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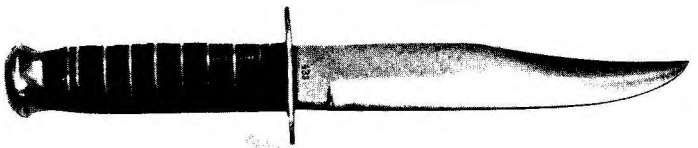

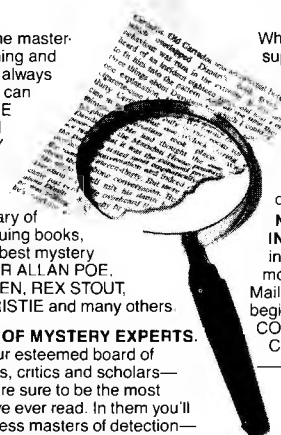

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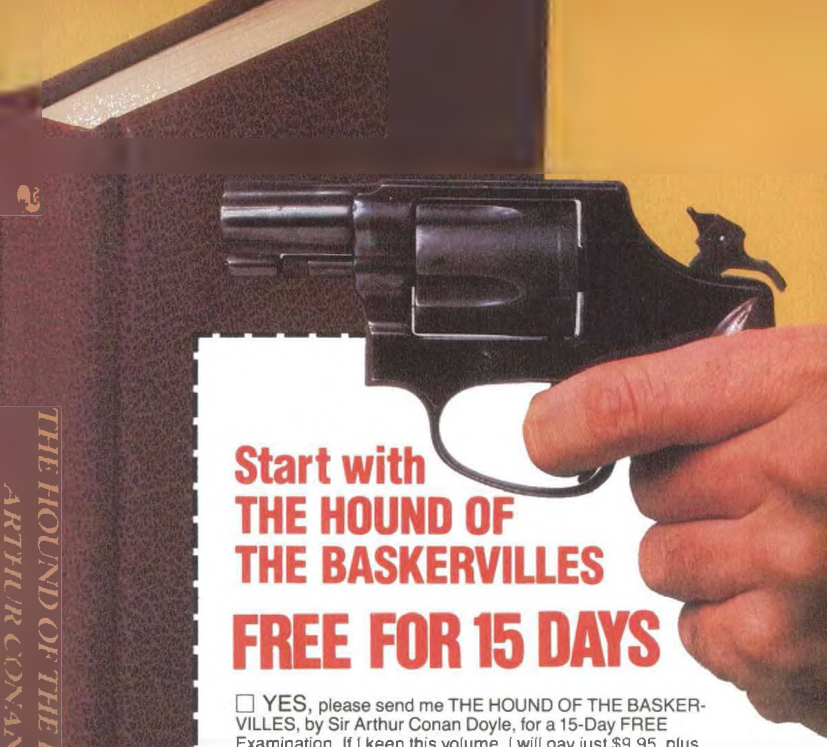

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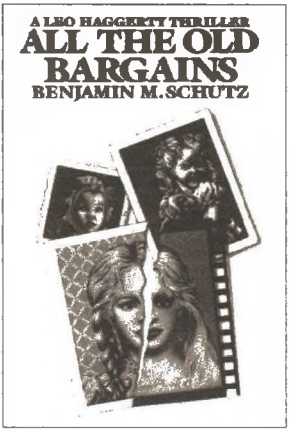

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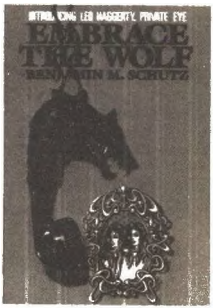

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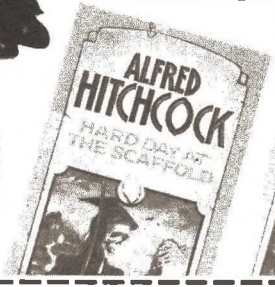

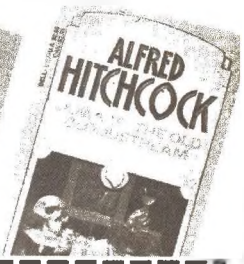

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a *NEW* Ben Snow story by

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From the outside, Turner's Waxwork Theater was a garish melange of signs and lights, but once Ben followed Seymour Dodge through the front door the place took on an atmosphere of slumbering menace. The lights were dim, barely illuminating the dozens of wax figures that stood poised for action. "This way," Dodge said, leading Ben down a narrow aisle past a display of the state's history . . .

THE SACRAMENTO WAXWORKS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Sacramento was on the main line of the transcontinental railroad in 1885, and it was by railroad that Ben Snow arrived there in the company of Seymour Dodge. He'd never been to California before and never visited a city as large as Sacramento. He was only twenty-six that year, still pursued by the bizarre rumor that he might be Billy the Kid.

He knew Billy was dead, shot by Sheriff Pat Garrett back in '81, but news traveled slowly in the West if it traveled at all. It had taken Washington eleven days to learn of Custer's defeat at the Little Big Horn and wanted posters for Billy the Kid were still being printed in Las Vegas a year after his death in New Mexico. The frequent gunfights between outlaws and sheriffs became almost mythic, with the myth often traveling faster than the actual news.

Seymour Dodge was a man who fostered myths. A slender gentleman whose wisp of a beard made him appear older than he was, he'd approached Ben at a Carson City cafe with an unusual proposition. "Come to Sacramento with me," he'd offered. "I'll pay for your train

fare and hotel room and give you one hundred dollars besides—all for a couple of days' work."

"I'm not a gunfighter," Ben told him, feeling uncomfortable under the man's steady gaze.

"Didn't say you were. But you *know* gunfighters—you've traveled among them. I can tell by the way you wear that holster. It's low, for a fast draw."

"I'm fast," Ben conceded. "And I hit what I aim at."

Seymour Dodge bit off the end of a cigar and struck a match to light it. "Ever meet Billy the Kid?" he asked casually. "You'd be about his age."

"Never met him."

"How about Pat Garrett or Wyatt Earp? The James boys?"

"Nope."

"Still," Dodge said, a bit disappointed, "you've known others like them, and that's what I need. I bought myself a waxworks in Sacramento—Turner's Waxwork Theater—and I'm adding a section of famous western sheriffs and outlaws. I need advice on the costumes, on the way a man wears his gun or his hat, on the look of his boots."

"I suppose I could tell you that much," Ben agreed.

"Fine. You can stable your horse here and come back for him. The train trip is only a hundred and thirty-five miles. Won't take us any time at all."

The journey and his first view of Sacramento were wonders enough for Ben Snow, especially the impressive State Capitol building in its spacious park. "Took 'em fourteen years to get that built," Dodge remarked as they rode past in a hired carriage, bound for the waxworks. "This is all gold-rush country, you know. If it hadn't been for Sutter's Mill nearby, this would still be a tiny settlement instead of the capital of the state."

"How long has the waxworks been here?"

"Richard Turner opened it in 1857 after a visit to Madame Tussaud's in London. He figured the newcomers pouring into Sacramento after the gold rush would really go for it, and he was right. It was an instant success—especially the main exhibit of a guillotine scene from the French Revolution. It was so realistic there was talk of ghosts haunting the place in its early days. Old Turner finally died and his heirs were going to close the place, but I bought it."

From the outside, Turner's Waxwork Theater was a garish melange of signs and lights, but once Ben followed Dodge through the

front door the place took on an atmosphere of slumbering menace. The lights were dim, barely illuminating the dozens of wax figures that stood poised for action. "This way," Seymour Dodge said, leading Ben down a narrow aisle past a display of the state's history.

They passed the guillotine display Dodge had mentioned, with one victim kneeling to lose his head while several others stood by—all dressed in the faded finery of the French aristocracy. "They look real enough to be alive," Ben commented.

"Turner claimed some of the costumes were the actual ones worn by victims at the time. But this is what I hired you for."

They passed beyond the guillotine to the rear of the building. A large sheet of canvas hung from the ceiling, blocking the newest exhibits from the public's view. Dodge lifted one end of the flap and Ben ducked beneath it. "Here, let me turn on a light," he said. The sudden bright illumination fell upon more than a half dozen figures in western garb, many with their pistols drawn. They were so realistic Ben almost went for his own weapon before he remembered he'd packed the gunbelt in the saddlebags he'd left at the door.

"Quite impressive," he admitted. "They look almost alive."

"Here's Wyatt Earp, with Doc Holliday at the O.K. Corral. And this is Jesse James. This one's Bat Masterson from Dodge City. Judge Roy Bean from Texas." He paused dramatically. "And here's Billy the Kid with Pat Garrett."

Ben drew a breath, facing the lifelike recreation of this man who had become his nemesis even after death. In truth he looked nothing like Billy, except for the accident of their births which had made them the same age. Even then, Billy Bonney had been born in New York, half a continent away from Ben Snow. He'd been a slight young man, barely five feet seven inches tall, with blue eyes and light brown hair. That much the model-maker had gotten reasonably correct. And he'd even captured the touch of cruelty in the boyish face. But there was something wrong.

"This isn't right," Ben said suddenly, motioning toward the gunbelt. "Billy wasn't left-handed."

"I thought—"

"He wore only one pistol, on his right hip, and often carried a rifle as well. Everything else seems about right, except for the hat. Billy didn't wear a traditional western hat. It had a narrower brim than that."

Seymour Dodge seemed pleased. "That's exactly the sort of information I need. But I thought you said you never met Billy."

"I've seen pictures of him."

Dodge took out a big gold watch and opened the lid. "Getting on toward dinnertime. I should get you settled at the hotel. Then tomorrow morning we can really work at this."

"Are there any other exhibits planned, or just these?"

"I've got Black Bart and some others in the basement, if we can get the right costumes for them. I might do something with Indians, too, and maybe Custer."

The hotel where Ben was staying proved to be in the next block, a recently built place that seemed like a palace to him. And it wasn't only the hotel that was luxurious by frontier standards. He ate in the fancy dining room with linen tablecloths on the tables and then strolled out to the lobby, where he was approached by a stunning young woman in a long silk dress. "You new in town, mister? Want to have some fun?"

"What kind of fun?" Ben asked innocently.

"How about a drink and we can talk it over."

"All right," Ben decided. "I like that dress. What's your name?"

"Molly." She led the way into a bar off the dining room. "The dress is Chinese. A sailor gave it to me. What's *your* name?"

"Ben. I'm in town on business."

"You look like a cowboy," she said, draping herself in a chair.

Ben sat down across the table from her. "Why do you say that?"

"Your boots. And you walk with your right hand sort of open and tense at your side, as if you're used to wearing a gunbelt and you're always ready to draw. Am I right?"

"Close enough, Molly," he admitted. "This is my first time in California."

"Well, folks don't wear gunbelts in Sacramento. It's the state capital. We're very law-abiding here."

"I was down at the waxworks today. I'm doing some work there."

She waited while the bartender took their order and then said, "You must know Seymour Dodge."

"I met him in Carson City. I'm working for him while I'm here, advising him on a new exhibit."

"He bought the waxworks earlier this year. The family was going to shut it down after Mr. Turner died."

"Is it a popular attraction?"

She smoothed the front of her dress provocatively. "Oh, sure—especially with visitors. Sacramento gets lots of visitors from all

over the state, people who come here to get land bills passed by the legislature."

"You do a big business with the visitors, I'll bet. You're a fine-looking girl."

"I do all right."

"Do you have a last name, Molly?"

She shrugged. "What's yours?"

"Snow. Ben Snow."

"Molly Harper," she relented.

"You in show business?"

"I was. They've got a theater here and—" She spied someone across the room. "Excuse me a minute. There's Senator Watkins. I have to see him."

She hurried over to a white-haired man wearing eyeglasses who looked vaguely familiar to Ben. They conversed for a few minutes, with the senator chuckling at something Molly said before they parted at the door and she returned to the table. "You certainly travel in the right circles," Ben remarked.

"He's the majority leader of the state senate—a very important man in this town."

"I'll bet he likes to party."

"Once in a while," she admitted. Finishing her drink, she asked, "Do you want to come up to my room?"

"You got a room at this hotel?"

"I know the room clerk. He lets me use one of the empty ones, as long as I don't stay too long."

Ben squeezed her hand across the table. "Maybe another night. I'll be here a few days."

He strolled around the city for a while alone, getting the feel of the place. It was a political town, at least with the legislature in session, and it seemed like a foreign country to him. He missed the sound of horses' hooves on dirt streets. Somehow, carriages on cobblestones weren't the same thing.

He slept well, and in the morning found the Sacramento morning newspaper outside his door. There was an artist's sketch of Senator Josh Watkins on the front page, looking exactly as Ben remembered him from the night before, under the headline SENATE LEADER NAMED IN LAND SCANDAL. The accompanying article was filled with innuendos, hinting bribery and malfeasance without ever becoming too specific. The details of the land scandal were too complex

for Ben to understand, and with no knowledge of California politics he wasn't particularly interested. Still, he wondered what Molly Harper would think about it.

Seymour Dodge was already at the waxworks by the time Ben finished breakfast and strolled down the block. It was a warm spring day and the street was crowded with carriages. Occasionally a single horseman rode by, but dressed so formally he would never be mistaken for a working cowhand or a roaming gunfighter. Some horsemen even tipped their hats as they passed ladies in carriages. This, Ben decided, was civilization.

"Enjoying the city?" Dodge asked as he entered the wax museum.

"It's certainly different from my usual territory. Sometimes I don't see a tree for months at a time."

"Travel a lot, do you?"

"Always. I don't remember ever having a home for more than a year at a time, even when I was a boy."

Dodge showed Ben around the waxworks, taking more time than he had the previous afternoon. There were four main exhibit areas—the French Revolution with its guillotine, a Gallery of Horrors in which famous murderers were depicted, the California History section with explorers and political figures of the past and present, and the Wild West section which he was in the process of expanding. As Dodge was showing him the California History exhibit, including an imposing waxwork of the governor, Ben spotted something out of place. "This fellow doesn't belong in California. He's General Lew Wallace—he was governor of the New Mexico territory a few years back. He wrote a novel called *Ben Hur*."

Dodge seemed puzzled. "You're right, of course, but how did he get moved over? I had him in the Wild West exhibit across the room over there."

"These governors like to stick together," Ben said, making a joke of it.

"No—this could be serious. I believe I mentioned that the waxworks had a reputation for being haunted in its early days. The haunting took this exact form—statues moving or changing position overnight."

"I don't believe in ghosts," Ben told him. "If the statue moved, somebody moved it."

He carried it back to where Dodge indicated, surprised that it didn't weigh more. It left an obvious gap in the California display,

but Dodge rearranged some of the other figures to compensate for it.

"They're not as heavy as they look," Dodge agreed. "We use beeswax. It melts at a low heat and mixes well with coloring. Wax figures of deities and even wax fruits were used by the ancient Egyptians, and the art survived through Roman and medieval times. The first exhibition of wax figures was shown in Germany in the early Eighteenth Century, though of course the most famous is Madame Tussaud's, which she opened in London a few years after her imprisonment during the French Revolution. It's from her that the tableau of the guillotine is almost a tradition in every wax museum today."

Ben, whose knowledge of French history was limited, inspected the Revolution section with interest. "Who's the man being stabbed in the bathtub?"

"Marat. He's being murdered by Charlotte Corday."

"What was he doing in the bathtub with a book?"

"He had a skin disease. He spent much of his time in warm baths."

Ben spent most of the day helping Dodge with details of the western costumes. When they'd finished with the wax figures in the main exhibit area, they went to the basement workroom where the head of Black Bart was nearing completion. "I can't help you on this one," Ben said. "I never saw a picture of him. All I know is that he held up some Wells Fargo stagecoaches."

"I have a picture of him here. See—he usually dressed well, sometimes in a derby and a long coat. He wore a hood for the robberies, but I want to show his face. I have to age it a bit and add a moustache, though. They let him out of prison early because of his age, you know. He's around sixty-five, I think."

They were finishing up for the day when there was a loud knocking at the front door of the waxworks. Dodge answered it and admitted a rough-looking man with an untrimmed beard. "I gotta see you, Dodge," he insisted.

"The waxworks is closed for a few days, Tracy. We're preparing a new exhibit."

The man called Tracy spat on the floor. "I don't give a damn about your waxworks! I want my money!"

"You'll have it. I've just had a little setback is all."

"You're gonna have a big setback if I don't get my money. Them deeds are valuable."

"Give me another couple of days," Dodge pleaded, and finally the bearded man departed with a promise to return.

When the waxworks owner returned to Ben's side, he brooded, "Maybe I ought to hire you as a bodyguard instead of a consultant."

"You got trouble?"

Dodge shrugged. "Nothing I can't handle, I guess. Tracy is a loudmouth, but I don't really think he's dangerous. He let me use some deeds as collateral on a loan for this place when I bought it. Now he wants the deeds for some deal of his own and I'm having trouble repaying the loan as quickly as I hoped."

They closed the place and had a drink together, and Dodge paid Ben fifty dollars.

"One more day should do it. Maybe only half a day. I'll pay you the rest of the money and you can be on your way back to Carson City by nightfall."

"Fair enough," Ben agreed.

"What do you think of our city?"

"The people are certainly friendly," Ben remarked, thinking of Molly Harper.

After dining with Seymour Dodge at a seafood restaurant on the Sacramento River, Ben made his way back to the hotel. He sat for a time in the lobby and wasn't surprised when Molly reappeared from the direction of the bar.

"How'd it go today?" she asked.

"Pretty good. It's easy money."

"You get all those Wild West characters dressed in their costumes?"

"Most of them. I'll finish up tomorrow." He chuckled a bit. "I've been learning a lot about the business. Most of the figures only have wax heads and hands. The parts that don't show are often little more than dressmakers' dummies."

"How about a drink?" Molly suggested.

"In the bar?"

"I was thinking of my room."

"Upstairs?"

She shook her head. "Upstairs is for business. I want to take you back to my room. It's just in the next block, over the poultry market."

Ben hesitated for only an instant. Why not? It would probably be his last night in Sacramento and he didn't want to spend it alone. "Let's go," he said.

They left the hotel and crossed the narrow street, avoiding a stagecoach that was just starting its journey. "Until they finish the rail-

roads, the stage is still the only way to reach some places," Molly said.

"Dodge was telling me about Black Bart today. He did pretty well robbing them."

"Until he got caught." She paused before the darkened windows of the market. "This shop opens at eight in the morning, just when I'm getting my best sleep. Come on—I'm right up these stairs."

Her apartment seemed to be the only residence in the building. A small kitchen and bathroom led off the main room, about half of which was occupied by a double bed.

"It's very nice," Ben said, admiring the draperies and the view of the street.

"I'd like it a little quieter, especially in the morning, but it's all right."

She opened a bottle of good whiskey, and over drinks he noticed the six-shooter on the stand next to her bed.

"Is this thing loaded?"

"Sure it's loaded. Sometimes guys try to follow me home. I gotta have some protection here."

He opened the cylinder and spun it. "Nicely balanced weapon."

"I bought it at the hardware store."

"Ever use it?"

"I fired it over somebody's head one night." She giggled at the memory. "He sure took off after that!"

He returned the gun to the bedstand. "You got a lot of guys?"

"Off and on. You probably saw in the morning paper about Senator Watkins."

"I couldn't miss it. He one of them?"

"He's been up here once or twice. He thinks he's in love with me, but he gets so damned jealous! For a while I had to be careful he didn't see me with anyone else. He's better now, though. This trouble he's in will probably take his mind off me."

It was getting dark out and she started to switch on a light, then thought better of it. "Let's keep it romantic," she decided.

"I'll be leaving tomorrow," he reminded her.

"Hell, I'm not askin' you to marry me. I just like you, that's all."

"I'm glad you do." He sat down on the edge of the bed and kissed her.

Moments later, when darkness had fully settled over the room, Ben heard a noise at the door. Someone was fumbling with the lock. Molly Harper sat up, suddenly tense with panic. "Who's there?"

"You know damn well who it is!" a gruff male voice responded, and in the same instant the door swung open. "How many people got a key to your apartment?"

The light from the hallway silhouetted a white-haired man with glasses, his right arm half hidden by the doorframe. He stood stock-still as if trying to peer toward the bed. "My God!" Molly gasped to Ben. "It's Senator Watkins. If he sees you—"

"Who's that with you?"

"No one, Josh!"

"I'm sick of your lies, Molly."

Ben saw the right hand appear, holding a tiny derringer. Before he could move, Senator Watkins fired. He heard the bullet strike the wall a foot above his head.

Ben knew the double-barreled pistol held a second bullet. He didn't wait for Watkins to fire it. He ducked his head, grabbed the revolver on the bedstand, and fired a single shot at the man in the doorway. Watkins toppled stiffly backward and hit the floor with a thud.

Molly was out of the bed in a flash, running to his side. Ben followed more slowly, dropping the gun among the blankets. He stared down at the closed eyes of the senator and stared mesmerized at the blood on his chest.

"You've killed him!" Molly said. "You've got to get out of here!"

They were alone in the building and the shots had attracted no neighbors.

Molly quickly threw a blanket over the body. "I'll do something," she said, "make up some story. Don't blame yourself, Ben. Hell, you saved my life!"

"I think I was trying to save my own life," he told her. "Why can't we call the police and tell them what happened?"

"He's majority leader of the senate, Ben! Next to the governor he's probably the most important man in this town! No one would believe our story. They'd have you swinging from the end of a noose before you knew what happened—and maybe me, too! Get to the station and hop a train out of here tonight!"

It seemed like sound advice at the moment. "What about my things back at the hotel?"

"You'd better leave them," she advised. "I'll have to report this to the police."

He started to reach for the derringer lying next to the body but thought better of it.

"It has to stay with the body," he decided, "whatever story you tell them." He kissed her lightly on the cheek. "I'm sorry it turned out this way."

She led him down the back stairs to the street and he hurried into the night.

He didn't go directly to the station, however. His gun was still in the saddlebags in his room and he wasn't leaving town without it. He reached the hotel without trouble and took the bags from his room. No one noticed as he left the lobby. When he passed the wax museum he saw it was in darkness. There was no sign of Seymour Dodge.

The next train east was in two hours and he hated to wait that long in the lonely station. "Train to San Francisco in thirty minutes," the ticket seller told him, "if you don't care which way you travel."

Did he care?

There was nothing waiting for him in Carson City except his horse Oats.

"Two hours, you say?"

"If it's on time."

He didn't buy a ticket yet. Instead, he strolled outside and stood looking at the distant dome of the State Capitol in the moonlight. He wanted to get out of Sacramento fast, before the police caught up with him. He wanted to run, and keep on running, back to the open range where the only thing he needed to trust was the six-shooter on his hip. But the more he thought about it, the more he realized he couldn't leave Sacramento quite yet.

He made his way back to the poultry market and waited in the darkness in sight of the door that led upstairs. If he was correct, he wouldn't have long to wait.

It was thirty-five minutes later when a familiar figure passed beneath the streetlight and went through the door that led up to Molly's rooms. Ben waited only a few seconds before following, moving as quietly as he could.

At the top of the stairs the man was knocking on Molly's door. "Molly," he whispered. "It's me. Open up."

As soon as the door began to open, Ben moved. He cleared the top two steps with a single bound and threw himself at the man, knocking him out of the way just as a shot sounded from within the room. Ben rolled over in the hallway, aiming his own gun, and ordered, "Drop it, Dodge! This isn't the waxworks any more!"

He waited until Seymour Dodge dropped the pistol and joined Molly in raising his hands above his head. Then Ben got to his feet and helped Senator Josh Watkins up from the dusty floor.

It was the senator who demanded explanations. Seymour Dodge and Molly Harper didn't need any.

"It must have seemed like a perfect crime to them," Ben began, keeping his pistol steady on the couple. "Dodge traveled to Carson City and kept an eye out for someone who looked like a gunfighter, who wore his gunbelt low for a fast draw. He needed a man who would shoot first and ask questions later. I looked like I filled the bill, so he hired me to come back here with him on the pretext of advising him about the costumes in his waxworks."

"But why did they need you?" Senator Watkins asked.

"The idea was that you would be murdered and I would be blamed for the shooting. Not only would I be blamed, but I would actually believe that I had committed the crime. The murder of the majority leader of the state senate would be avenged with a quick trial and I'd have ended up with a rope around my neck. You see, an hour or so ago, while I was in here with Molly, Dodge carried his wax dummy of you up here and stood it in front of the door. Then he opened the door and shouted something at me. I'd never heard your voice and in that instant, in the dim light, the whole thing had a terrible realism to it. The dummy's right hand was carefully hidden by the door jamb and Dodge reached past it to fire a derringer at me. I already knew there was a loaded six-shooter by the bed, and they were certain I'd fire back. My bullet knocked the wax figure over, with a little help from Dodge. When Molly ran to the supposed body in the dark, she smeared some red liquid on the shirtfront—"

"Chicken blood," Molly said, her voice flat and resigned. "From the market downstairs."

"I can't believe any of this," the senator told her. "Why did you want to kill me? I thought you loved me, at least a little."

"It was Dodge who wanted you dead," Ben explained. "I don't know all the details, but I imagine it's something about the land scandal. A man named Tracy was demanding money from him today, threatening him over some deeds."

"Seymour found out about—"

"Shut up, Molly!" Dodge barked. He might have gone for her if Ben hadn't been holding the gun.

"Let her talk," Ben ordered. "Tell me, Molly."

She brushed the hair back from her forehead. "Seymour found out about the newspaper investigation last week. He was afraid it would spread to implicate him. With the senator dead, the investigation would have stopped and his own land dealings wouldn't be involved. He knew I was friendly with the senator, so he paid me to help him with the scheme. I'd entice you up here and help fake the shooting, using the waxworks dummy. Then after you fled the scene, and the dummy and the derringer were removed, I'd lure the senator up here for the real killing."

"How could you have done this to me, Molly?" Senator Watkins asked sadly. "After all I've given you—"

She could only shrug. He waited but there was no answer.

Watkins turned back to Ben.

"How'd you get wise to all this?"

"When I first saw you last night at the hotel I thought your face looked familiar," Ben explained. "I'd noticed your waxworks figure when Dodge first showed me his museum. It was gone from the California History section today—Dodge tried to fill the space with a misplaced figure from another exhibit. When yours turned up outside this door an hour ago I should have realized what it was by the stiffness when it fell, and by Molly's haste in covering it with a blanket—she couldn't have me examining it too closely. Dodge had made an important change in the face. The eyes behind the glasses were closed."

"You knew we were in it together?" Molly asked.

Ben nodded. "I'd only told you I was advising Dodge on a new exhibit, yet tonight you asked if I'd gotten all the Wild West figures dressed in their costumes. Only Dodge could have told you what I was doing there. Even after I realized that much, I still didn't catch on until it occurred to me that the scheme must involve the real murder of Watkins, along with framing me for it. The police would have telegraphed ahead to Carson City and I'd have been arrested when I left the train."

"What if something had gone wrong?" Watkins asked. "What if you hadn't shot at the dummy?"

"Then they'd lost nothing. That was why the real murder had to take place after the fake one, to make sure I performed as planned."

"I'll get the police," Watkins said, "if you'll keep these two covered here."

"Gladly," Ben told him.

"You have to admit it was a good try," Seymour Dodge said when

the senator's footsteps had receded down the wooden stairs. "If it had worked, no one would have believed your story that the senator fired first."

"It wasn't such a good try," Ben told him. "There was one other thing I didn't mention. Molly had to spread the blood on the dummy's chest so it looked like a fatal wound. When I fired, I was aiming at the shoulder, not the chest. Even with a strange gun, I knew I couldn't have been that far off target."

a captivating story by

SIMON BRETT

An affair between a boss and his secretary. The oldest, shoddiest cliché in the book. Suddenly Isabel had to ring Jeremy to cancel their stupid dinner date for the following evening. Strangle it at birth. Stop it before anything started.

One of a dozen stories Scribners published this past September in a collection (Tickled to Death) Publishers Weekly *described as revealing "Brett's remarkable stylistic versatility." More than half the stories in the collection previously appeared in EQMM. One of these, the dark and astonishing "Big Boy, Little Boy," was duly nominated for an Edgar in 1983 . . .*

UNWILLING SLEEP

by SIMON BRETT

"Oh, Miss Black," Jeremy Garson's voice crackled authoritatively over the intercom, "could you come through for a moment, please?"

Isabel, who knew Jeremy well, recognized when he was trying to impress. As soon as she had seen the elegant red-haired woman, whose appointment had been registered in the diary as "11 o'clock—Mrs. Karlstetter," she had known it would only be a matter of time before he started showing off. And then his secretary would be paraded in the office, another accessory, another labor-saving device to go with the desk-top calculator, the miniature memo-recorder, the telephone amplifier, and the imposing, but unused, telex-machine.

Jeremy was leaning back in his swivel-chair when she went in, his poise undermined by a little glint of insecurity in his eyes. At

times he looked absurdly like his father, for whom Isabel had worked until John Garson's premature death, but the old man's eyes had never betrayed that fear.

"Yes, Mr. Garson?" She knew the rules. No Christian names when he was trying to impress. No lapse into assertions of her own personality. Just the image of efficiency, shorthand pad and freshly sharpened HB pencil at the ready.

Jeremy smiled proprietorially. "Mrs. Karlstetter, you met Miss Black briefly. She's an absolute treasure. Runs the whole office for me."

He chuckled, to point up the humorous exaggeration of this last remark. "Miss Black, Mrs. Karlstetter has not come to us to arrange the fitting of a burglar alarm."

"Ah."

"She has not come to take advantage of the advertised services of Garson Security. She is aware of the—other side of our business."

He vouchsafed Mrs. Karlstetter a brilliant smile. "It's quite all right. Miss Black knows all about the detective-agency operation. She's done all the paperwork for it since my father first—branched out in that direction. So we can speak freely."

Mrs. Karlstetter nodded, acknowledging Isabel as she might a new wall-unit pointed out for her commendation.

"Miss Black, if you could note down what Mrs. Karlstetter says."

Isabel sat on the least eminent chair and translated the red-haired girl's words into neat squiggles of shorthand.

"Basically, I think my husband is trying to kill me."

Mrs. Karlstetter left an appropriate pause for awestruck reaction.

"The fact is, I have always been a very light sleeper—no, worse than that, I have always slept very badly, almost always had a couple of hours awake in the middle of the night."

"I'm not a doctor," said Jeremy with his disarming smile.

"I know. And if I wanted a doctor's help, I would have gone to one years ago. But I don't believe in drugs. I think many of them haven't been properly tested out, you know, for all their side-effects."

"So you've just lived with your insomnia?"

"Yes. One gets used to it. I've just assumed that it's going to be with me for the rest of my life."

"Uhuh."

"But for the last four months I've suddenly started sleeping very deeply."

"Well, surely that's good news."

"It would be, if I thought the sleep was natural."

"You think you're being drugged?"

"Yes."

"By your husband?"

"There's no one else it could be. There's only the two of us in the house."

"How do you think he does it?"

"He gets a bedtime drink for me every night. Hot milk. I think he puts something in that."

"Have you tried not drinking it?"

"No. I don't want him to realize I'm suspicious, in case that makes him try something more drastic. But he's been away on business a bit recently, and those nights I've prepared the drink myself."

"And?"

"And I've slept as badly as ever."

"Hmm. You haven't confronted him with it?"

"I'm afraid to."

"And you haven't thought of going to the police?"

"What would I say? I can't risk them blundering in. If I'm going to do anything about it, I've got to be discreet."

"Which is why you've come to me?"

"Yes. I heard from a friend of mine, Mrs. Littlejohn, that you sorted out a problem about her solicitor defrauding her."

Jeremy Garson nodded complacently. "So what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to prove that I'm not imagining all this. My husband's working late tonight—won't be back before eleven—and I'm out playing bridge. I want you to search the house for some evidence, find the drug or whatever it is—before it's too late. I'm sure he's increasing the dose. I have great difficulty waking up in the mornings, and I get these terrible headaches. I'm sure he's killing me—slowly but surely killing me."

"Can you think of any motive?"

"None at all. I want you to find that out, too."

"Hmm. How do I get into the house?"

"I'll leave the kitchen fanlight open. You can reach the catch of the large window through that."

"Breaking and entering—" Jeremy mused.

"Yes. Will you do it for me? Please."

Isabel looked up from her shorthand pad to see her boss's reaction.

A break-in was unnecessarily dramatic. And risky. There were simpler ways of searching the house.

Jeremy Garson gave his most debonair smile. "Yes, I'll do it, Mrs. Karlstetter. Just relax and leave it all to me."

Isabel held the torch while Jeremy fiddled with the set of keys Clipper Jenkins had made for him between prison sentences. "I still think it's some kind of set-up," she repeated doggedly.

"No, Isabel. I'm a good judge of people and I'd stake my reputation as an investigator that Mrs. Karlstetter is absolutely genuine."

He tried another key in the lock of the drawer. The leather-topped desk, like everything else in the large suburban house, was discreetly expensive. Whatever problems the Karlstetters had, lack of money was not among them.

The edge of Isabel's torchbeam caught a photograph on the desk. The Karlstetters' wedding. Married within the last ten years, from the style of clothes. Mr. Karlstetter a good twenty years older than his wife. Second marriage perhaps?

This key worked. Carefully, Jeremy turned it and reached to slide the drawer. "Oh, gloves," he said, and punctiliously put on a rubber pair, oblivious of the neat set of fingerprints he had already laid on the desk-top.

The drawer was full of papers and envelopes, amongst which he rummaged carelessly before his hand closed 'round something in the farthest corner.

"Ahah." He turned triumphantly to face Isabel, who caught the full blast of the alcohol on his breath. He had had a long lunch at The Black Fox with a man "who was going to sign a very big contract for a complete security system for his factory" (though no contract seemed to have emerged from the encounter), and then a couple of stiffening whiskies before the break-in at the Karlstetters.

In his hand was a squat bottle about six inches high. Isabel directed the torch onto the label.

"Phenergan," she read.

"Would that put someone to sleep?"

"Oh, yes. Very popular with mothers of small children—especially when they're teething."

"So if someone were to build up the dose slowly—"

"I think it'd be hard work to kill someone. It's just an antihistamine."

"Well, perhaps Mr. Karlstetter is softening his wife up on this and then going to move on to something stronger."

"Perhaps," said Isabel skeptically.

"Anyway, we've proved there's something fishy going on. Why would a man keep this hidden away in a locked drawer if he wasn't using it for nefarious purposes?"

Isabel shrugged. "Could be a lot of reasons. Hay fever—"

"No, I'm sure we've got the proof Mrs. Karlstetter asked for. Come on, let's go."

"I think we ought to look upstairs first."

"Why?"

"Might be something else relevant."

There was. In the drawer of Mrs. Karlstetter's bedside table was a small bottle of pills. Again the label identified the contents.

"Valium," Isabel announced flatly. "Mrs. Karlstetter takes valium."

"So? So do a lot of housewives."

"She told you she never touched drugs. Because of the side-effects."

The outline of Jeremy's shoulders shrugged. "So she lied to us. So she's inconsistent. So what?"

"So it just makes me more suspicious. These and her 'unwilling sleep.' "

"Another of your father's quotations?"

"Yes. 'Mortality weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep.' Keats. 'Sonnet on Seeing the Elgin Marbles.' "

There was a tremble in her voice. It was over two years since her father's death, but a sudden reminder of him could still stab her like a physical pain.

Jeremy responded to her moment of weakness, but, as ever, his response was inappropriate. She felt his arms 'round her and smelt his whisky breath murmuring "Isabel" in her ear.

She was not shocked. She had been found suddenly attractive at the end of too many parties to be shocked. Besides, it was not the first time Jeremy had touched her. But the last had been twenty years before, when he had been about to go up to university, when she had been about to move from the suburbs to London to work, when their lives had seemed likely to turn out very differently.

"Isabel," he continued, his voice muffled in her hair, "let's go somewhere together. Go out to dinner. Not tonight. Thursday. Go out to dinner on Thursday."

"What about Felicia?" she asked, hoping his wife's name would

bring him to his senses. And yet, to her annoyance, not hoping it wholeheartedly.

"Felicia and the kids'll be away. Going to London for a couple of days. Come on, Isabel. Dinner on Thursday—what do you say?"

As the word left her lips, she cursed her stupidity in saying "Yes."

Jeremy was in the office before her the next morning. Most unusual. He looked full of himself.

"I've rung Mrs. Karlstetter."

"Oh yes?"

"Yes. And I told her about the Phenergan. She was very pleased."

"And?"

"And she wants us to compile a dossier proving her husband's guilt so that she can take it to the police."

"I see. And you said we'd do it?"

"She is paying us, Isabel."

"Yes, of course."

Jeremy rose from his swivel-chair and wandered over to the window. "I've got a few ideas of what to do next, but I haven't yet decided which should come first."

"I would have thought the first priority was to find out a bit more about Mr. Karlstetter."

He turned to face her. "Yes, that's what I reckoned."

"So I should think the best thing would be to ring Mrs. Karlstetter again to find out where her husband works—oh, and get the number of his car."

Jeremy Garson smiled. "That's what I thought, Isabel."

"Oh, good morning. Is that Mr. Karlstetter's office?"

"Yes." The secretarial voice at the other end of the phone sounded young, but confident.

"Is he there?"

"No, I'm afraid he's in a meeting."

"Oh, well perhaps I should try later."

"Can I help?"

"Perhaps you could. I'm ringing from Scotland Yard," Isabel lied.

"Oh."

"There's no need to be alarmed. This is only a routine check. The fact is that a Ford Granada similar to Mr. Karlstetter's was stolen last night and used in a raid on a jeweler's shop. According to Mrs. Karlstetter, her husband was working late last night, so presumably

his car was in the office car park. I just wanted to confirm that with him."

"Ah." The secretarial voice sounded uncertain. "Um, yes. Well, in fact, his car wasn't here all yesterday evening."

"Oh."

"No. Um, there was rather a rush job on yesterday, and he—er—wanted me to stay late for some dictation, but I had to get back to my flat for—er—because I was expecting a phone call from Australia, so we—er—worked at my flat."

"And where is your flat?"

"Notting Hill."

"Ah."

"Shall I get Mr. Karlstetter to phone you when he's finished his meeting? I'm sure he wouldn't want anyone to think—"

"No, no need to worry. The raid on the jeweler's was in Plaistow. Miles from Notting Hill. No, you've answered my query. Thank you very much. Now I've just got to work through about a hundred more Granada owners."

Isabel Black put down the phone with some satisfaction. Maybe the case was going to be easier than she'd feared.

"Jeremy," she said, when she went into his office, "mind if I go up to Town? It's something on the Karlstetter thing."

"No, fine. I'd come myself but I've got this lunch at Umberto's with a racehorse trainer who's interested in a surveillance system."

"Of course."

Mr. Karlstetter worked for an oil company, whose central office was in a large block near Victoria Station. Which was ideal for Isabel's purposes.

She parked her car on a meter 'round the back of the building, opposite a row of rubbish bins awaiting collection. A moment's casual sifting produced what she wanted—a brown envelope for internal mail. Most of the boxes on the front had names filled in, but, as is always the case in big organizations, the envelope had been thrown away before they'd all been used. Isabel wrote "Mr. Karlstetter" in the next vacant box, put her outdoor coat in the car, and went 'round to the front of the building.

In the foyer, in front of the lifts, were a cluster of armchairs and low tables. She lifted a magazine off one of them. *Oil News*. That'd do. She put it into the envelope and, ignoring the sign which said

All Security Passes Must Be Shown, walked up to the commissionaire behind the reception desk.

"Mr. Karlstetter?" she asked, holding the envelope up in front of him.

"Seventh floor. 7106," said the commissionaire helpfully.

Mr. Karlstetter's secretary was, as anticipated, a pretty little thing. Early twenties, with a good figure and a knowing eye.

Isabel had studied the other names on the internal envelope. "From Mr. Rogers," she said, naming the last one as she handed it over.

"Oh." The secretary looked at her curiously. "Why didn't Linda bring it?"

Isabel made a rueful face. "They can't think of things for me to do. I'm being retrained. Transfer from Manchester."

Mr. Karlstetter's secretary nodded without interest.

Isabel left it at that and went out of the room. Leave the more intimate bit for the Ladies.

There was only one on that floor, so she reckoned it was a safe bet, though it might mean a bit of waiting.

She bolted herself into one of the cubicles, propped her handbag mirror against the wall so that it gave her a view through the gap under the door, and waited.

It was after twelve, so there was quite a lot of pre-lunch coming and going. At quarter to one, her quarry arrived. Isabel waited till she heard the cubicle locked behind Mr. Karlstetter's secretary, then flushed her lavatory and emerged. She put her handbag on the shelf beneath the mirror and started to apply a neutral-colored lipstick. (Under normal circumstances she didn't wear makeup, but she had come prepared.)

The other lavatory flushed and Mr. Karlstetter's secretary came out. She smiled vague recognition at Isabel, washed her hands, and began to repair her more elaborate makeup. She took out a soft brush to highlight the cheekbones.

"Ooh, that's good, isn't it?" Isabel commented in her dowdiest voice.

"Hmm."

"Really doing yourself up."

"Oh, nothing special."

"Mr. Karlstetter taking you out for lunch then?"

The brush froze in midair and the secretary turned from the mirror to blaze at Isabel.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, sorry I spoke. Thought it was common knowledge about you and him."

"What?"

"I've only been here a few days, but everyone seems to know."

"Oh." The girl looked dejected, and very young. "It's meant to be a secret."

"Oh. Sorry. Difficult to keep secrets in an organization like this."

"Yes. These last four months haven't been easy. I'll be glad when we don't have to keep it a secret any more."

"Oh, when's that?" asked Isabel ingenuously.

"When we're married," Mr. Karlstetter's secretary replied defiantly.

Which perhaps provided a motive for Mr. Karlstetter to want to get his wife out of the way.

An affair between a boss and his secretary. The oldest, shoddiest cliché in the book. Suddenly Isabel had to ring Jeremy to cancel their stupid dinner date for the following evening. Strangle it at birth. Stop it before anything started.

There was no reply when she rang at two. She kept trying, from various call-boxes on Victoria Station. At ten to four he was finally back from lunch.

And a good lunch, too, if the fuzziness of his voice was anything to go by.

But when she heard him, something inside her, something that infuriated her, wouldn't let her say what she'd intended.

"Look, I want to try to follow Mr. Karlstetter tonight. Mrs. Karlstetter said he was working late at the office again."

"That's right."

"But he's told his secretary—who, incidentally. was what he was working late on last night—"

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. He's told her he's spending the evening at home."

"Ah."

"So I'm going to try to find out what he's up to."

"Good. I'd come up and help you, Isabel, but I think Felicia and the kids are kind of expecting me to—"

"Of course, Jeremy . . ."

Maybe Mr. Karlstetter did actually work late that evening. Isabel, from her car parked opposite, saw his secretary leave the building on the dot of five-thirty, but it was over two hours later, just when she was starting to think she'd missed him, that Mr. Karlstetter himself appeared. She recognized him easily from the photograph she'd seen at his home. A man fighting ungracefully against encroaching age.

Fortunately, there was not much traffic at that time of night and Isabel was able to follow discreetly without losing him. He made straight for Victoria Station. Oh, no—had he changed his mind? Was he actually going home to his wife after all?

But he'd only gone to the station to pick up a taxi from the rank in front. Isabel discovered how much easier it was to do the "Follow that taxi" routine in her own car than in another taxi.

He stopped outside Jules Bar in Jermyn Street and, when he had paid off the driver, went inside. Isabel parked a couple of streets away and followed him in.

The bar was full, but she managed to find a couple of seats at one of the tables. She ordered two drinks from the waitress, aware that a girl waiting angrily for a man who's late looks less conspicuous than one drinking on her own.

Then she looked 'round for Mr. Karlstetter. He was over in the corner with his arm 'round a girl. She was also thirty years younger than he, but she wasn't his secretary. The couple talked intimately, while Isabel maintained a masquerade of alternately looking at her watch and, with venom, at the untouched gin and tonic opposite her.

After about half an hour, Mr. Karlstetter and the girl left. With a final gesture of annoyance, Isabel stumped out after them.

Fortunately, they had difficulty in getting a taxi, so she had time to get her car and be ready for them.

This time the journey took them south of the river. This girl's flat was in York Mansions, Prince of Wales Drive.

Isabel waited outside. At half past ten Mr. Karlstetter emerged, looking pleased with himself.

It took him a long time to find a cab and Isabel kept having to resist the temptation to offer him a lift. But eventually he got a taxi back over the river and disappeared into Victoria Station. Back home to his wife, presumably, after another hard evening at the office.

Isabel thought about it. A man who wants to marry a younger girl might possibly contemplate murdering his wife to get her out of the

way. But a man who is two-timing the younger girl and only using the idea of marriage to keep her on the boil surely wouldn't bother to go to such lengths. In complicated deceptions, the existence of a wife is always a useful long-stop, the ultimate excuse when things get difficult.

As she drove back into the suburbs, a thought struck her. If he'd used his car for his philandering on Tuesday night, why would a man suddenly turn to taxis for the same purpose on a Wednesday?

Then she realized—and laughed out loud at the realization—that he'd only do it if Scotland Yard had been making inquiries about his car's movements.

"So I'm absolutely convinced, Jeremy, that she's set the whole thing up herself. She knows what he's up to and she wants to get her revenge. She doesn't really think he'll get arrested for trying to kill her—she just wants to scare the living daylights out of him."

"Are you sure, Isabel?"

"Positive. That's how that sort of woman works."

"What do you mean—that sort of woman? She's very attractive."

"That's neither here nor there. I'm certain that's what's happened. She's just drawing attention to herself and trying to get revenge."

"Hmm."

"You challenge her with it, Jeremy. I bet she'll confess. Her 'unwilling sleep' is completely self-induced. When did you say she was coming in?"

"Six o'clock this evening."

Mrs. Karlstetter arrived looking very elegant and confident. She was in Jeremy's office a long time before the intercom buzzed. Isabel stayed waiting at her desk outside. There might be something that needed tying up. Also, however much she tried to push it from her mind, she couldn't forget the plan that Jeremy had suggested for Thursday evening.

"Oh, Miss Black," the intercom asked peremptorily, "could you bring in some Kleenex, please?"

When Isabel went in, Jeremy was saying, "I'm sorry, Virginia, but you couldn't have hoped to deceive me. When I am engaged to investigate something, I'm afraid I always find out the truth—oh, thank you, Miss Black."

Isabel handed over a couple of Kleenex to the weeping Mrs. Karlstetter.

"If you could just hang on for a little longer, Miss Black. We're nearly through."

"Of course, Mr. Garson."

Half an hour later, the intercom buzzed again. "Oh, Miss Black, could you get on to Tiberio's Restaurant, please, and book me a table for two for eight o'clock tonight? One of the ones in the alcoves."

To her annoyance, Isabel's voice trembled as she fulfilled this commission. So he hadn't forgotten.

At half past seven, the intercom buzzed again. "Oh, Miss Black, do you think you could just type up Mrs. Karlstetter's invoice? I'd like her to have it before we go out to dinner."

"Yes, of course, Mr. Garson."

"Thank you. You're a treasure." Even over the crackles of the intercom, his voice sounded warm. "So if you could just leave the invoice on the typewriter, that'll be all. See you in the morning."

Isabel typed up the invoice, hitting the keys with something approaching savagery.

a *NEW* Griswold story by

ISAAC ASIMOV

"That was typical of Hazlett," Ingoldsby said. "He had a passion for getting detail correct. I've read a great deal about him, including his autobiography, and he would indulge in serious research in order to settle some small detail in his paintings . . ."

NEW ENGLAND EQUINOX

by ISAAC ASIMOV

Jennings walked into the library of the Union Club with a clearly discontented expression on his face.

"My wife," he announced with a tremor of outrage (which we were sure he would have repressed if he were in his wife's actual presence), "is up to her old tricks again."

The statement did not elicit an immediate response. There are old tricks and old tricks, and Baranov and I knew Mrs. Jennings well enough to doubt that some of the more spectacular old tricks were part of her makeup.

"What old tricks might those be?" I finally said, with a studied air of frank innocence.

"She's been buying paintings," said Jennings with an aggrieved air.

"For how much?" asked Baranov, getting down to the nitty-gritty.

"For more than I want to pay," said Jennings flatly. "And they're modernistic stuff that I can't bear to look at. Just junk, as nearly as I can tell."

I said, "Don't be a Philistine. Your wife may be making careful investments. Good paintings, however nauseating they may appear to the naked eye, have a habit of appreciating. You, or your heirs,

may someday outpace inflation with those paintings and, at need, sell them for ten or twenty or fifty times the purchase price."

"Not every painting," said Jennings intransigently. "Some go up in value and some remain worthless, now and forever. I can't tell the two kinds apart, and you can't, and frankly I don't think art experts can. It's all bluff and circumstance. If enough people say some artist is great, everyone else is afraid to disagree and proclaim that the Emperor has no clothes. Only how do you get people to start saying it about the paintings *you* buy—and if they're already saying it, how do you keep them from no longer saying it as soon as you make the purchase?"

"You *are* a Philistine," I said.

It was at that point that Griswold stirred in his armchair. He had obviously been listening to the conversation under his usual pretense of being fast asleep—though I've never been able to figure out how he maintains that soft, regular, and utterly authentic snore.

Griswold said, "It is sometimes very easy to make a judgment concerning a painting, even if one is not an art expert, which I'm not."

"There is something you're not?" I asked, turning up my irony faucet to the full.

"There are innumerable things I'm not," said Griswold with dignity, "but unlike you, I never pretend I am what I am not, which leaves me with my integrity."

I had no chance to answer him as he deserved, for he was already well and truly launched into his story.

It happened [said Griswold] precisely here in the library of the Union Club. It did not take place on *our* night of the week, however, so you three were not present. That pleasant fact was counteracted by the presence of two other individuals who were not members of the club as far as I know. I had never seen them before and, for that matter, I have never seen them since.

I presume they were waiting for a member whose guests they were, and while they were doing so they engaged themselves in an intense conversation, paying no regard to me, since they supposed me to be asleep, I presume. If so, however, they showed scant concern for my comfort, for they didn't bother to lower their voices very much.

This was three or four years ago, soon after the death of Louis Hazlett. Since none of you three is what might be considered knowl-

edgeable in contemporary art, or in much of anything else for that matter, I will go to the trouble of explaining who Hazlett was—and please don't interrupt to tell me you know all about him. Such a statement would be utterly unconvincing on the face of it.

Hazlett was an old-fashioned painter, you might say, intent on producing representational art. His barns looked precisely like barns, his trees strongly resembled trees, and sunlight illuminated his landscapes precisely as sunlight does in the case of what we refer to as "reality."

You [he pointed to Jennings] would undoubtedly find Hazlett entirely satisfactory, for you could look at a painting of his and know exactly what you were looking at. If you were looking at what you thought was junk, it would only be because Hazlett was deliberately portraying junk—old bottles, scraps of paper—and not because the painting consisted of colors and forms you could not understand, leaving you to suspect nervously that the fault might be yours rather than the painting's.

And you [he pointed to me], with your easy blathering about "Philistines," might dismiss the painting as merely a photograph in oils, but that would be nothing more than pretentious ignorance on your part. A photograph is a literal presentation and is helpless, or relatively helpless, to alter that—though photography in the hands of an expert can be art, too.

A painter—however representational and accurate his paintings—is more than a camera, for he can be selective. He can add, subtract, arrange, and rearrange, correcting deficiencies and supplying omissions. The painting may look real but still have a beauty and symbolism that a particular reality lacks, and may rivet attention in a way that that particular reality cannot—that is, if the artist has genius. Hazlett had genius.

Naturally, then, Hazlett's paintings grew more valuable with time and, as he produced them prolifically through a long life, he grew wealthy indeed, and, moreover, added to the wealth of those who bought his paintings, for one and all proved good investments.

After his death, it was not surprising that his paintings increased sharply in value, that being the ghoulish state of affairs when death puts a final limit on the number of an artist's paintings and the fight grows sharper for those that exist.

Imagine, then, the delight of someone who discovers a Hazlett painting in an out-of-the-way place, one which he can buy for a fraction of its value.

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This apparently was what had happened to one of the two conversationalists on that evening—one who was referred to by the other as Ingoldsby.

Ingoldsby was describing how he had come across a painting in a New Hampshire farmhouse a few weeks before, one which seemed to him to be an authentic Hazlett. The farmer said his wife had bought it at a garage sale because it looked pretty, but he wouldn't say how much they had paid for it. Apparently Ingoldsby looked too interested for the farmer to fix a value too quickly.

Ingoldsby said, "It had Hazlett's signature, and it *looked* like Hazlett's signature to my untutored eye. What's more, it's a picture dealing with precisely the sort of thing Hazlett loved to deal with. It's a painting of a small town at dawn. —Or it might be sunset, but if it were there would be some people in the one street he shows and that street is deserted. So it must be dawn. There's additional evidence for that which I'll come to later.

"There is nothing so crass as half a sun at the horizon, but there is a ruddy bit peeping through a gap in a stretch of clouds just at the line where the water of a lake meets the sky. It is a subtle but absolutely unmistakable suggestion of sunrise.

"The buildings," Ingoldsby went on, are lined up at the lower right of the painting, which is about three feet wide and one and a half feet high—it's no miniature—and those buildings seemed authentic New England in every detail. The town hall, in particular, was exactly what it should be, and there was just an indication, somehow, that it was on the point of needing a paint-job.

"To the left and above are fields and a grove of trees, and the lake, of course, and a sky with a scattering of beautifully handled clouds from pink-lined at the bottom to a gathering grey above. It is clear that Hazlett is showing how the works of man are dwarfed by nature, and even though the buildings are beautiful and possess a charmingly imposed unity they cannot compete with the sheer majesty of world-without-man. Hazlett strengthens the point by leaving human beings out of the painting. It's as though people shrink to such unimportance in Hazlett's universe that they disappear altogether.

"And yet there is one intrusion, Lomax. The scene might be bucolic Nineteenth Century, but in the one street before the line of structures, right in front of the town church with its graceful steeple, as though to emphasize the contrast, is an automobile. The machine age is invading paradise, you see, and it's enough to make your heart break.

"Another thing that made me think it was really Hazlett was the absolute accuracy of detail. I studied that automobile and I could swear it was a 1955 De Soto. I had one of those when I was younger—second-hand, of course. What's more, the clock on the town hall, which registered six o'clock, didn't have the hands shown as a single vertical hairline of black paint. I studied it with a hand-lens and there were two strokes, one for each hand.

"What's more, there was a weathervane on top of the town-hall tower and the hand-lens showed a plain E for East, done with jeweler's precision. Hazlett had the E pointing in the direction of the sun-glow, a clear indication he was portraying dawn and wanted to make the fact unmistakable.

"That was typical of Hazlett. He had a passion for getting detail correct. I've read a great deal about him, including his autobiography, and he would indulge in serious research in order to settle some small detail in his paintings. You should have seen the foliage on the trees—just a suggestion of beginning to turn. A touch of orange-brown here and there."

Ingoldsby's friend, Lomax, who had listened patiently, said, "Did you buy it?"

"Yes, I did. I certainly didn't go about it shrewdly, though. My scrutiny with the hand-lens was a dead giveaway, and when I asked the price the farmer said quite calmly, 'Five hundred dollars.' He had probably bought it for five.

"I didn't begrudge it, however. In fact, just to ease my conscience, I told him it was worth closer to a thousand, which I certainly felt was true, and he settled at once for that sum. I didn't feel cheated. If the painting is authentic, it's easily worth fifteen thousand and in a few years that value should double."

Lomax said, "*If* it is authentic? Is there doubt?"

"Well, I don't have its provenance. I have no record of previous owners and bills of sale and all that. In the world of art, a potentially valuable painting is considered a fake until it is proved authentic and it's hard to prove that without documents. You can take it to an art expert, but unless the expert is trying to sell you the painting himself he's extraordinarily cautious and won't commit himself. He has his reputation to think of. Mind you, the thousand dollars isn't wasted. I'll easily get a thousand dollars' worth of pleasure looking at it."

"Aren't there lists and descriptions of all the paintings Hazlett produced?"

"All those we know about," said Ingoldsby. "My painting isn't in any catalogue of his works and there are no descriptions of it anywhere in the listings. Of course, that's not conclusive. In his earlier days, Hazlett gave away many paintings he wasn't satisfied with. He was an easily dissatisfied man. In later years, he would buy back a number of the paintings he had given away just so he could destroy them. It wouldn't be surprising if he never referred to a painting he was dissatisfied with, and if he never put it up for sale or placed it on exhibit it wouldn't be in the catalogues."

"It's a pity you don't know the name of the painting," Lomax said. "That might give you a valuable lead."

"Oh, but I do know the name," said Ingoldsby, "and unfortunately it doesn't help at all. Burned into the wooden frame along its lower border is 'New England Equinox'—that, I presume, is the title."

It was at this point that I stirred. I had heard enough.

I opened my eyes and said, "Mr. Ingoldsby, I could not help but overhear your conversation, and I feel I must tell you that the painting is in all likelihood a forgery. That would be so even in the unlikely case that the experts agreed it was authentic."

Ingoldsby and Lomax looked at me with startled surprise as though they thought I had materialized from nowhere.

"What do you mean?" said Ingoldsby, frowning. "What do you know about this?"

"Enough," I said, and explained. Naturally, I was convincing. Since, as I said, I never saw the two men again, I don't know what happened with the painting, but I strongly suspect Ingoldsby must satisfy himself with getting a thousand dollars' worth of pleasure out of looking at it and nothing more. It is *not* a Hazlett. It may be just as good, but it is not a Hazlett.

With that, he sipped the last of his drink and lapsed into silence.

I said, "You took a big chance, Griswold, in making artistic decisions on a picture you didn't even see. You're probably wrong."

"Not at all," said Griswold stiffly. "I should have thought that even you halfwits would have seen the mistake the artist had made."

"What mistake?" said Jennings, looking all at sea.

Griswold sighed. "Then I'll explain. —Look, the painter was showing a New England town at equinox. The title tells you that. But there are two equinoxes, the vernal equinox on March twentieth and the autumnal equinox on September twenty-third. The one that was shown in the painting was unmistakably the autumnal. On

September twenty-third, the trees in New England, particularly in northern New England, are beginning to show signs of autumn coloring, as they were doing in the painting. On March twentieth, the trees of New England are bare. So the day being shown in the painting is September twenty-third.

"The scene is not Nineteenth Century. There's an automobile shown that is possibly a 1955 De Soto, so such a thing as daylight saving exists—and the two equinoxes are not identical in that respect, either. Daylight saving runs from the last Sunday in April to the last Sunday in October, so the vernal equinox, March twentieth, is in standard time and the autumnal equinox, September twenty-third, is in daylight saving time.

"In standard time, sunrise would be at six A.M., give or take a few minutes since the earth's orbit about the sun is elliptical, not circular. In daylight saving time, with the hands of the clock moved ahead one hour, sunrise at equinox would be at seven A.M. Consequently, sunrise on September twenty-third should be at seven A.M. and not at six A.M. as shown in the painting. The ever-meticulous Hazlett would not have made that error."

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

A FINE DISTINCTION

by RENA GARTER KUNIS

Cabot, Boston born and bred,
Of a noble clan the head,
When murdered in his antique bed
Stained the sheets blue when he bled.
However, he was just as dead
As if the blood he shed were red.

a *NEW* short story by

THOMAS LARRY ADCOCK

When we read Thomas Larry Adcock's Precinct 19 *last year, we were so held by his behind-the-scenes account of life in and out of that New York police station, we asked Mr. Adcock if he would write us a New York City police procedural, preferably a Christmas story because he treats "the holiday blues" with such sensitive accuracy in his book. Well, although this fine new writer delivered with speed the touching story that follows, a story right on target for the holidays, our lead time is so advanced and so odd (our Mid-December issue goes to press in May and is on newsstands in October, our March issue goes to press in August and is on newsstands in January) that we just missed receiving it in time to give you for Christmas 1985. But rather than hold it for a year, we present it to you now as an authentic picture of the Manhattan Christmas just past for Street Crimes Unit patrolman Neil Hockaday . . .*

CHRISTMAS COP

by THOMAS LARRY ADCOCK

By the second week of December, when they light up the giant fir tree behind the statue of a golden Prometheus overlooking the ice-skating rink at Rockefeller Center, Christmas in New York has got you by the throat.

Close to five hundred street-corner Santas (temporarily sober and none too happy about it) have been ringing bells since the day after Thanksgiving; the support pillars on Macy's main selling floor have been dolled up like candy canes since Hallowe'en; the tipping season arrives in the person of your apartment-house super, all smiles and

open-palmed and suddenly available to fix the leaky pipes you've complained about since July; total strangers insist not only that you have a nice day but that you be of good cheer on top of it; and your Con Ed bill says HAPPY HOLIDAYS at the top of the page in a festive red-and-green dot-matrix.

In addition, New York in December is crawling with boosters, dippers, yokers, smash-and-grabbers, bindlestiffs on the mope, aggressive pross offering special holiday rates to guys cruising around at dusk in station wagons with Jersey plates, pigeon droppers and assorted other bunco artists, purveyors of all manner of dubious gift items, and entrepreneurs of the informal branch of the pharmaceutical trade. My job is to try and prevent at least some of these fine upstanding perpetrators from scoring against at least some of their natural Yuletide prey—the seasonal hordes of out-of-towners, big-ticket shoppers along Fifth Avenue, blue-haired Wednesday matinee ladies, and wide-eyed suburban matrons lined up outside Radio City Music Hall with big, snatchable shoulder bags full of credit cards.

I'm your friendly neighborhood plainclothesman. *Very* plain clothes. The guy in the grungy overcoat and watch cap and jeans and beat-up shoes and a week's growth of black beard shambling along the street carrying something in a brown paper bag—that ubiquitous New York bum you hurry past every day while holding your breath—might be me.

The name is Neil Hockaday, but everybody calls me Hock, my fellow cops and my snitches alike. And that's no pint of muscatel in my paper bag, it's my point-to-point shortwave radio. I work out of a boroughwide outfit called Street Crimes Unit-Manhattan, which is better known as the befitting S.C.U.M. patrol.

For twelve years, I've been a cop, the last three on S.C.U.M. patrol, which is a prestige assignment despite the way we dress on the job. In three years, I've made exactly twice the collars I did in my first nine riding around in precinct squad cars taking calls from sector dispatch. It's all going to add up nicely when I go for my gold shield someday. Meanwhile, I appreciate being able to work pretty much unsupervised, which tells you I'm at least a half honest cop in a city I figure to be about three-quarters crooked.

Sometimes I do a little bellyaching about the department—and who doesn't complain along about halfway through the second cold one after shift?—but mainly I enjoy the work I do. What I like about

it most is how I'm always up against the elements of chance and surprise, one way or another.

That's something you can't say about most careers these days. Not even a cop's, really. Believe it or not, you have plenty of tedium if you're a uniform sealed up in a blue-and-white all day, even in New York. But the way my job plays, I'm out there on the street mostly alone and it's an hour-by-hour proposition: fifty-eight minutes of walking around with my pores open so I don't miss anything and two minutes of surprise.

No matter what, I've got to be ready because surprise comes in several degrees of seriousness. And when it does, it comes out of absolutely nowhere.

On the twenty-fourth of December, I wasn't ready.

To me, it was a day like any other. That was wishful thinking, of course. To a holiday-crazed town, it was Christmas Eve and the big payoff was on deck—everybody out there with kids and wives and roast turkeys and plenty of money was anxious to let the rest of us know how happy they were.

Under the circumstances, it was just as well that I'd pulled duty. I wouldn't have had anyplace to go besides the corner pub, as it happened—or, if I could stand it, the easy chair in front of my old Philco for a day of *Christmas in Connecticut* followed by *Miracle on Thirty-fourth Street* followed by *A Christmas Carol* followed by *March of the Wooden Soldiers* followed by Midnight Mass live from St. Patrick's.

Every year since my divorce five years ago, I'd dropped by my ex-wife's place out in Queens for Christmas Eve. I'd bring champagne, oysters, an expensive gift, and high hopes of spending the night. But this year she'd wrecked my plans. She telephoned around the twentieth to tell me about this new boy friend of hers—some guy who wasn't a cop and whose name sounded like a respiratory disease, Flummong—and how he was taking her out to some rectangular state in the Middle West to meet his parents, who grow wheat. Swell.

So on the twenty-fourth, I got up at the crack of noon and decided that the only thing that mattered was business. Catching bad guys on the final, frantic shopping day—that was the ticket. I reheated some coffee from the day before, then poured some into a mug after I picked out something small, brown, and dead. I also ate a week-old piece of babka and said, "Bah, humbug!" right out loud.

I put on my quilted longjohns and strapped a lightweight .32

automatic Baretta Puma around my left ankle. Then I pulled on a pair of faded grey corduroys with holes in the knees, a black turtleneck sweater with bleach stains to wear over my beige bulletproof vest and my patrolman's badge on a chain, a New York Knicks navy-blue stocking cap with a red ball on top, and Army-surplus boots. The brown-paper bag for my PTP I'd saved from the past Sunday when I'd gotten bagels down on Essex Street and shaved last.

I strapped on my shoulder holster and packed away the heavy piece, my .44 Charter Arms Bulldog. Then I topped off my ensemble with an olive-drab officer's greatcoat that had seen lots of action in maybe the Korean War. One of the side pockets was slashed open. Moths and bayonet tips had made holes in other places. I dropped a pair of nickel-plated NYPD bracelets into the good pocket.

By half past the hour, I was in the Bleecker Street subway station near where I live in the East Village. I dropped a quarter into a telephone on the platform and told the desk sergeant at Midtown South to be a good guy and check me off for the one o'clock muster. A panhandler with better clothes than mine and a neatly printed plywood sandwich sign hanging around his shoulders caught my eye. The sign read, TRYING TO RAISE $1,000,000 FOR WINE RESEARCH. I gave him a buck and caught the uptown D train.

When I got out at Broadway and Thirty-fourth Street, the weather had turned cold and clammy. The sky had a smudgy grey overcast to it. It would be the kind of afternoon when everything in Manhattan looks like a black-and-white snapshot. It wasn't very Christmaslike, which suited me fine.

Across the way, in a triangle of curbed land that breaks up the Broadway and Sixth Avenue traffic flow at the south end of Herald Square, winos stood around in a circle at the foot of a statue of Horace Greeley. Greeley's limed shoulders were mottled by frozen bird dung and one granite arm was forever pointed toward the westward promise. I thought about my ex and the Flummong guy. The winos coughed, their foul breath hanging in frosted lumps of exhaled air, and awaited a ritual opening of a large economy-sized bottle of Thunderbird. The leader broke the seal and poured a few drops on the ground, which is a gesture of respect to mates recently dead or imprisoned. Then he took a healthy swallow and passed it along.

On the other side of the statue, a couple of dozen more guys carrying the stick (living on the street, that is) reclined on benches or were curled up over heating grates. All were in proper position to protect their stash in the event of sleep: money along one side of

their hat brims, one hand below as a sort of pillow. The only way they could be robbed was if someone came along and cut off their hands, which has happened.

Crowds of last-minute shoppers jammed the sidewalks everywhere. Those who had to pass the bums (and me) did so quickly, out of fear and disgust, even at this time of goodwill toward men. It's a curious thing how so many comfortable middle-class folks believe vagrants and derelicts are dangerous, especially when you consider that the only people who have caused them any serious harm have been other comfortable middle-class folks with nice suits and offices and lawyers.

Across Broadway, beyond the bottle gang around the stone Greeley, I recognized a mope I'd busted about a year ago for boosting out of a flash clothes joint on West Fourteenth Street. He was a scared kid of sixteen and lucky I'd gotten to him first. The store goons would have broken his thumbs. He was an Irish kid who went by the street name Whiteboy and he had nobody. We have lots of kids like Whiteboy in New York, and other cities, too. But we don't much want to know about them.

Now he leaned against a Florsheim display window, smoking a cigarette and scoping out the straight crowd around Macy's and Gimbels. Whiteboy, so far as I knew, was a moderately successful small-fry shoplifter, purse snatcher, and pickpocket.

I decided to stay put and watch him watch the swarm of possible marks until he got up enough nerve to move on somebody he figured would give him the biggest return for the smallest risk, like any good businessman. I moved back against a wall and stuck out my hand and asked passers-by for spare change. (This is not exactly regulation, but it guarantees that nobody will look at my face and it happens to be how I cover the monthly alimony check.) A smiling young fellow in a camel topcoat, the sort of guy who might be a Jaycee from some town up in Rockland County, pressed paper on me and whispered, "Bless you, brother." I looked down and saw that he'd given me a circular from the Church of Scientology in the size, color, and shape of a dollar bill.

When I looked up again, Whiteboy was crossing Broadway. He tossed his cigarette into the street and concentrated on the ripe prospect of a mink-draped fat lady on the outside of a small mob shoving its way into Gimbels. She had a black patent-leather purse dangling from a rhinestone-studded strap clutched in her hand.

Whiteboy could pluck it from her pudgy fingers so fast and gently she'd be in third-floor housewares before she noticed.

I followed after him when he passed me. Then, sure enough, he made the snatch. I started running down the Broadway bus lane toward him. Whiteboy must have lost his touch because the fat lady turned and pointed at him and hollered "Thief!" She stepped right in front of me and I banged into her and she shrieked at me, "Whyn't you sober up and get a job, you bum you?"

Whiteboy whirled around and looked at me full in the face. He made me. Then he started running, too.

He darted through the thicket of yellow taxicabs, cars, and vans and zigzagged his way toward Greeley's statue. There was nothing I could do but chase him on foot. Taking a shot in such a congestion of traffic and pedestrians would get me up on IAD charges just as sure as if I'd stolen the fat lady's purse myself.

Then a funny thing happened.

Just as I closed in on Whiteboy, all those bums lying around on the little curbed triangle suddenly got up and blocked me as neatly as a line of zone defensemen for the Jets. Eight or ten big, groggy guys fell all over me and I lost Whiteboy.

I couldn't have been more frustrated. A second collar on a guy like Whiteboy would have put him away for two years' hard time, minimum. Not to mention how it would get me a nice commendation letter for my personnel file. But in this business, you can't spend too much time crying over a job that didn't come off. So I headed east on Thirty-second toward Fifth Avenue.

At mid-block, I stopped to help a young woman in a raggedy coat with four bulging shopping bags and three shivering kids. She set the bags on the damp sidewalk and rubbed her bare hands as I neared her. Two girls and a boy, the oldest maybe seven, huddled around her. "How much farther?" one of the girls asked.

I didn't hear an answer. I walked up and asked the woman, "Where you headed, lady?" She looked away, embarrassed because of the tears in her eyes. She was small and slender, with light-brown skin and black hair pulled straight back from her face and held with a rubber band. A gust of dry wind knifed through the air.

"Could you help me?" she finally asked. "I'm just going up to the hotel at the corner. These bags are cutting my hands."

She meant the Martinique. It's a big dark hulk of a hotel, possibly grand back in the days when Herald Square was nearly glamorous. Now it's peeling and forbidding and full of people who have lost

their way for a lot of different reasons—most of them women and children. When welfare families can't pay the rent any more and haven't anyplace to go, the city puts them up "temporarily" at the Martinique. It's a stupid deal even by New York's high standards of senselessness. The daily hotel rate amounts to a monthly tab of about two grand for one room and an illegal hotplate, which is maybe ten times the rent on the apartment the family just lost.

"What's your name?" I asked her.

She didn't hesitate, but there was a shyness to her voice. "Frances. What's yours?"

"Hock." I picked up her bags, two in each hand. "Hurry up, it's going to snow," I said. The bags were full of children's clothes, a plastic radio, some storybooks, and canned food. I hoped they wouldn't break from the sidewalk dampness.

Frances and her kids followed me and I suppose we looked like a line of shabby ducks walking along. A teenage girl in one of those second-hand men's tweed overcoats you'd never find at the Goodwill took our picture with a Nikon equipped with a telephoto lens.

I led the way into the hotel and set the bags down at the admitting desk. Frances's three kids ran off to join a bunch of other kids who were watching a couple of old coots with no teeth struggling with a skinny spruce tree at the entry of what used to be the dining room. Now it was dusty and had no tables, just a few graffiti-covered vending machines.

Frances grabbed my arm when I tried to leave her. "It's not much, I know that. But maybe you can use it all the same." She let me go, then put out a hand like she wanted to shake. I slipped off my glove and took hold of her small, bone-chilled fingers. She passed me two dimes. "Thanks, and happy Christmas."

She looked awfully brave and awfully heartsick, too. Most down-and-outers look like that, but people who eat regularly and know where their next dollar will likely come from make the mistake of thinking they're stupid and confused, or maybe shiftless or crazy.

I tried to refuse the tip, but she wouldn't have any of that. Her eyes misted up again. So I went back out to the street, where it was starting to snow.

The few hours I had left until the evening darkness were not productive. Which is not to say there wasn't enough business for me. Anyone who thinks crooks are nabbed sooner or later by us sharp-witted, hard-working cops probably also thinks there's a tooth fairy.

Police files everywhere bulge with unfinished business. That's because cops are pretty much like everybody else in a world that's not especially efficient. Some days we're inattentive or lazy or hungover—or in my case on Christmas Eve, preoccupied with the thought that loneliness is all it's cracked up to be.

For about an hour after leaving Frances and the kids at the Martinique, I tailed a mope with a big canvas laundry sack, which is the ideal equipment when you're hauling off valuables from a place where nobody happens to be home. I was practically to the Hudson River before I realized the perp had made me a long time back and was just having fun giving me a walk-around on a raw, snowy day. Perps can be cocky like that sometimes. Even though I was ninety-nine percent sure he had a set of lock picks on him, I didn't have probable cause for a frisk.

I also wasted a couple of hours shadowing a guy in a very uptown cashmere coat and silk muffler. He had a set of California teeth and perfect sandy-blond hair. Most people in New York would figure him for a nice simple TV anchorman or maybe a *GQ* model. I had him pegged for a shoulder-bag bus dipper, which is a minor criminal art that can be learned by anyone who isn't moronic or crippled in a single afternoon. Most of its practitioners seem to be guys who are too handsome. All you have to do is hang around people waiting for buses or getting off buses, quietly reach into their bags, and pick out wallets.

I read this one pretty easily when I noticed how he passed up a half-empty Madison Avenue bus opposite B. Altman's in favor of the next one, which was overloaded with chattering Lenox Hill matrons who would never in a thousand years think such a nice young man with nice hair and a dimple in his chin and so well dressed was a thief.

Back and forth I went with this character, clear up to Fifty-ninth Street, then by foot over to Fifth Avenue and back down into the low Forties. When I finally showed him my tin and spread him against the base of one of the cement lions outside the New York Public Library to pat him down, I only found cash on him. This dipper was brighter than he looked. Somewhere along the line, he'd ditched the wallets and pocketed only the bills and I never once saw the slide. I felt fairly brainless right about then and the crowd of onlookers that cheered when I let him go didn't help me any.

So I hid out in the Burger King at Fifth and Thirty-eighth for my dinner hour. There aren't too many places that could be more de-

pressing for a holiday meal. The lighting was so oppressively even that I felt I was inside an ice cube. There was a plastic Christmas tree with plastic ornaments chained to a wall so nobody could steal it, with dummy gifts beneath it. The gifts were strung together with vinyl cord and likewise chained to the wall. I happened to be the only customer in the place, so a kid with a bad complexion and a broom decided to sweep up around my table.

To square my pad for the night, I figured I had to make some sort of bust, even a Mickey Mouse. So after my festive meal (Whopper, fries, Sprite, and a toasted thing with something hot and gummy inside it), I walked down to Thirty-third Street and collared a working girl in a white fake-fox stole, fishnet hose, and a red-leather skirt. She was all alone on stroll, a freelance, and looked like she could use a hot meal and a nice dry cell. So I took her through the drill. The paper work burned up everything but the last thirty minutes of my tour.

When I left the station house on West Thirty-fifth, the snow had become wet and heavy and most of midtown Manhattan was lost in a quiet white haze. I heard the occasional swish of a car going through a pothole puddle. Plumes of steam hissed here and there, like geysers from the subterranean. Everybody seemed to have vanished and the lights of the city had gone off, save for the gauzy red-and-green beacon at the top of the Empire State Building. It was rounding toward nine o'clock and it was Christmas Eve and New York seemed settled down for a long winter's nap.

There was just one thing wrong with the picture. And that was the sight of Whiteboy. I spotted him on Broadway again, lumbering down the mostly blackened, empty street with a big bag on his back like he was St. Nicholas himself.

I stayed out of sight and tailed him slowly back a few blocks to where I'd lost him in the first place, to the statue of Greeley. I had a clear view of him as he set down his bag on a bench and talked to the same bunch of grey, shapeless winos who'd cut me off the chase. Just as before, they passed a bottle. Only this time Whiteboy gave it to them. After everyone had a nice jolt, they talked quickly for a couple of minutes, like they had someplace important to go.

I hung back in the darkness under some scaffolding. Snow fell between the cracks of planks above me and piled on my shoulders as I stood there trying to figure out their act. It didn't take me long.

When they started moving from the statue over to Thirty-second

Street, every one of them with a bag slung over his shoulder, I hung back a little. But my crisis of conscience didn't last long. I followed Whiteboy and his unlikely crew of elves—and wasn't much surprised to find the blond shoulder-bag dipper with the cashmere coat when we got to where we were all going. Which was the Martinique. By now, the spindly little spruce I'd felt sorry for that afternoon was full of bright lights and tinsel and had a star on top. The same old coots I'd seen when I helped Frances and her kids there were standing around playing with about a hundred more hungry-looking kids.

Whiteboy and his helpers went up to the tree and plopped down all the bags. The kids crowded around them. They were quiet about it, though. These were kids who didn't have much experience with Norman Rockwell Christmases, so they didn't know it was an occasion to whoop it up.

Frances saw me standing in the dimly lit doorway. I must have been a sight, covered in snow and tired from walking my post most of eight hours. "Hock!" she called merrily.

And then Whiteboy spun around like he had before and his jaw dropped open. He and the pretty guy stepped away from the crowd of kids and mothers and the few broken-down men and walked quickly over to me. The kids looked like they expected all along that their party would be busted up. Frances knew she'd done something very wrong hailing me like she had, but how could she know I was a cop?

"We're having a little Christmas party here, Hock. Anything illegal about that?" Whiteboy was a cool one. He'd grown tougher and smarter in a year and talked to me like we'd just had a lovely chat the other day. We'd have to make some sort of deal, Whiteboy and me, and we both knew it.

"Who's your partner?" I asked him. I looked at the pretty guy in cashmere who wasn't saying anything just yet.

"Call him Slick."

"I like it," I said. "Where'd you and Slick get all the stuff in the bags?"

"Everything's bought and paid for, Hock. You got nothing to worry about."

"When you're cute, you're irritating, Whiteboy. You know I can't turn around on this empty-handed."

Then Slick spoke up. "What you got on us, anyways? I've just about had my fill of police harassment today, Officer. I was cooperative earlier, but I don't intend to cooperate a second time."

I ignored him and addressed Whiteboy. "Tell your friend Slick how we all appreciate discretion and good manners on both sides of the game."

Whiteboy smiled and Slick's face grew a little red.

"Let's just say for the sake of conversation," Whiteboy suggested, "that Slick and me came by a whole lot of money some way or other we're unwilling to disclose since that would tend to incriminate us. And then let's say we used that money to buy a whole lot of stuff for those kids back of us. And let's say we got cash receipts for everything in the bags. Where's that leave us, Officer Hockaday?"

"It leaves you with one leg up, temporarily. Which can be a very uncomfortable way of standing. Let's just say that I'm likely to be hard on your butts from now on."

"Well, that's about right. Just the way I see it." He lit a cigarette, a Dunhill. Then he turned back a cuff and looked at his wristwatch, the kind of piece that cost him plenty of either nerve or money. Whiteboy was moving up well for himself.

"You're off duty now, aren't you, Hock? And wouldn't you be just about out of overtime allowance for the year?"

"Whiteboy, you better start giving me something besides lip. That is, unless you want forty-eight hours up at Riker's on suspicion. You better believe there isn't a judge in this whole city on straight time or overtime or any kind of time tonight or tomorrow to take any bail application from you."

Whiteboy smiled again. "Yeah, well, I figure the least I owe you is to help you see this thing my way. Think of it like a special tax, you know? Around this time of year, I figure the folks who can spare something ought to be taxed. So maybe that's what happened, see? Just taxation."

"Same scam as the one Robin Hood ran?"

"Yeah, something like that. Only Slick and me ain't about to start living out of town in some forest."

"You owe me something more, Whiteboy."

"What?"

"From now on, you and Slick are my two newest snitches. And I'll be expecting regular news."

There is such a thing as honor among thieves. This is every bit as true as the honor among Congressmen you read about in the newspapers all the time. But when enlightened self-interest rears its ugly head, it's also true that rules of gallantry are off.

"Okay, Hock, why not?" Whiteboy shook my hand. Slick did, too,

and when he smiled his chin dimple spread flat. Then the three of us went over to the Christmas tree and everybody there seemed relieved.

We started pulling merchandise out of the bags and handing things over to disbelieving kids and their parents. Everything was the best that money could buy, too. Slick's taste in things was top-drawer. And just like Whiteboy said, there were sales slips for it all, which meant that this would be a time when nobody could take anything away from these people.

I came across a pair of ladies' black-leather gloves from Lord & Taylor, with grey-rabbit-fur lining. These I put aside until all the kids had something, then I gave them to Frances before I went home for the night. She kissed me on the cheek and wished me a happy Christmas again.

a *NEW* short story by

CLARK HOWARD

"X-ray four-four requests clearance," Briscoe said, his voice transmitting through a mini-microphone inside his helmet.

"X-ray four-four, straight on," the tower replied. "The field is yours, sir." Nothing else on an airfield moved when an experimental aircraft took off.

A compelling story containing the powerful excitement of test-piloting, written with the authority Clark Howard brings to any subject he chooses to address—subjects notably both diverse and fascinating . . .

HIGH NOON AT MACH SEVEN

by CLARK HOWARD

Buddy Briscoe drove up to the main gate of Edmunds Air Force Base in a silver custom Corvette with enough options to pay for a second car. The two young Air Police enlisted men on duty at the gate gawked openly at it, one of them pursing his lips in a silent whistle. Thinking the driver of such fine wheels must be minimum a bird colonel, they both snapped to with robotlike salutes.

"Skip the military courtesy, boys," said Briscoe, "I'm a civilian. General Ludlow is expecting me." Briscoe handed one AP a telegram, which was quickly read and returned to him.

"Welcome to Edmunds, Mr. Briscoe. Please proceed straight ahead to the first cross-street, turn left, and you'll find base headquarters directly in front of you. The receptionist there will direct you to the base commander's office."

Briscoe eased the Corvette, glancing into his rearview mirror to see if the two young airmen were still admiring the car. They were.

Just a flash of the good life, boys, he thought. Recalling the barren New Mexico desert over which he had just driven, he decided that they probably didn't see much of it at this godforsaken base.

Five minutes later, Briscoe was being ushered into the office of Lieutenant General Malcolm Ludlow, the ranking Air Force officer at Edmunds. With Ludlow was his executive officer, Colonel Charles Wilder.

"We're *very* pleased to see you, Mr. Briscoe," the general said, almost in a tone of relief. "I want you to know that we sincerely appreciate your coming out to talk to us."

"You can thank North Aircraft, General," Briscoe replied neutrally. "They're paying for the trip and my time. You do understand that I haven't agreed to take the job yet?"

"Of course. Certainly. We're nevertheless grateful to you for giving us a chance to tell you about our problem. Did North Aircraft brief you at all?"

Briscoe shook his head. "All they said was that it was a testing problem. From the amount of money they offered me, I assume it's serious."

"It's serious." Ludlow turned to Wilder. "Colonel, why don't you fill in the details for Mr. Briscoe."

"Yes, sir." Colonel Wilder shifted in his chair to face Briscoe. "Our funding on North Air's X-44 and X-45 experimental jet fighters is what Congress refers to as 'contingency performance' funding. In order to receive the money to continue flight-testing these aircraft, we're required to achieve certain goals and objectives within a specific timeframe. The schedule is inflexible and non-extendable. If we fail to accomplish what we're supposed to in the time allotted, the remaining contingency funds pass on to the next approved project."

"To give you an example," General Ludlow said, "last year we had six-point-two million allotted to us for testing of the Bluejay experimental combat helicopter. We had six months to complete phase one of the testing. We were right on schedule until out of nowhere we had a freak snowstorm. It hadn't snowed on the low desert here in thirty-one years. The storm lasted eight days, put our entire program on hold. We tried to catch up, but ultimately went three days past the deadline. Three *days*. Four-point-one million dollars we would have received for phases two and three of the Bluejay Project went to the Navy to use on a new nuclear torpedo-guidance device. I wasn't here then, of course—my predecessor, General Bancroft, was base commander at that time. He's now the air liaison

officer at the U.S. Embassy in Ankara. Ankara, *Turkey*. Get the connection?"

"I think so," said Briscoe, smiling slightly. "What's your problem with the North aircraft?"

Ludlow nodded at Wilder and the colonel picked up the narrative. "A run of bad luck. We had two prototypes of the X-44 and two pilots, Colonel Dunbar and Major Reed, qualified to test them. Eight days ago Reed hit a weather-balloon guy wire and crashed on takeoff. Scratch one pilot and one prototype. Three days ago, our other pilot came down with a flu virus and is flat on his back. He's got a fever of a hundred and four degrees and is so weak he can barely sit up. Scratch another pilot. We're left with one prototype of the X-44, nobody on base qualified to fly it, and not enough time to get a new pilot checked out before the deadline on our contingency funds."

"And that, I presume, is where I come in," Briscoe said.

General Ludlow nodded. "If we don't complete testing of the X-44, we won't be allowed to even *start* on the X-45. And North Air has two test models already *built*."

"What's left on the X-44 test schedule?" Briscoe asked.

"Five flights. Two altitude, two high-level trajectory, one speed."

"How much time left?"

"Six days."

Like the young AP at the front gate, Buddy Briscoe pursed his lips in a silent whistle. That would be pushing it. *Really* pushing it. Right to the edge.

"We know," General Ludlow said, reading Buddy's expression. "We realize what we're asking."

Briscoe drummed his fingertips soundlessly on the padded arm of the chair and studied Ludlow. There were five rows of military decoration ribbons above the general's left breast pocket, including the Distinguished Flying Cross, and here he sat praying that a *civilian* test pilot would save him from being assigned to some dead-end this late in his career. Briscoe noticed light perspiration on the general's nose. North Air was offering Buddy a bundle to get Ludlow off the hook so that tests on the next experimental model, the X-45, wouldn't be cancelled. But five tests in six days!

"There wouldn't have been any problem if Colonel Dunbar hadn't taken ill," the exec said. "He would have finished all the testing himself. I'm sure you've heard of Harvey Dunbar. He holds the altitude world record, the vertical dive world record—broke Mach

six just last week. He's probably the best all-around test pilot in the world."

"Best *military* test pilot," Briscoe interjected. His tone remained casual, but his expression hardened a touch.

"That's what Colonel Wilder meant, of course," the general said quickly. "Everyone in aircraft testing knows that Buddy Briscoe is *the* best. Your reputation in unchallenged here, Mr. Briscoe."

"No question about that," Wilder amended. "I certainly didn't mean to imply otherwise."

Like hell you didn't, Buddy thought. They were giving him lip service now—saying he was the best, but not really meaning it. Both of these flyboys really believed that their Harvey Dunbar was the best pilot in the world. As far as they were concerned, civilian test pilots still wore leather caps and goggles. Briscoe and his peers called that kind of thinking The Right Stuff Syndrome.

"I'll have to study the X-44 test results up to now before I make a decision, General," he said.

"No problem. We have them all ready and we've got a room for you in our unmarried-officers quarters. Why don't you take the rest of the afternoon to look over the tests Dunbar has completed, evaluate what's left to do, and we can continue our discussion at dinner?"

"Fine," Briscoe said. He wanted to get away from these two men who had turned into desk pilots. Generals and colonels, he was convinced, were like corporation presidents and vice-presidents. They were your real good buddies when they needed you for something—the rest of the time they were convinced you were beneath them. Briscoe preferred dealing with aeronautical engineers and jet-aircraft mechanics. At least they were real people.

"See you this evening then," General Ludlow said, smiling and shaking hands.

"Fine," Briscoe said again.

The general's hand, he noticed, was cold and clammy.

They sent a car for him exactly at twilight to take him to the officers club. On the way, Briscoe admired the bursts of brilliant color set off by the sun as it left the cobalt New Mexico sky. Streaks of red and gold and yellow had drifted back from the quickly setting ball of fire like tinted vapor trails from a jet exhaust, piercing the fluffy white cumulus clouds left from the afternoon. Briscoe loved to fly in skies like that—he called them marshmallow-sundae skies. They were, to him, like the gigantic thunder waves daredevil surfers

waited for, or the occasional straightaway Formula One drivers claimed lifted their racing tires a hundredth-millimeter off the track on a tissue-thin airstream. Special. Very special.

At the officers club, which Briscoe found to be surprisingly plush, General Ludlow and Colonel Wilder were waiting for him with another officer at the bar. The third officer, a mild-looking man of about fifty, wore a medical insignia instead of wings on his uniform lapel.

"Colonel Dan Bracken, our flight surgeon," Ludlow introduced. Briscoe shook hands with him. "What'll you have to drink?" the general inquired, waving over one of the enlisted men tending bar.

"Just some ginger ale," Briscoe said. He saw Ludlow and Wilder exchange glances. They knew he would not consume any alcohol if he planned to fly at dawn, and they were jumping to the obvious conclusion. "I haven't made up my mind yet," he told them. "The ginger ale is just in case. The numbers are off by one test—from the reports I saw, there are six left, not five."

"There's a report missing," Ludlow explained. "Colonel Dunbar flew a speed test on Friday—he's just been too ill to dictate the report. But he was doing it at home this afternoon—you can see it tonight. I have verbal assurance that the test was unremarkable."

The four men stood at the bar drinking and talking planes and flying and, on Bracken's part, physical conditioning for test pilots. "How's *your* high-altitude blood pressure, Mr. Briscoe?" he asked conversationally.

"One-eleven over eighty-two at a hundred thousand feet," Buddy replied confidently.

"Outstanding. Any inner-ear vibes?"

"Never."

"Throat spasms?"

"Never."

"Sinus strictures? Ocular expansion?"

Briscoe shook his head. "None of that, ever. I was born for the high sky, Doctor." His glance shifted to the two flight officers. "That's one of the reasons I'm the best test pilot in the world."

Dr. Bracken suppressed a smile during a moment of awkward silence, then Colonel Wilder said, "Isn't that Donna who just came in?"

They all looked at a slim redhead walking toward them in a gold summery wraparound dress. Briscoe had seen dresses like that before—they came off by removing one tiny knot on the left hip. The

woman's hair was tightly curled close to her head like a beehive. Her upper lip curved down past the lower one just slightly at each corner. In front where her dress scooped low was a tanned sea of tiny freckles that disappeared into her cleavage.

"Hello, Donna," the three officers chorused when she got to them.

"Good evening, General, gentlemen," she answered in a soft southern voice. She handed an envelope to Ludlow. "I thought I'd run this over as soon as Harvey finished it. It's his handwritten report on Friday's flight."

"You should have let me send a driver for it, dear," Ludlow said. "You didn't have to trouble." He turned to Briscoe. "This is Donna Dunbar, Colonel Dunbar's wife. Donna, Buddy Briscoe."

She held out a hand that Briscoe found firm and cool when he took it. When he stepped closer, he could see an inch farther down the freckle mine.

"How's Harvey doing tonight, Donna?" asked Dr. Bracken.

"Much better, thanks. Fever's still around a hundred and one, but he managed to keep down some 7-Up a while ago."

"Good. Keep pouring clear liquids into him. I'll stop by in the morning after the test flight." The doctor looked at Briscoe. "If there *is* a test flight, that is."

Briscoe said nothing. The general offered Donna a drink but she declined. "Thanks anyway, but I'd better get back to my patient. Nice to meet you, Mr. Briscoe."

"Mrs. Dunbar," Buddy said, nodding.

After Donna Dunbar left, Ludlow handed Briscoe the envelope she had brought him. Briscoe removed the test-flight report and read it through.

"Unremarkable?" the general asked.

"Unremarkable," Briscoe confirmed. He became aware that all three officers were staring at him. Glancing across the room, he studied the door through which Donna Dunbar had walked out. In his mind he could still see her figure and that knot on her left hip. Flicking his eyes from the general to the exec to the flight surgeon, Briscoe finally looked over at the bartender. "Another ginger ale," he said.

The three officers smiled.

It was cold on the flight line at dawn: cold and clear, with the kind of cloudless, azure sky that pilots who pushed it to the edge liked to fly. In the ready room, Briscoe was suiting up in a set of his own

silver pressure skins and a custom-made oxygen helmet he had brought with him in case he decided to take the job. Dr. Bracken was reading the cardiogram tape he had just run on Buddy. General Ludlow and Colonel Wilder waited patiently for the doctor's official approval.

"He's fine," Bracken said at last.

Briscoe grunted softly and continued dressing. Colonel Wilder pushed an intercom button. "Roll out the Forty-four," he ordered.

"Which test do you want to do today?" General Ludlow asked Buddy.

Briscoe shrugged. "A test is a test. It's your airplane, you decide."

"There's only one speed test left. Let's do that."

"You've got it."

Briscoe left the three officers at the edge of the flight apron when he walked out to the waiting aircraft. A lead mechanic wearing master sergeant's chevrons handed him a clipboard with a printed checklist attached, certification that the aircraft was ready to fly. Briscoe initialed it without reading it. He and the master sergeant locked eyes for a fraction of a second. The checklist was nothing but a piece of paper and they both knew it. Experimental planes either flew or didn't fly. The master sergeant gave Briscoe a thumbs-up sign and Briscoe winked. He climbed into the cockpit, adjusted his body against the two parachutes, and strapped himself in. Connecting his pressure and oxygen tubes, he pulled down his helmet visor and pushed a button that closed the canopy. He pushed another button and the cockpit and his suit began to pressurize.

"X-ray four-four requests clearance," he said, his voice transmitting through a mini-microphone inside his helmet.

"X-ray four-four, straight on," the tower replied. "The field is yours, sir." Nothing else on an airfield moved when an experimental aircraft took off.

Briscoe powered up and moved the aircraft down the runway. In seconds the plane was rolling at a hundred miles an hour. Before Briscoe lifted it off the ground, it was doing one-ninety. He took it up at thirty degrees, not banking, and used his first thruster. The craft shot forward like the bullet it was. Seconds later, the people on the ground heard a thunderclap as the plane passed Mach one.

In the cockpit with Buddy Briscoe, there was only a soft, perfect silence. Flying faster than the speed of sound, he left all noise behind.

Ninety minutes later, Briscoe was back on the ground.

"You registered Mach six-two," an elated General Ludlow said. "That's one-tenth faster than Colonel Dunbar could get it to fly."

"That's what it's all about, General," said Briscoe. "Flying faster than the pilot who flew before you. Or flying higher. Or diving straighter. Whatever. That's why they call it testing. Which one do you want done tomorrow?"

"Trajectory?" the general asked.

"You've got it." Briscoe got off the examining table when Dr. Bracken finished the post-flight study. "Incidentally, where's the nearest carwash? My Corvette's got a lot of desert dirt on it—I want to have it cleaned up."

"There's one in Alamagordo," Dan Bracken said.

Back in his room, Briscoe showered and put on fresh clothes, left the base, and drove thirty miles across the desert to Alamagordo. He found the carwash at the edge of a shopping mall. While the Corvette ran through, he watched its progress through the waiting-room viewing window.

"Nice wheels," he heard a soft southern voice say next to him. It was Donna Dunbar.

"Well, hello," Buddy said.

"Fast, I'll bet," Donna said, bobbing her chin at the Corvette.

"It gets me where I want to go. On the road, anyway." Buddy had to exert control to keep his eyes from glancing down above the scooped-neck blouse she wore. "How's your patient?"

"Better. You didn't exactly make his day by breaking his X-44 speed-test mark."

"News travels fast."

"On this base, just short of Mach one." They watched a long rigid hose shoot a stream of frothy foam all over the Corvette. Then their eyes met again and Donna said, "So how come a good-looking, successful fellow like you isn't married?"

"How do you know I'm not?"

"I found an article about you in one of the back issues of *Aviator* magazine. Harvey subscribes to it. Never throws an issue away."

"I'll bet he keeps them on a shelf in leatherette binders."

Donna suppressed a smile. "What makes you so smart?"

Buddy didn't bother to suppress his own smile. "Just a hunch. Spit-and-polish types like to keep all their ducks in a row, that kind of dull stuff. And I'm not married because I don't want to be." Finally he had to look. "Where'd you get all the freckles?"

"In Georgia. I grew them. And the answer is yes, they are."

"Are what?"

"All over me."

"They'd be fools if they weren't," Briscoe said.

Their eyes were locked in a frank stare at each other that neither one of them wanted to be the one to break. Finally the carwash loudspeaker did it for them. "Number sixty-nine, please."

"That's me," said Donna, glancing at her claim check. "Take care."

As she started to leave, Buddy said, "Tell your husband to get ready for more bad news tomorrow. It's a trajectory test. I'm the best diver around."

"I'll bet," Donna said over her shoulder.

Buddy watched her walk out, get into a freshly washed station wagon, and drive off.

The next day, Briscoe took the X-44 to thirty thousand and brought it down to twenty in a fifty-degree dive. Then he climbed to forty and came down at sixty degrees to twenty-five thousand. From fifty thousand, he plunged to thirty at an angle of seventy-eight degrees. Then he shot up to sixty-five thousand feet and dove straight down at ninety degrees all the way to twenty-five thousand again, a forty-thousand-foot dive that made his eyeballs swell. When he pulled out of it, he could feel his kidneys shudder.

Back on the ground, he was told that the figures on all four trajectories had exceeded those registered by the previous test dives of Colonel Harvey Dunbar. "You're quite the pilot, aren't you?" said Dan Bracken as he gave Buddy his post-flight physical.

"Just the best, Doc, that's all," said Briscoe, "just the best." He paused a beat, then asked, "How's Dunbar's flu?"

"He's about got it whipped. Another two or three days of rest and I'll certify him back to duty."

After changing, Buddy got in his Corvette and drove back toward the unmarried-officers quarters. On the way, he saw Donna Dunbar's station wagon parked outside the base exchange. Pulling over, he went in and wandered around the huge, multi-merchandise store. He found Donna in the food section, pushing a grocery cart.

"Nice wheels," he said.

"Hello again," she said and smiled. "Break those records this morning?"

"Every one of them," Buddy confirmed.

"That'll put Harvey in a wonderful mood. I think I'll stay out the rest of the day."

"Sounds good to me. What shall we do?"

"You *are* fast, aren't you. Here, push my cart for me."

"Any time," Briscoe said, grinning.

He helped her finish the grocery shopping and carried the bags out to her station wagon. After he closed the tailgate, they stood in the morning low-desert heat without saying anything. In an arrangement of cacti growing between parking lanes, they saw a long black lizard darting after flies, its tongue shooting out at extraordinary speed to snag them. "That's a Mach two tongue," Buddy said.

"Everything is Mach something to you flyboys, isn't it," Donna asked rhetorically.

Buddy shrugged. "I guess so. When old Ernst Mach developed the ratio of the velocity of an object to the velocity of sound, he probably had no idea they'd name it after him. We probably ought to be thankful he had a *simple* German name, not something like Fritzengrubber. Can you imagine how that would sound: 'Pilot to tower, I just achieved Fritzengrubber three.' "

Donna laughed. "You're a case, Briscoe."

"Wait'll you get to know me better." His expression turned serious. "Did you mean it about staying out the rest of the day?"

"No, I'm sorry, I can't. Harvey still needs some taking care of." She saw disappointment filter into his eyes. "But he's going to his office for half a day tomorrow," she added. "In the afternoon. I thought I'd go for a swim at the officers-club pool. Around two."

Buddy smiled. "See you there."

On the third day of testing, Briscoe went for altitude. He took the X-44 from takeoff on a forty-five-degree climb to eighty thousand feet. On the second climb he went from fifty to eighty-five. For the next two hours, in increments of five thousand feet per attempt, he pushed the plane to ninety, ninety-five, one hundred thousand, one-five, and finally one-ten. When he was ready to return to the ground, he was exhausted. But on each climb he had exceeded the numbers achieved by Colonel Harvey Dunbar on previous attempts.

At the post-flight medical exam, Dan Bracken looked at Briscoe's blood under a microscope and said, "No alcohol for eight hours, Buddy. Your blood alkalinity is down. Drink a couple of Dr. Peppers or Cokes."

"All right to lie in the sun?"

"Sure. And better schedule trajectory tomorrow instead of alti-

tude. I'd like you to stay under seventy-five thousand for at least twenty-four hours."

"Whatever you say, Doc."

Back in his quarters, Buddy drank two Dr. Peppers and despite their high caffeine content took a long nap. It was past one when he awoke. Feeling sluggish, he went out to the vending machines, got another bottle of Dr. Pepper, poured a bag of salted peanuts into it, shook it up, and drank it. Ten minutes later, feeling fine, he put on swim trunks and sandals, tossed a towel around his neck, and drove to the pool.

Donna was already there, in a yellow one-piece suit with the straps undone. Buddy walked over and stood looking down at her. "They sure are," he said.

Shading her eyes, she looked up and saw it was him. "Are what?"

"All over you." He nodded at a chaise next to her where she had put a book. "Saving this place for me?"

"Nobody but."

Sitting down, he admired her figure. "Woman with a body like yours ought to wear a bikini."

"I used to. But I have a Caesarean scar down my middle now that's not very pretty."

Buddy nodded. "How many children do you have?"

"None. That one was stillborn and I can't have any more."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I didn't want kids anyway."

"I'm not sorry about the kids. I was talking about the bikini."

"Don't be sorry about that either, flyboy," she said, standing up. "This one shows enough. Swim?" She walked toward the pool.

They swam, sunned, ordered a snack, swam again, ate the snack when it came, then lay on their backs and talked without looking at each other.

"May I ask you a personal question?" she said at one point.

"Sure."

"How much do you get paid for what you do?"

"Depends," Buddy said.

"On what?"

"The plane, the tests, the risks involved."

"Give me an average."

"I'll give you an example. For these tests on the X-44, North Air is paying me twenty thousand per test."

"You'll make a hundred thousand dollars for five days of testing?" she asked incredulously.

"Yeah. But this is a high-risk, emergency job. Some tests are simple, low-risk runs that pay only seven-fifty or a thousand dollars. It varies. I make about six hundred thousand a year, gross."

Donna grunted. "Nothing gross about that. Do you know how much Harvey makes for doing the same thing? Sixty-two thousand a year."

"Yeah, but he gets to wear those snappy uniforms and have all the peasants salute him."

"Big deal."

"I *never* get saluted."

"Poor baby. Want me to salute you?"

Buddy looked over and smiled. "I'd rather salute you."

Donna returned his look knowingly. "Better get in the water, Briscoe, and cool off."

"I think you're right, Mrs. Dunbar." He got up, adjusted his swim trunks, and dove into the water. A couple of minutes later he returned and stretched out again. "All cooled off," he reported. "Temporarily anyway."

"That's a good boy."

"My turn for a question now."

"All right."

"How old are you?"

"Older than you," she replied.

"Not by much, I'll bet."

"I didn't say by much." After a moment, she said, "I'm thirty-nine. You're thirty-four. *Aviator* magazine again."

"Oh, yeah. Leatherette binders."

There was no stopping the afternoon from passing, and after a final swim Donna dried off to go home. "It's been real, Briscoe," she said.

Buddy took hold of her arm. "Let's cut out the games, Donna." All levity was gone from his tone.

"Take your hand off me, for God's sake," she said. "It's already going to be all over the base that we spent the afternoon together. Let's not make it any worse."

He took his hand away. "If you knew it was going to be a problem, why did you suggest it?"

"Because I wanted to be with you, dummy." Their eyes met and

held. "I've wanted to be with you since we met the other night. Can't you *feel* it?"

"*I* can feel it," he said. "I just wasn't sure about you. Women *have* been known to tease, you know."

"Not me, Briscoe. I *never* tease. When I play, I mean it."

"When can we meet?" he asked, his voice becoming hoarse with anticipation.

She bit her lower lip, thinking. Then she said, "Two o'clock tomorrow afternoon in Alamagordo. The back row of the Desert Theater. You can't miss the place—it's right next to the motel."

Briscoe flew the second trajectory series the next morning. He stayed under seventy-five thousand feet, as Dr. Bracken had requested, but carried out six separate tests, four of which exceeded the results of his own records set two days earlier. He was on a roll, pushing the plane and himself to the very edge, exhilarated as always at doing something no man—no *pilot*—had ever done before him. He was master of the high sky and he reveled in it. He had already made up his mind to push it one more time—another few thousand feet, another few degrees—but Dan Bracken's voice came over the radio.

"Buddy, I think that's enough for today," the flight surgeon said. "I'm getting a blip or two on some of your body readouts. Let's wrap it up, what do you say? Over."

"I read you, Doc. Bringing her in." Buddy Briscoe was fearless, but he wasn't a fool. If his body was telling him something through Bracken's instruments, that was a wrap for Buddy. None of that "We live in fame and go down in flame" macho jazz for him. After all, he had a Corvette to support.

Back downstairs, while Bracken was examining him in the medical debriefing room, General Ludlow came in with an officer Buddy had never seen before. "Buddy Briscoe, Colonel Harvey Dunbar."

He was exactly what Briscoe had imagined he would be: tall, board-straight, chin up, sideburns ending exactly at the earlobes, thin lips, immaculate uniform. He was everything Buddy Briscoe was not. Only their eyes were the same—steely-grey and direct, deep and fearless. The eyes of men who knew what it was to push to the edge.

Buddy was still on the examining table and the two men couldn't shake hands, so they merely nodded. Dunbar's thin lips spread in

a humorless smile without showing any teeth. "You flushed a few more of my records today, Mr. Briscoe. Congratulations."

"It's a good airplane," Buddy replied modestly.

"Speaking of which," General Ludlow said, "the two new X-45s arrive tomorrow from North Air. Colonel Dunbar will begin training a replacement for the late Major Reed at once, and testing on the new models can probably start right on schedule. Providing the final test of the Forty-four goes all right tomorrow."

"It will, General," Briscoe assured him.

"Going to flush the rest of my records?" Harvey Dunbar asked, displaying the same fixed smile.

"You never know," Buddy replied.

"Hell, personal records aren't important anyway," General Ludlow said. "It's the team effort that counts. The main thing is that we'll continue receiving our contingency funding."

Briscoe and Dunbar locked eyes for a moment. This was an administrator talking, a man who was no longer a pilot. To men who pushed it to the edge, personal records *were* important. When you were all alone so high in the sky that you could see the curvature of the earth, there *was* no team. There was just you and the airplane and the edge. *That* was personal.

"The general is right, of course," Dunbar said, giving lip service to his commanding officer. "It's been a real treat for our junior officers having someone on base who's been on the cover of *Aviator* magazine. Some of the younger pilots are a little jealous that their wives got to see you at the pool yesterday while they were up flying."

At the mention of the pool, Briscoe glanced at the officer but said nothing.

"They can all meet Mr. Briscoe tomorrow night at Dan's farewell party," said the general.

Briscoe turned to Dan Bracken. "Farewell party?"

"Yes, I'm bailing out," said the flight surgeon. "The Air Force put me through medical school and I've given it twenty years of service in return. Now I'm going to Maui, work three mornings a week in a clinic to supplement my retirement pay, and sip exotic drinks from a coconut shell."

"You'll be back," Ludlow scoffed. "I give you six months. One day my phone will ring and you'll *beg* me to let you re-up. You're a thirty-year man, Dan."

"Nope, twenty's plenty. Wait and see." Dan Bracken looked at

Buddy. "I hope you'll come to the party, Buddy." Pausing just a beat, he added, "Everybody will be there."

"Sure," Briscoe said, thinking of Donna Dunbar, "I'll come."

In the air-conditioned dimness of the Desert Motel that afternoon, Buddy lay on his stomach between lovemaking sessions while Donna dragged her fingernails lightly up and down his spine.

"Why don't you get goosebumps when I do this?" she asked. "Other men do."

"I'm not like other men," he said into the pillow.

"I'll second that," Donna purred. She put her lips close to his ear. "Have you rested enough?"

"What are you trying to do, kill me?" he asked in mock indignation.

"I thought you test pilots liked to push it to the edge."

Buddy rolled over and pulled her down against his chest. "I think you're a nymphomaniac, Mrs. Dunbar."

"So? Nymphomaniacs need love, too."

"Speaking of love, I met your husband this morning."

"Yes, he told me at lunch. What did you think of him?"

"Mr. Rule Book. I kept looking for a bulge in one of his pockets, to see where he carried his manual of Air Force regulations."

Donna smiled. "Want to know what he thought of you?"

"Not particularly," Buddy said aloofly. Donna kept smiling. Finally Buddy couldn't stand it. "All right, tell me."

"He called you a juvenile delinquent of the sky. Said you made up rules as you went along. Said you probably carried a lucky charm of some kind, like a rabbit's foot maybe." She shifted her weight and rolled one leg across his body. "Personally, I think you're both right on target."

In his final test of the X-44, the fifth test in five days, Briscoe made altitude climbs that no pilot had ever made before. He pushed the experimental plane to one hundred thirty-six thousand feet straight up, and then only leveled off because he was afraid his pressure suit would burst. All the time, Dan Bracken was speaking urgently to him from the ground.

"Buddy, level off. Do you read? Your systolic and diastolic lines are in the red zone. Level off at once. Do you read?"

Buddy pushed it a thousand more feet toward the edge.

"Briscoe, goddamn it, do you want your heart to burst! Level off! Now!"

There was a moment of chilling silence, then Buddy said, "Aloha, Doc. Leveling off."

When he got back to the ground, Bracken called him several choice names and said, "What the hell were you trying to do, spoil my party tonight?"

"Just wanted to give the natives something to talk about, Doc. Did you see those altitude figures? I went right to the edge."

"The edge of insanity. If you were in the Air Force, I'd have you grounded."

"Got you there, Doc. Listen, after you get checked out of this flying school, why don't you stop off in San Francisco and spend a few weeks with me? I've got a great highrise apartment next to Fisherman's Wharf and a book of telephone numbers you wouldn't believe. Women of every race, creed, color, and sexual proclivity."

Bracken looked at him in surprise. "Where did you ever learn a word like 'proclivity'?"

"Hey, I had a year of high school before I started flying." Buddy smiled engagingly. "I also lived for a while with a gal who had a Ph.D. We taught each other things. Now how about that visit? I'll let you have the bedroom with the view of Alcatraz."

"Oh, well. That settles it. Who could pass that up?"

"All right!" Buddy winked. "You may never get to Maui, Doc."

He threw his silver pressure suit over one shoulder and strolled into the pilots' locker room, whistling.

As he walked into the officers club that evening, under a large banner that read SO LONG, DOC, IT'S BEEN GOOD TO KNOW YOU!, he saw Donna at one of the refreshment tables with a plate in her hand. Going over, he said, "Good evening, Mrs. Dunbar."

"Good evening, Mr. Briscoe." She did not smile. Glancing around, she lowered her voice. "Harvey knows about us."

"What?"

"He told me at lunch today. Apparently he heard about our afternoon at the pool. He followed me to town yesterday. He saw me park in the theater lot and later walk next door to the motel. He saw me leave, too, then waited and saw you leave."

Briscoe looked around the crowded room until he saw Dunbar standing with a group of other officers. Picking up a canape, he took a bite, then asked, "What's he going to do about it?"

"I'm not sure. He said he had some thinking to do."

"Probably going to look it up in the regulations."

"Listen, he's looking this way. I'd better go—"

"Too late," Buddy said. "He's coming over."

Harvey Dunbar walked up to them, smile fixed. "Well, well. Mr. Buddy Briscoe. The world's fastest man, in the air *and* on the ground." Turning his smile to Donna, he added, "Not the fastest in bed, I hope, for your sake, dear."

Donna set down her plate and walked away. Dunbar faced Briscoe again, his smile fading.

"You're a real wing-walker, aren't you, Briscoe? A regular Hotshot Charlie."

"If I am, I guess that makes you Steve Canyon," Buddy replied.

"You can have my wife if you want her, Briscoe, but you're not getting my flight records," Dunbar told him evenly. "I can fly loops around you."

"*Nobody* can fly loops around me, Dunbar. And I've already *got* your records."

Dan Bracken walked up to them. "You boys look serious. Let me guess: you're talking about flying, right?"

"Among other things," said Dunbar. A thought seemed to suddenly occur to him. "Dan, what do you figure is the max speed a pilot can travel?"

"Well, astronauts have reached speeds of—"

"He didn't ask about astronauts," Buddy cut in. "An astronaut is a *passenger*. He asked about *pilots*."

"How fast do you think a man can fly and maintain control of his own craft?" Dunbar rephrased it.

Bracken shrugged. "We know the body can withstand Mach six-two—Buddy proved that several days ago."

"Could it take Mach seven?" Dunbar asked. His eyes met Briscoe's and held.

"Mach seven? I don't know," the flight surgeon said. "That's forty-six hundred miles an hour—"

"Forty-six-ninety," Buddy corrected.

Bracken began to explain. "Even in a pressure suit, inside a pressure cockpit, there's still force being exerted against the kidneys, bladder, brain, and heart. Particularly the heart, which is likely to be the organ that explodes first. Medically speaking—"

"Forget professional opinions," Dunbar said curtly. "Off the record, Dan. What do you think?"

"Off the record?"

"Strictly." Buddy assured him.

Bracken shrugged again. "I think it's possible. But it's just a theory," he added quickly.

"Thanks, Dan," said Dunbar.

"Yeah, thanks, Doc," said Buddy.

Dunbar and Buddy walked to the bar together.

"Perrier and lime," Dunbar ordered.

"Ginger ale," said Buddy.

In the ready room at dawn the next morning, Dunbar and Buddy suited up in silence. There were no pre-flight physicals, no briefing on tests to be flown, no flight plans filed. As senior flight officer at Edmunds, Colonel Dunbar had simply ordered the two new X-45 experimental aircraft fueled and readied for flight.

When they were suited up, Buddy in silver, Dunbar in blue, they walked out silently together and crossed the flight apron. The same master sergeant was there, this time with two clipboards. Dunbar carefully studied the checklist on his clipboard before initialing it. Buddy as usual initialed his with barely a glance. The master sergeant saluted Dunbar, gave Buddy a thumbs-up, and walked away.

Harvey Dunbar and Buddy Briscoe stood for a moment looking at each other through open visors. There was no longer any animosity in their eyes. It had been replaced by excitement—the sheer, raw thrill of what they knew was coming: pushing it to a new edge.

"Mach seven, Buddy?" asked Dunbar.

"Mach seven, Harv," answered Briscoe.

They grinned at each other and walked toward their respective planes.

Six minutes later, there was a double sonic boom as the two aircraft achieved Mach one.

Twelve minutes later, there were two fiery explosions at sixty thousand feet as both X-45s achieved Mach seven and disintegrated.

At twelve-thirty that night, Dan Bracken walked naked into the kitchen of his home on officers row and got a bottle of beer out of the refrigerator. Returning to his study, he sat on the floor, took a sip, and handed the bottle to Donna, who was stretched out on his couch, not naked but almost. After the officers' wives and other consoling visitors had left her own house, she had turned off all the

lights and slipped over to Dan's. She took a swallow of the icy beer and passed the bottle back to him.

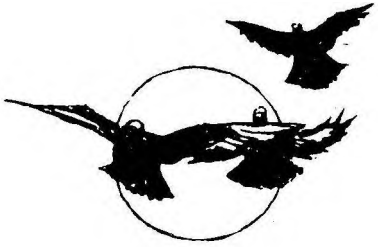
"We'll be set up pretty good, I think," Dan said. "With your officer's widow pension, my retirement pay, and the two hundred thousand hazardous-duty insurance the Air Force carried on Harvey, I might not even have to work three mornings a week at that clinic on Maui."

"Hmm," said Donna.

Dan yawned and stretched luxuriously. "Give us more time to sip exotic drinks from coconut shells."

"Hmm," she said again. She was looking at a bookcase across from the couch. Its shelves were partly filled with back issues of *Modern Medicine*, all kept neatly in leatherette binders.

Odd, Donna thought. She'd never noticed them before.



THE JURY BOX
by ALLEN J. HUBIN

One notably intriguing characterization in series mysteries is that of Jack S. Scott's Inspector Alf Rosher. Scott is masterfully adept at sketching his cast—Rosher and others—with telling phrases, and Rosher emerges as full bodied, a cascade of attractive and unattractive features, of strengths and failings, that blends into an unforgettable whole.

Rosher's eighth investigation is *A Death in Irish Town* (St. Martin's, $12.95), simple plot but rich in description, in people and interplay. A derelict warehouse near the docks burns, incinerating one human body. Those who work and drink in the neighborhood seem more than reasonably uptight, and Rosher's ominous presence at all hours produces peculiar reactions. The body was murdered, it develops, but there's more to this than meets the inspector's initial eye. Excellent storytelling.

One of the strongest first novels in recent months is *Laguna Heat* (St. Martin's, $15.95) by T. Jefferson Parker, who's a journalist, editor, and magazine writer. Tom Shephard, cop in Laguna Beach, left the L.A. police after the outcry resulting from his shooting of a black teenager. Laguna Beach normally has few murders, but now someone has burned an old man to death after shoving one thousand dollars in bills down his throat. This generates certain media attention, reopening old Shephard wounds. A second murder occurs, like unto the first, and the investigation comes far too close to home—to Shephard's father, a policeman turned successful TV evangelist, and Shephard's mother, killed decades before by a would-be rapist. Parker weaves this all together skillfully, making of Shephard an appealing and very human figure.

You may think Gregory Mcdonald's latest, *Safekeeping* (Penzler Books, $15.95) not really a mystery novel. It is primarily the story—the beguiling, witty, evocative story—of a suddenly orphaned eight-year-old boy during wartime in England and New York. But young Robby Burnes does witness a murder and spends most of his winter days and nights in Manhattan fleeing the killer, so *Safekeeping* should not be overlooked by readers in our field. Robby is evacuated from London to the U.S. when his parents die. He's sent to the care of Thadeus Lowry, a career-imperiled newsman who consumes only alcohol and has no idea what to do with his sudden charge. Do boys eat, or do they, like he, only drink? He sends Robby, enormously empty of stomach, out to find the nearest school (boys *do* go to school, don't they?), and so his adventures begin.

Hardcover (Arbor House, $15.95), the debut of Wayne Warga, begins

beautifully, with a fascinating protagonist deftly set in a convincing antiquarian bookselling milieu. Ultimately the plot proves a bit shaky and I am left to hope that, as Warga's confidence in his skills grows, he will leave off crude titillations. On balance, however, this is a striking first novel and Warga's next much to be looked forward to. Jeffrey Dean runs a small and select used-book operation in L.A., specializing in modern first editions and detective fiction. At a bookfair he finds two Steinbeck novels with forged inscriptions. Dealing responsibly with this discovery leads to the reappearance of a CIA agent for whom Dean did odd jobs during his years as a journalist. The agent wants Jeffrey's help again, as bait in a trap for villains in some scheme involving the Middle East, oil, and an assassination team. And, of course, bait tends to be consumed . . .

J. S. Borthwick's second novel, *The Down East Murders* (St. Martin's, $14.95), is even better than her capable debut, *The Case of the Hook-Billed Kites* (1982). Whereas that was set in Texas, now the author finds her two series characters in Maine. The town of Rockport and the island of Weymouth are arty—everyone paints, most rather well. But someone is stealing paintings in rather haphazard fashion, one of the artists—a cantankerous fellow not much to be missed—floats ashore wrapped in ropes, and a pair of elderly tourists expire accidentally (accidentally?). All this activity, and the suspicious behavior of most of the living inhabitants, swirls around Sarah Deane, teacher and graduate student whiling away a summer, and Alex McKenzie, Boston doctor whose mother lives on Weymouth. Alex and Sarah do a little detecting while unwittingly falling in love with each other. Nicely entertaining stuff; the August Maine setting comes especially alive.

Lovejoy, the antique scrounger who identifies the genuine article with the art of a diviner, returns again in *Pearlhanger* (St. Martin's, $14.95) by Jonathan Gash. You'll recall that Lovejoy's morals are flexible in all dimensions: the acquiring and selling of antiques at vast profit is the only objective. In the course of his own scams he frequently trips over the swindles of others, as well as their cadaverous byproducts.

One might suppose him to be friendless, but his uncanny abilities keep him surrounded at least with opportunists, and women stand in line to fall into his bed. Here he's hired by an abrasive lady to find her husband, who disappeared while on an antique-buying swing through the hinterlands. Lovejoy quickly finds that the lady's sums don't add, and a colleague dies as a result. So Lovejoy plots revenge . . . A curious and somewhat scrambled tale, this, but full of the winsome eccentricities of language usual in this series.

EQMM Title Contest Winners

As we go to press, we've received 484 responses to the Title Contest in the November 1985 issue, with submissions from Canada, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, the District of Columbia, and every state in the U.S. except South Dakota. We have sent prize copies of *Ellery Queen's Prime Crimes 3* to the following 6 winners and 3 runners-up, whose alternate titles for Steven LaPlante's "Business Sense" we considered most appropriate to the plot and tone of the story. The two titles suggested by all 6 winners were "Jack Patten's Perfect Solution" and "Old Mother Elmer." Inside the back cover is a list of 27 other contributors whose offerings are worthy of honorable mention. Our thanks to everyone who rose to the challenge (a good number from different members of the same family) and all who added welcome comments about the story and about *EQMM*.

The Editors

Barbara D. Clark, Greer, SC
Ann Hammock, Hemphill, TX
Donald L. Huyett, New Holland, PA
David D. Spice, Bluffton, IN
Lana Woten, El Paso, TX
F. Yolles, Brooklyn, NY

D. M. Blount, Greenacres, WA
Hilda Grace McPherson, Coshocton, OH
Z. M. Stralton, Campbell, CA

2 *NEW* short stories by

WILLIAM BANKIER

About thirty years ago, William Bankier's first published short story, in Liberty Magazine *(Toronto), won a Canadian Short Story of the Month Award. Since then he has published more than 130 stories—over 80 in EQMM alone. The two that follow are Numbers 24 and 25 to run consecutively since the June 1984 issue.*

Mr. Bankier's stories range from very, very funny to extremely grim. He has said that he finds it much more difficult to write humor than non-humor, and most humorists would agree that writing light is not easy, and yet the first of these two stories, "Information Leading To," shows none of whatever strain went into the writing of it. It is as irresistibly comic as the author's memorable "Gunfight at the O'Shea Chorale" and "Dead Women Sell No Tales." It would make a wonderful caper film. Variety *and Los Angeles papers please copy . . .*

INFORMATION LEADING TO

by WILLIAM BANKIER

"No daughter of mine goes around London posing for bondage photographs," Simon Legreed said. He shivered as he spoke, not because Gaynor's misdemeanor was so very upsetting but because the old house on Fulham Road, even on a morning in July, retained a degree of chilly damp. Never mind, by October the place would be fitted with central heating. It was only a question of finding the money.

"Half a dozen harmless Polaroid snapshots," Gaynor said as she

turned the pages of the morning paper, helping her father by searching for contests.

"Harmless? You were trussed like a turkey, gagged and blindfolded and suspended from a hook by your ankles."

"Houdini earned his living that way."

"Not wearing nylon stockings and a cutaway bra."

"How do you know what he did at home?"

"You've made my point!" Legreed rose from the kitchen table and towered over his daughter. He was five inches short of seven feet tall, more bones than flesh, a flicker of outraged hair at the back of his balding head emphasizing his resemblance to a wading bird. "What we do at home is our own business. But you went public."

"Here's one." Gaynor pointed to a quarter-page advertisement. "Sunway Juice is offering a holiday for two in the Azores." As she tore out the ad, she said, "He's a harmless old geezer from the pub. He gets his kicks from pictures. I felt perfectly safe with him."

Legreed accepted the ad, placed it in his basket of Contests To Be Entered. "Thanks, love. Sorry to come on the outraged parent. I've not been myself ever since that visit last April with your mother and her Canadian."

"Kirk Cable takes a lot of getting used to," Gayor said. "I've told him and I've told him but he still insists on calling me Gay."

"There she was," Legreed recalled the provocation that had plunged him into his obsession with central heating. "Walking about Cable's house in flimsy nightie and bare feet. He was in shorts and that ridiculous Medicine Hat shirt he wears. The evening turned unseasonably chilly, but all she did was adjust the thermostat and the place was like a greenhouse." Legreed mimicked his wife's voice. "I think I'll take a bath after you've gone. Always plenty of nice hot water."

"You must admit this old place *is* primitive. Move five feet from the electric heater and you might as well be outside." Gaynor stood up and tugged at the waistband of her T-shirt. She was built blocky like her mother, Nancy, so the name of her employer—The World's End Pub—was given a generous display in red letters on white cotton. "As for a hot bath," the girl grumbled, "we're lucky if we can get our old gas boiler to cough up six inches of rusty warm water."

"I'm taking care of that. I've had the estimate. For two thousand five-hundred pounds they'll install central heating, hot water, the works."

"Never happen. No matter how many prizes you win, you barely

make expenses." She collected her handbag, ran stubby fingers through three colors of hair—amber, green, and red. "I'm due at work."

"Don't worry. I'll find a way to get the money."

"You should never have quit teaching school. With a regular income, the bank would grant you a home-improvement loan." Gaynor turned in the doorway. "If Dermot calls, I'm at the pub."

Pulling pints at the World's End was a part-time occupation for Gaynor Legreed. She worked only the evening shifts for five pounds a time, cash in hand. These earnings, added to her dole money, kept her income around the poverty level, which was par for much of the young population of England at this time in the nation's history. The millions with no job at all fared worse. Gaynor survived by living at home with her father. One good thing about his having quit his job two years ago teaching English at Wandsworth High School was that he was usually around to make meals and clear up.

"Hello, me darling. Pint of best."

"Hello, Dermot." Gaynor held a glass under the spout and leaned back as she drew on the long porcelain handle. Amber bitter foamed into the glass, pumped from a barrel ten feet below in the dank cellar.

"Your dad was in a rage when I saw him," Dermot McDermot said. He balanced his guitar against a high stool which was set aside from the tables and chairs.

"Truly, or is that one of your poetic interpretations?"

"He'd just been on the telephone to your mum."

"He was in a rage." Gaynor served her boy friend his beer. Dermot paid, took a swallow, accepted his change.

"I admired the man when he packed in his teaching job. The soldier of fortune."

"I hated it. I still do." Gaynor went away to serve another customer. When she came back, she continued, "He's figured out how to win contests by putting in lots of entries and fulfilling all the rules. But it isn't fair for one person to do so much winning. It should be luck, not a business."

A heavy, pretty woman in a smart yellow suit approached the bar. "Gaynor darling, give me a large whiskey, I've just been with your father. And a pint of lager for Kirk. He's trying to find a parking space."

"You weren't *with* Daddy at all. Dermot said you were talking to him on the telephone."

"That's as with as I can manage these days. I wish I'd never boasted about our central heating."

"Hello, Nancy." Dermot strummed a chord on his guitar, tightened a peg, and strummed again.

"Look who's here," Nancy said, "the Bard of Belfast. How many depressing stanzas are we in for this evening?"

"I thought I'd lay a little truth on you, yes," the pub poet said.

Kirk Cable came in and swaggered to the bar, hands forced into the pockets of tight jeans. His head was cocooned in hair, beard, moustache, all of it grey and beautifully groomed. What skin could be seen was tanned. He looked like Gabby Hayes after a visit to an expensive salon. Forty years ago, Cable flew Spitfires against the Luftwaffe. It was the best time of his life. When the war ended, he went home to Medicine Hat, Alberta, to work on the land. After his parents died, he sold the farm, returned to his beloved England, and established himself with a variety store on the Fulham Road. He called the place Medicine Hat, a name as good as any in the trendy Sixties. It happened to be located not far from the Legreed residence. Nancy Legreed, estranged from her husband, not only worked for the Canadian, she lived with him. She took delight in pointing out that he was more youthful in his late fifties than Simon, who was only forty-four.

"What we need in London is more sidewalks," Cable said. He lifted his pint of lager. "Cheers." He drank and wiped his hairy lips. "The ones we've got are all covered with automobiles."

"Where did you park?"

"On somebody's patio. Hello, Dermot. Play 'Over the Hills and Far Away.' Farther the better."

"He was deported from Canada," Dermot said to Gaynor.

"For making jokes?" she suggested.

"For not being able to."

Cable took a tabloid newspaper from his jacket pocket and spread it on the bar.

"How about that," he said, indicating the headline. "Two million in gold bullion snatched from the airport."

Gaynor stole the paper while Cable was raising his glass. "Just checking for contests," she said.

"Spare me," Nancy moaned, letting her eyes roll back. "The time I used to waste shopping for packages with entry forms on them . . ."

When Simon Legreed wandered into the pub at half past nine, Dermot McDermot was perched on his stool, guitar across his knee, plucking and strumming a random accompaniment to one of his recitations. The customers were paying medium attention.

"Thin, pale kids in a beer-barrel room,
Belfast babes with eyes all bleeding,
Screamed and raged and tore what they were reading,
Tore what they were reading with a razor and a knife,
Magazines in tatters . . . Life, Life, Life!"

"What does the fool think he's up to," Legreed said, rapping on the bar for service.

"Shut up, Simon," Nancy said.

"Hi, there," Kirk Cable said.

"Shhh," Gaynor said, drawing a pint of ale for her father.

The recitation came to an end and as people applauded and conversations were resumed Legreed went on to say, "I used to be an English teacher. I know Vachel Lindsay when I hear him."

"I'm a poet of the people," Dermot said, arriving at the bar in time to catch the criticism. "I take my inspiration from whencesoever it may come."

"Not even a good parody. Why do you hang around, daughter, with this mediocre minstrel?"

"Don't make a fuss, Daddy, please. Drink your beer and read the paper." Gaynor pushed the tabloid across the bar.

"Closing time in half an hour," Kirk Cable said. "I have food and drink at the house. Wieners and beans and Calgary Red-Eye. Everybody's invited."

"Not Simon," Nancy whispered. "He's in one of his moods."

Gaynor rubbed hard on the mahogany surface with a towel, close to her father, as if she could erase the damage to his dignity. She need not have worried. He was reading the front-page story, his eyes narrowed with concentration and inspiration.

"Have I got an idea!" He drew his daughter away from the others. "The bullion robbery at Heathrow. A million pounds worth of gold taken. There's a reward of five thousand quid for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the perpetrators."

"So?"

"That's double what I need to pay for the central heating."

"Yes, but you don't have any information about the robbery."

"Not strictly speaking. But here is where my ingenuity comes in." Legreed's bird-eyes were like those of a crane focusing on a fish in

shallow water. "I'll treat this like one of the contests I enter. I'm used to putting in a dozen entries to get a winner. Why not send in explanations to the police about how the robbery was committed? Lots of different explanations."

"You're daft."

"The robbery wasn't done by magic. There must be an explanation. If I come up with a number of rationales, one of them could be the right one. Or close to it." Legreed rubbed his hands together. "The prize is worth the effort."

The pub would soon close. Gaynor rang the bell for last orders. Kirk Cable and party made moves to leave. Nancy was saying, "The time I wasted shopping for packages with entry forms on them . . ." As he packed his guitar, Dermot McDermot was saying, "All the gin joints in all the cities in the world and somebody who's read the poetry of Vachel Lindsay has to walk into mine."

"You're going out on a very long limb, Daddy," Gaynor said. She smoothed a feathery hair on the back of his head. "I hope you can make it back to the tree."

"It doesn't matter," Legreed said, rolling a clean sheet of paper into his typewriter, "if some of the scenarios are absurd. They can all be patently false. Except one." He began typing. "In this contest there can be only one correct answer. If I hit on it, then I'll collect the five-grand reward."

"They sound crazy to me," Gaynor said. She was glancing through the typewritten sheets, each one headed by her father's name and address, the body of every page filled with an explanation of how the robbery was achieved. "I mean, really. They dug a hole and buried the gold at the end of runway three?"

"A bit fanciful, that one, I agree."

"And how about this one? The gold was never stolen from the strongroom. It's still there, concealed behind a new wall the thieves built during the night."

"I got that idea from *Mission Impossible*," Legreed said. "They were always lowering a new wall into place through a slot in the roof." He paused in his typing. "Lucky for them it was a sunny day or the new wall would have been wet. Half the gimmicks on *Mission Impossible* would never have worked if it had been raining."

Gaynor sighed. "Daddy, I think you're wasting your time."

"You wait," he said. "I'm mailing these in to the police this after-

noon." He began typing. "One of them, I guarantee you, is going to make somebody sit up and take notice."

Inspector Marylebone fed the typewritten sheets of paper one at a time across the desk to his official visitor, Victor Jed, president of Armada Gold Bullion Shipments, Ltd. The Inspector was depressed. A robbery of this size was always hard to solve. So much money meant silence could be bought and paid for. There would be no legitimate tipoffs. These leads from somebody named Legreed were a joke. Marylebone wished he could get back to something worthwhile, such as completing his pornography file against the Commissioner. That way lay promotion.

Jed read the preposterous scenarios casually. They bored him —except for the one about the airplane catching fire and the phony fire engine. As he absorbed this one, Jed's rate of breathing increased and he sat up straight.

"Something?" Marylebone asked.

"Not really." Jed adopted an attitude of mild interest and hoped he would get away with it. All of his life he had been getting away with things. Nobody knew about his Swiss numbered bank account. The existence of his girl friend in her flat in Mayfair was unknown to his wife. As a lad of ten, Jed had kept back half of the money given to him by his father for the church collection plate, and to this day nobody had found out about that. Victor Jed had his secrets and he kept them. "No," he went on, "I was just interested by this reference to the executive jet that caught fire at the time of the robbery. There *was* a fire, I believe."

"Yes," Marylebone said, "but the rest of the information is too fantastic to be accepted. I mean, the fire started on purpose; a faked-up tanker made to look like a fire engine; smoke bombs to cover the transfer of gold to the tanker—it defies belief."

"The man is obviously making up stories in hopes of claiming the reward," Jed said. He read the name and address aloud so he'd remember it. Then he concluded, "Mr. Legreed and his crazy theories are not worth five minutes of police time."

On his way downstairs and out of the building, he was consumed with anger born of fear. How had this Simon Legreed discovered the secret plan? It was letter perfect, every step of the way. The only piece missing from the scenario was the name of the man behind the inside job—Victor Jed.

There was a telephone booth on the corner outside the police build-

ing. Jed dialed a private number. There was only one person to take care of this matter, to put paid to the meddling interference of Mr. Simon Legreed. Jed hesitated to let loose the vicious psychopath but what choice did he have?

The phone was picked up at the other end. Jed spoke softly. "Let me talk to Loco Parentis," he said.

Loco Parentis is to the fraternity of paid murderers what Pablo Picasso is to the community of modern art. His career spans decades, his name is known the world over, to many his masterpieces are disgusting, the products of a warped mind.

When Parentis accepted a contract and disposed of a victim, the method was often so protracted, the result so shocking, it could not be described. Even the tabloid press which feasts on sensational crimes had agreed on an editorial ban where the works of this sadistic monster were concerned.

Now the little man, overcoat-clad on a warm July morning, left his parked Citroen Deux-Chevaux and walked along the Fulham Road. He had purchased the misshapen, noisy little vehicle because it looked to him as if it could have been built by goblins. As he approached the house, he went over in his mind the techniques he might use to fulfill the unusual contract issued by Victor Jed. The man, Legreed, was not to be killed. He was only to be frightened into silence. No problem. Loco Parentis would have been capable, with a few words, of turning Gracie Allen deaf and dumb.

Parentis mounted the front steps, noted the name *Legreed* above a bellpush, rang, and waited. A young woman opened the door. This was all right. The famous hitman never made plans. He simply walked into each situation and took things as they came. "Is Mr. Legreed at home?"

"Not at the moment. I'm his daughter—can I help you?"

Parentis thought about that. "I'm not sure."

"Come inside." Gaynor led the visitor along a dim corridor into the kitchen. "Would you like to take off your overcoat?"

"No, thank you, I find this place chilly. I have an important communication for your father."

"Can I tell him?"

"I must do it myself. I must make absolutely sure he gets the message." Parentis sat on a chair. His boots hung clear of the floor and his monotonous eyebrow ran level with the rim of the table. "When will your father return?"

"Who can say? He could be with Dermot McDermot, slanging him about his poetry. He could be visiting my mother, Nancy, at Medicine Hat. Maybe he's left there with Kirk Cable and they've gone to drink beer at the World's End. Or he could be shopping at Tesco's for packages with contests on them. On the other hand, he might be down at Servowarm asking them about the central heating system. Or it's possible he might be—"

Parentis was struggling to keep his eyelids from closing. "I've changed my mind," he barked. "I won't wait for your father. I have a better idea. You're coming with me."

"No, I'm not. I'm going over to the ABC Cinema to see the Zazu Pitts Festival and then I'm going to work the evening shift at the pub."

"I intend to take you with me," Parentis said. He dropped off the chair, shrugging the bulky coat to a comfortable drape.

"Don't make me laugh. I could eat peanuts off your head, little man."

An old-fashioned coal-burning stove was within arm's reach. Parentis used the insulated handle to lift an inch-thick iron lid from the stove. Holding it in both hands, he snapped it in half like a biscuit. He put the halves together and broke them into quarters.

The girl was impressed. "Who are you?" she asked in a faint voice.

"I am called Loco Parentis," he told her.

"Your parents must have been crazy," she said, "to give you a name like that."

Dermot McDermot steered his motorcycle through the heavy traffic on Fulham Road. When he passed the entrance to St. Stephen's Hospital he almost turned in through force of habit—this was his friendly neighborhood casualty department where they bandaged him after frequent tumbles from his bike. Correcting himself, he wheeled on to find a narrow parking space near the Legreed residence. He was still trying, after years of her steady company, to talk Gaynor into moving out of her father's house and into his, Dermot's, apartment. It would be nice to have her to hand, so to speak. But best of all, her pub wages would come in handy as an aid to paying the rent. With the old man behaving so strangely at the World's End the other night, greeting news of the airport bullion robbery like money from home, perhaps Gaynor would be ready to listen to persuasion.

Two people were leaving the house as Dermot approached. Gaynor

was walking ahead of a man who was holding her by the arm. It was not her father. This bloke was four and a half feet tall and his overcoat swept the footpath like a circular broom. There was a tension between them that the Irishman misinterpreted. He read it as sex. Always a jealous man, Dermot fell victim now to the emerald-eyed monster. Gaynor was off to some matchbox love-nest, the abode of this pocket-sized lothario.

When the man hailed a taxi, Dermot ran back to his motorcycle and was mobile just in time to overtake the cab as it turned south in the direction of Wandsworth Bridge. Weaving in and out of traffic, keeping the taxi in sight, Dermot soon found himself across the river, moving into an industrial region of factories and warehouses in the region of Garret Lane.

Strange place for a tryst, he told himself as the passengers disembarked from the taxi and Gaynor allowed herself to be guided toward a low brick building with a gleaming blue tank-truck parked under a carport roof. The couple moved quickly, furtively.

Parking his bike, Dermot scuttled to the warehouse with a sideways movement which he imagined rendered him nearly invisible. He avoided the doorway through which the couple had entered the building. Instead, he went looking for a window that would give him visual access. He found several, but through each he saw only floor-space partially covered with packing cases. A window under the carport looked more promising—it was hung with curtains suggesting offices inside.

Dermot had to climb up and brace himself against the curved shape of the tanker to manage a peek through the window. When he did, he was so surprised at what he saw he almost fell. Gaynor was sitting in a chair with her arms stretched behind the wooden back and her wrists tied. Each ankle was roped to a leg of the chair. A handkerchief was knotted in place as a gag.

"Heaven help us," Dermot whispered, "she's at it again!"

A few feet away, the little man was crouching, holding to his eye the viewfinder of a Polaroid camera. As Dermot watched, the automatic flash blinded him, and when his vision cleared he saw the camera extruding the rectangle of paper which would soon be a photograph of a young woman in the classic bondage situation.

Gaynor had promised never to do this again. Yes, she needed the money, but after the last time posing for the notorious World's End pervert she had agreed to put this activity behind her. Yet here she

was, letting this little man use her as camera-fodder for his pathetic if harmless fantasies.

Dermot climbed down and walked away from the warehouse. He didn't want to get Gaynor into trouble. But he was determined to end this descent of hers into corruption. Should he call the police? Before taking such a step, he would have to discuss it with a sympathetic party. He would go and talk to Nancy Legreed—with her approval, the authorities might be called in.

Kicking his machine alive for the ride to Medicine Hat, Dermot noticed a flash of blue on the elbow of his suede jacket. Wet paint! Now he had a further grievance against the little man. The least he could have done was to have equipped his tanker with a Wet Paint sign.

Inside the warehouse, Gaynor rolled her eyes when she heard the familiar noise of Dermot's motorcycle coughing into action. The gag prevented her crying out for help. Parentis noticed her reaction but didn't connect it with any particular sound from the din of traffic.

"Calm down," the kidnaper said, enjoying his power to instill panic. "I don't mean to damage you. Your old man is the one I'm being paid to intimidate. If a picture of you in trouble doesn't make him lay off, I'll go further."

"Kirk, come out here and listen to this," Nancy Legreed called. Late afternoon on a Tuesday, things were quiet in Medicine Hat. The shop specialized in selling funny greeting cards, funny wrapping paper, funny candles, bags of dried flowers that smelled funny, felt hats that looked funny because they had big felt parrots perched on them, empty tins that were funny because they were shaped like famous chocolate bars, as well as recipe books, almanacs, calendars, and notepaper that were all funny. There was also a jokebook compiled by a television personality but it was not very funny. Before Kirk Cable took over and established Medicine Hat, the premises had been occupied by a bookstore. The entire row of shops had once housed clothiers, an optometrist, a drugstore—it had been a street of legitimate enterprises. But these had all failed and been replaced by quirky boutiques like Cable's establishment. People, mainly tourists, seemed to want to go into brightly lit shops painted in primary colors and offering a range of gimmicky products.

"What am I supposed to listen to?" Cable said, emerging from the back room. "Hello, Dermot, what brings you here?"

"Listen," Nancy repeated.

Dermot told of seeing Gaynor leaving the house on Fulham Road with the strange little man in his bulky coat. He described following them to the warehouse off Garret Lane and his observation of the photo session taking place inside. "*And* I wrecked my jacket," he concluded, exhibiting the fresh blue paint on his elbow.

"What do we do about it?" Cable asked.

"Dab it with a bit of turpentine," Nancy said.

"No, he means about Gaynor," Dermot explained.

"That's easy," Nancy said, "we call the police." She reached for the telephone and handed it to the poet.

"Hold it," Dermot said. "Your own daughter."

"Posing in bondage for dirty old men," the outraged mother said. "She deserves her comeuppance. Besides, when I moved out she insisted on remaining with that useless father of hers."

Dermot's telephone call was switched from desk to desk until it ended up with Inspector Marylebone. When he heard the words "obscene photographs," his interest was aroused. Here might be material to fatten his pornographic file. The Commissioner would be embarrassed—with luck, the old rogue might even be implicated. Promotion for Marylebone to the rank of Chief Inspector would be not far down the road.

"Give me the address," he said to the caller. "If we work fast, we'll trap the lot of them."

At about the time Marylebone was organizing his raid on the Garret Lane warehouse, an express messenger delivered into Simon Legreed's hands an envelope containing a photograph of Gaynor in distress and a note printed in the desperate hand of Loco Parentis. The paper was perforated in places and spattered with graphite where the pencil tip had snapped under pressure exerted by the psychopathic correspondent.

"Come to warehouse at 60 Garret Lane," the note read, "if you want to see your daughter alive. Come now or—" The message concluded with an alternative so barbaric Legreed almost fainted. When he could steady himself, he wasted no time. He ran outside, hailed a taxi, and set off for the borough of Wandsworth.

Stepping down with the warehouse in sight beyond a wire fence and half an acre of open space, Legreed paid off the cab and walked toward the building. He had reached the doorway and was about to press the bell when a familiar voice hissed at him. He turned and saw his wife peering from behind the fender of a car.

"What are you doing, you damned fool?" she called.

"Saving Gaynor."

"You're spoiling everything."

"She's in danger. He's got her tied up. He's going to torture her."

"No, he isn't, you fathead. He's taking pictures of her."

"Yes. To get me here."

"Why, for goodness sake?"

"So I'll keep my mouth shut about the gold." Legreed gave the bell a loud, long ring.

"I told you," Nancy said to the Inspector hiding beside her. "My husband is playing with fifty-one cards."

Marylebone stood up and raised a bullhorn to his mouth. "All right now," his amplified voice echoed across the area. "Let's move in."

Uniformed men appeared from various places of concealment and approached the building. Simon rang the doorbell again. Nancy reached her husband and dealt him a swat across the ear. He defended himself, managed a headlock on her—they struggled and fell to the ground. A florid face popped into sight at a curtained window, dropped back down, appeared again, fell out of sight again.

"There he is!" Dermot yelled. "The little villain! He needs a stepladder to look through a keyhole!"

"Surround the place," Marylebone instructed his men. "Don't let anyone escape. Arrest all those who have no clothes."

But Loco Parentis was too quick for the police. He charged out of a back doorway dragging Gaynor Legreed by one hand. She was untied now but still gagged. Demonstrating the agility of an acrobat, the hired assassin clambered onto the running board of the tank-truck, opened the door, climbed inside, and pulled Gaynor after him. She slammed the door and, obeying his threatening instructions, switched on and backed into the yard, catching one of the brick columns and bringing down the metal carport roof with a sound like thunder.

Policemen scattered as the truck careened across the yard. "No shooting!" Marylebone boomed through the horn. "We don't want an explosion!"

Gaynor at the wheel of the giant vehicle seemed to be enjoying herself. She slewed the tanker from side to side, sending up waves of gravel and dust as she made for the open gateway.

"Close the gate!" Dermot yelled.

A uniformed officer ran to obey this order and managed to get the

hinged panel into place moments before the truck ploughed into it at speed, ripping it from its mountings and carrying it for some distance along the road before it fell away to one side. A grey limousine was approaching along Garret Lane, traveling even faster than the escaping tanker. Car and truck were set for a head-on collision and the watchers screamed in unison. At the last moment, the limo veered off onto the shoulder and came to an uneven stop. Victor Jed climbed out and shook a fist at the retreating tanker. "It's mine!" he screamed. "You can't have it, it's mine!"

Dermot trotted across the yard and stood beside Inspector Marylebone, Nancy, and Simon. "He seems obsessively possessive."

"What?" the officer snapped with considerable impatience.

"He's a poet," Nancy apologized.

"It's only a second-hand truck and the paint isn't even dry," Dermot said.

The sun was going down. The cluster of policemen and civilians stood watching as the truck turned the corner heading toward Wimbledon. Victor Jed was back inside his limousine, backing, turning, pursuing. "Anybody interested in saving my daughter?" Simon said.

Moments later a convoy of police vehicles departed the site, leaving a team of officers searching the warehouse under Marylebone's instructions to gather and save all pornographic photographs. A prize for the man who found a set featuring the Commissioner.

"What has Jed to do with all this?" the Inspector thought aloud as the car in which he was riding began to overtake the limousine, with the tanker not far ahead.

Simon and Nancy were in the same car. "They kidnaped Gaynor," Simon said. "They warned me I'd never see her alive if I didn't shut up. What did I say that made them so mad?"

Dermot passed the police car on his motorcycle. He overtook and passed Jed's limo. He gained on the tanker. "That fool has no regard for his life or anybody else's," Marylebone said.

"He's in love," Nancy explained.

The convoy thundered across a railway overpass under a darkening sky. Ahead on the left, banks of floodlights illuminated a small stadium. Traffic lights turned red, causing the column of traffic to reduce speed and, eventually, to stop. "Now is our chance," Marylebone said, opening the door of the police car. Other officers descended from the vehicles behind. "Surround the tanker!" the Inspector shouted. "But no shooting! That thing may contain an explosive liquid!"

But as they moved forward, the tanker made a hard left turn and drove through a gateway into the stadium. "Back to the cars!" Marylebone shouted. "We've got them now!"

Motorcycle, limousine, police cars one after another, all followed the tanker under a large sign which advertised the venue as

Plough Lane Stadium
DEMOLITION DERBY TONITE

The crowd roared as the new entrants rolled into sight, feeding into the flow of battered, numbered sedans milling about on the dusty track. Here was new excitement. A giant tank-truck, a biker, several cruisers all in hot pursuit. On its first circuit, the truck sideswiped a green Cortina and knocked it into the infield. Number 17, a peppery Vauxhall painted red, backed at speed into the leading police car, stopping it dead. The motorcycle lost its wheels and skidded twenty yards through the dirt. Magic! Five thousand spectators cheered this race to end all races.

"Not what I expected," the Inspector said philosophically, rolling up his window to exclude the dust.

"Are we safe?" Nancy asked. They were immobilized, other cars churning and ploughing past on both sides.

"No. But better in here than out there."

"Look!" Simon called. He pointed ahead to where the tank truck had turned too sharply, lost its center of gravity, and toppled onto its side, wheels spinning. Gaynor was climbing up and out, apparently unhurt. There was no sign of the man in the overcoat.

"Is it true?" Marylebone said. "Can I believe this?" A door in the back of the cylindrical tank had sprung its hinges. Spilled from it onto the track were several gold bars.

Simon was climbing out of the police car. He began to dance in the dust, whirling, clapping his hands. "It's true—my theory was correct. They loaded the gold bars into the fake fire truck, then they drove it away and took off the hoses and ladders and painted it blue."

There wasn't much punch left in the demolition derby. One battered VW cranked itself up and took a run at a Buick but it was like a chihuahua courting a great dane and it achieved about that much success. The dust began to settle. The crowd fell silent, expecting some sort of curtain line.

The police inspector raised his bullhorn and addressed the stadium. "Victor Jed!" he yelled. "You are under arrest for the airport bullion robbery!" Jed was a well known local businessman. The

crowd cheered. "You are not required to make a statement!" Marylebone continued.

Five thousand citizens took up the litany and chanted in unison, "But if you choose to do so, whatever you say will be taken down and may be used in evidence against you!"

They gathered at the pub, Nancy and Kirk and Dermot, with Gaynor behind the bar serving them drinks. "You're lucky to be alive," Nancy scolded her daughter. "I've been told that Loco Parentis character was wanted for all kinds of crimes."

"Only one kind," Gaynor said. "Unspeakable. He was lucky he was wearing that coat. It protected him when he went through the windshield."

"They'll throw away the key when they lock his cell," Cable said.

"Here comes your father," Dermot said. "Boy, does he look mad."

"How do you like that Marylebone?" Simon said. "No reward. I don't get a penny."

"Why not?"

"Because it's for information leading to arrest and conviction."

"They've arrested Jed and Parentis," Nancy said.

"But not as a result of my information. Marylebone says my leads were all preposterous and he didn't believe any of them for a minute. Jed was arrested as a result of Gaynor being tied up and photographed. You'll be getting the reward, Dermot, for raising the alarm."

Dermot closed his eyes. "Five thousand pounds," he intoned. "A new guitar, a rhyming dictionary—"

"Make that two and a half thousand," Gaynor corrected him. "Half goes to Daddy to pay for his central heating."

"Why should I give all that money to a man who despises me," the poet said, "just so he can heat his grotty house?"

"Because," Gaynor told him, using the argument no man has been able to resist since before poetry was invented, "you want my love to keep you warm."

"Q"

If Wilmot's sister Connie was going to take up residence in Montreal, Eloise Martel was going to spend more time with other companions. Certainly there was no way she could be entertained in Martel society. "She isn't always this bad," Wilmot had apologized while his self-esteem touched bottom. "She has times when she's quite lucid . . ."

SEALED FATES

by WILLIAM BANKIER

When Steve Wilmot looked out of his apartment window and saw his sister Connie in the street five floors below lifting her suitcase out of a taxi, he said out loud, "Come on, I don't need this."

Pierre Martel had been scolding Wilmot over the telephone for the past ten minutes. "What did you say?"

"Not you, Pierre. Somebody's coming to the door."

"Okay, I've said what I want to say. You can thank Eloise. If it was up to me, I'd give the play-by-play to René Duchesne."

"We're talking about seventeen years. I did the first televised football game in Montreal. Go into any tavern, ask who's the voice of the Alouettes. They'll tell you Wilmot."

The cab had pulled away. Connie was standing in the road, staring at the building as if she was watching it land. Round face, opaque glasses, smile like a plastic badge.

"Around Peel Street they'll tell you Wilmot," Martel's voice clattered out of the telephone. "The dwindling English audience. Football is coming on with the French. I need Duchesne."

Wilmot said goodbye to the millionaire property-developer who paid for the football broadcasts. "Bastard!" he yelled as he kicked a hassock and felt pain in his ankle. "Scheming peasoup bastard!"

He was at the door, had it open as she came off the elevator. Apart from looking crazy with her institutional haircut, she looked young. At age fifty-eight, Connie could have passed for thirty-five had she taken some trouble. She came at Wilmot now like a child, so full of love she couldn't imagine her feelings were not universally held.

"Here I am. Came to see my little brother and give him some attention. Where should I put this?"

Wilmot took the suitcase from her. The hug was something he wore around his neck until she let go, slipping back down from his impressive height. "What are you doing here, Connie? Why do you just show up? I might not have been here."

"Where could you go?"

Good question. If Martel ever got his way (which should not happen as long as his daughter Eloise was on Wilmot's side), his choices were limited. He would never go back to Centralia.

"I've had it with Gordie," she went on. "He threatened me the other day. Drew back his fist and said so help me Harry I'm going to lay you out. Can you imagine that?"

"Don't live with him, then."

"I don't. I have my room at the rectory. I was delivering *Herald*s the other day and I went past where he was working, putting on a roof for those people on Pine Street, the old mansion house we used to think was haunted. Remember that? He's such a laugh, Gordie. First thing he does when he gets a job is put that pitiful home-made sign on the lawn, *Gordon Kennedy, Construction Engineer.* I only stopped to talk. Would you happen to have a beer in the house?"

Wilmot's foot was developing a cramp. His sister was delivering the local paper like a kid. He could picture the packed canvas bag slung over her seedy raincoat. He got them each a beer and they sat facing each other across the kitchen table. "You can't stay here."

"Only till I get myself straightened out. Don't get yourself all worked up. I need some time to get Gordie clear in my mind. Writing him all those letters was easy, I enjoyed that. It was when he came home and we got married. Remember that? Remember the Hasty-Pees marching down from the railway station to the armory? They looked so tired, I think they needed a rest. Gordie was certainly not himself."

She was talking about 1945, the end of World War Two, as if it had been last week. Wilmot remembered his sister taking him to see the return of the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment and, yes, he had been disappointed by the absence of weapons, the faded uniforms, the thin, weatherbeaten faces of men who had fought too long. "I don't have anyplace for you here," he told her. "If you'd telephoned me or written a letter I could have saved you a trip."

"What's the matter with the spare room?"

"I don't live alone any more."

"Are you married?"

"As good as."

"Eloise?"

"Yes."

"Say no more, say no more."

The last time Connie Wilmot Kennedy put in an unscheduled appearance, Eloise Martel was not in residence but she was a frequent visitor. The women did not get on. Wilmot could recall the hassle with Eloise when they went for a forced walk, leaving his sister to unpack. It ended with the boss's daughter putting her cards on the table. She sympathized with the poor woman who was obviously not all there and she felt sorry for Steve whose family closet could fall open and release such bad news. But if Connie was going to take up residence in Montreal, she, Eloise, was going to spend more time with other companions. Certainly there was no way Mrs. Kennedy could be entertained in Martel society.

"She isn't always this bad," Wilmot had apologized while his self-esteem touched bottom. "She has times when she's quite lucid."

"I should hope so."

Now Connie accepted her brother's refusal to take her in. "Give me one night under your roof and tomorrow I'll find myself a place to stay. There must be jobs in Montreal for a good waitress. I can telephone the Coronet Hotel in Baytown and ask them to send me a letter of recommendation. Once I get my feet on the ground, we can relax and have some fun." She took a swallow of beer and set down the glass with a flourish. "All these years you've been making it big down here while I tried to carry on in Centralia. You had the right idea, my love. And it shouldn't hurt my chances one bit when people discover I'm the sister of the famous Steve Wilmot."

He was appalled by the idea. Yet all he could think of to say was, "Waitress? Do you speak French?"

It took until eight o'clock that evening for him to talk Connie around. And to get her on the bus, he had to make a promise. She played it back to him as they stood in the terminal waiting for the Centralia express to load. "So it's a month, okay? Two months tops. You'll write me and confirm. Life isn't the same, Steve, I need something to look forward to. Isn't it weird? I was only married to Gordie for two years and that was more than thirty years ago. But all this time I've pretended we'd be getting back together."

Wilmot lifted her bag as the coach backed into the loading bay. "You want to sit up front?"

"I can't understand what I was thinking of. I have to do something with the rest of my life."

The last thing he saw as the bus pulled out was Connie's face in profile behind a dark window, frowning. Wilmot knew how stubborn his big sister could be. He was convinced she intended to come back. He was going to have to take some action to keep that disaster from happening.

When Wilmot returned from the bus terminal, he found Eloise Martel in the apartment drinking brandy. Their conversation convinced him he would have to go and see Sid Andover. "This place reeks of cigarette smoke," she said. "I know it isn't you."

Wilmot had washed both glasses and the ashtray but he wasn't able to have the curtains cleaned and the rooms painted. "Maybe the charlady smokes—she was here this afternoon."

"Tell the truth, Steven." She handed him a matchbook. "Don't lie to me, please."

The matchbook cover carried advertising for the Coronet Hotel, Baytown. "She was here. But I sent her home."

"For good, I hope. Once was enough."

"She knows I don't want her moving in."

"I wonder about that. You say you don't want her, but maybe she's getting a different message." Eloise's hands, her oval face, seemed to be made of polished walnut. Jet black hair parted classically in the middle and drawn tight gave her the appearance of a prima ballerina. She was wearing a velvet suit that would have cost Wilmot a week's talent fees. As she poured brandy into a glass for him and topped up her own, she said, "I know those little Ontario towns. Families grow up showing no emotions, everything is bottled up inside. Sister and brother, who can say what went on between the pair of you? You may not even realize it yourself."

"Don't worry about Connie. Or about me." He snatched at the glass and drank half.

"Big man."

"I'm getting a double dose of the Martels today. Your father this morning and now you."

"Papa said he spoke to you." She tucked a stockinged foot under her and patted the sofa cushion. "Nothing to worry about, Steven. He won't give Duchesne your job as long as we're together."

Wilmot sat obediently, loomed over her, the giant gone to seed beside the tough little socialite. "Why is it so hot in here?" He almost

missed his mouth as he lifted the glass and drank. Too much was happening to him. He earned a small fortune, yet he owed money. His chest ached every night as he tried to get to sleep. Eloise's father gave him no peace.

"Be calm," she said, rapping the back of his hand with a bony fist. She loved seeing him wound up like this. "Just you be calm now."

In the morning, Wilmot went around to the editorial offices of the *Gazette* to work on his column, which appeared twice weekly in the sports pages. The full-time journalists didn't take him seriously. They let him use a desk and a typewriter and they chatted with him about last week's game, but the editor never checked his copy, as if nobody expected anything good from him and so whatever he turned in would be acceptable.

Later he got into his car and drove around town with a determined look on his face, a man with a lot of places to go. Various people recognized him and waved. This was nice. Being a celebrity was his best reward, far more satisfying than the money he earned, which went through his bank account like water out of a broken main.

Wilmot wished he could relax and enjoy the adulation as in the early days. Back when few people owned a TV set, a brewery used to sponsor a film of last weekend's game in a downtown hall every Thursday night. A thousand raucous men with a few committed girl friends used to fill the place, and when the lights went down and the projector began to whir and Wilmot said over the PA in his nasal, emphatic voice, "Good evening, this is Steve Wilmot *speaking*," the room would erupt. All gone now. His audience was dispersed, drinking in their own homes. The TV presentation was full of electronic magic, a pageant of slo-mo replays and screens full of statistics. Who needed Wilmot? Anybody could do it—René Duchesne could do it.

Driving obsessively in his throaty Lotus, prowling the streets like a vice-cop, Wilmot was waiting for the time to become three o'clock. You could never see Sid Andover before three, by which time he had played his game of squash and taken a shower and was installed at the back table in The Golden Glow, drinking Perrier and snapping a peanut between his immaculate teeth.

Wilmot came into the restaurant sweating after his trot from the parking lot. He waved both hands above his head as soon as he came through the doorway and approached the table. All that was missing was a white flag tied to his rifle. Because he was the size of two

ordinary men, he had to force his body between the table and the upholstered seat, cracking his knee, excusing himself. Andover and two associates watched with cynical interest.

"Double Jack Daniels," Wilmot told the waiter when Andover asked if he wanted a drink. "Water, no ice."

"You should ration your booze," the restaurant owner said. In his forties, he looked twenty-five. Coarse red hair trimmed short covered his head like fiber-matting and the pale-blue, northern eyes looked immortal. An almost imperceptible blush of makeup enhanced cheeks too sensitive for tanning. He laughed as he said, "I don't like somebody who owes me money to play fast and loose with his health."

"Have no fear," Wilmot said, feeling better now that he was talking, "my insurance policies are all made over to you, Sid." This was a lie. Wilmot believed that if someday he could be lucky enough to die without warning and without pain, it would be a triumph. There was no insurance except for one small policy to pay for the burial. And what did it matter? He had no family except for Connie, who seemed able to live without money. As for Sid Andover, backer of Wilmot's compulsion to gamble, "Let him grind my bones to make his bread," the broadcaster had told himself one night in a mood of bravado. "He's collected more than enough from me in interest charges."

"You don't look good," Andover commented. "You don't sound good."

"That's why I'm here. I need your help."

"You're overextended now."

"Not money. I need a job done."

In the silence that followed, in the glance that passed from eye to eye, the men absorbed what Wilmot was saying. "Be careful," Andover warned him. "You make waves when you do something like that. Montreal is a small town."

"Not in Montreal. In Centralia." Wilmot's drink arrived and he tasted it. "Nobody you know—nothing to do with anybody around here."

Andover studied the overgrown sports announcer with a new respect. "You rouse my curiosity. Hidden depths." The mineral water fizzed as he filled his glass. "Someday you'll have to tell me the story of your life."

"This needs to be subtle." Because such powerful individuals were listening to him, Wilmot began to feel comfortable. "I don't want a blatant hit. It needs to come across like an accident. The thing is—"

"Hey, shut up," Andover interrupted, almost with affection. "Don't tell it to me, I don't want to know." He turned to a companion. "What happened to that crazy guy who worked in the kitchen? Where did he go?"

"Meara? Centralia."

Turning back to Wilmot, Andover said, "You have come at a lucky time. I can give you a man in Centralia. I can give you an address, maybe a telephone number. Let me check it out. Call me tonight."

That night, Wilmot was given a name and a street address in his hometown. Andover wasn't able to supply a telephone number. "The guy is close to down-and-out. He's living in a room above the restaurant where he works. You wouldn't want to phone him there, anyway. Michael Meara. Mention my name, and if he gives you any difficulty let me know." Andover sounded confident. "He sure as hell owes me a favor."

"When are you going to be finished?" Eloise called from the bedroom. "We have less than an hour."

"I'm ready to go," Wilmot said, index fingers pounding the keys of the portable typewriter. "Are you ready to go?"

"You always find something to do when Papa is waiting for us." She came into the room as Wilmot removed the second letter from the machine. He cranked an envelope under the roller and began typing a Centralia address. Eloise gave him half a glance as she snapped a fastening at either wrist. Dressed in clinging, near-transparent materials, she was a black nylon doll. "What say you?" She did three pirouettes, ending up with a hand on his shoulder.

"Call the cops," he said and he meant it. He stood and lifted her in his arms, squeezed her body against his, pressed his face into the musky warmth of her neck and shoulder. She was so *small*. If he wanted to, and the urge was sometimes there, he could dismantle her. "God, you are an incitement to violence."

She loved the danger. "Put me down," she commanded him. "Let's skate out of here."

"One minute." While she collected her evening purse and switched off lights, Wilmot folded both letters, slipped them into envelopes, sealed them, stuck on stamps.

"Applying for jobs?" she asked with amusement but not much interest.

He was able to mask the truth. "I'm making it plain to Connie that she is not to come here bothering us ever again . . ."

It sounded like a rat trying to struggle into the room through a small hole and the noise woke Michael Meara from his half sleep. He lifted his head, saw the edge of the envelope moving in the crack of light at the bottom of the door. Feet in slippers scuffed away. It had to be the landlady complaining about something.

Whenever else did he receive mail? Since arriving in Centralia eighteen months ago, he had been followed by exactly two letters, both from Sid Andover. One told him Melanie's cremation had taken place. The other said that the baby had been adopted by a couple from Toronto—and a postscript reminded him that he now owed Andover a favor.

This was true. When Mike Meara came to Montreal from Nova Scotia, he had no money in his pocket. He also had a jail sentence for assault hanging over him if the Halifax police ever caught up with him. Andover took care of all that.

He also gave Meara a job in the kitchen of The Golden Glow restaurant. Other people working there seemed to think it was the pits but Meara found the place had warmth and light, and the job had continuity. He did a lot of things in the kitchen—scrubbed pots, lugged blocks of ice, dumped rubbish, went down the road to the frozen-food locker for broiler chickens. Toward the end, before the trouble with Melanie, they were bringing him on as apprentice to the salad chef. Now Mel was dead and the baby was gone and here was Meara at the bottom of the ladder again—only this kitchen was not as nice a place to work. Or was it simply that he was growing old? Thirty-one seemed very old.

He rolled off his cot and went to get the letter. It was addressed to him from somebody who was not so good on a typewriter. Not from Andover, then. Sid's secretary did her job properly, like everybody who worked for Sid.

Meara raised the roller blind and opened his letter in the afternoon light. On his day off, he always slept as late as he could. The message was typed badly on a sheet of blue paper with a familiar name printed at the top: Steve Wilmot Sports Enterprises. Wilmot was the guy who did the pro-football games Meara watched occasionally on television. He was no great fan of the game. They played it in high school in Halifax but Meara was barely into his first year before they ordered him at home to stop wasting his time, get a job, bring some money into the house.

"Dear Connie," the letter began, "you must, repeat must, stay away from here for a couple of months at least. I'm trying to . . ."

Meara went back to the beginning. Connie? He turned over the envelope, read his proper name and address again. Who the hell was Connie? He went through the complete text, realizing it was intended for somebody else. A minute later, he had it figured out. The writer, Wilmot, had done two letters at the same time, one to Meara and one to this Connie. Then he had put them in the wrong envelopes. Which meant Connie now had the letter meant for Meara.

He needed a shave. He needed a bath. But that would require waiting while he switched on the tank down the hall and the water got hot. So Meara changed the underwear and socks he had been sleeping in, dressed himself in his wine cords and tight white tee-shirt, stepped into his pale-blue moccasins and went out and down the street to the telephone booth where there was a directory in a tin cover.

It was all he could do. Connie was Wilmot's sister, that fact came through in the letter, but she could well be married, her last name something other than Wilmot. And there was no guarantee she lived in Centralia—the other envelope might have been addressed anywhere. If he came up empty now, Meara's only recourse would be to write to the man in Montreal and point out his mistake. Maybe he could telephone, but that meant money for a long-distance call. Reversing the charge might put Wilmot off.

The telephone directory had been vandalized, but fortunately only the first half of it. Meara crammed himself into the booth with the door open and thumbed the wrinkled pages. His shirt was wet and he hadn't started yet.

Wilmot, Connie, 27b Rectory Lane, Centralia. And a telephone number. There were no great distances in this town, which was smaller, even, than Halifax. Meara knew where Rectory Lane was. It was behind the Anglican church halfway up Circle Hill. He decided to go and have a beer and then walk over there.

The whistle on the kettle was beginning to sputter and falter because the water inside had almost all boiled away. Connie Wilmot got up slowly from the table with Steve's letter in her hand. She turned off the gas, went to the window, and began to reread the message in the dying light of evening.

"Dear Michael Meara," her brother had typed erratically, "we have a mutual friend, Sid Andover. Sid tells me you owe him a favor and he has given me permission to call in your marker.

"I want you to do something for me there in Centralia. It must be

done within the next month. More I cannot tell you in this letter, but Andover says you are a tough bird and can be relied upon to deliver.

"Try to come to Montreal in the next few days and we can talk. There'll be good money in this for you and I am in a hurry. So come as soon as you can."

Connie jumped as the big bass bell rang in the tower outside the window. Now she was in for a quarter hour of distraction because the carilloneurs had climbed to the church belfry and were going to practice their changes. The tumbling, descending scales began and Connie's memory began supplying the words from a sheet of music she had studied as a child when it had been thought that she might learn to play the piano. Little brother Stevie used to stand at her shoulder, his breath smelling of licorice candy as he sang the words in a piping soprano voice.

"Beside Paul's steeple stands a tree,
As full of apples as can be.
The little boys of London town,
They run with hooks to pull them down,
And then they run from hedge to hedge
Until they come to London Bridge!"

The silence after the bells had finished ringing was penetrated by a persistent buzzing. Somebody was at the front door, had climbed the stairs unheard, had been out there pressing the button for how long?

"Coming! Sorry, couldn't hear you!"

At first, after she opened the door, Connie thought her brother was standing out there on the landing under the dusty skylight. But no, it was a man almost as big as Steve but considerably younger. His beefy body was packed into tight clothing and he was holding an envelope in his hand. "Connie Wilmot?"

"Yes."

"I think we're getting each other's mail."

For a few seconds she waited, letting her eyes widen, her mouth hang open, giving this once-in-a-lifetime situation its proper reaction. Then she said, "Michael Meara?" She was holding his letter the way he was carrying hers and they both began laughing as they raised them above their heads. "I thought I was going crazy," Connie said, "until I went back and saw it wasn't meant for me. But the envelope was. Yours, too, Mr. Meara? Come on inside, God help us,

sit down and have a cup of tea. No. to hell with the tea, the kettle just boiled dry. Have a beer."

Meara eased himself onto a chair beside the kitchen table and watched this angular woman bend herself double to get inside a small refrigerator and bring out two bottles of beer. They were quart bottles, she was the real thing. She snapped her cap, passed him the opener, and let him get on with it as she filled a glass for herself, half emptied it at a swallow, and topped it up. "Nothing my brother Steve does could ever surprise me, but I must admit this is exceptional. He's never put letters in the wrong envelopes before."

"He's the famous football broadcaster."

"To me, he's little Steve. I'm only four years older than he is but I did a lot of the bringing up. There were only the two of us but mother never believed in extending herself. She stayed in bed a lot of the time. Today we'd say she's depressed and give her some pills and she'd probably snap out of it and shape up."

Watching the woman talk, looking into the animated face, Meara decided she wasn't that old. Well, she had to be in her late fifties if she was older than Wilmot, but the cheerful curve of her mouth was young and her eyes were those of a merry child. He recalled Melanie, her face like the cover of a glossy magazine when she went to hustle men at the Rendezvous Bar, then the same face early in the morning, washed out, a woman defeated before she was thirty.

"We better exchange letters." He took hers from his envelope and pushed it across the table. She did the same for him.

"Are you a friend of Steve's?"

"Don't even know the man."

"I guessed that. Sorry, I shouldn't have read your letter, but I did, every word of it. Never mind, it made no sense to me. Steve is always getting up to things that never seem to . . ."

Meara drank his beer while the woman rattled on without any help from him. It was relaxing. He had never been much good at conversation. Neither was Melanie. The silences used to build up between them and fill the room like a gas leak—and then one of them would strike a spark and the explosion would occur, leaving them both devastated. Especially the last time when she took the baby from him, took the little girl out of his arms, leaving Meara's bare chest slightly damp and cooling, and then told him it was never his baby anyway. Took such pleasure in letting him know it was another man's baby—how stupid did he think she was, believing she would ever let a loser like him make her pregnant?

"But I've made up my mind to change things," Connie was saying. "It's possible if you make up your mind. What happened to the beer? Have another, I'm going to." She set about getting two more bottles from the refrigerator. "Listen to me doing all the talking, I've been that way all my life. Tell me to shut up, I won't mind. I won't shut up, either, but I won't mind. What about you, Mike? What are you doing these days?"

"Getting by. I work in the kitchen over at the Hole in the Wall."

"A restaurant man. Me, too. When I work, which I'm not doing at the moment because I don't feel like it, I drive on down to Baytown and serve meals at the Coronet Hotel. They put up with me coming and going because I've been there longer than anybody and some of the regulars like me. If ever you get arrested in Baytown and you come up in front of Judge Homer Lang, tell him you're a friend of Connie Wilmot."

Meara surprised himself by smiling. Close to arrest in Montreal for hitting Melanie harder than he meant to, the only thing that had saved him was the intervention of Sid Andover. He unfolded his letter now and frowned in the dim light at the typewritten lines. Connie took this as the cue for her to read her letter, too. In silence, they absorbed Wilmot's communications.

"The bastard," Connie said cheerfully as she finished first. "Stay away for a couple of months while he fixes up something for me. Stay here in Centralia because he wants me here. Sometimes I don't trust that little brother of mine. He can be devious. I wouldn't put it past him to find himself a job in the States somewhere and just disappear. Leaving poor old Connie high and dry."

Meara finished reading. He folded the letter into a small square and stuffed it into a back pocket. "Thanks for the beer," he said, getting to his feet. "I have to go."

"Really?" Her disappointment, though exaggerated, was genuine. "I hoped you'd read me Steve's letter. I'm only joking, I read it. Listen, I've enjoyed this very much. If ever you're in the neighborhood, drop up. I'm here most of the time. Come earlier and I can provide church bells. Cryptic joke. Nice meeting you, Mike, I mean it."

Meara thought about Wilmot's message through the next week. He knew what the man was getting at—the two letters made it clear. The sister was to be killed. What she had done to deserve this, Meara couldn't imagine. She was a decent sort, a good type. Maybe

he ought to telephone Sid Andover and ask his advice. Andover was his friend, not Wilmot. The phonebooth was outside and Sid wouldn't mind paying for the call.

In the days that followed, going about his work in the restaurant kitchen, Meara found most of his thinking was concentrated on the older woman with the youthful face. And with this thinking came a release from the day-and-night tension which he had been experiencing since the catastrophe with Melanie. Standing one morning with his arms inside a steel cauldron, scrubbing it with a plastic brush, Meara drew in a deep breath and let it all out—and realized that for the first time in years he was relaxed.

"What do you need two days off for?" the restaurant owner asked him, keeping his head down over an account book as his pot-walloper filled the doorway of the back office.

"I gotta see a man in Montreal." If the boss gave him trouble, he would mention Andover's name.

"Go, then."

On Friday morning, Meara was standing in the doorway of the bus terminal, suitcase in hand, traveling money in his pocket. But he was facing deliberately away from the ticket window and the feeling inside him was—hell, he would not have been able to say what his feelings were.

It was then that Connie Wilmot drove past in a rusty Volkswagen, beeped the horn, and made an abrupt, swerving stop at the curb. Meara was reminded of a carnival years ago in Halifax and himself and a girl in an electric car, deliberately ramming friends and strangers in other little cars.

"Hello, Mike. Going someplace?"

He had to bend double to get his face on her level. He got down on one knee, balancing himself with an elbow on the windowframe. She was radiating joy all over him and it made Meara uneasy. Not that he wasn't pleased as hell to be in her company.

"I was thinking about it," he said.

"Aren't you sure? You're all packed."

"I may not go."

"Is something the matter?"

"Yeah." This was crazy. She was going to ask him and he was going to tell her. Nothing else in the world—his own safety, the anger of Wilmot and Andover, the money he would lose—nothing was as important as telling Connie the way things were.

"Get in," she said. "We'll go for a drive and you'll tell me what it is."

They drove out of town and into farmland that lay between Centralia and Baytown. He got out her brother's letter and read it to her. She had not understood its meaning when she went through it by mistake. Now he explained, concluding, "I know it's what he wants me to do."

"But why?"

"Have you got another explanation?"

"Where do you come into this?"

"He got my name from a guy I used to work for."

"As a killer?" When he didn't reply, she said, "You've killed people for money?"

"Never."

"Then it doesn't make sense. Why would my brother ask you to see him about killing me? If that's even what he has in mind."

Meara wasn't ready to tell her about Melanie and the favor he owed Andover for getting him off that hook. Nor could he go into the mixed feelings he had ended up with after telephoning his old boss in Montreal. So he remained silent.

Connie pulled the car over onto the hard shoulder and shifted into neutral. She leaned forward, resting both arms on the wheel, staring through the windshield as if trying to penetrate fog. Then she turned to Meara.

"Did I ever tell you about Gordie Kennedy?"

"Your husband?"

"It wasn't his fault. Five years overseas and me writing him hundreds of letters. The understanding was that if he made it home, we'd get married. If the Germans didn't get him, Connie Wilmot would. Hoo-ha, I can laugh about it, would you listen to that? I knew as I went into the church it was a mistake. I said so to the maid of honor. She said, 'You can't back out, the hall's paid for.' "

"No joking matter, Connie. If I turn this down, they could send somebody here. For the both of us, because we know about it."

"What I mean about Gordie Kennedy is I'm not making the same mistake again. For years I've had my mind set on sooner or later moving to Montreal and staying with Steve. I saw myself ending up life looking after my little brother, the way I started out."

"He doesn't want that."

"Neither do I. Now I really think about it, it's the *last* thing I want." She clapped a hand on the back of Meara's neck and shook

his head gently from side to side. "I'd rather stay here and drink beer with you."

"Are you listening to me? They may not let us do that."

"No problem." She put the car in gear and made a U-turn, then eased her foot down on the road back to Centralia. "You're all packed. I'll throw some things into a bag and we'll drive down to Montreal together. See little Stevie and get this business straightened out once and for all."

Steve Wilmot knew he was repeating himself but he went ahead because he had invented the line and he thought it was good. Looking down onto the field where the visiting quarterback had just been overwhelmed for an eleven-yard loss, he said into the microphone, "And Hamer is sacked by Kaplanski, Zeno, Fetterman, Bailie, the coach, the water-boy, and several members of the Montreal Chamber of Commerce."

He glanced down the length of the broadcast booth to the visitors' section, where Connie was sitting beside the giant with the stubborn face who, he had been startled to learn last night when they showed up at the apartment unannounced, was none other than Andover's friend, Mike Meara. It was his own fault, sealing letters into wrong envelopes, tipping his hand to Connie, giving Meara a reason to meet her. Wilmot went mute as the football game retreated from his mind. At his side, René Duchesne took over with some instant commentary.

Last night, with Eloise bedded down and waiting for him, there had been no chance of talking, of finding out what the pair from Centralia were up to. It had to be bad news. All Wilmot could do was invite them to the game this afternoon in the hope that afterward he might get Meara aside and ask him if he was tired of living.

Duchesne concluded his analysis. Wilmot forced himself to concentrate. "Third down and twenty-one and this is make or break for the Tiger-Cats . . ."

Everybody was euphoric after the game because Montreal had won and people were starting to talk about the championship. Wilmot dragged himself past colleagues and hangers-on and made it to his sister's side. "You and me, Meara," he said. "Let's go someplace and talk."

"The three of us," Connie said.

Pierre Martel materialized at Wilmot's elbow. The millionaire was as polished and beautiful as his daughter. A delicate man with

many rings on his fingers, he put a hand through the crook of Wilmot's arm. "Great game, Steven. You recaptured some of your old form."

Everybody within earshot stopped talking and watched Wilmot for his reaction. "I call that faint praise," the broadcaster said. "Damn you, too, Pierre."

"Come on up. A few of us are having a drink." Martel guided Wilmot toward the carpeted stairs leading to his hospitality suite, which occupied a quarter of the top level of the stadium.

"Meet my sister Connie," Wilmot said in desperation. "Down for the day from Centralia. And her friend, Mike Meara."

Martel was delighted to add them to the party. "Come and have a drink. This is a great day for Montreal football in more ways than one." As they mounted the stairs, he was laughing. " 'Several members of the Montreal Chamber of Commerce,' I've always liked that one."

Wilmot was surprised to find Eloise in the suite, sitting beside one of the big windows with a drink in her hand. She hated sports in general and made no effort to disguise her feelings. "Why do you hang around with me, then?" he had asked her years ago when they began dating.

"Because I like the recognition in public."

Now she got up and began displaying herself for her father's guests, keeping some distance from Wilmot, as if he was carrying plague. Connie and Meara accepted drinks and seemed to fall into the party mood. Pierre Martel had one arm around the shoulder of a federal politician and was pointing to the eastern horizon. "A whole new urban focus," he was saying. "Seven highrise buildings, a shopping concourse, schools are there, churches—all we need is to extend the subway."

Wilmot got Connie and Meara into a corner. "What's the story?"

"You'll have to tell *me*," Connie said. "Mike and I put the letters together. He says it means you want him to take me out."

"Crazy," Wilmot said.

"What, then?" Meara asked him.

"There's no connection between the letter I wrote you and what I wrote her. I told Connie to stay put. I asked you to come here and see me about a piece of work."

Martel's voice was raised as somebody beat on a glass. Everybody else stopped talking. "—to the business at hand. I've gathered you here on this auspicious day—Montreal 35, Hamilton 22 (cheering

and applause)—to honor a man whose contribution to the success of football in this city is a matter of record. A big man who has done a big job—Steve Wilmot!"

René Duchesne was standing beside Eloise. Loud enough for Wilmot to hear him, Duchesne said to her, "What do you plan to do with the ashes?" She laughed and fell against him.

Martel was pontificating about contributions and rewards. "So as of the end of the season," he concluded, "Steve will join me in the executive suite on special projects. And the new voice of pro football will be that of René Duchesne."

As people clapped and cheered, Connie slung an arm around Wilmot's neck and kissed him on the cheek. "My little brother," she said, "in the executive suite."

"For God's sake, back off," he ordered her, grinning for the crowd. "You don't even know what day it is." Accepting handshakes and slaps on the back, he maneuvered his way to Martel's side. Their eyes met. The millionaire never stopped smiling. Guiding Wilmot into a pool of privacy against a window, he said, "It's been coming a long time, Steven. You must have seen it."

"Special projects?"

"You'll be paid. If you can't do it, don't."

"My lawyer will be checking my contract. I'll probably sue."

"It occurred to me you might cause trouble," Martel said. "I'm prepared for that, too."

On the way out with Connie and Meara, heading for his apartment, Wilmot cruised past Eloise. "Thanks for your support."

Her teeth and eyes matched his. "Without me, you'd have been gone three seasons ago."

Duchesne was the only one who was showing his discomfort. "It's my turn, Steve," he said wearily.

"In five years," Wilmot warned him, "it'll be your turn."

"I know," Duchesne said.

"It was never you," Wilmot said to his sister. They had been home for an hour and for once he was drinking more than she was. He moved about the room with the bottle, bracing himself with legs apart as he splashed a bit of whiskey into the drinks his guests were nursing, then fell back into an armchair and poured himself four more ounces. "Never you, Connie. I wanted you to stay put because I had this problem here. I had to get rid of Martel before he got rid of me. Which is where you come in, Meara." He had invented this

story on the drive from the stadium. By now he believed it himself.

"You must really think I'm crazy," Meara said, "if you think I'd go after somebody like him."

"You saw the bastard. Doesn't he deserve it?"

"Never did anything to me."

"So, good. You've got no motive, nothing to connect you. You hit him and I pay you and you go back to Centralia."

Connie said patiently, "You should sleep on this, Steve. You aren't thinking straight. We should all go to bed and sleep on it."

"Who asked you?"

"Michael is not a gun for hire. I don't know where you get your ideas."

"Michael owed a large favor to somebody named Andover." Their voices were rising progressively, turning petulant. Meara could imagine brother and sister around a kitchen table years ago, bickering for the sake of winning, the point of the argument long lost. He gave Wilmot a penetrating look.

"I don't know what you've said to Andover. I'm pretty sure he'd never authorize anything against Martel."

Connie produced an exaggerated yawn.

"I'm beat," she said. "Drunk enough to sleep. Can I lie down in the spare room?"

"As long as you don't expect me to tuck you in."

She approached him and cocked one foot across the other and leaned an elbow on her brother's shoulder as if he was a fencepost. "Little Stevie," she said, "don't you remember the way it was? You couldn't sleep. You were scared of everything in those days—scared of school because you couldn't understand decimals, scared of what would happen to us if Mum and Dad died."

"Go and lie down, for God's sake."

"So I used to sit on the end of your bed and read you to sleep. Remember that? *The Hobbit* had just come out and I'd do a chapter every night. Remember Gandalf and Gollum and Bilbo Baggins?" Her brother's face was drained pale, his eyes shocked by violence only he could see. She kissed him. "And you're still afraid."

"It was never you," Wilmot said after her as she drifted out of the room. "It was Martel."

Now Michael Meara walked through an open doorway onto a balcony. He stared down at a patio, shrubs, and fountains, five floors below. He glanced to either side, saw no neighbors, only closed doors. Wilmot followed him outside with glass and bottle.

"At the end of the day," the broadcaster said, "you're going to have to do what Sid Andover tells you."

"No doubt about that. I owe Andover."

Wilmot poured whiskey and drank, spilling some of it onto the front of his shirt. "And don't you forget it. Friends help each other. That's what friends are for."

It was as good a time as any. Meara moved to a position between Wilmot and the doorway. "You're right," he said. "But what made you think Andover was your friend? Sid Andover is Martel's friend." And having said this, Meara bullied into Wilmot, pushed him easily off balance against the railing, sent him over, falling, producing no sound except a faint smashing of glass and a blunt thud from fifty feet below.

He went inside quickly and telephoned The Golden Glow restaurant. He asked for the boss and was put through. "It's done," he said. "He committed suicide off the balcony."

"I was afraid something like this might happen," Andover said. "Being taken off the air was impossible for him to swallow. Thanks, Michael, well done. Now you don't owe me any more."

Meara decided to say it. "Martel owes you."

"Something like that."

The bell-ringers were making so much noise with their Christmas carol, conversation was out of the question. Connie went about putting the meal together while Meara worked on the jigsaw puzzle they'd been doing for a week. It was a tough one—"The Laughing Cavalier," acres of dark hat with all pieces looking the same. Trial and error. When the carilloning stopped at last, their ears buzzed for some time but they were able to talk again.

"I'm still not adjusted," Connie said, wiping her hands on a paper towel. "First Christmas without my brother Not that we saw much of each other."

"It's over."

She came to the table and began sorting through the pile of greeting cards Mike had brought from the front door when he came in. "I won't go on about it," she said. One of the envelopes hadn't been opened. She turned it over and saw the company name in the corner: Pierre Martel, Inc. It was addressed to Meara. "Aren't you going to open this?"

"After we eat." Meara was tired of being used. But he knew they had him, he knew he was probably in for keeps.

After being stationed with the Air Force in Washington, D.C., N. Scott Warner moved to the Maine coast, where he lives with his wife Thera and is a lab technician. He is working on his second story about deputy sheriff Ezra Katz.

Nice people, Katz thought as he drove to the hospital in the heavy rain. But I wish all these nice, well meaning folk got lost somewhere else . . .

NICE, WELL MEANING FOLK

by N. SCOTT WARNER

Lower down gives way to what has drifted up. The new Chevy police cruiser was driven by Sheriff Gagne because he was older, supposedly experienced, and, anyway, it was his county, right? Ezra Katz, the tall Maine deputy with sandy hair cropped close, was next in line and so drove a yellow rustbucket of a Bronco. The vehicle parked in the dusty driveway and its weary engine spluttered to a halt. Katz got out and walked to where the body lay in the grass.

The dead man was Roy Finney, a carpenter who took odd jobs. His tarpapered home wasn't far away. The chalky face pointed upward, the mouth slightly open and shriveled like a dead rose. Finney seemed to float in the bright grass, half swallowed by waves of hawkweed and mountain fern. His right temple was a dark mess, as if it had been sampled with a scoop. Beside him a cherry-red, new-looking Honda three-wheeler, a vehicle somewhere between a motorcycle and an oversized toy, was leaning crazily on its side. Oil, spilled from the crankcase, smeared the grass and rocks. The ignition key pointed to "on," but the engine was silent.

To the west, the field rose and melted into a gritty yard surrounding a farmhouse of unpainted granite fieldstone. Its metal roof, a protection against the harsh Maine winter, glittered in the sunlight

like a battered medieval helmet. A peeling barn flanked and dwarfed the building, a mountain of grassy manure looming up behind it. This was Hatch property, next to the Finney land. It didn't go far, for Mildred Hatch had been selling bits and pieces, holding onto a few acres that were no longer farmed. It was Mildred who had phoned in, claiming a body lay outside.

In the tan driveway dirt, there were faint marks that the deputy tentatively identified as boot prints. A recent, sudden shower had smudged them.

Katz knocked softly, then hard, but there was no movement around the green window shades. He stepped aside and put his face close to a pane. His knuckles rapped, and a startled face appeared on the other side. Katz stepped back and turned toward the door again. The lady of the house, a short, oldish woman in a purple sack of a dress, beckoned him inside.

"Come in, Ezra," she rasped. Her tough amber face, like a dried apple, split into a grin.

A hot wind flew out from the large, undivided downstairs room. The Clarion wood stove roared, although it was at least 65 degrees outside. A dented tin kettle steamed on its hot black surface. Katz loosened his collar a little and shut the door behind him. Mildred slopped hot water on instant coffee in a mug without a handle.

"Have some?"

"Sure."

He took the mug gingerly, anxious not to burn his fingertips, and sat back in a chrome-trimmed chair heavily patched with silver tape. He noticed a large wooden baseball bat leaning against the table.

Katz sipped the bitter brew. "Out of sugar and milk again," Mildred said. "Food stamps ain't what they used to be. Don't go far nowadays."

"Yep," Katz said. It hadn't been long ago that his mother had gone off stamps. That had taken some doing. "Good coffee," he said brightly.

"Nice and polite, aren't you?" Mildred said, dragging a step stool roughly across speckled linoleum. She sat down briskly, pushing heavy eyeglasses up her short nose.

"Want to tell me what you saw?" Katz asked after a carefully measured sip.

Deep furrows lined Mildred's forehead. "Not much to tell. There

was that damned noise again, and a bang—must have hit that rock. Drinking, no doubt. Always drinking, he was."

"Bashed his head, Mildred."

"Ayep," Mildred agreed. "Reckon he did."

"You go to look?"

"Just a bit," Mildred said. "Dead man doesn't need no ambulance, I figure, so I called the sheriff. Couldn't think of nothing else."

"Subject drove into your yard," Deputy Katz summed up, "made a short turn, hit that rock, fell over, and hit his head on another rock."

Mildred wasn't listening. Her beady eyes followed a cricket hopping on the well worn floorboards along the edge of the linoleum. Her hand crept to the bat, there was a quick movement and a noisy grind, and the fat insect became a whorl in the cracked linoleum. Katz noticed a good many others.

"Lots of them about now," he said. "It's the wet weather brings them out."

Mildred cackled. "Get every single one of them. Unwholesome little buggers. They slip in the food."

Katz studied the bat. It was large and splintered slightly. There were no dirty fingerprints on it as on every other object he saw around. Mildred didn't waste time on cleanliness.

"You always get them with the bat?"

"Stamp on them, too," Mildred said. "Got to get them good."

Katz finished his coffee with one courageous gulp. "Finney hadn't had the machine too long?"

Mildred poked carefully at a remaining tooth. "Only last week. Didn't know how to handle it yet. Drinking didn't help."

"He come often to visit?"

"Nah." Mildred leered. "Don't encourage no bums around here. Keep to myself."

Katz remembered seeing a car in the barn. He had seen her in town, too. She was getting around and had some welfare, maybe savings from selling land.

"You ever worry about getting robbed?"

"Of what?" Mildred asked.

"But Finney came to visit."

"Once in a while," Mildred said. "Not too often. Not today. Just showing off and racing his dumb machine, making a racket."

"What time, Mildred?"

"Got no time here." She pointed at what was left of a clock. "Sun'd been up a while."

"You phoned in at ten."

"Maybe ten," she said. "It's Saturday, ain't it?"

"Yes, Mildred," Katz said gently.

"Fridays he got drunker."

"Than what?"

"Than other days."

"Wonder where he got the money to buy that Honda," Katz said.

"Same here." Mildred waddled to the stove. "More coffee?"

"No thanks," Katz said quickly. "Bought it on time, cut the beer to make the down payment maybe. Had he been working lately?"

"With that other bum, Levesque," Mildred said. "He lives on the other side of them alders. I've seen them go off in Levesque's car."

"Last night, too?"

Mildred nodded. "Plowing up my dooryard again, them bastards."

Katz got up. "I better get going. See you, Mildred. Take it easy."

"Always do." She opened the door for him.

Finney's shack showed some effort at design, with a pretty gable sloping smoothly to a side where a shed had been started and never finished. But Katz noted other details, too. Exposed timbers on the unfinished shed were weathered to a silver grey. A stack of shingles rotted in the tall grass and shreds of tarpaper, blotched with water stains, blew about in the breeze. The roof was covered in odd-sized sheets of corrugated iron, some rusted, and there were yellow drip stains on the siding. Katz investigated several junk cars. The closest, a Ford Galaxy, might have worked until recently—the registration was still valid, but bottles were heaped against its fenders. Blackberry shrubs grew over the other phantoms. Bags of garbage ripped and worried by animals spread their contents across the yard and path, the labels and torn packages mostly faded into a tired white by the sun and rain.

Katz fanned blackflies and mosquitos aside as he pushed the poorly hung door and stepped inside. Light streaked weakly through greasy windows. Dust settled in clouds onto the contents of the single room. A couch wrapped in dark, brittle burlap sagged under a collection of damp newspapers and discarded clothes. A low cot with a blackened, dimpled mattress stood under a staircase that seemed ready to slide away. A tower of magazines, some bound with yellowed twine, leaned into a thin shaft of light, obliterating a window. Fast-

food packing littered the table and floor. An old console television set, its screen oily and dark, might still be in working order.

Katz left the shack and crossed Mildred's property, heading for alders thickly veiled in the gauze of tentworm colonies. It was raining again. Levesque's location was a lookalike of Finney's, but there was only one car, a badly rusted compact that probably started up all right. Katz noted it was overdue for an inspection. The Toyota made a brave effort to shine as it got washed by the rain.

Katz found his way between heaps of debris and approached the shack. A plastic flamingo, its eyes missing, had been stuck next to a cracked concrete slab that served as a step. "Anybody home?"

Levesque, a large, red-faced man with wooly sideburns, showed up at the door. He hadn't shaved for a while and his beergut ballooned over oily jeans, stretching the limits of a ribbed tee-shirt. A dirty hand, hanging limply, carried a beer bottle by its neck.

"The law," Levesque grunted, opening the door.

Katz followed Levesque inside.

"Someone notice my inspection is out of state?" Levesque asked. He put on a funny squeak. "Will see to it right away, officer—first thing Monday morning. Sorry about that, *sir.*"

The living room had a low ceiling the texture of cottage cheese and the carpet could have been made out of matted red hair. Levesque pointed at a chair and stumbled onto a vinyl recliner. He sat down clumsily. "Why did you put yourself out? I have a phone, and I'm in the book. Could have saved yourself the trip." He tipped back a plastic baseball cap with the mouth of the bottle, revealing a red crease that bordered a bald patch in wet, thin hair.

Katz ignored the chair that was one leg short and sat down gingerly on a sofa that looked like it had slept in the green army blankets that partially covered its ungainly bulk. The cushions were hard as brick.

"Something else," Katz said. "Never mind the inspection for now."

"Like what?" Levesque asked brightly, slurring comfortably now.

"You went drinking with Finney last night?"

Levesque tried to sit up. "As a matter of fact, I did," he said pleasantly. "Yes, sir, we had a few—but never again, and that's right, too. Silly no-good bum."

"Finney's dead," Katz said.

"No," Levesque said, draining his bottle. "What's that?"

"Dead," Katz said softly. "Lying in Mildred's yard with his head bashed in."

Levesque thought. He closed one eye. "Good for him."

"You two didn't go home together?"

"Must have walked," Levesque said. "Kept punching me in the bar. I wasn't paying much attention so he got thrown out alone."

"You didn't mind?" Katz asked. "He wasn't your buddy?"

Levesque's forefinger wagged. "Bad influence, officer. Never drank this much until I started working with old Finney. So he's dead now, eh? Well, what do you know."

Katz looked around. There was a baseball bat near the door. The handle was sooty with dirt. He pointed it out. "Go in for a bit of sport?"

"Guns are expensive," Levesque said, studying his bottle with a fascinated, intense stare; shaking it as if hoping it might fill itself again. "Had all sorts once. Twelve-gauge shotgun, a good twenty-two, a couple of handguns. Sold them all. Now I've got to bash them."

"Bash who?"

"Them that bother me."

A cricket crawled by Katz's right foot. He stamped his boot, avoiding the insect.

"Got some bugs here," he observed.

Levesque looked. "What—them little fellows? Come to keep me company. They have pretty legs, too. Sure can hop."

"Don't they get into your food?"

"What?" Levesque tried to focus. "No, not that I notice." He burped heavily. "Out of beer again. Bah. So what do you reckon happened to old Finney?"

"Drunk?" Katz asked. "Fell off his bike?"

"Nah."

"You don't think so?"

"Stupid bastard didn't get drunk in the morning, and besides—"

"Besides what?"

"He rode pretty good."

"You didn't see him this morning?"

"No, sir," Levesque said. "Wish I had, though. Might have bashed him myself."

"Would you do that?"

"Me?" Levesque asked. "I'm a good guy. I've been to Viet Nam. I got a medal."

"Come and have a look at Finney," Katz suggested.

"Not right now," Levesque said. "I'll read about it in the paper come Monday . . ."

Nice people, Katz thought as he drove back in the heavy rain. Then: They aren't really bad. They all got lost somehow. This is a good place to get lost in. Water pelted the roadside hard, mottling the runny mud. Budding trees and evergreens with rust-colored needles beneath their umbrellas swayed with the wind. A grey sky sat on a seamless horizon as if determined to keep the sun out forever. The Bronco's tires slammed into potholes and ruts.

But, Katz thought on, I wish all these nice, well meaning folk got lost somewhere else.

He parked the car in the new hospital's parking lot and pulled the emergency brake, noting smooth, recently laid pavement through a hole by the shift lever. The brake lever felt loose. He looked over his shoulder and saw a small tree. If the brake didn't hold, then perhaps the tree would for a bit.

He marched into the lobby, khaki uniform spotted in dark brown. He smiled at the switchboard operator, a middle-aged woman with protruding brown eyes and a pouty mouth. She folded her puffed arms on the counter and showed him her gums.

"Could you direct me to the morgue?" Katz asked. He shook the water from his hair.

"The morgue? You must be Deputy Katz."

He frowned. Should he be associated with corpses?

"The doctor is working on your client," the heavy woman said. "We got your call and the ambulance picked him up. The doctor won't know anything yet. Why don't you come back in an hour?"

The hospital had a coffee shop. Katz ordered some tea to wash his mouth with and there was some banana pie. The pie wasn't bad. He leafed through magazines.

The operator waddled in. "The doctor is ready for you now. Would you care to follow me?"

Katz shuddered as he got up. The elevator took him down to a corridor still smelling of fresh paint. The morgue was a tiny room that the doctor seemed to consider palatial. "Deputy Katz," the pathologist, still a young man but with a shock of white hair, said precisely, as if he were memorizing the title and name for future use. "Look what we have here. Everything in tip-top order. Much better than what we're used to in the city. Am I glad I got this job—unspoiled country, lots of space, a cottage instead of an apartment that gets burglarized twice a week, a garden. My wife just planted it. Broccoli! Leeks!"

"Glad to have you with us," Katz said obediently.

There were steel plates covering the concrete block of the far wall. In an alcove was a cabinet of blue-grey metal and glass containing surgical gowns and basins. To the left stood a deep porcelain sink with a long hose and spray nozzle curled around the wide drain. The center of the morgue contained a cutting table, a long metal altar with a beveled surface and a gutter on the side. Finney's belly had been split open, the incision spreading at the breastbone to create a flap of skin that stretched back over Finney's face. A scale hung by Finney's feet. Organs in labeled plastic bags were neatly corralled between the knees.

"Bit of a boozer," the doctor said. "Or, rather, a confirmed and terminal alcoholic, as we can see by the liver. This in here is the liver." He indicated a zip-locked bag filled with clear liquid in which swam a large purple object, yellow and brittle-looking at the edges.

"But was he drunk when he died?" Katz asked.

"No," the doctor said. "Yes, I can say that with some degree of certainty. No, Deputy Katz, this man was not drunk during the last few hours of his miserable life. I would say he had one hell of a hangover, but that's something else."

"And the wound, doctor?"

"A bad wound." The doctor rubbed his chin. "He got hit with something. Instantaneous death."

"Maybe he hit something?" Katz tried. "I mean he hit *it* rather than *it* hit him?"

"Yes," the doctor said. "That's police talk. You men think differently. Yes, I see. Well, perhaps, yes—why not? Hit a tree?"

"Why a tree?" Katz asked. "Why not a rock?"

The doctor brought a pair of tweezers. "This here is no rock, Deputy Katz. This is definitely a splinter."

"Pine," Katz said.

"Pine, do you think? I don't know about trees yet. They're all green to me. In summer, that is—maybe not in winter. I'll find out in due time. I'm looking forward to some hiking."

"Any trace of rock in the wound, doctor?"

"No. Dust, yes, bit of dirt. I'll have it analyzed. I can mail it out today."

"Ah," Deputy Katz said. "Thank you, doctor."

Lichen-smothered rocks shouldering spruce trees marked the entrance to the property, and this time Katz turned the wheel softly so as not to spin the tires in the soft dirt road. He cut power and the

engine quieted with a sigh. He let the Bronco coast down the incline and winced when it rattled heavily over a deep rut. Once within sight of the small stone farmhouse, he turned the wheel and softly applied the brakes by a tight cluster of firs. Katz got out and walked soundlessly to the sand by the foundation of the house. There was a line of laundry suitable for cover. He got behind it and worked his way along the wall.

Now.

He yelled and kicked the door, then jumped back into a crouch. He waited only a little over a second. Mildred was out, swinging her bat.

"Mildred?" Katz asked.

She whirled around and the bat came down. Katz deflected the weapon with his raised arm but the blow still stung. He grabbed the handle and wrenched it free. Mildred staggered back and whimpered. "Let's go in," Katz said.

Mildred backed to the rear wall.

"You always do that when you're bothered?" Katz asked. "Let them have it, huh?"

Mildred cried.

"It's all right," Katz said.

"It's not all right!" Mildred screamed. "He bugged me, like them damn crickets. I've thrown him out before. But he kept coming on that damn machine, making noise, wanting beer and what not. I got nothing to give away."

"Could have called us," Katz said. "That's what we're for, Mildred, to protect you. So you hit Finney. Then what happened?"

"Nothing," Mildred said. "He wasn't dead. He rode away."

"And bashed his head on a rock when his three-wheeler tipped over?"

"Right," Mildred said. "Right."

"Not right," Katz said. "Maybe you better come with me."

"Chains?" Mildred asked. "I don't want no chains."

"No chains," Katz said.

"Can't have no-good bums tearing around my place," Mildred said in the Bronco. "I'll tell the judge. He don't want no bums around his place, either."

"You tell the judge, Mildred," Katz said, "and I'll tell him, too. Don't worry now, you'll be all right in jail."

Sheriff Gagne rested behind his desk, dapper in his starched uni-

form, studying his trimmed fingernails. He could see himself in the glass of the bookcase. He touched his hair that had started greying at the temples. He thought that looked nice. Katz stood on the other side of the mahogany desk.

"So Mildred bashed the fellow," the sheriff said. "Amazing. I would think it was Levesque. A pretty rowdy lot, Finney and Levesque, bound to start bashing each other."

"Levesque is kind of kindly," Katz said. "Wouldn't kill a fly." He coughed. "Well, a cricket, anyway. Seems to like the little varmints. He says they keep him company. Mildred squashes bugs."

"So I heard." The sheriff blinked at Katz. The deputy was framed in the background of the office—thin rosewood paneling, certificates, pictures of goats from county fairs, and drapes. "Well, we've got some good charges against our suspect."

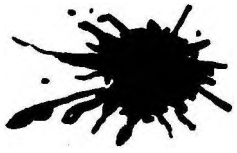
"Lonely," Katz said, "for one. And crazy. Lonely folk are often out of it a bit."

"Extenuating circumstances?" the sheriff asked. He got up and marched around his desk, stopped in front of a picture of a framed billy goat, and turned around. "Nah. First she bashes him dead, then she picks him up, then she slams him on his machine, then she starts the damned thing, gets it into gear, and aims it at the rocks. First-degree murder, Katz. We won't go easy on her."

"I'll go easy on her," Katz said, "and I made the arrest."

"Yes," the sheriff said curtly. "Back to work for now. The day isn't over yet."

Katz marched out of the office and Gagne snapped the report folder with his fingers to the rhythm of the step. He studied the billy-goat photograph, his scowl weakening into a grin. Crickets, he mused to the goat. No crickets here. Just a smart deputy who likes odd people. Why not? Someone should.



a *NEW* short story by

GEORGE BAXT

Andrea found the strength to say, "I have a previous engagement with my friend Ilie Torsum, the gentleman at your elbow who is eavesdropping on our conversation."

Nick turned and stared at Ilie Torsum, whose name he recognized, for he had won a certain reputation as the Oscar de la Renta of architects. He specialized in custom-designed restaurants, department stores, and houses of detention. "Mr. Torsum," said Nick somewhat gravely, "surely you recognize a case of love at first sight."

"I'm not in love with you," Ilie told Nick.

Nick Morell, perhaps safely described as a cross between Howard Roarke and Judge Crater. This story about him is one you'd enjoy reading aloud to friends. It's a story no one but George Baxt, our one and only, could have written. Wild . . .

IN THE TIME OF NICK

by GEORGE BAXT

Nicholas Morell was a man of unchallengeable ethics, morals, and principles. That was his first mistake. The most honored, the most respected, the most brilliant architect of his generation, he permitted himself to be seduced into a partnership with Grebb and Flakey. That was his second mistake. Louis Grebb and Merton Flakey were the flamboyant twosome who were putting together real-estate parcels all over the country, tearing down the most beautiful representational historical architecture and replacing it with office buildings and condominiums that were politely described as monstrous eyesores. It was Louis Grebb, he of the smooth tongue

and silver delivery, who had convinced Nick Morell that from now on Grebb and Flakey were resolved to beautify the landscapes of cities across the country and to hell with profiteering. When Nick finally came to his senses and realized he'd been had, he considered blabbing. That was his third mistake.

Andrea Morell had fallen in love with her husband when she attended his lecture at the Museum of Modern Art. The lecture was illustrated with films of his greatest architectural accomplishments and Andrea was impressed. At first glance, she could see that Nick himself was an architectural triumph—those shoulders, those slim hips, that face with a bone structure that would have driven Marlene Dietrich into a frenzy of envy. At the reception that followed the lecture, Andrea was introduced to Nick and she could see that the sexual attraction was mutual.

"Do you come here often?" Nick asked. With all his other endowments, Andrea wasn't about to expect verbal originality.

"Only when it's something special," said Andrea in the husky, throaty, B-picture-siren voice she reserved for special occasions such as this one. "And Mr. Morell, you are certainly something special."

Their champagne glasses clicked gently as they realized they, too, were clicking. "Will you have dinner with me tonight?" he asked. "My penthouse in the Morell Towers, which is my latest architectural triumph."

Andrea felt faint but found the strength to say, "I have a previous engagement with my friend Ilie Torsum, the gentleman at your elbow who is eavesdropping on our conversation."

Nick turned and stared at Ilie Torsum, whose name he recognized, for he had won a certain reputation as the Oscar de la Renta of architects. He specialized in custom-designed restaurants, department stores, and houses of detention. "Mr. Torsum," said Nick somewhat gravely, "surely you recognize a case of love at first sight."

"I'm not in love with you," Ilie told Nick.

"Andrea and I. I'm afraid you'll have to have dinner on a tray in front of the television set all by yourself. I'm taking Andrea to my penthouse."

"Your cook will be upset by such short notice," suggested Ilie.

"No. My mother is used to this sort of thing."

That was fifteen years ago. Andrea and Nick's passion for each other had waxed over the years, contrary to the dark predictions of doom, spread mostly by Nick's mother. They produced no children because Andrea proved to be barren. They considered adopting some

Korean orphans, but Nick didn't like the food. When his mother died, Nick honored the old pest by designing and constructing a tomb that was featured on the cover of *Life* and copied across the world by other millionaires delighted to be rid of their parent.

When the condominium boom infected the country like an unstoppable plague, Nick's glittering star blazed like a beacon. He was swamped with offers and accepted as many as he could manage. Both he and his wife shared lavish tastes and lived on a grand scale that would have brought a sigh of recognition from the lips of an Arabian potentate. Nick built them a showplace at the farthest tip of Long Island that was so splendidly magnificent there was talk in India of razing the Taj Mahal, which now paled in comparison to Nick's triumph. There they gave one plush party after another, bringing guests from the farthest corners of the world by private jet, yacht, and on one titillating occasion multicolored jeeps decorated with unquotable graffiti.

In New York, the penthouse was abandoned for a townhouse Nick designed and constructed of Italian marble, a mansion rumored to have cost in the neighborhood of twenty million dollars. A society columnist snippily commented that there were rooms in the mansion that hadn't even been dusted yet. To add fuel to her fire, Nick then built a ranch he impeccably designed on the outskirts of Palm Springs, covering some two hundred acres which included a golf course, tennis courts, Olympic-size swimming pool, private theater and cinema, and a wading pool for Andrea to splash about in when she was in her occasional proletariat mood.

On their fourteenth anniversary, at a party for over five hundred people at the Long Island mansion, Nick whispered in his treasured wife's ear, "Sweetie, we're near bankrupt."

She clenched his hand tightly. "I'll always love you."

"That's beside the point. There's a way out of the predicament."

"I'll sell my furs and my doll collection."

"Drastic measures are uncalled for," he said with his wonderful smile that still sent a chill up her spine. He told her about an offer he had from Louis Grebb and Merton Flakey.

Andrea paled. "But, beloved," she said in a voice that could have stampeded cattle, "aren't they the two thieves who are always being exposed by *New York* magazine?"

"They've sworn to me they're ready to turn honest and legitimate."

"That building of theirs in Denver—" Andrea's voice was now

sepulchral "—the one without doors and windows that no one's found a way to occupy—"

"It's been declared a national monument. It's a big tourist attraction." Nick was anxious to win Andrea's approval. He had already given his word to the two scoundrels, who were anxious to add class to their operation in the person of Nicholas Morell. They were multibillionaires and Nick needed a cut of their pie to get himself out of his financial predicament. Even his occasionally ethical lawyers agreed it was his only salvation.

"That church in Los Angeles, so grotesque that to this day no one knows its denomination—"

"It's been bought by a consortium of atheists."

Andrea shook her head sadly. "I have to admit they always come up smelling of roses." Then she remembered something and clutched Nick's sleeve anxiously.

"What is it, my love?" he asked, wincing as her talons dug into his flesh.

"I remembered something your mother said to you about *me* that pertains to Grebb and Flakey."

"One of her aphorisms?"

"I don't know what you'd call it, but I remember what she said. 'You lie down with dogs, you'll get up with fleas.' "

"Andrea sweetheart," said Nick, a twinkle in his pained eyes as he gently loosened her grip on him, "there are great advances being made in flea powder."

In their New York mansion the following week, Nick and Andrea entertained Grebb, Flakey, and their wives at dinner. Louis Grebb was fat, fiftyish, and shifty-eyed. He and his clothes smelled of cigar smoke and he wasn't surprised or insulted when Andrea on occasion went about the dining room spraying it with a sweet scent made especially for her in Portugal. His wife, Arlene, was short, squat, beady-eyed, and ate with her fingers because she was never sure which fork to use.

Merton Flakey was fifty-five going on thirty. He was tall, thin, and pot-bellied. His clothes were juvenile and mod. He wore an earring on his left lobe and every finger of both hands was covered with an expensive ring. Andrea decided that if hocked they could cover the national debt. Around his neck he wore a variety of necklaces that jingled when he walked, which wasn't often. His wife Bella had been a childhood sweetheart. They met when she was six,

just when her gift for tenacity was beginning to develop. Bella had no taste and capitalized on it. Her first sign of poor taste was in marrying Merton Flakey. She had no clothes sense whatsoever. Her Givenchy, Andrea reflected, looked ridiculous when she crossed her legs, shod with Adidas sneakers. Around her head she wore a terrycloth turban on which was plainly lettered HYATT HOTEL. She had bad teeth and worse eyesight and about a dozen bank accounts, the existence of which her husband never suspected. He thought she was an idiot and she encouraged him in the belief. She also had a mouth with fat lips she exercised mercilessly.

Bella Flakey said to Andrea when they were off in a corner of the eighty-foot-long sitting room sipping coffee and brandy, "Does your husband know what he's gotten into?"

"Why, yes," said Andrea with the smile she usually displayed at boring benefit dinners. "A multimillion deal that will make us exceedingly wealthy."

"Didn't he read all those exposés on them—especially the one in *Pravda?*"

"He doesn't read Russian."

"He could have had it translated by some underpaid wretch at the U.N." She patted Andrea's hand, causing Andrea to spill some brandy on her Bill Blass original. "I like you, Andrea. I like the look of contempt that's always on your face." She leaned forward conspiratorially and whispered darkly, though the others were at least seventy feet out of earshot, *"Caveat emptor."*

"Meaning?" asked a perplexed Andrea, who had no gift for languages.

"Meaning 'Look before you leap.' " Bella stared around the room and saw one of the maids spraying airwick around Louis Grebb. "My husband and his partner are killers."

"They promised Nick they'd reformed."

"They promised my boys they'd never go to Vietnam." She continued to survey the room. "This house of yours."

"It *is* lovely, isn't it." Andrea was dabbing at the brandy stains with her Gucci handkerchief.

"For ostentation, not bad. Grebb and Flakey would never underwrite a place like this."

Andrea raised her chin and said bravely, "They told Nick they have every intention of becoming a class act, like Donald Trump."

"Pfah! His days are numbered. You mark my words with a blue

pencil, your husband will rue the day he ever entered into a business relationship with the Burke and Hare of real estate."

"Who's Burke and Hare?"

"They used to murder people and sell their bodies for experiments."

"Well, then," said Andrea, who could occasionally find a bright side in any dire situation, "they accomplished *some* good for science, didn't they?"

Bella Flakey supressed an urge to slap Andrea in the face. She said, "You are madly, passionately, insanely in love with your husband still, right?"

"Whither he goest, I goest."

"Shakespeare?"

"Jessica Tandy."

Bella shrugged. "I'm warning you, your husband has bitten off more than he can chew."

Andrea studied the woman's face. The lips were set grimly. "Do you realize you're betraying your husband?"

"It's the least I can do."

"If you'll forgive a cliché, why are you telling me all this?"

"Because I like you."

"You hardly know me."

"I'm a good judge of character."

"You married your husband."

"I knew he'd be rich from the way he stole from all the kids at school. I'm no dummy like he thinks I am. I'm leaving him very soon."

"After all these years and conspiracies?"

"I've surreptitiously bought myself a condo in Torremolinos, Spain—one *they* didn't design and construct. I had it examined thoroughly before buying. They used real concrete." Andrea stared across the room at Nick, who was spraying the area now that the maid had staggered out. Was it conceivable that at this very moment she loved and adored him even more than she did at that magical first encounter at the Museum of Modern Art? Yes, it was conceivable. She adored every square inch of him.

That night, after their guests had left and fumigators had been summoned to come first thing in the morning, Andrea repeated Bella Flakey's warning.

"Oh, her," laughed Nick as he got into his pajamas designed es-

pecially for him by Calvin Klein. "I should have warned you. She's been in and out of insane asylums."

"Oh, that *is* good news!" cried Andrea with relief.

"She set fire to their house once after trapping Merton in the bathroom. You'd never do that to me, would you, pussycat?"

Andrea flung her arms around him and pressed her body against his. "Those aren't the kind of fires I like to set."

They made passionate love that night after setting the alarm for the fumigators.

Six months later, Andrea could see the terrible change in Nick. The gorgeous bone structure of his face was now more prominent, not from beauty but from aggravation and disillusion. His skin was sallow and sagged. He'd lost weight. His eyes were still magnificent but only because they were wild with anger and hatred.

"Sweetheart, sweetheart," cried Andrea with anguish and concern, "you're working too hard! I mean, designing four buildings for construction at the same time! And now this scheme of Louis and Merton's to buy up Rockefeller Center and the surrounding blocks—"

He put his hand over her mouth. "Andrea, Bella Flakey was right. I've been duped and deceived and betrayed."

"Oh, my God. I'll write to her in Torremolinos."

"These new buildings—" he sat bent forward with his hands clutching his head and Andrea noticed now how grey his hair had turned "—they're cutting corners and costs. They're using shoddy materials and illiterate workers. The one going up on First Avenue and Thirty-second Street—"

"What about it?"

"They start pouring the cement into the foundation tonight."

"Tonight?"

"They work them all hours without overtime."

"But what about the unions?"

"They've bought the unions." He emitted a sob and then jumped to his feet, pacing the room. "Those buildings are unsafe! I've got to do something about it!"

She hurled herself at him, stopping him in his tracks. "But your reputation! You'll never get another commission when word gets out."

"There are rumors already. *New York* magazine has a reporter snooping around."

"Again?"

"They've run out of second-rate restaurants to expose."

"What are you going to do?"

He placed his hands on Andrea's trembling shoulders and looked her square in the eyes. "Andrea, I cannot live with this on my conscience. If you love me as blindly as I know you do you'll back me all the way, regardless of the consequences. My darling, it may mean we'll lose everything."

"Everything?" Her voice was a ghostly echo. "Even the VCR?"

"Andrea, they've got to be stopped. Those houses could collapse, murdering thousands of coop owners. Can you expect me to live with that knowledge?"

"But you're only the architect!"

"I'm a full partner."

She thought for a moment and then said, "Do they know your feelings?"

"And how they know!"

"They'll kill you." She remembered Bella Flakey's warning and wished she and Nick were in Torremolinos with her, munching gambas and encouraging flamenco dancers.

"I have a meeting with the District Attorney at five o'clock. I'm going to blow the whistle."

Andrea smiled a sad little smile, a smile that would have been recognized by Lillian Gish. "Don't most whistles blow at five o'clock?"

He caressed her cheek. "You're so damned beautifully supportive. It's almost five now. I've got to be going."

"I'm going with you."

"No, sweetheart, no. I'm meeting our lawyers there. They're going to plea bargain or whatever lawyers do. You stay here and prepare a wonderful dinner for two by candlelight with expensive wine and an adorable floral arrangement on the table. I'll hurry home to you as soon as possible. We might even make love later, which may God forgive me I know we haven't done in months because my adrenalin has been so awry."

"A pocket full of awry," whispered Andrea mischievously.

Nick feinted gently at her chin and left.

Andrea never saw Nick again. His disappearance made headlines for a few days and broke Andrea's heart forever. She bravely told the newspapers and Barbara Walters that she suspected foul play

and even repeated what Nick had told her about his scoundrel partners the day he vanished on his way to grass to the D.A. about them.

But there was no way that Grebb and Flakey could be arrested, absolutely no evidence incriminating them in Nick's disappearance. Andrea fretted and wept and had hysterics and signed with a literary agency who rapidly got her an excellent deal with a reputable publishing house. Regardless, she had to severely curtail her lavish style of living. She sold the mansions in Palm Springs, Long Island, and Manhattan and the proceeds barely covered the mountain of debts Nick had left behind. She had a cable from Bella Flakey tersely worded: NEXT TIME LISTEN TO ME.

Next time? Never. There was only one Nicholas Morell and there would never be another. Ilie Torsum surfaced briefly to pursue the suit he had been forced to abandon fifteen years earlier but Andrea curtly informed him she'd had enough of architects. The four buildings Nicholas had left behind as a dubious heritage were completed and occupation begun in record time. Andrea was still living in the New York mansion through the kindness of the new owners, a drug-crazed rock star and her Japanese boyfriend, who were on a year's tour of the Far East though they weren't sure. She was looking about desperately for an apartment she could afford, but Nick's insurance had been eaten away by debts he had kindly hidden from her.

Word of her financial problems made the gossip columns, telling avid readers that the once wealthy Andrea Morell was making do on a publisher's advance, a good portion of which she had to share with a ghost writer strongly given to human greed.

Arlene Grebb was reading one of these gossip columns at breakfast one morning—her usual four scrambled eggs with bacon, ham, and Jewish salami, bagels, cream cheese, smoked salmon, black coffee and artificial sweetener—when she held a handkerchief over her nose and said to her husband Louis who sat opposite her, "Louis, here's your opportunity to be a hero in the eyes of the media that hates you and your rotten partner."

Louis thought of his rotten partner and his new sixteen-year-old child bride and blew a smoke ring that settled briefly over his wife's head, hoping it would turn into a noose and descend. "Why and how should I be a hero?"

She told him of Andrea Morell's dire plight.

"So what do you propose I do?" he asked, not giving a damn about Andrea's dire plight or anybody else's.

"Give her a condo, free. You got plenty unsold still, right?"

"Right." He contemplated the idea.

"Why such a wicked grin?" Arlene asked her husband.

"I know just the building to put her in."

Arlene was delighted. Maybe there was a bit of humanity in her husband after all. "You'll really give her a condo? You don't have to confer with that rat Merton?"

"Oh, I think he'll like the idea. There's a nice one on the second floor in the Jupiter Arms on First Avenue and Thirty-second Street."

To her own amazement, Andrea accepted the offer. She swallowed her pride because she was so nearly destitute. At least she'd have a roof over her head while she dictated her memoirs to the ghost writer—memoirs that would include an exposé of the very men who were now her saviors. How ironic, she thought—how really ironic.

When she was settled into the second-floor apartment at the Jupiter Arms, Arlene Grebb, who had come to visit with a housewarming gift, a polka-dot tea cosy, said, "I'm so glad you've let bygones be bygones. It's all for the good. Who knows? Maybe your darling Nick will turn up again. There are miracles, I'm told, though they never happen to me."

Andrea still disliked the woman, but bestowed on her one of her reservoir of smiles, the one she usually reserved for snotty checkout girls. "Actually, Arlene, in this apartment, for some strange reason, I feel very close to Nick. It's sort of mystical, as though he's right here with me, in this very building."

Arlene got a strange look on her face. As she started to mumble something about having to meet Louis at the Carnegie Delicatessen, an ominous rumbling began and the building began to shake violently. "Earthquake!" she shrieked.

"In New York?" cried Andrea as the roof started to cave in and the floor gave way beneath them.

As one spectator to the horrible devastation commented later, "It was just like a television special, the way the building collapsed, burying everybody in it. And what about that weird coincidence, the architect's wife one of the victims? And what's worse, when they started digging everybody out they find her missing husband's body buried in the foundation! How do you suppose he got there? Well, at least they were together at the end. Kinda romantic, isn't it?"

a *NEW* short story by

CELIA FREMLIN

Earlier in this issue there is a forceful story about test-piloting by Clark Howard. This new story from the always penetrating Celia Fremlin is about scientific testing of a different but equally dangerous kind. How much peace and quiet can the average human being actually endure? Lying inside the warmed and padded interior of the Sensory Deprivation Tank in total silence, total darkness, and total comfort, the volunteer would find out just how long it was before he went mad . . .

THE SENSORY DEPRIVATION TANK

by CELIA FREMLIN

With an attempt at nonchalance, Michael leaned down to peer under the heavy soundproof lid which so soon was going to close above him. It was exactly like looking down into his own coffin and his immediate impulse was to cancel the whole thing, here and now.

But how could he? How could he, Michael Davis, Professor Chilver's star student, be the one to play chicken? If the rest of the class at the Department of Experimental Psychology—well, most of them, anyway—were willing to volunteer themselves as guinea-pigs for this slightly nerve-racking experiment, then who was he to hold back, to let the side down by refusing to volunteer? What would they all think of him?

And above all, what would Fiona think of him when it came to her ears—as it immediately would—that he had ratted out at the

last moment? Where then would be her admiration, her romantic vision of him as a latter-day hero?

"I think it's *terribly* brave of you, sweetie!" she'd said, holding his head lightly between her white hands, compelling him to raise his face toward hers, to look right into her greenish, brilliant eyes. "I think you're wonderful—a sort of knight-errant performing deeds of derring-do for his lady! A modern, scientific knight-errant, of course!" she'd amended, with that small, lightly mocking laugh of hers—and had pulled his face near, nearer, and kissed him full on the lips as if to seal a bargain. As if she knew that for her he would do anything. *Anything.*

A scientific knight-errant. Yes, well, it *was* all in the cause of science, naturally. Or—if one were to be cynical—in the cause of furthering Professor Chilver's already glittering reputation by putting to sensational use his latest and most spectacular research toy, the Sensory Deprivation Tank. Long and hard had he battled with the Grants Committee over its installation, and now here it was, a monstrous new appendage to the hitherto unremarkable Psychological Research Laboratory. Sunk below floor-level, its great, double lid propped open on metal supports, it looked from above like a cross between an oubliette and a padded cell. Enclosed on all four sides by double soundproofed walls, the interior seemed to have been hollowed out of solid darkness and to be waiting, in silent expectancy, for its first victim.

Professor Chilver had, of course, explained to his class just what it was that they would be expected to do, and had likewise explained at length the object of the exercise. The idea, roughly, was to explore the effect on the human psyche of total rest in total isolation. Unbroken peace and quiet, in fact.

How much peace and quiet can the average human being actually endure? Inside the warmed and padded interior of the Sensory Deprivation Tank, cut off from all sound, all light, the answer was to be revealed. Lying there in total silence, total darkness, and total comfort, the volunteer would find out just how long it was before he went mad: how long, that is, before he began to hallucinate—before visions came to him out of the darkness—before voices began to babble sinister nonsense out of the silence.

Because that was what happened in the end—this was already known from earlier studies. What Professor Chilver wanted to write his new paper on was the nature of these hallucinations, the speed at which they developed in different types of subject, and the extent

to which their content related—if at all—to the personality of the subject. He hoped thus to throw fresh—not to say career-boosting—light on the nature of "stimulus-hunger." Was it merely a neurotic need in certain types of personality? Or was it truly the case that the human brain does indeed require constant stimulation as decisively and almost as urgently as it needs oxygen? When denied the constant small stimuli—visual, auditory, and tactile—of a normal environment, is it compelled, for its own sanity, to conjure up imaginary stimuli out of nothing? Hallucinations, in fact?

An interesting line of inquiry. No wonder so many of the students had been eager to volunteer in spite of the obvious hazards.

And of course—Professor Chilver had hastened to assure them of this—of course there would be safety precautions, as there always had to be in experiments that involved human beings. At any time, if a subject felt that the experience was becoming more than he could take, all he had to do was to press the button that lay within easy reach of his right hand and he would instantly be released by the supervisor, who would be in constant attendance up above.

"Naturally, no blame will be incurred by such a subject," the professor informed them. "No judgment will be passed upon him." But even as he gave these assurances, a tiny curl of anticipatory scorn was already on his lips and his steely blue gaze was already raking the uneasy ranks of his students, as if seeking to identify in advance the cowards, the back-sliders, and the poltroons who would be pressing that button before their allotted span of hours was completed.

"*Some* subjects," he proclaimed evenly, "have been known to press the button within minutes of the lid closing above them. This is referred to as the 'precipitate panic syndrome,' and while—as I have just explained—no penalties will be incurred by this type of reaction, and no judgment will be passed upon it, nevertheless the waste of time and of expensive resources incurred by this behavior-pattern is something of which it is impossible to be wholly unaware."

Did Michael imagine it, or did that blue, assessing gaze rest on him a little longer than on any of the others? And if so, how was he being assessed? As a precipitate-panic button-pusher? Or as God's gift to the project, destined to come out with flying colors, crammed with relevant data, and hyped up on just the right kind of hallucinations to support the professor's thesis?

Or could it be—and here Michael was aware of a quite new, and unprecedented, stab of fear—could it be that that assessing gaze

related not at all to his likely performance as an experimental subject but to something quite, quite different, to something more personal and more damaging even than cracking up on a research project? *Could* it be—could it *possibly* be—that the professor somehow knew about Fiona? About Fiona and Michael, that is, because of course he knew about Fiona. She was his wife.

For a nineteen-year-old student to fall in love with a faculty wife nearly twice his age—this was no rarity on the campus. Nor was it by any means unknown for the faculty wife in question to respond with such abandon, such total lack of discretion, as to ensure that the whole thing rapidly became a public scandal, to the ruination, sometimes, of more than one promising career. But in the case of Fiona and Michael, this was out of the question. Fiona's discretion was absolute, and in the art of deception she was a past master, as is not unusual in beautiful and discontented wives nearing the age of forty. Indeed, her skill and ingenuity when it came to dissimulation were so great as to be almost frightening—frightening, sometimes, even to Michael, even when, as now, these skills were being deployed entirely to his advantage. No way would she have allowed the faintest whisper of their affair to come to the ears of her husband, nor would she have allowed her own behavior in the home to give him the smallest inkling of what was going on. Famous psychologist he might be, and at the top of his profession, but when it came to psychological manipulation on a personal level, she could make rings around him, and always had done. Well, if a husband has his head in a Sensory Deprivation Tank, it's maybe not so difficult.

So, no: the Professor *couldn't* know anything. Michael realized that he must be imagining that faint air of hostility—and a moment later confirmation of this came when the professor turned to Michael in an unwontedly benign manner and told him that, as the top student of the class, he was to have the honor of doing the first stint in the Sensory Deprivation Tank.

"Eighteen hours will be your assignment this first time," the professor informed him. "We shall start at four-thirty tomorrow —Friday—afternoon, and we shall finish at ten-thirty on Saturday morning. I intend to monitor you myself, so I shall be in the lab throughout this period, to be at hand in case of—well, emergencies. Or in case—though I hardly anticipate this—you should choose to press the panic-button before your time is up." Again, that curl of the lip, that flash of steely-blue contempt, and the interview was over . . .

Four-thirty. The worst time, really. It gave you almost a whole day of mounting anxiety—breakfast and lunch both ruined by nerves and tea a non-starter. As the ordeal drew near, Michael found himself going over, yet again, all he had heard or read about these sensory-deprivation experiments, and the more closely he reviewed the data—as yet unnervingly sparse—the less reassuring it seemed.

Absolute darkness, absolute silence—these are things few people, normally, have ever experienced. On even the darkest night, in even the most closely curtained room, there is always some streak or blur of lesser darkness. In every silence, if you listen carefully, there is always *some* feather-light stirring of vibration against the eardrum, from near or far. Zero decibels simply don't happen. Except in the Sensory Deprivation Tank.

The darkness, probably, would be the worst. The awful thing about absolute darkness, so some of the early experimenters had reported, was that it was liable to make you panic lest you had gone blind. How, in this total blackness, could you reassure yourself that you had not? Staring, peering this way and that into the darkness, eyeballs at full stretch, desperate for a sensation, some of the volunteers could stand less than a minute of this terror—they pressed the panic-button almost at once, and were released instantly, thankful, disgraced, humiliated into the blessed light.

Silly, Michael had thought, listening to this sort of scare-story—and had indeed said so. The chances that a normal, healthy young person should by coincidence happen to go blind at exactly the time when he happened to be taking part in a sensory-deprivation experiment must be so many millions of billions against that—well, it was preposterous. Less, probably, than the chance that the human race might die out because of every baby chancing to be born the same sex as every other all over the world for three generations.

"You wait!" they had told him when he'd expounded this bit of armchair logic for their edification: and wait he had, until 4:30 on this soft, sunlit May afternoon.

This was it. Now. He took what felt like his last look at the summer sky and climbed down into the shadowed cavern. The lid closed with the soft whoosh of perfect, soundproof fit. The bright line of daylight switched off as by a vast power-cut, a fuse blown at the heart of the cosmos, and he was alone.

The darkness was complete, the silence total—and at once, just as they'd warned him, he began to wonder if he'd gone blind. Yes,

in the teeth of all those millions and billions of chances, those preposterous myriads of boy babies squirming like caterpillars over the face of the earth—in the teeth of all sense, reason, logic, he, Michael Davis, star student of his year, was already panicking lest he had gone blind!

Dark, dark everywhere—his eyes seemed to reach out like stalks, like antennae, scrabbling the blackness for some leftover crumb of light. But there was none. Blind! He closed his eyes to shut out the worst of the dark, at the same time despising himself for such idiot weakness. I must be mad! he scolded himself.

But of course that was another thing. People *did* go mad in these sensory-deprivation experiments, it was a known thing. You could always press the panic-button, of course, but how could he, of all people, chicken out like that? And within minutes of being incarcerated, too?

Of course, if he *really* felt he was going mad—but then, how would he know? If you were mad enough to go mad, he told himself confusedly, then you would be mad enough not to recognize your state as madness. You would suppose that the visions looming at you out of the darkness were really there, coming at you, and you would feel that it was only common sense to try and evade them as best you could, flinging yourself from padded wall to padded wall, beating your head against the padded ceiling as you leaped and dodged and tried to fight them off. While up there, in that other world, where the sun still shone and the birds twittered, Professor Chilver would be secretly monitoring your every movement with some devilish device of his own invention, recording your every scream, capturing for all time your idiot reactions to your idiot visions.

The visions. Yes, in the end (so it was reported) almost everyone had visions—and so perhaps it would be better to face them in their early stages, while one could still recognize their unreality.

Cautiously, he opened his eyes into the awful dark, and instantly shut them again, his heart thudding. Out there, on the other side of his eyelids, lay the blindness, waiting to pounce. He wouldn't open his eyes again—oh, no. It was too terrifying. For a time, he lay staring at the insides of his eyelids, no longer patterned with the reddish brownish squirls with which he was familiar but, for the first time he could ever remember, quite dark. And growing darker—he could swear to it.

The total comfort of this padded floor seemed to make it all worse, somehow—more threatening. The human frame, it seems, is no more

adapted to total comfort than it is to total darkness, and his hands reached out, panicky, from wall to padded wall, craving a *thing*. Anything. Something to touch. His relief when his fingers encountered the plastic container provided as a non-sensory (as far as possible) toilet facility was out of all proportion. A hard thing at last! Unpadded! Cold to the touch! With a rim, too, a real shape, firm and tactile.

He ran his fingers around and around it in near worship. He clutched it to his breast. In the cavern of the shadow of death, the rim, the plastic rim, doth comfort me . . .

How long had he been here? This, he knew, was part of the experiment—to find out about temporal disorientation and the distortion of the time sense. Some of the earlier subjects, so he had learned, had been convinced that they had been immured for two or three days when in fact only an hour had passed. Others, apparently, could hardly believe that their allotted span—eighteen hours, or twenty-four, or even two or three days—had been completed.

"Goodness, I must have been asleep!" they would say. "It only felt like half an hour!"

Half an hour. That's exactly what it *did* feel like to Michael now—but what was it *really?* This not knowing was strangely scary, and with every minute—every hour—it could only get worse. In a kind of formless, inexplicable panic, he decided from now on to measure out the time in the only way he could—by his own all-too-noticeable heartbeats. Seventy to the minute, wasn't it, in the normal resting state? Call it sixty to the minute, for easy calculation, so that when he got to a thousand he would know that a quarter of an hour, or perhaps a little more, had passed. Four thousand to the hour. His allotted span of eighteen hours would be over, then, by the time he reached seventy thousand.

One, two, three, four . . .

Not to open the eyes. No. Just count.

A hundred and seven, a hundred and eight . . .

Record it on your fingers, that's the way. Each time you get to a hundred, another finger.

One finger, two fingers . . . That's the way. Keep going . . .

Michael woke up with a start, and with a sense of utter dismay. He had been *asleep!* He had *lost count!* He had got to—what was it?—over a thousand anyway. At least half an hour that would

be—but *then* what had happened? Had he slept for ten minutes? Or ten hours? Or what? He felt himself utterly disorientated, swinging in some abyss of time, infinite in its unmeasurability.

He must find out the time! He must! He must look at his watch immediately—and in sheer unreasoning panic, he opened his eyes.

Dark, dark, dark! And what's more, the dark had crept closer, somehow, since he had last looked at it. It was right up against his eyeballs now, with nothing in between.

Dark, dark! The craving for some gleam of light was like an illness. He could almost feel the nerve pathways between brain and retina deteriorating, shriveling from disuse, atrophying, giving up—the miraculous system of carrying messages to the brain closing down forever.

Even closing his eyes didn't, this time, allay the sense of being blind, for the blindness was lodged now not in the circumambient darkness, but right there, behind his eyes, which screamed for light with the desperation of a starving creature screaming for food.

If it gets worse, said Michael to himself, trying to steady the rocking surge of his dissolving sanity by a clear and deliberate decision—if it gets worse, I shall press the button, and to hell with everybody. In fact, I shall press it *now* . . .

But he did not press it. He dared not. For a thought had come into his mind more terrible than anything yet.

Suppose I press the button and there is no response! Suppose he has just gone off and left me! Just simply gone, fed up with it all! The lab empty, locked up for the weekend—and me left here, forgotten!

For a moment, so vivid as to be almost a hallucination, he saw the professor's face looming up out of the darkness behind his eyelids—absorbed, intent as always, with the lips pressed close in the familiar thin line of concentration on some recalcitrant but all-absorbing problem. The blue eyes glittered with quiet purpose, as they so often did.

But *what* purpose? Michael felt the sweat break out all over his body. He *knows!* suddenly flashed through his mind. He knows! He is going to ignore the button when I press it, he'll let it buzz again and again, scarcely looking up from his work. And when the allotted eighteen hours is over, he is going to pack up his papers in his briefcase, fetch his hat and raincoat from the peg, and lock up the lab for the weekend. He is going to go away and let me die, slowly, in the darkness and the silence, and with the encroaching madness

moving in on me. Because he knows. He *knows*—and this is his revenge. He knows, too, that by Monday, when they all come back to the lab, I shall be dead. The air will never last that long.

This was madness. This was the onset of paranoia, it must be! And what was this dim and yet insistent thudding noise impinging itself on the silence? The place was supposed to be soundproofed, for God's sake! What the hell was it, this thump—thump—thump? Was it his own heart, beating once more that old tattoo of terror? No, it was his own fists, actually; beating, beating at the padded walls.

I'm cracking up, he informed himself—almost coolly, and with a sort of scientific detachment. These are the well known early symptoms. The next one to be expected will be—but before the thought was completed, the next symptom was upon him. The professor's face, mocking, rollicking in the darkness like a mad football, ricocheting from wall to wall, and all around the voices were beginning:

"Out! Out! Out!" they all shrieked, from every direction, and the darkness rocked with the noise, and the voice they all shrieked in was Michael's voice, and while the voices shrieked his hands, too, were busy. All on their own, without consulting him at all, they were slithering this way and that across the padded wall, trying which of them would first reach the panic-button.

It was the right hand that managed to fumble its way there first, and, before Michael could prevent it, it had pounced. It pressed the button; and Michael, like some helpless junior officer, stood alongside, waiting for the world to come to an end.

"Disappointing, Michael!" Professor Chilver pronounced. "Really, most disappointing. Only three and a quarter hours! And I've always thought of you as one of my best students. *Most* disappointing. This is not a criticism, of course, or any kind of judgment. I am a scientist, not a judge. When I say it is disappointing, this is a simple statement of fact."

It was still daylight when Michael finally staggered, humiliated, browbeaten, and still in a state of shock, out of the lab. Like an automaton, he moved through the golden summer evening, alive with the bedtime twitterings of birds, to face the worst ordeal of all.

"You mean—you mean you didn't do *anything!*" snarled Fiona, torn between fury and the need, even now, to keep her voice down. "You mean you just pressed the button before time—and climbed

out as if nothing had happened? You cowardly little no-good! So *that's* the end of all our plans!"

It was, too. Forever. Incredulously, now, Michael looked back over the plan—Fiona's plan—as it was supposed to have worked out. At the end of his eighteen hours, when the lid was opened, Michael was to have failed to emerge. He was to have lain there, as if unconscious, until the professor, worried, climbed down to see what was wrong. It would then have been the work of a moment for Michael, by far the younger and more agile of the two, to have sprung to his feet, scrambled out of the contraption, and to have slammed the lid down on the older, much slower man. He, Michael, would then have been the one to ignore the buzzer—to collect his coat from its peg, and to go away, locking up the lab for the weekend. Exactly as in his fantasy, only with the roles reversed.

"I couldn't do it!" he mumbled now, not daring to look up. "Of course I hate him—honestly I do, I always have! But I couldn't do it—not to anyone! I just couldn't! Not now that I know what it's like!"

He looked up now, and met the cruel, green, fascinating eyes—and he knew in that moment that there was yet another prison, even darker and more terrible than the Sensory Deprivation Tank, from which he must now find a way to extricate himself.

a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT TWOHY

"You're a game player, like me," Jinja told Reese. "You play a double game. You let on you're a killer, then tell the cops it's an act in such a phony-sincere way they're sure you're lying. Which is just what you want. You'd hate it if they started believing you . . ."

JINJA THE CAT

by ROBERT TWOHY

Jinja ripped guys off. Never much—ten or twenty dollars' worth. Frank Reese wished she wouldn't.

He loved her. He knew a lot of girls on the scene, but she was special—the way she looked, moved, talked, laughed.

Jinja. Most people thought her name was Ginger, for her hair. No, she told Reese after she got to know him, it was Jinja—J-I-N-J-A.

She'd made it up, she said. She liked the way it looked when she printed it. J's were fun.

First time she saw him she laughed at him.

He drove a hulking black LTD. Black was his theme color—black denims, black boots, thick black beard. He didn't work for a living. Walked with a rolling limp. Owned a sawed-off shotgun, which he'd showed a few people, who had spread the word.

Nobody laughed at him. Jinja did.

She was from Oregon or someplace, small, bright, quick, seventeen. Reese was thirty, 5'9", too much gut from booze and junk food but wide and strong as a small-scale bull. Cops and deputies would pull the LTD over and, with his amiable permission, sort through various junk, never finding the shotgun, dope, or anything else they could hang on him.

—Except one night Sergeant Weare of the San Mateo County Sheriff's Department lifted a blanket heaped on the back seat and found a young woman all taped up—wrists, ankles, and mouth. Reese explained that he was just throwing a scare into her, demonstrating that the scene can be dangerous, she should be careful who she got in a car with. Weare hoped to nail him for assault, at least—maybe kidnaping—but he needed backup, which the young woman wouldn't give, saying that if Frank said it was a joke, it was.

So it was—on Weare. Reese was back in the street next day.

His line when questioned was that cops had him all wrong, he was a peaceable citizen who had lucked into an inheritance, accounting for his solvency. He'd never owned a shotgun. As for rumors he was a professional hit man—straight baloney, he had started them himself. Purpose? To be a big man on the scene, and to get girls, a lot of who get turned on by someone they think is a really bad dude.

Not Jinja. He never got anywhere.

"You're a game player, like me." That was a day in June, the third or fourth time he had seen her, when she'd been on the scene about three months. "You play a double game. You let on you're a killer, then tell the cops it's an act in such a phony-sincere way they're sure you're lying. Which is just what you want. You'd hate it if they started believing you."

He grinned through the black beard. "No danger—they're programmed for excitement. Crime fiction's their game. They love it, they'd be lost without it." He asked, "What makes you think you're so smart?"

"I can read people. First time I saw you I knew you were a fake."

They were in Central Park in San Mateo, on the grass, this lush summer day. He said, "The scene's a big TV show. Everybody has an act—dopers, cops." His voice went soft. "Come live with me. I'll clean up my dump, make it nice. We're alike, we should be together."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I'm the cat that walks by herself." She looked like a cat somewhat, moved like a cat, had shiny green eyes tilted like a cat's. He wanted to stroke her red-brown fur.

She rolled away. "No. I don't grope or nuzzle. I watch and laugh and learn. I play my game, go my way."

He took what she gave him—moments of joy laced with pain as

he ached to have her. If they were all he could get from her, he'd take them.

One night he told her the story of the shotgun. He said that when Griscomb disappeared he had inherited it, sort of.

"Who was he?"

A dealer, an ex-con, probably a real-life hit man. Reese had been a nobody then.

"When?"

"A few years ago." Reese was scared of Griscomb like everyone was—Griscomb was the star on the scene.

He had told Reese that cops had searched his place and just missed finding his sawed-off shotgun. Could he stash it at Reese's place? Reese was bowled over by the honor. He hid it behind his reefer and at times Griscomb would come for it, never saying what the occasion was, letting Reese imagine. Then he didn't come any more. His car, his clothes, all his stuff were at his place, but he was gone. "Some heavies caught up with him."

Reese got an idea. He had the shotgun, Griscomb was gone, the star part was open—why not go for it? He grew the beard, got the black clothes, painted the car to match, developed the mean, rolling limp he now did without thinking.

The scene changes, people come and go—a burly, bearded, limping guy all in black showed up and it was the first time for a lot of people. Others had barely noticed him before, the cops didn't know him at all.

Telling Jinja the story, he gave a growly chuckle. "When they started leaning on me, that did it. The kids believed."

"The cops validated the act."

"What? Yeah, I guess. Cops love a phony like me."

"You were the breath of foul air they'd been yearning for since Griscomb."

He laughed. They were sitting in the LTD at the Vista Point on 280 above Lindenvale, a night in August. He had run across her downtown, they had shared a pizza, he'd asked her to ride with him—they could park and talk and joke. There was a fine full moon. His hunger for her was from the depths.

He murmured, "I'd like to take care of you."

"I walk by myself."

"You think you're so bright. But ripping guys off is dumb."

"I size people up. I don't mess with heavies or freaks—I pick young

studs who think they're God's gift, sure they'll knock me over with their macho charm. Those are the ones I deal with."

"You could read a guy wrong."

"Danger's the spice. You play your game, I'll play mine."

He loved and wanted her. His hunger was too much, too much—She was small and quick and away and out. His nosedive ended at the window handle, bringing on blazing lights, torrents of blood.

"Sit up." His head was being lifted out of the red cascade. He opened his brown eyes and her pale face was just outside the open door. He was sprawled like a dog across the seat. His nose had to be smashed flat. "You bled a little. It's stopped." A pair of neat fingers wiped his upper lip. "There's a tiny cut on the side. Put your finger on it." She guided his finger to the spot.

He sighed. "I don't seem to get anywhere with you."

"Find another girl. They're all around."

"I want you. I want to take care of you. You think you're so smart but you're going to get hurt."

"Cats walk away from advice. G'bye, have a nice life. Forget me, I'm too hard on you."

She walked away. It was a two-mile walk in the dark down to El Camino, where she'd catch a bus to somewhere. He didn't know where she lived—she'd never said or let him drive her home. He could go after her now, but why? What she'd said was true—she was too hard on him.

He watched her fade into the dark, finger pressed to his nose, which hurt, which was good as it put off thoughts that there might be no more moments of joy laced with pain.

He went to the usual places. She wasn't around. He played his hitman-between-contracts game, but it seemed to have lost flavor. Maybe the time had come to think of something else to do with his life and his inheritance.

He got pulled over twice, in San Carlos and Menlo, the Menlo fiction fan prowling through junk in the car and slicing his finger pretty good on a jagged oil can. Reese advised him to hurry off for a tetanus shot. It would have been a nice moment anytime but especially now, when he'd been needing a chuckle.

He was at Farmers' Market in Hillsdale having coffee and a sweet-roll and heard "Frank!" and Vee Winters—Vee for Victoria—dropped into the chair across the table.

Four months ago she had lived with him in his shack on the edge

of a derelict estate in Lindenvale Hills. one of a string of one-time servants' shanties, full of mildew and falling apart but available at what for The Hills was rock-bottom rent. He didn't mind the conditions and liked having a class address to blow the minds of out-of-town cops when they stopped him.

Vee was big and slow, but not clumsy—she had a swaying, kind of flowy way of walking. Intense dark eyes were set wide in a creamy babyface. She was a high-school dropout from Fresno, on the Peninsula scene about three years.

She had on a nifty pants-suit, light-blue, and her black hair had been shaped and shined by a pro. She looked like a girl being taken care of in good style, and he said so.

She said she was living with an old dude in Redwood City who owned an auto-repair shop. Three weeks ago he had picked her up hitchhiking on El Camino and told her his wife had just died, he was alone in the world, and would she stay with him? He bought her clothes, cosmetics, records, gave her spending money and a beat-up old Mazda. "He says he's forty-six but he's wrong by about ten years. But he doesn't bother me too much. I'll stay till I get a decent car out of him, which I think I can. What's happening with you?"

Not much, he said—just going with the flow.

She asked about this and that person, including Jinja, who Vee knew as Ginger—had she ripped off anyone lately?

Not that Reese had heard.

"One day she'll get hers, if she doesn't wise up." She gazed at him hard and bright. "You like her, don't you?"

"She's okay."

"Ever get with her?"

He shook his head, realized he was stroking the side of his nose, got up, and took their empty cups for refill, standing in a short line. He glanced and she was watching him with a small smile. The night she had moved in with him she had murmured at one point, "D'you know what you smell of?"

"What?" He was hurt. He had showered and hadn't suspected he smelled of anything.

"Violence."

"I don't use a scent. If I did it wouldn't be flowers."

"Not violets, violence." He still didn't get it. She defined it. "Like punching, clawing, being real rough." She smiled up at him. "That's my thing, too."

It wasn't his, but for a few weeks he did his best to oblige, while pondering ways to wind up the affair with minimum hurt feelings.

She came home from somewhere and found him in the kitchen rubbing cooking oil on the sawed-off shotgun like he knew what he was doing. She had never seen the gun before.

She sat near, reached, touched it. "What caliber?"

"Shotguns go by gauge—this is sixteen-gauge." He knew because Griscomb had told him when he had asked the same question.

"Is it loaded?"

"I load it when I'm about to use it." He put the gun on the table, stood up, said in a remote voice, "A job's coming up. I have to be alone, to get set mentally for what I'm going to do. That's my way. You'll have to go." He gazed off at dark visions.

She wasn't one to come between a man and his violence. She went off to the bedroom to get her stuff together. He called a cab.

He gave her a hundred dollars and told her he'd get in touch.

Alone, he wrapped the gun in its burlap sacking and carried it through the gap in his back fence that let into the estate grounds, returning it to the hole under a particular dead bush that he had dug shortly after moving into the shack. The hole had a plank cover and with loose earth and dead leaves and branches piled over it looked like anyplace else on the grounds.

Since that day, he'd seen Vee around with this guy, that guy—she always found a guy to move in with. Now she had found an old guy with money, and good for her. Reese liked her all right, they just had different views on what makes a meaningful relationship.

He set her coffee in front of her and flopped back in his chair. She eyed him over the cup, murmured, "We could get some beer and go to my place. He never comes home for lunch."

Maybe he didn't. Or maybe he always came home for lunch. Maybe she had a yen to see what might happen if he came home and found not lunch but a scroungy, hairy guy lapping up beer with his babydoll. Car repair develops hard muscles and a lousy disposition—this particular senior citizen could be a tough, mean old buzzard.

Reese scowled at his watch. "Past eleven. I got to meet a guy in Hayward at one."

"Want my address and phone?"

No. "Sure." He got out his address book and wrote the info she gave him at the end of the W's.

"Could you buy me some beer?" She was eighteen or nineteen. "I've got money," feeling in her handbag.

He turned her money down and went across the arcade to the liquor store and got a six-pack of Oly talls—

Came back and a slim young dude in a class tan jacket was at the table, brown hair combed in a way that made Reese guess he put in time in front of mirrors. His expression was that it wasn't his fault he was good-looking. He had flat blue eyes.

"Frank. Gene from Fresno."

Reese grunted and the kid did likewise, shooting a glance at near tables like checking if people noticed how cool he was, being introduced to this really evil-looking bearded guy in black.

Vee said that just two minutes ago she had glanced up and there was Gene. "How long's it been?"

"Three years." His voice was manful but with a trace of a teenager's whine.

She beamed at Reese, bright-eyed and excited it seemed to see this guy, probably a one-time high-school lover.

Reese set the sack of beer on the table and said he guessed they had a lot to catch up on.

He turned his farewell grin vaguely toward Gene, then limped away fairly fast, glad that if the garage guy came home for lunch he'd find Gene, not him.

Three days later he was at the beach at Pescadero, watching the ocean on a slow roll, eating a deli combo sandwich, drinking a few beers, and thinking how shorebirds have a great life. He'd like to be one, though he'd have to lose weight—you rarely see a shorebird with a gut unless he's just swallowed a fish.

He smiled, lay back in the sand. feeling okay, better than in the last few weeks since Jinja had walked away from him. He guessed he was starting to get over her.

He drank another beer, thinking how the hit-man game seemed to have gone flat for him. Maybe he'd cancel the show and cut out for some other territory, see if he could find some reality, which is hard to find in California.

Back in Lindenvale, he stopped at the pizza joint for a takeout. He'd stay in tonight, watch some TV, start figuring where he'd move to. Maybe the Southwest, which he'd never seen. New Mexico was said to be beautiful in a weird way, like noplace else.

"Hi." A wasted short guy ahead of him in the line had turned. Reese knew him as a fringe character on the scene, a bit player, nose usually on a coke run like now. "Uh—that big broad, I mean

that girl with the black hair, Dee or something, was around looking for you. She was at Scotty's and I heard her passing the word that if anyone saw you they should tell you to call her." He sniffed up. "She said it was important."

"She say why?"

"Uh—no." He looked like he hoped he wouldn't be blamed.

Reese nodded thanks and dropped out of line, not sure what he'd do—call Vee or not?

Which surprised him, as he flat-out didn't want to call her. If she wanted to start up their thing again, he didn't.

He got a flash that she wanted to tell him something about Jinja.

No reason to believe that, but he did. When he got a sharp flash like that, it was sometimes right-on.

He hoofed two blocks to the phonebooth at the S.P. station, looked in his book, and dialed Vee's number. One ring and she answered. He asked what was up. She said, "The bowling alley in Belmont, fifteen minutes."

"What's it about, Vee?"

But she had hung up.

He'd have met her in the time stated but she wasn't there. He hung around the entrance, looking out into the lot, and in five minutes an old grey Mazda hove into sight. He walked over and got in.

She wore jeans and an old shirt. Her eyes were smoky-bright. "Ginger ripped off Gene. He asked me to set her up and I did. She's coming to my place at eight tonight. It's almost six now. Where you been all day?"

"Coast, watching shorebirds."

"He's gonna get his dope back, what she hasn't sold or used."

Reese, slumped in the seat, asked for details.

He got it that two nights ago, at Nifty Burgers in San Mateo, Jinja had come up to Gene at one of the outside tables—

"Did he know her?"

"No, he never saw her before." Jinja had asked if he had any dope to sell and he had fourteen packs of crank in a plastic pouch, ten dollars each, and sold her one. They talked a while and she said she knew an old bird in Palo Alto who would buy the whole works for top dollar if Gene would trust her with his stash. She said she'd be back at Nifty in two hours with $200, less twenty commission.

"He wasn't suspicious?"

"No, he didn't know her—and she probably gave him the idea that

if he trusted her she'd know how to show appreciation when she got back. Anyway, he gave her the pouch and she drove off."

"In what?"

"I dunno. But that's what Gene said." So she had got hold of a car since Reese had seen her, or borrowed somebody's. "Naturally she didn't come back. He waited till the place closed."

Next morning, *this* morning, Gene had called Vee and asked if she knew a small chick with red-brown hair named Ginger? —Yes. Did she know where she lived? —No, why? He told her about the ripoff and that he had to find her and get his dope back. She said she'd try to find out something and he should call back in an hour or so.

She phoned around and finally a girl said she thought she knew where Ginger was staying and would give her a message. Vee said to have her call her, giving her number to the girl. "So Ginger called and I asked if she had any dope. She said she happened to have some crank. I said I had a hundred dollars and more and gave her the address in Redwood City and could she be there with the stuff about eight. She said she would. Then Gene called and I told him how I'd set her up, and he's gunna be there. She has no idea I know him or know she ripped him off."

Slumped in his seat, eyes closed, Reese chewed it over. Jinja had spotted Gene from Fresno as just the type she looked for—new on the scene, semi-handsome, and fond of his hair. She had nailed him for $130 worth of crank, much more than she usually got. Maybe her game was turning into a business, as can happen.

He asked, "What about the garage guy?"

"Evans? Every Friday he goes square-dancing."

"Really?" Reese got a quick picture of a hefty old dude in greasy mechanic's overalls hopping around with gaskets and things flying out of the pockets.

Vee was quiet for half a minute. "Gene cut a girl in Fresno. That's the story, anyway. I don't know if it's true, but I know one thing." She had a small, tight smile. "He can get pretty worked up."

So Gene liked violence, too.

She went on, "I wouldn't want her hurt. I'm not crazy about her, and a few slaps, okay. But if he got carried away—"

"Do you think he might?"

"I dunno. But I know how he can freak."

"You mean you know first-hand?"

"Yeah. But I'm big and strong, and that was always for fun—y'know?"

"Yeah," said Reese. "What you're saying is, it wouldn't be for fun with Jinja."

"If he freaked it wouldn't. And if he did, I'd have a job controlling him. He always carries a Buck knife."

Reese lay his head back, closed his eyes. "Call it off."

"No, I won't do that. She ripped him off—he has a right to get his dope back. Anyway, I don't know where she lives."

"I better be there." Reese's eyes were still closed.

"Would you?" Her tone was eager. "I hoped you'd say that. I didn't want to ask 'cause it's not your problem, but I know you wouldn't want her hurt. Everything'll be cool with you there with your gun."

He said slowly, "Gun."

"If he started to freak, that'd cool him down in a hurry."

Vee wanted not much violence tonight, just a few slaps—no big ruckus that might blow her thing with the hippety-hop garageman before she had worked him for a new car.

Reese didn't want to bring the shotgun, but what was the alternative? A knife of his own? Great—a knife fight, himself and his gut against a slim, quick kid who liked knives. No way.

He said, "I've never carr— It's risky to carry it." If he was pulled over and the car searched, the charge would be possession of a felony weapon, meaning prison. He'd never carried the gun except through the gap in the fence, to show Vee the one time, and two or three other times to show someone who would spread the word about it.

Vee said coolly, "Bring it or not. If he starts to cut Ginger like that girl in Fresno, I'm sure you can think of some way to stop him. Anyway, be at my place about seven-thirty, okay? You got the address. D'you know where Maidstone Street is?" He nodded. "Use the stairs to the rear—it's first door on the balcony."

She laid a hand on his and smiled. "Gene'll get his dope back, Ginger'll learn something maybe, and everything'll be cool."

"Yeah," said Reese.

He drove to his dump and took a shower, said to be helpful when you're tense. He yelled, "Damn! If you're the cat that walks by herself, why'd you ring me in on this?"

He got the gun, which had been empty when he'd inherited it and had stayed that way, as he'd never bought any shells. He broke it open anyway, and looked as he had before—then closed it, wrapped

it in a bath towel, and a few minutes later was heading south on the freeway.

The shower hadn't helped—he was tenser than ever. All the cops knew the black LTD—a CHP fiction fan might get an impulse to pull him over. He could deny permission to search, but they'd search anyway and after finding the gun would claim that the sawed-off barrel had been visible, sticking out from under the seat or some similar lie. Any cop or deputy would give his left ventricle to be the one to nail Reese.

A CHP slid up behind him in the left lane and laid back there while he turned to ice. If they turned on the red light, what would he do? Not a damn thing except pass out, which would probably solve all his problems.

The guy suddenly spurted and sailed on by down the freeway.

All the ice ran out of him. It had been holding him together—now he sagged, no bones suddenly. He'd better pull over.

He'd better not. He'd better get the hell on to Vee's.

Three turnoffs later was Whipple, leading up into Redwood. He had bones again. He crossed El Camino, turned left on Maidstone, and after five blocks was in a block of two- and three-story apartment buildings. Halfway along it he slid the car to the curb.

With the toweled gun under his arm, he walked north to the apartment marked 1435. To the side was a balcony with a stair at the back, 201 at the front. He knocked. A record player was going. He knocked again and Vee opened. His watch said 7:32.

"You brought it." She turned to his right, into a kitchen at the beginning of a short hall. "I'm finishing some dishes. Gene's not here yet. Go in the living room, I'll be through in a minute."

The living room had a daybed at the far end and a short couch at the left wall. The record player was under a hassock or something by the daybed. She had it loud so she could hear it in the kitchen with the faucet running, and he guessed when she came in she'd turn it down or he'd ask her to.

He laid the gun on the floor by the short couch, lingered a half minute, then, feeling edgy, wandered into the kitchen. She had a light bulb. "I was about to put this in the bathroom." He took it, learned that the bathroom was the first of the two doors left on the short hall and that he'd need a chair, which he jockeyed under the fixture and in a minute had light. The glass cover could use a washing but the hell with it. He shook some bugs out and screwed it back on.

She was wiping the sideboard. "Turn that thing down, will you?"

With pleasure. He went in the living room, crouched, and turned the thing way down, then straightened as Vee came in the room with a smile and a glow and Gene from Fresno. "You remember Frank."

Gene stopped like zapped. "What's *he* doing here?"

"I asked him."

"Why?"

"So Ginger won't fight or try to run."

Reese had sat down on the couch. Gene walked around in a stiff way and shot narrow looks with his flat blue eyes. "What's that?"

Reese picked up the shotgun, flipped the towel to show it. Gene said, "Why?"

"Frank'll point it at her and she'll freeze."

Gene started to walk around again. Reese laid the gun back on the floor. Gene muttered, "I don't need any help."

Vee was cold. "I'm involved, too, y'know. I don't want any fighting or screaming or crazy stuff that could get back to Evans."

"Who's that?"

"The guy that this is his place. I want things quick and cool. That's why I asked Frank."

She turned and motioned, and Gene followed her into the hall. "You'll be in this closet. When Ginger knocks, I'll yell to come in—I better unlock the door now." Reese, on the couch out of view of the hall, heard nothing for ten seconds, then: "I'll be on the daybed. She'll see me when she opens the door and I'll wave her to come in. When she's just past the closet I'll say, 'How much did you bring?'—and you'll come out behind her, and she'll be sewed up."

She came back into the living room with Gene. She said to Reese, "Be by the wall here, so when she comes in she'll see you with the gun pointed at her. Gene'll be right behind her. I'll come and grab her arms. Then Gene goes over her and gets his dope."

Gene said, "Does he know I'm going to pound her?"

"Pound her?" Reese looked at Vee.

Her eyes were wide in surprise. "You said you were going to slap her a few times."

Gene looked flat-eyed at Reese. "I said I was going to pound her."

Vee looked at Reese like this was all new to her. He doubted it. But it didn't matter—he had the gun and was in control, there'd be no pounding. "What if she starts screaming?"

"She won't, 'cause first I'll give her a throat-chop." He demon-

strated, side of the hand, smiling in a spacey way, probably an act but maybe not. "That'll keep her quiet."

Reese shrugged.

Vee said, "Soon as she's past the closet, I'll turn up the record player."

Gene started to say something but stopped as three quick raps hit the door. It was 7:58.

Vee motioned. Gene hurried to the hall to slide into the closet. Reese picked up the gun from the towel and crouched near the wall, gun at his right hip, finger on the trigger.

Vee flopped her big soft carcass on the daybed and called cheerily, "Door's open, come on in!"

Reese got a flash. *Stop it right now. Run to the door, turn Jinja around, get her out of here!* But why? His flashes were often right-on, but sometimes not—why stop things now? He was in control. Let Jinja learn that a ripoff game can turn into a freak show—let her find herself with a freak in back of her with a Buck knife, who she had read wrong, and another in front with a shotgun. Give her a few seconds of that, then ask her if she'd ever want to play the ripoff game again.

Vee, wide smile— "How much did you bring?"

Reese, crouching deeper, put on a fierce leer—and she was in front of him, Jinja the Cat.

She froze. Wide staring eyes flicked from the gun to his face. Softly, "Frank?"

He felt the leer melt and run down into his beard. The hell with this, he should have his arms around her, he should be taking care of her, what was he doing pointing a gun at her?

"Game playing." She had found the truth in his eyes. A step, a thrust with her arm, a grab—

A ROAR UNBELIEVABLE! Reese saw Gene, three feet from Jinja, going straight down, like the floor was swallowing his legs. They were caught under him at the knees, he was on his back, arms flopped out, Buck knife on the floor, weird smile, a fat black hole just above the left eyebrow.

Loud music, and mixed in it a scream of laughter. Vee, fists at her cheeks, eyes squeezed shut, mouth wide, laughing.

The gun hadn't been loaded, but Gene had a black hole turning red in his forehead. How?

Jinja was down, sitting on her heels by Gene. She touched his cheek, looked up at Reese with shiny cat eyes.

Vee was crouched at the record player and the music stopped as the laughter had stopped.

Jinja sprang up and moved across the room to the far corner, leaned in it with her hands behind her, head high, no expression.

Vee stood over Gene, who stared at the ceiling with empty blue eyes and that smile. She said thoughtfully, "If he'd been shorter, no problem." She frowned at the wall. "But there'd be a big hole there." Giggle. "Evans would of had a fit."

There was a knock at the door. Vee grabbed a folded grey blanket from the foot of the couch and threw it over the dead boy from Fresno. Reese realized he still held the shotgun. He went to the couch and sat down, laying the gun back on the towel. He looked at Jinja in the far corner. She looked back but he couldn't tell by her eyes if she saw anything.

Vee had trotted down the hall. He heard her bright voice, "Who is it?"

A rumble. Then more rumbles, squeaks mixed in. Then Vee: "It sounded like a giant firecracker. Maybe someone tossed it out of a car." Rumble, squeak, then: "Yeah, well— I dunno. Anyway, it wasn't from here. G'night."

She bounced in, smiling. "The manager. I think I convinced him." She looked at the heaped blanket. "Where's your car parked?"

He felt dumb and listless. He flashed that right this moment the manager was dialing the cops.

"Bring it to the stairs. We'll carry him down in the blanket and get him to the coast or wherever you think. First we better empty his pockets."

He got up. "Why'd you put a shell in the gun?"

She shook her head quickly, like she couldn't have heard him right.

"When you got me to change the light bulb. Did you want him dead?" But that didn't figure—she couldn't have known Jinja would grab the gun and push it. "Did you want Jinja dead?"

Jinja leaned in the corner, eyes like green glass.

Vee had her tight small smile. She didn't answer. But in her glittering dark eyes he saw the answer.

She hadn't known the gun would go off, or that anyone would be hit. She couldn't have known. That was the thrill of the game, not knowing. Anything might happen, nothing might.

Gene had been killed. Vee hadn't planned it but it had happened,

and it was exciting. There would be more excitement. That was the name of the game—excitement.

She had been the director, like Hitchcock, Spielberg, setting up the scene—manuevering everybody here, getting at the gun, opening it, finding it empty, slipping in a shell—then letting whatever would happen happen as it would. Or wouldn't. If it didn't, she'd have shrugged and gone on to the next game.

So Reese had her motive—excitement. And so what? If he told the cops how and why she had loaded the gun, they wouldn't be interested. They didn't want a teenage psychopath, they wanted him, their favorite bad guy.

He had brought the gun to the apartment and aimed it at another human being in a conspiracy to intimidate and rob, and in the course of that crime had occurred a homicide. Those were the facts, neatly fitting the bad-dude role he had created for himself. Cops didn't want to hear what he had read in Vee's eyes.

The DA would be pleased with a clean-cut case. Why drag in a complication he didn't want and wouldn't believe? Keep things simple, keep him feeling good—he'd be much readier to deal.

"Did you buy a box of shells?"

She said softly, "D'you think I'm dumb?"

He didn't. So she had stolen the shell, or found it, or asked someone for it who would never tell on her. Maybe she had got it weeks ago, on impulse, nothing in mind but knowledge that Reese's gun was sixteen-gauge and a feeling that someday things might work out excitingly.

Heavy pounding. *"Police! Sheriff! Open up!"*

Reese went across the room and stood by Jinja, who looked up at him with those eyes of glass.

Pound pound. Vee called angrily, "All right all *right!*" She opened and a blur of guys was there. Turning, she ran into the living room, smoky eyes bright as they came trooping after.

They separated into individuals—four uniforms, three suits. Reese knew the small grey guy in the nothing grey suit.

Reese moved from Jinja and stood hands spread from his sides, palms forward, as three uniforms aimed guns at him. He said, "Hello, Mr. Weare."

Sergeant Weare said in his nothing grey voice, "Hello, Reese. Who's under the blanket?" Last time had been a girl, taped up, which had got him nowhere. This time would get him somewhere.

"Gene from Fresno. He got shot. There's the gun you've been wanting."

In his statement, Reese said he hadn't known a shell was in the gun, couldn't recall loading it. He said he had brought it to intimidate Jinja so Gene could get his dope back.

He didn't say that he loved Jinja and had gone to the setup to protect her in case Gene freaked. Nor did he mention that Gene had cut a girl in Fresno, which might be only fiction by Vee. Don't badmouth the dead, keep things simple, don't make problems.

The DA would have tried him if he'd had a first-degree case, which he didn't. Statements by Victoria (Vee) Winters and Ellen (Ginger) Mallory backed up Reese's statement detail for detail as to how Eugene Haskell had got killed. With no contrary evidence to build exciting fiction on, the DA was stuck with the truth, as Reese was. He offered a deal, which Reese took.

Guilty of murder second-degree, sentence ten years, no minimum time before parole consideration. Guilty of possession of a felony weapon, three years concurrent. The charge of conspiracy to assault was dropped.

Vee made a deal, pleading guilty to conspiracy and serving a year county time less good time. She's back on the scene, sort of a star. There's no major star at the moment.

Ellen Mallory was charged with possession of nine packs of an illegal substance, found in her jacket pocket. The charge was dropped. She took the bus back to her town in Oregon or somewhere.

A letter addressed to S.M. Co. Jail, Redwood City, CA eventually reached Reese at San Quentin.

> Frank— Sorry you got sucked into the mess I created. I know you didn't load the gun. I wasn't in shock, that was an act—I think so anyway. I heard all you said to her. You didn't mention it so I didn't either.
>
> Thanks for being there that night. Bad for you but good for me, as if you hadn't come she'd have gone for another game and maybe let him slice me up good, cheering him on.
>
> The cat walks alone. Then she gets scared and hurries home to curl up by the fire and muse about where she's been, what it all meant, and where does she go from here?
>
> I guess I love you in my way, the way of the cat,
>
> Jinja

He folded it and put it in the box he kept personal stuff in, and knew he'd be reading it a lot in the next five or so years.

No return address, which figured. Cats don't like to be pinned down. They want room to jump clear.

When he got out, he might look for her, and maybe they'd get together and make a life.

Pure fiction. Which in prison is pleasanter than reality.

Fiction and reality—hard to keep separate. In California, anyway. Maybe everywhere.

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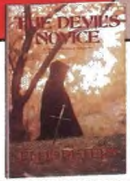

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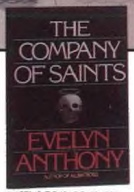

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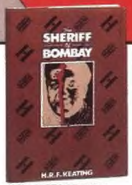

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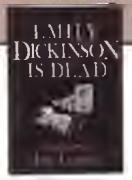

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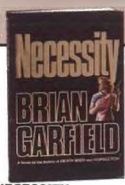

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