he had brought from home struggle to move the humid air. The papers on his desk barely moved as the fan swept across them in its shuddering arc. The ancient air conditioner had ceased to function two weeks before; just in time for the heat wave.

A police captain in a New Jersey resort town by day, since 1990 David Dean has been using his free time to write short stories for *EQMM*. This latest piece is a story within a story and takes readers to the rural South, where the author himself spent his boyhood. Mr. Dean's stories have been included in best-of-the-year anthologies, and frequently place high on the list of favorites for *EQMM*'s Readers Award.

In answer, Desmond threw a spiral notebook across the room to land on the lieutenant's desk, shifting the pile of folders and partially revealing the tourism pamphlet. Birdlike, he took a few mincing steps into the room, his head tilting awkwardly to get a look at it.

Selbourne hastily snatched at the notebook and slammed it down over the deep, alluring green of the Adirondacks and glared up at Desmond, finally aroused. "What is this?" he demanded. He didn't know why it was so important to keep his vacation plans from the young detective, only that he couldn't stand the thought of Desmond putting in his cynical two bits about it.

Desmond stopped short, startled at the unaccustomed vehemence in his boss's voice, yet the smile remained and even grew a little at the lieutenant's obvious discomfort. "A notebook, boss. Thought you might want to send it on to next of kin."

"Next of kin?" Selbourne asked, puzzled, his hands drifting away from contact with the binder.

Desmond rocked back on his heels, satisfied that the day was his completely. "Yeah, don'cha remember? You sent me to check out that stiff on East Third. That walk-up where the super complained of the smell, and the uniforms had to bust in?"

Selbourne felt his heavy face grow hot with blood and he kneaded his fleshy, stubbled cheeks to hide the blush. "Yeah . . . oh yeah," he mumbled. "So what do we have? Any evidence of foul play?"

Desmond chuckled at the antiquated expression. "Plenty that's foul, boss. But no play. Door was locked; windows were closed and locked—if you can believe that in this weather! No air conditioning, either. That was some stinky place, let me tell ya! Nothin' looked disturbed. Didn't look like he would have had much to steal, anyway. Lived alone, according to the neighbors."

"How long?" Selbourne asked.

"I would'a thought a week by the looks of him, but the M.E. says it's the heat. He looked 'bout ready to pop, if ya ask me." Desmond giggled.

"Natural causes, then?" Selbourne persisted.

"M.E. says not likely. Too young, late forties, he thinks. Though how he could tell that from what I was lookin' at, I don't know! I searched the place for drugs, but the place was clean. Probably the only apartment in the neighborhood that was. In any case, OD seems unlikely, but the M.E.'ll know more after the autopsy. He's thinkin' suicide."

"Where'd you find him?" Selbourne asked as a matter of rote.

"Kitchen floor . . . stretched out next to the table. Didn't even finish his peach."

Selbourne readjusted the glasses on his thick nose. "Peach?" he inquired, lighting his twentieth cigarette of the day. Happily, he

observed the odious Desmond back off a few steps. The young, and far from fastidious, detective had made it clear throughout the precinct that he was fanatically opposed to smoking. The older officer contentedly directed a plume of smoke in his direction.

"Yeah," Desmond continued, the smile finally erased from his sallow face. "The M.E. took it along for examination. . . . Smoking is illegal in public buildings, boss." He gestured disdainfully at the offending cigarette.

"Do you plan to arrest me, then? That would certainly be the capstone of your brief, but stellar, career." Selbourne let his glasses slip down again so that he was peering at the younger man over them. He was feeling good for the first time that day. "No? . . . So we're thinking suicide, are we?"

Desmond looked flummoxed for a moment, then caught back up. "Huh? . . . Yeah, prob'ly."

"So I'm to read this tome on the off chance that it's a long-winded suicide note?"

Desmond shrugged, his face gone dark and puckered.

Selbourne could already see the self-righteous little back-stabber demanding an audience with the precinct captain over the damage to his lungs and pride. And while he was there, taking a few moments to extol his own virtues in contrast. Well, in for a penny . . . "Too many big words in here for you to tackle, Detective?"

The door slammed, providing a momentary breeze that ruffled the paperwork on his desk and cooled the beads of sweat beneath his eyes. Yes, he would be seeing the captain before the day was through. Reluctantly, he took up the cheap paper notebook and, opening it, banished any further thoughts of serene Lake George and the plump and yearly more delightful Sarah. His wife and vacation would wait a few more days.

Dear Mama,

Aunt Anne wrote and told me that you are now out of the hospital and resting at home. She says she is staying over until a nurse can be arranged (Uncle Jack must be fit to be tied!). It is a great comfort to me that she is doing that, though I wish it were me. I guess that is why I am writing this to you. I feel so bad and I guess everyone back home in Georgia must think I am the worst of sons. Maybe I am, though it is my most fervent hope that you will not think quite so lowly of me once you have read this. In any case, at last you will have the real reason I ran off all those years ago to the biggest city I could find and have not budged since. There's a lot to tell you, so that's why I'm putting it all down in this little book instead of the usual letter. Once I'm done, I'll mail it off in a big manilla envelope.

Do you remember the summer I turned nine years old? I'm sure

you do. There's hardly a day goes by that I'm not reminded of it. I so hate bringing it up now with you feeling so poorly, but how else can I explain? It's where things began.

I was so excited about our vacation to Panama City! I had never been to the ocean before, and the prospect thrilled me as much as a trip to the moon! Fleming was calm and unruffled, as always. Being five years older than me, he felt compelled to show himself as a man of the world, I think. But then again, Fleming was always cool as a cucumber, wasn't he, Mama? I always looked up to him. And envied him a little, too.

It took me forever to fall asleep the night before we were to leave, and Fleming punched me a couple of times on the arm to stop my squirming in bed. When I did fall asleep, though, I dreamt, Mama. You know that, of course, after what happened that summer, but I never really could put into words at that age what I saw. Especially after Daddy got so mad about the whole thing. I was afraid after that to say much. I was just grateful I wasn't going along, after all. But the fact is, I've never forgotten it. I remember the dream as vividly as if I just woke from it.

I was sitting in an inner tube floating in the warm Gulf water. It wasn't that big an inner tube, more like for a Volkswagen than a Buick. My butt rested comfortably in the water while my feet and hands trailed along leaving little wakes. With some effort, I could paddle a little to change my course, but I couldn't reach quite far enough to do much. In any case, I wasn't concerned with that. My head lolled back, and occasionally a wave would break with just enough force to wet my hair. Otherwise, the ocean was as calm as Lake Eufala. The sun was strong and hot and I remember thinking about your cautions against sunburn. I always took after you in that respect and am too fair for much sun. Daddy and Fleming browned like Indians.

The sky stretched away in every direction the blue of a robin's egg, but bleached white near the yellow eye of the sun. On occasion I would lift my head and see the beach crowded with vacationers like ourselves, laughing and calling to one another. I remember you standing up from our beach towel and waving to me in your dark one-piece and thinking proudly that you were the prettiest mother on the beach. The pulsating heat from the powdery sands made your image waver in and out of focus, like a lovely mirage. Even your words were indistinct as you called to me, but I was sure they had something to do with suntan lotion or the like. I waved lazily back as if I understood.

As the sun continued to rise higher in the sky, the heat became a palpable force; not like the heat we were used to back home where you felt as if you were being slowly stewed and made sick in the murky humidity, but a warmth that seemed to rise from

within, clean and comforting. As I glanced again at the beach, I could see that only the smallest children were still active; everyone else, it seemed, had fallen under a spell of immobility, unable even to lift their heads from their blankets. The world had grown wonderfully quiet.

I don't know how long I slept, but I knew I'd been asleep when something awakened me. With a start, I tried to sit up and almost fell through the hole of the float; it was then that I remembered where I was. My flesh felt hot and tender and I could see at a glance that my arms and legs were as red as if my skin had been buffed with steel wool. It was painful even to move them. My skin felt as if it had shrunk under the unrelenting sun. I looked to the shore to see how far I would have to paddle in my condition and felt the first real stirrings of panic that I had ever felt in my young life—land was nowhere to be seen. I paddled to spin my little craft around; the agony of my baked flesh rubbing against the abrading rubber of the tube causing hot, salty tears to burn my swollen cheeks. How could this have happened? What were my parents doing? How long had I been adrift?

I succeeded in navigating a 180-degree turn, and to my immense relief there lay the shore, but much farther away than I had last seen it. The people on the beach appeared tiny and I was unable to distinguish you or Dad. The water around me was no longer the translucent aquamarine that allowed the bright sandy bottom to be seen, but a dark blue that faded to blackness as it receded into the depths. I knew instinctively that I was no longer in a playground, and with each long, gentle swell that I was being carried ever deeper into a world that was implacably hostile.

On the beach I could discern a sudden activity: people, like ants, scurrying about and forming clusters. It appeared that some entered the water with a purpose, while others seemed to be dragging something to the water line. I began to shout, in case they couldn't see me, but found my throat parched and sore, my voice a hoarse piping. After a moment, I could see that it was a rowboat they had launched for my rescue, even though it was still quite far away. I began to wave my arms.

Then I was reminded of what had awakened me, because it happened again and I remembered the sensation instantly. The sweat on my body turned icy as one side of my inner tube was lifted and then allowed to drop back with a small, lonesome splash. This was followed by something beneath the surface racing away with such force that my small craft was pulled in the wake of its vortex for several feet. I had been spun back around, and once again faced the great, dark ocean. Ahead of me a patch of color appeared beneath the surface, at first a dark green and then, as it drew away and neared the surface, it transformed to aquamarine—

shimmering blue, and as its fin and broad back broke the surface, steely gray. The fin and tail described a tight, fast turn and I knew the beast had turned to face me. It appeared to pause, as if making its final calculations. Somewhere behind me the shouts of alarmed men sounded faint and impotent. I had no voice, only the paralyzing fear of any animal that will shortly make a meal for another. The shark surged forth, its course unerringly set for me, unstoppable and merciless.

I didn't awake screaming. No, I awoke sobbing and blubbering, my tears having wet my pajama top. I don't think I've ever cried with such genuine sorrow before or since. After all, I was crying from the sheer horror of the precariousness of life itself. The fact that I had never been in any real danger didn't seem to matter one whit. I would never be the same again.

You know most of this, of course. At least, that I had had a terrible nightmare about the ocean and refused on pain of any punishment devisable by man to go with you all. I thought Dad would whip me for sure! But it would've been worth it. And somehow, you knew it and came to my rescue. Dad and Fleming had always thought I was overly sensitive and a crybaby, and I guess they were right, really, so I don't believe they minded all that much dropping me off at Grandmother and Granddaddy's farm on the way down to Florida.

I can't begin to describe the relief I felt when y'all pulled away from Granddaddy's and I knew for sure that I was staying behind. And now here's the part you don't know about, Mama.

The very next day, I woke up feeling as chipper as could be, like a great weight had been lifted from my shoulders, and as I looked out on the fields and pastures surrounding the house I couldn't wait to get out and explore the beautiful, dry world.

It was very hot, even though it was only just past dawn, with the sun not having crested the pecan grove near Granddaddy's barn. Even so, I was energized by what I believed was a near escape and I couldn't wait to get out and explore. At that age, being on a farm in the country was like an African safari to me, exotic and full of potential for adventure.

Granddaddy was already up and out of the house feeding livestock and I followed the smell of bacon to the kitchen, where Grandmother was just pulling some biscuits from the oven. She seemed disappointed that I didn't want to sit down and have a "real" breakfast, but allowed me to be on my way with a bacon biscuit in hand.

Once outside, I breathed in the pungent, foreign smells of the farm (cow patties predominating) and wolfed down my breakfast while regarding the propane tank that sat in the yard. Remember that, Mama? It looked like a small submarine inexplicably beached in the heart of wire-grass country. Naturally, I found a stick to whack it with. As it didn't explode, or otherwise do any-

thing interesting, I moved on.

As I rounded the barn, I saw Granddaddy's pickup truck approaching in a cloud of dust from the direction of the cattle pasture and waited. He slowed to a stop and regarded me with a bemused expression as he rolled himself a cigarette. He asked where I was off to and I think I told him, "Nowhere much."

With that he reached down and ruffled my hair and warned me to stick close-by and be careful of snakes, " 'Specially rattlers." I showed him my stick and a few deft fencing moves. With a grin, he ground the old truck into gear, waved, and drove off. I watched him go and felt suddenly homesick. The snake business scared me a little, I think. Nonetheless, I pulled myself together and set out again.

Crossing the pasture, carefully watching where I put my feet, I almost stumbled into an ant bed the size of a tree stump. After a little consideration, I poked it with my stick. Angry red insects poured forth so quickly and in such numbers that I involuntarily took a few steps backward. These were the fabled "fire ants" that I had heard spoken of in mythic tones—capable of stinging to death and stripping the flesh off anything not smart enough to run like the devil—man or animal. I ran like the devil, rattlers notwithstanding, until I crossed the field and reached the fence at the wood line.

Out of breath and already sweating, I hung onto a fence post a few moments to regain my wind. The sun had climbed clear of the trees and now shone down on the pasture with merciless intensity. My nightmare came back to me and I recoiled against the fence to shelter beneath the overhanging branches that reached out from the woods. The meager shade they offered felt cool and comforting. At my back I could feel the refreshing moistness of dawn still nurtured within their shadowed depths.

The fence was low, and not barbed; altogether not much of a challenge to a nine-year-old boy, and in a moment I stood on the other side. The forest was mostly hardwood, such as oak, tupelo, and sassafras, and largely devoid of underbrush—a hushed, dappled world wrapped in silence and blessedly free from the sun. I was delighted, and since I had not received a clear admonition against it, began to explore.

Small boys and woods go together, I think, and I was no exception, Mama. I wandered beneath the canopy poking into holes and slashing at saplings with my stick, turning over interesting rocks to view the squirmy life beneath and winging stones at squirrels that paused in their business to scold me for intruding. I lost track of time and had just thought of turning back when I chanced upon the creek bed. The stream that trickled along it was thin and slow; obviously, from the width of the bed, the summer had been a dry one. I slid down into it in a small avalanche of dirt and pebbles and came to rest on the soft, sandy bottom. When I straightened

up, the banks rose only to my chest and I gained the unique perspective of a small animal as I gazed out across the forest floor. The trees loomed enormous, and all that had recently seemed safe and enchanted now appeared threatening: a world of shadow and light, hushed and expectant.

I had succeeded in making myself nervous again and thought of returning to the farm. Yet the idea of climbing out and retracing my steps through the woods did not appeal to me. When I had first crossed the forest floor I had had the protection of innocence, but now, having peered back through the trees from my new vantage point, things seemed changed. It also occurred to me that I had made an awful lot of noise as I traveled. Like any nine-year-old, I began to occupy myself digging at a crawfish hole rather than dealing with the uncomfortable thoughts I had conjured up. Then I heard the baby cry.

Wail, or scream, might be a better description. It reminded me of Billy Seagrave's baby brother when he was pitching a fit about being hungry or not getting something he wanted. Just not as prolonged. It went on for just a few seconds and the silence that followed was eerie and pregnant with expectation. I knew that every creature within hearing distance was doing exactly the same thing as I was at that moment—listening with raised head and held breath for a repetition of that cry.

I don't know how, but I knew that it wasn't a real baby, though I was equally uncertain as to what it could be. Nothing good, of that much I was sure. I began to move along the creek bed in what I believed to be the opposite direction. It was less important that I find my way back home than it was to keep moving away from whatever had made that sound.

The going was fairly easy, though the sand was soft and slowed me down. Occasionally, I had to climb over a large branch that had been washed downstream and marooned there in wetter times. The stream bed twisted and wound like a serpent through the woods and gradually I became aware that it was deepening. I could no longer see over its banks. Roots from large trees, exposed by erosion, reached out like snakes petrified in mid strike and further slowed my progress, forcing me to wade in the shallow water to get around them. The coolness of the woods had vanished with my efforts and I was now puffing and straining for air. I halted for a moment and took a deep gulp and held it. Not far behind came a soft, stealthy splash.

My breath exploded from my lungs and I dashed forward, heedless of obstructions. Whatever had made that awful cry was only a few twists and turns of the creek bed from revealing itself! A long twisted finger of wood snagged my sodden T-shirt and scraped a furrow of red along my ribs. I cried out, too full of panic to care,

and ripped the thin fabric free. From the corner of my eye I saw something lean and tawny pad into view and suddenly crouch, surprised, I think, at how easily and quickly it had caught up to me. Without another conscious thought, I seized the nearest root and began to pull myself upward, reaching out for the next and the next in succession, making a ladder of the network that sprang from the bank. Behind me there was an explosion of movement, and I knew without looking that the creature now crouched beneath me, mercifully confounded by those same jagged tendrils.

I clambered onto the bank, bleeding from a dozen nicks and cuts, and sprang to my feet running. Behind me, the cry of the animal rose from the stream bed, the plaintiveness replaced by pure frustrated rage. I knew it wasn't over.

I had climbed out of the creek on the same side I had entered and now hoped that if I ran straight and true, I would fetch up at the fence. Beyond lay the pasture and the farmhouse. It all seemed impossibly far away, and my breathing was already ragged and hoarse.

The creature's angry yowl sounded close and off to my left, not behind me as it should have been. As I turned to look, all the while running and stumbling forward, the beast appeared to rise from the very earth some fifty yards away. It emerged with a bound, its yellow eyes fixed on me all the while. It must have found a shallow branch that fed into the creek only a little further downstream from the scene of my escape. I could see now that it was a cougar (a panther, Granddad would have said), thought to have been extinct from these parts for several generations, with only a handful left down in Florida. Yet here one was, making straight for me, all attempts at stealth abandoned. He was going to run me to ground.

Without thinking, I sprang for the nearest tree and began to shimmy up its scaly bark, the front of my already-ripped shirt shredding with my ascent. Thank God, I wore blue jeans that day and not shorts! I felt the tree shudder with an impact of something beneath me, but never paused or looked down. I didn't have to; I could hear the sound of the cougar's claws ripping bark away as it pulled itself up right behind me. I expected to be painfully hooked and flung to earth at any moment. I reached the branches first, and without bothering to test the strength of any limb, I snatched and pulled myself ever upward, showering the great cat with broken twigs and leaves. The higher I climbed, the denser the profusion of limbs became, accelerating my escape. I could see the top of the tree now. I would win this wild race.

Then, the obvious hit me. I had nowhere else to go. In sheer terror, I gazed out across the treetops for some answer, some miraculous escape route. But all I saw was the pasture some hundred yards away and fifty feet down—empty and placid. The narrow

trunk I clung to swayed to and fro with the slight breeze and my weight. I risked a look down.

The panther had indeed been slowed down by the branches, and gazed up at me through them in yellow malevolence. He could not have been more than ten or twelve feet below me, but he had to make his way cautiously, as many of these higher limbs snapped as he tested them. Equally, there was little of the trunk exposed at this height to afford him the purchase to shimmy up to me. But he was in no hurry. He knew from the beginning what I had just figured out—I had nowhere to go. He proceeded carefully, his eyes never leaving mine.

I began to snap off small branches and fling them down at him, shouting all the while. Other than flinching a bit and showing me his daggerlike fangs in an annoyed hiss, he was neither distracted nor dissuaded. I pulled my feet up as high as I could, seeing that within moments they would be within his reach. The treetop began to sway and lean alarmingly with his progress. I inched myself up a little further, even though I knew the trunk was so thin at this point that it was unlikely to hold even my slight weight. It hardly mattered; in another foot or two the cougar would surely snag me from my perch.

With a crack that sounded through the silent forest like a rifle shot, the slender trunk snapped, sending birds into flight from neighboring trees. For a long heartbeat nothing happened. Then, in a sickening rush, I felt myself falling, leaves and branches flailing as I clung to the treetop with sweat-slicked hands. I was suddenly looking straight up at the sky and the puffy white summer clouds overhead. My heart felt as if it would fly out of my mouth. Far, far off, it seemed, I heard the panther screech in frustrated rage. I believe I screamed.

Then, with a sickening lurch, the impossible happened. I stopped falling. The impact jarred loose my legs and I dangled above the earth. Hot tears burned my cheeks with salt. With a sob of terror, and no idea of what was happening now, I swung the whole weight of my lower body back and forth attempting to gain momentum. It didn't matter to me that I might dislodge the split trunk from whatever it had snagged on, because I knew with certainty that my spindly child's arms could not sustain my weight for long. I would rather fall with the trunk than without.

With a grunt of effort, I made it, causing the whole precarious arrangement to shiver and creak. Puffing with exertion, I hung upside down like a sloth and peered to the far end of the branch. I could now see that the treetop had been caught in the fork of a neighboring tree. I risked a look back. The top half of the cougar's body stood exposed above the decapitated tree and he gingerly placed one paw on the trunk leading to me and tested its

resiliency. I felt a shiver beneath my fingers.

Causing alarming pops and snaps, I began a frantic shimmy to the haven that lay before me. My efforts caused the trunk to sway and bounce, and somewhere behind me, I thought I heard a soft tearing sound. As I entered the welcoming branches of the saving tree, the trunk suddenly vibrated with the arrival of a new burden and I knew the cat had thrown away caution as it saw its prize disappearing into the leaves. The rending sound I had heard earlier became a groan and I began to bounce. The panther was coming.

Reaching out with one hand, I seized the nearest limb of any size and in one movement released the broken tree and swung out, desperately grabbing at the branch with my free hand. For a gut-wrenching moment my life was suspended by five sweat-slicked little fingers as gravity tugged at my thrashing legs. Then I had it, and my legs found and gripped the trunk. But I had no time for relief; I had to know where the great cat was.

With a twist, I turned to see the panther was two yards away, more than halfway across the accidental bridge. He lowered his head to peer through the foliage and ascertain my position. I could see now that one of his ears looked torn and there was an old scar across his muzzle. Close up, he looked worn and desperate. He favored me with a snarl that exposed yellowed teeth and a broken fang and resumed his careful crawl. I began to look for a way down.

Suddenly, a ripping sound came from the direction of the broken tree and there was no mistaking it. I whipped around and could now see its source. Where the treetop had broken, it remained attached by a large sliver of wood to the main trunk, but with the weight and exertions of myself and the panther, it was ripping itself free. As I watched, I could see that a wide strip of skinlike bark and fleshy, moist wood had been torn down the side of the tree in an ever-narrowing strip. It lacked but a few inches of freeing itself and the vee was traveling to its inevitable point even as I watched. The cougar froze, mere feet from safety, and yowled in anguish: unable to go forward; unable to go back. He looked to me with baleful yellow eyes. If it's possible for animals to hate, I believe he hated me with all his heart. Then he was gone, in a great crashing and groaning of branches, hurtling to earth.

There were two distinctive thumps as both cat and tree struck the ground amidst a rain of leaves, branches, and debris. From my perch, the cougar appeared dead and flat—an unmoving, deflated version of his living self. It was impossible that he could have survived. I had won and laughed like a jay sitting up in my treetop. So much for cats always landing on their feet and having nine lives. I hooted like a monkey and slapped at branches. Below, the cougar stirred.

My cries died away in silent horror as the panther's gaunt ribs suddenly inflated and he emitted a thin, pitiable cry. With a shrug,

he attempted to gain his legs, but his hindquarters betrayed him and he collapsed and lay panting for a long while. As I watched, fascinated, his head swiveled and he gazed upwards until his eyes found mine. They glowed with fury and the promise of death. Then they closed in pain and he turned away again. With a great effort, he was able to rise unsteadily onto his paws, where he stood for several more moments as if contemplating his condition. Never looking up at me again, he slowly and painfully made his way in the direction of the creek, favoring a hind leg until he vanished from my view.

The sound of a horn in the distance interrupted my reverie and I looked to my right from whence it came. The pasture was visible from my crow's nest and I could see Granddaddy's truck driving slowly along the fence line. Every few seconds he stopped and honked. I knew he must be looking for me, and I didn't hesitate.

I clambered down the tree as fast as I dared, dropping the last five feet to the ground where the panther had lain only minutes before. Never stopping, I sped as fast as my shaky legs would carry me towards the fence and safety, never looking back, and all the while feeling the icy tingle of pursuit in my spine.

With a cry drowned out by Granddaddy's horn, I half vaulted and half fell over the fence to land in the wake of the truck just resuming its patrol. Still not sure of my salvation, I climbed into the bed of the truck and banged on the rear window. Granddaddy turned and regarded me a little sadly, a hand-rolled dangling from his lips, gave me a little wave, and turned toward the farmhouse. The woods behind me, which had looked so inviting just a short while before, now appeared dark and inscrutable, an implacably hostile face masked in bucolic greenery. Here lay the true warning of Hansel and Gretel—that nature wanted to kill and eat you.

I was crying hard and couldn't seem to stop by the time Granddaddy ushered me into the house. Besides the terror of my encounter, I half expected to get a whipping for having gone into the woods, and wanted desperately to explain what had happened. They both stood looking down at me so solemnly that after a few minutes I began to feel a different kind of alarm and managed to subside to just a few sniffles. The air felt charged and the room seemed to grow darker as they watched me in silence. I expected to hear thunder rumbling in the distance and no longer wished to speak at all. Grandmother had her hands squeezed together and looked as if she might fall to her knees in sudden prayer. Granddaddy kept looking away from me and attempting unsuccessfully to roll another of his endless stream of cigarettes. When Grandmother spoke, her voice was dry and flat as a parched cotton field. I noticed for the first time that her eyes were wet.

"Maitland, son, yer daddy called here on the telephone just a short while ago . . . whilst you were playing out in them woods."

She paused, and this time I was sure I felt the distant roll of a coming storm. "It's 'bout yer big brother, Fleming . . ."

I found out later, of course, what had happened, but I knew even before she began to speak. Knew and understood. When I came to, Grandmother was bathing my face with a cool washcloth and promising me buttermilk biscuits with pear preserves if I would just come out of it.

Mama, I apologize for broaching such a painful subject. I wouldn't for the world if I could just think of some other way to explain why I can't come even at such a time. After reading all this, I suspect you'll have a better understanding. I did try to tell you and Daddy, but he wouldn't hear it; he was too full of grief for Fleming and thought I was just trying to get attention for myself. I think he resented that it was Fleming and not me that the shark had killed. He threatened to whip me if I kept it up. I learned to be silent . . . and watchful.

When Daddy hit that deer in his car and was killed, I had no doubts left. I resolved to take action, and precautions, as soon as I was able. So that's really it, Mama. That's why I took off for New York as soon as I was able and have never returned. There's just pigeons, squirrels, and rats (ugh!) to worry about up here, and a reasonable person can arrange to avoid all three. At least I have, and will continue to. I won't even visit folks who own cats or dogs. I tell them it's allergies.

Even with all that I have told you, and that you know yourself, you probably still think I'm a little nuts. If you do (and I'm not meaning to be cruel), think about this. Tuberculosis was considered just about wiped out up until just a few years ago, and now you have it. But that's not my point. You have the avian form of it, as contracted from birds. Think about that and maybe I'll make a little more sense to you. I hope so, as I miss and love you very much. It pains me no end not to be at your side during this ordeal, but I am a coward, I guess, and truly afraid. I will write and call often. Please forgive me.

Your loving son,
Maitland

P.S. Am very much enjoying the peaches you sent up. Can't beat Georgia when it comes to peaches!

Selbourne laid the notebook down on his cluttered desk and gazed thoughtfully at the damp fingerprints he had left on its lined pages. Lighting yet another cigarette, he swiveled slightly to his left toward the one dusty, begrimed window he was allowed. Outside, he could see the ancient crowded tenements wrapped in their rusty scaffolding of fire escapes and hear the relentless murmur of millions of people shoving, jostling, pushing, and shouting. There was nothing peaceful about any of it. Yet, for the first time in many years, he drew

comfort from the pulsing wash of man-made noise that never ceased.

Stubbing out his cigarette in the overflowing ashtray, he slid the brochure from beneath the notebook and stared for a moment at the forested mountains it extolled. Great folds of earth concealed beneath a dark green canopy, both mysterious and alien. With a shiver, he went to toss it in the wastebasket, when the phone rang.

Startled, he snatched up the receiver and almost shouted, "Yes! . . . Selbourne!"

There was an intake of breath and a pause at the other end. "Lieutenant?" Desmond began sheepishly. "Um . . . something unexpected with that stiff on Third."

"What? . . . Suicide, right?" It had to be suicide, he thought, recalling the letter. Paranoid ramblings. The stuff of madness.

"No, it was natural causes," Desmond announced smugly, happy to prove his boss wrong yet again. "But here's the funny thing—he died from poison."

Selbourne fumed for a moment, hating to ask the obvious. "And that's natural . . . how?"

"Spiders, boss, spiders! That's how. The M.E. found the poison in his bloodstream and had it analyzed, then gave me a call. I went back for another look and sure enough, there they were . . . right there in the bowl of peaches he had been eating. The M.E. thinks they're brown recluses that caught a ride up from Georgia with the fruit. How 'bout *them* peaches?" He chortled happily at his attempt at wit.

Selbourne felt the sweat on his spine turn cold. "Yeah, how 'bout that?" His own voice sounded distant. "Well . . . I guess that wraps it up," he concluded vaguely.

"Yep, it does at that," Desmond responded. "Oh . . . one other thing, boss," Desmond added a little slyly.

"What's that?" Selbourne asked, just wishing to get off the phone.

"The captain wants to see us both, ASAP."

A small bloom of anger rose in Selbourne's brain. So the little rat had been to see the captain after all. "Oh? . . . Why's that, Detective?"

"Oh, he just wants to kick around a few ideas about the bureau. A couple of changes," Desmond answered innocently.

"Changes," Selbourne repeated thoughtfully. "All right, then. I'll be right down. By the way, Desmond—" Selbourne studied the brochure that he had been about to throw away—"that vacation Sarah and I were planning hit a little snag. We won't be able to go now."

"Yeah?" Desmond asked, a note of disappointment in his voice.

"You've got quite a bit of time built up, don't you? Why don't you take our cabin?" Selbourne could almost hear the lonely wind soughing through the treetops.

There was a long pause. "You mean it?"

"Yeah," Selbourne murmured. "I do. My treat." ●

Turning It Round

by Liza Cody

I keep a huge ball-peen hammer behind the door. It's one of those elementary precautions a single woman takes when she's feeling insecure. I did not feel exceptionally secure at three o'clock this morning when I heard someone trying to break in, which is why I nearly brained my older brother.

He *said* he knocked and rang the bell before attacking my lock with his credit card. Hah! Breaking and entering is about the only thing his credit card's good for.

"If I don't answer, maybe I'm out."

"At three in the morning?"

"I might've had a date."

"Hah!"

"I *might* have. I mean, locked door, no one answers when you ring. What does that say to you? Come on in? Make yourself at home?"

"You might've been sick or lying injured at the foot of the stairs. . . ."

"It's a *flat,* Robbie. Doesn't the word 'flat' sort of imply no stairs? And don't turn it round. You weren't breaking into my flat for my benefit, were you?"

"Okay, look, I'm here now. Couldn't you just pretend you're pleased to see me?"

Actually, in a weird, primal way, I'm always pleased to see him. He's my older brother: He's been my Robbie forever. It's different for him. For him I was the cuckoo in the nest. Mum told me when she first brought me home from hospital he burst into tears and screamed, "Take it away." But somehow, after years of traumatic childhood, we forgave each other. Of course I let him in. I even sat him on my sofa and checked his head for bruises. But I didn't let him off.

"You in trouble again? Girlfriend chucked you out? Lost your job?"

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"No. Well . . . no. This isn't even about me. It's about Dad."

Oh, right: the sins of the father. Robbie's last refuge. He'd have been okay if Dad had been around to encourage him. Well, all right. But doesn't a girl need her father's love and approval just as much as a boy? Even so, I don't use Dad as an excuse, and no one in his right mind would want him as a role model. What's even more pathetic is that Dad's dead. He died of a dirty needle ten years ago.

"Don't start, Paula, just *don't*. You've got your Ms. Perfect Preacher face on and I'm so tired of it. I just want one serious, quiet conversation about Dad, with nobody blaming anyone. I want to ask you, honestly, do you believe Dad was innocent?"

"Taboo subject, Robbie. I'm not listening."

"You've got to now. We say, 'There was no evidence,' as if that proves something. And we say, 'Dad was an addict, not a killer,' as if being an addict is proof of innocence. And we say, 'Dad was too stoned to be competent enough,' like incompetence and innocence are the same thing."

"Hah! If it was, *you'd* be as innocent as a newborn babe."

"Hah, yourself. You're too scared to make anything but jokes. You're always accusing me of not meeting life head-on, of not growing up and taking responsibility, but you're the one who'd rather make smart remarks than have a proper conversation."

I didn't want to talk about the past. Nothing changes there. I wanted to say, "Move on. I have." And I work in a bank, for God's sake. I can't afford a murky childhood. But Robbie had that strung-out look—sometimes he needs soothing more than anything else.

"Of course I believe Dad wasn't guilty. We were just kids at the time, but Mum would have known. And she always said it couldn't possibly have been him."

"Paula, she hadn't seen him for a week. We talk as if we had a normal family life when we both know Dad was hardly ever home. Any legitimate income came from Mum. I played hooky all the time, and you—"

"Shut up, Robbie. Everyone nicks something from Top Shop sometime in their lives."

"Right, Sis, shoplifting's normal. Persistent shoplifting, therefore, is super-normal and really, really healthy."

"You're doing it again . . . turning things round to get at me."

"I'm just saying we weren't as normal as you make out."

"Well, *I* do all right."

"You keep a giant ball-peen hammer behind your door, for Gawd's sake."

"Okay, so I've been a bit unlucky with some of the men I've been out with."

"You're a magnet to every loose screw in a ten-mile radius. What is it with you and violent, unreliable freaks?"

So there we were, sitting one at each end of my sofa, dissing each other, dissecting the family—a game everybody can play. But I don't blame my doomed love life on Dad. It's not as if I've got an irresistible urge to date junkies.

"I've never, ever dated a junkie."

"I said 'violent' and 'unreliable' and 'freak.'"

"He was an addict, Robbie, of course he behaved weird."

"'*Weird,*' Paula? He used to hit Mum. He robbed petrol stations. Weird! I think you're letting him off lightly. You want him innocent so you can be respectable."

"And *you* are being hard on him so that you can let yourself off lightly. You want him guilty so you can be irresponsible."

Then it struck me—Robbie had never been in my flat for this long without asking me for money. What was going on here? He's always on the cadge. Then it occurred to me—all this talk about Dad—what if Robbie is doing drugs? We always swore up, down, and sideways we'd never do drugs. But something had changed. I reached across Robbie to turn on another light.

"What's up, Sis? Why are you staring at me?"

"I'm not staring at you." I was checking him out for the signs I was so familiar with when I was a kid. Let's see your eyes, Robbie, your arms, your receding gums. Are you twitching or nodding? How about those mood swings? Comatose one minute, rampageous the next? Oh, and I forgot to mention—keeping antisocial hours?

"Robbie, I'm tired. I want to go back to bed and I want you to go home."

"I can't go home yet. There's someone out there."

"Who?"

"A girl, Nadine Meneer. Does that name ring a bell?"

"No, should it?"

"Yeah. Oh yeah. She's twenty years old and she picked me up in the Ha-Ha Bar."

"Bit young for you."

"Her decision. She's very decisive. And gorgeous. And I'm thinking, wo-ho, my luck's changing."

"Hah!"

"Yeah. So a few drinks and a couple of clubs later, we end up at my place. I'm, like, getting my moves together and hoping the sheets aren't too horrible—when, *zap,* it all goes pear-shaped. She takes out her wallet and shows me her driver's licence. She tells me she's got two friends sitting in a car outside the block. And she's shoving her driver's licence in my face and shouting, 'Don't you know who I am?'"

"Oh, Robbie . . ."

"I know, because I didn't know either. I mean, she was so pretty and sweet. I thought I'd got really lucky. But she, like, she stayed with me all evening just so she could find out where I lived. So

that when she decided to confront me I'd have nowhere to run to."

I didn't want to ask, because I was afraid I already knew the answer. Nadine Meneer must be what's-her-name's daughter. What *is* her name? Why can't I remember? Dad was suspected of beating her to death with a hammer and I can't remember her name. Did I even know she had a daughter? A child called Nadine? Suddenly, I'm furious. "How the hell did she find you?"

"I think she went to the police first and then she hired a private detective."

"And what's the point? What gives her the right?"

"Hush, Paula, calm down. Her mother was murdered . . ."

"What's that got to do with us?"

"That's why I asked if you believe Dad was innocent."

"He was never even charged. Of course he didn't do it. She has no right to come here stalking us, badgering us. . . . And what about the other suspect? He had a green van, too. He didn't have an alibi, either. What about him? Is your precious Nadine stalking him, too?"

"As a matter of fact . . ."

"What does she *want?* We can't do anything about anything. We couldn't then—with all the neighbours staring when the cops came round and took Dad away. And they came back for his clothes, with yellow bags—could they have chosen a more eye-catching colour? Yoo-hoo, hello, neighbours—look what's happening to *our* family."

"Paula, come on, take it easy . . ."

"How can I? Why are you so calm?"

"I'm not. I freaked out and came here."

"You broke in."

"And you hit me with a hammer. Paula, this Nadine Meneer wants me to take a test. She wants to take a swab of my DNA. She says, 'Don't you *want* to know the truth?' "

"What about the other suspect? Dad wasn't the only one."

"Paula, the other suspect already gave her a sample. It came up negative. He didn't kill anyone. But Dad's dead. He was cremated. They can't test him."

"But *we* didn't do anything. We're innocent. We didn't murder anyone."

"I know. I know. But half our DNA is his. And half, apparently, is enough to tell them if he did it or not."

"That's outrageous—we're supposed to convict our own father?"

"Only if he's guilty. Maybe he isn't—I mean, Paula, I really want to help. But—oh God—he was my Dad."

"You're not considering this, are you, Robbie? I mean, the nerve of this woman."

"She said she *had* to know."

"And she thinks you have the answer—or at least half the answer—and you're prepared to give it?"

"No. Yes. Well. He was my *Dad,* but all the time she was talking, I was thinking—yes, the truth is only a swab away, the truth is the most important thing here. Did I say Nadine's really gorgeous?"

I couldn't believe it—my older brother fancied the daughter of the woman his father might or might not have killed. And for this reason he's prepared to betray the whole family. Well, me, actually; I'm the only one left.

But if I calm down and think carefully about it, I'm the one who can turn this around. Because I can't let Robbie risk my peace, my reputation, on a fifty-fifty chance. Do I really think Dad was innocent? Has Robbie got innocent DNA? Fifty-percent innocent or one hundred-percent innocent? He's already the son of an addict, a bad father, and a worse husband. That should be enough for him. And the other fifty percent—the fifty percent he ignores—his patient, masochistic, hard-working mother, the innocent fifty percent, goes unnoticed. And yet his mother's genetic contribution is the only one he can really count on. We're sure of our mother, Robbie and I. We could always rely on her. But Dad couldn't. Not always. There *is* a way out, provided I ignore the truth. I take a deep breath . . .

"Robbie, calm down. If you're that screwed up about the truth, *I'll* take the bloody test. Bring Nadine here. I'll do whatever has to be done with her swab. Then it won't be your fault. I'm the one who's positive my father's innocent."

"But are you? Do we really want to know? It's different for Nadine. She wants to close the case—she wants to bury her mother by finding out who killed her."

"Or who didn't. What will she do if I come up negative, too?"

"Then it won't be my fault. I'll have done my best."

Robbie smiles at me hopefully. This, for him, is the most successful outcome he could have hoped for: I have taken the responsibility and he will get the credit. Did I say that Robbie has a very sweet, feckless smile? I wonder who he reminds me of? Can it possibly be the man we both call Dad?

It's a good thing easy DNA tests weren't around when I was born, that's all I can say. But they are now. And as long as gorgeous Nadine doesn't think of testing both Robbie and me and comparing the result, I think I can prove the man we both call Dad was not guilty. I'm as sure as our Mum could be when she told me about it just before she died. She said, "Look after Robbie: I know he's older, but you're stronger." And she told me that the man we both call Dad was probably not my father.

Yes, Robbie has a sweet smile. Much sweeter than mine. He *looks* way more innocent than I do. But there is a strong probability that my DNA is way more innocent than his. And I'm being true to our mother's last wish—I'm looking after my brother. I can't be bothered about the truth. ●

Art by Anne Levine

BEAU JEST

by Brynn Bonner

Rica twisted the tissue in her hands, forming two mangled bunny ears with the corners. She shifted her slight weight on the hard wooden bench and squinted down the long hallway. Sunlight, fractured by the big paned windows, fell in irregular geometrics on the polished floor. Dust motes danced about gaily inside the shapes, oblivious to Rica's misery. She hadn't set foot inside a courtroom in all her nineteen years and she wished she wasn't obliged to spoil that record today. But this was likely the last thing she could do for Miss Olive and she didn't want to let the old soul down. Heaven knew, everyone else had.

Beyond the windows the hallway dissolved into a gloomy grayness and distant footfalls echoed off the marble floors. The place had an old-building odor, a mingling of cleaning products and old paper—and of all the people who'd come here to register, officially, the milestones of life: birth certificates, marriage licenses, land deeds, divorce decrees, and death certificates. The structure was a monument to history with a small *h*—the story of the little people. Yet every time someone opened the door at the end of the long cor-

ridor, the bouquet of the gardenia bush in full flower just outside wafted in, a reminder not to dwell too much in the past.

For at least a half-hour now that Cher song had been playing in Rica's head like a reproachful soundtrack. *If I could turn back time . . .* She hummed nervously as she tortured the bunny ears on the disintegrating tissue. The waiting was bad enough, and now on top of everything, this stupid song was stuck in her head. Rica was not a big Cher fan to begin with and from now on, she resolved, she'd immediately change the station anytime she heard that warble.

Brynn Bonner is the pseudonym of a former journalist and teacher from Cary, North Carolina. Winner of the Robert L. Fish Award for best short story by a new writer in 1999 (for her story "Clarity," from *EQMM*), Ms. Bonner has gone on to complete a novel, which is currently under consideration by a literary agent, and several more published stories. Her latest story deals with a case of "elder abuse."

It was true what they said about hindsight. Rica could see 20-20 now all the things she could only vaguely make out when the trouble started. *If I could turn back time. If I could find a way . . .* Rica would take care of Miss Olive—she'd look after her—as she'd been hired to do. Then she wouldn't be here now humming this annoying song and squirming on this merciless wooden bench to keep her rear end from going numb. Rica's mother had always told her to "listen to that little voice whispering to you in your head, Rica, that little voice don't ever lie to you—it's your good angel, trying to keep you from doing something *estupid.*"

Her roommate, Rachel, had a different name for it. "Rica, you've got to learn to trust your intuition," she was always saying. Whatever you called it, Rica *hadn't* listened. The voice had not only whispered, but screamed, ranting like a Pentecostal preacher. And still Rica hadn't acted. Now she feared poor Miss Olive would be the one to pay.

A few months ago Rica's two biggest concerns had been passing an Organic Chemistry exam and where she was going to find the money for summer-session books. She studied for hours for the test and she thought she'd solved the book problem when Rachel's mother told her about a job opening to be a part-time caregiver for an elderly woman in the area. The situation had seemed ideal. She would be able to schedule her hours around her classes and she had always gotten on well with older people.

Miss Olive was in her late eighties and still living alone in her small house on the five-acre plot that constituted what was left of

her family's once vast land holdings. She was a good-humored woman who was still physically spry. But she was becoming forgetful. She wasn't eating properly and was having trouble doing simple household tasks. She was adamant about staying in her home, but needed someone to keep her company for a little while each day and do light housework and cooking. Rica needed money and some quiet time to study. It seemed that providence had brought them together.

The interview had gone well. Rica liked Miss Olive from the beginning and got the impression the feeling was mutual. It was clear, though, that it was her granddaughter Marsha who was doing the hiring. Marsha lived three hours away in Spartanburg, where she was a successful executive with a textile corporation. She had driven up that morning and made no pretense of graciousness about the inconvenience. She was dressed in a suit that Rica was sure had to be dry-cleaned regularly and she kept looking at her watch all during the interview—if you could call it an interview. Rica got the impression that nothing short of a conviction for serial murder could have disqualified her from the job, especially since, according to Rachel's mother, she had been the only applicant for the job. When the perfunctory questions were done, Marsha reached into her leather attaché case and produced a contract. She tapped her pen rapidly on the table while Rica read it over carefully before affixing her signature to the bottom. That was another thing her mother had taught her; trust, but read every word on anything you sign. The ink was still wet when Marsha snapped up the paper, cramming it back into the case and rising to peck her grandmother on the cheek in one swift motion.

"Bye, Granny," she said, heading for the door without a backward glance. "With this young woman helping you, things should be a lot easier. I'll try to get back up here sometime soon."

"I hope it'll be very soon, dear." Miss Olive said, her voice almost a plea.

"We'll see, Granny," she replied, kicking the screen door open with a high-heeled foot as she continued simultaneously latching her briefcase and digging in her bag for her keys.

Rica scrambled to her feet and followed her out onto the small front porch, a dozen questions jockeying to form an orderly line in her brain. "My cousin, Gordon, will be looking in on her at night and will be the person you'll need to contact if you need anything," Marsha preempted, continuing apace across the small stretch of concrete and descending the steps in a quick cascade. "His number is on the bottom of your work schedule there." She nodded in the general direction of the sheaf of papers in Rica's hand. "He'll see to the day-to-day stuff. Don't call me unless it's an emergency. I've got a big project underway at work right now and I can't afford

any distractions. I'm sure you'll do fine with her. She's really no trouble."

Rica looked back in at Miss Olive, who smiled and tottered to the doorway, calling brightly to her granddaughter, "Drive safely, sugar."

Marsha's BMW, a manicured hand waving listlessly from the driver's window, was crunching gravel before the echo of the last word died away.

Miss Olive was, as advertised, no trouble. Rica got on with her famously and enjoyed her company. She admired the old woman's sense of humor and her love of a good story. And she discovered a surprising iron will below the soft granny exterior. When Miss Olive set her chin in a certain fashion, you might as well do it her way and get on with it. But it was also apparent why Miss Olive needed a companion. More than once she left the burner on when she made tea. She was easily frustrated while opening packages or doing up buttons or zippers. She sometimes became confused and called Rica "Margaret Ann," the name of her daughter who had died in a car crash fifteen years earlier. But the episodes were brief and she'd soon "get her wits about her," as she herself put it.

Rica was able to study while Miss Olive watched television or napped. But sometimes, after lunch, the old woman would disappear into the back bedroom—the plunder room, as she called it—where a jumble of castoff furniture, boxes, and shelves of books and knickknacks were arranged chock-a-block across the entire room, leaving only small pathways weaving amongst the clutter. Sometimes she'd be in there so long Rica would go to the doorway and call to her, wondering if she herself should leave a trail of bread crumbs so she could find her way back out of the maze. Miss Olive would emerge with a book, photos, or some doodad that had come down through her family with a story attached. Once it was her father's watch, which he'd won in a poker game aboard a transport ship to Europe during WWI. "He won it off a fella from Boston who'd been looking down his aristocratic nose at all the southern boys. Nothing Daddy loved better than bestin' a Yankee."

Another time it was a small brass replica of the Empire State Building. "New York, 1939," Miss Olive said, polishing the object with the hem of her sweater. "Daddy sent me and Mama as a birthday present to me. It was just after Charles started courting me. Tell the truth, I think Daddy sent us on that trip hoping I'd forget about him." She placed the trinket on top of the television set. "But Mama knew. She said, 'Now, Frank, you may wish that, but if wishes was horses, then beggars would ride. You've spoiled Olive, so you've got nobody to blame but yourself for her being so headstrong.' And I was stubborn. Still am," Miss Olive said firmly, and flipped on the television for her afternoon dose of soap operas.

Gordon, the proverbial fly in the ointment, showed up on Rica's third day at the house. Miss Olive was resting and Rica was scrambling eggs for their noontime meal—still called dinner in this part of South Carolina—when she turned to find a tall, blond, strikingly handsome man in the kitchen doorway. Not merely standing—lurking. He had obviously been enjoying the view of Rica's backside, and grinned as she startled and almost dropped the skillet to the floor.

"Didn't mean to scare you," he said in a neutral voice that didn't carry much of an apology. "I'm Gordon Kirby, Olive's nephew. My cousin Marsha probably told you I'd be looking after her." His gaze held hers longer than it needed to, but Rica didn't look away.

"I'm Rica Ruiz," Rica replied, striving for a brisk, professional tone. "I imagine Marsha told you the same thing about me."

"Guess we'll be seeing a lot of each other," he said in a voice that slithered across the air waves. Rica tried not to make instant judgments about people; she prided herself on that trait. But she was tempted to make an exception for Gordon Kirby.

She looked out the window to the spotty patch of gravel and brown grass that served as Miss Olive's driveway. Parked at a careless angle was a pickup truck featuring a large plastic cockroach perched atop the cab. And if that wasn't enough to get the message across, *The Bug Terminator* was emblazoned in neon orange along the side.

"That your truck?" she asked, jerking her head in the direction of the window as she scraped Miss Olive's eggs onto a plate.

"Yeah—well, not mine, the company's. Got a job over in Shannontown in about a half-hour." He looked at his watch. "What the hell. Cockroaches been around for thousands of years, what difference will another hour make? Those *huevos* look pretty good." He gestured toward the plate. "Make me up a couple, will ya, señorita?

Rica had been born in this country and if she had an accent at all, it was a slight Southern drawl, but this wasn't the first time she'd faced someone with such backward notions. She didn't allow it to offend her in the slightest—but it did help her size *him* up.

"Where is old Auntie anyway? We'll have dinner together. She'll like that." He looked around the room as if Rica might have accidentally mislaid the old woman.

Rica, ignoring Gordon's question, moved down the hallway and knocked lightly on the bedroom door. "Miss Olive," she called, "your dinner is fixed. And your nephew is here."

Rica heard a fuzzy "Gordon?" She lingered a moment until she heard Miss Olive shuffling about, and then went back to the refrigerator and pulled out the carton of eggs. She worked in silence, keenly aware of Gordon's presence. Inviting him to sit

down seemed presumptuous; this wasn't her house. But she wanted him sitting. His height diminished her confidence.

She needn't have worried about protocol. He pulled a chair from beneath the table and whipped it around in one motion, straddling it backwards. "I do love to watch a woman work in the kitchen," he said, tossing his cap onto the table. He ran his hand through his blond, wavy hair and flashed her a toothpaste-ad smile as his forelock fell in a perfect curve down onto his tanned forehead. Rica was sure others found him charming.

Miss Olive appeared, her housedress misbuttoned and her hair flat on one side. When she saw Gordon, her hands flew to her head, picking at the strands to try to even out the lopsided thatch. "Oh, Gordon, how nice you came. I must look a sight, let me go back and make myself presentable." She started the halting choreography required to reverse directions, but Gordon rose to intercept her.

"Don't be silly, Aunt Olive, you look like a beauty queen. Your new maid here is just laying us out a nice lunch. Come on in here and sit down with me, sweetheart."

Rica bristled at the "maid" label, but remained silent. She cracked two eggs into a bowl, added a little milk, and whipped them with a fork, using more vigor than was necessary.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Gordon plop back down in his seat, using his foot to slide out the chair so that Miss Olive could sit at her customary place at the table. The gesture was a few notches short of gallant.

As the three ate their modest meal, Miss Olive explained her relationship to Gordon, sometimes happily exploring spurs of the conversational track before returning to her point. "So," she said now, patting the cornflower-patterned tablecloth, "Virginia was Charles's baby sister, his only sibling. It was just nearly Biblical how she came so late in life to their parents. Charles was nearly grown when she came along. Then Virginia did the same trick when she had Gordon here. Poor boy, he didn't have his mama long. Lost to the cancer, just about the same time we lost Margaret Ann and her husband Bill in that car crash. So the Warner line ends here, what with Marsha being Margaret Ann's only one. But I'll tell you, there were some strong genes in that family. Gordon here may not have the Warner name, but he looks exactly like Charles. He's a Warner, through and through."

Rica had to agree that Gordon's resemblance to the photos she'd seen of Olive's late husband was, indeed, uncanny. But she also wondered if it was like making copies of photocopies, every generation losing quality.

Gordon downed the last of his iced tea, jiggled the ice in the glass, and looked expectantly at Rica. She refilled it and handed it

back, flinching in spite of herself as his hand touched hers. "You can certainly tell they're kin, all right," she said, wiping her hand on a paper napkin.

"Yep, I got Uncle Charlie's looks—and his eye for the ladies, right, Aunt Olive?" He fake-punched the old woman gently on the shoulder as if sharing an inside joke with a drinking buddy. It didn't seem to occur to him that this was an inappropriate thing to say to a man's widow.

Rica scowled at him and looked at Miss Olive, who blinked and seemed disoriented. When the silence grew heavy, Gordon cleared his throat and glanced around the kitchen, bouncing his leg until the dishes on the table rattled.

"Marsha wanted me to go over your bills with you, Aunt Olive," he said. "I won't be back until late tonight now we've had this lunch date. You got 'em handy?"

The two moved to the living room to go over utility bills, insurance papers, and such at the coffee table while Rica tidied the kitchen. Wide-arched doorways on either side of a narrow hall separated the living room from the kitchen. As Rica glanced in, she saw Gordon patiently examining each check Miss Olive signed, then filling in the proper amounts and payees. He complimented her on her handwriting and her orderly recordkeeping. Miss Olive glowed. He took the bills along to mail them on his way to execute cockroaches in Shannontown. Rica's opinion of the man softened a bit. Maybe she had judged him too quickly.

Miss Olive was in good spirits after he left, chatting on happily about how much Gordon reminded her of a young Charles. It made her so nostalgic, she retreated to the plunder room and brought out a large photo album. It was covered in a deep rose velvet, the nap worn away here and there through years of handling. Miss Olive patted the sofa beside her and Rica settled in to look at the small scallop-edged rectangles that demarked and illuminated Miss Olive's earlier life. One photograph featured a tall, handsome young man in a white suit. He stood with his arm draped casually around the neck of a petite, dark-haired woman. She wore a cloche hat and her head was thrown back, an adoring gaze centered on the man's face. *His* eyes were looking straight at the camera. He was gesturing with a white Panama hat, a relaxed and confident smile radiating toward the lens almost like a light source. Even in a static photograph the man was dynamic.

"That's Charles. And that's me," Miss Olive chirped. "We'd just gotten engaged. He was quite a catch, as you can imagine. All of my friends were just green with envy." She rubbed her hand over the picture as if she could absorb the memory through her papery fingers.

"Yes," she said, her voice growing soft and faint, "he was the one

every girl wanted for her beau, and he picked me. I felt like the luckiest girl alive on that day."

"You were a beautiful couple," Rica said as Miss Olive sighed and turned the page. In a formal wedding portrait, the resemblance between Charles and Gordon was even more pronounced. Whatever else he might be, Gordon was an extremely handsome man. Miss Olive stared at the photo for a long moment, her eyes red-rimmed. Two of the black tabs that had been used to mount the photo let go and fluttered into her lap. She seemed not to notice.

If I could turn back time . . . if I could find a way . . . Rica stepped down the hall to the drinking fountain, sipped disinterestedly at the tepid water, and returned to her bench. She sat down heavily and propped her elbow on the oversized woven bag she'd hoisted onto her lap. She pulled at the colorful threads and thought about the long journey this bag had made across distance and time. Her mother had carried it all the way from Guatemala, carrying everything she owned—including her hopes for the child in her bulging belly—into a place free of the turmoil that had made her a widow so young. Now that child sat on a hard courthouse bench wishing her brave mother was here to advise her. The little voice had gone mute.

If Rica *could* turn back time, she knew where she'd mark it to begin anew. On that late summer day, Gordon showed up--unannounced, as always—for lunch. Miss Olive greeted him with an effusive hug. She called him Charles more than once during the meal, and instead of correcting her Gordon began to play along, pretending to be Charles and "reminiscing" about the good times they'd had and suggesting what adventures they might have next. He seemed to be getting his jollies out of keeping her off balance.

Rica didn't like this little game. As he continued to tease Miss Olive and she continued to flirt back, Rica sought ways to repeat his name often in the conversation, hoping to nudge Miss Olive back on track. *Gordon, could you please pass the salt. Gordon, have you talked to your cousin Marsha lately? Gordon, would you like more soup?*

This seemed to have some effect, and by the end of the meal Miss Olive seemed less addled. When she excused herself to go and watch her "story" on television—*All My Children* was not to be missed, company or no company—Gordon muttered, "Old Auntie's knittin' with one needle today, I see. I don't see how she can stay on her own much longer."

"She was fine this morning," Rica answered, digging her fingernails into her palms to work up her courage. "I don't think it's a good idea to be encouraging her confusion like that. Pretending

you're her husband. That's not healthy for her."

"Oh, lighten up," Gordon said, his charming facade dropping. "She loves thinkin' about the good old days and Uncle Charlie and all. What's it hurt, huh?" he asked, the butter coming back into his tone. "You tell me, what's it hurt?"

She didn't have an answer. What *did* it hurt? Miss Olive had been happy—giddy, in fact—during lunch. So where was the harm?

Just before he left, Gordon knelt beside Miss Olive's chair, patted her hand, and said sweetly, "I'll be back 'bout nightfall, Olive. We'll spend a little time together. I've got some ideas I want to talk to you about. Just me and my sweetheart. You have a good afternoon, now."

The omission of the "Aunt" bothered Rica. There was the answer. This was what it hurt for him to act the way he did with her. It robbed Miss Olive of respect.

Still, Rica tried to rein in her judgments about Gordon. Miss Olive did brighten—if not sharpen—when he was around. And he was devoted. He took her to doctors' appointments, did her grocery shopping, helped her with paying her bills and filing insurance papers, and regularly came by to visit and tease her into a good mood when she was down. Rica had to give him the benefit of the doubt.

But her charitable leanings went out the window a few days later when Gordon, alone with her in the kitchen, made a ridiculous, clumsy—and crude—pass. She fielded him, giving him a clear understanding of the lay of this particular patch of land. He didn't take rejection well. His face turned ruddy red and he started to say something Rica suspected would have been very ugly if he'd had a chance to get it out. But just then Miss Olive appeared in the doorway, making her way from the back porch where she'd been shelling peas. Gordon immediately underwent a transformation, crossing the room to take the large aluminum bowl from his aunt, fussing over her in his familiar oily way. "You been workin' hard. You sit yourself down here and have a rest. How's my girl?"

As angry and disgusted as Rica had been minutes earlier, she couldn't help but be pleased by the sparkle in Miss Olive's eyes. She had seemed depressed over the past several days and Gordon's attentions did perk her up. Rica vowed to put the incident in the kitchen behind them for Miss Olive's sake. She had confidence that he'd gotten the message that she wasn't interested. She'd never given him any encouragement, she was sure of that. He was just one of those guys who always have to give it a try. The important thing, she told herself over and over, was that he was good to

Miss Olive. He deserved credit for that—his heart was in the right place, even if his hands weren't.

This illusion, too, vaporized when Marsha called for her weekly report, that Friday afternoon. Rica could picture it inked in as a "to do" item on the woman's office calendar—*Call for project report re: Granny.* The visit she had promised "soon" on the day she hired Rica had yet to come about. Today, as always, she asked about food supplies, doctors' appointments, and various other logistics—*check, check,* and *check.* Only then did she inquire about Miss Olive's state of mind.

"Well, she's confused sometimes," Rica answered. "But overall she's doing well."

"Good, good," Marsha said, and Rica had a mental image of her glancing at her watch. "And I assume Gordon is keeping up his end."

"Yes," Rica said, clamping the lid down on her own prejudices in an effort to be fair. "He's been very attentive. He always seems to know how to cheer her up."

"Yeah, well, it's amazing how much cheering up hard cash can buy," Marsha said sardonically. "I'm sure Gordon's devotion knows no limits—unless, of course, my checks stop coming."

Rica was stunned. She couldn't think of an appropriate response, but it was a moot point, as Marsha plunged ahead. "Granny likes you very much and you've been very reliable. It's taken a big load off me. Keep up the good work. I'll try to get up there soon—maybe next week." The line went dead.

Miss Olive usually didn't get up in the morning until around eight-thirty or so. Rica would look in on her when she arrived, then study until time to prepare a simple breakfast before going off to class. She was usually stationed at the kitchen table bent over her books when Miss Olive came out in her fuzzy blue bathrobe, smelling of Noxema and talc from her morning ablution.

But on one particular Monday morning, Miss Olive was up when Rica arrived at eight A.M., and had been for some time, by all evidence. Her room was strewn with what seemed to be the entire contents of her closets. Dresses, blouses, belts, and scarves lay helter-skelter across the bed and chairs. Miss Olive was on her knees rummaging in a cardboard box she'd pulled from beneath her bed. Rica stood in the doorway surveying the wreckage. "I can't find my wrap," Miss Olive said by way of explanation. "I have a beautiful azure wrap, but I can't find it anywhere. I need it for tonight. Charles has asked me out to supper." She looked up at Rica and beamed. "I know just the dress, but I need that wrap."

Rica hesitated. Two semesters in nursing school had not prepared her for this. "Miss Olive, you don't mean your husband Charles?"

Miss Olive smiled shyly and dropped her head, looking up at Rica coquettishly. "He's not my husband YET, but if I play my cards right . . ." Her words dissolved into a mischievous hum.

Rica moved about the room, picking up articles of clothing from the blizzard of apparel and placing them back on the hangers while she tried to come up with a strategy. "Okay," she said, "let's just put these all away for now and have some breakfast. It's early to be thinking about supper." Sometimes food and a return to routine helped Miss Olive get both oars back in the water.

The morning flowed more normally after breakfast. Miss Olive watched *Wheel of Fortune* and crocheted what looked like a half-acre of afghan, then took her watering can out to douse her flowers. Rica sat on the back steps trying to do some last-minute cramming on the endocrine system as she watched Miss Olive dribble water over each plant. The morning's fog seemed to have lifted, both literally and metaphorically. Rica felt tremendous relief.

A rumble on the gravel road was followed by a puff of red dust drifting into the yard and Rica and Miss Olive both looked in the direction of a rhythmic noise. Gordon came around the corner of the house thwacking his dusty cap against his thigh.

"How's my best girl?" he called in Miss Olive's direction.

"Well, I wouldn't know about that, Gordon, but your old auntie's doing fine. How're you today?" she replied, wiping her hands on her smock. Rica had the fleeting thought that Gordon was disappointed at the normal greeting. He no longer deserved the benefit of any doubts in Rica's mind. She had decided that being nonjudgmental was highly overrated. He reminded her of a quarter—shiny silver on the outside, but base metal on the inside. She went inside to prepare iced tea.

She concentrated on each part of the task: boiling the water, selecting the tea bags and smoothing out the strings, gathering each paper tab into a packet as neat as a deck of cards. Each little chore was cutting into the time she'd have to spend in Gordon's presence. She measured sugar—to the grain—and willed herself to think positive thoughts. She could hear the two voices and the *thump-drag* of the rocking chairs being repositioned on the back porch as she was putting ice into the glasses. The rhythmic pop of rocker on board had begun by the time she was cutting lemon slices. The voices murmured in the give-and-take of earnest conversation. She listened for Miss Olive's raspy cackle, but heard only rising volume and the rockers moving faster.

As she pushed through the back door with the laden tray, she overheard Gordon asking, "Don't you think we deserve it, Olive? It's for both of us. That's what money's for."

Rica lost Miss Olive's reply in the breeze. But whatever she said, it was clear to Gordon.

"Don't give me that," he shot back, his voice taking on a blade edge, "I've seen the bankbook, remember? You're not thinking clearly; remember we talked about this."

As the door slammed behind Rica he looked up sharply and reared back in his chair, suddenly loose and easy again. "Well, looky here, the girl wonder has brought us a refreshment. Isn't that just the ticket?"

He picked up a glass and handed it to Miss Olive with a little bow, his voice now slick with flattery again. "Sweet tea for the sweetest girl there is."

Miss Olive hesitated, her face hard, but then as she looked up into Gordon's smiling face something seemed to give way and she let out a ragged sigh. "Thank you, sir," she answered, lifting the glass in his direction with the same shy smile Rica had seen earlier in the morning.

Gordon drained his tea in one quaff and set the glass down on the tray hard. "I'll see you tonight, then," he said to Miss Olive. "You get yourself all gussied up good now. We're going to have a special night." He bent to buss her cheek. "We'll talk about private matters then," he added in a low voice. He shot a dark look in Rica's direction as he clumped down the steps.

By the time Rica returned from her class in midafternoon Miss Olive had found her old makeup tray and given herself a Barnum & Bailey makeover. Rica removed a layer of the makeup and tamed the overblown bouffant hairdo Miss Olive had erected with a teasing comb. The older woman's behavior began to alarm Rica, as she giggled girlishly and time and again referred to going out with Charles, resisting Rica's every attempt to bring her back to reality. She bustled about, making several trips to the plunder room to retrieve items: a beaded evening bag, her mother's pearls, a bottle of cologne, long gone to alcohol. Each item seemed to take her deeper into the past.

Rica called Marsha. She was in a meeting and would, her secretary assured Rica, return her call as soon as she was available.

"Miss Olive," Rica said, approaching her slowly as the woman struggled to get a floor-length gauzy dress off its hanger. "I don't think you'll be going anywhere that fancy. You're just going out to get a bite to eat with Gordon." *And you shouldn't go,* Rica wanted to say.

Miss Olive shook her head almost imperceptibly, but then let out a little puff of air. "Gordon? Yes, he's such a nice boy. He's very good to me."

Yeah, thought Rica, doting-for-dollars. But she was relieved that Miss Olive was operating in this decade again. She pulled a sensible navy dress with a floral-design sweater jacket from the closet and said, "How about this, this would be very attractive and you'd be warm enough if the restaurant is air-conditioned."

Miss Olive looked appraisingly at the dress, but then her gaze wandered back to the gown and her confusion returned. "But he said get dressed up special," she said with an adolescent whine. "I think this might be the night he pops the question."

Rica sighed. She was getting whiplash from these rapid changes of direction. "What question, Miss Olive?" she asked patiently. "What question does GORDON need to ask you?"

"I know what I know," Miss Olive answered cryptically, smiling so wide it pleated her cheeks into overlapping wrinkles like rows of Venetian blinds. Rica glanced at the telephone, trying to will it to ring.

Eventually she and Miss Olive reached a compromise on a silky street-length dress with a hand-painted shawl. Rica reduced the volume in the hair a bit more and put in a comb studded with rhinestones. Miss Olive was satisfied.

At six P.M. Gordon arrived carrying a bouquet of flowers and sporting a Panama hat. He was dressed in a white suit and moved with athletic grace across the yard and hopped onto the front porch. His hair smelled of pomade. He looked, Rica thought, like a malignant Good Humor man. Rica looked past him. The bug truck had been replaced with a sleek late-model sedan, fresh from the dealer's lot, judging by the sticker in the back window.

Miss Olive accepted the flowers he offered with a little squeal. She handed them to Rica and asked, "Would you be a dear and put these in some water for me?"

Rica could hear their voices coming from the living room, punctuated by an occasional giggle from Miss Olive that sounded like cellophane being uncrinkled. Rica arranged the flowers in a large glass vase and set them on the kitchen table, wondering what she should do. She was supposed to have been off hours ago and home studying. She wished Marsha would return her call.

"I'll just get my wrap," Miss Olive called over her shoulder as she slipped into the kitchen. She whispered to Rica conspiratorially, "All the girls are going to be so jealous," then did a hitching two-step down the short hallway to her room.

Gordon sauntered over and leaned in the doorway, tossing the hat by the brim and catching it. He looked at Rica as if she were one of his bugs.

"These are beautiful," she said, fussing with the flowers, "but I'm not sure dinner out is such a good idea. She hasn't had a very good day today."

"All the more reason she should get out and have a good time," Gordon answered tersely. "It's plain to see she's going around the bend. She'll probably not get too many more nights out. They don't let 'em out of some of those places. And anyway, I believe your work hours for us are over for the day."

Rica resisted the impulse to tell him she knew who paid *both* their salaries. Marsha saw that her grandmother wanted for nothing—nothing material, anyway. Rica went to the bedroom door and said goodnight to Miss Olive, raising her voice enough for Gordon to hear. "I'll check in with you later tonight to make sure you got in okay."

"That won't be necessary," Gordon said as she began gathering her things. "She'll be with me, after all."

"Right," Rica replied, and held her tongue tight to the roof of her mouth.

The bag weighed heavy on her lap and Rica set it beside her on the bench. Yep, that had been the day. That's when she knew—just knew—that something was going terribly wrong. She'd talked to Marsha later in the evening, but it didn't sound as urgent—even to her own ears—in the retelling of the bald facts. Miss Olive had been confused during the day. Gordon had taken her out to supper. Where was the problem? If she could turn back time, she'd explain it better.

The bailiff poked his head around the door and peered into the hallway. "Miss Ruiz," he called, "they're ready for you now."

Rica took a deep breath. Now was her chance. The truth was revealed as much in the way a thing was told as in what was said. If she hadn't learned anything else, she knew that now.

One side wanted to prove that Miss Olive was incompetent. That wasn't exactly so—at least not in the way they meant it. The other wanted to show that she was a responsible person able to make reasonable judgments. That wasn't true, either, and could get Miss Olive into a very bad place in quick order. Everyone had an agenda. A lot rested on what Rica had to say. She drew herself up and walked quickly into the courtroom.

After she was sworn and had taken the stand, Rica looked toward the long wooden table where Miss Olive was seated with her attorney. She wore the sensible navy-blue dress with the floral sweater, and her soft white hair stood out like a lacy dandelion around her small head. She smiled at Rica and waved with two fingers. Rica smiled back, feeling a lump migrate to her throat, then turned her attention to the attorney rising from his place across the aisle.

"Now, Ms. Ruiz," he began, buttoning the top button of his suit coat as he came around the table. "You were employed as a companion for Mrs. Olive Warner from May until November of last year, is that correct?"

"Yes, I was—part time," Rica replied, feeling her chest tighten.

"During the time you worked for her, would you say that Mrs. Warner was in good health?"

All of Rica's warning signals went off. Danger ahead. Reduce speed. Caution. The little voice was back. Rica strained to listen.

"Mrs. Warner," Rica began slowly, "was in good physical health for a woman her age. She was occasionally forgetful and would sometimes become confused—mixing the past with the present. But those episodes were usually brief—unless someone aggravated them," Rica added, keeping her eyes straight ahead.

The lawyer turned, tossing a hand to the side as though dismissing her answer. "Would you tell us—without editorializing, please—what happened at Mrs. Warner's home on the morning of September nineteenth?"

Rica wasn't sure she could tell him what happened. She remembered every detail of the chain of events, but they somehow didn't add up to what happened in the end.

Rica had arrived that morning to find Miss Olive pacing back and forth in the living room, papers, envelopes, and file folders obliterating every surface. The handset to the phone, beeping its off-the-hook warning, lay on the floor beside the sofa. Miss Olive looked at her wild-eyed. "Margaret Ann," she said to Rica, "your father's done it again. He promised me, and now he's done it again. Well, not this time!"

After an hour of soothing, Rica had finally gotten Miss Olive to tell her what was wrong. The power company had called to say that her bill was two months in arrears and that they were going to cut off her electricity unless a payment was made promptly. When Miss Olive called the bank to check on this problem, she'd found more waiting—more overdue bills, account transfers she hadn't authorized, and other irregularities.

Rica suggested that perhaps Marsha had rearranged some things for convenience' sake, but Miss Olive had let her know, in no uncertain terms, that she had given no one—not even Marsha—access to her bank accounts. "I've been down that road before," she'd said, with more than a hint of bitterness. "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me."

After breakfast she had gone into her bedroom and gotten dressed, still moving about in jerky motions and muttering under her breath. She was, she insisted, going down to the bank. Rica could either drive her or move out of her way and she'd walk it. Rica, alarmed by the old woman's heightened color and irregular breathing, agreed to take her, but convinced her to call Marsha first. Marsha, true to form, wasn't in. Miss Olive flatly refused to call Gordon. About that she was adamant—and crystal-clear. "You don't call the fox in to go investigate what went wrong in the hen house," she said to Rica as she picked up packets of envelopes festooned with sticky notes, paper clips, and rubber bands and stuffed them into her voluminous pocketbook.

As Rica went into the kitchen to get her own bag and keys, Gordon showed up on one of his impromptu visits. Any hope of a calm,

rational resolution to the problems at hand evaporated.

"And what happened after Mr. Kirby arrived?" the lawyer asked.

Rica couldn't decide where to look. Eyes seemed to be boring in on her from every corner of the courtroom. Marsha, looking tense and drawn, sat behind her grandmother in the gallery. For once she wasn't looking at her watch. Rica spied a small stain just below the knot of the lawyer's tie and put her focus there. She tried to organize the sequence in her mind. Miss Olive had become even more agitated when she saw Gordon, railing at him in a reedy rasp, alternately calling him Charles, then Gordon, then back to Charles again.

"But if you could see photographs of the two of them, there is a striking resemblance; it's really an understandable mistake," Rica added. "And he had been encouraging it."

The lawyer had this part of the truth stricken from the record. "Please, just tell us what happened, Miss Ruiz," he said, his voice and affect flat.

Again Rica listened closely for the voice. She was conscious of everyone waiting. "Let them wait," the little voice said clearly, and Rica strained to clarify her recollections of that morning, trying to put Miss Olive's behavior into the right context, into a frame that would help everyone see the picture clearly.

Gordon had appeared surprised by Miss Olive's anger at first, but as she continued to berate him he put up a hand to silence her and turned to Rica. "We've got family business to discuss," he said. "We'd like some privacy. You can go do your kitchen chores now."

Rica had hesitated, turning to Miss Olive for her cue. "Go on," Miss Olive said firmly. "I can take care of this."

From the kitchen she heard voice and tone, but few recognizable words. The voices were by turns angry, placating, defensive, and uncertain. Eventually the volume decreased, and Rica heard only murmuring. After a while, Miss Olive came through the kitchen, headed for her bedroom. Rica asked if she was okay, and Miss Olive had replied that she was fine, that she had jumped to conclusions and that she just needed a few minutes to rest and get "at" herself. She seemed lucid, but then she asked Rica to get "Charles" a glass of iced tea. Rica had corrected her and tried to press her further, but Miss Olive had hardened her lips into a thin line and in an uncharacteristically sharp tone told her to just get the tea and ask no more questions.

Gordon was on the sofa, leafing through a magazine, looking very pleased with himself. She set the tea down on the coffee table and mustered her courage. "I think you've upset Miss Olive. It isn't good for her to get like this. I would think you would want what's best for her."

"Well, señorita," Gordon had replied, "as a matter of fact I do want

what's best. For her and for me. And if you could get down off your high horse for one minute, you could have what's best for you, too. You're a good-lookin' girl, pretty face, *nice* figure." Rica had turned abruptly to walk out of the room, but Gordon jumped up and grabbed her arm—tight. She reacted without thinking, turning to slap him across the face. The sound reverberated in the small space.

Rica's cheeks burned even now when she recalled the degrading names he had called her. The lawyer took no pity and made her repeat them all in the open courtroom, then asked, "Did Mrs. Warner witness any of this?"

"No, she didn't see it, if that's what you're asking," Rica said, wondering if this weighed for or against Miss Olive's competency. "But she may have been able to hear it from her room."

"When did you next see Mrs. Warner?"

"She came out of her room just after that."

"And how would you describe her demeanor?"

"She was quiet."

"Quiet?"

"Yes, quiet," Rica said again, firmly. "She just walked through the kitchen and into a back bedroom she used for storage. She came out a few minutes later carrying a small box and went back into the living room where Gordon—Mr. Kirby—was. I followed her in because I knew Mr. Kirby was angry and I was worried about what might happen."

The lawyer nodded sagely. "Yes, and what *did* happen?"

Rica sighed and turned to look at Miss Olive, who smiled at her warmly and nodded encouragement. Rica smiled back at her, tears turning the courtroom into a blurry mosaic. "Then Miss Olive said, 'No more. No more, Charles.'" Rica swallowed hard, then continued. "She opened the box and brought out a gun that I've since learned was her father's old service revolver, and she shot Gordon where he sat. He didn't make a sound." Rica's voice went quiet and the memory flooded back, terrible and plain. "Then Miss Olive put the gun back into the box, dusted the lid with a hanky, and took it back to its assigned shelf in the plunder room."

Rica's class got out early and she made it just in time for visiting hours. She found Miss Olive watching *Wheel of Fortune,* dressed in her fuzzy blue robe. They watched in companionable silence until the commercial, when Rica asked, "How are you doing in here, Miss Olive?"

"I'm getting by fine, sugar," Miss Olive replied. "Some of the folks are a little—you know," she said, winding her finger at her temple and rolling her eyes, "but they're mostly harmless and the staff's good to me—mostly women, you know. I've got everything I really need."

The game show resumed and Miss Olive turned her attentions back to the set mounted on brackets to the gray-green wall. Other patients played checkers or cards at nearby tables. One woman was brushing a toy stuffed dog with a little yellow brush. "Come on over here, Celia," Miss Olive said, patting the chair beside her and motioning the woman over. "There's a lady dentist from Iowa on here that's about to win big. Don't you love how these days women can make their own way?"

The woman brightened at the sound of her name and came over to sit next to Miss Olive. "She's not quite right," Miss Olive stage-whispered to Rica, "but she's as sweet as she can be, normally. She wound up in here because she had a little dust-up with a neighbor who mistreated her dog." The woman held up her toy dog for Rica to see.

Rica looked from the woman, whose problems were apparent, to Miss Olive, who looked for all the world like a Norman Rockwell grandmother. "Miss Olive, tell me what happened. I don't even know what the truth is anymore."

"Oh, Rica, you're so young." Miss Olive sighed. "There's no one truth that would tell it all. We've all got our limits, and it took me eighty-seven years to find out where mine were, is all."

She sighed and reached over absently to stroke Celia's fluffy pseudo cocker spaniel. Her voice softened as she slid into the past. "I was just a child when I met Charles. Younger than you are. He was beautiful. I know that's not what you say about a man, but he was. He was the best-looking man I've seen—before or since. Every girl in the county was angling for his attentions and I was no different. I told myself I'd give anything to be with that man." She looked at Rica and her pale blue eyes became dark pools. "And, as it turned out, that's just what I did. I gave everything. Everything my daddy and mama worked for—and every last shred of my dignity along the way. Charles was not the faithful kind—nor the honest kind, either."

"And Gordon? Did you really think he was Charles that day—that day it happened?"

"Gordon. Yes, you want to know about Gordon. A man like that's got a powerful talent to bring hurt. He liked to fool people. Play his little jokes. Like I told you, he was a Warner, through and through."

She raised her head and Rica recognized a familiar set of the chin. The icy blue eyes narrowed as if looking past Rica's face toward a place of deeper understanding. "Maybe he wasn't my Charles, but he'd have been somebody's Charles sooner or later—wouldn't he?"

She pulled her robe tighter and turned back to the television, mesmerized by the spinning wheel. She and Celia hooted and clapped right along with the audience as the lady dentist from Des Moines put the wheel in motion. ●

by Jon L. Breen

The blurring of lines between genre fiction and mainstream fiction, popular fiction and "literary" fiction, may be a good thing, but it can confuse the consumer. I won't rate but will recommend Alexander McCall Smith's *The Kalahari Typing School for Men* (Pantheon, $19.95), the fourth novel about Precious Ramotswe, proprietor of Botswana's No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency. This bestseller has many attributes of good fiction regardless of category: likable and involving characters, a fresh and beautifully captured background, gentle humor, boundless charm in narrative and dialogue. A special attraction is the sense of openness and civility that persists in Botswana society while losing ground elsewhere. What the book lacks is those elements that individualize the mystery genre: serious crime, real detection, suspense, and a sense of menace. Do read it, but don't expect a crime or mystery novel. Then turn to a work that clearly has serious literary ambition and resonance but still delivers the goods as a mystery.

**** James Sallis: *Cypress Grove,* Walker, $24. Turner, ex-cop, ex-shrink, and ex-con, has come to a small Southern town to hide from his past, until the out-of-his-depth local sheriff asks his help in a murder investigation. Sallis juggles past and present story lines with ease while spinning a plot with special appeal to movie buffs. The lyrical prose is reminiscent of James Lee Burke, but most of Burke's male characters are full of hostile testosterone, while even Sallis's prisoners display the manly reasonableness of characters in a Howard Hawks Western.

**** Gerald Kersh: *Karmesin: The World's Greatest Criminal—or Most Outrageous Liar,* Crippen & Landru, $27 hardcover, $17 trade paper. By evidence of Paul Duncan's introduction, the prolific Kersh (1911-1968) was almost as outrageous a character as his most famous creation, who describes to a sceptical

friend a wide variety of seriocomic adventures in crime in 17 brief tales. All but one appeared in *EQMM* between 1945 and 1970. The question remains: If Karmesin was such a successful criminal, why is he in a constant state of impoverishment?

**** Bill Pronzini and Barry N. Malzberg: *Problems Solved,* Crippen & Landru, $42 signed limited, $16 trade paper. Two popular fiction masters joined forces on mystery and science fiction between 1972 and 1982 and recently resumed their occasional collaboration. Of the 22 stories gathered here, two are new; three first appeared in *EQMM,* six in *AHMM,* two in *Analog,* seven in other mystery or s.f. magazines, and two in original anthologies. Moods range from light and satirical to dark and disturbing. A trio of tales about a Luna Immigration agent achieve in a very short space the science fictional detective story's toughest task: giving enough information about the alien visitors that the reader has a fair chance to solve the mystery. Pronzini's preface and Malzberg's afterword provide insights into the collaborative process. (Pronzini's latest solo collection is a 35-year retrospective of the incomparable Nameless Detective series, *Scenarios* [Five Star, $25.95], beginning with the San Francisco sleuth's debut in a 1968 issue of *AHMM.* The only three of the 14 stories that have not appeared in earlier collections comprise about a quarter of the book: "The Ghosts of Raggedy-Ass Gulch," a novelette published only in Japan in 1981 and subsequently expanded into the novel *Nightshades* [1984]; "Season of Sharing," written with Marcia Muller and featuring Sharon McCone with Nameless, previously a Christmas 2001 Crippen & Landru chapbook with limited distribution; and "Wrong Place, Wrong Time," from the 2002 anthology *Most Wanted.*)

*** Tony Hillerman: *The Sinister Pig,* HarperCollins, $25.95. The latest about Navajo sleuths Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee concerns the traffic in drugs and illegal immigrants over the Mexican border and the disappearance of billions in oil and other royalties owed to Indian tribes. Bernadette Manuelito, the Chee romantic interest now working for the Border Patrol, is almost a coequal third protagonist. As much thriller as detective story, this is one of the best recent Hillermans.

*** Paula L. Woods: *Dirty Laundry,* Ballantine, $23.95. The third novel about LAPD detective Charlotte Justice is set in March of 1993, when a Korean-American aide to a Latino mayoral candidate is murdered and the subsequent investigation highlights all kinds of urban politics, whether ethnic, sexual, economic, or just plain dirty. Another solid achievement in a consistently reliable series.

*** Marcia Muller: *Cyanide Wells,* Mysterious, $24.95. Several years after being suspected

of the murder of his vanished wife, Minnesota college teacher turned British Columbia charter-boat operator Matthew Lindstrom learns she is still alive and goes to rural California to confront her. Sheriff's detective Rhoda Swift of *Point Deception* (2001) makes a cameo appearance, but the series character is Soledad County—in apparent homage to another writer who built a series around a California county, one character is named John Crowe. Muller's work is always rewarding.

*** Leo Bruce: *Death at Hallows End,* Academy Chicago, $22.50. The publishers have resumed their program to import the works of one of the more talented classicists to debut in the Golden Age 1930s. By 1965, when this novel appeared in Britain, its pure puzzle-spinning was already out of fashion, but Bruce (pseudonym of Rupert Croft-Cooke) carried on regardless, creating new adventures for schoolmaster sleuth Carolus Deene, this time looking into the case of a solicitor who disappeared while taking an elderly and wealthy client his new will for signature. While most strongly recommended to lovers of clues and analysis, this is no bloodless exercise: many of the characters, with their Dickensian names and verbal quirks, spring to life.

*** Larry King and Thomas H. Cook: *Moon Over Manhattan,* New Millennium, $24.95. One voice whispers that celebrity mysteries are rarely worth the bother. A competing voice counters that anything involving the versatile Edgar-winner Cook must be worthy of attention. Listen to the second voice. A criminous farce rather than a detective or suspense story, and nothing like Cook's straight-faced solo work, the novel offers plenty of laughs in its loving tribute to New York, via a cast of outsized characters, and its satirical look at American media and political discourse.

** Jill Churchill: *Love for Sale,* Morrow, $23.95. In a New York village on the eve of the 1932 Presidential election, Lily and Robert Brewster, the twenty-something brother and sister who now operate their family mansion as a boarding house, take a job as substitute teachers and become involved in the murder of a radio preacher. The plot is negligible, but the Depression period is well captured, apart from a couple of anachronisms. One of them only specialists will notice (Fibber McGee didn't debut on radio until 1935); the other will jar a wider audience (surely the police slang "perp" wasn't current in the 1930s).

One of the best historical anthologies has been reprinted with a semi-new title: *The Oxford Book of Victorian Detective Stories* (Oxford University Press, $17.95), edited by Michael Cox, first published in 1992 as *Victorian Tales of Mystery and Detection.* Its scholarly introduction runs 18 pages; authors represented range from Poe to Sax Rohmer and Robert Barr.

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BY DAVID EDGERLEY GATES

Missing You Already
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Morning of the Murder
BY HELEN TUCKER

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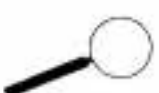

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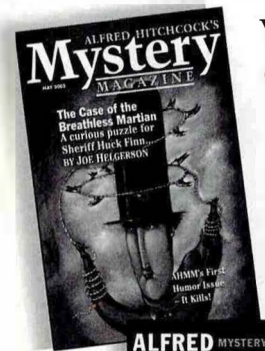

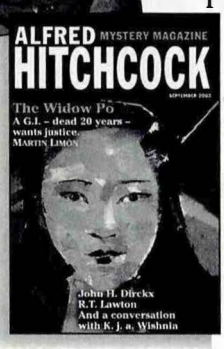

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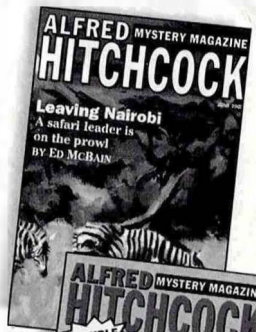

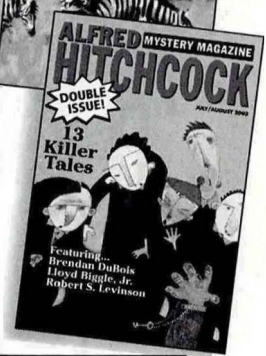

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