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ELLERY QUEEN

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

**Careful
What You
Ask For!**

JANUARY 2013



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SANDY MARLOWE
Subscriber Services
203-866-6688 Option #2

PETER KANTER
Publisher

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Editor-in-Chief 1941-1982

ELEANOR SULLIVAN
Editor-in-Chief 1982-1991

ADVERTISING SALES DEPARTMENT

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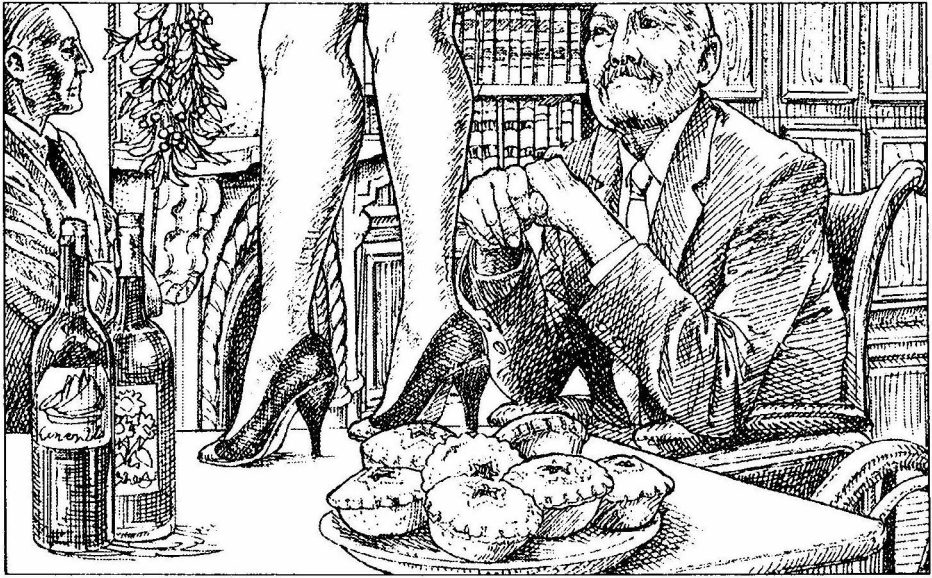
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A THREE PIE PROBLEM

by Peter Lovesey

Peter Diamond wasn't Scrooge, but Christmas could be a pain. For one thing, he missed Steph more than ever at this time of year. For another, people took pity on him and invited him to stay. His in-laws, Angela and Mervyn, asked him each year to go up to Liverpool for "a proper family party" and he was forced to think of excuses. He'd tried saying Raffles, his cat, needed looking after, but they didn't regard that as a reason. "Put him in a basket and bring him with you," Angela had said. "We'll fuss him up, same as you." Raffles, like Diamond, wouldn't relish being fussed up.

This year, Angela had a different strategy. "You know what I'm going to say," she told him on the phone about the second week of December, "and I know what you're going to say, so forget it. If you won't come to the party, the party is coming to you. It's ages since we visited Bath and we do so enjoy looking round. Don't panic, Peter. I'll do all the cooking and Mervyn will organise the games."

Games? He almost dropped the phone.

"It's fixed, then. We're arriving the Saturday before and we'll stay until the New Year."

"I could be on duty," was all he could think to say.

"Come on, you're the boss, aren't you?"

"A major incident."

“At Christmas?”

This Christmas, please, he thought. There was no stopping Angela. They arrived with their hatchback stuffed with suitcases and all the festive paraphernalia, including a plastic tree. Raffles took refuge in the airing cupboard.

For reasons nobody cared to go into, Angela thought the police in general were beneath contempt and her late sister Stephanie—she always used the full name—should never have hitched herself to one of them, let alone an overweight slob like Diamond. His rank did not impress her. His skills as a detective were disregarded. He hadn't papered the walls since they'd bought the house. Hadn't weeded the garden, washed the windows, mended the Hoover, removed the tidemark from the bath. He pampered the cat and cheated at cards. All this was pointed out to him on the first evening.

So the call from Bath Police Station on Christmas Eve came as glad tidings, even great joy, to the beleaguered head of CID.

“Sorry to disturb your Christmas break, sir.”

“No trouble at all. Do you need me there?”

“It could be nothing at all.”

“But on the other hand . . .” he said with a rising note.

“There's an outside chance it was murder.”

“Say no more. Duty calls.”

Angela rolled her eyes upwards and Mervyn looked aghast at the prospect of being alone with his wife. “Could I come with you, as a sort of observer?”

“No,” Diamond said. “Too horrible for a man of your good taste. Why don't you redecorate the Christmas tree? Angela thinks my effort was crap.”

He was gone.

Bath police had been alerted to the death of one Fletcher Merriman, aged seventy-eight, the senior partner in Merriman & Palmer, a small firm of accountants with an office above a shop in Gay Street. Old Mr. Merriman had died two weeks ago in the Royal United Hospital of heart failure.

“There are suspicious elements,” Georgina Dallymore, the assistant chief constable, told Diamond. “I wouldn't put it any higher than that. He wasn't admitted with a heart condition. They treated him for gastroenteritis following an office party. He was in considerable pain, I gather. The heart attack came later.”

“Poison?”

“The postmortem was inconclusive. They tested for the known poisons and found nothing of note. He was on medication for a heart problem anyway, so

It's hard to imagine any mystery novel garnering more stunning reviews than Peter Lovesey's latest entry in the Peter Diamond series, *Cop to Corpse* (Soho Crime/ June 2012). From *Newsweek's* “Extremely stylish, lighter than air . . . utterly surprising” to the *Wall Street Journal's* “Witty. . . . A perfectly realized murder mystery” and the *New York Times's* “A bravura performance by a veteran showman,” the critics are singing the praises of a writer who, as *Deadly Pleasures* magazine says, is “still at the top of his game.” Here is the latest Diamond short story. ¶

there were traces of various substances in the stomach contents, but nothing lethal."

"So what's the problem?"

"I hope we're not wasting your time, Peter. It's just that the circumstances could have come straight out of Agatha Christie. He wasn't a nice old man at all. In fact, he was appalling. Everyone at the party had reasons to knock him off."

"Everyone? How many is that?"

"Three."

"Small party."

"All the easier to question them. It could wait until after Christmas, but you left the message saying you wanted to be notified if any serious crimes were reported."

"Absolutely, ma'am. Maybe if I spend Christmas on this one I can take days off in lieu at a later date."

"You mean when the in-laws have left?"

He grinned.

The surviving partner, Maurice Palmer, had agreed to be in attendance at the office in Gay Street, but it was a woman's voice on the entry-phone. Diamond gave his name and entered.

"Sylvie Smith, junior accountant," she said. She was smart, in her twenties, with dark, intelligent eyes. "He's expecting you."

"And did he ask you to come in on Christmas Eve just to show me in?"

"It's a chance to tidy my desk."

"Don't go away, then. I'd like to speak to you later."

Palmer appeared from an inner room and introduced himself. Fiftyish, in the obligatory dark suit and striped tie, he looked well capable of tangling with tax inspectors. Or police inspectors.

"Decent of you to see me," Diamond said. "I hope this hasn't messed up your holiday plans."

"Not as yet," Palmer said, "but I hope we can clear up any questions now. I'm booked on a flight to Tenerife tonight."

"Is that a tax haven?"

"If it is, it doesn't come into my plans. I'm going for some winter sunshine, I hope."

Diamond glanced about him at the filing cabinets and computers. "So is this the room where the party was held?"

"No, in point of fact. This is the office where the ladies sit," Palmer said. "The party was in here." He swung open the door he'd come through. "My room."

Diamond stepped in. "Nice."

It was oak-panelled, with a high corniced ceiling and a marble fireplace with gas flames that looked realistic. Leather armchairs, an expensive-looking carpet, and a rosewood table with matching chairs testified to the status of the firm. "Fletcher Merriman used it for many years before he retired from the practice in two thousand and one." He went to the doorway and said to Sylvie Smith, "Why don't you finish off what you were doing?" Then he closed the door.

"So old Mr. Merriman came in just for the party?"

“His annual visit. It became a tradition. Every December he’d zoom in—you know he used a wheelchair?—with all the seasonal fare, three bottles of sherry, sweet, medium, and dry, a dozen mince pies, and a huge branch of mistletoe, and tell us it was party time. He loved surprising people.”

“Surprising them? You just said it was a tradition.”

“We had no idea which day he would arrive.”

“From what I hear, he was better at springing surprises than receiving them.”

“His heart condition, you mean? Yes, he had to be careful. He’d had two coronaries since retiring. He withdrew entirely from the business. I’ve been running it for years.”

“But he remained the senior partner?”

“Sleeping partner is a better description, but ‘partner’ is the operative word.”

“So he still had a slice of the profits?”

“Fifty-fifty. We’re still Merriman and Palmer, a respected name in Bath. He deserved some reward for all the years he put in.”

“And will his family get a share of any future profits?”

“There is no family.”

“So it all comes to you now?”

Maurice Palmer turned deep pink above his striped collar. “Unless I take on another partner.”

Diamond glanced around the room. “Let’s talk about the party. What kind of bash was it?”

“I wouldn’t call it that.”

“Did you finish the sherry between you?”

“Not entirely.”

“Three bottles between four of you would have been good going. Were they all freshly bought?”

“Yes, indeed, from the wine merchant in Broad Street.”

“Who opened them?”

“Fletcher—and he did the pouring as well. He liked us to be aware that he was the provider.”

“You didn’t keep the bottles, by any chance?”

“The dead men?” He shook his head. “They went out the same evening with the rest of what was left.”

“And was the mistletoe put to good use?”

Palmer glanced towards the door and lowered his voice. “You must understand that my esteemed ex-colleague belonged to a generation before PC came in, when a little of what you fancy was no offence.”

“He was an old goat?”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“Would the women?”

“I’m sure they wouldn’t be so disrespectful.”

“But *you* didn’t have to be kissed under the mistletoe.”

“Hardly.”

“I’ll speak presently to someone who did. Tell me, Mr. Palmer, did you try one of the mince pies?”

“I had three. And very good they were. He always bought them from Maisie’s, the best baker in town. They were still warm.”

“No ill effects?”

“None whatsoever.”

“And how did the party end?”

“With Fletcher complaining of stomach pains and saying he needed to get home. We called a taxi. Next morning I heard he was in hospital and some hours later he had a fatal heart attack. Sad, but not unexpected, allowing for his medical history.”

“You didn’t shed any tears, then?”

“He was not an easy person to have as a business partner. But that doesn’t mean I wished him to suffer.”

Diamond had heard all he needed at this stage, so he asked Palmer to send in Sylvie Smith.

“In here?” Palmer said in surprise.

“The scene of the crime—if, indeed, there was a crime. Where better?”

“You wish to interview her in my presence?”

“No, I suggest you wait outside and see if her double-entries are up to the mark.”

Sylvie Smith looked nervous, and more so when Diamond waved her towards her boss’s high-back executive chair. “Give yourself a treat. One day all this could be yours.”

“I doubt that very much.” She perched uneasily on the edge of the chair.

Diamond preferred to stand. “So how many of old Mr. Merriman’s surprise parties have you attended?”

“This was the second. I joined the firm after leaving college, towards the end of last year.”

“The first time it happened you must have wondered what was up when he rolled through in his wheelchair primed with mistletoe and sherry. Did he insist on a kiss?”

Her mouth tightened into a thin line. “He called it his Christmas cuddle. I’d hardly ever met him.”

“He took it as his right?”

“It makes me sick to think of it.”

“If you’d complained, your job would have been at risk—and there aren’t many openings in Bath for freshly qualified accountants.”

She rolled her eyes upwards. “That’s for sure.”

“Did you know this was an annual ordeal?”

“Donna said something about it, but I thought she was winding me up.”

“Donna is the other woman who works here?”

She nodded. “She’s been here six years. She’ll be chartered next year if all goes well.”

“But she isn’t in today?”

“Decided to take some of her annual leave.”

“Gone away for Christmas?”

“I don’t think so. She has a flat in Walcot Street.”

“Lives alone, then?”

“Yes.”

“What age is Donna? All right. Indiscreet question. Is she under forty?”

“I expect so.”

Diamond looked up at the bare ceiling. There was no central light. There

were wall lights representing candles. "I'm trying to picture this party. Presumably the old boy sat in his wheelchair under some mistletoe. I can't see where it was attached."

"We had to tie string across the room, from one of the wall lights to the one opposite. Then the mistletoe was hung over the string just above where you're standing."

"Got it. When you say 'we' . . .?"

"Me and Donna."

"I'm getting the picture now. So whoever attached the mistletoe to the string must have stood on this table beside me to do it. Who was that?"

Sylvie rolled her eyes again. "He insisted it was me. Said I had the longer reach." She hesitated and turned as red as a Christmas-card robin. "I happened to be wearing a short skirt."

"The picture is even clearer. Where was Mr. Palmer while you were on the table?"

"Mr. Palmer? Some way off, by the fireplace, I think. It was Mr. Merriman who had the ringside view, almost underneath me in his wheelchair."

"Did he hand you the mistletoe himself?"

"No. He was far too busy looking up my skirt. It was Donna who helped me."

"So when he'd got over that excitement, and the mistletoe was in place, the party got under way. Drinks all round, no doubt?"

She nodded. "I needed one."

"The sherry was where?"

"On the table."

"And the glasses?"

"Mr. Palmer keeps some in his drawer."

"As every boss should. Did Mr. Palmer pour?"

"Mr. Merriman did."

"Did you notice if the sherry was new, the bottles sealed at the neck?"

"I'm certain of it. He had to borrow scissors."

"You know why I'm interested? Something upset his stomach and if the sherry was new I'm thinking it must have been the mince pies."

She shook her head. "They were fresh too, fresh as anything, in boxes from Maisie's. Actually, they were delicious."

Diamond felt his stomach juices stirring. "So you had one?"

"Three, at least. We all did."

"And could anyone have slipped the old man a mince pie from anywhere else?"

"I don't see how. We were all in here together."

"Making merry?"

"Making a stab at it."

"I expect a few glasses of sherry helped."

She took a sharp breath. "Not when he grabbed me and forced me onto his lap for the kiss under the mistletoe. That was disgusting. His bony old hands were everywhere." She shuddered. "It went on for over a minute. I could have strangled him."

"But you didn't. Did Donna get the same treatment?"

"Not quite the same. She was wearing trousers."

"And did you also get a kiss from Mr. Palmer?"

“That was no problem. Just a peck on the cheek. He doesn’t fancy me, anyway.”

Diamond thanked her and returned to the outer office. “I’ll need the address of your other member of staff,” he told Palmer.

“Donna? There’s nothing she can add.”

“How do you know? Maybe she saw something you and Miss Smith missed.”

“You’re barking up the wrong tree, Superintendent. Nothing untoward happened here. Fletcher died from natural causes.”

“I’ll let you know if I agree—after I’ve heard from Donna.”

First, he returned to the police station and asked his eager-to-please detective sergeant, Ingeborg, to get on the Internet. Encouraged by her findings, he called the forensic lab that had analysed the postmortem samples and suggested a second specific examination of the stomach contents. He was told the chances were not high of finding anything they hadn’t already reported and anyway it would have to wait until after the holiday.

“Typical,” he said to Ingeborg. “We’re working. Why can’t they?”

The third surviving accountant lived in a classy flat. Donna was a classy lady with a sexy drawl to her voice. Not at all unfazed by Diamond’s arrival, she offered him coffee. While she was in the kitchen he used 1471 to check the last call she’d received. It was timed just after he’d left the Merriman and Palmer office—and that had been the source of the call.

It was no crime, of course, to tip her off. Any colleague would do the same.

“Here’s my problem,” he told her over the coffee. “Old Fletcher Merriman was taken home ill at the end of the party. The pains got worse and he ended up in hospital. I’ve seen the medical notes. Abdominal pain, blurred vision, nausea, and low pulse. We’re bound to check if he was poisoned, triggering the heart attack that killed him.”

“*Poisoned?*” she said with a disbelieving smile.

He nodded. “Yet we aren’t sure how the poison could have been administered, allowing that he brought his own food and drink to the party and everything was fresh. Poured the drinks himself, in full view of everyone.”

“Did they find poison inside him?” she asked as calmly as if she were enquiring about last night’s rain.

“Nothing obvious, but the traditional poisons like arsenic and strychnine are so easy to detect these days that they aren’t often used. I’ve suggested something else and they’re testing for it.”

She didn’t ask the obvious question. Instead, she said, “Why would anyone want to kill a retired accountant?”

“This is pure speculation and shouldn’t be repeated,” he said. “Maurice Palmer stood to gain financially. The old man’s death leaves him in sole charge of the firm.”

“Surely you don’t suspect Maurice.”

Diamond didn’t comment. “And Sylvie Smith told me she felt like strangling him after the groping she had to endure.”

“She’s young. She’s got a lot to learn about men.”

“His behaviour didn’t bother you, then?”

“I’ve been six years with the firm. I know what to expect from Fletcher the lecher.” She ran her fingertip thoughtfully around the rim of her cup. “Here’s a

theory for you, Mr. Diamond. Is it possible during a kiss to pass a capsule into someone's mouth?"

"I expect so. Nasty."

"Something like digitalis that is taken by heart patients, but dangerous in an overdose?"

"Ingenious. What gave you this idea?"

She shrugged. "He insisted on a full mouth-to-mouth kiss. In the absence of any other theory . . ."

"Ah, but I do have another theory. A better one than yours. The mince pies killed him."

She shook her head. "We all had mince pies. Rich food, I'll grant you, but the rest of us felt no ill effects. There was nothing wrong with them."

"Something was wrong with at least one of the pies Fletcher Merriman ate."

"I can't see how."

"It was laced with poison. Bear with me a moment." He took a notebook from his pocket. "Tyramine and beta phenylethylamine."

"Never heard of them."

"But you've heard of mistletoe. These are the toxic substances contained in mistletoe berries. The symptoms are similar to enteritis, but with blurred vision and a marked lowering of the pulse. In a tired old body susceptible to heart problems, as Merriman's was, the poison induced a failure of the cardiovascular system. Killed him."

"But the mistletoe was above our heads."

"Not when he arrived. You and Sylvie fixed it up."

"Excuse me. Sylvie tied it to the string."

"And while she was getting all the men's attention in her short skirt, you were stripping a number of the white berries from the branch before you handed it up to her."

She frowned. "Untrue."

"You waited for the next opportunity, and it came when the old man was kissing Sylvie. You lifted the lid of the mince pie on his plate and tucked the mistletoe berries under it. Lethal and almost undetectable."

She was as silent as a child waiting for Santa.

He stood up. "Might I look into your bedroom?"

"Whatever for?"

"To test my theory. This door?"

She was in no position to stop him.

"So you're planning a holiday?" There was a packed suitcase on the bed.

"People do."

He stepped closer and looked at the label. "Tenerife. Shame. You're not going any further than Manvers Street nick. I'm arresting you on suspicion of the murder of Fletcher Merriman."

"So she's singing?" Georgina, the assistant chief constable, said.

"She sang. Better than the Bath Abbey choir."

"You sound positively festive, Peter."

"It is Christmas Eve, ma'am."

"What was her motive?"

"She's a cool lady. Worked hard at her accountancy, filling in the columns,

promising herself a promotion when she's chartered next year. She saw the young woman, Sylvie, bright and ambitious, and decided she wasn't willing to wait and be overtaken. Cosied up to Maurice Palmer and promised to spend Christmas in Tenerife with him. She reckoned she could persuade him to take her on as his new partner, but first old Fletcher Merriman had to be sent to the great audit in the sky. She knew his annual ritual, so she could plan how to do it. A mince pie contains a rich mix. After digestion is anyone likely to detect some mistletoe berries in it?"

"Did they?"

"Not yet, but she thinks it's a done deal, and she's confessed."

"Murder by mince pie. Who would have thought of it?"

"An ambitious woman with time running out."

"You don't think Palmer had a hand in it?"

"No, ma'am. He's not that brave, or bright."

"Case solved, then, and all in one day. You can get back to your family and enjoy the rest of Christmas."

Diamond took a sharp, audible breath. "Not for some time. There's all the paperwork."

"Leave it for later."

"No, I don't trust my memory. I'll be here for a while yet. I know where to put my hands on a beer or two. And the odd mince pie."

"Not too odd, Peter. We need you." ●





THE JURY BOX

by Steve Steinbock

This month we have a variety of stocking stuffers, including novels with diverse historical and geographical settings, as well as a pair of whodunits featuring eighty-seven-year-old Jewish detectives.

*** G.S. Manson: *Coorparoo Blues and the Irish Fandango*, Dark Passage, \$13.95. Set on the Australian seacoast in the mid 1940s, here are two tight novellas of Australian noir thinly disguised as a novel. In *Coorparoo Blues*, P.I. Jack Munro is hired to track down a missing husband, and in the process encounters graft and racism among U.S. troops. *The Irish Fandango* takes Munro into the world of Bolsheviks, anarchists, the IRA, and a pedophile priest. The plots ramble in both of these novellas, but the rollicking narrative keeps the adventures fun and viscerally intriguing.

*** Sheila York, *Death in Her Face*, Five Star, \$25.95. It's 1946, and screenwriter Lauren Atwill is convalescing from her brush with death (in the 2010 novel *A Good Knife's Work*) when she is called back to L.A. to rewrite a screenplay in order to ac-

commodate a missing starlet. While Lauren makes the script changes, her P.I. lover searches for the missing actress. Filled with film moguls, gangsters, a shifty psychic, and the clacking rhythm of typewriters, *Death in Her Face* captures the mood and spirit of a nation recovering from WWII, and in the end gives readers a twist worthy of Raymond Chandler.

*** Ann Littlewood: *Endangered*, Poisoned Pen Press, \$24.95 (HC), \$14.95 (TPB). In her third "zoodunit," zookeeper Iris Oakley is sent to rescue exotic birds and tortoises found at the site of a meth lab and marijuana grow site. Stymied by the theft of evidence, the butting heads of various law enforcement agencies, and the discovery of a dead girl, Iris finds herself the object of interest of two attractive men, all the while pursued by a gang of smugglers and a ruthless killer. The novel is set in the Pacific Northwest and has a unique juxtaposition of exotic animals, the drug underworld, and an enclave of ultra-conservatives. Without ever being polemical, *Endangered* is a well-crafted mystery with a strong message. (Cont. p. 110)

THERE ARE ROADS IN THE WATER

by Trina Corey

Her name was Jenny and I loved her, more than life, more than breath. And I have lost her. There is a woman who sits across from me at the table, and they tell me, she tells me too, that she is Jenny. But I look at her and I don't know her.

They say it is because of the fall.

Every day the woman makes us breakfast, packs me a lunch. Today it is chicken salad and summer cherries. I take it from her and say thank you and walk out the door of the yellow house. I look back and see her past the roses. She lifts her hand to wave, and I turn away to the water. The water is everywhere around us here on the island.

I'm better, but not enough. Everything got rattled and shifted.

How much more things will improve no one knows. Small steps, if any, the doctors say. I haven't given up on more. At least these days I can get out of the house. The woman and I are both grateful for that. It's easy to walk from home to the terminal. No hills to climb. I don't climb anymore, ladders or hills. So it's a good thing I live here. Alameda is flat as a pancake, an island made out of a marsh, hung on the east side of the bay.

The ferry terminal is small, just posts and a roof, and railings on the wooden walk that stretches over the water. There is a garden along one side of the parking lot. We say hello to James, the security guard, at least those of us who are here every day say hello. After the ferry comes we cross the gangway and say hello to the crew. I sit at the front of the boat and feel the cold wind in my face, air that tastes of salt and fish and seaweed. The boat is full of noise. The push and pull of the engines against the water. Voices. Some people are quiet in the middle of the noise. They read, use their computer, or

Trina Corey's last story for *EQMM*, "Facts Exhibiting Wantonness" (November 2011), received a nomination for the Short Mystery Fiction Society's Derringer Award and is currently nominated for *Deadly Pleasures* magazine's Barry Award and Mystery Readers International's Macavity Award. The winners will be announced at the Bouchercon Convention in October 2012—after this issue goes to press. Like "Facts Exhibiting Wantonness," Trina Corey's latest story is strikingly unusual. ¶

just watch, like me, but not really like me, I think. There is a middle-aged man in a rumpled suit. A young woman with brown hair and tired eyes. Two mothers chasing five little, yelling children along the aisles. It wearies me, watching people, for too long. I turn to the railing and look over. A seal breaks the surface, fur dark and dripping, then disappears again into green water.

I take the small book out of my jacket pocket. Most of the journal's pages list names, places, numbers. I don't recognize the writing. Ships' tonnage and draft, specifications for their engines, rudders, propellers. I turn to the back pages instead. Different writing. The woman who says she is my wife tells me she wrote on those pages to remind me. I need to be reminded. Ears, eyes, the doorways to the mind. Force it open. Force it awake. Force it to remember.

One page tells me what to do.

One page tells me what happened.

One page tells me who I am.

Get off the boat. Walk through the building. Turn right and walk along Embarcadero. Come back in time for the 5:10 ferry.

You stepped from the harbor-pilots' boat onto the ship ladder of the GCM Liroga. The seas were running at seven feet, nothing you hadn't always handled easily. You were halfway up, thirty feet. A rung was defective, no one on the crew noticed. It broke. You were very lucky. You fell back onto the deck of the pilot boat, not into the water between the ships' hulls. Green swells crushed between steel. Other pilots have fallen there. I am lucky.

You are Brian Donovan. You are 56 years old. The number is written in, above the crossed-out 55. I think I am getting better. I remember most of the words before I read them. You were a SF Harbor pilot. You navigated ships into the bay for 17 years. Before that you captained merchant ships across the Pacific. You said you knew ships from the bilge to the bridge. We have a daughter, Lexie. We've been married for 37 years. 36 crossed out below. Hard slashes across it.

She's angry because she thinks I don't have to grieve for her, that I don't remember how much Jenny and I loved each other. But I do. I feel the hollow space in the air beside me where she should be. Now there are only strangers everywhere. The ones here, away from the house, are easier. They don't expect anything, at most a hello and a few words about the weather. Most people just want you to walk right by them and leave them alone. No one expects me to know them.

I get off the boat. Walk through the Ferry Building and its thick smells of coffee and chocolate. Turn right along the Embarcadero. There is glass in the sidewalk—green squares the color of sea water set into the concrete. When I walked along here with the woman who says she is my wife, practicing my route, she told me lights come on at night beneath the glass and make a ribbon of gold along the wharves.

Ships don't dock here anymore. Offices, shops, parked cars fill some of the long buildings. Others stand empty except for the roosting pigeons. All the

shipping business is in Oakland, has been for years. I never guided any ships here to this side of the bay. This is a place mostly for tourists.

People tell me I could be a difficult person, before. Cranky, bristly, controlling. "You'd tell the wind which way to blow," the woman said one day, tears rolling down her face, the glass of wine, not her first of the evening, empty in her hand.

Wouldn't I have to be? If I was going to pilot a thousand-foot thread through a twisting needle made of currents and wind? But there's no need for that person anymore. Now it seems I am difficult in different ways. She tells me I say yes too often, too often because I don't mean it, but she's wrong. I mean everything I say, even if I don't understand.

It takes awhile, though less time than it used to, to walk as far as the red-painted benches by the flowers. Orange petals, yellow, purple, glowing blue, and the bees busy at work. Their hum is in my ears as I sit and watch the dozens of small boats tied up bobbing at the docks. The restaurants, left and right along the waterfront, begin their day and the smells of boiling crab and fried fish start to fill the air.

Late in the afternoon, I am slower walking back, but sometimes I forget, and my step quickens when I think, for a moment, that it will be Jenny waiting for me on the other side of the water.

Most people's faces are happier on the ride east, going home. Not the young woman with the brown hair and tired eyes, though.

The next day is the same, and the days after. Then there is a lunchtime, people from the buildings joining the tourist crowds, and someone sits next to me, and says hello.

"I've seen you," I tell her. I am surprised, and pleased, that I recognize her. This is a good sign. "On the ferry, I think."

"Yes," she says, "on the ferry." Her eyes are gray, the skin below them shadowed and bruised-looking. She wraps her hands tighter around the cup of coffee, drinks, and the steam wreathes her face. She sighs, and looks out at the bay. There are gulls swooping, and sailboats out toward Tiburon, but I don't think she sees any of it.

"Have you eaten?" I ask her. "There's more than I can finish." I hold out half of a sandwich to her.

She comes back from wherever her mind had taken her.

"They're good." I smile at her. "My wife makes them every day." It is hard for me to say those two words, but I need to practice, and hope that someday it will seem like the truth.

She holds out her hand then. "Thanks," and even before she takes a bite, "they're good."

We finish eating, staring at the boats, the people, the diving birds.

"My wife," it is no easier to say, "puts in celery and olives. She says I've always liked my sandwiches that way."

The young woman nods, says, "I've got to get back. Thank you."

"What's your name" I ask.

"A. J.," she says, and turns away.



That evening, a thin man with red hair is waiting for her at the terminal in Alameda. I am not close enough to see, but I do not think her eyes brighten at the sight of him. He reaches around her, and her shoulders curve in on themselves, away from the weight of his arm.

When I get home, dinner is ready, as it always is now, right at six. Routine and predictability are important, we've been told. The news is on while we eat, and fills up some of the silence. Afterwards, I clear the table and wash the dishes. I'm not ready to help with the cooking. All I know how to fix are meals I used to make for Jenny. While I stand at the sink, hot water running over my hands, looking out the window, the woman stands in the garden, her hands full of Jenny's flowers.

"I brought you something," A.J. says, holding out a small package. "Cookies. They're oatmeal, homemade, we can pretend they're healthy."

I practice grinning at her, and say, "So we'll eat dessert first, then, how about that?" The first smile I've seen on her face lights it up.

"You've got a deal."

After we're done, she doesn't hurry away, seems to be content to sit in the noise of the wind and the people chattering all around. "What work do you do?" I ask her.

She's quiet for long enough that I think she isn't going to answer. I don't mind. How can I? How often in the last two years have I been the one sitting silent? Then, finally, "I'm an instructor at the art institute," she gestures past her shoulder.

I see the banners every day on the old building, a few blocks down the Embarcadero. I look at her hands, no paint or ink stains, but they are rough, some scars ridging the skin. Without thinking I reach over, touch her fingers as if I could ease old hurts, and she flinches away, then stops herself.

"Sorry. Overactive startle reflex, I guess." She holds up her hands, turning them in the sun, and the thin lines of scars snake across them. "I'm a sculptor. Occupational hazard when you're working with chisels, no matter how careful I try to be."

After she leaves, I follow the plan for the afternoons. *Walk west five blocks to the Hyde Street Pier. Show your pass at the entrance. Leave by 4:30 to walk back to the Ferry Building.* The three volunteers who take turns at the ticket booth know me by now, and wave me through. I smile back, not just to mirror them, but because I am starting to remember at least parts of their faces. Gray eyebrows bristly enough to edge past the black frame of his bifocals. Her eyes blue as glass. The other man's teeth yellowed ivory. They like to chat on the slow days, when there aren't lots of tourists or a school group coming through. I try to avoid it. It's a relief to get to the ships, to the quiet sounds of wood and water moving together, creaks and lapping.

These are old ships, with old names—*Balclutha, Thayer, Alma, Eppleton Hall, Hercules*. I would have piloted some of them, if I had lived a hundred or more years ago. Brought them across the sand bars to safe docking. Coming up windward, standing on the deck of the pilot's cutter, one hand on the shroud.

Then into the yawl, rowed close, timing the swells. Would I have fallen then, too? Is each step and misstep written, fixed like the lights etched into the concrete, even if you think you live your life on moving, changing water?

On the 5:10 ferry, I sit in my usual spot at the front, where I can feel the wind and watch the bay and the ships. The maps stayed in my head after the fall. I tried to draw them, in the hospital, at home. What I'd learned to do with precision, under pressure, for the licensing exam—not anymore. Now I just make an unusable scrawl. But I can see the roads in the water. I can read the surface, where the cold blue tides rush in and out the Gate, where the warmer green rivers' waters pour down from the valley. Each alone is enough to slew most ships around. Churning together, around the islands and bridges, over the Bar, they confound any of us who try to go headlong against them unprepared. I am thinking of myself as a pilot again, imagine myself on the bridge of each vessel I see transiting the bay, judge the choices of that other pilot. It gives me something to do, sitting here, a passenger, six-dollar fare receipt crumpled in my hand.

I sit alone in the living room that night, watching the fire. I hear her tossing and turning in Jenny's bed, our bed. Then the television clicks on, and voices mutter through the wall. It is a small house, and there is nowhere to really get away from each other. The night pills the doctor says I should take are on the kitchen counter, but I leave them there. By the time the fire's gone to embers, and there're no more sounds from behind the wall, I turn and go upstairs.

One half of the slanting roof is glass. Moonlight grays the paintings, brings winter to the glowing colors. Jenny ground and mixed the colors herself, turned minerals and insect shells into flowers. The woman who sleeps below the floor does not come into this room. If she did, if she could paint like Jenny did, maybe I could believe she is who she says she is.

Today the woman drives me across the bridge. We are going to the Institute; my progress, or the lack of it in her eyes, needs to be evaluated. I remember when she looked kind. She shared that much with Jenny, at first, but the kindness is mostly gone from her face, her face that is not Jenny's.

"So, how are you doing?" we're asked, after the tests have been run, after we've sat and waited in silence on the uncomfortable chairs.

The silence continues until the doctor breaks it. "Physically, excellent progress is being made. Strength and coordination are approaching near-normal parameters for your age. Cognitively, both processing of new information, and accessing of previous knowledge, are slowly improving. Where there has been little progress, and this is the nature of the syndrome, Brian still doesn't recognize anyone he knew from before the accident as being themselves."

"It's been two years." The words escape, forced out by pain. At first I think I said them, because they were roaring in my head, but the voice is hers.

The doctor looks back and forth from us to his computer screen. "You need to decide, together if possible, but if not, each of you for yourself, if it is time to focus on going forward with what you have and constructing a new relation-

ship, a new life together, or if you want to keep trying to get back at least some of what was lost.”

How can we decide together? So few words pass between us.

“Mr. and Mrs. Donovan, Brian, Jenny, if you want my advice, I think you should give it some more time. The brain is the slowest part of the body to heal. How is your support network holding up? Family, friends sticking around to help out?”

“They have lives of their own,” she says. “And it’s very hard for them, to know that he still doesn’t believe them when they say who they are.”

Should I lie to hold onto those people? For a long time I didn’t even recognize myself. I’d look in the mirror and not know my face. That came back, but it’s not near enough, is it? How much of who we are is other people?

Five more minutes of well-meant advice follows. We’re given a printout of appointments and directives, and we leave.

The next evening, A.J. isn’t on the ferry. I see the red-haired man waiting as usual, and when he realizes she isn’t there, his face darkens. He takes out his phone, calls, and she must have answered, because he starts gesturing as if she could see him. His hand slashes through the air like a knife, then clenches into a fist. I try to hear, but whatever he is saying he says quietly, his voice more controlled than his hand. He shoves the phone back into his jacket pocket and walks, stiff-legged, to the iron bench closest to the canal. He sits, his arms crossed tight against his chest, and his heels drum a harsh rhythm onto the concrete path.

I call and tell the woman, “Nothing is wrong. I’ve just decided to spend more time at the old ships. I’ll take a later ferry.” It is easier than telling her I’m already on this side of the bay, and trying to convince her not to come for me.

She doesn’t answer for a moment. I know she is trying to decide if this is a sign of trouble, of not being able to follow a plan, or if it’s a good thing that signals more independence. “Tell me what you’ve done today, all right?”

So I do, knowing she’s listening to see if I’m making sense, not exhibiting any signs of tiring or stress.

“And you just want some more time to look around? Are you hungry, Brian? You know you shouldn’t wear yourself out.”

“Yes, no, I know,” and I almost call her Jenny, because she used to do that, ask me one question after another, then fall silent to listen to all the answers. It was a game we liked to play.

Finally reassured, she lets me go, and I walk to the little garden, white alyssum around stones, and sit on a bench off to the side where I can watch the man.

For the half-hour we wait, he turns the phone around and around in his hand. Sometimes he’ll pause long enough to read or watch something on the screen, then he goes back to staring at the canal. A harbor dredger goes by, then a tug churning the gray water. A crane turns slowly, lifting and stacking blue containers onto the deck of the *Sorm Neches*. When the stacking is near done, the captain will put in the call for a harbor pilot.

One of the first tasks I would have to do on a new ship was to size up the captain. Would he trust my knowledge of local waters? Most of them had no

problem sharing the bridge for the few hours it took to guide their ship into or out of the bay. But a few did, and would try to crowd me.

When the ferry docks, the man is standing at the head of the gangway. She is the last of the passengers to come out, and when he puts his arm around her, I am close enough to see how tightly his fingers grasp her shoulder, and how he crowds against her as they walk, making her stumble, so it is him holding her up.

I follow them down Main, to Pacific, then Santa Clara. He has finally let go of her and she walks carefully, staring straight ahead. I am not close enough to hear the words, but I think he is doing most of the talking. They stop at one of the apartment buildings and he takes out his key, opens the lobby door. When he turns to her, I can hear him, his voice harsh and aggrieved, "You know I just wanted . . ." and then they are inside.

It is a strangely designed building. Two yellow stories, apartments stacked on top of each other, just like any other dozen buildings on the street, but one apartment extends out over the driveway—one of the rooms out in the air, held up by two pillars. It belongs to them. I see them walk in, put their coats in a closet. A. J. goes through a doorway to what I think is the kitchen, and the man comes over to the bank of windows. He looks up and down the block, and then his gaze settles on me, here on the sidewalk. He will know me the next time, and that is how I want it. A. J. gestures to him, and he turns, reaches for the glass she holds out to him, and they disappear out of sight.

The next day the sound of bells chimes from the Ferry Building as I wait for A. J. The sound is beautiful, but sound is all it is. Just recordings pouring through loudspeakers. No iron making other iron sing.

I have started telling her stories. I don't know if they're about me, or friends, or people I heard about, or if they're something I read in a book. A boy, climbing a tree outracing his brother, then laughing as he shinnied out over air and slid down from one branch to another, green limbs shaking all around him. Then, a young sailor waiting for his ship, going AWOL for a few hours from base every night, climbing across roofs and hopping fences to take his girlfriend dancing. A. J. listens, but does not tell her own stories, and I can tell that part of her mind is always elsewhere.

"Who is the man who waits for you?"

I do not think she will answer, but then she does, without looking at me. "David." Her hands turn over, empty, her lunch eaten and the scraps thrown to the birds a long while ago. She seems in no hurry to go back today.

"I don't think he is . . ." *good for you* is what I mean to say, but what gives me the right to say that? "I don't think he is kind to you."

All she does is shake her head and leave me to interpret that as I will.

"What does he do?"

Another silence, then finally, "Nothing right now. He was in finance. The company he worked for went under."

"It's been hard on you." I don't phrase it as a question, and I don't care if it was hard on him too.

She tries to shrug, but the little movement that breaks through the tension of her shoulders is more like a wince. "One kind of life falls apart, you try to

hold on, then make another if you have to.” She looks at me. “You know that as well as anyone.”

“Do you have family, friends who can help?”

“They’ve got troubles of their own. I don’t want to add to it.”

She is in a hurry to leave now, and goes without saying goodbye. I look out past the tourists, the birds, the fishing boats, to the islands in the bay.

The woman gets up from the sofa when I come in. The bottle and her glass, both a third gone, sit on the polished surface of the coffee table. This is another way I know she is not Jenny, no matter that they share almost the same eyes, mouth, freckles scattered across nose and cheeks. Jenny hardly drank, no more than taking a sip from my glass of Scotch, and when I kissed her we would share the taste of it, the smoke and the peat. This woman drinks white wine, pale and shimmering, and it brings her no joy that I can see. Her face is lined with worry, but whatever she would wish to say, she just bites down on her words.

I am restless after dinner, but we have agreed I do not go out alone in the evenings. So I circle the living room, pacing. The woman leaves the dishes on the table. I hear the click of her door closing. The neighbors’ lights, broken by leaves, shine outside the darkening windows. The people who used to live in this room, this house, were happy. Now we are ghosts. I cannot touch who she was, who I was. Only things. Sofa, chair, lamps, shelves. And empty space. There are not even pictures of the people we were. I remember the woman boxing them up. Along with other things that tormented me because I could not remember why they used to matter so much.

Up and down the hall. Into the room I could sleep in if I wanted to—desk, daybed. Too much changed. Too many dreams I don’t understand. Back in the hall and one hand on the bannister to go up to Jenny’s studio. To see what? Dust on the half-used tubes of paint? Caps wrenched tight so the colors inside won’t harden and crack? Not tonight. The door to the hall closet is partly open. I start to shut it, but instead pull it wide. Coats, parkas, bats, boots, ski poles, boxes. I take one out, lift the lid. Wool hats, goggles, thick gloves, and socks. Do I remember trees dark against a cold white sky? Jenny’s warm hands on my face before we set off again, the snow whispering under our skis? Another box. Here are the pictures. Framed, wrapped in thin cloths. The box too heavy for what it seems to hold.

I set it on the carpet in the living room, take out the pictures one at a time, unwrap them, leave the cloths in a heap beside me. Face after face after face. There is one I know. And as I try to remember her from before, and fail utterly, I am more ashamed of this failure than anything I have ever done in my life.

What do I say to her? This daughter I can’t remember, from before? A.J., Alexandra Jane, Lexie. I do not know, so for a week I leave earlier, come back earlier, and wait in the harbor garden where she will not see me, where I can watch the man waiting for her, and follow the two of them, to see that she is safe. She tries to walk apart from him, but he reaches out and holds her tight against his side, and she gives in. Nothing more than that happens, and once they are home, there is never any noise from their apartment, any shouting or breaking, that reaches the street where I stand.

In the evenings, after dinner and after the woman has shut her door, I take out the box from the closet. Set the pictures on the table in an arc in front of me, and try to see what was lost. Vacations, graduations, picnics, softball games.

The small carvings are packed below the photographs. Wood animals, wood people, then, as her skill grew and the lines grew more sure, more focused, she shifted to stone, and turned what she saw into suggestion—a wolf just caught sight of through thick leaves, a body glimpsed through water.

Finally I wait for her outside the art school at noon. Ask her if she'll walk with me. Ask her, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I did. Dozens of times. Hundreds." She stops, shakes her head, fights against tears. No one walking by notices.

I try to take her hand and she pulls it away, the scars pale against the wind-reddened skin. "I'm sorry," I tell her.

"I know," she says. "It was too soon. Everyone told me that. Months and months of too soon."

"I didn't know who you were." *So many faces pressing close, all telling me they are important, telling me they remember.*

"Do you now?"

If I tell her the truth, will it drive her away again?

"Sometimes. Pieces, flashes are coming back." Do I tell her that those pieces of memory never match who is in front of me? "Will you come home? Have dinner with your mother and me?"

She won't meet my eyes, but I can see her bite down on her lip, see her hands tighten. "I can't. I can't stand seeing how much this hurts Mom."

"Give me some time to make it better. A few days." Now, after all these months of slow and halting walking, thinking, feeling, there is finally a certainty that I have to move quickly. That being truthful is not what matters. That I have to give these half-known strangers at least something of what they need.

We've gone less than one of the long city blocks, people eddy around us when we stop, obstructions in the current. As she turns away, A.J. reaches back her hand and I catch hold, just for a moment. Do I remember her reaching back like that, when she was little, on her way into a classroom full of noise and the smells of chalk and paste?

I don't see her on the ferry going home, and the man is not waiting for her at the terminal. There are no lights on at their apartment, the curtains are open, and no one moves behind the windows. I circle back to the terminal, neither of them is there, nor on any of the blocks I walk on the way home. I am tired, breathing hard by the time I turn the door handle and go in.

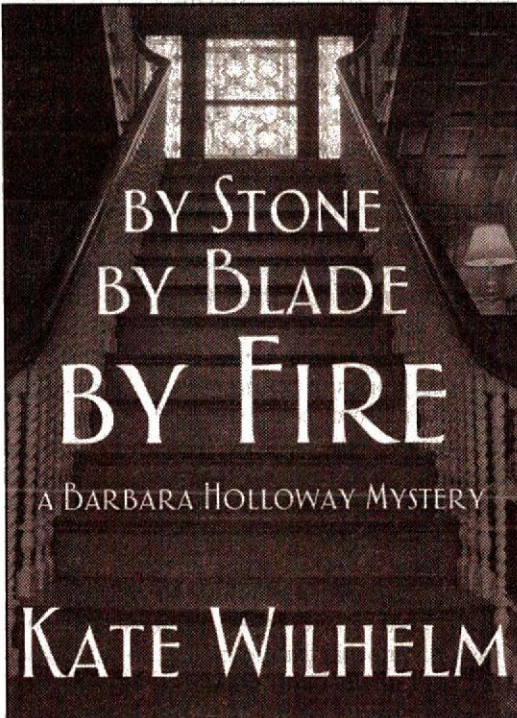
They are here, the woman and my daughter, and for a moment my heart lights up. Jenny and Lexie, I remember them together, the window and the bay behind them, blue sky and blue water. Jenny's arms are tight around our daughter. And then I hear his voice, rasping, angry, "Sit down."

When things go wrong on a ship, they go wrong quickly, and there is no time to agonize over solutions. He is standing in the kitchen doorway and I see what is in his hand. One November I was on a ship coming into the bay. We had just

crossed under the bridge and lost power in both engines. This should never happen, but it did. I turn away to the hall. Wind and currents were sending us onto the headland rocks. He follows me, away from my family. He will have to come close. The waters were too deep where we were for the anchors to catch hold. We had to wait, and drift closer into shore. I get the closet door open, grip the bat, and swing it back against him. He grunts, hard, but the knife does not fall. The anchor chains, each link a foot across, rattled, shaking the ship as they fell through the water. The rocks were close, too close, not close enough. He comes at me again, and I block him with the bat, push him up against the wall, trap his knife hand. We could hear, feel, through the hundreds of feet of rushing water, the anchors scraping, dragging, not catching hold, not saving us. I hear Jenny calling, "Brian, Brian!" He punches me, hard, with the hand that is not holding the knife, and I slip, enough for him to get loose. He slashes at me, here in the narrow hallway, and does not miss. I think he has cut a tendon because one arm falls, useless and hanging. It does not hurt and I still have the bat. We could see the rocks, gray and wind-scoured, ship-killers. He looks back toward my family. Jenny is on the phone. Lexie is moaning, "David, stop!" Now that she is standing apart from her mother I can see the blood on her shirt. He goes toward them and I bring the bat down on him. He falls and I do not care if he is dead or not, only that he does not take another step.

The detectives' questions go on for a while, but the answers are simple. "He had a knife. He hurt my daughter. He was going to hurt my wife."

They do not ask me the questions I still cannot answer. ●



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END TIME FOR ELLERY?

BY FRANCIS M. NEVINS

When the author dies, the work dies. That is almost always the reality, and certainly it's the rule in genre fiction. There are always a few exceptions, like Agatha Christie and Louis L'Amour, but those authors are *rarae aves*.

Fred Dannay had completed his synopsis for the next Ellery Queen novel and sent it to Manny Lee before his cousin's death in April 1971. No one has ever expanded this document to novel length as Manny would have done had he lived longer, but it gives us an opportunity to see and evaluate for ourselves the kind of raw material with which he had worked for decades.

The Tragedy of Errors opens on Monday, April 3, 1967, in a castle known as Elsinore on a hilltop overlooking Hollywood. A violent quarrel is taking place between sixty-five-year-old Morna Richmond, a superstar of silent screen who had invested wisely after talking pictures had ruined her career, and her decades-younger paramour Buck Burnshaw, a failed actor in cheap Westerns. At the climax of their battle over his affair with ex-starlet Cherry O'Hare, Buck comes very close to strangling Morna. Two days later, in the office of her lawyer Ted Curtis, Morna signs a will, making sure that neither Curtis nor the witnesses can see how she fills in the blank space where the name of the person to whom she's leaving her estate belongs. One copy of this will she leaves with Curtis, the other she takes with her. Soon afterwards, Buck steals the latter copy of the will from Morna's wall safe and leaves it with Cherry O'Hare.

On the morning of April twenty-fourth a servant finds Morna shot to death. Buck phones Dr. Rago, the psychiatrist on whom she was dependent, and the police. Ellery is in Hollywood and soaked in Shakespeare, being on assignment to turn *Othello* into a contemporary detective film. When the squeal comes in he happens to be chatting with Lieutenant Perez of LAPD Homicide, who invites him to accompany the police to Elsinore. Evidence against Buck Burnshaw piles up, notably a tiny BB-shot pellet clutched in Morna's hand, which the sleuths interpret as (what else?) a dying message. The one copy of her will has of course vanished from her wall safe—which has a special dial consisting of the letters of the alphabet and a combination made up of four of those letters—and the other copy is discovered to have vanished from her lawyer's office. Buck is arrested and put on trial, but the case against him collapses when Ellery finds a suicide note in Morna's indisputable handwriting, dated the day of her death, in a copy of the complete works of Shakespeare in her bedroom. Acquitted and therefore safe forever from being retried, Buck then reveals that Morna actually wrote the suicide note back in 1961, and that he himself had added a tiny horizontal stroke to turn the 1 in the year date into a 7. Why did he frame himself for her murder? So that he'd inherit her fortune under her will, which he then produces. To whom did she leave everything she possessed? *To whoever murdered her*. In many a Queen story or radio play, the validity of such a wacko will would have gone unquestioned. Here, however, Ellery knows enough law to point out what Buck never understood: that Morna's will is invalid and unenforceable as against public policy, so that Buck killed her for nothing. Since Morna had no known blood relatives, the issue of who will inherit her estate now arises. Just when it seems that her fortune will

go to the state of California by the process known as escheat, a forgotten old shoot-em-up actor named Reed Harmon enters the picture with proof that back in 1930 he and Morna were secretly married. The marriage only lasted ten days but was never dissolved, which means that Harmon, as her surviving spouse, will take the estate. Complications continue to abound—including a suicide, another murder, and a young black playwright who hovers around the fringes of the plot with his motorcycle—until Ellery identifies seven characteristics that Morna’s murderer must have and names one of the characters as the culprit. Then, as so often before, he discovers something he’s overlooked and offers a second and more flabbergasting solution that finally reveals the murderer, perhaps the most Iagoesque of all the many Iago figures in the Queen canon.

Accompanying this Shakespeare-saturated synopsis was an undated covering letter to Manny which makes clear that for Fred the subject of the book was to be “the insanity of today’s world.” Sane is mad, mad is sane. Fred never let me read the synopsis in his lifetime, but told me of its leitmotif and added that it had come to him from reading some of the work of psychiatrist R.D. Laing, who believed that some of the sanest people alive were in mental hospitals. In fact, as I discovered when his sons invited me to read it, it had even deeper roots in the Queen novel *There Was an Old Woman* (1943).

Seventeen years after Fred’s death, his synopsis became the centerpiece of a book that also contained twenty-two essays and reminiscences about the cousins by various authors and editors and members of the Dannay and Lee families. On the fiction side, *The Tragedy of Errors* (1999) brought together all the as yet uncollected short stories about Ellery plus the non-series novelette “TerrorTown” (1956).

The centenary of both Fred’s and Manny’s births, in 2005, led to a flurry of new material. *EQMM* celebrated the entire year by running an essay on some aspect of Queen in each monthly issue. Columbia University, the repository of the Dannay papers, hosted a one-day EQ symposium which drew the attention of the *New York Times*. And the small publishing house of Crippen & Landru, which had issued *The Tragedy of Errors* in 1999, celebrated the centenary with *The Adventure of the Murdered Moths* (2005), a generous assortment of some of the finest EQ radio dramas: nine scripts from the first season (1939-40), when each show ran sixty minutes, and five thirty-minute scripts from later years.

Seven years later, with the publication of much of the Dannay-Lee correspondence in *Blood Relations*, edited by Joseph Goodrich (Perfect Crime Books, 2012), every Queen devotee was given a ringside seat at the brutal verbal duels Fred and Manny fought during the period when some of the finest third-period Queen novels were being plotted and written. Almost all the material from their letters that I quote in *The Art of Detection* (from which this piece is excerpted) comes from this fascinating book.

I had always taken for granted that Ellery Queen was one (or two) of those rare authors whose work would survive them. I never thought I’d live to see the falling off into near oblivion of what had been a household name for more than a decade before I was born and for at least the first thirty years of my life. Why did this happen? Mystery author and reviewer Jon L. Breen wrote a notable piece for *The Weekly Standard* (October 10, 2005) both celebrating (**Cont. page 82**)



ADVENT

by Kevin Wignall

The regional train from Düsseldorf pulled into Cologne's main station a few minutes behind schedule at a quarter to nine. Even this late in the evening the station was busy—people with suitcases killing time waiting for night trains, beggars searching out the sympathetic or gullible, passengers jumping on and off the regional trains, which buzzed in and out like worker bees.

As the doors opened on the Düsseldorf train, forty or fifty people spilled out of it, charging along the platform at a brisk pace, none of them quite breaking into a run, but all of them eager to be where they were going. These were not people with luggage, but regular commuters returning home after a day at work, the station so familiar it had become invisible to them.

Karsten Groll, set against this backdrop, looked like someone walking at normal speed through a time-lapsed film. He'd stepped out of the front carriage of the train but walked so slowly that the passengers from the other carriages caught up with him, engulfed him, left him behind.

He hardly seemed to notice them, and anyone watching him might have wondered why he alone was in no hurry to be somewhere. Casually scruffy, but not homeless scruffy, he was wearing jeans and a military-style jacket, a beanie hat, a small almost-empty rucksack on his back.

Only the difference in his walking speed marked him out, but that in itself would have been enough to make the same observer question if everything

was well in this young man's world. Did he have nowhere to go? Again, he didn't look homeless, but perhaps he'd only just walked out on his old life. Or was it that he didn't want to go where he was headed, and if so, why did he not want to go there?

That observer might have had misgivings about the young man from the Düsseldorf train, and they would have been right to be concerned. Karsten *was* on his way somewhere and was determined he would get there, but it was true that he was in no hurry.

Because Karsten Groll was walking towards his own death. He walked towards it with the same certainty that his train had travelled towards Cologne—a few minutes early, a few minutes late, but the destination never in doubt. He was resigned to death too, a resignation which had developed its own steady momentum.

So Karsten walked slowly but deliberately, and knowing this was the last night of his life, he looked upon the station as none of his fellow passengers had done. In fact, he had chosen it—Messe would have been a little closer, but this station brought back memories of childhood visits with his mother and brother.

He glanced up now at the glass canopy arching overhead, at the orange glow of the lights and the darkness of the city beyond. He noticed a heritage train, the *Rheingold*, parked on a neighbouring platform—previously he might have sneered at something like that but now it looked wonderful and warm and inviting and filled him with a vague longing he couldn't quite identify.

He left the ordered hollow vault of the terminus with its tinny echoing announcements in German and English, and descended the steps to the more hectic retail area beneath the station. It was mainly fast-food outlets and cafes, but a few gift shops too—perfumes, chocolates, books—and Karsten guessed it attracted a lot of people who weren't even travelling because it was crowded with people at cross-purposes, some loitering, socializing, others trying only to pass through.

He felt a little in both camps. He was passing through, but he came close to stopping a couple of times to look in one window or another, and finally did stop to look in the window of the chocolate shop. The display was full of advent calendars.

He and Stefan had both been given one as children, to avoid fights over who would have the chocolate behind each window, though he didn't remember ever fighting with his brother. Perhaps he just remembered it that way now, but seeing these calendars, some shaped like Christmas trees, he wished he could call Stefan to tell him about them, to ask if he remembered how excited they

Kevin Wignall is the author of five adult novels; as K.J. Wignall he also writes for young adults (see *The Mercian Trilogy*). His novel *Who Is Conrad Hirst?* was nominated for an Edgar Allan Poe Award in 2008, in the category Best Paperback Original, and he's also been nominated for a Barry Award and for the British CWA Short Story Dagger. His last story for *EQMM*, "A Death," was translated into Finnish and was the basis for a short film by award-winning director Garrick Hamm. ¶

would get about opening each little window.

He wished, too, that some stranger would come and stand and stare at the same display, that they might strike up a conversation. It was never about the chocolates, he wanted to say to that person, but about the anticipation of opening the window, about the rhythm and the warmth that it gave to the Christmas season.

But no one came, and he walked on. He doubted all those calendars would be sold in the next six days, and after that they would be redundant. He wondered what happened to them afterwards. Maybe they were just thrown away. Like him, their time was almost up.

He left the station, out into the biting cold of this November night, across the concourse, climbed the steps and crossed the overpass to the cathedral. He was aware of it to his left, soaring above him like a Gothic cliff face as he skirted around it.

This was the other reason he'd chosen to come to this station, so that he could also stroll for one last time through one of the Christmas markets. It was his earliest memory of Cologne, but as he reached the far side of the cathedral he realized that dream would not be rekindled tonight. The fair was spread out before him, but unlit, and the shadowy activity filling Roncalliplatz was that of stallholders making last-minute preparations.

He walked through the almost completed market anyway, and as he overheard conversations about the opening the next day he regretted that his actions would fill the newspapers with something unpleasant, possibly even marring the atmosphere for a day or two. It was unfortunate, but he wouldn't change his mind.

Karsten was heading across the city, to Mohr's bar. Mohr would arrive there at nine, as he did every night to "check the books"—that's what Stefan had told him. Karsten would arrive a little later, kill Mohr, and then get killed himself, not by choice, but he was too much of a realist to dream up a plan that involved getting out alive.

Besides, there wasn't much left to stay alive for, only memories like this, tarnished forever now by loss and failure. This and the other markets would be full of families by this time tomorrow, and it filled Karsten with wonder and bitterness that his own family had been wiped out so succinctly by bad luck and bad choices—maybe the two were the same.

His father's death was so firmly lodged in the past that he struggled now to think of it as something that had not been meant to happen, but he guessed his father had known how tired he was before setting off on his last car journey. In truth, there had been nothing inevitable about it, only carelessness and perhaps a desire to be home with his family. Karsten had only been eight at the time.

There had been no choice in his mother's death, of course—no one would choose cancer—and it was still too raw for him to think about even five years later. What he did think about was the failed promise. He'd been twenty at the time, Stefan only seventeen, and Karsten had promised her as she'd lay dying, had promised that he would look after Stefan, make sure nothing happened to him.

He left the market behind and threaded through streets that were quieter, heading by memory and instinct towards the river and the Deutzer Brücke. On

one of the side streets there was some building work going on and he had to walk in the road.

Stefan had made choices too, in getting together with Martina, in staying with her even when he realized she was a junkie, believing he could get her clean. But Stefan had failed in his bid to look after Martina, just as Karsten had failed to look after his brother.

His mind raced back, wishing Stefan hadn't warned her pusher off, wishing the pusher had listened, wishing Stefan hadn't gone round there and flushed his drugs and beaten him up. Stefan had known too well what would follow, which was why he'd bought the gun.

Even thinking of it made Karsten suddenly aware of the slight weight of it in his rucksack, a gun wrapped in a towel, lightly bouncing against his back as he walked. He'd test-fired it once in the woods, making sure he understood it, but only once, one single round, because he hadn't found spare ammunition and, unlike Stefan, didn't know where to get it. The remaining bullets in the clip were the sum of his armory.

In the end, Stefan had left the gun with Karsten because he'd persuaded Martina to get away somewhere, hide out with him. That had been a choice too, and only an optimist in love could have failed to imagine that Martina would call her pusher as soon as the craving got too great.

As far as the police had been able to tell, they'd picked Stefan up on the street, driven him out of town. His body had been found a few days later. They'd beaten him to death. Nearly every major bone broken, his skull cracked in three places, one eye ruptured, massive internal injuries. That's what those simple words—beaten to death—concealed.

Karsten saw a girl huddled in a doorway, looking cold and strung-out and lonely. She mumbled something as she looked up at him but he didn't hear her and didn't break his stride because the world was full of people like Martina and it always would be. Any sympathy he'd had, learned from Stefan, had long since disappeared.

But Martina was no longer one of those people—she'd died two weeks after Stefan, an overdose. One of her friends had claimed it was intentional, a grief-stricken suicide, and Karsten wished he could believe that but he couldn't. Nor could he forgive her for confirming what he'd known from the start, that Stefan's death had been pointless.

He reached the bridge and started across its open expanse, cars tearing past, the tramlines in the middle. There were a few people cycling and walking on both sides too, but not many. The cold was raw and fierce out here with a wind whipping up off the river.

Even so, halfway across he stopped and looked back at the twin towers of the cathedral, illuminated against the night sky. He could just see, below the metal arches of the distant railway bridge, that the floating Christmas market was also being prepared for opening day.

It occurred to him that even though the news might be upsetting when it broke, he was actually about to give the city a gift, that the Christmas markets would open tomorrow and one of the city's biggest drug dealers would be dead. It wouldn't make the problem go away, of course, but it would be something.

That had been the excuse given by the police for not finding Stefan's killers in over two months, that the problem was bigger than Mohr. There were two

big rival drug gangs, so maybe the other had killed him because dealings between these various gangs were complex.

He'd reminded them again that Stefan hadn't been in a gang, that the pusher he'd beaten up was one of Mohr's. "Trust us," they'd said. "Trust us, it may not look like it, but things are happening, we're investigating."

Why did they not see that Karsten had no trust left, that he had used it all up? A week ago he'd called them one last time and had been spoken to as if he was the criminal. No mention of the two rival gangs, of Mohr and the Turk, no mention of ongoing enquiries, just a curt reminder that they were busy, that his was not the only case, that there were many innocent victims out there.

Innocent had been said in such a way as to differentiate it from his calls, as if Stefan had somehow been part of the underworld that had killed him. Stefan had been able to get hold of a gun, he'd had a junkie girlfriend, but he'd been no criminal.

A long express train crossed the rail bridge heading into the main station, an array of lit windows passing behind the metal trellis, revealing in silhouette the countless pedestrians ambling along looking at the thousands of love padlocks that adorned the bridge.

Perhaps there were couples attaching their own padlocks as he stood there watching, an expression of their love and commitment. And though he felt a city and a lifetime away from that other bridge, it made him smile to think that good things were happening in the world, that good things would continue to happen after he was gone.

He walked on. A tram passed him and he involuntarily picked up his pace, as if trying to pursue it. The little illuminated universe of the tram grew smaller and smaller, merging with the other lights on the bridge, calling him on to his fate.

He checked his watch and walked faster still, spurred on, fearful that if he walked too slowly Mohr might have left again. By the time he reached the far side of the bridge, his eyes were streaming with tears from the cold wind, but he didn't stop, just wiped them on his sleeve and kept walking.

He turned right, cutting through side streets, and his pace only slowed when he saw the bar up ahead of him. It was open but looked quiet. It wasn't the kind of bar that attracted casual clientele and the regulars were mostly in Mohr's employ or hangers-on.

He steadied himself mentally as he walked, trying to look relaxed, like this was something he did every day. He had no fear of dying, not now, but he feared one last failure, failing to get to Mohr, being stopped before he was even close.

He pushed the door open and stepped inside. There was music playing, but it was nothing he recognized, some kind of rock from the 1970s. And it was so warm that for a moment he had to stand and collect himself—he felt almost instantly sleepy after the biting cold out on the street.

He walked into the main room then, a long bar down the left-hand side, tables and booths filling the rest of the space. Only a couple of the tables were occupied, less than a dozen guys in total, all Mohr's people. One table was playing cards, the other had been listening to one of them telling a story but they fell silent when Karsten walked in.

He kept walking and looked at the barman as he passed and said, "I'm here to see Herr Mohr—he knows I'm coming."

The barman didn't respond at all, just stared blankly. Karsten had almost reached the door at the far end of the room, though, when he heard a voice behind him.

"Hey, kid!"

Karsten felt his heart perform a strange sickening manoeuvre. He stopped and turned as casually as he could manage. The dim lighting was the only thing masking his fear and the fluttering twitch that had started below his left eye and which he couldn't control.

It was the guy who'd been telling a story and he looked at Karsten now as if he was in the mood for sport. The others were all looking at the guy and smiling, and Karsten guessed this was one of the big men in the organization, maybe even the one who'd arranged Stefan's murder. It made Karsten wish that he had more bullets, that he could kill this man too, kill all of them.

"You're not Turkish, are you?"

The others all burst out laughing. Karsten looked anything but Turkish. It was a double joke too, because the Turk wasn't even Turkish, but an Albanian.

Karsten couldn't speak for a moment and responded by pulling his beanie hat off and putting it in his jacket pocket. He was too hot anyway, so hot he felt he might pass out.

The guy nodded in mock approval and said, "Now that is a fine German boy." He smiled at Karsten and said, "Don't look so worried, I'm just having some fun, but if you *had* been a Turk . . ." That seemed to be a punch line in itself because his friends fell about laughing again, maybe even laughing too hard, and so did the guys playing cards.

Karsten nodded and turned and walked through the door. There was a short corridor in front of him and then stairs to the upper floor. Even as he reached the bottom of the stairs he could see Mohr's bodyguard standing on the small landing at the top.

He tried a smile and stopped when he was halfway up the stairs and said, "I'm here to see Herr Mohr."

The bodyguard was heavily built, his head shaved, wearing a leather jacket.

"He's busy."

"He knew I might be coming tonight." As Karsten talked he eased the rucksack from his back and opened it. He clearly didn't look threatening because the guard looked unimpressed rather than suspicious. "I've brought him the payment . . . the money I owed." He was reaching into the rucksack now, and was pleased that it looked as if he was searching for the money instead of ensuring the towel was wrapped around the end of the gun, that his hand was firmly on the grip. "Three thousand, five hundred . . ."

Karsten held the outside of the rucksack with his other hand, pointing up at the bodyguard. He fired and his hand kicked backwards. The towel muffled the noise but the shot was still much louder than he'd expected. He'd been aiming at the bodyguard's chest but the bullet hit him in the side of the neck and blood sprayed out of it. The guy fell to his knees as he reached up, his hand blindly trying to address the fountain of blood which pumped deep and sleek around his fingers.

Karsten wasn't sure if he heard someone shout behind him—the music seemed louder now and he couldn't distinguish the sounds. They had to have

heard something, surely. Either way, he wouldn't have long and knew he needed to move quickly.

The bodyguard toppled forward, a confused expression locked into his face. His body slid down four or five stairs before becoming wedged and crumpling awkwardly.

Karsten flew up the remaining stairs, jumping over the body. He could smell burning and pulled the gun out of the rucksack. He pushed the door open and stepped into the office. He dropped the smouldering rucksack onto the floor, pointing the gun forward as he kicked the door shut behind him.

Mohr was sitting there just ten feet away behind the desk. He had a shock of dyed hair, was overweight, wearing a shirt and pale grey suit—he looked like a car salesman. And, amazingly to Karsten, he was actually going through the books in that there was some kind of ledger on the desk in front of him. There were no bundles of money or drugs, but then, he guessed that was only in the movies.

Mohr almost instantly went to reach into his jacket but Karsten waved the gun at him and said, "Hands on the table or I'll kill you right now."

Mohr complied and Karsten reached behind and fumbled for the lock, turning it. He couldn't hear anyone coming yet, so maybe they hadn't heard the first shot. They would hear the others, but it wouldn't matter then. The rucksack was still smouldering and Karsten stamped on it a couple of times as he moved forward, never letting the gun stray from Mohr's body.

"You look familiar," said Mohr. "But you don't work for the Turk. Have we met before?"

Karsten shook his head.

"I saw you once, from a distance, but we've never met."

Mohr shrugged and looked ready to speak, but Karsten only had a limited amount of time and this wasn't a conversation.

"I look like my brother, that's why you think I'm familiar. Stefan Groll, who you murdered."

He was expecting a denial, but Mohr nodded and said, "You know, in America they have something called suicide by cop, when a person wants to die and behaves in such a way that a policeman shoots him."

"Stefan didn't want to die—he wanted his girlfriend to live, that was all."

Mohr looked threatening as he said, "Did he honestly believe I would let him wreck my business? You call that wanting to live?" His voice got louder, and Karsten wondered if he was hoping his shouts might be heard from downstairs. "What did he think, that I would see the error of my ways and leave the drugs business behind? He left me no choice!"

Karsten couldn't hear anything, but he suddenly sensed, as if by instinct alone, that something was happening in the bar below, that there was some movement. He had no more time and realized anyway that he wasn't here for an admission of guilt, which was just as well, but for something much simpler.

He braced his arm and fired. The noise was deafening now. It hit Mohr in the chest and knocked him back in his chair. But there was no explosion of blood this time and Mohr looked damaged, winded, but no less threatening. His hands flailed about, and Karsten saw he was reaching for his gun in its shoulder holster.

At the same time, Karsten realized Mohr wasn't as overweight as he looked, that he was wearing body armour. He aimed the gun a little higher, directly at

Mohr's face. He squeezed the trigger, closing his eyes at the crucial moment, hearing a single word from Mohr, "No!" small and desperate, and then the deafening bang and another and another until the trigger clicked beneath the pressure of his finger and nothing happened.

He opened his eyes. Mohr had slumped sideways, not quite falling out of his plush leather office chair. He was dead, his face barely recognizable. Karsten's ears were ringing with the gunshots, but he heard the rush of bangs and clattering and shouts as his own death came panicked towards him.

Then he heard a gunshot, but it was from the bar below. He walked to the office door, unlocked and opened it to look down the stairs. There were more gunshots. The door into the bar opened, the '70s rock pounding out, then a voice shouting, "Miki! The Turk!" A percussive thud followed, the sound of that same person having the air pummelled out of his lungs by the impact of a bullet. Karsten couldn't see him, but he guessed he'd slumped in the doorway, wedging the door open, because the noise level stayed the same and the gunfire became more insistent.

Karsten stepped back inside, locked the door again. He could see another door in the corner behind the desk. He picked up his rucksack and ran through it, into a long narrow corridor which had boxes of spirits lined up along one wall.

There was a window at the end of the corridor and he opened it and looked down. It was a yard below, with a couple of cars parked there. It was quiet too, though he could still hear the noise carrying up from the bar and perhaps a siren in the distance.

The window was narrow and he doubted any of the other people in Mohr's bar would have got through it. Karsten slipped the gun into the rucksack and threw it down, then pulled himself through the window, slinking his hips sideways to get out. There was a Mercedes parked almost below and he jumped, landing on the roof with a denting thud, and immediately to the ground from there. The car wasn't alarmed.

He picked up the rucksack, took the gun out again, and slipped it into his jacket pocket. He walked along the side of Mohr's bar and out into the street. When he saw other people nearby looking on with concern, he adopted the same expression himself.

There were a couple of cars parked erratically outside the bar, and still the sound of gunfire, as if there was some kind of standoff. There were more sirens now too, and even as Karsten walked casually from the scene a couple of police cars came tearing past.

He dropped the rucksack into a litter bin a little way before the Deutzer Brücke, making sure he pushed it in all the way. And halfway across the bridge he stopped as he had before and looked at the cathedral and the trains passing on the railway bridge. He took the gun from his pocket and dropped it into the dark water below.

He stood for a moment longer, waiting for yet another police car to go hurtling over the bridge behind him. But he had no thoughts for the city now, nor for his family and his memories. He could think of nothing clearly because he was not meant to be alive.

What would he do now? He had no plans because he had imagined no future for himself beyond tonight. He was to return home, he supposed, but then what? Resume his studies, start again? He thought of an old Samuel Beckett

quote he'd once heard—he couldn't remember all of it, only the end: *Fail again. Fail better.*

He walked on and, feeling the cold as his senses came back to him, he reached for his beanie hat and put it on again. Had he failed tonight? He had failed to die, but that had never been part of his plan, just a consequence of it. He had killed Mohr and one other, deaths which sat remarkably lightly on his conscience, so in that at least he'd succeeded.

Perhaps, as it turned out, Mohr would have died tonight anyway, but Karsten had killed him, in a stand against Stefan's death, and against all the bad luck and bad choices that had beset their family and dragged it down. He had succeeded, for the first time in years, and it didn't matter that he didn't know how he'd succeeded, because nor had he ever understood the flowering of his failures.

He walked on, back the way he'd come, back to the market, and there for a few paces he walked alongside a middle-aged man carrying three cardboard boxes, an awkward load. Karsten was about to turn when he heard the man mutter something as the boxes slipped.

Karsten turned on his heel, grabbing the box that was in danger of toppling to the ground.

"I've got it," he said.

"Thanks," said the man, and was about to say something else when one of the other boxes slipped. Between them they managed to stop it falling to the floor but the top burst open and Karsten saw that it was full of wooden toys.

Once it was safely lowered to the ground Karsten smiled and said, "I loved these when I was a kid."

The guy smiled too as he stacked the open box on top of the other and picked them both up.

"I still do," said the man, then looked at the box in Karsten's arms as if at a complex puzzle.

"I'll carry this one for you."

"Thanks, it's only just over here."

They walked a short distance to his stall, the man talking briefly about the market and how long he'd been coming here. There were two people already at the stall, the guy's son and daughter he guessed, maybe a few years younger than Karsten.

He said hello to them and was thanked again for helping out.

"I was just there," said Karsten, and they shook hands and he said, "Well, good luck with the fair." He turned and headed towards the cathedral.

The man smiled and watched him walk off, but then, for some reason he couldn't quite fathom, he became full of misgivings for the young man who'd just helped him. He wasn't sure why, but he felt in some way that it was important not to let him walk away.

He glanced at his son and daughter, who looked back at him almost as if they knew what he was about to do. It was the way he was, he supposed, and they were long used to it by now.

"Hey, son!" He followed after him and as Karsten turned around he said, "I didn't even catch your name."

Karsten came back a couple of paces.

"Karsten Groll."

"This may be a strange question, Karsten, but do you have a job right now?"

Karsten shook his head and said, "I'm an art student, but I'm taking some time out."

"Art?"

He nodded and said, "Sculpture mainly. Some painting, but mainly sculpture." Over the past twelve months Karsten had almost forgotten art but suddenly felt the urge to go back to it, as if his old life was seeping back into him. He'd lost the will to create but could finally see that it would come back if he gave it time.

"Well, look, my other son's travelling around the world, so we're one short this year. I can't pay you much, but it could be a good experience for an artist."

"You want me to work on your stall?"

"Why not?"

Karsten looked across at the son and daughter, who were smiling expectantly, and he said, "I'm not sure what my plans are."

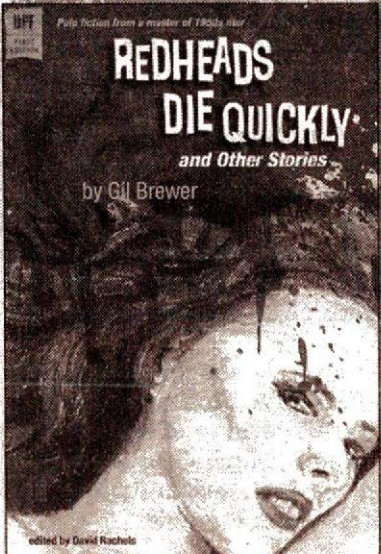
"It's only four weeks—Advent, that's all."

Karsten nodded and said, "I used to come here when I was a kid." He walked back as the man introduced himself and his family and talked about the opening tomorrow and what they might expect over the coming month.

Within twenty minutes it felt as if he had always been a part of this, or at least, as if nothing had come before. It was as if he had turned around on the Deutzer Brücke and not gone on and killed Mohr and his bodyguard.

Because this kindly man and his family had taken him in on a moment's trust, killer that he was. His future had been a blank, but now it seemed to him that the world had been made new again, and tomorrow night he would still be here when lights filled the darkness. ●

From the author of *13 French Street* and *The Campus Murders*




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BLOG BYTES



by Bill Crider

Since this is the January issue of the magazine, I thought it would be a good time to introduce a new feature. Each month I'll have an update on a blog that I've written about in the past, usually several years in the past, so those of you who are new to the column will get a chance to catch up. Those of you who are regular readers will get a short refresher. First up is *Jungle Red* (<http://www.jungleredwriters.com/>), one of my favorites because of the great lineup of bloggers. Here's who's there now: Julia Spencer Fleming, Jan Brogan, Lucy Burdette, Deborah Crombie, Hank Phillippi Ryan, Hallie Ephron, Rhys Bowen, Rosemary Harris, and Kaye Barley. Recently they've had interviews with other writers, talked about "the woman who tweeted her way to publishing success," and discussed their "favorite mystery hunk(s)." The hunks in this case are characters, not writers, but I still felt left out.

Schooled in Mystery (<http://academicmystery.wordpress.com/>) is a subgenre-specific blog dedicated to academic mysteries. If you don't know what an academic mystery is, don't worry. There's a link to a good definition. There's also a link to an exhaustive list of books (this time I'm included), a link to some good resources, and a list of visiting writers. The blog itself has interviews with good folks like Gillian Roberts and Jennifer Miller, as well as guest posts and other things. If you're a fan of academic crimes, as I am, this one is for you.

Pretty Sinister Books (<http://prettysinister.blogspot.com/>) promises that it's about "Crime, Supernatural and Adventure Fiction. Obscure, Forgotten and Well Worth Reading." It delivers on the promise, too. One of the books discussed recently is Berkley Mather's *The Gold of Malabar*, a favorite of mine from forty years ago or so. There are also posts on illustrations and illustrators like Stanley L. Wood, who did the drawings for the first edition of Guy Boothby's *Dr. Nikola*, along with some nicely illustrated posts on book jackets.

While we're on the subject of forgotten books, I should mention *Beneath the Stains of Time* (<http://moonlight-detective.blogspot.com/>), a blog about "the great old detective stories of yore." Reviews of books by Frances and Richard Lockridge, Delano Ames, Gladys Mitchell, and many, many more. There's even a link to an index of the reviewed authors so you can quickly locate and read about your favorites. Check it out. ●

Bill Crider's latest Sheriff Dan Rhodes novel is The Murder of a Beauty Shop Queen, from St. Martin's Press.

MR. MONK SEES THE LIGHT

by Lee Goldberg

The roof of the BMW 320i was flattened and the windows were shattered. That's what happens when a two-hundred-pound weight is dropped on the ultimate driving machine from seventeen stories up.

But when that two-hundred-pound weight is a human body, it also creates a gory mess that draws a crowd of shocked onlookers, a swarm of crime-scene investigators, and homicide detectives.

And if it happens in San Francisco, it also draws Adrian Monk.

He was standing still beside the BMW, but his attention wasn't on the corpse. He was staring at a gleaming, silver 2004 Mercedes CLK Brabus parked across the street.

My twenty-year-old daughter Julie was a couple of yards away, checking her e-mail on her iPhone. She was on summer break and working as Monk's temporary assistant.

I'd left the job to become a cop in Summit, New Jersey. Monk had called me a few times since I'd moved, mostly wanting to talk about Julie. He'd usually start by saying what a great assistant she was, and then complain that her car was a rolling death trap (because the tires on her car were a mix of brands and didn't have matching tread designs), or that she drank smoothies (he was afraid of milk and couldn't stand the idea of various fruits being blended together), or that she expressed a wanton disregard for human decency (for wearing a bracelet on one wrist without a matching one on the other), all deficiencies in her character that he attributed to lazy parenting on my part.

You'd think that infuriating diatribes like that would make me thankful that I was a few thousand miles away from him, but the anger and irritation he caused only made me more homesick.

It's crazy, I know.

The job made a lot of sense for Julie. She wasn't uncomfortable around crime scenes but she wasn't eager to hang around dead bodies, either.

Two-time Edgar nominee Lee Goldberg has written and produced a number of network TV series, including *Diagnosis Murder*, *Spenser: For Hire*, *Baywatch*, *Missing*, and *Monk*. This is his last Monk short story, and it will be incorporated in his final Monk novel, *Mr. Monk Gets Even* (January 2013). The California writer is also the author of more than thirty novels and non-fiction books. In May of 2012, with the novel *King City*, he launched a new series starring lawman Tom Wade, published by Amazon's Thomas and Mercer imprint. †

Besides, she figured her responsibility was getting Monk to the body, not examining it with him. Unlike me, she had no interest in the cases that he solved.

But she knew her job was to run interference for Monk, to make sure that he was free of distractions so he could concentrate on the task at hand, so when she glanced up and saw that he wasn't walking around the body, looking for clues, she sighed, stuck her phone in her back pocket, and walked over to him.

"What's the problem, Mr. Monk?"

"I'm revolted," he said.

"You can't see most of the body," she said. "It's under a tarp. Only his feet are sticking out. But his shoes are clean and his laces are tied."

"I'm not talking about the body," Monk said.

Julie followed his gaze to the Mercedes across the street.

If it was me, at that point I'd have tried to figure out what Monk found objectionable about the car, then attempted to make him see how petty and irrelevant the problem was compared to the dead body that was right in front of him.

It was an argument I would lose, which meant I'd have to find the owner of the car, then convince whoever it was to fix whatever was dirty, crooked, or imbalanced about the Mercedes, and then get Monk to calm down and focus on the investigation.

But my daughter took a different approach. She slipped her messenger bag off her shoulder, went over to the forensic-unit van, foraged around inside of it as if it were her own, and emerged with a folded blue tarp, which she carefully spread out evenly over the Mercedes so that it was completely covered.

Then she walked back over to Monk. "Is that better?"

"Thank you," he said. "But you need to make a note to have a police officer deal with that before we go."

"Will do," she said.

"You don't know what I am talking about, do you?"

She shrugged. "I'll just have them tow the car. That should solve the problem."

"But the backrests in the front seats will still be at different angles and the headrests at different heights."

"Yes, but the car won't be on the street anymore. Besides, having it towed will teach the owner an important lesson," Julie said. "Now he'll know not to leave his car without first making sure that all of the seats and headrests are in the same position."

Monk thought about it for a moment then nodded with approval. "You're right. Good thinking."

She smiled. "Just doing my job."

It was a job that was only supposed to last for a week or two until he found someone to replace me. But at the time the unemployment rate in California, a state teetering on bankruptcy, was at historic highs and she needed work, so she stuck with him.

It was a smooth transition for her. Julie didn't have to apply for a job, try to impress anybody, or learn new skills. Monk was like family. So unlike me, when she started working for him, she was already familiar with every bizarre facet of his obsessive-compulsive disorder. She wasn't startled by his behavior, confused by his arcane rules, or baffled by his phobias. It was life-as-usual for her.

And she certainly wasn't uncomfortable around cops. Captain Stottlemeyer was like an uncle to her and she thought that his right-hand man, Lieutenant

Amy Devlin, a former undercover detective with whom I had a rocky relationship, was probably the coolest woman she'd ever met.

It was a smooth transition for Monk too. He'd known Julie since she was a little girl. And having her there almost made it feel like I hadn't really left him. It kept a big part of me in his life even if I was thousands of miles away. Besides, he didn't like change. Sticking with her meant he didn't have to make any effort to find someone else or let a stranger into his life.

But their working relationship was definitely different from the one that he and I had. For one thing, Julie wasn't nearly as stressed-out by him as I was. Nor was she as accommodating to his needs. Her attitude was that he was a grown man and that she was his assistant, not his babysitter. And this was her job, not her life.

Not only had she grown up around Monk, more importantly she'd grown up around me working for Monk, and she wasn't going to make the same mistakes that I had.

While Monk walked slowly around the BMW, his hands out in front of him, framing the scene like a director picking his shots, Julie stayed on the sidewalk and texted Devlin, who was with Captain Stottlemeyer in the victim's seventeenth-floor apartment, telling her what they were up to.

Devlin sent back a text telling her to come up to the apartment with Monk as soon as he was done surveying the scene.

Unlike my daughter, I wouldn't have been standing around texting. I would have been right beside Monk, evidence baggies and wipes at the ready, trying to see for myself what the clues were. I involved myself in the cases.

Not Julie.

She was more interested in getting home and salvaging what was left of her Saturday night before the call from Captain Stottlemeyer had interrupted her date with Ricky Capshaw, an aspiring singer, who was still in our living room, watching movies on Netflix.

Monk took tweezers from his pocket and used them to pick up a pair of glasses from the street. Both of the lenses were cracked and one of the arms was broken. He held the glasses up in front of his eyes and squinted at them, then waved his hand at Julie. She knew what that meant.

She took an evidence baggie from her messenger bag and held it open for Monk. He dropped the glasses inside. "What's so special about the glasses?"

"Nothing," Monk said. "They are common reading glasses."

"So why are we bagging them?" She sealed the baggie and stowed it.

"He might have been wearing them when he fell."

"Is that significant?"

Monk shrugged, then tipped his head towards the corpse's feet, which were sticking out from under the tarp on top of the car. They reminded Julie of the Wicked Witch's feet peeking out from under Dorothy's house after it landed in Munchkinland. She half expected the feet to curl up and disappear underneath the tarp.

"He wears size eight shoes," Monk said. "They're New Balance 622s."

"What about them?"

"They are very clean," he said. "And a fine brand."

"So?"

"It shows he was a decent man," Monk said. "What else do we know about him?"

"All I was told was that his name was David Zuzelo and that he either fell, jumped, or was pushed from his apartment balcony," Julie said.

"Which apartment was his?"

Julie pointed up. "Seventeenth floor, second balcony on the left."

Monk staggered back and closed his eyes. Heights made him dizzy, even from the ground. "I'm going to need four bottles of Fiji water and fifty disinfectant wipes."

That's because he was afraid of elevators, which meant that he'd be taking the stairs to the seventeenth floor, counting each step and disinfecting the handrail with a wet wipe as he went along. The Fiji waters, the only water he drank (and brushed his teeth with), were to hydrate him during his climb.

If this had been Saturday afternoon, Julie would have wished him luck and told him she'd meet him at the apartment later. And while he was climbing, she'd have gone to a Starbucks, bought a coffee, and made a few calls before taking the elevator up to the apartment.

But it was Saturday night, her boyfriend was on our couch at home, and she didn't want to waste time.

"I have a better idea," she said, tapped a key on her iPhone, and then held the device up in front of the two of them. Julie's iPhone was connected to the apartment's wireless network and so was Devlin's. An instant later Devlin appeared live on screen and they could see one another thanks to FaceTime.

"Are you two ready to come up?" Devlin asked. Her hair looked like she'd cut it herself, blindfolded and using hedge shears. She was not a woman who cared much about her appearance. Not that she needed to. She was in great shape and had perfect skin, except for a few little scars here and there from the fights she'd been in.

"Mr. Monk won't get in an elevator, so he'd have to take the stairs all the way up, which he'd be glad to do," Julie said. "But since the apartment is on the seventeenth floor, that adds an unnecessary risk."

Monk smiled at Julie with pride. She knew him so well.

Devlin looked bewildered. "What's the risk?"

As far as Devlin was concerned, risk in any situation was a plus. It's why she became a cop.

Monk leaned in so his face appeared on camera. "This is Adrian Monk speaking."

"Yes, I know," Devlin said. "I can see you."

"The risk is that it's an odd-numbered floor," Monk said. "Very high up."

"So?"

"Look what happened to David Zuzelo," Monk said.

"It's not going to happen to you," Devlin said.

"It could," Monk said. "Or worse."

"What could be worse than dying?" Devlin asked.

"I have a list," Monk said. "It's indexed. You can borrow Captain Stottlemeyer's copy."

"No, she can't," Stottlemeyer leaned in close to Devlin so his face was on camera too. She moved the iPhone at arm's length to include him. Even so, at the angle she was holding her phone, he seemed to be peering over his own bushy mustache to look at us. "It's a family heirloom. You know it never leaves the locked display case in our living room."

The sarcasm was wasted on Monk, who didn't understand it and couldn't recognize it. But that didn't stop people from using it on him anyway, mostly as a way to alleviate the stress he caused them.

"So you understand why I can't come up," Monk said. "Naturally, it would be different if the apartment was on the sixteenth or eighteenth floor."

"Even you can't tell what happened to the guy without seeing where it happened," Stottlemeyer said.

"There's a simple solution. All the apartments are identical," Monk said. "Only the furnishings are different. There's a vacancy on the fourteenth floor. You can recreate his apartment there and call me when you're done."

"That's your simple solution," Stottlemeyer said.

"You can thank me later," Monk said.

"Get your ass up here, Monk, or I will have two officers handcuff you and bring you up in the elevator."

"That won't be necessary, Leland," Julie said. She was far less formal with Stottlemeyer than I was. He'd asked her to refer to him by his first name before she'd started working for Monk and she saw no reason to change now. Besides, the captain didn't seem to mind the informality. But I knew it bothered Monk. "You can show him the apartment with the iPhone camera. He can tell you what he wants to see."

"Sure, we can give it a try," Stottlemeyer said, then looked at Devlin. "You up for it?"

"Of course I am," she said. "If this works, maybe he'll never come to another crime scene again."

Julie looked at Monk. "Are you willing to try it?"

He rolled his shoulders. "I suppose it couldn't hurt."

"All right," Devlin said. "Where do we start?"

"Walk in the front door, just like I would," Monk said. "While you are on your way, what can you tell us about Mr. Zuzelo?"

"He's single, lives alone, and taught math at Northgate High School in Walnut Creek for thirty years until his retirement," Devlin said, keeping the camera on her face as she went to the door. "He inherited this apartment from his mother."

"What do you think happened to him?" Monk asked.

"A dumb accident," Devlin said. "He was standing on a chair, trying to change the light bulb on his deck, lost his balance, and fell over the railing."

Devlin reached the front door, turned around to face the apartment, and tapped the flip icon, switching to the camera on the other side of the iPhone.

Now Monk and Julie could see what Devlin saw: a narrow hallway that led to an open kitchen on the left, a hallway to the right, and a big room straight ahead that served as both the dining room and living room.

The far wall was dominated by a sliding glass door that opened to the deck and a view of the office building across the street. Stottlemeyer sat on a barstool at the counter that separated the kitchen from the living room.

In the living room, against the wall to our left, was a couch with a coffee table in front of it.

"Proceed," Monk said. "Slowly."

Devlin did. And on his instruction, she aimed her iPhone into the kitchen, held it at various angles, and zoomed in and away from the jackets, hats, and shoes inside. She was told to do the same on the floor, the ceiling, the artwork

on the walls, and in the hall closet, where several coats were hung. Monk was giving my daughter and Devlin a startling and dizzying peek into how he looked at the world.

It made Julie want to take a Dramamine.

After what seemed like an eternity, Monk finally asked Devlin to walk into the living room, where he spotted a Jonathan Franzen novel on the edge of the dining table.

Monk asked Stottlemeyer to pick the book up and show it to them. Stottlemeyer did and they could see that the corner of a page was marked down.

“Open the book to the marked page, please,” Monk said.

“I’ve heard that reading Franzen has made some people want to kill themselves,” Stottlemeyer said. “But I doubt that’s what happened here.”

“Me too,” Monk said.

Stottlemeyer opened the book and showed Monk the page. “So what difference does it make what the victim was reading before he died?”

“It makes no difference at all,” Monk said.

“Then why are we looking at the page?”

“So we can unfold the corner and iron it.”

Stottlemeyer closed the book and put it back on the table. “Moving on.”

“Okay, we can come back and do that later,” Monk said. “Could you push in the chair at the head of the table?”

“No,” Stottlemeyer said.

“Okay, we can do that later too. Let me see the couch.”

Devlin walked over to the couch. There were two pillows on the left-hand side, one by the armrest, the other atop the back of the couch, suggesting that Zuzelo had rested his head against it while he was reading. There was a coffee cup on a coaster on the side table.

“Do you see those two pillows?” Monk asked.

“Yes,” Stottlemeyer said.

“Take the one on the top and put it beside the armrest on the opposite end of the couch.”

“We’re showing you the apartment, Monk, not redecorating it,” Stottlemeyer said.

“I understand,” Monk said. “The bowl of seashells and the other items on the coffee table are in disarray.”

The items appeared to be neatly arranged in the center of the table, but that wasn’t what made Stottlemeyer grimace. “You said you understood what I just told you.”

“I did, but this isn’t redecorating,” Monk said. “It’s making things right.”

Stottlemeyer turned to Devlin. “Let’s take him to the deck.”

“I am not done looking around inside,” Monk said.

“Yes, you are,” Stottlemeyer said and led us to the sliding glass door that opened onto an unlit, narrow balcony with a wrought-iron railing, two wicker chairs, and a very small table with a light-bulb box on top. One of the chairs was tipped over and there was a big hole in the seat where it appeared Zuzelo’s foot had fallen through the wicker webbing. There was a broken light bulb on the floor.

“Show me the fallen chair,” Monk said.

She did.

“Show me the light fixture,” Monk said.

She aimed the camera up at the round, recessed light socket in what was basically the bottom of the balcony of the floor above.

“Show me the light bulb that’s on the tabletop,” Monk said.

It was a 100-watt bulb, still in its protective cardboard box.

“Show me the broken light bulb,” Monk said.

Devlin aimed the camera at the broken glass on the ground.

“Let me see the part that screws into the socket,” he said.

Stottlemeyer bent down and carefully picked it up. The stems that held the filament were still intact and there were some jagged bits of broken glass around the rim.

“Okay,” Monk said. “It’s obvious what happened here.”

“I told you so,” Devlin said.

“No, you told me he was changing a light bulb, lost his balance when his foot went through the seat, and he fell over the railing,” Monk said.

She hit the flip icon so the camera was now showing her angry face to Monk and Julie. “And that’s what happened. You saw the evidence.”

“I did,” Monk said. “That’s how I know it’s murder.”

“No way,” Devlin said.

She knew better than to question Monk’s conclusion. He was never wrong about homicide. But that didn’t stop her. He’d spotted something amiss that she did not and it was a blow to her pride. What made it worse was that this was the second death in a week that she’d initially determined was an accident but that Monk immediately concluded was murder.

Captain Stottlemeyer knew how she felt, but he had long since stopped worrying about how his observational and deductive skills stacked up to Monk’s and instead chose to appreciate the results. Besides, the captain knew the price Monk paid for his brilliance and, all things considered, felt he had the better end of the deal.

But Devlin had a long way to go before she achieved Stottlemeyer’s peace with Monk’s genius and stopped taking it as a personal insult every time he solved something before she did. The captain knew that questioning Monk’s conclusions was a necessary step towards acceptance.

“There’s no other possible explanation,” Monk said.

“I just gave you one,” Devlin said.

As much as Julie liked Devlin, she would have preferred it if the lieutenant simply accepted Monk’s conclusions and moved on. It would be easier for everyone.

“Look around,” Monk said. “The place has been trashed.”

“Everything is clean and orderly,” Devlin said. “There’s no sign of forced entry or a struggle.”

“I didn’t say that anyone broke in or that there had been a fight,” Monk said.

“But you said the place was trashed,” she said.

“I did,” Monk said.

“But it hasn’t been,” she said.

Stottlemeyer sighed. “How about we agree that you both have different definitions of what constitutes a mess, okay? Tell us what happened, Monk.”

“Here’s what happened,” Monk said. “Zuzelo was sitting on his couch, reading a book, when someone rang the bell in the lobby. It was someone he knew, so he buzzed his friend up and set his book on the edge of the table on his way to

answer the door. He greeted his friend and led him in. As they passed the dining-room table, the friend picked up the book and, as Zuzelo turned, he hit him across the face with it, knocking him out.”

“That’s pure speculation,” Devlin said.

“That’s how Zuzelo’s glasses got broken,” Monk said.

“What glasses?” Stottlemeyer asked.

“The reading glasses that he forgot to take off in his eagerness to greet his guest.” Monk nudged Julie, who produced the evidence baggie containing the glasses and held it in front of her so Stottlemeyer and Devlin could see it. “I found them beside the body.”

“Because he was wearing them when he fell,” Devlin said.

“I’m sure he wasn’t. The killer had to throw the glasses over the railing with the body to cover the fact that they were broken first by the book. You’ll find some bits of the broken frame in the carpet by the table. But I’m getting ahead of myself.”

“I never pointed the camera at the floor,” Devlin said.

“You did when you aimed it at the book, which the captain picked up and held above the floor,” Monk said.

“And in that brief moment, on a tiny iPhone screen, you could see a speck of plastic in the carpet that you can positively identify as coming from a pair of glasses.”

“I could see the crumbs from the sourdough toast that he had for breakfast too.”

“Not even Superman could see that,” Devlin said.

“That’s why Clark Kent wears glasses,” Monk said. “The killer got a fresh light bulb from the closet, turned out the lights in the apartment, and went out on the deck. The killer wanted the apartment dark so he wouldn’t be seen by anyone in the building across the way.”

Monk went on to explain that the killer set the new bulb on the table and stood on the wicker chair to reach the light fixture above. But he was too heavy for the chair and his foot went through the worn wicker seat. So he went back into the apartment, banging his shin on the coffee table in the darkness, and carried out one of the dining-room chairs, which he stood on to remove the bulb from the light fixture. He purposely dropped the old bulb on the ground, brought the chair back in, then picked up Zuzelo and threw him over the railing to the street below.

“That’s quite an elaborate story, almost bordering on slapstick,” Devlin said, then glanced around the apartment and looked back into her iPhone camera. “But I don’t see any evidence to back up a word of it.”

“Then you need to see an optometrist right away,” Monk said. “Because the evidence is everywhere.”

“Like what?” Devlin said.

“There’s the hole in the wicker chair,” Monk said.

“Yes, I can see that. How do you know Zuzelo didn’t put his foot through it standing on the chair himself to change the bulb?”

“There are four reasons. One, his shoe size. Whoever made that hole wears a size twelve shoe. Second, his height. Although I didn’t see his body, I saw his jackets in the closet. He was five foot two. Even if he stood on that chair, he would not have been tall enough to reach the fixture. Third, the light bulbs.

The old bulb is a sixty-five watt and the fixture has a seventy-five watt capacity, but the new bulb is one hundred watts, the kind used in the lamp beside the couch. The killer grabbed the wrong bulb. Fourth, everything on the coffee table is in disarray.”

She looked at the table. “It looks fine to me.”

“I’m surprised you’re allowed to drive,” Monk said. “The sunlight pours into the apartment and, over the years, has bleached the tabletop. When the killer banged the edge of the table with his shin, he shifted all the items that were on top of it, exposing the darker wood underneath them.”

Devlin turned to look, pointing her camera at the table at the same time. Sure enough, Julie could see the outline of the bowl of seashells was burned onto the tabletop. It looked like a shadow.

Julie hadn’t seen that the first time. Then again, she hadn’t been paying any attention. It wasn’t her job to look for clues. There were plenty of cops around for that. Her job was just to get Monk there and keep him focused. So she didn’t feel dumb for missing it the way Devlin did and, to a lesser degree, Stottlemeyer did as well.

“You’ll also find bits of wicker on the seat of the dining-room chair,” Monk added, “the one that is not pushed all the way under the table the way it should be.”

Devlin turned the iPhone camera back on her and Stottlemeyer, who was shaking his head.

“I’ve got to hand it to you, Monk. You got all of that without even coming up here. That’s a first.”

“I think he’s making half this stuff up,” Devlin said. “It’s guesswork.”

“Maybe so,” Stottlemeyer said. “But I’ll bet my pension that forensics will prove that he’s right about what’s on the floor and on the chair. I’m pretty sure Monk can spot pollen with his naked eye.”

“There’s no reason to be pornographic,” Monk said.

“I meant you could see it without glasses or a microscope,” Stottlemeyer said.

“Then that’s what you should have said instead of being unnecessarily crude.”

“You’re right,” Stottlemeyer said. “I apologize.”

“You do?” Devlin said.

Stottlemeyer shrugged. “It doesn’t cost me anything.”

“Only a measure of your pride.”

“Pride is grossly overrated,” Stottlemeyer said.

Julie turned the phone so it was just on her. “Are we done here, Leland?”

“Yes, you are,” Stottlemeyer said. “Unless Monk happens to know who the murderer is already?”

Julie turned to Monk. He shook his head and kept his eye on the tarp-covered Mercedes as if it might come alive and attack them both.

“Nope, no such luck, but if you want it to happen, there’s a car you’re going to need to tow.”

Julie turned the camera to show Stottlemeyer the car.

“Why?” Stottlemeyer asked.

“Because the balance of the universe is at stake,” she said then clicked out of FaceTime.

Monk smiled at her. “You’re going to be a great assistant.” ●



THE BEAR

by Kieran Shea

It was a little after seven-thirty in the morning. Nothing could have prepared me. “Jesus, Mike, don’t you answer your phone?”

It was my neighbor from two houses away, Jim Boyle. Fifty-two, lemur-eyed, and sweaty. On doctor’s dire orders Jim had taken up power-walking around the neighborhood and I assumed his lack of breath had something to do with his cartoonish workout routine. Poor guy. Should’ve just stuck with the Buffalo wings and scotch. Three years from his standing there a pulmonary embolism was going to chop him down.

I yawned and absently scratched my hip beneath my bathrobe. My head throbbed with the static

ache of a mid-range, mix-and-match hangover and my stomach yearned for the promising salve of bacon I knew I didn’t have in my refrigerator.

“I turned my phone off,” I answered. “My cell phone too. Haven’t been sleeping so hot since Jenny took Lisa and moved out. Dude, what’s going on? You look wiggled.”

“Did you hear about Rick Nicholas?”

The name rocked me back on my heels a bit.

“Rick from down the hill?”

“Yeah. Anna’s Rick.”

“No,” I said guardedly, “what about him?”

“He was killed yesterday.”

“What?”

“Killed. The Simmonses just called me. And the Tates. Well, Gloria Tate not Frank because Frank is in Florida at some convention or something. And the

Kieran Shea’s first published work of fiction, “The Lifeguard Method,” appeared in *EQMM*’s Black Mask department in August 2009. Since then, his stories have been published in a number of anthologies, including *Blood, Cuts, and Whiskey* (Kensington), *Discount Noir* (Untreed Reads), and *Crime Factory: The First Shift* (New Pulp Press). He has been nominated twice for *StorySouth*’s Million Writers Award, and he tells *EQMM* that he is currently at work on his first novel. ¶



Flaglers. Holy cow, Mike, the whole neighborhood knows about this by now but you. Rick was killed up in Alaska.”

“Alaska? What the hell was Rick doing up in Alaska?”

Jim glanced around. It looked as if he was either about to lose his tether on gravity or fall over and pass out. “He was fly-fishing with clients,” he said. “You won’t believe it. God, I still can’t believe it. It’s just horrible, just the most horrible, awful thing I’ve ever heard.”

A chilly October breeze swirled over the tops of my bare feet as I noticed for the hundredth time that my yard was lousy with fallen leaves. I braced a hand on the doorjamb and waited for him to finish.

“A bear ate him,” Jim said.

Richard B. Nicholas.

Forty-nine years of age.

Duke undergrad, Stanford Law, patent attorney, and law partner. Doughy out-of-touch father of twin teenage boys and cuckolded husband of the sweetest piece of tennis-toned tail I’ve ever had.

Anna Nicholas.

Six days later at Rick’s funeral my soon-to-be ex-wife Jenny made a show of it. Dropped off our daughter Lisa with her crab-mouthed parents over in Livingston and sat dutifully next to me in the church.

Circumstances notwithstanding, Jenny looked pretty stylish all creased out in black Donna Karan and heels. Above and behind us on a pipe organ, a silver-haired woman attempted Pachelbel’s “Fugues on the Magnificat” as Jesus gaped down his disappointment at me from a giant wire-suspended crucifix above the altar.

“How’s Lisa?” I ventured.

“Oh, screw you, Michael.”

Boy, that stung. I wanted to counter with something equally vicious and sharp but, as I said before, Jesus ain’t all right with me. I took a shallow breath.

“Nice. Real nice, Jenny. Do you think you could just lay off the self-serving piss and vinegar for once? I don’t think the big guy on the cross could hear you.”

Jenny’s eyes flicked up to Jesus. She sighed and set her jaw.

“Your daughter is fine if you must know. Just fine. Lisa is in her own little world these days thanks to her idiot father.”

“Thanks to me?”

“Yeah, you.”

“What are we up to, three pills a day now, babe?”

“Oh, get over yourself,” Jenny hissed. “You have no right to judge me. I’m here for Anna and her boys. And for my friends. I’m only sitting here next to you for appearances’ sake so don’t even try to make small talk with me. My lawyer said to steer clear of you.”

I nodded. “Oh, right. Your lawyer. Mr. *Just For Men*. Give him my love.”

Despite all her scathing bitterness, I was pretty sure Jenny knew nothing of my short-lived fling with Anna three years prior. Honestly, our affair lasted maybe all of five minutes and my betrayal never came up once, even after our marital discord ripped full throttle for a wrecked bridge. Then again, under her divorce lawyer's counsel Jenny could've just been hanging fire. Sitting there, I mulled it over some more. At neighborhood cocktail parties before our breakup I never caught a single glare from one of her gal pals in the gossip gaggles and I always made sure I scrubbed myself clean after each of the three times Anna and I slept together. Well, in truth, there was never much sleeping and only one actual bed all in all. A rainy afternoon at the Four Seasons in New York, paid for in cash, that was as sad as it was exhilarating.

They say with infidelity eventually one of the culpable tells, that the burden of shame eventually is too much to shoulder. Not me. As a lapsed Catholic, the practice of shutting things away was one of the few things I actually excelled at. Of course, I couldn't be too sure of Anna, though. She and I chose to end our unfaithfulness with mutual shrugs and averted eyes—a rest stop sandwiched between the heavily traveled arteries of the Garden State Parkway.

"We shouldn't be doing this . . ." she said.

I nodded and gripped the steering wheel.

"There's too much at stake. I mean, my family, my sons. Even Rick. They deserve better than this."

From the stir in the bodies behind us it appeared the funeral procession had finally arrived. A white-peaked priest and a sullen, buzz-cut altar boy carrying a tall decorated candle strode down the aisle past us to meet the family at the back of the church. Everybody stood.

Jenny passed a fingertip across her right eyebrow. "Good lord, you pay all that money to go on some dumb fishing trip in the middle of nowhere, you'd think your guide would carry a weapon of some kind. Anna should sue."

"For what?" I said. "All the steelhead she can eat? Maybe your lawyer will take her case when he's done bleeding me dry."

"Shut up. You never respected Rick anyway."

Fair enough. A plain truth.

I really didn't.

It was two weeks into December and the slog drudgery of Christmas when I finally worked up the stomach to touch base with Anna about Rick's death in person.

It was an early Tuesday evening, frigid and damp with the first serious fangs of real winter, and I had knocked back three or four Maker's Marks after work to steel myself for the queasy task I had been putting off for far too long. In an effort to be discreet I chose to cut through the woods out back down to Rick and Anna's house. Their colonial was an eighth of a mile away and set down the hill in our somewhat upscale suburban New Jersey community. Like everybody else, Jenny and I moved to the area for the schools even though most, like ourselves, dished out trunkloads of bills to send our kids to lip-service parochials or overpriced country days. A real fine place to raise a family and pass through life's general bewilderment in the shadow of Manhattan for sure, but go ahead, take a thumbnail and scratch the surface. These are desperate times. A fair spate of foreclosures, downsized careers, and shattered dreams in the appalling

wake of our national gluttonies. Despite the upper-middle-class trappings, we too are desperate people, all driven by some sort of fear now.

An icy rain hissed as I picked my way down along the path. The trail was used mostly by teenagers looking to chug cheap schnapps or blaze a bowl away from snooping parents and there was plenty of chattering bramble, slippery with funky rot underfoot. Through the tall oaks and sycamores in the distance I could see the blunted phallus of a county water tower, its air-traffic marker red like a single, fiendish eye.

As I edged downward, I briefly thought about Rick Nicholas's terrible final moments on earth. God, a fifteen-hundred-pound brown bear mowing you down and ripping you to pieces? Could it be any worse? I was born and raised in northern New Jersey and those development woods were about as far as my bones had ever gone with real wilderness.

I passed the pre-holiday glows emanating from tucked-away houses backing up to the woods. Kids at kitchen tables doing homework, younger children going through the bath-time rituals of splash and cry. Television huddles and teens dithering with oh-so-urgent messages on two-hundred-dollar smartphones. Here's a message for you all, boys and girls. Life when you get older? Doesn't exactly work out as you plan. LOL.

From my hidden vantage point in the woods, I could see Anna standing at the kitchen sink with a telephone crooked against her ear. She looked worn-out and agitated as she scoured the guts of a salad spinner, her short dark bob hanging limply to one side.

Quickly I legged over the low wooden pole fence and hustled around the side of the house to the front door before I reconsidered. Under some fake holiday garland draped around the door's edge I found and thumbed the doorbell and a half a minute later one of the lace curtains on either side of the front door drew sideways. The lock snapped back with an ominous, flat clack of a cocking gun.

"Jesus, couldn't you have the common decency to call first?"

Although angry and tired, Anna looked pretty good. Red piped turtleneck sweater and tight jeans stuffed into high, brown boots. A set of gold hoop earrings dangled from her ears.

"Hey, Anna . . ."

"What do you want? Are you out of your goddamn mind? You shouldn't be here."

"I was going to call but I thought, you know, in person this might be better."

Anna's mouth curdled. "Trust me, whatever it is, it's not. Not by a long shot. What's wrong with you? You look like hell."

She was right. I did kind of look like hell. Well, maybe not hell, but since the collapse of my marriage and Jenny finally moving out with our daughter I'd stopped taking care of myself on the personal front. Shoveled down too much starchy carryout and frozen meals, for one. Couldn't remember the last time I ate an actual piece of fresh fruit. Felt sluggish, and naturally my flirty slide into depressive heavy drinking didn't help matters much. So many late nights staring into mindless television and sorting through my aching, abysmal failings as a husband, a grown man, and a father.

My tech sales job didn't require too much face time as most of my clients were heavy into the handheld and laptop geek, so as long as I hit my numbers and kept the up from going down, management pretty much let me breeze

about with little oversight. Worked from home a lot. Hit the central Paramus office about twice a week for meetings or to glad-hand the occasional pitch to new prospects. That night I think I hadn't shaved or showered for two days.

After the rush of brisk exercise navigating my descent, the bourbon sloshing in my stomach took hold all of a sudden. I felt flushed, hot-eared, and slightly dizzy.

"Look," I said, "I never had a chance to tell you how sorry I am at the funeral and, well, with Jenny there and all it probably wasn't the best idea. It's so terrible. I'm so sorry about what happened to Rick. God, how are you and your boys holding up?"

Anna drummed her fingers on the edge of the door. "I'd be better if you just went away, I can tell you that. Like now. Someone might see you."

I ventured a glance over my shoulder. The closest house was across the street and completely dark. Two dentists who'd had their home on the depressed market since the housing bubble detonated, and for the life of me I couldn't remember their names. Janice and Peter something. Did it matter? No. A stark white realtor's sign plugged the right side of the driveway and the wreath on their front door rocked in a sudden gust of cold wind.

"Are the twins home?"

"No," Anna answered curtly, flipping back her brown bob, "they're not. Jackson was just on the phone before you rang the doorbell. He and Theo both need to be picked up from basketball practice and I have a zillion things to do but, lucky me, I have to get in the car and go get them. Traffic this time of night, God, I'm so sick of it. Just sick of it. It's going to take me at least an hour to get there and back through the new road construction."

"Well, I thought I'd just come by and—"

"And what? Offer more hollow condolences? Spread a little holiday cheer? Or maybe you're thinking now that your marriage is in the meat grinder and Rick is in the ground you'd pop by and jump my bones."

"Are you crazy? No. God, no . . ."

"You know what? You're not thinking at all and this is not at all okay. Not even in the slightest. Listen, Michael, whatever you think may have happened between us—"

"I'm not here about what happened between us, damn it. Whatever we did, I know it was wrong and a huge mistake. For both of us. Cripes, that was three freakin' years ago, I just thought . . ."

Anna looked behind me.

"Wait, did you walk here?"

I gestured with my chin toward the back of the house. "I came down through the woods out back. The kids' trail, you know? It seemed more prudent."

"More prudent? And you're standing on my front porch? Hardly the measure of discretion, you jerk."

"Hey—"

"Go home, Michael."

"Anna, c'mon. Rick was," I hesitated, searching for the right words, "he was a decent guy. I'm just trying to tell you how sorry I am for your loss."

Her eyes narrowed. "Spare me your half-baked sympathy. You don't know anything about Rick or my family or the grief I'm going through right now so don't even dare to presume. You and I both know that Rick, just like you, was a

child pretending to be a man. Lord knows he definitely wasn't the person I married anymore. Maybe it was his job, in the city all the time, being the good law partner with a bunch of bottom-feeding slime balls under his wings, growing all fat and invincible on some power trip, but all that doesn't matter much now, does it? No, it doesn't. Hell, Rick and I were in counseling when he died and even with that I knew the writing was on the wall. It's all so typical and I just hate it. I *hate* it. All I know now is I'm in the middle of my life with no career to speak of, no real income, and I'm twisting in a never-ending insurance nightmare with a mortgage yoked around my neck that can easily pull us all under. Oh, wait. Let me cherry that for you. To top it all off, you're here at my front door."

Man, I thought, maybe this was a bad idea.

"Do you have any idea what that bear did?"

"Anna, don't. Just stop. I'll leave."

"That bear ripped off his genitals and took his head. *His entire head.* They looked everywhere and couldn't find it. I buried a headless, mutilated husband because he thought it'd be fun to take some jackass clients to catch some fish, and my life is over."

Anna threw the door shut in my face.

I wobbled for a moment, feeling cored and humiliated. The light rain that was hissing down earlier picked up frosty weight and piled on my sweater as I started to retrace my steps back around the side of Anna's house. Looking up at the dim woods, I dreaded the steep, sloppy climb back home.

Then the garage door opened.

Quickly I scooted and squatted behind a boxwood shrub on the side of the house. Ensnared in the ubiquitous suburban-mom SUV, Anna backed out of the garage at an alarming speed and then hit the automatic door. As soon as I heard her SUV's engine drop into drive and gun up the street, I turned around and did something utterly stupid.

I tried the side door to the garage.

This is a crime, I thought.

Right now, even being in the garage, this is a crime and you are a goddamn idiot. You're half in the bag and not thinking straight. Just get out of here. Go home and sleep it off in your unwashed mess of a bed. What in the hell are you doing?

I shut the door behind me and stood in silence.

Like a hibernating beast, Rick's silver Volvo hulked in front of me and the musty, oily odors of lawn equipment and mildewed garage corners filled my nose. Beyond the hood of the car I saw a set of short steps before a pale yellow door that led into the back of the house. Moving with care so as not to bang my shins into anything sharp, I eased around the front of Rick's Volvo.

I saw some rubber waders hanging on a peg and I thought about Rick again. A bear took his whole head? How could they not find it? Wouldn't they have had, like, volunteers or sheriffs searching for that sort of thing? They couldn't just have shipped a headless body across the country, could they? Anna's shared detail was so vivid and beyond bizarre.

Amongst tongue-hanging sneakers and scattered boots at the back door, I found myself hooking a thumb into my own damp running shoes. The next

thing I knew I was setting them on a mat beside the recycling buckets, telling myself if I was going to do this I couldn't leave footprints. No, sir, no footprints, because that's evidence. That's all *CSI* and hip-handed David Caruso matching soil samples to shoe sizes and tracking my stupid ass down. In my head I heard Townshend's windmilled Rickenbacker chords and the fade of Daltrey's scorching howl.

We won't get fooled again. . . .

I reached out and gave the back doorknob a twist. Of course it too was unlocked, so I stepped up and proceeded inside the house.

Blame it on the booze or my jangled state of mind or my cratered personal life, but I couldn't help myself. I just couldn't. Still a bit dazed by the confrontation at the front door with Anna, I felt as if I was outside my body, vaguely controlling the shell of a man that I had become. Anna said it would take an hour to pick up her sons at basketball practice and somehow I just didn't care for some reason. I told myself all I wanted was to have a look around for a minute, maybe peer into her life to see if she was really doing okay. It felt sleazy, but if I was careful, she'd never even know I'd been there. Really, I thought, where was the harm?

Turns out there was plenty and I should have known better.

Sock-skating across the laundry-strewn mudroom, I made a quick left and another world opened before me—a still life of a well-appointed American dream. There was a dim set of winking wreaths in the front living-room windows and a decorated Christmas tree throwing out a soft scent of pine. Other than the kitchen overheads to my left, the twinkling strands on the tree, and the front porch light, the house was pretty much in the dark.

I had never been inside Rick and Anna's place before. Of course, I knew Anna had good taste but goodness, so many things of fleeting value. Expensive crystal lamps and bulky leather furniture so deep and inviting one could probably drift off into a coma for days. The Persian rugs alone I figured could feed a Sudanese refugee camp for decades. An antique print of a trout hung above the living room's gas fireplace, a chilling reminder of Rick's outdoorsy diversions.

Moving down the hall, I took in images matted and framed. Black-and-whites professionally shot. Didn't Anna once say she dabbled in photography? I couldn't recall. The twins at various ages and Anna and Rick in much happier times. There were a few older relatives in tinted fades on the walls too and their blank eyes gave me the creeps.

The wide stairs near the front of the house were carpeted with a runner, and as I glided a finger on the polished banister on my way up my feet sparked with static electricity.

Don't do this, you idiot.

Turn around and leave. Now.

But soon I found myself at the top landing. Like the rest of the house, the upstairs was completely dark and barely illuminated by the ambient lights below. I made another left and moved down the hall toward what I assumed was the master bedroom. I could detect crisp traces of Anna's perfume, and the excitement of my crime urged me on.

When I finally entered the master bedroom it looked like a bomb had gone off. Cardboard boxes and clothes everywhere on the pale blue wall-to-wall carpet. I bent over and peeled back the flap of one of the boxes. Rick's things.

Suits and sweaters and ties. It made sense. Good for her, I told myself. Get rid of Rick's presence and move on.

I turned around and surveyed the top of a high walnut dresser braced against the bedroom wall. In a silver frame next to a black leather-skinned jewelry box I saw a color group picture of a much younger Rick and Anna with a bunch of their friends. The photo looked like it was taken at a football tailgate or at least I assumed so from all the parked cars and banners snapping blue and white. Duke University—back where Anna and Rick first met. Red plastic cups and arms draped over shoulders, the pride of a gifted future before them. Even in the darkness Anna's bright eyes cut me deep. No clue of what the future had in store for her. Infidelity, a headless husband, a life in ruins and heading for the falls.

Next to the picture there was a second silver frame tipped over. Gently I lifted the frame and saw it was Anna and Rick's wedding pose. Yet another black-and-white with an empty meadow stretching out behind them. A date was etched in a buffed patch at the base and I noted that theirs was a June wedding. Of course it was, doesn't every girl dream of such a thing? Maybe, I don't know. Jenny and I married in April on her birthday so I'd never forget, but still every year I scrambled for flowers or some kind of a gift.

Questions for Rick swirled in my head that could have and should have been addressed to me. What happened, man? Wasn't she enough for you? Did the trials of marriage and kids crisscross against disenchanting expectations and the good life's soul-kicking strain? You had it all and lost your way, didn't you? Know that feeling, pal, know that feeling all too well.

I blew out a long breath and set the frame back down carefully in its spot.

I started to head back toward the staircase, but at the last moment I decided to hazard a quick peek at the boys' rooms.

The Nicholas twins were fraternal and while they did hold a resemblance in looks and gait, I remembered how Anna once told me that except for sports, their interests and personalities cleaved apart as they waded into their teens. Door number one was open and turned out to be a fastidious and all the way athletic scene. Lacrosse sticks and posters of Eli and Jeter—classic New York allegiances. I gave whoever's room it was an approving thumbs up and turned around. Across the way, door number two was shut and piqued my curiosity. I tried the knob and opened the door.

It never fails to surprise me how well-off white kids cling to the Rastafarian specter of Robert Nesta Marley. I mean, what the hell was that all about? Nothing in common other than drifty tunes and the promise of a good buzz. Bob Marley was pretty much dead long before your time, kid. Hell, he was dead long before my time. The singer's ganja-soaked profile loomed above a full-sized, unmade bed.

Yeah, right.

Lively up yourself.

Bet the kid had a stash of weed hidden somewhere.

I was a teenager once. I knew where I'd hide my dope. I checked the bookcase, behind the dog-eared paperbacks and amalgamated sports stats, and flipped through the bigger bindings looking for a hollowed-out core. Whoever's room it was, the boy seemed to love Koontz and King, but who wouldn't at their young age? Came up empty.

I checked the closet, the dress shoes probably worn once, and gave the video-game boxes stacked up top a sniff. Strike two. Then I saw a dusty guitar missing three strings tilted in the back corner of the closet behind a crate full of T-shirts. I gave the guitar a shake by the neck and something heavy clunked inside across the sound of crinkled plastic. I tried fishing my hand into the guitar hole to see what was inside but the width of my hand was too big.

I shook the guitar over the bed and a thick, banded roll of money bounced out on the crumpled bedspread. I felt inside the guitar's hole and seized the edge of a piece of plastic and pulled. A half-gallon zipper-lock baggie came out and it sure as hell wasn't full of weed.

Pills.

My breath caught. I knew the look of some of these pills. I'd had foot surgery a few years before and from the size and shape of the tabs and given the fact that the kids were into sports, I immediately did the math and assumed they were either Darvon, Vicodin, or some other more powerful narcotic. I held the bag close to my eyes and tried to see the engraved markings, but it was too dark.

There had recently been a scandal at one of the local private schools with student athletes dealing opioids and Adderall. Arrests had been made and after a well-publicized trial a coach and two of his teenage co-conspirators were sent to prison. Huh. It appeared whoever was behind moving pharmaceuticals amongst the "influenza" afflicted teens had found a new distributor with one of the Nicholas twins.

But who? Was I standing in Theo's room? Jackson's? Did it even matter? No, it didn't. I picked up the thick, banded roll of bills and it weighed nearly a pound.

Leave it.

Shove all this back in the closet where you found it and get your dumb butt out of here.

I checked my watch and calculated the elapsed time. How many minutes had passed? Anna said the trip to pick up the two boys would take her at least an hour, so what, maybe I had forty minutes or less left? What if traffic was light? What if Anna was racing back now? Jesus, what if she forgot something or had gotten a call from the boys saying they'd gotten a ride?

I shoved the roll in my front pocket and wedged the pills in another. Then I put the guitar back in the closet where I'd found it and quickly made my way down the stairs.

Twenty minutes later I sat on my couch in the dark, staring at the pills and the money roll on the coffee table, thinking.

Thinking.

I waited until after New Year's and checked the boys' away basketball schedule, figuring in all likelihood I wouldn't cross paths with their mother at an away game. Donated three dollars to a chirpy pair of teenage girls at the door and stood near the back of the bleachers next to a set of exit doors plastered with bulletins.

I asked a boy wearing a jacket from the Nicholas boys' school which player was Theo and he obliged by pointing him out. Point guard. Played most of the game. Could hit from the top of the key and showed real hustle on defense as well. The less enthusiastic player on the bench with similar features I took for

Jackson. He had some faded mottled bruises on his face, a floppy haircut, and seemed like his mind was elsewhere.

Before the boys boarded a team bus for the ride back, I sat in my car in the parking lot and waited. When Jackson Nicholas slammed out the back door of the gymnasium with a nylon duffel slung over his shoulder, I knew my guess in discerning which of the twins had stashed the money and the pills was correct. Jackson sported a wool cap with Rastafarian colors on his head, replete with a goofy pompom.

I climbed out of my car. I was at least fifty yards away.

“Jackson Nicholas?”

The boy in the pompom cap turned.

I walked about halfway over and looked around as I did. Some of his horsing-around teammates and his twin brother were climbing onto a chugging school bus. Their coaches had yet to emerge from the gym.

Jackson’s voice was cagey. “Yeah?”

“Congratulations on the win, but you should really restring your guitar.”

Jackson tilted his head and did a double take, looking back at the bus. “My guitar? Man, I don’t own a guitar, mister. What the—do I know you?”

I said nothing and dropped a business card on the cold asphalt. On the back of my card I’d scribbled down the address of a pizzeria near his school, a time, and one other word—Saturday.

As I drove away, in my rearview mirror I saw Jackson reach down and pick up the card.

Dressed in chinos, a flannel shirt, and my good topcoat, I sat in a booth sipping iced tea through a straw when Jackson pushed through the door of the pizzeria.

He had ridden his bicycle, and given the cold temperature outside I knew that had to be a bitch. His face was red from the effort and he sniffled and pulled his Rasta cap off of his head as he approached.

“Who the hell are you?”

“A friend.”

“A friend? Yeah, right. You a cop?”

“No.”

That gave the boy visible relief. I gestured to the seat across from me in the booth. Warily, Jackson looked around and then unzipped his down jacket before he slid in. The jacket looked new and expensive, so I figured it for a Christmas present. Then I noticed his fingers were shaking.

“What is this? Man, you broke into my house and took my stuff. Who are you?”

“I’m from your neighborhood.”

“My neighborhood?”

“I know your mother.”

His head circled. “My mom? Aw, crap. She sent you?”

“Your mother knows nothing about this.”

It seemed hard for Jackson to break that down.

“But you were in my house,” he whined. “You were in my room. You snooped around in my room and found my stuff. What’re you? Some kind of pervert?”

I leaned over and whispered, “Do you think I have the time or the patience for your smart-mouth attitude, kid? Do me a favor, all right? Just shut up and listen.”

Jackson huffed and fidgeted. "Okay, fine. But be real with me, okay? You swear you're not a cop or nothing?"

"'Anything,' and no, I'm definitely not a cop."

The boy's face pinched.

"Are you hungry?" I asked.

Jackson looked down and rubbed his hands on his jeans. "I suppose I could do me a slice of 'roni."

I took out my wallet and laid a five-dollar bill down on the table between us.

"Go get it," I said, "I'll wait."

Jackson took the bill, eased out of the booth, and loped up to the pizzeria counter. He returned a few minutes later with a slice of oily pepperoni on a pair of thin paper plates and gave me my change.

After dabbing the excess grease off with some paper napkins, he folded the slice of pizza, took a bite, and chewed.

"What happened to your face, Jackson?"

"You took my stuff, that's what happened."

"Your supplier?"

"Yeah. I was on the hook for all of it. They were pretty ticked off when I told them it had been stolen. Had to sell a lot of my things, clean out my savings account, and unload my Christmas money to make up for it. How'd you end up in my house anyway?"

"That's not important. Are you in the clear now?"

Jackson took another bite of his slice and cheeked it. He took a third bite and found my eyes with a squint. Given the seriousness of the situation it pissed me off that he was being so cavalier. I started to get up and Jackson shot out a hand to stop me.

"Wait—"

I sat back down. "I told you. I don't have time for your antics, Jackson. You want to play this all loose and cocky, fine by me. I still have your pills and your money and will be more than happy to give the money away to charity and flush the contents of that bag right down the nearest possible toilet. I'm not messing around here."

His mouth was full so he swallowed before he spoke again. "But what the hell, man, you said you were from my neighborhood. You're the one who broke into my house."

"Irrelevant."

"Irrelevant?"

"Sure, I was trespassing and what I did could be called burglary or worse but who do you think has bigger problems here, me or you? God, Jackson, are you out of your goddamn mind? This is serious. How old are you and your brother?"

"Theo isn't a part of this."

"How old are you?"

"We're sixteen. Seventeen next month."

"You are dabbling in a world of hurt."

"So are you. You broke into my house."

"So you want to blow this up? Bring your mother into this? I know her and right now I'm trying to do the right thing for you, that's all. I think your mom will be furious at me and might seek to press charges for what I did, but when she finds out you're dealing drugs you will break her heart. You will break her heart."

“I could just go to Miguel.”

“Your supplier, huh? Go ahead. But seeing that this Miguel stomped on your face for the first screwup my guess is he’ll be all out of lenience now that you have him exposed and I know his name. Look, the only way out of this is for you to trust me, that when I tell you right here and right now that this game you’re playing is over you take my advice as gospel and you stop. I mean, do you really want to throw your life away? Is being some penny-ante drug dealer that important to you?”

“No . . .”

“Look at me. You have plans, right? College?”

“Yeah, I guess. But that’s kind of sketchy now that my dad is dead.”

“Then why don’t you do the right thing? Honor your father’s memory and stop all this. If Miguel or whoever gets picked up, do you think he’ll care one iota about rolling over on some kid like you? You’re already in a hole so deep you don’t even realize it. Stop digging is all I’m saying. With any luck, maybe, just maybe, this Miguel character will move on, but don’t think for a second that you’re out of the woods.”

“Oh yeah? What do you know about it?”

“I know about mistakes.”

Jackson looked away. “It’s not that easy.”

I sat back. “I know it’s not,” I said unconvincingly. Then a terrible dark thought washed through my brain. “Oh, wait. No. Don’t tell me you’re that stupid. You’re not still—”

“Still what?”

“Are you still dealing?”

Jackson’s eyes bounced around. After a moment they finally settled on mine. “No,” he said weakly. “Miguel said no way. He doesn’t trust me, so I guess I’m on some kind of a break or something.”

“Let me clarify that for you. You’re not on some kind of a break. Not in the least. You’re a loose end.”

“But they’re just a bunch of lawn-care guys.”

“Sure they are.”

I let that sink in. For the both of us. As the dangerous gravity of his predicament dawned on him, Jackson’s eyes started to glisten with tears. I leaned over and placed a hand on his quivering arm.

“For the love of God, Jackson, please. Please tell me you’ve played this safe. Has any of this, what you’ve done, been on the phone? On the Internet? Something that’s traceable?”

“No. They don’t do business that way. They’re careful.”

“You’re not just telling me what I want to hear now, are you?”

“No, I swear.”

“Good.”

We sat for a while saying nothing. I hadn’t had a good stiff drink for over a month but still, sitting there and sharing the guilty details of each of our crimes, I was positive I was out of my mind. After about three minutes of silence I decided to sew it all up.

“Give me Miguel’s contact information.”

Jackson balked. “Dude, no! I can’t do that. I can’t. These guys, they’re—”

“Then you’re going to have to do it.”

“Do what?”

“Give them back their money and the pills.”

I wondered why I was caring so much. Even though I never respected him and slept with his wife, I told myself I owed it to Rick. Then I wondered even further if I had the fortitude for the task ahead.

“Either you give me Miguel’s contact information right now or I’m going to the police.”

Draw a picture of the worst part of town. Fill in that picture with long-term storage facilities, low-slung brick warehouses with plenty of razor wire and a graffitied, boarded-up KFC gone belly-up in expansion-franchise locale of the damned. Make a right past a giant burial mound of bald tires and you’ll find a small brick building. That’s where M&M Lawn and Landscaping housed their wares.

I parked my car in a potholed, trash-hemmed lot and came through a pebbled-glass side door next to a padlocked corrugated-steel garage door.

Inside, the concrete building looked like it had been a body shop at one time given the covered pits, hydraulic lifts, and greasy shelved benches on the back. Lawn equipment was everywhere. Big grass-stained Toros, John Deeres, and Hondas.

Fifty feet away, a watery-eyed Latino a foot and a half shorter than me and thick-chested turned and looked me up and down. The thick man was of indeterminate age and was decked out in heavily stained Carhartt bibs and a blue fiber-filled jacket with blown-out elbows like they were dipped in dirty snow. He stopped working on a tiny engine slaved to a weed whacker and wiped his hands on an oily rag. Even from across the room I could see that half of his teeth were missing and the guts of some other type of engine were spread out on the bench behind him.

“*Quién eres tú?*”

“I want to speak to Miguel,” I said.

The thick man paused and then took a step.

“Miguel? Miguel be busy.”

“I can wait.”

Another step. “I tol’ you, Miguel busy. Busy, busy, busy. You call later, no? Call in spring, ‘kay?”

“This can’t wait for spring.”

“So wha’? You some trees need cuttin’ or somethin’ like that? We no do trees but my brother, he do trees. I can give you his number. You call him. He do good job. Good price.”

“It’s not about trees. I’d really just like to speak with Miguel.”

The thick man shrugged, shuffled back a few feet, and picked up a long screwdriver from the bench. That gave me pause and I considered bolting for my car right then and there, but a moment later he barked some Spanish at the back of the garage and another man, thinner and in a shiny black-and-gold hoodie, poked his head around the corner. The second man’s neck and face were discolored with multiple tattooed symbols, lettering, and five-pointed crowns. The thick-chested man gestured to me with the screwdriver and cackled more rapid Spanish that ended with both men giving me dark looks and disappearing around the corner.

I stood for what felt like an eternity but was probably in reality only ten

minutes. At my side a paper shopping bag containing the pills and Jackson's money dampened in the grip of my left hand.

It was everything I could do not to turn around and just leave, but I knew I couldn't. I had to do something right. Something for Anna and even for myself. Something brave.

Finally a third man emerged from around the back of the garage. He was clean-shaven and dressed in black logo-free sweats and brilliantly white sneakers. He wore a pair of thick-framed glasses and appeared to have just finished eating something. The third man smiled broadly as he weaved around the mowers and approached. When he finally spoke I was surprised that his accented English was nearly perfect.

"Good morning. I am Miguel. We're not working, but you have come to see us about some work, no? Very good. Good for us. We like business, all times of the year."

He held out a hand and I shook it. His grip was sturdy and the skin of his hand was dry and calloused like the skin of a rhino. I noticed his knuckles were split and scabbed.

I held out the paper bag at my side.

"This is for you."

Miguel's dark eyes didn't leave mine. "For me?"

"Yes. For you."

"What is this?"

"I believe it's yours."

"Mine? I thought you come here looking to hire us."

"I'm not. I'm here about what's in the bag. Here. Take it."

Miguel's eyes still didn't leave mine and slowly he reached up and took the paper bag from my hand. He turned his head and looked toward the back of the garage once. Somewhere above us a jet roared on approach to Newark LIA.

"What is in this?" he asked.

"Money and pills," I answered, "Jackson Nicholas."

All the friendliness that had started moments before dissolved. He stepped back, unrolled the bag, and looked inside.

"I do not understand," he said, touching a finger to the bridge of his glasses.

"I took them. It's my fault Jackson screwed up, not his. I found them in his room in his house and I took them. He doesn't want to sell this stuff anymore. He's just a kid."

Miguel's next words were deliberate and low-toned.

"So, why do you think I would want these things?"

I held my ground. Miguel, if he really was called that, didn't budge. He folded his arms and then bobbed his head at me with a sharp twitch, begging for an answer. I didn't respond, and when he dropped the bag on the floor of the garage it landed with a slap. I flinched.

My heart pounded and the walls of the garage felt like a box closing in. I thought about my daughter Lisa. About Jenny. Of all the things I'd done wrong, my pathetic middle-aged imprudence and squandered, played-out years. All of it. Never really trying to be the man I once hoped I'd be. I thought of Anna's devastation and everything I'd done wrong in my miserable life. I wanted to tell everyone how sorry I was and maybe, just maybe, cry.

"This is a bad part of town, *ese*."

"I know."

"Very bad. Bad things can happen here, even in daylight. You come here with these things, you come to my place of business and you give me this bag. You make accusations."

"I'm not here to prove anything."

"So what it be then? You his father or something?"

"No. Jackson's father is dead."

"Dead?"

"He was killed. A bear attacked him."

"What?"

"I said a bear attacked him."

"A bear?"

"It's a long story, but yes. He was in Alaska and there was an accident. Somehow a bear attacked him and he died."

"*Dios mío . . .*"

"Look, nothing has to come of this. Like I said, Jackson doesn't want to do this anymore and I'm just here trying to put things right. I want to look out for him and told him it was the only way. Please understand, this is just between you and Jackson and me now. I don't want any trouble and neither does he." I almost added something to the effect that Jackson was a good kid but thought better of it. I didn't want to be insulting.

Miguel picked up the paper bag again. The thick man returned from around back and stood behind him. I noticed the screwdriver that was in the man's hand before was no longer there. Miguel gave the thick man the bag and whispered some crackling Spanish. The thick man nodded, took the bag, and disappeared around the corner again. When Miguel turned his attentions back to me he motioned back with his head.

"That's Aldo. We have known each other since we were little back in Veracruz. I just told him to write down your license plate so we understand each other, yes?"

The meaning of his words detonated in my head.

"Of course," I answered shakily, "I understand completely. There's nothing to worry about."

"You say that there is nothing to worry about, but these days," Miguel clucked his tongue, "these days there is always something to worry about, no?"

I think I nodded, but I was shaking too hard to tell.

Miguel waited a beat to make sure my fear was set in deep before he waved his hand toward the door I had entered, gracious as a king.

"You should go," he said. "Tell Jackson I am very sorry to hear about his father. What you say is a terrible thing. Really, a bear? Really?"

I looked down. "Yes. Tore off his head. They never found it."

Miguel winced. "Ah, poor Jackson. Very hard on a young man to lose his father in such a way. Very hard. But you say you're here standing up for him and this is a thing I think I respect, no? Go now and keep our understanding."

I backed up toward the door, trying not to run. His rough laughter chilled my blood.

"Like I said, this be a bad part of town, *ese*. A very bad part of town." ●

ICARUS

by Belinda Bauer

The old man thinks I'm better than this and, sometimes, I think he's right.

I'm watching Eddie riding a pink Barbie bike in the falling snow, with his knees around his ears, laughing that stupid laugh.

"Stop arsing about."

That's Nige. He's the brains. He keeps the records. Eddie tosses the Barbie bike in the back of the van with the others and we get in the cab and watch Nige write in the big book. *87 Capstan Road, 1X Barbie, 2X 13" BMX*

It's a full load. All kids' bikes—BMXs, mountain bikes, tricycles. You name it. More than thirty just today. We drive the lot to a farm near the railway and dump them in a pit. Nige gives the farmer twenty pounds to cover them with slurry.

It's a week before Christmas and my fingers are numb. All through November and December we're on the bikes. After Christmas we'll be back for the brand-new replacements. *That's* where the money is.

I never had a new bike. None of us did. The old man spent his whole life guarding treasure and never had two pennies to rub together. Forty years of standing by a door, staring at people staring at Picassos and Rembrandts. In all that time he only stirred once—and then never tired of telling anyone who would listen how he stopped a woman pushing a bronze of Icarus out of the museum in a push chair. "I knew something was up," he always said when he told the story, "because the baby looked nothing like her!"

When I was little I laughed. Not now. Now it makes me angry to think of him saving a million-quid statue—then he gets the Big C, and no one from the museum even sends a card.

Nick and Charlie are playing Snap on the old man's legs. Nick works at a timber yard and Charlie makes small metal things in a factory. The old man's proud of both of them. Tells people about them. Not me. He doesn't tell anyone about me.

He's asleep and I sit down.

Belinda Bauer grew up in England and South Africa. Before beginning her career as a crime writer she worked as a journalist and screenwriter. Her script *The Locker Room* earned her the Carl Foreman/BAFTA Award for Young British Screenwriters. She has been earning recognition as a crime writer too: This summer she was shortlisted for the 2012 CWA Dagger in the Library Award. Her three novels—*Finders Keepers*, *Blacklands*, and *Darkside*—are all now published in the U.S. †

“Want to play?” says Charlie, but I shake my head and look at the old man, all wasted and papery and with his teeth beside him on the bedside cabinet. He opens his watery eyes and I lean in to hear him whisper:

“Been thieving?”

I get up and knock the cards to the floor. The old bastard knows how to push my buttons, even on his deathbed.

The snow is falling harder, and the lights are on in the museum. The skating rink is strung with stars and filled with rosy children.

“Hello, Mikey,” says the ancient blazer at the gallery door. He knows me. They all do. Been in plenty when I was a nipper. We’d come in after school and wait for the old man to get off work. He’d lead us home through Impressionism, pointing out beauty while we whined.

Icarus is hidden in a little alcove all his own. He’s shiny as treacle, and the wings strapped to his arms are metal perfection. He hasn’t taken off yet; hasn’t flown too close to the sun in his quest for one moment of glory. Hasn’t fallen.

I tip him over and take off the tag. The old man told me how these things work; they transmit a signal to the security office, to show the exact location of each piece of art. As soon as it’s moved, a buzzer goes off and the blazers are alerted. I open the door at the back of the gallery and throw the tag down the stairwell. Then I pick up the statue, put it in my backpack, and together we walk past the old grey guardians, who shout into walkie-talkies as they hobble in confusion towards the basement.

Outside, the Christmas crowd quickly swallows me.

A million quid feels good on my back. That’s a lot of bikes.

Nick and Charlie have gone home, so I play Patience in the dark. The nine of clubs is missing.

Something in the old man’s eyes changes when he wakes to find Icarus at his bedside, watching over him.

“The museum sent it,” I say. “They want you to know they appreciate what you did. What you’ve always done.”

The old man stares at the boy with the wings and smiles.

He dies on Christmas Eve.

On Christmas morning I call the police from a phone box and leave Icarus there for them to find.

On Boxing Day, Nige calls from the van and asks why I’m not at work, so I tell him I don’t feel well.

But that’s not true . . .

I feel just fine. ●

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THE AUCTION

by Christopher Reece

Right this way, ladies and gentlemen. Mind the step, it has been the downfall of others, believe me. If you all could just move in so those at the back have a clear view of the merchandise, we can begin. That's perfect, thank you. Now, are we all here?

I am most excited to present you with this particular collection from the estate. While yes, most of the more valuable antiques may be found in the dining room and the front study, and Mrs. Nicole's jewelry collection is something breathtaking to behold (as many of you ladies know and many of you gentlemen fear), this room holds treasures of a different sort.

Those of you familiar with the Inman family know this room, I'm certain. Unlike most of the items we've already seen, many of the objects within this room have gained a certain, shall we say, notoriety? Other things in the collection are valuable because they come from a particular era of history. These items, why, these items are part of history! Ladies and gentlemen, you are being granted a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to purchase these treasures directly from the estate. Shall we begin?

Lot 434: The first item up for bid is a gilt statuette of the Roman goddess Minerva in full battle regalia. Minerva was the goddess of wisdom, war, art, and commerce. Like her Greek counterpart, Athena, Minerva sprung fully formed from her father's head when it was, somewhat unfortunately, split open by one of the other gods. Although the exact manufacture of this fine statuette has been lost to history, we do know that Mr. Henry and Ms. Nicole

When we find a story with an unusual concept or point of view, along with good writing, particularly among our submissions from new writers, we snap it up. That was the case here. Author Christopher Reece is currently a first-year law student, on scholarship following nearly a decade of service in the Navy. He lives in Atlanta, Georgia, where he also works as a computer programmer. This is his first published work of fiction. ¶

purchased it jointly at the famed Les Puces de Saint-Ouen market in Paris.

Mr. Henry was in Paris seeking the acquisition of a small wholesale coffee conglomerate. It was this acquisition, made with family money, of course, that led inexorably to the grand Inman Empire with which we are all so familiar. Flush with the success of the acquisition, Mr. Henry decided to kill some time before his return flight home by browsing the open-air market.

It is possible that an icon of the goddess of commerce appealed to his business instincts. More likely, he was attracted to that vendor not by the statuette but by the American coed who was attempting to purchase it. The young lady did not have nearly enough money to buy the statuette, or nearly enough skill in French to understand the vendor when he explained that problem.

The only thing Mr. Henry enjoyed more than a successful business deal was to play white knight to a lady in distress. When a dashing American businessman offered to purchase the statuette on her behalf, asking only the pleasure of her company over a cup of coffee and perhaps a glass of wine later, why, she could hardly say no, could she?

Lot 435: One pair of Sheffield silver-plated candlesticks.

Later, after coffee and wine and then dinner at a restaurant she could not have afforded to even look at, much less frequent, Ms. Nicole wanted to give her escort a gift. Unfortunately, she was in Paris despite, or possibly because of, massive debts accrued during four years at the American Academy of Arts. Any gift suitable for her obviously cultured date would be far outside her ability to purchase.

In a fit of rebellion, she waited until both her date and the waiter were distracted and slipped one of the candlesticks from the table into her purse. She presented it to her escort later as they walked along the Seine.

"You know these are more valuable as a pair, don't you?" Mr. Henry said, with a mock frown. Pulling the second candlestick from an interior pocket with an elaborate flourish, he gave her a wink. "There, now we're both criminals. A matched set."

They were still laughing as they purchased candles at a local market and returned to Mr. Henry's lodgings to try out their stolen candlesticks.

Lot 436: Here, next to the fireplace, we have an exceptionally well-maintained wingback chair in the Queen Anne style. Note the beautiful scrolled winds and iconic cabriole legs. This exquisite chair, selected by Ms. Nicole herself, is unusual in that it has an exposed wooden frame rather than the fully upholstered style more common today. This tells us this chair dates to the late eighteenth century.

Mr. Henry could afford the extravagance at this point, of course. Long gone were the days of browsing open-air markets and filching restaurant centerpieces. By the time he purchased this chair, the Inman Corporation had already begun to transition from a small wholesale company into a worldwide enterprise. Many of the most familiar names in coffee were already calling on the Inman Company regularly and would soon begin dealing with Mr. Henry exclusively. In the face of such wealth, he could hardly begrudge Ms. Nicole a simple chair.

The day this chair was delivered, Mr. Henry had it placed here in his new

office. He built a cozy fire in the fireplace, poured some champagne, and asked Ms. Nicole to take a seat. When he got down on one knee and proposed, she said yes without hesitation.

Lot 437: First edition of Edith Hamilton's seminal work, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*. This rare hardcover volume is in good condition and signed by the author. Yes, madam, unfortunately I did say "good condition." As they say, good condition is not really very good. This particular volume exhibits some wear and, you may note, a small tear at the base of the spine, preventing it from any higher listing.

Mrs. Nicole purchased the book in fine condition on the occasion of the couple's first anniversary. The traditional gift is paper, and having met each other over the statue of a goddess, Mrs. Nicole thought the book would be a romantic gesture.

Less romantic was Mr. Henry's gift, which was to forget the anniversary entirely. When he finally came home from work that evening, Mrs. Nicole flung the book at him, damaging it in the process, and went to bed without another word.

Lot 438: Our next item up for bid is Mr. Henry's grand walnut desk. As the Inman Company grew and expanded beyond coffee into so many other commodities, he necessarily spent most of his time working. On the odd occasion when his responsibilities did not keep him in the office, Mr. Henry could usually be found working here. Who knows how many multimillion-dollar deals were finalized from this very spot?

Mrs. Nicole famously detested this desk. To her, it symbolized the nights her husband spent away at the office or even overseas following up on some urgent piece of business. Having long since abandoned her art because it did not fit in with her new society friends, Mrs. Nicole resented this desk and the time her husband spent at it. To her way of thinking, she had made sacrifices for her marriage and Mr. Henry simply refused to reciprocate.

For his part, Mr. Henry largely dismissed his new wife's irrational abhorrence of a piece of furniture. He was a businessman, and a businessman needs a desk the way a doctor needs a hospital. So when Mrs. Nicole barged in one evening, interrupting an important teleconference, it led to a tremendous row. She demanded the removal of the desk and Mr. Henry refused. They fought for several hours, but afterwards made love. The topic of the desk was forgotten or, at least, no longer mentioned.

Lot 439: Two stained-glass overlays depicting the birth of Venus. Designed by Mrs. Nicole for her husband's birthday, these overlays were installed during one of Mr. Henry's frequent overseas trips. A specialty item of the utmost quality, these windows and their installation cost several thousand dollars, but Mrs. Nicole would not settle for less than the absolute best.

Why, yes, sir, that particular panel has been replaced. What remarkably keen eyes you have, to recognize such a slight variation in the color and pattern.

You see, when Mr. Henry returned from his trip—a trip that went badly, by the way—he was not enthusiastic about this particular addition to his office. He was, to put it delicately, ungrateful. This was his office, and she had no

right to make such changes without consulting him first. After all, he didn't tell her how to go shopping or whatever it was she did while he was away, now did he? And, my God, the cost! What was she thinking?

She was thinking that since he seemed to prefer the company of an empty office to her own, she could at least make it nice for him. She was thinking that she needed something to do while he was out gallivanting around doing who knows what. She was thinking that perhaps she should have married a man who could perform in the bedroom instead of just the boardroom.

This last observation led the already energetic discussion to become physical. Mr. Henry did not intend to strike his wife; it was simply an accident, a reflex. He most certainly did not intend for her to stumble back the way she did, losing her balance and striking her head on the newly installed overlays.

It was several weeks later, after a quiet hospital visit and a few stitches, before Mrs. Nicole noticed the glass had been cracked during the incident. Mr. Henry never noticed at all.

Lot 440: A simple carnival-glass lamp in a geometric pattern. Unlike most of the items in this auction, this lot is neither antique nor, shall we be honest, particularly well-executed. In fact, you may be somewhat surprised to find such a mundane item amongst the possessions of such a well-known family.

It was Mrs. Nicole who commissioned this piece, after a fashion. After the argument that resulted in the broken window pane, Mrs. Nicole endeavored to have the window repaired. Unfortunately, the original artisan was unavailable for the repair, so a young apprentice was sent in his stead.

The young man, barely twenty years old, unfortunately arrived in the late morning on his first visit, and really the light was so much different in the afternoon. Mrs. Nicole could hardly have him replace such a pivotal element without understanding the color of the piece, could she? He must certainly have some coffee or a cup of tea while they waited for the right time, it was only hospitable. Why yes, she had trained as an artist, would he care to see some of her work?

The apprentice glazier was ultimately required to make several trips to repair the window. First, he had selected a piece of glass that was entirely the wrong pattern. Such a silly mistake, he apologized for inconveniencing the lady in such a fashion. Mrs. Nicole assured him it was no inconvenience at all. Further visits were required to complete the preparation and repair work, not to mention touch-ups, and finally visits that hardly seemed to relate to window repair at all.

This particular lamp was a gift to Mrs. Nicole as a thank-you for the indulgence she had shown a simple glazier. He had thought of her while he made it. Mrs. Nicole greatly appreciated the gift, and returned the generosity several times over.

Afterwards, she placed the lamp in her husband's office.

Lot 441: A full set of antique brass fire irons. These fire irons were purchased by Mrs. Nicole at an estate sale in New Hampshire shortly following her marriage. Although Mr. Henry was rarely home, and even more rarely made use of the fireplace, even the occasional fire needed tending. To do otherwise would be unsafe.

This is somewhat ironic considering it was one of these fire irons that Mr. Henry grabbed when he walked into his office one evening, unexpectedly discovering his wife and the young glazier collaborating. The younger man, gallantly intercepting the threat, swept up another of the irons, and an impromptu duel ensued. Mrs. Nicole screamed. Threats were exchanged. The young glazier landed a glancing blow that cracked Mr. Henry's arm, causing him to drop the poker. Seeing an opportunity to end the fight, the young man lifted his own weapon, only to have Mrs. Nicole grab at his arm. He shoved her away.

Lot 442: An antique walnut end table. Propelled backwards by her lover, Mrs. Nicole tripped over that step—see, I warned you it was hazardous—and fell, striking her head on the scrolled corner of this sturdy end table, handmade by a renowned carpenter from upstate New York. Despite killing Mrs. Nicole instantly, you will note that this exceptional end table suffered no mars, dents, or discolorations. That is quality, ladies and gentlemen.

Lot 443: Handmade pile Oriental rug. Unlike the end table, this exquisite rug was permanently stained during the incident. Mrs. Nicole suffered a head wound, and I'm sure I don't need to tell you good people how such wounds bleed, even after death. Every effort has been made to remove any residual discolorations, but if you look closely you can still see the imprint of Mrs. Nicole's body, where she lay for several hours before discovery. Here you can make out the imprint from the glazier's knee, where he knelt to check on her, dropping his weapon in his panic.

And, most unfortunately, you can still make out slight discolorations here, here, and here. I am told these marks were made by what the authorities indecorously call cast-off. You see, while the young glazier knelt over his lover's body, Mr. Henry recovered one of the fire irons with his uninjured arm. He took several swings with the weapon, and all but the first were bloody. The resulting discolorations in this otherwise beautiful rug will sadly harm its resale value.

Yes, madam, an opportune attack with some cold water and baking soda would most certainly have saved the rug from harm. Unfortunately, instead of taking any steps to rescue the carpet, Mr. Henry simply took a seat at his desk and pulled something out of a drawer.

This leads us to our final item for bid before we move on.

Lot 444: A .38 Colt single-action revolver with rosewood grips and mother-of-pearl inlay. Only fired once.

Shall we start the bidding? ●

EDITOR'S NOTE: In case you haven't seen it yet, *EQMM* has a new blog called *Something Is Going to Happen: The Editor of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine and Guests Blog About Suspense, Short Stories, and the Mystery-Fiction Scene*. Visit us and join in the discussion at www.somethingisgoingtohappen.net.



CARL OF THE BELLS

by Annie Reed

My friend Carl was born a few beers short of a six-pack, if you know what I mean. He's one of those guys with a bucket full of great ideas you just know will never pan out. He told me once he could make a killing selling rocks in a box.

"People are stupid gullible," he said. "They'll buy anything if you package it right."

I didn't have the heart to tell him Pet Rocks went out of style while we were still learning our ABCs.

Carl being Carl, I shouldn't have been surprised when he interrupted our football watching one night to tell me about his latest money-making idea.

We were nursing beers at Big Ed's Tavern on this particular Thursday night, watching the Chargers beat the crap out of the 49ers on Big Ed's dinky television. Big Ed got the NFL channel, which was why we hung out there. The place was packed, because the 49ers were playing this week and Reno's chock-full of diehard Niners fans. Didn't matter that this late in December the 49ers didn't have a snowball's chance in hell of making the playoffs. Carl and I counted ourselves lucky we got our favorite seats at the bar so we could see the tiny screen. You'd think with all the money Big Ed raked in on Thursdays, he'd shell out the bucks for a flat-screen TV bigger than a postage stamp.

"You know those bell ringers they got in front of every grocery store around town?" Carl asked me.

“Yeah, the Salvation Army guys.”

Carl gave me one of his “that’s what you think” looks, complete with arched eyebrow and all-knowing sneer. Carl’s been losing his hair since high-school graduation, and he could stand to shed those thirty or so extra pounds around his middle. His sense of fashion is lounge-lizard slick. Look at him sideways, and he could have doubled for Clark Griswold’s hick cousin in that Christmas movie my wife makes me watch every year. The arched eyebrow combined with a sneer wasn’t a particularly flattering look on my good buddy Carl.

“How do you know they’re all with the Salvation Army?” Carl asked.

D’oh. “‘Cause it says so on the red buckets they got? And on the aprons they wear?”

“Ha!” Carl gestured at me with his beer bottle. “What if they just had aprons printed up at that T-shirt shop in the mall?”

Okay, he could have a point there. The bell ringers’ aprons had a logo, but anybody with a half-decent computer and printer could dummy up something to iron on a red apron. My wife did something similar for our son’s Halloween costume last year when he wanted to be an official Ghostbuster like in the video game.

Yeah, I know. For my kid, it’s the game. For me, it’s Bill Murray in the movie they show on late-night cable TV. Pretty soon I’m gonna be sounding like my old man with his “back in my day” nonsense.

“What about the buckets?” I said. “You don’t see those things on the shelves at WalMart.”

“How hard could it be to spray-paint a bucket red?” Carl leaned in a little closer. “Or take off with one? Those bell ringers don’t look in such great shape, if you ask me.”

I stared at Carl like he was out of his mind. “This has got to be the lamest thing you’ve ever spent too much time thinking about.”

Carl shrugged and turned back to watching the game, but I could practically see the gears spinning inside that thick skull of his.

Carl and me, we’ve been friends since his family moved next to mine when we were both in the fourth grade. We’ve done some stupid stuff in our time, most of which my wife doesn’t know about and some of which I wish I didn’t remember. Like snatching a toy from one of those collection barrels they used to have in grocery stores back when we were in middle school. My wife thinks I buy a brand new toy every year and donate it to whoever’s collecting ’em for poor kids because I’m a good guy. I don’t tell her I do it because I grew up and got a conscience.

I wouldn’t be friends with Carl if I’d met him for the first time after I got that conscience, but he was the first real friend I had when I was a kid. When you’re the only boy in a family that’s got four girls, having a guy friend who doesn’t think you’re a sissy and actually stands up to other kids when they call

Nevada writer Annie Reed is a paralegal by day, working on civil, not criminal, cases. Her most recent novel is *A Death in Cumberland* (Thunder Valley Press). Her other recent publications include the private eye novel *Pretty Little Horses* and the short-story collection *It’s a Crime* (both from Thunder Valley Press). A self-described sucker for all things related to Christmas, she admits that a little holiday overload may have inspired this story. †

you names is a friend for life.

Besides, Carl's not all bad. He was the first one in the hospital waiting room to congratulate me when my son was born. Sure, Carl was standing right under the No Smoking sign puffing on the world's nastiest cigar when he did it, but the guy had been there all night while my wife had the longest labor of any woman in history (according to her). He clapped me hard enough on the back that my teeth rattled, he was that proud of me being a dad. He was the best man at my wedding and a pallbearer at my old man's funeral. He just had the dumbest ideas ever about how to make a quick buck.

I slid off my barstool at the start of the fourth quarter. The Niners were so far behind they'd never catch up. Besides, my wife was expecting me home. Our son had his Christmas party at school the next day and my wife had to bake cupcakes. I told her I'd come home early and help decorate. I'm crap at making anything in the kitchen except a sandwich, but even a guy like me can toss those red and green sprinkle things on frosting.

"See you tomorrow?" I asked Carl. Fridays were payday for me, so we always met back at Big Ed's for a beer before I headed home.

He shrugged. "I got some stuff to do. I'll let you know."

Carl didn't have a regular job. Whenever I asked him what he did for money, he always told me he "did stuff" for people. Considering that some of our stupidest stunts back when we'd been kids could have landed us in juvie if we'd been caught, I didn't ask what kind of stuff he meant. I counted myself lucky that so far I'd never opened my door to find a couple of cops standing there wanting to ask me about my good buddy Carl.

Looking back, I probably should have put two and two together, but I figured Carl's latest idea would turn out like all the rest—an idea he never did anything about. Goes to show you how much I knew about my good buddy.

Three days later, Carl called me on my cell at four in the afternoon. "Meet me at Big Ed's. I got something to show you you're not gonna believe."

It was Sunday. The Sunday before Christmas. My wife had already been on my case because I had football on the TV in the living room and she wanted to watch her holiday DVDs. Plus, she was still mad at me about the cupcakes. It turned out that I really didn't know how to toss sprinkles on frosting. Go figure. If I told her I was going to go meet Carl for a quick beer, I was pretty sure I'd be in the doghouse until New Year's.

"It's Sunday," I told Carl. "I got things to do with the family."

"Joey," Carl said in that way that took me right back to fourth grade. I was Joe in my adult life. Carl only called me Joey when he wanted to get my goat. "Quit being a pussy."

If calling me by a kid's name didn't do it, calling me a pussy did. "At least I get some every now and then," I said.

Even I knew that was a lame comeback. Carl never failed to have female companionship when he wanted. I guess women can be stupid gullible if a guy promises them a good time, no matter how sleazy the guy looks.

"What, you got something better to do?" Carl said.

I guess I can be stupid gullible, too, when it comes to Carl. I sighed and put my hand over the phone. My wife was in the kitchen making Christmas cookies for our kid to leave out for Santa.

"Honey," I called in a voice that clearly said *please don't kill me*. "I gotta run

out for a minute and see Carl. You mind?"

My wife surprised me, though. She walked out to the living room, took the channel changer from me, kissed me on the nose, and told me to have a good time.

She really doesn't like football.

I thought Carl wanted to have a quick beer, but he was waiting for me in his car in the parking lot. He honked at me and rolled down the window when I got close. "Get in," he said.

Some of the worst trouble we'd gotten into as kids had started with that phrase.

"Where we going?" I asked.

"I told you, I got something to show you."

"We can't do it here?"

"No, we can't do it here," he said, parroting me and at the same time making it sound totally dumb.

I sighed and got in.

Carl drives one of those huge Cadillacs that's about a million years old and looks like something a door-to-door salesman or a little old lady who can't see over the steering wheel would drive. Carl's proud of that car, right down to its faded leather seats. He won't even smoke while he's driving, that tells you how special he thinks that old car is.

Spare change covered the floorboard on my side. My feet slid out from under me on all that change as I got in, and I flopped down on the passenger seat as if I'd already been drinking all night.

"You wanna tell me what's going on?" I asked.

Carl giggled. "Just wait and see."

He drove us half a mile away to a strip mall with a video store on one end and a beauty-supply store on the other. In between was a Laundromat, a dry cleaners, a twenty-four-hour liquor store, and a couple of empty storefronts.

A Salvation Army bell ringer stood in front of the liquor store, ringing his bell for all he was worth.

Carl pointed at the bell ringer. "That's one of mine," he said.

Huh?

Carl pulled into an empty parking space in front of the bell ringer. Now that I was up close and really looking, I could tell that the guy wasn't official. For one thing, he didn't have the exact same logo on his red apron. Instead of "The Salvation Army," the bell ringer's logo read "Save the Holidays" inside the white-outlined shield. The bucket was just a plain old metal bucket Carl had spray-painted red, and it hung from a wooden stand he'd painted black.

All in all, it looked like Carl had gone to a lot of trouble to get his idea to work. And work it did, if all the spare change on the floorboard of his Cadillac was any indication.

I'd never seen the bell ringer before. "Where'd you get the guy?" I asked.

"Day labor," Carl said. "Down by the DMV. I got five more of 'em around town. Soon as I get more buckets painted up, I'm expanding."

Huh. "You making any money at it? Besides the spare change under my feet?"

Carl gave me another one of his "I know more than you do" looks. "You'd be surprised."

"No kidding?"

"God's honest truth," Carl said, totally missing the irony.

It looked like Carl finally had an idea that worked. I should have been happy

for him, like he'd been for me all those times things turned out good in my life, but I couldn't shake the idea that he was taking money from gullible people who thought they were giving it to the needy. Carl might be a lot of things, but he wasn't needy.

I worked up a grin for him, then I told him I had to get back home. I had some thinking to do.

The hard thing about having a conscience is that it tells you what you should do but not how to do it. Oh, sure, I could have just sicced the real Salvation Army on Carl and his fake bell ringers, but I didn't feel good about doing that. Besides, they might not be able to do anything about it. It wasn't like Carl had his crew pretending to *be* the Salvation Army. He'd refined his idea somewhat after we'd first talked about it at Big Ed's Tavern, and I had to admit, he'd come up with a stroke of genius with his whole "Save the Holidays" scam.

I lay awake in bed almost all night thinking on the problem. By the time I finally fell asleep, I'd come up with something I thought might work. I hoped it would still seem like a good idea in the morning. Most of all, I hoped my wife would never find out about it.

See, back before I met her, I'd dated this girl who wanted to be a journalist. Not a reporter. A *journalist*. She was blond and intense, and damn, but she'd been about perfect in almost every way, that one way being that she never really liked me all that much. To make a long story short, once my wife found out who my ex-girlfriend was, my wife had a new enemy for life. I never have quite figured out why she would get jealous of a woman who had not one iota of interest in me, but I don't think there's a man alive who's ever truly understood everything about his wife.

My ex-girlfriend does the weather now on the local station on the weekends, but I figured she hadn't changed all that much. Back when we'd dated, she was always on the lookout for the next big story.

Monday morning I called the station and left a message for her. It took her until Tuesday afternoon to call me back. By then I was just about ready to tell my conscience to take a flying leap and let me have Christmas with my family in peace without worrying about how much money Carl was swindling people out of.

I turned out to be right about my ex. She still had dreams of breaking that one big story that would get her noticed by some big station somewhere else. When I asked her why her station hadn't done a story on the new Christmas charity in town—Save the Holidays—I could practically hear the wheels turning inside that calculating head of hers. I told her I'd seen bell ringers for the charity down by the liquor store and they seemed to be doing a right smart business with people spending their paychecks on a little Christmas cheer of the alcoholic variety. I hadn't counted on her asking me what the charity was collecting for. I couldn't think of anything to say except that I thought they were making sure kids who didn't have anything had a nice Christmas.

When I hung up from that call, my hands were shaking, but I felt pretty darn good inside.

The story aired Wednesday night on the eleven o'clock news. I was sitting on the couch with my wife when my ex appeared on the television.

"I thought she just did the weather," my wife said. "On the weekends." Icicles practically hung off her words.

I shrugged. One thing I do know about my wife is when to keep my mouth shut.

The next thing I knew, there was Carl on the television, looking for all the world like a deer caught in the headlights. My wannabe-journalist ex must have staked out the bell ringer in front of the liquor store until she caught Carl when he came by to pick up the contents of the bucket. She'd stuck a microphone in his face and asked him how many children he thought he'd be helping have a Merry Christmas this holiday season.

"Huh?" said Carl.

"Your charity—Save the Holidays," my ex said. "You're collecting to help kids have a good Christmas, right? That is what you tell people who drop change in your buckets? Or are you running a scam here?"

My wife elbowed me in the ribs. "Hey, isn't that your friend Carl?"

I grunted.

She narrowed her eyes. "What's he up to?"

I shrugged.

On the television, Carl looked at the camera, then looked back at my ex. He smoothed down what little hair he had and managed to smile. "Nope, no scam here." He cleared his throat. "No, ma'am. We're a brand-new charity just trying to make a difference."

"How will you be doing that?"

"Uh . . ." Carl glanced at the camera again. "We're . . . uh . . ."

Watching Carl try to figure things out on camera was painful. Maybe I should have made an anonymous call to the Salvation Army after all.

Carl's brain must have latched onto the same thing that had me donating a new toy every Christmas. "We're buying toys for kids whose parents can't afford it," he finally said. "Donate 'em in those barrels you see around town. We was gonna keep it on the quiet side, not draw a lot of attention to ourselves." Carl finally smiled, warming to the story he was spinning. "I guess now the cat's outta the bag."

"How about letting our cameras tag along when you make the donation?" my ex, the journalistic bloodhound, said. "Now that you don't have to keep it on the quiet side."

"Uh . . . sure, why not?"

The camera pulled back to show my ex and Carl standing side by side with the bell ringer in the background. My ex signed off with a promise to show the second half of the story the following night.

When the commercial came on, my wife turned to look at me. "You have anything to do with that?"

"What? Why would you think that?"

"You didn't breathe the whole time that story was on."

I rubbed at the back of my neck, thinking about how uncomfortable it was going to be sleeping on that couch. "Well . . ."

My wife looked at me for a long minute, then she shook her head. "I always knew there was a good man in there," she said before she kissed me on the cheek. "But if you ever talk to her again, you and this couch will get to know each other *real* well."

Well, at least my wife was still talking to me. I wasn't so sure about Carl.

The next night, there was Carl on the eleven-o'clock news again. Instead of an interview, this time the camera and my ex followed him around a toy store as he spent most of the money I figured he'd collected. After that, the story cut

to Carl taking the load of toys to a local fire station and giving the whole mess to the guys who collected all the toys from those barrels. The firefighters looked happy, my ex looked happy—heck, she had a story on two nights in a row that had nothing to do with the weather—and even Carl looked pretty jolly for a guy who'd finally made a bunch of money on one of his crazy ideas and then lost it all in the space of a week.

My conscience told me the least I could do was buy Carl a Christmas drink. So at two in the afternoon on Christmas Eve I met up with him at Big Ed's Tavern. The place was pretty crowded for a day without a live game on the NFL channel.

When Carl walked in, a strange thing happened.

The guys in the bar applauded. I kid you not.

Guys who never even grunted hello at Carl clapped him on the back, asked him why he hadn't told them what he was up to, if they'd have known, they would have chipped in a buck or two. Big Ed even gave Carl his first beer on the house.

Carl sat down on the barstool next to me. When the rest of the guys in the bar went back to doing what they'd been doing before Carl walked in, he leaned up close to me and said, "That was your doing, wasn't it?"

I gave him a worried look, but I didn't deny it.

"Thought I recognized her," he said. "She turned out pretty good for someone who'd date *you* in high school."

I let the insult slide and took a drink of my beer. "You pissed at me?"

He shook his head. "Naw. You see what happened here? I got this all over town today. Everybody thinks I'm a good guy."

I could see the wonder in his face. People usually didn't think Carl was worth much. Could be that's why he'd stayed my friend all these years. As much as he'd stuck by me, I'd stuck by him too.

"I gotta tell you, Joey. I sure felt like a good guy bringing all them toys over like I was Santa."

I was feeling good enough I didn't even mind he'd called me Joey. "Santa in a Cadillac," I said.

"Better than a sleigh," he said.

"Yeah. No one's gotta clean up after the reindeer."

We laughed about that, but I could see the wheels turning in his head.

"What?" I asked.

"Electric pooper-scooper," he said. "No one likes cleaning up poop, right? But you gotta do it. I bet we could make a killing with all them people walking those fancy dogs don't want to get their hands dirty."

I smiled at him. "Or clean litter boxes," I said, thinking of my wife's cats.

"Yeah! Litter pans with automatic scoopers in 'em."

I didn't have the heart to tell him my wife had already tried one of those and the cats refused to use it.

"I always get the best ideas around you," Carl said, giving me a hearty clap on the back.

I downed the rest of my beer and resigned myself to a few weeks of listening to Carl talk about poop. Besides, what did I know? He really might invent an auto-cleaning litter box cats would actually use.

In a world where my friend Carl was not only a local celebrity but actually felt good about giving stuff away, pretty much anything could happen. ●

TOM WASP AND THE GHOST PARADE

by Amy Myers

Sometimes Ned and I give ourselves a treat. We being chimney sweeps, this can't be often, but Ned's only twelve years old, so when times are good I do my best to count a few pennies out of the glass jar where we keep our earnings.

"Ghosts!" he cried, stopping in excitement in front of one of the many shows at Bethnal Green Fair, which is one of our very best treats.

It's a travelling fair, of course, and these show booths are carried on the back of wagons and erected on arrival. The best of these are grand affairs with wooden shutters for walls but this one was much simpler, the main part being constructed only of canvas and poles and its front parade and steps of wood. The parade is where they give you a taste of what

delights you'll find within once you've paid your money. I reasoned, however, that no self-respecting ghost would appear in the daylight, so to satisfy Ned's curiosity we would be obliged to go into the show itself.

GADD'S GREAT GHOST PARADE, I read across the top of the booth's impressive entrance. Or more truthfully, it would have been impressive if it hadn't been in faded letters across a banner that had seen more storms than Lord Nelson's navy. Underneath was painted "The Grisly Murders of Eugene Aram with Ghastly Ghosts of Kings and Queens." Ned was jumping up and down in anticipation now. Owing to where we live in East London, he's worldly wise in the ways of the Ratcliffe Highway, but before I knew him he was a climbing boy and he missed the ways of childhood. He knows what murder is, but ghosts! They were something exciting.

"It might be scary, Ned."

Series sleuth Tom Wasp was first seen in short stories such as this one for *EQMM*, but his creator, Amy Myers, eventually began to write novels featuring the Victorian chimney sweep. The most recent of them, *Tom Wasp and the Newgate Knocker* (Five Star, 2010) is available not only in hardcover but in large print and audio editions. *Library Journal's* starred review of the book spoke of "a winning historical series with an engaging protagonist." The latest novel by Amy Myers to see print is the Jack Colby mystery *Classic Calls the Shots* (Severn House). †

“Don’t care. You’ll come in too, won’t you?”

I would. Because of our smell, we chimney sweeps aren’t popular in small enclosed spaces like this fair booth, but it was very early in the day with few people about, and they might be glad of our custom. I knew about this murderer Eugene Aram. There was a book about him years ago and a poem too, which I often heard the Patterer proclaim to those who could not read, which is the case with most folk round here in this year of 1862. It was a real murder case, as such stories often are. Aram was a schoolmaster who, driven by poverty and urged on by his wicked accomplice called Houseman, murdered a man called Clarke. Aram was very remorseful afterwards, and hid himself away in a small village where he would never be found. There he fell in love with a lady called Madeleine and was about to marry her when Houseman turned up and squealed to the peelers. So poor Aram was hanged, and Madeleine died of shock. I did not recall any ghosts or kings or queens in the story, but no doubt Mr. Gadd, the owner of this show, had a better memory than I.

As Ned and I were making up our minds about going in, the door of the brightly painted living caravan next to the booth burst open and produced a drama of its own. At first I thought that this was the outside show, usually shown on the parade. Then I changed my mind, as the participants here seemed set on killing each other rather than tempting customers inside to see ghosts.

First down the steps stumbled a handsome but formidable-looking man who, judging by the shouting inside the van, was called Oscar. He was followed by an iron saucepan, which fortunately missed his head but made him stumble. In pursuit of the saucepan lumbered Peg Gadd, the wife of Mr. Gadd, both of whom I remembered from previous years when they were running a peepshow. She was a handsome if overpowering woman and no doubt not to be crossed. After her rushed their daughter Annie, a most attractive young lady crying most piteously. She was followed by old George Gadd himself shouting lustily. Lastly came a sulky-looking young fellow, doing his best to make his voice heard.

One powerful hand from Gadd stopped Oscar from escaping and the pursuers made a circle around him.

A man with a placard around his neck advertising Bartholomew’s Dancing Bear had stopped by our side to watch the fun, and even the bear whose reins he held looked interested. “I knew it would happen,” he said gloomily (the man, that is). “Always trouble, these Gadds. Mind you, Peg asked for it, choosing Oscar for her fancy man.”

“She doesn’t seem to fancy him at the moment,” I observed. The saucepan, having been collected by Peg, was once again being launched at Oscar’s head.

“I reckon she’s found out Oscar’s been tumbling her daughter too,” said Mr. Bartholomew.

Now it was the turn of the sulky young man, who gave Peg a hand with the saucepan. “Take that,” he yelled. “Annie’s mine. We’re going to be married.”

“You keep out of it, Percy Nash,” Annie promptly shouted at him. “This is family business.”

It seemed to me that as her husband-to-be Percy had a right to be involved in this nasty family situation. Ned showed little interest in it, as the bear was taking his attention. However, I was lucky enough to receive a commentary from Mr Bartholomew, although he was having to shout as the drama was breaking out with renewed force.

"That Percy doesn't know he's born," Mr. Bartholomew informed me at high pitch. "Taking on a bird like Annie. Have a look at Peg and beware, I told him. She'll be as tough as her mother one day. Annie already likes the ones she can push around—mind you, she likes Oscar too and he isn't one to be pushed around."

Annie's love of Oscar wasn't evident at the moment, and nor was Peg's. Oscar was clamped in a tight grip between Peg and George Gadd, and Annie was battering him with her fists and howling at the same time. Percy was alternately trying to pull her away and putting in his own blows—secure in the knowledge that Oscar could not retaliate.

"Hop the twig, Oscar," yelled George. "You're sacked."

"No, he's not," shrieked Annie. "I want to kill him first."

"And me," quavered Percy bravely.

Peg's eyes glittered. "He's mine, all mine."

"Clear out," roared George, shaking him fiercely.

"You let go of me, and I'll clear out," Oscar growled. "But you'll regret it, Gadd. I'm not keeping my mouth shut no longer." He had added this interesting threat in an undertone—well, an undertone compared with the rest of the exchange of views.

Gadd went rather pale, but luckily for the combatants another young man appeared from the show tent's side entrance. The cheaper, flimsier booths such as this are held up with a central kingpole, with a supporting front and rear pole each end taking the weight of the tilt—that being the canvas roof. Smaller poles hold the walls. The main entrance to the show tent is on the wooden parade, and leads the lucky audience into the higher level of seating, from which a ladder is provided for those rich enough to want to sit lower down. There's a side entrance for the audience to leave from so that they don't get tangled up with the rush of eager people wanting to see the next performance. There's also an exit for the cast at the rear of the stage area. This all sounds very grand, but I wouldn't want to be in one of these constructions during a high wind.

The young man who had just come to join the fun outside the living van looked very nervous. "Er—should I start the first show?" he shouted.

No one took any notice.

"That's young Walter. He's a good lad," Mr. Bartholomew remarked. "Does the magic lantern and all that. To old Gadd, he's the son he never had."

I quickly shushed him, in case Ned heard the words magic lantern, although he was still more interested in the dancing bear. Ned is young enough not to want to know how these ghosts would manage to appear, but clever enough to work it out afterwards, if he wanted to.

"Mr. Gadd," Walter cried a bit louder. "I'll have to begin the show."

There was instant silence. Then George growled at Oscar. "I'll sack you later," he promised. Oscar slunk away to the rear of the show tent, followed by the rest of the happy party. Peg's face suddenly appeared at the front entrance and began to shout, "Roll up, roll up, ghosts a-plenty, 'orrible spectres, frightful phantoms, only tuppence." Then she sat down to take the money.

Miss Annie appeared outside the show tent in a short dress with pink tights, and as the parade is raised up it allows folks the privilege of seeing her ankles, which usually brings potential customers clustering round. Not today, because it was too early in the morning. The outside show consisted of Miss Annie

screaming as Percy appeared and dangled a skeleton before her. His other arm then caught an apparently fainting Annie. I'd like to record that customers then rushed up to pay their money, but they didn't.

Ned was more interested in ghosts than ankles. "Let's go in, Gov," he pleaded.

I wasn't sure now. I didn't like the look of the family scene we had just witnessed and I didn't like the look of this flimsy tent. It promised to be dark inside in every sense. There would be no lights, in order that we could see the ghosts, and I had a feeling that trouble might begin again at any moment.

But I went in with Ned so as not to disappoint him. There was still an oil lamp burning when we went inside, enough to see that there were only two other customers in the gallery—by which I mean a row or two of wobbly chairs and benches—and from here we looked down on the stage, with the pit below us. There was no one seated in the pit either, but times are hard and so the show went on, even though there were only the four of us watching.

First of all, George Gadd appeared and bawled out: "Lights out."

Peg waddled into the gallery behind us and blew out the oil lamp and there we were. In pitch darkness. I shivered. I didn't like this one little bit, and Ned clung to my hand. He doesn't like being in the pitch dark, because it reminds him of his days as a climbing boy wriggling up narrow chimney flues, so I had had to grab his hand to assure him that I was still there.

"Gov," Ned breathed at my side. "What do ghosts look like? I never saw one before." His voice came out of the darkness as if he were a spectre himself.

And of course he wasn't going to see a real spectre now. All he would see would be the result of a hidden magic lantern worked by Walter at the back of the stage, which would project images from photographic slides onto a gauze screen which we in the audience couldn't see. It would have been let down after the oil lamp went out, and was between us and the magic lantern. The effect is clever, because the spectres seem to move both by the use of glass sliders and by moving the magic lantern backwards and forwards on rails. I knew all that, but it wouldn't make the show any less impressive when it started. The images might move, of course, but they wouldn't speak, and so that, I realized, would have to be rectified by live people speaking their parts on the darkened stage from behind the screen.

The first ghost we saw after the light was extinguished was Queen Elizabeth, who kindly explained what a splendid woman she had been; she was lit up most ethereally and seemed as if she had indeed come down from heaven—even if she did bear a suspicious resemblance to Peg Gadd dressed in a funny old gown and gold paper. Peg herself boomed out from the darkness to inform us that although she had the body of a weak and feeble woman (news to anyone who had seen her performance outside the living caravan), she had the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too. We all cheered at that. When she faded away, King John (Percy) was creeping up to strangle his poor little nephew and we all boomed. Ned didn't like him at all. A ghostly Henry VIII, whom I recognised as Oscar, walked towards us hand in hand with a lady whose head he'd chopped off in life (Annie). Oscar's voice from the darkness told us how much he'd enjoyed having six wives, but then I heard a commotion as though Queen Elizabeth and Anne Boleyn were having a fight either with each other or with Oscar.

It did not reassure me, but luckily Gadd then announced that the tragedy of Eugene Aram was to begin. First we saw a ghostly Eugene Aram sitting in a chair with his head in his hands to show how sorry he was for what he'd done

in murdering Clarke. In the darkness, Oscar's voice abandoned Henry VIII and quavered: "Oh, what monstrous deed have I done?"

We all shouted, "Murder," and at that very moment a skeleton appeared in the darkness dancing up and down and alternately grinning and scowling. Ned screamed, but I told him not to worry, it was just the ghost of the poor murdered man, Clarke. Sure enough, Percy's voice squeaked out: "I'm Clarke. I'm dead at this man's hand." The scene promptly changed to one of Aram with his hands round Clarke's neck, with another man behind them looking very happy. Percy's voice then informed us that he was also Mr. Houseman, that he was an Evil Man, and that he had persuaded Aram to kill Clarke. Clarke's ghost then jumped up and down glaring at him most fearsomely.

I could tell Ned thought he'd seen enough ghosts by now, but luckily the next slide showed Aram with his new sweetheart Madeleine in his arms, who was played by Annie. She made a prettier picture than the others, so Ned cheered up.

"I love you, dearest Eugene Aram," she cooed, and I heard a giggle as though Oscar had decided on a bit of playing of his own in the darkness as we watched the magic lantern slides of Aram and Madeleine with Clarke's skeleton bobbing in and out every so often.

"You're not having Oscar, girl," yelled Peg from the doorway behind us, forgetting this was only a play.

"You love me, Annie," shouted Percy, who then shrieked that he would stick a knife in Oscar. He must have belatedly realised that wasn't in the plot either, because he then announced that he had come to see Aram got his just deserts.

"You button your lip," shouted Oscar's voice, forgetting he was Aram. A lot of bad language followed, which made it hard to believe that Aram was truly contrite for having murdered Clarke, since he was swearing alternately that he was going to marry Madeleine and threatening to croak old Gadd at the same time.

Fortunately, Walter must have hastily switched photographic plates to reach the dramatic ending, as all the ghostly players appeared together, with Gadd as judge, Percy beaming as Aram was sentenced to death, and Madeleine swooning. Then a swift blackout and then came the best ghost of all, the body of Aram swinging with a rope round his neck in ghostly form. That was very creepy, and Ned whimpered. After that came what one might call a curtain call, if there had been a curtain. We had a ghostly image of each participant, followed by a glimpse of the real ones on the stage, once the screen had been drawn up again. Each lit up a candle in turn so we could briefly see their faces. First came old Gadd's, then Annie's pretty face. I presumed that Peg was still at the door because she did not appear. There was a slight commotion after Oscar's face showed up, leaving only the victorious Percy as Houseman to go. This seemed a strange ending, but we all four cheered, and I got ready to leave as soon as the oil lamp was lit so that we could see our way out.

But it wasn't lit and no one lifted the door curtain. Instead there was a terrible rumbling, and I knew something bad must be happening. Everything was shaking, and then a rumpus broke out backstage with yells and screams. I could see daylight streaming in front of me as though the door to the stage had opened, but there was too much for that. The shaking and noise got worse and I realised that the whole tent was beginning to fall from the stage end. Creaks and groaning metal suggested the poles were giving way. Ned and I had to get out as quickly as we could. *If* we could. Now the central kingpole was beginning to tot-

ter and where the stage had been was obliterated by the fallen roof canvas. Supporting wall poles were beginning to bear inwards through the force of the falling kingpole. Luckily that was falling *towards* the stage, but the seating around us was shaking and we would be next to follow the kingpole. The precarious seating in the gallery would go crashing down, bringing the rest of the roof and canvas walls with it, just as any cast who hadn't yet escaped would now be buried.

I grabbed Ned and pushed him towards the doorway—if it still existed. I could see a hole where the canvas had already been torn away from the poles, and Ned pulled me through as my legs began to fail. We made for the steps, which were already off the ground, but willing hands below dragged us to safety, just as the whole remaining structure tipped away from us and joined the wreckage of the rest of the booth.

I thought Ned would be whimpering with terror, but it was the other way about. In God's fresh air he felt safe and was only worried about me, because I was gasping for air. I pulled myself together, seeing that onlookers were rushing round to the rear of the pile of canvas and iron poles that had once been Gadd's Great Ghost Parade. Then I heard the screams gathering in strength, screams that did not end.

"Stay here, Ned," I ordered, pushing him towards Mr. Bartholomew and the dancing bear. "I'll be back."

What made me go into that carnage I'll never know, but I did. I saw the wreck of the show tent, figures still crawling out; I could see the other two people who had been watching the show with us; I could see the top of the magic lantern amidst the ruins, and Walter wringing his hands pathetically as he tried to comfort those who had been caught inside. Most were out safely but one of them lay on the ground, covered in blood. Hit by a pole, I thought. As I drew nearer, however, I saw, partly concealed by the torn canvas, a hammer. It too was covered in blood.

In this version of the Ghost Parade show, it was not Aram who died, but Houseman. It was Percy's body, and I realised that no tent collapse had caused his injuries. No iron pole, but a hammer. Held by a human hand.

Even if we're on the same side, I don't always get along with pigmen, and Sergeant Peters feels the same about me. He and I aren't what you might call chummy, so when I saw him arrive to represent the law, I stood well back. He had a constable with him who was unknown to me, so anything I thought the police might need to know I would tell him.

Sergeant Peters as usual did not need to know anything. "Nothing here for us," says he authoritatively. "Hit by a fallen pole—he must have been last out of the tent."

I looked at the way the blood had spilled over the ground, and the way the body was lying. I've seen matelots hit as they stumbled out of pubs on the Ratcliffe Highway or in the dark alleyways of Nightingale Lane, and this was much the same. No pole could have been the source of Percy's injuries.

"What about the hammer?" I asked the constable quietly.

Sergeant Peters had heard. "What hammer?" He groaned as he saw my grimy face. Even though this was a holiday, the grime of soot remains and marks us sweeps out. Then he guffawed. "Always buzzing around, aren't you, Wasp?" He likes his little joke.

"There are a lot of dirty chimneys round here, Sergeant," I said politely, and pointing to the hammer, added, "Here's one of them." The constable looked interested, but Peters tried hard not to.

"Percy Nash," I said. "He was affianced to the young lady sobbing over there."

Annie was weeping copiously. Her father had one arm round her, and Oscar put his round her from the other side. Peg was grabbing his other one.

"It was me," Oscar shouted.

"You killed him?" Peters was getting interested now.

"No," Oscar yelled. "It was me who was meant to get it. I should have been last one out, not him. We came out in the wrong order. Some fool mixed the plates." He glared at Walter.

So that was it, I thought. It had to be the last person out, so that whoever killed Percy with that hammer wouldn't risk being seen by the next person. As the last person crawled out, any apparent helper could wield the weapon with far less risk of being seen in the chaos around at that moment.

Walter looked utterly miserable, especially as Gadd joined his accusers. "True enough," said Gadd. "You put the wrong slide in. Oscar's always last."

"Wasn't me, Gov," Walter wailed. "Someone changed them. Sorry."

"I'm not," Oscar growled. "It would have been me. Suit you all nicely if I kicked the bucket, wouldn't it?"

"Good riddance," Gadd growled.

"Told you," Oscar said to Sergeant Peters triumphantly. "Hear what he says? He's confessed to wanting me dead. He's your man."

Anne and Peg began to howl.

"I gave you the sack," Gadd roared. "Why would I do that if I was going to murder you?"

"You're a crafty devil, that's why. You and your wife too. So what if I fancied her daughter more than her? Where's she got to, anyway? Found out she killed the wrong man, has she? I'll get you, Gadd. And you know how."

More threats. And there was indeed no sign of Peg. "Ma was here when it happened," Annie said quickly.

"She didn't have to take a call," I pointed out. They all stared at me as though I had a screw loose—and that phrase set me thinking as to what had happened to the show tent.

"Look. She's over there," Oscar roared. "In the living van. You get out here, Peg. Answer for what you've done."

Sure enough, Peg was standing in the van doorway, looking as if she'd seen one of their own ghosts. "Thought you were dead," she yelled.

"You got Percy by mistake," Oscar sneered. "So now you'll have me as a son-in-law. You'll like that, Gadd, won't you?"

"Over my dead body," George shouted, then realised this was a most unfortunate phrase in the circumstances.

Sergeant Peters lost his temper. "It's this body that matters," he roared. "Either way, a man lies dead. And all I want to know is who used that hammer on him. Sounds to me like all three of you had a reason to want Oscar dead."

"That's right," Oscar readily agreed. "They do."

"But," George shouted back at him, "you wanted Percy dead, because you thought you might get Annie that way."

"Me?" Oscar roared. "Jealous of a runt like that? It was me you were after, Gadd."

"And it's my tent here. You think I'd crash my own tent just to kill you? You were responsible for the build-up, Oscar. What happened to them poles?"

"Locking nails must have come loose," Oscar muttered. "They were all right when I checked them. Someone must have got at them later."

"You," George hurled at him.

"Why would I try and kill myself?" Oscar yelled back.

The way Peters was looking at him suggested that's exactly what he'd done, for whatever reason. I could not believe it. Oscar thought too much of himself to want to deny the world his charms. Moreover he was heartily disliked by all three members of the family, even if it's a long way from an iron saucepan flung in rage to murdering someone with a hammer. Gadd had sacked him, and would soon be rid of him, though, so why try to murder him instead? I began to wonder if there was something I had missed.

We took off our hats in respect as the police mortuary van came to collect Percy. The number of spectators had increased, and Peters took Oscar into the Gadds' living van for what he called a chat.

Ned and I gave Walter and other willing hands help in clearing up a bit of the debris. The other two in the former audience exchanged their lucky escape stories with ours, and Walter added his. He was still trembling, no doubt seeing the end of his job at least temporarily. I decided he might be able to help me clear my mind, as well as the debris.

"How do you think that slide got into the wrong place?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he wailed. "I could have done it by accident, but it's easy enough for someone else to switch the order. I don't sit at the lantern until the show is about to begin, but the plates are already there in the order they should be in. The most obvious person to have switched it is—no, I shouldn't say it."

"Oscar," I said for him. "Then he could make sure that he was out first before Percy."

Walter nodded gratefully. "Yes. I didn't like to accuse the poor man, but you're right."

"What happened when you realised that the wrong one had been shown?"

"I had no choice—I told Oscar to light his candle and change with Percy. How could I know someone was planning to murder him?"

"Any ideas who?" I thought of his veiled threats earlier that morning.

Walter hesitated, then said reluctantly, "The show's future was at stake. Oscar was putting the screws on George."

This was interesting. "You mean Gadd could have pretended to sack Oscar knowing all the time that he was planning to kill him?"

"I don't know," Walter said miserably. "But Mr. Gadd is friendly with a lady here, Jessie—she has a performing monkey. She's at every fair we are, only Peg hasn't realised that yet. Oscar's been taking all the money he can out of the show."

This began to make sense. George had every reason to want to get rid of Oscar, but how could he know the tent would collapse? He wouldn't have done that intentionally. Or would he? This was the first show of the morning, which meant that any loosened locking nails in the kingpole and rear pole—the ones that fell first—could have been done overnight and just given the final push this morning. George would be first out of the tent chaos, and could wait for

Oscar to appear. But why switch the photographic plate in that case?

"After him!" A great roar went up, as I saw Oscar jump down the steps from the van and disappear into the crowd.

The police whistles and rattles were going at full strength, but in the crowd that had now gathered, Oscar could soon be lost.

Ned, seeing me, came to join me as Walter sped off to join Annie, Peg, and George.

"No wonder Oscar's running," I said to Ned, "if he thinks all three Gadds are out to murder him." Suppose, I wondered, they all three tried to murder Oscar together, because he was taking money from them? It was a neat answer, but I wasn't happy with it.

Sergeant Peters was happy. He saw me watching and came over to me. "Don't worry, Wasp. He's escaped, but we'll have him yet. Clear as anything that he used that hammer. Wanted the woman so he could be part of the family."

Was he right? Oscar had Annie's affections anyway, and he could increase the pressure on George to secure his future without killing Percy.

Peg and Annie and George were looking at the ruin of their show. "Any hope we can get it up again, Walter?" Gadd asked sadly. "Looks as if we've seen the last of Oscar."

Walter swelled with pride. "Certainly, Mr. Gadd. Let's start now."

George gazed at him, then caught the spirit of the thing. "Don't just stand there," he yelled at the watching crowds (including me). "Come and help."

There were so many people helping that poor Percy seemed to have been forgotten. It was as if his murder had been a mere illusion, like all the other ghosts here.

Illusion. Perhaps Sergeant Peters was right. It was Percy who was the intended victim, and Oscar was intended for the role of murderer. Some of these old fairs still hold justice courts of their own, called Piepowder courts, and I had in mind what might happen if one was set up over Percy's murder. What would its judgement be? Man dead, Percy, and it seemed the verdict would undoubtedly be "murdered by Oscar." Why? He had nothing to gain. Why do people get killed? For a woman? For money? What if there were both at stake here? Oscar wanted not only Annie, but the show as well, but he could have both at the drop of the magician's hat. But if Oscar were part of the illusion . . .

Illusions are brought about by human hand, in this case the man who works the magic lantern.

Walter.

Who was like a son to old Gadd. If he married Annie he would inherit the show for himself. Who knows what he aspired to? Perhaps he saw this as a stepping stone to working at the Alhambra, becoming another Wizard of the North, perhaps dreaming up another ghost illusion such as the one recently exhibited in London by Professor Pepper. The first stepping stone is the most important, and Walter had seen his chance. Before the fair opened that morning, he could have removed the locking nail on the rear pole, loosened that on the kingpole, and reversed the order of the slides. . . . He had only to hit the last man out, Percy.

I could see Sergeant Peters preparing to leave. "Sergeant," I called.

"Another bee in your bonnet, Wasp?" he chortled.

It did not take long for me to convince the sergeant that my "bee" had been in his mind right from the moment he clapped eyes on Walter, and it took even

less time for Walter to confess.

When it was all over and the pigmen had departed with their prisoner, I went to give my condolences to the Gadd family for their triple loss. None were needed, however. To my surprise, George Gadd was beaming, and another gentleman had one arm round Peg and the other round Annie.

"This is Eric, Tom," George introduced his new "son." "Come to work the magic lantern—he's handy at taking photographs too."

I crept sadly away. I had an idea which grisly murder and whose ghostly ghost would shortly be taking over from Eugene Aram. Could I blame the Gadds? A travelling showman's life is a hard one. Nevertheless, it was with a heavy heart on Percy's behalf that I went to reclaim Ned from Mr. Bartholomew.

"Ned," I said, "don't fret. We'll sweep a few chimneys and save up for you to see another ghost show, now this one's been ruined."

Ned wasn't listening. He was hopping up and down in excitement again.

"Gov, if we had a dancing bear . . ." ●

END TIME FOR ELLERY? (Cont. from p. 23) the cousins' centenary and attempting to account for why their work had been so completely forgotten. He offered five reasons. (1) Hardboiled or *noir* detective fiction has become so closely identified with male authors like Hammett and Chandler, and classic formal detective puzzles (now called cozies) so closely linked to women authors like Christie and Sayers, that the great masters (as opposed to mistresses) of Golden Age detection—like John Dickson Carr and the cousins Queen—have fallen between the cultural cracks. (2) Perhaps the Queen prose style has fallen out of favor and become a barrier to today's readers. (3) There seems to be "a general critical prejudice against literary collaboration." (4) The farming out of so much of the EQ product to ghosts in the 1960s was "disastrous in its effect on the Queen reputation." (5) "Ellery Queen has fallen from public attention because our respect for intelligence, our cultural literacy, and our attention span are all in steep decline."

This analysis strikes me as unarguably correct. But will Queen remain forgotten? In Japan and to a certain extent in Italy the name is still meaningful. Might it become so again here? Fred Dannay and I discussed this in his last years, and since his death I've had similar discussions with the editors of the magazine he founded. I am no oracle, but it seems to me that EQ's return, if it happens at all, will not be driven by the print medium in which Fred and Manny worked. Perhaps, as I once suggested to Fred back in the days when Columbo was king, a high-quality series of TV movies might be the answer. Perhaps the computer or the smart phone or some high-tech device no one has yet imagined will return Queen to the public eye. Whatever the future holds for the authors and characters and novels and stories that meant so much to me and to countless others going back to the first years of the Great Depression, it's good to have had them as part of my life. ●

EDITOR'S NOTE: Thanks to e-publishing, Ellery Queen may soon enjoy a renaissance. Five of the novels, including *The Roman Hat Mystery* and *Calamity Town* are currently available for e-readers (two from MysteriousPress.com/Open Road and three from Langtail Press) and that number will soon rise to twenty-three. The preceding article was excerpted from Francis M. Nevins's upcoming book about Ellery Queen, *Ellery Queen: The Art of Detection* (Perfect Crime Books, January 2013). The publication of this definitive work on the literary collaborators may be another sign that Ellery Queen is on his way back.

PURPLE TOWN

by Ron Carlson

It was the first week in June in Los Angeles, always a purple time with the jacaranda trees dropping their purple leaves so they skitter in the wake of every car crossing Pico climbing over into Beverly Hills, and the sunlight filtered through the purple trees bluing the haze further, and in front of Esther's house the agapanthus clusters were all purple trumpets that brushed against my twill holiday trousers as I stepped up her walk.

I wasn't supposed to be here. I was supposed to be parked across from Crosley's Grocery watching the front door for when the old man would come out and get into what had been described to me as a lime-colored Ranchero, which means to me any green wreck because, according to my look in the big book, lime was never featured from the factory on that car, if it is a car. The truth is that the Ranchero itself always bothered me. I could never figure who would buy it. Does the guy want a truck or a car, or is it that it is a vehicle for those characters who never could make up their mind. In that case, there would be a million of the things, because, face it, it was an age absolutely crammed full of folks who couldn't make up their minds. I hadn't met somebody who had made up their mind for twenty years. That's why I'm in the business I'm in, because you know for solid-gold certain that there are plenty of mistakes coming down the line. People can't make up their minds, but they can put off deciding until things go wrong, and then they call me.

I love that: *then they call me*. It sounds like a tough-guy line, but it's not. I'm not a tough guy. I'm not a smart alec; I'm not even smart. I'm a private detective. Drake Marks is the name and I'm half of Marks and Dugan Investigations, although the truth is that I'm all of Marks and Dugan Investigations because my dear partner Rudy Dugan has left the firm to go to law school, which just hurts. Who the heck knew?

Regardless, I had been parked two back in the parking lot of the closed-down Radio Shack across from Crosley's Grocery all morning, and I'd seen Crosley a couple times come to the front of the store and line up the tall guy

Ron Carlson's short stories have appeared frequently in the *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Esquire*, and many other mainstream magazines, as well as in the *Best American Short Stories* anthologies and the *O. Henry Prize* series. He is also the author of several novels. *The Washington Post* said of his 2010 novel *The Signal* (Penguin): "[it] accelerates like an avalanche . . . If men can't be brought back to fiction by books as fine as this one, it's their own damn fault." f

who was working the register, and I had seen no green cars at all. Look around some time in Hollywood, you won't see it. Green's fine by me, but my theory is that it is not the power color you need to drive around this town.

So it gets to be eleven o'clock and I just can't stay there any longer. I don't know about this, but it is the way I am now. Three hours watching a storefront, reading every special painted on the windows, including the word *organic* six times in big red script, a word this city is in love with and a word which everyone uses for every blinking thing they put in front of your face, a tomato, a necktie, a movie. Everything is organic to where the word now might as well be *astounding*; because that's a word you'll hear twelve times a minute when someone is trying to sell you absolutely anything, some mouthwash, a tuna sandwich, a pair of socks. The truth is, for me, that I'd rather have my tuna sandwich be *astounding* than organic.

But I wasn't thinking of lunch. It was after eleven and I knew I should stay and see if the Ranchero came by, because Crosley's brother had hired me to find out where the old man went every day for forty minutes. My cell phone shook and I saw my partner's name, Rudy Dugan, as of last month my former partner, the future attorney. He can wait. He's got the big life underway and he can wait. The time was 11:11 A.M., and I had a funny thought. In my life I had become the kind of guy who knew who called when, precisely, because I'd seen whole cases made by the time of the call. I didn't know it, sitting there mad at my old buddy, but this was one of those times.

My windshield was scattered with the purple flowers from the jacaranda trees that grew up in the trashy alley behind the former Radio Shack; that's the way it is in this town, you get a stunning purple tree struggling up between the cinderblocks and the dumpster, so purple it wants to poke your eyes out, a thing of such singular beauty it should be in the queen's private courtyard at the Louvre, if not the queen, then somebody. I was making exactly forty-five dollars an hour for such brain-dead labor, but even so, I started my Skylark and eased onto La Cienega and crossed the tracks.

"Here you go, again," I said aloud. I was headed for Esther. It sounds like a seedy tryst, but it was not a seedy tryst. I was headed for Esther the way that those giant moons orbit Jupiter. What are they going to do? This is to say, I admired her and that is a way of saying I had a crush, and yes, a grown man who runs his own business because his partner went hinky and rolled over for law school, which has been shown to be the last port for philistines, can have a crush. I could put my hand on my breastbone and show you where it hurts. You want me to name Jupiter's moons, I can do it.

If there was any question about purple in Los Angeles, it would be answered on Esther's street. The entire block looked like the aftermath of some kind of massive accident with parade floats. Purple leaves and purple orchids washed up against the curbs and gathered along all the little wooden fences. It made you blink to see if you could get the ink out of your eyes. Purple town.

I rang her bell and brushed my trousers, and I had the same feeling I'd had the fifty times that I'd stood here night and day for the last four months and that is, *Drake, boy, you are wasting your time with that doll*. That is word for word my thinking. It is something I'd heard around. I'd heard it from my former partner Rudy Dugan the day after I'd introduced the two of them. He stopped by Table Ten, the tiny lunch garden in the lobby of our building, named

like everything else in California by smart alects. There are four tables in the whole place and they call it Table Ten. Rudy Dugan sat down for maybe five minutes, more like three, long enough to hear Esther say she'd heard about him from me, and she wished him well with law school, which he had just started, to my sorrow, and I think maybe she brushed something off the shoulder of his California flannel jacket, and based on that extensive research, he tells me the next day that I am *wasting my time with that doll*.

I didn't even answer him. I could hold my tongue with him now, ever since I got over the fact that he was stepping away from our business, Marks and Dugan Investigations, to go to law school. He was going to better himself, he said. Keep the name on the door, he said. My gift. Well, I was going to keep the name on the door and on the stationery and our business cards. As much as I wanted to go at the milky glass door with a razor blade, I couldn't afford to have it repainted. What really hurt me wasn't that my best friend Rudy Dugan was walking away from the six years we'd spent building a good business, but that he took the LSAT without even telling me. I don't know the code, but I know one of the rules is if you take the law-school exam, you tell your blinking friends. You tell your partner.

And as for wasting my time on Esther, who exactly is the big judge on that one? Is there a timekeeper? I made a note in my book when I departed the stakeout across from Crosley's and was no longer on his brother's nickel. So it was my time, as I saw it, and I could spend it however I wanted. What makes any person a waste of time? I liked Esther. I'd met her at the Department of Motor Vehicles last fall when we went to the B window at the same time. We both had number 18 and when it was called, we met, and being a detective I was able to point out that she was absolutely right, she did have number 18 but hers was for the C window. When I looked up and handed her coupon back to her, she said it: "Must be fate," and we went to coffee afterward. When I asked her what she did, she said she was retired, but that she collected experts for the things she loved.

"Collected experts?" I said.

"There are so many people better at things than I am," she said. "Right now I'm trying to find somebody who can find my car, a Lexus stolen from the parking garage in Beverly Hills two doors from Nat and Al's."

"In a city of cars," I told her in the Bluebird Cafe, and if I'd had a hat on I would have thumbed it back, "I can find your car." She slid a slip of paper across the table with the tag number on it underneath the words: Lavender Lexus. Two door.

Dugan called her a doll because she is a sort of doll in that she's always dressed up, and like a lady. These dresses are embroidered and loaded with columns of buttons and they go almost to her ankle and she knows how to sit up straight and drink her coffee and she finishes all of her words and all of her sentences.

That doesn't sound like much, does it? But I meet a lot of people, and I'm testifying that it is a rare thing. Most people in this big town quit early on what they're saying, chapter and verse, and then throw in a little *you know what I'm saying* at the end of every breath, all run together like one big soft word.

No, you know, I don't know what you're saying. Feel free to say it.

I've had to say that in my office ten times a morning. I'll be writing out the request or the report and some woman in the wrong pair of jeans and a jogging bra is there saying, *husband, shithead, window, you know what I'm saying?* Or

a guy, his shirttail out, the cuffs rolled no socks, the way guys dressed twenty-five years ago, sits sideways in the chair and waving his hands says, *a little money, a little a this with the boss and you know what I'm saying?*

I always lift my hands off the keyboard at such moments. I mean, these people put you in a spot. I want to ask them if they're going to pay me extra to teach them how to talk, and the minute I have that thought, I sort of smolder, because I'm not exactly the orator of Seville. I finish my sentences, but I'm not going to get elected Toastmaster General.

What I did about Esther's Lexus was call all three cops I know, all LAPD lieutenants, and I read them the digits from the license plate while they typed them in the database. These guys do their own computer work if you let them know you'll stay on the line. You don't want to hang up until you've heard the keys in the background, tap tap tap. I knew these guys from the community lunches I go to every month, one of my biggest expenses, but worth it. For one hundred dollars a plate you get the iced tea and a chicken salad sandwich and you hear from some clean-cut sergeant who is running a softball league in one of the parks by the tracks and they trot out a couple of these kids in their T-shirts, waving their mitts thank you very much, and hear how far away everybody is staying from crime thanks to the training and the only thing they are stealing is the bases and everybody laughs and stands up for the cookies and coffee. I use the coffee to introduce myself to the lieutenants. By the time they've seen you three times, they return your calls. It isn't like I'm going to do them a favor, but we all know that the biggest part of police work—and a slug of my work—is identifying cars and so it's all VIN numbers and tags and year, make, and model. Lieutenant Bugle said that when bank robbers and kidnappers go to bicycles, it's all over.

I was thinking that maybe Esther's car was in Mexico for sure when Lieutenant Bugle called me back two weeks later and said they'd found the car inside of a gutted Laundromat in Venice along with five other high-end vehicles, all of them dusty and missing the battery but otherwise good to go. "Some dumbbell chop shop," he said, "where the only thing they know how to do is unhook the battery."

So, good news for this lonely detective. I bought a battery and drove Esther out to the impound lot where they'd towed the cars and then I escorted her to the carwash where we sat and talked as her lavender automobile emerged from the soapsuds like something new being born. She was happy and it was a pleasure to see. "I knew you'd find it," she told me. "You know what you're doing."

It was about that time that I got the job with Crosley Groceries. When Mr. Crosley first called and reported his brother missing I thought it was a walk-away which I have a number of every year. Somebody gets confused and walks away and is out overnight which can be a bad deal; usually it's an older guy, somebody's husband and he gets confused and walks away. There's a full boat of confusion in this country of all kinds. It isn't just the old folks. I see a lot of people on street corners in Santa Monica or in the parking lot at Target who look like they could use a ride home. The thing about walk-aways is that if you find them, like the guy I found last year on a bus bench on Wilshire, the conversation you have with them is one of the best of the week. It doesn't all make sense, but they can talk. That guy was full of beautiful phrases. I was asking him where he spent the night and instead of pointing and grunting, which you get a lot of in my work (it's a result of being with people too lazy to actually

speak the lie), he turned and said, "Well, you know, it's interesting. I think I was at my sister's, but she wasn't there. Whatever happened to your sisters?" I was driving the guy and he asks me this, a question I've never had, having no sisters, but I thought: Yeah, where are my sisters, but by then he's noticed a guy spraying his car at the carwash and he says, "There's Julius. He grew up right next to the grade school and we envied him so much because he could watch television until the last minute and still make it to class. You could hear the bell at his house. Can you imagine? He became a very fine citizen."

But it wasn't a walk-away. Zeke Crosley, half-owner of the three Crosley Grocery stores in Los Angeles, comes in and says, "My brother, the three stores, monkey business, you know what I'm saying?"

I leaned forward and I said, "Not really. Why don't you tell me?"

So then he spills with the rest: the lime Ranchero, every day, where does he go, and it is just that, a spillage.

"Is there anything wrong or off at work with the money or the books?"

"No," he said. "Still, I don't want there to be. I don't like this."

"Could it be a woman?" I say. He looks at me, so I add, "You know what I'm saying?" and he nods heavily and shrugs, which means he doesn't know.

"Just find out where he goes," he tells me. "Confidential."

So now for six days, I've been parked in the ruined old parking lot of the closed Radio Shack and I'm reading the windows, nothing but *organic*, and I'm really wondering how a Radio Shack goes broke, and I haven't seen the green Ranchero once. I only hope that Zeke's brother isn't secretly going to law school. There's enough of that going around. I give it until eleven and then quarter past and, of course, I go see Esther.

When she came to the door, she was in a pale yellow wrapper right out of the thirties. This thing had white embroidery snaking down the front, the white welt of her initials on the pocket, and a Ming the Merciless collar made out of lace.

"Drake," she said. She reached out and brushed my right shoulder and then my left shoulder and the purple jacaranda scattered. "Turn around," she said.

What are you going to do? I'm a goner. The gravity of Jupiter. When you find comfort and light in this purple world, take it.

When I'm all dusted off, she leads me into her breakfast room where the little bay window looks down the leafy street, the sky choked with the purple trees. "It's like you live in a coloring book," I said, looking out.

"They are amazing trees."

I sit down and put my straw Stetson on my lap. Her chairs in here are big rat-tan things with patterned fabric.

"You want some coffee?" she asked me.

"I do, if it is no trouble," I say.

"Good good," she said.

"For a big desert town on the edge of the continent, this purple place is brimming with mystery," I said. It's the way I talk sometimes around her. Start the paragraph with a little poetry, see where it goes.

She turned to me and smiled. "Oh? You are so full of intrigue."

Of course, when she said that, I wanted to fold my hand and simply say, "Nah, I'm bored out of my California skull and I've got a crush on you."

She went on: "What's simmering?"

"We've got a big grocery mystery over at Crosley's; the old man is up to something."

"Antonio has the best tomatoes in Los Angeles County," she said. "All their produce is astonishing."

"It's organic," I said. And she gave me a bit of a look. I wanted her to. It's terrific when you can dial up the way a doll drills you. She set the milky coffee in front of me in a big Italian bowl with a rocky town running around the outside on brown hills with a yellow sky. The houses were red, blue, green, red, blue, green. "So you know him," I said.

She looked at me now with the pressure of the ages and I coughed it up: "You know everybody."

"A lady who knew everybody in this town would not be a lady," she said. "But I know Antonio Crosley. You want to meet him?"

I was going to tell her my game, the stakeout. Truth be told, I was going to play the detective card, my life as a gumshoe, weary and lonely, something like that. I wanted to get a little further with Esther than this beautiful mug of java. But now I clammed up.

"You mean go down to the store, say hello?"

"No, Drake," Esther said, standing in that killer dress. Her hand drifted around delicately but it might as well have had me by a chain. I stood and followed her into her back garden. It was big for a yard in L.A., and the immediate back was a sweet-edged lawn bordered in the back by a tall squadron of agapanthus and shaded by two jacaranda trees, one big and one small. Esther led me out the stone path through an arbor and there in the back half of the yard was her vegetable garden, marked and tiered, and on his knees in the middle of a section bordered by a funny purple sign of an eggplant and labeled "Early Beauty" was the man himself, Antonio Crosley. He sat back and wiped his forehead, smiling.

"The soil is perfect," he told her. "Prepare for a massive harvest. And get your eggplant recipes ready." He brushed his hand off on his store apron and thrust it up at me and we shook.

"You're the expert," I told him. I made a note to put my visit to Esther on the time card for Antonio's brother. Forty-five more dollars against shutting up the office.

Just to put the polish and the period on it, I pointed out back to where a green Ranchero was parked in the alley. There were several tool handles protruding from the bed. "Is that your other car?" I asked Esther. She was resplendent in the blue sunlight. "Yes," and there was a smile in her whisper. "I use it for projects."

This case was solved, but not to my satisfaction. You hate to see another man in your doll's garden, even if she isn't your doll, you hate to see it. But she was a doll, no question. Women, they have a man or two, but a doll runs all the men she knows.

She spoke to Antonio Crosley: "Drake is the hero who went out and found my car when it was stolen last month."

"That's a needle in a haystack," he said. "Los Angeles is a car town."

This is a big town and you hear about it every day. It's not enough that people live here. They've got to talk about it like some character in a play. It's this kind of town or that. I'm not so sure. But I know for a week early in June, this big sprawling place is purple town. ●

THE ULTIMATE SECRET

by Diana Lama

*Translated from the Italian by
Anne Milano Appel*

The Palace! Quiet, let's all be real quiet."


I used to pass by the prince's palace every day, lots of times, as a kid. I had always yearned to go inside. When I was little I always stopped in front of the imposing door and waited, hoping it might open a crack and I could sneak in.

But back then, the palace always remained closed to me. Except that last time.

The palace of the Prince of Sansevero!

In those days, when I was a kid, before I left this sweet, decaying city, before I went looking for adventure and dreams of the sea, before I fled my homeland to chase after a crust of bread and a jug of wine, before I went, *guaglione*, a young man, on a ship with sailors drained by hunger and hard work, before I chose a life of misery and horror to escape the life

of horror and misery that I had here, before I ran away that night, leaving my mother and my four younger brothers to die of fever and despair, before all this and what came later, when I thought that the sea would take me far away and be my salvation, when I was still a naive, gutsy kid, I had

Diana Lama, a native Neapolitan, is a medical doctor specializing in surgery of the heart and great vessels. Winner of the prestigious Alberto Tedeschi Award for Italian mystery fiction, she is probably the greatest collector of the genre in her city, and tells *EQMM* that she has been afflicted by an irrepressible, insatiable passion for noir fiction and thrillers since childhood. Her novels and short stories have been translated into French, German, and Russian, and her work was recently seen in English-language translation for the first time, with the short story "The Best Part" (in *Beacons*). In addition to her many contributions to the field as a writer, she is the founder and president of the Neapolitan crime writers' association, and the creator of the ParoleinGiallo Award. 

decided that one day, or rather, one night, I would enter the prince's palace.

In those days, I was sure I'd break free of poverty.

My name proclaimed it. My mother had called me Alessandro, after a great king of the past, because on the cold December night when I was born, a miraculous monster had arrived in Naples to celebrate that magnificent king. An opera called *Alessandro nelle Indie* appeared at the Teatro San Carlo, and a strange creature, horrific and breathtaking, an elephant, was brought onstage to astound the nobles thronged in the first-tier boxes near the king's box, amid the velvet, gilded stucco, and candles.

My mother, like hundreds of other ragged beggars, stood out in the cold for hours, hoping to catch a glimpse of the elephant as it passed by from Portici Gardens where it was kept. She waited, heedless of the crowd shoving her around, oblivious to her swollen, increasingly heavy belly, in which I waited to be born. When the monster finally did come by, she didn't see him, because she was already on her knees, writhing and weeping softly as she pressed her abdomen. When someone dragged her away she heard the loud shrill cry of the animal frightened by the crowd, then she started to give birth to me. She named me Alessandro, and I grew up confident that I would one day be king.

"Let's go. This is it, this time we'll get in." Rafele was the youngest of us, always enthusiastic, always convinced that luck was waiting just around the corner. He died three years ago, his throat slit by someone drunker than him, behind a tavern somewhere near Piazza del Mercato. His body might be buried in Santa Maria della Pietà or maybe not, it doesn't matter since nobody is looking for him to cry over him.

There were four of us, crouched behind the corner of the alley. It was the dead of night, people scurried by hurriedly, hands in their pockets, casting furtive glances at us. Naples was scary at night, and still is, and even a group of ragged kids could constitute a mortal danger.

Soon it would be the small hours, the time when witches, after dancing with the devil, crept into houses, taking advantage of decent folk's last moments of sleep. They slipped in through cracks in doors that had been duly bolted, and suffocated newborn infants.

I wasn't afraid. The prince's palace loomed before us, a dark shape in the night's liquid blackness.

In 1753, the prince was Raimondo di Sangro di Sansevero, and he was not only a prince, but a witch, a sorcerer; he was magic and wealth and opulence and mystery, he was a name that was whispered in the alleyways of a city where the rats were fatter and more numerous than the populace, he was hope and art and nobility, he was everything that poor kids like me could only gaze at from afar.

By contrast, I was a ragamuffin not more than ten years old, with filthy bare feet and a stinking shirt that was all I had to cover myself, winter or summer. With my friends, foul-smelling beggars like me, I roamed around the streets and alleys from Porta Capuana to Chiaia, looking for something to steal, something to eat, or something to trade. At home I wore nothing, and went there just to sleep, in the damp, fetid hole of sweat and piss where my mother gave

birth and nursed and, when she could, screwed whoever wanted her for a scrap of food or a few coins.

“I don’t believe it, that we’ll get in tonight.” It was me, my voice from many years ago. Sceptical, cautious, and prudent like someone who’s been kicked around all his life.

“Shhh, be quiet, they’ll open up soon. They have to bring in something, my brother Ciruzzo and his friend went with the master to dig at the Fontanelle.” It was Totonno, the oldest of us: muscle and meanness in the body of a young child.

Totonno is already resting at the Fontanelle cemetery, near his older brother Ciruzzo and the other members of his family. All of them with bulging eyes and a rope tightened around their snapped necks, rotting away in the communal grave, piled one on top of another. They were hanged in different years, for murder, theft, or rape, but once in the pit they were mysteriously reunited, and now their limbs lie decomposing together.

The palace, which overlooked Piazza San Domenico Maggiore, was the honey around which my friends and I buzzed like frenzied flies. It was the magnet of our dreams and hopes. Its door was the entrance to wonderland. Inside, the floors were marble and gold, the chairs and benches were of the most precious, aromatic woods, brocades and damasks and silks hung everywhere, and if we could only get in we could wrap our filthy limbs in them and let the scented fabrics caress us.

Some nights, and even some days, the palace sang. By morning, a rhythmic tap-tap-tapping: the presses and other machines in the print shop in the basement. In the evening, hissing, flashes of light, sparks, puffs of smoke from obscure furnaces hidden deep in the bowels of the palace. People passing by hugged the walls warily and crossed themselves; hastening their steps and swearing, they changed direction and struck off into narrow alleys where the sun was never seen, just to avoid the sorcerer’s palace.

“Here they come! *Maronna mia*, holy mother of God, what are they carrying? A corpse!” cried Peppino, the only son of a widowed mother, a poor decent woman who would take the bread out of her mouth for him. The neatest one of us four, the only one with a pair of trousers, though with more patches than the number of teeth in his mouth. His cautiousness didn’t protect him: Peppino was beaten to death just three days ago by his wife’s lover. His body is beginning to putrefy in the new cemetery in Poggioreale, the 366 Fosse, where there are no names or dates or faces, but only as many *fosse*, graves, as there are days in the year.

There has always been a need for cemeteries in Naples, since the plague has visited this blessed city eagerly and often. But the Neapolitans have always had a lighthearted spirit and a desire to amuse themselves and not think about their troubles; and then, as now, the palace and the prince were the central topic of whispered conversations among both high-ranking citizens and the stinking paupers rotting in the streets.

He was a saint, the prince was, he was a criminal.

He was a sorcerer, the prince, he was an enlightened scientist.

He was kind and generous, the prince, he drank his victims’ blood to stay young.

I had seen him up close only once, not many months before that night: It was

an early afternoon in July, when after eating and drinking their fill, people go indoors to take a nap; satiated, they retreat to the coolness of the house and avoid going out and exposing themselves to the rank heat of the streets where the open sewers are constantly clogged. That day, however, the prince went out, catching me by surprise. I was wandering around like a famished rat; for me midday simply meant fewer people in the streets whom I could rub up against or bump into, so I could hurriedly slip a hand into some pocket full of coins.

He came out of the door of the adjoining chapel, a handsome man, his face full and plump, wearing a powdered wig and wrapped in a velvet cloak the color of the sky at dusk. I gawked at the silk stockings, the delicate shoes not meant for going about in the mud, I nearly knelt as he went by, he was so grand. He wasn't tall, far from it, but he seemed like a giant, a giant who gave off the scent of talcum and perfume. He didn't even glance at me, a guttersnipe hunkered in the shadows, but I would never forget him. When he passed right in front of me I saw the mole on his left cheek, a beautiful round mole on his high cheekbone, eye-catching in his round rosy face.

How fine looking he was! Afterwards I dreamt about him for three nights in a row, and fantasized about entering his palace and being chosen as his assistant. The prince's aide!

Now, a few months later, I was entering the palace. Ciruzzo had purposely left the door open a crack and we scampered in like mice in the dark. In return for Ciruzzo's favor, I, the fastest one of us, had stolen a pair of earrings for him, ripping them off the ears of a fat fishwife while the others distracted the crowd in Piazza Mercato, yelling and tripping people.

"Sasà, you go first." Sasà was me, Alessandro has always been a formal name, only my mother called me that. I would be Alessandro when I became rich, or so I thought then.

"Shhh! Be quiet, if the prince hears us, he'll eat our hearts!"

"*Mamma mia*, how dark it is! I'm scared."

"This way, quick, let's go down these steps."

I expected to see gold, damasks, silver, and precious woods. I saw nothing in the silky darkness that immediately enveloped us.

My other senses were trying to make out our surroundings, strained to the breaking point. A velvet carpet beneath our bare feet. A faint scent of wax and incense and cleanliness, what since then for me has been the smell of wealth. A sweet, low humming in my ears like music, which I didn't recognize as the hum of my own heart. A sickly saccharine taste in my mouth, my saliva helping my brain to visualize in the dark.

My friends crept along beside me, poor unfortunate souls, already damned back then, beasts of prey not even yet grown. At that time, like now, for that matter, if you were caught stealing in a rich man's home you faced two prospects. Either you were killed on the spot: The rich man and his servants would beat you to death and nobody would blame them for it. Or if you survived, trampled and bloody, you ended up rotting in jail where anything was possible and death by hanging was the swiftest, most preferable alternative. If you didn't want to end up in King Carlo's prisons you were better off dying or being killed, as we well knew. We would come out of the prince's palace alive, and richer, or we would never come out again.

We gripped each other's hands in the dark and groped our way down the

staircase, Sasà and Rafele and Totonno and Peppino, and I can see them again now, from an immeasurable distance in space and time, and I feel like weeping tears of blood but I can't, I who know everything there is to know about their miserable lives, from how they began to how they ended.

"Light. There's a light, hide!" We hid in a recess on the stairs, and Ciruzzo and two other figures passed by on their way up the steps.

A stench of rancid sweat and toil and earth: Totonno's brother and his friend. A chilling smell of alcohol, soap, and ashes that masked something sickening and indefinable: the master.

We shrank back, still as corpses, in the dark opening where we were hiding, and they continued up the stairs followed by the light of the candle that the master held raised over his head. We waited a long time after hearing the thud of the door as it closed. Had the master gone out with them or was he inside with us? I wondered, and shuddered, hoping the same thought had not occurred to the others. The Prince of Sansevero's master was a figure as mysterious as his employer, but much less known, and only disgust and horror were associated with his name, not the awe and wonder that the prince inspired. No one had ever gotten a good look at the master's face, but he was the one who carried out the orders, who had strange things brought into the palace at night, who knew all the secrets, and who was said to be willing to kill, and probably had already done so, for his superior. He was a tall, stooped figure, nothing more than a dark mantle, who preferred moving about in shadow; he was a presence you knew was there but that's all.

When all was silent up above, we screwed up our courage and continued down the stairs. Peppino was scared and wanted to turn back, but the three of us egged him on. Rafele was in front, with me beside him, Totonno came last to keep Peppino from doing anything foolish.

We all wanted to run away, but we didn't say so. Our feet feeling for the stone steps, we reached the bottom of the staircase. We shuffled our way forward in a space barely illuminated by a light coming from under a massive door just up ahead.

We leaned against it, breathless. The door moved slowly and we crept into a huge room equipped as a laboratory, lit by two candelabra placed on the floor near the doorway. I just had time to see rows and rows of alembics on long wooden shelves, strange apparatuses, tubes, beakers, glass pitchers of all shapes, two tables with forms covered by a filthy sheet; the rest was lost in shadow. A bad smell permeated the air, but it was an odor that we had already come across in our city's streets: the stench of dead flesh.

Behind us footsteps, voices, and light. We scurried around like crazed cockroaches, making for the room's darkest depths. I bumped into one of the tables and something shifted under the sheet: a hand with chipped, dirty fingernails brushed my arm, but I stifled my scream and managed to slip behind a pile of casks, boards, and various scraps where the others had already hidden. We stayed there, a shaking heap of rags, bony legs, and elbows, our eyes like coals glinting through a crack, and watched.

The master was the first to enter, holding aloft a gold candelabrum with seven black candles which, besides light, produced a sharp but not unpleasant smell. Now I know that it was eucalyptus—now that I'm familiar with the entire palace and its secrets. Eucalyptus helps fight respiratory infections, the

noxious miasmas arising from a decaying body that grab you by the throat and kill you. It's medicinal, a remedy known to those who by choice or necessity have to deal with the putrid exhalations that human bodies or animals can give off. At the time all I noticed was a curious, unfamiliar scent which my nostrils, accustomed to the city's stench, didn't recognize; another little mystery of that unknown cavern in which we were prisoners.

Behind the master, lit by the black eucalyptus candles that highlighted his person while leaving the nooks and recesses of the cavernous room in shadow, was the prince. He himself, Raimondo di Sangro, Prince of Sansevero, in all his splendor. He wore red silk stockings with silver-plated slippers, the first thing I noticed, since I hardly dared raise my eyes. His garment was also silver, and he had a cane with an inlaid pommel. He was even more handsome than the other time, with his powdered wig, his mole, and rosy lips, a prince who even in the seclusion of his home wore magnificence and wealth like an indispensable skin.

Farther behind came a slender young man who seemed nervous.

"So then, Giuseppe Sammartino" the prince said in the gentle, alluring voice that I had always imagined he had, "after the mystery of marbling, you'd like to learn another of my enigmas. But can you keep a secret?"

"Prince, I would die rather than talk, you know that, my devotion is absolute," the young man replied so softly that I could barely hear him. My riotous heart was pounding so loudly that I didn't even notice the labored breathing of my companions in the dark.

The master stood motionless in the corner. At a sign from the prince he took a bundle from one of the shelves that ran along the wall and handed it to his employer.

"Come, Sammartino, marvel at this phenomenon for which I only recently found an explanation," the Prince of Sansevero said and unwrapped the cloth wound around a large vessel. Immediately a greenish light lit up his face and that of the other two men.

"The light of the devil!" was the terrified thought that I didn't dare voice. Peppino, Totonno, and Rafele huddled even closer to me; we were trying to get inside each other so we'd be invisible and the devil wouldn't spot us. I saw the whites of their terrified eyes take on a greenish hue. Peppino turned up his eyelids and had a kind of fainting fit, but we held him up and covered his mouth. The prince's voice reached me, muted.

"You see, my friend? The calcination of human bones, joined with base metals, causes this phenomenon of eternal fire, which doesn't yield to time, doesn't heat the glass, but requires a perfectly perpendicular support. Watch! Look at the incomparable light that is emitted from our bodies once they've begun to decompose! You who were willing to support my project and sculpt a Christ that I was able to veil,¹ look at what time, earth, and a little air united with the metal can produce!"

"Prince, you honor me with your trust, that eternal flame is incomparable."

¹ The sculpture referred to is Giuseppe Sammartino's "Veiled Christ" (1753), whose success was attributed to the masterful rendering of the veil. Over the centuries legend had it that the person who commissioned it, Raimondo di Sangro, a scientist and alchemist, supposedly taught the sculptor how to convert the material into marble crystals. For nearly three centuries, many considered the veil to be the result of a marbling alchemy performed by the prince on Sammartino's sculpture. Supposedly studies have since shown that this was not so.

I was getting over my fear. Maybe there was no devil in the green fire, even though I'd understood very little of what those two had said.

All of a sudden, the Prince of Sansevero collapsed, gasping as if he couldn't get enough air. The master was ready to support him, but he murmured: "The *ampulla*, the vessel, save the vessel." The servant took it gently out of his hands while the young man named Giuseppe Sammartino helped him sit down. Then the master handed him a strange leather mask and a new odor, sweetish but not unpleasant, spread through the cavern, covering the miasmas of putrefaction of the body lying on the table. The prince inhaled deeply from the mask and seemed to recover, holding it up with a weary smile.

"This, Giuseppe, is my salvation. I made it when I realized that spending time in these dungeons with my alembics and substances was compromising my lungs."

"What does it contain?"

"Filtering agents such as charcoal and dried spongy herbs whose Latin name I'll spare you, which I personally gather on my lands in Puglia. It's the only way I can stay down here for long."

"The eternal flame certainly gives off dangerous exhalations, it seems. But that odor of death, Prince, where is it coming from?"

"My young friend, to sculpt your Christ you needed a body that remained still, and I provided it to you. Didn't you ever wonder how it was preserved intact in the three months it took to create your incomparable work?"

"But I thought he was asleep! You assured me that it was a servant whom you sedated with a magic potion for that purpose!" The young man was trembling; even from a distance I could hear the fear and anguish in his voice.

"That's how it was at first," the prince replied gravely, "but after a time the infusions with which I put him to sleep for you had a cumulative effect, and the poor man never woke up again. So we kept him preserved with other medicinal substances and towards the end, when your marvelous work was almost finished, wrapped him in icy strips of cloth and kept him in the coolest cellar of the palace. I must say you finished just in time; by now it's time to bury him."

I could see the young man's face, a mask of horror. He turned and fled up the stairs, stumbling and bumping into the walls.

"Follow him and do what you have to do," the prince said.

The master roused himself; he hadn't yet opened his mouth and did so now.

"Why?" he whispered hoarsely. "Why did you have me bring this body here from the cemetery? The servant who was the model for the statue has already been underground for quite some time, why make him think it's this one?"

"I wanted to test his loyalty," the prince replied, and I actually thought I caught a trace of sadness in his voice. "I liked this young Sammartino. Enthusiastic, curious, extremely talented. He was eager to learn and I could have shown him many things. But this is exactly what I feared might happen once I exposed my most momentous secrets. So, better to know it now. Go now, my loyal friend, and do what you do so well."

The master crept away like a specter up the dark passageway of the stairs. I wouldn't have wanted to be in the shoes of the young man he was chasing for all the gold and silver in the world.

The prince remained seated, his face hidden in his hands. I thought I heard a deep sigh, but I couldn't be sure because something urgently drew my

attention. Peppino had wriggled out of our grasp, taking advantage of the momentary distraction caused by what had just happened, and was frantically trying to run out of the hidey-hole where we were crouched. Our efforts to hold him were to no avail; he shot out like a crazed animal, and we followed, under the astonished eyes of the prince. We sprinted towards the darkness of the staircase. I brought up the rear and turned around to look at him. At the moment I was more afraid of him than of the master, though the latter hadn't gone far yet, but the prince did not call out. He merely whispered the words that have haunted me since then.

"You have pried into the secrets of this house. My curse will fall upon you no matter where you go, you will not live to see the age of thirty."

Step after step, pushing and shoving, grabbing at each other's hair and tattered clothes, trying to outrun and pass one another, we managed to make it out of the palace—or rather, we were spit out like foul, solid matter vomited on the pavement. We nearly tumbled out, then we got up and shot off in various directions, losing ourselves in the city's dank, dark belly that had never seemed as comforting to us as it did then.

Days passed before we saw each other again, well away from the palace and those nightmarish memories, and we never learned how Giuseppe Sammartino, a young sculptor of great promise, had been found stabbed to death, his tongue sliced off and his eyes gouged out, in a dark, foul-smelling alley in a completely different part of the city. Back then, and even today, dying at night in Naples with a knife stuck in your body was a fairly regular occurrence, and didn't cause a sensation.

As for the Prince of Sansevero's curse, I didn't say a word to the others. I wasn't even sure of what I alone had heard. For one thing, it was just so much claptrap, a waste of breath. Then too, they would have called me a coward, afraid of his own shadow, and I didn't want to imagine things. Besides, we never spoke about that night, and then shortly afterwards I managed to get on a ship with some other sewer rats and sailed away from childhood for good and from Naples for many long years.

I returned a few days ago and quickly learned everything I needed to know about Peppino, Rafele, and Totonno.

During those long years at sea I'd never thought about them, just as my thoughts never dwelled on my mother or brothers. My only thought was to survive. I had intimate knowledge of men and women, I visited Algiers, Constantinople, and Genoa, I killed and looked death in the eye, and I distanced myself from the memory of the prince. It was only by chance that I landed back here, but as soon as I set foot on terra firma it all came rushing back to me, and I didn't want to end my life—however miserable it might seem to others' eyes—in the dust and mud like my old friends ended theirs.

One humid night redolent with memories, my steps and my desperation led me to the palace. Over the years I'd spent time with murderers, traitors, and thieves, and from the latter I learned a precious skill by which no door remained locked to me for long. And the door I had stood longingly before as a child was no exception. Nothing had changed in these dark alleys, suspicion hovered there as it did years earlier, and I entered without anyone prying. I

crept down to the cavern at the bottom of the stairs; even I don't know what I wanted—forgiveness, mercy, absolution, or simply the opportunity to extinguish with my own hands the life of the man who had put a curse on mine. Maybe killing the prince would save me, so I thought.

I never found out. Silently I approached the laboratory, where a brilliant light illuminated the prince, the master, and two other men leaning over a form on a slab.

"It's fantastic, Doctor. You've exceeded all my expectations." It was him, the prince, his voice hoarse, excited.

"It's thanks to you, Your Highness. The secret of the mechanism by which the substance has pervaded this body's blood vessels will make your name immortal through the centuries."

"And yours as well. The name of Dr. Giuseppe Salerno², distinguished physician and anatomist, will be immortalized by this woman and her unborn child. Only one thing is still missing, but I haven't given up hope; providence has often facilitated my wildest dreams."

They stepped away from the table and I could finally see the thing that was lying on it. A stifled sob came out of my chest, muffled but not sufficiently, and all eyes turned towards me as I stared, stupefied, at the heap of bones, flesh, nerves, and blood vessels forming the outline of a human. A body delineated only by the network of veins running through it, a structure both obscene and awesome, a nightmare before my dazzled eyes. A woman, they had said, and in fact, horror of horrors, a tiny creature, like a big rat or a small kitten, was hidden in the viscera of the female looking at me with a wanton smile from a cranium that had been completely stripped of flesh. I stood there horrified, riveted to the spot; I had seen many corpses during my years at sea, but never anything like that, and it never for a moment occurred to me that I should run away. So they caught me and tied me up and dragged me before him, the prince.

I don't know if he recognized me, I don't think so, I was very different from the terrified guttersnipe he had cursed so many years ago, but he was as handsome as ever, full and plump, with the mole, the thick, powdered wig, and his oily, penetrating fragrance of aromatic blends.

"What did I tell you, Doctor? Providence," he murmured, satisfied. Then the master raised his club over my head and struck me, and I no longer felt a thing.

Now, though, I can hear and see everything.

A curious effect, I suppose, of the substance with which my arterial branches were irrigated. I am alive and conscious and immobile, fixed in the present forever, bones and muscles and tendons and nerves and blood vessels, and I can see the future and the past, and I know that hundreds, indeed thousands, no, what am I saying, hundreds of thousands of viewers will pass before me, marveling, astounded, horrified, incredulous, sceptical, they will admire the perfect design of the arterial, venous, and lymphatic tree that adorns me. I will learn

² Dr. Giuseppe Salerno of Palermo. His "Anatomical Machines" were constructed in 1763-64 and still reside in their glass cases in the "Underground Chamber" of the Museo Sansevero. They were quite sensational in their time, when popular imagination held that the Prince of Sansevero, in his ardor for rational, materialist science, had commanded that two of his servants be killed and virtuosically enhaled for the project.

many things over this long period of time, listening to the voices around me, scholars, professors, the excited or curious crowds that flock to pay admission to admire the Anatomical Circulatory Machines of Arteries and Veins of Raimondo di Sangro, Prince of Sansevero, The Man and Woman, Joachim and Boaz, awesome and monstrous, fabrication and legend, horror and astonishment, enchantment and deception and mystery. Yet they will never discover how this could have come about, how the prince created me and my companion, whether we were living or dead when he made us immortal, what instruments and substances made all this possible.

I know everything, and I laugh, in the silence of time, because I know the ultimate secret, the most important one of all, the one not even the prince will ever find out: I live. ●

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Like many historical crime stories, this one was built on a foundation of myth and historical fact. Readers who'd like to know more about the Anatomical Machines of Cappella Sansevero, which form the basis for this story, will find a picture on the Atlas Obscura Web site (<http://atlasobscura.com/place/the-anatomical-machines-of-cappella-sansevero>). According to that source, the machines were "built on real human skeletons" and "represent the veins, arteries and musculature in amazing detail. Long thought to be made by an early form of plastination, they were recently discovered to be made—with the exception of the human skeletons—of beeswax, iron wire, and silk." A much more prosaic constitution than what Diana Lama has imagined for them in her chilling story!

READING MYSTERIES ON A MORNING TRAIN

by Kathy Ferrell

The taste of bitter almonds
or the scent of lemon leaf,
the smell of unlit pilots
or the odd off taste of beef.

A gathering of apple seeds
or collection from the castor,
there's many ways to do one in,
but I wish they'd do it faster.

©2012 by Kathy Ferrell

THE PEOPLE AT PENROWLAND HOUSE

by Simon Brett

1.

The day before New Year's Eve isn't the best time to be dumped. And receiving a text message isn't the best way of finding out that you've been dumped. But that was the experience of Melissa Garforth. And it left her feeling pretty raw.

She had known things weren't going too well with Jake for a while. They were both so busy with work that they never had a chance to talk things over. And though they'd been at lots of parties together in the run-up to Christmas, they'd hardly exchanged more than a few words at any of them. He was stressed, she knew, working insane hours trying to convince a sceptical, post-credit crunch world that all was well with the bank which rewarded him so handsomely. Melissa too had been overworked by her PR company. At most of the many pre-Christmas parties they'd attended she'd been on duty, checking guest lists, seeing the right people were talking to the right people, seeing everyone's champagne glass was fully charged. The result was that Jake's presence at those parties had been a detail, at times almost an irritation.

But it was all going to be all right over the New Year. Then she and Jake were going to have some time together, time for each other, time to reestablish the bond that had kept them together for nearly four years. Everything would be all right when they got to Penrowland House.

She had found the advertisement online after much searching. Jake had been happy to leave it to her, as he was happy to leave most arrangements of

Simon Brett is best known in the U.S. for his several humorous mystery series, and as this issue goes to press he has new books either just out or in the works in three of them. July 2012 saw the publication of the fourth book in his newest series, *Blotto, Twinks and the Bootlegger's Moll*, along with the paperback of the previous entry in the series, *Blotto, Twinks and the Rodents of the Riviera*. In January 2013, *Crème de la Crime* will be releasing a new "Fethering" mystery, *The Corpse on the Court*. And readers will also be treated to a new Charles Paris novel sometime in 2013; look for *A Decent Interval*. †

a domestic nature to her. When she'd said she wanted to rent a house in Cornwall over the New Year holiday, he'd said fine. So long as she sorted it out. He didn't want to know any of the details, least of all what it was going to cost. Though Jake may have had his problems, they were never about money.

The only stipulation he made was that he wanted to invite Greg and Felicity too. Initially disappointed at the thought of sharing their self-indulgent reconciliation, Melissa quickly began to see advantages in the proposal. Felicity, a school friend of hers, was not only married to Greg but also expecting their first child. The presence of such a domestically sorted couple at Penrowland House might provide a useful template for Jake. If Greg and Felicity could cement their relationship by getting married and making babies, maybe he would be prompted—somewhat belatedly—to see the advantages of himself and Melissa going down the same route.

And there was something about the picture of Penrowland House on the Web site which promised magic. It was in a part of Cornwall that had once been part of the tin-mining industry, and the blurb promised “invigorating cliff-edge walks in some of England’s most untamed but beautiful scenery.” Penrowland House, a tall grey Victorian structure perched on a crag against the bright summer blue of the Atlantic, was the perfect environment in which to slough off the anxieties of work and of London. Here was a place that would heal any rift there might be between Melissa and Jake.

They were both spending Christmas with their respective parents. The idea of the couple being together on Christmas Day in either Gloucestershire (hers) or Cambridge (his) suggested an image of far greater commitment than Jake could tolerate. As ever, their relationship was conducted on his terms. And, while Melissa survived the tedium of her father moaning about how much value his shares had lost and her mother constantly asking when “that city-slicker boyfriend of yours is going to make a decent woman of you so that we can have some grandchildren,” she could see Jake’s point. How his festive stay in Cambridge would be she couldn’t guess. He had never allowed her to meet his family.

So Christmas, so far as Melissa was concerned, represented just something to be got through, with the promise of four days at Penrowland House ahead.

The plan had been that they would leave from their respective parents’ houses on the morning of New Year’s Eve and drive to Cornwall in separate cars. Melissa had tried to argue against this, suggesting Jake should pick her up in his Porsche on the way, either in Gloucestershire or London. But he’d vetoed that idea, saying he might have to field some work calls and couldn’t be tied for time. He ordained that they would leave from their respective parents’ houses.

In retrospect, Melissa thought he might just have been covering his exits. That, of course, was after she’d received the text.

It came late on the evening of the thirtieth, reading very simply: “WE’RE FINISHED. IT HASN’T BEEN WORKING FOR SOME TIME, AND I’VE MET SOMEONE NEW. SO PULL THE PLUGS ON CORNWALL. JAKE.”

Fortunately, her parents had already gone to bed and Melissa’s room was out of earshot, so they could not hear her crying. Jake’s text had not really come as a surprise, but that didn’t lessen the visceral pain it caused. She felt deeply, deeply stupid. You’re unlikely to meet “someone new” over Christmas at your parents’ place. She must’ve been around for some weeks at least. Melissa

wondered how many of the “insane hours” Jake had spent in the run-up to Christmas had been spent working at the bank, and how many squiring “someone new.” She felt utterly humiliated, and could not imagine a time when she would ever have any self-esteem again.

She tried ringing Jake, but of course he had his mobile switched off. Or maybe he had already exchanged it for a new one, whose number Melissa would never know.

A later text from her friend Polly served only to turn the knife in the wound. “LUCKY YOU, HOLED UP IN CORNWALL WITH THE GORGEOUS JAKE. THINK OF MY NEW YEAR—JUST ME AND A BOTTLE OF VODKA.”

The temptation to pick up the phone immediately and spill out her misery was enormous. Polly had been dumped by her boyfriend a couple of weeks earlier. Make it two bottles of vodka, Melissa wanted to say, and we’ll raise a few glasses to the perfidy of men.

But no, she had her pride. If she cancelled the booking on Penrowland House, Jake’s victory would be complete. She was definitely going to Cornwall. It wouldn’t be the same, but she was determined to prove she could have a good time with just Greg and Felicity . . . and all their talk of the babies she would now probably never have.

Melissa told her parents nothing about the change in her circumstances. She didn’t mention her sleepless night, explaining away her red eyes to her mother by saying she was getting a stinking cold, and set off in her car at the time she had said she would.

It was when she stopped at the Services just outside Exeter that she checked her mobile and found the new text. “I’VE HAD A MINOR SCARE WITH THE BABY AND BEEN ORDERED TO TAKE A FEW DAYS BED REST. SORRY. YOU AND JAKE HAVE A FABULOUS ROMANTIC TIME. HUGS FELICITY.”

Melissa felt winded by the news. The temptation to ring up Polly and drive straight back to London was stronger than ever. Biting her lips, unable to stop the tears coursing down her cheeks, she resisted it.

As she drove on, a little virus of doubt began to grow inside her. Felicity had been her friend, but Greg was more a mate of Jake’s, and Felicity always did what Greg wanted her to. Melissa felt certain that Jake had dissuaded them from going to Penrowland House, that Jake had suggested making up the excuse about a problem in Felicity’s pregnancy.

Melissa knew she was being paranoid, but she still felt victimised.

She hadn’t spoken to anyone during the process of booking Penrowland House. The filling in of details, the payment (in full, she’d been too late just to send a deposit) had all been conducted online. Instructions had been e-mailed to her to collect the keys from the local pub, The Tinman’s Arms.

Penrowland had hardly enough dwellings to qualify for the title of a village. It was set on an exposed promontory of rough, balding grass. The few short trees that managed to survive in the stony soil were bent, crouching, as though trying to flee the marauding Atlantic winds.

Penrowland House was the nearest building to the sea. Next to it was a small church, which also seemed to be hunkering down against the sea winds. Uneven, crooked gravestones rose from the high grass of its sloping churchyard. Scattered about the headland were the ruins of stone buildings, presumably

something to do with the defunct tin-mining industry. Nearer the road was a short terrace of tumbledown houses, at the end of which stood the pub.

Though it was only midafternoon when Melissa arrived at Penrowland, the sun had already given up on the day. Winter had drained the colour from the image she had seen on the website. Everything was grey, and greyest of all the tall house that stood out against a gunmetal sea.

Maybe in the tourist season The Tinman's Arms was open all day, but that afternoon it was certainly closed, and it took a lot of knocking before Melissa could rouse anyone to answer her summons. Eventually a bearded man in a grubby sweatshirt appeared in the doorway. "What do you want?" he asked, without enthusiasm.

"I've come to collect the keys to Penrowland House."

"Have you?" He chuckled charmlessly. "You've chosen a lovely day for it."

"What do you mean by that?"

He shrugged up at darkening sky. "The wind'll get up tonight."

"I'm sure I'll survive," said Melissa quite sharply. The man gave her a strange, almost insolent look. "Could I have the keys, please?"

"They're kept behind the bar. You'd better come in."

The interior of The Tinman's Arms was as unwelcoming as its landlord, cramped and smoke-blackened, smelling of stale beer. The vinyl flooring felt tacky on the soles of Melissa's shoes.

"Is there anything I ought to know about the place?"

"Like what?" the landlord asked from behind his bar.

"Instructions for how to put the heating on, that kind of thing?"

"There's a sheet on the hall table up there with that kind of information." He was shuffling through a big bunch of keys to find the right one. "Or there used to be."

"And are there any people up at Penrowland House?"

He turned sharply at her question and fixed her with a look, half suspicious and half curious. "Why do you ask?"

"I just wondered if there was a kind of janitor or caretaker up there?"

The landlord smiled sourly. "No, I don't think there's anyone up there you'd call a janitor or caretaker. You on your own?" he asked suddenly.

"For the time being." Melissa had her pride. She wasn't about to admit that she would be spending the whole New Year holiday on her own.

"Well, just be careful," he said.

"Careful of what?"

The landlord looked at her appraisingly, as though selecting from an array of possible answers to her question. After a long silence he made his choice. "Be careful of the remains of Wheal Penrowland."

Melissa was puzzled. "Wheel? What kind of wheel?"

"Oh, don't you know that? No, of course, you're from London." He made it sound like an insult, then explained, "'Wheal' is the local word for tin mine. Penrowland House was built on the profits of tin. On the profits from Wheal Penrowland. And all right, all the tin mining finished here a long time back, but there's still deep shafts cut into the headland. And some of them haven't got the kind of railings round that perhaps Health and Safety would say they should have. So be careful of that . . ."

His intonation left the sentence hanging in the air, as though he was about to continue.

“Are you telling me there’s something else I should be careful of?”

But the moment had passed. “No,” he said brusquely. “Just keep clear of the mine shafts. Particularly after dark. Did you think to bring a torch with you?”

His intonation suggested that he wouldn’t have expected anyone “from London” to have considered such a precaution, and Melissa was forced to admit that she hadn’t.

“There might be one up at the house,” he said without optimism, “but I don’t know whether they’ll have any batteries.” He moved out from behind the bar, and his body language made it clear that it was time for her to go.

“Oh, one thing . . .” said Melissa. “What time will you be opening up this evening . . . you know, if I wanted to come down for a drink . . . ?”

“You can’t. Tonight’s a New Year Special dinner. Ticketed, and it’s all sold out.”

He seemed to take satisfaction from his reply. As soon as Melissa was through the door, she heard him locking it behind her. But as she went back to her car, she felt as though the landlord was still watching her out of the pub window.

She had parked where the road ran out, which was as close as she could get to her destination. It took two journeys up the steep, stony path to carry her bags and the boxes of food she had brought into Penrowland House. Each time, the higher she got, the more ferocious the wind grew, scouring her face, tugging at her clothes with its icy fingers. The house loomed over her, unwelcoming and malign.

When she closed the heavy front door for the second time, the sound echoed, unnaturally loud in the dusty stillness. She had to feel along the damp wall for a light switch and when she clicked it, the illumination produced was of very low wattage.

Melissa located the door to the kitchen and carried through the boxes of food. She found a switch which put on some feeble striplights under the shelves. It was when she saw the boxes on the table that she was hit by a new wave of misery. So much food, Jake’s favourite shortbread and a bottle of the malt whisky he liked, plenty of supplies for Greg and Felicity. She knew she’d overcatered, but now it was all just for her, she felt the true depth of what she had lost. Melissa Garforth was so pathetic, such a loser. Always had been, really, beneath her veneer of sophistication in her shallow PR world. Her dreams of life with Jake, of children with Jake, of children with anyone, had all crumbled away to nothingness. She had never felt so alone. Her eyes filled with unstopable tears. For the first time in her life, she felt suicidal. The world would be a better place without her in it.

She thought she heard a sound from the hall and froze, her skin tingling with cold. No, nothing, she must have imagined it. Or if there was something, it could be a mouse in the skirting board, or some intimate creak of the old house, buffeted by the wind, reacting to the unaccustomed central heating.

A drink might make her feel better. Failing that, it might help her to oblivion. She reached for the malt whisky and moved towards the shelves in search of a glass.

This time she really did hear a sound from the hall. A footstep. Definitely. Another footstep. Footsteps coming towards the kitchen.

Melissa shrank against the sink, her heart pounding so loudly she thought its sound must be filling the house.

The outline of a tall figure moved along the corridor towards the kitchen door. Closer and closer.

Melissa couldn't stop herself. She screamed.

The figure froze in the doorway, then reached out to a light switch Melissa hadn't noticed and flooded the kitchen with warm, reassuring light.

"What the hell's all this screaming about?" asked a reassuringly avuncular male voice with a slight Cornish burr.

The man stood over six foot, old but not stooped. He had white hair, an untrimmed beard, and startlingly blue eyes. He wore a faded blue fisherman's sweater, faded blue trousers, and heavy black boots.

"I thought you were a ghost," Melissa admitted.

The man chuckled. "Oh, don't you start."

"What do you mean by that?"

"A house like Penrowland House, just 'cause it's old and creaky, everyone who comes here thinks it must be haunted. They all tend to be rather disappointed when they find out it isn't."

"I'm sorry. Who are you?"

"My name's William Rickford. I kind of look after the place for the owners, you know, when it's let. I see that the visitors have got everything they might need." He indicated the boxes of food on the table and chuckled. "It looks like you have."

"My name's Melissa Garforth." She reached out her hand and the firmness of William's grasp removed any residual idea that he might be a ghost.

"Do you live in the house?"

"No, no, down in the village."

"Down at the pub I was told there wasn't anyone looking after the place."

"That's just that sour-faced landlord being contrary. He knew full well that I'd come in to check everything was all right for you."

"He certainly wasn't very welcoming."

"No, I don't know what's wrong with that one. You'd have thought the first quality you need in a publican is a liking for other people. Well, he seems to hate everyone." William Rickford looked around the room. "You the first one to arrive then, are you?"

"Yes." Suddenly Melissa could see no point in lying to this open-faced old man. "The others have changed their plans. It's just going to be me."

He nodded, taking in the information in a completely nonjudgmental way. "Well, it's a nice house. You'll be all right here. I see your bags are still in the hall. Would you like it if I lit a fire in the sitting room while you put your things away upstairs?"

"That'd be kind. I'd like that very much."

Somehow William Rickford's presence had completely changed the atmosphere of Penrowland House. The bedroom Melissa selected, over the front door, looking inland, was surprisingly cosy and the double bed looked welcoming. Even better, it had an electric blanket, which she immediately switched on. The lack of sleep the night before was beginning to catch up with her. It'd be an

early night tonight. A good few drinks and a sleeping pill, anything to stop her mind returning to the subject of her now ex-boyfriend.

William's fire was burning cheerfully when Melissa got down to the sitting room, and it seemed entirely natural for her to offer him a drink. She had brought plenty of everything. He chose beer. Melissa, fearing the malt whisky would only make her think again of Jake, opened a bottle of red wine.

They sat either side of the fire and, as the warmth spread creakily through the house, she found the old man incredibly easy to talk to. He told her of his life as a fisherman, "until the old bones were so creaky I couldn't go on with it." She asked him if he had family.

"Not now. No family now." And for the first time there was an edge of melancholy in his voice. But he didn't let the mood settle. He was quickly on to asking Melissa about her own life.

And, to her surprise, she found herself telling him everything. All about Jake, all about how Jake had behaved, the lot spilled out. And, in the presence of William Rickford, she didn't cry. Even though the pain was so new, so raw, his quiet nods, his sympathetic comments made Melissa feel almost as if she was being tended by a counsellor.

By the time the old man said he had to leave, there was only a third left in the red-wine bottle and Melissa felt more tired than she could ever remember. She made herself some toast and Golden Syrup—childhood comfort food—had a cursory wash, took a sleeping pill, and buried herself under the electrically-toasted duvet. She was asleep within seconds.

It was the tapping that woke her. An insistent, regular tapping.

For a moment Melissa was disoriented. She didn't know where she was. She hardly knew who she was. But as consciousness returned, it was accompanied by a tsunami of misery. Whatever comfort she had been given the evening before by the presence of William Rickford was swept away in an instant. Jake had dumped her. Jake had been two-timing her for months. Jake was probably even at that moment in bed with his new woman.

The tapping continued, forcing its way into Melissa's troubled mind. The sound came from the curtained window that looked out over the front of Penrowland House. Probably the branch of a tree, repetitively blown against the glass by the moaning, discontented wind.

Once she had heard it, Melissa knew that she would never get back to sleep unless she somehow stopped the tapping. She rose from her bed, the edges of her duvet cold now the electric blanket had been switched off. The polished floorboards felt icy on the soles of her feet, and she shivered in her thin night-dress. She switched on a bedside lamp which brought a meagre, pale light into the room, and moved forward.

She drew back the curtain to reveal the large panes of the sash window. Outlined by the light behind her, she saw a blurred image of her own reflection. She reached for the brass fingerholds to open the window and break off the offending branch.

It was as she did so that she remembered there were no trees on Penrowland headland tall enough to reach her bedroom. Whatever was tapping on the window was not a branch.

Melissa looked at her reflection, a face of abject misery. The image was

clearer now. She could see the anguish in her eyes, the defeated sag of her lips. Her hand reached up to brush away her tears.

Except it didn't. Her arms were both firmly by her side. And the hand she thought was lifting to brush away tears was moving up to tap on the window. The sound was very loud in the cold stillness of the bedroom.

It was not her reflection. The pale figure she could see through the glass was another woman. Thinner than her, and with longer hair. The only thing they had in common was the depth of despair in two pair of eyes that locked on to each other.

Melissa felt the breath sucked out of her body as the woman on the other side of the glass beckoned to her.

2.

"This was my bedroom," said the girl who had come in through the window of Penrowland House.

The two girls sat on the end of the bed, and the subdued lamplight gave Melissa a chance to look properly at the intruder. The first striking thing about the girl was her pallor, and the greyish skin tone that was echoed in the colour of her clothes and wild windswept hair. The long grey skirt came right down to her grey buttoned boots. Above the waist she wore a loose grey blouse. She would have been beautiful, but for her expression of infinite pain.

Since the girl's arrival, the room temperature seemed to have dropped by several degrees. Melissa took her dressing gown from a hook on the door and wrapped herself into it. "Do you want something to put on . . . ?"

"No, I'm used to the cold," said the girl. She spoke in a Cornish accent, but her voice didn't carry the warmth usually associated with that sound. "My name's Loveday."

"Melissa."

The girl nodded, assimilating the information. Her eyes again sought out Melissa's, the raw pain deep inside them exerting an eerie magnetism.

"I was drawn to you," said Loveday, "by your unhappiness."

"Oh?"

"You don't deny you are unhappy? I wouldn't believe you if you did."

"Yes, I'm unhappy," Melissa admitted.

"And the cause a man, I dare say?" A nod. "Tell me what happened, Melissa."

She could not have kept silent to save her life. She found the words forming on her lips, she felt them coming out as if drawn by some power she could not control. And they were almost the same words with which she had told her story to William Rickford the night before. But then she had felt comfort.

Telling the same details to Loveday brought her no comfort, only dispirited her further. She felt increasingly convinced of her own stupidity, of how many times she had shut her mind to clues that should have made clear to her the real nature of Jake's character, the real nature of their relationship. When she stopped talking, Melissa felt drained and worthless.

There was a long cold silence in the bedroom. Though Melissa had evaded them, Loveday's pained eyes had been fixed on her face all the time she had been speaking. Now she felt their power, drawing her own eyes up to meet them.

“No wonder your sadness called to me,” said Loveday. “It so closely matches my own.”

Melissa did not consciously shape the words, but heard herself asking, “You are a ghost, aren’t you, Loveday?”

The girl let out a bitter little laugh. “What’s a ghost? An uneasy spirit? My spirit is uneasy, yes.”

“But are you dead?”

That prompted another cold snap of laughter. “They buried me in the churchyard here. That would have been cruel if I had not been dead. Yes, my body rotted away long ago. Only my sadness could not be destroyed.”

“What happened?” asked Melissa, unwillingly.

The ghost sighed, then said, “Like you, it was a man that was the cause. His name was George, and he was brought up in Penrowland, just like I was. We knew each other from childhood, George being a couple of years older than me, and many in the village reckoned we would end up wed. Not my father, though. He’d risen up in the world, and he wanted someone better for his only daughter than a lad from a tin-miner’s family.

“The village was bigger then. The wheal—sorry, I should say ‘the mine’ for you who don’t come from these parts—the mine was thriving, and my father, who owned it, was making good profits. There were some rough types that came here to work in Wheal Penrowland, but George’s people were good, God-fearing folk. His father had been injured in a fall down one of the shafts, and George was breadwinner for the whole family. Nobody in Penrowland ever had a bad word to say about him. I felt sure my father would come round when the moment was right for us to get wed.

“It was then that things started to go wrong. Tin was discovered in Australia, where it could be got much more cheap, and the Cornish tin mines suffered terribly. Suddenly my father was laying men off. George had no work. I didn’t let that upset me. I loved George, regardless of whether he had any money or not.

“He was a dutiful lad, though, who wanted to provide for his crippled father and family. No work in Cornwall, but in America they said there were jobs for mining boys. George was determined somehow to scratch together money for a one-way ticket and make his way over there. I was struck to the heart when he told me that, but he swore when he could afford it he’d send for me to join him. And I swore, whatever pressures my father put on me, I would never marry anyone else.

“But then one morning George didn’t come to the place where we usually met. I went to his parents’ house. They told me he had found the money for his passage and had gone to Liverpool that morning to catch a boat for America.

“Of course I knew where the money had come from. I came straight back here and confronted my father. He didn’t attempt to deny it. He’d given George the money, twice as much as he needed for the boat. But that wasn’t the worst of it . . .”

The ghost stopped, overcome by emotion. “What happened?” asked Melissa, curiosity for a moment overcoming her terror.

Loveday was silent for a moment, then leant forward. Melissa could feel the icy breath on her face as the girl continued. “Typical, my father had made his way in business by doing deals, and he’d done a deal with George. He’d give him the money, but on one condition—that George’d leave immediately for Liverpool and never try to contact me again.

“George loved me, he really loved me, but he had this great sense of responsibility for his family. Rather than let them starve, he would give up the only woman he loved.

“I don’t need to tell you how I felt, Melissa. Because I know it is how you are feeling at this very minute. We both have lost the man on whom we built all our dreams.”

A new, more powerful wave of desolation swept over Melissa.

“I can help you put an end to your pain,” said the ghost.

“How?”

“Easily.” A slender grey hand fixed its icy grip on Melissa’s wrist. Loveday rose from the bed. “Follow me.”

Melissa had not even a vestigial shred of will left. She stood up and allowed herself to be led out of the bedroom, across the dark landing, and down the uncarpeted stairs of Penrowland House.

Outside the front door, Melissa was aware of, rather than felt, the howling wind off the Atlantic, the sharp crags beneath her bare feet. And she followed, unquestioning, where Loveday was leading her.

It was no surprise to find that their destination was a mine shaft. A circle of twisted, rusty railings around the opening offered little protection.

Melissa and Loveday both knew why they were standing at the edge of the dark vertical tunnel. “This is where I found relief from my pain,” said Loveday, her voice hissing to make itself heard above the ferocious wind. “And this is where I found revenge too. Revenge on my father. Revenge on George. This is where you will find revenge on Jake.”

The cold grip on Melissa’s wrist shifted into a gentler hand-holding. The two stood together on the brink of the shaft, like small girls about to enter a party, nervous, but excited too.

“You don’t even have to jump,” Loveday murmured soothingly. “Just lean forward. Lean forward, further forward, and let the weight of your body do the rest. It’ll only take a moment, Melissa, and then, like me, you will be free of all your pain.”

Melissa had a floating feeling, a sense that her body was just a feather at the mercy of the winds. Matching Loveday’s movement, she slowly, serenely leant forward over the void.

“No! No! Don’t do it, you little fool!”

Melissa was suddenly aware of strong arms around her waist, immobilising her, pulling her back. But Loveday did not stop. Her momentum pulled her down. Melissa felt the frozen hand trying to get a purchase on her own, failing, slipping free. She caught the look of infinite reproach in Loveday’s eyes, as the grey phantom disappeared into the darkness of the shaft.

But the thin scream that echoed up from the depths would stay in Melissa’s memory for the rest of her life.

Of course it was William Rickford who had saved her. Solid, reliable William Rickford. His strong arms felt so warm around her that Melissa could not prevent herself from weeping tears of relief.

When finally she could speak, she asked, “Who was she?”

William’s honest face looked puzzled in the moonlight. “Who was who?”

“The girl. Loveday. The one who was holding my hand.”

The old man shook his head wryly. “There was no girl. Sounds to me, young

lady, that you've been having a nightmare. Not to mention doing a bit of sleep-walking."

By the time they were back in Penrowland House and had switched all the lights on, and after William Rickford had made her a milky drink laced with whisky, Melissa was close to believing that maybe she had dreamt it all. She certainly didn't say anything more to William about ghosts. He waited till she assured him she had recovered from her shock, then left, saying he'd "pop round in the morning to see you're all fine and dandy."

But as, drowsy from the whisky, she slipped back under the rewarmed duvet, Melissa could not completely convince herself that Loveday had been just a dream.

The following morning the wind had dropped. It was a crisp, bright New Year's Day. Melissa got up late and made herself a leisurely breakfast. She felt occasional pangs about the loss of Jake, but now knew that their parting at some point had been inevitable.

She decided that she would stay the three more days she'd planned at Penrowland House. A bit of her own company would be good as she planned the next stage of her life. She could enjoy the promised "invigorating cliff-edge walks." Even brave the frosty welcome of The Tinman's Arms. And certainly have more drinks and chats with William Rickford.

Wrapped up warm, she set off down the headland to join up with the sign-posted path. She passed the opening of the mine shaft that had featured in her night's experience. The twisted railings were still there, but the mouth of the tunnel itself now seemed to be blocked with rocks and other rubble.

Melissa took a diversion through the tiny churchyard, looking with interest at the wind-blasted tombstones that stuck at strange angles from the rough grass. Two stood side by side, apart from the rest.

She felt a frisson of excitement as she brushed away the lichen with her gloved hands and read the eroded inscriptions.

On the first tombstone were the words:

HERE LIE THE REMAINS OF
LOVEDAY RICKFORD
BORN 1857
AND KILLED IN AN ACCIDENT IN THE MINE WORKINGS
15 MAY 1875
MAY SHE REST IN PEACE

Only eighteen, thought Melissa. And she wondered how much influence and money her father had had to use to get a suicide buried in consecrated ground.

On the second tombstone the legend read:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF
WILLIAM RICKFORD
1804-1877,
WHO DIED OF A BROKEN HEART,
NEVER FORGIVING HIMSELF
FOR CAUSING HIS DAUGHTER'S DEATH

Melissa returned to London reenergised by her stay at Penrowland House. But of course she never saw William Rickford again. ●

THE JURY BOX (Continued from page 11)

**** Tana French, *Broken Harbor*, Viking, \$27.95. Joseph Wambaugh once said, "The best crime stories are not about how cops work on cases but about how cases work on cops." If he's right, and I have little doubt that he is, then French's latest novel is up there with the best. In *Broken Harbor*, Detective Sergeant Michael Kennedy is assigned a case that is wrong at every turn: an apparent break-in, a father and two small children murdered and a mother with critical stab wounds, inexplicable security cameras and holes punched in walls throughout the house. The setting is a housing development on the Irish coast left half abandoned during the economic recession. The setting and the details of the case dredge up ghosts from DS Kennedy's tragic youth that threaten the detective's principles and his career. French's writing is tight and the story goes deep. But readers seeking satisfying, upbeat endings are likely to have their spirits broken like the harbor of the title.

*** Barry Fantoni: *Harry Lipkin, Private Eye*, Doubleday, \$24.00. Written by a British jazz musician, humorist, and 'sixties rebel, *Harry Lipkin, Private Eye* is a fast and funny whodunit featuring an eighty-seven-year-old Florida detective whose quirky charm will remind some readers of Lieutenant Columbo. Plotted in the mold of a classic parlor mystery, but adorned with tastefully placed Jewish shtick, the story follows the octogenarian dick as he gets to the bottom of a series of thefts from the home of a wealthy Miami widow.

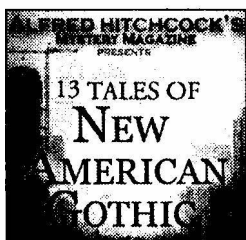
**** Daniel Friedman: *Don't Ever Get Old*, Minotaur, \$24.99. A simple—almost bland—book-cover design belies the exciting story told by an altogether unique protagonist. At

eighty-seven, retired Memphis cop Baruch "Buck" Schatz is called to the bedside of a dying WWII acquaintance who claims that a notorious SS officer, long thought dead, is alive with a treasure in stolen Nazi gold. With the help of his grandson, Buck goes on a search for the Nazi and his gold, in the process running afoul of greedy survivors, a Baptist priest, a loan shark, Israeli agents, and indifferent cops. Buck Schatz is a Jewish character without stereotypical Jewish kitsch. Instead he's cantankerous, chain-smoking, angry, and impatient, and someone whom readers will reluctantly come to admire.

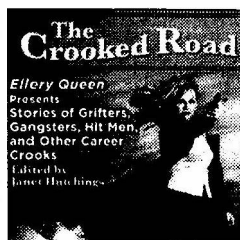
**** John Billheimer, *Field of Schemes*, Five Star, \$25.95. When a baseball trainer is asked by his players for steroids, he mixes up an innocent placebo of cold-cream, sunscreen, and lemon juice. But when the team's top hitter tests positive for steroids, and later dies of an overdose, the trainer faces humiliation, shame, and criminal charges. The novel's hero is Lloyd Keaton, a third-generation sportswriter (his grandfather broke the Black Sox Scandal in 1919) with a gambling problem. When Keaton tries to clear the trainer's name, he finds himself opposed on one side by mobsters, and on the other by a U.S. senator with a McCarthyesque zeal to root out steroid abuse, no matter whom he hurts along the way. Personal subplots are often annexed to stories like a third arm. But in *Field of Schemes*, the multiple subplots involving race, family, and addiction are seamlessly interwoven throughout the book, running parallel to, while enhancing, the central plot. With strong dialogue, rich characters, and passionate storytelling, Billheimer hits this thoroughly engaging story out of the ballpark.

**** Joanna Campbell Slan, *Death of a Schoolgirl*, Berkley Prime Crime, \$15.00. After five well-received whodunits featuring St. Louis scrapbooker Kiki Lowenstein, Slan has turned her attention to Jane Eyre, the eponymous heroine of Charlotte Brontë's 1847 novel. It's 1820, and the former governess is now married to former employer Edward Rochester and is the mother of his son. The couple receives a distressing message from Rochester's ward and

Jane's former student begging for help. As Rochester convalesces from the tragic events at the end of *Jane Eyre*, Jane travels to London to where she finds the administration of a girls' school is not as it should be. *Death of a Schoolgirl* is layered with compound mysteries that unfold in a manner true to Brontë's style. In this first of a projected series, Slan has given readers a faithful and ultimately satisfying continuation of an English classic. ●



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